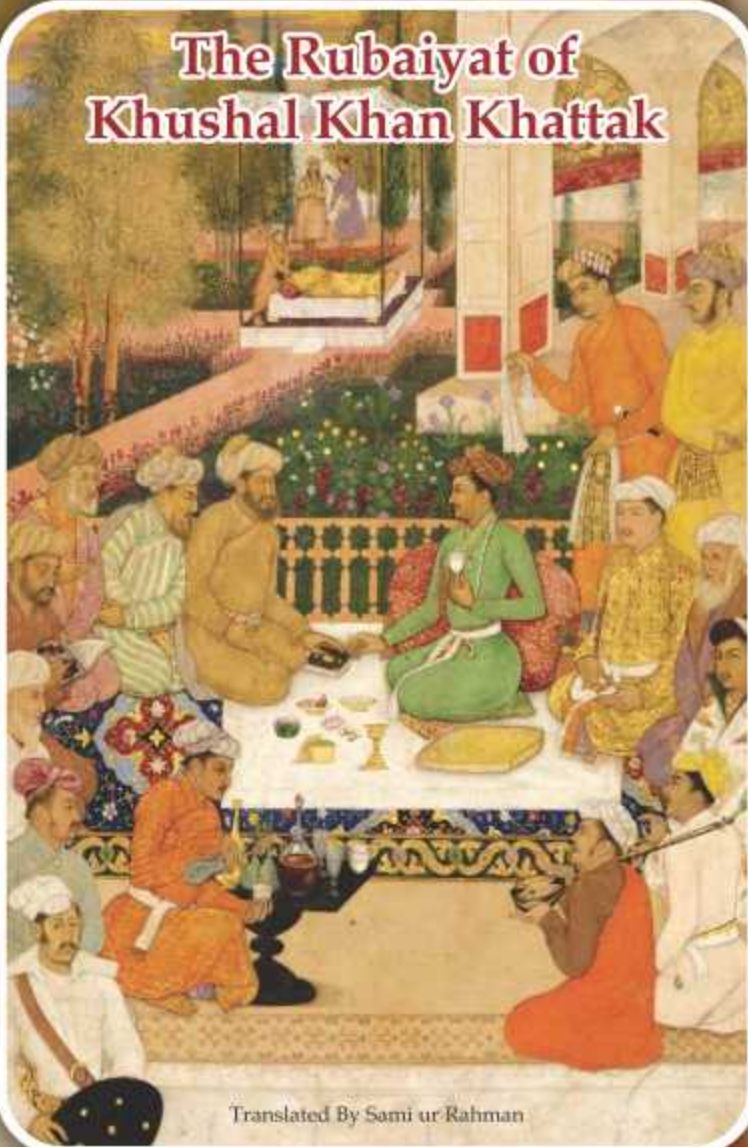


# The Rubaiyat of Khushal Khan Khattak



Translated By Sami ur-Rahman

THE  
RUBAIYAT  
OF  
KHUSHAL KHAN KHATTAK

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL  
BY SAMI UR RAHMAN

**The Rubaiyat of Khushal Khan Khattak**

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## *Introduction*

The works of Khushal Khan Khattak, a grand poet of the Pashtuns, have been largely invisible to the world, including the majority of Pakistanis who are not familiar with the Pashto language. This state of affairs has to do with the flawed state policies that overlook the pluralistic traditions of Pakistan and favor the one religion (Islam), one language (Urdu) and one country as a means to define Pakistani nationalism. Most Pakistanis are unaware of the rich cultural traditions that are centuries-old and perhaps one of the key reasons for the much-touted resilience of Pakistani people.

Essentially, the subalterns of Pakistan, not unlike much of North India, are united through a few common threads: folk heritage and syncretic South Asian spiritual traditions that overlap and nourish each other, creating a peculiar secular culture where religious creeds are tolerated for local harmony and to preserve community bonds. Khattak – a poet, administrator, warrior and a rebel of Mughal India – is a torchbearer of this rich tradition. Khattak is to Pashto, what is Shakespeare to English language. His poetry traverses a variety of themes through the prism of humanism:

Men are all equal  
Whether they are kings or cleaners  
They are only different  
In their actions, skills and demeanors

In the tradition of great Persian Sufi poets, Hafez, Jami and others, Khattak celebrates the human spirit, freedom and the power of mystical love beyond the limits set by hard-line clerics. This ethos is in direct conflict with the colonial construction of the Pathan as a fearsome, rugged warrior that the British propagated and continues to date in the local and global imaginations. As Rahman's translations tell us: "Men of honor will make war today and peace tomorrow/ When they sit together, they would resolve their row."

Rahman's translations capture the essence of Khattak's poetry. They are a refreshing change from the earlier translations undertaken by British writers of the colonial era who employed a more formal and complex syntax. Rahman uses blank verse as well as rhyming at places. As an employee of the Mughal Empire and later a rebel-warrior, Khattak's

egalitarianism is reflected throughout these quatrains. More importantly, the fallibility of human beings is paramount in this sensibility. In a memorable rubaii, Khattak states:

Do not worry, O Khushal!  
No matter how wretched you are  
You are only a man of flesh  
Not some heavenly seraph

This vision of human equality and empathy is one that Khattak shares with all his contemporaries. In the Punjab his contemporary was Bulleh Shah, who had also rejected caste, the formalism of religious edicts and clerics' hegemony. He was made an outcast and the clerics refused to offer his funeral prayers. Bulleh's message was also straightforward: "Yes, yes, you have read thousands of books, but you have never tried to read your own self/ you rush in, into your Mandirs, into your Mosques/ but you have never tried to enter your own heart/ futile are all your battles with Satan/ for you have never tried to fight your desires."

India underwent a slow but significant transformation from the eleventh century onwards when the Muslim Sufis interacted with their Hindu counterparts. During what is known as the Bhakti era, the poetries and folklore acquired newer dimensions of inter-communal understanding. Khattak even hints at such interactions and cultural dialogue in his poetry. And this fiercely professed and guarded object of co-existence – between Hindus and Muslims – is striking.

In this selection, one can trace how this compact was impacted by the stern Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb who was known for his puritanism. It should be noted that Khattak by Aurangzeb's reign was an opponent of the Mughals, so there could be a political ring to his quatrains of that time. But we do get a powerful narrative woven in the poetry. In one of the quatrains, Khattak praises King Shah Jahan (his previous employer) and then lashes out at the unworthy son and successor: "It was not your son who imprisoned you/ It was rather a devil in the human form."

Aurangzeb's acts were mostly political, but there are many anecdotes – some folk and fewer supported by primary texts – of his decision making that was not conducive to the secularist tendencies of his forefathers:

He has forced to recite by rote many guys  
He has made the Indian Hindus wise  
Aurangzeb's rule is devoid of any practical value  
All he could do is to raise a book's price

In another quatrain, Khattak laments the judicial system instituted by Aurangzeb:

Aurangzeb does not dispense justice  
He openly commits acts of crime  
What can poor Khushal do  
When God is happy with this paradigm?

This is a powerful commentary and would actually reflect the treatment that the King meted out to his secularist brother Dara Shikoh who was beheaded on the charges of apostasy. As Khattak tells us, Aurangzeb's idea of justice does not differentiate "between a thief, a bandit and a guardian." In this extraordinary collection, one can clearly identify the contempt for Mullah that Khattak has. He was not the only one as much of medieval and modern Pashto poetic tradition castigates the hypocrisy and shallowness of a religious cleric. It is ironic that the Pakistani state has chosen to rely on the colonial imaging of the Pathan and from 1948 employed their 'services' as jihadists.

Since 1980s, the Pashtuns have suffered an onslaught of religious conservatism and violent extremism that has been orchestrated by the state in cahoots with foreign powers such as Saudi Arabia and the United States. The results have been disastrous with a near-genocide of Pashtuns taking place in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It does not seem to be ending anytime soon. Strangely, these upheavals remind one of the later poetry and writings of Khattak that document the cruel vagaries of his own times.

Perhaps, what remains intact as a continuous thread through history is the spirit of an ordinary Pashtun, which is pragmatic, entrepreneurial and forward looking. With mass migrations to Karachi, the Gulf and other places, the Pashtuns have made their mark on local economy and society. Contrary to the Taliban image, their children like Malala Yusufzai have presented a snippet of their resilient spirit to the world.

Khattak's poetry is layered and timeless. It speaks of humanity, of tolerance as well as a restive spirit that rejects slavery. Through the course of human history – from the Greeks to the Arabs and from the Europeans to the present multi-polar globe – exceptional poets have explored such universal themes. But for today, Khattak's poetic musings and simple, folksy messages are an antidote to the decades of extremist ideology that we have built around Pakistani identity. It is time to challenge that and Khattak's verse enables us to do so.

For the Western readers, it is perhaps even more important to know more about the people they have been treating as a collateral in the ever-expanding and fragmenting 'Great Game' in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The monumental folly of propping radical jihadists becomes even more sinister when poets such as Khattak remind us of how a people's past has been robbed of them, denuded often with the collusion of their elites. Yet, decades of war, civil conflict and exploitation have been unable to suppress the essence of Pashtun culture, their egalitarian and communitarian spirit, and the strategies of survival and resistance.

Sami ur Rahman deserves much appreciation for his labor of love. And it is hoped that in the future editions of this collection, he would further chisel the language to come closer to what Khattak was composing centuries ago.

Raza Rumi  
Ithaca College, USA  
23 February 2016





*Rubaiyat*



1



You are a talisman of unreliable birth  
Made of wind, water, fire and earth  
A non-entity before, a non-entity after  
For God's sake, know your worth!



2



A priest so long prayers who offers  
Imagines houris, horses and bowers  
Expecting rich, lavish and silky dowers  
He dreams of silver and gold coffers



3




Full of strife black heavens!  
When will you annihilate?  
So that a new world is born  
And peace be perhaps our fate



4



Lo! I heard a heavenly voice last night, saying:  
"Do not sweat at the severity of your woe  
Whoever is your friend's friend is your friend  
Whoever is your friend's foe is your foe."





5



My sweetheart, soaked in wine stupor  
Drowned in musk and rosewater  
With unveiled scattered tresses  
Gave me a kiss, sweeter than sugar



6



Only if there ever were flowers and books  
Songs, music, wine and brooks  
Beautiful belles; handsome dudes  
The sweetness of life and youthful looks



7



A nightingale rebuked a flower in a bower  
Saying: "Do not be so cocky, O flower!"  
"Think before you speak," retorted the flower,  
"Coquetry is the way of the comely lover."



8



Sometimes, impatience, row,  
Whining, wailing and woe  
Have no other reason  
Except passionate love



Lovers Embracing, c. 1630-1650, Mughal Dynasty © The Cleveland Museum of Art



9



All the world's problems,  
Privations and dirty pools  
None of them is caused by the wise  
They are all the product of fools



10



Jurisprudence is the tree's root  
Mysticism its swaying shoot  
The truth its leaves and foliage  
The vision its flower and fruit



11



We humans fall into different categories:  
We are musk, onion, garlic and ambergris  
We are honey, sugar, poison and cactus  
We are red, yellow, green and turquoise




12



Not from the books of a judge or a jurist  
Khushal has learned this lesson from Hallaj<sup>1</sup>  
Hang him or burn him alive  
He will never forsake the truth

6 <sup>1</sup> Mansur Hallaj was a 10<sup>th</sup> century sufi mystic who was hanged by the clergy for his famous motto, "I am the truth."





13



Nobility consists of nothing else  
But of good morals  
There are nobles among the wretched  
And wretched among the nobles.



14



As a dad, I got sixty sons to date  
Half of them are living, half are dead  
When I see the dreadful work of the living  
I find the dead quite preferable instead



15



A man's skill, tact and intellect  
Are promptly known through his talk  
His intrinsic nature, however,  
After years of interaction you can chalk



16



Man is only an animal with respect  
To his blood, bones, flesh and body  
He is different since sense, speech, tact,  
Intellect and love he would embody



17



Let there be death, demise and disease  
Let there be all life long sorrows and crises  
But for company of sweethearts I wish  
I had two centuries of youth at least



18



Troubles and worries abound  
I feel gloomy and insomniac  
If I ever succeed this time around  
I will forever repent to be a love-maniac



19



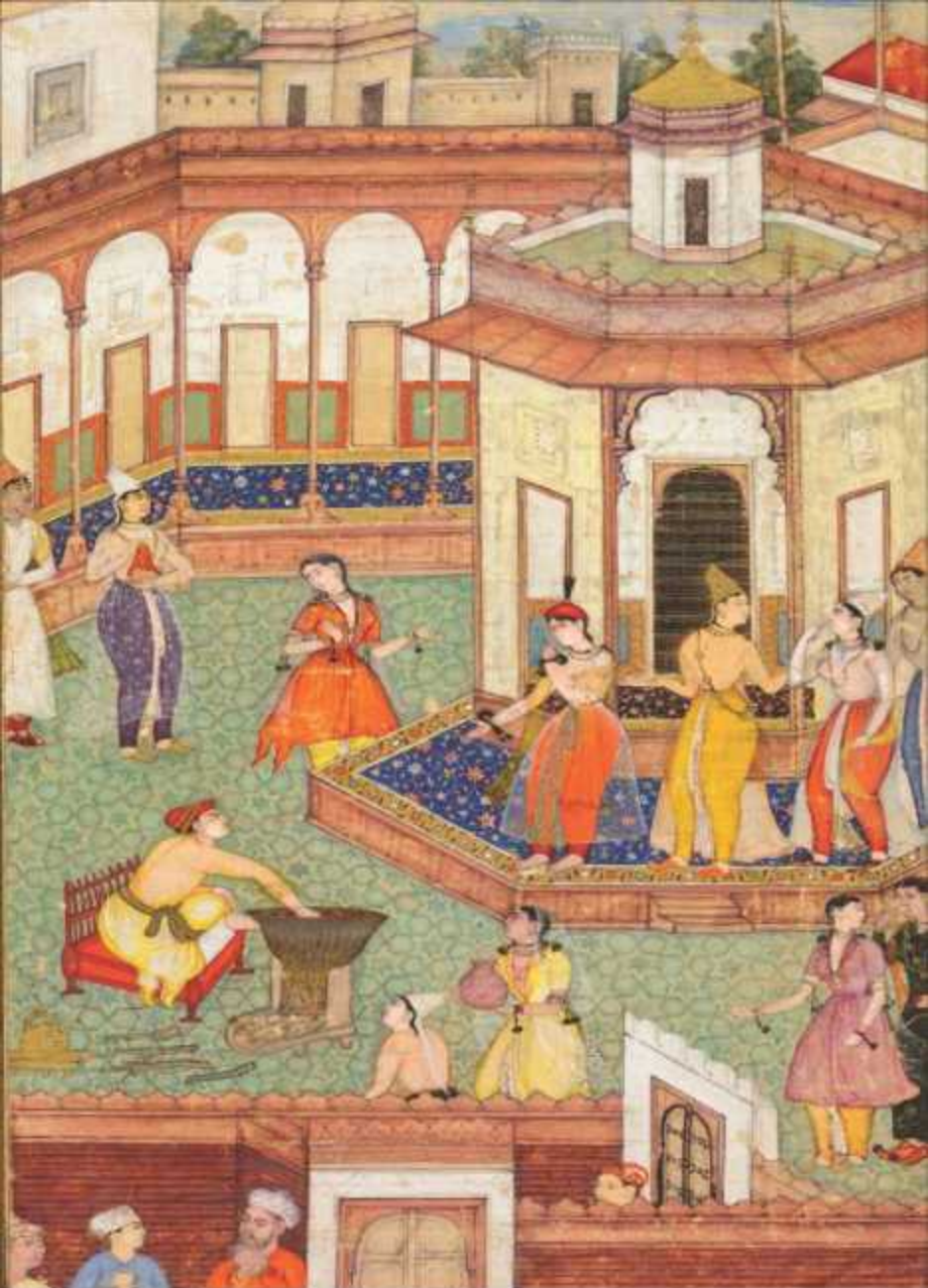
To lovers, three signs one may assign  
Like the drowned, to sleep they resign  
Like the grief-stricken, they wail and whine  
Like the sick, they eat, they dine



20



He, who avoids beauty while he is juvenile,  
Although, he is human, yet he rivals angels in patience  
Abstinence, however, behooves the senile  
The juvenile should give vent to their juvenile passions



A Man Dips his Hand into a Cauldron as Ladies of the Harem Stand in Amazement, c. 1600, Mughal India @ The Cleveland Museum of Art