



## ḲALILI, ḲALIL-ALLĀH

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**ḲALILI, ḲALIL-ALLĀH**, (b. Kabul, 1907; d. Islamabad, 4 March 1987), renowned 20th-century Afghan poet in Dari (Persian), literary historian, scholar, and high-ranking official. Ḳalili is regarded as one of the last great vestiges of the traditional Persianate culture in Afghanistan, where erudition and classical training were particularly valued ([Figure 1](#)).

### *i. Life.*

### *ii. Work.*

### *iii. Poetry.*

#### *i. Life*

Ḳalili was born to Moḥammad Ḥosayn Khan Ḳalili, a state treasurer (Mostawfi-al-Mamālek) who was closely affiliated with the court of Amir Ḥabib-Allāh Khan (r. 1901-19). He always maintained great interest in scholarly pursuits,



an aspiration which he also impressed upon the young Ḳalil. Upon the murder of the Amir on 19 February 1919, and the accession to power of his son, Shah Amān-Allāh (r. 1919-29), Mostawfi-al-Mamālek was arrested and swiftly executed, and his land and possessions were confiscated. This incident left a lasting effect on Ḳalil-Allāh. Despite never attending a formal school, Ḳalili was able to study privately and then join the administration of the Ministry of Finance. When Amān-Allāh was ousted from power and Ḥabib-Allāh Kalakāni conquered Kabul for a brief time (January-October 1929; see *bacca-ye saqqā*), the young Ḳalili was promoted to such high positions as the mostawfi and, afterwards, the governor of the northern region of Mazār-e Šarif. Ḳalili hardly revisited his involvement with the “bandit-king” from Kalakān. In the last few years of his life, however, he broke his silence and published a controversial account called *‘Ayyāri az Ḳorāsān*, where Ḥabib-Allāh—long vilified in the official historiography of Afghanistan and derisively called *Bačča-ye Saqqā* (the son of a water-carrier)—was portrayed quite sympathetically. With the rise to power of General Moḥammad Nāder in October 1929, Ḳalili’s fortunes again turned sour. He briefly chose exile in Tashkent, but through the mediation of his maternal uncle and soon-to-be father-in-law (who was a high official in Nāder’s regime), he was “pardoned” and allowed to settle in Herat (q.v.). Away from Kabul for nearly two years, and undisturbed by the political intrigues of the capital, Ḳalili was able to concentrate on scholarly research.

During 1932-46, when Nāder’s brother Moḥammad-Hāšem was the prime minister, Ḳalili served as one of his secretaries. In 1944, perhaps because of suspicions that he had sympathized with Nā’eb-Sālār ‘Abd-al-Raḥim Khan’s rebellion against the central state, the poet was briefly imprisoned. Soon thereafter, Hāšem resigned and was replaced by his younger brother, Shah Maḥmud. Ḳalili gained his freedom but was forced to live in exile in Kandahar before being allowed to return to the capital. Perhaps because of the painfully rough life that he experienced in his youth—from the execution of his father to his forced exile, to his imprisonment and displacement—Ḳalili shied away from active politics during the time he was rehabilitated and given permission to join and serve the ruling, aristocratic circles in Kabul. He refused to take a clear stance vis-à-vis the regime’s harsh treatment and repression of intellectual dissidents and, instead, devoted himself strictly to scholarship and to his official cultural duties. In 1948 he was appointed the vice chancellor of Kabul University, and a year later he became the chief secretary of the cabinet. From this period onwards, Ḳalili’s standing rapidly improved. In 1953 he was chosen as the chief cultural adviser to the king, Moḥammad-Zāher Shah (r.



1933-73). This rather enviable position provided him with unlimited access to the highly valued library and archives in the royal palace. Furthermore, it offered him the opportunity to travel abroad, meet numerous cultural figures of significant stature, and participate in various seminars and literary and artistic assemblies.

In 1963-64 Moḥammad Zāher Shah launched a new constitutional era that heralded a decade of intense political activity and ideological jugglery. Although Ḳalili remained skeptical of organized politics, he launched a conservative political party and published a newspaper, *Waḥdat-e melli* (National Unity) in Kabul (Dupree, pp. 590-91; for a study of this decade, see Koškaki, 1986). Ḳalili, who was at odds with the new “democratic” order, was soon appointed the ambassador to Saudi Arabia and in charge of the Afghan mission in Baghdad. Effectively exiled from the center of power and relieved from his role as the royal adviser, Ḳalili the ambassador had ample time to concentrate on his literary creativity and scholarly production. Living in an Arabic-speaking milieu enabled him to write in Arabic and also to befriend many prominent Arab scholars and poets. During this period he stopped writing panegyrics for the king and, instead, wrote exquisite nature poems, moving personal poems, and poems about social topics of more universal content. The political tone of his poems became more abstract, ambiguous, and ironic. Afghan literary historians and critics usually consider the period that Ḳalili served as a diplomat (1965-78) to have been his finest and most productive years as a poet (Rażawi-Ġaznawī, “Be yād-e Ostād Ḳalili,” *Naqd wa ārmān* 1, 1995, pp. 25-49).

The Sawr (April) Revolution of 1978 not only brought Ḳalili’s diplomatic mission to an end, but it also rejected traditional poetry (such as Ḳalili’s) for being “démodé” and “serving the interests” of the old, pre- and anti-revolutionary order. The poet refused to work for the new regime and promptly resigned his diplomatic post. Ḳalili initially received asylum in Germany and, for a little while, lived in the United States. He then decided to make his domicile in Pakistan, close to his homeland of Afghanistan. As the anti-communist resistance gathered momentum, especially after the Soviet intervention in December 1979, Ḳalili’s stature as the emblematic poet of the resistance grew rapidly. While he always strongly identified himself with Afghan nationalism and wrote many didactic poems in praise of the nation for the school youths, the patriotic tone became much more vocal after the invasion. At this juncture in his life, the poet worked diligently to fulfill what



he considered his utmost mission: to make poetry an essential component of the anti-Soviet resistance, to point out the dreadful nature of the occupation of his homeland and its horrific impact on his people, to urge the rest of humanity to address the suffering of the Afghans, and to lionize those who stood up to the far mightier invading army and defended their country based on the ideals of national unity and Islamic solidarity. Ḳalili passed away on 4 March 1987 in Islamabad and was buried in a cemetery in Peshawar reserved for refugees from Afghanistan.

## ii. Work

Ḳalili's writings were prodigious and encompassed a wide range of creative and scholarly works. He published several collections and selections of his poetry (see iii, below) and authored many works of literary-historical scholarship. He also wrote a handful of prose narratives as well as a book in the Pashto language. Throughout his life, Ḳalili authored numerous articles and essays, most of which appeared in journals and magazines in Kabul, Jeddah, Baghdad, Kuwait, Ankara, Tehran, and Cairo. As a gifted poet and scholar with immense knowledge of Persian literary history and cultural heritage, Ḳalili participated in, and represented Afghanistan at, various national and international conferences and colloquia and gained the recognition and admiration of his hosts. He twice traveled to Iran, where he was much welcomed by the literary establishment. He earned prestigious literary prizes and was a member of a number of literary associations.

To prepare an exhaustive list of the entire corpus of Ḳalili's writings is all but impossible; some of his writings are yet to be published. Besides, in terms of bibliographical information, his published works were not always meticulously referenced. A number of his books were published by his admirers, perhaps with no direct knowledge of the author. A couple of his books were published more than once, without any editorial changes, alterations, and corrections. Of existing collections of Ḳalili's *Divān*, the following are especially noteworthy: *Az aš'ār-e Ostād Ḳalili* (Kabul, 1961); *Kolliyāt-e Divān-e Ḳalili*, ed. Moḥammad Hāšem Omidvār Herāti (Tehran, 1962); *Robā'iyāt-e Ḳalil Allah Ḳalili* (Baghdad, 1975); *Majmu'a-ye aš'ār-e Ḳalili*, ed. Moḥammad-Āqel Birang Kohdāmani (Tehran, ca. 1976; this fine edition was republished with virtually no changes to the text except listing another individual as the editor: *Majmu'a-ye aš'ār-e Ḳalil-Allāh Ḳalili*, ed. Mahdi Madā'eni, Tehran, 1993); *Kolliyāt-e aš'ār-e Ostād Ḳalil-Allāh Ḳalili*, ed. 'Abd-al-Ḥayy Ḳorāsāni (Tehran, 1999); and *Divān-e Ḳalil-Allāh Ḳalili*, ed. Moḥammad



Kāzem Kāzemi (Tehran, 2006). The latter is a revised and much improved version of *Divān-e Kāzil-Allāh Kāzili*, ed. Moḥammad Ebrāhim Šari'ati (Tehran, 1999). His many collections of poetry of resistance were published in exile, usually by the Pakistan-based Afghan Mujahidin organizations. Some such works include: *Mātamsarā* (Peshawar, 1982); *Ašk-hā wa kunhā* (Tears and blood, Islamabad, 1994); *Šabhā-ye āvāragi* (Nights of vagrancy, Peshawar, 1986); and *Sorud-e kun* (Song of blood, Peshawar, 1989), among others. During his years in exile, he was able to publish a controversial, semi-fictional account of the brief reign of Ḥabib-Allāh Kalakāni (Bačča-ye Saqqā') entitled *'Ayyāri az Korāsān* (Peshawar, 1980).

Kāzili's literary-historical scholarship includes, among others, *Ātār-e Herāt* (3 vols., Herāt, 1929-31; 2nd ed., Tehran, 2004); *Salṭanat-e Ġaznaviān* (Kabul, n.d.); and *Ārāmgāh-e Bābur* (Kabul, n.d.).

Kāzili also produced critical works on the lives, times, and poetry of some luminaries from the classical period of Persian literature. See, for instance, *Aḥwāl va ātār-e Ḥakim Sanā'i* (Kabul, 1936; repr. 1978); *Yamgān, Šarḥ-e ārāmgāh-e Nāšer Kosrow* (Kabul, n.d.); *Ayāz az didgāh-e šāhebdelān* (Peshawar, 1983); *Fayz-e qods: Šarḥ-e aḥwāl-e Mirzā 'Abd-al-Qāder Bidel* (Kabul, 1955); and *Nay-nāma* (Kabul, 1973; 2nd ed., Tehran, 2007).

Kāzili partially translated *Tafsir-e Kāboli* (Mawlānā Šabir Aḥmad's extended commentary on the Qur'ān, from the original Urdu into Persian; Kabul, n.d.). He also freely translated Rabindranath Tagore's Bengali poem *Gitānjali* and his short story "Kāboliwāla" (New Jersey, 1982). He wrote in Arabic: Ebn Baṭṭuta's *Fi Afḡānestān* (Baghdad, 1971); *Herāt: tārikihā, ātārihā wa rejālihā* (Baghdad, 1974); and *al-Foqhā' al-Maḡāniyun* (Baghdad and Marrakech, n.d.).

### iii. Poetry

Kāzili was an undisputed master of composing *qašidas* in Persian. His poetry earned him much fame among the literati, not only in his native land but also in the rest of the Persophone world.

During the early decades of the 20th century—a period which coincided with Kāzili's formative years as a poet—under the influence of the journal *Serāj al-aḵbār* (ed. Maḥmud Ṭarzi, 1911-29) as well the poetry of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, poetry in Afghanistan was assumed to embody progressive ideals and to be a vehicle for advocating and advancing political change,



modernization, and social development. While Ḳalili's firm belief in the grandeur and perfection of classical Persian poetry made him less interested in new poetic experiments, he did not reject some of the principal tenets of the emergent aesthetics of his time ("Diruz, emruz, va fardā-ye še'r-e Afġānestān," [Tehran, 1994, p. 71]). Throughout his creative career, Ḳalili insisted on engaging contemporary issues of profound importance such as nationalism, the value of modern education without breaking with traditions, women's rights, international peace, the deleterious effects of colonialism and exploitation, Third World solidarity, and Islamic fraternity. Even when he wrote splendid panegyrics for the king, he never failed to acknowledge his role as a voice of his time and an advocate of his nation and people. A careful study of his panegyrics will show that they are not simply poems in praise of the ruling monarch. In many such poems, he put forward his specific vision of kingship derived from the principles of justice, generosity, and moderation. In fact, his panegyrics are clear instances where this vision is elucidated in an elaborate manner. The best of kings would be the one who is courageous and insightful, yet reserved and God-fearing. Ḳalili considered kingship not simply "to rule over" the people but primarily as "service to God and the humanity." In the latter case, the poet insisted, the king will surely earn a high place in the hearts of his people and will be amply rewarded in the after-life ("Qaṣida," *Divān-e Ḳalili*, ed. Mawalā'i, Tehran, 1999, pp. 98-99; "Mostazād," *Divān*, p. 488).

Another topic of paramount importance to Ḳalili is love. However, it was love incarnated as poetry that appealed to him most. Deeply rooted in the tradition of classical Persian belles-lettres, Ḳalili's poetry was not devoid of romantic love. Life without love is worthless, and poetry without love—however defined—is no less than impossible. Whenever he was dismayed by the events around him, he would find refuge in refined songs of love. Ḳalili maintained that poetry was the most intimately personal experience one could ever find, because it reverberated the message of the heart in its totality ("Naqṣ-e Ḳiāl," *Divān*, p. 351). Ḳalili also saw a direct connection between poetry and prophecy, between his poetic disposition and his practice as a poet. In some of his better-known poems, he expressed the view that the essence of love and the foundation of faith are one and the same. Thus, poetry should be seen as the preferred vehicle towards the realization of the absolute, the divine.

Ḳalili's work shows strong philosophical undercurrents. His contemplative, reflective poetry brings him closer to the introspective, metaphysical poetry that characterizes so much of classical Persian poetry. He celebrated life, but



he was wary of the constant shadow of death and destruction that encompass the joys of life. Thus his description of the human condition remains less than straightforward. Life is fraught with danger; so is human history (“Se qatra ašk,” *Divān*, p. 365). Kālili was obsessed with history, not only as the agonizing and distressing passage of time but also as an abstract and highly intricate entity. He alluded to history as a journey fraught with all sorts of complications (“Mosāfer-e sargardān,” *Divān*, p. 259) and lamented the fate of human beings who are destined to dwell in a world of puzzles and predicaments. What is life if not a riddle, a seemingly convoluted conundrum, he would ask. It was in these terms that Kālili saw the human nature as essentially contradictory, paradoxical, and ambiguous (“Bān baḡbān va kāzān,” *Divān*, p. 289). In his view, the intricacies of base ambitions and historical forgetfulness were nowhere clearer than in the invasion of Afghanistan by the former Soviet Union; and nowhere the human capacity to endure adversity and to resist pain clearer than in the resilient guerrilla warfare the Afghans waged against the sophisticated military machine of a far superior enemy. As Kālili wrote in one of his memorable poems, it was precisely because of such an event of far-reaching consequences as the Soviet invasion that his “love poems” turned into “songs of blood” and he himself turned from being “an old bard” into “a fighting youth” (“Vaṭān,” *Divān*, p. 186).

Indeed, during the latter phase of his long poetic career, Kālili’s poetry thoroughly changed course. The transformation was so total that the poet himself expected a reception of his later poetry vastly different from that of the previous ones. Not only did he explore the role of the common individual (in contradistinction to notable heroes and famous kings and commanders) in consciously taking part in and affecting the course of history, but he also emphasized the potential of the human will to resist forces of repression and occupation and bring about individual emancipation and collective liberation. From melodious lyrics, celebrations of nature, philosophical reflections, social occasional topics, and royal panegyrics, Kālili had at once moved towards writing poetry of war, struggle, and resistance (*Aškhā va kunhā*; Islamabad, 1994).

Nostalgia is a theme that pervaded the poetry of Kālili from the very onset. Some of his stronger works dealt with his ordeals as an orphan, a tormented exile, and a beleaguered outcast. In a moving autobiographical work, the poet called himself “a child of pain,” suffering in the arms of one who is not “his



mother.” Whereas in his early life his exile ultimately led to redemption and acceptance among the ruling elites, in the last years of his life in exile any hope for redemption proved illusive. Thus a substantial part of his later poetry remained heavily nostalgic, focusing on reminiscences of the past—a past that, despite its grueling hardships, was at least coherent and whole. In one of his poems written in exile, he yearned to return to his beloved homeland and be buried there but soon changed his mind, simply because “the sacred land” of his ancestors was now “defiled” under the boots of the “infidel enemy of God” (“Nowruz-e āwaragān,” *Divān*, p. 325).

It was precisely in the context of the Soviet occupation that Ḳalili sided, as resolutely as he could, with the Mujahidin “holy warrior.” Most of his poems lionized the resistance, which he saw as fighting an unjust, unjustified, and imposed war. He was quick to chronicle the atrocities which the invasion of his homeland had brought. He considered the resistance as “materially poor,” “barefoot,” and “ill-equipped,” but nonetheless morally superior for heroically fighting an occupying power. (“Vatandar-e dalir-e man,” *Divān*, p. 277). Aware of the potential pitfalls of the resistance movement, Ḳalili was often anguished that regional, ethnic, and sectarian divisions in Afghanistan might be exploited by the enemy (“E’temād be ḳod,” *Kolliyāt-e aš’ār-e Ḳalili*, ed. Šari’ati, Tehran, 1999, p. 464). Therefore, while he vacillated between contemplative pessimism and a sense of utopian idealism, he never failed to encourage a unified stance and emphasized the necessity for unity among all Afghans in order to to oppose a common enemy. In conjunction with the theme of unity, adherence to Islam (however abstractly) provided the specific modality and rhetoric of his historical consciousness. Ḳalili was critical of the “insensitiveness” of the rest of the world vis-à-vis the plight of the Afghans. He was also no less abrasive about the complicity of Muslim countries in appeasing the Soviets. In fact, he praised the Iranian support for the Mujahidin and was appreciative of the Pakistanis for sheltering Afghan refugees. Yet he reserved the bulk of his wrath against the Muslims who sided with “infidels,” intent on destroying a fellow Muslim nation (“Sina-ye suzān,” *Kolliyāt-e aš’ār*, p. 22).

Ḳalili was well-known among the Iranian literati and literary establishment. He often carried correspondence with his Iranian counterparts in Persian verse. His *Divān* contains numerous “letters” and “replies” which he wrote and received from Iranian scholars and poets. In his two official trips to Iran (in 1956 and 1961), he was well received. In addition to the officials from the Ministry of Education and the University of Tehran, such eminent established



literary figures as Badi‘-al-Zamān Foruzānfar (q.v.), Loṭf-‘Ali Şuratgar, Sa‘id Nafisi, Jalāl-al-Din Homā‘i, Ḥabib Yağmā‘i, and Reżāzādeh-Şafaq would host Ḳalili and write prefaces to his collections of works (see Kāzemi, pp. 815-17, 819-21, 823-24, 827-30). In addition, Ḳalili was in touch with such prominent poets and writers as Rahi Mo‘ayyeri, Nurāni-Veşāl, Maḥmud Farroḳ, and Şādeq Sarmad. The elegy (*marsiya*) Ḳalili wrote on the occasion of the death of Malek-al-Şo‘rā’ Bahār was widely praised in Iran (“Dar reṭā-ye Bahār,” *Divān*, pp. 97-98).

Ḳalili continues to be regarded as the greatest of contemporary poets in Afghanistan in the classical style. The appearance of several critical editions of his *divān* in Iran, as well as the inclusion of his poetry in various anthologies throughout the Persian-speaking lands, clearly show that he is greatly admired among Persophone readers.

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