



## ŞĀBER

---

**ŞĀBER**, MIRZĀ 'ALI-AKBAR ṬĀHERZĀDA (b. Šamāki [Shemakha], 30 May 1862; d. Šamāki, 12 July 1911), famous Azarbaijani satirist and poet. He came from a middle-class religious family who seemed reluctant to provide him with a modern education. However, in his early adolescence he found a sympathetic teacher in Ḥājjī Sayyed 'Aẓim Širvāni (1835-88), a poet of some fame, who had started a progressive school where Arabic, Persian, Azeri, Russian and other subjects were taught. Encouraged by Sayyed 'Aẓim, Şāber began translating Persian poetry and wrote poems in Azeri. His father, a grocer by trade, deemed a few years of schooling sufficient for him and wanted Şāber to work in his shop but the son's strong resistance and his attempt to run away from home and join a caravan to Mašhad, forced him to relent and he allowed him to follow the literary career that he so coveted. He wrote many *ġazals* in imitations of Persian poets, particularly Neẓāmi and he found many friends among the literary circles of Shirvan. In 1885, he embarked on a tour of some of the cities of Persia and Central Asia. His travels greatly widened the horizon of his intellectual perception and later on inspired him to depict a vivid picture of the people of these lands. After his return, Şāber married and settled down in Shirvan.

Şāber had eight daughters and one son, and had to work hard to support his large family. For fifteen years he worked as a soap maker and humorously would remark: "I make soap to wash away the external dirt of my countrymen." He unsuccessfully tried to open a European style school. Also, on account of his criticism of the reactionary and conservative elements, he kept



on receiving unsigned and threatening letters. According to some accounts these letters were sent by the journalist Hashem Beik Vezirov (1868-1916), whose *nom de plume* was “bir kas”(a person). Şāber answered him in the journal *Sāda*: “I am a poet, the mirror of my age/ in me everyone sees his own face/ As it happened yesterday, ‘a person’ looked at me /Seeing none other than himself in the mirror.” (‘Ali-Akbar Şāber, *Hup-Hup-nāma*, Baku, 1962, p. 291.)

The first poem of Şāber appeared in 1903 in *Şarq-e Rus* (East of Russia) in Tbilisi. At the time the poet was not known outside his native city. Three years later and five months after the first issue of *Mollā Naşreddin*, he began to publish in this journal. Within a few years Şāber was known not only in Azarbaijan, but also in Persia, Turkey and Central Asia. He also created many bitter enemies for himself at home and abroad. Some of the conservative mullahs of Tabriz denounced *Mollā Naşreddin* as heretical and called Şāber an unbeliever (Ārianpur, *Az Şabā tā Nimā* II, p. 48). The campaign against him became so intense that he defended his faith in a famous poem addressed to the people of Shirvan:

I am a Shi‘ite, but not in the ways you desire

I am a Sunni, but not like the examples you like. I am a Sufi, but not like the ones you describe. I am a lover of truth, O people of Shirvan. (*Hup Hup-nāma*, p. 359)

Not being able to stay in Şamāki, Şāber left for the more cosmopolitan and progressive Baku, where he was employed as a schoolteacher in 1910. Here he wrote nearly all of his short satirical pieces called “Taziyanaler” (The Whips). Unfortunately his stay in Baku did not last long and a liver ailment curtailed his activities. Şāber went back to Şamāki for treatment while the weeklies *Guneş* and *Mollā Naşreddin* were publishing his poems. *Mollā Naşreddin* began a publicity drive to collect funds for his operations in Tbilisi, but the poet did not consent to the operation.

The satirical works of Şāber embrace a wide variety of subjects, ranging from the defeat of the Tsarist armies by Japan to scenes of social and domestic life at home. Political satire was an important part of his work, and the butt of his satire ranged from Emperor Wilhelm of Prussia to Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah of Persia, and from the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid to corrupt petty officials and ignorant mullahs. Frequently religious hypocrisy was a subject of his

criticism, with superstitious and ignorant women as well as chauvinistic men as targets of his satire.

In the art of poetic satire Şāber surpasses all others in Azarbaijani literature. According to his friend ‘Abbās Şaḥḥat, himself a writer of some significance, Şāber created a revolution in Azarbaijani literature, and the difference that he created between old and modern poetry was such that after him hardly anyone dared to go back to old ideals and style (*Hup-Hup-nāma*, p. xii.). Apart from his originality of theme and subject, Şāber’s poetic language was new and well suited to the topics he chose. It was conversational, witty and lively, and in this respect it greatly differed from the formal language of his predecessors. The famous Persian writer and lexicographer ‘Ali-Akbar Dehḳodā, himself a great satirist, writes: “Şāber was a great innovator in Azarbaijani literature. He was a child of one night who traveled the way of one hundred years, and surpassed the thoughts and the writers of his age by centuries. He was incomparable in depicting political and social problems.” (*Loḡat-nāma*, under “Ṭāherzāda,” p. 101).

In the early years of the twentieth century, Russian Azarbaijan and to a lesser degree Iranian Azarbaijan, enjoyed a remarkable literary revival and particularly in satirical journalism. The period between 1905 and 1920 was the “Golden Age” of Azarbaijani satirical newspapers. Of 405 journals and newspapers published between 1832 and 1920 in Russian Azarbaijan in Azeri, Persian, Russian and a few other languages, fifteen were satirical papers in Azeri. With two exceptions, the publication of all of them was in the space of these fifteen years. *Mollā Naşreddin* (1906-1932) under the editorship of Jalil Memedqulizadah was an exceptional driving force in Azeri journalism and its influence went as far as Persia, Turkey and Central Asia. Şāber wrote for many journals under different pseudonyms, and from the early issues of *Mollā Naşreddin* until his death he was very closely associated with this journal. This period in Şāber’s life coincided with the Persian Constitutional Revolution (1905-11) and his vibrant and biting political satire was recited by the Constitutionalists in the trenches of Tabriz. His influence was considerably far-reaching: [Sayyed Aşraf Gilāni](#) freely translated or adapted him in his journal *Nasim-e Şemāl* (Ārianpur, *Az Sabā tā Nimā* II, pp. 46-77) and the poet Mu’jiz of Şabestar (Nazim Akundov, *Azerbaycan Satira Journallari 1905-1920*, Baku, 1968, p. 346) was greatly influenced by him. Some of his political satire were commented on in the journal *Azarbaijan* and by Dehḳodā in *Sur-e Esrāfil*. On the occasion of the assassination of [Atābak-e A’zam](#) in August 1907 *Azarbaijan*



published a poem addressing “Mulla Amu,” boasting how one of the enemies of constitution was killed. Şāber answered (*Mollā Naşreddin*, October 2nd, 1907) that “don’t be so self assured. I don’t doubt the assassination of Atābak. There are still thousands of other Atābaks left on your way.” (*Az Şabā tā Nimā*, ii, p. 46) Such literary disputations (*monāzaras*) between *Azarbaijan*, *Sur-e Esrāfil* and *Mollā Naşreddin* were very common. Abu’l-Qāsem Lāhuti in a letter to the biographer of Şāber, Mir Ahmadov on June, 17, 1954, writes “Şāber’s poetry is so simple, fluent, intelligent, brave and well-liked by people and so imbued with a courageous spirit that it leaves a great impression on the minds of people desiring freedom.” He went on to say that not only him but most Iranian satirists of this era were indebted to him. (*Az Şabā tā Nimā* II, p. 169-170). Nimā Yuşij believed that Şāber, with his lucid and popular style, enabled common people to enjoy poetry (*Arzeş-e ehsāsāt*, Tehran, 1958, p. 126).

Though Şāber was closely associated with *Mollā Naşreddin*, he wrote for many other journals including *Hayāt*, *Fiuzāt*, *Rahbar*, *Dabestān*, *Olfat*, *Erşād*, *Haqiqat*, *Yeni Haqiqat* and *Ma’lumāt*. By publishing in newspapers he was able to reach a much wider audience than earlier poets. The topics that he chose for his satire were such that appealed to a wide range of people: reforms needed to improve the lives of his countrymen, criticism of superstition, male chauvinism, corruption of the officials, despotism of the rulers and sham piety of the clerics. From the point of view of satirical technique, Şāber uses almost all the forms and techniques employed by satirists before him. He exploits a large arsenal of forms and meters in his works, from *qaşida* to *ğazal* and from *matnawi* to *robā’i* and *baħr-e tawil*. Şāber sometimes parodies a well-known poem, or, to be more precise, he takes the first *bayt* and tags on a pastiche of the poem. He also made a fine verse translation of some passages of Ferdowsi’s *Şāh-nāma* into Azeri, including the episode of Siyāvaş. In one poem, imitating the style of the *Şāh-nāma* in a mock-heroic form, Şāber makes a general in M oħammad-‘Ali Shah’s army, who has been sent to fight Sattār Khan and the Constitutionalists in Tabriz, boast of his valor. The poem turns farcical when he is defeated by Sattār Khan, and he tries to defend himself in a letter to the king (*Hop-Hopnāma*, pp. 167-71).

In summing up the achievements of Şāber in the development of Azeri literature in particular and as a poet and satirist in general, one should emphasize the originality of his themes, his versatility in using a wide variety of poetic forms in his satire and in adopting conversational and remarkably

witty language. In the words of the Italian scholar Alessio Bombacci: “In Sāber, the anger of Juvenal, the bitter remarks of Béranger, and the infinite humanity of Nekrassov are gathered in one.” (Ahmet Caferoglu, “Azerbycanin mizah şaerleri: Ali-Akbar Saber” Doğumünün 100 yili münasibbetiyle, Turklulturi, Ankara, no. 3, p. 15).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Nazim Akundov, *Azerbaycan Satira Journallari 1905-1920*, Baku, 1968.

Yaḥyā Ārianpur, *Az Şabā tā Nimā*, 2 vols., Tehran, 1973.

‘Ali-Akbar Deḥkodā, *Loġat-nāma*, under “Ṭāherzāda.” Asad Behrangi, *Şāber wa mo‘āşerin-e u*, Tabriz, 1979.

Mirza Ibrahimov, *Azerbaijani Poetry*, Moscow, 1969.

M. J. Ja‘farov, *Akundov va Sābir*, tr. into Persian by Aḥmad Şafā’i, Tabriz, 1977.

Hasan Javadi, “Ali-Akbar Sābir, The Poet Satirist of Azarbaijan,” in Sabri M. Akural, ed., *Turkic Culture Continuity and Change*, Bloomington, 1987.

Idem, *Satire in Persian Literature*, Rutherford, 1988.

Ja‘far Khandan, *Şabir*, Azerbaycan Elmler Akademisi, Baku, 1943.

Idem, “Buyuk Realist ve Akhlaqi Satir yazan Sābir,” *Azarbaijan* 6, Baku, 1952.

Idem, “Sābir ve social realism xxinci Azerbycan eddabitinda,” *InceSen’at* 27, Baku, 1956.

Moḥammad Payfun, *Naşriya-e Mollā Naşreddin payk-e enqelāb*, Tehran, 1979.

‘Ali-Akbar Şabir, *Hop Hop-nama*, ed. Abbas Zamanov, Baku, 1962.



Raĥim Şadriniyā, *Hop Hop zabāni barā-ye enqelāb*, Tehran, 1978.

Aĥmad Şafā'i, *Hop Hop Nama*, Baku, 1965 (a fine translation of *Hop Hop-nama* into Persian).

Abbas Zamanov, "Azadliq ve demokrasiya sha'eri," (on 45th anniversary of Şābir's death), *Işchi* 172, Baku, 1956.