

## a fragment from a manuscript titled *Khatarnaak Khavateen*

Words persist in the unlikeliest of places: in dark, unlit rooms, in the wilderness of decay, and in memory. The following excerpt is all that remains of an unfinished manuscript - written by Talatum “Adambezar” Khatun, \* b. 1896 in Lucknow – that defies and complicates traditional conceptions of genre. Khatun was the originator of a style termed *Adab-e-Awr*, † as exemplified by the fragment, which weaves history, poetry, memoir, and riffs on etymology to seamlessly produce an avant-garde and frankly, bizarre text. Little is known of Khatun’s life, except that she appears to have been somewhat of a rabble-rouser with no end in mind beyond the purpose of shock. She learnt English by making use of her father’s collection of dictionaries – he was a publisher – and through a line of tutors, each of whom left her house more exasperated than the last. Based on what we currently know, Khatun’s life is difficult to tell; difficult to determine; difficult to chart.

However, by way of detail, history furnishes three yellowing news reports from *The Pioneer*, the first of which places Khatun at the All India Ladies Conference in 1922. In an assembly of 400 women, Khatun – stifled by talk about definitions of purdah and the intricacies of inheritance – sprinted through the hall joyously screeching, “An al Haq! An al Haq!” while lobbing leaflets at passersby that contained a hagiography of Hazrat Babajan. Given the meagre information at our disposal, it is impossible to make a definitive statement about Khatun’s interest in Sufism. Additionally, an unsubstantiated anecdote claims that she spat on the Irish suffragette and Theosophist, Margaret Cousins, who was instrumental in arranging the conference. A second report from 1932 claims that Khatun was charged under a public nuisance clause, because she recited a rekhti and set her burkha on fire. The poem contained a preamble that denigrated the seminal practitioners of the genre (Insha, Rangin, Juraat, Jan Sahib and Qais) and declared their vision of womanhood myopic and false. The report also states that Khatun subverted the conventions of the chaptinama and roared a poem about her love for another poet, a courtesan, named Jahanara. Unfortunately, we have been unable to find any record of this poem. The final report places Khatun outside the Amir-ud-Daula Public Library in 1939, where she was burning novels written by a prominent writer and reformist, Nazar Hyder. Khatun castigated the heroines of the novels - *Akhtarunnisa Begum* (1910), *Surraiya* (1930), and *Najma* (1939) – as too respectable for her liking. She implored witnesses, “Awr apnao, ashraf ko bhagao!” These reports and some correspondence constitute the sum total of information about Khatun that is available at present.

The following fragment is Khatun’s anthology of *Adab-e-Awr*, an attempt to create a history through poetry of aberrant and deviant women writers in India. The entirety of the manuscript contained entries of fifty different women and was incomplete at the time of Khatun’s death. Our current understanding of the intended manuscript is that each page contained two entries on different women and that these entries were kept distinct by a middle column through which a poem about women snakes through. The existing excerpt contains two entries on Princess Zeb-un-Nissa and the courtesan Mah Laqa Bai. Zeb-un-Nissa’s takhallus is Makhfi (The Hidden One) and her collection of poems *Diwan-i-Makhfi* contains both ghazals and ruba’is. Mah Laqa Bai’s takhallus is Chanda (Moon) and her poetry was published under the title *Gulzar-e-Mahlaqa*, which is a collection of ghazals. Both texts were published posthumously as the public prefers its poets dead than alive. The entry on the second page is devoid of hints that point to a specific historical subject, and at one point Khatun briefly addresses the reader and herself. In a Lacanian moment, Khatun embodies the notion of dugana, a mirroring of the self, as she taunts the reader, “You cannot imagine me.” This theory is given credence by the fact that the entry descends into a repetitive and self-reflexive refrain, perhaps a commentary on the difficulty of biography, poetry, or any form of story-telling. Towards the end, Khatun loses the plot as any unity unravels into echoes.

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\* She shortened her name to T.A. Khatun in correspondence. Adambezar, which means misanthrope and can arguably be interpreted as misandrist, is Khatun’s takhallus.

† Adab means respect, etiquette, and literature, while awr is the Arabic root of Awrah or Aurat, which means defectiveness, blemish, imperfection, nakedness. Thus, we can think of Khatun’s style in a variety of ways, including but not limited to the literature of nakedness or the etiquette of imperfection.

Hidden away in a tower unbidden I speak,  
 I scream, I hiss, I despair because protest  
 remains my power, and I was made for  
 trouble, from turbid waters, muddied at  
 the root, and awry from the beginning, I  
 wonder if every عورت is condemned to  
 imperfection, faultiness, and deficiency  
 from birth or if these are the tall tales men  
 tell themselves to fall asleep at night and  
 to stay elevated in their seats, slaves to the  
 throne, unable to keep quiet, they boast of  
 hunts, conquest, and conflict, and of their  
 unfaithful lovers, their unquiet lovers,  
 their undeserved lovers, and their  
 ungrateful lovers, and reduce us to mere  
 adornment when we are in fact unhinged,  
 unruly, unsung for so long that all that's  
 left to do is roar, and screech, and shriek,  
 and cackle, and heckle at those that  
 support our imprisonment including our  
 fathers, and our husbands, and our lovers,  
 and our brothers, and our cousins, and  
 our sons, and even our friends who  
 despite secluding and sequestering us,  
 forget such spaces steam with subversion  
 and sedition, slowly and steadily because  
 in the زنانہ women chitchat, spitfire, and  
 hurtle in ways unfathomable to others and  
 اڑو بیگیذ with daggers swashbuckle and  
 protect us from the prying eyes and  
 forceful whims of men both indifferent  
 and cruel but listen, listen, listen, I come  
 from a line of men ironwilled and  
 stonyfaced, bound by the limits of their  
 imaginations, confined to the borders of  
 their kingdoms, incapable and impervious  
 to the notion that I also come from a line  
 of women that're poets, dreamers,  
 storytellers, chroniclers, leaders, bearers  
 of flora and light, queens of the universe,  
 exalted beings, women who embody  
 every kind of magic that you can  
 imagine, women that are divine and can  
 shine through the night lighting up skies  
 of darkness with the moon-lit stories  
 they spin and spool, whole reams of text  
 at the behest of forces hidden in the  
 tapestry like me, like me, like me

مخفی

...ribelling from  
 Adam's cage the  
 khataranak  
 khavateen came  
 into the world  
 with a plunge  
 and not a fall,  
 with some  
 women  
 breathing fire,  
 buoyed by gusts  
 of wind and  
 lively breath,  
 while others  
 chose the cover  
 of night, but ran  
 amok wild fast  
 and loose,  
 encircling the  
 world in their  
 serpentine grip,  
 infiltrating and  
 spreading to  
 each nook and  
 cranny, with  
 men none the  
 wiser of what  
 was transpiring  
 under their  
 noses, in fact the  
 boom and  
 clamour of  
 men's voices -  
 they are victims  
 of their own  
 vanity - provided  
 cover to the  
 slow stamp of  
 steps, the pitter  
 patter of  
 rebellion  
 underfoot and  
 the men  
 unbeknownst,  
 unaware,  
 unsuspecting,  
 uninformed, and  
 unwitting of the  
 end that would

Around a طوائف they perform طواف and they  
 circle-orbit-surround but I break from the  
 circuit and hurtle restless-errant-rootless  
 because the four walls of a house could  
 never contain my multitudes, I spill out of  
 nooks and crannies, flooding and  
 illuminating every corner, and this is the  
 story of my celestial self, میری آپ بینی, my  
 journey as a moonfaced-mercurial-  
 mundivagant poet, running amok in the  
 streets of Hyderabad, leaving evanescent  
 verses in my wake that children try and  
 catch as they shimmer-gleam-glimmer for  
 what am I if not the supreme تماشا بین -  
 extravaganza-ostentation, what am I, if not a  
 revelation for those who look at me and are  
 driven mad and ecstatic, but gaze at your  
 own peril, mere mortals, poor mortals,  
 hapless mortals, they grasp and they gasp as  
 I buzz-careen-whizz past them, evading  
 death effervescently since my birth, my  
 mother, she paid a red ransom at a مزار,  
 while death briefly held me hostage, but I  
 babbled-gurgled-bubbled in my mother's  
 womb, creating merry havoc, alerting her to  
 the danger destined for me, reciting verses in  
 jabber-tongue, cherubic churning of the  
 unborn young, willing myself into this  
 world, because there's no other way to be, to  
 be, to be, I sing, I dance, I recite, I write, I  
 right infelicities with words because they  
 allow us to weave our way out of misery,  
 provide brief respite-distraction-delay from  
 the inevitable decay that will befall us all,  
 because I was born with a god-shaped hole  
 in my heart that I chose to fill with every bit  
 of life that I could find: walk-talk-shock,  
 live-love-loathe, but let me tell you a little  
 secret, an obvious one, I can't stop moving,  
 because when I was young, I absorbed all  
 the noise of the city, all the heat of the city,  
 all the joy of the city, and now all this gamut  
 of sound and light flows through my veins  
 throbbing and pulsating, and some days I  
 feel I'd burst with all the motion inside me,  
 and that is why I scamper-scuttle-scurry,  
 destined to hurry, for the rest of eternity,  
 with lightness and levity and burn my effigy

اور میرا نام ہے چندا

پیدائش سے آدم بیزار  
they wrenched me out after they cut my  
mother open as I'd wrapped the  
umbilical cord around my neck as one  
ties a noose in order to not fall loose and  
from the first I inspired compassionate  
clucks at the end of complaints to my  
mother who was beside herself with what  
to do with me and my abundance so it  
only made sense that by the time I could  
write a sentence it was the shape of a  
poem I'd written about the time I began  
bleeding and all the girls pointed at me  
with shrieks and exclamations forming  
an echo that reverberates in my brain  
when I'm tired and my sister panicked  
and took me home because my شلوار  
was a muddied red because real blood is  
never bright but dull and my mother was  
mortified to see her daughter draw so  
much attention even if it was inadvertent  
and she unleashed a barrage of words all  
rooted in the prefix of negation as she  
characterized my excess as unseemly  
undignified untoward unabashed  
unrepentant and that was the first time I  
felt unloved and unholy and unable to  
understand fully what prompted such  
vitriol especially now that I regard blood  
as a banal fact of life and neither worthy  
of worry or veneration but  
documentation at best and so from a  
budding poet I became a bloody poet,  
and what if I were to show you my  
person, my poems, shorn of a bejeweled  
idiom, the cups of wine spilt, the flowers  
wilted, and the bloody Beloved,  
vanquished and vanished, because میرا  
مرض میری مرضی ہے  
and I stupefy and stymie your  
understanding of what it means to be,  
and what if there is a third a fourth a  
fifth or infinite ways to be to being to  
becoming to belonging to be to being to

befall them at  
the weathered,  
wizened, and  
worthy hands of  
women called  
sluts,  
termagants,  
harlots, viragos,  
strumpets,  
shedevils,  
hookers, crones,  
tarts, hags,  
tramps, nags,  
molls, hustlers,  
harridans,  
vixens, harpies,  
hellcats, as if any  
of these are  
insults, with  
some  
snakehaired  
with tresses  
and  
ringlets that have  
a life of their  
own and are  
pernicious and  
pervasive,  
wrapping silkily  
around men and  
other women  
with hairless  
skulls curved  
and smooth like  
the earth began  
to  
shove, push, and  
butt their heads  
against forces  
that seek to  
control, crush  
and crucify but  
we won't let  
them, we'll get  
them, we'll ru...

تم میرا تصور نہیں کر سکتے

You cannot imagine me

تم میرا تصور نہیں کر سکتے

cannot imagine me

تم میرا تصور نہیں کر سکتے

imagine me

تم میرا تصور نہیں کر سکتے

me

تم میرا تصور نہیں کر سکتے

تم میرا تصور نہیں کر سکتے