

The Tragic Life of Rabia Balkhi

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The ancient city of Balkh, known as the mother of cities, is a myriad of destroyed historical sites in northern Afghanistan. Among the ruins is the shrine of Rabia Balkhi, the famous poetess who lived a thousand years ago.

The life of this young poetess is shrouded in mystery. She was the daughter of Ka'b, the ruler of Sajistan and Turan. She led an isolated life and from childhood roamed in the vineyards of the countryside and wrote inspiring poetry. The people of Balkh were so overwhelmed with her literary prowess they called her a bird with golden wings. She had an intimate relationship with natural beauty and had a special admiration for the gardens of her native land. Sitting beside the swift flowing streams and brooks of the orchards and gardens she would lapse into a contemplative mood to write her poetry.

One day while wandering in the gardens of Haris, her brother, who became the ruler after her father's death, she met Baktash, a slave in the court of Haris. The slave presented her with a flower as a token of his friendship and love. She immediately left the garden fearing someone may see her. It was this incident which intensified her poetic career and led to her tragic demise.

The pangs of love enveloped her life. From then on she lived in a dream world and spent day and night meditating about Baktash. Every word of her poetry was addressed to him. It was not long before the rumor of her romance reached her brother who stopped her from seeing Baktash. Unable to control her feelings she sent messages written in poetry to the slave who hid them in a jewelry box. Another slave, with whom Baktah shared his quarters, one day opened the box, hoping to find expensive jewels. To his surprise he only found some papers. He took the box to Haris and upon reading the notes realized they were love messages written by his sister to the slave which read:

I Wish my heart knew of my soul;
And my soul of my life's role.
I hope my love ends safe and sound
And escapes seduction all around.

You accuse me of love by a trick and fraud,
Oh how will you answer the omniscient God?
Without you I banish heaven; with you hell is worthy,
In your absence sugar is poison, with you poison honey.

Haris became infuriated after reading the messages and ordered his sister to be thrown into a hot bath with her veins slashed. The orders were carried out. After Rabia's death when

the attendants of the court entered the bath they found what the desperate Rabia had written on the wall with her own blood. Her last poem read:

I am caught in loves web so deceitful
None of my endeavors turned fruitful.
I knew not when I rode the high blooded steed
The harder I pulled its reigns the less it would heed.
Love is an ocean with such a vast space
No wise man can swim it in any place.
A true lover should be faithful to the end
And face life's reprobated trend.
If you see things hideous, fancy them neat
Eat poison, but taste sugar sweet.