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HABBA KHATOON'S POETRY: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

One aspect of feminist criticism is to undertake a study of literature written by women to examine their suppressed feelings, and experiences of female victimization. Studying the style, themes, and imagery of women writings reveals a distinctive feminine mode of feelings, experiences, and concerns. The present paper is an analysis of Habba Khatoon's poetry to study the style, themes, and imagery of her poetry through which she expressed her feminine sensibility. Habba Khatoon, a sixteenth-century poetess and the queen of Yusuf Chak is a cultural icon in Kashmir who is known for her lyrical excellence and musical compositions. Her poetry is an expression of female consciousness and experiences of a woman marginalized in a patriarchal society. Poetry acts as a vehicle through which she vents out the suppression of the struggles of her traumatic and tragic life.

**Keywords:** Habba Khatoon, Kashmiri Literature, Feminism, Gynocriticism

Although women's writing as a field of study has developed since the 1960s, women over the centuries and across the globe have stood out for suppression of their identity in the patriarchal society by expressing their experiences and feelings into words. Their writings expose their repressed desires, anxiety, and dissatisfaction with their subjugation down the ages. However, these writings were not included in the literary canon and were only a part of their personal experiences. The second wave of feminism as literary tradition aims to study undertakes a study of the literature produced by women who were ignored and disregarded due to gender bias. This paper is an attempt to study one such woman poet, Habba Khatoon, whose poetry remained alive mostly through oral tradition and was absent from the collective official history of Kashmir. By expressing her personal experiences, struggle, and thoughts she stands for the dilemmas of the women psyche, in general, securing her an eminent place in the Kashmiri women literary tradition. The paper has been divided into three sections to study Habba Khatoon's life, work, and style. In the first section, feminist theory is discussed and the feminist lens and her life is done. In the second section, her unique poetic style and theme of her poetry is analysed. The third section studies the employment of feminine imagery in her poems.

One of the main efforts of feminist criticism in the 1970s was to give new prominence to neglected women writers. This phase of feminist criticism where the attention was shifted from 'androtex- books by men' to 'gynotex- books by women' aimed at the assessment and evaluation of the female literary canon. Showalter, who coined the word Gynocriticism, has observed one of the aspects of feminist criticism is to expose the "exclusion of women from literary history" (Showalter, The New 5). Gynocriticism studies feminine aspects of

literature written by women that aim to interrogate female authorship, feminine experience, ideology, and images to be included in the female literary canon. This field of study proposed by Showalter in her *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* covers “the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics of female creativity” (184). Gynocriticism also studies the impact of female writers in the cultural tradition to understand their accomplishments and oppression. The study in this field continues to evolve.

In the cultural tradition of Kashmir, Habba Khatoon’s position is unmatched. Her emotional and romantic poetry and the tragic story of her life have left an indelible impact on the folk memory of Kashmiri people. However, even though Habba Khatoon occupies one of the highest positions as a cultural figure of Kashmir, she has remained ignored in history books, chronicles of literary history, or academic writings. The earliest reference to her is made in Abdul Wahab Shaayak’s *Tareekh-e-Kashmir* (1756), two hundred years after her death. In the book, she is mentioned as Habibah, a singer in the court of Yusuf Shah Chak and not as a poet. The work doesn’t delineate details about her life and work. However, despite her underrepresentation in the official canon, her importance in the cultural tradition in the Kashmiri society can be noticed through several songs, movies, plays, and serials based on her life and work in the folk and popular culture. Habba Khatoon is a representative of women issues of her times. The underrepresentation of Habba Khatoon in the official canon and the articulation of women feelings and suffering through her unique style of poetry augment the need to study the life and works of Habba Khatoon through the feminine aspect. Khatoon and her successor, Arnimal, an eighteenth-century Kashmiri poet have been called as “original feminists in that they foreground women’s issues and expose the cruelties they suffer” (Matto 85).

Habba Khatoon, a sixteenth-century poetess, is one of the most remarkable literary and cultural figures of Kashmiri literature and life. Her poetic expression which is characteristically romantic, melancholic, and nostalgic reflects her life story as a distressed woman subjected to male oppression. She was the queen of Yusuf Shah Chak, the last ruler of Kashmir. Famously called the Queen of Song<sup>1</sup> and Nightingale of Kashmir<sup>2</sup>, her songs are known for their remarkable spontaneity and melody. She is a constant source of inspiration to the Kashmiri women poets, who along with Lal Ded has left a mark on the Kashmiri feminine sensibility.

As Kashmiri poetry mostly existed in oral tradition up to 1930, her life has mostly been documented through oral conventions and folk legends. A widely recognized narrative of her life is that she was born in a small village, Chandahar in Pampore to a peasant named Abdi Rather. She studied from the village *maktab* where she learned the Holy Quran and few Persian classics. She was named Zoon (which translates to Moon in English) and was known for her beauty, intelligence, enchanting voice, and spontaneous composition of verses. She was married to a peasant, Aziz Rathar at an early age who did not appreciate the gift of her impressive lyrical composition and melodious singing which brought her fame amongst the rural folk.

Due to her inability to conform to the traditional standards of a daughter-in-law, she was ill-treated by her husband and mother-in-law and later divorced. She found an escape from her unhappy married life through songs that portray the agony of an abandoned wife and a tormented daughter-in-law. It is believed that once passing by the prince, Yusuf Chak, who later ascended to the throne of King, fell in love with her because of her charming looks and captivating voice, and made her his queen. But her happiness was short-lived and after fourteen happiest years of her life, Kashmir was invaded by the Mughals and Yusuf Chak was exiled to Bihar by Akbar. Distressed by her fate, she renounced the palace life and spent the rest of her life on the outskirts of the city in a small hut where she spent her time singing and composing songs in memory and longing for her beloved.

### Poetic Style of Habba Khatoon and Themes of Her Poetry

One aspect of the feminist study is the analysis of female consciousness, female experiences and psyche in women’s literature. According to Freud libido is male in essence irrespective of whether it appears in a male or a female, and that the female libido doesn’t have its original nature. Feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir in her *Second Sex* denounced the male bias of the psychoanalytic philosophy of Freud. Freud’s philosophy holds the views that due to the lack of male anatomy women suffer “penis envy” and feel intellectually inferior.

To feminists Freud's theory is flawed and on analyzing Habba Khatoon's poetry it can be noted that her poetry is original in nature. She promulgated a tradition of her own and has been called the "most musical lyricist of Kashmir." (Kachru 26). In addition to the female expression of love and musical lyrics, she is credited with introducing a new art form- *lol* lyric (love lyric) to poetry. "*Lol*- lyrics" is a term coined by J.L Kaul which is a lyric longing for love that ranges from six to 10 lines and generally includes a refrain. Habba Khatoon is known for initiating 'watsun', a form of *lol* lyric that comprises three-line stanzas followed by a refrain. Her 'watsun' lyric stays preserved in Kashmiri classical music, *Soofiyana Kalam*. (Vaklu 200)

During her time at the palace of Yusuf Chak after her marriage, she got the opportunity to develop her musical talents and it was during this time she introduced the melody *Rast Kashmiri*. Also, her use of colloquial language at the time when Persian was the official language at the court represents the revival of the Kashmiri language. The native diction and expression of romantic love coupled with the tense and vivid passion of her poetry continue to capture the emotions of the common masses to the present day. Her *lols* are known for their "spontaneity and extreme simplicity of diction" (Kachru, 29).

Feminist criticism refutes the view that great literature is written by men and women depend on male predecessors for writing. Habba Khatoon's poetry is exemplary of its originality and uniqueness as her poetry neither depends on the male writers or any other predecessor. Rather, she influenced famous male poets like Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor and Dina Nath Kaul. Kashmiri poetry increased its range of interest inheriting from Habba Khatoon's folklorish quality. ( Tikku 156)

Comparing her poetry to the norms of the time, G. L. Tikku writes:

contrary to the traditions of Persian poetry, Habba asserted the Indian tradition of love, where woman and not the man is the lover. This differs from contemporary Persian poetry in Kashmir, for example in Sarfi's *mathnavis*, where the Persian tradition has been followed. (81)

Also, during her lifetime Persian was the official language and also the language of scholarship. Her use of Kashmiri provides an insight into the lives of Kashmiri women as her poetry encapsulated the social norms and constraints put on women.

Through her poetry, she reveals the "internalized consciousness" of women and their experiences, a subject which was mostly considered shameful and embarrassing for her times. At the time when most Kashmiri poetry was concerned with spirituality and divinity, her songs expressed her desire for a "personal substantive love" (Kalla 201) and she did not hesitate in expressing her anguish of separation from the lover. Her non-mystical poetry depicts a women's emotional experience, of personal relationships, and of human love at a time when mystical traditions of Persian Sufi poetry and Bhakti poetry were the norms. The following lines portray her perpetual longing for love.

I've waited long and patiently  
My heart is numb and idle and  
empty of hopes.  
Sweet is the ritual of love.  
I would deck my love with ornaments  
And in henna dye his hands.  
I would anoint his body with  
fragrant kisses  
And offer him wine in golden goblets.  
The lotus of love blooms in the lake  
of my heart.

Say, friend, when will fate smile on  
me  
Go forth and call him, friend,  
I've made posies of flowers for him  
Over passes high I carried him wine  
But he is roaming mid distant glades. ( Sandhu 19)

She also expresses her feminine self and thoughts in the poems from the first-person point of view through which she not only gained affection and familiarity from the common Kashmiri people but also throws light onto her personal life. The employment of "I" in her poetry reveals pieces of her, otherwise, undocumented autobiographical details like her illuminating personality, oppression in a patriarchal society, unrequited love, and discontented family relationships. She also expresses the wide acclaim she had for her beauty and lyrical verses through her poetry.

Her solely feminine writings universalize the emotion and traumas of women who are treated as the "other". The following verse of her poem demonstrates her use of "I" and her name to express despondency and helplessness of being unable to express her talent due to the male-centric society. Much of her autobiographical details can be uncovered from her the themes and subject of her poems itself. The following verses delineate biographical details of her life before marriage and the fame she received because of her beauty and poetry:

I left home to play and was absorbed  
in it  
Till the day sank in the west  
I came of a noble family which gave  
me  
Dignity and name  
Many a lover was drawn towards me  
Till the day sank in the west.  
Within the house I stayed hidden  
from view  
Once outside, my name was on every  
tongue,  
Hermits, in their urge to see me  
gave up their penance in the  
woods.  
My shop was loaded with stock.  
And the world was keen to see it,  
My precious wares exposed, (lost)  
the prices crashed  
As the day, alack, sank in the  
West. ( Sandhu 41)

Gynocriticism aims at identifying feminine subjects in literary works written by women such as domesticity, nurturing woman-family relations, woman-woman relationships. A gynocritical analysis of Habba Khatoon's poetry represents the distress of being a female. The theme of domesticity and family relations is articulated in her poetry which portray the prejudice and ill-treatment she received from her in-laws. As is in any patriarchal society where a young woman is considered incapable of guarding herself, Khatoon's father, afraid of her growing fame, married her at an early age to a peasant boy. Her husband didn't value her talent and it was a period of physical torture, and mental agony for her.

Her poetry portrays her psychological attachment with her paternal home and her longing for an emotional connection. It is commonly accepted that she was educated, but she was married to an illiterate peasant who didn't value her talents. The physical torture and the mental agony she suffered at her husband's home finally resulted in a divorce. Through her poetry she doesn't only express her own personal experience but also presents the ordeals of the common Kashmiri women victimized by the patriarchal system Habba Khatoon had an unstable and hostile relationship with her husband and her mother-in-law which she expresses in these 'watsun' verses :

All is not well with me at my  
husband's house  
Rid me of my troubles, my father's  
clan

I left home to fetch water from the  
stream  
My tender parents, the waterpot  
broke  
Either replace the broken pot or  
Pay for it, I beseech you  
All is not well with me at my  
husband's house.

My youthful frame is wasting  
Mounting the uplands has become  
backbreaking  
My feet are blistered, gathering  
Herbs  
Salt is spreading over my wounds  
All is not well with me at my  
husband's house

Falling exhausted on the spinning  
wheel  
I broke the shaft.  
My mother-in-law seized me by the  
hair  
Worse than death was it to me  
All is not well with me at my  
husband's house (Sandhu 23)

### **Feminine Imagery in Habba Khatoon's Poetry**

Images act as symbols of emotions and thoughts. The study of feminine imagery is often used for a feminist reading of a writer. Feminist theorists examine the imagery used by women writers to uncover the underlying symbolism women writers use to express themselves and their circumstances. Habba Khatoon's poetry is replete with images of nature that depict her own marginalized and oppressed position.

S.L. Sadhu writes about this aspect of Habba Khatoon:

We are nevertheless impressed with her familiarity with wild nature: jasmine, basil, musk-rose, dandelion, menthe, cress, water-chestnut, almonds, pomegranates, mulberry, parrots, larks, bulbuls, freshet, stream, etc. Perhaps it is in harmony with feminine nature that she does not involve gigantic deodars,

mighty lions, crafty owls or other gross or coarse objects in finding an utterance for her emotional reaction. (49)

The concept of relating nature with women dates back to ancient times as nature is seen as the embodiment of women's characteristics like domesticity, simplicity, kindness, reproduction, and beauty. The following verse of Khatoon's poetry demonstrates the imagery of jasmine flowers, herbs, woods, and water to depict her feminine sensibility and longing for her beloved. Contrasting it with death, decay, wounding, and poison her poems depicts the pain caused by the unrequited love.

Let us go, friend, to gather jasmine  
Once dead, none can enjoy life  
I crave for your prosperity, love  
Come, O come, my flowery Cupid

Let us go, friend, to gather basil  
Wounding my heart with the axe  
He disdains even to enquire of me  
Come, O come, my flowery Cupid

Let us go, friend, to gather herbs  
Heartless people make fun of me  
Would that they were in a similar  
plight  
Come, O come my flowery Cupid

Let us go, friend, to the woods  
People poison his ears against me  
Naively he gives credence to these  
tales  
Come, O come my flowery Cupid

Let us go, friend, to fetch water  
The world is fast asleep, my love  
I yearn for a response from you  
Come, O come, my flowery Cupid (Sandhu 21)

The present study explored the unparalleled position of Habba Khatoon as a literary and cultural personality of Kashmir under a feminist lens. A feminist analysis of Habba Khatoon's poetry shows that despite her tragic life in a patriarchal and male-dominated society, she stood firm and explored her creativity and poetic expression. She explored her individuality through her own unique style which depicts her feminine sensibility and female victimization. It can also be seen that while her desire for love causes her unendurable pain, she doesn't try to escape her suffering through worldly pleasures. Rather, for her the only escape is poetry through which she vents out her emotions. Her "internalized consciousness" echoes in the romantic style and themes of her poetry, and in her individuality establishing her as one of the most important female literary personalities of Kashmir.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Raina, Trilokinath. *HabbaKhatoon, Arinmal, The Queens of Song*, Indialog Publications, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Vakhlu, S.N. "The Nightingale of Kashmir." *The Literary Heritage of Kashmir*, edited by K.L Kalla, Mittal Publications, 1985, pp.198-208<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> G. L. Tikku, *Persian Poetry in Kashmir*, 81.

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