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Representation of Women in the History of Kashmiri Literature

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Abstract:

Women have always been a neglected group of individuals and the histories of various literatures are a scathing proof of this fact. Wherever they find a representation, it is through the agency of male interlocutors. The history of Kashmiri literature is also a discourse saddled by discrimination against women poets. Lalla and Habba Khatoon are the only two women poets acknowledged by the mainstream history. These names are popular in every household of Kashmir and evoke much love and respect. However, the histories of these poets are also shrouded with male prejudices and are essentially biased in their explorations of the lives and contributions of these poets. Such histories deny them their identity as women poets, instead mystifying their poetic sensibilities as supernatural abilities. The other minor poets are also not represented adequately and majority of them are even left out of these histories. The aim of this paper is to portray how the discrimination against Kashmiri women poets is standardized in the history of Kashmiri literature.

Keywords: Kashmir, Women's poetry, Feminist, History, Representation.

Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* published in 1977 marked the beginnings of a creative exploration of feminist literary studies. The book laid bare the long but neglected tradition of women writers in England. Showalter argued that women have had a literary subculture of their own. Although they are known as "sociological chameleons" (11), meaning that they imbibe the manners and culture of their male relatives, women have been self-aware and established a subculture based on common experiences. They have arisen in the face of a male dominant culture to assert their voices. There have been many lacunae in the female literary tradition as the women who managed to achieve some success were forgotten after their lifetime and no record of them was made in the history. Therefore, as Showalter says, "each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew"

(11). In a sense, women have always been alienated from a collective history. It is with this understanding I propose to engage with the status of women poets in Kashmiri literature. Apart from a few well known poets (the chosen ones), the representation of women in Kashmiri literature is negligible. The aim of this paper is to portray in what manner male historiography represents these chosen few while turning a blind eye to others.

Braj B. Kachru divides the history of Kashmiri literature into five phases: The Beginnings (1300-1500), Early Middle Period (1500-1750), The Middle Period (1750-1900), The Modern Period (1900-1947) and The Renaissance (1947 onwards). The first authentic Kashmiri verses were provided by the Shaivaite mystic, Lallesvari. It can be said that the foundations of Kashmiri literature were laid by a woman poet and her popularity has still not diminished as is evident by the recent scholarly works related to her poetry. The Early Middle Period had yet another woman poet namely Habba Khatoon, who developed the *lol*¹ lyric. She is a part of the Kashmiri oral tradition. Apart from these two stalwarts, two other women poets contributed majorly to Kashmiri literature. Arnimaal continued the *lol* tradition of Kashmiri poetry and Rupa Bhawani continued the *vaakh*² tradition started by Lalla. With the end of Early Middle Period, a period of silence begins in Kashmiri women's poetry. The other periods have no traces of women poets or authors and the major Kashmiri woman poet after Rupa Bhawani is Naseem Shafaie whose first collection of poetry was published as recent as 1999.

There is no female voice in Kashmiri literature for about three centuries. Although Kashmiri literary history began with a woman poet and the two major genres of poetry were started by women poets, a huge gap exists in the history of women's representation after them. The history books have conveniently forgotten the names of many women poets and sometimes we only witness a passing reference to poets like Tulsi (Tul Mastani), Asha Kumari (Asha), Mehmooda Jabeen and Jawahira Bano among many others. It seems like a few "great" poets overshadow other "less great" poets, who, consequently, are left out of anthologies and history books. It is quite evident that male historiography is a biased one where women who emerge as successful are not seen in terms of their gender as Showalter says, "Finding it difficult to think intelligently about women writers, academic criticism has often overcompensated by de-sexing them" (8). Lalla and Habba Khatoon, the most beloved and revered poets of Kashmir are not

essentially perceived as ‘women’ poets. They evoke such respect and love due to the mysticism and power equation associated with them.

Lalla or Lal Ded was a mystic poet whose sayings, called *vaakhs*, are the first metrical forms of Kashmiri poetry. She was born in first half of the fourteenth century at Pandrethan and was married into a Brahmin family at Pampore. Her family priest, Siddha Shrikanth, was her teacher and introduced her to certain spiritual disciplines. He is popularly known as Sedha Mol (Father Siddha) who laid the foundations of Kashmiri Shaivism. She eventually renounced the worldly pleasures and often roamed around alone or with other *sadhus*. In popular legends Lalla is often perceived as a mystic roaming around semi-nude/nude in the streets and her verses are said to be a form of revelations. A.N Dhar says, “It is essentially through the vakhs, which she uttered as direct outpourings from her heart rather than as consciously wrought poetic compositions; that Lalla became very popular as a saint-poet in Kashmir.”³ Such representations neglect her creativity as a poet and ascribe her poetic ability to supernatural revelations. However, Lalla was born with a sharp poetic sense and a flair for language. Even before the renunciation, she had a poetic understanding of circumstances surrounding her. In one instance when her friends teased her about the lavish food cooked at her home on a particular day, she replied:

Hond maary`tan kina kath

Lali nalavath tsali na zaanh

Whether they kill a ram or a lamb

Lal always has her big round stone⁴

It was a heartbreaking moment as she expressed the cruelty of her mother-in-law who almost starved her by serving a big round stone with a layer of rice covering it.

In popular legends as well as in her representation as a poet, she is seen as possessing supernatural abilities, thus, sabotaging her identity as a woman. Such undermining is not new in the genre of mysticism. Although, in mysticism, a woman enjoys equal rights as that of a man, she is still perceived as a “man of God.”⁵ Again the name of Rabia al-Adawiyya or Rabia of Basra heralds the beginning of the actual mystical movement in Islam. She transformed the

feelings of asceticism into a genuine form of mysticism. She elicits deep respect and reverence from all the followers of mysticism. She is also referred to as “the Crown of Men.” Both Lalla and Rabia are put on a pedestal by their followers, not as great women poets, but as emissaries of the heavenly voice.

Lalla’s *vaakhs* do not essentially talk about discrimination and subjugation faced by women. She talks more about the businesses of men, be it artisans or merchants, than the domestic lives of women. Such absence of expression does not necessarily typify an absence of feeling. It is not a collective representation, but, she asserts her individual identity throughout the cluster of her sayings as is evident by the recurring use of “I, Lalla.” There is no doubt that she was a mystic but she was a poet too. Her contribution to the development of Kashmiri language is huge. Most of the common proverbial sayings are attributed to her. All poets who came after her were inspired by her poetry.

Habba Khatoon inaugurated an era of melodious verse in the history of Kashmiri literature. The earliest references in history books portray her as a great singer and mistress at the court of King Yousuf Shah Tsak. It is even believed that he married her and their story is a part of popular Kashmiri oral narratives, though, there is no definite historical proof of their romantic relationship. She was originally from Pampore and born with a natural poetic talent, therefore, her parents educated her at a village school. She was then married at a young age. Her marriage did not last long due to the rustic nature of her husband but the tales of her beauty and melodious voice spread far and wide resulting in her appointment at the King’s court. After she was associated with the royal court, her fame increased exponentially and soon her songs were a part of every household.

The themes of her poetry, like many folk songs, are exuberance of love, throes of separation, cruelty of her in-laws and love for her parent’s home. She universalizes her personal feelings and never deviates from these themes. Even after being associated with the court and living a luxurious life for some time, she stuck to her roots, for “she was of the earth” as Trilokinath Raina puts it (48). Habba Khatoon is a household name in Kashmir and it is not wrong to say that the legends associated with her are more famous than with any other poet. She is heavily romanticized as a lady in distress opining after her lost husband, the King. She roams around from door to door in search of her husband and sings songs of longing. Such

representation, even though oral, finds its way in some of the official histories without any definite proof.

A typical example of how male historiography portrays influential women is the historical novel *Habba Khatoon: Nightingale of Kashmir* by S.N. Wakhlu. It tells the parallel stories of Habba Khatoon and King Yousuf. Habba, originally named Zoon is always seen through a male gaze with her silken robes and embroidered clothes epitomizing her beauty and elegance. She composes and sings songs of love in such a voice which is enough for anyone to fall in love with her. The novel overlooks history with stories of black magic, prophecies, bad and good omens looming around from time to time. It is as if the universe is conspiring to bring Zoon and Yousuf together because it is only after meeting him, she can be the 'lucky star' as prophesized at her birth. The original intention of the author is typified by the statements he makes in the Preface to this novel, "Habba Khatton was such a soulmate to Yousuf Shah. Singing her love-lyrics, she moved like Cinderella through the pageantry of the "Yusufean" scene" (ix).

It is against such representation many feminist critics like Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter and Kate Millet have protested in their works. In *The Second Sex* (1989), Beauvoir contends that men have written all of women's history. Women are mythologized in their literary representations and portrayed as the mysterious other. Habba Khatoon was an original woman poet but she is seen as an 'object' which deserves to be embellished and adorned. Wakhlu paints a romantic picture of Habba Khatoon in words such as:

There she lay the fairest thing. The web of dark hair flowed all about her. One white rounded arm made a pillow for her head. Her rich lips were parted in a smile, showing the ivory lines of teeth and her rosy limbs were draped in a thin robe of silk held about her by a jeweled girdle so that the white gleam of flesh shone through it (151).

Such idealized image of 'angel in the house' popularized by oral narratives is one of the most degrading factor to the representation of women poets like Habba. She is one of the most influential Kashmiri woman of all times and such narratives distort her historical significance as the poet of Kashmir. Many of the official histories do not mention her at all. The earliest reference to her is made in Abdul Wahab Shaayak's *Tareekh-e-Kashmir* (1756). It is a brief description of her as Habeeba, a great singer in the Royal Court. There is no mention of her being a poet. The other historical references are no different from Wakhlu's novel focusing on

her meeting with Yousuf Shah and their relationship.⁶ The feminist critique of such historical representations of women is quite right in its contention that men have always portrayed women as the 'other' and denied them a place in the collective histories of their nations.

Rupa Bhawani was also a mystic poet. She was born in Srinagar and like her predecessors suffered from trials and tribulations of early marriage. Eventually, she renounced all worldly relations and meditated for twelve years at Chashma Sahibi.⁷ She is popularly known as Alkeshwari (Divinity of the Lock of Hair) and Alak Ishwari (Incarnation of the Invisible). There is no written record of her *vaakhs* and they are not as popular as Lalla's because of their intricate nature. The language of her *vaakhs* is heavily Sanskritized making it difficult for a common man to understand them. It also seems that they are deliberately kept obscure as "devotees, afraid to incur the saint's displeasure, refuse to explain the sacred secrets; probably they themselves know precious little of what they recite or contemplate in blind admiration" (Bazaz 167). Once again another woman poet's work is shrouded in mystery and enigma instead of efforts to make it intelligible to people. What is told us is that she was not only a mystic, but a social reformer too. She eradicated the practices of bigamy and polygamy in her followers, the Dhars, a Kashmiri Pandit surname.

Arnimaal was born in Palhalan in a respectable household. She was married early and grew up with her husband, idolizing him. Her husband, Bhawani Das was educated and rose to a position of eminence very early in his life. Blinded by the pleasures of upper class world, he grew apart from his wife leaving her heartbroken. She shifted back to her home in Palhalan where she was inspired by nature to compose poetry. Her lyrics are written in *lol* tradition but have an extraordinary sensuousness about them. Arnimaal, though an exceptional poet, is not as famous as Habba Khatoon because there are no unprecedented legends surrounding her. Irrespective of this, Arnimaal was a poet of the people and used spoken language best for the songs to be sung. Her poems have an atmosphere of unrelieved gloom. Unfortunately, she is seen as a subordinate to Habba Khatoon and often compared to her. Her individuality as a poet is clouded by that of her predecessor.

Although Arnimaal is not perceived as a major poet, the histories of Kashmiri literature do not mention any woman poet or author after her. One is bound to wonder if women were not composing any lyrics or if it was a deliberate silencing of women. Modern Kashmiri poet

Naseem Shafaie reiterates that every woman living in Kashmir is a poet, be it a mother cuddling her child in her lap or a woman rejoicing over some good news. She shares the apprehensions of feminist critics when she says, “I believe that there must have been some anonymous, unsung poetesses whose verses remained shut and hazed in their wedded locks and boxes.”⁸ Naseem Shafaie, herself, is the first woman poet of Kashmir who is conscious of her feminist identity. She portrays the inner feelings of women with such affectation that her poems emerge as a mirror to the patriarchal society.

In the above mentioned work, Elaine Showalter also talks about how extraordinary women are dependent on ordinary women for their self-awareness as female authors. The historical investigations do not focus on the daily conflicts and challenges faced by ordinary women. She says, “If we want to define the ways in which “female self-awareness” has expressed itself in the English novel, we need to see the woman novelist against the backdrop of the women of her time, as well as in relation to other writers in history” (9). The living conditions of ordinary women provide us a measure with which to evaluate the contributions of extraordinary women. Almost all the scholarly works on Lalla and Habba Khatoon never appraise them with respect to the lives of ordinary women of their times. They are portrayed as women who received the ‘gift the God’ and should not be compared with the rustic and bucolic women. Due to such flawed illustrations, there is a need for a different approach to characterize history of Kashmiri literature with a focus on unearthing of lost works and making it a collective representation without any discrimination.

Notes:

1. B.B. Kachru says that *lol* tradition is similar to Hindi *geet* in stylistic terms. It has three characteristics: it conveys one mood, it expresses a feeling of longing, and it emphasizes romantic love. It comprises of *vatsun* (song) where the opening line is called *hur* and the second *vakhanai* (the refrain). It is a highly rhythmic form which is meant to be sung, hence, the most popular poetic form.
2. Trilokinath Raina defines *vaakh* as a sententious, gnomic, four-lined stanza, complete and independent in itself. It has a compact style and the metre is accentual. A *vaakh* does not run into a next *vaakh* except a number of Lalla’s *vaakhs* which take the form of question and answer.

3. Quoted in Hoskote pp. xxxviii.
4. Trans by Trilokinath Raina
5. For further discussion, see Schimmel, Preface pp. 15
6. For a detailed discussion on historical representations of Habba Khatoon see Raina, pp. 14-23.
7. Chashme Sahibi was a spring discovered by Rupa Bhawani. Later a garden was constructed around the spring by Shah Jahan. It is now a famous garden called Chashme Shahi (The Royal Spring).
8. Interview with Imran Yousuf.

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