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Comparing Mira Bai with Lal Ded, and Habba Khatoon

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Abstract:

Lal Ded and Habba Khatoon are two Kashmiri women poets who share commonalities with Bhakti poet Mira Bai. Within the comparative framework the paper would try to explore these commonalities in their poetry. The selection of these three women poets would throw some light on the syncretism in the Sufi and Bhakti tradition as upheld by Lal Ded and Mira Bai respectively in their poetry. This paper would not be just an intercultural comparative analysis of Lal Ded and Mira; it would also engage us intra-culturally. This analysis would be done within the framework of literary historiography. From Lal Ded to Habba Khatoon, we see a shift from the Sufi poetry to the romantic poetry. It is this “idea of literary history” which helps us to have a holistic understanding of these poets irrespective of their socio-cultural background, and the different temporal settings they live in. The aim of this paper is to explore their voices against the patriarchy. For this, the paper shall closely observe a few works of the above mentioned women poets and see, how their ideology of self determination sets them apart not only from the women of their times, but also many women of contemporary times.

Keywords: Bhakti poetry, Literary historiography, Romantic poetry, Sufi poetry.

Lal Ded and Habba Khatoon are two Kashmiri women poets who share commonalities with Bhakti poet Mirabai. Within the comparative framework, the paper would try to explore these commonalities in their poetry. The selection of these three women poets would throw some light on the syncretism in the Sufi and Bhakti tradition as upheld by Lal Ded and Mirabai respectively in their poetry. Sisir Kumar Das argues in his essay, *The Idea of Literary History* that there are the various “‘facts’ of literary history” which increase the “‘possibility of its multiplicity as well” (42). The multiplicity of literary history makes it possible to trace the literary history of these three different poets also. Sisir Kumar Das further argues in third section of the same essay that “Changes can be ‘internal’, i.e. certain rearrangements of items or innovations within the system leading to a noticeable difference, and thus opening up the possibilities of introducing something that did not exist before” (Das 44). The paper would try to explore the “‘internal’ changes and innovations within” the poetry of Habba Khatoon “that did not exist before”. Habba Khatoon’s shift to romantic poetry and her *Lol* “did not exist” in the poetry of Lal Ded “leading to a noticeable difference” in the form itself as Lal Ded wrote her poetry in the Vakh form. It is not just in the inter-cultural comparative analysis of Lal Ded and Mirabai that we see a lot of differences or similarities; these can be traced in our intra-cultural study of Lal Ded and Habba Khatoon as well. This would help us to have a holistic literary overview of these poets. This would be a new literary and poetic history. Therefore, the paper would try to link these three women poets with the framework of historiography. It becomes a bit problematic as these poets do not just have the diachronic variations among themselves; they

have also the synchronic variations. Their synchrony can be seen both linguistically and geographically. Mira is from Gujrat whose poems are written in Hindi language while Lal Ded and Habba Khatoon are from Kashmir with a different language of their own. Still such a study is possible through an approach that was proposed by Rene Wellek in his essay "The Problems of Comparative Literature". "His aim is ethical as much as methodological: he calls at his essay's close for an expansive vision of humanity expressed in the transnational and transhistorical patterns of art (qtd. in Damrosch xiii). This analysis would be done within the framework of literary historiography. From Lal Ded to Habba Khatoon, we see a shift from Sufi poetry to the romantic poetry. It is not that Habba Khatoon is just challenging "the expectations" of those who would appreciate the Sufi poetry of Lal Ded instead of any romantic poetry but she is also here to "extent the horizon" of their expectations (qtd. in Chanda ii-iv). The aim of this paper is to explore the voices of these three women poets against the patriarchy. For this, the paper shall closely observe a few of their works and see, how their ideology of self-determination sets them apart not only from the women of their times, but also many women of contemporary times. Sisir Kumar Das argues that "there can be changes caused by cultural borrowings or foreign influences, which can be identified as external changes" (44). The changes caused by Habba's "use of a particular Persian metre" in her poetry that was suggested to her by Sayed Mubarak are external and not internal (Mujeeb 167). Syed Mubarak, himself a poet, has persuaded Habba Khatoon for singing. Her "love of music... offended the susceptibilities" of those who thought music to be frivolous as "the Muslim *sharia* 'ah condemns frivolity" (Mujeeb 167-68).

Kashmir is a state with a primarily Muslim population. That does not change the fact that prior to the insurgency during the 1990's a large number of pandits co-existed in the valley with relative peace and harmony. Our study shall first take us to the syncretism of Lal Ded that symbolized the value system pervading most of medieval Kashmir. As was and continues to be the plight of many women in India, Lalla was married off into a family highly incompatible with her. Her mother-in-law would beat her up for minute errors and not give her enough food to eat by putting stones underneath the food served to make plates look full. A defeated Lalla would look on as her relatives ate mutton and she had stones to nurse. Hers would have been one of neglect and non-significance if she did not take the course of her life in her own hands, and continued to suffer quietly. In what is an extremely radical act even by the prevalent standards of today, Lalla simply got up and left her home. She wandered far and wide in the valley until she was exposed to the Shaivite principles. Of the many influences on her, that of Shankaracharya was significant. Slowly but steadily Lalla adopted the ways of the Shaivite:

Let me mock at me and call me names.

If a true devotee of Shiva I be.

I shall not feel distressed nor hurt.

Can a few ashes a mirror befoul? (Kaul)

As if leaving home like this was not enough, Lalla is known to have vehemently opposed the idea that she had any singular religious or spiritual teacher. Even though some of her sayings known as *Vakhs* mention a 'Guru' one must not assume that a literal person. Lalla's training in spiritualism was acquired through her wanderings with the various hermits and their groups:

My Guru gave me but one precept:
 “From without withdraw your gaze within,
 And fix it on the Inmost Self”
 Taking to heart this one precept,
 Naked I began to roam, (Kaul 97)

Like Mirabai the Rajput princess who broke free from the shackles of matrimony and patriarchy, Lalla roamed the wilderness without a care for her physical appearance. Like Mira Bai she too was on a spiritual search but her search was focussed on a Nirguna God. To her God and the higher power that guides all of creation was not a beautiful flirtatious prince. S/he/it was formless and part of the eternal void. Everything emerged from and eventually dissolved in this void. Mira is the only women in the family of major North Indian bhakti poets. Stratton Hawley argues in his in book *Three Bhakti Voices* that “Priyadas makes it plain that when Mira, princess of Merta, was married to the son of another royal Rajput family..., she mouthed the mantras but in her heart she dedicated them to Krishna, not her earthly gloom”(128). This rejection of the “earthly gloom” can be seen a protest of Mira against the male patriarchy itself. But her way of protest is different, she does not raise her voice against the male patriarchy directly. She rather raises her voice in love for Krishna that is itself a voice against the earthly male patriarchy. Mira shaves her head in order to have some closer resemblances of her beloved yogi, Krishna to become his yogini. Mira sings:

My dark one has gone to an alien land.
 He’s left me behind,
 He’s never returned,
 He’s never send me a single word,
 So I’ve stripped off my ornaments,
 Jewels and adornments,
 Cut the hair from my head,
 And put on holy garments,
 All on his account,
 Seeking him in all four directions.
 Mira: unless she meets the dark One, her Lord,
 She doesn’t even want to live. (Hawley 121)

Lalla preached that the only way to access this force that had in it everything, one had to give up the desire for everything. This however was different from the kind of expectation Kabir

had from his disciples. Kabir advocated a slow and steady effacement of the physical body to attain union with the eternal spiritual being. Lalla advocated a full bodied life. It was only through the body and bodily sense perception that one can experience anything at all. As such the body had to be protected and nourished. The Supreme Being in Lalla's philosophy approximates to the idea of the Hindu god Lord Shiva but in so far as he is formless, he could as easily be the God of the Holy Quran. Human sense perception in her opinion could access divinity only when it learns to unlearn the various ways of the world and look within. As he was the part of all things animate and inanimate, he was also a part of every human being. We need only turn our gaze from the outside to the inside. Ranjit Hoskote in his pioneering work on Lal Ded captures these essential elements of the Poetess.

Now let us look at Habba Khatoon. M. Mujeeb points out "Habba Khatoon was not discovered. She has been everywhere in Kashmir, like her songs, ever since her lifetime. But it was Mahjur's admiration for her that made people aware of her presence. In fact born in a lowly peasant family, there was no way she could've had any place in History. Her rise to prominence is located in her unique ability to have been educated by the village Moulvi. Trained in the simple art of reading and writing she embarked on a lyrical journey of writing 'Lol' poetry. The closest English stylistic similarity to Lol is borne by romantic lyric poetry. The most extraordinary part of Lol poems are their rendering into soulful music by Habba. The songs are so touching and relatable that people in the valley sing them to this very day. Her marriage with a village farmer left her unhappy. They simply could not see eye to eye on things like creative self-expression that was intrinsic to Habba's personality. The result was a speedy divorce, following which, Habba would simply go into the wilderness and sing to herself. It is this beauty in her songs that captured the heart of Yousf Shah Check, the ruling monarch of the valley. Yousf and Haba got married shortly after they met each other. Their happiness however was short lived. The Mughal Emperor Akbar summoned Yousf to his court in Delhi and upon Yousf's arrival imprisoned him in order to destroy any possibility of challenge to the Mughal rule from the valley. Habba spent the remainder of her life pining away for her lover and her songs record her laments. Once again it is curious to note the kind of similarity in her poems post her severance from her husband and those of Mira Bai. Mira's song like 'Today your friend is coming' (Hawley) is similar to Habba's poems like 'Never Return These Hours':

Come my lover of flowers!
Come Meadows I cover with flowers for you,
Let me gather fresh jasmine for you,
Never return these hours!
Lilacs have bloomed by the river for you,
Deeply the world is asleep,
Still, though, no answer has reached me from you,
Garlands of green I keep.
What if they speak only evil of me?

Who has been able to change destiny?

Come, my lover of flowers!.(Cook 9)

The critic Kumkum Sangari points out in the case of Mira, that her's was a move of radical protest against patriarchy that set a precedent for other women to follow. The very same may be said of Habba. Her erotic poems are one of a kind and have no parallel in the valley or anywhere else in the Indian subcontinent except those of Mira which she dedicated to Krishna even as she burned in the flames of desire, known as "Viraha" on account of Krishna's absence. The key difference is, Krishna was a God and Yousf was very mortal. While Mira's desire could be couched in spirituality, Habba's desire for Yousf was romantic. She does not hesitate in expressing her love for her husband. The fact that a woman from a Muslim community of medieval times could voice the angst of female desire is in itself a radical act paramount. The beauty of it is in the simplicity and earnestness. Which is why even if her lyrics could be deemed offensive, they were actually taken in the right spirit. How much of that happened due to Habba's social position as Queen shall never be known, but the fact that we hear nothing, erotic or otherwise, from other Queens in medieval India is in itself a telling point about their positions. In her "Lol of the Lonely Pine" Habba sings:

The one who dazzles –have you seen that one?

Upon him look!

A sleepless stream in search of him I ran,

A restless brook.

In far off woods, a lonely pine I stood

Till he appeared,

My woodcutter, and came to cut the the wood.

His fire I feared,

Yet though he burn my legs, behold I shine,

My ashes wine! (Cook 6)

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