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Lyricism and Desire for Freedom : Habba Khatoon

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Abstract:

Lyricism, feminism, and freedom are related notions and the relation between them has been determined by the literary traditions of poetry in a particular language. Since the tradition of lyrical poetry in all languages emerged from folk poetry, it is grounded in oral medium. All cultures before the advent of modern ways of life were oral in nature, and such, lyrical mode was the primeval as well as the most popular mode of poetic expression. Lyricism in poetry works on various linguistic trajectories and devices that have universal acceptance. Lyricism of Habba Khatoon of the sixteenth century is an attempt to use language to create a semblance of personal freedom in giving vent to suppressed feelings of woman. Being rooted in the oral tradition lyrical poetry follows various universal patterns that are uniform across ages and cultures. It is open ended and does not follow the rigors of classical structure. Lyrical form of poetry is not sectarian, parochial, and encompasses wide range of human passions that cannot be categorized and appreciated in terms of a particular faith. It remains unaffected by the changes in social and economic patterns of society, nevertheless conforms to these changes in terms of lexical items. In the light of various aesthetic theories from Longinus to contemporary critics, like Derrida, it can be said that motive of lyricism is to seek transport through ecstasy. Thus songs of Habba Khatoon illustrate and conform in giving expression to the longing for freedom. Some common themes of the poet are: intense feeling of captivity, transience of life, craving for full abandon, sado-masochistic pleasure, obsession of death and return to the origin and vanquishing death through music.

Keywords : Lyricism, Feminism, Freedom, Oral Tradition.

Lyricism, feminism, and freedom are related notions and the relation between them has been determined by the literary traditions of poetry in a particular language. Since the tradition of lyrical poetry in all languages emerged from folk poetry, it is grounded in oral medium. All cultures before the advent of modern ways of life were oral in nature, and such, lyrical mode was the primeval as well as the most popular mode of poetic expression. The song form of poetry, called a lyric, is the principal form of poetry. A lyric is a short poem with one speaker (not necessarily the poet) who expresses his/ her feelings spontaneously. Generally a lyric is a brief poem about feeling. But there are

many forms of lyrics which express complex evolution of thoughts and feeling under a dominant mood. All the emotions expressed spontaneously seem personal emotions of the poet, but most often it is the tradition of free use of musical language that determines the emotions.

Oral culture has to descend from generation to generation, it, therefore, depends on collective memory of the linguistic community. Oral literature enhance is power of getting amalgamated with the collective memory and increase its abiding nature within the social and economic milieu before the popularity of written or printed literature. The advent of printing was the beginning of the literate literature which bears the imprint of the individual creative mind and does not need the mnemonic dynamism. Its quality and credibility is determined by the printed text that is recognized by the qualities of individual form and expression. Individual talent is hardly a matter to be reckoned in oral literature because everything is dictated by tradition. The group performance plays its role in its continuation and , as such, gets influenced by it. It, being open ended in form, can accept all sorts of interpolations during the performances of the singers of various generations. Only those works of creative literature have remained safe from interpolation which were consigned to the manuscript form.

Lyricism in poetry works on various linguistic trajectories and devices that have universal acceptance. The use of all these devices forms the conventions of lyricism in a particular language. A Convention is a rule or practice based upon general consent and upheld by society at large. A convention is an arbitrary rule or practice recognized as valid in any particular art or discipline, such as use of rhymes, word repetition and refrain. When we read or listen to a song, we have various expectations with the use of all these devices, and appreciate even the slightest novelty or innovation in their use.

Lyrical poetry is also based on stock characters, stock situations and stock responses. Stock character means character types of the genre of song, e.g., a lovelorn maid deserted by her lover, an innocent damsel fallen in love with a stranger, a girl languishing for her parental abode, a woman identifying herself with the romantic heroines of the legends of the past, the male lover presented as a knight, a prince or a callous beau, and so on and so forth. Stock situation underlines a country damsel tormented by her in-laws, agricultural labour, participation in some festival and secret trysts with her childhood lover, a married young maid meeting her father, boy-meets-girl, the eternal triangle, the innocent proves himself or herself, craving for death or fear of death, shock on the fast fading beauties of nature, and so on and so forth. Stock response is a highly cadenced expression, use of alliteration and assonance, stock similes and images, reflection of the subjective states in the states of nature, erotic and mystic metaphor suggesting union between the loved and lover, death as resolution of all conflicts, indifference of people around, torments by the community, withdrawal from the outside world and discovering the real in the soul itself, and so on and so forth.

Thus we see that lyrical poetry across the languages, cultures and ages follows the same principle. The tradition can be traced down directly from Sappho the famous poet of ancient Greece. Sappho was born on the island of Lesbos. She is believed to have been born sometime between 630 and 612 BC, and she died around 570 BC. Most of her poems have been lost, but the surviving fragments have given her immense global reputation. She is believed to have lived a lustful life and hailed all the beauties of the mortal world. All her poems are highly passionate and subjective in nature.

Lyricism is a desire for oblivion and reunion with the elemental nature. Women, burdened by the customs of patriarchal notions of modesty, seek their freedom, though momentarily, in wild abandon and merger with forces of nature. Here is a typical Habba Khatoon song:

Lej phulay and vanan.

All the hinterlands are filed with bloom,
you are yet to heed my call.

The far off hamlets are all burgeoned,
let us revisit our parental homes,
lilacs have bloomed in grove there;
you are yet to heed my call. (*kulyaat* 96)

In yet another song Habba Khatoon *Phwalivinyi zyiaThoo* we have images drawn from the common phenomena of nature that suggest transience of humankind and the world of his ordinary life contrasted with the permanence of nature:

O advancing spring, here I beseech you,
come to my parental house, O my love.

In elation I stepped out from my abode,
destined to bear the fire in my bosom;
Habba Khatoon has set an example of love.
Come to my parental house, O my love. (*kulyaat* 103-4)

In this short lyric the speaker's aspiration for the reunion with elemental force to attain permanence is suggested in a series of images. In the first image, there is a passionate call to spring. The spring season has been an archetype of regeneration and the beginning of new cycle of life from the very beginning of poetic imagination. The poets of all ages in all cultures have therefore hailed spring because it ends dissolution and augers new creative surge. The poet, therefore, wants to enjoy every moment of spring's re-creative process and transcend all the limits that deprive human beings of pleasure. Pleasure is seen as an unhampered participation in the vivaciousness of spring. Like a hedonist, the poet wants to be as free as imagination itself, free like 'airy nothing' like Ariel in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Archaeology has shown that the earliest poets were all hedonists. According to Freud, this urge for seeking pleasure from the essential

reunion with natural phenomenon can be explained in the light of his concept of 'Pleasure Principle' which is a contrast of the death principle. It is individual's instinct to seek pleasure and avoiding sufferings in order to satisfy his or her biological and psychological needs. According to Freud, pleasure principle is a driven force of the Id.

The image of the lotus blooming in the water is a symbol of the natural of spontaneity of life. The freshness of the flower in the vast lake suggests the solitariness of the unfulfilled desire. The flower is perilously existing in the lake that gives it birth but within a short span of time, after its withering away dissolves it into its essence. The flower is man's psychological urge for the emancipation, but the lake is perpetually waiting to make it disappear after it shows its full bloom. Thus the invincibility of the pleasure principle against an equally invincible death principle permeating all the existents is portrayed in the lyric of Habba Khatoon. She, therefore, advocates that every moment of life be considered valuable as the chariot of the time is uncontrollably moving fast. She asks her love to understand this before his temples grow grey and he loses his glory.

When the temples turn grey and glow fades, too,
Yet my Love is callous not to heed,
time may bring you down from the throne.
Come to my parental house, O my love.

In the lyric of Habba Khatoon, cited above, the lament on destined privation and misery is a constant skewed yearning for joys and happiness of life. By enduring all suffering and pain she has set an example of love. Thus she has become an incarnation of desire and passion.

Obsession about death and decay is a leitmotif of lyrical poetry. Lyrical poets, with love for the sensuous world, are especially obsessed about death. Lyricism seeks to achieve tragic sense of life by engaging readers/ listeners in contemplating the inevitable end of all the joys and delights of this mortal world and then think of eternal oblivion after death. Every religion has its own tale of afterlife; the fundamental notion common to all these tales is that every human being shall be liberated from the material cage and get transformed into 'soul' that shall have eternal existence. Soul is sometimes used as a synonym of 'spirit'. Soul denotes a more worldly and less transcendental aspect of a mortal person. Soul has an affinity for negative thoughts and images, whereas spirit seeks to rise above the prisons of life and death. Another word generally used as a synonym of the soul is 'psyche'. However, in lyrical mode of poetry, the notion of death is on the one hand man's consciousness of the tragic sense of the world and celebration of freedom, on the other. By singing of the end of life, the lyricists lament on the loss of the world of sensuous delights. The verses of Habba Khatoon are replete with the images of the evanescence of life and celebration of every moment of life. Here is a lyric of Habba Khatoon in which she compares death as inevitable journey from the paternal house to the house of the in-laws.

*Maalinyi gari noo dyan guzeeryiy
veeryivyi lagay peery peery yey*
When the middlemen finally arrive at my home,
nothing of this possession shall be of any use to me,
freshly decorated, I shall be driven through the market;
O my second home, I relinquish all for you.
(*kulyat* : 119-120)

The whole lyric is an epiphany of leaving this world and entering the other. She has a sudden manifestation of the essence of something; in a spiritual flash she envisages herself as a bride. The coffin shall be her bedecked palanquin and the wailings of her kith and kin shall be their farewell song. In the sudden revelation of the end of her worldly life, she imagines her world as an old mansion that shall cave in. The journey to the abiding abode shall be a solitary journey because it is to endure by the individual soul. The support of all the kindred shall get reduced to a naught. In the funeral rites the poetess envisages a sumptuous feast which shall be enjoyed by all, including the priests. The only permit to the other world shall be the religious verses that the priest shall read to her departed soul. Thus the brief life in this material world is considered a sojourn or a holiday when compared with the eternal life to come. She finally realizes the vanity and futility of this life that is never to abide. The worldly life, though very brief, burdens the soul with sins and merits it for retribution in the flames of hell.

Habba Khatoon, though in an unrestrained form of the lyric, hails death as liberation from the mortal world which is full of sorrow, pain, anguish, guilt and suffering. In her lyric '*dunyah chhu taavan booz vanheeryiy. Ruuziy ni yaadaveery yey*' she identifies her personal suffering with that of the whole humankind. Absence of an identifiable self in lyrical poetry is one of its principal traits. The lyrical poet is the voice of the whole community. Death as cessation from life and end of the rowing of the soul in the ocean of temporal world has been a collective archetype. The tale of every individual life is an addition to the eternal sorrow for the loss and a yearning for permanence.

The world is futile, listen O golden finch,
Yet you are wont to oblivion.

let my friend be asked what I owe to him;
why all this burden shall I bear so long?

Many have the longing to be one with you,
many a beauty are eagerly waiting for you.
Here is Habba Khatoon telling her woes.
Yet you are wont to oblivion. (*kulyaat* 124-5)

The lyric, in spite of many inconsistencies for the constraints of rhyme and alliteration, has a surface import: the world is vain and nothing is to be gained. The recurring refrain 'Yet you are wont to oblivion' is emphasis on man's getting aroused from forgetfulness. Life is seen as a transitory phase between one waking and the other. The soul has intimacy with the origin before coming into the material world, and finds the same intimacy with the origin in afterlife. This construct of spiritualism has been a leitmotif with all mysticism across the cultures. But there are many binary opposites of this enunciation. Life is called a golden finch which suggests that it is given to wild ecstasy and getting enticed by the beauties of the world. Life is beautiful and full of enchantment for the frail soul. One has to take the journey all alone and the friends and relatives are not to be relied upon. This very reminder is an assertion of the fact that man is afraid of his loneliness gets support and strength from others. The poet's lament on the very birth to this world and her relation with her parents is affirmation of the meaning of life. The birth is seen as an unavoidable consequence of the original sin. It is called the 'earlier business' because man's coming to this world entailed many responsibilities. Calling life a burden to be endured suggests that the individual life has meaning only by shouldering the responsibilities. The love for freedom is called the 'fire of love'. It is this fire one has to share with others in this world. All depends on the predilection of the individual whether he wants to get consumed in the light or in the heat of the fire; light and heat are two binary opposites of fire.

The lyrical outpouring of Habba Khatoon under the sway of phonic music of language and the established structures of Islamic mysticism is on the one hand sorrow on the transience of life, and celebration of the freedom in afterlife. Since poet uses the language of his social reality, it is bound to create melancholy.

Lyricism in Habba Khatoon is marked by an ostensible subjectivity. She uses 'I' as the principal speaker in her poems. M. H. Abrams finds at the core of the modern sense of the term "a speaker who expresses a state of mind or a process of thought and feeling" (*Glossary of Literary Terms* 97-98). This is in agreement with Wordsworth's famous and often quoted definition of lyrical poetry that it is "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (1800/1802 Preface, *Lyrical Ballads*, 246). It is, therefore, a commonplace of the criticism and history of lyric poetry to associate this genre with subjectivity.

Imagination gives the poet fortitude to bear all pain and anxiety that are a result of her engagement with the world around. Whenever she feels that her strength is failing her, Imagination is there in company to encourage her and overcome her despair.

The poet's desire for freedom is not realized in the outer world which she finds hopelessly alien. She finds her freedom within her own mind because she does not face

guile, hate and doubt there; she is free from suspicion. The customs of the world so callously unfeeling have no overpowering scope because in her withdrawal she has the euphoria of having the best communion with nature. When the poet says that she is absolutely free from the world of worries, she unambiguously rejects the external social world that is full of grief, darkness and danger. In comparison to this gruesome picture of the external world, the poet finds the world inside bright and pure. The sky portends no danger or gloom for it is perennially bright and blue. The sun keeps it always warm, and the summer's exuberance is never-fading.

Subjectivity in Habba Khatoon's, poetry is surfaced by the presence of a speaking subject who is often confused with the self of the poet. In every lyric, the driving force is a chose rhyme and an assumed mood, and the verses go on adding up. Since her poetry has remained preserved in oral medium, there is likelihood of many interpolations by various singers and even later poets. The semblance of a speaking subject is therefore much alluding. Any of her lyrics can be extended to any extent by a person having the skill of using rhymes. One of the most popular songs of Habba Khatoon is '*tsya kyihoozyi geyiy myeeny diy*', which has been sung by all the major singers of Kashmir.

Who is my rival to have seduced you?

Why this aversion for me?

I, Habba Khatoon, am remorseful now,

all in your love I forgot to worship;

sorrowfully I remember the youth I lost.

Why this aversion for me? (*kulyaat* 158-161)

The lyric is a succession of spontaneous complaints of a woebegone girl who is passionately waiting for her callous nonchalant lover. The speaker, though conscious of her own charms, has a suspicion in her mind that some other charming dame has seduced her amorous beau. She implores her in every possible way to give up his grudge and value her true love. Thus the young woman is destined to bear the burning embers in her heart and marrow and the dandy lover is preordained to be conceited. The suffering caused by this primeval polarity is the cause of the intrinsic vitality of Nature.

Music is the essence and guiding principle of all such lyrics. *Habba Khatoon*, so far as the legend goes, was well-versed in music. It is said that she contrived her own symphony known as '*maqam-i raast*'. The legend seems to be cogent because most of the musicians and singers of the time were women who were called 'Hafizas'. The centres of music and dance managed by Hafizas were the centres of culture besides being the rendezvous of the pleasure mongers. The songsters were greatly respected and

singing was considered a mark of modesty and gentility. The song quoted above, though superficial in its translated form, is one of the most melodious lyrics in Kashmiri.

The munificence of nature's charms evokes an irresistible longing in the soul to transgress the physical existence of body and have intimate communion with every constituent of nature's immensity. Music, divested of lexical associations, has the scope of this perfect harmony. If meaning of words is the prime end of the poet, the music is sullied and loses its evanescence. In rustic folk lays we have numerous songs which have their sway only because of their dissociation from meaning and thought. Pure music, an end in itself, is the soul of lyrical poetry.

Freedom attained through perfect blending with nature has also the objective of achieving perfect oblivion or harmony that enable us to get rid of all worldly considerations. The Gnostics in all languages know the secret of this swaying potential of music and use it to produce delirious states of mind. The dithyrambs of the ancient Greeks were the most perfect examples of this autonomous music in the shape of songs.

Freedom through lyrical poetry has yet another manifestation, that is to liberate the meditative mind from the mundane values of good and bad, pain and sorrow, loss and gain, and now and then. The sway of music makes all artificial boundaries of reason meaningless. It attains the power of such a frenzy that breaks the barriers between the imagining mind and the imagined reality. The poet, the singer, and the devoted lovers of music seek complete freedom, though momentarily, from the arbitrary codes of the here and now and help them have some sort of epiphany of the desired experience. It is not, therefore, amazing that many religious and social institutions, consider music a bane to reason. The lyricists, who aim at producing symphonies through words and images are in perfect agreement in using music to counter arbitrary logic imposed on the freedom loving soul. Music to them is a means to transcendence. Music and spirituality are, therefore, inalienable in many religions and cultures. It reflects the very essence of a culture and is regarded as the most enduring element of the identity of a community. According to Walker (1990:4) musical meaning is the product of a learned belief system about particular sounds and not intrinsic to sounds themselves. It is, therefore, important to study the belief system itself, and not to analyse reaction to the sounds used.

The lyrical poets, conscious of the spiritual import of musical sounds and sound patterns, avail themselves of the repertoire of musical phrases available in their language in creating supernal effects for the liberty of the soul.

Subjectivity in lyrical poetry of the poet under discussion assumes many other forms of desire for freedom and the speaker remains invariably a female. But we must not forget

that this type of lyrical subjectivity is not the foregrounding of the real self of a feeling and thinking person, it is rather a sort of semantic skill. It is a kind of word-game that produces the semblance of a real experiencing subject. The internal semantic suggestions make it clear the semblance is not real. Lyric poetry, as the poststructuralist analysis reveals, works to the contrary of subjectivity. The more we read this kind of lyrical poetry across languages, the more we come to realise that composers of lyrics have the artifice of producing new combinations of the stereotyped structure; it is only the poet's wit and linguistic competence that produces ever-new symphonies out of the given raw material. Therein lies the difference of the text of a lyric. In the words of Derrida, "there is nothing outside the text". (Derrida 1967: 158–59). It means that the traditional subject of Wordsworth's aesthetic does not exist; it is the reading habit of the reader or listener that generates meaning in the text. In the words of Terry Eagleton:

... meaning is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers...it is never fully present in any one sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together. (128)

The theme of freedom through literary exuberance is, therefore, not to be restricted to any particular sign or set of signs; it is to be perceived through the reading of the entire text and in the possibilities of its extension. The two lyrics quoted above are a clear illustration how the reader or listener can add new stanzas to the poems without doing any harm to them. The reason is that the readers have a habit of connoting different words in their traditional meanings. Words like, cage, bird, home, parental home, in-laws' home, lover, love, beloved, and so on and so forth have a free play in lyrical poetry because the tradition in the languages has already determined their 'meaning' or 'semantic equivalents'. The theory of representation of Aristotle is hardly applicable to lyrical poetry. In a lyric we do not find a spaced out subject, it is a game of using in which signifiers point to 'signifieds', and 'signifieds' are changed into signifiers. There is no such thing as a final signified in the shape of the self of the poet; it is in itself a signifier. Thus meaning of a lyric becomes an endless play of signification.

The poet's self, the reader's self, the self inbuilt in the language, and the self governed by the moment and the milieu constitute an interesting play of never-ending signification. We can never speak of 'Truth'. Rivkin and Ryan write:

Without signification, without those processes of substitution (of a signifier for a signified) and differentiation (of the signifier from the signified and from other signifiers) and repetition (of an original differentiation in an opposition that situates it as the subordinate and devalued term) and non-identity (of the original truth with itself because its "self" is entirely other than itself, being difference) that are "essential" to the making of meaning in a language. (341)

The foregrounding of self becomes all the more impossible in lyrical poetry as it is essentially the voice of the community which the poet carries forward. Musical contrivances, in spite of the individual innovations by a poet, are a part of the phonetic structure of a language and are handed over from one generation to the other. Lyrical music relies on the nature of consonants and vowels, accent, intonation, stress and tone of the language. The poets exploit all these features of their mother tongue in agreement with the community. They may get influenced from the poetry of other languages, or even borrow some of the prosodic norms from them, but they cannot graft the music of any non-native language on to their mother tongue. Every language has its natural potential to reject or accept such musical experimentation. Thus the lyrical poet has to remain subservient to the domineering intrinsic music of their language that has been established as a lyrical mode by their precedents. It becomes a literary tradition from which there is no escape.

The lyrical language being essentially verbal music remains cryptic, only hinting to the expository nuance, delicacies of emotions, and beauties of expression. They are bound to remain abstractions; any attempt to expound these abstractions through rational analysis is bound to reduce them into a jumble of words. The deconstructive analysis is not applicable to lyrical poetry; Derrida himself knew the hazards of this analysis and therefore stressed that “Deconstruction is not a method, and cannot be transformed into one.” (Derrida 543). Deconstruction is not a mechanical operation or an arbitrary system of reducing a literary text into fragments. Derrida warned against considering deconstruction as a mechanical operation when he stated that “It is true that in certain circles (university or cultural) the technical and methodological “metaphor” that seems necessarily attached to the very word “deconstruction” has been able to seduce or lead astray.” Richard Beardsworth explains that

Derrida is careful to avoid this term [method] because it carries connotations of a procedural form of judgement. A thinker with a method has already decided *how* to proceed, is unable to give him or herself up to the matter of thought in hand, is a functionary of the criteria which structure his or her conceptual gestures. For Derrida this is irresponsibility itself. Thus, to talk of a method in relation to deconstruction, especially regarding its ethico-political implications, would appear to go directly against the current of Derrida's philosophical adventure. (41)

To conclude lyricism of Habba Khatoon of the sixteenth century is an attempt to use language to create a semblance of personal freedom in giving vent to suppressed feelings of woman. Being rooted in the oral tradition lyrical poetry follows various universal patterns that are uniform across ages and cultures. It is open ended and does not follow the rigors of classical structure. It has to be read, and enjoyed in totality and not through critical scrutiny. Her poems reveal how lyrical poetry is conservative, mnemonic

and part of collective memory of a people. The poet's individual personality and talent does not play much role in the choice of words, metaphors, similes and allusions, the texture is rather determined by the lyrical conventions in language. Lyrical form of poetry is not sectarian, parochial, and encompasses wide range of human passions that cannot be categorized and appreciated in terms of a particular faith. It remains unaffected by the changes in social and economic patterns of society, nevertheless conforms to these changes in terms of lexical items.

In the light of various aesthetic theories from Longinus to contemporary critics, like Derrida, it can be said that motive of lyricism is to seek transport through ecstasy. Thus songs of Habba Khatoon illustrate and conform in giving expression to the longing for freedom. Some common themes of the poet are: intense feeling of captivity, transience of life, craving for full abandon, sado-masochistic pleasure, obsession of death and return to the origin and vanquishing death through music.

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