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Creative Work and Female Individualization: Female Aesthetics in Kashmiri Folk Poetry

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Abstract:

Recognition of Female Aesthetic suggests existence of a separate way of writing by women writers that has its distinct idiom that entails a special methodology of critical discourse and stylistic analysis. There have been several attempts to fortify the independent domain of women's writing and defining and applying the methods of feminist critical stylistics. Critics like Julia Kristeva, Barbara Smith, Susan Bassnett, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and many others in English and other languages, have vehemently defended feminist criticism and suggested various ways of critical analysis and appreciation. They believe that the distinct perceptions and interpretations of women entail a literary style that reflects, captures, and embodies the quality of our thought.

However, the paradox is that all the substance and style of feminist literature and feminist criticism have been developed and defined by male writers in all languages and women have accepted it as their own voice. In her monumental book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir has discussed in detail how women across ages and cultures have been described and adored in myriad physical objects of the physical world, but denied a personality that thinks, rationalizes, analyzes, opts and and decides. Woman has been described as spring bloom, morning breeze, a shady tree, a passive doll, a fertile field, a verdant garden, and similes and metaphors proliferate in poetry. In all the things that are used as poetic equivalents of woman, it is their use or value to man that imparts meaning to woman. It is because of the value of utility associated to woman that she is best when she is loved.

In all strains of oriental poetry, especially folk poetry, woman is one who has loved passionately; she is mere desire, a flame, an echo, a houseless gust of wind—and whatever she is, she is a metaphor without an ontogenic existence or “self”. She compares herself with the women of the collective memory like Shireen, Laila, Zulaikha, Himal, and many others who are known for their exceptional love and got consumed in the heat of their own inner flame.

A characteristic of female aesthetic is communion with the free and untamed aspects of nature. Craving for freedom, escape from ennui, and longing for unhampered fruitfulness is the underlying psychic content of all calls to the forces of nature.

Kashmiri folk poetry is replete with variegated expressions of feminine aesthetic. Myriad and plentiful are the shapes and analogies of women's beauty found all around in the immanent world, but no where is she present in her within. She is just a name, a desire, a craving, a cry, an ache, and what not, but an individual human being with a self of her own. The masculine imagination has produced a collective myth of womanhood and this myth, fortified through ages, has been accepted by women of all cultures as her inevitable fate. In female aesthetic, as illustrated by a few Kashmiri folk songs a woman is always related to nature; she is rather nature in an anthropomorphic character. Thus female aesthetic presents woman as an open rose for the drones to cherish nectar, a valley, a garden, curve of a hill, fertile soil, earth spread everywhere, a doll ready to be played with, a faithful shadow of man; she is all that what men can crave for, and vanquish or obtain. However, sometimes she is extolled as a sacred name, a candle of a shrine, she is muse to inspire, she opens the door to the redemption, key to paradise, a grace or oracle, she can bestow peace and harmony on the world.

Keywords: Folk Poetry, Kashmir, Individualization, Female Aesthetics, Feminism

Recognition of an aesthetic that is essentially female is still a controversial issue. One strong opinion maintains that genuine literature does not show dichotomy in terms of gender-based imagination and it follows universal standards of experience and expression. Even Julia Kristeva believed that there was no identifiable uniqueness inherent in women's writing. She wrote, 'Nothing in women's past or present publications seems to allow us to affirm that there is a feminine writing.' (1990. 188) The supporters of this point of view believe that great literature is literature only when it stands the tests of non-racial and non-gender standards of appreciation and evaluation in terms of content and form. A piece of 'literature' that is meant for *women only* and cannot be enjoyed by men is anything but not literature. Great creative minds do not evince male or female aesthetic norms and does not qualify any one gender for its readership to exclude other sex. The opposite stance in this debate holds that sex is the determining or guiding principle in the process of literary composition. It, therefore, advocates gynocentricism as the basis of constructing a female literary tradition with its gender-specific norms and canons. The supporters of this notion believe that there has always been a distinct style of feminine writing, that in French terminology is called *écriture féminine*.

Female aesthetic, however, is evident in all forms of literary composition in all languages. It has to be recognized as a category in literary discourse as it is not specific to

any particular language, but is found across languages and cultures throughout the annals of patriarchal ages. Female aesthetic demands indigenous principles of literary criticism. In the West the notion developed as a part of the political struggle of women for freedom. Interestingly it was augmented by the movement of Black Arts who proposed the notion of 'Black Aesthetic' to intensify their demand for a lost homeland, end to domination, and assertion of their racial pride. The intellectual connotation of Female Aesthetic too is that there was some 'nation' or 'motherland' with a distinct 'mother tongue' and culture of women that was usurped by men or was lost because of gradual dissipation of women in males' world. They visualize this dissipation analogous to Diaspora. Even Adrienne Rich does not hesitate to talk of this political assertion. She wrote:

The idea of a common female culture - splintered and diasporized among the male cultures under and within which women have survived has been a haunting- though tentative theme of feminist thought over the past few years. Divided from each other through our dependencies on men-domestically, tribally, and in the world of patronage and institutions -our first need has been to recognize and reject these divisions, the second to begin exploring all that we share in common as women on this planet. (1990. 187)

The global scope of this new resolve is clearly suggested by two facts noticeable at the very surface of this manifesto formulated by Adrienne Rich: firstly, that it is a part of an introduction to an anthology of international women's poetry and, secondly, she clearly and emphatically talks of it in the last clause of the the passage cited above: '...all that we share in common as women on this planet.'

Recognition of Female Aesthetic suggests existence of a separate way of writing by women writers that has its distinct idiom that entails a special methodology of critical discourse and stylistic analysis. There have been several attempts to fortify the independent domain of women's writing and defining and applying the methods of feminist critical stylistics. Critics like Julia Kristeva, Barbara Smith, Susan Bassnett, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and many others in English and other languages, have vehemently defended feminist criticism and suggested various ways of critical analysis and appreciation. They believe that the distinct perceptions and interpretations of women entail a literary style that reflects, captures, and embodies the quality of our thought.

However, the paradox is that all the substance and style of feminist literature and feminist criticism have been developed and defined by male writers in all languages and women have accepted it as their own voice. In her monumental book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir has discussed in detail how women across ages and cultures have been described and adored in myriad physical objects of the physical world, but denied a personality that thinks, rationalizes, analyzes, opts and and decides. Woman has been described as spring bloom, morning breeze, a shady tree, a passive doll, a fertile field, a

verdant garden, and similes and metaphors proliferate in poetry. In all the things that are used as poetic equivalents of woman, it is their use or value to man that imparts meaning to woman. It is because of the value of utility associated to woman that she is best when she is loved. Discussing the image of woman in the poetry of Breton, Simone de Beauvoir wrote:

It is in love that woman is fulfilled and is really attained; special, accepting a special destiny — and not floating rootless through the universe — then she sums up All. The moment when her beauty reaches its highest expression is at that hour of night when ‘she is the perfect mirror in which all that has been, all that has called upon to be, is bathed adorably in what is going to be this time.’ (Breton) For Breton ‘to find the place and the formula’ is confused with ‘to get possession of the truth in a soul and body’. And this possession is possible only in reciprocal love — carnal love, of course. (263)

The love that man gets from woman is not purposeless; love to him is fusion of essence and existence. It is realized for the two lovers engaged in the process of love and at the same time, in mystical language, through the whole cosmos. It is in this sense that woman, in all forms of poetry, incarnates nature. Woman, therefore, accepts that she has not a vocation other than love. She discovers this significance of her being in the eyes of her lover. Her own love is not key to the world and revelation of beauty. She has been assigned esoteric naturalism in all the utterances of Gnostics. Woman is Sophia, the principle of redemption; she is Beatrice who guides Dante in the heaven; she is Isis, the strength of Osiris, she is Shakti, the power of Siva. She is “Truth, Beauty, Poetry — she is all: once more all under the form of the *Other*, All except herself.” (Simone de Beauvoir 268)

In all strains of oriental poetry, especially folk poetry, woman is one who has loved passionately; she is a mere desire, a flame, an echo, a houseless gust of wind—and whatever she is, she is a metaphor without an ontogenic existence or “self”. She compares herself with the women of the collective memory like Shireen, Laila, Zulaikha, Himal, and many others who are known for their exceptional love and got consumed in the heat of their own inner flame. Being copious, repetitive, and redundant in nature, oral poetry is essentially an ‘enactment’ which is not an ‘authentic text’ but just ‘remembering’ every time in a slightly different tone, tempo and re-arraying. It is a concocted sort of new combinations of traditional formulae. All the accepted symbols and myths are remembered. The reciter of a folk-song imagines a listener and repeats a fixed, memorized pattern as if fabricating a new tapestry out of the familiar mnemonic elements. Here are a few lines from a popular Kashmiri folk song:

I, as garden basil, shall cover his ways
go, my friend, get me my Love mollified;

sulked he left, who knows why, for what grudge.
 I shall lie for him under the canopied chinar trees,
 and wait and wait for the tormentor, the merciless.
 Remember what befell that Farhad of the past,
 for Shierien he struck his head with his own hammar.
 Remember what befell that Neegyraay of the past,
 Dived in a milk-bowl he went down to the nether world....

The persona of the loved woman in all forms of Oriental poetry is that of an immaculate, pious, coy, modest virgin who, like an element among elements of nature, is free from all worldly anxieties. She is wild and untamed and, in spite of her innocence, is ravaging, ferocious, and destructive; she has the power to 'annihilate' her lover to drown him in complete oblivion. Thus she is visualized and represented as the sacred archetypal Mother - a paradisiacal state of forgetfulness. The Oedipal association with the chaste and virgin mother is the beauty of the romantic female beauty that gets expressed in myriad metaphors and myths. She is a perfect blend of the sacred and the erotic.

Woman in folk-poetry has equated herself with such objects of nature as are dependent on human care and safeguarding, otherwise they are to perish. She, on the one hand, is conscious of her charm to seduce man and of her helplessness and vulnerability, on the other. In many a song, she sings of her beauty, but laments her feebleness. She is to be entrusted to man's desire as well as compassion and heed. Here is a folk song:

She's a fibre of the saffron of Pampore,
 O dear, let her have her place on your head.
 She is the darling of her caring father,
 wont to be the master of her house she is,
 ask her mother if this is not true;

 O dear ! let her have her place on your head.
 Happily flying a dove she thus came,
 to weave her nest in the house you own;
 she is the pride of her parents' clan,
 O dear ! let her have her place on your head.

The same idolized child-bride is destined to leave her parents house, forget all her kindred, all her childhood friends, abandon all her childhood fantasies and euphoria and accept for herself a new home, develop new relations and learn to live with harsh realities of life. Before she finally assumes the role of herself being the appropriator of the new house she is melancholically nostalgic about her carefree childhood that she has

been deprived of, wistful about her gadding in the meadows, pastures and fields, and pensive about her girlish love. In one folk song a teen-bride narrates her plight and the dreams of her meeting her loving father :

On my way to the garden
 I made bouquets of jasmine,
 and after six months I set out to my parental house;
 On my way I first met my dear father.
 He lovingly took me to his own room,
 made me sit on the cushioned bed.
 He got me a bowl of milk.
 A lamp he kept lit in the lamp niche.
 He recited to me the verses of the Holy Quran,
 and then revealed the secret truth to me.
 Tears burst forth from my eyes.
 He fondly placed his hand on my head.
 “My dear daughter,” he said,
 “ your in-laws’ house is your real house.
 Nothing you have to gain from your father’s house.
 The real maternal house is when your mother is alive, your brothers’ house is not
 your real maternal house.”

However, there are many songs in a variety of rhythms that sing of a forlorn, and deserted married girl pining for seeing any of her kith and kin. In one of the most pensive songs sung in a very moving melody by girls :

The moon rises and garden-basil is dew washed;
 O Moon ! come down to see the hapless.
 Those who have brothers are visited by them ,
 And one who is brotherless, watches them with ache.

Here is another popular song in which a married woman languishes at her in-laws house remembering her relatives:

Come let us go to our maternal house,
 maternal house is really a royal house.
 Come let us go our paternal house,
 Paternal house is open to all.
 Come let us go to our brother’s house,
 Brother’s house is really a pleasant house,
 Come let us go to the house of mother’s brother,
 The house of mother’s brother is propitious house.
 Come let us go to the house of our sister,

A sister's house is a bell-bedecked house.

A characteristic of female aesthetic is communion with the free and untamed aspects of nature. Craving for freedom, escape from ennui, and longing for unhampered fruitfulness is the underlying psychic content of all calls to the forces of nature. Here is a beautiful folk song in which a love-lorn girl calls her heedless lover.

All around there are spring blossoms,
 O Bulbul, I pine to see you again.
 O plum flowers why this delay!
 Are you still slumbering in deep forest?
 Come anon, all is lively again;
 O Bulbul, I pine to see you again.

 The founts have started gushing forth,
 Flowers in the garden are flourishing full;
 Come and enjoy the verdure of paradise,
 O Bulbul, I pine to see you again.

Kashmiri folk poetry is replete with variegated expressions of feminine aesthetic. Myriad and plentiful are the shapes and analogies of women's beauty found all around in the immanent world, but no where is she present in her within. She is just a name, a desire, a craving, a cry, an ache, and what not, but an individual human being with a self of her own. The masculine imagination has produced a collective myth of womanhood and this myth, fortified through ages, has been accepted by women of all cultures as her inevitable fate. In female aesthetic, as illustrated by a few Kashmiri folk songs given above, a woman is always related to nature; she is rather nature in an anthropomorphic character. Thus female aesthetic presents woman as an open rose for the drones to cherish nectar, a valley, a garden, curve of a hill, fertile soil, earth spread everywhere, a doll ready to be played with, a faithful shadow of man; she is all that what men can crave for, and vanquish or obtain. However, sometimes she is extolled as a sacred name, a candle of a shrine, she is muse to inspire, she opens the door to the redemption, key to paradise, a grace or oracle, she can bestow peace and harmony on the world. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir, 'In any case she appears as the *privileged Other*, through whom the subject fulfils himself: on of the measures of man , his counterbalance, his salvation , his adventure, his happiness.' (1949. p. 278)

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