

**HABBA KHATOON AND ‘LOL’: GENDER AND PATRIARCHY IN THE SONGS OF THE “EDUCATED
POETESS QUEEN” OF MEDIEVAL KASHMIR**

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Habba Khatoon, a sixteenth century Kashmiri poetess, who has been attributed with a corpus of songs and is also hailed as the queen of the last Chak ruler, Yusuf Shah Chak, has become one of the important cultural icons in the present state of Jammu and Kashmir.¹

Habba’s maiden name was Zoon (Kashmiri term for moon). She was the daughter of a peasant named Abdi Rather of village Chandrahar in the present district of Pulwama in Kashmir. After having received education from the village *maulvi*, she was trained to read Persian classics like Sadi’s Gulistan and Bostan along with the Quran. The narratives do not tell us at what age she was married. However, they are all unanimous in stating at a very young age, Habba was married to a local village boy who was an illiterate. Such a mismatch made Habba unhappy. Her problems were further compounded when her husband and her mother-in-law ill-treated her. The result was a miserable life which was followed by a divorce as Habba being a refined, literate woman could not put up with this rustic. She lived a deplorable life by tending cattle and singing the lyrics that she composed extempore. While passing by, Yusuf Chak once happened to see her. He got so mesmerized by her charming looks and captivating voice that he made her his queen. But this happiness proved to be short lived. Kashmir was invaded by the Mughals and Yusuf Shah was taken prisoner by Akbar, and exiled to Bihar where he was to spend the rest of his life. Disappointed with her fate, Habba renounced her domestic life, left the palace and settled on the outskirts of the city (perhaps the capital city), built a small hut and spent the rest of her time in seclusion composing and

¹ One realizes this after seeing the number of things in Kashmir which are associated with the name of Habba Khatoon. There is a mountain in Tsoora Van, Gurez (District Bandipore) that is known as ‘*Habba Baal*’ (Mountain of Habba). A drama club by the name of Habba Khatoon was also founded in 1976. Besides some local schools, a girls’ hostel in Kashmir University and the magazine of Government Women’s college, Nawa Kadal, Srinagar Habba Khatoon day was also celebrated in 1954, by the then Prime Minister, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. Her popularity and influence in Kashmir can be gauged from the fact that, an Indian Coast Guard Ship has been named after her in 1985. All this shows how central her figure is to the modern identity of a native of the region.

singing songs of longing and desire for her beloved Yusuf Shah Chak. The widely acceptable and recognized narrative about her life.

This paper analyses the songs which have been attributed to Habba Khatoon. Such an analysis will provide us with a template to understand the means through which she expressed her longings and desires. As Habba Khatoon was not a mystical poet like Lal Ded or Nuruddin Rishi, attempt would be made to analyse the songs from the gender perspective to examine the themes and motifs that she used in her poetry in order to ascertain their sustained popularity in the popular tradition.

Reference to Habba, her life and songs is totally absent in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Persian *tarikhs*- *Baharistan-i Shahi*, [Abode of the Spring of Kings, 1586-1616], *Tarikh-i Haider Malik*, (1620), composed during and after her period respectively. *Baharistan-i Shahi* was written by an anonymous person and *Tarikh-i Haider Malik*, was written by Haidar Malik Chadoora, who served as the Mughal governor of Kashmir under the reign of Jahangir (1605-1627). An analysis of the representations of Habba Khatoon and Yusuf Shah Chak shows that Habba was excluded from the dominant narratives because of the patriarchal and gendered attitudes and the marginalization of Kashmiri language in which she composed her songs.² It would be highly erroneous to state that since the seventeenth and eighteenth century Persian *tarikhs* (which had their own concerns and motives for recording history) did not record her name, she did not exist at all, for, the oral tradition is brimming with her songs and stories about her early life and also that of her romance with Yusuf Shah Chak

Therefore oral history in the case of this chapter has to be made the main plank in order to recover the voice of figures that because of their gender, class, status and so on were not deemed fit to be included within the textual tradition dominated by Persian in medieval Kashmir. Jan Vansina in his seminal study puts forward as to how oral tradition could be utilized to study history. Rejecting the methodology of using the Oral traditions to just supplement or corroborate the written records he writes:

Oral traditions have a part to play in the reconstruction of the past. It is a part similar to that played by written sources because both are messages from the past to the present, and messages are key elements in historical reconstruction. But the relationship is not one of the diva and her understudy in the opera: when the star cannot sing the understudy appears: when writing fails, tradition comes

² Texts, Contexts and Representations: Habba Khatoon in the Narratives of Kashmir (Sixteenth and Eighteenth Centuries), Amir Suhail, Unpublished M.Phil Dissertation, Submitted to Department of History and Culture, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

on stage. This is wrong. Wherever oral traditions are extant they remain an indispensable source for reconstruction. They correct other perspectives just as much as other perspectives correct them.³

Vansina also makes a clear distinction between oral history and oral tradition:

The sources of oral historians are reminiscences, hearsay, or eyewitness accounts about events and situations which are contemporary, that is, which occurred during the lifetime of the informants. This differs from oral traditions in that oral traditions are no longer contemporary. They have passed from mouth to mouth, for a period beyond the lifetime of the informants... Oral traditions are documents of the present, because they are told in the present. Yet they also embody a message from the past, so they are expressions of the past at the same time. They are the representation of the past in the present. One cannot deny either the past or the present in them. To attribute their whole content to the evanescent present as some sociologists do, is to mutilate tradition; it is reductionistic. To ignore the impact of the present as some historians have done, is equally reductionistic. Traditions must always be understood as reflecting both past and present in a single breath.⁴

Therefore to argue that the Persian *tarikhs* encompassed or recorded everything would be untenable, since this view does not take into account the politics of history writing or the great amount of selection that is intrinsic to the process of recording the past. This view also reduces oral tradition to a mere supplementary position wherein oral tradition cannot be relied upon or can only be used to corroborate what is written in the 'all-encompassing' written texts.

Habba Khatoon is considered as the most significant name in Kashmiri poetry after Lal Ded and Nuruddin Rishi. What distinguishes her from her illustrious predecessors though is the fact that her poetry unlike Lalla and Nuruddin was not didactic or mystical. Her *lol*-lyrics as Mohibul Hasan puts it sing of 'human love, its disappointments, yearnings and fulfillments'.⁵

Authorship of the songs of Habba Khatoon needs to be discussed here, for it was only in the twentieth century when attempts were made to put her compositions into black and white. Until then these songs circulated primarily in the oral sphere thereby making them 'vulnerable to interpolations' in different times and contexts. It can be argued in the case of Habba Khatoon whose accounts and compositions formed a part of the collective memory of a society wherein these songs get shaped to suit the values, needs and interests of the society in different contexts. This study does not claim of having access to original or pristine songs, which did not change at all after they were composed by the former, could be made. Neither does this study attempt to "winnow husk

³ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition As History* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 199.

⁴ Ibid. 199.

⁵ Ibid., 259-60.

from grain” in order to select the ‘most genuine’ of her songs. I rather intend to look at the most popular and common songs attributed to her since these songs are not the creation of Habba alone but have been collectively constituted over a long period of time. These songs have been on the lips of the people of both the genders belonging particularly to the lower classes. These songs form an intrinsic part of the daily routine of peasants comprising both men and women working in the fields, the boatmen (men as well as women) and women singing in the marriages etc. Since Habba Khatoon is undisputedly believed to have been the composer/creator of these songs, one can actually after analysing these songs have an impression of the common themes and motifs fundamental to the life of these classes who preserved these songs. It would also help us to gauge as to how Habba Khatoon is perceived by those who kept alive her songs by singing them till now.

Habba Khatoon’s poetry may be divided into three phases considering the time and context wherein it was composed. The songs which regularly allude to her youthfulness and also the search for a beloved may be put in the first category. The second group comprises of songs composed after her first marriage at the house of her in-laws. Lastly the songs that describe her dejection and disillusionment after the estrangement of her lover would be taken into account. The songs of Habba Khatoon, analyzed in this section, have been translated into English by Trilokinath Raina.⁶

‘POMPURY GATH (THE MOTH AND THE FLAME)’

These songs are characterized by the adventures of a maiden who constantly strives for love and the company of a beloved. Most of these songs are addressed to her *Ves* (friend) in whom she confides all of her desires and secrets.

Come friend, let us search my love
On the so familiar meeting spot!
My almond like youth is in full bloom:
I’ll seek you down the wandering brooks-
Praying we shall meet again
The wild yellow rose has bloomed,
My iris buds too ache to flower,
O let these eyes behold your form-
Don’t tell me we shan’t meet again!

⁶ See Trilokinath Raina, *Habba Khatoon, Arinmal: The Queens of Song*, 44-75.

According to G. L. Tikku, '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.'⁷ He further says that the metaphor "almond like youth" is typically Kashmiri and would be characterized by seeking visual gratification and denoting the flimsiness of youth's beauty which fades away as rapidly as almonds blossom.⁸

Frequent complaints against the callousness displayed by the lover also constitute one of the main themes of these songs.

Have you by chance seen him?

Who makes me languish night and day?

He bared me to midwinter frost,

Let the summer sun scorch me dry,

Made me wander like a wayward stream:

He makes me languish night and day.

I was a happy greenwood pine.

Till this callous woodsman chopped me down

And burnt each piece to ashes!

He makes me languish night and day.

These songs express her 'feminine fragility' which prompt her to satisfy the sensual lust of her paramour.

I've made poises for you, my love,

Enjoy my pomegranate blossoms!

I am the earth, you the firmament

Veiling my deepest desires;

I'm the feast, you the guest-

Enjoy my pomegranate blossoms!

'PHUETMET KHAAB' (BROKEN DREAMS)

The second phase comprises the songs composed at the house of her in-laws after her first marriage. These songs symbolize the *Phuetmet Khaab* (shattered dreams) of a girl who unexpectedly found herself amidst psychological and physical abuse at the hands of her in-laws. These songs are characterized with a strong sense of nostalgia for the *maalyum* (parents' home) and the loss of

⁷ G. L. Tikku, *Persian Poetry in Kashmir*, 81.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

childhood in the face of oppression from her relations. She recalls her days of comfort and efflorescence at the home of her parents and laments her present condition. She also frequently calls upon her parents to come to her rescue. It is interesting to note that she only demands from her parents the means which would help her to avoid or mitigate the wrath of her mother-in-law. These songs are palpable with instances of her physical mistreatment from the mother-in-law (*hash*) and sister-in-law (*zam*) and also express the bewilderment of a recently married girl who finds herself in an altogether hostile environment away from the patriarchal protection of her parental home.

Who knew, friend, where I'd be born,

Who knew where I'd go as bride?

And one day I was married off.

A town-bred girl was in a village now.

How could I change what fate had willed?

Who knew where I'd go as bride!

A longing dragged me home one day,

Where the taunts of my fortunate sister-in-law

Made me wish I'd died at birth.

Who knew where I'd go as bride!

There are numerous expressions in the folklore of Kashmir through which one can infer the recurrent practice of early marriage and the resultant harassment of the newly-wed brides in the distant as well as in the recent past. A number of popular *Rov* (festival) songs express it thus:

'Oh my friend, would you like to share my woes?

I am plunged into grief and gloom!,

My father managed my marriage without taking me into confidence,

I am reduced to ashes inwardly, which is there to listen to me.

Would you spare some time to share my agony and pain?

Moreover Kashmiri proverbs like, *Sherif Kori Henz tshopei gai aankar*⁹ (A noble girl's silence is the approval for her marriage) reveal how the consent of the girl for marriage has never been considered important.

I feel wretched in my husband's home

Redeem me, O my parents!

While I was fetching water,

⁹ Farooq Fayaz, *Kashmir Folklore: A Study in Historical Perspective* (Srinagar: Gulshan Books, 2008) 93-99.

The pot slipped and broke
Now I'll have to replace the pot,
Or pay the price, my parents!
I feel wretched in my husband's home.
Redeem me, O my parents!
Sleep assailed me at the spinning wheel,
While made the handle break.
My mother-in-law grabbed my hair;
Or, worse than death to me!
I feel wretched in my husband's home
Redeem me, O my parents!
O how I yearn for a loving soul,
My eyes all brimming over!
Habba Khatoon gives a hint here
To her most affectionate parents.
I feel wretched in my husband's home
Redeem me, O my parents!

Kashmiri folk literature is also abound with references to the rather unstable or hostile relations between the *Hash* (mother-in-law) and *Nosh* (daughter-in-law). It is a relationship portrayed as one of distrust, doubt, acrimony and dis-integrity. Kashmiri folk literature both in prose and poetry abound in references to the oppressive behavioral style of the *hash* and have been the subject of a major chunk of Kashmiri folk songs.¹⁰ In addition to the songs attributed to Habba Khatoon and numerous other folk songs¹¹, there is a substantial chunk of proverbs and folk sayings used up to this day which reflect the unpleasant relationship between the *hash* and the *nosh*.¹² A number of folktales too reveal the tensions within this relationship wherein the *hash* is determined to control the behavior of the *nosh*. This seems natural in a patriarchal setup wherein the modes and spheres of operation are well marked and gendered. The *hash* encompasses a semblance of the same patriarchal authority that is characteristic of the male member over the other members. The

¹⁰ Farooq Fayaz, *Folklore and History of Kashmir* (Srinagar: Nunaposh Publications, 2001), 125-27.

¹¹ "Hash te thez, nosh te thez, Deg daze te vale kus (Since both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law claim to be of high descent, none is willing to remove the boiling pot from the stove which is about to get spoilt). *Noshe demie phoher, Hashie demie budith* (Remember daughter-in-law I have given you spoilt food, Mother-in-law I will do the same to you once you grow old). *Hange mange badnam nosh bichari, hash hendy kharei kya wanei* (My mother-in-law levelled baseless allegations against me, how could I recall the countless ill-machinations of my mother)". See Farooq Fayaz, *Kashmir Folklore*, 126-27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 96-97.

mother-in-law while trying to control the behavior of the daughter-in-law attempts to retain the patriarchal power which the patriarchal structures have bestowed her with in certain spheres.

What blazing fire I nurse within!

May no one's childhood vanish thus!

Brought up at home on honey and sweets,

Bathed in milk every day;

Now I lead a vagrant beggar's life

May no one's childhood vanish thus!

What love my parents lavished on me,

And my maids granted me every wish!

Who thought this house would ever fall?

May no one's childhood vanish thus!

Can a handful of rice sustain one ever

ESTRANGEMENT AND THE RESULTANT DEJECTION

The following songs express her dejection and anguish at not being able to meet her beloved. These songs seem to have been composed by her after her estrangement from her lover, Yusuf Shah Chak following Akbar's invasion in 1586 CE and the subsequent exile of the former to Bihar. The first song describes her misery by asking the lover as to which *swon* (Kashmiri Co-wife) of hers has lured him away- *tsu kamyoo swoni myaani bram dith nyoonakho, che khyoho gayee myaany duy*. A strikingly repeated image that emerges from the songs of Habba Khatoon is the sensual longing of a female for a lover who is expressed in corporeal terms. Sensuality and the impermanence of youthfulness are essential characteristics of the songs attributed to Habba Khatoon and also of the folklore.

Which co-wife¹³ of mine has lured you away?

Why this hate for me?

Why loath to leave your ire and hate?

Why this hate for me?

At midnight I opened wide my doors

Hoping you'd come for a while-

There's no rift save what you can fancy!

Why this hate for me?

I am in love's consuming flames,

¹³ Triloknath Raina in this song has translated the word *swon* as rival. See Trilokinath Raina, *Habba Khatoon, Arinmal, The Queens of Song*, 71.

Yearning for you alone.

My almond eyes shed tears of blood.

Why this hate for me?

Longing for you and you alone,

My tears gush out in streams

That you could forget even my road!

Why this hate for me?

In the following and a number of other verses subordination of the female in a conjugal relationship appears to be quite palpable with the articulation of in the ideas of service, and domination. But what most strikingly becomes visible after a study of these songs is the fact that she presents herself not as a moral dutiful wife but as a bold lover who is not hesitant to express her conjugal desires within the public domain.

How desolate I was when you left,

Leaving me with blighted hopes,

Smitten pride and strangled dreams!

Why this hate for me?

Habba Khatoon eats her heart out

With the desperate yearning to serve you

And the haunting memories of lost youth.

Why this hate for me?

The most striking aspect of the songs of Habba Khatoon is the yearning for a beloved who is a mortal. This is significant since her sensual desires are not couched in spirituality as was the case with women poets like Lal Ded or Mira Bai. One may compare her with the fourteenth century bhakti poet Mira Bai who 'burned in the flames of desire, known as "*Viraha*" on account of Krishna's absence'. The difference, however, is that Krishna was a God whereas Habba's beloved was a corporeal being. While Mira's desire could be concealed in spirituality, Habba voiced her yearnings for a finite being and put it in the public domain without taking recourse to mysticism.

What could hold me on to life

When he has forsaken me?

With a steady fire within me.

I feel baked in an oven

With my flesh all ablister

The metaphors of desire and longing that she uses signify the language of social and patriarchal subjection. Harbans Mukhia while analyzing the Urdu *ghazal* states that in the medieval Hindi *sringar* (romantic) poetry, there is little space for the subdual of one's love for the beloved and that it must regularly and repetitively find utterance.¹⁴ Habba Khatoon's songs too continually express the sensual longings without holding them back are camouflaging them through different means.

Smitten with love in every limb,
I am consumed with passionate longing!
He gazed at me through the door
(Wonder who showed him where I lived!)
And I ached with love in every limb.
I am consumed with passionate longing!
Peeping at me through the window,
With a swan's neck and pendants' grace-
O, he just stole my heart away!
I am consumed with passionate longing!

One of Habba Khatoon's most famous songs *vwolo maine poshe madano*, [Come back my lover of flowers] is said to have inspired the great Kashmiri poet Mahjoor to compose his own *Poshe mati jaanaano* [My Adonis, fond of flowers]¹⁵.

dil nith rarytham goshe
vwolo myaani poshe madano
You stole my heart and stole away.
Come back my lover of flowers.

This seems to be the only song wherein one gets a hint of the way she was viewed within the society. For instance:

Let's go gather sweet wild leaves.
I suffer the taunts of the madding crowd.
Would they jeer if they shared my fate?
Come back my lover of flowers!

Let's go to the upland wood, my friend.
Being gullible, he swallowed whole

¹⁴ Harbans Mukhia, "The Celebration of Failure as Dissent in Urdu Ghazal Author", (Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 33, No. 4: Cambridge University Press, Oct. 1999)

¹⁵ Trilokinath Raina, *Habba khatoon, Arinmal, The Queens of Song*, 27.

Whatever was said to slander me.

Come back my lover of flowers.

This seems similar to the taunts and abuses that the mystic Lal Ded was subjected to as has been discussed in some of her vaakhs:

Let a thousand mouths abuse me,

If I be a true devotee to *sankar*,

I shall not feel hurt in my mind,

How can ashes soil a mirror?¹⁶

One wonders here that if Lal Ded despite being a mystic had been the subject of social censure for not following the prescribed social framework, what sort of reaction Habba Khatoon would have generated. But barring the few verses mentioned above wherein Habba Khatoon tries to be indifferent to the slandering that she was subjected to, one does not find her other songs expressing the same concerns.

Thus the songs of Habba Khatoon, may be said to express variegated themes ranging from the trials and tribulations of a daughter-in-law to the desires of the feminine self and the pathos of separation from the beloved. An analysis of her songs reveals the absence of any protest against the existing social order or structures thereby expressing conformity to the patriarchal institutions rather than dissent. She does speak against the ill-treatment and oppression of her in-laws but she tries to mitigate her sufferings by seeking patriarchal protection from her parents. Her other songs wherein she expresses her desires and anguish after she is estranged from her beloved too constitute the same theme.

¹⁶ Cited in Neha, *Representing Gender: Lal Ded in Kashmiri Sufism and Shaiva Tradition*, 73. Unpublished M.Phil Dissertation, Submitted to Department of History and Culture, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

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