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FEMALE IDENTITY AND GENDER DYNAMICS IN HABBA KHATOON'S POETRY

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Abstract

This study conducts a feminist analysis of the poetry of Habba Khatoon (1554-1609), a well-known Kashmiri poetess. This article digs into her devastating expressions of female victimisation in her time's patriarchal society by examining the themes of her poetry, her distinct style, and striking imagery. Khatoon's poetry expertly expresses repressed emotions and obstacles faced by women, highlighting their perseverance and toughness. This study emphasises Khatoon's cultural relevance as a symbol of women's emancipation and an advocate for gender equality in writing, demonstrating her long-lasting influence on the literary scene of the 16th and early 17th century.

Keywords: Habba Khatoon; Kashmiri; female; feminine; romantic

Introduction

Ever since the 1960s, women's writings have long been used in academic forums as a medium to express repressed feelings and unhappiness of females in patriarchal society. However, a lot of female writers—like Habba Khatoon—continue to be marginalized, with their works being left out of literary canons because of their gender. This study examines the lasting significance of Khatoon by considering her hardships as well as her engagement with the “Woman Question” in the context of representation of women's mental health issues in Kashmiri literature.

Habba Khatoon, born Zooni in the village of Chandhara in 1554, wrote adventurous poetry that was largely autobiographical but also universal. Her compositions frequently reflect her personal experiences, such as her early arranged marriage, subsequent divorce, and her strong feelings for Yousuf Shah Chak, the last king of independent Kashmir. Scholarly studies and historical sources mostly disregard Habba Khatoon, an important character in Kashmiri culture. Despite her standing as a cultural legend, she has received posthumous recognition for her work as a singer in Yousuf Shah Chak's court, primarily since the seventeenth century. During her time, the

literary scene was thriving, with many contemporaries focusing on Shaivism and spirituality. Poets such as Laleshwari (Lal Ded) and Nund Rishi (Sheikh Noor-ud-din Noorani) were well-known, with writings firmly rooted in mysticism and spirituality. Lal Ded, who lived a few centuries before Khatoon, was well-known for her *vakhs* (poetic lyrics) on Shaivism and the inner spiritual path. Nund Rishi's poetry and teachings emphasised Sufism and communal harmony, advocating a combination of spirituality and social justice. Khatoon's poetry, on the other hand, stood out for its emphasis on love and personal pain. Political turmoil and patriarchal rules dominated the social climate in 16th-century Kashmir. Despite these obstacles, Khatoon used her lyrical talent to highlight women's issues and explain their sufferings, garnering her the moniker "original feminist." Her poetry not only provides insight into her own life, but it also speaks to the general experiences of women in her society.

Background of the Study

A complex exploration of femininity that goes beyond the historical context of Kashmiri society in the middle ages is understood by the portrayal of women in Habba Khatoon's poetry. Her narrative techniques create a mosaic of female identities, roles, and agencies that come together and create a powerful story about what it means to be a woman. The complexity of women's positions is central to Khatoon's portrayal. Women are shown in her poems as active agents negotiating the difficult terrain of emotional, social, and familial landscapes rather than as merely passive subjects. Her poetry presents images of mothers, daughters, lovers, and rebels, all with their voices and agency. Khatoon broadens the scope of the narrative, shedding light on the variety of women's experiences that go beyond traditional preconceptions.

Statement of the Problem

Since early ages, women in patriarchal societies have been facing domestic violence

which compels them to suppress their emotions. However, it is interesting to study, how these repressed feelings and emotions burst in the form of creative output, as is the case with Habba Khatoon.

Significance of the study

This study fills a void in the academic literature by shedding light on the feminist contributions made by Habba Khatoon to Kashmiri poetry. The study examines how she represents women and questions conventional gender norms to emphasize how important it is for her to articulate the realities of women in a patriarchal culture. In addition to enhancing feminist literary criticism, this study improves Khatoon's standing in the canon of literature and fosters a greater understanding of her influence on culture and history. In addition, it emphasizes how crucial it is to value and acknowledge women's voices in literature to advance the conversation about social justice and gender equality.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design to explore the feminist themes and gender dynamics in Habba Khatoon's poetry. This approach enables a close analysis of textual nuances, cultural contexts, and the subjective feelings portrayed in her poetry. Information is acquired using an extensive examination of primary sources, which encompass textual interpretations of Khatoon's poetry, as well as secondary sources, which include scholarly journals, research papers, and historical compositions. To improve comprehension of Khatoon's contributions and her social background, additional resources about Kashmiri literary history and cultural studies are analyzed. The process of analysis in Khatoon's poetry makes use of thematic analysis to pinpoint recurrent themes, motifs, and linguistic idioms.

This includes an examination of theme issues such as women's subjectivity, resilience, and rejection of patriarchy, as well as a

gynocritical approach to understanding the particular female literary heritage and the portrayal of women's lives. The texts are analysed to reveal feminist motifs and gender norms, and contextualized within the historical and cultural setting of sixteenth-century Kashmir. Information from academic journals, research papers, and historical texts is integrated through document analysis. To fill in knowledge gaps and improve Habba Khatoon's standing in the canon of literature, the study critically engages with the body of current literature on the author. The study creates a complex story that appropriately portrays Khatoon's literary achievements and her status as a cultural icon in Kashmiri society by combining knowledge from a variety of sources.

Methods of data collection

Numerous primary and secondary sources were thoroughly reviewed to gather data for this study. Textual readings of Habba Khatoon's poems are primary sources, whilst academic publications, research papers, and historical writings comprise secondary sources. Books and research papers enhance our comprehension of Khatoon's contributions and the social setting in which she wrote by offering insightful analyses of her life, poetry, and the cultural context of sixteenth-century Kashmir.

Discussion

In addition to being a land of breathtaking scenery and landscapes, Kashmir has long been known for its literary fertility, having produced notable poets like Lalleshwari, Mahmud Ghani, Arnimal, Mahjoor, Rasool Mir, and Habba Khatoon, whose spiritual poetry and love songs enhanced Kashmiri literature. Habba Khatoon, who was once known as Zoon or Zuni because of her moon-like beauty, is one of the most distinctive poets of the sixteenth century. She was raised in poverty in Pulwama, where she was taught to read and write by a village teacher. She also had a gift for writing and singing songs. While singing beneath a *chinar* tree, she attracted the attention of Yusuf Shah

Chak, the ruler of Kashmir, following an unsuccessful marriage to an ignorant farmer. He married her after being enthralled with her singing and beauty, dubbing her Habba Khatoon and establishing her as the queen of Kashmir. Tragically, Yusuf Shah's imprisonment by Mughal emperor Akbar resulted in his death in Bihar, ending their six-year marriage. Habba Khatoon was deeply impacted by this separation; it turned her into an ascetic who wandered the valley and sang melancholic songs in remembrance of her loving spouse. Habba Khatoon explored themes of earthly and physical love in her vivid, romantic poetry written in everyday language, in contrast to her contemporaries who concentrated on spirituality. The addition of the 'lol' form to Kashmiri literature by her enhanced its depth. Her intense emotional surrender to Yusuf Shah, however, resulted in severe bereavement and serves as an example of how such surrender can have a detrimental effect on mental health by fostering emotional dependency, loss of self-identity, disregard for one's own needs, and increased susceptibility to emotional suffering. The life and poems of Habba Khatoon emphasize how crucial it is to strike a balance between preserving one's uniqueness and emotional well-being and making emotional relationships.

Khatoon's poetry transcends the constrictions of conventional expectations and presents a diverse tapestry of feminine identities. Her poetry speaks to women who break social expectations and forge their paths despite social restrictions. Khatoon's female characters represent a range of identities that defy the stereotypical image of women in medieval Kashmiri society, whether they are the rebellious daughter questioning patriarchal authority or the abandoned wife mourning lost love. Most importantly, Khatoon's portrayals of women provide a nuanced and emotional critique of the conventional gender conventions that are pervasive in her environment. She challenges the status quo and promotes a more

equal conception of women via her poetry. Her poetry celebrates women's tenacity, intelligence, and autonomy—qualities that are in sharp contrast to the constrictive roles that society has assigned them. Through elevating the voices of underrepresented women and questioning long-standing preconceptions, Khatoon's poetry develops into a transformative force that cuts beyond geographical and temporal bounds.

Using poetry, Khatoon allows readers to enter the inner lives of women, revealing the challenges, hopes, and victories that are poetically expressed. The poetry of Habba Khatoon shows the great diversity of women's identities, experiences, and agency. She questions established gender stereotypes and presents a transcendent image of womanhood through her nuanced portrayal. Women are portrayed in Khatoon's poetry as powerful agents of change rather than as helpless objects whose voices reverberate through the ages, leaving a legacy of fortitude and empowerment.

Khatoon's poetry hardly shows any trace of the influence of mysticism which her mighty predecessors Lal Ded and Sheikh Noor-Ud-Din embody. Lalla and the Sheikh were primarily saints and had to impart instruction to their contemporaries. Their message was couched in verse. Habba Khatoon's own contemporary Khwaja Habib-ullah Nowshehri also was sufi mystic and poet (Sandhu 1983).

The examination of female consciousness, experiences, and psyche in women's literature is one facet of feminist studies. The idea that great literature is created by men and that women must rely on their male forebears to write is challenged by feminist criticism. Poetry by Habba Khatoon is a perfect example of originality and distinctiveness since it doesn't rely on any other poets or male authors. Instead, she had an impact on well-known male poets like Mahjoor Ghulam and Kaul Dina Nath. Kashmiri poetry expanded its scope of interest by embracing the folkloric qualities of Habba Khatoon (Tikku 156).

Khatoon expresses her agony of being parted from her partner without holding back. Her non mystical poetry captures the emotional experience of a woman, human love, and interpersonal interactions during a period when the prevalent poetic traditions were those of Persian Sufi and Bhakti poetry. It seems she considers itself more intently as a lover than as a poetess (Sandhu 1983):

At the gates of Harmukh

I will wait at Harmukh gates for you my love, whatever you ask I will offer you.

Ask for a flower on your forehead, I will offer you a rose my love, whatever you ask I will offer you.

Cotton and fire have fused, by God my heart is stuck on you.

I also can't take this distance between us my love, whatever you ask I will offer you.

I left my tribe for good, what a destiny.

What can a preacher do about it my love, whatever you ask I will offer you.

Saffron I am planting in the beds, henna I will apply on my nails.

Whom are you yearning for my love, whatever you ask I will offer you?

My youth is at its zenith, look at me from that level.

At the end the temples will wither, whatever you ask I will offer you.

(Translated by Maharaj Kaul n.p.)

Harmukh, a sacred mountain in Kashmir, represents a site of spiritual and emotional significance. Waiting at its gates can represent a trip of love and dedication. "Harmukh Bar Tal Zaagaie Madano" is an epic and timeless Kashmiri hymn that is revered by Muslims and Pandits alike, albeit for different reasons. Muslims consider it a powerful romantic song written by a woman for her beloved, whilst Pandits regard it as Parvati's love hymn to Lord Shiva. The poem is full with emotions of love and unwavering commitment. The repeated sentence "whatever you ask, I will offer you," emphasises the Khatoon's willingness to

sacrifice and accomplish the beloved's desires, emphasising the idea of selfless love. The phrases portray a great sense of yearning and the sorrow of separation, with the speaker's heart described as "cotton and fire", implying intense inner upheaval and desire. Furthermore, Khatoon discusses leaving her clan and describes it as "what a destiny", implying a sense of sacrifice and the unavoidable aspect of fate. This emphasises the personal cost and societal limits she experienced in her search of love.

Through the poetry, she also shares her views and feminine identity from a first-person perspective, shedding light on her personal life in addition to gaining the affection and familiarity of the common Kashmiri people. Her use of "I" in her poetry exposes aspects of her that would otherwise remain unrecorded, autobiographical elements such as her enlightening demeanor, oppression within a patriarchal society, unfulfilled romantic relationships, and unhappy familial dynamics. Through her poems, she also conveys the widespread admiration she received for her beauty and beautiful verses. One of the main efforts of feminist criticism in the 1970s was to give new prominence to neglected women writers. This phase of feminist criticism where the attention was shifted from 'androtex- books by men' to 'gynotex- books by women' aimed at the assessment and evaluation of the female literary canon. Showalter, who coined the word Gynocriticism, has observed one of the aspects of feminist criticism is to expose the "exclusion of women from literary history" (Showalter 5). Gynocriticism examines the feminine qualities of women's literature, including authorship, experience, ideology, and images that contribute to the female literary canon. Showalter's *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* proposes a study of women's literature, including its history, styles, themes, genres, and forms. Gynocriticism also examines the impact of female writers in the Cultural tradition helps people realise their accomplishments and oppression. The research

in this sector continues to evolve. The goal of gynocriticism is to identify feminine themes, such as caring ties between women and their families and between women, in literary works authored by women. A gynocritical reading of the poetry of Habba Khatoon illustrates the anguish of being a woman. The subject of family dynamics and domesticity is expressed in her poems, which depicts the bigotry and mistreatment she endured at the hands of her in-laws. Khatoon's father married her off at a young age to a peasant boy because he was worried about her rising stardom, as is the case in any patriarchal society where a young woman is believed as not being able to protect herself. Her husband didn't appreciate her talent, and she went through a time of mental and physical suffering. The mental and physical suffering she endured at her husband's home eventually led to a divorce. Habba Khatoon had an unstable and hostile relationship with her husband and mother-in-law, which she expresses in these verses. She also presents the struggles of the common Kashmiri women victimized by the patriarchal system through her poetry.

O my father's clan (Translation by G.R Malik)

All is not well with me at my husband's house

Rid me of my troubles, my father's clan
I left home to fetch water from the stream
My tender parents, the water pot broke
Either replace the broken pot or
Pay for it, I beseech you

All is not well with me at my husband's house.

Rid me of my troubles, my father's clan
My youthful frame is wasting
Mounting the uplands has become
backbreaking

My feet are blistered, gathering Herbs
Salt is spreading over my wounds
All is not well with me at my husband's house

Rid me of my troubles, my father's clan

My mother-in-law seized me by the hair
Worse than death was it to me
Falling exhausted on the spinning wheel
I broke the shaft
All is not well with me at my husband's
house (Translated by G.R. Malik)

Khatoon's female characters represent a range of identities that defy the stereotypical image of women in medieval Kashmiri society, whether they are the rebellious daughters questioning patriarchal authority or the abandoned wives mourning lost love. Her poems depict the pain caused by unrequited love.

The poetry of Habba Khatoon is a moving example of her rejection of the traditional gender norms that were pervasive in medieval Kashmiri society. She skilfully challenges conventional expectations by providing alternate perspectives on womanhood through her poetry, subverting accepted stereotypes. Her examination of language, ideas, and motifs is a potent tool for questioning the existing quo and promoting a more complex view of women's identities and roles in her cultural and social context. The abandoned lover metaphor, which challenges conventional gender norms by depicting women as agents of want and longing, is one of Khatoon's most recurring themes in her poetry. Khatoon's poetry often shows female characters aching for their love, rejecting the submissive role that women are usually assigned when it comes to romantic relationships. In her poetry "Lament of Habba Khatoon", for example, she bemoans:

The spring has come already, oh friend (Translated by Arvind Gigoo)
The spring has come already, oh friend!
Ask my beloved to come to me
What happened to that love of yours?
What did I do to be forgotten by you?
Only you were my companion in agony!
Ask my beloved to come to me

Only when he comes, will the flowers bloom for me! Ask my beloved to come to me. (Translated by Arvind Gigoo n.p.)

By using these verses, Khatoon asserts women's agency in expressing longing and desire, challenging the idea that women should be passive in matters of love. In addition, Khatoon's poetry frequently honors women's fortitude and bravery in the face of misfortune, providing a different interpretation of femininity that is bold and determined. In "The Strength of Women", she writes, "Like the river that carves its path through the mountains,/ Women endure, steadfast and resolute".

Habba Khatoon's poetry, like Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*, defies the rigid identity constructions imposed by religious and communal disputes during Partition. Khatoon, like Puro in *Pinjar*, must traverse a complex web of gender expectations and cultural restraints. Her sentiments of personal loss, love, and rejection of the responsibilities placed on her as a woman in mediaeval Kashmir are consistent with the larger themes of identity development under stress. Khatoon's sad lines exemplify the tenacity of women who, despite being marginalised and subjected to societal restraints, find a way to establish their individuality and defy the patriarchal systems that aim to define them.

This junction of personal and community identity in the face of restrictive societal norms reflects the conflicts described in *Pinjar*, in which women's bodies serve as both contestation sites and emblems of cultural honour (Suri 177).

In this instance, Khatoon presents women as tough natural forces that can overcome challenges and claim their agency in a world ruled by men. Furthermore, Khatoon defies conventional gender conventions through her linguistic choices, lending her poetry an air of assertiveness and rebellion. In "Defiance," her poetry, she writes, "I am not bound by the chains of tradition,/ I am the master of my destiny".

By using language like this, Khatoon defends women's autonomy and opposes patriarchal systems that aim to limit their agency and freedom. It is impossible to overestimate the impact of these subversions in the context of Khatoon's social and cultural surroundings. In medieval Kashmiri society, women were often relegated to submissive roles and obliged to conform to rigid gender norms and social expectations. In contrast, Khatoon's poetry subverts these assumptions by promoting feminist principles that respect women's independence, fortitude, and courage.

Conclusion

Habba Khatoon's poetry is an unwavering witness to her rejection of the patriarchal systems and deeply ingrained gender conventions that characterized medieval Kashmiri society. Khatoon breaks the mold of traditional femininity by examining a wide range of subjects, motifs, and linguistic expressions. She presents a unique perspective that values the autonomy, resilience, and power of women. Through her fearless assertion of women's autonomy and individuality in the face of social constraints, Khatoon challenges established gender stereotypes in her poetry. Khatoon shines as a lighthouse of artistic expression and feminine empowerment despite going through difficult personal struggles in a patriarchal and male-dominated environment. Her poetry provides a haven for her to express her most intense feelings, demonstrating the ongoing value of artistic endeavor in assisting people through difficult times in their lives. A feminist reading of Khatoon's poetry reveals the intricacies of her lived experience and presents a woman who, despite her pain, finds strength and comfort in writing poetry. Utilizing her distinct artistic manifestation and investigation of feminine sensitivity, Khatoon demonstrates her status as a literary icon whose influence endures beyond the limitations of time and affects future generations.

Khatoon's unwavering devotion to the craft of poetry as a vehicle for catharsis and emancipation is further demonstrated by her reluctance to give in to the pull of earthly pleasures in the face of her suffering. Her poetry serves as a vehicle for expressing her "internalized consciousness," reflecting the depths of her mental anguish and her spirit's tenacity. A significant part of Kashmiri literature, Habba Khatoon's poetry is a tribute to the tenacity of women and the transforming power of the arts. Her legacy serves as a constant reminder of the need to question social norms, promote gender equality, and establish welcoming environments for the voices of women. By recognizing Khatoon's efforts, we open the doors to a more just society where the creative potential of all people is appreciated.

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