



MEDIEVAL PATRIARCHAL MINDSET IN WARIS SHAH'S *HEER EPIC*

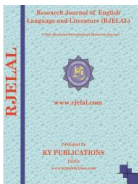
SUKHDEV SINGH DHANJU¹, Dr. PRIYA SAROJ²

¹Assistant Professor of English, University Institute of Legal Studies, Chandigarh University, Mohali

Email: devdhanju@hotmail.com

²Assistant Professor of Political Science, University Institute of Legal Studies

Chandigarh University, Mohali



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Abstract

Feminist analysis concerns itself with the representation of women in literature. It pinpoints the fact that man written literature is a means of strengthening patriarchal ideology. Man written literature glorifies woman's beauty but intellectually she is considered as zero. She is presented as mere embodiment of sex and lust. She is not considered capable of rational thinking. Waris Shah's classic *Heer Rajnha* is no exception. Heer is presented as having fairy's beauty, exceptional qualities and totally submissive to her lover. She is presented as a model woman to be followed by other women. In modern times, women writers have tried to combat patriarchal ideology by narrating and presenting real women in their fictions.

Keywords: Monotony, Liberate, Usurpation, Paradigm, Narrative, Dogmas.

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of the man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her (Castle 2007; p.95).

From centuries woman is struggling against patriarchal subjugation and exploitation. Whether born in east or west, she is regarded as other, an unwanted inferior being. Patriarchs try to each and every moment of women. Man expects woman to act according to her wishes and to achieve this goal of subjugation of woman, he employs every kind of strategy and literature is one of the means to achieve this end. Man written literature is full of women characters who are totally submissive to every will of man. Male writers present woman as an embodiment of sex and lust. Male patriarchs consider woman as an object which they can mould in whatever shape they want to.

With the advent of multimedia and increasing awareness, women have become conscious of their inferior position. They try to liberate themselves from the conjugal patriarchal setup. They have reacted sharply and strongly against the constructed roles of women. This reaction resulted in feminist movement and feminist criticism. Feminist criticism concerned itself with the representation of women in literature and with changing women's position in society by freeing them from oppressive restraints. Central to these restraints are essentialist definitions of what it is to be a woman: definitions that assume human nature is universal and which refuse to see how culture plays a significant part in constructing and fixing identity.

Modern feminism began with Mary Wollstonecraft's "Vindication of the Rights of Women", a work that criticizes stereotypes of women as emotional and instinctive and argues that women should aspire to the same rationality prized

by men. Liberal intellectuals like John Stuart Mill also supported women's case. In *The Subjugation of Women*, he argued that women ought to enjoy equality in the social sphere, especially in marriage and condemned "forced repression and unnatural stimulation" (Castle 2007; p.95). Revolution was brought about by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* claiming "one is not born, one becomes a woman." Beauvoir challenged the idea that a woman's essence was distinct from man's essence. Social construction was further developed by other feminists and for Kate Millet patriarchy was the root cause of the subjection of women.

"Patriarchy is seen as male-centered and controlled and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate woman to man in all cultural domains; familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic" (Abrams 2007; p.89). This patriarchal ideology pervades those writings which have been traditionally considered great literature and which until recently have been written mainly by men. Feminist critics analyzed these works to show what strategies are employed by male writers to maintain their control over women. They presented women as an emotional being who know no reason.

My objective in this paper is to hint at the patriarchal ideology that pervades *Heer Waris* and how this composition presents romanticized picture of woman character by taking into consideration five things

1. Heer's marriage to Saida against her wishes.
2. Ranja's continuous accusation against Heer of ditching him.
3. Patriarchal emphasis on chastity of woman.
4. Sehtis altercation with Ranjha.
5. Use of adjectives, words to describe Heer and Ranjha.

Heer Waris enjoys the status of a classic in Punjabi literature. More than hundred versions of *Heer Rajha* are composed but *Waris Shah's* composition stands apart. He is regarded as the Poet of people.

His *Heer* is a historic gem which shines with full of its glory over the crown of undivided Punjab"

(Narang 1987; P 165) Inner depth of *Waris Shah's* poetry sways human feelings and sentiments . "Intensity of thought leads the human mind to the provocation where all the emotions melt" (Narang 1987;P 167). Amrita Pritam a noted poet calls *Waris Shah* "a solace for the sufferers, a balm for the bruised hearts". When Punjab was divided, Amrita burst into tears and she wrote:

O' wake thou the savior of sufferers, see the condition of the Punjab

In the forest, dead bodies are lying
Chenab is flowing full of blood (Narang 1987; P 165)

The legend of *Heer Ranjha* as composed by *Waris Shah* gives voice and visibility not only to the protagonist *Heer* but also to her sister-in-law *Sehti* and in fact endows *Heer* with attributes usually associated with a hero. What *Weales* said for the women characters of *Tennessee Williams* is apt for *Heer* and *Sehti*, "women characters are more striking as the female characters have the quality to fascinate" (*Weales* 1965-66; p.321).

Yet the narrative of *Heer Ranjha* is firmly characterized by patriarchal closures, both in the structure of its episodes and in its rhetoric. It narrates the love tragedy of daughter of the *Siyals* in the context of a feudal set up, who falls in love with a young man but their marriage is opposed by her family. Daughter's love is sacrificed for the sake of kinship and her lover conditioned by the prescribed gender role, fails the beloved at crucial moments.

The patriarchal discourse has consistently indulged in either a romantic glorification of woman or her arbitrary condemnation and the legend of *Heer Ranjha* is no exception. Like most of the traditional literature by men, this legend also presents what may be termed as "fictional woman" who is a male product and suppresses the historical i.e. the real woman who remains oppressed under a biased value structure and obliterated by the cultural representations of gender.

“Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society.” (Beauvoir 1993; p.447) In the feudal patriarchal setup, marriage is not just a matter of union of two individuals but of two families. It is a means of enhancing power by making alliances with other powerful class. Daughters are not individuals in their own right but merely pawns in the male game of consolidating power. At best they are gifts for exchange. Gayle Rubin remarks that:

‘The essence of kinship is an exchange of women among men’

The exchange cements relations among groups and provides men with power (Flax 1990; p.144)

Heer loves Ranjha, who is a son of chieftain, yet she is denied happiness because the Siyals think Kheras are more powerful. Convinced about the truth and righteousness of her love, Heer argues with her parents and Kazi. The Kazi advises her to be feminine and he tries to persuade her in the name of God and warns her about the violence that may be inflicted on her. Her brother too speaks oppressive language. Finding her still adamant at the time of her marriage, Kazi invokes the authority of the Quran and she is forcibly married to Saida.

In the grand scheme of patriarchy, religion too is misinterpreted for political ends, to circumvent the desires and rights of women. Religion, in fact, provides an opportunity to women to give or not to give her consent to marriage. However the social practice has reduced it to a meaningless ritual. Though a darling daughter, Heer has no right to take decision of her life. What Joginder Bahrla writes in *Sahiban* is equally applicable to Heer also:

Like children in the lap of witches Daughters grow in the homes of the Jats their tongues remain tied forever

Though flame rage within their hearts. (Singh 2007: p.47)

Heer’s condition in her in laws home can be best summed up in the following words:

‘life seems not to have purpose or meaning or direction,

(S)he lacks identity, suffers feelings of restlessness and longing.

(S)he feels totally hollow...” (Hills 1968; p.19)

This shows the steadfastness of Heer in love. She does try to escape this imprisoning familial order. She offers to elope with Ranjha. Ranjha however, turns down her suggestion, saying that love gained with deceit and elopement has no charm.

When Ranjha leaves Takht Hazara, he becomes a faqir (hermit) and after Heer’s marriage, he becomes a jogi (ascetic). A major part of *Heer Ranjha* depicts him as a jogi even though he bribes or steals, quarrels, curses or beats others unnecessarily. Repeatedly in the narrative he is referred to as kamlā i.e. insane, thus freeing him from the constraints of responsible behavior. As a resisting reader, one can realize that the male hero, by sheer virtue of the assigned adjectives, is kept out of the domain of judgment. That’s why feminist criticism is not, as Toril Moi has observed, “just another interesting critical approach” like “a concern for sea imagery or metaphors of war in medieval poetry” (Moi 1987; p.204). It dives deep into the text to see the hegemony of male protagonists. Ranjha himself refused to elope with Heer before her marriage, but repeatedly complains that he has become a jogi for her sake while she is happily married. Projecting his own flaws on other i.e. woman, has been a frequent practice of men in patriarchal set up. That’s why Simone de Beauvoir writes, “A man is in the right in being a man, it is the woman who is in the wrong” (Beauvoir 1993; p.X111).

Heer’s character is romanticized as usual in this narrative too. She confronts the problems with grit and only when things go beyond her power does she entrust their solution to God. On the contrary, when Ranjha is confronted with problems, he either turns away from them or sees refuge in the miracles or in five-Pirs. The only time he undergoes some hardship is as a cowherd at the Siyals.

After becoming a jogi, he goes to Rangpur where his action is extremely childish and undignified. His language goes past the limits of decent civilized behavior. In his speeches, patriarchal ideology comes to forefront. Violent and quarrelsome, he boasts about his powers to cure and his capacity to destroy. He even boasts about his jog. In the prolonged altercation with Sehti, he is abusive, irreverent, full of threats, ill-tempered and rash. He beats Saida even after Saida swears about Heer's chastity despite three years of their marriage. When he is actually deceiving them and trying to get his beloved through a lie. Therefore, behavior is erratic and full of contradictions – he first refuses to elope but later abducts Heer from her in-laws. He demands respect that is due to an ascetic but acts as a pompous imposter and yet he is never subjected to scrutiny.

Heer's love for Ranjha, however, is marked by absolute submission. She maintains the stance of a perfect devotee and never questions Ranjha's conduct, whatever may be his flaws. Instead, she keeps on worrying about him. When Ranjha becomes an ascetic, Heer reflects sadly:

Having lost his woman and torn his ears

What has he gained indeed from love?

He suffers all this for my sake,

He has licked hot irons with his tongue.
(Shekhon 1996; p.246)

Hence, "for man she is an amusement, a pleasure, a company, an inessential boon, he is for her the meaning, the justification of her existence" (Beauvoir 1993; p.X1V). When Ranjha is blessed with Heer by the Pirs, his love is marked by skepticism from initial doubts about woman's trustworthiness to specific allegations later against Heer of desertion and insincerity. Ranjha tells Heer that the word of women cannot be trusted. Women falsify the truth and feel no shame. To comfort her skeptical lover, Heer reminds him of several instances of woman's constancy in the past and pledges her absolute submission to him. She says as long as blood runs in her veins, she will remain his slave. He can do anything with her and can sell her in market.

Without him, her life is „futile and impermanent" (Hills 1968; p.19).

Nothing, however, convince Ranjha and he remains susceptible. He does not take note of social structure which made Heer helpless. He has no remorse of his failure to stand by Heer's side. Instead he harps on his own sufferings. He taunts Heer by saying that he is ruined, but she is happy. He speaks against women in general:

...maidens betrays their lovers and get married,

They make Faqirs of the Jats in their parents' home,

And happily reign at their in laws (Singh 2000; p.60).

The patriarchal emphasis on woman's chastity is sustained even at the cost of probability. Married for three years, Heer still remains untouched. If she is to meet Ranjha, she must be chaste. Even then Ranjha is full of complaints against her in particular and women in general. He tells the young maidens of Rangpur, "you are the true grandmothers of Satan" and he even says that woman is nowhere faithful in the world. Like Christians, he too blames women for man's fall from heaven and says:

They turn kings into ascetics,

Princes and they have ruined all.

Waris Shah all virtues reside in men,

And full of vice are women (Singh 2000; p.61).

Sehti counters these allegations of Ranjha by rational arguments. She tried to correct him of his biased perceptions regarding men and women but not only her arguments fail to have any effect on Ranjha, but her confrontation is silenced by converting her into a meek disciple. She replies to Ranjha :

I shall go and do as you desire,

Submitting entirely to your will.

There is no doubt, I was to you,

Most uncivil, for which I grieve (Shekhon 1996; p.250).

Thus the contesting voice is transformed into one of obedience, surrender and supplication. Once again woman is shown as “incidental, the inessential as opposed to essential” (Beauvoir 1993; p. XL1V-V). Hence, Waris Shah negates the position of woman. He brings the woman (Sehti) down on her knees admitting man’s (Ranjha) supremacy. Thus the patriarchal practice stands vindicated with the haughtiest and most aggressive of the female species cut to size, seeking forgiveness. The patriarchal bias of Waris Shah also reveals itself frequently in the voice of the omniscient narrator. Waris Shah himself is no less eloquent than Ranjha in degrading women. It is the initiative and planning of Sehti and Heer and their clever performance which make possible the union of lovers. Their actions could have easily been described in such complementary terms as „resolution“, „daring“ but repeatedly narrator calls it deceit, pretence and fraud. He then calls them cleverer than Satan. If this is a deception then Ranjha too is an equally deceit as he pretends to be a true jogi but actually he is not. He remains out of the ambit of narrator’s strictures. When as per plan Sehti seeks her mother’s permission to take Heer with her to the fields, omniscient narrator adds:

See, how daughter cheats the mother,

Assuming fake gestures,

Embers under palm,

All affection on her face (Singh 2000; p.64).

While conspiring with Sehti, Heer is given this self deprecatory speech uttered with an unconscious celebratory tone

Tutors of Satan we are, let us think of some deceit,

Going to the garden behooves us not,

How to bring home the lover? (Singh 2000; p. 64).

In this legend, Waris Shah indulges in glorifying Heer’s character. She is presented as a person of exceptional qualities and commits herself to Ranjha with absolute submission. She can be recognized among millions.

Physically Heer is matchless but there is no praise of her mental capabilities. In fact there is no

reference to Heer’s rational thinking. She is presented only as a Barbie, perfect picture of an ideal beauty as every man aspires to have with complete submission to his will.

To sum up we can safely say that patriarchal voice controls the narrative of *Heer Ranjha* throughout, while Waris Shah’s poetic excellence certainly earns him a place among the best poets of the world, in the range of both his conception of ideas and their expression on page but his lack of generosity in complementing women or rather his explicit bias against them makes his art disturbing. His sweeping denigration of women certainly makes the celebration of this “classic” questionable more as it takes a woman exceptionally steadfast in love for its female protagonist. It presents “fictional woman”. However in modern times, the swaying effects of patriarchy are losing their grounds. Modern women fictional writers combat this fictional presentation of woman by presenting real woman in their literature. Their women characters are not constructions- glorified physically and condemned mentally but real pictures, women like Mandip in *Agni Prikhiya* or in *Iho Hamara Jiwana*. We can say that now subaltern can speak for herself.

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Her lips are brilliant red like rubies, And chin a pear from Iran.

Her teeth a string of lilies pearls. (Sekhon 1996; p.234).

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