

Feminism in Lal Ded and Habba Khatoon's Poetry

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Abstract

The movement of Feminism started in 18th century in America, but the concept was from the beginning as the idea came much before than that in Kashmir in 12th century with the emergence of the torch bearers of Kashmiri poetry, Lal Ded and Habba Khatoon. They raised their voices and bare their heart to people in the times when it was rarity that a woman would give vent to their feelings. Though, they belong to different eras but through their poetry they critique and evaluate the social and traditional structures of their society through their poetry. Lal Ded introduced a new vehicle of expression which is known as *Vaakh and vatsun*, a channel of expressing the ideas and deep down emotions. Whileas, Habba Khatoon introduced lol to Kashmiri poetry which was later imitated by her contemporary and successors as their style of writing poetry. The objective of this paper is to trace the feministic strains in the poetry of Lal Ded and Habba Khatoon. It will be worthwhile to see, how these two queens of Kashmiri poetry remain unparallel in representing the emotions, yearnings and sufferings through their poetry by using different poetic devices.

Keywords: *Feminism, poetry, Lyricism, Kashmir, sufferings*

Introduction

The enemy of feminism is not men. It is patriarchy, and patriarchy is not men. It is a system, and women can support the system of patriarchy just as men can fight for gender equality. – Justine Musk

Feminism represents the major change in social thinking and politics because it radically questions our understanding of 'men' and 'women' and the social structures which maintain their differences. The ideas that ushered in the movement called Feminism are based on the understanding that in every society women are less valued than men. It also depends on the premise that women can consciously and collectively change their social position. Feminism continues to be a contestable issue, but its relevance can never be overstated. It is not only a literary movement but traverses the realms of culture, politics, economy and all other social spheres that have some kind of interaction between men and women.

Lalded is one of those women who were the trend setters of feminist thought. She was the torch bearer of feminism in Kashmir even before the existence of the concept of feminism itself. She chose the genre of poetry as her source of expression of her ideas. Reading and writing was not in vogue at that time especially among women. There were only these

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religious manuscripts and Sanskrit was used as a standard language for writing any manuscript. But, LalDed didn't follow the trend, in fact; she changed it with the usage of a vernacular language which was Kashmiri, so that every layman would understand her ideology. One can argue that LalDed was a mystical poet and there is no lie in that but that mysticism gave her a kind of opportunity to voice her underlying thoughts fearlessly. To raise a voice against the system of patriarchy in the 14th century was a win in itself because at that time the concept of feminism was not come into being and women were not even remotely aware about their rights. No doubt, that she started her life within the patriarchal setup as she got married in a very young age with a person who was very rude an unsupportive and a mother in law who was crude and a symbol of tyranny. While providing an account of one episode which expounds the crudity of her mother in law and husband, a cultural historian states, "Her mother in law has invented ingenious means of cruel treatment. She would, for instance, serve food to her, spreading a thin layer of cooked rice so as to cover a lump of stone which was placed in her plate. Not only this, her mother in law had other, more sinister strategy up her sleeve, slyly accusing her of infidelity to her husband." She bearded all the hostility and crudity of her in laws and especially of her husband who accused her of infidelity on several occasions. Though, she did show her anger verbally but she showed her resistance towards the institution of patriarchy, she liberated herself from the tradition set up by breaking the marriage and left her husband's home forever which was a sign of resistance or feminist approach towards life. Instead of being an object of pity and sympathy, she chose to use her poetry as a medium of revolution against the domination and removed the boundaries of being woman and expressed her sufferings, yearnings and her ideologies through her vakhs.

She was the first one who introduced the vernacular language in her vakhs to make people comprehend her philosophy. Virginia Woolf has also demanded for a language of woman in which she could express her feelings, share her sufferings I could relate her with LalDed when she uses Kashmiri language as a medium of communication in her poetry and when she was well versed with the Sanskrit as well which was a standard language.

As I have mentioned earlier, that LalDed was mainly considered a mystical poetess through which she achieved her liberation from the traditional mindset. Luce Irigaray, a French feminist while describing how mystic discourse has provided space to women for self-expression. She states, "The mystic discourse has provided the only space for women where they can express themselves to publicly. They break out of the self containment enclosure where hierarchies and dualities rule, and find themselves in a space where the

distinction between inside/ outside is transgressed, the experience is like an abyss that swallows up all persons, all names and even proper names.”

Lal Ded’s disrobing herself became an important or in other words it became a turning point of her life. This was a gesture of doing away with all the unnecessary burden of tradition, culture and clothing that she carried in her life. She remains unaffected by the opinions of people as if nobody existed for her and also expressed her co-conscious desires and thoughts through her poetry. She also states this incident in one of her vakhs by saying:

“Tee mye lalli gom vakh te vatsun
Tawai logum nagai natsun
That became the turning point in Lalla’s life
And naked I began to dance” (kotru, 1989)

Different Writers and Scholars have interpreted this vakh differently, as Jayshree Kak; a writer translated this vakh as:

“That became my initiation
That is why I began to wander naked”.

According to Jayshree Kak, Lalded’s wandering nude worked as a symbolism for the rejection of the patriarchal code of conduct. Neerja Mattoo, was a writer of many renowned feminist books and while putting forth her opinion on this vakh, she stated, “she (Lal Ded) seems to have become completely unself-conscious; almost unaware of her body, she refused to be bothered by what the world would say when she went about naked. When she was asked whether she felt no shame at showing her body to all men around her then, she asked whether there was a man around. Because, to her ordinary mass of people was no better than sleep or other dumb animals. For her, who apart from the lord was a real man?”

Lal Ded through her vakhs generated the concepts of self-awareness and self-esteem. She became a role model not only for women in Kashmir but women across the globe as she crossed all the boundaries and emerged as a strong woman who challenged the institution of patriarchy. Her voice will resound forever and will continue to motivate women to live life on their own terms.

Habba Khatoon

Habba Khatoon, an eminent Kashmiri lyricist of the sixteenth century gave voice to her sufferings when women were subjugated to the extent that they could not even express

their opinions regarding the day to day affairs of their lives. She represented the sufferings of the women folk through her songs. She was a legendary Kashmiri poet, who pioneered lyricism in Kashmir and introduced “Lol” (a style introduced by Habba Khatoon to Kashmiri Poetry. It expresses one brief thought). She remained unsurpassed in representing the sufferings, desires, yearnings, longings of women in her poetry. She has unashamedly confessed about her desires in her poetry. She is considered as a feminist poet of 16th century. And she was bestowed with the title of “Nightingale of Kashmir”. She was the first Kashmiri woman romantic poet. She was the first Kashmiri woman who openly raised her voice against patriarchy and its evil nature. She remained the unbeatable feminist voice of the 16th century. She expounded her sufferings and tortures that she has undergone by her in laws. She remained vocal about it in the 16th century when women of her age could not think of raising their voice against the traditional conventions of the culture. While portraying the afflictions of her, she states:

When, mother in law grabbed my hair.

It was for me worse than death!

Spinning on the wheel, I feel asleep,

And the wheel came apart, oh my home!

Feminism doesn't only mean to address the sufferings or to challenge the institution of patriarchy, but, in the meanwhile, to voice one's inner most longings unashamedly in an era when a man could not express his hidden longings publicly, he would feel that coyness in expressing those emotions. In her poetry, we could find the subtleties of women's sensitivities which can be only expounded by women. She brought genuine emotions in her poetry which at times were outrageous and at times are miserable. She has expressed the torments of a woman being a girl, a wife and a daughter in law. Habba Khatoon was the only woman who unapologetically expressed those experiences and it is in itself a revolution. Like Lal Ded, she was a victim of domestic violence; she was rebuked or at times beaten by her mother in law. Her mother in law was so crude that she pulled her by hair; Habba Khatoon expressed the episode in her verses as:

“Hashe laaeynam Mei taepis thap

Te Mei gomo maute khoti sakh

Yendra pachi pyath nendur peyimo

Tsakhur phutmo maalinyo”

Translation:

“When mother-in-law grabbed my hair,
It was for me worse than death!
Spinning on the wheel, I fell asleep,
And the wheel came apart, oh my home!”

She left her husband’s home and tried to commit suicide but somehow she escaped and that was metaphorically a new start of her life. Instead of being a victim of the traditions and conventions of the society she managed to live her life on her own terms. She boldly expressed her innermost feelings, not only this she expressed her love for her lover unashamedly in her poetry, she writes:

*“Vwolo myaani rindo
Tsey pata draayes gindaane
Naavas lagai bu
Haavasa zooo chas vandaane
Vata chas vuchhaan
Tsey pata raavum nender ta neh
Haavatam deedaar
Bu doorera chaani chas galaane”*

Translation:

“How I adore you
And offer you my life, full of dreams!
Do let me join you in the dance
Of gathering rosebuds of life!
Forsaken by sleep or rest,
Those eyes keep gazing at your path.
O let me behold you once again!
Torn from you, I waste away”.

It will be wrong to say that Habba Khatoo has only expressed the wailings of a woman, but she fiercely has boasted about woman's sexual desires in a very eloquent manner:

*“Ratschi ratschi retakol chum soraani
Bara maa gatschan acchi posh
Kunni hita bulbulo yeti aki aanai
Chhaav myaany daanai posh”*

Translation:

“With summer steadily on the wane,
These champa flowers soon may wither-
O bulbul, be here before they fade!
Enjoy my pomegranate blossoms”!

After leaving her husband's house, she retired to writing, expressing the pangs of separation from her husband, her despondency spilled out through her poetry. In some of the verses she says:

*“Hovouri baal draayas gati
Tsoora bay pyomo naav
Kanan swon ta ladur hati
Aki lati yeham naa”*

Translation:

“Love-stick, I left my home at night.
My gold earrings and coral beads
Made people take me for a thief.
Won't you come to me, just once”?

*“Yaar myon chu jamalati
Kamala tas chu naav
Su chuu tati bu kas mati
Aki lati yeham naa”*

Translation:

“My sweetheart- his name is kamaal-
Lives in distant Jamalatta
To whom, has he entrusted me?
Won't you come to me, just once”?

Usually, some writers or scholars believe that she was a romantic lyricist but when we read her poetry, we come to know that she did not only write about love and separation but she has touched the issues of woman as well. She has expressed how a woman leaves her own home of parents and goes in another one after marriage which also does not belong to her. She also expressed how a woman is subjected to hear the taunts of people if she decides to revolt against torture that she receives at her in-laws home. Habba khatoon has expressed this beautifully in her poetry, she says:

*“Vwola vesy gatshavai kretsche
Luka maty tujnas retsche
timan tem yon hyoo gatsche
vwola myaani poshe madano”*

Translation:

“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”!

The poetry written by her was sung at different occasions like in marriages, Eid festivals, during harvesting, etc. In these songs, they express their sorrows, longings and sufferings. She has not only included “vatsun” which is a short poem but also consists of “hur” (opening line) and “vaakhnai” (refrain). It is an expression of woman's feeling, but she put a life in it. Habba khatoon is a significant name in the history of the Kashmiri poetry. She has not been only an inspiration to woman poetesses but also male poets as well like Mahjoor (famous Kashmiri poet).

Conclusion

Lal Ded and Habba Khatoon inspired of being from different era, former belonging to 12th century and latter to 16th century or dealing entirely with different genre of poetry still became empowered women of Kashmir. They depicted the aspirations of women in the patriarchal society. They have shown female as patriarchs as well, who dominates the other women. They have shown how their mother-in law have mistreated them and turned them into a rebel. LalDed introduced *Vakh* to Kashmiri poetry, the oldest and strongest form of poetic expression.

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