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Heer Ranjha: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract: Feminist criticism 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 a mere embodiment of sex and lust. She is not considered capable of rational thinking. Waris Shah's classic *Heer Ranjha* 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: Feminism, woman, literature, patriarchy, ideology, fictional and real woman.

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

For centuries, women have been struggling against the patriarchal subjugation and exploitation. Whether born in east or west, she is regarded as an 'other', an unwanted inferior being. Patriarchs try to control each and every movement of woman. Man expects woman to

act according to his 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. Males consider woman as an object which they can mould in whatever shape they like.

With the advent of multimedia and spread of education, women have become increasingly aware of their inferior position. They are trying to liberate themselves from the suffocating patriarchal setup. They have reacted sharply and strongly against the constructed roles of woman. This reaction results in feminist movement and feminist criticism. Feminist criticism concerned itself with changing woman's position in society by liberating her from the oppressive restraints of patriarchy. Central to these restraints are the 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 *A 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 have also supported women's case. In *The Subjugation of Women*, Mill argued that women ought to enjoy equality in the social sphere, especially in marriage, and condemned "forced repression" and "unnatural stimulation" (Castle 2007, 95). Revolution was brought by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* claiming "one is not born, one becomes a woman" (cited in Moi 92). Beauvoir challenged the idea that a woman's essence was distinct from man's essence. Social construction was further criticized by other feminists and for Kate Millet, patriarchy is the root cause of subjugation of woman.

"Patriarchy is seen as male-centered and controlled and is organised 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, 89). This patriarchal ideology pervades those writings which have been traditionally considered great literatures

and which until recently have been written 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 emotional beings who know no reason.

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

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

Heer Ranjha enjoys the status of a classic in Punjabi literature. More than hundred versions of *Heer Ranjha* have been composed but Waris Shah's composition stands apart. He is regarded as the poet of people. "His *Heer* is the historic gem which shines with full of its glory over the crown of undivided Punjab" (Narang 1987, 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, 167). Amrita Pritam calls Waris Shah a "friend of suffering" in her "Ode to Waris Shah" (1992). When Punjab was divided, Amrita Pritam burst into tears and she wrote:

O wake, thou the saviour of sufferers, see the
Condition of thy Punjab
In the forest dead bodies are lying
River Chenab is flowing full of blood. (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, "women characters are more striking as the female characters have the quality to fascinate" (Weales 1965, 321) is apt for Heer and Sehti. 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 a daughter of Siyal clan 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 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-produced fiction” and suppresses the “historical” woman i.e. the real woman who remains oppressed under a biased value structure and obliterated by the cultural representations of gender.

Beauvoir writes, “Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (Beauvoir 1993, 447). In the feudal patriarchal set-up, 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:

“... the essence of kinship is an exchange of women among men...the exchange cements relations among groups and provides men with power” (Flax 1990, 144).

Heer loves Ranjha who is a son of a chieftain, yet she is denied happiness because the Siyals think Kheras are more powerful. Convinced about the truth and righteousness of her love, she 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 voices oppressive language. Finding her still adamant at the time of her marriage, the Kazi invokes the authority of the Quran and she is forcibly married to Saida.

In the grand scheme of patriarchy religion too is misrepresented 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 but the social practice has reduced it to a meaningful ritual. Though a darling daughter, Heer has no right to decide about her life. What Joginder Bahrla remarks in *Sahiban* is applicable to Heer too:

Like children in the lap of witches
Daughters grow in the homes of jats
Their tongues remain tied forever
Though flames rage within their hearts.

(quoted in Singh 2000, 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 & Hills 1968, 19).

Heer is steadfast in her love for Ranjha. 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*. 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 *kamla* i.e. insane, thus freeing him from the constraints of responsible behaviour. 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 judgement. 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, 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 *faqir* for her sake while she is happily married. Projecting his own flaws on others i.e. woman, has

been a frequent practice of men in patriarchy. That is why Simone de Beauvoir writes:

“a man is in the right in being a man, it is the woman is in the wrong.” (Beauvoir 1993, XIII)

Heer’s character is romanticized in this legend. She confronts the problems with courage 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 faqir, he goes to Rangpur where his behaviour is extremely childish and undignified. His language goes past the limits of decent behaviour. 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 joy. 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, and all this when he is actually deceiving them, trying to get his beloved through a lie. His behaviour is erratic and full of contradictions – he first refuses to elope but later abducts Heer from her in-laws. He demands respect due to a jogi 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 faqir, 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,
Has licked hot irons with his tongue? (Shekhon 1996, 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, XIV). Even though Ranjha is blessed with Heer by the Pirs, his love is marked by scepticism from initial doubts about woman’s trustworthiness to specific allegations later against 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 the 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 & Hills 1968, 19).

Nothing, however, convince Ranjha and he remains suspicious. 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 saying that he is ruined, but she is happy. He speaks against women in general;

....Maidens betray their lovers and get married
They make faqir of the Jats in their parents’ home
And happily reign at their in laws (Singh 2000, 60)

The patriarchal emphasis on woman’s purity 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 Heer 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 woman for man’s fall from heaven and,

They turn kings into faqirs,
Princes and princelings they have ruined all
Waris Shah all virtues reside in men
And full of vice are women (Singh 2000, 61)

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

I'll 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, 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, XLIV-V). Hence, Waris Shah negates the position of woman. He brings the woman (Sehti) down on her knees admitting man's (Ranjha's) 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 is degrading woman. 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 Waris Shah calls it deceit, pretence or fraud. He calls them cleverer than Satan. If deception is this, then Ranjha too is an equal partner in the deception as he pretends to be a true jogi but actually he is not. Even then he remains safely outside the ambit of Shah's strictures. When as per plan Sehti seeks her mother's permission to take Heer with her to the fields, the omniscient narrator adds:

See, how daughter cheats the mother
Assuming fake gestures,
Embers under palm
All affection on her face. (Singh 2000, 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 behaves us not,
How to bring home the lover. (Singh 2000, 64)

In the legend, Waris Shah indulges in glorification of Heer's character. She is a person of exceptional qualities and commits herself to Ranjha with absolute submission. She can be recognized among millions. "She is the sister of queen fairy" (Narang 1987, 167). Waris Shah showers praise over Heer:

Her lips are brilliant red like rubies,
And chin a pear from Iran
Her teeth a string of lilies pearls,... (Shekhon 1996, 234)

Hence, patriarchal voice controls throughout the narrative, while Waris Shah's poetic excellence certainly earns him a place among the best poets of the world, in the range of his conception and expression, his total lack of generosity in complementing women or rather his explicit bias against them makes his art disturbing. His sweeping degradation of women certainly makes the celebration of this "classic" questionable more so as it takes a woman exceptionally steadfast in love. It presents fictional women. However, in modern times, the swaying effects of patriarchy are losing grounds. Modern women fictional writers are trying to portray real woman in their writings. Their women characters are not constructions – glorified or condemned but real pictures.

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