

RECONSIDERING THE ROLE OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE MEDIEVAL KISSAS

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Abstract: Literature imitates, records, reports, mimesis, presents and represents history and thereby, the two are tied very meticulously with one another. Inspired by historical events, ancient legends, and oral anecdotes that travel some generations, many novelists, poets, and short story writers replicate them through their imagination. These texts or works of literature, fictional or semi-fictional in nature, are not only the imitations of the changing historical situations, but observations of the values, codes of conduct, approaches, rites, rituals, traditions, customs, classes and caste systems of the concerned society. Writing and producing works of literature have been the dominion of men from the very beginning because women generally did not get quality time to echo and pen down their thoughts, desires, wishes, opinions and beliefs. Punjabi poetry is generally divided into three main categories like the heroic literature; religious, mystical and metaphysical poetry; and the third is the love poetry and narratives of the legendary lives of “Heer Ranjha”, “Sassi Punno”, “Mirza Sahiba”, “Sohni Mahival” to name a few. We can read Punjabi Kissas from an analytical point of view as with all literatures, and occur to trace themes of love, betrayal, sacrifice, revolt against set patterns of society, and social values that structure a society. The aim of the present paper is to analyze the women characters of the abovementioned Kissas through a feminist perspective which would perhaps justify their actions, dialogues, decisions, standoffs and a particular pattern of living.

Keywords: History and Literature, Romance narratives, Feminist analysis, Patriarchy, Binary opposition, Resistance, Threshold.

Background – History and Literature:

Punjab has been the entranceway for innumerable trespassers/powerful rulers/intruders/warriors who left their own lands in an expedition to seize the pre-partitioned India. Every assault, every annexation, every intrusion, every attack, and every invasion left its impression on religion, culture, art, language, economy and the psyche of the Punjabis; and this imprint has been recorded and enumerated equally by the historians and the creative writers; thereby instituting a fundamental affiliation between history and literature. Literature seems to imitate, record, report, mimesis, present and represent history. The two are, therefore, knotted closely with one another to weave a new genre, which is multidisciplinary in nature. Inspired by historical events, ancient legends, and oral anecdotes that

travel some generations, many novelists, poets, and short story writers replicate them through their imagination. These texts or works of literature, fictional or semi-fictional in nature, are not only the imitations of the changing historical situations, but observations and chronicles of the values, codes of conduct, approaches, rites, rituals, traditions, customs, classes and caste systems of the concerned society. Both, history and literature are the analyses of the society, the former based totally on facts and the latter adding imaginative touch to the facts and figures. History, most of the times, catalogues the larger concerns and literature more often concentrates on the consequences of the historical events, situations and epochs. Literature is the storehouse of the historical, the mythical, the legendary and the oral narratives which have been sailing for centuries. Punjabi poetry is generally divided into three main categories like the heroic literature; religious, mystical and metaphysical poetry; and the third is the love poetry and narratives of the legendary lives of “Heer Ranjha”, “Sassi Punno”, “Mirza Sahiba”, “Sohni Mahival” to name a few.

Aim of the paper:

Richness of Punjabi Language comes from and delves in the diversifying Kissas whose variety in perspectives offer readers to peep inside the depth of its soul and hopefully come across diverse yet satisfying answers. We can read Punjabi Kissas from an analytical point of view as with all literatures, and occur to trace themes of love, betrayal, sacrifice, revolt against set patterns of society, and social values that structure a society. Apart from a thematic interpretation of a piece of text, a character’s psychological journey, his/her power to fight against or unquestioningly accept the forces operating in a society ought to be a considered critically and read thoroughly. Rigour and reason in the actions of women as portrayed by the male authors often gets sidelined or, to say, misunderstood under the male subjected shadow of the society. As for the portrayal of women characters in Punjabi Literatures produced by men, it thus becomes very important to analyze these characters through a feminist perspective which would perhaps justify their actions, dialogues, decisions, standoffs and a particular pattern of living — the aim of the present paper.

Theoretical background:

Writing and producing works of literature have been the dominion of men from the very beginning because women generally did not get quality time to echo and pen down their thoughts, desires, wishes, opinions and beliefs. A western feminist Virginia Woolf’s remark, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction,” concludes the absence of women from the arena of writing (Woolf 6). Another oft accepted reason of their being quiet or their being spoken for by the dominating sex is that women have always been the main preys of incursions and infringements. Amrita Pritam’s most quoted and most sung poem, “Ajj Aakhan Ware Shah Noo” vividly captures the above-mentioned theme and she represents agonizing experiences of women when one religion was butchering the other and women – the honour of man, home, clan, city, state, religion, and nation – were abducted, looted, raped and killed mercilessly. Sometimes women may have played an important role in the battlefield but their sacrifices were not donated with substantial and reputable space in literature. In today’s postcolonial world one cannot study literary works without looking at the space granted to the other sexual category, because “in many different

societies, women, like the colonized subjects, have been relegated to the position of ‘Other’, ‘colonized’ by various forms of patriarchal domination” (Ashcroft 249). In most of the social set-ups the masculinity of men and the femininity of women are determined on the basis of pre-designed behaviour. A feminine behaviour has been devised for women since times immemorial. Any act which is not in accordance with the same is considered to be an abnormal form of the behaviour; and is severely denounced. This is the reason that Beauvoir’s words seem so true when she says that a woman “is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human woman presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (Beauvoir 281). Authors are generally infected with sexual discriminations, biases and prejudices prevalent in his/her contemporary times, consciously or unconsciously. Women, in no society, are not allowed to step beyond the confining boundary-lines. They cannot affirm their identities and contend with the world of men. Beauvoir rightly observes that each sex embodies as “the Other in the eyes of the opposite sex; but in man’s eyes woman often appears in spite of everything as an *absolute other*.” (Beauvoir 243). Woman has mandatorily been torn apart from matters of the world outside the threshold and allotted domestic responsibilities.

Throughout history, women have “always been subordinated to men, and hence their dependence is not the result of a historical event or a social change — it was not something that *occurred*” but something that has been forced through the social structure (Beauvoir xlvii). Although cultivating and nurturing the biological or natural difference of sexes, the sexual discernments as masculine and feminine are disapproved of, yet women are always alienated as second-rate and ancillary subjects of the society. The strong women are often presented as ‘mad women in the attic’ and patriarchal world achieves pacification only when they are blessed with capacity for care and sympathy. With the attachment of the negative traits of the binary oppositions with the women they are refused integration into dominating world of the patriarchy. The women’s rebellion against their partners is considered to be an “act of transgression. Having committed that act they may never re-enter their designated first world and must live by their irretrievable choice of making the outer world their permanent space” (Lal 12). Stress is always laid on the role of women as dutiful wives, loving mothers and responsible house-keepers and in failing to perform these duties well they are castigated as impure sexual objects. Their main role is to nurture the merits of trustworthiness, honesty, credibility and obedience in all the members of their families.

The issue of gender is one of the major contested domains in the discourse on Punjabi society as well. A woman who accepts suppression, compliance and devoutness is a perfect effigy to be idealised. For some critics like J. S. Grewal, Bakhshish Singh Nijjar, and Satinder Aulakh, the portrayal of woman as a lesser entity and as unthinking being, by Waris Shah, is not unexpected. His stereotypical representation of woman in a tightly knit patriarchal world shows her as cause of all evils, disasters, battles, wars and deaths just as Helen of Troy. If women “actively resist the imposition of dominant ways” on them then they emerge “as a site of resistance” (hooks 218). In the male dominated society, Ranjha the embodiment of absolute power, expresses his love for the body of the woman in words like,

“This surging sea of maidenhood
 Turned out to be the Lady Heer...
 Upon her frame
 A red breast clinging shirt did rob
 Distracted gazers of the sense
 Of high and low...
 A ruby nose-drop decked her nose
 Like pole-star or a blazing flame...
 A moon of beauty was her brow.
 Her fair complexion was aglow...
 Her murderous ringlets did enclose
 Her face, as moon is flanked by streaks
 Of dark nocturnal shades.”

And, the same lover also adheres to the patriarchal constructs which treat woman as no better than a savage. He wants to see her sometimes as servant and sometimes as an enchantress. He is a part of the scenario that coerces woman to submit herself exactly to the role that her patriarchal society forces upon her. Abiding by the binary divisions erected by the patriarchal-colonial world, disguised as a Monk, Ranjha says:

“Men are undisguised
 Aspects of virtue and are prized
 For their unerring wisdom bright
 And learning vast and deep insight.
 Women present a different font,
 Disjunctive and remote,
 Like suffix or an adjunct
 In human speech. They dote
 And drivel and possess no sense.
 Woman! Thy name is treachery:
 Such is God’s eminent decree
 Recorded in the Holy Book.

Similarly in Peeloo’s “Mirza Sahiban,” Sahiban’s unmatched beauty is praised in words like:

“One day Sahiban went to buy oil

She went to the grocer

He forgot to hold the scales

The fascinated shopkeeper poured honey instead of oil

The grocers faltered

And the farmers left their ploughs

Three hundred Nagas were ruined...

But very soon Mirza's beloved is painted in negative shades by another woman. This matriarch is a perfect part of the patriarchal set-up that harnesses, modifies and confines the social, economic, political and intellectual life of women. Sahiban is believed to be nothing more than a witch. Since Sahiban has gone against the code of conduct, she is associated with darkness, vociferousness, weirdness and non-conformity. On receiving Sahiban's message when Mirza is about to leave to fetch her, he is warned by his mother with words like:

“Those Syals are no good, they are ill-mannered

The women of Syals are witches

They bewitch poor men

They take out their livers and eat...

You are going for the sake of a woman

And you will lose your life.”

The idea of patriarchy in this love legend settles on the manner Mirza's mother portrays the image of Sahiban as 'evil'. Here one woman of a seemingly high order (being the elder one of the society) puts another of a younger order in a frame that is although quite acceptable to the male of dominating society but not appreciable for those demanding justice for Sahiban and yet for another group that does not wish to see women getting marginalized.

But sidelining the pre-designed roles assigned to them, women made their presence felt first through the oral folk traditions and later through the Kissa-Kaavs. These stories of “Heer Ranjha”, “Sassi Punno”, “Mirza Sahiba”, “Sohni Mahival” in verse, also termed as romance poetry are long narrative poems about medieval chivalrous ethos and clandestine love. Collected during the 14th to the 16th centuries through the means of folklore of numerous communities of the people of ‘the Punjab’, these Kissa-Kaavs valorize not only romantic love but women also. Thematically seen, these epic romances narrate tales about two people belonging to different ethnic groups fall in love and this relationship is unacceptable in the traditional societies. In almost all the Kissas the supernatural or the fate or the Aristotelian tragic flaw in the protagonists lead to the union of these unfortunate lovers but only after death which immortalizes them. The male protagonists are representative of their class, caste, religion and society. Almost

all of them are archetypes of the mediaeval set-up and tenacious adherence of the hoary ethics and have doubts about precariousness of the new morals. The women in these Kissa-Kaavs, on the other hand, display strength and assertiveness.

A Reading of Heer in “Heer Ranjha”:

Waris’ Heer/Ezzat Bibi, a stunning woman, is born into a wealthy heer caste family of the Sial tribe in Jhang now Punjab, Pakistan. She revolts against the rules and customs of the society by falling in love with Ranjha/Murad Bukhsh, a Jat, and the youngest of four brothers and living in the village of Takht Hazara by the river Chenab. Heer retaliates against the existing code of conduct and the governing institutions engaged in arrangements of relationship between man and woman. Since she takes the courage to choose a husband for herself, her parents feel that they had been appropriated the right of choosing her life-partner. She introduces her lover to her father and gets him an occupation in his business as a cowherd. Heer meets Ranjha clandestinely in the woods every day. Soon people begin to suspect an affair between the two and rumours start to spread around. Heer’s uncle eavesdrops and spies upon her and catches her red-handed. As Heer seems to possess some rebellious elements to achieve her ambition, she takes a lead and tries to defend the righteousness of their relationship; and Ranjha is just trying to buy time. Marriage in the society is not union of two bodies and souls but it involves an equality of families and clans at social and economic levels. Heer’s parents prefer Saida over Ranjha. It shows that at no level – social, economic, religious, and cultural – does a woman get an opportunity to practice her will in choosing her partner. Heer’s being feminine does not mean that she lacks resolution. Heer beseeches Ranjha to elope with her when she comes to know that her marriage was fixed with Saida.

Heer’s strength is also seen in the fact that because her right to make a choice has been denied to her, she obtains blessings from the pirs and does not let her nuptial relations reach consummation. Her ability and power to transgress what has been thought of as generally an accepted notion of a woman’s actions amidst patriarchal forces exemplifies her supremacy over the most basic notions generating in a society. Heer’s insistence that she will go to Takhat Hazara with Ranjha as his wedded wife and not as his mistress depict her decisive temperament, her will to act, and to exercise what she sees as reasonable even if that stands against communal righteousness. Heer here may be seen as shameless, rebellious and stubborn. But one may also not forget that her belief in the tradition of Islamic marriage shows a coexistence of conformity and rebellion in Heer. She symbolizes a being whose decisions and actions are substantial, at least for herself, and by standing strong against society’s perceived design, she explicates a woman’s potency to revolt.

A Reading of Sassi in “Sassi Punnu”:

One may say that Heer is eloquent, unyielding and daring while Ranjha seems to be immature, indolent and diffident. Heer like resoluteness, fortitude, and intelligibility can be observed in Sassi also. When she is born to the ruler of Bhambour, it is predicted that she is an unfortunate child who will bring shame to her parents and will die in hot and burning deserts. Sassi is, therefore, abandoned by the ruler and brought up by a washer man, who finds her afloat in a basket in the river while he is washing clothes on the riverside. Like the other female protagonists of the *Kissa*'s, Sassi also grows up into a stunning woman. She falls in love with Punnu and the prediction comes true when Sassi realizes that she had been cheated. Punnu's brothers take him away to another village a day before his marriage under the effect of intoxication. Sassi becomes furious with the anguish of parting from her lover. Losing the sense of right and wrong, she runs barefoot towards the town of Kech Makran. On the way she tries to cross miles of desert, all alone. Valiant and heroic Sassi, continues her journey until her feet are scorched and her lips are dehydrated from continuously crying the name of her lost lover.

Sassi's forte is seen in her resilience to accomplish her passion. Her undaunted resolution and conscious determination to cross the burning inferno substantiates her being and overshadow brilliance of the sun and heat of the sand. Her ruffled tresses, scorching red eyes juxtaposed with the gentleness of her body show a demonic resolve protecting her chastity for her love. Facing this bigger-than-life situation, she falls into the lap of death to be remembered for centuries as a martyr. Punnu's return after a duel with his brothers, opening of Sassi's grave to become one with her eternally, highlights chastity and power of their love. The discussion points out that a bigger role here has been assigned to Sassi whose deep commitment to her wish champions her role as a woman. She has blurred the forces of the society and her focus rests primarily on the attainment of her love the intensity of which remains solid throughout the narrative. Her figure as a martyr sets a distinctive yet attainable wish fulfillment that seems, in a patriarchal society, a detached area where a woman's access is seen as something unritualistic.

A Reading of Sahiban in “Mirza Sahiban”:

In Peeloo's “*Mirza Sahiban*” we come across another brave-minded and resolute heroine, Sahiban. She also comes from a society in which clans, male ego, and family honour get an advantage over an individual's emotions or wishes, particularly a woman's. The two families/clans to which the two lovers belong are the bitterest of the enemies. Like the heroines of the other *Kissas*, Sahiban plays a strong role as she takes the initiative for the sake of her love and offers to elope with Mirza although their move ends into their death.

Mirza and Sahiban study together at the Mosque where they fall in love. Soon the people of village become suspicious of the friendship between the two. When Mirza goes to Danabad for his sister's wedding, and Sahiban's marriage is fixed in the family of Chandars. Taking a lead, the courageous woman sends a message to her lover imploring him to take her away with him. When Mirza is about to leave for Sial, his sister and mother try to stop him but fail in

their attempt. On their way to Dhanbad, Mirza wishes to take rest and he lays down under the shade of the acacia tree. When Sahiban warns Mirza of the ferociousness and cruelty of her brothers who, she was sure would chase them and reach there soon, Mirza brags of his invulnerability, and says:

“The angels are afraid of my Bakki

And God is frightened of me...

I don't know a fighter who dares strike me

I shall hit the heads of all

Even the Brars are afraid of me

I shall cut these brave men

As the hailstones destroy the crops

I shall make a heap

Of your dead brothers on the ground!”

Mirza, the well-conditioned patriarch, rudely dismisses Sahiban's concerns and pleas. Pride and ego, the two tragic flaws do not let Mirza realize the strength of his opponent. He proclaims that he would kill the whole army of her brothers single-handedly. Sahiban's hallucination of Mirza killing all her brothers and her fiancé pushes her into a gorge of an existential dilemma where the pathetic woman is forced to make a choice and she chooses to hide the quiver of Mirza's arrows. Sahiban, since that day is wrongly seen as an embodiment of betrayal and deceit – the two vices supposed to be inherent in the other sex. Mirza's tragic flaws and his responsibility of the tragedy are ignored effortlessly. Sahiban's mental conflict and emotional torment to save all her male relatives gets submerged under her prompted infidelity.

Mirza's projection of his own errors onto Sahiban towards the end of the narrative sets her as a figure representing artificiality of a woman's love. This goes unchanged as Sahiban's emotional and mental journey and the reasons of her measures remain unseen. Between love and society she sets to create a sense of balance but Mirza's casual considerations toward her retellings wraps her in an image of woman's betrayal. It sets the obvious and unchanging larger view of the narrative; thereby overlooking a woman's emotional distress and turbulence and avoiding to see her as an image of a sufferer.

A Reading of Sohni in “Sohni Mahiwal”:

In “Sohni Mahiwal” yet another love legend of this category, Sohni loses her life to the rising waves of Chenab which she crosses every late evening with the help of an inverted well-baked earthen pot to meet her lover Mahiwal. Seeing Sohni being carried away by the currents one evening, Mahiwal also jumps into the river to save his beloved and they are finally united in death caused by the overwhelming waves of the river.

Izzat Baig, now popularly known as Mahiwal, a rich merchant from the great city Bukhara in Uzbekistan renounces everything and every relation and settles down in potter Tulla's house as a mere cowherd and servant for the sake of his love for Sohni. Sohni is also soon enamored by the contagious feelings of Mahiwal's love — the relation which does not last for long as people in the neighborhood find out about their secret and blissful meetings and inform her father. Sohni is forcefully married to another potter in the neighbourhood and her flustered Mahiwal begins to live across the river Chenab flowing close to the house of his beloved. According to one of the versions, Sohni, also like Heer, does not let her marriage consummate. Her husband travels for days together and she keeps meeting her lover. Her mother-in-law and sister-in-law find out her extra-marital affair and as perfect matriarchs, they want to control the daughter-in-law of their household. Sohni's sister-in-law exchanges her earthen pot with a half-baked pot that dissolves in water leading to the death of both of the lovers. Like the unbaked earthen pot, Sassi also perishes for the sake of her lover and the waves of Chenab symbolize the society that cannot accept a reverse current. Even after knowing that her earthen pot has somehow been exchanged with an unbaked one, Sassi's determination to meet her lover, lest he takes her absence for deception shows her resilience, courage, trustworthiness, honesty and truthfulness.

Sohni delves into a space which she herself has created and that is different from the structures built by the society; a space of her choices guided by passion. The actions of Sohni ought to be considered and revisited in order to analyze and justify the working of her inner voice. Any sort of external force or construct would not stop Sohni meet her Mahiwal. The inner power of Sohni stands firmly against what ought to be considered as an acceptable 'order of society.' The impulsiveness of Sohni is simply an act of bravery which surprisingly takes a heroic form in a male oriented society. The portrayal of our female protagonist has offered to the readers a diversified form of critical appreciation in the context of how a woman becomes a *warrior of the times* by choosing not to stoop but to accomplish what her heart desires. Sohni has, noticeably, proved herself decisive enough to make her presence intense at the time when she could have chosen to present herself marginalized, as was the institution.

Conclusion:

From the medieval times till today, kinship is preferred in an eternal encounter between the wishes of an individual and communal customs defined and propagated by patriarchy. Any incongruity that could perturb harmony of societal fabric is slaughtered. All the Kissa-Kaavs, "Heer Ranjha", "Sassi Punno", "Mirza Sahiba", "Sohni Mahival", analyzed above revolve around this central conflict between individual and society, id and super-ego, desire and conditioned conduct, which is why the Kissa-Kaavs carry the essence of all the ages. The analysis demonstrates that it may be a man who contests with the blade, travels the world, invade new territories (both physical and metaphorical), but the ray of hope lies in the woman who from submissive victimisation rises like phoenix to become an agent of action. Rejecting the position of the auxiliary she questions or rebels against the ethical system of the society. At the end, it may be said that Heer's, Sassi's, Sahiban's, and Sohni's bravery and love triumph over their death. The active resistance against the imposition of dominant ways on them and stepping beyond the restricting

boundaries to grapple with the world of men earns them an identity and an individuality. Generally, the lovers, who are conditioned by patriarchal ideologies and norms, fail their beloveds at decisive instants leading to emotional isolation, poignant loneliness, victimisation and seclusion of these intricate heroines. They are wronged not only by the society (that consists of both well-trained patriarchs and matriarchs) but their lovers too.

Since these women, agents of action, show their resolution and courageousness to cross the threshold, they become an object of intimidation for hierarchical system of hegemony established since ages. Due to their un-feminineness, they are considered indecorous, inappropriate and degrading. Generally literature revolves around the male protagonists and the sacrifices that they make for their beloveds but here the so-called miserable and helpless creatures create a niche for themselves by exhibiting their dexterity in scheming and manoeuvring their lives. They possess the courage to cope with the excruciating and agonizing circumstances. They have the backbone, moral-fibre, determination and resilience that surprises, as well as pleases the readers. They are neither divine nor animalistic anymore. Heer, Sohni, Sahiban, Sassi are remembered even in the twenty first century because they sacrificed everything for love and also because defying the religious and patriarchal constraints courageously, they died for the sake of their love.

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