

## **Habba Khatoon: The Unparalleled Queen of Lyricism**

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### **Abstract**

*The present paper is an attempt to study Habba Khatoon against the backdrop of poetry written before her and establish her as a historic figure in Kashmiri literature. Kashmiri literature had to wait for four hundred years after Lal Ded before a bright star like Habba Khatoon shone in the firmament of Kashmiri literature. Further attempt is made to show that how did she uplift the lyrical folk poetry to higher imaginative and creative heights and popularized the Vatsun form of expression and became its unparalleled queen. Study has been made to show how in sharp contrast with her predecessors she passionately revels in this mundane world with all its colours and contours. Effort has been made to bring out the various shades of light and darkness, celebration and lamentation in her poetry making it a mere remembrance of bygone things of the past on the one side and an elegy or a mournful cry in distress on the other. This paper also seeks out to establish her as a messiah of Kashmiri music which was on the edge of death due to lack of patronage before her attention.*

### **Discussion**

The category of poetic expression which dominated the whole of Kashmiri poetry for the last eight to ten hundred years is the category whose basic quality is lyrical. This category gives vent to personal pleasures and displeasures. Habba Khatoon is considered to be the first Kashmiri songstress who uplifted this category from the level of folk poetry and imparted to it the peculiar tone and individuality of expression paving the way of its creative sublimity and as such played a historic role during the 16th Century AD. Her parents perhaps called her by the name of 'zoon' or 'habba' who subsequently became famous as Habba Khatoon—a personality surrounded by myth like but significant tales. The oldest mention of Habba Khatoon and the distinctive qualities of her poetry is found in a few Persian verses of a Kashmiri Persian poet, Abdul Wahaab Shayak, who lived some two and a half century after

Habba Khatoon. The three verses out of them which deserve more attention are the following:

chuu boodast khatoon ra habba naam, yakee aarifa buud saahib maqaam  
kalaamash ba sooz o gudaaz aashina, hamee daad baa murda jaan aznawa  
chu aan ariafa nazam gowhar fishaan, daru shair maouzun ba kashmir maanid

(There is a woman named habba and she is a seer and has achieved the ultimate Reality, her poetry has pathos and a quality that would give life to the dead as if she scatters pearls and she lives in Kashmir.)

To call Habba as a seer and a person who has attained the ultimate Reality did sound strange to a certain section of the society who made ill propaganda against her mostly due to slavish inferiority, degenerated feudal thinking, defeatist shallowness and cynicism of the concern people with regard to her relation with the sovereign of the time, namely Yousuf Shah Tsak. Not only this the well known disciple of Maqdoom sahib (RA), Baba Dawood Khaki has described Yousuf Shah Tsak as a learned man of artistic qualification and a religious man, thus rectifying to a large extent the misnomer people had about Habba and Yousuf Shah's character and their relation.

Again if the poetic creations of Habba Khatoon are studied deeply one can find evidences which prove that she was not only reared up in cultured and educated environment but that she was herself a pious and chaste lady, who could read and understand the Quran:

Habba (1995:47)

Seerare treh parem ake aano  
Phaere noo goom kuni zaeri zabray

(I read the Quran in one go from end to end without any hitch)

Not only this, some of her popular songs are such which can without much difficulty be interpreted allegorically or symbolically as somehow mystic:

Habba (1995:67)

Gindanay draayas tuur gayas rasith  
Doh daryamath luseth goom

(I went out just to play for some time, but i didn't realise i spent the entire day there till the day reached its end i.e. she came into this world just to spend some time but she got so much caught up here that her entire life is coming to an end and she did not realise it, she has just wasted her life here.)

Habba (1995:60)

Duniya afsuus choth chai kathaa, yatene bakaayee tee woun mei  
Khootuni pan nes rab senz sathaa, raatha wounday malino

(To put it briefly this world is an illusion, there is nothing that lasts here

Habba Khatoon has hopes just on her Lord and nothing else. In this context one can ask that why one shouldn't interpret her complaint and lament *warevain seethe vare chas no* as

something allegorical or metaphoric. Where *warev* (In-laws home) can be this mundane world and *maalun* (parental home) can be the real home where we all actually belong. As such it sounds unjust to open like Shafi Shauq and Kaul that:

Shauq: “her poetry doesn’t contain any such moral, spiritual or any such thinking”

Kaul (1968:188):

Her lyrics are not intellectual at all. There is nothing mystical, moral or sermon like about it. It talks of secular and mundane love and much so of love’s exaltation, rupture or ennobling idealism as of its pain, frustration and disillusionment, sadness and sorrow of unrequited love. However, we find in a few of her lyrics a touch of sensuous gaiety, which is a quality rarely found in lyrics of the kind.

However, what made Habba Khatoon the historic poetess of Kashmiri language and what inspired many poets almost four hundred years after her to adopt her as a role model was her dominant theme concerning human love. It was a theme different from the mystic and moral themes of Lal Ded and Sheikh ul Alam, a theme which treats of supernatural and other worldly secrets. The theme dealt with by Habba Khatoon is mostly related to our obvious, material and transitory world in which lives a sensitive being; a being comprised both of soul and body.

Avatar Krishan Rehbar, a well known Kashmiri critic has rightly said that Habba Khatoon introduced into Kashmiri literature a new magic and a new language. One way of identifying the freshness of Habba Khatoon is to recollect the poetry against the background of which Habba Khatoon attained to prominence, that background was different from Habba’s dominant theme and its treatment both in point of what was said and how it was said. Lalla and Sheikh ul Alam are the two most important representations of that background. Lalla’s experience, her sensibility, the quality of her emotion and imaginative flight all was basically related to the beyond:

Lalla (1986:15):

Aami pane sodras naav chas lamaan, katee booze dai myon maeti diyi taar  
Aamain takain poen zan shamaan, zuw chum bramaan gare gatshaa  
With loose-spun yarn I tow my boat  
Upon the sea O that my Lord  
Heard me and helped me to the shore!  
Like water soaking through half-baked plates  
My soul id lost. I yearn for home.

Lalla (1986:30)

Shiva, Kesheva, Zanwa Kamlaz nath Daarain yuh  
Mei abli kaesetan bowzar suwa, suwa suwa  
(Like Keshva, Zanwa, Kamlaznath wouldn’t Shiva too redeem me of my plight!)

Similarly, one can say that the basic aspiration of Sheikh ul Alam, and the real centre of his thinking are above mundane matters or worldly pleasures, that is spiritual peace and redemption after death:

Sheikh ul Alam (1986: 35):

Kunray boozakh kun noo rozakh, ami kunirain kuthah duth jalaav  
Akal te fikr toor koth soozakh , kame maale chath houkh su dariyaav  
Would you know what Oneness is?  
But reason and thought will reach it not,  
And who within his ken can bring the Infinite

It is because of this that their language and the way that language is used while dealing with the above mentioned themes are both serious and thought provoking and the style of their expression is more metaphorical and symbolic. Lalla dreams of eternity like Shiv and Shakti and Sheikh ul Alam wants to swim across the untoward sea of harsh time like a holy swan (raze haenz). Although both of them refer to various aspects of nature around them and hint at the peculiar situation and people obtaining in their times, yet they aspire for their reality within their self and reality above that self.

In contrast with Lalla and Sheikh ul Alam, Habba Khatoon gives utterance to the pleasures and discomforts of a person who lives and struggles in the obvious material world and thus makes felt the beats of the human heart, warmth and coldness of the mortal physique, highs and lows of the human thought. Appropriate to such topics Habba Khatoon's language too is free from the traditional manners, classical metaphors and symbols. She used words and expressions of day to day usage and makes use of such images, metaphors and situations as are related to day to day life at large. As a result her poetry which is basically related to singing and music does not remain as a means of mere auditory sweetness but assumes the form of such poetry which sometimes looks like to quote Shafi Sauq "the poetry of the printed page". This poetry is simultaneously *wanvun* (group female song) and *rouf* (female group song) and in the words of Avtar Krishan Rehbar "a shriek in distress as well as a mournful elegy". This poetry is both simplicity and craftsmanship. It is a song sung in rice fields as well as a humming tune in solitary chamber and at the same time it is a time bound song of sufistic music (*sofiyana mausiqui*). This poetry recalls to mind the childish flippancy as well as the joyful leaps of the youth. It imparts the colourful flames of youth to both the body and mind and also makes one experience the pain of the setting sun of youth.

Comparing Habba Khatoon with Arn'nymaal, another great employer of the vatsun form in the 16th C, Trilokinath Raina, (2002:34) comments:

Arn'nymaal's poems are an expression of unrelieved gloom, while  
Habba Khatoon's poetry presents a normal mixture of light and shade.

Habba Khatoon does mention disappointments, but she also talks about love received.

No such ray of sunshine ever permeates the gloom of Arn'nymaal.

Illustrating the point Raina (2002:87) quotes Arn'nymaal as:

Will he ever find time to see me?

There is no end to my shedding tears

The fire burning with me dries up even my tears.

...

Friends, do not laugh at me

Is there anybody who has suffered as I do?

I, whose young love has left for good,

Sitting in my splendid room I heard the door screeching.

I thought it was He who has entered into my premises

But not having found him my heart is sinking.

According to traditions, Habba Khatoon's life witnessed a strange and vital mixture of light and darkness: A girl from a middle class family enjoys in her childhood some happy glows and in her youth some spring showers but all those bright snuggles and pleasurable showers get changed into black shades and woeful ditches; A common Kashmiri woman has to say goodbye to earlier hardships and reaches royal palaces where she enjoys gatherings of music and song. The heart of a person enjoying laughter in Royal palaces is subjected to heart breaking woes and soul consuming griefs. Considering this manifold life one could assume that Habba Khatoon's poetry would include various reflections of light and darkness, but the truth is that, to quote Amin Kamil, "in her love songs put together we mostly find the pain of separation in comparison with the good fortune of union".

The love songs of Habba Khatoon represent above all two aspects:

a) The first aspect of her poetry recollects the good days of her childhood and youth:

Habba (1995:87):

Maale maaje rechnas kong kosturay,

Doodh seeth aesim tan nawaan

...

maale maaje rechnas lole kay wuray

saase baz chonje aasem sulawaan

...

maale maaje harsheyes yele duray

pate pate drayem wase wanwan

My parents brought me up on honey and sweets,

Bathed me in milk everyday—

...

What love my parents lavished on me!

And my maids granted my every wish

...

I was sent as a bride far away.

Friends followed me, singing wedding songs.

The thing to be noted in this connection is that all this gaiety and fervor is nothing but remembrance of the past only a recollection, a remembrance, a past bygone thing which seems blossoming but is felt as a flaming fire or as smokeful ashes.

The second aspect of Habba's lole lyrics shows the same youthful and lovely lady separated from her beloved, experiencing restlessness and dreaming dreams of union with her beloved or because of the impossibility of meeting the beloved person, uttering a woeful cry: Habba (1995:90):

Aalow chane be do balai

laalo kale aaliwai

...

baalas zuun lagmech chale

chei kate zole gamech chai

laalo kale aaliwai

One call from you cures all my ills.

I offer you my life my love!

...

Like the moon poised on the mountain top,

I shall soon be gone.

O, where are you? In blissful sleep?

I offer you my life, my love!

Habba (1995:75):

neere neer su dai yaar chanson

warei panene shai

man dei yane meyeen gaisai

tane maeth sai lai

...

kose par zene peyes daayes

ruudum pardeshai

kaari lainum naare kartal

daari oush chum juwai

Sein te wogein waen ba demsai

ruudum kate san shai

Come friends lets seek my love

At our usual haunt.  
With his love cooling off, I faded  
Out of his mind.

...

Which temptress charmed him to resort  
To strange abodes?  
He struck me with a flaming sword;  
My tears gush out in streams.  
I'll seek him high, I'll seek him low  
To know where he is camped?

The following verses of her illustrate the point further:

Habba (1995:53):

I will seek you down the wandering brooks:  
Don't tell me we shan't meet again:  
The wild yellow rose has bloomed;  
My iris buds too aches to flower;  
O let these eyes behold your form;  
Don't tell me we shan't meet again.

Habba's dominant theme is the self same which the whole body of Kashmiri poetry dealt with after her. It won't be an exaggeration to say that long after her when the Kashmiri language came to know the special poetic genre, the *gazel*, that too in the beginning assumed the tone and the colour of her songs. The love of a beautiful and self conscious lover, a hopeful but restless eager person, a sensitive heart, a woman whom one would place within one's heart, but nonetheless lives in a male dominant society and lives a life of compulsion, inattentiveness and unrespectiveness:

Habba (1995:34):

Madnoo badan zoolthum goch hum mei adne chei  
Badaam cheshmov khoon chas haaraan chei kehoze gai maen dai

(O beloved you make me burn within, but still i want none other than you

My almond shaped eyes are shedding tears of blood, O what makes you so cold towards me)

Looking at Habba's theme and style one is pleased to find there a unique interplay of poetic sensibility. Instead of the traditional genres of Kashmiri poetry, like *vakh*, *pad* or *shrukh* Habba chose *lole vatsun* for her expression, a genre which resembles the *geet* of Hindi. Like the *geet*, the nature of *vatsun* is very much close to earthly mundane life, simplicity of expression, directness and music. The earthly relation of her love songs is so obvious that certain people feel disturbed as if by some of its apparently obscene tones.



However, the undeniable fact is that the way Habba Khatoon talks of human body and human sex, she emerges as a person with right thinking and healthy emotions.

In lyrical poetry, music becomes the most important quality. In order to communicate their emotions and intellectual values lyrical poets verbalize their perspectives in such a manner that they get concentrated on music. Dealing with lyrical poetry as a distinct class of poetry certain obvious and evident characteristics are attributed to it for instance brevity, metric simplicity, subjectivity, passion, rhythmic appropriateness, pleasure and peculiarity of images. However, many such poetic compositions exist which people count with the lyrical but which do not possess all the above mentioned qualities simultaneously. As such lyrical poetry is divided into three classes:

- a) poetry based on vision
- b) poetry based on imagination
- c) poetry based on emotions, feelings and passion

Use of the term lyrical turns our attention mostly to the last group which comprises of feelings and passion. The lyrical poetry based on emotion and passion is itself divided into three types:

- a) Pleasurable b) Thoughtful c) Mystic.

Habba Khatoon's poetry seems mostly related to this third group and the obvious distinctive qualities of this group are pre dominantly pleasurable rather than mystic or intellectual; the basic element of this manner of expression is its musical quality. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that almost all the poetic outpourings of Habba Khatoon are basically songs whether we call them *rouf*, *wanvun*, *hikchi*, *baeth*, *chakri* or *sufiyana*.

In addition to the well known qualities of songs meant for musical presentation, Habba Khatoon's compositions possess certain distinctive which render their music predominantly emotive rather than making them thoughtful humming. It is not difficult to identify particular meters used by Habba Khatoon, nor is it difficult to identify that she makes use of the device of repeating certain similar situations and images. These devices one can find in many of her songs like *chumai bali tamana* and *waloo miyani poshay madano*.

The pleasurable outpourings of Habba Khatoon make one feel their truthfulness and freshness. The examples of this kind of poetry are her poems like *thovnum bali tamanaa* or *dil deith raet tem goshai waloo miyane poshai madnoo*.

What is more, tantalizing to note is that even though she had Yusuf Shah's admiration, patronage, and the luxury of his court at her disposal she did not replace the images that she employed earlier with the images of present opulence. She did not discard the imagination, feeling or style which came from the life she lived before stepping into the court with something drastically new in order to build a new edifice. She did not change her style



of writing because of the chaotic times due to the invasion of Mughals. She was neither a court poetess nor a mystic nor a narrative poetess; all such territories were alien to her. Whatever she wrote was liked alike by king, other people at court as well as by the common populace as such she did not feel any need to don a new robe and colour her outpourings in a different hues. She stayed with the two piece of ivory called the *vatsun* with which she had ventured into this poetical journey. In her *vatsun* she employs a rich and astounding wealth of imagery which is beyond the league of any common place poet. This in turn makes her repertoire of internal rhymes, assonance and alliteration more cogent than they would be in any other dexterous craftsman. It can be without doubt said that she was the living soul of Kashmiri music. Her passion for music was there long before she entered into yousuf shah's palace. However, at his court she got an opportunity to work in close proximity with the sovereign's musicians and singing in accompaniment of full scale exotic instruments. In such an atmosphere her knowledge of Persian classical music deepened further. From being a mere votary she mastered the Muquaam-i-Iran and became the creator of a raag known as *Rast Kashmiri* based on *Rast Faarri*, a very popular raag sung at midnight. Thus, Habba Khatoon brought in a rebirth of Kashmiri music which suffered neglect for want of patronage for over a century. This style of expression is reared up with the milk of folk poetry, and along with this one witnesses in certain *vatsun* songs of her the management of rhyme scheme, which makes one incline to assert that Habba Khatoon commendably tries to bestow a new artistic attraction to Kashmiri folk poetry:

Habba (1995:77):

Mei haa kare chai keth poshe daswanai  
Chaav meyeen danai poosh  
Laali gati manz chong zaajanai  
Baale rudus ne hosh  
Che chum shama te be chas parvaanai  
Chaav meyeen dalai poosh  
Charith anmai phum moyanai  
Jaanane mei moo roos  
Habe Khotune rudum armaanai  
Chaav meyeen danai poosh

(I made bouquet of flowers just for you come and enjoy my blossom, i lit the lamp for you in darkness and then got lost within myself, you are my candle, and i am your moth, i selected for you special cotton, my dear don't stay cold, Habba Khatoon remained incomplete forever).

### **Conclusion**

This paper establishes Habba Khatoon with the credit of raising folk poetry to new levels by impressing on it her own tone, individuality and style. She further popularized the *vatsun*

form and became a role model for all those who came after her, becoming thus its unparalleled queen. Not only this she also comes across as an iconoclast who casted away the mantle of mysticism and didacticism followed by her predecessors and celebrated openly her feministic physical beauties and enjoys the leaps and bounds of a person living in this obvious mundane world with all its highs and lows. Thus, breathing in new life in Kashmiri literature. She not only saved the Kashmiri music from dying a pathetic death but also established a new rag called the *Rast Kashmiri* raag. Making her the greatest historic female figure after Lall Ded, the greatest songstress and the unparalleled queen of lyricism.

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