

The Lady of Love

— The Life and Work of Habba Khatoon

In Manushi No. 32, we presented an account of the life and work of Kashmiri mystic poet, Lal Ded. This account of another important woman poet of Kashmir has been prepared by Ruth Vanita from material in S.L. Sadhu's biography and essays by Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din and Ghulam Nabi Khayal.

HABBA Khatoon was born in 1553, about two centuries after Lal Ded. She gave to Kashmiri poetry a new art form—the *vacan* or short lyric which was probably influenced by folk songs as well as by the Persian *ghazal*. The *vacan* is a short poem set to music. Habba also invented the *Raast-i-Kashmiri*, the *raga* of Kashmiri classical music.

The songs that are attributed to Habba Khatoon have come down to us either through musical compositions, in which they are interspersed, or through the oral tradition. A collection of her lyrics has been published by the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Languages, Art and Culture, but the authenticity of some of these verses is disputed.

Overflowing Sorrow

No historical chronicle before the 19th century refers to Habba Khatoon. Many legends about her are prevalent in Kashmir. From these, and from her poetry, scholars have tried to reconstruct the details of her life.

It is generally believed that she was born in village Chandahar, in Pampore region, south of Srinagar. Lal Ded was also born in this region. In one lyric, Habba refers to her parents sending her to a distant place for education and the teacher beating her with a switch.

On the evidence of the lyrics, it is also believed that she was named Zoon (meaning moon) by her parents, and that the name Habba Khatoon (meaning lady of love) was assumed by her later. It is said that the saint Khwaja Masood

bestowed this name on her when she visited him to ask his advice on how to handle her marital problems.

She explicitly describes her sufferings in her in-laws' house. It is believed that she married a man named Aziz. This belief seems to be based on the fact that some of her love lyrics are addressed to an unresponsive person called "Aziz." However, as the word "Aziz" means beloved, and the songs do not state that the person addressed is her husband, this interpretation seems far from certain.

According to the legend, her husband disapproved of her composing songs and singing them in public. In one of her most famous and popular lyrics, *Chaara' Kar Myon Maalinyo*, she looks to her natal family to help her in a predicament common to many women :

All is not well with me at my husband's house
Rid me of my troubles, my father's clan

I left home to fetch water from the stream
My tender parents, the waterpot broke
Either replace the broken pot or Pay for it, I beseech you
All is not well with me at my husband's house

My youthful frame is wasting
Mounting the uplands has become backbreaking
My feet are blistered, gathering herbs

Salt is spreading over my wounds
All is not well with me at my husband's house

Falling exhausted on the spinning wheel
I broke the shaft.
My mother-in-law seized me by the hair
Worse than death was it to me
All is not well with me at my husband's house

I am uneasy with the smart of the loved one
My sorrow overflows the brim
Habba Khatoon has passed on the hint
Be alerted, father's clan all-watchful
All is not well with me at my husband's house

It is interesting that other women poets of Kashmir, such as Lal Ded, the 17th century mystic Rupa Bhawani who retired to the wilderness, and the 18th century Arnimal who returned to her parental home, all suffered similarly in their in-laws' homes.

The Wounded Heart

Most of Habba's lyrics express the sufferings of unrequited love. One critic, S. Sadhu, attributes this melancholy to her unfulfilled "dream of wedded life" but, in the absence of other evidence, it would seem that it is attributable more to the expresses a longing for an ever elusive? tradition of the romantic lyric which expresses a longing for an ever elusive



—Ira Roy

emotions expressed in the songs with the events of her life would seem misplaced.

Not a single lyric expresses fulfilment or happiness in love. All of them are variations on the theme of separation from an unresponsive beloved. One of her most famous songs in this strain is *Wolo Myaani Poshey Madano* :

Having snatched my heart, you have gone far off

*Come, my love, my flowery Cupid
Let us go, friend, to gather jasmine
Once dead, none can enjoy life
I crave for your prosperity, love
Come, O come, my flowery Cupid*

*Let us go, friend, to gather basil
Wounding my heart with the axe
He disdains even to enquire of me
Come, O come, my flowery Cupid*

*Let us go, friend, to gather herbs
Heartless people make fun of me
Would that they were in a similar
plight
Come, O come my flowery Cupid*

*Let us go, friend, to the woods
People poison his ears against me
Naively he gives credence to these
tales
Come, O come my flowery Cupid*

*Let us go, friend, to fetch water
The world is fast asleep, my love
I yearn for a response from you
Come, O come, my flowery Cupid*

*Come, give up this loathing of me
I have been longing for none but you
This life is all too short
Come, O come, my flowery Cupid*

In voicing the feelings of the female lover addressed to the male 'beloved', Habba's lyrics were at variance with the then dominant and established Persian tradition of love poetry, where the male lover addresses a male or female beloved.

Her lyrics also depart from the *ghazal* tradition of extolling the beauty of the beloved, and concentrate solely on her own emotion :

Say, friend, when will fate smile on

*me
And my love come to me again, say
when ?
I've waited long and patiently
My heart is numb and idle and
empty of hopes.
Sweet is the ritual of love.
I would deck my love with ornaments
And in henna dye his hands.
I would anoint his body with
fragrant kisses
And offer him wine in golden goblets.
The lotus of love blooms in the lake
of my heart.
Say, friend, when will fate smile on
me
Go forth and call him, friend,
I've made posies of flowers for him
Over passes high I carried him wine
But he is roaming mid distant glades.
O why is he roaming mid distant
glades?
O where is he drunk with my rice
wine?
In his absence like jasmine I will
fade.*

The Wheel Of Fortune

According to the legend, Yusuf Shah Chak, heir to the throne of the Sultanate of Kashmir, was riding through Habba's village when he heard her singing *Chaara Kar My on...* while she was picking saffron flowers in a field. He was enchanted by her and proposed that she go and live in his palace. In 1570 AD she is said to have entered the palace.

Scholars differ on the issue of her status in Yusuf's palace. Some believe that he got her divorced from her husband and made her his queen. Oral tradition supports this view. However, many others, including the 19th century chroniclers, believe that she was a member of his harem.

Habba is believed to have been happy with Yusuf and to have found the atmosphere of the court congenial to her art. Legends are related about their pleasure trips to different parts of Kashmir and their lovers' tiffs and reconciliations.

In 1579, Yusuf ascended the throne but internal feuds took a turn for the worse

and he was unseated in 1580. He approached the emperor Akbar for help. Akbar gave him asylum and attached him to the Mughal army. For 11 months, Akbar did not provide any armed assistance. When he finally deputed Raja Man Singh as an escort, Yusuf gave him the slip and re-covered the kingdom on his own in 1581 after a series of manoeuvres at Sopore.

But the disturbances continued. In 1585, the Mughal army marched into Kashmir and brought pressure on Yusuf till he made submission, against the advice of his son Yaqub. He did not return to Kashmir again and died in exile in Basok, Bihar, seven years later.

Handful Of Grain

No reliable details are known of the last phase of Habba's life. According to the dominant tradition, she could not accompany Yusuf because of the hostility of her stepson Yaqub, so she lived in Kashmir for about 20 years more, wandering about without attachments or possessions. She is said to be buried at Paanta Chhokh, at Srinagar, overlooking the river Jhelum. Others believe that she followed Yusuf to Basok and lies buried there in a grave next to him.

Some critics, like Ghulam Nabi Khayal, have related the despair and melancholy of her lyrics to this separation from Yusuf. Akhtar Mohi-ud-din goes further and says "Her apparent yearning for her be-loved was, in effect, the voice of the people for freedom from the yoke of Mughal slavery"—a rather far fetched explanation.

One of her lyrics, said to date from this period of her life, seems to sum up her life experiences :

*I have to nurse the scorching flames
in my heart
Let no one lose the opportunities of
youth*

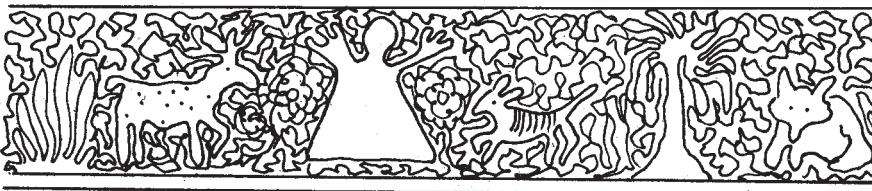
*My parents fed me candy and musk
They washed me in showers of milk*

*The same person is now a hapless
wanderer*

Let no one lose the opportunities of youth

*My parents showered love on me
A bevy of maids stood in waiting
Never did I dream the mansion
would crumble to dust
Let no one lose the opportunities of
youth—*

*When my parents gave me in
marriage
My friends sang for me in joy
The love songs they chanted never
came true
Let no one lose the opportunities of
youth*



*Calling me the daughter of fortune,
“Your in-laws are waiting for you”
they said
The bright painted palanquin was
decked with silver
Let no one lose the opportunities of
youth
I am here while you are so far away
Both were so fond of each other
Who dared imagine my world would
come to dust and rubble
Let no one lose the opportunities of
youth*

*If god withholds and destiny favours
not
Can anyone feed on a handful of
grain ?
Habba Kkatoon drank deep of love
Let no one lose the opportunities of
youth*

Her Contribution

In Habba's time, Persian influence was very strong in the Kashmiri court. In the 14th century, hundreds of Syeds fleeing persecution by Timur in the Middle East and Central Asia had settled in Kashmir.

After the 14th century, the time of Lal Ded and Sheikh Nur-ud-Din, there are hardly any specimens of Kashmiri writing for another century, except for a few anonymous songs.

Habba's poetry represents a revival of Kashmiri poetry. Though living at the court, where Persian was the medium of official communication, she used the Kashmiri that was spoken by the common people at the time. She was not a purist and incorporated many Persian words which had passed into the spoken language.

Her work was a formative influence for

the development of the Kashmiri language and also on many poets of succeeding generations down to our own day. Several contemporary Kashmiri lyricists have acknowledged the influence of Habba's work on their own.

She invented a captivating stanza of three lines, followed by a refrain. The first and third lines rhyme while the second line is unrhymed. She also frequently uses a medial rhyme.

Her songs also continue to be sung by village women in Kashmir. She depicts the everyday experiences of rural women, for instance, panting while climbing hills carrying a headload, meeting each other on the banks of a stream where they go to fetch water, which she terms “friends’ gathering” (*yaaraba’i kaakni*).

In an atmosphere permeated with mystical traditions of various kinds, from Persian *sufi* poetry to *bhakti* poetry from different parts of India, Habba Khatoon remained firmly rooted in a nonmystical tradition. For this reason, critics like S. Shah have called her the first secular and humanist poet in Kashmiri, while noting

that her weaving of references to flowering shrubs and birds into the fabric of her song does convey an impression of all life being one. Habba Khatoon emphasises the importance and meaning of the individual's emotional experience, of personal relationships, and of love that is human, not divine.

Even when she does dwell on the transitory nature of fame and honour, she does not draw a moral regarding the need to detach oneself from the world. Her song is expressive, never hortatory, and represents an important tradition which celebrates human experience:

*I left home to play and was absorbed
in it*

*Till the day sank in the west
I came of a noble family which gave
me*

*Dignity and name
Many a lover was drawn towards me
Till the day sank in the west.*

*Within the house I stayed hidden
from view*

*Once outside, my name was on every
tongue,
Hermits, in their urge to see me
gave up their penance in the
woods.*

*My shop was loaded with stock.
And the world was keen to see it,
My precious wares exposed, (lost)
the prices crashed
As the day, alack, sank in the
west.*

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