

The Feminine Stereotypes in Heer by Waris Shah

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Abstract

The patriarchal construction of Pakistani society has given its women secondary status. The woman is idealized through subjugation, reverence, submission and devotion. The literature of Pakistan as an effigy of its society provides a large body for a feminist critique to unclot the veil of patriarchy and the victimized women. The study of the stereo type representation of female is the great concern of 'images of women' school of thought. This criticism rooted up in the second wave of feminism where the projected major concerns were the gender discrimination and the sexual objectification of women in the reign of patriarchy. Waris Shah is the Sufi poet who has written an epic poem Heer; that is documented on the folk tragic love tale; it provides a fertile ground for feminist critique for the enriched references of female stereotypical representation within a male dominated society. In this paper 'images of women' approach is used to critically evaluate the portrayal of women in the work of a grand Sufi Poet. This criticism uncovers how the female is embodied through a male author and how she is persecuted in the name of honour and dignity in a patriarchal society.

Key words: Patriarchal society, feminism, portrayal of Pakistani women

1. Introduction:

Waris Shah is one of the great names in Sufi poetry whose work Heer as the name suggests, encompasses woman. The present research analyses *Heer* of Waris Shah in the perspective of images of women school of criticism. The woman of Pakistan though dotingly treated but she is always idealized through a submissive daughter, a subjugated and obedient wife and a self sacrificing mother. Her subordination to man is considered respectful and dignified. The Pakistani woman in its socio-cultural context is given the secondary status and segregated from the affairs of the world outside and assigned domestic tasks. She is subjected to degradation, humiliation, exploitation, violence and to sexual abuse. The patriarchal society gives primary position to its male component as father and brother who appear as guardians of their woman and are responsible for the family sustenance. Woman by birth is not considered an asset of her family, she would be married and only serve another family. In this regard she faces the inferior position in her family and hence her food, health, education, inheritance become secondary matter whereas a man is an asset of a family therefore his food, health, education became the primary focus because he has to sustain and protect the good name of his family.

The patriarchal construction of Pakistani society has great influence on its literary discipline that appeals to a feminist critique to uncover the gender discrimination within society.

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Patriarchy as defined by Sylvia Walby as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" ¹ indicates to the stereotypical roles played by man and woman within a social system as man dominated and women oppressed. The current research aims at rendering such stereotypical portrayal of woman by analyzing the work of a male author.

2. Images of Women Criticism:

Feminism was initiated as a political movement that aims to understand the peripheral role of woman and her subordination within a social structure dominated by the male supremacy. It disapproves the biological or natural difference of sexes and considers the social and cultural constructs are watering the sexual discriminations as masculine and feminine, by alienating women as inferior and secondary subject of the society. Simone de Beauvoir in her feminist account *The Second Sex* elaborates this phenomenon as 'one is not born woman, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch which is described as feminine'. ²

Feminism is not a static phenomenon. Through the biological study of sexes as natural reality, it bent over to the social and cultural ideology of gender discrimination that gave rise to unscramble the feminine from the nexus of objectification, humiliation and degradation. History splits feminism in distinct waves that are further being categorized through development in different intellectual approaches, into diverse forms and directions. The critical expansion of feminism classifies it into liberal, psychoanalytic, post-structuralist, post colonial and Marxist schools of thoughts. This classification does not end up the variations in the development and expansion of feminism. It further extends its theoretical perspective by citing the variety of interests of the feminists. Some of them evaluate the character of female in male authored texts and some aim at the study of woman as writers. The initial phase of female critique in literary text is known as 'Images of Women Criticism'. Josephine Donovan illustrates 'Images of Women approach' as 'dominated feminist literary studies in the 1970's and is still central to the pedagogy of Women's Studies in literature'. ³

'Images of Women' School of thought aims at evaluating the misogyny of women in Literature. Betty Freidan, as one of its exponents, scrutinizes the portrayal of women as 'beautiful, healthy and respectful when she is a mother and a housewife'. ⁴ Kate Millet analyses the role of female at the level of biological experience, she views sexual dominion as obtaining 'the most pervasive ideology of culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power', thus passivity, ignorance, docility, virtue and ineffectuality is being associated with the female and intelligence, force, aggression and efficacy cherish the male. ⁵

In the context of feminist approach to literature the textual analysis of the pioneers categorize female in positive or negative character. Mary Ellmann examines femininity on the basis of sexual analogy. In Literature, she evaluates the female

character of male writers through eleven stereotypes: passivity, compliance, confinement, spirituality, piety, materialism on the one side and irrationality, formlessness, instability, the Witch and the Shrew on the other side.⁶ Simone de Beauvoir disintegrates the positive image of female character from the negative representation; 'the saintly mother has correlative for the cruel mother, the angelic young girl has the perverse virgin; thus it will be said sometimes that mother equals life, sometimes that mother equals death, that every virgin is pure spirit or flesh dedicated to the devil'.⁷

'Images of women' school of thought relates the positive or negative representation of female character with the male character. In words of Simone de Beauvoir (16) the female character is 'differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential he is the Subject, he is the Absolute --- she is the Other.' (pg. 16) Beauvoir observes female character in relation to male as noble and dignified if she is obedient and self devoted. "Woman is not to be scorned, she is deep richness, a warm spring; but she should give up all personal transcendence and confine herself to furthering that of her male."⁸

Feminists observe Literature as an exposition of male power where woman serves the man; she is passive in her role and the 'only pursuit, the only goal a woman is permitted is the pursuit of a man.'⁹ 'She is the sexual object sought by all men. She need never give positive evidence of her moral character because virtue is assumed from her loveliness and her passivity'.¹⁰ The textual study of female character delineates that the ideal femininity is associated with passivity, obedience, submission and subordination to the male power and the one who does not meet these standards of compliance is not accepted by its sexually dominant counterpart.¹¹ This analogical representation of femininity in literature remains the major concern of the Feminist critics who disintegrates the reality of female character from the set standards of idealized feminism.

Feminism is the quest of female position in the society; it interrogates the role and status of woman within society. Feminist critics elevate the passive character of woman as inauthentic whereas the authentic and ideal character is self determined and self assertive. The idea of authentic and inauthentic being is borrowed from Heidegger's existentialist phenomenon. According to him inauthentic being is an object, the other and authentic self is the critical conscience¹² Therefore the authenticity of female character is associated with self assertive roles to challenge the conventional image of woman determined by the male domineering society.

3. Feminist Critique of *Heer* by Waris Shah:

In the rags of Pakistani Literature *Heer* has a very eminent place. Waris Shah¹³ in *Heer* has narrated the folk story of Heer and Ranjha. The work is rich in its thematic and stylistic aspects. Waris Shah in his narrative deals with the seventeenth century society wherein he depicts socio-cultural and psychological dealings of the people of that time.

The work of Waris Shah is significant for feminist critique as the name suggests, it revolves around a love story of a female character Heer. In *Heer* the female character is dominantly centralized figure in the story whereas the male plays the peripheral role. Waris Shah through different characters aims to explore the feminine world and the conspiracies going on inside this sphere.

The society that has been depicted in the story is male dominated. Waris Shah portrays the male figure as the symbol of power and authority. The social order and justice is also in the hands of the men folk. They are controlling and manipulating their rules and regulations according to their favourable circumstances. Waris Shah portrays the figure of Qazi¹⁴ and the respected lot of the society who bribe on trivial matters. They practice injustice within the community and serve the rich and powerful people. The Qazi, in the story, has been bribed on the matter of segregation of land. According to his decision, the fertile land is allotted to the elder brothers of Ranjha and the barren land has been given to Ranjha.

The figure of Qazi significantly dominates the situation when he admonishes Heer for marriage. Her continuous refusal makes him angry. It is difficult for him to accept that a girl has disapproved him. He threatens her through different references from religion as a tool to convince her. In reply Heer also refers religion to legalize her matter. She sternly remarks that for the sake of money Qazi can legalize the illegal and for this regard their faith would not hinder their way (210). Bitter remarks of Heer antagonize Qazi and he cogently solemnizes her wedding with Saida. Hence, it becomes obvious that legitimacy is authorized by the men of the society where woman is not allowed to use the right to choose her life partner. She is suppressed if she raises her voice against the set patterns of respect and honor.

The poem represents the male character as head of the family and responsible for the sustenance his family. He is, therefore, regarded for taking decisions for his family. He is protecting the name of his family within the social circle and does not desire his woman to spoil his dignity and honour within the respected community. The father of Heer, Chuchak, is the member of Punch of the community and, thus, his family is well known and esteemed in the social circle. However, Heer becomes a cause of his defame because her love affair with Ranjha is disclosed and people of low class begin to point their fingers in the name of his honour and dignity. Consequently, immediate reaction of her father and brother, Sultan, is aggressive and violent. Both of them wish to execute Heer for having illegal terms with Ranjha. They expect her mother to keep an eye on Heer otherwise they would kill her.

It is apparent that Waris Shah in his work is more eager to probe the character of man and woman. His association of all power and virtue with man reflects his sense of superiority and dominance. As a Sufi poet, the work of Waris Shah is sacred for his believers. The idea to be superior, strong and domineering creature as he advocates in his work, opens the ways for feminist critique. The image of man is regarded as dominant and reputable whether his prescribed rules are being

followed, his words are being kept or the legal system is corrupt. The dialogue between Sehti; sister in law of Heer, and Ranjha is significantly important to find out the image of man and woman that is represented by Waris Shah. He prioritizes man when he says that virtue is associated with the male. He is scholar, intellectual, surplus and the honorable lot of the society.

“Men faces are verified faces of virtue,
But the faces of women are superfluous.
Men are rational, competent and fair,
But a woman is unwise.
Men are figures of patience and tolerance,
But women are aggressive and hostile.
Women have memorized all the books of hoaxing and deception.
She is a lizard in silk costume.”
(Stanza. 361)

Waris Shah embodies strength and power with the figure of man and the one who is not authoritative and potent is not appreciated by a woman. It is obvious in the beginning when Ranjha is estranged in his town Takhat Hazara, people jeer at him and say that a woman will not adore a man like Ranjha who cannot plough and who is not physically powerful.

While observing the character of Ranjha it appears that he is much inclined towards the beautiful women. He enjoys the company of women. He remembers the past days when he used to be surrounded by the beautiful virgins. These days have brought him to Rangpur when he willingly accepts the invitation of Heer and becomes a Jogi. He admires the beauty in Rangpur and gazes the bodies to satisfy him on sexual grounds. His arrival in Rangpur has delighted him with beautiful faces around him that he admits in his first dialogue at Rangpur. But when he cannot see a woman around him he feels annoying and tiresome.

The dialogue of Balnath¹⁵ and Ranjha reflects the real nature of his character. He enlightens Ranjha that becoming a jogi means he cannot see a woman. However, the irony is that Ranjha is becoming jogi for a woman, it is not a religious inspiration rather he is invoked by a woman only. Balnath criticizes him for gazing women and for singing after them that have reflected his wickedness, therefore, jog cannot be sustained by a man like Ranjha. He is the character who is only concerned with female body not with her dignity. Whenever he talks about Heer or any other woman he uses the similar tone that is contemptuous and sneering:

“How could you investigate me? I find a woman an inferior creature.
I can catch her, chew her and swallow her,
And do not bear any obstacle in between.
People usually enjoy the woman while awaking
But I can enjoy a woman even in dreams.”
(Stanza. 357)

If he truly loves Heer it is all because she is renowned as the most beautiful girl of the region and satisfies his dominance on sexual grounds. However, his

analogous dealings with different women even with Heer reflect his lack of interest in her. She is just being treated as an object of sexual satisfaction and cannot be regarded as an honourable and respectable lady. It is noticeable when they get connected through letters after the wedding of Heer, the letters of Ranjha are filled with contemptible words for Heer. In these letters he recalls her clever act of making him a cowherd. He relates her with Kaidu for her deception. It is all because of his personal bias for Heer that reflects his doubts about her sincerity. It is even remarked that a woman is insincere but the text does not employ any example of her insincerity with Ranjha. His remarks about the position and status of women represents that he treats all women on the same level and she is just like an object to be dominated and ruled by men.

Ranjha knows that Sials¹⁶ will never solemnize his wedding with Heer therefore he never proposes her officially. On the other hand when his scandal is exposed to the father of Heer, Chuchak, he is rebuked and dismissed from cowherd. He calls Heer as mediocre and inferior creature before his father. (Stanza. 101). If he has taken any interest in her, his act must be different, respectable and esteemed. However, if Heer could have apprehended his intentions she may not be victimized by the society. She must have spent a glorious life with rich Saida. Though, it is not the only place where he exhibits his self-obsession and his detachment with her, fate has provided many opportunities for Heer to identify his insincere intentions but her error in judgment or her innocent belief in his love has brought her to a tragic ending. She is incapable of investigating his lurking lust under his love. Even when her wedding is decided after her huge protest, she asks Ranjha to get married; the answer of Ranjha clearly remarks his weariness from Heer:

“To sneak in or kidnapping, evaporates the real ecstasy of love.
I have heard of such people who have fled their homeland;
If their rivals have smelled them from a distance,
Millions of people are attacked.”
(Stanza. 180)

The insignificance of Heer is in fact the cause of Ranjha's delay to get married with her because he uses her as an object to glorify him whenever he desires. Mary Wollstonecraft analyzes the importance of woman for her man just like a toy and 'it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused'.¹⁷

Whenever he talks about Heer he accuses her for slyness and whenever he describes her that is through her body. She is not a human being, rather an object to satisfy and submit on sexual grounds. The beginning of their relationship is described through the changes of her body that appear in puberty. The first appearance of Heer has also been assessed from head to toe. It reflects that her worth is associated with her body. Like a painter Waris Shah colors her splendid beauty. He begins with her jewels then he moves to her beautiful visage. The shine of Heer's forehead is compared with moon and her dark hair with the dark night. After her face he singles out her body parts to adore her. He compares her body parts with different

objects as, an apple, a silk cloth and with a mountain. They are presented as if they have separate identity.

“Her bright red lips shines like rubies, like pearls.
[...] Her breasts, made of marble, are firm and strong,
But the touch is as soft as butter,
The top of the crests are like a euphoric waves,
However, it seems as if two pillars of silk;
Have been put on her chest.”
(Stanza. 57)

Waris Shah legalizes his objectification through commenting that Heer is arrogant because of her beauty as if her awareness is an open invitation for men to gaze her and to treat her as a sexual object.

The text reflects not only Heer as the only beautiful lady of the story but there are other as well who also seems to be objectified. The beautiful ladies are presented as objects to entertain the lustful eyes of Ranjha at Rangpur when he is taken to a female gathering by some young girls where beautiful virgins are dancing.

“They were dancing like drunken fatuous,
And pushing hips of each other,
In the meantime, they smack their breasts with one another.”
(Stanza. 324)

The body parts of these virgins appeal to the male folk when they are singled out for amusement on the grounds of sexism. Waris Shah has introduced the female characters through their external beauty and if these characters have something to express either that is shrewd or that is their sexual passion.

The text has portrayed the stereotypical image of female character that is not regarded as respectful and dignified in contrast with man she is witch and shrew and the root cause of evil whereas man is the symbol of authority and strength. Though she is beautiful and the breathing world is there to admire her including men, but still it is a woman of the society who seduces man. She is sexually obsessed and licentious. Therefore, she is responsible for tempting the scrupulous and pious man.

The main Character of the story, Heer is the most rebellious and stubborn. She is not an obedient daughter because she openly expresses her love for Ranjha. She refuses Qazi, therefore, she is cursed, she demands her desired partner, thus, she is shameless and for Waris Shah these symptoms of a young virgin are very offensive and notorious. Hence, the character of Heer is not a good character because she is not passive but defiant. Waris Shah advises the Men folk about the girls like Heer:

“For a virgin hideous love affair is disrespectful,
And it is famous throughout the country in a moment.
The women who are engaged in such trivialities
They are acquainted with such tricky ways that will take you nowhere.”
(Stanza. 134)

She is being accused for making connections with Ranjha, she bears the cruelty and malice of the patriarchal society. She is also victimized by Ranjha for her commitment and for her honesty. The society does not blame Ranjha but only Heer because of being inferior and mediocre part of the society.

The close study of her character exhibits that she bears a strong character who challenges the social norms set by the men folk. Unlike Ranjha she is very innocent in her love. She is not afraid from the society to assert her deep love for Ranjha. She becomes a source of salvation for Ranjha by convincing her father to make him a cowherd. He gets a place to live and to eat. She is also a source of temptation for him. They spend hours together by enjoying each other's company. Ranjha dominates Heer sexually and she willingly and passively submits herself to him. When their meetings are finally exposed and the marriage of Heer is decided, she decides to elope and get married with Ranjha. Her character reveals that she is decisive and she has the ability to prescribe her way of life. Once she gets committed then she is not concerned about the pros and cons of her decision. Her blind trust in Ranjha is actually her tragic flaw. She cannot doubt the sincerity of Ranjha even when he timidly refuses to elope. She is honest to the commitment that she has made twelve years ago. Her refusal before Qazi reflects her strong character who is potentially challenging the rulers of the society. Her character symbolizes the struggle for freedom, struggle for basic rights in male dominated society. She has been objectified by the author to overcome the authenticity of her character but her lurking ability to think and to respond has not been concealed by the author.

The female character as a whole is associated with evil, she is hypocrite and devious. She is cunning in nature and for this Waris Shah calls her a follower of Beelzebub who will not be afraid of accusing angels. He refers to different historical figures who were victimized by the shrewdness of woman as Raja Rasaalo, Raja Bhoj, Ravan and Hazrat Yousaf (AS). He calls woman as obtuse creature who is only qualified for shrewdness and sneakiness. (Stanza. 17)

Severe critique of feminine is found when Sehti and other young girls of Rangpur plan a way of escape for Heer with Ranjha. Waris Shah states that their scheme has defeated Satin that shows extreme viciousness of woman. But if the scheme of young virgins and the married women, is analyzed it reflects their longing for their emancipation from the prescribed set of rules where they are not allowed to choose their life partners. Their accomplished plan is not regarded by Waris Shah as an act of dignity because he as a man who cannot accept woman's autonomy. He proposes a stereotypical image of woman that portrays her acceptable in submissive and subordinate role. She is restricted to domestic affairs and her prior duty is to serve her husband.

“The beauty of a home is because of a woman
In such beautiful homes honest and obedient wives live
Some of these live happily with their husbands in every situation
But some spend hours and hours in adorn of themselves.

Waris Shah, shyness and obedience is the real splendour of these ladies
These are the ladies who are always subservient and submissive.”
(Stanza. 482)

The character of Malki, Heer's mother is also worth analyzing. She is presented as an opportunist who seeks her benefit and for this regard she is not hesitant of doing something offensive. However, the core study exposes her as an innocent mother who demands nothing more than a prestigious life for her daughter. She is scared when the scandal of her daughter is revealed by Kaidu.¹⁸ She becomes anxious and frightened because she knows the astuteness of Kaidu who will depreciate her daughter before the honourable person and their subordinates. Her hostile reaction reveals that she wishes to snub Kaidu for this act. She tells her husband the whole situation because she does not rely on Kaidu as sooner or later the matter will be exposed to the community. Furious Chuchak dismisses Ranjha to prove his esteem and honour. But when the buffalos have stopped grazing and she finds her husband anxious about the loss she becomes a source of salvation for him. She asks him to beseech Ranjha for grazing the cattle, she knows that Chuchak will never ask her to call him back and that he is also regretting upon his decision because he has not paid him for years for his job and expels him from the house. She fabricates a myth to maintain his respect that people are blaming him for not paying wages to Ranjha and asking him to call him back before he is cursed. Chuchak is delighted by this myth and decides to appease Ranjha.

Waris Shah presents woman as incomplete without man. She is dependent on man emotionally, physically and economically. Waris Shah, in comparison with female character, finds the male character as an honest creature that is busy in the matters outside the domestic affairs. They are unaware of the wickedness of woman that she carries inside the home. They believe on their woman and do what she desires them to do. She is in fact leading the situation and decisive inside the home. Hence the men folk are puppets in the hands of female characters. But if the text is analyzed the matter renders something diverse. In the beginning when the decision of land segregation is taken, Ranjha places the blame on the wives of his brothers and calls them deceitful for detaching brothers but in fact the brothers are to be blamed because of their resentment with Ranjha. Ranjha receives extra love and care from his father and his brothers are neglected. Therefore, they bribe Qazi and execute him from Takht Hazara after the death of their father; Moju Chauhdary.

The character study of chuchak reveals the embedded sneakiness when he asks Malki to pacify Ranjha by herself. He says that till we find a suitable proposal for Heer, Ranjha can spend his time with Heer and they will handle the situation to resolve their financial matters. If Chuchak is an honourable person of the community, such a resolution puts a question mark on his honour and prestige. It also shows that how easily he has moulded his rules for the sake of his benefit. However, when Heer elopes with Ranjha, he treacherously kills her in the name of honour and the respectable members of Pun¹⁹ join him in such an act of brutality without investigating the real convict.

“The dignified people protect their family honour.
The whole society humiliates us because of Heer Sial.
We are notorious in the whole world
If we arranged the marriage of Heer and Ranjha,
We will be cursed and our honour will be buried into dust.”
(Stanza. 622)

Thus, they all decided to assassinate Heer for humiliating them in the respected society. The murder of Heer is not referred to any scheme of Satin Waris Shah. The killing of Heer cannot be regarded as an honour killing but it also symbolizes the intolerance of man to liberate a woman who ran away with her desired man. If they would not have killed her many other girls like Heer might have come out to raise the same slogan. Therefore, it becomes necessary to kill one Heer instead of many.

4. Conclusion:

It is concluded that a woman is always accused and has suffered within a male dominated society in struggle for gaining her basic rights. The work of Waris Shah as a part of canonical literature postulates the constructed thinking patterns of man of the society who always treats woman merely as an inferior object who appeals him when he desires her, thus, it seems very difficult for men to accept women as thinking beings who are acquainted with their rights.

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- ¹ (Walby, 1990)
- ² (Beauvoir, 1993) pg 273
- ³ (Donovan, Beyond the Net: Feminism Criticism as Moral Criticism, Contexts for Criticism., 1998) p. 235
- ⁴ (Freidan, 2001) p. 13
- ⁵ (Millet, 2000) p. 25-26
- ⁶ (Ellmann, 1968)
- ⁷ pg 261. *ibid.*
- ⁸ pg 256. (Beauvoir, 1993)
- ⁹ (Freidan, 2001) pg 30
- ¹⁰ (Greer, 1970) pg 67
- ¹¹ (Simon de Beauvoir 1993, Mary Ellmann 1968, Kate Millet 1970)
- ¹² qtd. in Donovan pg 133. Donovan, *Feminist Literary Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism*, 2000
- ¹³ Waris Shah is a great Sufi Poet of Pakistan and *Heer* is one of his renowned seminal works.
- ¹⁴ a Qazi is a judge in Muslim Society
- ¹⁵ the man who teaches Jog to Ranjha
- ¹⁶ Name of a caste in Punjab
- ¹⁷ (Wollstonecraft, 1796) pg. 66
- ¹⁸¹⁸ The antagonist in the story
- ¹⁹ A jury; contains respectable members of the society. It takes decisions about the people of a particular social circle.