

GENDER AND SUFISM: REFLECTION OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN SHAH ABDUL LATIF BHITTAI'S POETRY

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Abstract

Women empowerment and gender inequality have been dominant issues in academia for the last three decades. Empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability; they can freely analyze, develop and voice needs and their interests. Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai has emphasized the issue of women empowerment and wanted to see the women of Sindh free from the cage of machismo. The main purpose of this article is to analyze the role of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai as empowering women in Sind Society. It mainly focused to find out the overall condition of women in the time of Shah Abdul Latif and the factors that persuaded him to consider the women from entirely the different perspective thereby throwing away the existing social norms and mores of that time. It also tried to see on what basis he assigned the diverse roles to women in his poetry, what was the impact of Latif's stance of promotional poetry for empowering women of Sindh thereby checking if it left some impacts on the men too or not and whether his notion of empowering women could appeal other contemporary poets to tread his path of building a society based on gender equality.

Keywords: Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, Poetry, Empowerment, Women, Sindhi society

I. Introduction

The status of women in South Asia has not been satisfactory since the time immemorial time. Same is the case inside Pakistan where women have continuously been held with less regards in every sphere of life. The prime reason of women suppression is none but the male conception of staying dominant in every sphere of life. Such a situation has also ever had a trickle-down effect on other less exposed regions from which Sindh is one of them where women are considered the entity below men and their rights have been snatched deliberately since ages. One of the most powerful

statements regarding the status of women in a patriarchal society is of Beauvoir who says that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Gupta and Sharma, 2014). While Gupta and Sharma noted “a woman has been socialized since birth to feel and act in ways that automatically have excluded her from participating in culture’s most valued activities” (Gupta and Sharma, 2014). Jiliet Mitchell pointed out that women oppression is based in the ideological realism of a society, which includes production of certain stuff, child’s reproduction, sexuality as well as socialization within parenthesis (Mitchell, 1996). The empowerment of women within society has been defines by Pillai: “It is a process of awareness and capacity-building leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control and to transformative action. Broadly women empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life” (Pillai, 1995).

Fortunately, a few Sindhi Sufi poets have kept trying to break the shackles of women by highlighting their dare, courage, and holding them the role models for other women of the society with the narration of various tales. Of them all, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, who indiscriminately has promoted the women regarding their rights, seems to proceed 5 (Meenai, 2003). He is widely famous in Sindh and other parts of Pakistan not only as a poet but also as a scholar, saint and mystic. His poetry collection Shah Jo Risalo exists in numerous versions and translated into various languages including English and Urdu. He has been described as a direct emanation of Rumi spirituality in South Asia. He wrote on many issues including locality, Sufism, Islam, the secrets of love, culture, love of Almighty, the philosophy of life and death and complexes of knowledge and epistemology and above all about women.

The people of Sindh are seen divided on the question of if Shah Abdul Latif has argued for the rights of the women and has been the adherent of women empowerment. Some are of the view that Bhittai has emphasized the issue of women empowerment and wanted to see the women of Sindh free from the cage of machismo. He wanted the women to turn equal to men in every regard so that a harmonious and progressive society could be formed. Whereas a great of number of populace still believes that Bhittai has talked about women through the use of his seven queens or heroines but in a particularly one dimensional way where he suggests women to remain stuck and dedicated to their men only and have to show sincerity and be faithful forever to their males whom are given in marriage. They, through their own arguments about the selective poems of Bhittai, foster their stance which stresses on the status quo of putting the women where have been like past. These two diverse segments are seen not only among common people but also among the experts who have done much work on Shah Abdul Latif and his poetry. Here in this article an attempt has been made to highlights women empowerment in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif’s, purely a manifestation of yielding to social development not a diehard view to bind women to men.

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai was the poet who extended his vision of poetry to every sphere of human life. His poetic style, subjects and stance was entirely different from other poets of the time. He reached to the position of eminence amongst other Sufi-saint poets, because of his unique style and writing on those ears new to the era. At the time of Bhittai women were considered as a tool to be utilized by men. They were bound to the household chores and used to do thankless jobs. They had to do many pieces of work at home or with their husbands or without them in the fields for which they were never paid. These were the sacrifices that were given by the women. But, they did this all without any resentment or cry which showed the highest level of tolerance having had by the women (Baloach, 1976). These qualities inspired Bhittai to write on the women whom he considered the

most determined entity in the world for he thought that women have such an outstanding capacity through which they alone can change the course of history. This article comprises of two broader perspectives; first it examines the social, political and economic conditions of women in Sindh society, and then has analysed the messages in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif regarding strengthening women role in Sindh society.

II. Social, political and economic conditions of women of Sindh during the times of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai

It is much interesting analysing and knowing the general social position of Sindh. Perusing psychology of the people of Sindh, it is known that the psychological and sensible reactions are consisting of emotions and feelings. On the one hand patience is perceived in their tolerant and silent nature, while on the other hand hatred and inferiority complex are observed. As much they are kind hearted, they are also of free nature not caring anyone. They are generous and valorous along with being frightened and worried. They have been always guests loving but have also been plundered and looted in the name of hosting the guests. It can be found out why they have been composed of various conflicting qualities.

Sociologists say that hatred, envy, theft, dacoity, violence, unawareness, illiteracy are the signs of poverty and uncertainty. Perhaps, scarcity of national resources and exploitation are the prime causes of social evils (Durant, 1954). Fertile countries face lack of resources due to famine. Unemployment begets hunger, restlessness and hatred inside society. There arises a situation when man eats man and this causes injustice, plundering and violence inside society (Durant, 1954).

The history of Sindh shows that people had never seen such complicated and tough situations. Sindh had been fertile and prosperous where people had manifold resources for hundreds and thousands of years. Due to this fact, people were prosperous and national unity was found which always discouraged theft, dacoit, bad characters and violence. People were peaceful and peace loving (Sorley, 1968). Of course these all the existing conditions of that era would have left impacts on the living style of the women. Women would be behaving under the old conditions.

Women were true to their husbands and in all circumstances they wanted to live with them. Even they were offered the big houses and royal palaces; they denied them for the respect of their husbands. Women were very much true to their husbands and families. They used to work inside their homes and also helped their husbands in the work of fields happily. A woman never felt the desire of living in a palace even if her husband was poor. Her life was her husband and children and lived gaily with what she had. This was the training she got from her parents and kept it continued for thousands of years. This reality can be best understood from one of the verses of the Bhittai mentioned below:

It rained on land, it rained on Thar Desert, and it rained everywhere;
The women started to churn the milk,
Their hands filled with butter and curd,
They milk the cows and buffaloes,
All household women and maids are cheerful at their homes. (Translation)

Bhittai has narrated the story of the common men and women who have belief in God and rest their expectations in the will of God. After it rained, they were much happy. The fields were full of plants, weeds, flowers and various hers. The tamed animals of the people ate the fodder and gave the milk in great quantity. The wealthy people churned the milk, ate themselves and sold out for earning money. Their women had no craving for any big house or palace that had only milk animals to sustain them and their families. They seemed healthy and sound in their thatched huts. Because the women had great concern for the respect of husbands and families and they had such training in their huts. The women living in the palaces considered their lives as a hell with full of miseries but the poor women never felt such miseries for to them those troubles were part of life that they accepted as a gift from their Creator. They used to say: *The real happiness, which lies in the huts with husbands, has no match at all and those palaces and big houses are nothing before them because those are made out of the blood and sweat of the poor and for their safety and security the services of poor men are required. So, how the real happiness can be there in those palaces and big houses!*

In the Sindhi society, almost every woman, belonging to any class, did her whole housework by herself. She used to wake up early in the morning. Wrapped the sleeping quilts, cleaned them; cleaned the house and animal husbandry; filtered and ground the wheat; filled the pitchers; milked the goats, cows and buffaloes; churned the milk for getting butter and curd etc. Fed the chickens and prepared the all meals eaten during the day. Fed her children and took meals to her husband in the fields and sometimes worked with him in the fields for cutting the grass, picking cotton, ploughing, leading the cows to plough and riding the camels or donkey carts. After coming home she collected sticks and dung for burning to prepare meals. She didn't sit idle even after doing much work. She weaved the thread, stitched, made quilts and made the thread. It means she performed all types of work to be the main part of economic and social system of the Sindhi society (Durant, 1954).

Commemorating happiness at birth, singing Sehra in wedding ceremonies, mourning at death and waiting vigorously for the husband gone to a long voyage are the common instincts included in the nature of women (Sorley, 1968). If there were not women, there would not be the existence of life. Women were so much worried about their husbands who left for long and difficult voyages and waited for them very much seriously and prayed the God for their safe return to home and in extreme cases sacrificed animals to make God happy so that their husbands return home safe and sound. Bhittai narrates such situation as:

It is suggested; hand over everything to God,
Do away all your sadness and confusion,
Get consolation through this,
Then with the support of God,
You'll be able to get your husband's return. (Translation)

Some women were so much crazy about their husbands (sailors who went to fishing on long sea voyages) that they offered different precious things to the sea so as the sea return them their husbands. Such a position is depicted as:

The wives of the sailors are ready to sacrifice,
They offer all their precious objects to the sea. (Translation)

The rural area of the Sindh had not places of recreation so women didn't have such chance of recreation or entertainment. But, on religious grand days of Eid or some other days of ceremonies, women met and had company where they entertained themselves and chatted and shared their

worries and stories. Ointment of new-born baby (Chatti in Sindhi), circumcision, etc. were celebrated heavily by the women where they danced, sang and beat the drums. On these events they wore new clothes and ornaments so as to appear beautiful and cute. Still women prepare themselves for beatification on these occasions though today's women have been provided with various types of entertainment. Women in that time, for preparing herself for such occasions, stitched her own clothes, stitched small round or square mirrors onto shirts, putting flowery tiny pieces of cloth on her dupatta and such other beautification pieces of work. Bhattai even suggests women to get her prepared for such days or they would have to face tough consequences among her friends:

Do your own endeavours,
For stitching and decorating your clothes,
Might there arise a condition, Lest you should
Weep and cry among your friends in the morning. (Translation)

Bhattai strongly recommends women to work for her decoration through tailoring clothes and collecting such objects which could help her for make-up. Bhattai says to women if you don't do that and don't prepare yourself in advance, you will have to face the castigation from your friends for they will rebuke you and cut jokes on you for which you will weep and cry and remorse that you would have prepared earlier to save yourself from the severe criticism of friends (Shane, 1976).

In that period, it was the custom that women used to throw roses and flowers in the water and lit oil lamps on the surface of the river water and let them flow on it. That they did for their husbands and their healthy and long lives. If any woman didn't do such an act, she was reproved by the people in and out of the family. Therefore, such custom is mentioned hereunder. Latif narrates:

If any woman neither throws flowers nor does lit oil lamps,
Do you believe that she worries about her husband?. (Translation)

III. Status of Women in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif

Women were the prime focus of Bhattai's poetry through whom he wanted to be instigated towards a positive social change in society. Women as the weak segment of Sindh society having equal size and population to men and he wanted to mobilize them so as an ideal society can be built. His poetry has a message for women to acquired equal and equivalent rights as men have. Therefore, assigning various roles to the women, he highlighted the different aspects of the human affairs (FahmidahHusainu, 2001) Somewhere, he shows the greed and somewhere there is a dedication to the cause, sometimes women are sincere in love to an extent that they don't care about harsh realities of life and sometimes women are advised to wait for many years and their tolerance level is checked.

Whether women used to be or not the same as mentioned in the poetry of Bhattai, but it can be said that Bhattai just took the local mythical tales as a support to bolster his thoughts and philosophy for creating awareness among masses (Hussain, 2001). He exaggerated women for, to him; the women were such an entity that can really make the societies a heaven if they want or if they are given the opportunity. Bhattai encourages women to love and he considers her equal to men in his poetry, as he says:

There is a cry in the wilderness, as is of a woman,
She is not a woman; actually it is a love that cries.(Translation)

Bhittai says that Sasi was crying after Punhal and was seeking him, the cries were of a woman also but those cries were not of a woman but of the lover and her love because Bhittai understands that the passion and emotions are entirely uncontrollable irrespective of man or woman (Baloach, 1976). Bhittai does not differentiate between a man and a woman and directly points to the woman with the feminine terms and words (Shahwani, 1996). He does not show camouflage or duplicity in the matter of women. He says:

I need neither a house nor a fan, dear,
Living with one's lover, is called a real woman. (Translation)

To Bhittai, a woman is one who should not desire for a house or such types of worldly attachments, rather a woman is the one who wishes to live with her lover forever under all circumstances and this can be said a genuine woman.

In Sindhi society women are less heard and not given equal status. If any man wants to go on a voyage or away from his woman, he does not ask her wish or does not oblige to her requests. So, such a situation is narrated by Bhittai as:

These are my youth days; my husband is leaving for voyage,
Weeping but he does not pay heed to it, what do I do,
He has left me alone, setting for a long journey. (Translation)

Here, Bhittai has depicted the tender nature of a woman who is living in a closed society where women are not provided their due rights. They even cannot express their inner emotions. So, what would her condition be when she is in her prime youth and her husband leaves her alone and goes to a long journey. But, even then, Bhittai takes her the most daring one that she has the broad tolerance and persistence.

River Indus is supposed to be awful when it comes its season of flowing in full swing. Seeing its high tides one cannot remain without awe and fear. But, even then Suhni crossed it in the dark night which conveys the message that her determination was unshakeable. This is told by Bhittai as:

The terror and the tumult rage within the flood
Where monsters shelter and where brutes of prey do cry
And turn them hither thither. Ships in the abyss
Have been engulfed whole till not a trace of wreck
Nor any timber showed the catastrophe.
The whirling waters hold some power of dread: for ships
Depart thence and return not. Sahir, take thou them
Who have no skill swimming, to that farther shore?. (Translation)

So, Bhittai depicts the original position of the Indus and tells how fearful and abysmally horrible various phenomena of the river are. There are many water animals that continuously wait for the prey and tear it once they reach it. Even the bottom bed of the river is so deep that no ship comes back once it capsizes and sinks into it. Whirl pools are so broad and the deepest that they demolish in twists and turns whatever comes into their possession (Baloach, 1961). In this situation, Suhni prays the God that may she could swim across the river for she is not swimmer. Bhittai tells Suhni's determination and passion with her target of meeting with her loved one. Apparently it looks that she is doing this all for only love but it is more than love that she wants to achieve (Ali, 1985). It is her target of love that she wants to get and that is why she wants to achieve the impossible.

In the time of Bhattai, people were backward and especially men were male chauvinist for who women were less than them. Men had the social right of loving any woman openly whereas the concept of women's loving anyone was thought to be socially wrongful act. Till today in Sindhi society such a concept is visible where women are the victim of honour killings and they don't have the basic right of marrying anyone with their own wish and whim not to talk of loving anyone whose punishment is death only.

No flood of waters might hold Suhini back. For her
An ocean's crossing was no weightier than a step that's ta'en.
May that mother smile who bore to life a girl
So sadly fated, saying: 'Suhini, if thou seest
Love's longing, surely thou wilt bring that love to thee. (Translation)

Bhattai not only applauds Suhni for loving passionately but also congratulates her mother for giving birth to such a courageous lady.

Seeking but don't want to find out,
It is my wish not to meet Hot,
For the determination of finding someone,
Vanishes with the achievement of the target. (Translation)

Here, Bhattai adopts very much curious approach and has Moomal say such words that it is better not to meet with the target because after achieving the target one becomes satisfied and satisfaction makes one lazy (Rashadi, 1970). So, the best way is to continue to search rather than finding and sitting idle.

Women are seen as trustworthy and true in the very nature. Once they have the intention for anything, they remain stuck with that. Their target is clear and to the point in which there is no any doubt or suspicion. Shah Latif says for Marvi:

It is not the nature of the residents, changing oneself seeing gold and jewels,
Coming to Umerkot, I would not be disloyal,
I love houses of my elders, would never hate them due to these palaces. (Translation)

From this it is clear that for Bhattai women are the most dedicated ones in their commitment to their parents and to their original homes (Kazi, 2010). Whatever greed is offered to them, they deny it for the sake of their parents and kith and kin.

It can easily be gauged that women are as important for Bhattai as are men. If men can do any task, women can also do all types of such tasks. There are many men who have done outstanding pieces of work, so are the women. But, as compared to men, women have remained suppressed under the very dominance of the men so their outstanding performances in the history have also been less evident. But, as long as Bhattai is concerned, he has brought women out of this fixed perception and showed to the world that women and their status is not limited to their homes, rather they have done such pieces of work through which they are equal to men in their rights. His poetry has a message for women to acquired equal and equivalent rights as men have.

IV. Conclusion

This article has analysed the overall condition of Sindhi society during the times of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, and concentrated on the social, political and economic conditions of women. It concluded that women were at less privileged position and had equal to no social status for they were limited up to their houses in caring their husbands and children with doing other household chores on daily basis. The status of women in the eyes of Shah Abdul Latif was examined that entirely focuses the factors that led Bhittai to encourage women thereby highlighting seven queens as exemplary figures for women of all the times to learn from them by being different from the rest of the women. The impacts of Bhittai poetry as empowering women in Sindhi society can be seen today that there are many women who are working in different walks of life and even there are many poetesses in Sindhi society who endeavour to fight for the basic rights of the women. Many poetesses include Amar Sindhu, Irfana Mallah, Rukhsana Pireet Chanar, Shabnam Gul, etc. whose poetry is the source of inspiration for many women. All these poetesses have Bhittai as their ideal poet who specifically spoke for their rights.

It has been concluded that the whole discourse of Bhittai was not alone women but the underprivileged class of the society whom he wanted to see set free from the shackles of slavery of all types. In this way he tried to disseminate the message of free well for all irrespective of gender differences. Therefore, women, being underprivileged segment of the society, were more touched so as to bring them under the light of discussion. This helped and many poets onwards seem to be attracted to the issues of women and its impact is that, today many poets, being male, talk for the rights of the women. Gender issue is being discussed nowadays. Wherever women are persecuted or their very rights are suppressed, the poets write on them emotionally to sensitize masses about the women rights.

Latif is one of the most powerful and famous poet in Sindhi literature. Sindhi society was a patriarchal one, where women were assigned the role of kitchen holders, house holder and were never allowed to speak an unwanted opinion. Women were oppressed by men, rooted in the historical context of the women status in the social order of the Sindhi society. He wrote about women in a time when they were still dominated by men. The feelings of women oppression in a male dominated society was expressed by Latif in his poetry and especially in his seven queens or heroines, whereas they were continuously struggling for their wells, which were unwelcomes in the society. The narratives of women in Latif poetry was the reflection of women, whereas they suffocated within the domestic prisons of the Sindhi society and were desperately looking for their role outside the prevailed chains. Latif viewed women were not only the source of reproduction, enjoyment and household but rather than an individual and living entity like men.

Sindhi literature had been influenced for centuries through the traditional themes of women and their body parts out of libido; however Bhittai changed that perception among the coterie of poets. He didn't deny the passionate view in the poetry when he wrote on women, but he presented women from his own different view in which he discussed and calculated women from qualities and character not through their body parts. Romanticism was the part not the theme of Bhittai's poetry when he concentrated on women and he tried to alter the romanticism in the matter of women and endeavoured to sift the libido and romanticism through displaying women by qualities not by their bodily curves and buxom-like curvatures. This was the core philosophy of Bhittai that has helped women come out of the abyss of ignorance and to achieve the real status of women in society.

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