

***Heer* in Popular Imagination: A Comparative Analysis of the Historical
and the Modern Media Image of Heer**

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Abstract

Heer is a popular lore and its female protagonist, Heer, is embedded in the public's imagination both due to the written text and the visual narratives that adapted it for popular consumption. Postmodernism rejects the distinction between the high and the popular art as a modernist heresy. In order to explore the relevance of postmodernism, an attempt is made here to study a song "Kheriyan Day Naal", which has won applause from the audience for its rich vocals (sung by Shafqat Amanat Ali, one of the finest singers of Pakistan). Apart from its rich vocals by this classical/pop singer, the visuals of the song call for an in-depth analysis. The song illustrates the traces of postmodernism in its video when metanarratives of the past are being challenged and new mininarratives are produced and mediated.

Key terms: Postmodernism; folklore; Heer

Introduction

"Kheriyan day Naal" is not just a song. In fact, it refers to the tragedy of Heer Ranjha, the most prominent figures of romance and unrequited love, like Romeo and Juliet, Sussi and Punhoo, Laila and Majnoo, and Shereen and Farhad. Heer was a simple girl in the village of Siyyal in district Jhang of Punjab, while Ranjha belonged to Takht Hazara. They both belonged to the tribes that nourished old enmities against each other. "In this town of Siyals, Heer and Ranjha fell in immortal love, here the tale of their romance started, here their love reached its climax, here it met its tragic end" (Sheeraz, 2013, p. 172). They sacrificed their lives for the sake of love but didn't give up the struggle. The sacred bond of love between them seemed to be mystical. Heer was engaged to be married to a man belonging to a tribe, Kheray, but she refused to fulfill this family commitment against her will. Her parents and the members of the tribe forced her to accompany them as a bride to the tribe of Kheray. The response she gave is versed by different writers as her refusal to go

with them: "Nae main jana kheriyan day naal." She clearly mourned and implored to her parents not to force her to join them. Many writers have written the account of her refusal in different contexts. Some of them also borrowed the name of Heer for mysticism like Baba Bullah Shah and Peer Waris Shah. Heer in Punjabi and Urdu poetry is treated as a symbol of sincerity and purity. Her love for Ranjha has been interpreted in mystical terms. The death she embraced was also a heroic one as she had been poisoned by her family. Sheeraz puts in: "...after hearing of Heer's death, Ranjha could labor for only a few long breaths and then fell on the ground. His brothers leapt forward to pick him. But he had already breathed his last, in order to go to where his Heer was already" (Sheeraz, 2013, p. 187).

Analysis

First of all, the language of the song is a mixture of Urdu and Punjabi, fragmented, but is celebrated. The story of Heer actually belongs to Punjabi language and has been told in various moods by different writers. In this song, the attempt to maintain the impression of Heer is somehow Postmodernist. The beginning of the song is in Punjabi language and so are the punch lines: "Nae jaana Kheriyan day naal". In the second line of the first stanza, there is again a combination of Urdu and Punjabi (fragmented) when the writer says "Mujhko to Rab **da** Jamaal". The word **Da** is Punjabi word in the texture of Urdu. Similarly, a Punjabi word "Maaye" is also employed in the same fashion. "Na bhaj na Maaye mujhko". The opening line of the song also enjoys the combination of two languages where the word "Muji" is a not a Punjabi word. The second line of the beginning is a transition from Punjabi language to Urdu language. "Jis Ranjhay sang saans juri wo Ranjha ha is dees". This change is frequent in the course of the song. Secondly, the theme of the song is the refusal of Heer to submit to the rivals, i.e., Kheray. It should have been sung by a female artist rather than a male singer expressing the emotions of helplessness in the context. In Urdu, there is a literary device known as "Raikhti" in which a male artist adopts the characteristics of a female and writes or sings. This is evident in mystical poetry of Baba Bullay Shah and Peer Waris Shah and many others. The usage of this literary device is to emphasize the submissive attitude towards the Lord and the liability which a female owes to her husband. Baba Bullay Shah observes himself in the submission to his mentor and writes,

"Main jaana joogi day naal."

“Mayjaee aan lakh heeraan iss nu Tay may kiss gintee which aawan.¹”

The use of Raikhni is somehow different as projected in the song. The incline is not towards the Lord, nor has it been employed in the mystical sense.

As far as this song is concerned in the context of mysticism, it clearly rebels the theme of mysticism or submission to the Beloved. Moreover, Baba Bullay Shah metaphorically writes that she will accompany her beloved with all formalities of embellishment. This is one way of quoting duties or liabilities of a wife towards her husband, but in this song, such concept is missing. Even the mystical, pure character of Heer is postmodernised in the visuals of this song. Heer, as a character, is a symbol of purity and sanctity, the devotion towards beloved and a sign of loyalty. The concept of Heer in the song is far removed from the traditional concept of Heer as a mystic character. Heer is portrayed as a "Call Girl" submitting herself to the "Customers" instead of Ranjha, or her Beloved. The concept of embellishment in mystical poetry is metaphorical, but the embellishment of the so called Heer in the song is to attract the customer and to ensure "business". The bright makeup of Heer in the song clearly speaks out the motives of embellishment. The simplicity in the character of Heer is distorted in the song when she attends parties, drinks, dances and addicts drugs. Heer was a simple country girl without pomposity in her character, whereas the postmodern Heer in the song breaks away from the conventions, norms of the society enjoying relations. The conception of Heer was that of a simple country girl with the tendency to submit herself in the way of love and sincerity till the very end of her life without getting despaired. Moreover, the word “Heer” symbolizes the attitude of sincerity and loyalty, and it was successfully employed by the writers and mystics of Modern era. Heer of the Modern era is not just a character; rather it is a term that expresses submissive attitude towards beloved, purity and extreme loyalty. She is such a noble character, that nothing besides sincerity and purity can be expected, but the Heer of Post modern era is quite different from that of the traditional one. She can be any girl who attends parties, drinks, dances, makes loves out of sincerity and commitment. She is fashionable and fickle in nature. She is not chaste enough to be compared to the traditional Heer of the past. The Chastity of the modern Heer is above board and unquestioned, but the chastity of Postmodern Heer can be inferred only by

¹ Bullay Shah, a mystic poet. The mystical poem can be retrieved from http://qausain.wordpress.com/2009/10/17/main-jana-jogi-de-naal/

observing her resentment and repentance after making love to the customers, when the “business” is over.

Another evidence of postmodernism is in the punch line of the song that declares the displeasure of Heer to comply with the orders of her parents to company the rivals (Kheray), but throughout the song, such a situation never exists. Heer (so called) is accompanied by so many customers but at her own will. No one compels her to go and enjoy illicit relations with a smile on her face. She has no connection as far as the relation of Heer and Kheray is concerned. The punch line of the song is refusal to her mother on going along with the rivals (Kheray), but she willingly submits herself to the customers without any obligation and nowhere can we find the mother of Heer convincing her for the expedition. The main theme of refusal shows a paradox, a contradiction. The postmodern Heer is not forced by anyone to company the rivals, but she herself offers herself to be accompanied. The theme of refusal is not more than the conflict of mind and even there we find the postmodern Heer having a weaker will and potential to face the odds. Moreover, in line number 13 and 14 (see appendix), there is a confession that she has been brought to the consciousness by the love lighted by Ranjha and she is able to look for the destiny with her closed eyes, but such “Consciousness” is seen only when she repents after making love with her customers. It is not the consciousness that Heer would have been brought about in her days.

Another distinction we find in the song is the immature death of Ranjha before Heer embraces death. The real story (for instance as recounted in Sheeraz, 2013) illustrates the death of Heer before Ranjha in the hands of her tribe. Ranjha in the song gives appearance in the form of a ghost, unnoticed by Heer in every scene. Heer was poisoned by her tribe and lost her life of hardships and challenges, but the postmodern Heer in the song loses her life due to overdrinking and drug addiction. She earned her death at the cost of her postmodern life style, not by the odds, too heavy to be bore. Heer embraced unearned sufferings throughout her life, but the postmodern Heer doesn't seem to be at pins and needles till the very end. Nowhere throughout the song we find her to be oppressed or tortured mentally or emotionally.

At the death bed, she is being taken to the hospital and many journalists and press reporters gather on the scene to give coverage. Despite the fact that the death is not heroic, she claims importance in the postmodern world.

The scene of the eternal life in the song highlights the union of the two souls. But the point of contradiction is how Heer is purged of her sins? If the union of the two souls is destined, then why Heer dies a shameful death? The reunion of the souls seems illogical, but in the postmodern context, Heer with certain traits and characters even can be purged off her sins.

As far as the background music of the song is concerned, it does not relate the entire effects of melancholy in the song. Heer and Ranjha are folk characters and the music of the song should have accommodated folk tunes. On the other hand, the music of the song does not confirm itself to the entire theme of the refusal. The punch line of the song even deviates from classical to rock music in the background. Throughout the song, only the notes of the flute make a link of the story with the real one. The tunes and the melody the song enjoys is postmodern in its nature, even there we can find fragmented parts of different disciplines of music merged together.

Moreover, the character of Heer is purely folk, but the entire song projects the life in a populated city, and most of the people exposed are aristocratic. The folk tale of Heer Ranjha is citified. It is not a story of rustics in a village rather the busy and lusty life of the urbanized people. Heer in the postmodern world is urbanized with all the characters and traits of aristocracy of the postmodern world.

Overall, the song projects the character of Heer in a postmodern context. Not only the sole character of Heer is post modernized, but the odds and the events in her life are also post modernized. The challenges of the postmodern world are much harsher than the odds of modern era and the struggle to maintain the identity is also one of the biggest challenges for the post modern individuals.

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Appendix

The Song

Na Maaye na bhajj mujj main nae jana pardees 1
Jis Ranjhay sang saans juri who Ranjha ha is dees
Main nae jana Kheriyan day naal
Main nae jana Kheriyan day naal
Loog kahen usay ranjha jogi 5
Mujhko to rab da jamal
Jaane na jaane log ne jaane
Wooh janay mera haal
Na bhajj na maaye mujhko
Main nae jana nai jana 10
Nai jana main nae jana
Main nae jana main nae jana Kheriyan day naal
Band ankhoon say raah dikhay
Ranjhae wo joot jagae
Ranjha mera deen dharam 15
Ranjha ha kul khudai
Na bhajj na maaye mujhko
Main nae jaana nae jaana
Nai jana main nae jaana
Main nae jaana Kheriyan day naal 20