

The Role of Women in Pashto Literature

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Women constitute the backbone of Pashtun society and social organization. Home management is entirely her responsibility. Agriculture, stock raising, crafts and defense of the country are the duty of men. But when needed, women also take part in these tasks. They work beside men in farming. On the other hand, the maintenance of agriculture production and livestock raising is also a woman's responsibility. She has a significant role in the production of handicrafts and again it has been women who, sword in hand, have stood in the battlefield with men to defend the motherland.

Like the Pashtun man, who did not have time and the opportunity to promote his knowledge, literature and art, the Pashtun woman has been engaged in life's commitments and she did not find time to promote her literary prowess. Despite this, if we look into the unwritten literature of Pashto we find a significant contribution of women to Pashto literature and from time to time we come across woman who have made an outstanding contribution to the language.

Landey

Landey, *tapey* and *naarey* are three forms of unwritten Pashto folk literature compiled by women. It is a testament of the psychology and national character of the Pashtuns and needs to be studied if a person wishes to understand the intimacy of Pashto literature. Women play a significant role in landey. Half of this fine and heart-rendering poetry is the work of women. The most enchanting landey have been sung by Pashtun women in battlefields and during episodes of love. Such as:

Oh flower on the mountain peak,

It is I who water you, God knows who would own you.

The Pashtun woman in love goes through unbearable pain and suffering. *Pashtunwali* (the code of Pashtun conduct) demand that the man should be enduring and should not let the hardships of life dishearten him. Therefore she bears without question and says:

In secret I will endure heartaches,

I will not tell of my misery to my unkind lover.

In another landey the Pashtun maiden sends the message of her faithfulness to her

separated lover in these words:

*You keep wondering happily on Indian soil,
I will save my black eyes in your name.*

Eastern poetry is full of condemnations of the rival and the tale-bearer, and this has such a great effect that the word rival, used to be written upside down in hand written compilations of poetry. In landey composed by Pashtun women different scenes of the rival are depicted. For example, when a maiden sees her lover sleeping under a poplar, she says:

*May you catch fire by yourself,
That my lover sleeps under your shade.*

The gardener's envy and the nightingale's wish depicts another scene of rivalry in this landey:

*God will let the nightingale feast on his flowers,
It is your eagerness Oh gardener that makes me cry.*

During the spring season when young women dance in flowerbeds, not paying the slightest attention to the wretched lover, he addresses the women:

*Your pride will ruin spring's beauty
With green sandals you tread on yellow flowers.*

The faithful woman, who is attracted to her lover answers in these words:

*Spring and flowers are plentiful,
I will present flowers of my forelock to my beloved.*

In Pashto literature the expression of love, unlike in Dari literature, is not only the privilege of man or lover. The Pashtun woman deems it her right to express her feelings of love and pain freely in landey. See how an afflicted woman describes her pain and grief in tears:

*Do not slap my face, Oh cruel lover,
Whom should I turn my tearful eyes to?*

The Pashtun woman not only demonstrates her feelings in the world of love, but she also used landey in the battlefield. We come across events in our national history where the singing of a single landey by a woman has proved to be more effective than weapons. After hearing such couplets, men have always rushed to the battlefield without hindrance. She addresses them in these words:

*Do not ever lose heart my love,
I will hang a garland of flowers around your neck.*

In the battle of Maiwand, when Pashtuns prepared to fight for their country, a Pashtun maiden proudly sent off her lover to the battlefield and dispatched this message to the commander of this patriotic war:

*Convey my greeting to Ayub Khan,
I have sent off my lover to lend a hand.*

The Pashtun woman, not only sent her lover to fight but accompanied him into battle.

*Why should my love not wield the sword?
I accompany him halfway to the trenches.*

When love vies with the nation, the patriotic Pashtun woman chooses to sacrifice her love rather than accept defeat and disgrace:

*May you come riddled with bullets,
For I do not want to hear news of your cowardice.*

When the young Pashtun returns triumphant from war, his lover greets him as such:

*Welcome! Welcome home, thanks God,
You were not humbled before the enemy.*

And so we see the part of Pashtun women in Pashto folk literature. Another part of folk literature are naara in stories and *ghara* in the national dance called *Atan* and *sundarey* (songs) recited in weddings to which woman have contributed significantly. In fact, most of the naras and wedding songs have been authored by women.

In Pashto love stories the woman enjoys a special status similar to that of a hero. For example, in the tales of Fateh Khan and Rabia, Momin Jan and Sherino, Shadi and Bibo, Adam Khan and Durkhaney, women express the tender feeling of the fair sex in naaras in a charming literary manner.

The Naara

Generally there are two characters playing the leading roles in a love story that is the lover and his beloved. The story revolves around the actions of these two. The lover also has his own naaras, but the naaras of his sweetheart are delicate and touching.

Atan is an old tribal custom of the Pashtuns, and when young men and women come together to dance filled with rapture, the fire of love is kindled and the young men sing love songs in their melodious voices. The maidens accompany them with their ecstatic whirls of dancing and singing. For example, notice how a young lover from Kandahar expresses his love for a girl

from Bori in the following Atan nara.

*The Bori girls are dancing the Atan, how befirring,
As they stretch their back, their braids caress their navels.*

Hearing this nara, the Bori girl proclaims her love for the Kandahari lover as such:

*Like pears in the trees of Kandahar, my tresses grew long,
How long should I stay without a lover?
Flow, flow oh water in the brook, convey my greetings to my love,
And take this flower from my bosom to him.*

While dancing the Atan, happiness and love are moving and exciting states. We see here how explicitly a Pashtun women, inspired by love expresses here passion and mutual attraction in this naara:

*My tresses are touching the rocks,
When they hear me coming,
The youths come flocking like pigeons.*

Sometimes these idyllic songs also describe a woman's family structure and her own position in the home, and one can picture the situation of a Pashtun woman in her household. For instance:

*I have made a snug home buttressed by the foothill,
My father-in-law has many sons,
And I have claimed the most precious of them all.*

In love stories also the women's part and her statements are worthy of special interest and attention which express the tender feeling of the world of love in a literary form. For example, Adam Khan, conveys this message to his sweetheart, Durkhaney.

*My fair lady, Durkhaney queen of my heart,
The fame of your beauty has spread wide and far,
Your seductive glances afflicted Adam,
Would you caress him with the tip of your tresses?*

In answer to this nara Durkhaney describes her pain of endless waiting:

*I sit waiting on one side of the bed,
Leaving the other for you to come,
As you don't come dear Adam,*

Every hair of my forelock cries separately.

The tale of Shadi and Bibo also is an unforgettable treasure of Pashto folk literature., The naaras and songs of Bibo in this tale have special warmth and attraction, and this Pashtun lady expresses her stricken heart's feelings in naaras.

When Shadi is starting on his journey, and Bibo is trying to dissuade him, she says:

Much as I try to dissuade Shadi Jan he won't stay.

Even if I offer him my luscious lips,

My handsome Shadi still will not agree.

Once again the maiden in love tries to stop Shadi and soften his heart. In this naara we can clearly see the effect of simplicity of imagination and pure feelings:

I will fill up the pipe with cloves,

Put my golden nose ring on its top,

Then take the pipe and

Offer my tender lips to Shadi.

The offering of her lips by a maiden to her lover is a precious gift and has a special charm, and it is a very delicate and interesting state in the world of love appreciated to the full extent only by those disposed of love.

In spite of all this, Shadi went away and Bibo fails in her efforts. She is left alone and lonely in darkness. She is distressed and address her mother:

Mother, please go tell my father.

I am fainting, burning all over,

Shadi has gone, he is not returning,

Without Shadi life is barren and charm less.

Alas, alas, I lost my Shadi!

The flames of Bibo's love, however, do not extinguish, and in the hope of finding her lover again, she goes out to see every caravan that crosses the Bakwa desert. But Shadi does not come, and Bibo's love gets further inflamed. Disappointed she utters these words from the depth of her heart:

Caravans are crossing the Bakwa desert,

Caravans are crossing the Bakwa desert,

Shadi Khan is not among them,

The rest can't quench my thirst of love,

Alas, alas, I lost my Shadi!

These naras are recited in a colloquial accent to express the Pashtun feelings. There is a special force and charm in their composition and the way they are sung. The repetition of some lines has also a special meaning. For instance, in the above naara, the succession of caravans in the Bakwa desert suggests the persistence and continuity of love, and the fact that Bibo goes out to watch every passing caravan in the hope of seeing her lover again but returns disappointed, is indeed a painful and heart rending scene.

The same force of interpretation and the originality of expression could be seen more clearly when the naara begins with an ambiguous and conditional statement. Such a naara could be fully appreciated by a native speaker only.

For example, Gul Makey, another Pashtun girl in love address her lover, Musa Jan, in these words:

The sky turned red, Musa go on stride your mount,

For my heart is drenching in the sweat of death.

Thus the part played by Pashtun women in the stories and naaras of folk literature is also quite significant, and we see to what extent a woman's feeling and literary talent have contributed to Pashto literature.

Compiled Literature

Beside folk literature, women also have played a role in compiled Pashto literature and we see that the woman's hand is at work in both Pashto prose and poetry, and here creative talent is passed on from generation to generation.

The greater part of Pashto compiled literature is unfortunately now lost, but it seems that women had a hand in the literary movement from the earliest times. When Mohammad Hotak was compiling his *Pata Khazana* (Hidden Treasure), he devoted one part of his book to Pashtun poetesses, and it is due to the efforts of this author that today we know of some learned women in the history of Pashto literature.

Zarghuna Kakar

According to Mohammad Hotak, the literary works of women date back five hundred years in the history of Pashto literature, and the oldest poetess that we know is Zarghuna Kakar,

It is estimated she lived after the year 1471 A.D. She was a learned poetess and was a stylistic calligrapher. She lived in the historic Panjwayi of Kandahar. Her father was Mullah Din Mohammad Kakar, and she was married to Saadullah Khan Nourzai. In 1524 she versified in Pashto the famous Bustan of Shaikh Saadi, and when one writes the history of ethical poetry in Pashto literature Zarghuna Kakar surpasses all others.

Other works of this eminent poetess do not exist today but Mohammad Hotak has quoted this story from her Pashto Bustan which illustrates the eloquence and fluency of her style.

*A story I have heard
Sweeter than honey is its every word.
One morning on Eid day
Bayazid was on his way,
He had come out from a bath
And was walking on the path.
Someone threw down some ash
Unknowingly from a stash,
His face and head were soiled
And his clothes were spoiled.
Bayazid thanked God with grace
And said as he cleaned his face:
"I am worthy of this fire
May it burn my attire,
Ash I do not despise
Nor will I complain in guise."
Wise men seek to be humble
With pride they do not rumble,
Those who proudly yelp
Cannot look at God for help.
By boasting, honor you won't attain
From pride you should abstain,
With humility you will earn fame
Pride will destroy you in shame.*

(Pata Khazana, p. 193)

Rabia

Rabia is another old Pashto poetess who, according to Mohammad Hotak, lived in Kandahar during the reign of Babur Shah. Mohammad Hotak has recorded one of her quatrains in his book. The author does not say much about the life or family of Rabia. But even this one quatrain is very valuable, both from the viewpoint of meaning and wording, and it seems that Rabia was an experienced poetess and deep thinker who lived to the year 1541.

Poets have found many and varied subjects in the life of man on love and pain. Mawlana Balkhi wrote:

*With love, the earth of man was made of mud,
Untold mischief and suffering were born in this world;
A hundred times was the vein of soul pierced
A single drop dripped to the ground;
And they called it the heart.*

Iraqi has folded the philosophy of love and pain in his poetic logic as such:

*The very first wine poured into the cup,
Was borrowed from the captivating eyes of the cup-bearer;
In the world wherever there was a heartache,
It was brought together and they called it love.*

In the same vein Rabia also has a quatrain which embodies some very deep meaning. The Sufi and the Ishraqi scholars believe that man has been separated from a supernal origin and that his soul is always seeking its original source and that the world is a home full of the pains of separation. Therefore we hear a continuous and interrupted wailing of separation everywhere. In the words of Mawlana Balkhi:

*Since I was cut off from the reed-bed,
Men and women have cried over my separation.
Whoever is left from his origins
Of necessity must seek the day of unification.*

Rabia also pictures the world of separation, a world full of pain and sorrow, and man's role in it in these words:

*He brought man to the world's mire
And put his inner body on fire,
By creating hell on earth called separation
To endure, if you Divine love desire.*

(Pata Khazana, p. 195)

The first quatrain signifies the philosophy of pessimism which is shared by some later scholars such as Schopenhauer. The second quatrain is an indicator of man's separation from the Divine source. These thoughts have entered Pashto literature from other sources and are not considered as the original thinking of the Pashtuns.

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