

From Royal Courts to Poetic Hearts: The Eternal Romance of Yousuf Shah Chak and Habba Khatoon

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Abstract

A timeless romance: Yousuf Shah Chak, last of the independent Kashmir rulers, and Habba Khatoon, poetess, presents a rich and historical saga on love, poetry, and revolt set against the context of 16th-century Kashmir that had been portrayed to be "paradise on earth". This paper explores the lives of these two iconic figures, their poetic exchanges, and the lasting impact of their union on Kashmiri literature and cultural identity. By weaving their original Kashmiri verses alongside English translations, this study clearly outlines the paper's key arguments, methodology, and main findings, demonstrating how their poetic expressions of love, loss, and defiance transcend time and culture of their emotions and their enduring relevance. Their love and poetry, forged in the crucible of political turmoil and personal longing, demonstrates how their poetry serves as both personal expression and political resistance, portraying resilience in exile, deep emotional devotion, and the use of creative expression to preserve Kashmiri cultural identity.

Keywords: Yousuf Shah Chak, Habba Khatoon, Kashmir, poetry, cultural identity, resilience

Introduction

Kashmir, with the snow-clad mountains, verdant valleys, and tranquil rivers, had long been the poet's muse as well as a painter's easel. That beautiful land of Firdaus-e-Bareen (Paradise on Earth) is also the field of turbulent historic events and tales of passionate love. Among such stories, nothing is as heartbreaking or as resilient as the tale of Yousuf Shah Chak and Habba Khatoon.

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Their love story is more than a saga of personal love it illustrates how love, poetry, and political struggle were deeply intertwined, shaping Kashmiri identity and resistance. This paper argues that their poetic exchange not only reflected personal longing but also served as a form of cultural defiance against political turmoil, highlighting the intersection of art and activism. Yousuf Shah Chak's struggle for Kashmir's liberation and Habba Khatoon's heart-wrenching poems, which caught personal as well as collective grief, seem the two motifs of struggle and creativity.

This paper is going to be a disentangling of their love affair, and delving into historical, literary, and emotional layers of the story. Exploring their poetic exchange and their legacy helps uncover how their lives and work still continue to reverberate through time and space.

❖ **The Historical Context: Kashmir and the Chak Dynasty**

A warrior tribe from the north, known as the Dards, founded the Chak dynasty, which ruled Kashmir well into the mid-15th century. The Chaks became the first defenders of Kashmiri sovereignty during a politically turbulent time, resisting external influences while molding the region's cultural and political character. This was followed by the rule of Yousuf Shah Chak, the last of the dynasty, who had to not only rely on his inheritance to sit on the throne but his resistance to Mughal invasion under musician-turned-Emperor Akbar.

Yousuf Shah Chak's rule was characterized by a tangled web of diplomacy and military resistance. His predecessors grappled with internal challenges, while he confronted the more existential threat posed by the Mughal Empire's expanding ambitions. Imperially, Akbar's policies aimed at consolidating power over Kashmir, which he regarded as a key region for both strategic and cultural reasons. However, Yousuf was betrayed above all and exiled, ending local Kashmiri rule. During this time, regional autonomy eroded as the Mughal administration altered the governance of Kashmir, bringing it fully into the imperial realm.

In addition to his skill in politics and war, Yousuf Shah Chak had a strong affinity for Kashmir's culture and artistry. His court became a centre of literary and poetic activity, replete with the Persianate it had absorbed in its literary traditions. During this period, Persian literary traditions, especially Sufi poetry, had a significant influence on Kashmiri verse. This potpourri of Persian and autochthonic Kashmiri

influences gave rise to a unique poetic tradition, one that deep down fed Habba Khatoon's imagination.

Habba Khatoon is known as a poet and mystic, most famous for her lyrical poetry about love and loss — themes closely related to her life, both personal and political. Using Feminist Literary Criticism, we can analyze her poetry as a form of self-expression in a world where women were largely robbed of their voices. She turned private sorrow — her separation from Yousuf Shah Chak — into a poetic inheritance that crossed generations. And her works can also be studied as Cultural Memory Studies, as her verses were assimilated to the Kashmiri folk memory, the love story of a fallen king and a poet-queen.

When interrogated through the lens of the Postcolonial, one can view Yousuf Shah Chak's resistance as representative of Kashmir's plight against outside forces. The Mughal conquest was not only a change of power, but a change of context; Kashmir was swallowed in the greater narrative of empire. Such a synthesis of power, poetry and cultural memory, all in one period, made the Chak era central to Kashmiri history — and one that still informs the identity of Kashmir.

❖ **Habba Khatoon: From Zoon to the Nightingale of Kashmir**

Born Zoon in the village of Chandhara, Habba Khatoon found her personal sorrow in verse, articulating her hardship, including the oppressive first marriage from which she was rescued by the lover she would immortalize. Her humble-language lines resonate with themes of love, loss and resilience, offering “the loss of a diamond ring,” between every lyric.

Poetic Devices

The use of metaphors, alliteration and rhythmic patterns in her poetry are characteristic of Habba Khatoon's style. She employs natural imagery throughout, rivers standing for separation, flowers for transitory joy, mountains for endurance. Repetition and lyrical refrains add to the musicality of her verses, lending them a memorable, oral-transmission-friendly character. Her use of the Kashmiri vernacular as opposed to the stylized administration Persianized court poetry made her work very relatable.

Gendered Perspective

Habba Khatoon's poetry is more intimate and personal than that of other female poets of her times. While many poets addressed religious or philosophical themes, she made the subject of her verses the emotions and struggles of women. Her work represents an early articulation of a feminist resistance, subverting the expectation during the Victorian era that a woman's cry be silenced, through her defiance in voice, agency, and strength. Like Meera Bai in India or Lalla Ded in Kashmir, she redefined poetry as a form of self-expression in a patriarchal society.

❖ Habba's Early Verses:

"ژهن چه ميه زوند تبه نال چه گزه، ميانه بجهه راون چهه ميه زبر وژه"

My life is a river, flowing aimlessly, My shattered dreams are poison to me.

The river is an emblem of uncertainty, representative of her stifling first marriage, and poisoned dreams express intense grief. The poem emphasizes her loss of agency, and thus, her poetry becomes a powerful demonstration of mourning and passive rebellion within a patriarchal society.

Poetry celebrating her sadness, lost love and unfulfilled dreams, became the fabric of Habba Khatoon's identity. Her first marriage stayed behind her too, not only as a personal transition but a self-reclamation through poetry. Each lamenting verse she poured down on paper, crafted into art a pastime from pain that secured her the etching in fame as Kashmir's Nightingale.

Her verses, once individual manifestations of sorrow, started reverberating through the collective consciousness of Kashmir. The poetic awakening not only sculpted her visage but also set the stage for her destined meeting with Yousuf Shah Chak. United by their mutual love of beauty, intellect and art, their *kreng* (a Kashmiri word for a union of souls) became woven into the land of Kashmir's cultural narrative. In Yousuf, she found not only a lover, but a patron of her poetic voice, the intimacy of her songs rising from tales of personal sorrow to anthems of longing, of freedom, of resilience.

❖ The Meeting of Yousuf Shah Chak and Habba Khatoon

The first meeting of Yousuf and Habba is preserved in Kashmiri folklore. According to popular accounts, Yousuf was enamored by Habba's singing as he passed by the banks of the Jhelum River. Her voice, imbued with the sorrow and beauty of her poetry, resonated deeply with the king.

Habba's Verses:

"تو ہے زود نس کی پہلی تو ہے گیت وہ گہ راء دل جسے کا تو اس کا ہے"

You are the bloom of life, you are the song, My heart's deepest desires, to you they belong.

This verse speaks of love and admiration, differing from her normal themes of despair. The flower of life indicates hope and loveliness, and the song indicates joy and love. It speaks of her romantic yearning, perhaps towards Yousuf Shah Chak, and indicates how poetry and love were inextricably linked in her life.

This verse, like many of her others, reflects the purity of love. She equates her affection for Yousuf with life's most essential elements: the bloom of nature and the song of existence. This vivid image emphasizes the idea that love, for Habba, is not just an emotional connection but an intrinsic part of her being, one that nourishes and sustains her.

The verse he read touched Yousuf, who immediately composed one of his own. Their poetry and romance took off.

Response by Yousuf:

"تہی منز چہ گلزارس خوشیو، میانہ زوند چہ سرگس نیم پو"

Your presence fills the garden with fragrance, In my life, you are heaven's essence.

Yousuf's verse expresses great esteem and piety; Habba Khatoon is a wellspring of aesthetic and peace. The Scent of the Garden represents her inspiring presence right here on earth, while the Scent of Heaven speaks of pure love and spiritual

connection. Fabulizing their epic romance, this answer immortalized it beyond personal love to cultural and poetic eternity in Kashmiri folklore.

It is not only a poetic acknowledgment of her beauty but rather a proclamation that her presence raises his worth.

Through verse, he allows the readers to experience his referring of her as a beautiful fragrance in a fragrant garden; and just like it, she is a miracle in times everlasting, symbolizing paradise.

❖ Poetry as the Language of Love

For Yousuf and Habba, poetry was more than an art form—it was the essence of their love. Through their verses, they expressed emotions that societal norms may not have allowed them to voice openly. Poetry became their private language, filled with imagery of Kashmir's natural beauty, metaphors of longing, and declarations of devotion.

Habba's Reflection:

"نُہی چھے باغس بند ژوند پوئش، میانہ ژھوچھ منز نُہی بند بُش"

He is the flower of life in my garden, In my dreams, you are my light.

This couplet is one of profound devotion and yearning, presenting Yousuf as the precious flower in her emotional and poetic universe. The garden represents her life, and light in dreams indicates hope and love beyond reality. It reflects the spiritual intensity of their relationship, immortalized in Kashmiri literature.

The recurring theme of the garden is found throughout their poetic exchanges, symbolizing both growth and beauty. Habba's metaphor conveys how deeply Yousuf has rooted himself within the garden of her heart. The imagery of light suggests not only romantic affection but the illumination of her inner world by his presence. Through the lens of feminist literary criticism, particularly Elaine Showalter's perspective, Habba Khatoon's poetry emerges as a powerful assertion of agency, where her verses transcend personal sorrow to challenge societal norms and reclaim her voice.

Yousuf's Response:

"میانہ دلس منز ٹہی چہ خواب، میانہ ژوند چہ ٹہی بند حساب"

In my heart, you are the sweetest dream, In my life, you are my ultimate truth.

This verse shows deep love and devotion, with dreams representing yearning and desire, and ultimate truth representing an unshakeable emotional connection. It is a reflection of how Yousuf was both her inspiration and reality, fusing romantic and existential significance in Kashmiri poetry tradition.

In Yousuf's response, the comparison of Habba to a dream that lives within his heart underlines the deep impact she has on his soul. His verse indicates that she is not just an emotional presence but a guiding force in his life—a truth that transcends all other worldly concerns.

❖ The Garden as a Symbol of Love and Loss

The metaphor of the garden frequently appeared in their poetry, symbolizing both the beauty of their love and its fragility. In Kashmiri culture, gardens represent paradise—a recurring theme in their verses that reflected their shared longing for a world free of turmoil.

Habba's Garden Verses:

"بم باغ چہ ژوند ٹہی بند وسہ، میانہ ژوند چہ ٹہی بند سندہ سوزہ"

This garden flourishes in your presence; My life blossoms under the fragrance of your spirit.

Here, the garden is a symbol of love and harmony, which flourishes in the presence of Yousuf. The scent of his soul is a representation of his long-lasting impact on her life. This verse reinforces their emotional togetherness, depicting love as a caretaking force in poetry and in life.

The garden imagery here suggests that love, like a garden, flourishes only in the presence of its nurturing force. In Habba's case, the force is Yousuf, as he gives her

world meaning. The garden also serves as a metaphor for the very life of their love and peaceful, idyllic existence.

But it is far from a paradise. With their exile and exile-induced separation dawning upon the couple, it turns out not to be more than a simile, hence a metaphor representing loss.

❖ Painful Separation: Love Put in Exile

However, when Yousuf Shah Chak was betrayed and exiled to Bihar by Akbar, their love saw its biggest test. Their separation became the reason for ultimate sorrow, which is visible in their poetry as well. Akbar's strategy extended beyond mere political consolidation; it also sought to integrate Kashmir into the Mughal cultural sphere, subtly replacing local traditions with Persianized governance and artistic expressions.

Habba's Lament:

"ژ هوچه ژ هيلمس منز چه تيم ژ هار، ميانه باغس منز چه ژور گژ هار"

The Jhelum flows with your sorrow, In my garden, only shadows grow.

This stanza exhibits profound sorrow and yearning, with the Jhelum River standing for never-ending sorrow and the garden of love now desecrated by darkness and loss. The shadows evoke voids, lamenting the exile of Yousuf and the eroding of their common aspirations.

Expatriation transformed their poetry, made it more emotionally intense and thematically rich. Habba Khatoon's verses that had once celebrated love's joy became suffused with sorrow and longing; Yousuf's poetry sang of nostalgia, the pain of dislocation. Their words, born of separation and political turmoil, became an eternal act of witness to love and loss, enshrined in the cultural heritage of Kashmir.

The imagery of the flow of the river, often symbolizing time and fate, here emphasizes that sorrow is persistent in Habba's heart. The garden, once an emblem of flourishing love for them, was now full of shadows, a reflection of darkness due to separation.

Yousuf also turned to poetry, penning verses to express his longing for Habba and Kashmir, during the period of exile.

Yousuf's Exile Verses:

"ژ هيلمس ژ هار منز چه ميه ژهن، ميانه و آرى چه ئهې ټنډ وُن"

In the Jhelum's tide, I see your face, In my exile, your memory is my solace.

The Jhelum's tide symbolizes her yearning, as its flowing waters represent Yousuf's absence. Exile serves as a metaphor for emotional isolation, with his memory being her sole solace. This verse illustrates the lasting anguish of lost love, a recurring theme in her poetry.

Exiled, Yousuf's words express such morose portraiture of loss: his vision of the Jhelum River is what chains him to his homeland and love, becoming a pathway through which, his memories resound.

The tide serves as a metaphor for time and the timeless emotional pull of his memories.

❖ Legacy: Eternal Tale of Love and Resistance

The story of Yousuf Shah Chak and Habba Khatoon remains a quintessential part of Kashmiri identity. Their love, immortalized in their poetry, symbolizes tenacity, creativity, and pride in culture. Habba's songs are sung today in the valleys of Kashmir; Yousuf is remembered as a king who cherished art and love over power.

Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity helps explain how Kashmiri poetry, rather than being erased, adapted and blended indigenous themes with external influences. Through this hybridity, Habba and Yousuf's verses not only preserved Kashmiri identity but also subtly resisted Mughal cultural dominance, ensuring their voices remained a symbol of defiance and heritage.

Their verses, full of emotions and imagery, have transcended the boundaries of languages and cultures to inspire poets, writers, and lovers everywhere.

Conclusion: Love Beyond Time and Borders

The love story of Yousuf Shah Chak and Habba Khatoon is not just a historical account; it is a universal love, creativity, and resistance story. Their poetry, filled with the beauty and pain of their lives, has become a timeless message of hope and resilience.

Through their poetry, they spanned the divide between the personal and the political, the emotional and the intellectual. In their lives, they experienced separation and loss, but in their poetry, they secured immortality.

Habba's poetry continues to influence modern Kashmiri literature, offering a voice to contemporary struggles of identity and resistance. Exploring her work alongside other South Asian women poets, such as those from Bangladesh or Pakistan, could reveal shared themes of resilience, exile, and love across borders, enriching postcolonial literary studies.

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