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Abstract

In every folktale characters hold a significant place because they are not confined to describing or fantasizing the love relations but they reflect the collective social behaviors of the concerned society. Waris Shah portrays Punjabi culture in his classic Heer Ranjha and elaborates on the internal social system and every character of the tale represents the core realities of society. The present study is to highlight the intellectual, symbolic, social, and cultural representation of female characters in Heer Waris Shah.

Key Words: Institution, Women, Representation, Religion, Punjabi Culture, Social Structure

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Abstract

In every folktale characters hold a significant place because they are not confined to describing or fantasizing the love relations but they reflect the collective social behaviors of the concerned society. Waris Shah portrays Punjabi culture in his classic Heer Ranjha and elaborates on the internal social system and every character of the tale represents the core realities of society. The present study is to highlight the intellectual, symbolic, social, and cultural representation of female characters in Heer Waris Shah.

Keywords: [Institution](#), [Women](#), [Representation](#), [Religion](#), [Punjabi Culture](#), [Social Structure](#)

Introduction

Heer Ranjha is a love folk tale of Punjab written by Waris Shah in 1766, this qissa has been written by many others before Waris Shah but the fame and prestige of Waris Shah's Heer is unmatched. Damodar Das is the first known writer of Heer, and it is believed that he witnessed the whole story himself and later narrated it as a qissa. Waris Shah took Heer and recreated the qissa with his own imagination at the request of his friends. Heer by Waris Shah is the same story as told by Damodar

and others but the plot and characterization are way different on multi-dimensional research that has been done by various scholars on both sides of borders.

The existing literature on Heer can broadly be divided into two categories. The first category of literature helps in understanding Punjabi culture and the other helps in understanding the philosophy of pure love. Heer is an epic in which even cultural studies are different from each other. Scholars while unfolding cultural aspects of Heer used various



lenses such as gender, institutions, or daily practices. Dr. Manzor Ejaz in 'This Wanting World' and in his many other works on Heer has focused on institutions to analyze the cultural setup of Punjab. According to him, Heer has unfolded the internal social system of Punjab and critically reviewed all basic institutions of the society i.e. Family, property, Mosque, Qazi (Judiciary), Feudal, and ruling elite. To him, Waris Shah has critically reviewed all institutions and disclosed dimensions of human relations and shows the existing realities of that time based on economic interests (Ejaz, This Wanting World, [2011](#)) like him many other authors have also centered their argument on economic relations. Waris Shah rejected the reliability of all institutions and called economic interest the only source of reliable relations in Punjab (Kaur, [2010](#)).

Dr. Shaisata and Azra Waqar in their works have focused on the characters of Heer to understand the culture of Punjab. Heer is a long story that separately reflects the whole culture of society through various characters; every single character is used to depict a certain class or practice of the society (Nuzhat, [2006](#)) Heer also shows the deteriorated social system and the rebellious youth of the Punjab (Waqar, [2009](#)). All these works and many others have included a gender lens as well to understand Punjab because among all important institutions, events, and characters the women of the tale played a vital role in making it a classic. The title itself reflects the importance of women in Heer; most of the dialogue in Heer is by and with women or is about women. Rightly claimed by Surjit that Woman today has no comparison with the Heer of Waris Shah, the religious, social, and political independence of women of that time in today's world is unmatched (Kaur, [2010](#)). Nikky in her work "sacred and secular desires" explored Heer with reference to gender roles and gender relations. According to her waris, Shah showed a patriarchal socio-cultural setting in which all social relations and honor are centered on the bodies and sexuality of women (Singh, [2012](#)). Along with her many other writers such as Sadaf Mahmood and Surinder Kaur have also shown women in Heer as a victim of social subjugation and male dominance while using images of women's approach and gender roles respectively. According to Surrender Kaur, Waris Shah romanticized patriarchy in Punjab and showed

women as completely dominated by men (Kaur S., [2015](#)) Surinder Sadaf Mahmood also argues that Waris Shah showed male characters as the righteous and females as the bone of contention in society and symbol of evil (Mehmood, [2014](#)). Both have evaluated female charters with a biased approach. All writers while exploring Heer with reference to gender roles and women's portrayal have somewhat misinterpreted the text of Heer. They have interpreted the gender roles while keeping in mind today's women or have unintentionally compared both periods. Another missing link in the above-mentioned literature is the manipulation of original text or less use of original text. To me Waris Shah neither subjugated women as much as narrated by Surrender, Sadaf, and Nikky nor did it show women as independent as Surjit claims. In contrast to above mentioned selective literature, I believe that Waris Shah showed various aspects of Punjabi women through different characters. Heer the main character of the qissa is on one hand shown as a victim and on the other as the rebellious heroine of the story and Waris Shah artistically balanced this diversity of Heer's character. This paper unlike many others will evaluate the intellectual, symbolic, social, and cultural representation of female characters in Heer Ranjha while using the original text of Waris Shah.

Women Representation

Heer by Waris Shah on one hand shows the existing social structure of that time and on the other hand reflects an opposing point of view through various characters (Ejaz, This Wanting World, [2011](#)) and female characters are of mere importance in it. Waris Shah used the name Bhaag bhari woman with good fortune and act^{ed} on many occasions while addressing women. Some scholars are of the view that Bhag Bhari was a lover of Waris Shah and in Heer Waris Shah reflected himself in the form of Ranjha and Bhag Bhari in the form of Heer, they also argue that Waris Shah created Heer as a strong woman character because he wished his lover to be that strong and supportive which he didn't have in real life Heer (Suzhou, [2006](#)) but this argument doesn't seem logical as waris shah himself narrated in the Qissa that he has written this story on the request of his friends and it was not a planned effort.

Figure 1

یاراں اسماں نوں آن سوال کیتا قصہ ہیر دا نوال بنائیے جی
(Shah, 1985, p. 3)

Some would negate this on the basis of the assumption that this line was a poetic need of Waris Shah but the literal meaning of the poetry is enough to silence them as it is from the author itself. But we cannot negate the fact that while narrating the qissa he was predominantly influenced by his personal experiences which is reflected in Heer.

Waris Shah has touched on various notions regarding women in Heer Ranjha. He did not only portray the cultural role of women but he also discussed the rights of women in Islam. He has criticized the cultural practices through various characters and also provided religious explanations for his criticism. The first cultural notion that Waris Shah has given in this masterpiece is that Punjabi society revolves around the ownership and honorship of property while considering women also part

of the property. Waris Shah on many occasions shows that the prestige of a man is linked with the woman (Singh, 2012). Either it's about winning/losing a woman or the character/acts of a woman. Various events and characters in the Qissa support this argument such as the mocking of Ranjha by his sister's in-law while using woman woman-based argument, Heer's life after the revelation of his love affair with Ranjha, and Sehti's argument with Ranjha.

The whole Qissa of Heer Ranjha is a result of mocking of Ranjha by his sister-in-law, during an argument over Ranjha's laziness he is challenged by his sister-in-law that if he thinks he is a hero he should go and marry Heer from Sial family in Jhang.

Figure 2

ساڈا حسن پسند نہ لیاوئاں جاہ ہیر سیال ویاہ لیاوین
(Shah, 1985, p. 10)

Ranjha representing a true male of Punjab accepts the challenge and makes it a matter of his life or death. Waris Shah showed how a man responds to a challenge if it comes from a woman, even if it is impossible to achieve, the typical man will not think twice before accepting it because sexuality involves biological, erotic, physical, emotional, social, or spiritual feelings and behaviors matters. Any challenge coming from the opposite gender can be devastating for prestige if not met that is the one way how waris shah linked honor with women the others will be discussed later.

Waris Shah has shown in Heer that Ranjha throughout his journey was supported and helped by women on different occasions; we can connect

these practices with the concept of sexuality. Ranjha was shown as a super handsome guy with all possible manly qualities which was a reason for woman attraction towards Ranjha. He was popular among women and had a good sense of dealing with them. Waris Shah did not fantasize about sexuality but explained it as a usual practice that does not affect the cultural code of conduct if any. On this Dr. Manzor Ejaz argues that Ranjha on many occasions was supported by women and people from lower classes because of his belongingness to the lower and weak class (Ejaz, Waris Shah, and Society, 2014) but one cannot negate the sexuality factor as Waris shah clearly mentions that Ranjha mesmerizes others with his manly beauty and flute.

Figure 3

پنڈا باہوڑی جٹ یجاگ رتاں کیا شغل ہے آن جگا بیٹھا
وارث شاہ ایس موہیاں مرد رتاں مہنیں جان دا کون بلا بیٹھا
(Shah, 1985, p. 23)

As mentioned earlier waris shah through various characters discloses social practices in Punjab and also criticizes them. Waris Shah showed a patriarchal social structure in Punjab where on one hand women enjoyed significant independence but on the other were victimized in the name of culture and norms (honor). Interestingly he shows women themselves as supportive and sometimes defiant of patriarchy. As in the Qissa if we consider Heer as a victim of patriarchy we will see that her mother Malki was part or supporter of patriarchy and Sehti her sister law was a super rebellious character who at first enforces patriarchy and later breaks all traditions and customs. These three main female characters represent different modes of women in the qissa therefore to further understand and for an in-depth analysis of women's roles this paper will focus on these three characters separately.

Heer and Maalki

Heer is the main female character of Qissa, and various scholars have different opinions about the Heer. Waris Shah has presented Heer as a beautiful woman with fairy's allure, with exceptional qualities

of mental and physical strength, who had a friendly relationship with her parents and was supported by them in all matters. Heer is a socially independent character who after falling in love with Ranjha recommends him to her father as a cowherd so that she can meet him easily on a daily basis. Her father Chochak on the other hand without any objection accepts Ranjha as cowherd and for twelve years Heer and Ranjha advanced their love secretly. Heer during twelve years of love tried hard to hide her love from her parents so that she could enjoy mobility and maintain her image in front of her parents. Waris Shah shows that a woman was able to enjoy independence only until she obeyed cultural and religious norms. If she breaks the stereotypes the mobility comes to an end immediately this is the other way how waris shah linked honor with woman. Waris Shah also shows that after committing such wonders in Punjabi culture the relations of alleged with the rest of the family members also change. As in the case of Heer when Kaidu unfolds her love in front of Malki and Chochak the parent-child love also took another turn. Maalki and Chochak find this act of Heer insulting and wanted to sort it out quickly.

Figure 4

چوچک باپ دے راج نول لیک لائیاں گیما فاندہ ماییاں تاونے دا
نک وڈھ کے کوڑماں گالیوں ای ہویا فاندہ لاڈ لڈاونے دا
راتیں چاک نول چا جواب دییاں نہیں شوق اوس مہیں چراونے دا

(Shah, 1985, p. 48)

Both parents decided to fire Ranjha from his job and wanted to tame Heer but of no use. As Waris Shah Within the framework of patriarchal society released Heer from the stereotypical male-female roles and endowed her with a powerful personality (Singh, 2012) who was able to challenge socio-cultural practices against her will but on the other hand was totally submissive to her lover (Kaur, 2015). Heer can be considered a unique character because she did not accept patriarchy as far as she was dealing with people. But when it came to Ranjha she accepted all her dominance in the relations which can be because of her high emotional attachment and feelings for him but it's interesting to note that she forgot all her emotional attachments to her parents and opposed their dominance.

Unlike Heer Waris Shah portrayed Maalki as a completely different character. Maalki being the mother of Heer had all her sympathies with Heer which was a natural response but when Heer turned to be a rebellious daughter and broke all customs of the family by fighting for her love, Maalki turned to be more concerned about the prestige of the family. Waris Shah showed Maalki as a clever woman who had an idea of Heer's affair but didn't disclose it until people started talking about it (Mehmood, 2014). After Heer's love got popularity in the village she started criticizing Heer. In the following stanza, Maalki is telling Chochak how helpless she is with Heer's attitude, Maalki also suggests Chochak that they should marry Heer outside the village to save the rest of the respect in the village.

Figure 5

ملکی آکھدی چوچکا بنی اوکھی سانوں ہیر دیاں مہنیاں خوار کیتا
طعنے دین شریک تے لوک سارے چو طرفیوں خوار سنسار کیتا
وکیو لُج سیالاں دی لاه سٹی نڈھی ہیر نیں چاک نوں یار کیتا
جاں میں مت دتی آگوں لڑن لگی لُج لاه کے چٹم نوں چار کیتا
کڈھ چاک نوں کھو لے میں سھے اسان چاک تھوں جیو بزار کیتا
اکے دھیو نوں چاگڑھے ڈوب کرے رب جان کے ہے گنگار کیتا
جھب ویاہ دھیو نوں کڈھ دیسوں سانوں تھٹھ ہے ایسے مردار کیتا
وارث شاہ سانوں ہیر خوار کیتا نہیں رب صاحب سردار کیتا

(Shah, 1985, p. 49)

After this conversation, Maalki and Chochak fire Ranjha from his job but later on they call him back for service. Waris Shah gave two reasons for this act first they didn't want to get criticized by people over

their unfair treatment of Ranjha, secondly it was difficult for them to control their livestock without Ranjha and they were facing business loss.

Figure 6

چوچک آکھیا جا منا اوسنوں ویاہ تیک تاں میں چرا لیے
جدوں ہیر ڈولی پا ٹور دیئے رس۔ پوے جواب تاں چا دیئے
ساڈی دھی دا کچھ نہ لاه لیدرا سبھا ٹھل نکور کرا لیے

(Shah, 1985, p. 53)

But on the advice of Chochak when Maalki goes and requests Ranjha to join back his job she completely changes her notion she asks Ranjha to come back for the sake of Heer and not business. She tells him

that how sad Heer is for him and only Ranjha can please her at the moment. Apparently, she promised Ranjha that Heer would be his only but she cleverly supports Heer's marriage with Saida.

Figure 7

کڑی کل دی تیرے توں رس پئی اے تو میں اوس آتوں منادتاں اس

(Shah, 1985, p. 55)

Despite all the love and affection, the sials didn't give Heer the right to marry of their own choice using the pretext of traditions, culture, and class. Considering Heer their property they arranged the marriage of Heer with Saida khera out of her wish to which Heer reacted but it didn't work. Heer

rejected the marriage and had a strong argument with Qazi about women's rights in Islam specifically the right to Nikah without agreement. In her dialogue, she denounces conventional beliefs and practices and tries to convince her parents and Qazi.

Figure 8

ہیر آکھدی جیوتاں بھلا سوئی چہڑا ہووے بھی نال ایمان میاں
سمو جگ فانی کو رب باقی حکم کیتا ہے رب رحمان میاں
کل شہی خلقنا زوجین حکم آیا ہے دج قرآن میاں
میرے عشق نوں جان دا ڈھول بانگ لوح قلم تے زیں آسان میاں

(Shah, 1985, p. 116)

Her continuous refusal makes Qazi angry. It is difficult for him to accept that a girl has disapproved of him. He treats her through different references from religion as a tool to convince her. In reply, Heer also refers to 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. Bitter remarks of Heer antagonize Qazi and he cogently solemnizes her wedding with Saida. The patriarchal society didn't allow Heer to choose a partner of her own choice she was suppressed when raised her voice against the set patterns of respect and honor. Her parents signed the marriage papers anyway, and the Kheras took Heer back to Rangpur, to Saida's house. But even then she didn't lose her hope and struggled to find the love of her life. Heer spent one year at her in-laws but she maintained distance from Saida and refused to be in any relation with him. She wrote a letter to Ranjha and advised him to visit her in her in-laws. Waris Shah showed that traditions had only

a physical hold over Heer but they didn't change her mind and heart about Ranjha. She wanted to achieve what she desired. On the other hand, Maalki was completely influenced by social structure and she promoted and supported the system herself.

SEHTI

After Heer's marriage to Saida Waris Shah introduces another female character Sehti, and shows her as a beautiful, proud, arrogant strong, and intelligent young girl. The longest part of Heer Ranjha is based on an argument/dialogue between Sehti and Ranjha when he visits Heer in her in-laws. During this argument, Sehti and Ranjha argued over all important issues of life. Waris Shah presented both male and female perspectives on different topics. Sehti on many occasions promoted equal status of women and rejected male dominance. Ranjha being male criticizes Sehti and says those who claim themselves to be equal to men are not good women.

Figure 9

آء نڈھپے غیب کیوں وڈھیا ای ساڈے نال کیمہ رکتاں لائیاں نی
کریں نراں دے نال برابری کیوں آکھ تیاں وچ کون بھلیائیاں نی
(Shah, 1985, p. 260)

In response to Ranjha's allegations Sehti responded with strong arguments on one occasion she said

Figure 10

مرد رنگ محل ہیں عشرتاں دے اسیں ذوق تے مزے دیاں ماڑیاں ہاں
ایسہ آپ نول مرد سد اوئدا ہے اسیں نراں دے نال دیاں ناریاں ہاں
ایس چاک دی کون مجال ہے نی راجے بھوج تھیں اسیں نہ ہاریاں ہاں
وارث شاہ وچ حق سفید پوشاں اسیں ہولی دیاں رنگ پچکاریاں ہاں
(Shah, 1985, p. 262)

Sethi was also an intelligent and visionary woman who at first sight discloses Ranjha being a fraud and warns him to stay away from them. Sehti is also

shown as a brave woman who never fears even a physical fight with a man. She brutally beats Ranjha.

Figure 11

جان گئی ہاں میں سارا فقر تیرا اتوں کچیا وچوں پھوٹیا وے
نڈوچ دلو شاہاں نال لاگا سدھا کروں گی مار کے سوٹیا وے
دے دھر کونیا کون منونیا وے، کے چک توں لٹھیا لوٹیا وے
بیعت فقر دی من نہ نرم ہو یوں رہیوں سخت ہشتانت دیا لوٹیا وے
پوسے کاغذ تے دار تادوں فقط، جدوں جائے سختی اتے گھوٹیا وے
(Shah, 1985, p. 270)

Through the character of Sehti Waris Shah breaks the existing stereotypes that a woman who is not married can also have strong opinions about every topic and can be a difficult person to handle for others. Dr. Manzoor Ejaz called the character of Sehti a symbolic representation of the status quo in Heer Ranjha, who does not accept change easily (Ejaz, Waris Shah and society, [2014](#)) and without logic but this point can be seen in other ways, as Sehti on one hand is against the love affair of Heer but on the other had her own affair with Murad Baloch. Sehti is a follower of traditions and culture but she doesn't follow things blindly, she tries to find logic for every point, Sehti when found that Heer and Ranjha's love is loyal and she doesn't agree to marriage to her brother Sehti decides to help Heer. Sehti and Heer both concoct a secret plan to run away with their respective lovers; Heer with Dhido Ranjha, and Sehti with Murad Baloch.

Sehti in comparison to Heer is the most important character as she is the only one who stood for Heer and accepted the Heer's stance. Sethi was herself a victim of patriarchy realized the pain of Heer and helped her find her love. Sethi without any fear of her family and culture supported Ranjha and Heer and also decided on her own faith. She did not follow her family blindly and on logical grounds knowing her rights she decided to achieve her rights on her own. Here Waris Shah made a point that

women can be the saviors of other women you don't need to depend on men only. No one can change your destination only you can do it for yourself and Sehti did the same. Heer fails to achieve her desire because she feels like a victim of society but Sehti realizing the injustice to another woman found it unbearable and turned the tables. Heer, Maalki, and Sehti present different modes of woman in Heer, it is interesting to note that every time a woman was involved in deciding the faith of others. Maalki supported the patriarchal structure and saved the so-called prestige of family while Sehti destroyed the customs of both families and stood against a social evil to help another woman. These characters show that waris shah no doubt portrayed a patriarchal society but he showed that woman themselves were responsible for their subjugation and only they could change their destination.

Conclusion

Heer of Waris Shah unfolds the status of women in old Punjab and also helps to understand the stereotypes of that time. Waris Shah showed that woman was the center of culture and all traditions and customs. We can assume that woman was kept in a gold cage from which only those who were able to fly and who struggled and challenged the system were. Others even didn't recognize that they were in prison.

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