

UNDERSTANDING GENDERED DYNAMICS IN PAKHTUN SOCIETY THROUGH LIFE HISTORY AND WORKS OF KHUSHHAAL KHAN KHATTAK

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Abstract

This study aims to look at the representation of women in Pakhtun society from the writings and life history of Khushhaal Khan Khattak. It will attempt to reflect what gendered dynamics of Pakhtun society are represented and/or underrepresented in the life history narratives and translated works of Khushhaal Khan Khattak. The implied assumption is that Pakhtun society based on its ethnic character is relatively similar in overall gender relations and perceptions. Given this relative homogeneity, the paper will be built on anthropological references from other Pakhtun tribes for gendered analysis. To infer Pakhtun gendered dynamics, this paper will draw references from translated works of Khushhaal which praises women and shows fascination with their feminine splendor. It will also appropriate excerpts of his biographical accounts which entails references to his marriages and presence of important elderly women in his adult life.

Key Words

Pakhtun society, Khushal Khan Khattak, Women, Marriages, Poetry

Introduction

This paper will explore the following dimensions on the status of women in *Pakhtun* society, women as marital partners in reference to *Khushhaal's* numerous marriages, *silencing* (my Italics) as in underrepresentation of women in the life history narrative of *Khushhaal*

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despite the explicit mention of women as sensual objects in *Khushhaal's* own poetry.

This study will be based on the theoretical underpinnings of Lindholm's (1968) work to explain the kinship and marital relations in *Pakhtun* society. Lindholm's work on 'Jealousy and Generosity' (1982) and 'Frontier Perspective' (1992) will establish that marriages in *Pakhtun* society are representative of animosity within and with other tribes, even though the aforementioned work talks about Swat *Pakhtuns* only.

However, in this analysis I will build on this argument that women have played crucial role in *Khushhaal's* life but they had been systematically eliminated in the historical discourses pertaining to *Khushhaal* and his works. The underlying assumption is that traditionally in *Pakhtun* culture (which in this case dates back to seventeenth century) women have enjoyed substantial social status. But it is the twentieth century narratives which have resorted to symbolic annihilative representation of *Pakhtun* women in *Khushhaal's* life.

To explain my central argument I will draw that why *Khushhaal* married numerous times and at the same time held affectionate feelings about women who may or may not had been his wives. These were the women to whom he devoted his poetry to and in them he praised their breathtaking beauty and his fascination with that charm. From the same explanation of social structure I will explain why and how the elderly women had an influential role in his life, though that role has been limited to one instance only, which is explicated further in this paper.

The nonexistence of representation of *Khushhaal's* wives in his biography and lack of reference to whom and why were those romantic poems devoted to will be explained by Tuchman's framework of (1978) symbolic annihilation. According to Tuchman, 'the very underrepresentation of women, including their stereotypical portrayal bespeaks their "symbolic annihilation"' (1979, p. 533). Although this concept as Tuchman employs in her analysis has been borrowed from

Gerbner (1972) in reference to representation of women in mass media saying that, ‘women’s representation in the media signifies their social existence, so too their **underrepresentation**, **trivialization** and **condemnation** indicate symbolic annihilation’. However, the study will elaborate on this concept while taking into consideration the representation of *Pakhtun* women in the life history and compiled works of *Khushhaal*. This will delineate not only the silencing of females’ perspective in *Khushhaal*’s life, but also underrepresentation of females in his life history written by the noted historians.

The available academic contributions on the life and works of *Khushhaal* are abundant with sagas of his bravery, militancy and the call for unification of Afghan-*Pakhtun* nationalism but it is silent on the discussion of several women in his life as marital partners with whom he bore sixty two sons and thirty four daughters, nearly ninety six children. *Khushhaal*’s poetry also takes a romantic turn and goes on to praise the beauty and charm of the opposite gender but his biographies and compilation of works are all devoid of the fact that women existed in his life. This brought a critical concern to the surface that women are symbolically annihilated in *Khushhaal*’s life history the status women hold in *Pakhtun* societies in various contexts.

The foremost limitation of this study is that the poetry and other works of *Khushhaal* are scarcely available in Urdu and English translations. Most of the work is in its original Pashto language which is not my native language hence I had to resort to given translations. Moreover, I was unable to delve deeply in the *Pakhtun* social and cultural dynamics as I remain an outsider to *Pakhtun* culture. In the given time schedule I only consulted secondary data and the respective research findings were then derived from it. Furthermore, the available secondary resources on *Khushhaal*’s life do not explicitly relate to the role of women in his life, either from the perspectives of his mother, wives or even daughters. In this scenario most of my findings will be based on overall *Pakhtun* social systems and the status of women therein.

This study also does not explain in detail the translated romantic poetry of *Khushhaal* because the central focus of his paper is not his fantasy or desire for women instead the paper aims to explore the how women have been involved in his life. For this purpose certain instances of his life and glimpses of his selected works will be discussed within the scope of this paper.

Symbolic annihilation' of women

This paper will be built on the premise that women in *Khushhaal*'s political and private life have been really instrumental, but they have been purged from the pages of history. This proposition will be developed on the basis of various instances from *Khushhaal*'s biography that how women were not only important in his life but also that he was fascinated and was dear to women around him. In his life, *Khushhaal* married many women and had children with them. As a young man he was highly fascinated by feminine beauty. Moreover, elderly women in his family also had a significant impact in his life.

On the contrary, *Khushhaal*'s life history as penned by historians and social researchers boast on his martial achievements and his aspirations for composite *Pakhtun* nationalism. The historians have clearly blinded away from the depiction and representation of women in his life.

As mentioned earlier, even if women have been mentioned anywhere that has been done in a very limiting capacity in reference to certain instances like that of his early years when he was taken for a swim by female servants and when he was married the first time and the decision of elderly women suggested remedy for his ailing body. The women in his life have been systematically erased and silenced in the narration of history that undertook in the 20th century, nearly three centuries after *Khushhaal*'s death.

Subsequently Gerbner and Tuchman's theoretical underpinning of symbolic annihilation, the absence and trivialization of any social group is tantamount to their social marginalization and disempowerment. This dimension suggests that through the given historical narratives the gendered discourses are represented as

polarized and elucidate subservient status of women in *Khushhaal's* life and poetry. Power of the patriarchal *Pakhtun* tribal society is constructed in contrast to the omission of women which is synonymous of their powerlessness in the society.

This phenomenon is clearly present in *Khushhaal's* biography, because despite *Khushhaal's* fascination with women, marriages to women and important relationships with elderly women as mentioned by historians are devoid of the representation and discussion about women in *Khushhaal's* life. This shows that women in *Pakhtun* culture are symbolically annihilated based on the 20th century presumption that *Pakhtun* women belong to the four boundaries of the house. The narrative constructed through historical writings may have contributed to such leading assumptions about women in *Khushhaal's* life. However, a deeper insight into the life and work of *Khushhaal* may reveal that this may not be the case. This work aims to develop the aforementioned argument by excavating the history and works of the illustrious *Khushhaal*.

Marriages

Khushhaal had many children and it is assumed that those biological children were born from his several marriages. In this reference his numerous marriages have to be understood in the specific social dynamics of *Pakhtun* culture where, *Pakhtun* marriage which is considered as a social contract to settle differences in tribes. A study conducted by Lindholm asserts that, '*Pakhtun* men and women (married) confront one another in continuous struggle for power. Women as incoming wives, seek to retain their lineage honor and to gain a position of dominance in their new home. The husband has a trump card in this battle, since he can take a second wife, thereby shaming the first and her lineage' (Lindholm 1982, 60).

A glance at *Khushhaal's* life reflects that he contested a long term struggle with various other *Pakhtun* tribes; it was because of his loyalty towards Mughal king *Shahjahan* in particular. The alliance with Mughals at the expense of other *Pakhtun* tribes was considered treacherous by them. *Khushhaal* as a member of *Khattak* tribe had

developed animosity with various *Pakhtun* tribes particularly the *Yousafzai*'s with whom their rivalry began in the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar. Even before *Khushhaal*'s birth his father and grandfather had developed antagonism against the *Yousafzais* and as result many of their tribal chiefs were killed in their combats with each other (K. Mohmand 1951, p. 22).

Marriages as it is deemed in traditional tribal *Pakhtun* society whether they be in *Khattaks*, are held to settle or to exacerbate arch rivalry between the competing tribes. The institution of marriage is based on animosity, to settle feuds with other tribes. Kamil Mohmand mentions this as the system of 'swara' in which most of the Afghans and in particular *Khattaks* settle tribal dispute by marrying the man of victimized tribe with a woman of the perpetrator's tribe. As it was the case, *Khushhaal*'s father was killed by *Yousafzais* which led to further spiraling of the inter-tribal conflict between *Yousafzais* and *Khattaks*. (K. Mohmand 1951, p. 16 & 60).

Kamil Mohmand mentions in his book that despite such arch rivalry *Khushhaal* married a *Yousafzai* wife with who he gave birth to Sadar Khan one of his sons (1951, p. 61). 'He married *Malak Malu Khan*'s daughter (*Malak Hamzah Khan*'s sister) in total disregard of his tribes and family's past anti-*Yousafzai* and pro-Mughal role' (Sultan-i-Rome, p. 121). This delineates that marriages in *Pakhtuns* are representative of political power over other tribes which explains the why *Khushhaal* had many marital partners because he had developed many tribal feuds due to his alliance with Mughal emperor.

In this compromising matrimonial alliance, the relationship between husband and wife represent constant struggle for power. *Khushhaal*'s numerous marriages were also a reflection of his political strategies against rival *Pakhtun* tribes, where not only he took second but many other wives. '*Pakhtun* marriage is.... primarily concerned with politics in the very broadest sense-that is, in the pursuit of power' (Lindholm 1996, p. 20).

Furthermore, in *Pakhtun* context the greater number of wives represents person's (of a particular tribe) power and authority. The need for marriage as a display of power dynamics and conquest of political game show in *Pakhtuns* is asserted as, 'women as wives are an object of strong competition among the *Pakhtun*, especially among the elite khans, who view taking women as an aspect of their hobby of warfare and one-upmanship; having a wife reveals one's capacity to dominate and subordinate another elite clan' (Lindholm 1982, p. 111). *Khushhaal* who was a tribal chieftain and renowned *Pakhtun* warrior needed this assertion, owing to his supremacist tribal and personal status.

The aforementioned aspects of *Khushhaal*'s life and marriage are unexplained in the depiction of his historical accounts. The mention of the number of wives he had, or the reasons for such matrimonial alliances are also absent from historical manuscripts (referred in this study). This is referred to as '*underrepresentation*' of the dimension of marriage in *Khushhaal*'s life history documentation. This is one of the aspects of symbolic annihilation of women as marital partners or mothers of his ninety-six children from the records of his biography. The dearth of information in this regard attributes to the systematic silencing of *Pakhtun* women from the historical records.

Trivialization of the portrayal of women

From the aforesaid underrepresentation of *Khushhaal*'s marriages or married life, it is deduced that the institution of marriage in *Pakhtuns* and in particular in *Khushhaal*'s life is assumed to be tainted with feelings of animosity and conquest in contrast to romantic love. However, in *Khushhaal*'s testimonies it is observed that romantic love and heterosexual desires are not all absent from *Khushhaal*'s life. In his own poetic works we come across a couple of poems celebrating females' beauty and exquisiteness and yearning for romantic love. Nevertheless, the mention of his wives is absolutely absent from these poems (or as is recorded in his translated works). These poems make no reference that they have been dedicated to his own marital partners rather show his desires and longing for stunning women. In one of the study on *Pakhtun* culture it is stated that, 'romance can never be with

one's spouse or fiancée, but must be with a stranger' (Lindholm 1982, p. 223).

The translation of poetry from Howell and Caroe's (1963) translation show a couple of poems that represent the beauty and attractiveness of women whether they be 'Maids of *Adamkhel*' (p. 19), 'Love in Garden' (p.21), 'Distraction' (p. 25), 'Beauty, Apparent and Real' (p.27).

In one of his poem 'Distraction', the unrequited love and longing to be loved can be observed,

*'My place is in thy secret heart, of thee the inmost part,
As the sweet basil the potsherd within;
All else forgot but one desire, to merge in thee twin flames one fire,*

I am distraught...' (Howell and Careo, p. 25)

Moreover, in other instances those have been taken from excerpt of poem lead to this notion that *pardah*, veiling or females' segregation was not a rampant notion in seventeenth century *Pakhtun* culture. Women were visible in the open spaces, which led to inspiration of *Khushhaal* to praise the beauty of women in the above mentioned poems. This is in contrary to twentieth century's *Pakhtun* women's depiction which insists that *Pakhtun* women had been *pardah* clad and were restricted to the four walls of their houses ever since. On the flipside, twentieth century's work on *Pakhtuns* by Lindholm states that, 'romance of the *Pakhtun* is the mirror image of *pardah* which pervades local poetry and legends. Men are perfectly capable of falling deliriously in love with barely glimpsed eye or an accidently revealed ankle' (1982, p. 223).

However, in the following poem, 'Love in a Garden' he describes the splendor of female beauty which is presumably witnessed by naked eye,

*'When her petalled lips are parting, whitest pearls do their lustre;
When her glance to me is darting, fades the fairest flower-cluster;
She the rose, her grace bestowing, on the thorn that waits her pleasure,*

*I the fountain faintly glowing, mirror of a garden's treasure,
lover loved together knowing, rapture passing dream or measure'*
(Howell and Careo, p. 21).

However it can also be assumed that love, infatuation and desires were held in contrast to the ritual of marriage which was considered a political game. Interestingly, one of his poems directs to the gorgeous women of the *Afridi* tribe with whom *Khushhaal* lamented friendly and cordial relations. It may be inferred that love, desires and appreciation of beauty were linked with women of non-antagonistic clans but marriage a political tool to dominate the hostile tribes.

Khushhaal had established friendly relations with the *Afridi* tribe and amongst them *Aimal Khan Afridi* and *Darya Khan Afridi* were his friends and confederates (Howell and Careo, p.7). Looking into the past, we observe that *Khushhaal* made a decisive victory against the Mughals in the battle of *Khaiber* with his *Afridi* confederates aforementioned. The cordial relations may reveal that he had access to *Afridi's* motherland and he could loiter around without restrictions. This leads to the subject of one of his poetic works where glorifies the splendor and exquisiteness of the women of *Afridis*,

*'Rosy and fair to the eyes are the
daughters of Afridis;*

*Maids of Adam Khel, lovely, how
lovely they are!;*

*Large and liquid the eyes, brows
arched, long lashes a-tremble;*

*Sugar lips, cheek like flowers,
foreheads as bright as the moon'*

(Howell and Careo, p. 19).

The above mentioned excerpts from *Khushhaal's* poetic works delineate that although *Khushhaal's* life was influenced by feelings of romantic love and desires yet they have been trivialized. This trivialization refers to the minimal representation, in this case, of romantic love and desires in life and works of *Khushhaal*. For a headstrong *Pakhtun* warrior and national poet this dimension of his life and personality may not have been congruent, as men may have been associated with aggressiveness and militarization. The trivialization of romance and celebration of females' beauty in his poetic works directs to the assumption that in *Pakhtun* culture romance may not have been considered as much 'manly' as the earlier mentioned attributes of *Pakhtun* masculinity.

Condemnation of *Pakhtun* matriarchs

In traditional *Pakhtun* cultures women who bear sons have a significantly higher status in the family. *Khushhaal's* mother had male children and his wives gave birth to his sixty two sons. It is stated that, 'if a woman has many sons, she is entitled to special marks of respect. She will be the matriarch of the house or sit near the matriarch of the house at family feasts, men will stand when she enters a room, her advice will be asked' (Lindholm 1982, p. 163). Despite this, we see in the narrative of history matriarchs of *Khushhaal's* family were condemned and were also omitted from the narrative.

The case of condemnation as an aspect of symbolic annihilation of elderly respected females of the family can be looked upon by a case quoted by two historians. M. Kamil (1951, p. 30-32) and Ferozuddin narrate that in 1040 *hijri* (June-July) when *Khushhaal* got married for the first time (with Ashraf Khan's mother) he got ill with severe fever. Due to this he could not even go with his own marriage procession and his newly wed bride came along *Khushhaal's* family to his home. On coming back all the women along with his mother and new wife gathered around high fever stricken *Khushhaal* who was unconscious due to his condition. The women decided to cover his body with a blanket so that all the body could be covered in sweat and this could mean that the fever will perspire. But this action in actual aggravated his condition to the verge where it was assumed that

Khushhaal has died. They took off the blanket in haziness and waited for him to breathe back, *Khushhaal* was there and he struggled back to life. M. Kamil suggests that this significant event of his sickness and his marriage was a strange moment and it reflected the mentality and collective thinking of the Afghan women of the privileged classes at that that (Kamil, p. 31). The author hinted towards irrational decision by the women that led to near to death escape of the sick *Khushhaal*. Further, Ferozuddin mentions, ‘poor *Khushhaal* was made the victim of this foolish suggestion in no time’ (2007, p. 64).

The narration of the said instance in historical accounts refers to the assumption that women even though elderly and influential in the family have been condemned to participate in the ‘making’ of the great *Khushhaal*. It has been directed that had the advice of the elder women been followed the legend *Khushhaal* would not have managed to life and would have dies as a young boy. This directs us to see that the decision making and participation of women has been represented by the historians as irrational and threatening. This is condemnation, which is another aspect of symbolic annihilation where women’s participation is represented in a manner which is condemnable.

This is in spite of the fact that in *Pakhtun* culture women become real decision makers and are upgraded to higher status in family when they are growing old. Lindholm refers to this as when they (women) have produced sons, they become real matriarchs of the *Pakhtun* family who then takes strategic decisions based on many years of political strategy and manipulation within their own family compounds (Lindholm 1996, p.19).

Even in the above mentioned instance of *Khushhaal*’s adulthood, it shows the strong presence of *Pakhtun* women to make a decision regarding men and sons in the house. This suggests that though elderly women from his tribe have been instrumental in *Khushhaal*’s life but the historians chose condemn their participation in important matters in the family.

Conclusion

From the above discussions we may observe that representation is significant in delineating power dynamics both in the historical and contemporary contexts. The concept of power becomes significant when we discuss the gendered relations of *Pakhtun* society. The way in which gendered discourses are represented in the life and history of *Khushhaal*, there women are assumed to be insignificant and irrational in the construction of legendary *Pakhtun* heroes and overall culture. This representation leads us to the assumption that women do not play a vital role in the construction of the society.

The power of patriarchy in *Pakhtun* society is well justified by the discourses of underrepresentation, trivialization and condemnation of women in *Khushhaal*'s life and work. Siddique states that, 'power and discourse have an interesting relationship; they justify and legitimize each other' (2014, p.18). the notion of silencing or as borrowed from Tuchman and Gerbner symbolic annihilation is to show women in *Khushhaal*' life as meek, docile and lacking agency.

This submissive representation of women caused by their symbolic annihilation stems from various contemporary stereotypes related to *Pakhtun* women. These stereotypes are legitimized by proverbs and sayings like, 'Women have no noses. They will eat shit. One's own mother and sister are disgusting. Women belong in the house or grave' (Lindholm 1982, p. 113). This clearly shows that *Pakhtun* society is highly patriarchal and which has contributed to the silencing of women in the historic discourses.

This has been elaborated by taking varied aspects of *Khushhaal*'s life and works to explicate that even though there have been references of women yet they have been symbolically annihilated in their representation.

There is categorically no clear reference of women in his life as marital partners, lovers or matriarchs of the family. This suggests that the twentieth century historians (who have been referred in this paper) had 'symbolically annihilated' *Pakhtun* women who may have been instrumental in *Khushhaal*'s life.

Moreover, the mention of women and his marriages and reference to his romantic desires are also represented without the contextual analysis of *Pakhtun* culture he ascribed to. The concepts of romantic love, marriage and female authority when noted by historians recollecting *Khushhaal's* life history and works were not looked into the particular context of *Pakhtun* culture. The narration of history of the illustrious seventeenth century Afghan warrior poet does not represent contextual underpinnings of the *Pakhtun* culture he belonged to.

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