

WARIS SHAH'S *HEER*: SUBVERSION AND RADICALITY IN THE QISSA AND POSTCOLONIAL PUNJABI POETRY

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Abstract

This paper explores the feminist poetics of Punjabi Qissas with special focus on Waris Shah's *Heer*. At the outset the paper explores the critical question whether Waris Shah's *Heer* should be regarded as a Qissa (in the typical Arabic/Persian tradition) or as an Epic (in the conflated Eurocentric sense). It further draws parallels with postcolonial Punjabi poetry, focusing on poets like Amrita Pritam. Through a close reading of her poems like "*Ajjaakhan Waris Shah nu*" [*Today I Call on Waris Shah*] by Amrita Pritam, I try to establish that these progressive poets have deployed the contestatory and popular genre of *Heer* to critique the intersectional patriarchies of nation, region and community. Their radical and nuanced re-working of *Heer*'s voice seems to de-center male authorial privilege in the Punjabi literary formation, constituting Punjabi language as a potent site for engaging with tradition under modernity. Together, their poems seek to offer an inversion of the existing gender dynamics and offer a historiographical and literary reconstruction of cultural identity to locate women as active subjects and narrators of history.

As the paper develops it becomes evident that the Qissa is not so much about Ranjha's devotion and piety as it is about *Heer*'s attempts to question and then rebel against the law enforcing authority of her father, and by extension, that of a paternalistic, oppressive feudal order embodied by the Qazi, thereby de-legitimising all known notions of heroism endorsed by patriarchy.

Keywords: Qissa, epic, patriarchy, cultural identity, feminist revision, vernacular writing.

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Waris Shah's *Heer* is regarded as one of the most significant texts of Punjabi culture, a text that, like so much more, serves as a bridge between the *Charda* (Eastern) and the *Lahnda* (Western) Punjab, between the two scripts of *Shahmukhi* and *Gurmukhi*, between the oral and the written literary/cultural traditions. Its popularity can easily be assessed by the fact that though it was written in 1766, it continues to be read, recited and sung in rural, as well as urban Punjab (both East and West) with much the same gusto and enthusiasm as it was when it was initially created. Waris' *Heer* is woven so intricately into the tapestry of Punjab's history and culture, that any effort to disengage the two would simply make both fall apart, almost in the same way in which the multi-coloured threads of phulkari often cut loose, if prised open. The cultural semiology of Waris' *Heer* is perhaps as difficult to decode, as would be the case with phulkari. Further, like the rich, complex patterns of phulkari, Waris' *Heer*, too, is a complex narrative, steeped in the soil of Punjab with an astounding range of meanings, both local as well as universal, inscribed in it. The paper revisits the old legend and reworks it to find in the *Qissa* a feminist, subversive reconstruction while also drawing parallels with the critique of a masculine/poisonous nationalism immanent in Pritam's poetry. In doing so the paper uses an intersectional matrix of feminism, gendered nationalism, culture studies and colonial bilingualism, hierarchies of languages and power in the postcolonial context.

Going beyond, it also raises some abstruse, philosophical questions such as: is it mainly a love and death story projecting human predicaments and conflicts or a pretext for discussing the metaphysical questions of life and death? The critical debates also veered around this question of whether Waris Shah's *Heer* could be read as a *Qissa*(1) or as an Epic.

Often, we use the term Epic or any other rather loosely, at our own peril, ignoring the claims of a very serious and even significant argument of 'cultural inwardness' of a text like *Heer*. It is this cultural argument that I wish to invoke in the context of Waris Shah's *Heer* to advance my thesis. Be it *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana*, or *Heer*, we are always over-enthusiastic while using the term Epic, and in most cases, we use it not as a descriptive, but rather as a prescriptive category. In support of my argument, I would like to make two brief points. One, we can't possibly re-visit our cultural texts, today, without first looking into the history of 'colonial modernity,' and the manner in which its agendas have been adopted by us over the years, without much rigorous questioning or a sustained critique. Two, this notion

of 'colonial modernity' is closely allied to the question of 'identity politics,' on the one hand, and the twin issues of self-representation and/or cultural misrepresentation, on the other.

Epic as a literary form originated in the West, and has been valorized as a canonical literary form in the Western cultural tradition, it essentially remains a dominant Euro-centric concept. (The canonicity of Epic can be judged from the fact that it has repeatedly been used as a point of departure/reference in discussions of other literary forms such as Drama or Novel (Aristotle and Bakhtin). One of the possible ways of approaching this Euro-centric form is to conflate it with the ideology of 'nation' or 'nationalism', something that Hegel has done in his discussion on Poetry. That is to say, so long as we remain trapped within the Euro-centric paradigms, our approach to our own cultural texts shall remain "flawed," and even myopic. In this situation, our connection with our own cultural texts shall mainly be through the prism of euro-centric, self-inferiorizing gaze. We may thus end up colluding with the miasma of 'colonial modernity,' taking it to be a significant milestone in our march towards progress and/or evolution. But the whole notion of 'colonial modernity,' with its complex ramifications, needs to be critiqued, even deconstructed. This is necessary because of another fact, too. As pointed out earlier, somewhere down the line, we need to recognise that literary texts/forms have an organic relationship with the cultural context within which they are either born or created. The only way in which we can possibly negotiate the 'disruptions of colonial experience' is by thus challenging the existing frame of reference of our debate, and also re-setting our agenda on our terms, not anyone else's. Incidentally it was on a redoubtable Romila Thapar where she made this point in relation to *The Mahabharata*.

Waris Shah's *Heer* was written in 1766 (incidentally, in 2016 we completed 250 years of its continuous, uninterrupted dissemination in our culture). The legend of Heer-Ranjha that constitutes its kernel has been with us much longer, of course, in its various mutating forms. Waris Shah, widely acknowledged as an exponent of Sufism was the only one among many poets to have written about it. Much before he recreated this popular love-legend into a multi-layered text, Damodar Das, Shah Hussein, Hafiz Shah, Jahan Muqbil, and Ahmad Gujjar had already dealt with it in a variety of ways. Though some scholars have been more concerned about the 'historicity' of this love-legend (as they have made repeated attempts to locate it in the actual/historical time-space), it is far more important to emphasize how different configurations of this love-legend have

evolved over four hundred years or more. Historically, different versions of the love-legend could roughly be said to cover this extremely significant, though turbulent, period in the history of Punjab, right from the 1450s to 1800. (This is the period dominated by the Sayyid and Lodhi dynasties of Dehi Sultanate {1420s} to that of the Mughal Empire {1857}, with the dominance of Ahmad Shah Abdali and Marathas over North thrown in for a good measure.) If we confine ourselves only to these popular Punjabi variants, probably we would end up contextualizing this Qissa in a very limited way. Interestingly, the literary ancestry of this Qissa has its roots in the mythical substratum of popular Indian/Hindu love-legends, too. Though this love-legend originated in the soil of Punjab and was articulated in Punjabi language (in Shahmukhi script, of course) and within the Arabic/Persian literary tradition (Qissa as a form is typically Arabic- Persian), it has connections with the legendary love of Radha-Krishna, embedded in a much older Vaishnavite tradition. It was Damodar Das, the first Punjabi poet to have dealt with this particular love-legend, who established this cultural connection, something that Waris Shah's Qissa also largely endorses. It's in the conception of Ranjha, the lover, that we find shades of Krishna, as both are conceived as pastoralists (cow-herds) and also as flute-players. Both end up alluring their respective beloveds, Radha and Hir/Heer?, with the overwhelming power of the divine music they create.

The cultural sociology of Waris Shah's Heer, is fairly complex and so is the philosophical/ideological substratum of this text. For, one, the cultural sociology is not only historical, but mythical as well. Two, it is not merely a story of two clans of Muslim Jats, but also that of conversions of Hindu Rajputs under the dominant Muslim rulers, with strong, irrepressible resonances of Hindu mythology, philosophical tradition(s), that echoes in the distant background. Interestingly, this Qissa is located in a period of Punjab's history, when the Sikhs, under the rule of Shah Alam II, were embattled with the Mughals. (The Sikhs, at that point in history, felt as besieged and embattled as Ranjha does, first at home and then in Jhang Siyal.) It is another matter that the Mughals themselves were crumbling rather fast under the dual pressure of their own internal strife, and the rising tide of the colonial power.

The historical and political situation of Waris Shah was so complex that virtually the very notion of the 'dominant' had been rendered fluid. There was no single, fixed, identifiable, dominant monolith that could either be postulated or fought against. It was this complex

political situation that made Waris Shah turn away from the idea of 'nation' to that of the community and patriarchy as the ultimate source of oppression and subjugation. Owing to its peculiar history, Punjab has had a long, established tradition of resistance, rebelliousness, and dissent. If there is anything that defines Punjabi character, it is this tendency to oppose the authoritarian mind-set, particularly within the local and regional context. One of the popular notions about Punjabis is that so long as they are out of power, they fight against the dominance of the political outfit in power, and once they come into power, they start fighting against the tyranny of their own party chieftainship. Though this might appear to be an overstatement of sorts, it does tell us a great deal about the Punjabi mind-set, and its problematic relationship with authority-figures, even visible symbols of authoritarianism. It is against this backdrop that I'd like to position Waris Shah's *Heer* as a cultural text that subverts the notion of patriarchy within the domestic, familial space, and by its implications in the wider social, political, and cultural space. The manner in which this *Qissa* develops, it does take on the classical form of love becoming hostage to two feuding families, fighting their internecine battles for local dominance and supremacy. One of the reasons why Heer's father is consistently opposed to marrying his daughter off to Ranjha is because he believes that the latter is from a lower caste and certainly not as well-heeled as his own family. (Incidentally, Ranjha had not only been turned out of his house by his brothers and *bhabhis*, but also deprived of his share in the landed property of his father Maujoo.) Apart from the considerations of inherent superiority that Heer's father Chuchak displays as the head of a land-owning class, it's a combination of caste, class, status, and patriarchy that works to the detriment of Heer-Ranjha's ultimate union.

Turning to a major contention of this paper, the character of Heer as portrayed in *Heer Waris Shah* inaugurates a literary mode of disputation to challenge existing moral and spiritual authority. This tussle for female voice, a thematic which is later developed by Amrita Pritam, is embedded in the original text itself. The story of Heer has circulated in the Punjabi oral and poetic tradition for at least the past four hundred years, in the form of *kafis*, *dohas*, *qissas*, folksongs and *raas* (theatre). Dhido (Ranjha), after a dispute with his brothers over their father's land, leaves his hometown Takht Hazara with nothing but his flute in hand. He embarks on a journey that takes him to Jhang, where he meets Heer and they fall in love. On her suggestion, he joins her father's household as a cowherd,

but the love affair is eventually discovered, at which point Heer's parents marry her off to the wealthy Khera clan. Ranjha, disguised as a *jogi*, (2) follows Heer to her in-laws' house in Rangpur, where the two decide to elope. The runaway lovers are eventually tricked by Heer's family with a false promise of marriage. While Ranjha returns to Takht Hazara for the ceremonial preparations, Heer is poisoned. He dies of shock upon hearing the news (Syed 1968:44).

Several years later, Punjabi poet Amrita Pritam (1919–2005) references the narrative of Heer and Ranjha, a story that has circulated in oral, textual and performative form in Punjab since the sixteenth century. She writes:

*Ni Hiray,
Ranjhantere da naa(n)
Ki hoya je maulvi lainda
Lai laindiamreete babul vi lainda
Tebhanvai(n) laindasabhgara(n)
Par ik je Hiraytu(n) nalaindi
Teajkonlaindaohdanaa(n)
Sadianpicho(n) vi ajkurian
Apneapnesajan da
Rakhdaindia(n) ne Ranjha naa(n)
Ni Hiray,
Ranjhantere da naa(n)"I*

[O Hir, The name of your Ranjhan,

Who cares if the maulvi took it,
Mother can take it, father does too,
Brothers take it, and their wives too,
So what if the whole village took it,
But if, O Hir, you hadn't taken it
Who would have taken his name today?
Even centuries later, girls today
Name their lovers Ranjha.

O Hir, The name of your Ranjhan.] (Pritam N.d.:2)

This poem from Amrita Pritam's *Naveen Rutt* (The new season) captures the tender, sensuous lyricism that characterized much of her "love poetry," a form that dominates her highly acclaimed 1955 anthology *Sunehade* (Messages). The poem lists the characters that "take" Ranjha's name: mother and father (Hir's parents), *maulvi* (a village cleric who Ranjha has had an altercation with), and brothers and their wives (Ranjha's brothers and their wives who cheat him

out of his inheritance and push him out). The tone of lively teasing is augmented by Pritam's use of pet names for Hir ("Hiray") and Ranjha ("Ranjhan"), creating a sense of intimacy and endearment that culminates in, and in a way affirms the enduring influence of the Hir narrative in popular memory today— "Even centuries later, girls today/Name their lovers Ranjha."

Mir (2005) argues that colonial-era retellings of Hir reveal a shared Punjabi ethos rooted in a sentiment of belonging and cross-communal notions of piety. Pritam's poem signals how the *qissa* continues to exercise the imagination of 'lovers' and 'poets' even in the postcolonial period, and also sheds light on the history of contestation that has surrounded the Heer tale. A subversive, feminist reading of the Heer Ranjha romance is embedded in Pritam's poem reproduced above, "O Ranjha, your name." While the title and the first half of the poem are addressed to Ranjha, the second half shifts its focus to Heer. Her re-naming of Dhido as Ranjha transforms him from a masculine subject into a lover who forsakes everything, including the identity he received from his patriarchal home. Heer has the power to name. It is through this power that she brings Ranjha into existence and gives him a place in history. When women *name* men Ranjha centuries later, they embody her constitutive power.

Even in her supremely famous poem, "*Ajj Akhan Waris Shah Nu*" [Today I call on Waris Shah], Pritam continues this practice: she reconstitutes Waris Shah to implicate regional and nationalist patriarchies in the gendered violence of the Partition of Punjab in 1947. The question for Pritam was: How can we construct a feminist poetics of the vernacular that remains equally critical of nationalist, regional and communal patriarchies? How can we craft a poetic language rooted in the land, that does not reify the distinction between region and nation, vernacular and metropolitan, tradition and modernity?

This paper apart from looking at the cultural sociology of the *Qissa* also explores answers to these questions by analyzing the literary after-lives of the Heer folktale in postcolonial Punjab. Drawing on an analysis of the Heer-Qazi dialogue in *Heer by Waris Shah*, I will argue that the 'Heer' texts from the Punjabi tradition furnish a de-centering of male authorship, a template for reinterpreting tradition and a dialogic tension that facilitates Pritam's intervention to address points of historical, political and cultural conjuncture in Punjab through a gendered lens. Pritam invokes *Heer Waris Shah* at the cusp of independence to fashion a feminist take on the debate on national culture triggered by decolonization and Partition in

India and Pakistan.

Heer's hermeneutical subversion comes across forcefully in her exchange with the Qazi. This can be considered a defining episode in the Heer narrative, featured in all textual and performative telling. The episode occupies a pivotal moment in the story—the love affair between Heer and Ranjha has been discovered and her parents have vowed to marry her off to Saida, a wealthy scion of the Khera clan. While Deol (2002) views Waris' heroine as a "markedly subdued Heer who speaks from within the bounds of social and literary convention" (p. 145), I will argue that Heer's character becomes integral to the text's "ironical interrogation" of the relation between faith and rite in religion" (Matringe 1995:203). Her reinterpretation of tradition ultimately subverts the Qazi's discourse, and she forces her way into the domains of various discourses that are traditionally denied to women.

The Qazi announces his arrival with a strong and imperious pronouncement highlighting his claim over orthodox religion, "*Qazi mehkmaivichirshadkita, man Shar'a da hukm je jivna ai*" [Qazi declared in the court, obey the orders of the *Shariah* if you want to live] (Stanza 205). By referring to his "declaration" in the "court," the Qazi also impresses upon Heer for an access to the male public sphere. He then presents tenets of this patriarchal domain to Heer in the form of religious commandments: "*Bad maut de naliman Hiray, dakhilvichbahisht de theevna ai/... Chadar nal hya de satr kijay, kah darz haram da sivna ai.*" [After death, we will only enter heaven if we have faith/... cover your head, have some shame, only so can you stitch up (your) transgressions.] (Stanza 205) Heer's first blow in this hermeneutical contest works by turning the Qazi's religious discourse around the Day of Judgment upside down:

*Hirakhdi, jivnabhala soi, jehrahovaibhinaliman, mian,
Sabh jag fani, hikorabbaqi, hukmitahairabrahman, mian,
'Qulshi'ikhalqazuji'in, hukmayahaivich Quran, mian,
Mere ishq nu(n) jandadholbashik, lohqalm, zaminasman, mian.*

[Hir says, life is only worth living, if one has faith here and now, mister,
This world is illusory, only God is real, that is His merciful command,
mister,

"We have created everything in pairs," it has been mandated in the
Quran, mister,

My love is known to the Bashik serpent, the Pen of Destiny, heaven and
sky, mister.] (Stanza 206)

While the Qazi mandates that "faith" is essential to enter heaven

after death, Heer counters this injunction with a conviction that faith is necessary, here and now, to do justice to life on earth. In a single line, Heer shifts the grounds of the discussion from the abstract and the lofty heights that the Qazi has adapted to the messy materiality of human relationships. She also opens the floor to her re-interpretation of "faith" as love, her unwavering commitment to Ranjha against all familial and social odds. She hints at this through the Quranic verse she cites in the original Arabic, "We have created everything in pairs" (51:49).

As the dialogue progresses, Heer claims that she was given Ranjha through her pleas at the "*dargah*," the word commonly used to denote a shrine across all three major religions of Punjab, Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism. Heer's interpretive maneuver combines, and thus reworks, both scriptural Islam and popular spirituality, as she intersperses her utterances with snatches of Quranic Arabic and references to the "*dargah*" and the "*qutb*." (3) Both these institutions are associated with the popular religious practices of Sufism, a domain abhorred by the likes of the orthodox, *Shariah*-wielding Qazi. In fact, in the last line of the stanza quoted above, Heer's instrumentalization of tradition widens to include ancient Sanskritic mythology through the invocation of the *Baashik* serpent or *Vasuki* as it is called in Sanskrit. The serpent was used as a rope to churn the oceans into existence before the beginning of life on earth. To the primordality and creational significance of this great snake, Heer adds the testimony of the elements, sky and earth, and of "*lohqalam*," which translates directly as "pen and tablet," but also points us towards the "Pen of Destiny" referred to in Islamic tradition, the hidden or indelible documentation of all of humankind's deeds since eternity. Interestingly, while the Qazi looks ahead to life after death and the day of judgment to buttress his position, Hir takes us back in time, to the traditions of origin (the *Baashik* snake) and to the timeless, constant existence of nature (earth and sky). At the same time, while the invocation of "*lohqalam*" strengthens her claim to antiquity and tradition, it also highlights the importance of Heer's human agency, signified by the literal meaning of "pen and tablet." The pen is afterall a tool of the thinking, acting human, one who can write her own destiny.

In this dialogue spanning fourteen stanzas, Heer's rhetorical prowess continues to deliver masterstrokes one after the other. The exchange becomes more heated, and threats from the Qazi continue to pour forth, yet Heer refuses to back down, ultimately leading him to conclude:

*Qazi akhya, ai je rorpakka, Hirjhagreyannalnahardi ae,
Lao parho nikah, munh banh is da, qissa koi fasadguzardi ae,
Chad masjidan, dairian(4)vichvardi, chadbakriansurianchardi ae,
Waris Shah, madhani ae Hirjatti, ishqdahi(n) da ghiyonatardi ae*

[Says Qazi, she is an unwielding stone, Heer cannot be defeated through arguments

Tie her up, gag her mouth, and marry her off, she is making trouble with her stories

Shunning mosques, she sits in councils, she grazes hogs instead of sheep

Waris Shah, Hir churns love's yogurt to refine *ghee*.] (Stanza 218)

The Qazi loses the war of words, but prevails through recourse to sheer force. His admission that Heer “cannot be defeated through arguments” is coupled with a deep anxiety regarding her challenge to the religious and patriarchal tradition he represents. This is manifested by his anger at her brazen intrusion into the exclusively male sphere of “councils,” an act he likens to domesticating pigs: a despicable, deviant practice because these animals are considered abhorrent to Muslims, and their consumption is forbidden in Islam. Waris Shah, as diegetic author, steps in here to have the last word: “Waris Shah, Heer churns love's yogurt to refine *ghee*.” Yet that is not how *ghee* is made: milk is churned to obtain butter, which is then boiled slowly to yield *ghee*. In fact, it is impossible to obtain *ghee* from yogurt, because once the milk curdles, it cannot produce butter. Heer has accomplished the impossible, and this impossibility hints at a dialogic tension between the author and the character—Heer's rhetorical power looms large enough to threaten and overwhelm her creator, the poet himself. Encapsulated in Waris Shah's own concluding remark, this tension is also relayed to us through the Qazi, who becomes a mouthpiece for this authorial anxiety: “*Khera haq halal qabulkartu(n), Waris Shah ban baithi ai dhitiayni*” [Accept the Khera (as your husband) by law and right, *you have become Waris Shah himself*, o stubborn woman”] (my emphasis) (Stanza 207).

Herein lies ahead Heer's highest transgression—a female character indebted to the eloquence and wit bestowed by the *qissa* poet inevitably takes the reins of its narrative away from the male author and appropriates his voice as her own. This looming and overwhelming quality of Heer's voice becomes a template in the popular Punjabi poetry, a dialogic play that is used to censure the nexus between orthodox religion and social control, but also imposes limits on the authorial ego of the male poet.

Despite being a rich terrain for contestation, most readings of *Heer* and the Punjabi *kafi* (5) remain wedded to abstract frameworks of "Sufism" or mysticism. As Ahmad (1992) argues, literary and religious canonicity emerged at the same time and have overlapped in Indian history, a development that has emphasized the "sublimity" of texts such as *Heer Waris Shah* to the point that it can no longer be "read in relation to the secular conditions of its production (n) or as an ideological text whose main task is to offer an imaginary resolution in the secular, familial and material domains" (Ahmad 1992:260–61). This produces an exaggerated bifurcation between the pre-colonial literary tradition and contemporary writing, a distinction challenged by Pritam's reflexive approach to *Heer* texts in "Today I call on Waris Shah."

In his essay titled, "Where mirrors are windows," A.K. Ramanujan (1989) discusses the role of such a "reflexive intertextuality" in furnishing Indian literature with a "common yet creative language of dissent." (p. 208) Pointing to the indictment of the Brahminical tradition in *Bhakti* literature, he unites the two in a shared repertoire in which texts mimic, reflect and critique each other. For Ramanujan (1989), "modernity disrupted [the] whole tradition of reflexivity with new notions of originality and autonomy of single works" (p. 190). However, the relationship that Pritam establishes between her poem and Waris Shah's *Hir* militates against this reading of literary modernity. Pritam's poem connects with Waris Shah's *Hir* as Ramanujan's "*akam-puram*" texts do, embodying all three facets of "reflexivity"—it responds to Waris Shah's text by directly addressing him in its title and de-centering his authorial control, it reflects on his *Heer* by contextualizing its serpent/venom imagery in the contemporary era, and lastly, it is "self-reflexive" in Pritam's exploration of a postcolonial feminist poetics of the regional vernacular.

Returning to the postcolonial parallels, Pritam's poem works by mimicking the structure and form of *Heer Waris Shah*, exploiting the narrative technique of oral tradition by dwelling on chosen episodes regardless of any transitions (Matringe 1995:206). Like the eighteenth-century text, "Today I call on Waris Shah" powerfully conjures a sense of place by drawing on images of the Punjabi landscape and rural life: the fields, the river Chenab, the earth, the spinning wheels and the Pipal tree. Waris Shah's *Heer* begins in much the same way, with detailed descriptions of Takht Hazara, the village where Ranjha lived with his brothers and father. Hazara is described as "paradise on earth," a bountiful hamlet whose inhabitants, ostensibly seem to

engage in little more than merriment. This exuberant description is followed by Waris Shah's first dose of ironic contrast (Syed 1978:45), as he follows his hyperbolic description of Takht Hazara with a stanza exposing the corrosive jealousy of Ranjha's brothers towards him. The brothers are compared to venomous snakes that strike Ranjha's heart mercilessly, completing the biblical imagery by placing a serpent in paradise (p. 47). Pritam similarly evokes the geography of the land, complementing her description of the landscape with tropes from the folk tradition such as Ranjha's flute and trinjann (6). The juxtaposition of the physical landscape with regional cultural symbols conjures a counter cartography of Punjab—constituted neither by the imperatives of the colonial state, nor by the aspirations of the mainstream nationalist movement. Her verse constructs a cultural geography of the region, its contours sketched by the *qissa* of Heer. Yet Pritam's grounding in a precolonial literary tradition does not lead to a romanticized view of region and community as the primordial, utopic martyrs of colonial oppression and nationalist modernity. As the poem progresses, Pritam's deployment of the Hir narrative deepens her analysis of the nexus between Punjabi patriarchy and Indian/Pakistani nationalism. Just as in Waris Shah's *Heer*, the serpent and its poison become central to establishing this linkage.

Heer Waris Shah makes repeated use of the serpent motif that reappears in the description of Kaido, Hir's uncle and nefarious village outcast, who exposes the lovers to the village council and plays an instrumental role in marrying Hir off forcefully. The serpent, used exclusively to refer to male characters, appears first in Takht Hazara to signify the corruption wrought in familial relations by greed, and then to represent the need to regulate women's bodies and sexuality. It becomes a symbol of patriarchal control and toxic masculinity, lurking menacingly in the domestic and the public sphere, in Ranjha's home and in Heer's village. However, in the aftermath of Heer's altercation with the Qazi, once she is married and forced into a palanquin, the serpent and poison motif undergoes a subtle transformation. Waris Shah follows a series of stanzas detailing the ostentatious contents of Heer's dowry, with one in which the snake and venom reappear in a new form:

Sak mareya(n) de kho lain dadhai, anpuijde o naboldaini
Nahi chalda vas lachar ho ke, moai sap vangu(n) vis gholdaini...
...Gun mareya(n) de sabhairehnvichai, maraymareya(n) de dukhpholdaini...
Waris Shah lutaindeghari(n) maray, maraykhauf de munh o nakholdaini.

[The mighty snatch the relations of the weak, the wretched, they cannot even speak

Rendered helpless, hapless, *all they do is dissolve poison like a dying snake...*

...The strength of the weak remains repressed, their grief directed towards one another...

...Waris Shah, the weak are robbed in their own homes, they cannot even speak out of fear.] (my emphasis; Stanza 190)

This stanza, with a sub-heading titled, "The cry of Ranjha," highlights his plight as he watches his beloved borne off to her in-laws' village in Rangpur, a captive of her own wedding procession. Thus, in an immediate sense, the victims here are Heer and Ranjha, yet Waris prefers the generic category of "the weak" or "the wretched" to paint his picture of suffering. The line "*moai sap vangu(n) vis ghoaldaini*," which I have translated as "dissolving poison" refers to an idiom in Punjabi—the act of "stirring" poison is used colloquially to refer to repressed anger, conveyed by the image of absorbing and concentrating poison, internalizing rather than purging it. As the entire village, including its low-caste, low-class denizens, participate in Heer's wedding, the spread of this patriarchal venom is captured in the line: "they dissolve poison like a dying snake." Patriarchal authority stands internalized by society as a whole; it is no longer embodied solely by Ranjha's brothers and Kaido. The wretched and poor become both sufferers and perpetrators—as the pomp and splendor of Heer's dowry comes to represent economic exploitation, a regime under which "they are robbed in their own homes." The victims are drawn from the same ranks that are mobilized to maintain the feudal, patriarchal status quo.

Pritam reworks this play on "dissolving poison" to analyze the carnage and social devastation wreaked during Partition. In her poem, this idea of venom or poison is generalized into ideology, which in this case, takes the form of a masculine nationalism informed by communal consciousness. Thus, "I call on Waris Shah" underlines the destructive and inter-related role of colonial complicity, nationalist ideology, regional patriarchy and religious identity in creating a situation in which ordinary people turned to killing their own neighbors, "their grief directed towards one another" (Stanza 190). She develops the serpent metaphor to give us the powerful image of venom being dissolved into the land itself, spreading through the life-giving flow of the river that subsequently "drenched the earth" itself:

*...Kisai ne panja(n) pania(n) vich dita zehrrala
Ohna pania(n) dhart nu dita pani la*

*Is zarkhaizzami(n) de lu(n) lu(n) phutheyazehr
Gith githcharhia(n) lalia(n), futfutcharheyaqehr
Vehovalaisivahphir, ban banvaggija
Ohnaiharih vans di vanjhli, ditti nag bana*

*Pehle dang madaria(n) mantargayegawach
Dujai dang di lag gai, janikhani nu lag
Laga(n) kilaylokmunh, bus fair dang hi dang...*

[...Somebody dissolved poison into the rivers
And those waters drenched the earth

Poison then sprung from every pore of this fertile land
Along every inch ascended anger, at every foot rose rage
A noxious, whirling wind blew through the jungles
Turning each bamboo flute into a snake

With the first bite, the incantations of snake charmers were lost
The second sting's effect was felt upon all
This affliction consumed everyone, and they bit and bit on...]

Similar to the “stirred poison” in Waris Shah’s verses, the venom is no longer an external agent acting on the body of Heer, who is eventually, significantly, poisoned in the story—it is toxic matter that has seeped into the very substance of the body politic of Punjab. Polluting the air itself, in the form of a “noxious, whirling wind,” its destructive contents have been breathed in and ingested by the entire population, turning them all into snakes (“*they* bit and bit on”) (my emphasis) that attack each other. Pritam also hints at colonial complicity in nurturing this beast through policies that communalized identity in Punjab, suggested by the othering tone of “*somebody* dissolved poison into the rivers” (my emphasis). In many ways, Pritam exaggerates and extends Waris’s symbolism to mark the enormity of historical rupture created by the Partition in Punjab, as the bamboo flute, the pristine symbol of Ranjha, also undergoes this heinous transformation. As Punjab is carved up, the venomous serpent of patriarchal ideology grows into a ferocious Hydra, its many-headed form signifying the convergence of the “multiple patriarchies [national, colonial and communal] at work in women’s lives.” (Menon and Bhasin 1993:WS3)

As Menon and Bhasin point out, “the location of women at the intersection of these forces, rather than at their periphery, cast(s) an entirely new light on the apparent fixity of defining features of

identity like community, religion, nationality.” (p. WS2) It is this intersectional position of gender that informs Pritam's feminist revision of vernacular roots. Partition may have been “over,” and the transition from colony to nation completed in a literal sense. Yet the process of cultural and social reconstruction has just begun, a challenge to which Pritam responds through Heer's mode of contestation, to inscribe women's agency within the Punjabi literary tradition. The opening and closing lines of Pritam's poem almost work like a *kafi*'s refrain, drawing on the dialogic tension created by the insertion of the poet into the “*takhallus*” or poetic signature. By addressing Waris Shah, Pritam reverses the “vocal masquerade” (Petievich 2008) of Punjabi poetry in which men speak as women to men, to create a reflexive text in which women speak for themselves, addressing men:

*Ajakha(n) Waris Shah nu, kito(n) qabra(n) vicho(n) bol
Teaj kitab ishq da koi aglavarqakhol*

*Ikroisidhi Punjab di, tu(n) likhlikhmarai vain
Ajlakha(n) dhia(n) rondia(n) tenu Waris Shah nu kehn...*

*Ajsabhai Kaido ban gaye, husnishq de chor
Ajkitho(n) laiylabhke, Waris Shah ikhor?*

[Today I call on Waris Shah, from beyond the graves, speak
And turn today in the book of love, a new leaf

Once a single daughter of Punjab cried, you wrote and wrote
lamentations
Today, millions of them cry, and call out to you...

...Today, all have become Kaido,
Thieves of beauty and ardor
Where can we find today
Another Waris Shah, once more?]

The hint of irony in the last two lines cannot be missed. Where can we find another Waris Shah to speak the unspeakable truths of Partition? Where can we find a man who can give voice to the ordeals of the voiceless women? Where can we find a man who can fashion an emancipatory cultural identity in a society that has made clear that the burden of nation formation will fall so heavily, so literally, on the body of the woman?

“Today I call on Waris Shah” is itself the answer to this question. Pritam appropriates the role of Waris Shah, a woman taking ownership of the centuries old tradition of the Heer narrative,

which has largely been the domain of male poets. She establishes her feminist revisionist intent from the very outset, as the poem's opening invocation of Waris Shah can easily be read in the tone of a sharp rebuke—speak Waris Shah, you are dead and long gone, but arise from your grave, for you must! The sheer scale of violence in the Partition, the uncountable rapes, abductions and murders of women calls for this macabre resurrection of the poet who penned the most beloved ballad of the land. Yet this resurrection is not merely an act of nostalgia stemming from a romantic sense of cultural loss—it is also Pritam's attempt to prize away male authorial privilege to fashion a feminist reworking of cultural identity and nationalist critique that becomes imperative to the nascent process of nation-building. Much like Heer's hermeneutical challenge to the Qazi at the height of a crisis in the narrative, a woman must rise to the task of re-interpreting tradition and appropriating the intellectual tools of the male at a time of great upheaval following decolonization.

In a sense, the fractures inaugurated by Partition revealed themselves at a microcosmic level in responses to Pritam's poem among literary circles in Pakistan and India. In her autobiography, she suggests that the poem invited some controversy, writing how the Sikhs deemed her guilty for not addressing her invocation to Guru Nanak (Jha and Pritam 1994:32), while some Pakistani intellectuals viewed it as a scourge on the moral legitimacy of the Muslim nation, criticizing her for not having accepted "the reality of the cartographical fact of Pakistan" (Jha and Pritam 1994:24). The communists, on the other hand, were disappointed that Pritam chose not to call upon Lenin (Jha and Pritam 1994:32)! While Pritam may have been caricaturing what she refers to as "communist" critiques of her poem, these responses emblemize the widening rift in postcolonial Punjab between models of progressive cultural politics. In a political context that became increasingly defined by linguistic nationalism, leading to a further division of Indian East Punjab in 1966, and rising demands for a Siraiki province in south Punjab in Pakistan, "Today I call on Waris Shah" initiates a crucial conversation between the universalist visions of emancipation provided by Left-wing perspectives with particular regional histories and vernacular identities. Pritam's poem addresses both progressive writing and the Punjabi literary sphere, in an attempt to synthesize the concerns of both vis-à-vis the relationship between region and nation, local and universal, gender and cultural identity. For Mir (2010), "Today I call on Waris Shah," reads as an "elegiac" poem that mourns the demise of "the ethos of the Punjabi literary formation" (p. 183), that seemed "to wane at the cusp of independence and diminish

further during the postcolonial period" (p. 183). However, when read as a postcolonial reworking of pre-colonial Heer texts, we find that Pritam's poem re-invigorates the trope of argumentation and interpretive contest in Punjabi literature to construct a dynamic poetic engagement with regional roots.

Punjabi writers through history faced a double bind—in that poetry in the regional languages is excluded from the purview of "national high culture" a space that a language, like Urdu or Hindi can occupy. This relegation of regional vernaculars and their literatures, and their alienation from important deliberations around gender, national reconstruction and political transformation is rooted in the hierarchy of languages instituted by colonial knowledges in South Asia, which designated Urdu, Hindi and English as "languages of command," while Punjabi and other regional languages were consigned as "rural patois" (Mir 2010) unsuitable for a refined cultural production.

This adoption of regional tradition, also seen in Pritam's "Today I call on Waris Shah" has been grossly misread in studies of postcolonial Punjab and literary cultures in South Asia, an endeavor complicated by the fact that we are confronted with three Punjabs today: Pakistani, Indian and the diasporic. Each has its unique experience of identity, politics and cultural development, yet threads of commonality continue to unite them particularly in the imaginative arenas of creative expression and cultural production. Studies of postcolonial Punjab have gone a long way towards highlighting the separatist current active from the late 1970s to the early 1990s in Sikh-dominated East Punjab on the one hand, and emphasizing the place of Muslim-dominated West Punjab as the dominant, "ethnic hegemon" (Ayres 2009:28) on the other.

As our readings show, these poets' relationship with Punjab and Punjabi cannot be seen as a simplistic assertion of ethnic pride or linguistic identity. Their engagement with Punjabi history and culture was instead a "complicated and resistant habitation" (Gopal 2005:6): Punjabi authors like Pritam remained "obstinately insistent on their locatedness" (p. 6) within the historical-cultural terrain of Punjab, even as they offered "persistent and excoriating critiques" (p. 6) of its regressive tendencies. Attention to such sites of critique allows us to "interrogate and rethink influential templates for the postcolonial intellectual" (p. 7), enriching our understanding of writing in the regional vernaculars beyond seeing them as an undifferentiated mass defined by amorphous ideas of ethnicity, local identity and provincial politics. As Pritam shows through her contemporary engagement with the Heer tradition, the pre-colonial

past and the postcolonial present are often erroneously bifurcated in a way that today prevents emancipatory projects from connecting with the voices of literary resistance in our history.

Pritam's initiation into the Indian literary sphere, and her interest in the themes of national reconstruction were shaped heavily by the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWA). The PWA constituted "a hugely influential radical cultural movement that spanned several regions and languages across India... this movement was closely linked to debates over decolonization and the nature of the postcolonial nation-state that was to come into being" (Gopal 2005:1). This influence was seen most directly in Pritam's 1944 anthology, *Lok Peed* (People's Anguish), which criticized the colonial economy, particularly in light of the Bengal famine of 1943. The PWA's anti-colonial project resonated deeply with the young Pritam, as did the "particularly instructive" and "constitutive" (Gopal 2005:5) role that gender played in the literature produced by her progressive contemporaries. Yet writing in the regional vernaculars, such as Punjabi, remained a marginal practice in the PWA. Despite the organization's regional branches, it garnered most influence in North India, where Urdu dominated as a language of culture. Most leading members of the PWA, even those who were native Punjabi speakers, chose to write in Urdu. This choice was tied to their class (most urban, middle-class Punjabis were educated in Urdu), as well as a political commitment to forging a unified national culture for India or Pakistan. As Asdar Ali (2011) argues, this also indicated a shared consensus on Urdu among North Indian Ashraf elites across the ideological spectrum (p. 501). Pritam however, wrote extensively in her mother tongue, despite grappling with the issue of limited readership for regional writing:

"My initial reaction at an early stage of my writing career was to stop writing in the language if I couldn't reach through it to my people. I said to myself: "No more Punjabi for me." But as I thought calmly about it, the writer in me decided, whatever the consequences, I couldn't write in any other but my mother tongue. That relates me to my soil, my milieu. And I gave myself wholly to Punjabi." (Jha and Pritam 1982:194)

Her choice to write in Punjabi thus grafted the question of vernacular tradition and regional culture onto the intersecting themes of women's emancipation, political responsibility, religion, caste, class and citizenship that framed the progressive debate on national culture in the years leading up to, and following, independence.

Notes

1. Mir (2005) informs us that the Punjabi Qissa, as a genre, has its roots in the Arabic and Persian storytelling traditions. It has particular affinity with the Persian romance Qissa, and the masnavi poetic form, which were transmitted to South Asia during the medieval period. South Asian poets began composing qissa in Persian, the court language of the time, but slowly, the genre was adopted by regional vernaculars (Mir 2005:7). The Punjabi Qissa follows the typical pada rhyme scheme, but uses indigenous rather than Persian metres, also incorporating local romances.
2. *Jogi* is derived from the Sanskrit word, "jog" or "yog," which refers to joining, or yoking together. The jogi appears in this narrative, and Punjabi culture generally, as a wanderer and ascetic. In Heer Waris Shah, Ranjha joins the sect of the famed jogi Balnath, becoming his disciple.
3. In his Historical Dictionary of Sufism, Renard (2005) translates "qutb" as "pole." The term is used to refer to individual Sufi leaders sometimes identified as the cosmic axis, pivot, or pole of an age. "Some consider the pole of each age to be the manifestation of the spirit of the Prophet for that time" (p. 185).
4. The word used here by Waris Shah is "*daira*," which translates as "circle," referring here to the practice of public debate and intellectual deliberation, where all participate as equals. More specifically, "sitting in dairas (circles)" points us to the "panchayat"—the regular, if not daily, congregation amongst the men of the village to discuss politics and other affairs pertaining to the community.
5. The Punjabi kafi is a popular genre of Punjabi literature. It comprises "a lyric consisting of rhymed couplets or short stanzas having a refrain repeated after each verse..." (Bearman et al. 2012) Prominent exponents of the Punjabi kafi include Shah Hussain (1538–1599) and Bulleh Shah (1680–1757)
6. The *trinjann* was the communal space where women from the village would gather and work. In the Punjabi poetic tradition, the *trinjann* has developed into a salient symbol, representing the spirit of collectivity and equality, and often a stage of innocence, where girls play before they are married and have to leave their own villages.

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