

PUNJABI ANTIGONES, THE MARTYRS OF LOVE

Heer Ranjha and other Legends of the Punjab
by Harjeet Singh Gill and Eric Vikramjeet Singh Gill
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Are you tired of philistines who are always talking about colonialism and globalization? Then it is time to take leave of the *madrassa* and enter the *maikbaana*, the tavern of the heart, drink the wine of love and follow the trials and tribulations of the bold and the beautiful in the *Qissas* or the legends of the Punjab. The philistines argue that love should be in moderation. Divide your day into work, study and other affairs of the world and keep some time aside for love. Similarly, spend your resources wisely. Give gifts occasionally on special days like birthdays. In other words, love with reason! For the heroes and the heroines of these legends, there can be no such calculations in the affairs of the heart. In the realm of the heart, *aqal* or reason is bypassed in the quest for *ishq* or love. The lover and the beloved, possessed with love and longings, blessed by the *pirs* and *faqirs*, break all anthropological barriers and strive to cross the river of separation. Thus purified in the sacred fire of love, they unite like the moth unites with the flame. The union often culminates in death but this death is a cause for cosmic celebration where the Being passes into the divine Other. The Sufi concept of *fanaa* is not annihilation but ascent to a higher plane of spiritual development where the 'I' and the Other merge so that ultimately there is neither 'me' nor 'thee'. No wonder every legend begins with an invocation to God 'who made love,

the fundamental principle of this universe'.

There are numerous versions of the *Qissas*. Every author, known or anonymous, adds or deletes some elements from the infrastructure of the legend or myth, depending upon his/her conceptual world and the specific existential situation at the moment of the creative composition. According to Levi-Strauss, every new version 'adds a new 'slate' to the already existing set of slates and in this manner the density of the composition increases with the passage of time. Each slate is somewhat different from the other which means that the various versions do not blend and become one but each maintains its independent entity although the underlying structure remains the same. The book under review has two authors: HSG of the written texts and EVSG of the illustrations. Let us see how these authors generate new versions of the evergreen lays of love and death. First the written versions: there are five Punjabi legends, two in prose and three in free verse. The gaze, however, lingers on the heroines of the narratives. They are the Punjabi Antigones, the martyrs of love. The author appears to have conceptualized these grand figures with a great deal of affection. They are conceived as exceptional women who combine beauty, charm and grace with courage, determination and fearlessness. They are fiercely independent women who dare to

follow the dictates of their hearts, crossing the threshold of customs and conventions to live life on their terms. They live a life of dreams and dangers and do not hesitate in courting death. There is one feature, in particular that sets apart this author's heroines from all previous portrayals. Lacan, in his unusual interpretation of Antigone, focuses on her classic beauty rather than her famous disputations with Creon and her anthropological role in the ancient Greek civil society. Our author does a role reversal in the case of these Punjabi Antigones. Exercising transformations, he adds the element of 'intellect to the qualities of beauty and courage. His heroines are artists. Sassi is a 'connoisseur' of arts and letters. Sahiban is similarly known across the country for her 'intellect and 'incision. Sohni 'excels all and sundry in aesthetics' and 'her body and intellect are in perfect harmony'. She is 'the most sensitive artist of her times'. These resplendent women give the world lessons in love just as it is a woman, Diotima, who teaches the mysteries of love to Socrates (Plato's Symposium). The author's description of Sohni, Sassi and Sahiban should please the feminist critics who bemoan the gender bias in folklore and other literary narratives. But his project does not end here. In his analysis of Waris Shah's *Heer* and Qadiryar's *Puran Bhagat* his focus is on the exploration of the semiotics of these intricate cultural discourses than on passing

moral judgements. He lays emphasis on the existential and cultural predicaments of all the characters in the general context of anthropological and cosmological dialectics.

The poetic texts are complemented by illustrations. Each painting freezes a single moment in the narrative and creates a whole universe of significance through forms, colours, expressions and emotions. Each tableau represents a moment that *is* but has also gone through a process of its *becoming* to arrive at this moment that is. The tableaus are far removed from the traditional canvases like those of Sobha Singh and Arpana Caur. They are an admixture of the real and the surreal, the oriental and the occidental, the medieval and the modern. Heer on the cover is Omar Khayam's Rubaiyat. Imagine the playful seductive Heer poised elegantly on the branch of a tree! Her scarf, that comes in the way of such an enterprise, is casually cast aside. In the inside painting, she is the celestial beauty emerging from a tree. In the third superimposed image, she is demurely carrying *churi* for her Ranjha. Particularly eye catching is the imagery of the roots of the trees in the jungle that fill practically the entire canvas. The dense roots appear to signify the eternal, growing, slowly but steadily, like the legends themselves. Ranjha, in fluorescent blue pants, burnt orange kurta and juttis with a flute in his lap appears to be day-dreaming whereas the jungle is alive with an enormous grasshopper, a flying lizard and eagles. Ranjha looks more of a Persian than a Punjabi. As I stated earlier, the paintings are not fixed in time and space which goes well with the essence of the timeless legends as also with the dedication in the beginning of the book: 'for all the Punjabis, of all religions, of all nations'.

The most beautiful, from the point of view of the reviewer is, Sohni with the earthen pot at the threshold of death. Corresponding to the spirit of the verbal text, the focus is on the heroine, with the hero simply missing from the frame. Sohni's painting can be conceptualized without Mahiwal but it would remain incomplete without the fatal embrace of the earthen pot, a culturally loaded signifier in the Punjabi tradition. The painting captures Sohni in a green metallic dress plunging into the wild waters of the river Jhanaa, knowing very well that the baked *ghara* has been replaced by a freshly-baked *kacha ghara*. There is an expression of firm resolve on her face as she makes an existential choice 'to be or not to be'. The eyes are intoxicated and the girl seems to be in a trance. Her tresses are being swept in the storm and they are flying in all directions like the fibrous roots of a tree. Her tall and taut body with the young breasts is drenched in ecstasy. The scarf is nowhere, lost in the frenzy of *bekbudi*. Her dark skin and physical strength, signified particularly by the long and lean fingers stretched out towards the pot remind one of a supple and strong gypsy or a tribal girl. The dark and cloudy night casting its ominous shadows on the waters and the fury of nature are rendered in beautiful geometrical forms.

The painting of Mirza Sahiban also tells its own story. Mirza's blissfully happy sleep after eloping successfully with his love is juxtaposed over Sahiban's restlessness as she sits erect, meditating over her destiny, staring at Mirza's arrows. Mirza's smile contrasts sharply with Sahiban's grim expression. The moment is surcharged with tension. The ferocious leopard in the jungle accentuates the terror of the scene.

Sahiban's burning eyes and tense body project her psychic state of turmoil. She is torn between her loyalty to her brothers and to her love. The brothers are approaching the lovers, their swords are drawn. It is in this moment of absolute confusion that she hangs Mirza's arrows high up on a tree, out of his easy reach. Her indecision presents a sharp contrast to the unyielding resolve of her spiritual sister, Sohni. Sohni crossing the ferocious waters and Sassi traversing the burning desert are more akin. Indeed, Sahiban is the most human of all the heroines.

Simonides of Ceos said in his famous dictum that painting is mute poetry and poetry is a speaking picture. There is 'likeness' between the verbal narrative and the visual experience. At the same time, the pictorial is not an exact replica of the words. Each text with the specificities of its medium is capable of standing independently of the other.

There are many versions of these legends in Punjabi but practically nothing in English. The book *Heer Ranjha and other Legends of the Punjab* fills this gap. The Punjabi metaphors are transcribed with grace. The congregation of lovers is rendered in modern free verse. The rigorous semiotic analysis of Heer and Puran Bhagat is a model for all students of literary criticism. The legends mirror the eternal truth where 'the highest principles of faith and friendship are underscored with divine sanction'. Yet each legend has its own project. Sohni's determination, Sahiban's dithering and Heer's lamentations give each narrative a flavour of its own.

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