

LOVE AND MYSTICISM IN THE PUNJABI QISSAS  
OF THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the tension between mystical (*haqīqī*) and romantic (*majāzī*) conceptions of love in the Punjabi *qissa* tradition before the end of the eighteenth century. All the texts under consideration date from before the third quarter of the eighteenth century and, therefore, both predate and inform the classical *qissa* tradition of the nineteenth century. The texts narrate three of the most commonly represented love stories in pre-twentieth century Punjab, two of them versions of local folk legends and one an episode from the Quran. A total of six texts are considered in the thesis: Hāfiz Barkhurdār's *Mirzā Sāhibā*, Siddīq Lālī's *Yūsuf Zulaikha*, and the versions of *Hīr* by Ahmad, Muqbil and Vāris Shāh.

The thesis begins with a chapter on the *qissa* tradition which seeks to situate the *qissa* in the Punjabi literary tradition and to define the classical *qissa* based on its formal generic features. The body of the thesis argues that most of the early texts under consideration attempt to subvert the transgressive potential of the love stories they narrate: where Ahmad contains the love story of Hīr and Rānjhā through narrative compression, for example, Muqbil subtly recasts the story as a mystical allegory. The thesis argues that the image of the slaughter of the Imām Husain underlies the structure of the *Mirzā Sāhiban* of Hāfiz (as well as the versions of his successors) and that the entire poetic of Siddīq Lālī's *Yūsuf Zulaikha* figures the narrative universe as an intersection of the mystical with the worldly. Finally, the thesis argues that Vāris Shāh's *Hīr* recasts the narrative by introducing a certain sexual component at the same time as it downplays the social and religious transgressiveness present in earlier poems.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## NOTE ON transliteration

More than for most north Indian languages, the transliteration of Punjabi presents serious problems of cultural choice: even when using Roman script, one must choose whether to transcribe Persian or Gurmukhi spellings. The process is complicated by the fact that the Gurmukhi spellings themselves often transcribe Persian spellings, raising the problem of how they themselves represent Persianate sounds not easily distinguished in Gurmukhi.

For this thesis, I have chosen a mixture of Persian-script and Gurmukhi spellings as a basis for the transcription of pre-modern texts and terms, except in the case of quotations taken directly from sources originally in Gurmukhi. The system followed is essentially that used in the *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, except that I have used "sh" to transcribe the sound often represented by "ś".<sup>1</sup> I have made no distinction between the various letters for the sounds represented in transliteration by "h", "t", "z" and "s" since they are not pronounced differently in spoken Punjabi and have dropped the *hamzah* for the same reason; I have however maintained the transliterations "'ain", "q", "kh", "khw" and "gh" in their usual values. I have also chosen to deviate with regard to nasalisation of short vowels, which is represented by "n" before a consonant other than a labial and by "m" before a labial. Nasalisation of final vowels and vowels before "v" and "h" is represented by the tilde. Quotations and words from other languages have been transcribed according to the widely accepted systems for these languages.

I have used diacritics and italics for all terms from Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu and Persian on their first appearance in the text; the terms appear in italics but without diacritics on subsequent appearances. Names of languages and religions,

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<sup>1</sup>Harbans Singh, *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, Vol. 1 (Patiala: Punjabi U, 1992): xiii-xv.

well-known place names, holy books (like the Quran) and the word “*qissa*” are never given diacritics; less well-known place names are given diacritics where necessary. Islamic terms commonly used in Punjabi have been transcribed as if they were Punjabi words: *hadīs*, *sharī’ā* and *Shī’ā* are used for the words often transcribed as *ḥadīth*, *sharī’ah* and *Shī’ah* respectively. Personal names of modern authors are written in the Roman spelling they favour (when known) and with diacritics (on first appearance and in the bibliography) where the author’s preferences are not known; pre-modern names are given in full diacritics on first appearance and in the bibliography. Titles of books and articles occur with full diacritics on every appearance. Dates are CE unless specifically marked VS or AH. Full lines from poetic texts are transcribed with “inherent *a*” where appropriate, but individual words appear in modern Punjabi transcription.

## CONTENTS

|   |   |     |
|---|---|-----|
|   | Abstract  | 2   |
|   | Acknowledgements  | 3   |
|   | Note on Transliteration   | 4   |
| 1 | The Punjabi <i>Qissa</i> : The Genre and its History                            | 7   |
| 2 | The Problem of the Early Mirza-Sahiban <i>Qissas</i> : Pilu and the Two Hafizes | 75  |
| 3 | "People Will Talk": Ahmad Gujjar's <i>Hīr</i>                                   | 107 |
| 4 | "Acceptable Poetry": Muqbil's Mystical <i>Qissā Hīr Rānjhā</i>                  | 137 |
| 5 | The Poetry of Correspondence: Siddiq Lali's <i>Bahr ul-'ishq</i>                | 179 |
| 6 | "A Wondrous Story of Spring": Varis Shah's <i>Hīr</i>                           | 206 |
| 7 | Conclusion  | 253 |
|   | Bibliography  | 257 |

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE PUNJABI QISSA: THE GENRE AND ITS HISTORY

When the Punjabis told the *qissa* of Hīr and Rānjhā last night  
They ravaged the suffering. (Inshā)<sup>1</sup>

*Qissa*: 1. Description, story, tale; ...imaginary story, fiction, long story. 2. Quarrel, argument, fight, dispute...<sup>2</sup>

Arguably the best known literary productions of pre-modern Punjab are its *qissas*, particularly the *qissa* of Hir and Ranjha. There is almost certainly no Punjabi who does not know at least in outline the stories of the major *qissas*, and many will have heard portions of the famous texts recited. Most literate Punjabis will have read parts of the most major texts, and the cultural currency (even outside literary circles) of the reputations of the *qissa*-writers held to be the masters of their art is rivalled in Indian and Pakistani Punjab perhaps only by the Sufi lyricists and the Sikh Gurūs. Some writers like the mid-eighteenth century poet Vāris Shāh add to their celebrity status in the Punjabi culture something approaching a pan-Indian reputation (through hearsay if not through actual acquaintance with his works), and many non-Punjabis easily recognise the *qissa* in general and Varis's poetry in particular as an important part of the Punjabi literary culture.

As one might expect from the popularity of the classical *qissas*, the love stories which they narrate have enjoyed wide currency in the Punjabi culture since at least the very beginnings of written Punjabi literature. The position these stories had assumed in the culture by the sixteenth century is evidenced by references to them in the *vārs* of the Sikh poet Bhāī Gurdās and the *kāfīs* of the

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Piārā Singh 'Padam,' "Hīr-sāhitt," *Panjābī Duniā* 2:7(Sept. 1951): 27.

<sup>2</sup>*Panjābī koś*, vol. 1 (third ed.; Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1990): 447.

Sufi lyricist Shāh Husain.<sup>3</sup> So central were (and are) these stories that they came to form “a part of that store of materials available for a system of sideways (or backwards or upwards) looking poetic references” in a number of folk or written genres of literature in the Punjab.<sup>4</sup> The popularity of the poetic versions of the stories, in turn, is shown by the fact that texts like Hāshim Shāh’s *Sassī Punnū* and Qādir Yār’s *Pūran Bhagat* were being recited alongside versions of the Hir-Ranjha and Mirzā-Sāhibā stories by professional bards in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> In broad outline, the scope of the *qissa* expanded over two hundred years from the retelling of well-known love stories to include romances, historical stories, humorous tracts, autobiographies, and virtually every other narrative subject. During the nineteenth century, the *qissa* began to narrate Punjabi folk tales and Islamic hagiographies as well as high literary romances. Some strands of the *qissa* derived formal inspiration from the model of the Persian *maṣnavī*, while others modelled themselves on Punjabi folk-songs or Hindi *prabandha kāvyas*. At the same time, the almost total numerical predominance of Muslim *qissa* writers<sup>6</sup> that had characterised previous periods was replaced by a situation in which the number of Hindu and Sikh writers came to equal and then to surpass the number of Muslims. In its various forms, then, the Punjabi *qissa* reflects the many changes and developments that occurred in the Punjab from the seventeenth century onwards.

If the language of the Punjabi *qissas* renders the poetic texts inaccessible to audiences outside Punjab, their subject matter is, however, a fundamental part of

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<sup>3</sup> Daljinder Singh Johal, “Punjabi Literature (Late 18th-Early 19th Century),” *Journal of Regional History* 4(1983): 23,

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Shackle, “Between Scripture and Romance: The Yūsuf-Zulaikhā Story in Panjabi,” *South Asia Research* 15:2(Autumn 1995): 161.

<sup>5</sup> Johal, op.cit. 38.

the cultural tapestry of large parts of northern India. At the same time as they provide a source of allusions for Punjabi singers and writers of all periods, the stories of Sohñī-Mahīvāl and Hir-Ranjha for instance are an integral part of the narrative stock of Rajasthani and Sindhi culture and have been committed to writing in various parts of the subcontinent in Hindi, Persian and Urdu. The Urdu poet Insha's reference to the telling of the story of Hir and Ranjha in eighteenth-century Delhi and Lucknow (quoted above) hints at the wide currency of the story in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century North India—as do the presence of Persian versions of the story in such far-flung places as Dacca<sup>7</sup> and the existence of traditions of paintings on the theme of Sohni-Mahinval in Rajasthan and Awadh.<sup>8</sup> Nor does the cultural transmission flow entirely in one direction: the Punjabi *qissa* tradition has absorbed narratives from sources as diverse as Sindhi oral tradition (Sassī-Punnū), the classical Persian romance (Shāh Bahrām) and Arabic hagiography (Tamīm Anṣārī). As much as it remained a part of the folk culture of the Punjab in the pre-modern period, then, the *qissa* also came in time to subsume the myriad strands of north Indian and general “Islamic” culture so integral to the Punjabi episteme before the arrival of the British.

Nor did the popularity of the *qissa* end with the disruption of cultural forms that followed on the heels of the British conquest of the Punjab. Instead, the *qissa* redefined and redeployed itself to meet the challenges of the print culture that arose in the last half of the nineteenth century. Most of the old stories

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 24-5. No doubt due not only to a demographic situation in which Muslims were the largest group by percentage in the Punjab's population but also to the widespread availability of *madrasā* education.

<sup>7</sup> Azīmuddīn Azīm's *Hir o Rānjhan*, dedicated to the Tālpur *mīrs*, is found in manuscript in the Dhaka University Library. See M. Siddiq Khan, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Persian, Urdu and Arabic Manuscripts in the Dacca University Library*, vol. 1 (Dacca: University Library, 1960):125-6.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Markel, “Drowning in Love's Passion: Illustration of the Romance of Sohni and

continued to be written and rewritten—just as the “old standards” continued to be printed, recited and sung—at the same time as new entrants into the genre completed a transformation of its nature and concerns that had begun in the heyday of Mahārājā Ranjīt Singh’s kingdom. Down to the present day, *qissas* of every conceivable variety on every conceivable subject remain among the most popular texts in Punjabi bookshops. Numerous cheap bazaar texts of every major *qissa* are available in the bookstores and bookstalls of every Punjabi city, and film, musical and radio adaptations are legion. Any list of the “greats” of the Punjabi literary tradition is bound to include at least the most prominent of the *qissa* poets, and no discussion of Punjabi literature is complete without reference to at least the most famous of the *qissas*. Equally, any account of the development of the *qissa* is also an account of the cultural history of the Punjab since the seventeenth century, as very few of the major trends and developments in Punjab are completely unrepresented in the *qissas*.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps precisely because of the fame of the *qissas*, attempts to deal with them as literary discourse are fraught with problems. The lack of a clear account of the cultural frameworks of the various periods of pre-modern Punjab hampers historicist lines of argument, while the paucity of material on similar narrative genres in other languages vexes comparative work. As in many other fields of pre-modern Punjabi literature, many important but obscure works remain in manuscript, while “critical editions” of many of even the most major texts often leave much to be desired. Like the texts’ chimerical promises of romantic union, the *qissas* shimmer in the distance, beckoning the ardent seeker further and further into the burning desert or the raging river, promising bliss but remaining

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Mahinwal” in P. Pal, ed., *A Pot-Pourri of Indian Art* (Bombay: Marg, 1988): 99-114.

<sup>9</sup> One brief literary history lists 47 well-known versions of the Hir-Ranjha story, 33 of Sassi-Punnun, 22 of Sohni-Mahinval, 25 of Mirza-Sahiban, 17 of Yusuf-Zulaikha, 6 of Laila-Majnun and

ever-elusive. The ardours of the journey–mystical or critical–remain the only fulfilment.

### Interpreting the *Qissas*:

Even though the *qissa* has become a central part of the Punjabi literary canon, the amount of substantial criticism on the genre in general remains relatively scant. Indeed, most criticism consists of first-order works which merely regurgitate the plot of individual texts and enumerate examples of traditional figures of speech—in the case of Indian Punjabi critics often by applying the classificatory canons of Sanskrit and medieval Hindi criticism to texts whose substantive model is arguably provided by the traditions and tropes of Persian poetry. There are, nevertheless, a number of themes that emerge again and again in the available criticism: a brief enumeration of the most important of these themes will serve as an introduction to the major critical methods of dealing with the Punjabi *qissa*.

Perhaps one of the most common interpretations of the *qissa*—especially in non-literary discourse—is a psychoanalytic interpretation which asserts that the *qissa*'s preoccupation with romantic love exhibits “what a culture's members most want but which the community find so upsetting to acknowledge.” Perhaps the most sophisticated of these “psychoanalytic” interpretations is that by Sudhir Kakkar and John Munder Ross (themselves psychoanalysts by profession) who link the Sohni and Hir *qissas* with the “archetype” of Laila-Majnun: Laila and Majnun fall in love, are separated by Laila's marriage to another man, and are briefly reunited by intermediaries before dying separate deaths. Kakkar and Ross argue that the core of the Punjabi *qissa* lies in the female protagonist's assertion of

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13 of Puran Bhagat, see Quraishī Ahmad Husayn 'Ahmad', *Panjābī Adab kī mukhtasar tārikh* (Lahore: Merī Laibrerī, 1964): 280-9.



her subjecthood, an assertion that “lies not in her rebellion against social norms but in the choosing of her fate.”<sup>10</sup> In actively seeking to choose her own fate, the heroine defines herself independently of the patriarchal codes of society, challenging “the rights of older and powerful men, especially fathers, to dispose of and control female sexuality.”<sup>11</sup> It is in this challenge to the patriarchal right of ownership of women (and the consequent right to trade in women as commodities) that the true threat to *‘izzat* (honour) lies. While this type of reading illuminates certain aspects of the *qissa* tradition, it is quite unable to deal with the nuances introduced by the literary pasts of the Punjabi *qissa*. Kakkar and Ross’s contention that the suffering of the female protagonist of the *qissa* is “an inescapable consequence of her assertion of an individual erotic freedom which clashes with the traditional Islamic morality” leads them to the contradictory position of denying all the other characters in the *qissa* their subjecthood: since the lovers’ families are all completely constrained by social ideology, “[t]here are no real villains in the tale who can be conveniently blamed for the erotic catastrophe that overtakes the lovers.”<sup>12</sup> At the same time, their valorisation of the heroine’s assertion of her subjecthood is equally problematic: they comment that her willingness to suffer as a result of her love makes her the antitype of “the treacherous female—animated exclusively by her sexual passions,” not taking into account that the heroine’s fidelity is at least partially a function of the conventions of the *qissa*. In being faithful, the heroine both emulates the stereotype of the ideal lover as martyr and acts as the comforting antidote to the “fickle” woman of the courtly *ghazal*, for example. They also fail to recognise the fine tension between the heroine’s assertion of her selfhood and the *qissa* topos

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<sup>10</sup> Sudhir Kakkar and John Munder Ross, *Tales of Love, Sex and Danger* (London: Unwin, 1987): 56. The first quotation in the paragraph is from *ibid.* 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 60.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 58; 59.

that both lovers are trying to lose their selves in love and shed their social and (to some extent) personal identities. In doing so, they virtually ignore one of the fundamental tropes of Punjabi mystical (and mystically-influenced) poetry: the image of the soul or lover as a female in search of her beloved.<sup>13</sup> They are merely able to remark that in seeking submission to a woman the male protagonist overturns society's conventional gender paradigms.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, such a limited reading of the male protagonist's role ignores the significance of his own "assertion of subjecthood": he abandons all his social roles and ties for his love, a process both simplified and signified by the absence of his father (at least in *Hir* and *Sohni*). Although it reveals a great deal about the characters of the *qissa*, then, the psychoanalytic interpretation of the *qissas* has a number of limitations.

Slightly more limited than the psychoanalytic reading of the *qissas* is the structuralist reading.<sup>15</sup> This reading rests in part on the contention that the aristocratic heroes and heroines of the poems are "the heavenly beings who hate the life of common realities" and are "ideal characters endowed with the qualities which make them super-humans."<sup>16</sup> Once this assumption has been made, it is only a short leap to the acceptance of the allegorical reading of *Varis's Hir* and from there to contention that the figures in the *qissa* are caught up in a romantic, fanciful world and "never posed a threat to the existing social system

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<sup>13</sup> For an evaluation of the image, see Annemarie Schimmel, "The Influence of Sufism on Indo-Muslim Poetry" in Joseph P. Strelka, ed., *Analogic Qualities of Literature* (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971): 197-9. She remarks that "In no part of the Islamic world has the soul been so completely identified with women" as in the Punjab (ibid. 199).

<sup>14</sup> Kakkar and Ross, op.cit. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the most explicitly structuralist reading is provided by Doris Buddenberg, "*Hir*": zur strukturellen Deutung des Panjabi-Epos von *Waris Shah* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1985). I have chosen not to analyse the text because it contains only a brief English summary of its argument.

<sup>16</sup> Satinder Aulakh, *The Fast Horse and the Ferocious River*. Printed as *Studies in Semantics* 1 (no publishing details; available at SOAS Library, University of London): 8-9.

in a serious manner.”<sup>17</sup> Instead of comprising an interrogation of social codes, the *qissas* become a literary structure of conceptual oppositions (life and death, physical union and piety, love and social order) and correspondences centred around “the problem of spiritual purity versus the implied impurity of the physical union” and a progress toward an apotheosised union in which “life and death lose all distinction.”<sup>18</sup> This privileging of death creates a parallel between the marriage procession and the war-march and a narrative trajectory in which the heroism of the stoic lovers elevates them to the status of mystics.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, this structural reading of the *qissas*’ narrative projection and the explicit acceptance of their allegorisation—an attempt to “confront the problem of impermanence of human existence opposed to the permanent nature of the Divine or the opposition between body and soul”—shifts events and actions from the realm of human action into the abstract realm of fate: “[t]he tragedy in the *qissas* is due to the forces of fate and man becomes instrumental in it as in the Greek tragedies.”<sup>20</sup> This reading of the *qissa* leads to a pessimistic view of social rebellion at the same time as it romanticises the lovers’ tragic end:

The leaving of the ancestral home is semiologically parallel to opting for something which is not attached to the existing order. The refusal to accept the established order is an act of alienation from this order, at whose end is death waiting to embrace them. But for them, to accept the ordinary routine life is a living death, in place of it they choose life in death.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 22-3, 38, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 43, 46.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 44, 57.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 36.

As such, the structuralist reading of the *qissas* virtually determines an allegorical and mechanistic reading of the *qissas* in which human agency barely makes an appearance and social criticism is all but impossible.

One of the repeated themes in most strands of Punjabi criticism on the *qissa* the desire somehow to prove that the events narrated in the *qissas* actually happened. This often takes the form of exhaustive studies attempting to fix the dates between which the protagonists of a particular *qissa* must have lived or to gauge the probability of various happenings in the texts by compiling outside data (often geographical or genealogical). A prime example is V.N. Tiwari's 1964 article on the Mirza-Sahiban tradition, in which he attempts to show that because the events narrated in the *qissas* seem "quite probable" and the places mentioned actually exist (as do the graves of Mirza and Sahiban) it must follow that "*Mirza-Sahiban* is not an imaginary love-romance. The characters were real and so were the events connected with them."<sup>22</sup> After adducing folk genealogies and the testimony of "the great-grand-children of Mirza's family" to show that the lovers must have lived in the time of Akbar, Tiwari takes care to hedge his acceptance of the *qissa*'s reality with the claim that Sahiban's modern descendants depise their forebear's immorality: "Even to this day the Sayals of Jhang district curse Sahiban, are ashamed of her and resent the mere mention of her name."<sup>23</sup> In fact, he goes further and attempts to cleanse the *qissa* of any trace of "immorality"—and of most of its transgressive potentiality: "After reading the texts of *Mirza-Sahiban* in Punjabi and other languages, I can easily say that there is nothing in the *Qissa* overtly or covertly to suggest that the love between Mirza and Sahiban was a lewd affair actuated by lust."<sup>24</sup> Such, then, is one of the dominant modes of

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<sup>22</sup> V.N. Tiwari, "Mirza Sahiban," *Parkh* (1964): 83.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 87.

reading the *qissa* in Punjabi: as an account of an actual affair that involved real lovers in the past, but which had no erotic content at all.

At the opposite end of the critical spectrum from this sort of detailed work lies criticism on the genre of romance in general. Although no work has been done which explicitly treats the Punjabi *qissa* as a genre of romance, there does exist some work on Persian *masnavi* literature as romance. Heavily influenced by studies of English and French medieval romance, this interpretation argues for the primacy of allegory and moralistic interpretation in the *masnavi*: “‘story’ is not viewed by the romancer as an end, but as a means to a goal beyond itself: the presentation of an exemplary narrative of profound ethical significance.”<sup>25</sup> According to this interpretation, part of the reason why the Persian romance displays a marked tendency toward allegory and exemplum is the conventional nature of its narrative material: “The romance writer conceives of his task as being the revelation, through the use of rhetorical techniques available to him, of the meaning implicit in his material (usually a received source or sources, which he adapts or reworks).”<sup>26</sup> One of the consequences of this reading of the *masnavi* as a work of interpretation rather than of exposition is that common rhetorical tropes such as extended description are seen to “furnish a means for comment, especially as regards the moral dimension of the events”: battle descriptions, for example, serve to criticise the warrior ethos.<sup>27</sup> At the centre of the exemplary narrative that, we are told, characterises the Persian romance lies the ambiguous concept of love, a source of both joy and affliction and often also the source of the universe itself:

. . . love itself, conceived of as that cosmic force that maintains  
harmony among the varied levels of creation, transcends

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<sup>25</sup> Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987): 130.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 87.

interpersonal relationships to encompass the entire range of human experience. Love is the power that integrates macrocosm and microcosm; correspondingly, in romance the individual's personal experience of love, his quest for fulfillment reflects at once his own moral qualities and his place in the larger order of things.<sup>28</sup>

In this reading, all the elements of the *masnavi* come together to form an allegory that points toward metaphysical abstracts, a conventional map that sketches the road to transcendence.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, this reading of the *masnavi* leaves little room for irony, word play or multiple meanings. Despite the shortcomings of this kind of reading, the act of placing the *qissa* in such a general framework affords ample scope for generic definition and comparative work.

### The Persian *Masnavi* Tradition: A Genealogy for the Classical *Qissa*?

Despite the efforts of recent Indian Punjabi critics to "indigenise" the *qissa* by locating many of its thematic features in the Hindi *premākhyāna*,<sup>30</sup> the accepted critical opinion portrays the *qissa* as a development of the Persian *masnavi*. We shall see the problems inherent in such a blindly linear approach to the growth and origin of the *qissa*, but there is no harm in acknowledging that the *masnavi* provides the template for at least the classical love *qissa* (although not for the formal features of the many other types of poems that came to be called *qissas* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). The term *qissa* itself comes to Punjabi from Persian, to which in turn it comes from Arabic, in which the verbal root *q-ṣ-ṣ*

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 97.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 137.

<sup>29</sup> One might note in support of this *general* type of interpretation that there are indications in the life stories of saints of the eighteenth century that Hir and Sahiban might have been seen as female saints and their tombs venerated by the period. See Muhammad Āsaf Khān, *Hir Damodar: Hir Rānjhe dā pahlā Panjābī qissā* (Lahore: Pākistān Panjābī Adabī Board, 1986): 20.

<sup>30</sup> See below.

(attested in the Quran) means “to tell a story, narrate” or “to recount an event by giving all the details successively.” From this root, the Arabic formation *qiṣṣah* comes to mean miracle-stories or religious and moral tales. By the ninth century, the Arabic word acquires in addition to these meanings the connotations of both “myth” and “story full of marvels and somewhat unbelievable.” At the same time, the term retains the legal and technical sense of a petition to a ruler or a written exposition of a particular matter.<sup>31</sup>

In Persian, *qissah* is virtually synonymous with *ḥikāyat*, *afsānah* and *dāstān* and implies a narrative genre centring around biography, whether religious, fictional or romantic.<sup>32</sup> Over time the place of the *qissah* is increasingly usurped by the *masnavi*, a poem on any subject in rhymed couplets, although most commonly dealing with “the heroic, the romantic and the didactic.”<sup>33</sup> In addition to its pronounced narrative concern, the classical Persian *masnavi* is characterised by “the monologue, the dialogue (often in the form of letters), songs, adages, and the reflections and admonitions of the poet,”<sup>34</sup> all features prominent in the classical Punjabi *qissa*. Like the Punjabi *qissa*, the romantic *masnavi* is structured by a tripartite division into prologue (*dībāchah*), poem proper (*dastan*), and epilogue (*khātimah*); in addition to the praise of the poet’s Sufi guide, the obligatory sections of the prologue consist of “praise of the One God and prayers (*tawḥīd*, *munājāt*), a eulogy of the Prophet (*na’t*), which usually included the praise of his Family and his Companions, a dedication to the poet’s patron, and

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<sup>31</sup>C.E. Bosworth, et al, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Islam: New Edition*, Vol. 5 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986): 185-6.

<sup>32</sup>Bosworth, et al, op.cit. 186, 197. *Qissah* retains its technical sense of “written petition” in early New Persian as evidenced by its use in this sense in texts such as Niẓāmī Samarqandī’s *Chahār maqālah* and Niẓām ul-Mulk’s *Siyar ul-mulūk*. The sense is, however, missing from F. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*. 1892 (London: Kegan Paul, 1930): 974.

<sup>33</sup>Bosworth, et al, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Islam: New Edition*, Vol. 6 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991): 832-3

<sup>34</sup>J.C. Bürgel, “The Romance” in Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *Persian Literature* (Columbia Lectures on Iranian Studies 3. Bibliotheca Persica, 1988): 162.

digressions on the occasion for writing the poem [and] its subject matter."<sup>35</sup> In essentially this form, the *masnavi* passed into the Muslim literatures of the Indian subcontinent almost from their very beginnings: the *masnavi* was the major genre of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dakani Urdu poetry and one of the more popular forms of north Indian Urdu poetry after the latter half of the eighteenth century.<sup>36</sup>

The question of whether the *masnavi* influenced the Punjabi literary tradition through the medium of classical Persian literature or via Urdu is not one that can be answered in the current state of research. Indeed, such problems of cultural transmission are particularly intractable for all areas of pre-modern India. It is, however, certain that the Persian *masnavi* was a genre not only familiar to but cultivated among the educated classes in Mughal Punjab: the use of Persian as the language of government, education and commerce and among clerics and the educated classes must have meant that members of these classes would have been familiar with at least the most popular of classical Persian texts.<sup>37</sup> While we have no direct evidence of which Persian texts were the most popular in Mughal Punjab, we have the literary example of the texts supposedly known to the students of the village *maktab* in Varis Shah's *Hir* to indicate the breadth of texts presumably available to those with a religious education in eighteenth-century Punjab:

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<sup>35</sup>Bosworth, et al., op.cit., 833.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid. 837.

<sup>37</sup> For some account of the influence of Persian poetry (and particularly the works of 'Attar and Rūmī) on Indian Islamic literature in general, see Schimmel, "The Influence of Sufism" 181-210. For some suggestions on the influence of Jāmī on the Urdu Yūsuf-Zulāikhā tradition and the reasons for Nizāmī's lack of popularity, see Shackle, "Between Scripture and Romance" 157-61. Although the curriculum of Persian schools in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Punjab is not available, the syllabus of such schools in late nineteenth-century Punjab included Jami's *Yūsuf Zulaikhā* and *Tuhfat ul-abrār* as well as Nizami's *Sikandarnāmah* and *Lailā Majnūn* (G.W. Leitner, *History of Indigenous Education in the Punjab since Annexation and in 1882*. 1882. Reprint ed. (Lahore: Republican Books, 1991): part 1, 63.).



They recited by heart the *Ta'lil*, the *Mizān*, *Ṣarf-i Mīr* and *Ṣarf-i Bahāi*.

They had copied fourteen volumes, including *Kanz-i unvā'* and texts by Qāzī, Qutb and Mas'ūd;

They had polished off *Khānī*, the *Majmū'ah-i Sulṭānī* and the *Ḥairat ul-fiqh*.

They had memorised the *Fatāvā-i barahnah-i manzūm-i shāhān* and the *Zubd-i taṣarruf*;

They had spread the teachings of the *Ma'ārij un-nubūvat* and the *Rauḏat us-shuhadā'*.

They had explicated *Zarrādī* and the *Sharḥ-i mullah*.

.....  
Some read poetry, others the *Inshā'-i Harkaran* and the *Nāmāh-i haqq*,  
*Khāliq bārī*,

*Gulistān*, *Būstān*, *Bahār-i dānish*, *Tūṭīnāmāh*, *Vāḥid bārī*,

*Maktūbāt-i 'Allāmī*, *Ṣamad bārī*, *Shāhnāmāh* and *Rāfiq bārī*.

They had written out *Qirān us-sa'adat*, the *dīvān* of Ḥāfiẓ and

The story of Shīrīn and *Khusrāu*.<sup>38</sup>

A corollary of the tradition of Persian education in the Punjab was the sustained production up till the end of the nineteenth century of a substantial corpus of Persian texts in almost every genre. Among the earliest and most popular Persian

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<sup>38</sup>Adapted from Jit Singh Sītal, ed., *Hīr Vāris* (Patiala: PEPSU Book Depot, n.d.): 5 with assistance from Jogindar Singh, "Vāras dā maktab" a three-part article appearing in *Panjābī Duniā* 5:10(Oct. 1954): 31-44; 5:11(Nov. 1954): 35-49; and 5:12(Dec. 1954): 20-30. Some reference has also been made to Denis Matringe, tr., *Hīr Vāris Ṣāh: poème panjabi du XVIIIe siècle* (Pondichéry: Institut Français d'Indologie, 1988): 131-9, whose treatment is, of course, flawed by his incorrect translation of the verbs in the passage in the singular rather than the plural. Compare the broadly similar mid-nineteenth century lists in Fazl Shāh, *Qissā Hīr o Rānjhā Panjābī* (Lahore: Shaiḥ Muhammad Ashraf, n.d.): 26, and Agrā, *Vār Hakikat Rāi krit Agrā*, ed. Tej Kaur Vig (Ludhiana: Panjābī Sāhitt Academy, 1966): 30-1. For a list of the books taught in Persian schools in Punjab in the late nineteenth century, see Leitner, op.cit. part 1, 62-4.

texts were *qissas* and *masnavis* on various subjects, and from the sixteenth century onwards, a substantial number of Persian *qissas* and *masnavis* were written on Hir-Ranjha and the other major Punjabi love stories.<sup>39</sup> Not enough work has been done on these Persian texts (or indeed on the Punjabi *qissas*) to permit any account of their influence on the Punjabi poems and *vice versa*.<sup>40</sup> Such detailed work would, however, go a long way toward sketching the complex webs of cultural interaction that characterised pre-modern Punjab and, indeed, pre-modern north India.

### Genres Classical and Debased: What is a *Qissa*?

The figure of Varis Shah towers over the Punjabi *qissa* and structures all literary discussion of it in much the same way as the magical interventions of the Panj Pīrs structure the narrative of his *Hīr Rānjhā* (1766). Indeed, Punjabi critics almost unanimously give Varis the laurel of having given Punjabi literature the polished *qissa* (much as the Pīrs give Hir to Ranjha) and commonly use his name as a magical incantation that grants instant release from the complex problems raised by the question of defining exactly what a *qissa* is. For contemporary Punjabi criticism, Varis's *Hīr* provides the template of the definition of what the "real" (or "classical") *qissa* is and the norm against which the "early development" and "later adulteration" of the genre are measured. Varis's *Hīr*,

<sup>39</sup>Muhammad Bāqir, ed., *Panjābī qisse Fārsī zabān mein*. 2 vols. (Lahore: Panjābī Adabī Academy, 1956-60) contains a list of Persian versions of the major Punjabi *qissas* along with samples of text from each. Two modern editions of Persian poems produced in Punjab in the period are Indarjīt Munshī, *Nāmah-i 'ishq*. Ed. Vahīd Quraishī (Lahore: Panjābī Adabī Academy, 1959) and Maulānā Muhammad Akram 'Ghanīmat' Kunjāhī, *Nairang-i 'ishq: maṣnavī Ghanīmat*. (Lahore: Panjābī Adabī Academy, 1962).

<sup>40</sup> See for example the very unsatisfactory summary treatment in Āghā Yamīn, "Tārīkhī prasang vich Panjāb de Fārsī shā'irā dā rol" in Fakhar Zamān, Iqbāl Faqīr and Jamīl Ahmad Pāl, eds., *'Ālmī Panjābī Kānfrāins 1986 Lāhaur (Paṛhe gae maqāle te kārvāī)* (Lahore: Classic, 1986): 83-91.

then, is a model of the archetypal *qissa*, a real (and realisable) Ur-text upon which is constructed a critical and cultural utopia.

For Punjabi criticism, the magic of Varis's text lies in its form as much as in its disingenuous, casual dismissal of the poem's narrative in its final lines. Most criticism on Varis's poetry centres around the supposedly rigid form of his poem, a focus that allows critics to trace the poem's structure to various "influences" and "sources." Postulating a rigid, inherited literary structure for Varis's poem allows critics to root the *qissa* as a genre in a prestigious literary culture—the Persian—and in an easily domesticated, highly structured literary form. While the attempt to embed the Punjabi *qissa* in the Persian *qiṣṣah-maṣnavī* tradition is fruitful insofar as it provides a putative genealogy of the genre and many of its features, it has become damaging in that it postulates a moment at which the *qissa* instantaneously comes into being as a fully-formed genre, leaping directly from the pages of the Persian classics to the pen of the Punjabi Sayyid. Such a narrative also implies the tragedy of the "adulteration" of the *qissa*, a decay that supposedly mirrors the concurrent "decline" of Punjabi culture.

While it is difficult in the current state of research to postulate an alternate patrimony for the *qissa*, it should be possible to suggest some of the whispered nuance that insinuates itself at the margins of the accepted literary histories: a story of development and re-development, birth and re-birth which still must be written. Unfortunately, recent Indian Punjabi criticism has ignored all traces of nuance in the development of the *qissa* and has opted instead to make the *qissa* yet another of the battlegrounds of the conflict between "the Islamic" and "the Sanskritic" by attempting to find "indigenous" roots for all the elements of the *qissa* previously ascribed to Persian influence. Such combative attempts at making the *qissa* the ground of wider cultural conflict have tended to obscure the false starts and hidden resonances implicit in the *qissa*'s "biography." Until,

however, we have more texts upon which to base our judgements, we may only critique the current hegemonic narrative and suggest the outlines of the alternate genealogies it suppresses.

The critical hegemony of the “classical” *qissa* of Varis has, quite simply, thrown up a fixed model of what the *qissa* should be. A poem about romantic love stymied by societal opposition, the classical *qissa* is divided into three constituent and stereotyped movements: the prologue, the main body, and the epilogue. The prologue moves in stages from macrocosm to microcosm, from the glory of God on high to the disingenuously self-abnegating modesty of the poet. Like the rungs of a ladder or the *maqāmāt* of the orthodox Sufi, the prologue descends from its origins in the praise of God, love, the Prophet, the Companions and the *pirs* to the mundane (and debased) world of the literary present. A hint of the earnestly upward trajectory of the *qissa* comes at the very moment of the poem’s fictional genesis, though: only reluctantly does the *qissa*’s author agree at all to his friends’ request to write a love poem for their enjoyment and edification. Beginning like the prologue from a point of otherworldly inspiration, the main body of the poem begins with an idealised description of the geographical setting of the poem, the beauty and nobility of the protagonists (often through *sarāpā* description), and the almost ritually ordered early lives of the hero and heroine. Almost immediately, the poem abandons sacral time and descends to narrative and dramatic dialogue—often detouring through the bawdy and the misogynistic. Indeed, the ritual berating of the wiles of women characteristic of the *trīā charitra* genre is so typical a feature of the classical *qissa* that some have even enumerated it among the *qissa*’s formal features.<sup>41</sup> More often than not, an author of the classical *qissa* like Fazl Shāh divides its narrative

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<sup>41</sup>Gobind Singh Lamba, *Panjābī kissā-kāvi: ālochanātmak adhiain* (Ludhiana: Lahore Bookshop, 1979): 17.

with brief prose rubrics (usually in Persian) describing the contents of a particular section or even stanza. Returning in its conclusion to its beginning, the *qissa* ends with a renarration of its genesis and a brief notice of the year and place of its composition. In *Varis* (and many others) the *qissa*'s ending redeems its descent into the often racy realm of worldly interest by restating its vertical trajectory: it condemns the fallen state of the world and hymns the transformative powers of mystical love. The classical *qissa*, then sketches the form of an elongated U, a schematic representation of the descent and mystical ascent of Adam's progeny.

*Varis*'s metre is the *baint*, regarded as the prototype and pure form of the "*qissa* metre."<sup>42</sup> Imbued in the critical literature with resonances of the high Persian literary tradition, the *baint* seems in actual fact to owe everything to Punjabi oral tradition and nothing (or very little indeed) to its putative source, the Persian *mutaqārib*.<sup>43</sup> As its etymological connection with the Arabic *bayt* (couplet) would seem to demand, the Punjabi *baint* is a metre of two lines with a Persianate *qāfiyā-radīf* rhyme scheme.<sup>44</sup> Unlike the quantitative Arabic and Persian metres and like its Punjabi folk counterparts, though, the *baint* derives its metrical structure from the twin principles of stress and moric count: the irregular counts of even *Varis*'s lines seem to confirm the importance of line stress as a structural principle for the metre. Early *baint* compositions like the

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<sup>42</sup> Jagjīt Singh Chhābrā, for example, suggests that a switch from *davayyā* to *baint* marks the genesis of the classical *qissa*: "It seems that as long as narrative was dominant in *qissa* poetry, *davayyā* remained the only metre. When pathos, dramatic elements and eroticism took the place of narration, though, *baint* took over from *davayyā*" (*Kavi Vāras Shāh*. 2nd ed. (Patiala: Madān Publishers, 1971): 87). His classification fails to take into account the continuing composition of *qissas* in *davayyā* (compare Imām Bakhsh's *Qissā Shāh Bahrām*, discussed below) long after the *baint* supposedly usurped its place.

<sup>43</sup>For two attempts to derive *baint* from *mutaqarib*, see: Jogindar Singh, "Baint dā arūzī vazan," *Panjābī duniā* 6:5(June 1954): 20; Lāl Singh, "Baint dā vikās," *Panjābī duniā* 6:1(Jan. 1954): 64.

<sup>44</sup> Vīr Singh Bal, who wrote a *Hir-Ranjha qissa* in *baint* uses the terms *jhulna* and *baint* interchangeably. See Kanvaljīt Kaur, ed., *Hīr Vīr Singh* (Patiala: Amarjīt Book Store, 1980): 105.

*Hīrs* of Muqbil and Ahmad Gujjar are invariably organised in stanzas of two couplets ending in a line containing the poet's *takhallus*, while later poems move perceptibly toward assimilation with the model of the *masnavi* by stringing together couplets in stanzas of often staggering length—or even by abandoning the stanza in favour of an extended couplet-based narrative. (Varis himself composes stanzas of twenty couplets or more, sometimes with odd numbers of lines per stanza.) Despite the replacement of the stanza with strings of sequential couplets, it is the purity of the metre which defines the *qissa* (or vice versa): a *qissa*, the critics would have us believe, is a poem written in *baint*.<sup>45</sup>

This assertion, however, gives rise to a serious objection: most *qissas* are not in *baint* at all. In fact, most *qissas* do not fit the template of the classical *qissa* particularly well. Although most later *qissas* preserve the multi-syllable rhyme scheme that so neatly defines the *baint* in the minds of casual listener and critic alike, the metre they use is not *baint* at all, but *jhūlnā*, *davayya* or *dohrā*. Similarly, although every *qissa* begins with an invocation to a deity (as do almost all pre-modern Punjabi poems), not all *qissa* invocations are as formally structured along the lines of the Persian *masnavi* as those of Varis or Fazl Shah. Indeed, many *qissas* invoke Rām, Gaṇesh or Gurū Gobind Singh and are in metres as “foreign” as *kabitt*, *savayyā* and *chaupaī*. Either the definition of the *qissa* as proposed by the devotees of the classical model is wrong, or the non-classical texts’ claim to be *qissas* is to be rejected.

If we accept the model of the *qissa* as the spontaneous offspring of the Persian *masnavi*, we must thereby accede to the classical definition of the Punjabi *qissa* and reject out of hand much of what purports to be *qissa* literature. If,

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<sup>45</sup> Jagjit Singh Chhabra suggests that “Varis . . . made *baint* such a suitable metre for *qissa* poetry that any poem written in *baint* came to be called a *qissa* no matter what it was about” (op.cit. 31). He fails to take into account the fact that many of the narrative poems that were called *qissas* in

however, we suppose the critics' classical *qissa* to be a particular type or variety of the larger genus *qissa*, we begin to see in outline the boundaries of the genre itself. If the core definition of any genre maps out the normative ideal which both dictates the form and content of a text and encourages its subversion of generic convention, the outer limits of the territory defined by the genre display at its fullest the infinite play of variations and modulations that lies just below the surface of the generic definition's certainties. Alongside the normative ideal of the genre—a kind of "Form" imposed as a template of what the author strives toward—there also exists a shadowy territory implied by the ideal: the varying forms that the genre can plausibly encompass within the limits of its definition. To put the matter slightly differently, a generic definition consciously or unconsciously forms a complex of terms and ideas that structures the way authors write: they seek to some extent to imitate the terms of the genre, at the same time as they exploit the outer boundaries of the generic definition to deny the prescriptive force of the definition itself.

In the case of the Punjabi *qissa*, the normative definition has been imposed by critics in deference to a supposedly more prestigious literary model (the Persian *masnavi*) rather than on the basis of what most *qissas* are actually like. In fact, the classical *qissa* represents only a single strand of *qissa* poetry (albeit an influential one), and one imported somewhat belatedly into the genre. The early importance of this particular type of *qissa* was buttressed by its popularity among nineteenth-century poets, some of whom (like Fazl Shah) were made part of the literary canon of "classical" *qissa* poets. The dominance of the classical model of the *qissa* has, however, been so complete that very few critics have attempted to define the genre in any other terms; gaps in the printed record of *qissas*

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the late nineteenth century were in metres other than *baint*, particularly Braj metres and the stress-based metres of Punjabi folk songs.

problematise such a definition even further. This being the case, perhaps the best way to begin to approach an alternative definition of the *qissa* is to render an account of the peripheries of the genre—a sketch of the outlines which will throw into relief the heart of the generic definition. Rather than concentrate on the earliest *qissas*—somewhat limited as they are in number—we shall take as our boundary markers some of the numerous and varied nineteenth-century examples of the *qissa*.

If the definition of the classical *qissa*—or at least the notion of a traditional love story told in rhyming *baint* and loosely divided into invocation, narration and conclusion—lies at or near the heart of the definition of the genre, a number of texts lie at points along or near the faintly visible boundaries of the generic field. We shall use a brief account of the chief features of three such “peripheral” texts to throw the boundaries of the genre into somewhat sharper relief. The first of these poems is Vir Singh Bal’s *Rānjhe Hīr kā prem* (1837), perhaps the most “typical” of the three texts. Written largely in *baint* metre organised into stanzas of two couplets each, the poem narrates the most famous of the love stories retold in the *qissa* tradition. The title of the text and the author’s clearly Sikh name, however, alert us to the distinctiveness of the text in a tradition whose great classical authors were all Muslims. Indeed, the form of the text reflects the author’s religious concerns: the text begins with a *dohra* and a *baint* in praise of Guru Gobind Singh (dispensing with all the other possible prefatory matter). Similarly, the text’s ending reflects the influence of the (predominantly Hindu-Sikh) Braj tradition on the author, as the poem’s final verse is a *kabitt* on its date and place of composition. The poem’s final verses display the same distinctly Hindu-Sikh emphasis, an increasingly common phenomenon in the *qissas* written from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards:



Ranjha was Indra and Hir Mainikā [*sic*]; both were hiding their true nobility.

The fourteen worlds and eighty-four *lakh* births fall into the mouth of Kāl again and again:

Vir Singh, if you live a hundred thousand years, you still go to God in the end.

I trust in you, O Satgurū; listen to my prayer, O Protector of the Poor:

Helper of the Low, Ocean of Compassion, True Guru, help me here and now.<sup>46</sup>

In the process of appropriating the *qissa* to the Sikh episteme, Vir Singh has even assimilated the story to the Dasam Granth metanarrative of the *qissa* as a tale about Menaka and the god Indra.<sup>47</sup>

Imam Bakhsh's (1805-1863) *Qissā Shāh Bahrām* (first half of the nineteenth century), on the other hand, derives its substance directly from one of the most famous classical Persian romances. Written as an extended poem in *davayya* couplets (rather than in stanzas), the *qissa* takes as its matter one of the most fabulous of the Persian romances (although it does not state a specific textual source). Rather than the world of human or mystical love, the poem deals with the world of fairies and demons. The text begins with an invocation to God, the Prophet and the four Companions, but significantly excludes any reference to the popular worship of the pirs. Indeed, like the poets of the Persian tradition he consciously refers to, Imam Bakhsh attributes his writing of the *qissa* to a desire for immortality rather than to the classical *qissa* poet's desire to satisfy the public

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<sup>46</sup>Kanvaljīt Kaur, ed., *Hir Vir Singh* (Patiala: Amarjīt Book Store, 1980): 105.

<sup>47</sup>In the Ṛg-veda Menakā is the daughter of a ṛṣi: "A Brāhmaṇa tells a strange story of Indra having assumed the form of Menā and then fallen in love with her." John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History, and Literature*, 5th ed. (London:

urge for love stories. Despite the concerted classicism of his theme, though, Imam Bakhsh uses a clear and simple Punjabi that stands out in comparison to the consciously Persianate language of many of his Muslim contemporaries.

At completely the other end of the spectrum from Imam Bakhsh's appropriation of (or homage to) the Persian tradition is Nagāhīā Rām's chapbook *Qissā durānī jīḥānī dā jhagrā* (early twentieth century).<sup>48</sup> Clearly intended for mass consumption, the text presents a humorous dialogue between two sisters-in-law about their respective husbands. Unlike the other two poems, this *qissa* is firmly rooted in the realm of popular culture: it is written in the rhyming stanzas of four lines with refrain characteristic of many folk *bolīs* and includes a *bārāmāh*. The text begins with a single *dohrā* of invocation and ends with the poet's identification of himself and his place of residence—more a way of advertising himself to publishers and readers than anything else. The poem's intent is clearly humorous and its audience a distinctly popular one.

These three texts, then, represent three of the many types of poems that lie upon the outer boundary of the generic field that is the *qissa*. More than the idealised classical *qissa* that has for so long lain at the heart of Punjabi literary criticism, they provide an impressionistic sketch of the terms and contracts implicit in the genre. Accordingly, the core characteristic of the *qissa* would seem to be that it must be a narrative poem in rhyming couplets or stanzas that advances through both narrative action and dramatic dialogue. As a general rule, the *qissa* narrates a well-known fictional tale or fable (or even a notorious one), although it may exceptionally narrate less well-known stories including local folklore or actual occurrences. The range of the *qissa* spans everything from the humorous chapbook to the mystical love-allegory, and its literary "models"

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Kegan Paul, 1914): 208.

<sup>48</sup> *Qissā durānī jīḥānī dā jhagrā* (Ludhiana: Hitkāri Press, 1901).

include everything from the ornate Persian *masnavi* to the folk *boli*. Within this range, it is of course the ostensibly allegorical love-*qissas* that have become famous, but the far greater number of *qissas* are of one of the other types enumerated above. Decentring the love *qissa* in this way opens the way for the tremendous number of other *qissas* so variously represented in the early history of printing in the Punjab to exert their influence on the redefinition of the genre. Any such redefinition of the *qissa* must perforce reject the two dominant typologies of the genre, the first of which assumes that all *qissas* are love-stories and the second of which leaves no room for the more “popular” *qissas* of the nineteenth century. The first typology groups *qissas* according to their origin in Punjab, in other regions of India, and in the Perso-Arabic literary culture; the second distributes texts among the categories love story, heroic-historical tale, religious *qissa*, and romance.<sup>49</sup> Without attempting to impose a new typology, we must recognise that the register of a *qissa* and its affinities to and differences from other genres are as important to our understanding of its identity as its subject matter or the ultimate origins of its story. Equally, any typology of the *qissa* must take into account the way audiences perceived texts: the way authors, scribes and publishers name texts, for example, tells us as much about genre and texts in various periods than could any theoretical or critical pronouncement (which are largely lacking for this period). Only when the detailed work necessary to allow generalisations based on these and other specificities has been done can the problem of defining the *qissa* be tackled with anything approaching assurance.

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<sup>49</sup>Swaran Singh, *Kisṣā-kāvi vich samāj te sabhiāchār* (Amritsar: Ravi Sāhitt Prakāshan, 1991): 51; Lamba, *Panjābī kissā-kāvi* 14.

## The Search for Alternate Genealogies: The Hindi *Premakhyana*

If many of the formal features of the classical love *qissa* can be said to descend from the Persian *masnavi*, it must also be acknowledged that some of its distinguishing characteristics have a certain commonality with the tradition of the Hindi *premakhyana*. Indeed, at least one *premakhyana* version of the Hir-Ranjha story written in the Punjab is known to exist, Guradāsa Guṇī's *Kathā Hīr Rānjhan kī* (1706). That this poem is by its author's own admission based on Damodar's earlier Punjabi version of the legend<sup>50</sup> (discussed in Chapter Three) very strongly implies that Damodar's poem itself represents a Punjabi adaptation of the *premakhyana* genre. In any case, some Punjabi critics claim that the significant similarities between certain features of the Hindi *premakhyana* and certain types of the Punjabi *qissa* imply that the *premakhyana* influenced the development of the Punjabi *qissa*. Kulbir Singh Kang, for example, recognises the following formal features of the *premakhyana* in certain of the Punjabi *qissas*: an opening invocation, the lovers' first meeting in the form of a dream, the continuation of their love through a number of births, the help of magical powers, the placing of difficulties (including a malevolent "anti-hero") in the lovers' path, the vocalising of inner thoughts, lengthy descriptions of nature, colourful portraits of female characters (including *shikha-nakha* "head-to-toe" description, the use of moral and religious allegory, and a happy ending.<sup>51</sup> In fact, only some of the features enumerated by Kang are present in the classical love *qissas* at all, and those few that are often bear a greater resemblance to the formal features of the *masnavi* rather than of the *premakhyana*. As such, any

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<sup>50</sup> Satyendra Taneja, ed., *Kathā Hīr Rānjhanī kī*. 2nd. ed. (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1972): 38.

<sup>51</sup> Kulbir Singh Kang, *Panjābī vich Kissā Hīr Rānjhā: itihāsik, ālochanātmak te tulanātmak adhiain 1605 ī. tō 1805 ī tak* (Amritsar: Lok Sāhitt Prakāshan, 1983): 22. Similarly, Bikram Singh Ghumman argues that Damodar's version of *Hīr Rānjhā* and Pīlu's *Mirzā Sāhibān* show that the genre need not be taken as a lineal descendant of the *masnavi*. See his *Panjābī kissā kāvī ate dukhānt paramparā*

resemblance between the *premakhyana* and the classical love *qissa* seems mere coincidence rather than evidence of direct influence, and it becomes rather difficult to discount the *masnavi*'s pervasive influence on the genre.<sup>52</sup> Instead, the attempt to postulate the *premakhyana* as a formative influence on the *qissas* seems to be a convenient way for Indian Punjabi critics to give the *qissa* "indigenous" roots and remove it as far as possible from Islamic cultural influence.

The *premakhyana* has a lengthy pedigree in the Hindi literary tradition, including within its ranks some of the earliest Hindi texts by Muslim authors. Many of the early *premakhyanas* are Sufi allegories, although a number of *premakhyanas* make no attempt at allegory. Ronald Stuart McGregor's formal definition of the genre is worth quoting in full, both for its thoroughness and for its enumeration of the significant differences between the contents of the main body of *premakhyanas* and the Punjabi *qissa*:

The romance would deal, typically, with the love of a hero and heroine (usually a prince and princess, or children of a king and a minister respectively); with their separation and adventures in which magical and martial feats were stock elements; and with the reunion of the couple, by which time a liaison or second marriage might have been made by the hero. Stories of secular love might, as in *Candāyan*, take on a *sūfī* allegorical interpretation. The romances of the 15th and 16th centuries were with some exceptions composed in the vernacular. Most vernacular romances use stanzas

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(Ludhiana: Punjabi Writers' Cooperative, 1983): 13. As we shall see, neither of the texts he cites is in actual fact a *qissa*.

<sup>52</sup> Alternately, the resemblance between the *qissa* and the *masnavi* may argue for the Persian *masnavi*'s direct influence on the *premakhyana*.

in which a fixed number of *caupāī* or *caupāī* lines (often five as in Candāyan, or seven or eight) is followed by a *dohā*.<sup>53</sup>

As the foregoing description implies, not only are many of the formal features (such as metre) of the Hindi *premakhyana* dissimilar to those of the Punjabi *qissa*, but the content of its stories is also radically different from that of the Punjabi poems.

The first full-fledged Hindi *premakhyana* appears to be the *Chandāyana* (1379) of Mullā Dāūd, a Sufi from Dalmau near Rae Bareilly whose spiritual lineage goes back to Hazrat Nizām ud-Dīn of Delhi. The story, which describes the romance of Lorik and Chandā, begins with a series of invocations followed by a lengthy description of the locale in which the story took place; there is also a *shikha-nakha* description of the heroine Chanda. The poem is divided into *khāṇḍas* made up of verses consisting of 5 lines of *chaupai* followed by a *dohā* or extended *dohra*. McGregor comments that

With Dāūd the tradition of sūfī literary romance (*maṣnavī*), as illustrated by the Persian *maṣnavīs* of Khusrau, becomes fully Indianised. The use of 'Hindī' (in this case Avadhī dialect) is seen as normal by the poet, so much so that he does not mention his choice of language. There is an implication that Dāūd's work was preceded by other, similar work now lost.<sup>54</sup>

The poem is filled with Sufi symbolism and parallels, and was translated into Persian by ca. 1480 (although the translation is said to have been destroyed before it was completed).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Hindi Literature from its Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century. A History of Indian Literature*. Ed. Jan Gonda. Vol. 8, fasc. 6. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1984): 60. Except where specifically noted, the information about specific *premakhyana* texts and authors that follows is taken from *ibid.* 26-8, 60-73 and 148-54.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 26-7.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 63-4.

Daud's *Chandāyana* is followed by a number of poems from Rajasthan written in the mid-fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries which do not allegorise their stories in Sufi terms, as well as by a handful of Avadhi non-Sufi romances from the sixteenth century. The period around 1600 also saw a number of non-Sufi romances written in Braj, including Nandadāsa's *Rūpamanjarī*.<sup>56</sup> The period in which these non-Sufi romances were written in various parts of North India seems also to have been the heyday both of the Sufi *premakhyana* and of other types of poetry that allegorised love:

Extant sūfi adaptations of romance subject matter in the eastern region (and perhaps also in the north-west) date from around 1500. It is clear from popular Hindi verse of the late 15th century that the equation of human love and love for a divine being was commonly made by poets of this time . . . .<sup>57</sup>

The first major Sufi *premakhyana* after the *Chandāyana* appears to be the *Mirgāvati* (1503/4) of Shaikh Qutban, a Suhrāvardī Sufi. Written in stanzas of five *chaupai* lines and one *doha*, it describes the story of a prince and his beloved Mirgavati. The poem contains a large number of fabulous elements and a number of extended lists of flowers, *rāgas* and the like.<sup>58</sup> The next important Sufi text is the *Kutuba-shataka* (early sixteenth century), which describes the love of a Delhi woman and a fictitious son of Sultān Firozshāh Tughlaq named Qutb ud-Dīn in a

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<sup>56</sup> The Rajasthani texts are *Lakṣmaṇsena-padmaṅvaṭī kathā* by Damo/Damodara (1459?), *Madhumālatī-vārtā* by Chaturbhujadāsa (ca. 1500), and *Chitāi-vārtā/Chitāi-charita* by Nārāyaṇadāsa (ca. 16th century). The Avadhi poems are 'Ālam's *Madhavanala-Kāmakandala* (ca. 16th century), Īshvaradāsa's *Satyāvati-kathā* (1501) and Sādhana's *Mainā-sat* (ca. 1567). The Braj romances of the period include Parashurāma's version of the story of Ūṣā and Aniruddha (ca. 1575), a version of the Nala story by Narapati Vyāsa (ca. 1625), and Jaṭamala's *Gorā Bādala kī bāta* (1623 or 1673), a version of the Padminī story. (Ibid. 60-3).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 64.

<sup>58</sup> One might also profitably note for its similarity to the Dasam Granth's version of the story of Hir-Ranjha (adapted by Vir Singh and Jog Singh in the nineteenth century) that "[a] central

mixture of Khari Boli and Punjabi. The most famous Sufi romance of the period is the *Padmāvat* (1540/1) of Malik Muhammad 'Jāyasī', a Chishti from the Sufi centre of Jais near Rae Bareilly. The poem, which tells the story of Ratanasena and Padmāvati, has 6,000 lines in a stanza pattern of 7 *chaupai* lines followed by a *doha* or *dohra*. Jayasi manages to transmit his sense of the composite culture of North India by a procedure somewhat reminiscent of the technique employed by his predecessor Qutban:

... to deal with themes and motifs traditional in Indian literature and to describe objects, phenomena and activities of life in often encyclopedic detail. References to Indian mythology and to heroines and heroes of Indian legends are matched by allusions to Persian literature.<sup>59</sup>

This rich system of cultural cross-references is supplemented by a Sufi allegory characterised by metaphor and word-play: "The sūfī character of Padmāvat is clear from the outset of the poem and is insisted on in allegorical interpretations at almost every turn of the plot."<sup>60</sup> Close on the heel of Jayasi's *Padmāvat* is the *Madhumālatī* (ca. 1545) of Mīr Sayyid Manjhan 'Rājagīrī', a Shattārī Sufi. The poem narrates the story of Manohara and Madhumālatī in 540 stanzas of five *chaupai* lines each followed by a *doha* or extended *dohra*. The "sense of the value of mystical love is if anything more insistently stressed in Manjhan than in his predecessors" and often recalls the techniques and tropes of the *bhakti* poets of the period.<sup>61</sup>

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Indian version by Meghrāj Pradhān of Orchhā (1666) Hinduises details of the story (making Mṛgāvati an *apsaras* of Indra's heaven and the shepherd a demon)" (ibid. 67n).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 69.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 73, 72. See also S.C.R. Weightman, "Symmetry and Symbolism in Shaikh Manjhan's *Madhumālatī*" in Christopher Shackle and Rupert Snell, eds., *The Indian Narrative: Perspective and Patterns* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992): 195-226.



After the sixteenth century, the *premakhyana* began to decline in importance as a literary genre, and few of the texts written after 1600 have secured the lasting fame of the earlier poems. In this later period, about half of the romances (essentially in Avadhi but with an admixture of Braj) were Sufi and half (in Braj) were not.<sup>62</sup> McGregor notes that “[b]y the mid-eighteenth century the literary romance seems from the extant evidence to be on the wane: its character reverting, perhaps, towards that of the popular tale.”<sup>63</sup> The best well-known Sufi *premakhyana* of the period is the *Chitrāvalī* (ca. 1613) of ‘Usmān of Ghāzīpur, which tells the story of Sujāna and Chitrāvalī in 620 stanzas of seven lines of *chaupai* followed by a stanza of *doha*: “he gives a specifically sūfī interpretation to his story, using much the same metaphors and symbolism as his predecessors. . . . there is a marginal Kṛṣṇa influence on Usmān’s symbolism.”<sup>64</sup> Other Sufi texts of the seventeenth century include Dayāla’s *Shashīmālā kathā* (1601), the story of a prince and his beloved Shashī in 500 stanzas of five *chaupais* followed by a *doha* or *soraṭhā*; the Avadhi *Puhupāvātī* (ca. 1669) of Dukhaharaṇa of Ghazipur, which narrates the story of a prince and his love Puhupavati; and a *Nala-Damana* (1657) in 370 verses of nine *chaupais* followed by a *doha* by a Lucknow poet named Sūradāsa (whose father was from the Gurdaspur area of the Punjab). Major texts of the eighteenth century include a version of the story of Hāsā and Javāhir in 730 stanzas of *chaupai* and *doha* written in the reign of Muhammad Shāh by Qāsīm Shāh of Dariyābād in Barabanki; an *Indrāvāt/Indrāvātī* (1744) and *Anurāga-bāṃsurī* (1764) by Nūr Muhammad ‘Kāmyāb’ of Azamgarh; and an Avadhi version of Jami’s *Yūsuf Zulaikḥā* (1790)

<sup>62</sup> The non-Sufi romances of the period include the Avadhi *Jñānadīpa* (1617) of Shaikh Nabī of Sultānpur district (Jaunpur), the Braj *Rasaratana* (1616?) of Puhakara, a number of poems by Mirzā Muhammad ‘Jān’ (first half of the seventeenth century), and a Braj version of the Kāmarūpa story (1700-35) by Harisevaka Mishra of Orchhā. (Ibid. 148-9)

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 148.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 151.

written in stanzas of nine *chaupais* followed by a *kavitt* or *savaiyyā* by Ghulām Ashraf (also known as Shaikh Nisār) of Rudaulī district. The latest *premakhyana* McGregor notes is a text entitled the *Bhāṣā-prema-rasa* written by a Muslim civil servant from Bahraich between 1903 and 1915 in imitation of the earlier “classic” *premakhyanas*.<sup>65</sup> In its sudden decline in popularity in the face of modern genres like the novel and the short story as much as in its early dominance by Muslim writers and Sufi allegories, then, the history of the *premakhyana* resembles that of the Punjabi *qissa*. Unlike the *qissa*, though, the *premakhyana* does not seem to have been able to adapt to the changing circumstances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with any appreciable measure of success.

### **The Historical Background:**

One of the most problematic aspects of pre-modern Punjabi literary history is to define the geographical and linguistic area to be covered. Most definitions of the Punjab, modern and pre-modern, have had to contend in one way or another with the difficulties created by the tension between administrative boundaries and the loose cultural and linguistic unities and disunities of the areas contained in and excluded by those boundaries. Chetan Singh, a historian of seventeenth-century Punjab, points out that while Mughal documents and chronicles use the term Punjab to refer exclusively to the *sūbā* of Lahore (the land between the Sutlej and Indus but excluding Multan and its dependencies), the *suba* was linked to Multan on the one hand and the lands immediately south of the Sutlej on the other both by strong economic imperatives and by the settlement of Jaṭ and Bhaṭṭī tribes.<sup>66</sup> For the literary historian, the problem of definition is complicated further by the competing claims of various language and dialect groups

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 154.

<sup>66</sup> Chetan Singh, *Region and Empire: Panjab in the Seventeenth Century* (Delhi: OUP, 1991): 14-15.

(primarily in modern-day Pakistani Punjab) about the relative autonomy of their linguistic group *vis a vis* Punjabi.<sup>67</sup> For the period under study, the situation appears to be complicated by the emergence of corpora of texts utilising the features of various of the "dialects" of modern Punjabi, raising afresh the problem of which works to fit under the rubric "Punjabi literature":

. . . an earlier composite literary language, based on several of the dialects of present-day Pakistan Panjab, was gradually replaced—during the collapse of centralized imperial authority in the 18th century—by at least two fairly distinct literary vehicles with narrower dialectal bases, a central language based on the Lahore area, and a south-western based on the Multan area, also cultivated to the south in Sind under the name Siraiki . . . .<sup>68</sup>

Despite this nascent linguistic confusion, it seems clear that most of the literature produced in the *suba* of Lahore and the neighboring regions up to at least the middle of the eighteenth century can rather unproblematically be classified as "Punjabi." The consensus of linguistic, literary and historical evidence, then, seems to argue that the area which should be the province of the Punjabi literary critic's inquiries is strikingly similar to Chetan Singh's "Mughal historian's Punjab," an entity that roughly approximates the British province of the Punjab:

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<sup>67</sup> For an account of some of the linguistic issues involved in the modern debate, see C. Shackle, "Punjabi in Lahore," *Modern Asian Studies* 4:3(1970): 239-67; "Siraiki: A Language Movement in Pakistan," *Modern Asian Studies* 11:3(1977): 379-403; "Rival Linguistic Identities in Pakistan Punjab" in Peter Robb and David Taylor, eds., *Rule, Protest, Identity: Aspects of Modern South Asia* (London: Curzon Press, 1978): 213-234; "Problems of Classification in Pakistan Panjab," *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1979): 191-210; and "Hindko in Kohat and Peshawar," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43:3(1980): 482-510.

<sup>68</sup> Shackle, "Problems of Classification in Pakistan Panjab" 193; see also Denis Matringe, "L'utilisation littéraire des formes dialectales par les poètes musulmans du Panjab de la fin du XVIe au début du XIXe siècles" in Collette Caillat, ed., *Dialectes dans les littératures Indo-Aryennes* (Paris: Institut de Civilisation Indienne, 1989): 527-56 and C. Shackle, "Early Vernacular Poetry in the Indus Valley: Its Contexts and its Character" in Anna Libera Dallapiccola and Stephanie Zingel-Avé Lallemand, eds., *Islam and Indian Regions*. Vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1993): 259-89.

The region under consideration is bordered by the Yamuna in the east and the Indus in the west. To its north and north-west lie vast mountain ranges, while its southern extremities are contained by the Great Indian Desert which flings out extensions in two directions. The eastern extension included much of what were formerly the Phulkian states. The western extension went through Sindh and up the Indus valley to the south-west angle of the Salt Range. The region enclosed within these natural boundaries is a great mass of alluvium brought down by the Indus and the other five rivers.<sup>69</sup>

It is the *qissa* literature produced in this region that we shall consider in this thesis.

During the period under study, the Punjab was undergoing a series of social and political changes whose impact on the region was crucial. Perhaps the most pertinent of the social shifts that was still taking place in the seventeenth century was the transformation of tribal groups in the Bār region of northwest Punjab (where most of the stories narrated in the early *qissas* take place) from pastoralism to settled agriculture. By this period, major groups like the Jats, Bhattis and Khokhars had already taken up settled *zamīndārīs* which allowed them to submit only a summary (rather than a detailed) revenue assessment on their lands, while groups like the Ḍogars, Vaṭṭūs and Gūjars still practised the older pastoralist mode of existence along the lower riverine tracts of the region.<sup>70</sup> One of the social consequences of this shift to settled agriculture was “the social stratification of those that were sedentarised”<sup>71</sup>, a process whose results we see particularly in the story of Hir-Ranjha: the Kharals see themselves as superior to

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<sup>69</sup> Chetan Singh, *op.cit.* 15. For a detailed geographical description of the region, see *ibid.* 12-29.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 112, 141.

Ranjha, whose employment in the old Jat status of cowherd links him with socially "inferior" pastoralists.

Another major consequence of the shift into settled agriculture was the increasing attachment of the Jat and Rājput tribes of the Bar to Islam, particularly the popular Sufism of the shrine of Bābā Farīd at Pākpatṭaṇ. Believed to have died around 1265, Farid had settled in the ferry town of Ajodhan on the Sutlej (later renamed Pakpattan, "the holy ferry-point," in his memory) at about the same time as it had become one of the centres of Turkish settlement in the Punjab following the Mongol invasions of central and western Asia in the thirteenth century.<sup>72</sup> The object of Khaljī and Tughluq patronage in the fourteenth century, the shrine established in his memory gained in popularity among the urban Muslim populations of the lower Punjab, at the same time beginning to garner a following among the tribes of the Bar, who depended on urban populations for elements of their livelihood and "for providing the ritual and belief structures that made up their religious system."<sup>73</sup> Indeed, many of the Jat tribes which were most likely attracted to the shrine of Baba Farid as a highly complex social and religious institution" claim to have been converted by Baba Farid himself: the Siāls and Kharals both claim to have been converted by Farid, and the Sials claim that he sent their chief to settle the Ravi-Chenab region that became their homeland.<sup>74</sup> At the very least, this tradition indicates that the *dīvāns* of the shrine (since it appears unlikely that the tribes were converted as early as Baba Farid's time) had a hand in encouraging the Jats and Bhattis of the Bar to make the transition from pastoralism to settled agriculture. These clans, in turn, kept up

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 263-4.

<sup>72</sup> Richard M. Eaton, "The Political and Religious Authority of the Shrine of Bābā Farīd" in Barbara Daly Metcalf, ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: U of C Press, 1984): 335.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 341-2.

their ties with the shrine, taking *bai'at* from the the descendants of Farid and participating in a general Islamicisation of their identities: a somewhat haphazard survey of the personal names of members of prominent Sial families in Jhang indicates that while Muslim names were first adopted in the fifteenth century, their proportion did not even begin to reach 50% before the end of the seventeenth century and had reached about 75% by the eighteenth century.<sup>75</sup> Throughout the period (and in many cases, until well into the twentieth century) Sufi shrines such as the tomb of Baba Farid served as "symbolic cultural outposts of the power of Islam and of the Muslim state in a world where local, tribal identities remained important."<sup>76</sup> By the end of our period, the linkages between shrine, state and "official" Islam became even more clear under the influence of a Chishtī revival in the Punjab (where a large number of *khānqāhs* were set up); the effects of the revival eventually spread as far away as Avadh, Rajasthan and even central Asia.<sup>77</sup> The major eighteenth-century figures responsible for the revival—*Khwājā Nūr Muhammad Mihārvi* and his disciples *Khwājā Muhammad 'Āqil* of *Koṭ Miṭhā*, *Hāfiz Muhammad Jamāl* of Multan and *Shāh Muhammad Sulaimān* of Taunsa—stressed adherence to the *sharī'ā* and reconciliation between mystics and theologians.<sup>78</sup> In doing so, they attempted to resolve the same tension that lay at the heart of the *qissas* written during the seventeenth century.

Political events at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century ensured that chaos was almost the only constant in the period. During the early part of the seventeenth century, Punjab had been

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 341-2, 345-6, 348.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 349; 352-3.

<sup>76</sup> David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1988): 41.

<sup>77</sup> M. Zameeruddin Siddiqi, "The Resurgence of the Chishti Silsilah in the Punjab During the Eighteenth Century.," *Indian History Conference: Proceedings of the Thirty-Second Session* (1970): I, 308-12.

“among the most prosperous and rich territories of the Mughal empire” and Lahore was seen as the finest city in the East, an impression partially created by a drastic rise in the Punjab revenues in the period.<sup>79</sup> By the third quarter of the century, though, refractory *zamīndārs* began to take advantage of Aurangzeb’s absence on campaigns in the Deccan to rise up against Mughal authority, and “the social restructuring engendered by increasing prosperity” contributed to the disaffection of the Jat followers of the Sikh Gurus with the landowning classes and the Mughal state.<sup>80</sup> Chetan Singh suggests a dual cause for the grievances of the Sikh Jats, who displayed a “long-term trend in upward social mobility” in the period: on the one hand their desire for land-holding status put them in conflict with the landed classes, and on the other the commercialisation of the areas inhabited by the Sikh Jats meant that the decline of trade in the second half of the seventeenth century hit them particularly hard and created in them a feeling that wealth was distributed unevenly in the society.<sup>81</sup> Whatever the cause of Sikh grievances, the results were clear for everyone to see. The uprising led by Bandā Bahādur between 1710 and 1714 devastated the economy and stability of the region, and was followed by both Sikh unrest and *zamindar* revolts in virtually every corner of the province over the ensuing two decades; the regular plunder of the trade caravans that constituted such a vital part of Punjab’s prosperity continued unabated in the 1720s and 1730s and towns were regularly attacked.<sup>82</sup> By the 1740s, organised Sikh armies roamed the Punjab and the repeated invasions of first Nādir Shāh and then Ahmad Shāh Abdālī between 1739 and the 1760s shattered the economy and political structure of the region as a whole. By

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 308-10.

<sup>79</sup> Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab 1707-1748* (Delhi: OUP, 1986): 142-3.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 136; Chetan Singh, op.cit. 273

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 271; 272, 279.

the time of Ahmad Shah's final invasion in 1769, the Punjab was effectively no longer under Mughal control, and by the last quarter of the century, there were about 125 independent political units in the Punjab: many of those in the west were ruled by Muslims (occasionally by religious leaders like the Sayyids of Hujrā Shāh Muqīm or the descendants of Baba Farid at Pakpattan), while most of those on the plains of Mājhā, Mālvā and Doābā were ruled by Sikhs of the cultivating classes.<sup>83</sup> The economy of the entire region suffered throughout the decades of chaos, and "there is evidence of deurbanisation in the Punjab during the late eighteenth century in the sense that some of the urban centres of the Mughal times went out of existence or became merely villages."<sup>84</sup> By the end of the century, stability began to return to the Punjab as more powerful rulers subjugated numbers of less powerful chiefs, a process that culminated in Ranjit Singh's foundation of a state based in Lahore by the year 1799. The rise of Punjabi rulers during this last period (and a general economic upswing in the upper *doābs*) appears to have encouraged the production of literature in Punjabi for aristocratic patrons, setting the stage for the vast amounts of literary production during Ranjit Singh's reign and the ensuing period of British rule.<sup>85</sup>

#### Genres and Metres:

Before embarking on a brief account of Punjabi literary history, it is perhaps necessary to provide an outline of the major genres and metres of

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<sup>82</sup> Alam, *op.cit.* 139, 184-5; 177, 184.

<sup>83</sup> Veena Sachdeva, *Polity and Economy of the Punjab During the Late Eighteenth Century* (Delhi: Manohar, 1993): 147; 148-9. The Sials, for example, fought and briefly conquered the Kharals in 1747 but were themselves subjugated by Harī Singh Bhāngī in 1760, to whom they paid tribute until the Bhangis' territories were appropriated by Ranjit Singh (*ibid.* 56, 17).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 156, 155

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 157.



Punjabi literature.<sup>86</sup> Such an attempt at brief definitions is not, however, without its problems. Perhaps the major difficulty in writing about genre in Punjabi literature is the almost complete lack of critical writing on the subject in any language; this neglect, in turn, renders even more thorny a number of issues related to the problem of generic definition in Punjabi. The most obvious of these issues is the problem of how to create a definition of even the major genres of Punjabi literature that remains valid over time: the shifts and reinterpretations that characterise the history of the *qissa* are also evident in a number of other genres as well. Equally vexed is the problem of trying to understand the effect that related genres in languages such as Persian, Hindi and Urdu have on Punjabi genres, particularly in the situation of increased cultural exchange created during the nineteenth century. Finally, the concentration of critical efforts on “prestigious” genres like the *qissa* has meant that genres with folk roots such as the *baramah* or even the *var* have tended to get short shrift in Punjabi critical writing. A very similar problem has dogged Punjabi writing on metre: most books on Punjabi prosody ignore indigenous forms such as the *sadd*, *baint* and *davayya* and simply reproduce the readily-available hyperclassifications of metres borrowed from the Hindi-Sanskrit *pingal* or Persian *‘arūz* traditions.<sup>87</sup> In light of these difficulties, this section will attempt no more than a summary presentation of the main genres and metres necessary for an understanding of the literary history that follows and of the discussion of the *qissas* that forms the body of the thesis. No attempt will be made, therefore, to describe in any detail the “Hindi” genres and metres used for religious texts by Hindu and Sikh poets

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<sup>86</sup> For very summary accounts of genre and metre, see for example ‘Abdul Ghafūr Quraishī, *Panjābī zabān dā adab te tārikhī* (Lahore: Taj Book Depot, 1956): 24-31; Ahmad Husain Ahmad Quraishī, *Panjābī adab kī mukhtasar tārikhī* 19-30; Sayyid Fayyāz Mahmūd, ed., *Tārikh-i adabiyāt-i Musalmānān-i Pākistān o Hind*. Vol. 13: *Ilāqāi adabiyāt-i maghribī Pākistān* (Lahore: Punjab University, 1971): 229-51.

from the late seventeenth century onwards or indeed the forms employed in the *Adi Granth*, which have been dealt with elsewhere.<sup>88</sup>

One of the most prominent genres in Punjabi is the *sīharfī*, a “golden alphabet” poem of the type composed in most regions where the Perso-Arabic script was used. As its name implies, the *sīharfī* consists of a number of stanzas, each of which begins with a different letter of the alphabet. Each stanza consists of four lines, and each line ends with the same *qafiya* and *radif*. The last line of each stanza normally contains the poet’s *takhallus*. There is no set metre for the *sīharfī*, although many early examples seem to be in *baint* or *dohṛā*; later poets innovate even further and introduce the use of the *mātrik* metres of Hindi to the genre.

The most prominent of the short lyric genres is the *kafi*, popularised and used mostly by Sufi poets. Often orally transmitted, *kafis* are meant to be sung and are composed in a particular *raga*. In formal terms, the *kafi* consists of a number of rhyming lines or couplets, the first of which is a repeated refrain and the last of which contains the poet’s *takhallus*. Since the *kafi* is a sung genre, the predominant metres are the 14- and 16-*mātrā* based syllabic metres that Punjabi poetry shares with the Hindi tradition. Another widely encountered lyric genre—although not normally composed in order to be sung—is the *baramah*, “the twelve months.”<sup>89</sup> A *baramah* consists of at least twelve stanzas on the twelve months of the year that express the lover’s separation from the beloved. There is no fixed

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<sup>87</sup> See for example Jogindar Singh, *Pingal te arūz* (Ludhiana: Panjābī Sāhitt Academy, 1960), which is notable for its skilled treatment of both systems of prosody.

<sup>88</sup> These have been treated rather exhaustively in both Punjabi and English. See for example Surindar Singh Kohli, *A Critical Study of Adi Granth* (New Delhi: Punjabi Writers’ Cooperative Society, 1961).

<sup>89</sup> For an anthology of Punjabi texts, see Piara Singh ‘Padam’, ed., *Panjābī bārāmāhe* (Patiala: Sardār Sāhitt Bhavan, 1969). For a discussion of the genre in the wider North Indian context and sample texts from various languages, see Charlotte Vaudeville, *Bārahmāsā: les chansons des douze mois dans les littératures Indo-Aryennes* (Pondichéry: Institut Français d’Indologie, 1965).

stanzaic or metrical pattern for the *baramah*, which is consequently found in a number of metres and poetic forms.

One of the major genres descended from early folk poetry is the *var*, originally a type of poetry that described battles and wars. The *var* originally seems to have consisted of a number of stanzas (*kalīs*) in *davayya* metre or in *sadd* linked by prose passages of narrative exposition. Every line of an individual stanza has the same rhyme, although separate stanzas often have different rhymes. Later poets experimented with new metres, including various *matrik* and *vārnik* Hindi metres, and expanded the range of subject matter included in the *var*.

A number of genres seem to have been used exclusively in Islamic religious poetry. Among the folk genres appropriated to Muslim religious poetry are the *char khānāmā* (an allegorical adaptation of women's songs about spinning cotton on the *char khā*, or spinning wheel) and the *shuturnāmā* or *ushturnāmā* (an adaptation of herder's songs in which the poet speaks of the trials of mystical love in the persona of a camel). Genres whose origins are somewhat more mysterious include the *chūhretīnāmā* (in which the poet presents himself as a sweeper woman desirous of mystical union), the *faqarnāmā* (a tract about proper conduct and mystical knowledge) and the *jogīnāmā* (in which the poet expounds mystical love in the persona of a *jogī*). Other purely Islamic genres which have parallels in other literatures include the *jangnāmā* (a lengthy narrative poem in episodes on the martyrdom of the Imāms Hasan and Husain that resembles in some particulars the Urdu *marsiyyā*), *mī'rājnāmā* (describing the Prophet's ascent to heaven), *na't* (praises of the Prophet), *hulīyā sharīf* (physical description of the Prophet), *vafātnāmā* (a narrative of the Prophet's death), *tafsīr* (Quranic commentary), *sīrat un-nabī* (biography of the Prophet) and *ahvāl ul-ākhirat* (admonitory poems on the fate of the soul after death).

Rather than list the various types of Punjabi metres, we shall deal here only with those used in the *qissas* studied or referred to frequently in the text. One of the metres in which many of the *qissas* are written is *davayya*, usually defined as consisting of four lines of 28 *mātrās* (16+12) ending in two long syllables.<sup>90</sup> In *qissas* such as Siddiq Lālī's *Bahr ul-'ishq*, though, long 'stanzas' of twenty or thirty lines in *davayya* replace this notional structure of four line units of verse. In terms of scansion, *davayya* is identical to *dohra*, the name employed for independent verses consisting of two or four lines with the same metrical pattern of 28 *matras* per line. Christopher Shackle has postulated that the increasing popularity of the *dohra* versus the *doha* (see below) after 1600 can be explained as a function of the loss of the grammatical case endings of classical:

The result was the replacement of the *dohā* . . . by the 28-*mātrā* *dohra* whose greater length . . . was better suited to accommodate expanded syntactic patterns, and whose rhyme with its two long syllables was better fitted to the altered phonemic system.<sup>91</sup>

Since Lālī's *qissa* does not follow the four-line stanza pattern commonly associated with *davayya*, a stanza from Hāfiz Barkhurdār Rānjhā's *Sassī Punnū*<sup>92</sup> will be used to illustrate the metre. Note particularly how consonants otherwise unmarked with a vowel must be read with a short *a* in order to fit the metre:

*Yūsufa vāgū Sassī tāī, Punnū ākha suṇāe.*

*Kecha vatana maī nāū Punnū, jo rājā hā usa jāe.*

<sup>90</sup> Kāhn Singh 'Nābhā', *Gurshabad ratnākar mahān kosh*. 1930. Reprint ed. (Delhi: National Bookshop, 1990): 647. Kahn Singh also notes the similarity of the *davayya* to the *sāra* metre so common in Hindi *pada* poetry.

<sup>91</sup> Shackle, "Early Vernacular Poetry in the Indus Valley" 286-7. On the *doha*, it is worth noting that many *risalas* (Islamic religious tracts) continued to be written in *doha* during the eighteenth century.

<sup>92</sup> Printed as Piār Singh and Gobind Singh Lamba, *Sassī te hor kisse krit Hāfiz Barkhurdār* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1977): 43-68.

*Beṭā 'Ālī Khāne dā hā, jiharā takhata kamāe.*

*Hāfiza iho gallā karake, Punnū turata sidhāe. (40)*

Like Yusuf, Punnun says to Sassi,

“My home is in Kech and my name is Punnun; I am the *rājā* of that place.

I am the son of Ali Khan, who rules there.”

Hafiz, after saying this, Punnun left straight away.

The metre most commonly associated with the classical *qissa* is *baint*, composed of couplets that end with two long syllables and have a fixed number of stresses per half-line.<sup>93</sup> In theory, there are 40 *matras* (20+20) per line, although the number of *matras* per half line varies even in sequential lines of the same verse. Despite the importance of line stress rather than *matra*-count to the metre, most Punjabi critics have refused to see *baint* as anything but a *matrik* metre—indeed, they have been equally reluctant to see it as a metre based on couplets rather than on four-line stanzas.<sup>94</sup> An examination of lines of *baint*, though, shows the importance of line stress in its formal composition. The example reproduced below from Muqbil's *Qissā Hīr Rānjhā*,<sup>95</sup> for example, can be read in a number of ways (the variant readings are in brackets)—the first *charan* (quarter) can be read with 20 or 21 *matras*, the second with 19 or 20, and the third and fourth with 18 or 19. Only by reading for four strong stresses per *charan*, though, do the lines make metrical sense:

*Rānjhā khāvaṇḍ pīvaṇḍ taraka (tarka) kītī, māra Hīra de darada (darda)*

*hairāna kītā.*

*Bhullī matta te surata (surta) jahāna vālī, Jhanga jāvaṇe dā samiāna kītā.*

(28)

<sup>93</sup> In fact, the most common pattern for the ending of a line of *baint* is long-short-long-long.

<sup>94</sup> See for example Kahn Singh 'Nabha', op.cit. 890.

Ranjha gave up eating and drinking: pining after Hir caused him  
great pain.

He lost his wits and good sense and got ready to go to Jhang.

A third important metre in the period is *doha* or *dohra*, a couplet based metre of 24 *matras* (13+11) usually ending with a long syllable followed by a short. Very common in the Hindi tradition, *doha* was often used in Punjabi for *risalas* (Muslim religious tracts). The example reproduced is from the eighteenth-century poet Hafiz Barkhurdar Ranjha's tract *Namāz dī haqīqat*:<sup>96</sup>

*Je ko pucchhe Hāfizā, avvala fajara namāza*

*Kisa paighambara parhī hai, dassa asānū rāza. (1)*

Hafiz, if anyone asks, "Tell us

Which prophet first read the morning prayer . . ."

A few words are also in order about *sadd*, a genre which is often taken by critics to be a metre. *Sadd* is a type of folk song in imitation of which many *vars* and *qissas* have been written. Kahn Singh 'Nabha' notes about the form: "It is a type of song (*gīt*) in Punjabi. It is not a type of metre (*chhand*); instead, it is a song beloved of village people that is sung with a long refrain. Many types of metres are used in the *sadd*."<sup>97</sup> What Kahn Singh fails to note is the common feature of the metres that are used in *sadd*: they are all based on line stress. The example that follows is from Pīlū's *Mirzā Sāhibā*<sup>98</sup> and is based on lines of roughly the same length as a *doha* with three strong stresses per half line. Although the second couplet scans as a *doha*, note how the first example has lines of 15+14 and 13+17 *matras*:

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<sup>95</sup> Printed as Jogindar Singh, ed., *Kissā Hir Rānjhā Mukbal* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1984).

<sup>96</sup> Printed as Piar Singh and Gobind Singh Lamba, op.cit. 165-9.

<sup>97</sup> Op.cit. 150-1.

<sup>98</sup> Printed as Piar Singh and M.S. 'Amrit', eds., *Kissā Mirzā Sāhibā* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1981).



*Bhajjiā nū jāṅ na deṅage, uddhala gaiā de chora.*

*Viccha ujārā de māra de, terī suṭṭade dhaunā marora.* (lines 155-6)

“They won’t let those who steal runaway women get away:  
They will break your neck and kill you in the wastes.”

*Rājā jhūre rāja nū, budhi nū jhūre chora.*

*Gorī jhūre rūpa nū, pairā jhūre mora.* (ll. 81-2)

A *raja* laments his kingdom, a thief his intelligence;

A fair woman laments her beauty, a peacock his feet.

### **Pre-modern Punjabi Literature:**

Although often lacking in detail and analysis, the history of pre-modern Punjabi literature is known at least in outline. More than anything else, the writing of literary history in Punjabi is hampered by the fact that many works are available only in manuscript, and many manuscripts are themselves quite hard to get at. Nonetheless, a relatively good picture of the general development of the literary tradition has already been sketched and, at least for the nineteenth century, the detailed work is beginning to be done. This being said, the writing of Punjabi literary history is further complicated by a number of issues which have not yet been theoretised by writers in the field. One of the major problems, of course, has been the privileging of Sikh literature, particularly religious texts, in literary histories written in post-1947 Indian Punjab and of Islamic literature in studies published in Pakistan.<sup>99</sup> The most recent Indian literary history,

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<sup>99</sup> One might also mention in passing the general problem of Punjabi studies in Pakistan, where enthusiasm for the language has only appeared since the 1970s (for further details, see particularly Shackle, “Punjabi in Lahore”). With some notable exceptions—such as the strength of literary histories of Islamic writing and recent attempts to produce editions of Punjabi “classics”—Punjabi criticism in Pakistan has remained a pale reflection of trends in Indian writing. Much Pakistani criticism displays an understandable obsession with the position of Punjabi in Pakistani society: in the proceedings of the World Punjabi Conference held at Lahore in 1986, for example,

published by the government-sponsored Sahitya Academy in New Delhi, mentions almost none of the extensive corpus of Islamic religious literature, not even in its chapter on religious and devotional poetry.<sup>100</sup> Quite the opposite problem exists in Pakistani Punjab, where one literary history relegates its somewhat limited selection of Hindu and Sikh poets to a specifically demarcated section of the book.<sup>101</sup> A second related problem is that of language: from the seventeenth century onward, a large proportion the of Hindu and Sikh religious literature produced in Punjab is in Braj (mostly in verse) or in an early form of Khari Boli (mostly in prose). Is this literature to be classified as "Punjabi" because it comes from the Punjab, or is it Hindi literature? Punjabi literary critics' failure to deal at all with this problem has left the field of Punjabi literary history relatively unsophisticated and unnuanced; in Indian Punjab, it has meant that anything written by a Sikh has come to be considered Punjabi literature and most works written by Hindus as Hindi literature. Leaving aside this rather crude communal division, what does become clear even from the scanty material presently available is that by the nineteenth century, it is mainly popular poetry, Islamic tracts and the *qissas* that are still being written in Punjabi, while many other types of literature are being written in Hindi (Hindu and Sikh religious texts), Urdu (prose histories and "secular" poetry) and, with decreasing frequency, Persian. This increasingly complex linguistic and literary situation raises the third major problem of Punjabi literary studies (albeit one that has not been explicitly written about at all): what status is to be given to the myriad Persian texts written in the Punjab? Very few of the texts are available in edited editions (or indeed in print at all), meaning that a very significant body of the

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eight papers of the 28 presented bear titles such as "The Problem of Punjabi" or "Obstacles to Punjabi literature/the Punjabi language" (Fakhar Zaman, et.al., op.cit.).

<sup>100</sup> Sant Singh Sekhon and Kartar Singh Duggal, *A History of Punjabi Literature* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992).



literature produced in the Punjab has never entered the discourse of literary criticism—or even of literary history.

The problems and possibilities raised by this third question are amply illustrated by the situation of the Punjabi classical love *qissas*. In addition to the substantial body of Punjabi love *qissas*, there also exist a number of versions of the story in Persian and in Hindi, some of which were written outside the Punjab (most probably under the influence of earlier Persian versions rather than that of the Punjabi poems). At least ten Persian versions of the story of Hir and Ranjha were written in north-west India before 1800, and literally dozens were written before the end of the nineteenth century. The earliest Persian text of the legend appears to be Hayāt Jān Bāqī Kolābī's *Mathnavī Hīr o Rānjhā* (1581-5), and Persian versions of the story were so numerous by the seventeenth century that Mīr Muhammad Murād Lāyaq Jaunpurī was able to write an anthology of the earlier collections entitled *Muntaḵhabāt-i maṣnavī Hīr o Rānjhā* in 1685. Other versions in Persian include: Mītā Chanābī, *'Ishqīyah-i Panjāb* (1618); Sa'īd Sa'īdī, *Afsānah-i dilpazīr* (ca. 1608-28); Shāh Faqīrullāh 'Āfirīn', *Hīr o Rānjhā* (1730-1); Ahmad Yār Khān 'Yaktā', *Maṣnavī Yaktā* (1734-5); Sundar Dās 'Ārām', *Gulshan-i rāz o 'ishq o wafā* (1757-8); Mīr Qamar ud-Dīn 'Manat', *Qissah-i 'ishq-i Hīr o Rānjhā* (1783); and Kanhaiyyā Lāl 'Hindī', *Nigarīn nāmāh* (1881). An equally early entrant into the Persian tradition (again before the *qissa* had been written in Punjabi) was the *qissa* of Sassi-Punnū; Persian versions include: Muhammad Razā 'Razāī', *Zebā nigār* (1643); Munshī Jot Prakāsh, *Dastūr-i 'ishq* (1723); Indarjīt Munshī, *Nāmāh-i 'ishq* (1728); Muhammad Salāmat 'Alī Khān 'Salāmī', *Taur-i 'ishq* (1816); and Farah Bakhsh 'Farhat', *Sassī o Punnū* (1840). The Mirza-Sahiban *qissa* seems to have entered the Persian tradition at about the same time that the story was being written in Punjabi: at least two eighteenth-century versions of the poem exist,

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<sup>101</sup> Abdul Ghafur Quraishi, *Panjābī zabān dā adab te tārīkh*.

*Sham'-i mahāfil* by 'Taskīn' (1732) and *Qissah-i Mīrzā o Sāhibān* by Khairullāh 'Fidā' (1742). The Sohni-Mahinval *qissa*, though, appears to have entered the Persian tradition only after it had become popular in Punjabi; the major Persian versions (all written after 1840) are: 'Sālih', *Maṣnavī Sohni Mahīnvāl* (1841); Shaikh 'Atā Muhammad 'Zīrak', *Maṣnavī arzhang-i 'ishq* (1859); and Shaikh Najm ud-Dīn 'Miskīn', *Qand lazzat* (1867).<sup>102</sup> As such, the Persian tradition of *qissa* writing—a tradition which made the *qissas* accessible throughout north India—spans the period of the major *qissas* in Punjabi and includes versions of all the major stories. At the same time, a number of Hindi versions of at least the Hir legend were written: Ganga Bhatta wrote a verse *samvād* between Hīr and the *qāzī* in 1565, a version appears in the *Trīā Charitra* in the Dasam Granth (traditionally supposed to have been written before 1703), and Guradasa Guni wrote a lengthy poem based on Damodar's Punjabi version of the legend in 1706.<sup>103</sup>

Unfortunately, no sustained work has been done on either the Persian or the Hindi texts of these Punjabi love stories that would help illuminate their relationship to the poems being written in Punjabi during the same period.

Most Indian Punjabi literary critics tend to divide pre-twentieth century literary history into five periods, based largely on external political events but also displaying an Indian Punjabi bias toward Sikh writing and Sikh history. The periods are named here according to Mohan Singh's classification, but the general scheme is still used by more recent Indian writers on the subject: the pre-Nanak age, the age of Nanak ("the golden Age for Panjabi life and letters"), the age of Mughal decline, the age of Ranjit Singh and the British period.<sup>104</sup> A very similar scheme of classification which renames and slightly alters the first two

<sup>102</sup> For details of the texts and some samples of verse, see Baqir, ed., *Panjābī qisse Fārsī zabān mē*.

<sup>103</sup> Piārā Singh 'Padam,' "Hīr-sāhitt" 31, A manuscript of Ganga's text is available as ms. number 529 at Central Public Library, Patiala.

periods is used by one of the major literary histories of Punjabi produced in Urdu in Pakistan: the initial period (the Lodhī era), Aurangzeb's time, the Mughal decline, the Sikh period, the English period and the Pakistani period.<sup>105</sup> As is to be expected, any periodisation so completely based upon political circumstances on the one hand and the religious history of a minority community on the other must seem rather unsatisfactory and arbitrary. Indeed, Mohan Singh's classification is particularly inappropriate to the study of the developments that took place in the *qissa*, since it bisects the early period of the *qissa*'s growth between "the age of Nanak" and "the age of Mughal decline." For this and a great many other reasons, this naive and arbitrary periodisation is badly in need of replacement by a new model or set of models; unfortunately, the identification and publication of the numerous texts still in manuscript in institutional and private collections is a necessary precondition for any such rewriting of the discipline of Punjabi literary history.

In some sense, the Indian critics' "pre-Nanak age" is merely a way to push the pedigree of the Punjabi literary tradition further into the past, as the authors included (except for Baba Farid) often wrote in Khari Boli, and the folk literature included under the rubric need not by any means be that old. The list of authors and folk genres included in the period by most authors includes: Chand Bardāī's *Prithvī Rāj Rāsau* (a Middle Indo-Aryan text), the *bāṇī* of the Nāthpanthī *jogīs* Gorakhnāth and Charpaṭnāth, a *baramah* attributed to the Lahore poet Masud in Persian chronicles, a *var* attributed to Amīr Khusrau 'Dihlavī' by a seventeenth-

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<sup>104</sup> Mohan Singh, *A History of Panjabi Literature (1100-1932)*. 2nd ed. (Amritsar: the author, 1956): 11.

<sup>105</sup> Ahmad Husain Ahmad Quraishi, *Panjābī adab kī mukhtasar tārikh*. Compare the rather more flawed periodisation used in a Pakistani history of poetry: the initial period, the age of Islamic religion, the age of Varis Shah, the age of new Punjabi poetry, and the contribution of Hindus and Sikhs to Punjabi (Abdul Ghafur Quraishi, op.cit.).

century chronicler writing in Persian,<sup>106</sup> the poetry of Farid and (the imaginary figure) Shai<sup>kh</sup> Brahm, folk-songs, folk *vars* and riddles.<sup>107</sup> The only one of these figures accepted as a predecessor by the nineteenth-century poets who began to theoretise their place in the Punjabi literary tradition is Baba Farid, who is often seen as the originator of the Punjabi literary tradition.<sup>108</sup> His works, mostly *salokas* on religious themes, are preserved as a part of the Adi Granth, in a collection of tales on his life and in three Chishti *malfūzāt* from the Deccan.<sup>109</sup>

Indian literary critics unanimously name what they perceive to be the next "era" of Punjabi literature after the Sikh Gurus or (following Mohan Singh) after Guru Nanak in particular. The dominating presence in this era as defined is, of course, the Adi Granth, in which are collected the poems of the first five and ninth Sikh Gurus and those of a number of Hindu and Muslim *bhagats* (including Baba Farid).<sup>110</sup> Perhaps more pertinent for our purpose than the poetry in Sadhukkari or Braj that forms the majority of the Adi Granth are the old Punjabi appropriations of Punjabi folk genres: wedding songs like *ghoṛīā* and *lāvā*, mourning songs such as *alāhīā* and the martial *var*. The Gurus' use of these

<sup>106</sup> The seventeenth-century chronicler Sujān Rāi Bhaṇḍārī of Baṭālā attributes a *var* "in the language of Punjab" (*bi-zabān-i Panjāb*) on the battle between Sultān Nāsir ud-dīn (Khusrau Khān) and Ghāzī ul-mulk (Sultān Ghiāṣ ud-dīn Tughlaq) in 1320 to the famed poet Amir Khusrau (1253-1325). No *vars* attributed to Khusrau or texts on the battle are known to exist in Punjabi, however. For reference to the *var*, see Sujān Rai Bhandari, *Khulāsāt ut-tavārīkh*. Ed. Zafar Hasan. (Delhi: G and Sons, 1918), p. 235. For two anthologies of Punjabi *vars*, see Piara Singh 'Padam', ed., *Panjābī vārā* (Patiala: the author, 1980) and Ganda Singh, ed., *Panjāb dīā vārā*. 1946. Reprint ed. (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1990).

<sup>107</sup> Mohan Singh, op.cit. 12 and C.L. Narang, *History of Punjabi Literature: 850-1850 AD* (Delhi: National Bookshop, 1987): 15-26.

<sup>108</sup> Mian Muhammad Bakhsh, op.cit. 656.

<sup>109</sup> One of the two collections, *Masle Shekh Pharīd ke*, is a biography of Farid produced in the Mīnā tradition of the Sikh panth (ms. 359, Bhasha Vibhag, Patiala); for some information on the verses preserved in the *malfuzat* of Burhān ud-Dīn Ghārīb and Zain ud-Dīn Shīrāzī see Shackle, "Early Vernacular Poetry in the Indus Valley" 269-70n.

<sup>110</sup> Despite its voluminous size, the Dasam Granth (attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru) has not assumed the same importance in Punjabi literary history, largely because most of the book is in Braj and Persian.

genres (and their reappropriation in *nirguna* terms) indicates in a broad way the major genres and forms of oral folk song literature during the period. The period also saw the composition of exegetical and panegyric literature by Sikh poets like Sundar, Sattā and Balwaṇḍ (as well as the other *bhaṭṭ*s whose works are in the *Adi Granth*) and Bhai Gurdas, who wrote a collection of 39 *vars* explicating Sikh belief and doctrine. The Sikh tradition also contributed to the flowering of prose literature in the period, since a number of *janamsākhīs* on the life of Guru Nanak, dialogues between religious figures, and commentaries on the Gurus' works were written. Major poets of the period include Suthrā Shāh and Jallhaṇ, both known for their ascerbic and witty didactic verse, religious poets like 'Abdī, Chhajjū Bhagat, Kānha and Santreṇ and Valī Rām, a contemporary of Shah Jahan known for his *kafis* and *rekhtās*. The period also saw a small number of translations of Sanskrit and Persian works: Chatar Dās's *Bhāgvat gyārovā skandh* (1635), Hirdai Rām Bhallā's *Hanuman nāṭak* (1630), Prahlād's *Vaitāl pachīsī* and Sītā Rām's *Kavi tarang* (1651), a translation of a Persian medical work. A number of verse treatises on theology, music and prosody were also composed: Anāth Dās's *Vichār mālā* (1669); Diāl Anemī's *Abgat hulās* (1675), *Sārdhā bodh* and *Agiān bodhinī*; Husain Bastī Bilgrāmī's *Ras prabodh* (1154 AH/1741-2); and Dīvān Lachhmī Rām's *Buddh prakāsh darpaṇ* (1681), a treatise on music.<sup>111</sup> The major figures in the period other than the Sikh Gurus are the Sufi poets, whose *kafis* enjoy a wide popularity even today; they also popularised in Punjabi a number of other genres including the pan-Islamic *siharfi* and the Punjabi folk *charkhanamas* and *shuturnamas*. Shah Husain (1539-1593), in whose honour the festival of Melā Chirāghā is still celebrated every year in Lahore, was a *faqīr* attached to the shrine of Dātā Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore. Sultān Bāhū (1631-1691), on the other hand, was the son of a cleric who had enjoyed a grant of land from

<sup>111</sup> The information for the last three sentences has been taken from Mohan Singh, op.cit. 42-3.

the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and is known both for his Punjabi *dohras* and a reputed total of 140 religious books in Arabic and Persian. Shāh Sharaf Baṭālvī (1629-1724) is less well-known but composed a body of *dohras* and *kafis* as well as a *shuturnama*.<sup>112</sup>

Mohan Singh's "age of Mughal decline" (which seems a convenient rubric for at least the political events eighteenth century) witnessed both a flowering of writing in established genres and a number of new trends, including anthologising poetry, writing saints' lives and writing *qissas*.<sup>113</sup> A large amount of Hindu religious poetry was written in the period, during which a flowering of Vaishnava poetry in Punjabi and Braj occurred; the major religious poets of the period include Budh Singh, Sundar Dās, Devī Dās and Sahjo Bāi and Charan Dās Gulābdāsī. The amount of translated literature increased greatly in the period: major works include versions of the *Singhāsan battīsī* by Jamī'at Rāi (1780) and Parmānand; numerous versions of the *Bhagvad gītā* and *Bhāgvat dasam skandh*; Kavīndrachāraj's *Basīṣṭa sār*; Mushtāq Rāi's *Hingal purān*; Devī Dās's *Kathā singh gāū*; versions of the *Mahābhārata* by Kaval Nain and Rām Kishan; and Ṭahkaṇ's *Jaiminīya aṣṭamedha*. A number of original texts on various subjects have also survived: notable among these are *Bārash bilās* (on meteorology), an untitled text on prognostication, and Charan Dās's *Sabhā prakāsh* (on prosody).<sup>114</sup> A great deal of prose literature was written in the period, including a number of *janamsakhis*, commentaries on Hindu and Sikh scriptures and saints' lives and moralistic tales (*bachans* and *sukhans*). As in the previous period, some of the most enduringly popular poets are Sufi lyric writers. Bullhe Shāh (1680-1758) was a Sayyid from Qasūr (near Lahore), a disciple of the Qādiriyā saint Shāh 'Ināyat who is famed

<sup>112</sup> Information on the Sufi poets is taken from Sekhon and Duggal, op.cit. 66-8.

<sup>113</sup> Mohan Singh, op.cit. 54. Mohan Singh notes fifteen poetry anthologies from the period in Lahore collections alone.

<sup>114</sup> The information in the preceding three sentences is taken from Mohan Singh, op.cit. 59, 61, 63.

for his *kafis*, and is credited with a number of *baramahs* and *siharfis*. 'Alī Haidar of Multan (1690-1751) was a Chishti who is known for a collection of five *siharfis*.<sup>115</sup>

It was during Mohan Singh's "age of Mughal decline" and the last part of his "age of Nanak" that the classical Punjabi *qissa* tradition has its beginnings. The first classical *qissas* appear to have been written by rural Sayyids and *pirs* or by the rural disciples of urban Sufi *pirs*. Most of the early *qissas* are versions of the Hir-Ranjha story, although at least three versions of Yusuf-Zulaikha and one of Sassi Punnun were written before 1750. The two earliest Hir *qissas* were written by Ahmad Gujjar, who claims to have lived during the reign of Aurangzeb (1658-89) and Hāfiz Shāhjahān Muqbil, supposedly writing during the reign of Muhammad Shah (1719-48). There are manuscripts of a *Sassī Punnū* by a poet named Āḍit whom Shamsheer Singh 'Ashok' has connected with a Sikh of Gurū Arjan from Rohtās by the same name, although no firm evidence for the attribution is available.<sup>116</sup> The only figure about whom we have any biographical information (most of it legendary) is Varis Shah (mid-eighteenth century). By his own testimony, Varis was a rural Sayyid associated with the Chishti *pir* Sayyid Makhdūm Qasūrī. According to popular tradition, Varis migrated from his native village of Janḍiālā Sher Khān (district Shekhupura) to Pir Makhdum Qasuri's establishment in Pakpattan, where he fell in love with a woman from a nearby village named Bhāgbharī.<sup>117</sup> He began to live in the mosque in her village, until the secret of their love was found out and he was beaten and expelled from the village. Soon afterward, he migrated to Malkā Hāns and began to write his

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<sup>115</sup> The information on Bullhe Shah and Ali Haidar is taken from Sekhon and Duggal, op.cit. 69, 72.

<sup>116</sup> Shamsheer Singh 'Ashok', "Kissā Sassī-Punnū de do agiāt rachaytā," *Khoj darpan* 2:2(July 1975): 88-92. The manuscripts are in Central Public Library, Patiala and Moti Bagh Library, Patiala.

<sup>117</sup> Similar stories are told about other *qissa* poets: Hashim Shah is said to have fallen in love with a Brahman woman, Ahmad Yār with a woman named Rāṇī and Fazl Shah with an unnamed woman. M.S. 'Amrit', "Sohṇī Vaid Indar Singh," *Khoj darpan* 2:2(July 1975): 123-32.

*qissa* (finished in 1766-7) in the local mosque.<sup>118</sup> If we have more legend than fact about Varis Shah, though, we know even less about the writers of the other early *qissas* that have come down to us—only that much of their literary output was largely dedicated to Islamic themes and subjects. Certainly most of the major pre-twentieth century poets were from the Rachnā *doab* and (to a lesser extent) from Majha—most commonly from districts Lahore, Gujranwala, Shekhupura, Gujrat, Sialkot, Amritsar, Qasur, Batala and Gurdaspur—areas that correspond with the major centres of Islamic learning in the Punjab: Lahore, Multan, Sialkot, Pakpattan, Batala, Qasur, Gujranwala, Wazirabad, Sheikhupura and Gujrat.<sup>119</sup> It seems likely that the traditional *madrasā* education available in urban and rural centres throughout Punjab played a significant role in the spread of the Punjabi literary tradition among educated Muslims, as well as the growth of the tradition of *ustādī-shāgirdī* that Punjabi literature apparently came to share with the metropolitan Urdu tradition.<sup>120</sup> The Islamic credentials of many of the early *qissa* writers are impeccable, and where they are more uncertain later tradition attributes implausibly long lists of religious tracts in Punjabi, Hindi and Persian to the writers. Among the extant Punjabi religious tracts are *Jangnāmā*s of Imām Husain attributed to Muqbil and Hāfiz Barkhurdar; indeed, Barkhurdar is credited with the authorship of a strikingly large number of *risalas*. Hand in hand with the practice of writing religious works along with *qissas* came the trend of writing *qissas* on explicitly Islamic themes, initially the Quranic love-story of Yusuf and Zulaikha. Hafiz Barkhurdar appears to have written the first Punjabi version of the story in 1679-80, followed by and Siddiq Lali in 1725 and Rukn

<sup>118</sup>Budh Singh, *Koīl kū*. 2nd ed. (Amritsar: Phulvārī, 1912): 121-3.

<sup>119</sup>Johal, "Punjabi Literature" 26-7, 20-1.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid. 24-5, 35-6. Otherwise the beginnings of the system of *ustādī-shāgirdī* in the nineteenth century (see below, p. 68).



ud-Dīn 'Hindī', a disciple of the poet Shāh Zarīf (1634-1708), in 1727.<sup>121</sup> Chirāgh Āvān (born ca. 1670) of village Kher in district Dera Ghazi Khan wrote a *Hīr* in 1709.<sup>122</sup> One of the more famous poets of the late eighteenth century was Hāmid Shāh 'Abbāsī (born 1748 in a village near Pathankot in district Gurdaspur), a *musāhib* at the Nūrpur court who had studied Hindī, Sanskrit and astrology in Banaras. He wrote a version of *Hīr* in *baint* and *dohra* in 1220 AH (1805) after having opposed the story as un-Islamic for 22 years; he had earlier presented his *Jang-i Hāmid* (1191 AH/1777-8) to Allāh Baksh Minhās, a *vazīr* at the court of Nurpur (near Kangra), and received a horse, a dress of honour and some cash. His other works include *Akḥbar-i Hāmid* (1197 AH/1783-4), *Gulzār-i Hāmid*, *Tafsīr-i Hāmid*, *Faqarnāmā-i Hāmid*, *Fakīlat-i roz-i 'Ashūrā* and other religious tracts.<sup>123</sup> Bihbal (born ca. 1752), a resident of Lahore and disciple of Pīr Fatehullāh Chishtī, wrote a *Hīr* and a *Sassī Punmū*.<sup>124</sup> Sundar Dās 'Aram' wrote a *Sassī Punmū* (1172 AH/1759) and a *Hīr Rānjhā* (1761).<sup>125</sup>

As Mughal power declined in the Punjab and local *zamindars* and *sardārs* (and later Maharaja Ranjit Singh) began to extend their influence, there seems to have occurred a consequent extension of patronage to local artists, including poets. Even before the period of Sikh rule instances of aristocratic patronage of Punjabi poets from locations as diverse as Bahawalpur, Multan and Nurpur are

<sup>121</sup>Gobind Singh Lamba, "Panjābī vich Yūsuf Zulaikhā dā kissā," *Khoj Darpaṇ* 1:1 (Jan. 1974): 92. Lamba's comments on Rukn ud-Din, of whose *qissa* he possesses the only known (incomplete) manuscript, are usefully corrected by Pritam Saini who assigns the text its correct date and also notes the existence of another work by the poet, a Punjabi translation of the *Rauzāt us-shuhadā'* completed in 1723, see *Yūsuf Zulaikhā-Sadīk Lālī (Bahir-ul-ishk)* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1993): 3-4.

<sup>122</sup>Surindar Singh Kohli, *History of Punjabi Literature* (Delhi: National Bookshop, 1993): 87.

<sup>123</sup>Ajmer Singh, *Mahārājā Ranjīt Singh ate Panjābī sahitt* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1982): 53-4; Kohli, op.cit. 92-3. Kohli claims that Hamid was the *imām* of his village mosque.

<sup>124</sup>Kohli, op.cit. 93.

<sup>125</sup>Shamsher Singh 'Ashok', op.cit. 92-6.

known.<sup>126</sup> Presumably, the popularity of the *qissa* encouraged the new patrons to request both new treatments of old *qissas* and *qissa* treatments of other stories already familiar to them. The tastes of both the new patrons and the poets they patronised (many of both were Hindus and Sikhs) changed the dominant tone of the *qissas* as a whole: on the one hand, many folk tales came to be written as *qissas* for the first time; on the other, the tropes and techniques of Braj poetry began to enter the *qissa*— a trend that had begun with Kesar Singh Chhibbar’s mid-eighteenth century religious *qissa* about Gopī Chand and Bhartṛhari, written in *dohras* in *raga* Rāmkalī.<sup>127</sup> Despite (or perhaps because of) this large-scale innovation, this period has become known as the “golden age” of the Punjabi *qissa*. Following the lead of the Dasam Granth, for example, Vir Singh Bal and Jog Singh rewrote the story of Hir and Ranjha as a Hindu legend.<sup>128</sup> Originally from district Jalandhar, Vir Singh wrote his *Hir* in 1812 at the request of Maharaja Karam Singh of Patiala, for whom he also wrote two *gurbilas* texts and a Braj *Rāmāyaṇa*.<sup>129</sup> Kishan Singh wrote a *Hir* in the *doha* metre to be sung to the accompaniment of *ḍhaḍ* and *sārangī*, as well as a *Shīrīn Farhād*.<sup>130</sup> There was also a trend toward innovation by using other indigenous Punjabi forms, particularly metres belonging to folk or oral literature: Lakh Shāh wrote a *Sassī Punnū* in the folk metre *ḍiodh* in 1832.<sup>131</sup> At the same time, sections of the new elite (and, presumably, the old elite as well) began to demand more treatments of Islamic themes as well as Punjabi versions of the Persian romance classics. There was a consequent tendency to emphasise Persianate features in *qissas* of this variety:

<sup>126</sup>Johal, op.cit. 31-2.

<sup>127</sup>Ajmer Singh, “Pahilā Sikkh kissākār Kesar Singh Chhibbar.” *Ālochanā* 29:1(Apr.-June 1984): 39, 41.

<sup>128</sup>Lamba, *Panjābī kissā-kāvi* 66.

<sup>129</sup> Ajmer Singh, *Mahārājā Ranjīt Singh* 72-5

<sup>130</sup> Sekhon and Duggal, op.cit. 89.

<sup>131</sup> Kohli, op.cit. 111.

“Under this influence, the folk vigour and native colouring of the *qissas* began to disappear and artifice took its place. Persian vocabulary and poetic conventions and hyperbole became common.”<sup>132</sup> Among the *qissas* which make their first appearance in written form between 1800 and 1850 are the *qissas* of Pūran Bhagat, Rājā Rasālū, Kāmṛup Kāmlatā, Chandrabadan Maiyār, Shah Bahram, Hātam Tāi and Tamim Ansari.<sup>133</sup> The earliest versions of *Qissa Chandrabadan Maiyār*, for example, are that of Ahmad Yar (written in 1798) and Maulvī Nūr Muhammad of village Doburgī, Qasur (district Lahore), who completed his poem in 1801.<sup>134</sup> At the same time, the *qissa* became the territory for cultural and even sectarian engagement: scribes of manuscripts in Persian script (writing both for Muslims and for Persian-educated non-Muslims) invoke Allah and call their texts *qissa*, while those writing the same texts in Gurmukhi call them *kathā* and invoke Vāhigurū.<sup>135</sup>

One of the more famous poets of this “golden age” of the Punjabi *qissa* was Hashim Shah (1752-1823), a Quraishi Sayyad *hakīm* from the village of Jagdeo in district Amritsar; he wrote eleven works in Punjabi (including the first *Qissā Shīrīn Farhād*, a *Qissā Sohṇī Mahīvāl*, a *Qissā Sassī Punnū*, a *Sīharfī Sassī Punnū* and a *Hīr Rānjhe kī birtī*), five in Persian, one in Urdu, eight in Hindi, and a book each on medicine and astrology.<sup>136</sup> Hashim is often reputed to have been a favourite of Ranjit Singh if not actually a court poet, although no evidence exists to support either claim.<sup>137</sup> Qadir Yar (born 1805) was a Sandhū Jat from district

<sup>132</sup>Lamba, *Panjābī kissā-kāvi* 17. Although different types of *diodh* have different *matra* counts, the metre consists of four rhyming *misras*, each of which is followed by a rhyming half-line.

<sup>133</sup>For details of these *qissas* and their various authors, see *ibid.*

<sup>134</sup>Kohli, *op.cit.* 108.

<sup>135</sup>Lamba, *Panjābī kissā-kāvi* 10.

<sup>136</sup>Ajmer Singh, *op.cit.* 56-61.

<sup>137</sup>Budh Singh, for example, claims that Hashim gained favour with Ranjit Singh by reciting a commemorative *var* on the death of Ranjit Singh’s father Mahā Singh and later became a

Shekhupura whose *Pūran Bhagat* has secured lasting fame; he also wrote a *Sohṇī Mahīvāl*, a *Mī rājnāmā* and a *Vār Sardār Harī Singh Nalvā*. There is some indication that he may have received a small *jāgīr* for his *Pūran Bhagat*.<sup>138</sup> Perhaps the most prolific poet of the period was Maulvī Ahmad Yar (1768-1848), a cleric from district Gujrat who was commissioned to produce a biography of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Persian: he wrote at least 18 *qissas* (including a *Hīr*, a *Chandrabadan*, a *Rāj Bībī*, a *Kām rūp* and a *Yūsuf Zulaikhā*), four *Jangnāmās* and nine religious tracts, as well as a text on medicine and numerous miscellaneous works. He was a “professional man of letters” who “depended for support on the patronage of the aristocracy of his time” and received at least one village in *jāgīr*.<sup>139</sup> Jog Singh, a *Nirmalā sādhu* and the brother of the famed Braj poet Santokh Singh, wrote the first *Hīr Rānjhā* in the Malvaī dialect in 1882 VS/1825 (although he had been born in Amritsar, he spent many years living near Ambala).<sup>140</sup> A number of poets whose primary contributions were to the Braj tradition also wrote *qissas* during the period: Gangā Rām, a disciple of Manohar Dās Udāsī, wrote a *Qissā Gopī Chand* in *siharfi* in 1840 (in addition to six major texts in Braj including a translation of the *Viṣṇu purāṇa*) and Gurbakhsh Singh, who wrote a Braj text on prosody for the Patiala court in 1856, became the first Sikh author of a *Sassī* with his *siharfi* version of the story.<sup>141</sup> A number of Muslim religious figures also took up the writing of *qissas* during the period: Akbar Shāh (died 1858) was a Qadiriya Abbasi Sayyid with strong anti-English leanings who spent his life engaged in *tablīgh* (religious instruction) in the Multan area and

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favourite at court, reciting his *Sassī Punnū* to the court at Dasehrā. See Budh Singh, *Bambīhā bol* (publishing details unknown; available at SOAS Library, University of London): 143-4.

<sup>138</sup> Sekhon and Duggal, op.cit. 87; Ajmer Singh, op.cit. 81. He is also credited with a *Rozānāmā* is also attributed to him and he himself claims to have written a *Rājā Rasālū* and a *Rājī Kokilā dī vār*, although neither appears to be extant.

<sup>139</sup> Sekhon and Duggal, op.cit. 86-7 and Ajmer Singh, op.cit. 67-9.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 76-7.

wrote a *Sassī Punnū*, a *Mirzā Sāhibā* and a *Qissā Misrī* (1237 AH/1822-3) in addition to a *Jangnāmā* and a number of collections of shorter poems.<sup>142</sup> Maulvī Ghulām Rasūl Āvān (1813-74) from *zilā* Gujranwala wrote a *Sassī Punnū* in Jami's metre in 1847, but later regretted having written it and wrote a *Huliyā Sharīf* in repentance. He travelled around the Punjab giving religious instruction after returning from the *hajj* and was briefly arrested in 1857 on the suspicion of having incited the Paṭhāns against British rule.<sup>143</sup> One of the poets whose career spanned the end of Sikh rule in the Punjab and the beginning of the British period was the prolific writer Imam Bakhsh (1805-1863), a Quraishi from zila Shekhupura (near Lahore) whose works display a marked admiration for the Persian romance tradition, although his style generally lacks the Persianate vocabulary and rhetoric of later authors. A teacher in a village mosque who earned his living through carpentry, his works include *Qissā Malikzādā Shāhparī* (1822), *Qissā Adham Balkhī*, *Qissā Chandrabadan*, *Qissā Lailā Majnūn* (1830), *Qissā Shāh Bahrām*, *Qissā Badī' ul-jamāl* (1263 AH/1847-8), *Qissā Gul sanobar*, *Qissā Gulbadan*, *Qissā Amīr Hamzā* (1867), *Qissā Shīrīn Khusrau*, *Yūsuf Zulaiḫā* and *Munājāt-i Mīā vaḍḍā*.<sup>144</sup>

The nineteenth century saw a dramatic increase in the amount of literary production in genres other than the *qissa* as well, a rise partially caused by a corresponding increase in patronage from the royal courts at Lahore, Patiala, Jīnd, Kapūrthalā and Nābhā. An idea of some of the major emphases of court patronage may be gleaned from an examination of some of the major works produced at the request of patrons. Fateh Singh Āhlūwālīā of Kapurthala had the *Akbarnāmāh* translated for him by Rām Kavī in 1823; the Patiala *darbār* patronised

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 90-1, 96.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. 91-2.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. 92-3.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. 84-5.

Kavī Nihāl Singh's *Sunīti panth prakāś* (a translation of the *Akhlāq-i muḥsinīn*) and *Sabhā maṇḍan* (a translation of the *Ā'im-i Akbarī*), Vir Singh Bal's *Hīr Rānjhā*, his *gurbilas* texts *Gurkīrat prakāś*<sup>h</sup> and *Singh sāgar*, and the early works of the famed poet Santokh Singh. (Santokh Singh himself later moved on to Kainthal, where Uday Singh patronised his translation of Tulsī's *Rāmāyaṇa* and his monumental *Srī Gurpratāp sūraj*.) Among the many works patronised by the court of Lahore was Budh Singh Lāhorī's *Buddhi bāridhī*, a translation of the *Bahār-i danish* completed in 1868 VS (1811-12).<sup>145</sup> The extension of royal patronage to Punjabi poets also led to the rise of two closely linked new genres (both of which tend to subsume elements of the other), poetry of praise and chronicles in verse and. . . . Examples of the first type include Ja'far Beg's *Sīharfī Sarkār kī* (1840); Sāvaṇ Yār's *Sīharfī Sarkār kī* (1838); versions of *Vār Sardār Harī Singh Nalve dī* written by Qadir Yar (1838), Sahāi Singh (ca. 1838) and an unknown other (1838); and versions of *Jangnāmā Sardār Harī Singh Nalvā* by Rām Diāl Aṇad (1838), Gurmukh Singh (1838) and an unknown author.<sup>146</sup> The second type of literature is represented by a large number of texts, both written chronicles that were the products of official patronage and popular *vars* (both oral and written). Although most of the patronised histories of the Lahore court were written in Persian, the courts of Patiala and Kapurthala in particular sponsored a number of texts in Punjabi: the most famous of the texts prepared for the Kapurthala court, for example, are Rām Sukh Rāo's biographies of the first three rulers, *Jassā Singh binod*, *Bhāg Singh chandroday* and *Srī Fateh Singh pratāp prabhākar*.<sup>147</sup> Examples of the second type of work include the numerous *vars* composed on the internal conflicts in Lahore after Ranjit Singh's death and the Anglo-Sikh wars: the anonymous *Vār Lāhaur dī*

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. 34-5.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid. 144-5, 148, 151, 153-4, 156-8.

<sup>147</sup> For an edition of the third text, see Joginder Kaur, ed., *Ram Sukh Rao's Sri Fateh Singh Partap Prabhakar (A History of the Early Nineteenth Century Punjab)* (Patiala: the author, 1980).

*khānājangī* (1843), Nihāl Singh's *Baintā Sher Singh kiā* (1843), Hīrā's *Sandhāvālīā dī vār* (ca. 1845), Shāh Muhammad's *Jangnāmā Singhā te Phirangīā* (1846), Maṭak's *Jang Singhā te Phirangīā* (1846), Kāhn Singh Bangā's *Jangnāmā Lāhaur* (1845) and Sobhā Baloch's *Multān dī vār* (1850).<sup>148</sup>

The sheer volume and variety of the literature produced in the nineteenth century make anything approaching even a representative selection cumbersome. One of the major genres in the period was translation from Sanskrit, Hindi and Persian works such as the poetry of Vrinda, Tulsi, Sūrdās and Nanddās, Jayadeva's *Gīta Govinda*, the Upanishads, the Bhagvadgita, the works of Shankarāchārya, various Purāṇas and Mughal chronicles. A number of works in prose and poetry were written on subjects such as prognostication, prosody, music, medicine, the care of horses and erotics. "Sikh" literature such as *janamsakhis*, *rahitnāmās*, scriptural commentaries, devotional poetry and collections of stories on the Gurus proliferated, as did "Hindu" poetry on Ram and Kṛṣṇa. A number of Muslim writers wrote commentaries on the *sharia* and *fiqh*, manuals of religious practice and moral tracts, as well as commentaries on the Quran and versified lives of the prophets. A large number of *vars*, *siharfis*, *baramahs* and poems in numerous other genres on a variety of subjects were also composed during the period.<sup>149</sup> The end of the period saw the introduction of the lithographic printing press in the Punjab, under the impetus of which a number of older works were reprinted and large numbers of new texts—both in established genres and in new forms like the short story and novel—were published. The period also saw a number of developments in poetry that appear to have been borrowed from the Urdu tradition, the most important of which was the starting of public *mushāirās* in imitation of the gatherings held in Lahore

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<sup>148</sup> Ajmer Singh, op.cit. 109, 111-2, 114, 116, 124, 127, 129.

<sup>149</sup> See Mohan Singh, op.cit. 64-71 for details.

by the Anjuman-e-Panjāb from June 1874 to March 1875 and attended by both Hālī and Āzād: indeed, some poets read at both the Anjuman's Urdu gatherings (and its successors after 1879) and the Punjabi *kavī darbārs*.<sup>150</sup> Organised by the Lahore poet Hidāyatullāh (1838-1929), one of the most prolific interpolators of Varis Shah's *Hīr*, the gatherings remained popular from their beginnings in 1875 to roughly 1912. During the same period, *ghazals* began to be written in Punjabi and the tradition of *ustadi-shagirdi* developed, with poets of lesser reputation gathering around the major poets of Lahore.<sup>151</sup>

The period after the arrival of the British in the Punjab saw both a renewed emphasis on the existing varieties of the *qissa* and the rise of new types. Some of the major developments in the period include a shift in the production of *qissas* from the central and western regions of the Punjab to Malva in the south-east; the expression of a wider range of subject matter; an increasing number of Hindu and Sikh themes and writers; the use of new metres; more information about poets (particularly their places of residence and the year of composition) in the *qissas* (primarily for commercial reasons); and the elaboration of separate idioms (in different scripts) by Muslim poets on the one hand and Hindu and Sikh poets on the other.<sup>152</sup> The cultural anxiety produced by the entry of the British into the Punjab seems to have added a new urgency to the composition of the florid, ornate Persianate *qissas* of the classical tradition: it is almost as if the writers of the classical tradition were attempting to assert the prestige of the Persianate Islamic tradition against the intrusions of British

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<sup>150</sup> For an account of the Anjuman's *mushairas*, see Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and its Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): 35-8. Leitner (op.cit. part 1, 171) notes about the 1875 *mushairas*: "The effect of the mistake of 1874-5 lasted till 1879 when public *Musháaras* could again be revived at Lahore, which still continue; but they had never ceased in native society itself . . ."

<sup>151</sup> Parmindar Singh, *Panjābī sāhitt de mūl lacchhan te pramukh pravrittīā* (1849-1900) (Ludhiana: Lahore Bookshop, 1986): 398-9.



culture and thinking. Perhaps the most famous example of such a classical *qissa* is the highly Persianate *Sohṇī Mahīvāl* (1265 AH/1849-50) of Fazl Shah (1828-90), a Sayyid who worked in the office of the Stores Commissioner in the new British administration in Lahore. Fazl Shah's text quite consciously owes to the *masnavi* its use of lavish Persian imagery and vocabulary, as well as its use of formal *masnavi* conventions like the use of Persian prose rubrics to introduce each unit of verse. Fazl Shah's other works include a *Hīr Rānjhā* (1284 AH/1867-8), a *Lailā Majnūn* (1288 AH/1871-2), and a *Yūsuf Zulaikhā* (1308 AH/1890-1), as well as versions of the Hir, Sohni and Sassi stories in *siharfi*.<sup>153</sup> His contemporary Muhammad Būṭā 'Gujrātī' (1836-1919) is "better known for his didactic and Islamic historical poems" (especially his *Panj ganj*, written in 1874) but also wrote a large number of *qissas* including *Mirzā Sāhibā* (1898), *Sassī Punnū*, *Sohṇī Mahīvāl*, *Roḍā Jalālī* (1888), *Yūsuf Zulaikhā*, *Shūrīn Farhād* (1872), *Kissā Chandarbadan* (1887) and *Qissa Sultān Mahmūd* (1900). Gujrati, who writes in one of his *qissas* that he would rather write in Arabic and Persian than in Punjabi, emblematises the dividing line between the continuance of traditional learning in the first part of his life and its decline by the period of his poetic maturity.<sup>154</sup> Often based on Islamic themes or Persian and Arabic adventure stories, many of the *qissas* of this period were both culturally encyclopedic and exceedingly lengthy; many of the extended versions of the Yusuf-Zulaikha story, for example, sold better than the shorter treatments, presumably because "[a] new class of customers, perhaps consisting chiefly of Maulvis and circles close to them, seems to have been drawn rather more powerfully to treatments looking both satisfyingly long and

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid. 401-3.

<sup>153</sup> Ajmer Singh, op.cit. 95.

<sup>154</sup> Sekhon and Duggal, op.cit. 89; Parmindar Singh, op.cit. 405, 500-1. Parmindar Singh notes that *Kissā Chandarbadan* was first written by Ahmad Yar in 1798 and then by Nur Muhammad in 1801.

reassuringly Islamic.”<sup>155</sup> Some of the more famous examples of the encyclopedic variety of *qissa* are the works of Miā Muhammad Baksh ‘Jihlamī’ (1829-1905), the son of the *gaddidār* of Shāh Ghāzī Qalandar (Pīr Damrīvāle), whose *Saif ul-Mulūk* alone contains over 10,000 lines. His other works include *Sohṇī Mahīvāl*, *Mirzā Sāhibān*, *Shīrīn Farhād*, *Shāh Mansūr*, *Shaikh San’āī*, *Sakhī Khavās Khān*, a number of religious works (*Tuhfā-i Mīrā*, *Gulzār-i faqar*, *Hidāyat ul-muslimīn* and *Tuhfā-i Rasūliyā*) and a number of minor poems (including a *Chitṭhī Hīr Rānjhā in siharfi*).<sup>156</sup> Another master of the extended *qissa* was Ghulām Rasūl (1849-1892) of zila Hoshiarpur, who is most famous for his *Ahsan ul-qisas* (a version of the Yusuf-Zulaikha in over six thousand verses) and his almost equally lengthy *Dāstān-i Amīr Hamzā*.<sup>157</sup>

At the other end of the literary spectrum from the classicising *qissas* of Fazl Shah and Ghulam Rasul were the increasing number of *qissas* written in the Malvai dialect of south-eastern Punjab (often in poetic styles particular to the region). The most famous of these are the *Hīr* (1886; in *kabitt* metre), *Sohṇī Mahīvāl* (1891), *Jiūnā Moṛ* and *Mirzā Sāhibā* of Bhagvān Singh (1850-1902), a Khatrī Sikh from zila Bhatinda who was a *kavīshar* (a poet who recites at public gatherings).<sup>158</sup> Another poet who achieved regional fame in Malva was the Rajasthan-born wandering *sadhu* Sadā Rām (1861-1933), who wrote a total of sixteen *qissas* and religious works but was well-known primarily for his *Sohṇī Mahīvāl* and *Sassī Punnū*.<sup>159</sup> Some of the poets of the period were motivated more by commercial considerations than by anything else: one of the most famous of the *bāzārī qissākār*s of the period (many of whose *qissas* are still widely available

<sup>155</sup> Shackle, “Between Scripture and Romance” 170.

<sup>156</sup> Parmindar Singh, op.cit. 501-4.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. 506-7.

<sup>158</sup> Sekhon and Duggal, op.cit. 90; Parmindar Singh, op.cit. 406, 504.

<sup>159</sup> Parmindar Singh, op.cit. 509-11.

in chapbook form in Punjabi *bazars*) was Kishan Singh ‘‘Ārif’’ (1836-1900), a disciple of Gulāb Dās, who was (like his father) a bookseller by trade.<sup>160</sup> A brief list of some of the other poets writing in the period will serve to indicate both the range of interests among late nineteenth century *qissa* authors and their geographic affiliations (in many cases parts of Malva): Natthā Singh (1834-1924) of *zila* Sangrur wrote *Jīūṇā Moṛ* in 1893; Karam Singh (died 1919) of district Ludhiana who wrote *Qissā Pūran Bhagat* (1887), *Qissā Kaulā Bhagtaṇī*, *Qissā Guggā*, *Qissā Hīr Rānjhā*, *Qissā Sassī Punnū* as well as *Jangnāmā Kābul* (published 1895);<sup>161</sup> Kishan Singh (1860-1911) of *zila* Sangrur wrote *Dulhā Bhaṭṭī* in 1897; Kishan Singh (1864-1934) of district Ludhiana wrote *Dulhā Bhaṭṭī*; Jīvā Singh (1864-1934) of district Ludhiana wrote *Mirzā Sāhibā* in 1892; Gokal Chand (1868-1951) of district Ludhiana wrote *Hīr* in 1898 and *Jaimal Fattā* in 1900; Bajārā Singh (1869-1920) of district Faridkot wrote *Hīr* in 1884; Narain Singh (1872-1943) of district Ludhiana wrote *Pūran Bhagat* in 1894 and *Jānī Chor* in 1897; Raṇ Singh (1877-1931) of district Sangrur wrote *Qissā Ghunḍvālī nār* in 1889; Nand Singh (1880-1950) of district Sangrur wrote *Pūran Bhagat* in 1898; Sundar Dās (1865-1942) wrote *Hīr* in 1893; Gaurī Nāth ‘Gauharī’ (1868-1908; the younger brother of the famous poet Pandit Mān Singh ‘Kālīdās’) wrote *Qissā Malkī Kīmā* (1883); Bishan Singh ‘Khatri’ (1859-1917) of Jhelum wrote *Qissā Jahāndār Shāh* (1895) and *Kissā Shāh Murād* (1897); Pīrādittā Tragaṛ (born 1860) wrote *Yūsuf Zulaikhā* (as well as interpolating Varis Shah’s *Hīr*); Karam Bakḥsh (1785-1876) of Lahore wrote a *Hīr*; Chaudhri Ghasīṭā Mal ‘Ghamnāk’ (1857-1917) wrote a number of small *qissas* on various subjects; Bhāi Khān Shaidā (1860-1924) of district Gurdaspur wrote a *Shīrīn Farhād*; Lahorā Singh (1865-1923) of Lahore wrote *Hīr Rānjhā* in 1899; and Sāī Maulā Shāh (born 1867) of district Amritsar wrote a *Sassī Punnū*, a *Hīr Rānjhā*

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid. 498.

and a *Mirzā Sāhibā*.<sup>162</sup> Perhaps one of the most interesting examples of the cultural syntheses that could still take place in the period was Gopāl Singh 'Gopāl' (1846-1914), the son of Sardār Javāhir Singh 'Rāmgarhīā' of district Gurdaspur, who wrote *Qissā Shāh Bahrām* (1876), *Qissā Bishno Baggā Mal* (1878), *Qissā Sassī Punnū* (1893), *Yūsuf Zulaikhā* (1894) and a *Rāmāyaṇā* (1895).<sup>163</sup>

The large number of *qissas* on well-known themes during the period should not be allowed to obscure another trend whose effect on the genre was (at least quantitatively) greater: the subsuming of other genres and subjects into the short *qissas* made so popular by the printing press. At the same time, individual *qissas* began to incorporate more than one verse form or metre. Beginning perhaps with Shah Muhammad's *qissa* on the fall of the Lahore kingdom to the British—variously called *Qissa Singhā te Firangīā*, *Vār Singhā te Firangīā*, or *Jangnāmā Singhā te Firangīā*—writers and publishers seem to have begun to use the term *qissa* to describe an increasing variety of connected narrative poems on a vast number of subjects. Many of these narrative poems are written in metres common to Punjabi folk-songs and seem to have been produced for popular consumption.<sup>164</sup> Among the *qissas* published at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries were humorous dialogues between female friends or relatives, didactic disputations between *mullās* (Muslim clerics) and doubters, ghost stories, reformist tales of child marriage, the story of the introduction of rail and motor transport into the Punjab, and accounts of British battles on the Northwest Frontier. Prominent local happenings such as murders and banditry were also popular subjects for the new *qissas*. As the scope of Punjabi life began to expand, *qissas* which narrated the experiences of Punjabi

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<sup>161</sup> Published as Gurdev Singh, ed., *Kissākār Karam Singh rachnāvalī* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1991).

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. 412-5.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. 411.

labourers in Africa or the exploits of Akalis and Congress politicians began to appear.<sup>165</sup> The writing of the more familiar *qissas* also continued well into the twentieth century, though: Vaid Indar Singh (born 1906 in *zila* Bhathinda) was famous for his *Qissā Sūrpanakhā līlā ate Janakī haran* and his *Sohṇī Mahīvāl*, Sayyad Navāb Shāh Bukhārī wrote a *Sohṇī Mahīvāl* in 1892 (as well as three *qissas* which are no longer extant, a *Shāh Bahrām ate Hasan Bano*, a *Chandrabadan Maiyār*, and a *Mirzā Sāhibā*) and Bāg Singh (born in *tahsīl* Moga in 1866) wrote a *Sohṇī Mahīvāl* in 1906.<sup>166</sup> A number of versions of *Yūsuf Zulaikhā* were also written in the period: Karam Ilāhī's *Ahsan ul-qisas* (also known as the *Tafsīr-i Yūsufī*) was written in 1320 AH/1902; Maulvi Muhammad Muslim's two volume *Ajā'ib ul-qisas* (containing the stories of a number of prophets) appeared in the same period; Muhammad Azhar Hanafī's version of the *qissa* was published in 1909; 'Abdul Sattār's 12,000 verse *Qisas ul-muhsinīn* was written in 1896 and published in 1900; and Muhammad Buta's *Ahsan ul-qisas* was written in 1336 AH/1917.<sup>167</sup> A massive version of 15,000 verses entitled *Gulzār-i Yūsuf* or *Qisas ul-muhsinīn* was written around 1910 by Maulvī Dilpazīr from district Gujranwala, and later versions include a text written by Dāim Iqbāl 'Dāim' Qādirī in 1942 and Muhammad Ayūb Hashmat (of district Shekhupura) in 1950.<sup>168</sup> A prime example of the trend toward subsuming other genres in the *qissa* is Sayyid Mirā Shāh

<sup>164</sup>Shahbāz Malik, *Nitāre* (Lahore: Taj Book Depot, 1979): 46.

<sup>165</sup>For author-title listings of the numerous *qissas* of the period preserved in the British Museum and India Office Library collections see J.F. Blumhardt, "Catalogue of Panjabi Books" in *Catalogues of the Hindi, Panjabi, Sindhi and Pushtu Printed Books in the Library of the British Museum* (London: B. Quaritch, 1893); J.F. Blumhardt, "Catalogue of Panjabi Books" in *Catalogue of the Library of the India Office, Vol. II-Part III: Hindi, Panjabi, Pushto and Sindhi Books* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1902); L.D. Barnett, *Panjabi Printed Books in the British Museum: A Supplementary Catalogue* (London: Trustees of the BM, 1961); Ganesh Gaur, *Catalogue of Panjabi Printed Books Added to the India Office Library 1902-64* (London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1975).

<sup>166</sup>M.S. Amrit, "Sohṇī Vaid Indar Singh" 123-132; Dharam Singh, "Sohṇī Sayyad Navāb Shāh Bukhārī" *Khoj darpan* 2:2(July 1975): 97-103; Gurdev Singh Sidhu, "Sohṇī Bāg Singh: Lok sabhiāchār de paripekh vich" *Khoj darpan* 3:2(1976): 47-60.

<sup>167</sup>Lamba, "Panjābī vich Yūsuf Zulaikhā dā qissā" 95-8.

'Jālandharī''s (1829-1914) *Hīr* (written in 1307 AH/1889-90) which is mostly in *davayya* but also contains a *baramaha* and twenty-five *kafis* (five of which are by other authors); his other works include a *Mirzā Sāhibā* (1893) and a *Sohṇī Mahīvāl* (1896).<sup>169</sup>

One of the major questions which arises from a study of the *qissas*—arguably among the very few Punjabi genres to have wide cross-sectarian appeal in pre-modern Punjab—is the question of to what extent these texts were susceptible to communal influence. Gobind Singh Lamba has pointed out that many Gurmukhi copies of texts presumably written originally in Persian script supply Hindu and Sikh rubrics and epithets for God in place of Muslim ones.<sup>170</sup> Similarly, a subtle mixture of religious imagery, doctrinal motivation and literary influence from the Persian *masnavi* seems to lie behind many of the “Muslim” alterations to the folk stories that lie behind the *qissas*: Damodar’s morally neutral Kaido becomes a near-Satanic figure for Varis, the folk Sassi’s emphasis on inter-religious marriage becomes a story of tragic love among Muslims, Sahtī’s Hindu lover Rāmū becomes a Baloch Muslim, and the happy endings to Damodar’s and Guradasa Guni’s versions of *Hir* become a tragic tale reminiscent of the Persian *masnavi*.<sup>171</sup> On the other hand, the rise in the number of Sikh and Hindu writers of *qissas* in the Sikh and British periods swings the pendulum in the other direction: invocations are invariably to Sikh and Hindu epithets for deity, and metres and verse forms imported from Braj poetry increasingly take the place of the *baint*. Clearly, as the pace of printing and composition increase in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the *qissa* both remains at the centre of Punjab’s

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<sup>168</sup> Shackle, op.cit. 173-6.

<sup>169</sup> Piārā Singh Bhogal, “*Hīr Sayyid Mīrā Shāh*” *Panjābī duniā* 4:11 (Nov. 1953): 47-59; Parmindar Singh, op.cit. 409.

<sup>170</sup> Gobind Singh Lamba, *Panjābī hatth-likhit sāhitt* (Patiala: Amarjīt Sāhitt Prakashan, 1981): 13. He cites in particular the example of Ahmad Yar’s *Kissā Kāmruṡ*.

common literary culture and increasingly becomes the arena for sectarian demarcation and tension.

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<sup>171</sup>Lamba, *op.cit.*, 16; Kang, *Panjābī vich Kissā Hīr Rānjhā* 94-5.

CHAPTER TWO  
THE PROBLEM OF THE EARLY MIRZA-SAHIBAN QISSA:  
PILU AND THE TWO HAFIZES

Although the Sials of the Sandal Bar are as much at the heart of the story of Mirza Sahiban as they are at the centre of the Hir-Ranjha legend, *qissa* treatments of the Mirza-Sahiban legend gained popularity in the Punjabi literary tradition much later than those of the Hir story. Although seventeenth-century texts refer to the poet Pilu and his *Mirzā Sāhibā* with great respect, the only version of his poem presently available is an orally-transmitted *var* that bears few of the distinguishing marks of the *qissa* tradition. Similarly, a *qissa* supposedly written by the late seventeenth-century poet Hafiz Barkhurdar seems to have been assimilated into that of the late eighteenth-century poet Ranjha Barkhurdar by oral tradition and specious editing. Only by the mid-nineteenth century, were *qissa* versions of the Mirza Sahiban story being written in numbers, although none managed to secure the lasting fame of, say, Varis's *Hīr* or Fazl Shah's *Sohṇī Mahīvāl*. Instead, the story of Mirza and Sahiban remained essentially the preserve of folk tradition: innumerable Punjabi folk-songs (often in the *sadd* genre now characteristically associated with the legend) refer to the story, and there is even a special genre of folk-song, the *ḍholā*, dedicated to the legend in the Bar region where it is supposed to have taken place.<sup>1</sup> Although we can only speculate as to why most *qissa* writers avoided the story, it seems clear that one reason must have been the controversial nature of its engagement with issues of family honour and kin relationships.<sup>2</sup> Mian Muhammad Bakhsh Jihlami, a late

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<sup>1</sup>For some samples of folk-songs on the subject, see Piar Singh and M.S. 'Amrit', eds., *Kissā Mirzā Sāhibā kī Pīlū* (Amritsar: GNDU, 1981): 81-2. For the *ḍholas*, see Sher Singh 'Sher', "Mirzā Sāhibā de ḍhole," *Panjāb Duniā* 4:3(March 1953): 36-44.

<sup>2</sup> A nineteenth-century British observer claims that "The feuds [between the families in the legend] . . . lasted a long while, so that it came to be considered unlucky to possess daughters,



nineteenth-century writer who wrote a *Mirzā Sāhibā*, claims that some of the most famous *qissa* writers of his day refused to versify the story of the two lovers because they felt it did not express the kind of love generally valorised in the *qissa* tradition:

The respected Fazl Shah refused to compose a *qissa* about Mirza  
and Sahiban;

Arūrā Rāi also kept away from this task out of shame.

They thought Mirza Kharal's love (*'ishq*) faulty because he acted  
unreasonably--

Just as the *ulamā* didn't comprehend Shāh Mansūr's secret.<sup>3</sup>

The reason why Mirza's love was deemed faulty seems to have been his refusal to accede even nominally to social norms of propriety: his decision to steal his lover away on the day of her wedding rather than accept her marriage to another man was probably seen as too transgressive of social codes. Equally, the fact that Mirza and Sahiban were cousins (permitted to marry according to Punjabi Muslim social custom) means that when he opposes himself to Sahiban's family by stealing her away he disobeys his own family, robbing his own elders of their power to command the next generation. At the same time, he sets the two branches of his family against each other for the sake of his love. Finally, the fact that (unlike the male protagonist in the Hir-Ranjha and Sohni-Mahinval stories) Mirza is not and does not become a servant in order to further his love alters the central dilemma of the *qissa*: no longer is the debate between parents and children one based on status; instead, what is at stake is quite simply the

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and thus they led to extensive female infanticide by strangulation in the manner of Sāhibān's death. As regards the Kharals, this was only put down by the English within the last forty years. The Siyāls to the present day resent a reference to Sāhibān as they do to Hir . . . ." R.C. Temple, *The Legends of the Panjāb*. Reprint ed. Vol. 3 (New York: Arno Press, 1977): 1.

<sup>3</sup>Mian Muhammad Bakhsh Jihlamī, *Mirzā Sāhibā* quoted in Piar Singh and Gobind Singh Lamba, eds., *Sassī te hor kisse kṛit Rānjhā Barkhurdār* (Amritsar: GNDU, 1977): 72.

individual's ability to choose and the family's power to control. Unlike in many other *qissas*, the only way for the family to reassert control is murder.

Partially as a reaction to this naked conflict between family and individual, most later authors of the *qissa* emphasise an episode that is barely mentioned in Pīlu's poem: how Sahiban's act of hanging Mirza's bow on the *jaṇḍ* tree leaves him defenceless against her brothers' attacks. In doing so, they re-embed the story in a context of kinship loyalty. At the moment when Sahiban could ride off with her lover over the corpses of her brothers, she decides to side with them instead, choosing her brothers over her lover. Sahiban becomes the figure of the "divided, conflicting loyalties" of the Punjabi woman caught between her own feelings and her cultural codes defining familial roles.<sup>4</sup> At the same time the episode carries another subtext: the location of Mirza's death under the *jaṇḍ* tree creates an equation between the lovers' death and the marriage that never took place, since "Mirza meets his death under the tree that would have served to sanctify his marriage."<sup>5</sup> This equation contains within itself an ambivalence that can be read as a message of social dissent.

### The story:

The story of Mirza Sahiban is, like that of Hir and Ranjha, a tale of love and family honour that involves one of the Sial clans of the Sandal Bar region. Unlike the story of Hir and Ranjha, which reached a relatively high degree of standardisation early in its written history, the Mirza-Sahiban legend admits a

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<sup>4</sup> Satindar Aulakh, *The Fast Horse and the Ferocious River* (n.p., n.d.) 12. Aulakh quotes a Punjabi folktale about a Punjabi woman whose husband, brother and son were brought before a judge on serious charges and sentenced to death. Sympathetic to the woman's plight, the judge allowed her to choose one of the three to save from the gallows. The woman chose her brother, the only one of the three who could not be replaced. (ibid, 14).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 67. Aulakh refers, of course, to the role of the *jaṇḍ* tree in the rituals carried out by the groom before the wedding. In some versions of the tale, Sahiban is hanged from the same tree. Aulakh also links Mirza's red shawl (which, as we shall see, bears other connotations as well) to the marriage rites (ibid. 69)

significant amount of variation until about the middle of the nineteenth century; even in the earlier period, though, there is a discernable core to the story. Mirza, the son of Vanjhal the Kharal from Dānābād, is sent to live in his mother's village of Khīvā, where he studies at the village mosque with his cousin Sahiban, the daughter of Khīvā the Mahṇā (a branch of the Sials). The two fall in love, but Mirza eventually has to go back to his village. He promises, however, to return one day to marry Sahiban. Much later, Sahiban learns that she has been betrothed to the son of Tāhir the Chaddhar (also from the Sandal Bar) and sends a message to Mirza via Karmū the village Brahman asking him to rescue her. After Sahiban repels Karmū's unwanted advances, the Brahman delivers her message to Mirza in Danabad. Upon reading the letter, Mirza prepares to go to Khiva alone, ignoring the protestations of his father Vanjhal, his mother Nasībā, his brother Sarjā (some versions of the *qissa* include another brother) and his sister Chhattī (or Chhahtī). Once in the village, Mirza enlists the aid of a few associates and scales the walls of Khiva's house as the wedding party waits in the courtyard, taking Sahiban away with him on his trusted horse Bakkī (also called Nīlī). On the way back to Danabad, Mirza stops to rest under a *jand* tree, despite Sahiban's protestations that they are sure to be pursued and must hurry to the safety of Mirza's village. While he sleeps, the Mahnas and Chaddhars arrange a search party which locates the pair. Led by Sahiban's brother Shamūr, the party attacks Mirza, who refuses to wake up because he is sure of his ability to win. When he finally arises to attack, Mirza cannot find his bow: fearing that he would kill her brother, Sahiban has hung it from the *jand* tree to prevent him from getting at it. Defenceless and without allies, Mirza is killed. Enraged at the shame she has brought upon the family, the Mahnas hang Sahiban from the *jand* tree and return home. In Hafiz Barkhurdar's version of the story, Bakki returns to Danabad to tell the Kharals of Mirza's death and Mirza's mother complains to

the local potentate, Rāi Rahmū. Concerned to protect the honour of his peasant followers, Rahmu puts together a small army which proceeds to Khiva to loot the Sials' cattle (as "blood money" for Mirza's death) and avenge Mirza's death. In the battle that follows, the Sials and Chaddhars are defeated and Sahiban's father and brother killed. Pilu (and to a lesser extent Hafiz Barkhurdar) hints that the horse Bakki has near-magical powers, and Mirza himself is symbolically equated with Alī's sons Hasan and Husain.

**Pilu:**

Friends, poets are mistaken if they claim to be Pilu's equals:  
He has been blessed by the Panj Pirs, who put their hands on his shoulder.  
(Hafiz Barkhurdar)<sup>6</sup>

No one can match Pilu, he expresses a unique pain:  
Some *faqīr* or *valī* must have looked on him kindly. (Ahmad Yar)<sup>7</sup>

Early Punjabi poets' comments on Pilu seem to imply that he wrote a polished body of poetry with a significant stamp of mystical thought or feeling, a striking masterwork (or masterworks) deserving sustained critical attention. Instead, the body of poetry currently attributable to Pilu consists of an ill-preserved oral version of a *Qissā Mirzā Sāhibā* and eight *saloks* attributed to him in a nineteenth-century printed compilation of poetry by various *bhagats*.<sup>8</sup> (Many have, however, argued that the two bodies of work are in fact by two different poets, the *qissa* by a Muslim and the *saloks* by a Hindu.<sup>9</sup>) The version of the Mirza-Sahiban legend attributed to Pilu consists of 280 lines of verse in rhyming

<sup>6</sup>Hafiz Barkhurdar, *Mirzā Sāhibā*, verse 67 in Piār Singh and M.S. 'Amrit', op.cit. 80.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmad Yar, *Ahisanul-Qasis*. Ed. Piar Singh. (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1962): 271.

<sup>8</sup> For Pilu's version of Mirza-Sahiban, see Piar Singh and M.S. 'Amrit', op.cit. 41-52; for the *saloks*, see Sant Singh Sekhon, ed., *Shabad salok bhagīā de* (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1969): 250 and Piar Singh and M.S. 'Amrit', op.cit. 64-5. Piar Singh and M.S. 'Amrit' also cite six verses which Abdul Ghafur Quraishi attributes to Pilu but comment that "in our opinion these verses seem to be part of a folk-song" (ibid. 65).

<sup>9</sup> Indarjīt Singh 'Vāsū', *Pilū te Hāfiz Barkhurdār rachit Kīssā Mirzā Sāhibā dā tulanātmik adhiain* (Ludhiana: Lahore Bookshop, 1970): 39.

couplets; unlike in the classical *qissa* tradition where *radif* rhyme-schemes with three or four rhyming syllables dominate or *dāvayya* poems in which the last two syllables of the line rhyme, in Pīlu's *sadd* only the last long syllable of every line rhymes.<sup>10</sup> Even the evidence for the attribution of the poem is scanty, since only the last line of the poem actually attributes it to Pīlu: "Pīlu the poet (whom the whole world knows) composed this *qissa* about Mirza and Sahiban" (280).<sup>11</sup> Available texts of the poem derive from the version collected from "some Jātts from the Jālandhar district" by the British folklorist Sir Richard Temple and published in his *Legends of the Punjab*.<sup>12</sup> Temple's text bears all the marks of a composition preserved by oral tradition (if not actually composed within a tradition of oral recitation), as is to be expected from his own account of his methodology:

My own procedure is this:—when once the bard has begun there is nothing for it but to let him go straight through his poem and write down after him whatever he says, sense or nonsense. . . . The recitation done, the MS. is carefully read over to him, and then is the time to go into unintelligible words and passages, but if you expect much in the way of elucidation from him you will be disappointed, for he is always very ignorant and often very stupid to boot, having learnt his task purely by rote, with at best but a traditional knowledge of the meaning of obsolete words. I have found by experience that the surest way to solve a knotty problem is to trust to strict philology and a strict translation of the words . . . .<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Indarjit Singh 'Vasu' (op.cit. 118-9) notes that Pīlu's *sadd* is based on a 24 *matra* line (more or less a *dohā*).

<sup>11</sup> All citations to Pīlu's poem are to the edition of Piar Singh and M.S. 'Amrit'.

<sup>12</sup> R.C. Temple, op.cit. 3:1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 1:x-xi.

Unfortunately no manuscripts of a *qissa* by Pilu are available in Pakistani or Indian Punjab to supplement or correct Temple's obviously faulty text.<sup>14</sup> The editors of the most recent Gurmukhi version of the poem have commented:

Because it has been sung by *dhādhīs*, singers (*gamantrīs*) and *mirāsīs* for such a long time, the *qissa* which has reached us through Temple's efforts has reached us in a changed and debased form—and it is incomplete. Even so, if we consider it to be the ruins of an old palace it should not be impossible to guess at the beauty of the original palace.<sup>15</sup>

The haphazard nature of Pilu's text as currently available is matched by the complete lack of any information on Pilu himself. The only references to any poet named Pilu in the Punjabi literary tradition come in nineteenth-century *gurbilas* accounts of the compilation of the Adi Granth by Guru Arjan: the texts claim that when he heard of the compilation of the Granth, Pilu came to Guru Arjan and recited a *salok*, hoping it would be included; it was not.<sup>16</sup> While, as we have seen, some critics contest the identification of the Pilu of the *saloks* with the *qissa* poet, we do know that a certain Pilu was seen as a Mirza-Sahiban poet from at least the end of the seventeenth century: Hafiz Barkhurdar, who wrote during Aurangzeb's reign, exalts this Pilu as an honoured literary predecessor.<sup>17</sup>

The question of whether Pilu's poem is a *qissa* or not is central to any evaluation of its contents—although it is a question that is seldom asked. The

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<sup>14</sup> Piar Singh and M.S. 'Amrit', op.cit. 16-17. The Temple Papers at the India Office Library (IOLR MSS Eur F98) do not contain a transcription of the *qissa*. See S. Quraishi, comp., *Catalogue of the Urdu, Panjabi, Pashto and Kashmiri Manuscripts and Documents in the India Office Library and Records* (London: British Library, 1990): 131-56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 26.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Giānī Indar Singh Gill, ed., *Kavi Sohan krit Gur bilās Pātsāhī 6* (Amritsar: the author, 1977): 84.

<sup>17</sup> See the version of Hafiz's *qissa* reproduced as Piar Singh and M.S. 'Amrit', op.cit. 66-80, verses 61-4, 67. The verses refer to Pilu's tomb as well as to his high literary reputation.

simple answer is that despite the efforts of Punjabi critics to make it one, the poem is not in fact a *qissa*. The poem displays none of the defining generic features of the classical *qissa* and lacks the connected—even concerted—narrativity of the classical poems. In fact, the fragmented narrative of the poem suggests that it may have been performed as a *var*, with sung stanzas acting as amplifications of events narrated in prose. Indeed, when Mirza leaves to retrieve Sahiban, he tells his worried mother that “A *var* will circulate about your son Mirza and your daughter-in-law Sahiban” (83), indicating that the poetic in which the narrative action takes place is in fact the genre of the *var* rather than the *qissa*. As such, the text of Pīlu’s poem does not represent the first Mirza-Sahiban *qissa* and does not contradict the notion that the Mirza-Sahiban story did not become popular in the Punjabi *qissa* tradition until approximately the middle of the nineteenth century.

Although it is not a *qissa*, Pīlu’s *Mirzā Sāhibā* manages to hint in the brief space of 280 lines at the themes of honour and social conflict central to the later Mirza-Sahiban *qissas*. As in other versions of the legend, kinship (both real and fictive) lies at the heart of the poem, and Mirza in particular is aware of the conflicts which his love for Sahiban must engender. As he prepares to leave for Sahiban’s house, he attempts to forestall his mother’s objections to his leaving by referring ironically to the duties which his kinship relation with the Sials impose upon him:

“There is a wedding at Khiva’s house and he sent the *lāgīs*

[functionaries] to me.

They came to my house and told me the date of the wedding (*sāhā*).

They are my mother’s house (*nānke*) and I their grandson (*dohtrā*):

don’t try to stop me from going.

I am going to give five rupees and a turban as a ritual offering

(*niundā*).” (63-6)

It is with this consciousness of his ritual role as the son of the daughter of Khiva's house that Mirza leaves for the Sials', his ambivalence symbolised by the fact that his horse is "adorned" (67) like that of a bridegroom. But Mirza shirks more than just his duty as a grandson of the Sials: he also abandons his duty to his own sister, renouncing one of the most affective kinship ties in the Punjabi culture. Mirza leaves Danabad on the eve of his own sister's marriage, renouncing his brotherly duties in favour of his honour as a lover:

Chhahti says to Mirza Khan as he leaves,  
"Stop and wait, Mirza, listen to what the family has to say.  
Sit on the bed and marry me off with your own hands.  
Tomorrow the Bhaṭṭīs, rulers of the Sandal, will come from the  
Sandal Bar."

[Mirza replies,] "I must go. I have four brothers  
Who will act honourably: the Kharals will not be disgraced.  
I must go: do not stop me.

I forego the wedding: what are weddings to me anyway?" (49-56)

In leaving to rescue Sahiban, then, Mirza leaves behind both his maternal and paternal bonds of kinship—including the brothers who would otherwise have been his allies on his dangerous journey. Even then, his family's honour remains at the centre of Mirza's preoccupations: not only does his father remind him (after admonishing him for letting the love of a woman ruin him) "Don't leave Sahiban behind: we'll be disgraced" (80), but Mirza himself argues to his mother that "If I abandoned the woman I've engaged myself to, the Kharals will be disgraced" (82). Although he may have rejected his ritual duties as brother and grandson, he has not managed to escape the construction of his identity as the sum total of his family's honour.



If Mirza utterly renounces the bonds of kinship, Sahiban is somewhat more reluctant to do so. As she descends the makeshift ladder which Mirza has made by pounding nails into the mud walls of her father's house, her hem catches and she stops to allow herself to free it without ripping it (148). The event is both a bad omen—similar to the moment before Mirza's departure when Mirza sneezes and his own hem catches (68)—and a powerful symbol of Sahiban's attachment to her home and family, perhaps even of a deep-seated wish to stay in her father's house. Unlike Mirza, who promises her heaps of new clothes in Danabad as they ride away (148), Sahiban seems to realise that she cannot allow her hem to be ripped: she must leave open the possibility of return and cannot afford to sully her honour or completely sever her ties with her family.

Throughout the poem, Sahiban seems more conscious than Mirza of her family's probable response to their flight: she constantly urges the sleeping Mirza to take her to Danabad before her father and brothers arrive, reminding him that "They will kill you with their swords just as the carder cards cotton" (216). Indeed, she shows that she knows that her family will protect her honour, through murder if need be, from the very beginning of the poem: she rejects outright the advances of Karmu the Brahman, whom she has chosen to take her message to Mirza, by reminding him that

"If my brother Shamir finds out he will kill you;

If the boys of the village find out, they will stone you.

.....

My father Khiva will hold court and have you tied up and brought  
before him." (36-7, 40)

Ultimately (and perhaps even predictably) even her attachment to Mirza does not manage to outweigh her affection for her father and brothers: when she sees them coming to kill Mirza and take her back home, she refers to them by the

most affective of female terms—*bābal* (father) and *vīr* (brother) (193). Although the theme of Sahiban’s attachment to her brothers is not as prominent in *Pilu* as in later *qissa* treatments of the story—we do not, after all, find out that Sahiban has hung Mirza’s bow on the *jand* tree until after he is dead (269)—the poet does make it clear that Sahiban is more closely attached to her family than Mirza is to his.

Another important theme in the poem is the constant association of Mirza with Hasan and Husain, particularly with Husain’s martyrdom at Karbalā.<sup>18</sup> The first reference to Hasan and Husain in the poem is a rather oblique one: Mirza’s mother attempts to warn her son from going to rescue Sahiban by quoting proverbs and traditions about Moses’s life, adding a note of pathos by remarking that

Bībī Fātimā cried and flailed her arms,  
“What have I done to offend you, Lord? You killed my pair [of  
sons].” (88-9)

Mirza’s mother’s identification with Fatima begins a chain of references that connects Mirza with Hasan and Husain: he carries a green bow (127) and a red shawl with which he covers himself when sleeping under the *jand* tree (187), and his horse Bakki is one of five which descended from heaven with Ali’s horse (202-8).<sup>19</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, when Sahiban explicitly compares his death to that of Hasan and Husain at Karbala:

Next Sahiban said, “Listen to me, Mirza!  
Fate overwhelmed the prophets, now fate has descended on Mirza.  
Shāh Ali’s sons, the brothers Hasan and Husain  
Killed legions [of their enemies] fighting with Yazīd’s people.

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<sup>18</sup> These references form part of a general religious context in which Mirza worships the Panj Pir before making a makeshift ladder of nails to scale the wall of Khiva’s house (145) and asks residents of the village to act as his “aunt in religion” (130) or “brother in religion” (145) when he wishes to solicit their help in spirited Sahiban away.

<sup>19</sup> Red and green are traditionally associated with Husain in Shia iconography.

Bibi Fatima stood in her doorway weeping, 'They never returned to me.'" (262-6)

Like Mirza's mother, Sahiban identifies with Fatima and, thereby, strengthens the Karbala imagery associated with Mirza in the poem.

If Mirza's death echoes the martyrdom of Husain at Karbala, the "natural" entailment of the metaphor seems to be that the Sials are to be associated with Yazid. The poet makes no such claim, however, preferring instead to place the blame for Mirza's downfall elsewhere: "The angel of death killed Mirza, as did his own pride" (278). Although the poet occasionally does invoke fate in the poem—fate is said, for example, to have taken the Sials' side during Mirza's last moments (255)—Mirza's pride seems the more dominant of the two causes.

Indeed, the poet's only appearance as a character in the poem is connected with the first solid indication of Mirza's prideful nature: in response to Mirza's request for advice before spiriting Sahiban away, Pilu explains to him by way of a rather mechanistic metaphor that the workings of fate are as inexorable as that of a Persian wheel and that he should accept his lot and return home. Rather than accept the poet's advice, though, the haughty Mirza calls him a liar and refuses to believe him (102-10). Similarly, when Sahiban tries to warn him to get her to Danabad before her family can catch them, Mirza boasts that "there is no warrior who can defeat me. / I will fight off whole armies: even lords (*nāḥ*) fear me" (217-8). At the height of his pride, he even claims that "the angels fear Bakki and God fears me" (162). Sahiban's efforts to assuage his pride by claiming that the women of her village will talk about how he vanquished the Sials if he goes to Danabad to seek his brothers' help (227-8) only spur his pride further: he replies with the warrior's boast that

"I will block the roads to Lahore and cause commotion in the cities  
.....

One has to die and leave the world—but my name will remain.”

(230-2)

The end result of Mirza’s pride is, of course, that he decides to go to sleep under a *jand* tree rather than ride home to seek his brothers’ help. In fact, when the Sials and Chaddhars catch up with the pair and begin to attack him, he just goes back to sleep: he believes he can defeat them with no effort and take Sahiban home to Danabad in the morning (251-4). When the poet invokes the power of fate in the very next line of the poem (255), his attribution of agency seems less than convincing: more than fate (or even the Sials) his own refusal to accept his limitations kills him. Had he ridden home to safety rather than stop to sleep under a tree, he and Sahiban would surely have survived.

### The Two Hafiz Barkhurdars:

I’ve read hundreds of *qissas* written by people,  
But Hafiz Barkhurdar from Musalmānī never understood the trick:  
He followed the straight path to truth and wrote it so simply  
That every woman who spins cotton knows.  
But no one’s verses are as pure as Hafiz’s; you get the full measure at his shop.  
(Ahmad Yar)

Hafiz Barkhurdar Ranjha from Chittī  
Was inspired to knowledge and action by the grace of God. (Ahmad Yar)

Ranjha Barkhurdar is said to be the nightingale of the garden of words:  
His verses are like the morning breeze bringing the fragrance of the garden.  
Every verse of Hafiz Barkhurdar the writer (whose tomb is in Chitti)  
Is as sweet as a lump of sugar. (Mian Muhammad Bakhsh)<sup>20</sup>

Punjabi literary history knows two famous Hafiz Barkhurdars (and at least half a dozen who are not so famous).<sup>21</sup> The first, a poet from the village of

<sup>20</sup> Ahmad Yar, *Ahisanul-Qasis* 271, 272; Mian Muhammad Bakhsh Jihlami, *Kissā Saif ul-Mulūk*. Ed. Santokh Singh ‘Rāzī’. 2nd ed. (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1971): 658.

<sup>21</sup> All the biographical information that follows has been taken from Piar Singh and Gobind Singh Lamba, op.cit. 11-22 with some additions from Ahmad Husain Quraishi, “Hāfiz Barkhurdār horā dīā kujh hor likhatā,” *Khoj* 3:2(Jan.-June 1981): 29-30. Faqir Muhammad Faqir denies that the first Hafiz exists at all, claiming that he is an invention of nineteenth-century writers, see Faqir Muhammad Faqir, ed., *Mirzā Sāhibā az Hāfiz Barkhurdār* (Lahore: Panjābī Adabī Academy, 1965):

Musalmani (*parganā* Chīmā Chaṭṭhā, district Lahore), lived during the reign of the emperor Aurangzeb and received his education in Sialkot from the famed theologian Maulānā ‘Abdul Hakīm Jahānābādī.<sup>22</sup> Three works are attributed to him: *Farā’iz-i vīrsā*, *Yūsuf Zulaikhā* and *Mirzā Sāhibā*.<sup>23</sup> The *Farā’iz-i vīrsā*, a text on the Islamic law of succession, contains the most information on the poet’s life: in addition to identifying the poet’s *ustād* and home village, it indicates that the poem was completed in 1081 AH (1670-1) in Jahānābād, where Barkhurdar had gone in search of livelihood.<sup>24</sup> The poet’s version of the Yusuf-Zulaikha story was completed nine years later in 1090 AH (1679-80)<sup>25</sup> and contains a description of how he was rewarded for his writing by his patron, one Navāb Ja’far Khān:

This *qissa* was written at the request of Navab Jafar Khan;  
 He was completely pleased when he read it.  
 Know that he gave me seven *bīghās* of land,

*alif-be.*

<sup>22</sup> Ahmad Husain Quraishi claims on the basis of a reference in his own manuscript of the *Farā’iz-i vīrsā* that Hafiz Barkhurdar’s *ustad* was a different Abdul Hakim who lived in Harīyā, see Quraishī Ahmad Husain ‘Qil’ādārī, ed., *Jangnāmā Imām Husain Hāfiz Barkhurdār Rānjhā* (Lahore: Pākistān Panjābī Adabī Board, 1979): 41. Although there is no evidence to link him with the Punjabi poet, one of the disciples of Shaiḥ Hājī Muhammad Qādirī (popularly known as Nau Shah Ganj Bakḥsh) was a Hāfiz Barkhurdar ‘Naushāhī’ (died 1717 CE) who lived at “Kakhiya Nawali” (presumably Kakhiāwālī) in the Punjab, see Muhammad Umar, *Islam in Northern India During the Eighteenth Century* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1993): 512-3.

<sup>23</sup> Bedi mistakenly attributes to the first Hafiz the compilation of religious texts entitled *Anvā’-i Barkhurdār*, which most authorities firmly attribute to the second Hafiz (op.cit. 19-20).

<sup>24</sup> Quraishi, *Jangnāmā* 41-2.

<sup>25</sup> I base my comments on the manuscript of the *qissa* available in the SOAS Library (Ms. 44596), dated 1230 AH (1815-6) and titled *Zulaikhā Hāfiz Sāhib*. The manuscript itself quotes 1009 AH (1600-1) as the date of composition (folio 98b), but most other manuscripts apparently bear the date 1090 AH (Bedi, op.cit. 16). The scribe’s colophon (folio 98b) is not without interest: “*in risālah Yaqīn Shāh navishtah ast barāy-i zauq-i khud*” (Yaqīn Shah wrote this tract for his own enjoyment). This colophon seems to imply that the scribe—like the poet, who himself refers to the poem as a *risālah* in the body of the text (folio 97b)—understood the *qissa* to be a religious tract rather than a *qissa* and that he viewed the act of copying it as an act of merit or self-improvement. One might also note the *qissa*’s own claim about its efficacy (a commonplace in religious texts): “Whoever reads this most beautiful *qissa* will find true faith / And God will grant him all his worldly wishes and desires” (folio 13a).

A horse, robes of honour and some cash—know it to be a hundred  
rupees.<sup>26</sup>

If genuine, this colophon would represent the first reference to literary patronage in the Punjabi literary tradition and would also seem to mark out Hafiz Barkhurdar Musalmani as a professional poet who derived at least part of his income from writing; the verses' reference to the poem as a *qissa* (when the author refers to it as a *risala* in the body of text) may indicate either that the colophon is a later addition or that Hafiz sought and received patronage after rather than before writing the poem. His *Mirza Sahiban* appears to be the first extant treatment of the legend in the Punjabi literary tradition and appears to have furnished material for the second Hafiz Barkhurdar's *Qissā Mirzā Sāhibā*. The tract *Vafāt-nāmā-i Rasūl-i Karīm*, attributed to Hafiz Barkhurdar Musalmani on its first publication, bears no explicit connection to the first Barkhurdar and may be more securely associated with the more prolific Ranjha Barkhurdar, who wrote a number of tracts on religious subjects.<sup>27</sup>

The second famous Hafiz Barkhurdar (often referred to as Ranjha Barkhurdar or Hafiz Ranjha Barkhurdar) was a Ranjha Jat from Takht Hazara: some of his works are dated from the period 1762 to 1776, which makes him a contemporary of Varis Shah and Siddiq Lali. He appears to have been aware of the works of his predecessor—he refers to himself as “the second Barkhurdar” (*sānī Barkhurdār*) in his *Jangnāmā Imām Husain*—and even wrote his work *Risālā-i qādiriyā* (a tract on the law of inheritance) in response to Hafiz Barkhurdar Musalmani's *Farā'iz-i vīrsā*.<sup>28</sup> He states in his *Sharh-i qasīdā-i ghausiyā, Anvā'-i*

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<sup>26</sup> The verses do not occur in the SOAS manuscript but are quoted in Bedi, op.cit. 9-10.

<sup>27</sup> Nabīlā Rahmān, “*Vafāt nāmā-i Rasūl-i Karīm* (Hāfiz Barkhurdār–Musalmānī)” *Khoj* 15:2 (Jan.-June 1993): 5-6. She attributes the text to Hafiz Barkhurdar Musalmani on the grounds of a reference to Sialkot, a commonality of language with one of the two available versions of *Sassī Punmū* and a verse that occurs in “many other books by Hafiz Barkhurdar Musalmani.”

<sup>28</sup> Quraishi, *Jangnāmā* 85, 51.

*Barkhurdārī* and *Tarjumā-i qasīdā-i burdā-i sharīf* that he studied in Sialkot, and it seems that he also spent time in Lahore and Rasūlnagar in search of livelihood: indeed, he wrote two Persian translations of Arabic tracts (*Sharḥ-i durūd-i mustaghāth* and *Sharḥ-i durūd-i viṣāl*) at the request of Chaudhrī Ghulām Muhammad Chatṭhā, the chief of Rasūlnagar.<sup>29</sup> While in Rasūlnagar, he also wrote a compilation of ten religious tracts in Punjabi dated 1190 AH (1776-7) which seems to have been preserved in the autograph copy.<sup>30</sup> His *Mirzā Sāhibā* is arguably the best well-known of the works attributed to the two Hafizes: the editor of the text somewhat flamboyantly claims that “you can find people in every village who have memorised his *Mirzā Sāhibā*” and claims that recitations of the poem are wildly popular with rural Punjabi audiences.<sup>31</sup> The only <sup>ONE</sup> of his other *qissas* to have been published in a scholarly edition is an incomplete Gurmukhi text of his *Sassī Punmū* (1186 AH/1772-3).<sup>32</sup> Ranjha Barkhurdar’s other works are a compilation of eighteen *risālās* entitled *Anvā’-i Barkhurdārī* (1176 AH/1762-3),<sup>33</sup> a *siharfi* version of the Hir-Ranjha story, a *Shīrīn Farhād*, a *Yūsuf Zulaikhā*, a *var* about Karbala, at least six religious tracts, the first *Charkhānāmā* in

<sup>29</sup> Quraishi, *Jangnāmā* 45, 47, 48; Quraishi, “Hāfiz Barkhurdār” 30 (in which Quraishi claims based on rather flimsy evidence that Barkhurdar was a student of Maulvī Muhammad Ashraf bin Muhammad Murīd of Lahore).

<sup>30</sup> The contents of the manuscript are: *Tarjumā-i qasīdā-i Bānat Su’ād*, *Tarjumā-i qasīdā-i burdā-i sharīf*, *Tarjumā-i qasīdā-i ghausiyā*, *Tarjumā-i qasīdā-i rūhī*, *Sharḥ-i ismā ul-Husainī*, *Sharḥ-i yāzdah nām-i Hazrat Pīrān Pīr*, *Sharḥ-i nūzdah nām-i Hazrat Pīrān Pīr*, *Tarjumā chahal kāf*, *Sharḥ durūd-i mustaghāthās* and *Sharḥ du’ā-i ganj ul-’arsh*. Many of the works in the collection praise Abdul Qādir Jīlānī, the founder of the Qadiriya Sufi *silsilā*.

<sup>31</sup> Faqir, op.cit. *jīm-dāl*. His enthusiastic comments may to some extent reflect a Pakistani Punjabi activist tendency to valorise texts which preserve older or dialectal forms of the language that display the maximum distance from the Persianised norms of modern Pakistani Urdu.

<sup>32</sup> The two *qissas* are published as Piar Singh and Gobind Singh Lamba, op.cit. The date is taken from Quraishi, *Jangnāmā* 50.

<sup>33</sup> The contents of the compilation are as follows: *Shams ul-’ulūm*, *Bahr ul-’ulūm*, *Nahr ul-’ulūm*, *Fiqh-i jamāl*, *Maslā-i bāng o nikāh*, *Miftāh ul-musallā*, *Najāt ul-muslimīn*, *Sharf un-nikāh*, *Tambīh ul-ghāfilīn*, *Risālā namāz*, *Risālā sāyā-i aslī*, *Mizān-i sharī’ā*, *Miftāh ul-fiqh*, *Sharḥ ul-hamd-i sharīf*, *Risālā bohal-i namāz*, *Sirāj ul-mu’āmalāt*, *Sharḥ-i khulāsā-i Kaidānī*, *Miftāh us-sā’ādat* (Quraishi, “Hāfiz Barkhurdār” 40); the date is taken from Quraishi, *Jangnāmā* 50.

the Punjabi literary tradition and a number of miscellaneous poems.<sup>34</sup> Many examples of the last two categories of poems (and the *Hir siharfi*) are found in manuscript *bayāz* compilations of works by various authors,<sup>35</sup> indicating both the popularity of Ranjha Barkhurdar's minor works and the difficulty of attributing them firmly. Ultimately, though, even the problem of attributing the much more substantial *qissas* to one Hafiz Barkhurdar or the other awaits detailed textual work on all the poems attributed to either of the two authors:

The works of the two Barkhurdars . . . have become mixed-up in one another because both wrote a *Mirzā Sāhibā*, a *Sassī* and perhaps a *Yūsuf Zulaikhā* and a number of religious *qissas*. Because of this their texts match at a number of points; at the very least, there is a great similarity between the two texts of *Mirzā-Sāhibā* at many points. This similarity can be seen in *Sassī* for the description of similar circumstances. It seems that Ranjha Barkhurdar is using the works of his predecessor Hafiz Barkhurdar from Musalmani to advantage when writing.<sup>36</sup>

What this rather bald statement seems to exclude are a number of other possible reasons why the works of the two Hafizes may have become "mixed-up": a common corpus of works under the *takhallus* Hafiz may have grown up which readers and scribes were no longer able to differentiate; one or the other poet's works may have circulated in oral form and come to be included in written texts

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<sup>34</sup> Quraishi, op.cit. 32-40. The other works attributed to Ranjha Barkhurdar are: *Risālā-i benamāzā*, *Sharh-i nūzdah nām-i Nabī-i Akram*, *Mu'jizāt-i nubū'iyā*, *Qiṣṣah Bībī Fatimā*, *Hikāyāt-i Pāk Rasūl*, *Nasīhatnāmāh*, *Sīharfī Barkhurdār*, *Bārāmāh*, *Sarāpā-i ma'shūq*, *Qissā khetrī* and two short poems (Quraishi, op.cit. 40).

<sup>35</sup> Quraishi, op.cit. 32, 33, 37, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 19. An example of the scale of the problem is Quraishi's list of Ranjha Barkhurdar's works, in which appear two versions of *Sassī Punnū* and three versions of *Jangnāmā Imām Husain* (op.cit. 40). The fact that the beginning verses of the two versions of *Sassī Punnū* are different (ibid. 38-9) seems to indicate that they are in fact two separate poems by two different authors.



of the other's poems; or scribes or modern editors may have conflated texts by both writers in a misguided attempt to avoid missing out any of "Barkhurdar's" verses in their versions of the poems.

An examination of the textual history of the two most accessible texts of the versions of *Mirzā Sāhibā* attributed to the two Hafizes adds to the suspicion that one of the above phenomena must be at least in part responsible for the confusion about who wrote what. The first Barkhurdar's poem, published as an appendix to Pīlu's poem, consists of 68 verses of uneven length in *sadd*: however, a number of lines (and even whole stanzas) are identical with the version of the poem attributed to Ranjha Barkhurdar.<sup>37</sup> No manuscripts of the poem exist in Indian collections to help establish the text, and no manuscripts in public collections in Pakistan have been cited.<sup>38</sup> The text of what is supposedly Ranjha Barkhurdar's poem is far more problematic than that of the first Barkhurdar. The published text (edited in Persian script by Faqir Muhammad Faqir of Lahore) consists of 242 verses in *sadd*;<sup>39</sup> the Indian edition of the poem is a transcription of this text into Gurmukhi script.<sup>40</sup> Faqir's account of the origins of his text is worth quoting in full for the light it sheds on the ways in which the versions of the poem attributed to the two authors might have been conflated (in the manuscripts as well as in the published edition):

... I went to make copies wherever I heard there were manuscripts of the text, and was presented with unexpected difficulties that are

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<sup>37</sup>The text, taken from V.N. Tiwari, "The Treatment of One of the Panjab Romances, Mirza Sahiban, in Panjabi Verse" Unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Panjab University, Chandigarh, 1963), is published in Piar Singh and M.S. 'Amrit', op.cit. 66-80.

<sup>38</sup>Piar Singh and Gobind Singh Lamba, op.,cit. 71. It is unclear which Hafiz Barkhurdar is the author of the manuscript of *Mirzā Sāhibā* cited in Arshad Mīr, "Mere zātī kutub khāne de Panjābī qalmī nuskhē" *Khoj* 8-9(1982): 152.

<sup>39</sup> Presumably because of the metre of the two poems, Faqir refers to Ranjha Barkhurdar's *Mirzā Sāhibā* and *Yūsuf Zulaikhā* as *vars* and to individual verses of the poems as *kalis* (op.cit. *jīm-ze*).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 77.

beyond all description. The reason was this: many of the manuscripts were with owners who still support themselves by reciting the *var* in public gatherings and think that to allow them to be copied would be to make their source of livelihood a public possession. For this reason I was not successful in obtaining a complete copy of the manuscript from anywhere.

In the end the plan occurred to me that I should ask the owners of the best manuscripts to allow me to copy different parts of the *var* from the trustworthy manuscripts. This scheme was successful. . . .

Through this effort of mine, I assembled fourteen incomplete manuscripts out of which I separated four which I considered trustworthy. These four manuscripts seem to be one poem because of the commonality of their texts.<sup>41</sup>

The editor then quotes the beginning verse of the ten manuscripts which he has not used in his edition—essentially the opening verse (with numerous textual variations) of the version of the first Hafiz Barkhurdar's poem as edited by Tiwari!<sup>42</sup> He does not, however, indicate which portions of his text he has taken from each of the four manuscripts, nor does he describe each of their contents in detail. This lack of textual information and the large measure of commonality between the two poems means that for purposes of analysis we shall treat the published text of Ranjha Barkhurdar's *Mirzā Sāhibā* as a conflation or an

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<sup>41</sup> Faqir Muhammad Faqir, op.cit. *yab*. He goes on to claim that two of his four manuscripts are copies prepared under the supervision of Hafiz Barkhurdar himself (ibid. *yah-yū*).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. *yaj-yad*. He tantalisingly notes that "the ten manuscripts show great differences among themselves" (ibid. *yab*), raising the possibility of a large degree of fluidity in the texts of the first Hafiz's poems as well.

expansion of the poem attributed to the earlier Hafiz and use it to the exclusion of Tiwari's text.<sup>43</sup>

### **Ranjha Barkhurdar's *Mirzā-Sāhibā*:**

Although Hafiz's poem shares the poetic of a religious subtext with Pilu's version of the legend its focus is somewhat different. If Pilu's treatment lends a substantial *imāmī* colouring to the story, Hafiz's *qissa* relegates the deaths of Hasan and Husain to the background. This is not to say, however, that hints of Karbala are entirely absent in the *qissa*. As in Pilu's poem, Mirza sleeps under a red shawl while he waits under the *jand* tree for the Mahnas and the Chaddhars to catch up with him (157) and, in a departure from Pilu's text, Mirza's horse Nili (she is only called Bakki near the end of the poem) bears red and green litters on her back when she goes with the Rai's army to avenge Mirza's death (239). As in Pilu's text, characters in the poem also contribute to the characterisation of Mirza as Husain: before he leaves for Khiva, his sister begs him

"In God's name, forget about going today:

Khiva is to us like Karbala was to the martyrs." (87)

Later in the poem, Kalha and Nārada, traditional figures in Punjabi *var* poetry about wars and battles, agree with Chhatti's fearful prophecy: as Mirza and Sahiban flee towards Danabad, they compare Mirza's fate to that of Hasan and Husain (139). Predictably enough, Mirza's death prompts his father Vanjhal and brother Sarja to comment that what happened to the prophets has just happened to their family (211, 228). Mirza himself is not unaware of the parallel and uses it himself at one point in the poem. When in the early stages of their love affair,

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<sup>43</sup> There are also a number of lines in common with Pilu's poem: Indarjit Singh 'Vasu' (op.cit. 112-3) counts six individual lines, two couplets and one group of three lines common to Pilu and Hafiz Barkhurdar, although two of the lines he cites share only one word in common.

Sahiban warns him that her brother Shamir will kill her for loving her, Mirza reminds her that

“Sahiban, lovers (*muhabbatī*) do not fear death, knowing that to hide  
their love is shameful:

The moth burns on the candle with devotion and dedication;

Lovers anticipate a battle just like the martyrs fought at Karbala.

The *mahāsati* who runs from the fire is a fake.” (34)

Mirza himself extends the metaphor as the moment of his death approaches. Just as he is surrounded by his pursuers and Sahiban begins to plead for his life, he launches into an extensive eulogy of himself as the figure of the martyrs of Hasan and Husain, using the opportunity both to attempt to comfort Sahiban and to blame her:

Mirza says, “Shah Ali’s sons, the brothers Hasan and Husain,

Fought the good fight with the followers of Yazid.

The women of the family were silent after sending them to their  
deaths:

Hafiz, the prophets accepted God’s will—you should too.

To us Khiva is like Karbala to the martyrs:

Hafiz, what can we do now that the river is in flood?” (166)

Although Mirza’s excessive pride and the strong subtexts of family honour in the *qissa* prevent the analogy with Hasan and Husain from being fully effective, the image does succeed in problematising Mirza’s death: the characters’ refusal to name the Mahnas as the murderous followers of Yazid strengthens the analogy all the more. Further, Mirza’s own attempts to associate himself with Hasan and Husain strengthen an already powerful set of images in the poem that associate Mirza with the prophets and saints of Islam.

If Mirza is linked to prophets and saints throughout the poem, his very birth is in fact the result of a boon from a saint:

The generous one, the beloved of Shāh Sulaimān, the noble

Naushah Pīr

Who is famed in the four quarters and whose glory is great.

He sprinkled love over the whole universe, the earth and the skies.

(4)

Hearing of the arrival of the saint, Mirza's mother Nasiban, who has been unable to have children, offers him a bowl of milk and requests the boon of a child (5): the saint "puts love (*ishq*) in her" and promises her that she will "have the moon of Ramzan play in [her] lap" (6). The saint's words recall the welcome image of the sliver of moon whose arrival heralds the end of the month of fasting and the beginning of the feasts and celebrations that follow (as Mirza's birth will most certainly cause feasting and celebration). They also call up images of purity and holiness, for Ramzān is not only a period of fasting but also the month in which the first verses of the Quran were revealed and in which the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven. Naushah Pīr's words also initiate the imagery of light and illumination that is associated with Mirza throughout the poem: when he is young, for example, Mirza's mother tells him that he is moon of Badr Munīr (10). Images of light and references to the Prophet come together in the verses that describe Mirza's birth:

On the day Mirza was born everything was light.

The angels came on pilgrimage and *hūrīs* played with him in their  
laps.

"By the sun and the morning light" and the light was manifest

Know that through [the verse] "They said, 'Yes'" God gave him  
fame. (7)<sup>44</sup>

Not only is Mirza a child of light, then, but he is also a reminder of the Prophet's greatness and of the affinity the Prophet had for lovers. Indeed, as the poet tells us, the Prophet himself was a lover:

Lovers (*'āshiq*) got blessed souls on the day the Prophet ascended to  
Heaven;

In the end, the Kind Lord made him a lover too. (7)

And if Mirza is like the Prophet, his horse is like the mount which carried Muhammad into the presence of God: when he leaves Danabad for the village of Khiva, Mirza boasts that "My Nili can fly like the Prophet's mount Burāq" (114). Even though he is going on a journey to his own personal Karbala, then, Mirza is also (or so he may believe) going on a journey to mystical fulfillment. By the end of that journey, though, he has undergone a different type of transformation: he has gone from being a figure for the Prophet of Islam to being the image of the martyrs Hasan and Husain. But the poet frustrates this simple equation by introducing a Quranic parallel for Mirza's battlefield cremation: Mirza, he tells us, was cremated "like Nimrūd made a pyre for Ibrāhīm" (172). Here the poet refers to a story from the Quran according to which Ibrahim was thrown on a funeral pyre by the evil king Nimrud for destroying a number of idols; the fire turned into a bed of flowers. The poet seems to imply that although Mirza is being punished for his idol-breaking (opposing the codes of family and honour for the sake of love), God will reward him, too: he too will become *Khalīlullāh* (God's friend).

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<sup>44</sup> By the sun and the morning light" recalls both the beginning of Quran 91:1 and the complete verse 93:1; alternately it may be a misquotation of the whole verse "By the sun and its glorious splendour" (91:1). "They said, 'Yes'" (7:171) is the response made by the children of Adam to Allah's question, "Am I not your Lord?" on the day he created them.

This portrayal of Mirza as a figure of the prophets is characteristic in a narrative that adduces religious and Quranic analogues for many of the poem's events: if "love flows in the Chandal (Chenab) and lovers drink from it" Jhang itself is "like heaven" (12). In this charmed setting, Mirza's arrival in Khiva becomes for Sahiban a moment of faith and devotion, an echo of the moment when the call to prayer drives disbelief and doubt from the heart:

'I have heard the Prophet's call to prayer: I've heard *his* voice!  
Read the *kalimah*, O faithful ones: disbelief has fled from my heart.'

(105)

This context of religious parallels extends beyond association with Mirza alone to include other significant moments in the poem. For Mirza, the moment when he receives Sahiban's letter telling him that she is to be married off is like the moment when God tells Ibrahim to cut his own son's throat:

It was as if Karmu had Ibrahim's knife in his hand:  
He thrust it into the Kharal's pained body.  
His soul left his body and entered the unstruck (*anhad*).  
Hātif yelled out and he came to his senses;  
Jibrā'īl found out and grabbed onto the departing soul. (72)

Unfortunately for the metaphor (and for Mirza), we know that in the end Mirza will be killed: there will be no sacrificial sheep in this Ismā'īl's place. A similar, although more foreboding, reference haunts Mirza and Sahiban's departure from Khiva. As they leave the village, Sahiban sees a number of spots where she used to play with her girlfriends; as they pass one copse of trees, Sahiban recalls how she used to swing there on "the swing of love" (125). Her memories are, however, interrupted by her realisation that it was sorrow and suffering (*dukh*) that pushed the swing and she is silenced by the thought of "the saw that sliced Zakriyā" (125)—a prophet who was pursued by his kin and sliced in two while he

hid in a hollow tree-trunk because he predicted that God would show his wrath to them. The analogy to the pursuit and murder of Sahiban is obvious. More interesting in the narrative context of the poem is the poet's contention that Sahiban possesses Sulaiman's magical ring: when Mirza is almost killed by reading her letter asking for his help, she uses the ring to ascend into heaven, see what has happened, and intercede for him (73). Even the poem's moments of narrative magic are punctuated by faith and devotion.

Overall, Sahiban's dependence on the world of religion is relatively strong in the *qissa*, as (to a lesser degree) is that of the poem's other characters. Mirza, for example, is careful to remember God and worship the Ka'abā and Khwājā Khizr before leaving for Khiva (75), and Sarja worships the Pirs before embarking on his mission of revenge (227). At another level, though, there are two different strategies of devotion and supplication at work in the poem, a popular devotion to *pirs* exemplified by Chhatti and an attachment to the Islam of the book displayed by Sarja. When Mirza leaves for Danabad, Sarja goes to the village *qazi* to get an omen from a commentary of the Quran (88), while Chhatti asks the Pirs, particularly Baba Farid, to protect her brother. Chhatti's strategy of devotion to the Pirs is also used (and extended) by Sahiban as the poem nears its tragic climax: in addition to promising to go on *hajj*, she pledges that "I will sacrifice a goat for the Pir if I reach Danabad safely" (122, 104). When she realises that both she and Mirza are about to be killed, Sahiban extends the remit of her devotion, proclaiming that while "There is no one for me but God / My cries will reach him" (185) she expects the Prophet to mediate for her and show the Mahnas that Mirza was her rightful husband (*haqq*) (165). As she prepares to die, Sahiban once more manifests her personal faith in the Prophet as intercessor:

Sahiban said, "O Respected Prophet, head of the community,  
You alone will decide and announce your decision.



Please tell me the truth: when will I meet my lover Mirza?" (193)

In death as in life, Sahiban expresses a devotion centred on the figures of the Prophet and the Pirs, an expectation that her devotion and service should yield a return from these powerful figures. The obvious parallel is Nasiban's complaint at the door of Rai Rahmu: in exchange for her family's service and devotion, Mirza's mother expects (and receives) the support of a powerful lord.

Nasiban's expectation that Rai Rahmu will recognise her family's service and revenge Mirza's death is one of the many manifestations in the poem of the themes of honour, status, family and revenge. These themes are, however, far from unproblematic: as the poet points out at the moment of Mirza's murder, "in the end [the Mahnas] are Mirza's *nanke* (maternal relatives)" (172). This tension between kinship and honour structures the whole story: as the theme of the poem turns from Mirza and Sahiban's flight to the reality of the Mahnas' impending revenge, the poet starts to call them the Sials, shifting the discourse of honour from the level of the individual family to the level of the wider clan. But as Sahiban points out from the very beginning of her affair with Mirza, in social terms there is nothing wrong with her love for Mirza: "I chose my lover carefully, seeing that he is from noble stock" (56). Indeed, as she reasserts later in the poem, there is nothing to prevent an honourable marriage between her and Mirza, since "I have sought out an equal" (145); moreover, as Nasiban's marriage to Vanjhal shows "the Mahnas have kept up relations with the Kharals since forever" (144). It is only when Sahiban's family decide to ignore these pre-existing kinship ties and "my brothers and sisters forsake me" (198) that the Mahnas are able to kill her.

If the Mahnas' rejection of Sahiban leads to her murder, it is Mirza's act of forsaking his family that leads to his. When Mirza leaves for Danabad, his brother Sarja begs him

“Your brother has come [to stop you]: listen to what he says.  
You’ve snapped my heart in two and are severing all ties by  
leaving.” (86)

Although Mirza ignores his brother at the time, as the moment of death approaches, he realises how his disregard for kinship ties has left him defenceless in a world defined by familial revenge:

“Who will cover my back except my own brothers?  
If my own brothers were with me they would share my  
difficulties.” (169)

If Sahiban realises the power of her affective ties with her brother (and hides Mirza’s bow as a result), Mirza does not realise until it is too late the value of his brothers’ help—according to a Punjabi saying one’s brothers are one’s arms. So important is the theme of Mirza’s lack of allies that even Nili refers to it when she tells the Kharals about his death (231). If Mirza ignored the codes of family honour and revenge that surrounded him, though, his family does not. His mother Nasiban goes to the local potentate Rai Rahmu, who assembles an army of Kharals (including Sarja) to avenge Mirza’s death. Not only does Sarja fight in the army that defeats the Mahnas, but he also takes their cattle (232-3), presumably both as a form of “blood money” and as a way of angering them into starting the battle. When Rahmu and the Kharals arrive at Khiva, it is the full restoration of their honour that they seek:

Rai Rahmu utters the challenge, “Come out, O Khiva!  
We sent Mirza to get married and you killed him.  
Send us Sahiban in her *ḍolī* (palanquin): we have come ready to  
fight.” (238)

That the Kharals seek (and achieve) the restoration of their honour according to the codes of clan revenge and worldly honour which led to Mirza’s death

indicates the power of those codes in the poet's world: revenging Mirza has the effect of restoring him to respectability.

The poet's expression of the codes of honour and revenge is not without explicit reference to the other Punjabi folk-tales that express the theme; indeed, the *qissa* partakes of literary and folkloric reference as much as it does of religious discourse. Mirza and Sahiban carry out their love affair within a universe of discourse informed by the actions of other legendary lovers of the past. At both the level of the poet's narrative framing of the poem and the level of characters' individual utterances, this universe of discourse recognises that love is inevitably tragic. Indeed, the narrator begins the poem not with invocations to God and the Prophet but with an invocation of love's terrible power to destroy:

Who can change what the Writer has written?  
Love (*ishq*) beguiles lovers (*ashiq*) and slaughters them.  
.....  
Passion (*birhō*) drowned Sohni in the middle [of the river]  
And destroyed Sassi in unknown desert wastes.  
It skewered Bāndī, Lailā, Hir and Jalālī  
On the thorns of love (*ishq*) one by one.  
It wiped out Mirza completely  
And in the middle of the Bar stole the *doli* in which Sahiban had sat.

(1)

And if the poet's narrative frame makes Mirza and Sahiban's fate clear through direct reference as well as through allusion, the lovers themselves are aware of the fate of other legendary lovers from the very beginning of the poem. When Mirza leaves Khiva for his own village and Sahiban protests her inability to bear his absence, Mirza admonishes her in terms that make eminently clear his understanding of what society does to lovers:

“Sahiban, the world is like a day-dream, insubstantial and airy.  
One should die at the hands of love so the whole world will talk:  
Laila, Sassi and Hir are praised all over. . . .” (37)

That the lovers understand their fate in general terms is hardly evidence of their folly; that they constantly refer to the fate of their Sial predecessor Hir, though, indicates their complex relationship with the Hir legend: on the one hand they cannot escape the patterns and narratives it provides (even, on occasion, using them to advantage); on the other they try throughout the poem to negate the tragic ending which it imposes upon their own story. Before they actually elope to Danabad, both Mirza and Sahiban seem to use the Hir story as a harmless, even encouraging way to structure their experience: Mirza reminds the *dāī* whom he asks to take a message to Sahiban of how Sahti reunited Hir and Ranjha (110), and Sahiban evokes echoes of Ranjha coming to whisk Hir away from Rangpur Khera when she jokingly asks Mirza what sort of a weak horse he has brought from Tīllā (112).<sup>45</sup> When the lovers are actually on their way to Danabad, though, they realise the gravity of their actions and use Hir as a symbol of their rejection of some social values and retention of others: Hir taught us how to rebel, they say, but at least we did not repeat her mistake of failing to consider the status of her lover. Sahiban tells a potter whom they encounter on the way to Danabad to take a message to her brother Shamir:

“Go tell Shamir Khan not to be sad.

*I'm* not to blame: Hir committed the real error.

Hafiz, [Mirza] is the grandson in his mother's house: sugar and  
milk have mixed together.

Auntie Hir was the first to do this to you:

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<sup>45</sup>Ranjha was initiated as a *jogī* at Tilla by the Nath guru Bālnath before coming to Rangpur to meet Hir.

She fell in love with Ranjha from Takht Hazārā.

[But] the Mahnas and Kharals have been on good terms since the  
beginning:

I found Mirza, my Naushah, among them.

O itinerant potter, go to the Mahnas [and say]

'We Mahnas and Kharals are tied together by marriage.

I'm not making a mistake: Hir was the one who erred.

Hafiz, she set her heart on a cowherd: I sought out my equal.'"

(143-5)

At one and the same time, Sahiban tries to lessen the impact of her act by pointing out the monstrosity of Hir's greater disobedience of social codes and insults the Sials by reminding them that they have lost their honour because of a daughter's disobedience once before.

If the *qissa* is permeated with references to other famous love-stories, it also presents a literary genealogy that ties it in with a pre-existing Punjabi Mirza-Sahiban tradition. At the moment of her death, Sahiban asks an aged crow to ensure that her memory is preserved for posterity:

Sahiban says, "O ascetic crow, You've seen what's happened!

I sacrificed my life for my lover and took shelter at his feet.

What my fate decreed has happened; what was going to happen  
happened.

Go forth, O knower of my pain, so that people will speak of me."

(200)

Knowing that Sahiban can achieve worldly fame only through the medium of poetry, the crow seeks out the poet Pilu. Pilu, in turn, reponds that he has left the world and can no longer write poetry; instead, he passes the responsibility for

preserving Sahiban's reputation as a lover onto Hafiz Barkhurdar, giving both poem and poet a literary genealogy:

"Go give my respects to Hafiz Barkhurdar.

Greet him and give him Pilu's command:

Write a *qissa* about Sahiban, and write it well." (203)

This genealogy both grounds the *qissa* in a wider literary tradition and attempts to impart to it the prestige of Pilu's literary reputation—although it may well be that the poet exaggerates or satirises Pilu's reputation in order to heighten his own poem's prestige. In any case, the agency of Pilu in the story of the poem's creation marks it out as a conscious literary document, a *qissa* that acknowledges (and even takes pride in) its place in a literary and cultural tradition.

### Conclusion:

An examination of the textual history of the earliest Punjabi versions of the Mirza Sahiban story reveals that the two earliest *qissas* have not reached us in their original form: Pilu's poem is available only as an orally-transmitted *var*, and the *qissa* written by the late seventeenth-century poet Hafiz Barkhurdar Musalmani appears to have been incorporated into and confused with that of the late eighteenth-century poet Ranjha Barkhurdar. But such dubious textual histories should not be allowed to hamper investigation of what has reached us of the early Mirza-Sahiban *qissas*: they adumbrate many of the themes which reappear in most of the later versions of the story and display a surprising degree of interrelatedness. The second of these observations, of course, begs the question of the role of oral transmission in all three of the poems: did the lines common to Pilu's poem and one or both of the Hafizes' *qissas* migrate to Pilu's poem from the oral or written texts of the other two *qissas* or do the lines of transmission

flow in the other direction? Or are the common lines part of a wider oral tradition which has influenced all three poems?

But if there are striking verbal similarities between the three poems, their thematic centres are radically different. Where Pīlu's poem imbues Mirza with an aura of Karbala that seems at first glance to paint the Sials as analogues of Yazid, Hafiz's poem (the texts of the two poems are so conflated as to necessitate treatment as a single entity) emphasises family loyalties and conflicts at the expense of this religious imagery. Hafiz, like many of the poets who followed him, concentrates on the paradox that Mirza's killers are his mother's family and the problem of Mirza's having abandoned his own best allies, his brothers. In doing so, Hafiz embeds Pīlu's Karbala in a complex web of social codes and kin relations that complicates the problem of Mirza's death: no longer can the tale be a story of vengeful, cold-blooded murder; instead, it becomes (in one of many possible readings) an allegory for the conflict between codes of love and honour and ideas of familial duty and personal will, reflecting the conflicts and tensions inherent in a kinship system that allows marriage between full cousins. By reflecting and amplifying these conflicts, the early Mirza-Sahiban *qissas* set the stage for much of what is to follow, both in the written tradition and in folk-songs.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “PEOPLE WILL TALK”: AHMAD GUJJAR’S *HĪR*

The story of Hir-Ranjha tells of the illicit love affair between the children of two Jat village chieftains in north-western Punjab. Dhīdo, a young Ranjha Jat from Takht Hazara, is forced to flee his village when his brothers allot him barren land to cultivate after the death of his father Maujū. After spending the night in a village mosque and fighting with a boatman to get across the river Chenab, Dhido (known throughout the *qissa* as Ranjha) falls in love with Hir, a young Sial girl from Jhang, and is taken on as her father Chūchak’s cowherd. Hir and Ranjha spend an increasing amount of time together in the wastes outside the village, where they are spotted first by Chuchak’s brother Kaido and later by her brother Sultān. Angered by Hir’s actions, Chuchak and her mother Malkī forcibly marry her off to Saidā, a Kheṛā from Rangpur, and dismiss Ranjha. He arranges a few cursory meetings with Hir through the agency of the barber’s wife Miṭṭhī and even accompanies Hir’s *doli* to Rangpur. After Hir’s marriage, Ranjha takes initiation as a Nath *jogi* from Balnath at the Nath centre of Tilla and goes to Rangpur with the intention of meeting Hir. Through the initially-reluctant agency of Hir’s sister-in-law Sahti, who is herself in love with a travelling Baloch merchant, Ranjha is reunited with Hir in the Kālā Bāgh outside Rangpur and the couple elope (as do Sahti and her lover Murād). Hir and Ranjha are pursued by the Kheras into the territory of Adlī Rājā, where they are captured. Ranjha’s cries alert Adli to the happenings on the borders of his kingdom, and the feuding parties are brought into the Raja’s presence. On the advice of the *ulama*, Adli initially gives Hir back to the Kheras and Ranjha curses his city to destruction by fire. When he realises that the fire cannot be quenched, Adli calls the Kheras back and returns Hir to Ranjha, setting the stage for the



poem's denouement. It is in the ending of the story that the different versions of the poem show the most variation. In Ahmad's poem, Hir returns to Jhang Sial to allow Ranjha to come with a wedding party to marry her but dies of fever while waiting for him, and Ranjha dies when he hears what has happened to her; both lovers are then granted eternal life and serve pilgrims on the road to Mecca. There are two endings to Muqbil's poem: in one, the two lovers go off to Mecca together and spend eternity serving pilgrims; in the other, Hir dies of fever while waiting for Ranjha to come <sup>to</sup> marry her and he dies upon hearing the news. Varis is far less equivocal: he has Hir's family poison her after she returns to Jhang to await the arrival of Ranjha's marriage party and Ranjha dies of shock when he hears of her death. In contrast to the trends toward tragedy and mystical apotheosis present in the Punjabi *qissas*, Damodar reunites the lovers at the end of his poem.

#### Damodar:

Many Punjabi critics claim that Damodar's *Hir Rānjhā* is the first *qissa* treatment of the story in Punjabi; indeed, a recent Pakistani edition of the poem is subtitled "The First Punjabi Hir-Ranjha *Qissa*".<sup>1</sup> This claim is, however, based on both the incorrect assumption that any lengthy poem which narrates the Hir-Ranjha story must perforce be a *qissa* and <sup>on</sup> a failure to recognise the serious problems of dating that the text presents. Damodar's version of the Hir-Ranjha legend is by far the lengthiest in the Punjabi literary tradition, consisting of 961 stanzas (more in some editions) in *davayya* metre.<sup>2</sup> Most modern published texts descend from an edition published by Bāvā Gangā Singh Bedī in 1927 and based on two manuscripts he found in Jhang district; another edition based on a now

<sup>1</sup>Muhammad Asaf Khan, ed., *Hir Damodar: Hir Rānjhe dā pahilā Panjābī qissā* (Lahore: Pākistān Panjābī Adabī Board, 1986).

<sup>2</sup>Stanzas 730-750 appear to be based on the *dohra* metre.

missing manuscript was published by Bāvā Budh Singh in 1949.<sup>3</sup> No other complete manuscripts have been found in Pakistani or Indian Punjab since.<sup>4</sup> Very little is known about Damodar, except that he claims in the poem's ending to be a Gulāṭī Aroṛā from the district of Jhang:

The story of Hir and Ranjha is complete: there is no love like theirs.

The whole world knows that I wrote it as I intended to.

My name is Damodar, my *zāt* Gulati; I wrote what I saw.

I lived in Sial with Chuchak. (961)<sup>5</sup>

There is a brief preface to the poem of seven verses (numbered separately from the rest of the poem and probably an addition by a later scribe) which amplifies Damodar's magniloquent claims about himself: he claims that he decided to migrate to Sial and was welcomed by Chuchak and his wife Kundī (usually called Malki in the later Hir tradition). According to the preface, Damodar set up a shop in Jhang Sial and saw all the events he narrates with his own eyes; he also dates the events of the poem to the reign of the emperor Akbar.<sup>6</sup> The last two of Damodar's claims have, as might be expected, engendered a great deal of suspicion, particularly since the language of the text does not appear to resemble that of other sixteenth-century Punjabi literary documents. In fact, many of the features which are invoked to justify the early date of the text appear to be markers of dialect or literary style rather than of temporal development: it is, for example, often claimed that the use of the pronoun *kā* rather than *koī* to mark feminine subjects requires that the text be given an early date, since the same

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<sup>3</sup> Muhammad Asaf Khan, op.cit. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Prof. Pritam Singh of Patiala possesses an incomplete manuscript of the poem (interview, Patiala, December 1993). The manuscript is also referred to in Shamsher Singh 'Ashok', *Panjābī hatth-likhtā dī sūchī*. 2 vols. (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1961-3): 2:326 and Kulbir Singh Kang, *Panjābī vich Kīssā Hīr Rānjhā* 115.

<sup>5</sup> The edition used for citations is Gurdit Singh 'Premi', ed., *Damodar rachnāvalī* (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1974).

<sup>6</sup> Verses 1-3.

usage is found in the language of the *Adi Granth*. In fact, the use of *ka* in such circumstances is widespread among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Punjabi texts, particularly those from areas included in modern-day Pakistan: to take a few random examples, Pīr Muhammad Kāsībī's *Jangnāmā* (composed in 1681) uses the pronoun regularly to mark feminine subjects, and Varis Shah's *Hīr* (1766) uses its extended form *kāī* for the same purpose.<sup>7</sup> Damodar's claim that he is writing in Akbar's time has come under particularly close scrutiny, in part because of his references in the poem to tobacco, which may have been introduced to north India as late as the reign of Jahāngīr.<sup>8</sup>

The dating of the poem has been further complicated by the fact that although the preface claims that the events of the poem took place in Akbar's reign (1556-1605), the ending of the poem dates the union of Hīr and Ranjha to the year 1472:

Hir and Ranjha got together in 1529 *vikramī*;

God solved all quarrels.

As they left the city they prayed that

The reign of Akbar increase day by day.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Pīr Muhammad Kasbi, *Jangnāmā*. Ed. Shahbaz Malik (Lahore: Taj Book Depot, 1982); Jit Singh Sital, ed., *Hīr Vāris* (Patiala: PEPSU Book Depot, n.d.).

<sup>8</sup> Chetan Singh notes that the late seventeenth-century chronicler Sujan Rai Bhandari describes tobacco addicts in Lahore "and his concern about the increasing use of tobacco amongst all classes of people indicates the extent to which Panjab may have been affected" (*Region and Empire* 109.) He also notes that during Jahāngīr's reign, ships belonging to Shahjahan (who was then governor of Gujrat) imported tobacco into India (ibid. 131n). Gobind Singh Lamba argues that the reference to tobacco must date the text to before the year 1617, when Jahangir issued a *farmān* banning its use (*Panjābī kissā-kāvi*, 19), while Sītā Rām Bāhrī has argued that one of the references to tobacco (in verse 167 of the poem) is both unidiomatic and out of context and must therefore be a scribal error (Sītā Rām Bāhrī, "Damodar dī bolī te bhinn bhinn asar" in *Damodar: Jīvan te rachnā* (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1970): 97). Muhammad Asaf Khan claims that Kabīr and Jayasi used the term *kurkaṭ* for tobacco in their poetry and that the existence of the Sanskrit term *tamrakūṭ* in medical texts indicates that the plant is in fact indigenous. He traces the first references to tobacco in Punjabi literature to the poetry of Hazrat Naushah Ganj Bakhsh (born in 1552) and Hafiz Barkhurdar's *Mirzā Sāhibā* (op.cit. 25-6; 29).

<sup>9</sup> 'Premi', op.cit. 260.

Some Punjabi critics have taken the poet's asseverative comments that he saw the events of the poem with his own eyes as more than a literary tactic and have posited a date early in Akbar's reign (or even before) for the poem's composition. In doing so, they ignore both the tendency of Punjabi folk stories to link kings and *rājās* to stories in the same way that Damodar uses Akbar and the fact that Damodar's insistence on having witnessed the events of the poem reflects similar claims in the wider *qissa* tradition: Pilu appears as a character in his own *Mirza Sahibā* (as well as in the *qissas* of the two Hafiz Barkhurdars), Said Saidi (a contemporary of Shahjahan) claims in his Persian *Afsānah-i dilpazīr* to have known Ranjha's father Mauju, and Khairullah 'Fida' says in his *Qissah Mirzā Sāhibān* (1742) that he met both Mirza and Sahiban.<sup>10</sup> In any case, Guradasa Guni's *Kathā Hīr Rānjhan kī* provides a *terminus ad quem* for the composition of the poem: writing in the fiftieth year of Aurangzeb's reign (1707-8), he states that Damodar was his main source.<sup>11</sup>

As in the case of Pilu's *Mirzā Sāhibā*, Punjabi critics (in both Pakistan and India) have attempted to make the poem into a *qissa* without bothering to theoretise their choice of genre. This tendency seems to arise from a desire to indigenise the genre of the *qissa* on the one hand and to lengthen its pedigree on the other: the editor of the most recent Indian edition uses the supposed early date of the *qissa* to claim "The beginnings of *qissa* writing in Punjabi lie in approximately the same period that *premakhyanas* began to be written in various parts of North India."<sup>12</sup> The poem is, therefore, used to further a particular brand of Punjabi cultural nationalism by granting an older indigenous pedigree to one of the most popular Punjabi genres. As in Pilu's case, though, Damodar's poem

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Asaf Khan, op.cit. 21, 16-17.

<sup>11</sup> Satyendra Taneja, ed., *Kathā Hīr Rānjhani kī*. 2nd. ed. (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1972): 38. The earliest manuscript used in the preparation of the edition is dated 1842 VS, or 1785 (ibid. 19-20).

<sup>12</sup> 'Premi', op.cit. 2-3.

does not bear the distinguishing marks of the classical *qissa* (or any of its later variants)—although it is most certainly a narrative poem (and a lengthy one at that). In fact, the poet refers to the text as a *katha* at the end of the poem (961), linking it to the Sanskrit-Hindi tradition of (often lengthy) narratives of which it is more assuredly a part. Indeed, the ending of the poem (in which the lovers are reunited) seems to bow to the dictates of Sanskrit-Hindi narrative convention rather than to the tragic ethos of the Persian *masnavi* and the Punjabi *qissa*.<sup>13</sup> The only explicit reference in the poem itself to the *qissa* tradition comes in the preface (7), whose authenticity is somewhat doubtful. Any claim that Damodar's poem is the first *qissa* is, therefore, untenable.

### Ahmad and His Text:

While it does not conform to the classical paradigm of Varis's *qissa*, Ahmad Gujjar's *Kathā Hīr Rānjhe kī* (written in 233 verses of *baint*) contains enough of the elements of the classical *qissa* to be considered the first *qissa* about Hir in Punjabi—despite the title's explicit reference to the Sanskrit-Hindi *katha* tradition of narration. As in the case of so many other pre-modern Punjabi poets, we know nothing about Ahmad himself. The heading of the poem informs us that Ahmad was a Gujjar by caste, and the last line of the poem dates the text to the year 1682:

The story (*katha*) of Hir and Ranjha was completed in the twenty-fourth year of Aurangzeb's reign. (330)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> 'Premi', op.cit. 54.

<sup>14</sup> All citations of the text of the poem are from Piārā Singh 'Padam', ed., *Hīr Ahmad* (Chandigarh: Punjab University, 1960). Lines from the poem are cited by verse numbers only. The information that Ahmad was a Gujjar is, however, contained in the heading of only one of the four manuscripts which have been consulted by the two editors of the text. See S.S. 'Padam', ed., *Hīr-Ahimad* (Barnālā: Panjābī Sāhitt Sabhā, 1960): 19.

While some have surmised from the poet's use of certain dialectal forms and the fact that most of the manuscripts of the poem are found in Malwa (south-eastern Punjab) that Ahmad too must have come from that region, there are no independent grounds for making such an assumption—especially since the argument incorrectly assumes that manuscripts now found in institutional collections in Malwa must necessarily have originated from the region.<sup>15</sup>

There are at present two printed editions of Ahmad's poem, the first edited by Piārā Singh 'Padam' and the second by Sant Singh 'Padam', both published in 1960.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, manuscript collections in India and Pakistan possess at least ten manuscripts of the poem, including one dated 1305 AH/1887-8.<sup>17</sup> While Piara Singh bases his edition on the Central Public Library manuscript (with minor emendations from the Moti Bagh text), Sant Singh uses a manuscript in private possession as the basis of his edition and supplements its readings with those of the Central Public Library manuscript and an incomplete text in the possession of the Panjabi Sahitt Sabha, Barnala.<sup>18</sup>

The relative rarity of the text—there appears to have been no printed version before 1960—calls into question the importance of Ahmad's text during the pre-modern period. Evidence of his influence on later poets is, indeed, rare if not non-existent: Piara Singh has cited six lines of Muqbil's which bear some verbal resemblance to lines in Ahmad's poem,<sup>19</sup> but taken individually or as a

<sup>15</sup>Piara Singh 'Padam', op.cit. 17. That the first assumption is particularly untenable is shown by the fact that Shamsher Singh 'Ashok' has apparently argued on the basis of the language of the text that the poet must have been from Jhang in western Punjab! See S.S. 'Padam', op.cit. 19.

<sup>16</sup>Kulbir Singh Kang, *Panjābī vich Kissā Hīr Rānjhā* 120-1.

<sup>17</sup>Shamsher Singh 'Ashok', *Panjābī hatth-likhtā dī sūchī* 1:460; Piara Singh 'Padam', op.cit. *gaggā*; Kang, op.cit. 120-1; S.S. 'Padam', op.cit. 11, 14, 22; Sayyid Jamīl Ahmad Rizvī, "Panjāb Yūnīvarsitī Lāibrerī vich Panjābī qalmī nuskhē," *Khoj* 8-9(1982): 31-2; Ahmad Husain Quraishi, "Kutub khānā ul-Qurashiyā Qil'ādār (Gujrāt) de Panjābī qalmī nuskhē," *Khoj* 8-9(1982): 112; Shahbaz Malik, "Mutafarriq kutub khāniā vich Panjābī ma khūtūte," *Khoj* 8-9(1982): 265. The Bhasha Vibhag manuscript is, however, a copy of the Moti Bagh text.

<sup>18</sup>Op.cit. 11, 14, 15, 22.

<sup>19</sup>Piara Singh 'Padam', op.cit. *kakkā-khakhkhā*.

whole, none of the lines seems to indicate any borrowing at all. S.S. 'Padam' has noted a number of Muqbil's lines that bear some verbal resemblance to those of Ahmad and five of Varis Shah's stanzas which use the same *radif* (and often the same rhymes) as Ahmad's stanzas relating the same parts of the story.<sup>20</sup> While there seems to be some evidence of influence, it remains to be seen whether Ahmad directly influences Varis or does so only through the medium of Muqbil (for further discussion, see Chapter Six). None of the nineteenth-century poets who compiled long lists of their literary predecessors—Muhammad Bakhsh and Ahmad Yar in particular—have included Ahmad in their enumerations; in fact, the 1880s *Hir* poet Bhagvan Singh writes that "Muqbil wrote the first *Hir*."<sup>21</sup> Writing in 1849, the chronicler Ganesh Dās Baḍherā notes that only Muqbil had written about Hir and Ranjha before Varis.<sup>22</sup> The only poet who appears to have cited Ahmad is Hamid, who wrote a *Hir* in 1783: Hamid claims as his sources and literary influences Ahmad, Muqbil, Bāgā Qādirī, Rāmā and Gurdās (Guradasa Guni).<sup>23</sup> For one reason or another, then, Ahmad remained peripheral—if not unknown—to the pre-modern *Hir* tradition.

### The Narrative Emphases of the *Qissa*:

Perhaps the most striking feature of Ahmad's *qissa* to readers familiar with the *Hir*-tradition as a whole is the extreme compression of its narrative. At many points, the poem resembles a dramatic script more than it does a narrative poem: parts of the story are glossed over or completely elided, and the narration skips through other events in such an incomplete and enigmatic way as to presume

<sup>20</sup> Op.cit. 131-2, 134-6. It also seems clear that Ahmad is the first poet known to have written a *Hir* in *baint*: his lines have between 28 and 52 *matras* and always end in two long syllables (ibid. 172-3).

<sup>21</sup>Piara Singh 'Padam', op.cit. *gaggā*.

<sup>22</sup>J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga, eds. and trans. *Early Nineteenth-Century Panjab from Ganesh Das's Chār Bāgh-i-Panjāb* (Amritsar: GNDU, 1975): 107.

<sup>23</sup>Piara Singh 'Padam', op.cit. *khakkhā*.

that readers or listeners already know the story in outline anyway. The narration of Ranjha's encounter with Luddan and Hir, for example, is so compressed as to exclude completely any mention of why Hir is upset at Luddan, just that she beats him. Indeed, the poet does not even explain why the bed on Luddan's boat belongs to Hir:

"Take this afflicted one across, brother: I'm going to Mecca."

He didn't listen to Ranjha's pleas; the boatman knew no mercy.

Ranjha played his flute and even the fish heard the sound:

The melody made everything happy—how wonderful are God's  
miracles!

Ranjha went to sleep on Hir's bed: it was like throwing oil on a  
burning flame.

Ranjha had a good rest on the bed, and Hir beat Luddan the Jhabel.

(19)

Similarly, although Ranjha's complaints to Hir at their meeting in the Kala Bagh comprise a narrative in miniature of Ranjha's dismissal from his post as Chuchak's cowherd and the role played by Hir's brothers in her betrothal, the main body of the poem never mentioned these events at all. Only Ranjha's brief complaint alerts us to their having happened at all:

"What tyranny you practise, Hir! Why did your father forget his  
promise?

Why did your mother deceive me, sending me away after she had  
arranged [your marriage]?

Why did you support your brothers when they joined up with the  
Kheras?" (169)

Clearly, the narrator assumes that his audience does not need a step-by-step presentation of an already familiar narrative. Since the audience is assumed to



understand and know the narrative in advance, it is to read or hear the poem not as a linear narration of the story but as an abridged dramatic presentation.

Ahmad's abridgement of the Hir story displays its own set of emphases and biases. Although most of Ahmad's narrative is the familiar story of later more famous versions of the legend, the text contains a number of narrative digressions (also present in Damodar) which drop out of the later Hir-tradition. Perhaps the best well-known of these portions—presumably sacrificed by later writers like Muqbil and Varis to allow greater emphasis on the episodes of the *mulla* and the boatman—are the two encounters which Ranjha has on the road from Takht Hazara to Jhang: the first with a lion that he tames with his flute, the second with an old woman from whom he steals drinking water. Both the episode of Ranjha's stealing drinking water and his later act of threatening the shepherd who recognises him outside Rangpur with dire consequences if he reveals his identity reinforce the general impression in the poem of Ranjha as a wily—even deceptive—rogue who knows how to get his own way: he is far from being an innocent Jat at the mercy of the world. Similarly, his encounter with the lion emphasises that he is not helpless even in the face of hostile nature. The magical powers of his flute ensure that despite his later protestations that he was endangered by having to sleep out in the wastes while he was a cowherd, he was never actually in danger at all.

More important than these brief episodes that disappear from the later Hir-tradition, however, are the well-known portions of the legend that do not appear in the text. The brevity of the portion of the poem leading up to Ranjha's meeting with Hir (which occurs by the twenty-second stanza) implies a radically different emphasis in the beginning portion of the story. Where Varis, for example, emphasises the sexual subtext between Ranjha and his sisters-in-law and the difficulties the lay-about Ranjha faces in becoming a cultivator, Ahmad

tells us in a mere six stanzas only that Ranjha's brothers have fought with him and divided the land, giving him the uncultivated portion. Similarly, Ranjha's dialogue with the sister-in-law who brings his lunch to the fields is both uncomplicated and brief (it lasts only five stanzas): she taunts Ranjha for his womanising ways and warns him that he won't be able to survive on his own, while he repeats his determination to strike out on his own. The compression of the episode emphasises both Ranjha's pride—he refuses to eat “someone else's *rotī*” (2)—and the instrumentality of the episode itself in allowing Ranjha to leave home and encounter Hir: “The brothers fought with Ranjha and divided up the land; God opened the way for him to meet Hir” (1).

A more important set of alterations and omissions surrounds the affair between Hir and Ranjha at Jhang. The actual moment of the lovers' first meeting is almost telegraphic in its briefness, replacing the set of negotiations that in most other versions accompany Ranjha's decision to stay in Jhang with his simple statement that he will herd Chuchak's cows:

“Hey, who is that sleeping on my bed? Get up and show yourself!”

She had gone to beat him up but was herself conquered: Ranjha  
was the lion and Hir his prey.

Their eyes worked out a bargain, and love (*ishq*) was the middle-  
man.

“Thank God I didn't hit you or swear at you,” said Hir,

“Do you know a profession?”

Ranjha said, “Herding cows.” (22)

Where Muqbil for example emphasises the slow processes of revelation and discovery that doom the lovers, Ahmad is content to account for the affair in a brief stanza of narrative followed by the immediate entry of Kaido into the story. In a slight alteration of the sequence of events familiar in the Hir-cycle, Kaido

sees Hir sleeping next to Ranjha and asks the unsuspecting Ranjha for the *chūrī* which Hir has made him as alms. When Hir awakes and hears what Ranjha has done, she pursues her malign uncle and knocks him to the ground in anger. Unlike in Muqbil's poem, where Hir burns down Kaido's hut before her father takes the latter's side against her, Chuchak immediately calls together the ritual specialists to arrange Hir's marriage after only a few words from his brother:

"You have been shamed in God's court: the girl is involved with a rustic.

If you don't believe me, send your men and they will see themselves.

Find the remedy to this problem quickly or everyone will laugh at you." (28)

Similarly, Ahmad's poem contains almost no description of the pivotal episodes of Hir's wedding or her journey to her in-laws' village—certainly not the extended narrations of the repeated meetings between Hir and Ranjha arranged by Mitthi that figure so prominently in the versions of Muqbil and Varis. The net result of this compression is to shift emphasis from the narrative onto the dialogue that is so prominent in the poem, whether between Hir and her mother, Hir and the *qāzī*, or Ranjha and Sahti. As a result, the audience engages with the characters based on their words rather than their actions: rather than sympathising with Hir as a rebellious lover, to take a random example, they <sup>identify</sup> intellectually rather than emotionally—with the force of Hir's arguments against her marriage to her parents and the *qazī*. At the same time, though, the poem loses its air of social transgressiveness precisely because this emphasis on dialogue precludes any extended description of the actual romance between Hir and Ranjha: we barely understand, for example, that Hir and Ranjha enjoy the "forbidden fruits" of love or that Hir still objects to her marriage after she is taken to Rangpur. This

absence of explicit depictions of romantic love and, later, of the headstrong, independent Hir of the first part of the poem constructs and supports an orthodox, "safe" moral universe in which issues of class-pride and *sharia* dominate—not questions about the morality of love in a traditional society. In other words, Ahmad compresses the commonly accepted Hir story (as represented in literary form in, say, Damodar) in order to contain its transgressiveness.

### **Hir: The Disappearing Rebel**

From her first appearance in the poem, Hir is unmistakably her own woman. Arriving at the riverside to see a stranger asleep in her bed on Luddan's boat, she declares her rebellion against the constrictive powers of family and ideology at the same time as she sets about the business of punishing Luddan and Ranjha:

"I don't care about my parents or my family: what store do I set in  
anyone?"

"I'll beat you and him too: I do what I feel is right in my heart." (21)

This attitude of independence and complete antagonism to the strictures of family and community comes through particularly clearly in the characterisation of Hir before she is married off. Not only does Hir carry out her vow to "do what I feel is right" but she constructs a moral universe that completely opposes family, religion and society. As a result, Hir effectively dominates the first part of the poem, not in the least because she is virtually the only character who appears enough to create a firm impression of herself.

Unlike in Muqbil's *qissa* (in which Hir's mother begins arguing with her only after people begin to gossip about her love for Ranjha) Ahmad's Hir begins an argument with her mother on her own initiative immediately after hearing

that she is to be married off. In a speech whose second word is an expletive, Hir claims that her marriage to Ranjha was sanctioned by God at the beginning of creation and points out that (according to the *sharia* at least) her parents had no right to marry her off without her permission: "You, my parents, have done me a disservice: you didn't ask me before you did this deed" (32). Her mother's strikingly less forceful response is almost a text-book enumeration of the intertwining interests of wealth, control, status, honour and power that form the basis of society's marital ideology:

"Daughter, don't blame the go-betweens: they did what was right.  
I will marry you off with my own hands and all of our relations  
(*sharīk*) will come.

These taunts that tale-bearers make in the streets shame us.

I will send a trunk of goods—God's gifts—with you when you go."

(33)

Hir's response is simple but forceful: "What right to you have to marry me off? Are you carrying out your bounden duty?" (34). Hir's attack seems so potentially subversive and contrary to the norms of society that a helpless Malki is left only one response—to curse her daughter:

"What joy has your birth ever brought us? The lucky ones are those  
who have no children.

For the sake of the Kheras may you die like a tree when it sees the  
saw." (35)

To ensure that Hir's rebellion remains no more than a speech, her mother and father decide to marry her off immediately rather than risking delay (37).

Frantic to find a justification for their actions, Hir's parents appeal to the village *qazi* to provide ideological force for their decision: "Find a ruling of the *sharia* that will reconcile Hir to her marriage" (37). That Hir's parents ask the *qazi*

to reconcile Hir to her marriage rather than trust to the power of their own role as parents shows the regard they have for their daughter's stubbornness—and their fear that she may try to disobey them. Almost immediately, though, the demands of ideology begin to seem immoral and the *sharia* a compromised tool of that ideology: after all his books and omens show him that Hir and Ranjha have been married by God, the *qazi* still “makes a ruling with his mouth but regrets it in his heart” (38). Once again, Hir's response is defiant to the point of being rude: she tells the *qazi* “Your rulings are useless: go home, *qazi*!” (40). When the *qazi* becomes frantic at Hir's refusal to accept his authority and begins to threaten her with violence and eternal damnation, Hir still refuses to be moved:

“I make this ruling with the authority of God's *sharia*, girl!  
God will punish whoever does something other than what I say.  
You will be beaten in God's court and have chains placed around  
your neck.  
I rule according to the *sharia* and show the fallen the way, O Hir!”  
“*Qazi*, what God are you talking about? You speak nonsense.  
May a horse trample you for the bad things you wish on me.  
You walk around with the scriptures under your arm, but you  
know absolutely nothing.  
May you be ruined in this world and may your grave catch on fire  
after you're dead!” (41-2)

Hir's only response to the *qazi*'s continuing attempts to coerce her into accepting both his rulings and the authority of her parents is to assert that he is mad—in effect to question his right to adjudicate the *sharia* at all—and to reiterate that his utterances will have no effect on her at all (44). In the end, Hir's mother only succeeds in carrying out Hir's wedding by “falling upon” Hir—a turn of phrase

that alludes to the language of conflict and war rather than the discourse of home and family (*itthe Hīra Siāla de paī Māī*–46).

With the departure of Hir from her parents' village, though, a silent absence grows up at the centre of the poem—a silence punctuated only by Hir's letters to Ranjha and, finally, her meeting with the *jogi* Ranjha in the Kala Bagh. The tone of both of these interactions with Ranjha is, however, strikingly different than the tone of the rebellious, even truculent Hir that we encountered in Jhang Sial: Hir adopts a discourse of courtly love redolent with hints of submission and entreaty. Where Ranjha's letter curtly accuses Hir of being cruel to him even while they were still at Jhang—"You left me with the cows at night, with snakes and scorpions and tigers and cheetahs" (55)—she gently placates him by telling him that he sewed their hearts together with his flute and stole away her heart (54). Indeed, the only overt note of disagreement or discontent in Hir's letters to Ranjha is her attempt to counter his claims that she is being overly haughty by reminding him that "Leaving behind Chuchak's high status, I became the lover of a cowherd" (56). Just as in the letters, Hir's meeting with Ranjha is permeated by a discourse of self-abnegation. Her first words to Ranjha upon ascertaining his identity are:

"I wanted you when I was at my in-laws' house just as I lived on  
your strength at my parents' home.

I get no rest day or night because of the pains of longing for you.

You are in my heart and on my lips: if I ever turn away from you it  
will be to my harm." (164)

Even when Ranjha once more accuses Hir of having enjoyed a life of ease while he suffered and of having deceived him into becoming a cowherd, Hir's response is only to insist quietly that "I've been in pain ever since I was separated from you; I don't care for family ties (*sāk*)" (166). Even his continued insistence that she

must have had sex with her husband (167) leads her to new heights of self-abnegation and romantic devotion: she claims that

“I constantly wish that I may remain attached to your skirts,

Ranjha:

My eyes are fixated on you, and you are in my mind; I constantly repeat only your name.” (168)

Her expressions of devotion seem only to spur Ranjha to greater heights of suspicion and anger, and Ranjha resorts to accusing her of being as faithless as all other women are wont to be. Hir’s only response to Ranjha’s misogynist tirade is to claim that she is a poor pawn of fate who was married to the wrong person in the same way that Zulaikha was (170). Clearly then, the Hir that emerges from the silence of Rangpur—from the state of being a wordless cipher that is the existential condition of a wife and daughter-in-law of the Kheras—is constituted by discourses of submission and self-abnegation quite different than the discourses of rebellion that Hir adopted when at home in Jhang Sial. Why is this the case?

### The Hierarchy of Love

From their very first meeting to our last glimpse of them on the road to Mecca, the relationship of Hir and Ranjha is defined by an unchanging, rigid hierarchy. The first link in what is almost literally the chain of Hir’s narrative imprisonment as Ranjha’s subordinate is the poet’s constant use of the image of Hir as prey and Ranjha as hunter. When Hir first lays eyes on Ranjha, we hear that “She went to beat him but was herself killed: Ranjha is a lion and Hir his prey” (22). Similarly, Balnath’s initiation of Ranjha means that “a lion left Tilla on the hunt” (84), and his arrival in Hir’s courtyard prompts the observation that “He was eager to see Hir in the same way a heron searches for a fish” (118). This



image is extended when the poet notes during the lovers' meeting at the Kala Bagh (surely one of the narrative high points of the poem) that as she returns home Hir is "like a fish caught in a net" (173). The poet argues that Hir is no more in control of herself than the fish and lions that are entranced by the playing of Ranjha's flute, a helpless beast who is ensnared by a magic she cannot hope to understand. Like Hir, the Kheras too are blind to the hunter that is in their midst: when they agree to have Hir carried into the enclosure prepared for the *jogi's* magic, the narrator tells us that "they showed the prey to the hawk again" (199). The image of Ranjha as a hunting hawk occurs repeatedly in the poem, and the poet apparently sees it as a flattering comparison: when Adli mistakenly gives Hir to the Kheras, he laments that she has been given to a crow rather than to a hawk (220). Another narrative strategy which elevates Ranjha (although less obviously at the expense of Hir) is the constant equation between Ranjha and the prophets, particularly Yusuf. Hir tells the *qazi* that the love she and Ranjha share is equal to that of Yusuf and Zulaikha (40), and states to Ranjha that she was married off to Saida in error just as "Zulaikha was the true possession of Yusuf but was married to 'Azīz in Misr" (170). Hir even tacitly equates Ranjha with the Prophet Muhammad, telling her mother that if she is married off to Saida, "I will sit and read God's word and busy myself with Ranjha" (36), substituting the more usual dyad of God and the Prophet with the pairing of God and Ranjha. No wonder, then, that Ranjha's miracle prompts Sahti to say to him, "I too am become your disciple" (157).

Equally important to the subjection of Hir in the *qissa* is the discourse of the possession of Hir by Ranjha that attends the romance, language that ultimately equates Hir with the cows he herds. One common expression in the poem is that "Hir is Ranjha's *haqq*," the term *haqq* meaning something that one is entitled to. In this sense, *haqq* also means the wages or benefits due to a servant

or employee (usually in kind), such as the cows that Malki and Chuchak owe Ranjha when they dismiss him from their service. Most importantly, the term implies a legal right of possession or entitlement over something (or someone) else. It is in this sense that the term is used to describe a husband's right over his wife: Hir even uses it to describe Yusuf's right to Zulaikha (*aslu haqqu Zulaikhā sī Jūsafē dā*—170). Even more tightly connected with the notion of possession than *haqq* is the use of the term *māl* (meaning "goods" or more idiomatically "cattle") to describe Hir. So pervasive is the notion of Hir as the *mal* of Ranjha or the Kheras that she even uses the term to describe herself: when Ranjha begins to fall asleep after taking her across the frontier of Adli's kingdom, Hir warns him that "This is not a time for sleeping; those whose cattle you've stolen (*mālu hakkio jinhā dā*) will come for it" (207). Even the final debate between Ranjha and the Kheras in Adli's court is about who has the right to possess Hir: about whether Ranjha's primordial love for Hir or the fact that the Kheras spent a great deal of wealth on the wedding (218) grants the more secure right of possession. Indeed, the poem concludes by emphasising the injustice of Ranjha's property having been given away to the Kheras (219-27). Ultimately, even the lovers' final apotheosis reflects a certain hierarchy between the lovers as much as it does the traditional divisions of all tasks (including the devotional) among the sexes in pre-modern Punjab: we are told that while Ranjha shows travellers the way to Mecca, his devoted mate Hir cooks them food. More importantly, though, the poet tells us that "God made Ranjha a pure martyr (*shahīd*) and Hir joined the ranks of the *hūrīs*" (233). Even in apotheosis, the relation between Hir and Ranjha remains clearly hierarchical: Hir is the *huri* that every martyr is promised to serve him in heaven. Even in paradise, Hir is Ranjha's *haqq*.

### Trickster, Lover and Miracle-maker: The Character of Ranjha in the *Qissa*

Our first view of Ranjha in the poem is undoubtedly that of a naive younger sibling who is bilked out of his patrimony by his elder brothers. This initial image of a helpless, unworldly Jat who easily falls prey to others' evil intentions is, however, quickly contradicted by Ranjha's actions. We have already noted the rashness and cunning implicit in Ranjha's stealing drinking water from the old lady he encounters on the road to Jhang; this impression is further reinforced by the way Ranjha conducts himself when he reaches the mosque at which he decides to stay the night. When the *mulla* quite legitimately asks Ranjha who he is, Ranjha remains completely silent, attempting to mask both his identity and his reason for leaving home. His silence prompts the *mulla* to try to eject him because he "looks like a deceptive person (*daghebāz*)" (10). Ranjha displays a similar craftiness when he first encounters Luddan, disingenuously begging the boatman to take him across the river for free because "I am going to Mecca" (19). It is hardly surprising, then, that Ranjha tricks Balnath into initiating him as a *jogi*, only revealing afterwards in a fit of pique at the Nath's efforts to instruct him in the teachings of the sect (79) that "I took *jog* for the sake of Hir; I've got nothing else to do with you" (81). After the initial glimpses we have had of Ranjha's character, it is not at all "out of character" for him to be an outright liar.

But if Ranjha deceives Balnath in order to become a *jogi*, his new identity seems an appropriate alter ego for an already charmed young man. We see from the very beginnings of the poem the magical power which Ranjha's flute—normally merely an indicator of lowly cowherd status (110) but here at least somewhat reminiscent of Krsna's flute—possesses to tame dangerous lions, unsuspecting fish and hostile boatmen. His transformation into a *jogi* seems to enhance and expand these powers. Ranjha's entry into Rangpur Khera, for

example, prompts a sympathetic twitching in Hir's arm (89), and Sahti's attempts to expel him from the family's courtyard cause the top of the house to tremble (132). For Sahti, however, the matter of Ranjha the *jogi's* magical powers is settled once and for all when he changes the contents of the tray she presents him with in the Kala Bagh from five rupees, sugar and cream to five *paisās*, sugar and rice (156):<sup>24</sup>

Seeing the tray, Sahti's doubts were completely swept away.

She lowered herself and bowed three times and the curses in her mouth turned to praises.

"I need a protector of *faqar* like you to release me from my burden of sins."

Oh Ahmad, she begs the *jogi*, "Hir is Hir, but let me be your disciple too!" (157)

Her new-found faith in the Jat-turned-*jogi* whom she so thoroughly castigated as a charlatan is, of course, most famously manifested in her prayer to the *jogi* (on the strength of the miracle she has witnessed) to reunite her with her lover Murad: "I believe that God listens to what you say, Ranjha" (203). Interestingly, Ahmad adds to Ranjha the *jogi's* miracles one that is not present in Muqbil and Varis—one which unquestionably strengthens the link between Ranjha and Krsna created by his flute and his cowherding. On the night when the four lovers decide to escape from Rangpur, the Panj Pirs come to Ranjha's aid once again, putting the entire family to sleep just as Kansa's guards were put to sleep on the night Krsna was born.

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<sup>24</sup>The actual mechanics of the change are rendered somewhat unclear by the fact that at this juncture the text mistakenly mentions that both rice and sugar were in the tray before and after the change (153, 156), while Sahti later mentions that the contents of her tray were changed into rice and sugar (203).

Despite the echoes of Krsna in the Pirs' miracle and the Hindu overtones of the *jogi*-disguise which Ranjha adopts, he is a decidedly Islamic *jogi*. Ranjha buttresses the Islamic credentials created by his constant identification with Islamic prophets by maintaining a resolutely Islamic discourse even after he becomes a *jogi*. Indeed, he tries to convince Balnath to initiate him by relating stories about Ibrahim and Yusuf (71, 73), and he reads a *fātihā* of thanksgiving before he leaves Tilla (84). When Ranjha enters Rangpur, the magical powers he claims to possess are similarly Islamic: when he proposes to Sahti that he should cure Hir, he claims to have studied the science of "Allah Burhān" rather than that of curative herbs, and he says that he can reunite separated lovers by writing out a Quranic amulet (115). In response to Sahti's doubts about his abilities as a *jogi*, Ranjha notes that only experts in *'irfān* (Islamic mystical knowledge) will truly be able to recognise his value as a *jogi* (115). The end result of Ranjha's Islamic discourse is that others see him as a Muslim mystic rather than as a Hindu *jogi*: when Sahti goes to see Ranjha in the Kala Bagh, she takes along a tray of eatables and money as "a presentation for the *pir*" (*nazar pīr dī*–148). Further, Adli Raja believes Ranjha to be a *pir* when the Kheras first bring him into the court and threatens to kill them because he has never been made to punish a *pir* before (213).

At least one other aspect of the characterisation of Ranjha would seem to come from a background that is Islamic in its origins. From quite early in the poem, Ranjha is the ideal type of the Indo-Persian lover of the *ghazal* and *masnavi*, literary forms which were widely diffused in the North Indian cultural and literary systems of the period. As soon as he hears Hir's name from the Panj Pir in the wastes on the way to Jhang Sial, "he mount[s] the horse of passion (*shauq*) and gives the bridle to separation (*birah*)" (16)—subverting reason and giving emotion control of his being. His wanderings and tribulations at the hands of

love (including his loss of social status) are, of course, the matter of many secular and religious love-tales in the Indo-Persian tradition, as is the discourse of self-sacrifice and suffering that defines his response to Hir's pained letters begging him to visit her in Rangpur:

The war-trumpet of love made a thundering sound and shook  
Ranjha's soul:

He accepted poverty and hunger and took to the road; love would  
not let him sleep, so he set off.

Slaughtered by pain and separation, he could not bear it: pained by  
separation, he wailed and wailed. (59)

When he finally enters Rangpur, Ranjha assumes yet another of the classic roles of the lover, that of the ill-starred and oppressed lover wandering the streets of his lover's city, starving in body and soul but desiring only a glimpse of his lover: "he walks about through the streets / He cares nothing for nourishment, searching for a glimpse of his beloved" (93). Ranjha's disorientation in the cause of love culminates in one of the most striking portraits of his condition in the entire Hir tradition, one which emphasises both the obsessive nature of his love for Hir and the impossibility of constructing his life in the way he intends to. After he breaks his begging bowl in an attempt to stay in Hir's courtyard a little while longer, the narrator tells us that

His eyes are on his love, and he has forgotten himself: he puts the  
little pieces of his bowl together.

Lost in thought he has forgotten purity; picking up the sugar, he  
puts it in his bowl.

When the pieces go in the bowl, it falls apart again: these are the  
troubles that plague this unfortunate! (130)

Like his clay begging-bowl, Ranjha's life inevitably falls apart when he tries to reconstruct it in the light of the love he feels for Hir.

### **Ideological Conflict in the *Qissa*:**

We have already seen how Hir's debate with the *mulla* before she is married off to Saida centres around the conflict between the *sharia* and Hir's conception of primordial love, ending with Hir's complete rejection of the authority of a *sharia* compromised by its complicity with societal ideologies of control and suppression. Essentially the same terms come into play in the debate between Ranjha and the Kheras in Raja Adli's court to determine which of the two parties will possess Hir. As in the case of Hir's debate with the *mulla*, this disputation is compromised before it begins by the dynamics of power and violence that surround it: the debate itself is occasioned by the fact that the Kheras together with Hir's brother Paṭhān (called Sultan in most other versions of the legend) have hunted the lovers down and captured them. The punishments meted out to them (and, by implication, the fate which awaits them in Jhang) are only averted by Ranjha's cries for justice in Adli's court:

They put Hir on a horse and sent her back; they ensnared Ranjha  
with a noose and drove him forth.

Saida remembered the pain of the hoe [Ranjha had hit him with]  
and whipped Ranjha again and again.

His body was covered with blood and whip-marks: the bloody  
Khera beat the delicate Ranjha. (210)

It is against this backdrop of murderous violence that the Raja suggests referring the matter to the *qazi*, who will decide the dispute according to *sharia*, '*ilm*, *fiqh* and *riwāyat* (215). The *sharia*, backed in this instance by the Raja's temporal power, is "accepted by Hindus and Muslims" (215)—supposedly an impartial

force, but in actual fact one implicated in the relations of society as a whole. Against this powerful array of social forces Ranjha interposes love and the Sufi sanction of *pirs* and the Prophet:

'*Ain, shīn* and *qāf* [*ishq*] were my wedding-party and carried out my marriage.

The Qutb was the *vakīl* for my wedding-contract and the sun and moon were the witnesses.

We accepted this arrangement at the very beginning of creation and the Prophet's soul read the *nikāh*.

My soul mingled with hers: this is the way of longing. (217)

In response "the Kheras took the sanctuary of the *sharia*" (218). They base their claim for "possession" of Hir on the fact that "we spent [a lot of] gold to bring her as a bride" (218), neatly equating marriage with the purchase of slaves or chattel. Their argument, brief as it is, seems to please the *qazi*, though: he immediately declares that Ranjha is "quarrelsome" and that the *hadīs* and the *sharia* support the Kheras. The result of this misuse of the *sharia*, of course, is that Ranjha's prayers for justice cause God to set Adli's city on fire—a fire which can only be quenched by his calling the Kheras back into his court and restoring Hir to Ranjha.

Before this can happen, however, Ahmad inserts two crucial events that do not occur in other versions of the Hir-Ranjha story. The first is Hir's meeting with her brother Pathan, who has accompanied the Kheras on their mission to get her back and punish her lover. As the Kheras take Hir away to Jhang, she notices her brother, who tries to turn away so Hir does not see him. His attempted turning away from his "disgraced" sister has a double meaning which Hir exploits: not only is he refusing to gaze upon the sister who has disgraced the family, but he is also avoiding her gaze out of his shame at being a member of



the Kheras' vengeful posse. Seeing his reaction, Hir reminds him of the impropriety of the way she was married off and the injustice of the way she has been treated. "This was written in my fate," she tells Pathan, "It was my good fortune that Ranjha came to Sial, met me by the riverside and stole my soul" (225). She continues that Ranjha, the son of a landlord, became a cowherd for her sake and, more importantly, that the *qazi* was bribed to marry her off. Most crucially, however, Hir raises the question of status and prejudice that is at the centre of her parents' opposition to her union with Ranjha, to whom her parents objected merely because he was a simple cowherd: "I am the daughter of a Jat and Ranjha is a Jat: you deliberately created grounds for disagreement" (225). The simplicity of her argument appears to convince her brother, if not the skeptical reader:

"Aren't you ashamed to be running around with [the Kheras]?" Hir admonished her brother.

Pathan the Sial understood the truth and turned his horse towards home. (225)

Symbolically at least, the Sials' opposition to the relationship between Hir and Ranjha has ended, and the only parties to the dispute are the Kheras and the lovers themselves. The way is now clear for Raja Adli to reverse his initial decision.

Here again, Ahmad introduces an interesting innovation. Instead of announcing his decision to the two parties, Adli instructs Hir to make her own choice, to take—for the first time—her fate entirely into her own hands:

They brought the Kheras into the Raja's presence, and the Raja said, "Don't be afraid, Hir.

They are Muslims and you the daughter of a Muslim: don't have any fear in your heart.

If anyone does you any wrong I'll kill them: I shall cut off the noses  
of brave warriors.

I shall separate the water from the milk and decide truth and  
falsehood.

Go, daughter, grab the hem of the one whom you believe possesses  
you by right (*haqq*).” (226)

Hir, of course, turns her back on the Kheras and chooses Ranjha, prompting the narrator to indulge in a syntactic parallelism that exalts the king and simultaneously throws the twin supports of social ideology onto Hir's side: “God was kind and the Raja just” (228).

The poem's vacillation between the dictates of ideology and the claims of love is, however, far from over—even this late in the narrative. For Hir, at least, the sanction of God and ruler means nothing if it is not backed by the social sanction of a public wedding:

They asked the way and set off for home right away. Hir gave  
Ranjha this counsel:

“If I go to Hazara like this, people will say, ‘She is a runaway.’  
Those related to you and those you know will come in great  
numbers to gawk.

Take me to my parents' house, Ranjha, and go to Hazara to meet  
your brothers.

Bring your relatives with you as a wedding party: then everyone  
will praise us.” (229)

Hir's hopes of assimilating her transgressive love for Ranjha into the ways of traditional society are, however, doomed: she dies soon after returning home. Once again, the *qazi* of Sial tries to strike a blow for the *sharia*, exploiting the tragedy of Hir's death for his own ends: writing to tell Ranjha about her death,

he notes that “there is no remedy for the way of *sharia*” (232). The apotheosis of the lovers after their death implies, though, that love itself is a remedy for the *sharia*—but that the remedy is a poison to the strictures of society. If one escapes the bonds of *sharia*, one no longer has a place in society: in those circumstances, the only route left to acceptability is by being sainted, by having one’s emotion and passion “dignified” by the name of ecstatic religion. Otherwise rebellion is pointless and doomed.

### **Conclusion:**

As the first known Hir-Ranjha *qissa* in Punjabi, Ahmad Gujjar’s *Kathā Hīr Rānjhe kī* initiates many of the themes and strategies which dominate the later *qissa* tradition. Although the actual extent of the poem’s direct influence on later *qissas* is somewhat uncertain, it shares with them its central concern with the tension between societal ideologies of control and suppression on the one hand and the transgressive love of Hir and Ranjha on the other. As in the other Hir *qissas*, the *sharia* comes in for particular condemnation—not only in the dialogues of Hir and the *qazi* but also in Raja Adli’s decision to override the *qazis’* ruling and allow Hir to return home with Ranjha. Despite these affirmations of the power of love in the face of religion, by the end of the poem the discourse of religion succeeds in containing and defining the lovers yet again (as it does in most of the early Hir *qissas*)—both through the *qazi* of Jhang Sial’s assertion that the *sharia* always wins and in the lovers’ final mystical apotheosis. Unlike in most of the other *qissas*, though, the discourse of family honour that lies at the centre of Malki and Chuchak’s disputations with their daughter falls apart by the end of the poem: the image of Hir’s brother Pathan turning his back on the Kheras’ posse at Hir’s urging symbolises the Sials’ tacit acceptance of Hir’s power to choose.

At the same time, Pathan's refusal to join the Kheras' expedition focusses the poem's debate on one central issue: who possesses Hir-Ranjha or the Kheras? This focus on the (ultimately legalistic) issue of possession ties in with the poem's constant use of language which portrays Hir as Ranjha's own possession— a metaphor that equates her with cattle rather than with the conventionalised lover of Indo-Islamic poetic imagery. Notwithstanding this rather unconventional metaphor, Hir and Ranjha do play out the stereotyped roles of lovers in the courtly tradition (although with the usual Punjabi alteration that sees the woman occupy the submissive role): Hir's language is characterised by submission and entreaty and Ranjha's by suspicion and anger. As in much Punjabi love poetry, there is a discernible tension between Ranjha's role as the classical *ashiq* who pursues a distant, unattainable *ma'shūq* (the married Hir) and the typically Punjabi transformations that see Hir adopt the self-abnegating discourse of the lover and Ranjha the haughty tone of the beloved. This tension is, to a certain extent, resolved (or at least recast) by the poem's attempt to view the relationship between the lovers through the decidedly mystical lens of the *pir-murid* paradigm: if Ranjha is (analogically at least) a *pir* who shares certain qualities with the prophets, it is only right that Hir adopt a certain attitude of formalised devotion towards him. Once again, the poem attempts to resolve a potentially transgressive social configuration (Hir and Ranjha as loving equals) by embedding it in the language and imagery of mystical discourse.

Indeed, an attempt to contain the legend's transgressive potentialities is evident throughout the text in the poet's strategy of compressing the story and omitting or shortening certain key episodes. By limiting what the audience hears or reads during the course of the poem, the poet attempts to create a version of the legend that adheres in the main to a certain standard of moral conduct and ideological control. But is his attempt successful? In a poem whose audience

already knows the narrative in detail, any attempt to omit or silence certain portions of the legend can only have the effect of highlighting the points of disagreement and rupture between the poet's vision of the legend and the other known versions; these silences betray the poet's ideological project: the containment of the poem's transgressive possibilities. Perhaps the most telling indication of whether or not the poet succeeds in his project is given by yet another of the poem's many silences: when Pathan turns away from the Khera posse that seeks to punish Hir and Ranjha, he says absolutely nothing. His silence speaks volumes.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “ACCEPTABLE POETRY”: MUQBIL’S MYSTICAL *QISSĀ HĪR RĀNJHĀ*

My poetry only became acceptable when I repeated the name of the Lord:  
I prayed for the pure soul of the beloved Prophet again and again;  
I lowered my head before Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uṣmān and ‘Ali.  
Muqbil, I cried and sighed as I related the *qissa* of Hir and Ranjha. (Muqbil, *Qissa Hīr Rānjhā*, verse 4)<sup>1</sup>

Muqbil’s matter is simple and straightforward, popular and loved;  
His words are delicate but his meanings complex and worth remembering. (Mian Muhammad Bakhsh)<sup>2</sup>

As with most pre-modern Punjabi poets, we do not know enough about Muqbil to be able to contextualise his works with any degree of certainty. We know nothing of his background or social status, not even where he was born or where he spent most of his life: Muqbil is, in effect, an equivocal sign, a question mark, a trace preserved by writing, copying and (in the modern age) printing. There exist at present three texts attributed to Muqbil: *Qissā Hīr Rānjhā*, *Sīharfī madh-i Pīr-i dastgīr* (a poem in thirty acrostic verses praising ‘Abdul Qādir Jīlānī, the founder of the Qadiriya Sufi *silsilā*) and *Jangnāmā Imām Hasan Husain* (a lengthy tract on the martyrdom of Ali’s sons).<sup>3</sup> It is from the third of these works

<sup>1</sup>The edition cited in this chapter is Jogindar Singh, ed., *Kissā Hīr Rānjhā Mukbal* (Patiala: Punjabi U, 1984). I shall cite by verse number rather than by page number. The alternate ending to the poem, available in the footnotes to the main text, has been cited by footnote numbers alone.

<sup>2</sup>Mian Muhammad Bakhsh Jihlami, *Kissā Saif ul-Mulūk* 657.

<sup>3</sup>The works are collected in Shamsher Singh ‘Ashok’, ed., *Mukbal rachnāvalī*. 2nd. ed. Rev. Avtar Singh Dhodi (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1974); another edition of the *Jangnāmā*, based on two printed texts, is Shahbaz Malik, ed., *Jangnāmā Muqbil te Panjābī marsiyā* (Lahore: Tāj Book Depot, 1974). There are at least four manuscripts of the *Jangnāmā* in India and three in Pakistan, see Shamsher Singh ‘Ashok’, *Panjābī hatth-likhtā dī sūchī* 2:132; ‘Ashok’, *Mukbal rachnāvalī* 36; Sayyid ‘Arif Naushāhī, “Kutubkhānā-i Ganj Baḳsh (Rāvalpīndī) vich Panjābī makhtūte,” *Khoj* 8-9(1982): 41; Muhammad Aslam Rānā “Kitāb khānā Iqbāl Salāh ud-Dīn (Okārā) dā Panjābī qalmī sarmāyā,” *Khoj* 8-9(1982):172; Hafiz Tāib, “Kutub khānā Dākṭar Vahīd Quraishī de Panjābī makhtūte” 205. There exists at least one manuscript of the *Sīharfī* in India and ten (with various titles) in Pakistan, see ‘Ashok’, *Mukbal rachnāvalī* 36; Rizvi, “Panjāb Yūniversitī Lāibrerī” 18, 24; Sayyid Arif Naushahi, op.cit. 46; Ahmad Husain Quraishi, “Kutub khānā ul-Qurashiyā” 91, 98, 101; Rana, op.cit. 194; Anjum Rahmani, “‘Ajāib Ghar (Lāhaur) de Panjābī makhtūte,” *Khoj* 8-

that we get our only hint of biographical information about the poet: at the end of the poem we read

Muqbil Shāh Jahān wrote this tract (*risala*)

In the twenty-ninth year of the reign of Muhammad Shah

On Thursday the seventh day of Zīqa'd

In the year 1208 *hijrī*.

This *faqīr*'s pen-name is "Muqbil", as is well-known;

Brothers, this suffering one is deprived of his eyes.<sup>4</sup>

Even these hints, however, are shrouded in a textual uncertainty that must render any reliance on them risky to say the least: the verses containing the *hijri* date of composition do not appear in two of the three manuscripts used by the editor of the text they are a part of, and one of the two manuscripts that mentions the emperor Muhammad Shah does not give the regnal year in which the poem was supposedly written.<sup>5</sup> Even then, the two dates given in the verses are nearly fifty years apart: while the *hijri* year 1208 corresponds to 1793-4, Muhammad Shah sat on the throne in 1719<sup>6</sup>—making the twenty-ninth year of his reign 1748. Leaving the thorny problem of dating aside, we have as biographical evidence only the poet's testimony that he is blind—and no certain assurance that the Muqbil who wrote the *Jangnāmā* is the same Muqbil who wrote *Qissā Hīr Rānjhā*. In the absence of any reason to suspect that both poems are not by the same Muqbil, though, it may be concluded that Muqbil was an eighteenth-century Muslim author with allegiance to the Qadiriya Sufi *silsila* who wrote at least three literary works, two of them overtly religious.

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9(1982): 217; Shahbaz Malik, "Mutafarriq kutub *khāniā vich*" 254, 260. In addition, an anthology of Punjabi and Persian *risalas* containing Muqbil's *Siharfi* came on the London art market in October 1995.

<sup>4</sup>Ashok', *Mukbal rachnāvalī* 218.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. 218 note.

<sup>6</sup>John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire (The New Cambridge History of India I.5)* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993): 272.

### The Text of *Qissā Hīr Rānjhā*:

If almost nothing is known about Muqbil the poet, the text of his most well-known work is equally subject to uncertainty, contest and play. The central conundrum of Muqbil's *Qissā Hīr Rānjhā* is the hermeneutic challenge of its two completely different endings: in one version Hir and Ranjha depart together on pilgrimage to Mecca and receive eternal life; in the other, both lovers die. Nor can we rely on textual criticism alone to adjudicate between these two endings and give us a firm answer to the question of which might have been Muqbil's "original" ending to the poem: all of the manuscripts used by the Indian editors of the poem are undated, giving no clue as to which version may have appeared first. Indeed, even to look for such a simplistic resolution of the two contradictory versions of the poem belies the myriad interpretative possibilities latent in a text that comes to us with two completely different endings and two completely opposed hermeneutics. It may seem tempting to suggest that the "happy" ending of the poem in which the lovers travel together to Mecca is more in line with the text's decidedly mystical trajectory and that the tragic ending is a projection by later scribes and readers of the popularity of Varis Shah's solution (if not that of the earlier Persian *masnavis*) to the social conundrum of the text's forbidden passion.<sup>7</sup> Such a simple explanation, though, not only ignores the significant disjunction between Varis's ending and Muqbil's (in Varis, for example, the Sials poison Hir) but also sidesteps the uncertainty and play inherent in the text as we now have it in favour of a constructed, monochrome certainty—one that incidentally fortifies the critical tendency to valorise Varis as

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<sup>7</sup>It is equally tempting to suggest that commercial considerations led to the adoption of one or the other of the two endings: perhaps readers disaffected with one of the text's two endings began to ask for versions of the poem with another ending. This conjecture, however, once again raises the vexed and misleading problem of having to determine which of the endings is the 'original' one.



the inventor of tragedy in the Punjabi *qissa*. Giving primacy to one or the other of the endings of Muqbil's poem completely effaces the interpretational possibilities inherent in the composition and reception of an eighteenth-century Punjabi poem (however mysticised) about romantic love: the different endings of Muqbil suggest the impossibility of trying either to harness the subversions of romantic love to the service of mysticism or to subordinate mystic love to the dictates of ideology. Unlike his predecessor Ahmad Gujjar, who simply has Hir and Ranjha die before they go on eternal pilgrimage, Muqbil seems to offer two stark alternatives as a form of critique of the opposition between the certainties of mysticism and secular ideology: instead of narrative resolution, his poem yields only questions and hermeneutic uncertainty. The poem's different endings set up a multi-layered poetic of self-reflexive questions and uncertainties more subversive than those posed by any one of the possible endings alone.

In fact, it would seem that there are at least three recensions of the text of *Qissa Hir Ranjha*, differing from each other more in their endings and treatment of the episode of Hir's marriage rather than in the readings of individual lines.<sup>8</sup> The three known recensions are: a short version of 360 verses that ends with the death of Hir and Ranjha; a longer version of 433 verses containing extended descriptions of the ceremonies surrounding Hir's marriage and arrival in Rangpur and ending with the apotheosised lovers going on eternal pilgrimage to Mecca; and a shorter version that retains the mystical ending but omits the extended descriptive passages. Only the first two recensions are represented by printed editions, the first edited by Jogindar Singh, the second by Shamsher Singh 'Ashok'.<sup>9</sup> Both of these editions are loosely based on a common core of

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<sup>8</sup>There also seems to be a general tendency for the Gurmukhi manuscripts to replace overtly Islamic religious references in the poem (to Abdul Qadir Jilani, for example) with Sikh ones. This is a relatively common occurrence in nineteenth-century *qissa* manuscripts in general.

<sup>9</sup>Unfortunately, I did not have access to Pakistani editions of the poem during the course of this study.

eight manuscripts of the poem, five in Gurmukhi and three in Persian script; Jogindar Singh mentions but does not cite an additional two Gurmukhi manuscripts.<sup>10</sup> In the actual construction of the texts, though, 'Ashok' has used only one Gurmukhi and two Persian-script manuscripts, while Jogindar Singh has utilised two Gurmukhi texts and one in Persian script.<sup>11</sup> Even this accounting masks the fact that both editions seem to be essentially diplomatic transcriptions of a different Gurmukhi manuscript, that of 'Ashok' being the longer of the two (there is, however, a significant measure of doubt with regard to Jogindar Singh's text, since he uses different sets of sigla in his introduction and in the notes to his text). In actual fact, then, the two editions are based on a total corpus of two Gurmukhi and two Persian-script texts (since one each of the Gurmukhi and Persian-script texts are used by both editors); eight manuscripts are totally unrepresented. Since neither editor mentions using a dated manuscript, we may assume that all the texts consulted are indeed undated. Because neither editor gives any description of the contents of any of the manuscripts used or the number of verses in each text, though, it is impossible to say what individual manuscripts actually contain or what features they have in common.

At the same time, though, the available evidence seems to support the conjecture that the manuscript 'Ashok' has based his text on is the only one that contains the lengthier text he prints; while the shorter recension is available in at least three manuscripts in both Gurmukhi and Persian scripts, the small actual size of each editor's corpus and the total lack of reliable manuscript notes in both

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<sup>10</sup>Neither editor seems to be aware of the Muqbil manuscripts at John Rylands University Library in Dublin and Cambridge University Library. Another nineteenth-century Gurmukhi manuscript (with 360 verses) came on the London art market in 1994. There are also at least four manuscripts in the Persian script in Pakistani institutional collections, see Rizvi, "Panjāb Yūniversitī Lāibrenī" 32 and Malik, "Mutafarriq kutub khāniā vich" 265-6. For a listing of the eleven known manuscripts in India, see Jogindar Singh, *op.cit.* 22 and Shamsheer Singh 'Ashok', *Panjābī hatth-likhtā dī sūchī* 2:323.

<sup>11</sup>'Ashok', *Mukbal rachnāvalī* 36 and Jogindar Singh, *op.cit.* 23.

editions puts even this observation into some doubt. While the available evidence would seem to favour the conjecture that the shorter text is at least better represented in the manuscript tradition, the lack of reliable information about the total corpus of available manuscripts of the *qissa* renders impossible any judgement on which version of the text is earlier or more commonly represented among the available texts. Indeed, each of the two editors ultimately chooses to follow the ending of only one of the manuscripts he uses, ignoring the other two. For our purposes—and in the absence of further textual information—each of the poem's two endings possesses an equal degree of interpretational validity.

### **Muqbil's *Hīr* as a Sufi Allegory:**

If two of Muqbil's literary works are overtly religious, his *Hīr* can at the very least be said to have marked religious tendencies. The love (*ishq*) presented in the poem, both as a concept valorised by the poet and as a force in the lives of Hir and Ranjha, is deeply mystical. Our first indications of the centrality of the concept of *ishq* and its mystical meanings in the text come in the brief prelude to the poem. The poet tells us that

*Ishq* unites one to Truth: sacrifice yourself to this *ishq*.

Those who are killed by *ishq* don't die: don't try to run from the  
blows of the sword of *ishq*.

*Ishq* is the caste of *auliyā's* and *faqirs*; enjoy *ishq* by practising  
humility (*faqar*). (2)

For the narrator, *ishq* is a passionate attachment to the divine which makes irrelevant to Ranjha the fact that the land given him by his elder brothers is the worst portion of his late father's holdings (6), a force more powerful than the *sharia* (171) or rationality (90, 104):

Reason ('*aql*) doesn't operate where *ishq* has set up camp:  
Muqbil, I sacrificed my soul and all my property to the name of  
*ishq*. (18)

Again and again in the poem, the narrator makes the point that *ishq* elevates the faithful lover: God protects dispossessed, homeless lovers (27) and those who slander them go straight to Hell (45). And not only are lovers granted boons while alive, but their faithfulness and constancy result in mystical apotheosis after death (in both endings of the poem), the analogical status of a martyr (*shahid*) (349):<sup>12</sup> in the ending in which Hir and Ranjha go off on pilgrimage to Mecca, they go as immortal *valis* (footnote 221); in the version in which they die, they die possessed of mystical knowledge (*irfan*) (359). The reason for this elevation, we are told, is lovers' constant willingness to sacrifice themselves for the sake of *ishq*:

Praise Hir and Ranjha's love: they kept to their promise (*qaul*).  
They let themselves be killed like goats by the butcher *ishq*.  
.....  
Whoever hasn't tasted the pleasures of love will not have his  
prayers answered. (footnote 221)

The narrator's valorisation and mysticisation of *ishq* is perhaps most succinctly expressed in the first line of the final verse of the poem: "Be a lover of God—all other beauty is empty" (360).

If the narrator's conception of *ishq* promises the reward of mystical knowledge and union with God, it also gives a boon whose desirability would have been somewhat more questionable in the society of the eighteenth-century Bar, dominated as it was by Jat and Rajput lineages concerned with notions of

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<sup>12</sup>The idea of the lover as *shahid* goes back to the Arabic tradition of secular love literature. See Lois Anita Giffen, *Theory of Profane Love among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre* (London: Univ. of London Press, 1971).

honour and prestige (*izzat*). The path of *ishq*—its mystical *tarīqā*, as it were—is humility and humiliation, the loss rather than the retention of status. Ranjha, for example, becomes a cowherd for the sake of *ishq* (74) because “to beg in the city of love is kingship for faithful lovers” (62). Indeed, the *qissa*’s entire narrative is a powerful illustration of *ishq*’s ability to humble the lover: Ranjha moves from the pampered life of the youngest son of a powerful landowner through wandering vagrancy to becoming a herder of another Jat’s cows and finally to the very margins of society by becoming a wandering *jogi*. Transformation after transformation takes Ranjha further and further down the social scale, from a position in which identity is constituted by land and power to one in which identity is restricted to the outward *panthic* trappings of the *jogi*’s garb. The spiritual rewards for Ranjha, though, are considerable: as the narrator tells us when Ranjha first sleeps rough after leaving Takht Hazara for Jhang, “Muqbil, those who plant seed in this world will reap in the next” (26). Ranjha is another Mansūr, unafraid of the gibbet (165), a saint whose act of relinquishing status to become a *jogi* is analogous to Shaikh San’āī’s becoming a pig-herder for the sake of his lover (232). Muqbil’s emphasis on the power of *ishq* to elevate the humble explains his reference in the first verse of the poem to Satan, perhaps the only mention of him in an invocation in the entire Punjabi *qissa* tradition:

Friend, first praise God, the boundless Lord who is without  
worries:

Hazrat [Muhammad], who repeated the Lord’s name, became king  
of all heaven and earth.

‘Azāzīl did not obey the command, so God made him into Satan:

O Muqbil, I believe that if you are humble, God will accept you on  
the Day of Judgement. (1)

Ranjha's conduct is the opposite of that of Satan who did not submit to the newly created Adam and was punished for his pride by expulsion from heaven. If the lover is forced to humiliate himself for the sake of his love, his reward is diametrically opposite to the punishment accorded to Satan: he is elevated beyond his wildest imaginings.

Mystical conceptions also play a central role in the poem's construction of the relationship of Hir and Ranjha. The pair's love exists in a universe of magic in which the prayers of *jogis* burn cities, long-dead Pirs appear on country roads to help hapless Jats, and voices from the heavens promise Hir to Ranjha after she has left for Rangpur with her new husband's family (footnote 231). In such a world, it is not surprising to learn at the beginning of the poem that Hir and Ranjha's love had a decidedly mystical beginning:

Hir's eyes slaughtered Ranjha in a dream, but he tells no one the secret.

Like Muqbil, day and night he longs to see the beloved. (5)

Nor is it particularly incongruous that Ranjha's inability to cultivate the land given to him by his brothers leads him to take refuge in the twin paradigms of lover and *faqir*:

Crying, Ranjha says, "Sisters-in-law, ploughing is very hard.  
I've had an easy life, so working hard is impossible for me.  
My heart tells me to become a *faqir*: life in this world is a dream.  
Muqbil, leave the world behind and become a *faqir*: love's wealth is  
enough for happiness." (13)

Ranjha unwillingly ate his food to please his sisters-in-law;  
He sent his soul to Hir's city but came back to the village with his  
sisters-in-law.

When he was returning to the village, Ranjha felt the flame inside himself: he tore his clothes and rubbed ash on his body. (17)

That Hir enacts the same pattern by washing off the *vaṭṭṇā*<sup>13</sup>, breaking her bangles and rubbing ash on her body after the *shagan* ceremony<sup>14</sup> to mark the impending arrival of her future husband's wedding party (154) is an entailment of one of the poem's central metaphors: Ranjha has initiated Hir into the *tariqā* of love, becoming her *pir* and she his *murīd*. Compare for example the strikingly parallel iconography of Ranjha's first meeting with the Pirs and that of his first conversation with Hir in the wastes outside Jhang:

Ranjha stopped playing his flute and the Pirs said, "Eat *chūrī*<sup>15</sup>."

Ranjha said, "I'm not hungry. My divine soul (*rūh nūrī*) craves milk."

The Panj Pir meditated on God and brought a brown water-buffalo from the sky:

"Drink the cow's milk, Ranjha, and God will fulfill your wishes."

He got a bowl from the Panj Pirs and milked a brown water-buffalo.

He filled the bowl with milk and placed it before the Pirs as an offering:

The Pirs drank the milk and were happy; Ranjha drank their leavings (*ulash*) and his sorrow disappeared. (39-40)

Ranjha plaintively played *mājh* on his flute and took Hir's soul under his control.

He drew the sweet milk of the brown cow and drank it with Hir.

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<sup>13</sup>A paste rubbed on the body of both bride and groom in the days before the wedding.

<sup>14</sup>Auspicious ceremonies held to mark the engagement and the arrival of the wedding party in the bride's village.

<sup>15</sup>Crumbled *roti* mixed with *ghī* and sugar.

There was no more shyness between the two: *birhā* sewed their  
souls together.

After asking Muqbil to get it from God, Hir took the lesson (*sabaq*)  
of *ishq* from Ranjha. (80)

Clearly, the iconography of Hir's relationship to Ranjha mirrors that of Ranjha to the Panj Pirs. Hir's acceptance of Ranjha as preceptor adds another dimension to her own expression of the relationship between the two: where before her initiation she refers to herself as "your worthless slave; sell me if you wish" (77), upon meeting him again in Rangpur she comments that "Ranjha's name is my support: I am a long-serving disciple [of his]" (327). Indeed, the narrator himself likens this meeting to that of *pir* and *murid*. One is once again reminded of the poem's first verse, in which the narrator puts forth Satan as an example of the punishments awaiting those who refuse to submit: if Satan's example is a warning to the believer, Hir's conduct is an exemplum.

As a whole, the decidedly mystical trajectory of Muqbil's poem seems at first glance to point inexorably toward the ending of the poem in which the lovers eternally travel the route to Mecca and away from the tragedy of their untimely but socially convenient deaths. There would certainly appear to be no disjunction between the mystical gnosis that reveals Hir to Ranjha while he sleeps at Takht Hazara and the eventual elevation of the lovers to the status of *valis* who (like the shepherds in Middle English dramatic treatments of the birth of Christ) walk straight off the arid plains of the Bar onto the pilgrim route to Mecca:

They both went off on pilgrimage to Mecca; I don't know what  
happened next.

People say they're still alive and God has saved them from death.  
Even the Prophet accepted death: life without God is false.



Muqbil, the Prophet's *hadis* is true: *valis* never die. (footnote ending)

But if this ending seems to encapsulate and valorise the mysticism inherent in the body of the poem, the *qissa*'s other ending is equally emphatic in its recognition of the primacy of mysticism in the lovers' story:

Hir went to Jhang Sial and was pleased to see her family.

When she was going home, she got a fever, and the girl was in a poor state.

No medicines worked, and finally she died on a Friday.

Her parents wept as they buried her: Muqbil, her love (*prīt*) was perfect.

Chuchak sent someone to Ranjha with a letter explaining her death:

"Hir died thinking of you, Ranjha. What fate decrees cannot be effaced."

Ranjha read the letter and sighed so much that he died:

Muqbil, Ranjha's love (*ishq*) was purified and he obtained the status of one with mystical knowledge (*irfan*). (358-9)

Significantly, this more socially acceptable ending relegates Hir to a lower status than Ranjha: where his purified love leads him to mystical knowledge, she merely dies in the knowledge that she has loved perfectly. No longer do the pair travel the pilgrim routes to Mecca in the complete equality of *vali*-status: instead, the dictates of social ideology determine who is a mystic and who is not. If the "happy" ending satisfies the hermeneutic expectation of mystical apotheosis, this ending satisfies the social demands of a narrative in which Hir has always been Ranjha's disciple on the path of love.

One of the fundamental oppositions in the text is that between the orthodox Islam represented most forcefully by the *qazi* of Jhang Sial and the Sufi,

*pir*-centred Islam situated in the interstice between the narrative voice and the already established folk legend of Hir and Ranjha. Even the most casual reading of Muqbil's text must recognise the centrality of the Panj Pirs in the narrative and in the patterns of faith displayed by the main characters.<sup>16</sup> After Ranjha leaves the village mosque on the second day of his journey from Takht Hazara to Jhang Sial, he runs into the five Pirs. Spreading his *lūngī* for them to sit on and bowing to them, he asks for a boon. The Pirs preempt and determine the course of the entire narrative by granting him Hir, whom he has up to this point seen only in a dream:

Ranjha tells the Pirs everything that has happened to him:

He tells them how of Hir's eyes slaughtered him in his sleep and of  
the remedy for his wounds.

The Pirs grant him Hir, and he cannot contain his happiness.

Oh Muqbil, my Ghaus Muhūddīn is kind: he fulfills the whole  
world's desires. (36)<sup>17</sup>

Not only does Ranjha's initial meeting with the Pirs cause his eventual union with Hir, but it also results in his being given the boon which will reunite him with Hir after Raja Adli gives her to the Kheras: the Pirs tell him that "Whenever you are in difficulty, remember us and we will come help you" (41). Ranjha uses the Pirs' gift three times in the poem: the first that very night when, frightened by the lions and serpents by the riverbank, he calls on the Pirs to help him and feed him (41-2); the second when he asks the Pirs to burn Adli's city after the Raja returns Hir to the Kheras (349); the third—part of the alternate ending to the poem—when he gets the Pirs to fix his ears (pierced to receive the earrings of the

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<sup>16</sup>Unlike Varis, Muqbil does not name the Panj Pirs.

<sup>17</sup>I have translated the footnote variation to the final line rather than the obviously incongruous reading *Mukbalā Satigur Purakh diāl merā* (Oh Muqbil, the True Guru is kind . . . ) adopted by the editor.

Nath *jogi*) as he returns to Takht Hazara to await his wedding to Hir (357).

Perhaps the most important—and certainly the most iconographic—of the Pirs' involvements in the poem is when they marry Hir and Ranjha in the wastes outside Jhang:

Ranjha called on the Panj Pirs and they became manifest.

They sat cross-legged on a bed and sat Hir next to themselves.

Together with Khizr they were the witnesses and performed Hir  
and Ranjha's marriage.

Oh Muqbil, they chewed the auspicious rice grains and put them in  
Hir's lap.

The Panj Pirs instructed the pair, "Worship God twenty-four hours  
a day.

The world is a transitory abode: even if you live a hundred  
thousand years you still have to die.

The low don't call themselves great when they are not.

Muqbil, you've set your heart on the name of love (*ishq*)—you still  
have to cross the river of longing (*shauq*)." (64-5)

Throughout the poem, Hir at least considers this marriage to be legally valid, with or without the sanction of her parents: the Pirs therefore become the guarantors of the pair's marriage as well as of their love. Indeed, in a lengthy passage (present in only some manuscripts) describing Hir's wedding night, she calls on the Pirs to protect her chastity—which they do by smashing her husband Saida's ribs when he lies down on her bed (footnote 270).

This valorisation of the Panj Pirs occurs entirely at the expense of the *sharia*-based Islam represented by the village *qazi* of Jhang Sial. Indeed, unlike in Varis, the *mulla* of the village mosque whom Ranjha encounters while on the road to Jhang is a decent and pious provider of hospitality—although he too is

connected with the Pirs, if not himself regarded as a *pir* by the villagers (31). This opposition between the Pirs and a more metropolitan “orthodox” Islam appears to reflect the struggles between traditional *pirs* and Chishti reformers on the one hand and reformist *ulamā* on the other that characterised the history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Punjabi Islam.<sup>18</sup> It may also reflect one of the more important social trends in the Bar from the sixteenth century onwards: the gradual settlement of the pastoral Jat tribes, who owed their religious allegiance to the lineages of the *pirs* supposed to have converted them to Islam, and their transformation into settled cultivators, with the increased linkages to and frictions with formalised religion that such a transformation might imply.<sup>19</sup> As some scholars have noted, the importance of Sufi *pirs* and their shrines to the predominantly rural populations of the Bar lay largely in their role as mediators—both between people and God and between rural Punjab and the metropolitan Mughal state—and in the ascription of *barkat* (miraculous powers) to the *pirs*.<sup>20</sup> The *pirs*, in other words, were associated with a magical universe inaccessible to the practitioners of more metropolitan Islam. In the poem, the instrument of the *ulama*’s humiliation is Hir, who decisively defeats the *qazi* in a debate over the *sharia*.

### Implicating Ideology: *Khair* and Agency in the *Qissa*

In the world of the *qissa*, much of what constitutes everyday society is the target of direct or implied contempt: indeed, the image of society compromised

<sup>18</sup>For some suggestive hints on this conflict, see Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj 1849-1947* (Riverdale, Maryland: Riverdale, 1988): 24-5; see also M. Zameeruddin Siddiqi, “The Resurgence of the Chishti Silsilah in the Punjab During the Eighteenth Century,” *Indian History Congress: Proceedings of the Thirty-Second Session I*(1970): 308-12.

<sup>19</sup>For some account of the settlement process, see Chetan Singh, *Region and Empire* 110-114 and 263-70.

<sup>20</sup>See for example Richard M. Eaton, “The Political and Religious Authority of the Shrine of Bābā Farīd” in Barbara Daly Metcalf, ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1984): 333-56.

lies at the very heart of the *qissa*'s narrative. Where Hir and Ranjha pursue a divinely inspired love, social ideology—supported by the *qazi*'s ratiocinations and Malki's threats of violence—circumvents their aspirations and ultimately dictates that Hir be given away in marriage to salvage her family's honour. In the course of the *qissa*, all the societal institutions brought into play against Hir and Ranjha—family, religion, marriage and the *sharia*—are compromised and brought into question: none is immune from the consequences of its opposition to the poem's mystical and romantic trajectories. What happens to the central conceptions of societal ideology during the course of the *qissa* is illustrated by the fate of the concept of *khair* (which normally covers a range of meanings from alms and charity to kindness and well-being), which is inverted and thereby subverted on every one of its appearances in the poem. A concept with a distinguished religious pedigree—charity is, after all, one of the five “pillars” of orthodox Islam—becomes a debased expression of worldly interests, a tool to be manipulated by the malevolent and mocked by the mischievous. This devaluation of one of society's virtues mirrors the parallel fates of other religious and social conceptions in the poem, all of which begin to tarnish due to their opposition to the love of Hir and Ranjha.

The first explicit entry of the concept of *khair* in the poem coincides with the first appearance of the gruff and self-interested boatman Luddan. When the shrewd Meo refuses to allow Ranjha to sleep off the effects of his journey on Hir's bed, Ranjha decides to buy his kindness by offering him a ring as a bribe:

Ranjha gave Luddan the Meo a ring and said, “Who's going to go  
tell Hir?

I'm just going to rest for a minute; it's not like I'm going to build a  
house here—

I promise you! God will grant you what you wish.

Understand that kindness (*khair*) keeps away a million misfortunes  
and be kind (*khair kamāi*)."

Luddan the Meo took the ring from Ranjha with shame in his eyes  
and compassion in his heart. (52-3)

In the world of the poem, charity belongs to the highest bidder—no longer a moral quality, it is a commodity to be purchased like any other. A more explicit parody of the notion of disinterested alms-giving occurs when Kaido the putative *faqir* begs alms from Ranjha as he sits alone in the wastes waiting for Hir to return with the herd (95): Kaido's supposedly humble request for a donation of food in the name of God conceals his malign attempt to obtain evidence of the lovers' clandestine meetings outside the village and Ranjha's act of charity ceases to be a meritorious act of charity, becoming instead a foolish (perhaps even naive) blunder that exposes his dalliances with Hir for all to see. The episode underlines not only the compromised nature of virtue in the world of the poem—*faqirs* are no longer holy men and acts of kindness damn the doer—but also highlights Ranjha's naive inability to comprehend the deceptions and inversions behind the world of appearances. By the second half of the poem, though, Ranjha has learnt to exploit the gap between appearance and reality, and the concept of *khair*, too, participates in the comic ambivalence of Ranjha's disingenuous transformation from Jat-cum-cowherd to womanising Nath *jogi*. When Sahti suspiciously questions the legitimacy of a *faqir* who will not take alms when offered them—Ranjha wants a little more time to gaze upon his beloved—Ranjha begins to promise boons he knows he cannot give: he promises Sahti rich reward in the next world if she donates food to him (256-7). Ranjha parodies the concept of *khair* and the conduct of individuals like Luddan and Kaido, comically reflecting the world of the first half of the poem. The irony of the dialogue (since we know who Ranjha really is) points up the decidedly deceptive nature of the

world and its virtues, creating an ironic tension which allows us to view through the lenses of comedy the image of the corrupt world of the poem.

A larger strategy for pointing out the compromised nature of worldly values is the characters' and narrator's tendency to assign responsibility for major changes in the narrative to abstract signifiers like God, fate or love rather than to the social forces that actually compel or dictate the changes. These shifts of agency serve a dual purpose in the poem: at the same time as they emphasise the role of social ideology by attempting to elide it, they corrupt the positive meanings of the signifiers they impose in its place. Their silence about the role of social ideology pushes it to centre stage, simultaneously discrediting the concepts that support it. There are, of course, a choice few instances of misplaced agency which are simply convenient pieces of narrative shorthand, ways of introducing a sudden event without elaborating its antecedents: for example, Mauju dies at the beginning of the poem because of the dictates of fate (6). A more ironic use of shifted agency occurs in the incident of Hir's burning down Kaido's hut: the narrator's statement that God kept Kaido away from the hut that night (106) seems to mask questionable conduct on the part of a character who consciously and deliberately presents himself as a *faqir*—why exactly was he away from home that night? On a more ironic level, Hir disingenuously tries to mask her hatred for her uncle Kaido—at the same time as she tries to grant her love for Ranjha divine legitimacy—by telling him that the burning of his hut was not her doing but was instead God's revenge for mistreating the humble lovers (109). A similar argument resurfaces later in the poem when Sahti conceals her plan to reunite Hir and Ranjha by telling Hir's mother-in-law that fate has conspired to make her ill and hinting to Hir that fate will determine what happens next (300, 304).

More often than not, though, such shifts of agency attempt to mask the naked exercise of power in society. Driven from Takht Hazara by the uncompromising nature of the land he has been given and the taunts of his sisters-in-law, Ranjha tells Hir that his fate (*lekh*) compels him to wander (68); similarly, he tells Balnath that "I have gotten what was written in my fate (*karam*)" (243)—even though it was the Sials who drove him from Jhang and deprived him of employment. The same complete elision of social forces accompanies the reunions of Hir and Ranjha and Sahti and Murad later in the poem: on each occasion (325, 332-3) the narrator tells us that God reunited the lovers. What is quite clear, though, is that the ascription of the lovers' reunion to divine agency masks the crucial issue of who separated them in the first place, effacing the role of social ideology in the construction of the circumstances and justifications of their separation and (on the surface, at least) encouraging a hermeneutic that ignores the injustices suffered by the lovers simply because everything turns out well in the end.

The most compromising and subversive uses of the device of shifted agency, though, occur during the episode of Hir's betrothal to Saida and her family's attempt to reconstitute mechanisms of ideological control to justify their actions. Attempting to reassert patriarchal control over his daughter and bend her to the disciplines of social ideology, Chuchak warns Hir that

"You don't do what your parents tell you: you fall in love with  
someone of your own choice.

Muqbil, God gets tired of those who pain their parents." (132)

His attempt to veil his desire to kill Hir in notions of divine justice seems, however, somewhat strained. When threats of violence and the dictates of the *sharia* have failed to overpower Hir, Chuchak bribes the *qazi* with cash, clothing and a horse to conduct Hir's marriage (which even the *qazi* recognises is against



*sharia*): the narrator's moralistic attempt to claim that "God separates lover from lover" (189) is belied as much by Chuchak's shameful actions as by the narrator's plaintive cry that the Sials "sat [Hir] next to Saida the Khera: the shameful bastards did an evil thing (*zulm*)" (188). Clearly, the Sials and the corrupt *qazi* are to blame for separating Hir from Ranjha: if anything, God is absent from the scene. The final appearance of shifted agency in the poem—in the tragic ending—once again highlights the way in which characters displace agency in order to mask the ideological mechanisms of society: begging Ranjha to marry her so that people will not call her a runaway (*udhāl*), Hir implies that if he does not fate will condemn her to a bad reputation (356). The hermeneutic of shifted agency has, however, taught us that fate has nothing to do with the making of Hir's reputation.

#### The Poetics of Narration:

Narration lies at the heart of the Punjabi *qissa*: by convention, the *qissa* is an extended story. The fact that the last line of every verse of the poem generally contains the poet's *takhallus* foregrounds both the narrativity of the genre and the authority of the narrator, allowing the poet scope to insert into the poem moral or narrative comment on a number of levels (a device conventionalised as extended verses known as *maqūlā-i shā'ir*, "the poet's words"). Such a set of conventions imply a complex self-aware poetic of narration, one susceptible to interpretation on a number of simultaneous levels. The poetics of narration in Muqbil's *qissa* are, as we would expect, intricate and multifaceted: not only does the persona of the narrator shift repeatedly at key moments in the narrative, but the characters repeatedly appropriate and reappropriate narrative authority as they tell their stories to themselves and each other. The narrator's own involvement in the story is, like that of many of the characters' own narrations,

primarily an affective and aesthetic one based on identification with the characters' own powerful emotions—an involvement as subversive of canonical notions of identity as Ranjha's own transformations throughout the tale.

In a poem at once as compact and as dialogic as Muqbil's *Hir*, it comes as no surprise that much of what happens does so, as it were, "off-stage." The compulsions of the *qissa* as a semi-dramatic genre mean that for the poet to show everything that happens would involve an intimidating amount of dramatic dialogue between the characters. Instead, the narrator often resorts to the shorthand device of having characters narrate events to each other, devolving onto them the authority of presenting their own story. In all but a handful of cases, though, we do not actually hear what the characters say: we only know that they tell their story. Many of the instances of narration by characters are crucial to the progression of the action of the poem: Ranjha tells his sisters-in-law about his difficulties cultivating his land (11), Ranjha tells the Panj Pirs about his tribulations (36), Kaido tells Chuchak about the burning of his hut (100) and about Hir's meetings with Ranjha (110), Hir's friends tell her about her impending marriage (117), Sultan tells Malki and Chuchak about Hir's continued meetings with Ranjha (146), Malki tells Chuchak about Hir's insolence (167), and Saida tells his mother about his inability to convince the *jogi* to cure Hir (320). And many of the narrations that we actually witness are rather straightforward and plain. Sahti, for example, explains her complicated role in the plot to reunite Hir and Ranjha—by orchestrating the exchange of letters between the pair, pretending that Hir has been bitten by a snake and arranging for Ranjha to take her away and cure her—in a mere three lines of compressed narration (310).

Perhaps the most significant of these appropriations of narrative authority, at least in terms of our understanding of the character of Ranjha, comes during Balnath's initiation of the young Jat: at the same time as he

unwittingly grants institutional form and sanction to Ranjha's *birha*, the Nath tries to subvert it by replacing the narrative of his love with "the *qissa* of Jog" (247)—which includes, among other things, an injunction to refrain from looking at women. While Ranjha accepts certain of the *qissa*'s propositions (like the instruction to beg), he rejects its emphasis on restraint and chastity as unsuitable to his disingenuous purpose of using the disguise of a *jogi* to see Hir again. This selective reading of the *qissa*'s moral message points to the self-aware irony which characterises Ranjha's actions throughout the poem: we know, after all, that he never really intends to become a *jogi* anyway. A similar ironic detachment characterises Ranjha's attitude toward the *mulla* of the mosque he stops at while on the way from Takht Hazara to Jhang Sial. When the *mulla* asks Ranjha who he is and where he is coming from, Ranjha disingenuously fabricates a false motive for his journey—once again hiding what we know to be his true purpose—and crafts a clever petition for food:

[Ranjha] says, "My name is Dhido and my caste Ranjha; I left Takht  
Hazara yesterday.

I spent the night hungry in the wastes (*ujār*): I bore what God  
ordained for me.

I want to see the country, that's why I've become carefree and left  
home.

Muqbil, God sent me to you so I could the drink this village's  
water." (30)

The success of Ranjha's narrative is made clear by the fact that the *mulla* gets the boys learning at the village school to bring food from home for Ranjha to eat. As a narrator, then, Ranjha is both ironic and successfully self-interested: he knows how to use narrative to secure and conceal his aims.

If Ranjha's use of narration with the outside world is suavely deceptive, the lovers' narrations to each other are far more straightforward even if far more emotionally charged. Even at second hand—such as when Hir and Ranjha have Hir's niece take messages to each other—the lovers' communications are saturated with the discourse of pathos and betrayal on Ranjha's part and submission on Hir's:

Leaving Ranjha, the girl slowly went and sat beside Hir.

“Chāchī<sup>21</sup>, hear what I have to say:

Let me tell you what the cowherd from your village said.

Broken by your love (*ishq*) he's become a *jogi*: go see Muqbil's state.

He cries and blames you—the poor, injured, homeless Ranjha.

You used to make him *churi* and he gave you the cows' milk for  
your whole life.

Now that things are difficult, you don't acknowledge him, but he's  
the same Ranjha.” (283-4)

The girl went and told Ranjha all about Hir.

“She will come to you by some trick or another: I told her the  
secrets (*bhet*) of your heart.

I've not stopped loving you: I feel more and more pain every day.

Muqbil, I've done wrong: forgive my error. I didn't do anything  
treacherous on purpose.” (287)

In both cases, the young girl's narrations closely match what the lovers themselves have said to her (280, 285): indeed, in each case, she directly quotes a half-line from what the lovers themselves told her to say. For her account of Hir's feelings in particular, we have the support of Hir's own narration of her feelings to Ranjha near the beginning of their relationship at Jhang:

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<sup>21</sup>Father's younger brother's wife.

“My life and death are with you, Ranjha: the world is empty, like  
dust to me.”

.....  
She cries and tells her state (*hāl*) to the beloved Muqbil.

“Don’t pain this afflicted one: see my state, O one favoured with  
long life!

The butcher *birha* has chopped me up and won’t leave me alone.

Whether you know it or not, I’ve sacrificed my life and property to  
you.” (142-3)

The lovers communicate without irony but participate in a discourse of love that puts Ranjha in a dominant role and Hir in a subordinate one—at the same time as its misogynist elements constantly implicate Hir in the supposed unfaithfulness of womankind. As such, their discourse participates in the tradition of “courtly love” that in one form or another suffused North Indian writing in Persian, Urdu and other languages for centuries.

Perhaps the high point of this socially embedded romantic discourse is the exchange of letters between the recently-married Hir and Ranjha, who has returned to Takht Hazara. Placed into roles which neither of them relishes, the lovers mimic the poet’s act of writing and inscribe their individual discourses to each other, becoming (for the moment at least) authors. Hir, the narrator tells us, writes her letter to Ranjha with her finger as pen and her tears as ink, stressing the importance of the promises the pair made in front of the Panj Pirs and her own determined choice to abandon the values of family in favour of her attachment to Ranjha. She concludes her epistle by begging Ranjha to see her again, emphasising both her longing and her humility:

‘Ranjha, my eyes want to see you and my arms long to embrace  
you.

Of what miraculous garden am I a radish (*mūlī*)<sup>22</sup> that I should  
claim to be equal to a king?

I've sacrificed happiness for pain: sometimes I feel happiness on  
top of my pain.

Muqbil, come show yourself to me again: I don't want any other  
pleasure.' (216)

The more prolix of the pair, Ranjha responds with a letter that is at once less  
focussed and more indicative of the sources of his discourse of love. He begins  
by praising her love, but quickly moves into the contradictory stance compelled  
by the misogyny he consistently adopts as a defence against the marriage which  
he knew from the beginning Hir's parents would contract for her: "I didn't get  
anything by falling in love: I became a cowherd for nothing" (225). He accuses  
her of "saying one thing and doing another" and says that loving her has caused  
him pain (226). He concludes by making a promise to come see her, a promise  
whose tone is, however, tempered by both his attachment to the combat  
metaphors of courtly love and the contention that she has ruined him:

'The sharp daggers of your eyes have pierced my heart and body.  
You've gone to your in-laws' home, while I, robbed, wander from  
place to place.

God must be pleased with me: you've remembered Muqbil again.  
Hir, you burnt my body: what did you get anyway?

.....

I will carry out my promise: no one knows what you will do.' (227-  
8)

The tone of Ranjha's letter as opposed to Hir's indicates the different worlds  
from which they speak and the different ideal images they act out in their drama

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<sup>22</sup> The word connotes anything that is considered worthless or insignificant.

as lovers. Both, however, are virtual scripts of the characters' roles in a stereotyped drama of love—the one dedicated and humbly insistent, the other accusatory and blusteringly insecure.

If narration in the poem is occasionally appropriated by the characters for their own purposes, it is equally fluid in the hands of the poetic narrator himself. Muqbil's *qissa* does not contain the kind of extended *maqula-i sha'ir* which becomes almost *de rigueur* for the genre in the nineteenth century; instead, the narrator's explicit participation in the poem is largely limited to those lines in which his *takhallus* appears as a part of the sense, grammatical or otherwise, of the last line of a verse.<sup>23</sup> This means, for example, that the vast majority of lines bearing the *takhallus*—"Sighing he went along with Hir; Muqbil, he played his flute expressively" (193), to take a random example—are not instances of the narrator's participation in the text: they are merely expressions of the formal classical convention that the last line of every stanza *should* bear the poet's signature (often in order to make narrative glosses or express maxims).<sup>24</sup> Because of the dialogic form of the *qissa*, on the other hand, many of the instances in which the poet-narrator's name appears in the vocative or oblique cases are instances of a different kind of direct participation in the poem: the narrator effectively becomes one of the characters in the poem by appropriating one of the characters' voices. It is these instances of the narrator becoming a character or identifying with one of the characters that concern us here.

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<sup>23</sup>I exclude also those cases in which the vocative form of the name Muqbil (Muqbilā) is clearly being used as a way of addressing an unknown person: for example, the *mulla* and Luddan addressing Ranjha (29, 44), the village *qazi* of Jhang referring to Hir's future husband (177), Ranjha asking Balnath for initiation (239), and Sahti speaking to the unknown *jogi* at her door (253). Chuchak also uses the epithet in this way to refer to the village *qazi* (112-3). I exclude from both categories, for reasons explained below, the structurally similar episodes of Sahti and Ranjha addressing the Brahman who acts as their go-between as "Muqbil" (217-8, 220).

<sup>24</sup>There are of course *qissas* in which this is not the case. Even in Muqbil, some verses—20, 329, 333 and 353 for example—do not bear the poet's *takhallus*. For some examples of the narrator as a source of narrative gloss or maxim, see among numerous others verses 106, 158, 225, 359.

In the *qissa*, the narrator's shifting identity is a poetic of identification and play that at once subverts notions of identity and authority and provides a metaphor for a particular way of reading the text. More often than not, the narrator's shifts of identity involve identification with characters in distress or in the throes of emotion. (Ironically, the name "Muqbil" itself means "prosperous" or "fortunate.") The obvious analogy in the text—a character who effaces her own identity and participates emotionally in the events of the poem—is Hir, who so eagerly becomes Ranjha's disciple: it is almost as if the poet exhorts us to join him in becoming seekers on the same *tariqa* as Hir, to subvert our own identities and subsume them in those that play forth in the text. The emotional, ecstatic basis of this poetic of loss is something that the poet himself recognises: he begins the *qissa* by exclaiming "Muqbil, I cried and sighed as I told the whole story (*qissa*) of Hir and Ranjha" (4). The poet asks us to make a similar emotional connection with the poem, to read it as if in ecstasy: he puts forth a poetic of participation. Certainly, his characters manage to put forth the model of being ecstatic or grief-stricken through much of the poem: an account of the number of times characters in the poem are said to crying (especially when narrating) or distressed (*hairān*)<sup>25</sup> in the course of the poem would be too long for inclusion here. Muqbil's *Hir* is a text filled with the sounds of crying and sighing—a form of proto-narration without words, as it were, at the same time as it is a text intended to make its readers cry and sigh.

In line with this poetic of sorrow and longing, the first of the narrator's adopted personae is a distressed and pained one: that of the forlorn lover Ranjha. After Ranjha first sees Hir in a dream, the narrator tells us that "Like Muqbil, he longed day and night to see his beloved" (5). Similarly, the narrator identifies

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<sup>25</sup> In eighteenth-century usage, *hairan* often bears the meaning "distressed, pained" rather than the modern Persianate meaning "amazed, surprised."



with Ranjha when he is persecuted by his sisters-in-law: "May God give sorrow to those who enjoy luxury: they shattered Muqbil's heart" (8). Similar identifications of the narrator and the figure of Ranjha occur at a number of places in the poem: after Hir tells Ranjha about her marriage, he says to her, "Muqbil will keep his promise, but no one knows about the girl Hir" (footnote 150). Not only does the narrator occasionally place himself in the position of Ranjha or have Ranjha refer to himself as Muqbil, but the other characters in the poem adopt this discourse and address Ranjha as Muqbil: his sisters-in-law (14, 15), Luddan (44), the *mulla* (29) and Balnath (234), among others. More often than not, references by the narrator or other characters to Ranjha as Muqbil occur at moments in the poem where Ranjha is in an unfortunate state: abandoned by his brothers, under attack from his sisters-in-law, separated from Hir, homeless or wandering. One might argue that such usage begins as early as Ranjha's encounter with the village *mulla*, who addresses the hapless wanderer as Muqbil (29), or with Hir's introduction to her father of Muqbil the homeless Jat and potential cowherd (71-2); certainly, the occasion on which Malki calls Ranjha to receive the dues (*haqq*) owed him for his years of service as a cowherd is an example of this usage: "Chuchak says, 'Go call him,' and Malki brings Muqbil" (140). The clearest indication of the terms of Muqbil's identification with the hero of his poem, however, comes in the narrator's description of the festivities that surround the engagement of Hir to Saida Khera:

What Hir's parents wanted happened. They called a Brahman to fix  
the auspicious date (*saha*).

They called their kin (*sake*) together and showed them what the  
Kheras had sent to Hir.

The Mirāsīns<sup>26</sup> came when they heard the news and sang wedding songs (*sohile*) and beat drums.

They broke Muqbil's heart and cut Hir's throat. (116)

The identification of the broken-hearted Ranjha with Muqbil the narrator is strengthened through the various episodes that precede Hir's arrival at her new home in Rangpur. Hir, for example, comes to see Ranjha one last time when he is grazing the cattle outside Jhang and "Cries as she begs and tells the beloved Muqbil how she feels" (142). Ranjha himself takes leave of Hir with the words

"In the end, women are faithless: I've proven this, Hir."<sup>27</sup>

Muqbil has spoken the truth: women know neither kindness or faithfulness, Hir." (162)

Ranjha maintains the epithet when he writes back to Hir in response to her letter, emphasising the pain of his wanderings and remarking in a tone both pathetic and satirical "You've remembered Muqbil: God has granted me good fortune" (227). In the first part of the poem, then, both the narrator and the other characters in the poem identify Muqbil with Ranjha as the hard-up Jat or the wronged lover.

After Hir's marriage to Saida, most of the identifications of Ranjha with Muqbil centre around the tribulations of his new personage as a *jogi* and his status as a wounded and wandering lover. When he lingers in the Kheras' courtyard to pick up the grains of sugar that he has dropped on the floor by flinging down his begging bowl, he admonishes the recalcitrant Sahti with the rebuke

"Don't be proud of beauty and don't make anyone feel jealous:  
Daughter, give alms to lovers like Muqbil with kindness." (260)

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<sup>26</sup>Female Mirasis (a *zat* of singers and genealogists who are paid ritual fees to sing at weddings).

<sup>27</sup>Alternately, "I've fucked you and seen that it's true, Hir."

The identification of Ranjha and Muqbil is one which remains constant throughout the encounter, with Ranjha referring to himself as Muqbil (254, 262), and Sahti (perhaps satirically?) doing the same when she accuses him of being a false *jogi* (253). The same transference of Ranjha's construction of himself as Muqbil occurs in the episode of his convincing Hir's niece to tell Hir about his presence in the Kala Bagh: after he refers to himself as Muqbil, she does the same when telling Hir about him (279, 283).

Not only does Muqbil the narrator identify himself with the afflicted Ranjha but he also identifies with other characters in similar situations. When Hir attempts to describe the strength of her love to her disapproving mother, for example, she does so in the persona of Muqbil (85); her father subsequently calls her Muqbil when condemning her physical attachment to Ranjha (103). The same sort of identification occurs between the narrator and Malki at the points in the argument between Hir and Malki when Malki emphasises most her own inability to persuade Hir to leave off the cowherd Ranjha (124) and see the dishonour she is bringing upon her family:

“No one can argue with you: you know too many evil ways.

You say to your mother whatever comes to mind and don't

recognise the duties of deference (*adab*).

You've cut off the noses of your elders and thrown dust on your  
mother's head.

Unlike Muqbil, you don't care for your family: you cause new  
troubles every day.” (126)

In very different circumstances, Hir's mother-in-law refers to her stricken daughter-in-law as Muqbil (299), as does Saida when he explains the fact that he has never slept with Hir (318).

As the *qissa* arches towards its climax in the dramatic events at the court of Raja Adli, the narrator's participation in the drama begins to take on a new colouring: increasingly, he himself becomes one of the characters on the narrative stage, not just a vicarious participant in the characters' emotional highs and lows. We first glimpse this increased participation when the narrator comments on his feelings for the young girls who participate in a *trinjhaṇ* (cotton-carding party) with Hir's niece and who go out to play in the meadows around Rangpur one Friday: "Some were young and some were old—but they all pleased Muqbil's heart" (271). Similarly, the narrator appears in the persona of an infatuated lover at the moment of the lovers' reunion at the hands of Sahti, a moment charged by the discourse of courtly love:

Hir was happy when she saw Ranjha as she lowered her veil.  
Hir's eyelashes are arrows and her eyebrows the bow: she shot  
them at Ranjha's chest.  
Hir's eyes are sharp daggers with which she stealthily kills—  
Even though she saves lovers (*ashiq*) like Muqbil with her kind  
glance. (324)

This growing poetic of participation in the *qissa* reaches a new height when Muqbil virtually claims to be one of the *muṭasaddīs* who convinces Raja Adli to release Ranjha from prison:

When the Kheras had gone, the *musaddīs*<sup>28</sup> said to Raja Adli,  
"It isn't wise to imprison the *jogi*: he got himself in this mess!"  
Muqbil barely managed to release Ranjha from Raja Adli. (347)

With this the narrator's involvement in his poem has become complete: not only does he identify with characters in the throes of emotion, but he claims to be a prime cause of one of the major events in the poem. The situation is not unlike

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<sup>28</sup>This is the Punjabi form of the word.

the episode of the Brahman's taking the lovers' letters from Rangpur to Takht Hazara and back again: both Sahti (217) and Ranjha (220) refer to the Brahman as Muqbil, setting him up as the substitute narrator that he appears to be. The Brahman's role in the poem is, in many ways, quite similar to that of the narrator Muqbil: we are supposed to see him as merely the conduit of the characters' dialogue with one another, effaced in their exchange of letters—but we are prevented from doing so by our knowledge that the Brahman is in actual fact crucial to the mediation of the lovers' message, even reading Hir's letter to the illiterate Ranjha. Even though we expect him to remain silent, he does not—and neither does the narrator of the poem.

At the same time, the figure of the Brahman-narrator highlights the centrality of identity in the poem: he is an unknown figure in Takht Hazara, and even Ranjha asks him to establish his identity before speaking to him (220). The problem of identity is, of course, central to the poetics of the narrator's continual shifting from character to character and stance to stance. Indeed, the issue of identity is so complex in the poem that the only supposedly fixed identities the poem calls on again and again are not individual or personal identities but those moderated by caste: early in the poem, Ranjha answers the *mulla's* questions about where he is going and where he has come from with his name and caste (30). When Luddan tells him about Hir, Ranjha is careful to ask about her caste and parentage (47), and she begins her infatuated eulogising of him by asking, "What is your caste by ancestry and, lover, who is your mother?" (59). Ranjha asks Hir's niece her caste (275), and she promises to transmit his identity—meaning his name and his *zat*—to Hir so that she may recognise who he is (281). This identity defined by parentage and status is what Balnath asks Ranjha to return to instead of taking up the perilous path of *jog* (238) and, more importantly, it is the identity which Chuchak asks Hir to uphold by acting like a

daughter should (122). But such ideological constructions of identity are problematic in a text whose main character is favourably compared with Sufi saints for abjuring his identity as the son of a landowner and in which the dictates of love repeatedly force new constructions of identity on the protagonists. How can identities mediated by caste be stable if Ranjha ceases to be a Jat by becoming a cowherd? Hir subsumes her identity in the personage of her lover Ranjha, and Ranjha himself disingenuously “transforms” from aesthete to Jat to cowherd to *jogi*—each time taking on enough of the new trappings to be a convincing image of what he should be, but at the same time remaining somehow out of reach or incomplete. Ranjha’s flirtations with new identities, in particular, are nothing but play—a slide of the signifier that is Ranjha into a new realm of symbolic meaning, but a shift which allows the signifier to retain some of its claim on the previous territories of meaning that it has inhabited.

Indeed, the notion of play is central to the whole conception of the character of Ranjha, if not to the *qissa* as a whole. Although Ranjha the flute-playing cowherd is not as obviously linked to the Krsna of the early years at Vṛndāvan as in Varis’s continual evocations of the arch-trickster, Ranjha still manages to be the main signifier of play in the text. As Ranjha constantly shifts from identity to identity and from role to role, we begin to realise the fluidity of his own portrayals of himself and the conscious irony that informs each of his roles. The only characters in the poem who seem to cotton on to Ranjha’s delicate subversions are Hir and Sahti, both of whom must sustain deceptions of their own to hide their forbidden loves: when the *jogi* appears in their courtyard, Sahti is quick to call him a *makrīā* (a trickster) and Hir equally eager to brand him an *aṭhkhelīā makrīā* (a playful trickster). Soon to be caught up in his web of tricks and be transported to fulfillment, both women recognise in the *jogi* who appears on

their doorstep the shiftiness of Ranjha's identity and tactics: the shimmering images of what may be and what is portrayed to be.

### **Hir and the dialogic construction of character:**

Whereas Ranjha manages throughout most of the *qissa* to define himself as much by what he does as by what he says, Hir is so often the object of other peoples' actions and motives that what she says assumes an even greater importance than in the case of Ranjha. Where Ranjha's dialogues are mostly with Hir (before he becomes a *jogi*) or with Sahti—and are therefore conducted at the fringes of power and ideology—Hir directly interrogates the ideologies of family and religion in her dialogues with her mother and father and with the *qazi*. For this reason, the construction of Hir's character through dialogue is central to poem's own ideological entailments.<sup>29</sup>

From Hir's very first appearance in the poem we become aware of her strength. Paradoxically, the first hints of Hir's fearlessness come from actions rather than from words: Hir arrives with three hundred and sixty *sahelis* and proceeds to punch, kick and beat Luddan the Meo for allowing Ranjha to sleep on her red bed. In turn, this violent confrontation prefigures the summary way in which Hir deals with Kaido's attempts to stymie her love for Ranjha by burning down his hut. But this very strength and resistance to the dictates of ideology and the ties of family—most famously represented in her statement to the *qazi* that "I'm not afraid of my own brothers and will go fight with the *qazi* and the *sharia*" (105)—seems at some level to contradict the Hir who refers to herself as "Ranjha's

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<sup>29</sup>The Punjabi literary tradition in general has always recognised the importance of Hir's dialogues, particularly with her mother, to the construction of her character in general. Ali Haidar, a Multānī poet noted for his *siharfis* who lived from approximately 1690 to 1785, wrote a brief *Qissā Hīr o Rānjhā* which consists entirely of twenty-seven stanzas of debate between Hir and her mother. See Ujāgar Singh, ed., *Alī Haidar dī kāvī-rachnā* (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1966): 152-61.

property (*mal*)" (118) and accepts what is effectively the subordinate position in their relationship. At least one solution to the enigma of Hir's character is, as we shall see, visible in the tactics deployed by both the longer version of the poem and the alternate "tragic" ending, both of which mitigate the effects of Hir's rebellious words by transforming her into a pious saint.

If Hir is generally powerless to act against those who define the terms of her existence, she is remarkably effective in combatting and defeating them with words: where Hir's parents try to intimidate her into forgoing her love for Ranjha by appealing to status and honour, she resolutely maintains the primacy of her love. She effectively wins every debate with Malki and Chuchak, prompting them to appeal to another level of ideological control by sending her to the *qazi*. Hir's first confrontation with her mother comes early in the poem, soon after she is married to Ranjha by the Panj Pirs. Hearing accusations of her daughter's liason with the cowherd, Malki accuses Hir of being without shame and warns her that "The cowherd will sing a different tune when Chuchak Sial cuts him to pieces" (84). Hir cuts her mother off in mid-sentence and extols the virtues of love, since "without love all people are like animals" (85). Malki can only resort to threats of violence again: she points out to Hir that as soon as their love is found out, both Hir and Ranjha will be murdered. Hir's response is to appropriate divine authority by claiming that "God, who will save everyone, is my support" (87) and to reiterate that she will have no truck with anything but her love for Ranjha. Similarly, her response to Malki's admonition to remember that "you are you mother and father's daughter" (88) is to deny the identity her mother imposes on her and state her complete identification with Ranjha, a response that sends Malki into fits of sighs and tears. Hir's words have silenced Malki, replacing the discourse of authority with wordless waves of tears (90).



Hir's second confrontation with Malki is both more extended and more involved. The scene begins with Hir cursing her impending marriage and ripping out her hair in frustration and mourning. Malki almost naively asks Hir what is wrong—since she has been promised to a very good family—and tells her to go out and while away her remaining time with her girlfriends (*sahelīs*). Hir tearfully responds with a riposte that reveals the true situation to Malki for the first time and forcefully expresses Hir's intention to avoid marrying the Kheras:

“You're giving your daughter a second husband: what's gotten into you?

Ranjha has been my lover since the Creation: I haven't started loving him just now.

Muqbil, Hir won't go with the Kheras: why are you making all this noise for nothing?” (121)

Malki appeals to the ideology of family honour, asking Hir to “do what a daughter would” and “not take the veil of shame off your face” (122); Hir's response is to eulogise her love for Ranjha, claiming that “I have one soul and that is Ranjha's; I throw dust on the head of the Kheras” (123). Malki once again reasserts the social and economic argument which is one of the pillars of her debate with Hir, warning her that her union with the cowherd will bring her nothing but regret and the analogical status of a *sati* (124); Hir, however, says that she does not want fine things and is prepared to endure pain and suffering for the sake of her lover Ranjha (125). Rebuffed by Hir's reassertion of her love for Ranjha and her unwillingness to go with the Kheras (128), Malki responds with a sketch of Hir so enticing (although assuredly not to Malki herself) and so strong as to deserve quotation in full here:

“No one can argue with you: you know too many evil ways.

You say whatever comes into your mind to your mother and don't  
recognise the duties of deference:

You've cut off the nose of your ancestors and thrown dust on your  
mother's head.

Unlike Muqbil, you don't care for the family: you create new  
troubles every day."

Hir's mother said, "Listen daughter, you know no shame.

You've fallen in love with a cowherd: you don't care for the world's  
opinion.

You've always eaten our food, but you have no regard for  
anyone.

You lustily enjoy Muqbil: you feel no fear or regret at all." (126-7)

When even this plea fails, Malki calls in Chuchak, hoping that a reassertion of  
patriarchal authority will tame Hir.

Chuchak attempts to assert his control over Hir by appealing to notions of  
honour and status and by making blatant threats of physical violence—reinforcing  
the link between social ideology and violence that runs through the entire set of  
dialogues. After accusing Hir of shaming the Sials by being born, he thunders

"You won't stop going to the cowherd: God willing, I'll kill you.

The Sials' name is famed the world over: Muqbil, the girl Hir has  
thrown it in a well." (130)

Hir's response to her father's intention to make her a ritual sacrifice for the  
collective honour of the Sials is the strongest she has made yet: she curses him,  
saying, "Father you've become an old man: you've got no brains" (131). She once  
again tries to appropriate to herself divine sanction, denying the patriarchal  
power to kill in the name of honour by stating that "No one dies unless God kills  
them" (131). In effect, Hir has rejected entirely her father's power over her,

insulting him in the process. Stunned, Chuchak begins to cry as he too reverts to curses: "May God punish you, Hir!" (132). He makes one last attempt to buttress the ideology of family and honour by claiming for it divine sanction, saying that God punishes those who pain their parents (133). Hir, however, will have none of this: she once again accuses her father of having gone out of his mind, adding that to do what her parents ask would be to contravene the *sharia* (133). "Hir," the narrator tells us, "satisfied Chuchak Sial" (134). After this, the only debate Hir has with her parents is a short one with her mother after her brother Sultan sees her in the meadows with Ranjha. In this brief interchange, Malki repeats her argument about the loss of status inherent in a match with a cowherd, and curses Hir as "the one who should be beaten by her brother" (148) and an "evil daughter" (150). Unable to continue to spin its discourse of authority, the patriarchy and its agents once more revert to insults and curses: now the only route left to it is to bribe the *qazi*.

It is in her debate with the *qazi* that Hir carries off what is surely her most impressive performance. When Hir gets the *qazi*'s summons to appear at the village mosque, the narrator not only tells us that "the girl was not afraid of being beaten" (172) but also rhetorically asks "Muqbil, what can the *sharia* do where love (*ishq*) has set up camp?" (171), setting the context for the debate's eventual outcome. The *qazi* begins not with words but with physical violence: he grabs Hir by the arms and commands her, "Tell me about religion: / Your parents have married you off but you go with one of your own choosing: who gave you this idea?" (173). Hir's tearful response is both to reassert that she has loved Ranjha since the Creation and to compromise the *qazi*'s presumed right to interrogate her by rebuking him for taking bribes and "putting the noose around his own neck" (174). Evading Hir's accusations, the *qazi* tries to invoke his authority on another level by asking Hir to "listen to [her] teacher" and leave off

the ways of infidelity (*kufir*), reminding her once again that Ranjha is an impoverished cowherd (175). Tearful, Hir expresses her willingness to follow the dictates of the *qazi* and the *sharia* in any matter other than this and states that she fears no one—not even her brothers—and is ready to become a *mahāsati* (176). In response, the *qazi* tries to buttress the claims of religion and *sharia*, warning Hir of the dangers of following Satan and reminding her of the importance of the distinction between *harām* (forbidden) and *halāl* (allowed). Hir’s response is to appropriate the *sharia* to herself and condemn the *qazi*, a stance surely as shocking as her insults to her father:

Hir says, “I respect the *sharia* and I’ve followed the word of the  
Quran.

Lovers follow the way of love (*ishq*); *qazis* and sinners follow the  
way of Satan.” (178)

Stunned, the *qazi* asks Hir to prove that she is married, warning her that indulging in the forbidden (*haram*) leads to an eternity in Hell (179): Hir plays her trump card, telling the *qazi* that the Panj Pirs married her to Ranjha and that God will support her on the Day of Judgement (180). Unable to counter what Hir has told him, the *qazi* once again makes an empty appeal to his own authority: he asks Hir to do what her teacher tells her, promising that he will recommend her on the Day of Judgement (181). Hir’s emphatic reassertion that she is married to Ranjha and cannot marry another seals the argument (182): the *qazi* turns to Chuchak and informs him that “Hir knows all the tricks: I can’t argue with her” (183). Hir has successfully defeated the representative of orthodox religion, demolishing the last bastion of ideological authority in the poem’s world. Unfortunately, she can do nothing against the naked force and deception that Chuchak will use against her.

The dichotomy between the Hir whose stubborn adherence to her love for Ranjha allows her to flout all the representatives of traditional authority and the Hir who submits utterly to Ranjha—if there is a dichotomy in this portrait at all—seems to have exercised readers of the poem from the very beginning. In a certain sense, the extended version of the poem—including the tragic ending—is an attempt to tame and domesticate the rebellious Hir that the dialogues construct. The Hir of the tragic ending is concerned, as her mother was, to protect her reputation and please her parents, insisting that Ranjha marry her (356). At the same time, though, the lengthy descriptions of Hir's wedding and of her arrival in Rangpur in the middle of the extended version of the poem beatify Hir. Not only do we suffer the exquisite agony of watching every detail as Hir is married to Saida—including details of what the *qazi* took as his bribe—but we see Hir fight with the *vakils* (intermediaries/witnesses to marriage) whose job it is to see that she is married (footnote 205-209), Chuchak (footnote 212-3) and the *qazi* who is to marry her (footnote 218-222). In all three cases, Hir's interlocutors repeat familiar arguments about Hir's duty to her family and in all three cases Hir lays stress on the *sharia* and on the fact that the Panj Pirs have married her to Ranjha. She says that she has forsaken her mother and father (footnote 209), asserts her more correct adherence to the *sharia* (footnote 220) and warns the *qazi* that he will be punished by God if he marries her to the Kheras (footnote 219-20). Hir appropriates entirely the discourse of religion and authority, becoming at once more of a rebel (she is after all, a woman claiming precedence over a *qazi*) and a more manageable rebel (because her dissent is now couched entirely in the acceptable terms of the *sharia*). When we learn that Hir's prayers prevent Saida from consummating his marriage with Hir (footnote 252), the transformation is complete: Hir is well on her way to becoming the saint that she appears to be at the end of the tale. Instead of an impetuous young girl in love with a young Jat,

we see a female mystic, a second Rābī'ā—a figure who is presented in Hir's argument against Ranjha's misogyny as being as orthodox as the mothers of the prophets (79). If Hir, too, is a Rabia, she must not be so threatening after all.

### Conclusion:

Despite the vexing textual conundrum associated with the poem, Muqbil's *Qissā Hīr Rānjhā* displays in all of its versions a strong tendency to attach mystical meaning to the story of Hir and Ranjha. The manifestations of this tendency are everywhere in the poem: its focus on the divine attributes of love (*ishq*), its beatification of Hir, its valorisation of Ranjha's loss of status. This mystic reinterpretation takes place against the background of a world exposed in all its corruption—a world in which alms are no longer alms and society attempts to buttress its values and ideologies through deception and naked force. If the *qissa* turns away from the worldly to the otherworldly, it is because the worldly seems so unappealing—even disgusting—in comparison.

In choosing the path of religion, though, the poem adopts a decidedly Sufi stance. One of the many pairings in the poem is the opposition of *pir*-centred Islam and the Islam of the *sharia* and the *qazi*. During the course of the poem, the second of these versions of Islam becomes the target of contempt and scorn: the *sharia* repeatedly sets itself up as an obstacle to love, compromising its own authority each time. Not only is Hir able to counter the arguments of *sharia* in her dispute with the *qazi*, for example, the *qazi*'s resort to threats and violence and his willingness to be bribed call its moral authority into question. In contrast, the world of the *pirs* is one in which Hir and Ranjha are protected and their love validated through marriage.

The poem's attachment to the model of *pir*-based devotion is perhaps best symbolised in its representation of Hir as Ranjha's disciple on the path of love.

Hir's passionate and unceasing attachment to her *pir* presents a vivid exemplum, a paradigm of Sufi seeking on the path so striking as to be almost iconographic. Equally striking, if less immediately visible, is the narrator's hermeneutic for reading (or hearing) the poem as a mystical experience: he urges his readers to weep and to sigh, joining him in his complete identification with the suffering and the afflicted in the poem. In doing so, he mirrors the characters' own shifting identifications and their indictments of the idea of fixed social identities. By asking the audience to lose its own identity in the sufferings of the *qissa's* characters, the poet transforms the very reading of the poem into a mystical act.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE POETRY OF CORRESPONDENCE: SIDDIQ LALI'S *BAHR UL-'ISHQ*

There was a certain Siddiq Lali, a good man:  
He made a garland of flowers for the honoured Yusuf,  
Weaving in *āyats* and *hadis* like roses.  
May that Lord forgive everyone—including corrupt little me! (Mian  
Muhammad Bakhsh)

Siddiq Lali wrote a *qissa* about Yusuf to explain Sufism—  
But he couldn't understand the trick of writing a *qissa*.  
The works of that devout man are filled with  
Tradition, law, commentary, and verses from scripture.  
He didn't care at all about composing verses:  
He made a *faqir's* frock with his clumsy stitches. (Ahmad Yar)<sup>1</sup>

As the above quotations from Muhammad Bakhsh and Ahmad Yar imply, the reputation of Siddiq Lali (died 1179 AH/1766) rests not so much on the quality of his poetry as on his command of Islamic learning.<sup>2</sup> Descended from a long line of well-known Sufis, Lali's father and grandfather were prominent scholars and his brother Muhammad Sharif was a poet. Siddiq Lali appears to have spent most of his life in the village of Lālīā in district Sargodha where he supplemented the learning he had acquired from his elders with the books available in his family's vast library. To this day, folk songs in the area praise Siddiq Lali as a great religious figure who was favoured by the Prophet, and local tradition asserts that he was seen as an authority on the *sharia* and a deeply moral individual who even expelled some of his eighteen sons from the district for immoral conduct. Tradition attributes a number of miracles to Siddiq Lali, and the neighbourhood around his tomb in the village of Lalian is referred to as "the *darbar*." His 'urs is enthusiastically celebrated at his tomb and in some of the neighbouring

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<sup>1</sup>Mian Muhammad Bakhsh 'Jihlami', *Saif ul-mulūk* 658; Ahmad Yar, *Ahisamul-qasis* 272-3.

<sup>2</sup>The biographical information that follows has been taken from Riāz Ahmad Shād, ed., *Kulliyāt-i Lālī* (Lahore: Pākistān Panjābī Adabī Board, 1982): 53-74. The edition used for citations from the poem is Pritam Saini, ed., *Yūsuf Zulaikhā—Sadīk Lālī (Bahir-ul-ishk)* (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1993). As the verses of the poem are not numbered, all citations to the text are by page number.



villages. In addition to his *Bahr ul-'ishq*, written in approximately 2500 lines of *davayya* in 1137 AH (1725-6),<sup>3</sup> he authored at least sixteen religious tracts (one of which is dated 1107 AH/1695-6), a genealogical tract, a geographical poem, an account of a battle in the Khyber pass, a tract on erotics and a number of short poems.<sup>4</sup> There are at least five manuscripts of Lali's *Bahr ul-'ishq* in Indian and Pakistani collections, one of which is dated 1224 AH (1809-10 CE).<sup>5</sup>

### The story:

Siddiq Lali's version of the story of Yusuf and Zulaikha derives ultimately from the narrative in the twelfth *sūrah* of the Quran (in which it is referred to as "the most beautiful of stories"), with some additions from the Islamic commentarial tradition and classical Persian versions of the story. One day Yusuf, the son of the prophet Ya'qūb, has a dream in which he sees eleven stars and the sun and moon bowing before him. When he relates the dream to his father, Yaqub tells him not to tell his brothers about it because it indicates that he will be favoured above all of them. They find out about the dream, though, and decide to kill him, persuading a reluctant Yaqub to allow Yusuf to go out to play with them. Instead of killing him, the brothers leave Yusuf in a well and return home with his cloak, claiming that he has been killed by a wolf. The caravan of a merchant named Mālik passes the well and rescues Yusuf; when Yusuf's brothers find out, they tell him that Yusuf was their slave and ask a price for him. Malik takes Yusuf to to Misr (Egypt), pausing along the way to display Yusuf's beauty and mystical powers in a number of cities. When he reaches Misr, Malik shows Yusuf publicly for a

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<sup>3</sup> The ending of the poem dates it to 1137 AH and to the seventh year of Muhammad Shah's reign (97).

<sup>4</sup> Shad, *op.cit.* 45, 96-7. Shad notes that he has not included the *Lazzat un-nisā* (Lali's tract on erotics) in his edition of the poet's collected works "because the poem is for mature people only, and both young and old are going to read this book. For this reason, it is being printed separately" (*ibid.* 97).

number of days before he selling him at auction to Aziz, the ruler of Misr, who purchases him at the insistence of his wife Zulaikha. The daughter of Taimūs (the king of the west), Zulaikha had seen Yusuf in a number of dreams over a period of three years and fallen in love with him. When Yusuf told her in one of the dreams that she would find him as the king of Misr, she entreated her father to marry her to the ruler of Misr; when she arrived for the wedding, she found that her spouse was the aging Aziz.

After buying Yusuf, Zulaikha has a palace built in which she installs a golden idol of Yusuf; one day she calls him to the palace and unsuccessfully tries to seduce him. When her efforts to portray Yusuf as the seducer fail and the women of Misr begin to slander her, she invites them to a banquet at which Yusuf's beauty causes them to cut their hands. Yusuf is then cast into prison, where he interprets a pair of dreams for two prisoners, Sharhīā and Barhīā, one of whom is released. The released prisoner forgets his promise to plead for Yusuf's release until the day several years later when Aziz asks for an interpretation of one of his dreams. When Yusuf explains that the dream foretells a famine that will strike the region, he is released from prison and made the new king of Misr; his judicious management of the country's grain stores ensures that Misr remains prosperous during the years of famine, while most neighboring countries begin to starve.

Struck by famine, Yaqub sends his other sons to Misr to ask for grain; concealing his identity from his brothers, Yusuf sends them back with gifts and their original merchandise but asks them to return with his nephew Ibn Yamīn before he will give them any grain. The brothers return with the boy, whom Yusuf manages to keep in Misr by planting his own jewelled bowl in Ibn Yamin's sack of provisions and accusing him of being a thief. The brothers return to Yaqub, who writes to Misr to plead for Ibn Yamin's

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<sup>5</sup> Shamsheer Singh 'Ashok', *Panjābī hatth-likhtā dī sūchī* 2:340; Rizvi, "Panjāb Yūniversitī Lāibrerī" 25-6; Ahmad Husain Quraishi, "Kutub *khānā* ul-Qurashiyā" 100; Rana,

release, and Yusuf replies by sending his own shirt to Yaqub as a token that he is still alive. An overjoyed Yaqub journeys to Misr with his sons and is reunited with Yusuf, whom his brothers accept as their king. Yaqub spends the rest of his days in prayer. Yusuf marries Zulaikha, who has broken her idol of him and is rewarded by receiving the boon of renewed youth. The story ends with the deaths of Yaqub, Zulaikha and Yusuf.

### **The Poetics of Correspondence in Lali's *Bahr ul-'ishq*:**

As a retelling of the Quranic tale of Yusuf and Zulaikha, Siddiq Lali's *Bahr ul-'ishq* is at once both an original poetic creation and a mimesis of its Quranic original. More so than the love *qissas* of the classical Punjabi tradition, the poem both depends on and reflects a written original—ultimately one which enjoys the status of holy scripture. Perhaps because of the poem's status as a retelling of (if not a commentary on) scripture, the *qissa* displays a marked fascination both with the idea of the written word and with the Quran in particular. Indeed, unlike many later Punjabi versions of the Yusuf-Zulaikha story, the *qissa* completely <sup>elides</sup> its relationship with the fifteenth-century Persian poet Jami's massively influential *Yūsuf Zulaikhā* in favour of its claim that it is based entirely upon the Quran.<sup>6</sup> At one and the same time, this preoccupation foregrounds the *qissa*'s secondary status and grants it renewed currency by linking it with so exalted a source. It is no surprise, then, that the *qissa* includes in its repertoire of opening invocations a section in praise of the Quran itself:

Just as God is higher than all of creation,  
So does the Quran contain greater holiness than all other words.  
Just like the grace of the Prophets, the Quran's glory does not  
increase or decrease.

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<sup>6</sup>“Kitābkhānā Iqbāl Salāh ud-Dīn” 201; Malik, “Mutafarriq kutub khāniā vich” 266.

Know this to be true: the grace of the Prophet and the Quran  
are equal.

If someone reads the Quran with pure faith and love of the  
Master

And loves to read it out to people, he will be pre-eminent in the  
world. (22-3)

Explicitly linked to the text of the Quran throughout the text of the *qissa* is the *kalimā* or *shahadā* (the Muslim profession of faith): "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet." Just as the Quran provides a genealogy for his text, the poet posits that the *kalima* is the source of both the created universe and the Quran itself:

'There is no God but Allah' was written first;

'And Muhammad is his Prophet' inscribed on the heavens.

The pen flowed for four hundred years before the whole *kalima*  
was written:

If anyone reads this heading once, his greatest sins will be  
forgiven.

If one reads the *kalima* and not the Quran, his sins will never be  
forgiven:

That rude man has not recognised the value of Allah's word.

If someone reads the *kalima* a lot, people call him crazy--

But everyone knows that he will become a *sayyid* in Paradise. `

(20)<sup>7</sup>

That this quotation is in fact the beginning of Siddiq Lali's poem marks it out as the "genealogy" of the poem;<sup>8</sup> once again, it is worth noting that the poet

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<sup>6</sup> For some suggestive hints on the importance of Jami's poem as a model for Indian poets, see Christopher Shackle, "Between Scripture and Romance" 158-60.

<sup>7</sup> I have emended the seventh line to read *ākhaṇa hoiā kamalā* according to Shad, *op.cit.* 210 rather than Saini's much less satisfactory reading *ākhaṇa hoiā kalimā*.

<sup>8</sup> The *kalima* retains its importance throughout the course of the *qissa*: the poem ends with the comment, "Remember the pure *kalima*, this is the truest means" (98).

stresses the writing of the *kalima*. The *kalima*, he says, was “inscribed on the heavens,” forming a sort of Ur-text or template for the created universe: if the *kalima* lies at the heart of everything in the universe, it should by extension be possible to read the meaning of all creation in reverse and arrive back again at the profession of faith. In other words, the immanence of the *kalima* and its co-requisite the Quran in the created universe makes possible the supposition that the universe—and every object and action in it—contains within it two levels of meaning: the *majāzī* (or worldly) and the *haqīqī* (or divine). It is precisely this immanence that allows verses from the Quran to become physically manifest as a warning to Yusuf when Zulaikha tempts him in the mirrored palace:

A bird sat on his shoulder and whispered,  
“If you commit this sin, you will fall from the status of a  
prophet.”  
He saw Yaqub biting his finger in grief;  
“Do not go near women” became manifest on his hand.  
Yusuf ripped open his chest and knew the verse;  
“O chaste Prophet of Allah, get away you innocent one!”  
He looked toward the ground and saw the *ayat*  
“If anyone does evil he will receive its fruits.” (58)

Not only is the *qissa* itself a retelling of the Quranic tale, then, but it is also a poetic universe into which the Quran can manifest itself and in which the Quran itself can control and create narrative action. The meaning of the poetic representation is, therefore, directly dictated by the original. That the poetics of representation are central to the *qissa* is shown by the effect that the painting which Yusuf has prepared on the walls of the palace where his brothers are staying has on them:

Rū'īl sighed when he saw it and they asked, “What happened?”  
He said, “What we've done is painted right there.”

They lifted their heads and saw the picture.

Their hearts sank and their tongues were silenced. (78)

It is worth remembering that in Punjabi the same verb (*likhṇā*—to write) is used for the acts of painting and drawing. As such, Yusuf's act of having his story painted on the walls of the palace mirrors the act of writing the *qissa* and *vice versa*: just as the artist of the mural aims to represent the story Yusuf dictates to him, so too does the poet attempt to represent the Quran's narrative without excessive poetic embellishment and for a specific effect. He too attempts to stun us with his representation—but instead of aiming to shame us into silence, he hopes to compel us into repeating the *kalima* and recognising its immanence in the *majazi* universe.

If the text's beginning reveals the importance of concepts of the Quran and the *kalima* in the text, it reveals in its praises of the Prophet's companions and Abdul Qadir Jilani what must be considered the *qissa's* central poetic. Describing the chain of discipleship that lay behind the early Caliphate, the poet inserts an Arabic quotation that expresses one of the *qissa's* central tropes—that the poetic universe is a territory of correspondences between the *majazi* and the *haqiqi*:

[Hasan Basrī] renewed the oath of fealty (*baiat*) and the custom  
of discipleship (*murīdī pīrī*),

Laid out the fourteen *haqiqi* paths (*tariqa*) which are not *majazi*.

The *pir* says that the way is, "The worldly (*al-majāz*) is the bridge  
to the truth (*al-haqīqat*)":

O Siddiq, tell people how to understand this point! (21)

This principle creates a poetic according to which events in the universe of the poem are taken as metaphorical equivalents of various elements of Islamic theology and soteriology. This strategy extends beyond the simple trope of analogy which lies behind the analogies to Nūh, Ibrahim, Mūsā, and Muhammad—valid for the simple reason that Yusuf is actually a prophet—that

the poet introduces when Yusuf's brothers decide to kill him (25) or the parallel between Yusuf's brothers' affection for him before his dream and that of Pharaoh for Moses before his miracles (29). It is also of a different order than the parallels between the pairing Zulaikha-Yusuf and the dyads of Yash'a-Musa, Shim'un-Īsā and Abu Bakr-Muhammad that the poet adduces when Zulaikha falls in love with the Yusuf she has seen in her dreams (49-50). It even extends beyond the occasions when the poet uses one of the characters' situations or actions as an occasion to preach directly to the audience, such as when Yaqub's determination to steel himself to the reality of living without Yusuf leads to a sermon on patience (33), Malik's greed to find the slave who he has been told will bring him prosperity introduces a digression on greed (35), Malik's auctioning Yusuf causes a warning against losing oneself in covetousness (37), Yusuf's imprisonment leads to a sermon on the fate of the adulterer (62), or Yusuf's hospitality to his brothers causes the poet to remark that every Muslim should be kind to his brethren in order to escape the fires of hell (67). Instead, in a number of instances the poet actively creates homologies between the *majazi* world of the poem's action and events and the *haqiqi* world of soteriology and theology, a poetic universe of correspondences that breaks down the barrier between the two worlds and merges them into one.

Some of these parallels produce metaphors in which Yusuf is equated with God or the angels. Thus, Yusuf's act of camping out on the border of Misr to await and interrogate his brothers is equated with the angels' actions on the Day of Judgement:

So do the angels stand on guard on the Pul-sirāt:

They will ask, "Which are the oppressed and which the bloody oppressors?" (71)

We shall see later how the poet explicitly equates the people of Misr's first vision of Yusuf's (still-veiled) beauty with the theoretical proposition of being

able to see God; the equation of God and Yusuf implicit in this interrogation occurs more explicitly a number of times in the poem, though. The first explicit equation of God and Yusuf occurs when Yusuf refills Aziz's coffers after the king purchases him as a slave: the poet counterpoints Yusuf's remark that he does not wish to be a source of difficulty to the king with the comment that "If a believer gives away and thinks of God / God will give him twice as much wealth in this world and the next" (53). Indeed, when Yusuf sends Ibn Yamin back to his brothers instead of keeping him with himself, the narrator remarks that "It is like when the *auliyas* go from the presence of God to the *huris*" (81). More common is the exhortatory parallel between the way characters in the poem display their devotion to Yusuf and the way the poet tells us the believer should feel towards God. After outlining the depth and emotion of Zulaikha's attachment to Yusuf, for example, the narrator adds:

Those who are nourished by the love of God can go without  
food:

They have no money and no water-bags, and run through the  
jungle foaming at the mouth [?].

Their complexion is sallow and they sit in the corner massaging  
their withered limbs.

Siddiq, they keep remembering the friend and consider their  
body useless. (56)

Similarly, the first moment when Yusuf unveils himself to Ibn Yamin after revealing to him that he is in fact his uncle is compared to the union of the believer with God in Paradise:

Each takes the other in his arms and wails, forgetting himself:

So will the believers wail, forgetting themselves, when they see  
God.



Intoxicated, they will go crazy and not get up for a hundred  
thousand years:

Longing to see God, they will never tire of looking.

The *huris* will complain, saying, "O God, be kind!

The friend doesn't come even though we wait—a long time has  
passed!" (80)

Thus, the narrator equates Yusuf with God in order to use the affection of Zulaikha and Ibn Yamin as figures for the believer's attachment to God—just as he uses the equation on other occasions to remind the reader that he will be judged after death and that he should give away part of his wealth in charity. Such parallels function not as simple metaphors but rather as admonitions and sermons.

A number of the homologies between the *majazi* and the *haqiqi* in the poem adduce parallels between the events of the poem and the favour that God shows to believers. We are told, for example, that Yusuf is protected on his journey to Misr by an army of two hundred mounted angels "as is every believer" (41), that the 360 cloaks which Zulaikha has made for Yusuf replicate the 360 glances which God uses to create love, miracles, fear and faith in every person (55), and that the way in which Yusuf's whole family participates in his wedding replicates the way in which "the Prophet joins in every believer's wedding procession" (92). At the same time, many of these homologies form a sort of parallel narrative which charts the fate of the believer in this world and the next. The believer spends his time in the prison of this world in joy because, like Sharhia and Barhia after Yusuf joins them in prison, he is close to God:

So too does the faithful man seem imprisoned in this world:

But he is happy in his heart because he is near Allah and beloved  
by Allah. (63)

The poet tells us that the believer will have been informed in advance of his impending resurrection and entry into Heaven in much the same way as Yaqub received advance knowledge of the arrival of Yusuf's shirt because its scent preceded it by two months:

The believer will perceive the scent of heaven five hundred  
years in advance;  
He will come out of his grave like Yaqub came out of his  
prayer-cell. (87)

After his death, "the believer, bound up in the world," will be saved from the fires of Hell in the same way that Aziz saves Yusuf from being put to death despite Zulaikha's entreaties (59): his faith will outweigh his sins much as the weight of Yusuf's prophethood outmatched the weight of all the gold that was used to set his price on the day he was sold (52). On that day, God will make ample provision for the believers, an act that is mirrored in the poem by Yusuf's instructions to his *hājib* (chamberlain) to provide food and hospitality for his brothers when they enter Misr:

Allah will make a similar command when all people die:  
The sky and earth will collapse and the moon and stars will fall  
down by day.

.....  
"I will protect those who have committed good acts." (73)

When he has finally been judged, the believer will find himself in a situation similar to that of Yaqub's family at the end of the *qissa*:

Just as Allah reunited the offspring of Yaqub in Misr,  
So will the believers meet Muhammad in Heaven. (92)

Thus, the whole story of Yusuf and his reunion with his father and brothers becomes a parable of the believer's progress to Heaven, a narrative that proceeds simultaneously on two levels. The parallel *haqiqi* narrative that underlies the poem and becomes visible through homology constitutes a

thoroughgoing reinterpretation of the meaning of the poem and directs it toward parable or allegory: this "second story" of the poem constitutes a promise to the believer as well as an account of his fate after death.

But if events in the poem provide a paradigm for the believer's fate in this world and the next, they also provide a warning of the fate which sinners will suffer on the Day of Judgement. When Yaqub realises from the fact that Yusuf's cloak is not ripped that he has not been killed by a wolf, the narrator remarks that

Similarly will the sinner feel sorrowful when he sees himself  
dirtied by sin:

Only if he sees mystical knowledge safe in his heart will his  
sorrow disappear. (33)

In the same way, Yusuf's brothers' regret at having brought before Yaqub a wolf that was able to tell him that it had not eaten Yusuf comes to be equated with the sinner's feelings of guilt on the Day of Judgement:

So too will people regret bad actions on the Day of Judgement:  
If they knew that their hands and feet will speak, they would  
leave off pride right now. (34)

Not only does the narrator hint that the sinner's evil acts will return to haunt him on the Day of Judgement, but he also depicts by analogy the reactions that the sinner will experience on that day. He equates these reactions with that which Yusuf has upon reading his father's letter to him asking for the release of Ibn Yamin:

He turned pale, began to shake, and was covered in sweat:  
He felt guilty at the letter in the same way as the sinner will on  
the final day. (85)

Perhaps the most evocative explication of the sinner's fate after death, however, is provided by the narrator's comments on the regret that Malik

feels after Yusuf (who has just been sold to Zulaikha) tells him who he really is:

Screaming, he started to faint and regretted what he had done  
again and again:

Such will be man's fate on the Day of the Standing when God  
tells him his sins.

"It is as if you spent your life in intoxication and didn't fear the  
Court of God:

You have become an old man but still don't understand and  
haven't left off your sinning yet.

Know that God is always present: wake up and stop being  
negligent!

Siddiq, if you carry out evil in God's presence, you will be ill-  
starred. (53)

Thus, if the pattern of the poem's narrative provides an allegory of the believer's progress toward paradise, certain of its events also foreshadow the dismal fate of the sinner. As such, the *qissa* is as much a warning and an admonition away from sin as it is a promise of redemption to those who believe.

But if the narrative of the poem is a homology of the world of faith, theology and soteriology, it is assuredly a homology that only those with the right hermeneutic framework can apprehend. The narrator tells us that when Malik's slave Bashrā comes to the well in which Yusuf's brothers have thrown him,

He saw birds all around the well,

Circling it just as pilgrims circle Mecca.

They were angels but seemed like birds to Malik the idol-  
worshipper. (36)

Clearly, if only those with the correct religious viewpoint can see the angels for what they are, the same must apply to the homologies of the *qissa*: the believer will understand them to be promises and warnings, while the non-believer (or the sinner) will see them as mere figures of speech, poetic metaphors like any other. That the strategy of homology is central to the poetic of the *qissa* is, however, made clear by the ending of the poem: by the time Yaqub and Yusuf are reunited, the *haqiqi* reinterpretation of the narrative no longer follows or forms a part of the narrative that it reframes; instead, it precedes it and predetermines its meaning. Before we are even told about Yusuf's preparations to meet his father with an army of thirty thousand mounted troopers, the first lines of the episode tell us that

The birds will become Arabian horses, mounts for the believers:  
They will come out of the grave, cry out and depart for Heaven.

(89)

The allegorical content of the narrative is, therefore, determined even before the narrative takes place. No longer are *haqiqi* reinterpretations the homologous correlatives of the narrative: instead, the narrative becomes a function or derivative of pre-existing *haqiqi* meaning. If anything, the poem becomes a homology of a wider *haqiqi* narrative rather than the other way around.

### Concepts of Love in the *Qissa*:

Although the beginning of the *qissa* links the creation of the universe with the first utterance of the *kalima*, it also asserts another genealogy, one more in line with the poetic of the classical Punjabi love *qissa*. The poet asserts that God's wish to be loved prompted him to create the universe:

God created the universe out of desire to be recognised;  
He created a number of lovers for himself. (20)

In a similar fashion to the manner in which the centrality of the *kalima* to the universe allows the poet to exalt the text of the Quran, the importance given to love allows him to privilege the metaphysic of reading his poem “with love.” Just as the *kalima*’s centrality to the created universe mirrors the importance of the Quran for the poet’s *qissa*, the role of love in Allah’s creation of the universe provides a genealogy for the poem not unlike the *isnād* of a *hadis* or the *nasbnāmā* of a mystical *silsila*: ultimately descended from Zulaikha’s love for Yusuf, the poem is nurtured by the passion that his own reading of the Quranic version of the story created in the poet and directly prompted by his companions’ search for a love story. This leads to a hermeneutic for reading the *qissa* in which the reader’s willingness to read the text with love grants soteriological benefits:

Zulaikha was infatuated with Yusuf, both were in love (*ishq*);  
 Reading their story, “the most beautiful of all stories,” I was  
 filled with longing (*shauq*).

The reason the *Sūrā Yūsuf* was revealed is written in books.  
 My companions asked for a story of pleasure and love (*zauq muhabbat*).

.....  
 If someone reads it with love (*muhabbat*) and understands its  
 whole meaning

He finds humility and law (*fiqh faqīrī*) and becomes a companion  
 of God (*vali*). (22)

This genealogy of love is repeated at the conclusion of the poem, with the significant addition that its beginning point becomes the will of God rather than the Quranic story itself:

God himself chose this story of love and attachment (*qissā ‘ishq muhabbat vālā*):

The tale of lovers and beloveds was heard throughout the entire world.

If someone reads it with love and understands its whole meaning

He finds humility and law and becomes a companion of God.

(97)

As such, the *qissa* itself—an impassioned author's loving reproduction of a story of love—becomes itself a repetition of God's act of creation through the twin agencies of love and the Word: the poem itself becomes a correspondence for the created universe.

Although the *qissa's* stress on the ideal of love would seem to link it to the classical love *qissas* of the Punjabi literary tradition, its unwavering stress on *haqiqi* rather than *majazi* love separates it from those poems. Where Muqbil for example seeks to use the love of Hir and Ranjha as a metaphor for a *pir*-centred *tariqa* of Sufic devotion, the poet of *Bahr ul-'ishq* seeks to direct the reader toward orthodox conceptions of Islam, promising worldly reward as well as spiritual benefits to those who read the poem with a proper Islamic orientation:

Leave off infidelity and innovation, beloved, follow the road of instruction;

Keep your foundations firm on the *sharia* and receive *mansabs* and territories (*vilāyat*). (97)

Indeed, the words which Yusuf utters to Malik after the latter sees Yusuf coming out of the Nile after a bath illustrate a certain aversion to the idea of devotion to an individual *pir*:

Malik began to bow to him but he forbade him to:

"Bow to no one but the Creator." (43)

Within this framework, Yusuf's own attempts to proselytise while he is still a slave are interesting both for their orthodoxy and for their stress on his own

beauty as a symbol of God's love for creation (and the desirability of returning that love). Note, for example, Yusuf's reaction to Zulaikha's attachment to his beauty, manifested in her worship of a golden idol of him. He has her idol fall and shatter into pieces after she mentions her devotion for it, prompting a not entirely successful attempt to wean her away from her affection to physical beauty alone:

"Look what happened to my idol, Yusuf," said Zulaikha.

He said, "That's because you started worshipping an idol and bowing to it.

If he wants to my God can do to you what he did to the idol:

If he wishes he could break your neck, it's not difficult for him."

"Who is your God?" she asked. He said, "He is always with me, The God of Ibrahim and Ishāq who created the universe."

She said, "How did he know that I bowed to an idol?"

He said, "He sees everything, but no one sees him."

She said, "I love him because you love him:

I will worship him and the idol—now both are worthy of reverence." (54-5)

If his attempt to use his beauty to convert Zulaikha to the worship of the one God fails insofar as Zulaikha decides to worship both Allah and her idol, his proselytising to his fellow prisoners is somewhat more successful. After warning them not to love him because of the pain his love has caused Yaqub and Zulaikha, he manages to convert them all:

"Let me tell you the means that God has sent:

O Muslims, leave the jail if you wish!"

There were one thousand four hundred prisoners:

All of them became believers through Yusuf's mystical powers— even the poor cook! (64)



This *haqiqi* reinterpretation of worldly beauty is further emphasised by an anecdote that is immediately preceded by a description of how people struggled to catch a glimpse of Yusuf as he was being sold off—"People raised up their heads and stretched out their bodies / Standing on their toes so they could see Yusuf" (47)—and of the effect of his beauty on them: "they forgot the world and became intoxicated" and "twenty-five thousand men and women convulsed to death" (47). It is in this context of exaggerated *majazi* love that the poet introduces the story of Bībī Qāri'ā, the daughter of Astālū Mas'ūd and a descendant of Shaddād, who came to Misr with the intention of spending all of her considerable wealth on acquiring Yusuf. Upon arriving she realises that all the wealth of the world will not be sufficient to possess Yusuf and decides instead to worship the God who created him:

When she caught sight of Yusuf, she was astonished  
 And said, "Who are you? Who made you? Your face is so  
                   beautiful!  
 All my wealth is not even equal to a fraction of your beauty:  
 All the wealth and land in the world is not equal to your worth."  
 He said, "The Lord of the two worlds created my form."  
 She said, "I need the One who created you."  
 She gave her goods as alms to holy men and the indigent  
 And lives by the Red Sea worshipping God. (48).

This didactic tale of conversion expands the sentiments present in the poet's explicit moralising at the moment of Yusuf's entry into Misr itself: he tells us that when Yusuf entered the city, "the birds began to sing, / People stopped eating and drinking, and the trees began to dance" (44); so striking is Yusuf's effect on people that "those who come [to Malik's house] to see him lose their wits and cannot find the door" (44). The poet moralises the moment, remarking that "If it's like this to see a creation, how must it be to see the

Creator?" Clearly, in the poem worldly beauty is to be seen as a means of approaching an imaginative vision of the divine rather than as an end in itself.

If the poet encourages a vision of love in which the only proper love is *haqiqi* and worldly love and longing are only means to love for the divine, his most sustained exploration of this theme lies in his portrayal of the shifting terms of Zulaikha's love for Yusuf. The initial image of Zulaikha's love for Yusuf utilises the tropes and rhetoric of courtly love, in which the "the oppressive hunter love" (48) drives her to distraction after she sees her first dream vision of him: "She cried and cried and screamed, ruining herself with her crying" (49). As time passes and she still has not been united with her beloved, the increasing number of marriage proposals from rulers other than the king of Misr drives Zulaikha to actual madness. Simultaneously, it pushes her further and further into the discourse of courtly love:

Physicians grabbed and prodded her hands but didn't  
understand her heart's secret:

The lover hasn't sent a message, a bunch of strangers have  
come.

Waves wash through the river of the heart and the boatmen  
have begun to drown.

Siddiq, the lover's desire has suffered a blow. (50)

So complete is Zulaikha's longing for Yusuf that when she finally does see him being sold at auction she has precisely the reaction we would expect from a courtly lover: "Zulaikha fainted and fell to the ground, saying 'Oh, oh!'" (51). Indeed, Zulaikha's debt to the rhetoric of courtly love is so great that she literalises one of the central metaphors of the courtly love tradition: her *majazi* love for Yusuf leads her to make a golden idol of him to worship. In her devotion to the idol, she acts out the discourses of courtly love as reality in a way that she cannot with the staid preacher Yusuf:

That daughter of Mālik Taimus loved from the very beginning.

Yusuf was in her heart and on her lips and her eyes saw only  
Yusuf.

Yusuf caught her bowing before the idol and saying,  
"O idol, I have worshipped you and received a boon from you:  
I have obtained my beloved friend, my heart's companion." (54)

As we have already seen, Yusuf manages to convince Zulaikha of the efficacy of worshipping God in the discourse that follows but is unable to convince her to stop worshipping the idol: able to see the promise of *haqiqi* love but unable to give up her attachment to worldly beauty, she decides to worship both God and the golden idol. Her new devotion toward the Lord who has created Yusuf does not, however, bring Zulaikha out of the discursive universe of the courtly lover:

Zulaikha forgot everything out of love (*hubb*) for Yusuf.  
She saw the name of Yusuf written on every star;  
When she spoke, "Yusuf" came from her mouth and Yusuf was  
always in her mind.  
She couldn't sleep for an instant and couldn't eat anything; her  
visage looked demented.  
She cried so much that she began to cry tears made of blood,  
The drops spelling out "Yusuf" on the ground. (56)

So inured is Zulaikha to this discourse—which she has managed to literalise with her idol and with her tears—that none of Yusuf's efforts to preach the virtues of devotion yield fruit. When she decides to build a palace for Yusuf to live in, Yusuf once again tries to persuade Zulaikha of the transitoriness of worldly beauty and the primacy of God in the created universe:

Zulaikha said, "O friend, you live in my heart.  
I have made this mansion for you."  
He said, "God has made a house for me in Paradise:

That house is better than this one and will never be ruined.

Listen to me: I am afraid that the earth will swallow your house  
up.”

Zulaikha said, “Yusuf, you are most fragrant.”

He said, “The fragrance will be gone after thirty days in the  
grave.”

Zulaikha said, “Yusuf, your eyes are most beautiful.”

He said, “After thirty days in the grave, there will be dust in  
these eyes.”

Zulaikha said, “Yusuf, your hair is most wondrous.”

He said, “It will fall out before I decay in the grave.”

Zulaikha said, “Yusuf, there is no one more beautiful than you.”

He said, “Allah made my form this way.” (58)

Even this dialogue fails to convince Zulaikha to abandon her obsession with worldly beauty, and she responds to his assertion that his love for God means that he must ignore her by trying to force herself upon him. The poet attempts to recontextualise and to denigrate Zulaikha’s physical passion by juxtaposing to it a pair of stories about divine love: in the first the angels Mīkā’īl and Jibrā’īl test Ibrahim’s love for God by asking him to sacrifice his herd of sheep, and in the second God gives Ūsā a boon he has asked Moses to request for him even before Moses asks for it. Both stories emphasise the joys enjoyed by those who love Allah—a stark contrast to the penury that afflicts the widowed Zulaikha after Yusuf becomes king of Misr. Although the episode of Yusuf’s reunion and marriage with Zulaikha does not occur until nearly the end of the *qissa*, the juxtaposition created by these narratives sets the stage for the transformation which her love has undergone during the long years of her widowhood and penury. After God promises Yusuf that he will make Zulaikha young again and “instruct her away from infidelity” (91),

Yusuf is presented with a surprise on their wedding night that ironically mirrors their first encounter in the mirrored palace:

The young girl went through the marriage ceremony and  
entered her private quarters:

She kept the door shut and remained busy worshipping Allah.

Yusuf came at midnight and knocked on the door:

She said, "Go! I don't need you—I've found someone better than  
you."

Yusuf broke down the door and burst in.

He embraced her and Zulaikha ran, ripping her shirt.

An angel descended and said, "Yusuf, you got what was  
coming to you:

A love for a love, a flight for a flight and a rip for a rip." (91)

By the end of the *qissa*, then, the transformation of Zulaikha's love is complete: cleansed of worldly desire and attachment, she turns away from the world and towards God. Finished with the *majazi*, she becomes absorbed in the *haqiqi*.

If Zulaikha's love for Yusuf displays a progress from the *majazi* to the *haqiqi* that adheres to the poetic of the *qissa* as a whole, that poetic also subverts and appropriates the discourse of courtly love itself. Primarily using the figure of Yaqub, the poem redefines the language of courtly love as a discourse applicable to the world of familial relations rather than to the world of romantic love. When Yusuf's brothers ask Yaqub for permission to take him outside to play, for example, Yaqub expresses his fear that Yusuf might not return in the language of the courtly lover or the *virahinī*:

"Why should I send away Yusuf, the light of my eyes?

May I not feel separation (*vichhorā*) from the friend (*dost*), for  
separation (*judāī*) is very difficult!

It feels like a painful death if you forget him for a minute,

And separation from the beloved (*firāq yārā dā*) envelopes the  
breast;

The lover's heart (*dil 'āshiq dā*) is always filled with darkness and  
eats the food of sorrow (*gham*).

O God! May the lover (*ashiq*) never experience the pain of  
separation (*dard firāq*).” (27)

And Yaqub's actions match the passion of his discourse: when Yusuf leaves  
with his brothers, “Yaqub went and sat at the head of the road / And said, ‘I  
won't move from here until he returns’” (28). At this stage in the narrative, a  
parallel for Yusuf's adoption of the stance of the *virahini* is provided by the  
actions of Yusuf's full sister Zainab, who has seen a dream foreshadowing  
Yusuf's fate. She

Followed her brothers, crying out “Brother, brother”  
And grasped Yusuf's skirt, saying, “I will not let go of your  
hem.

There is no calamity greater than separation (*firaq*) or pain  
greater than the burning of absence (*vichhora*):

It does not go away unless the beloved (*habīb*) returns and there  
is no remedy.” (29)

Once Yusuf has left, Yaqub becomes a full-fledged *virahini*, both in his own  
actions and discourse and in the eyes of others: Ibn Yamin describes how his  
“Father has turned sallow and blind and crazy with crying / And does  
nothing but cry and repeat ‘Yusuf, Yusuf’” (80). Yaqub's own discourse  
conforms to Ibn Yamin's image of him: he repeatedly refers to Yusuf as his  
beloved (*yar*) or friend (*dost*) (83-4), and when they finally meet in Misr,  
Yaqub poignantly remarks to Yusuf, “Come beloved (*habīb*)! The beloved is  
here; I have found my sweetheart (*dilbar*)!” (90). So complete is Yaqub's  
identification with the discourse of the *virahini* that his letter to Aziz asking for

the return of Ibn Yamin adopts the same language as he has used to describe his separation from Yusuf:

“I am a man with a broken heart strung together with pain:  
I cry when standing, I cry when sitting, I cry when lying in bed.  
Pain gnaws at my bones constantly, and there is no joy in my  
heart.” (84)

This identification of Yaqub with the emotions and discourse of *viraha* is not without meaning for the poem as a whole: when Zulaikha discovers from her third dream that the lover of her visions is in fact the king of Misr, she introduces a string of Quranic parallels for her affection. Her love, she says, is like the affection of Yusha for Moses, Shimun for Jesus and Abu Bakr for Muhammad; more importantly, she says that “Zulaikha has seen the beauty of Yusuf just as Yaqub did: / He ruined his eyes [by crying], and I spent my wealth and beauty” (49). Yaqub thus provides an initial model for Zulaikha’s passionate attachment to Yusuf. At the same time, his reinterpretation of the language of the *virahini* provides a template for Ibn Yamin’s own relationship with his uncle Yusuf: before he even knows who exactly Yusuf is, he cannot stand to leave him after their first meeting and “Crying, Ibn Yamin says, ‘I cannot withstand separation (*firaq*) from you: / Don’t turn your back on me beloved (*piāriā*)—you are carrying my heart away” (77). If the extension of Yaqub’s use of the discourse of courtly love to describe his relationship with Yusuf first to Zainab and then to Ibn Yamin is not enough, Yaqub himself extends the remit of the renovated concept to include the natural world: presented by Yusuf’s brothers with the old wolf supposed to have killed Yusuf, Yaqub responds to its protestation that it is looking for its captured brother with the words, “Oh, oh! Wolves too feel the pain of separation (*firaq*)!” (34). Thus, the language of courtly love is remodelled as a mode of describing the family rather than the world of romantic love.

## Conclusion:

As a *qissa* based on a prestigious written original (in this case both Jami and the Quran) Siddiq Lali's *Bahr ul-'ishq* displays a marked concern with representation in general and with the act of writing in particular. Perhaps as part of this concern, it effaces completely any hint of a relationship with Jami in favour of a more prestigious connection with the Quranic original of the Yusuf-Zulaikha story. As a consequence, the poem grants the text of the Quran a great deal of importance, even including it among the opening invocations of the text. While this emphasis negates the status of the *qissa* as a creative work—and perhaps even as a “romance”—it also lends greater weight to the *qissa*: it ceases to be just any story and becomes “the most beautiful of stories.” At the same time, this emphasis turns the *qissa* back toward the kind of scriptural Islam that the classical love *qissas* largely eschew: where the classical *qissas* treat love as an end in itself or as a stage on a Sufi *tariqa* of *pir*-centred devotion, the textual concerns of *Bahr ul-'ishq* turn it toward the *kalima* on the one hand and the *sharia* on the other. As much as the prestige of the scriptures sanctions Lali's *qissa*, the poem repays the compliment by privileging scripture in particular and writing in general.

The poem's intimate relationship with the Quran and its privileging of the *kalima* and the Quran as agents in the creation of the universe create a poetic universe in which both *kalima* and Quran are immanent in the poetic universe of the poem. Indeed, the *kalima* in particular becomes a kind of “source-code” for the entire universe, the hidden *haqiqi* meaning behind the *majazi* world. When combined with the poem's genesis in Quranic narrative, this hermeneutic encourages the supposition that the only way to read the (poetic) universe is as a homology of *haqiqi* meanings. As a result, the narrative of the *qissa* comes to resemble an allegory in which the progress of the characters mirrors the progress of the reader towards heaven or hell; in fact, the poet's liberal use of direct analogies between the action of the poem



and Islamic soteriology means that the poem comes to contain a second narrative which charts the believer's progress toward paradise. Initially analogous to a commentary or gloss on the action of the *qissa*, this second narrative eventually superimposes itself on the narrative itself, rewriting the *qissa* and predetermining its meaning.

One of the major hermeneutic shifts which this second narrative prompts is a reinterpretation of the idea of love itself. Like many of the classical love *qissas*, the poem adduces love as the source of the both the created universe and the poem itself. Unlike most of the classical *qissas*, though, the poem locates this love firmly in the territory of devotion: the love that inspires the creation of the poem, for example, is a love for the Quran. Placed in this fundamentally reinterpetative context, the discourse of the courtly love tradition is also reconstituted: not only does the story of Zulaikha's love for Yusuf become a narrative within a narrative that illustrates the desirability of *haqiqi* over *majazi* love, but the whole discourse of courtly love is shifted from the realm of romantic love to that of familial affection. In doing so, the poem subverts one of the central poetics of the entire classical *qissa* tradition, calling the whole tradition into question in the process. Despite its lack of poetic refinement, then, Siddiq Lali's *Bahr ul-'ishq* constitutes one of the earliest and most complete questionings of the Punjabi classical *qissa* tradition. Indeed, its refusal to conform to the language and style of the classical *qissas* may be one of the markers of its rejection of that tradition.

## CHAPTER SIX

### “A WONDROUS STORY OF SPRING”: VARIS SHAH’S *HĪR*

Varis Shah is the lord of poetry: who can criticise him?  
I am not worthy enough to point a finger at his verses.  
If anyone understands the *Chūhṛeṭī* he wrote completely  
It has fragrance in its every word, just like a basket of flowers. (Mian  
Muhammad Bakhsh)

Varis Shah is the lord of poetry and never stumbled or got stuck—  
Like an unroughened millstone, he crushed both big and small.  
A man filled with compassion and feeling, he everywhere expressed  
himself indirectly:  
But even the wise don’t understand what he described and thought.  
(Ahmad Yar)<sup>1</sup>

Not only is Varis Shah’s *Hīr*<sup>2</sup> the most famous treatment of the legend in the Punjabi tradition, but it is also the best well-known and most popular pre-modern literary text in Indian and Pakistani Punjab. As against most other pre-modern texts, whose reputation is confined to literary or academic circles, Varis’s poem enjoys a wide reputation in the Punjabi culture as a whole; indeed, it is said that there exist individuals who have memorised the entire text, and reciters of the poem are often invited to Punjabi villages to perform.<sup>3</sup> Some indication of the widespread reputation of the text can be gained from an anecdote related by an Indian Punjabi critic which purports to record a “Partition miracle” involving Varis Shah. In a valedictory article significantly titled “Varis Shah—A folk poet”, Sūbā Singh narrates that in March of 1947 he was travelling in a train that stopped at ‘Ārifwālā station (near Lahore), where a mob of enraged Muslims led by slogan-shouting

<sup>1</sup> Mian Muhammad Bakhsh, *Saif ul-mulūk* 493; Ahmad Yar, *Ahisanul-qasis* 271.

<sup>2</sup> Citations from the poem generally follow the text in Jit Singh Sital, ed., *Hīr Vāris* (Patiala: PEPSU Book Depot, n.d.) with occasional additions and corrections from Muhammad Sharif Sābar, ed., *Hīr Vāris Shāh* (Lahore: Varis Shah Memorial Trust, 1986) and ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, ed., *Hīr Sayyid Vāris Shāh* (Lahore: Panjābī Adabī Academy, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Ziyā Muhammad, *Yādgār-i Vāris* (Lahore: Qaumī Kutubkhānā, 1935): 2. Another contemporary source adds that the poem is traditionally recited in the town of Qabūlā, the site of Adli’s fort, and that the poem is sung through from beginning to end at the annual

*maulvīs* swarmed the platform with the intention of attacking the train. Suddenly they caught sight of an intoxicated Sardārjī hanging out of one of the carriages singing verses from Varis Shah's *Hīr*. Hearing him sing the verses (supposedly those criticising the way the corrupt *mulla* who initially refuses Ranjha the hospitality of the mosque on his first night away from Takht Hazara ignores his Islamic duty of hospitality), the mob stopped and refused to follow their leaders. The train left the station unscathed. Suba Singh remarks, "His eyes half-closed, the opium-addict sang away, and hatred turned into fellow-feeling. Varis Shah's words were working a miracle; the soul of the Punjab was speaking through Varis Shah's soul."<sup>4</sup> True or not, this story encapsulates one of the majority views about Varis Shah's poem: that it expresses, manifests and symbolises through its popularity and its contents an ideal Punjabi cultural unity that is lost to modern Punjab.

Such valedictory attitudes to the text are extremely common in Punjabi literary criticism, and indeed most "criticism" of the poem consists entirely of valediction and praise: one critic has compared Varis to Shakespeare and Kālīdāsa.<sup>5</sup> Another critic has classified the general run of responses to the poem as follows: some consider it a "tragic romance," others a "mystical allegory," a select few "an exercise in conventional morality," and yet others as "a work of vast and varied potentialities, containing high romance and deep pathos, with a spattering of moral aphorisms and spiritual allegory."<sup>6</sup> A rather more combative predecessor divided reactions to the text in a strikingly different manner:

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*melā* held at Varis's tomb in Jandiala Sher Khan, see Mazhar ul-Islām, *Lok Panjāb* (Islamabad: Lok Virsā kā Qaumī Idārā, 1978): 96, 140.

<sup>4</sup> Sūbā Singh, "Vāras Shāh-Lok-kavi," *Panjābī duniā* 5:2-3(Feb.-March 1954): 203-10.

<sup>5</sup> Bikram Singh Ghumman, *Panjābī sāhitt* (Ludhiana: Punjabi Writers' Cooperative Society Limited, 1989): 87. Two of the many other examples of this type of criticism by praise are Shahbāz Malik, "Vāris Shāh: Ikk āfāqī shā'ir" in his *Nitāre: khoj te parkh* (Lahore: Taj Book Depot, 1971): 167-72 and Mohan Singh, "Vāris Shāh dī *Hīr* dīā shāirānā khūbiā" in *Varis Shāh: Jīvan te rachmā* 73-7.

<sup>6</sup> Najm Hosain Syed, *Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry* (Lahore: Majlis Shah Hussain, 1968): 3.

There is a great deal of difference with regard to *Hīr Vāris Shāh*. One group (religious leaders) has denigrated it as infidelity by saying that it is against the *sharia* and a corrupter of morals; the other (ignorant Sufis) have seen it as the true *sharia*, essence of wisdom and route to mystical knowledge and raised it to the zenith of spirituality.<sup>7</sup>

This particular writer's approach to the poem, a common one in a critical climate of unstinted praise, is to read it unironically as a part of his own moral program: he asserts that the poem is intended to be a document of social reform that warns against the dangers of letting children run wild and disobeying the *sharia* at the same time as it criticises the failings of the *ulama* and other religious figures.<sup>8</sup> Such readings of the text, however, find the numerous examples of suggestive language and "obscenity" in the text extremely problematic: indeed, many scholarly editions purge these passages and insert lines of dots instead.<sup>9</sup> A typical example of the prevailing critical opinion toward "obscenity" is provided by the words of Gurditt Singh 'Premi':

Firstly, how can it be said with certainty that the objectionable verses are those of Varis Shah and have not been added by another poet. I believe that all these lines are additions by

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<sup>7</sup> Ziya Muhammad, op.cit. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 35-6.

<sup>9</sup> Even Sabar's exemplary edition of the text displays an occasional tendency to exclude or alter certain of the most sexually suggestive verses without comment, particularly those referring to sodomy. For example he excludes from his verse 385 the *takhallus* line *Vāris ākhanī hā ṭala jāha sāthō gāḍū sākha ladho hindū vāhiā nū* (Abdul Aziz 385; the first half also as Sital 377), in which Sahti curses the *jogi* as a sodomite (*gāḍū*). He also alters the reading of Kaido's curse to the village council *akkhī vekha ke phera je kare ṭālā tado jāṇasā parhe de buṇḍiā dī* (149)—"If it continues to dither even after it sees [the truth] with its own eyes, I'll fuck the assembly up the ass"—to the nonsensical "*parhe do buṇḍiā dī*" (verse 153), in which he glosses *do buṇḍe* as "hypocrites" (536).

someone else; they are not the work of a great Sufi poet like Varis Shah.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, a criticism which aims to praise cannot countenance anything in the poem that does not tally with a particular critic's idea of conventional morality.

A corollary to these types of narrow readings of the poem is the widespread tendency to read *Hīr* literally and take all of its statements as truth. One writer has assumed from the opening lines of the poem that "much of Varis's own life is hidden in the picture he has drawn of Dhido's early life," including that he must have left home at an early age because his brothers and sisters-in-law were against him; he also assumes that Varis's mention of the town of Pakpattan in his opening praises of Baba Farid must mean that he spent time there. Equally improbably, he claims that all the proverbs in the poem express Varis's "true character."<sup>11</sup> Another writer takes the poet's laments about his old age and regrets about the indulgences of his youth as evidence that Varis was in fact in his old age when he wrote the poem.<sup>12</sup> Yet another critic ignores even the most basic evidence of literary convention and asserts that we should accept as reality the poet's statement that he composed the *qissa* at the request of his friends!<sup>13</sup>

As the two nineteenth-century quotations which head the chapter indicate there has always been room for difference of opinion with regard to Varis Shah's poetry. Ahmad Yar's criticism that Varis ignores the rules of poetry and word-construction in order to get his point across has often been echoed in modern Punjabi criticism, and the Partition of 1947 has contributed to a growing critical opinion in Indian Punjab (where Urdu and Persian are no

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<sup>10</sup> Op.cit. 124-5. Ghumman (op.cit, 97) claims that the verses were added by publishers to increase sales.

<sup>11</sup> Gurditt Singh 'Premī', *Vāris Shāh: Ikk parichay* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1984): 11, 8, 10-11; 12-15.

<sup>12</sup> Jit Singh Sital, "Vāris dā jīvan us dī rachnā de ādhār te" in Jit Singh Sital, ed., *Vāris Shāh: Jīvan te rachnā* (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1970): 32-3.

longer taught and words ultimately descended from Persian are being replaced by Sanskrit loan-words) which claims that Varis's language is overly Persianised. One might at this stage note that on a global level, Persianate vocabulary forms a mere 11% of Varis's text, and many of the examples of Persian loans are concentrated in the speeches of Islamic religious figures, in expressions of Islamic themes, and in topoi of Persian poetry like the invocatory verses at the beginning of the poem and the *sarapa* description of Hir. Such words are also used for abstract concepts (such as political terminology) and certain aspects of daily life for which equivalent Punjabi words seemed not to exist: "It is therefore permissible to consider [such words] to be an integral part of the language."<sup>14</sup> One can, therefore, see the Indian Punjabi tendency to criticise this aspect of Varis's language as the result of a conception of Punjabi identity that attempts to exclude its Islamic elements: indeed, one critic comments about his language that "in his *qissa* 'Sayyid-ness' dominates 'Indianness' (*Bhāratpuṇā*)."<sup>15</sup> Influenced by overly literal methods of reading the text, other critics have enumerated instances of "errors" in the text without attempting to see those "errors" as part of the discourse of the text as a whole.<sup>16</sup>

Another aspect of the poem which has been rather heavily criticised is Varis's insertion of lengthy lists of realia at various points in the poem. While these lists have often been used by modern-day critics to characterise the material and cultural life of eighteenth-century Punjab, very little attention has been paid to their literary function; instead, they have been condemned as superfluous and tedious additions to the text. One critic has remarked: "... the occasional unnecessary lists in the love story of Hir and Ranjha become a cause of boredom for the discerning reader and the flow of the story is

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<sup>13</sup> Harnām Singh 'Shān', "Kavi Vāras Shāh" *Panjābī Duniā* 1:3-4(May-June 1951): 33.

<sup>14</sup> Matringe, *Hir Vāriṣ Śāh* 65-6; 65.

<sup>15</sup> Ghumman, *op.cit.* 89.

impeded by the minuteness of the description."<sup>17</sup> In fact, it seems clear that the lists in the *qissa* serve a number of literary functions, the most major of which is to mark off major transitions in the narrative. In the first part of the poem, such lists and the transitions that they herald are always preceded by Ranjha playing on his *vanjhli*: the lengthy accounting of the books read in the village *masjid* that marks Ranjha's entry into the life of a vagabond (33), the *sarapa* description of Hir that announces her entry into the poem (55), the catalogue of relics given to Ranjha by the Panj Pirs that marks both the beginning of his life as a cowherd and the entry of Kaido into the narrative (80), the list of *ragas* Ranjha plays for the Panj Pirs that introduces their boon to Ranjha (116), and the list of the *sahelis'* sports with Ranjha that precedes Kaido's final and most decisive complaint to Malki (121). Similarly, the scene is set for Hir's wedding by a lengthy catalogue of the foodstuffs prepared, dowry goods, performers and sundry preparations that is punctuated by a sermon on the connection between power and marriage (184-98) and for Ranjha's entry into Rangpur by a list of the types of women in the *trinjhan* (317). The lengthy confrontation with Sahti is itself heralded by a short list of the farm implements in her parents' courtyard (328) and the debate about Hir's health by a list of medical texts (364) and an accounting of various black magic techniques (367). We shall see that such narrative marking is not the only function of the numerous lists in the poem; suffice it to say here that none of them can be shown to be the superfluous accretion that some Punjabi critics make them out to be.

Despite Varis Shah's celebrity, very little is known about his life. The evidence of the poem would seem to indicate that he was a Sayyid from the village of Jandiala Sher Khan (district Shekhupura) who studied with

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<sup>16</sup> See for example Jogindar Singh, "Hir Vāris de kāvi-dosh" in *Vāris Shāh: Jīvan te rachnā* 235-47.

<sup>17</sup> Ghumman, op.cit. 91.

Makhdum Qasuri in the city of Qasur for a period of time.<sup>18</sup> Punjabi popular legend claims that he fell in love with a woman named Bhagbhari but was driven away from her village and decided to express his pain at his lost love by writing the *qissa*. The poem itself was written in the village mosque of Malka Hans in the year 1180 AH (1766-7). Although there seems to be general critical agreement that *Hīr* is Varis's only extant work, very little work has actually been done to determine whether or not there are any other texts that can be securely attributed to him: one reason why seems to be the general reluctance to "dilute" Varis's status as the author of Punjabi literature's great masterpiece by "reducing" him to the status of an "ordinary" poet. As the quotation from Mian Muhammad Bakhsh would seem to indicate, though, by the nineteenth century a relatively well-known *Chūhṛṛṭṛnāmā* was attributed to Varis. A number of other texts have been loosely attributed to Varis Shah, some by bazaar publishers who have published poems under Varis's name and others by the presence of manuscripts bearing the *takhallus* 'Varis' or 'Varis Shah' but containing no other information about the author.<sup>19</sup> At present, this corpus of uncertainly attributed texts seems to number eight in total: the *Chūhṛṛṭṛnāmā*, a *Sīharfī Sassī Punnū*, a *Sīharfī Lāhaur*, a *Mi'rājnāmā*,

<sup>18</sup> Suggested dates of birth for Varis range from 1720 to 1738, and suggested dates of death range from 1784-1808. Although no solid information on the poet's religious affiliation is available, the descendants of his brothers living in Jandiala Sher Khan are Shia. See Sibte ul-Hasan Zaigham, "Sayyad Vāris Shāh dī jīvan kathā." *Khoj Darpan* 3:2(July 1976): 32-46.

<sup>19</sup> One might note in passing a rather extreme nineteenth-century example of misattribution by linking any poem with the *takhallus* "Varis" under the rubric of Varis Shah. Writing in 1849, the chronicler Ganesh Das Badhera confuses a poet named Varis from Rasulnagar (renamed Rāmnagar by Mahā Singh) with Varis Shah and writes about the town "The Panjabi poet Wāris Shah belonged to this place. His *sīharfīs* are on the lips of the people. The story of Hīr and Rānjhā is also one of his compositions." J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga, eds. and trans., *Early Nineteenth-Century Panjab from Ganesh Das's Chār Bāgh-i-Panjāb* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1975): 107. Catalogues of Pakistani manuscript collections list texts of three works (*Abyāt*, *Sīharfī* and *Vahdat nama*) by Varis 'Rasūlnagarī' and one (*Marākā o Bago*) by Varis Tāraṭ of Bīrīvālā (Gujranwala), see Rana, "Kitābkhānā Iqbāl Salāh ud-Dīn" 163, 180, 190, 199; Malik, "Mutafarriq kutub khāniā vich" 264; Sayyid Arif Naushahi, "Kitāb khānā Naushāhiyā (Sāhn Pāl, Gujrat) de Panjābī makhtūte" *Khoj* 8-9(1982): 127-8.



a *Tarjumā Qasīdā burdā sharīf*, a *Nasīhatnāmā*, an *Ushṭarnāmā* and an *‘Ibratnāmā*.<sup>20</sup>

The only writer to have considered these texts in any detail seems to be Sibṭ ul-Hasan Zaigham, who has attributed the two *siharfis* and the *‘Ibratnāmā* to Varis Shah and the *Chūhṛeṭṛīnāmā* to a poet he identifies as “Miā Vāras Tārar of Rasūlnagar”; he is of the opinion that no verdict can yet be made with certainty on the other four works.<sup>21</sup> In another article, he cites without comment verses from a manuscript copy of the *Tarjumā qasīdā burdā sharīf* that identify the writer as a Sayyid named Varis from Jaṇḍālā (presumably Jandiala) and date the composition of the text to 1152 AH/1739.<sup>22</sup> A recent series of catalogues of Persian-script Punjabi manuscripts in a number of Pakistani public and private collections lists two manuscripts of the *Chūhṛeṭṛīnāmā* (one dated 1890), one of the *Sīharfī Sassī Punnū* (also dated 1890), one of the *‘Ibratnāmā* (dated 1920), two of the *Mi’rājnāmā* (one dated 1920), two of the *Tarjumā qasīdā burdā sharīf* (one dated 1872-3 and the other 1891-2), one of the *Nūrnāmā* (dated 1824-5), one of the *Qasīdā na’tiyā* (dated 1870-1 CE), and four undated manuscripts of the *Munājāt*.<sup>23</sup> Such a large corpus of manuscript texts, most completely unremarked in the critical literature, highlights the need for more detailed work to establish the actual extent of Varis Shah’s *oeuvre*.

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<sup>20</sup> The British Museum has recently acquired a manuscript (BM Ms. Or. 13728) containing three Punjabi poems in praise of Abdul Qadir Jilani, one by Muqbil, one by Niyāz ‘Alī and one by a poet using the *takhallus* ‘Vāris’. Presumably copied in the nineteenth century, the manuscript is not dated, and there is nothing in the poem that connects it explicitly with Varis Shah of Jandiala Sher Khan.

<sup>21</sup> “Vāris Shāh dī rachnā” *Khoj Darpan* 6:1 (Jan. 1979): 113-22, particularly 118-9. His rather shaky criterion for authenticity seems to be that if a poem uses the *takhallus* ‘Varis Shah’ rather than merely ‘Varis’ and exists in a manuscript from before the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the text must be the work of Varis Shah; if the work uses the *takhallus* Varis Shah but no manuscript is extant, there are sufficient grounds to view the attribution as probable but requiring further evidence.

<sup>22</sup> “Sayyad Vāris Shāh dī jīvan kathā” 38. The author has not, however, identified the source of the manuscript he quotes.

<sup>23</sup> Tāib, “Kutub *khānā* Dākṭar Vahīd Quraishī” 205-6; Rizvi, “Panjāb Yūniversitī Lāibrerī” 19; Rahmani, “Ajāib Ghar (Lahaur)” 216, 218; Rana, “Kitāb *khānā* Iqbāl Salāh ud-Dīn (Okārā)” 187; Ahmad Husain Quraishi, “Kutub *khānā* ul-Qurashīyā” 77, 98, 101, 105-6, 110-11.

If the full repertoire of Varis's writings is not yet known, the text of his *Hīr* is equally problematic, particularly because the text has been constantly growing since its composition in 1766-7. For example, the earliest known manuscript of the text is dated 1821 and contains 635 stanzas; another manuscript dated 1861 contains 110 more stanzas (for a total of 745), while a copy of the first text dated 1919 VS (1862-3) contains 960 stanzas.<sup>24</sup> The problem of textual expansion is compounded by the fact that most other manuscripts of the poem seem to be undated, including a manuscript containing just 631 stanzas and a manuscript associated with the descendants of Varis Shah used as the basis of the most recent Pakistani edition.<sup>25</sup> Shamsheer Singh 'Ashok' has enumerated twelve manuscripts in Indian collections, including five dated texts in Gurmukhi script (dated 1821, 1827, 1834, 1853 and 1872) and two in Persian script (one of which is dated 1834). He notes that while the 1821 manuscript contains 635 stanzas, the 1827 manuscript contains only 555 stanzas and the 1872 text 627 stanzas.<sup>26</sup> Abdul Aziz's 1960 edition utilises 21 manuscripts, only eight of which are dated. The earliest manuscript is dated 1833, although the author provisionally dates a manuscript which he acquired from the village of Malka Hans (where the *qissa* was written) to the period 1800-1820. One other manuscript is dated 1840, although most of the others seem to date from the period after 1850.<sup>27</sup> There also exist at least eight Persian-script manuscripts (three of which are complete) in public and private collections which have not been used by any

<sup>24</sup> 'Ashok'. *Panjābī hatth-likhtā* 1:454-5 and 2:331-2. Compare his "*Hīr Vāris dā sampādan*" 415-6, where he claims that the third manuscript is undated and contains 961 rather than 960 stanzas.

<sup>25</sup> Sabar, op.cit. *shīn, te*. All of the other manuscripts consulted for the edition are those used by Abdul Aziz, with the exception of an undated text from the collection of the late Miā Anvar 'Alī that contains 631 stanzas (ibid. *te*).

<sup>26</sup> "*Hīr Vāris dā sampādan te kalmī nuskhe*" in Jit Singh Sital, ed., *Vāris Shāh jīvan te rachnā* (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1970): 415-6 and *Panjābī hatth-likhtā* 1:454-7, 462 and 2:331-3. He notes further that the 1827 manuscript has "a great many differences of readings and a different order" (ibid. 1:457).

editor: one is dated 1237 AH (1822-3), while two others are dated 1273 AH (1856-7) and 1280 AH (1863-4).<sup>28</sup>

Despite the problems posed by the manuscript tradition of *Hīr*, it would be no exaggeration to claim that Varis Shah's poem has remained in print in a number of editions for as long as the printing press has been in the Punjab. Although most scholars agree that the first printed edition was produced in Lahore in Persian script in 1865, Mohan Singh 'Divana' claims that the first edition was produced in Amritsar in Persian script in 1851. An 1865 edition of the poem contains 749 stanzas, an increase of 114 stanzas over the 1821 manuscript.<sup>29</sup> The first "interpolated" text with verses added by the famous Lahore poet Hidayatullah was published in Lahore in 1885; the most famous interpolated edition, printed in Lahore in 1910, contains an additional 1192 verses by the poet Piranditta Tragar. Two later less famous interpolated texts are the 1917 edition—entitled "The big, real and perfect *Hīr Vāris Shāh*"—containing 794 stanzas added by Miā Muhammad Dīn 'Sokhtā' and an undated edition containing 750 stanzas composed by Maulvī Mahbūb 'Ālam 'Siprānvī', who also "corrected" a large number of Varis's own verses.<sup>30</sup> So enduringly popular have been these interpolated versions of the poem (some of which are still available today) that Mohan Singh's 1947 edition of the poem, based largely on manuscript texts, was called "the destructive edition of *Hīr Vāris*" (*Hīr Vāris kā satyānāshī aidīshan*) by a Lahore daily when it appeared—even though most critics saw it as the first learned attempt to approach an edition of Varis Shah's text.<sup>31</sup> Most scholarly editions of the

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<sup>27</sup> Op.cit. *be-yah*. The other dated manuscripts are: three from 1851, one from 1864, one from 1887 and one from 1860. Other Pakistani scholars have dated the Malka Hans manuscript to the period 1818-1840 (Sabar, op.cit. *fe*).

<sup>28</sup> Rizvi, "Panjāb Yūniversitī Lāibrerī" 32; Sayyid Arif Naushahi, "Kitābkhānā-i Ganj Baḥsh (Rāvalpīṇḍī)" 61; Mir, "Mere zātī kutubkhāne vich" 158; Muhammad 'Azīm Bhaṭṭī, "Kitāb khānā 'Azīm Bhaṭṭī (Shīhnā Khurd zilā Aṭak) de Panjābī qalmī nuskhē" *Khoj* 8-9(1982): 239; Malik, "Mutafarriq kutub khāniā vich" 265-6.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. *ye-kāf*.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. *kāf-lām*.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. *fe*.

poem are plagued by a number of problems which render their texts uncertain to say the least: the lack of early manuscripts; problems interpreting the orthography of early manuscripts, particularly those in Persian script; scribal errors, omissions and alterations; the widely varying number of verses in manuscripts of the poem; and the fact that popular publishers have tried to print the longest texts they could and have employed poets to add verses to Varis's text.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the unfamiliarity of Indian Punjabi editors with the elements of Islamic culture has meant that many errors have crept into their editions of the poem.

### **Narrative Compression in the *Qissa*:**

As a narrative of the Hir story, Varis's *qissa* is known largely for its expansion of certain episodes, most notably Ranjha's confrontations with the *mulla*, Luddan, Balnath and Sahti. What has been less frequently noted is the poem's tendency to compress and even elide certain other events, particularly those that relate directly to the affair between Hir and Ranjha: one critic simply comments that the poet "has centred his text around the most significant moments of the legend, omitting all that was not relevant to his purpose."<sup>33</sup> As in Ahmad's earlier version of the legend, such narrative compression seems to owe at least something to an attempt to moderate the sexual transgressiveness of the poem: indeed, many of the "narrative gaps" in the two poems are the same. While it is difficult to postulate a direct influence from Ahmad's seemingly little-known text—especially in the absence of detailed work on the Persian treatments of the legend extant in eighteenth-century Punjab that may have influenced Varis's text—there are some indications that this may in fact be the case. Not only does Varis gloss over

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. *shīn*. Sabar enumerates and evaluates in detail a total of twelve scholarly editions of the poem, three published before the Partition, four in Pakistan and five in India (ibid. *shīn-shīn*).

<sup>33</sup> Matringe, *op.cit.* 29.

many of the same portions of the narrative as Ahmad does, but he also includes in his poem Ahmad's episode of Ranjha the *jogi's* encounter with the shepherd outside Rangpur Khera: he even has the shepherd renarrate the *qissa* to Ranjha just as Ahmad's shepherd does. More importantly, Varis's poem shares with Ahmad's the recurring image of the hunting hawk (*baz*)—so much so that the second quarter of the following line (describing how Ranjha and Sahti fool the Kheras into handing Hir over to him) mirrors a line from Ahmad's poem:

*vekho 'aqla sha'ūra jo māriā ne, tāmā bāza de hattha pharāvāṇe nī.*

See how they ignored common sense to hand the prey over to  
the hawk! (562)

While such resemblances cannot in themselves be taken as evidence of direct influence, they do at least point to significant areas of similarity in the two poems.

As in Ahmad's poem, the actual first meeting between Hir and Ranjha is almost telescopic in its brevity, moderated in Varis's poem by the introduction of a lengthy *sarapa* description of Hir. Although as sudden as the transformation of the Hir of Ahmad's *qissa*, the conversion of the Varis's Hir from violent attacker to star-struck lover (analysed in further detail below) is rendered more dramatic by the introduction of the image of Hir as a fairy and is given greater depth by a deftly adduced parallel to the story of Yusuf and Zulaikha. Despite the eleven stanzas of conversation between Hir and Ranjha, though, the actual decision to make Ranjha Chuchak's cowherd is announced with a remarkable compression reminiscent of Ahmad's poem:

[Hir said,] "I sacrifice myself to the road you came on: tell me,  
friend, where have you come from?

Some haughty woman must have thrown you out of your  
home, which is why you wander about.

Who is the lucky one whom you regret having left behind?

What is my lord's caste and dwelling-place, and what does he  
call himself?

I sacrifice myself to you: herd my father's cows." (63)

Rather than depict the steps which must have been necessary to arrive at this momentous decision which allows the lovers to stay together—even Muqbil has Hir ask Ranjha what profession he knows before volunteering him as her father's cowherd—the poet prefers to lavish attention on the dynamics of the love affair itself: Ranjha asks Hir to pledge her love to him, and she responds with streams of vows and protestations that stress her submissive devotion to him. At the same time, the suddenness of Ranjha's transformation and consequent loss of status seems to stress the inevitability of such sacrifices in the cause of love.

An even more striking example of narrative compression occurs a few stanzas later when Kaido manages to beg from Ranjha the *churi* that Hir has made for his midday meal. Unlike in Muqbil's poem, where it is made clear that Kaido comes to Ranjha in the guise of a *faqir* and the affair between the two lovers is described in some detail, Varis has everything happen in the space of a mere two stanzas:

Hir took the midday meal of sugar, rice pudding and butter and  
rushed to Mian Ranjha's side.

"I've tired myself out searching the whole meadow for you,"  
she explained.

Kaido was sniffing around for some traces and caught a whiff of  
the the scent of *churi* from the *bela*:

Varis Shah, see how the lame one rouses the quarrels of Satan!

When Hir had gone to the river to get water, Kaido showed his  
face.

"I'm sore with hunger," he said, begging in the name of God.

Ranjha asked Hir, "Who was that lame man, Hir? What sort of *faqir* and from where?"

Varis Shah, it was like rubbing salt on an open wound. (81-2)

The enigmatic brevity of the narrative—we do not find out much about Kaido until later in the poem—not only emphasises the ferocity with which Hir beats her uncle but also diverts narrative attention away from any description of the actual affair between Hir and Ranjha. Indeed, most of the portion of the poem devoted to Ranjha's time in Jhang Sial concentrates on the intrigues of Kaido, the threats of Chuchak and Malki, and the kindly interventions of the Panj Pirs—to the almost complete exclusion of the meetings between Hir and Ranjha. Virtually the only clue the audience gets of what happens in the *bela* comes from a long stanza which lists the occupations of Hir's girlfriends during those lazy afternoons at the house of Mitthi the barber's wife:

Ranjha would come in the afternoon, as would Hir:

Ranjha would settle his buffalo down, and Hir would bring her girlfriends.

He would play on his flute, and she would sing with her friends.

One would caress Ranjha's hair, and another would come and embrace him.

One would cling to his waist like a water-bag, and another would touch her face to his . . . . (121)

The narrative purpose of such a lengthy, digressive list (as indeed of the poet's refusal to elaborate on the love affair at all) is made clear by what precedes it: the stanza immediately before the list describes how Mitthi would prepare a bed for the two lovers, who would stay until the last quarter of the night "constantly enjoying themselves while the cows stood and grazed under the protection of God" (120).

Another motivation seems to lie behind the complete lack of narrative preparation for Mitthi bringing Ranjha to Hir's *doli* as he herds the cows that

comprise her dowry to Rangpur Khera. Not only is it not explained why the marriage party has stopped on the way to Rangpur (other versions of the legend explain that the Kheras have stopped to hunt deer), but there is not even any explanation of how Ranjha got to meet Hir at all. Instead, a description of how Ranjha is appointed to herd the cows is followed directly by eight stanzas of dialogue in which Ranjha accuses Hir of being fickle and the Sials of being faithless and dishonourable:

Ranjha said, "Damn the Sials! Hir too has become faithless.

Chuchak the Sial dishonoured himself when he presented his  
case to the village assembly.

They sell their daughters and go back on their word . . . ." (218)

The narrative ellipsis that precedes this complaint heightens the sense of Ranjha's grievance simply because it is without context: unlike in other versions, we do not see Ranjha beg Mitthi to arrange for him to see Hir once again. As a result, Ranjha's apparent alienation from Hir has a stronger impact than in the other poems, and Ranjha seems more a puppet of narrative events than in those other *qissas*.

#### The Role of the Narrator in the *Qissa*:

Unlike in Muqbil's *Qissā Hīr Rānjhā*, the figure of the narrator of Varis's *qissa* neither becomes a character in the poem nor has <sup>an</sup> full-fledged poetic ~~been~~ articulated around his persona. Literal-minded critics have nonetheless often taken the embryonic persona of the narrator (and in particular the lines in which the narrator is associated with one of the characters in the poem) as a reflection on the personality of Varis Shah the poet: as we have already seen, such a reading leads to conjecture on how much of Ranjha's biography is identical to that of Varis and other such improbable conclusions. Such misreadings of the lines bearing the poet's *takhallus* have led critics to claim that through the narrator Varis the *qissa* poet presents himself "at one and



the same time as a saint and as a man still attached to the pleasures of the world.”<sup>34</sup> It is clear, however, that many of the lines which are often taken to be direct statements on Varis’s personality in fact serve other functions in the poem: for example the very famous statement

*eha Qurāna majīda de mā’ine jihāre shi’ra Mīē Vāris Shāh de nī.*

The verses of Varis Shah are the meaning of the glorious Quran.

(211)

is in actual fact Hir’s statement about the value of the speech she makes to the *qazi* at her marriage. Indeed, the poet’s *takhallus* is put into Hir’s mouth twice more in the poem (86, 522), as is done on different occasions with Luddan (56), Sahti (472, 489) and Ranjha.<sup>35</sup> The narrator even uses the *takhallus* to identify Saida when the *sihrā* is placed on his head at the time of his marriage to Hir (196). Indeed, the most common association by far of the *takhallus* with any character in the poem is with Ranjha, whether by the narrator—in the line “He put his flute under his arm and left: Varis Shah forgot his homeland” (27), for example—or by another character, such in as Saida’s father’s supplication to the *jogi* in the Kala Bagh “Varis Shah should forgive our sins and be kind to such sinners” (554). As such, this usage not only outnumbers but is more flexible than that of the *takhallus* with other characters, which is most often restricted to a few occasions upon which they refer to themselves as “Varis Shah”.

The narrator of the poem makes very few appearances in the *qissa* under the rubric of the poet’s *takhallus*; when he does, it is either as a paradigm of suffering or as a *pir*. Perhaps the only unequivocal example of the first phenomenon is the moment when Ranjha leaves Takht Hazara: “Taking his shoes in his hand and wrapping a blanket around himself, Ranjha left like Varis Shah” (25). On the other hand, the narrator presents himself as a *pir* or religious figure more than once: Chuchak quotes an Arabic phrase to

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<sup>34</sup> Matringe, *op.cit.* 27.

Ranjha, saying that “Varis Shah spoke this in the beginning” (96); the Kheras distribute sweets in the name of Varis Shah when they hear the news of Saida’s engagement to Hir (173); and the guests at the wedding offer *churma* to Varis Shah before distributing it at the festivities (195). These equations segue ironically into the narrative persona that emerges at the very end of the poem, with Varis Shah protesting his religious and poetic modesty at the same time as he rather incongruously claims to be the first to have written the story of Hir (605) and advertises himself by repeating his *takhallus* four times in four lines (608). The Varis Shah of the poem’s ending is both a traditional protestation of modesty (608) and an expression of devotion—“Varis Shah desired a vision just as Hir desired her lover” (609). Both are subverted by the boasts they find themselves juxtaposed to.

#### The Critique of Religion in Varis’s *Hir*:

If texts like Muqbil’s *Qissā Hir Rānjhā* are notable for their critique of the nexus between religion (particularly the *sharia*) and social power, Varis’s text distinguishes itself primarily for its trenchant attack on the hypocrisy of religious figures. So pervasive is the anti-clerical rhetoric of the poem that Sahti includes in her abuses of the *jogi* who begs at her door the seemingly commonplace curse, “He ‘does’ women like a rascal . . . he is a rogue from the mosque” (*ustādyā masīt dā ī*–338).<sup>35</sup> The most sustained example of this type of discourse in the poem is of course the famous scene of Ranjha’s encounter with the hostile *mulla*—referred to by the narrator as “a bundle of quarrels” (32)—of the village mosque he decides to stay in on his first night away from Takht Hazara. The scene is preceded by a lengthy list of the books being studied by the students in the school attached to the mosque (quoted in

<sup>35</sup> 276, 288, 343, 372, 399, 423, 424, 463, 492, 502, 590.

<sup>36</sup> One might compare the comment of the prominent Sufi Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz Dihlavī (died 1823) that pederasty was so commonly associated with eighteenth-century Sufi *shaikhs* and

Chapter One) and by a eulogistic description of the mosque itself which claims that

The mosque was like the Kaaba and had been built on its  
pattern

It was like a sister of al-Aqsā . . . (33)

This image of the ideal is quickly undercut by the *mulla's* dismissive attitude to Ranjha, who he claims has violated the *sharia* by keeping his hair long. Ranjha replies with invective that highlights both his own directness and the *mulla's* hypocrisy:

The beard of a *shaikh* and the actions of Satan: just look at the  
way you fuck travellers.

You take out the Quran and sit on the pulpit (*mimbar*): you've  
spread the nets of falsehood (*makar*).

Tell me about "pure" and "dirty" so I can know what the *sharia*  
says!

You're always entering "the impure place": be thankful that  
God isn't watching!

You screw mules, sheep and monkeys and don't forego either  
married or unmarried women.

Varis Shah, *mullas* "do it" in their meditation chambers and put  
yokes around the necks of the peasants. (36)

The *mulla* responds not by answering Ranjha's allegations but instead by  
emphasising the fact that Ranjha's long hair is against the *sharia*: "Those who  
abandon prayer keep long hair; destroy those who keep their hair long!" (37).

He calls such individuals "enemies of God", claiming that they are dogs that  
should be whipped (37, linking them with *faqirs* and, ultimately, with the  
figure of the martyred Mansur that so haunts South Asian Islamic discourse:  
"Those who don't know jurisprudence (*fiqh*) should be crucified" (37). Ranjha

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their *khānqāhs* that the new term '*illat-i mashāikh*' (the *shaikhs'* vice) was coined to describe it

responds in the tradition of the *jogi/faqir* he is soon to become, posing a riddle to the self-righteous *mulla*:

Tell me what *namāz* is for? What is it made of?

How many ears and noses does it have? Who has it exasperated  
since the beginning of Creation?

How tall is it? How wide? How old is it? What is it made of?

Varis, how many pegs has it been tied to?<sup>37</sup> (38)

Ignoring Ranjha's queries once again, the *mulla* emphasises his own orthodoxy, particularly his stress on teaching the minutiae of *sharia* and *fiqh*—simultaneously expressing his wish that those who flout such rules should be summarily whipped (Sabar 40). In response, Ranjha questions the *mulla*'s commitment to the *sharia*'s admonishments to offer hospitality to travellers by pointing out to the *mulla* that "You have made the *sharia* your head-covering but are actually a big sinner: / Varis Shah, you tell travellers and visitors to go away" (40). Ranjha's admonition has at least its most immediately intended effect: the *mulla* agrees to allow him to stay the night at the mosque. The meaning of the episode as a piece of social critique, though, is made clear by the narrator's comment at its end: "Varis Shah, these *mullas* are a misfortune that blight the houses of God" (41).

Despite the striking effect of such pieces of anti-clerical invective, it is not the only technique used in the poem's overt critique of religion. Throughout the *qissa*, *qazis* and *mullas* are associated with bad consequences, and they often have a considerable hand in bringing those consequences about: the *qazi* of Takht Hazara (ironically referred to as "Hazrat Qazi") assists the *painch* (the village council) in splitting up Mauju's land in such a way as to give the barren land to Dhido (12), and the *qazi* who gives Hir back to the Kheras in Adli's court is praised because he "had memorised the Quran and the *fiqih*" (583). As is to be expected from such a negative portrayal, the

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(*Malfūzāt-i Shāh 'Abdul 'Azīz*, quoted in Umar, *Islam in Northern India* 49).

contrast between the Islam of the *mullas* and *qazis* and the Sufi *tariqa*—whether at the pan-Islamic level of figures like Mansur and Rabia or the more local level of the Panj Pirs—is as striking as in the earlier versions of the legend: the *mulla* of the mosque at which Ranjha stays on his first day away from Takht Hazara refers to him contemptuously as a shameless infidel who is another Mansur (35), while the *qazi* of Jhang Sial’s attempt to threaten Hir into obeying her parents is framed by two episodes in which the Panj Pir readily come to the assistance of the distressed Ranjha (106-18).

Much as its predecessors did, Varis’s *Hir* points out the embeddedness of religion in ideologies of social control: the central focus of the scene of the marriage of Hir to Saida, for example, is the debate that she has with the village *qazi* at the ceremony itself. This is Hir’s second clash with the *mulla*, the first having occurred after the Sials dismissed Ranjha as their cowherd before taking him on again until after the wedding. Immediately after she and Ranjha are instructed by the Panj Pirs to remember God constantly and remain constant in their love (106), Hir returns home only to be confronted by a visual tableau of the dynamics of power in her society: her mother and father sit waiting for her, the *qazi* between them (107). As we shall see in a later section, Hir counters the *qazi*’s arguments of social control and retributive violence with a quiet insistence that her love is both divinely inspired and involuntary; she also argues that the formal ideology of religion protects her against the violence which societal ideology wishes to subject her to:

“Those who kill their daughters will bear a great burden of sin  
on the Day of the Standing:

They will be ordered to eat the daughters they have killed.”

(111)

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<sup>37</sup> The last line compares *namaz* to a boat tied up at a river crossing.

Despite Hir's warning, the *qazi* reverts to threats of violence and continues to back those threats with the sanction of organised religion:

The *qazi* said, "Fear God: if you're stubborn, your parents will kill you.

They'll rip your tongue from your mouth and kill you for the sake of honour.

They'll kill you the moment I pronounce a *fatvā*." (114)

The naked violence of the *qazi*'s pronouncement is immediately contrasted to the arrival of the Panj Pirs in the wastes outside Jhang Sial at the behest of Ranjha, preceded by a leisurely sixteen-line exposition of the *ragas* which he plays on his *vanjhli* to please them. The insertion of a list at this point in the narrative only serves to emphasise the importance of the boon which the Pirs proceed to give Ranjha:

The Panj Pirs were pleased and commanded, "Son! Ask for whatever you want."

[Ranjha said,] "Grant me Hir the Jattī and colour me in the colour of love.

Make me a *malang* and rub ash on my body" . . .

.....  
Ranjha pleased the Pirs and they blessed him. "Go! Hir is yours. Everything you want is yours; the Panj Pirs have helped you."

(117-8)

The juxtaposition of these boons with the *qazi*'s threats of violence and blind support for the dictates of societal ideology emphasises them even more: the contrast between the restrictive religion of the orthodox *mulla* and the blessings of the Panj Pirs is crystal clear.

Hir's debate with the *qazi* at the wedding centres more strongly around love than around issues of faith—at least in Hir's conception of the argument. Hir responds to the *qazi*'s threats that "I will get some straw and

burn you in front of the whole village" (203) and his contention that obedience to one's parents and to the dictates of the Quran are one with a direct challenge to his moral authority: "All *qazis* should be punished because they take bribes and sell their faith: / God will fill Hell with them and burn them. What have we poor ones done wrong?" (204). She follows up her direct attack on the *qazi* with a series of disquisitions on the power of love and the divine pedigree of her marriage with Ranjha:

"Our marriage was contracted on the day of 'They said, "Yes"'<sup>38</sup>  
and the soul of the Prophet himself read out the contract.  
The Qutb was the intermediary and God himself gave the  
command;  
Jibrail, Mikail, 'Izrāil and Isrāfil were the four witnesses.  
When did God ever allow someone to break off one marriage  
and contract another?" (206/Sabar 212)

While most of the rest of Hir's response to the *qazi*'s religious and social arguments consists of paeans to love, her impassioned statement that "the *qazi*<sup>39</sup> of the *sharia* has nothing to do with the people of the way (*ahl-i tarīqā*)" (202) links her with the explicit rejection of *sharia* often associated with Sufism. More importantly, her dialogue with the *qazi* concludes with a reinterpretation of love in terms of the paradigms of religious faith—a reinterpretation that subverts those terms at the same time as it partakes of their status:

"Those who are engrossed in love are allowed on to God's path.  
Those who have perfected belief and faith are accepted in God's  
court.

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<sup>38</sup> Quran 7:71, which outlines the response made by the children of Adam to Allah's question, "Am I not your Lord?" on the day that he created them. Hir, therefore, says that she was married to Ranjha at the Creation itself.

<sup>39</sup> She uses the ironic "*Miā Qāzi*."

Those who have repeated (*vird kītā*) the name of the beloved are  
the incumbents of high places:

Those who take bribes to ignore truth are thieves and  
highwaymen.

Mian Varis Shah's verses are the meaning of the glorious  
Quran." (211)

Hir, then, subsumes the *qazi's* discourse of religion into her paean of love,  
exalting her ties with Ranjha at the expense of the *qazi's sharia*. In doing so,  
she subverts the *qazi's* authority (and that of his discourse) at the same time as  
she usurps its acceptability for her own use.

The discourse of religion and of religious hypocrisy is, in turn,  
used to subvert the discourses of familial honour in the poem. The high point  
for familial honour in the first half of the poem lies <sup>in</sup> the scene of Hir's wedding  
to Saida the Khera, a scene that is preceded by sixteen stanzas of lists  
describing the food eaten, the ornaments worn, the performers engaged and  
the dowry given to Hir. In the middle of this long list comes a moment whose  
irony undercuts the wedding and its aura of social acceptability: the poet  
states that the Kheras' wedding procession

Is like the way people beat drums and create commotion at  
Nagāhā and Ratan Hājī:

They dance about to and fro shouting praises.

The ones that come with faith kiss [the *pir's*] feet and get what  
they desire:

They make *chūrmā* for Varis Shah, say prayers over it and  
distribute it. (195/ Sabar 198)

The fact that the Kheras have come not to please a *pir* but instead to force Hir  
into a marriage she does not want lends weight to the irony of the poet's  
analogy, highlighting the immorality of the Kheras' wedding party all the  
more. An even more deconstructive discourse is the regular equation in the



poem between beards (enjoined by the *sharia*) and falsehood. When Ranjha reminds the *mulla* that his evil actions do not match his *shaikh*'s beard (and Sahti does the same to the *jogi*), his discourse impinges upon the conventional image of the beard as the marker of both personal and family honour. Similarly, his warning to Adli that the Kheras' "beards and turbans look noble, but they have the habits of Satan" (579) underlines the discrepancy between appearance and reality at another crucial moment in the poem-- despite the fact that the Raja does not heed Ranjha's warning. Long before his use of the image in Adli's court, though, Ranjha rejects the discourse of familial and clan honour implied by the image of the beard by becoming a *jogi*. Ranjha's rejection of the discourse does not, however, stop others from continuing to try to apply it to him: when he enters Rangpur Khera, the shepherd taunts him for allowing the Kheras to take Hir away, stating that he lost his honour and "shaved off your beard in the village assembly" (287). The image reappears to describe the predicament of the Kheras after both Hir and Sahti manage to escape the bounds of the clan's control: narrating their escape, the poet notes that "the clan shaved off their own beards" by being deceived into allowing them to go (571). Indeed, the image haunts the clan up to the end of the poem: when Ranjha prepares to take Hir home with him, the shepherds taunt the Kheras that "he has cut off all their beards" (599). This stark reminder of their dishonour (heightened by the low status of the shepherds who bring the reminder) is enough to prompt the Kheras' assembly to recommend killing Hir to protect their honour (602). The poem's subversion of the equation of beards and honour--and the codes that underlie that equation--adds to the horror of their action.

#### Religious Subtexts in the *Qissa*:

Perhaps one of the most controversial points of interpretation in the criticism of Varis's *Hir* is the meaning of the final verse of the poem in which

the poet purports to reinterpret the entire narrative as an allegory. As we have already seen, some have taken the verse to be ~~an~~ inauthentic or disingenuous, while others have taken it to be the key to the poem's meaning. Very little help is forthcoming from editors of the poem, one of whom has described the verse as "slightly doubtful."<sup>40</sup> Certainly the verse's position in the text (after the formal ending of the book) renders its authenticity somewhat doubtful, although the lack of detailed information on the contents of various manuscripts and the tendency to interpolate even the earliest texts render a definitive judgement somewhat difficult. Even so, the curious terms of the allegory and the very attempt to impose a neat system of one-to-one theological correspondences after more than six hundred verses of complex narrative make it more plausible that the allegorical "reinterpretation" is itself intended to be ironic:

Hir is the soul and Ranjha the body, Balnath was made the *pir*.  
The Panj Pirs are your five senses, who gave you  
encouragement.

The *qazi* is truth, the boatmen your actions; the shepherd was  
made the recording angels.

Hir's girlfriends are your wife and family, with whom you have  
established a connection.

Know the lame Kaido to be the accursed Satan who turned you  
in God's court:

They'll tie you up and take you away like Hir—no one will go  
with you . . . (611)

Although most of the terms of the allegory do not seem to fit the narrative in any more than a cursory way, at least one of its equations does correspond to a metaphor repeatedly used in the text of the poem itself. If the final verse of the poem compares Kaido to "the accursed Satan," it is an identification that is

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<sup>40</sup> Abdul Aziz, *op.cit.* 789.

also made on when Kaido first arrives to steal Ranjha's *churi*: "Varis Shah, see the lame one, Mian: he starts Satan's quarrels" (81). Similarly, when Hir pursues Kaido and thrashes him to within an inch of his life, her act of throwing him down onto the ground is associated with the expulsion of Satan from Heaven: "Varis Shah, it was like when the angels threw Satan from the heavens onto the earth" (85). The image of Kaido as Satan manages to haunt him on virtually his every appearance in the poem: when they tell Hir of the stories he has been spreading about her, Hir's *saheli*'s call Kaido "the drum of the impure Satan" (131), and when Kaido takes his complaint to the village assembly, Chuchak refers to his brother as "the image of Satan, the root of all quarrels" (139). But if Kaido is unequivocally associated with Satan, the reverse is not the case. The poem also strongly associates the wiles of women (or alternately, wily women) with Satan. Sahti's cleverness in deceiving her mother-in-law is compared with Satan's own wiles (537), and her joy at being asked to do so is compared with Satan's joy at being able to deceive the believer:

Sahti was happy just like Satan

Dances with glee when the morning prayer is forgotten—  
women's souls are like glass finger-rings! (472)

There are indeed two other associations with Satan in the poem which destroy the one-to-one correspondence with Kaido set up in the *qissa*'s final verse: first, Sahti's expulsion of Ranjha from the Kheras' courtyard is compared with God's expulsion of Satan from Heaven; second, when the Kheras take Hir from Adli's court, the narrator comments that "Both [Hir and Ranjha] were shaken, just like Satan is when '*lāḥaul*' is read" (588). In both cases, Satan's reaction is the ground of comparison rather than Satan himself, a usage which questions the applicability of one-to-one allegory to the poem: Satan himself is seen to have many possible meanings.

There are occasions in the poem where a religious analogy is used in a relatively straightforward manner. Principal among such are the comparison between the *jogi's* taking Hir to the secluded farmhouse and God's saving the sinner from Hell and taking him to Heaven (564), the analogy between the red-hot fury Ranjha displays when given what he feels are insufficient alms and the way the earth will burn on the Day of Judgement (415), and the parallel between Ranjha's interrogation of Hir's niece and the way the Angel of Death will expose everyone's sins (458). But even these simple equations are subverted by the numerous occasions in the poem when a religious analogy ironically precedes a revelation of how corrupt the real world is. We have already seen how the narrator's eulogistic description of the mosque in which Ranjha stays on his first night away from Takht Hazara as al-Aqsa and the Kaaba leads into a revelation of how corrupt and sly the *mulla* is: Najm Hosain Syed notes that such "[e]xtravagant comparison, sometime's [sic] subtly ironical, sometime's [sic] boisterously satirical, is the main instrument of Waris's comedy."<sup>41</sup> He further points out the similarity of the mosque incident with the very first scene of the poem—also, as he notes, introduced by a comparison using *goyā* ("as if")—in which the poet says about Takht Hazara "how can I praise Takht Hazara? It is as if Heaven came to earth" (1).<sup>42</sup> But this seemingly idyllic parallel leads into a description of Takht Hazara as the scene of intestine quarrels between the Ranjhas over land and the sexual advances of Ranjha's *bhabis*: to borrow from Najm Hosain, the poet presents Takht Hazara as an Eden destroyed by the snake of jealousy which "keeps striking at [Ranjha's] heart" (10).<sup>43</sup> Such is the strength of this portrayal, coming as it does at the beginning of the poem, that it taints all the religious metaphors which follow it.

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<sup>41</sup> Op.cit. 35.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 36-7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 34.

Perhaps the closest the *qissa* comes to containing a religious sub-narrative is in its constant equation of Ranjha and Adam. When Luddan finally decides to take Ranjha across the river (albeit because he fears Ranjha will seduce his wives), the narrator compares the way Ranjha is bathed and placed on Hir's bed with Adam's reentry into Paradise:

He grabbed Ranjha by both arms and put him in the boat again:  
Adam's sin was forgiven and he was brought into Eden again.

(47)

It is worth noting that even at this early stage the incipient sub-narrative in which Ranjha is Adam is immediately subverted by the next line: "It was as if Azazil had fallen in a dream and was again raised to Heaven from below" (47). Nonetheless, the narrator continues to expand the analogy and build up the associated narrative: after Ranjha herds the cows that form part of Hir's dowry to Rangpur, "They took the box from his head and snatched away the blanket: Adam was expelled from Eden and scared away" (214). Similarly, Ranjha the *jogi's* ejection from the Kheras' courtyard is compared with Adam's expulsion from Eden—and with Satan's expulsion from Heaven (447). Before considering the dialogue between Sahti and Ranjha in the Kala Bagh that subverts the association between Ranjha and Adam, it is worth taking notice of the other prophetic association with Ranjha in the poem. We have already seen how Ranjha is compared to Yusuf at his first meeting with Hir; similarly, his reunion with his brothers at the end of the poem and his imminent marriage to Hir is compared with the sea-change in Yusuf's fortunes: he is fêted by his brothers "Like Yaqub's beloved son was taken from the well and put on the throne" (600). This association alone snatches allegorical primacy from the narrative of Ranjha as Adam. The second factor which undercuts the force of the poem's "second narrative" is part of the dialogue on misogynist myth between Sahti and Ranjha when she comes to

see him in the Kala Bagh. Ranjha begins the argument by making the traditional claim that women are the root of all quarrels:

When God created the universe and made these domains for  
people  
Women, boys, spirits, Satan, *faqirs*, dogs, hens, goats and camels  
Were created as the roots of dispute and afflicted the roots of  
the world.

They expelled Adam from Eden and ruined him—these witches  
have been doing bad things from the beginning. (474)

At this point Sahti begins a wide-ranging reinterpretation of misogynist myth that places emphasis on women's generative powers and virtue but still fails to pull Ranjha out of his anti-woman tirade. She does nonetheless manage to reinterpret the myth of Eden in a way persuasive enough to render its value as allegory almost negligible:

Sahti said, "He ruined his digestion and was thrown out of Eden  
for eating a grain.

He was kicked out of Eden because of desire and severed the  
rope of his own hopes.

The angels repeatedly warned him and commanded him not to  
eat the grain:

Instead Adam destroyed Eve, who refused to leave him.

Men screw up and blame it on women: why lie?" (475)<sup>44</sup>

By Sahti's reading, if Ranjha has been expelled from Eden, it would have to have been his fault and no one else's. Thus, Varis's use of religious subtext is as sophisticated and ironic as we would expect from the poetic of his *qissa* as a whole. This being so, it becomes even more difficult to accept the final stanza of the poem as a genuine attempt to allegorise it.

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<sup>44</sup> I have emended the last two lines according to Sabar 480, which also contains two extra lines not translated here.

### The Character of Hir:

One of the most notable aspects of Varis's *Hir* compared to other Punjabi versions of the legend is the comparatively small amount of time devoted to the character of Hir. Where Muqbil creates a comprehensive image of Hir as a social rebel and even Ahmad allows Hir to dominate the first half of the poem before she virtually disappears in the second, Varis places Hir into a secondary position from the very beginning of the poem. As is to be expected from a consummate artist like Varis, though, he does not allow Hir to become a one-dimensional or conventional character: instead, he uses and subverts the image of the conventional romance heroine to produce a complex Hir who refuses to fit into the socially constructed image of the female at the same time as she demurely avoids overt conflict with social ideology.

Hir's first appearance in the poem seems at first to be an entirely conventional one, so much so that critics jaded by Ranjha's tribulations at the hands of his brothers, the *mulla* and Luddan have rejoiced that "for once we meet a person who can be interested in another human being for reasons other than those of material benefit."<sup>45</sup> The poet introduces Hir by beginning a description of her and her sixty *sahelis* only to pause to ask himself the question, "How is a poet to praise Hir?" (54). He answers his question with a lengthy two-stanza *sarapa* of Hir peppered with such traditional equations as "Her face is beautiful and her features like the fine calligraphy of a book" (54) and "Her lips are red like rubies and her chin like the best apples from afar" (55). In a lengthy chain of similes almost literally lifted out of narrative time by the complete lack of verbs until the last line, he compares Hir to fairies, paintings, musk, puppets, deer—in short, everything that one would expect from a Persian *sarapa*, plus a liberal sprinkling of distinctly Punjabi elements.

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<sup>45</sup> Najm Hosain Syed, *op.cit.* 41.

He even utilises the traditional equation between love and war, saying that “her eyebrows are like the bows of Lahore” (54) and “her nose like the sword of Husain” (55). It is here, though, that the portrait of Hir begins to press against and to transgress the boundaries of the traditional *sarapa*, hinting that Hir herself may be more than just the traditional heroine. For the poet indulges in a rather more explicit (and contemporary) type of martial imagery that seems to foreshadow the violence of Hir’s attacks on Kaido and the sternness of her resistance to the *qazi*’s dictates:

The *surmā* adorns her eyes like the armies of Punjab attacking  
Hind;

She sways about in the *trinjhan* like the Navab’s elephant  
charges about in must. (54)

She goes about bursting with desire just like that fearsome  
army descended from Qandahar. (55)

If these images extend the traditional metaphor of love as war, the final metaphor of the *sarapa* almost literally embodies the traditional image of the slaughter of the lover by the eyes of the beloved with its local specificity:

It is as if a Qizilbāsh executioner has emerged from the Urdū  
Bazār on horseback:

Varis Shah, when the game of the eyes begins, no one can win  
the match. (55)

At the same time as he fills his description of Hir with such explicit military references, the poet also indulges in anatomical reference and sexual innuendo of a level not normally encountered in the classical *sarapa*. Twice in his description of her, he refers to her as “consumed by lust” (53, 55) and he refers to her sexuality when directly addressing her before the beginning of the *sarapa* itself: “O accursed one, wearer of earrings, desist! You’ve already given hard-ons to so many!” (53). From so explicit a beginning the poet’s *sarapa* of Hir descends (anatomically, if not literarily) from conventional



metaphor and local colour to a level of description normally absent from such *sarapas*:

Her arms have been flattened with rollers (*velḥe*) and kneaded  
in butter; her chest is of coloured marble.

Her breasts are silken balls thrown up by a wave, apples from  
Balkh chosen from a large pile.

Her navel is like a ball of musk from a heavenly pool, her  
genitals (*pedū*)<sup>46</sup> velvet from the royal court. (55)

Thus, in his very first description of Hir, the poet introduces a set of imagery which removes Hir from the world of the chaste heroine and transforms her into a sexual being. At the very least, he creates a fuller and more ironic portrait of Hir than the traditional romance heroine who some critics have seen in Hir's initial appearance in the poem: "The heavily built up facade of a conventionally proud beauty is removed to reveal a heart capable of intense emotional involvement, a mind possessing strength to make a life-long commitment and stand by it with religious devotion."<sup>47</sup>

Not surprisingly, the poet's description of Hir leads into a narrative that emphasises both her sexuality (dealt with below) and her aggression. The poet's description of Hir as a Qizilbash executioner leads directly into her attack on Luddan, in which he is left bloody and beaten (56)—but it also introduces the ambivalence that will characterise Hir throughout the poem. Although she is unrestrained in her attack on the boatman and promises that she will thrash the sleeping Ranjha, the reality is quite different. The oft-quoted scene of the lovers' first sight of each other defines the roles each of them will play in the love affair:

Screaming, she grabbed a switch: the fairy became enraged at  
the man.

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<sup>46</sup> The word can also mean the part of the belly between the navel and the genitals.

<sup>47</sup> Najm Hosain Syed, *op.cit.* 43-4.

Ranjha arose and said, "Oh beloved!" Hir smiled and was kind.  
The *vanjhli* under his arm, rings in his ears, his locks spread  
across his face,

His long hair shining, Ranjha was the moon, the *kajjal* attacking  
his eyes.

Like Malik, Taimus's daughter was driven to distraction by  
Yusuf's face.

His drunken eyes pierced her heart like the sharp point of a  
lance.

She sat beside him and began to speak to him—like the quiver  
next to the bow.

"It's good that I didn't hit you—that would have been very bad."

Ranjha saw her beauty and awoke; Hir sacrificed herself to him.

(59)

That Hir's anger turns to wonder the moment she sees Ranjha's face is as expressive of her position in the love affair as is the sheer inequality of their reactions. Where Ranjha exclaims aloud at her beauty and finds himself fully awake, Hir is stunned into silence and adopts the lover's rhetoric of sacrifice: the only words she can find <sup>to</sup> express her guilt at almost having beaten him. The poet's reference to Hir as Zulaikha only strengthens the equation made by their reactions: where Yusuf suffers difficulties that are eventually resolved by his becoming ruler of Misr, Zulaikha is married off to a husband not of her own choosing and is ultimately dependent on Yusuf to save her from the penury that her widowhood brings her. The very first meeting of the lovers, then, encodes a dynamic in which Hir is the subordinate partner, her discourse characterised by apologies and silence.

While Hir displays a certain enterprise by having the family's former cowherd dismissed for making advances to her (77) and later by suggesting to Ranjha that he become a *jogi* and come to meet her in Rangpur, for the

most part she remains a passive character after attacking Luddan and beating her uncle Kaido to get back the *churi* he begged from Ranjha in the guise of a *faqir*. Her treatment of her uncle shows, however, that she does have the mettle necessary to take on all comers:

The girl caught up with him on the path and calmed him with  
her deceptions.

She came closer and roared like a lion, tears of anger running  
from her eyes.

She ripped his hat from his head, snatched the *sehlī*<sup>48</sup> from his  
neck, and grabbed him by the waist and threw him to the  
ground.

She threw him against the ground with anger like a washerman  
slaps a blanket against the washing-board. (85)

Despite the fury of her attack on Kaido, this is the last time Hir asserts herself so openly in the poem. When Kaido next endangers her by telling Malki about her meetings with Ranjha in the *belā* (the wastes outside the village), she and her friends hatch a plan to beat him and burn his hut down. In the description of their attack, which the poet compares with Ahmad Shah Abdali's looting of Lahore on his way back from sacking Mathura (137), the *sahelis* take the major role and Hir's role in the attack is not even mentioned (133-137). Similarly, when the girls are brought before the village assembly, it is they (and not Hir) who accuse Kaido of molesting them (144, 146), even though they know that—at least initially—the assembly's sympathies are with him. Such intransigence marks most of the rest of Hir's stay in Jhang Sial—so much so that when Malki and Chuchak berate her for getting involved with Ranjha, her only response is to say that God sent the cowherd to her (93). Her response is only slightly more firm when Malki next confronts her, although

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<sup>48</sup> A woollen string worn around the neck by *faqirs*.

it is notable for her negation of patriarchal power. She responds to Malki's curses and threats by saying

"Stop, mother. Don't curse: cursing is a great sin.

It is difficult to dig up the foundations that God has laid: it is  
great sin to kill one's daughters.

May some sudden pain or fever take me away—I who should be  
beaten by my brother!

Varis Shah, I will not turn away from my dear Ranjha even if  
my father's father's father comes." (128)

It is in this context of timidity mixed with a certain amount of defiance that Hir conducts her two major debates with the *qazi*.

In contrast to the forceful Hir of Muqbil's *qissa*, Hir's debates with the *qazi* portray a character who is not willing (or perhaps able) to engage the *qazi* on his own terms and must instead reiterate the traditional discourses of love: she pleads her own servitude to the paradigm of love more than she questions the *qazi's* attachment of ideologies of social control. Hir's first debate with the *qazi* occurs in the her own home in the presence of her parents. The *qazi* begins his argument with an explicit statement of the Jat patriarchy's expectations of its daughters:

"Hir, my daughter, let me give you some kindly advice:

Don't associate with fools and cowherds—they are lowly  
labourers.

Put out your *charkha* and stay in your house singing nice songs:

Set out your red *charkha* and fill your box of yarn—how pleasant  
are the songs of the Chenab!

Always look downwards and live with shame: this is what the  
wise say.

You know, Hir, that Chuchak the Sial is the *sardar* of five  
villages:

Be attentive to your parents' honour, for they are are noble Jats  
of the Chenab.

It is not nice for Jat girls to wander about outside: nowadays  
emissaries for marriage are coming to the house." (107)

As we have seen above, Hir responds to the *qazi's* threats of violence by reminding him that killing daughters is a sin. Her response to her brother Sultan's threat that "If I see her outside again I will kill her. / If she doesn't stay inside like you say, I will chop off her head" (112) is somewhat less forceful:

"I'm in love, brother. Hir has sacrificed herself.

A river's flow can never be stopped, no matter how hard you  
try;

Blood will flow if you've been hit by a dagger, brother.

Diarrhoea doesn't stop once it's started, even if the doctor  
writes every conceivable prescription." (113)

In the interim between this first debate and her confrontation with the *qazi* at her wedding, Hir has what is certainly the most forceful of her encounters with any figure of authority. When her *sahelis* tell her about her impending marriage to Saida the Khera, she immediately confronts her mother before returning to the *bela* to ask Ranjha to run away with her:

Hir comes and fights with her mother, "You have married me  
off by force!

Tell me when I ever asked for a man? I don't know what hidden  
anger you're taking revenge for.

Stupid people throw the bricks of a mansion into the drain."  
(174)

That her plan to revenge herself on her parents by running away with Ranjha does not succeed is more Ranjha's fault than hers: his honour prevents him from loving a runaway (176). Even then, Hir's response to Malki's threats is

to avoid confrontation rather than to confront the arguments that Malki uses against her.

Before she leaves Jhang Sial, Hir has one more opportunity to define the terms of her love for Ranjha when Ranjha's sisters-in-law write to her demanding that she send him back to Takht Hazara. She responds to their jealous request in terms that make it clear that she will not compromise: she reminds them that "Bones sent to the Ganges do not return, and time cannot be turned back" (162). The *bhabis'* continuing protestations that they are distressed at Ranjha's departure yield a very similar response. Hir emphasises that she sings only of Ranjha in the *trinjhan* and that she has sacrificed herself to him (165-6). Other than to renarrate to the sisters-in-law Ranjha's account of his departure (which she herself elicited from him), the simple statement of her love for him is the only response she will give.

Hir's later response to Ranjha's letters to her is broadly similar. He accuses her of cheating him into becoming a cowherd and going off to enjoy herself at her in-laws' home:

'You wanted this marriage; it's good that it happened quickly.  
You've left here like a bad day and are happy at your in-laws',  
O happy wife of the Kheras, niece of the lame Kaido.' (236)

Hir's response to Ranjha's taunts is an entirely submissive one. Pointing out that her marriage was something she could not avoid, she once again asks Ranjha to become a *jogi* and come to Rangpur to see her. She asks her messenger to pass on a message redolent with the devotion of the courtly lover: "I'm dying, and my soul has reached my lips: come see me just once" (239). In line with the discourse within which she operates, she adds, "tie him up with the rope of the chain of my locks" (239). Even this piece of courtly rhetoric is not, however, enough to assuage Ranjha's hurt pride: comparing her to the women who he says destroyed Raja Bhoj and the Pandavas, he accuses her of deceiving him into losing his social status and then going off to

enjoy herself with her husband (242-3). A very similar dynamic underlies the long-awaited meeting of the lovers in the Kala Bagh outside Rangpur Khera. Where Hir assumes a posture of submissive devotion, Ranjha once again portrays himself as a victim and Hir as a beneficiary of the whole situation. Hir strongly emphasises both her chastity and the opposition she has had to face in order to maintain her love for Ranjha:

“My cruel parents tied me up and sent me away, and your love  
ravaged me:

I made a cowherd my relation and forgot about mother, father  
and other kin.

I have touched no one other than you—God is my uncorruptible  
witness.” (501)

Ranjha’s response is predictable: he once again launches into a litany of criticism, blaming Hir for his loss of status. That she does not answer his allegations and instead continues to assure him of her devotion seems somehow a response appropriate to her character. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Hir’s lengthy curse on Adli’s city in which she asks God to bring upon the city the calamities He visited on the prophets and the Imams is ineffective. Instead, it is Ranjha’s invocation of Hindu mythology that yields results: “God accepted what he said and set the city on fire immediately” (594). In this episode is latent the entire dynamic of the relationship between Hir and Ranjha: Hir may curse all she likes, but to no effect. The world will only heed the words of Ranjha.

### **Sexual Suggestiveness in Varis’s *Hir*:**

Many critics have commented on the “earthiness” of Varis Shah’s *Hir*, whether the lively exchanges of insults between Sahti and Ranjha characterised by “frequent recourse to the obscener resources of a language

often said to be so rich in them"<sup>49</sup> or the sexual suggestiveness of a number of other passages in the poem. We have already seen above how some critics attempt to explain away the presence of such suggestive language in the poem by claiming that it is in fact the product of interpolation; by contrast, others see the earthy sexuality of the poem as an important part of its overall tone. Bava Budh Singh, considered the founder of Punjabi literary criticism, sees the poem's bawdiness as central to any reading that attempts to deal with the allegorising final verse of the *qissa*:

. . . to say that *Hīr* was written by a *faqīr* or speaks of *haqiqi* love through the medium of *majazi* love is to hide the truth. Varis Shah's final stanza, in which he gives a lecture on *haqiqi* love, is a made-up and insincere. If it were not, he would not have written a "manual of love" (*kām shāstar*) in his *qissa*. He has used *kām* and *shingār ras* to make every verse of his poem more interesting.<sup>50</sup>

Budh Singh's sense of the importance of eroticism in the *qissa* is shared by Matringe, who remarks that the eroticism of the text is part of a series of juxtapositions that make difficult any interpretation of the poem as an allegory: he says that Varis' poem differs radically from such an allegory in that "the love of Hir and Ranjha is at once very ideal and very sensual, just as in the metaphors of the author the sublime and the grandiose are juxtaposed to the obscene and the uncouth, and a Persianised literary language to the simplest Punjabi."<sup>51</sup> While such a totalising reading of the *qissa*'s sexual suggestiveness is perhaps excessive, it does highlight the integral nature of that suggestiveness to the poem as a whole. What it does not do, though, is to recognise the ambivalence that surrounds the discourse of sexuality in the

<sup>49</sup> C. Shackle, "Transition and Transformation in Vāris Shāh's *Hīr*" in Christopher Shackle and Rupert Snell, eds., *The Indian Narrative: Perspectives and Patterns* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992): 259.

<sup>50</sup> *Koīl kū*. 2nd ed. (Amritsar: Phulvārī, 1927): 120.



poem: while it is literally brimming with sexual innuendo, Varis's *Hir* ultimately denies the sexuality of its protagonists Hir and Ranjha. In doing so, it problematises both its own suggestiveness and the "moral rectitude" of its tragic ending.

It would be no exaggeration to say that sexuality occupies a very central place in Varis's *qissa*. Indeed, many of the most quoted and most beloved passages in the poem are rife with sexual innuendo. Compare for example the overt sexuality of the narrator's description of the morning routine in the village where Ranjha stayed on his first night away from Takht Hazara, its explicit phallic imagery and reference to the villagers' nocturnal pursuits providing a welcome contrast to the sanctimonious *mulla*'s request that Ranjha cover his privates during his sojourn in the house of God:

*chirī chūkādī nāla jā ṭure pādhi pāī duddha de vicha madhāṇīā ne.*  
*uṭṭha ghusala de vāsate jā pahute seṭā rāta nū jinnhā ne māṇīā ne.*

The traveller left when the birds had begun to chirp and the  
churning rods had been inserted in the milk;

Those who had enjoyed their beds at night had begun to bathe.

(42)

Similarly, we have already seen how the poet's *sarapa* of Hir contains a more significant measure of sexuality than the traditional classical *sarapa*.

In such a context, then, it is hardly surprising that sexuality pervades the relationship between Ranjha and his sisters-in-law. They complain to Ranjha that

"He eats milk and rice and is stubborn: these are the joys of  
eating one's fill!

All of our relatives laugh at us, saying we have enjoyed  
ourselves with him.

They all want Ranjha but don't dare to say so:

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<sup>51</sup> Op.cit. 25.

Women fall when they see the foppish boy just as flies fall on  
butter." (16)

While their jealousy at the way other women look at Ranjha seems to imply that they may not in fact have enjoyed themselves with him, Ranjha himself strongly implies that they have. Using a common Punjabi idiom for sexual intercourse, he accuses them of "taking away the ladder after allowing me on the roof" (*koṭhe chārha ke paṛṛā khich laindī*–19). A similar sexual jealousy on the part of the sisters-in-law seems to characterise the exchange of letters between them and Hir. Having become "agitated" (*tang*) by Ranjha's absence—he accuses them of writing to him because "they need a watchman for their fields" (161)—they accuse Hir of "having gotten this foppish one without any effort" (159). In their second, more desperate letter to Hir, they spell out their relationship to Ranjha more clearly, indicating at the same time the level of their sexual jealousy of Hir:

'If you think you're beautiful and want to become a co-wife  
(*saunkan*), remember that each of us is more beautiful  
than the other.

God knows that we have become the slaves of this beloved one  
for our whole lives.

We have gone mad over him; it doesn't matter whether we are  
good or bad.

He is like the moon among us, and we are the Seven Sisters.

.....  
*Jogis* shave people and make them their disciples: we have been  
tonsured by our love for him.

Varis Shah, fold your hands before Ranjha and say, 'The fire of  
your love has roasted us.'" (163)

If the eroticism of his relationship with his sisters-in-law makes it difficult to view Ranjha as a sexual innocent even at the beginning of the *qissa*, so too

does his response to Luddan's rude refusal to take him across the river for free. Unable to defeat the boatman with words, he decides to make him jealous by seducing his wives:

He sings songs of separation and cries, playing compositions on  
his flute:

Everyone—men and women—left the crossing-point and  
gathered around him.

The wives of Luddan the Jhabel massaged him, each taking one  
of his legs:

Luddan furiously pounced on them and shouted at both of  
them.

“O people of the village, help! This Jat will take away your  
women: see what mischief he has created!

Varis Shah, who knows what kind of evil spirit he is: he's  
seduced both men and women.” (45)

It is with such a background of seduction and mischief that Ranjha the Jat appropriates Hir's bed and enters into his affair with her in Jhang Sial.

For most of the story, the image of the relationship between Hir and Ranjha that we get from the poem carries a pronounced sexual subtext. We have already seen how Mitthi arranges a bed for them to while away their time in and they enjoy themselves all night while the buffalo graze contentedly outside. Additionally, Hir claims at her wedding that “I have presented my butter to Ranjha: why is my silly mother wasting the buttermilk?” (199), while Ranjha accuses her of “allowing me on to the roof and taking away the ladder” (178) just as his sisters-in-law did. When she meets Ranjha the *jogi* in the Kala Bagh much later in the poem, Hir states that “God is my witness that I have touched no one but you” (*tere bājha nā kise nū anga lāiā*—501), which strongly implies that she has indeed had sex with him.

Similarly, when trying to get Sahti to reunite her with Ranjha, she explains to her that

“He left off his name, caste and status (*chudhrāī*) and grazed  
cows for my sake:

He has been my lover since the beginning (*mudḍh qadīm*) and  
opened the locks (*chūḍḍā*) of my virginity.” (469)

We have also seen how the sports of Ranjha with Hir’s girlfriends in the *bela* are deeply erotic: clearly at this stage in the narrative, the poet sees no reason to present Ranjha as anything other than an erotic character (although within certain limits). While the poet does not go so far as to actually state definitively that something happens between Hir and Ranjha, he certainly implies quite strongly that it does.

Nor does the eroticism of Ranjha’s character disappear when he becomes a *jogi*. Indeed, the newly-initiated *jogi* cannot resist inserting innuendo even in the midst of his first speech to the girls of the village in which he tries to establish his credentials as a *faqir*. Claiming that he comes from a long and distinguished line of *jogis* and that he lives exclusively in the jungles, Ranjha notes that

*nagara bīcha na ātama parachadā hai udiāna bikhe tambū tāṇade hā.*

“My heart is not happy in the city, so I pitch my tent in the  
forest.” (307)

One need only note that the idiom *tambū tāṇnā* carries the secondary meaning “to get an erection” to understand the way in which Ranjha plays with new-found status as a supposedly celibate *jogi*. His first meeting with Sahti is characterised by a similar ambivalence to sexuality: making an exaggerated claim to celibacy, he claims that “I have taken off my bull’s bells and taken up *jog*: why do you keep circling the well?” (313). At the same time as he denies his sexual nature, though, he peppers his extended confrontation with Sahti with innuendo, accusing her of being “consumed with desire” (*loṛ dī māṛī*–333)

and warning her that “My stick and your buttocks are going to have a war today” (401).<sup>52</sup> Sahti responds in kind to Ranjha, accusing him of having become a *jogi* so he could display himself, “Crotch naked and long pubes unshorn and hanging down” (482/ Abdul Aziz 486)<sup>53</sup>. She says that he “does it to women like a rogue” (338) and “smells other women’s crotches” (346); in response, he puts his own verbal crudeness into action by “putting his finger in the hidden place of shame” (445) of Ravel and Sahti when they try to expel him from the courtyard.

If Ranjha is an explicitly sexual character, Sahti herself is characterised by an anxiety about the sexuality of her own relationship with Murad and an extreme sexual jealousy towards Hir. The combination of these two elements within Sahti explains both the quarrel that she has with Hir near the end of her confrontation with the *jogi* and the spiteful violence of her extended interrogation of the interloper as a proxy of Hir—especially when she comes to believe that the *jogi* is actually Hir’s lover. When Hir attempts to defend Ranjha against Sahti’s onslaughts by accusing her of trying to have Ranjha for herself in order to relieve the pain of nights spent alone (409), Sahti attacks Hir for being a hypocrite because “you yourself came here after enjoying (*hanḍhāi ke*) the cowherd” (410). At this, Ranjha focusses his attention on Sahti’s double standard—“Why have a relationship with a Baloch when your sister-in-law is being slandered about the cowherd?” (430)—and Sahti becomes more and more defensive. The result of Sahti’s new-found defensiveness is that she turns violently against Hir, threatening that in addition to having Hir beaten by her brother “I can only call myself a woman if I have you kicked out of the house and used by Murad the Baloch” (438). Thus, her frustrated love for Murad and her violent intentions toward Hir are inextricably linked:

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<sup>52</sup> The implication is, interestingly, one that Hir picks up: “You’ll grab the *jogi*’s stick from behind: who knows where he’s from!” (404).

<sup>53</sup> Sahti refers here to the common custom among male Muslim villagers of shaving their pubic hair.

Hir's history of sexual indiscretion threatens her own freedom as a daughter of the house, so she tries to stop Hir from threatening her own enjoyment any more. Stung by her jealousy, Sahti launches into an envious list of the adornments that enhance Hir's beauty before making a jealous claim that she is no less beautiful than Hir, threatening her with dire consequences:

"You emphasise the corners of your eyes with *kajjal* and wind  
your hair into curls,

The locks hanging low over your chest, and enhance your  
beauty by putting on rings . . .

.....

But I am not any less than you, even though you call yourself a  
dandy:

My body is like the moon and my face beautiful: you look like a  
sweeper-woman (*chūhṛī*) to me.

.....

The world will see what I do to you because of the way you  
spread rumours about me:

What do you hope to gain by spreading rumours about Varis  
Shah?" (440)

It is because of this sexual jealousy that the reunion of Hir and Ranjha, which the narrator himself suggestively compares to the blooming of greenery after the rains of Sāvaṇ (563), is defined not by what does or does not take between Hir and Ranjha, but instead by nine stanzas (510-18) in which Sahti describes the physical effects of lovemaking on Hir:

"Today some passionate one stole your veils of *chambā* flowers;  
Someone probed your chest today and plucked both your pods  
of scent.

Some archer struck the targets that you always used to hide;

Someone joined his chest to yours and crushed your roses . . . .

(Sabar 518)

“Your pubes are flattened, your chest red: who ran his hand  
over your belly?

Someone turned you Persian-wheel and circled your well today:  
Perhaps the *malang* fearlessly enjoyed you, slapping his limbs  
against yours.

Someone took off the milk-pot’s lid and fiddled with the cream.

Someone took off the lid of the *surmā* container and got it all  
over the needle. (Sabar 519)

For her part, Hir denies having had sex with Ranjha and attributes each of the effects to an unlikely secondary cause: “the ties of my garment are loose because I ran into a calf on the road” and “my belly is red because I was lying face down on a wall” (518). Clearly, Hir does not want to give any ammunition to someone she perceives at this point in the narrative to be her enemy.

Despite the strong presence of sexual innuendo throughout the whole poem—and, incidentally, surrounding most of the main characters—the poem comes to express a rather ambivalent attitude toward sexuality by its end. The narrator punctuates his description of how Hir and Ranjha and Sahti and Murad leave Rangpur “as brides and grooms” and are pursued by the Kheras with the warning

Women are sharp hoes for cutting the roots of faith:

Mian, whoever enjoys someone else’s wife will feel the pain of  
fire and cattle-prods in Hell. (571)

It is unclear whether the narrator intends to undercut the lovers’ triumph, satirise the self-righteousness of the Kheras—who “fight with the barber after chopping off the clan’s beards themselves” (571)—or admonish the audience (ironically or otherwise) against following the lovers’ example. In either case,

his sudden renunciation of the poem's sexual subtext rings as hollow as his attempt to allegorise the whole poem in a single verse at its end. It is simply not so easy to erase everything that has preceded the narrator's stark declaration, and his attempt to do so both highlights the ambivalence to sexuality in the poem and increases its importance to the poem as a whole.

### **Conclusion:**

Perhaps the most popular of pre-modern Punjabi literary texts, Varis's *Hir* occupies a central position in the Punjabi cultural episteme. The subject of more critical comment than perhaps all the other Punjabi *qissas* put together, the poem has always been subordinated to various moral or cultural programs—whether the moralising discourses of social control or the indigenising tendencies of modern Indian and Pakistani literary criticisms. Perhaps because of these concerted attempts to privilege external concerns, very little attention seems to have been given to the poetic of the *qissa* itself: for example, discussion on the propriety of the poem's sexual suggestiveness or the appropriateness of its numerous lists treats such features of the poem in isolation rather than as part of the text as a whole. At the same time, the widespread critical contention that *Hir* is the greatest Punjabi literary masterpiece has led to a criticism by valediction that similarly fails to come to grips with the poem itself.

Unlike Muqbil's poem, Varis's *Hir* attempts to contain many of the transgressive possibilities of the *Hir* story. Like Ahmad Gujjar, Varis compresses key parts of the narrative, including the actual details of the affair between *Hir* and *Ranjha* in *Jhang*. Similarly, the image of *Hir* presented in the poem is a much more restrained one than in either Muqbil or Ahmad. Unlike the heroines of these earlier *qissas*, Varis's *Hir* avoids questioning the bases of social ideology and instead constantly reiterates a discourse of love that puts her in a subordinate position. Largely the traditional classical lover, she avoids



explicit confrontation with her parents or the *qazi* and has no particular claim to knowledge of the *sharia* or the favour of the Panj Pirs (as she does in Muqbil's poem). Unlike in earlier versions of the poem, Hir does not become the centre of an interrogation of the legitimacy of social ideologies of control.

Despite the general restraint of Varis's presentation of the legend, though, the *qissa* is ultimately subversive of both literary convention and social ideology. Throughout the poem, Ranjha acts as a figure who reveals the flaws of key figures like the *mulla* and Balnath, and many of the poem's most biting and memorable critiques of formal religion come from his speeches. Indeed, the poem as a whole displays an ironic stance toward formal religion, eschewing the secondary religious narratives that characterise other early Punjabi *qissas* and taking every opportunity to subvert the discourses of religion by juxtaposing high religious imagery with hypocrisy and sensuality. It is in this context of controlled irony that the poem's suggestive language assumes importance: *Hir's* bawdiness subverts the literary convention of the classical romance as surely as the poem's use of religious analogy undercuts the discourse of religion. Indeed, not only does the *qissa's* suggestiveness undermine the staid discourse of classical romance but it also alters the image of Hir as a conventional romantic heroine: although she refuses to engage with the representatives of formal religion and familial control, Hir emerges as a profoundly erotic character. It is in such unexpected yet eminently successful reversals that Varis Shah's genius lies.

## CONCLUSION

While the major Punjabi *qissas* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries share a number of key literary and social concerns, each of them also has its own individual agenda. In broad outline, the Hir *qissas* of the period move from a position of social critique hedged by narrative containment (Ahmad Gujjar) and mystical allegory (Muqbil) to the more socially disembodied classical romantic treatment of Varis. At the same time, the literary and metrical form of the *qissas* becomes both more polished and more nuanced: consider, for example, Varis's sophisticated subversions of the very classicising poetic which he adopts in his poem. With this increasing literary sophistication, however, comes a marked loss of the social critique which characterised the treatments of Ahmad and Muqbil. Roughly contemporaneous with these developments are the earliest extant Punjabi treatments of the Mirza-Sahiban and Yusuf-Zulaikha stories by Hafiz Barkhurdar and Siddiq Lali respectively. In contrast with the early Hir *qissas'* questioning of the codes of family honour, Hafiz Barkhurdar's poem concentrates on the problem of retaining the patrilineal clan's honour by being faithful to love, exalting Mirza's efforts to keep his honour intact by comparing him to Ali. As such, the *qissa* seems to be the mirror opposite of the early Hir *qissas*, a constituting a reversal of their critique of the concept of honour itself: if anyone in the Hir story is in Mirza's position, it is perhaps Saida (although only at certain points in the narrative). If Hafiz Barkhurdar reverses the moral values of the early Hir *qissas*, Siddiq Lali's *Bahr ul-'ishq* attempts to reverse the poetic of the entire *qissa* tradition by explicitly rearticulating *haqiqi* love in *majazi* terms. Instead of following his predecessors by comparing the passion of the lovers to the rhetoric of devotion, he insists that the *majazi* world is merely an encoded version of the *haqiqi* reality that lies hidden behind the whole created universe. In doing so, he creates an anti-

romance that situates the poetic of love firmly within the discourse of religion.

Despite their individual differences, the early Punjabi *qissas* also share a number of concerns. The early Hir *qissas*, for example, focus on the role of clan status, kinship and marriage in Punjabi society. Both Ahmad and Muqbil stress the importance of status in marital transactions, showing the way in which Ranjha's transformation from landed peasant to cowherd has placed him in a social position inferior to that of the Sials. In doing so, both poems reflect the increasing concern with social status that accompanied the transition to settled agriculture that occurred in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Bar. The *qissas'* concern with social status and clan honour ties in with another of the major social debates of the period: the role of the *sharia*. In the poem, this debate is expressed as the problem of reconciling the different modes of validating marriage provided by the *sharia* on the one hand and by social custom on the other. Ahmad's use of a discourse that sees Hir as the possession of either Ranjha or the Kheras is one half of a debate whose other side sees both his Hir and Muqbil's argue passionately that it is forbidden by the *sharia* for her parents to marry her off without her express consent. Muqbil, in turn, extends this questioning of the role of the *sharia*, emphasising the ways in which it is misused in social discourse: his Hir questions in the strongest terms the *qazi's* legitimacy and his use of the *sharia* to justify social codes of honour. In doing so, Hir interrogates the very bases of ideological control and social authority and calls into question the very structure of her society itself.

If Muqbil uses the figure of Hir to question the subservience of religion to social authority, he follows Ahmad in opposing to the corrupt Islam of the village *qazi* the Islam of the *pirs*. Once again, the poems embody a larger debate in society, one that was particularly important as the eighteenth century went on. The poems' questioning of the social use of the *sharia* is itself

embedded in the wider context of the tension between the Islam of popular *pirs* and the metropolitan (and textual) Islam represented by the village *qazi*. Like the poems' concern with social status in marriage transactions, this tension seems to reflect another of the problems of adaptation posed by the transformation of Bar society from one of wandering herders owing allegiance to urban *pirs* to one of settled agriculturalists more in contact with the representatives of metropolitan Islam. By the time Varis writes his *qissa*, both the settled nature of Bar society and the efforts of eighteenth-century Chishti *pirs* to preach adherence to the *sharia* make the dichotomy between *pirs* and *qazis* rather irrelevant: instead, Varis furnishes a biting critique of the hypocrisy of religious figures. Arguably, though, it is the ambivalence of the earlier *qissas* to orthodox Islam that clears the path for Varis's vitriolic attack on organised religion.

As literary texts, the early Punjabi *qissas* show a common tendency to try to contain the transgressive possibilities of the stories they present. While the most obvious manifestation of this tendency is the increasing bleakness of the texts' endings—Varis has the Sials poison Hir and Hafiz Barkhurdar has both Mirza and Sahiban hung from a tree—it is also made evident by the poetics of the texts themselves. Both Ahmad and Varis attempt to limit the transgressiveness of their *qissas* by avoiding any description of the actual love affair between Hir and Ranjha (although the latter does so in a predictably ironic way), while Muqbil casts their love in a new light by portraying their relationship as that between *pir* and disciple. At the same time, the rebellious Hir of Ahmad and Muqbil disappears behind the poetic veil of the classical lover in Varis's poem. Similarly, Hafiz Barkhurdar avoids entirely the issue of the relationship between Mirza and Sahiban, instead presenting Mirza's abduction of his lover as the somewhat more socially acceptable act of a Jat trying to protect the honour of his name. Siddiq Lali takes this type of discourse further by reinterpreting the courtly discourse of love entirely. No

longer the tool of impassioned lovers, courtly love becomes in his hands the familial love of the prophets for one another.

As is perhaps to be expected from a series of north Indian texts in the tradition of classical love poetry, the early Punjabi *qissas* focus strongly on issues of identity. With his transformations from agriculturalist to cowherd to *jogi*, Ranjha provides the most obvious example of the poetic that sees the lover lose both his social identity and his status in pursuit of the beloved, while Hir embodies the paradigm of the lover who sacrifices her identity in complete subordination to the beloved. In doing so, they embody a discourse of love that is so well-known as to be almost stereotypical. At the same time, though, both Hir and Ranjha (and indeed Mirza) seek out a new identity constructed around love that is in part intended as a replacement for the social identities they must forego in the cause of love: denied honour by the fact that they have disobeyed society and their parents, they seek to gain honour by being faithful to love even to the point of death. In doing so, they substitute for the shifting identities of the lover a new identity that mirrors the ones they have lost.

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