Faculty of English

Writing Resistance in the Three Punjabs

Critical Engagements with Literary Tradition

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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

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This dissertation is inspired by my literary and musical engagements with the Punjabi literary tradition as a political organiser and theatre performer for the past ten years. My experience of organising, reading, and performing with the Sangat, an independent group of artists and intellectuals based in Lahore, has crucially

enabled and shaped my readings of Punjabi literatures of resistance. In particular, I am deeply indebted to Huma Safdar, Maqsood Saqib, and Najm Hosain Syed, who have served as both muse and mentor. I continue to learn from their theatre, criticism, and writing.

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Abstract

This dissertation analyses post-colonial Punjabi writing on the left as a critical engagement with literary tradition that re-interprets tropes of resistance embedded in popular, oral genres to articulate political critique in the contemporary. Drawing on Punjabi texts from India, Pakistan, and Britain, I show how this corpus constitutes an imaginative geography of an un-Partitioned Punjab by re-working regional oral texts like the Hir qissa, the Bulleh Shah kafi, and the var of Dulla Bhatti. However, this turn to regional roots can by no means be read as a nostalgic paean to a pristine pre-colonial past. Instead, these post-colonial interpretations of literary tradition are informed by resistance against the oppressions of caste, class, patriarchy, race, dominant religion, and statist authoritarianism. Thus, my readings of Amrita Pritam, Nasreen Anjum Bhatti, Gursharan Singh, Najm Hosain Syed, Ustad Daman, Sant Ram Udasi, Niranjan Singh Noor, Ajmer Coventry and Avtar Singh Sadiq highlight the centrality of contestation and resistance to the living Punjabi literary tradition.

I focus attention on how Punjabi intellectuals continued to resist and defy the physical, conceptual, and political borders that empire and post-colonial state alike sought to entrench, de-provincialising Punjabi writing and connecting it with wider debates around decolonisation, feminism, Marxism, revolutionary culture, anti-imperialism, and popular struggle in the global South. More broadly, I draw on this selection of Punjabi writing to explore the relationship between tradition and modernity, and orality and print culture, interrogating the link between pre-colonial pasts and post-colonial futures in visions of liberation.

Note on Translations and Transliteration

All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. For transliterations of Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, or Sanskrit words, I have used romanisation conventions that are commonly used and most accessible to native speakers.

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1. Punjabi Writing on the Left: Language, Tradition, and Resistance

> Those who in every age emerge from the toil of the soil
>
> Who have wandered many lands in many forms
>
> Sailing in the boat of words, they sang the five rivers into being
>
> They sowed the seeds of words in our barren tongue
>
> Who raised the smouldering night by ploughing the day
>
> Who made the collective breath from the secrets of the discarded
>
> Who curdled into existence the milk of tomorrow
>
> Who tied small streams into rivers of love
>
> Who left the throne of faqeeri to the bent and needy:
>
> Farid, Damodar, Nanak, Gurdas, Hussain,
>
> Bahu, Bullah, Waris, Barkhurdar, Najabat
>
> Mohammad, Qadiryar, Hashim, Sachal, Fareed
>
> They joined the creator and creation, making one the earth and skies
>
> Now they ask one and all
>
> To sing the unsung song.[1] (Syed, 2013)[2]

In its invocation to key poetic figures, its sketch of a counter-cartography of the region, and its insistence on routing literary tradition to address the

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[1] Translation by myself and Virinder Kalra.

[2] Transcribed from a live performance by Shafqat Hussain at Suchet Kitab Ghar circa April 2013.

contemporary, this poem by Najm Hosain Syed encapsulates the literary methodologies deployed by the dissident Punjabi authors discussed in this dissertation. Titled “Panj Pir” (The Five Saints), it centres popular resistance and social critique as the defining feature of the Punjabi literary tradition. Written well after 1947, the poem celebrates and pays tribute to the Punjabi literary tradition’s incredible potential to serve as a source for revolutionary consciousness. “The Five Saints” almost takes the form of a narrative of origins, a creation story that centres the role of popular literary production in shaping the history of the people. The unnamed ‘they’ who ‘sang the five rivers into being’, ‘sowed the seeds of words in our barren tongue’, and ‘raised the smouldering night by ploughing the day’ are revealed in a chronological list towards the end. This list, which cycles through key poetic figures of the Punjabi literary tradition including Waris Shah and Bulleh Shah, is drawn from across the communal divide, its continuous form collapsing the Sufi saint Baba Farid into the Hindu poet, Damodar Das, and the Sikh Guru, Nanak Dev.

Syed’s choice of images and actions to construct the Punjabi landscape evoke the labour and materiality of subaltern life. The work of sailing, sowing, ploughing, curdling milk, and managing water (‘tying streams’) becomes that of forging literary tradition, drawing a direct link between material histories and popular poetry. This playful treatment of geography is a technique that we often see in post-colonial Punjabi writing, for instance, in Chapter Two of this dissertation, Pritam presents a distorted geography of the region by painting rivers and fields red with blood, while in Chapter Five, Niranjan Singh Noor’s “Ho Chi Minh” shades the rural expanse of Punjab into the Vietnamese landscape to draw connections between the Indian and Vietnamese anticolonial struggles. Thus, in Syed’s “The Five Saints”, the Punjabi literary tradition is elaborated as “a philosophy which

already enjoys… a certain diffusion, *because it is connected to and implicit in practical life*" (Crehan 2002, 111) (My emphasis). This connection with 'practical life' to use Gramsci's wording, also extends across time, into the contemporary, linking 12th century Punjabi poet Baba Farid with 'each one of us' ('jani khani') today. The exhortation in the 'now' to sing the 'unsung song' follows the vast historical sweep across regional literary figures, distilling the tropes, expressions, and poetic modes of centuries into the urgency of a present that demands an active engagement, a song that invokes and re-interprets the sounds of the very tradition that 'sang the rivers into being'.

"The Five Saints" is not simply a tribute to Punjabi poets of the past, as its focus on the material roots and transhistorical expanse of literary tradition also frames the poem as a manifesto for revolutionary writing in the present. The historical poetic figures from the regional literary tradition are invoked in relation to oppositional politics today, as the concluding lines make clear: "Now they ask all and sundry/ To sing the unsung song." By placing this public invitation at the very end, Syed stresses the dynamic and interpretive relationship that must be forged between the contemporary writer and historical tradition, imbuing an urgency through the word 'now'. Moreover, the very last line ascribes a state of becoming to literary tradition, incomplete until 'each one of us' 'in every age' 'sing the unsung song'. Thus, these concluding words close the gap between literary tradition and post-colonial writing, rejecting a view of Punjabi poetry as part of a hallowed canon or a pre-colonial culture. This is accomplished through the sharp contrast between a long list of primarily male literary/ devotional figures and the ordinary, public underpinnings of 'all and sundry'. It is also crucial to note that the English translation does not capture the gendered implications of Syed's rendering, who uses the term 'jani khani', which is

the feminine form for the North Indian word ‘jana’. ‘Jana’ refers to any living being, but is commonly used in the masculine sense, for a man. Hence, the inheritors and exponents of literary tradition are those offering resistance from the margins, women, ordinary people, in other words, ‘those who emerge from the toil of the soil’, and comprise ‘the bent and the needy’.

Central to the poem’s crossing of the borders of nation, time, and literary modernity is an oppositional understanding of ‘tradition.’ How did Najm Hosain Syed and other radical Punjabi authors understand and interpret literary tradition? How did they perceive its relationship to anticolonial consciousness and post-colonial critique? How did this tradition help them theorise the particular and the universal in their political and intellectual practice to participate in planetary debates around liberation and revolutionary culture?

To answer these questions, this dissertation will trace the genealogical development of regional literary structures of resistance in post-colonial Punjabi writing. I examine how post-colonial Punjabi writing by anti-imperialist, Left-wing, feminist, anti-caste, and antiracist intellectuals inhabited and actively created an imaginative geography of a pre-Partition Punjab, by referencing and re-interpreting key texts and motifs from the regional literary tradition. In doing so, I focus attention on how Punjabi intellectuals continued to resist and defy the physical, conceptual, and political borders that empire and post-colonial state alike sought to entrench. Malhotra and Mir have emphasised the notion of ‘Punjabiyat’ as a ‘sense of belonging to Punjab’ with foundations in a “shared, cross-religious, cross-caste, cross-class culture”, deploying it as an alternative framework that subverts the categories of ‘India’, ‘Pakistan’ or ‘diaspora’.

However, dissident Punjabi intellectuals remained wary of romanticising any such “idea of Punjab” (Malhotra and Mir 2012, 25). Rather, their poetry, short stories, and drama centred a critique of exclusion along the lines of gender, caste, class, race, and dominant religion, re-deploying literary structures of resistance from the qissa, var, kafi, and other popular genres to this end.

My reading of feminist, anticolonial, anti-authoritarian, anti-caste, and antiracist intellectuals highlights the centrality of contestation and dissent to the Punjabi literary tradition, de-provincialising Punjabi writing and inserting it into wider debates around decolonisation, Marxism, revolutionary culture, anti-imperialism, and popular struggle in the global South. As the works of Amrita Pritam, Nasreen Anjum Bhatti, Gursharan Singh, Najm Hosain Syed, Ustad Daman, Sant Ram Udasi, Niranjan Singh Noor, Ajmer Coventry and Avtar Singh Sadiq show us, resistance against empire, dominant nationalism, and regional hegemonies do not have to entail a universalism that shuns local roots. Rather, through their intimate and critical engagement with regional oral texts like the Hir qissa, the Bulleh Shah kafi, and the var of Dulla Bhatti, these progressive Punjabi writers worked to forge a revolutionary political culture that was grounded in local histories of resistance and literary genealogies of critique.

As one such text emerging from a dialogue with literary tradition, Syed’s “The Five Saints” is simultaneously a comment, an interpretation, and an internal critique. The poem exemplifies the spatial and cultural imaginary of radical Punjabi writing, and its specific take on decolonisation and political critique. For these dissident writers, the Punjabi literary tradition was a subalternised archive of the region’s history, culture, and society, a living site where struggles for hegemony, past and present, were enacted

and encoded. Thus, while the Punjabi literary tradition undoubtedly ventriloquised dominant power, reinforcing patriarchal, casteist, feudal, and classist norms, it *also* housed the conceptual tools for resistance, which competed with and often subverted hegemonic interpretations. For Punjabi writers on the left, this genealogy of contestation and subversion was the keystone for the contemporary intellectual's engagement with regional tradition.

While Chapters 2-5 offer close readings of selected writing and focused discussions of the political contexts that shaped the progressive, left-wing outlook of these intellectuals, this introductory chapter will sketch the broad contours of post-colonial Punjabi writing on the left as shaped by an oppositional engagement with literary tradition and an anticolonial, Marxist-inspired language politics. In so doing, the current chapter also offers commentary on academic debates around Punjabiyat, borders and literature, regional/ vernacular cultures and post-colonial writing, and genealogies of anticolonial and progressive literary production in South Asia and beyond.

In particular, I engage critically with Farina Mir's conceptualisation of the 'Punjabi Literary Formation' and with Gramsci's theorisation of the place of 'folklore' and 'common sense' in revolutionary culture to establish resistance as a central category in post-colonial re-workings of regional literary tradition. Moving on, I discuss the importance of language politics in dissident Punjabi writing in India, Pakistan, and Britain. Drawing on Ngũgĩ Wa Thiongo's manifesto to decolonise the language of African literatures, I read Ustad Daman, whose poetry is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four, as exemplifying the left-wing Punjabi language politics that sought to de-link linguistic identity from ethnicity and address it in

relation to class and colonial histories.The purpose of my engagement with Gramsci's theorisation of folklore and Ngũgĩ's manifesto for decolonising language is to establish a resonance between different Global South contexts of left-leaning and anticolonial struggle, rather than deploy these canonical texts merely as frameworks for interpreting Punjabi literary resistance. Discussing Najm Hosain Syed and Ustad Daman alongside and in critical dialogue with Gramsci and Ngũgĩ forces a deprovincialisation of Punjabi writing as dictated solely by local concerns and the primordial continuity of a bardic tradition. It is pertinent to mention that in 1970s Punjab, Gramscian concepts like hegemony, folklore, and subaltern culture were being debated amongst Punjabi Marxists deliberating the shape that revolutionary cultural politics should take in the region[3], and similarly, Ngũgĩ's writings, including *Decolonising the mind*, were translated into Punjabi during the 1970s,[4] and deeply influenced Marxist writers and intellectuals in articulating the relationship between literature and language. However, my focus remains on developing a methodology that tries to think *with* radical Punjabi literary texts and centre them as theoretical contributions in and of themselves, rather than 'applying' established academic frameworks from post-colonial studies to their reading.

Through this discussion, and close readings in subsequent chapters, I hope to share a literary methodology that challenges the logics of bordering by working across the nation-state divide, and pushes the boundaries between

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[3] For instance, the debate between leftist intellectuals Kishan Singh and Sant Singh Sekhon is well known, and broadly represents two distinct streams within Punjabi cultural Marxism. While Kishan Singh emphasised the need for a materialist analysis of popular regional texts, including Gurbani, the Sikh scripture, Sant Singh Sekhon embodied the modernist, secular aesthetic of the progressive writers' movement, calling for an overhaul of rather than a return to regional literary and spiritual traditions.

[4] In a personal interview, Maqsood Saqib, editor of the left-leaning Punjabi magazine *Pancham*, short-story writer and translator, described Ngũgĩ as his 'hero'. Saqib translated Ngũgĩ's *Decolonising the mind* into Punjabi during the 1970s and has published excerpts of it over the years in *Pancham*.

orality and print, the pre-colonial and post-colonial, and tradition and modernity.

Punjabi Writing in Academic Analyses: Overcoming Methodological Nationalism

My analysis of dissident Punjabi texts in this dissertation is grounded in an approach that will consider so-called 'pre-colonial vernacular culture' as simultaneous to, and in dynamic engagement with 'post-colonial literature'. However, existing academic writing on the subject has largely maintained this divide. As a review of writing around these categories demonstrates, the binary between tradition and modernity orders academic approaches to the study of Punjabi literary cultures. Overall, Punjabi writing has received limited critical attention. When it comes to texts of pre-colonial origin from the poetic tradition, most research is concentrated in the fields of religion, history, and culture studies, with the result that literary texts often feature as 'sources' to be mined for sociological or historical analysis, and are rarely read as aesthetic and intellectual interventions with something to offer in and of themselves. So, for instance, Ishwar Dayal Gaur's *Society, Religion and Patriarchy: Exploring Medieval Punjab Through Hir Waris* is the only book-length treatment of the qissa of *Hir Waris Shah*, and approaches the narrative as a descriptive, historical text (Gaur 2009). Notable exceptions include Jeevan Deol's 2002 article on *Hir Waris Shah* that analyses the poet's 'ambiguous' treatment of the heroine's sexuality, and Anne Murphy's nuanced elucidation of Sufi-Bhakti intersections through contextualised close readings of Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah (Murphy 2019).[5]

[5] See also Murphy (2019), "Sufis, Jogis, and the question of religious difference: Individualization in early modern Punjab through Waris Shah's *Hīr".* Chapter Two of this dissertation turns to *Hir Waris Shah,* analysing the voice of Hir as providing a genre of feminist critique for the post-colonial poetry of Amrita Pritam and Nasreen Anjum Bhatti.

Thus, studies of 'literary tradition' in Punjab tend to focus on the medieval or pre-colonial period, and few attempts have been made to trace its re-working and interpretation in post-colonial writing. In any case, when it comes to analyses of post-colonial Punjabi literatures, there are few detailed studies of note that offer close readings of key texts and authors. For the most, anthologies and volumes like Duggal and Sekhon's 1992 *A History of Punjabi Literature* provide surveys of twentieth and twenty-first century Punjabi writing, with a heavy emphasis on titles from East Punjab, India. While 'parvasi sulekh*'* (diasporic Punjabi writing) has been accorded some attention in journal articles by Murphy (2008), Kalra (2017), and Tatla (2002), West Punjabi writing from Pakistan remains especially poorly represented.[6] This relegation of Punjabi writing from Pakistan stems from the bordering logics of dominant nationalism that stricture academic inquiry. The field of post-colonial writing is organised primarily around 'national literatures', in which authors from India and Pakistan can at best be read through a comparative framework. Moreover, the communal categorisation of languages that was instituted by both colonialism and dominant nationalism marks Urdu as Muslim, Hindi as Hindu, and consequentially, Punjabi as Sikh. The boundaries of the nation-state are mapped onto literary and linguistic worlds, eliding from view the dissident cross-border publics that thrive in spite of and in resistance to dominant nationalism, constituting alternative imaginations like the texts discussed in this dissertation. Thus, an insistence on reading Punjabi texts from India, Pakistan, and Britain together presents a path for overcoming bordered thinking and methodological nationalism. When viewed from this counter-

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[6] Some exceptions include Kazmi, Sara. "Of Subalterns and Sammi Trees: Echoes of Ghadar in the Punjabi Literary Movement." *Socialist Studies/Études Socialistes*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2018, pp. 114–133., https://doi.org/10.18740/ss27242; and Kalra, Virinder S., and Waqas Butt. "'If I Speak, They Will Kill Me, to Remain Silent Is to Die': Poetry of Resistance in General Zias Pakistan (1977–88)." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 04, 2019, pp. 1038–1065., https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x17000130.

national space, what shapes the forms of post-colonial Punjabi writing? This thesis argues that the primary inspiration remains the shared centuries-old Punjabi literary tradition, which pre-dates Independence and continues to challenge the 1947 divide.

The tradition-modernity binary and the bordering logics that govern the study of Punjabi writing prevail across writing on post-colonial literatures in South Asia. While there is a rich body of scholarship that addresses questions of vernacular literatures, orality, folklore, popular religion, and poetic cultures in medieval India,[7] few of these insights inform post-colonialist criticism. For Aijaz Ahmad, this is due to the singular focus that colonialism receives in contemporary analyses, due to which its (apparently only) converse, nationalism, is designated as "the determinate and epochal ideology for cultural production in non-Western societies" (Ahmad 1992, 243). It follows that the "nation as an analytic eclipses other concerns… in formulating counter-canons of Third World literature", obscuring our view of "the history of sedimentations that constitutes the Indian cultural formation" that includes much besides colonialism per se (Ibid 124; 17). Moreover, this fixation on British colonialism also over-determines our view of literary modernity, which is understood to have caused a definitive rupture in form and thematic content. This has led to, as discussed earlier, a singular focus on the prose genre that is seen as synonymous with print culture, the novel. Further, the print forms ushered in by colonial modernity tend to be read solely in relation to the concerns of colonialism, nation formation, and post-colonial identity. However, in the Indian context, oral

[7] See for instance, Orsini, Francesca, and Katherine Butler Schofield. *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*. Open Book Publishers, 2015; Orsini, Francesca, and Samira Sheikh. *After Timur Left Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth-Century North India*. Oxford University Press, 2015; Pollock, Sheldon. *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003; and Blackburn, Stuart H. *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*. 1st edition. edited by A. K. Ramanujan. Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1986.

and textual traditions not only coexist but are symbiotic. As Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan (1984) point out, the oral and textual, traditional and modern, are co-constitutive and engaged in a relationship in which the "borrowing from one to the other has never ceased" (Ibid, 4). In particular, in the case of post-colonial Punjabi writing in which these historical sedimentations in the form of genres and motifs of the regional literary tradition are both intertextually invoked and directly referenced, an analysis that extends beyond the borders of colonial time, and geography becomes imperative. As this brief review of writing on Punjabi literatures shows, a methodology which addresses the connections between orality, literary tradition, and regional history with contemporary writing, colonial modernity, and global concerns, remains missing.

A Punjabi 'Literary Formation'

Farina Mir's important study of Punjabi print culture in colonial India attempts to break from these methodological limitations by teasing out a cultural history of late nineteenth century Punjabi qisse[8], highlighting the "resilience" of the 'Punjabi literary formation' that thrived in spite of the marginalisation of Punjabi language and literature under British colonialism (Mir 2010). Mir's *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* remains the only monograph that charts continuity and renewal in the Punjabi literary culture through a meticulous documentation of dozens of new versions of the traditional Hir qissa that were authored, published, and circulated during the colonial period. Her most significant contribution lies in highlighting the durability of vernacular literary tradition, the limits of colonial cultural domination, and

8 Farina Mir (2010) informs us that the Punjabi qissa, as a genre, has its roots in the Arabic and Persian storytelling traditions. The Punjabi qissa follows the typical pada rhyme scheme, but uses indigenous rather than Persian metres, also incorporating local romances.

her de-centring of communal identities and nationalist politics, themes that dominate the study of colonial India, and Punjab in particular.

Of particular interest to literary scholars is Mir's theorisation of the 'Punjabi literary formation', a concept that I critically engage in this section to present my own reading of the relationship between regional literary tradition and post-colonial critique. Mir reads the Punjabi literary formation as a "sociotextual community" and a public constituted by specific social relations, devotional practices, cultural forms, and "shared literary practices and ideas." (Mir 2010, 98) For dissident writers and left-wing organisers, these social and cultural roots of the literary formation made it an important site for explorations in revolutionary culture, presenting a historical cultural field indispensable to popular mobilisation and social commentary in the region.

However, there are serious limitations to Mir's assertion that the Punjabi literary formation was defined through shared notions of piety regardless of religious affiliation (Ibid 2012, 9) and that it represented cross class, -gender, and -caste collaboration (Ibid 2010). Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's writings on folklore, hegemony, and common sense, I offer a shift in focus that centres the role of contestation and resistance in the Punjabi literary tradition. I discuss how Mir's emphasis on "shared notions of piety" (Ibid 2012, 9) and belonging overlooks anticolonial Punjabi print culture that directly challenged both the colonial state and Indian collaboration by critiquing regional structures of power such as caste and dominant religion alongside capitalist imperialism. Further, I contend that Mir's formulation romanticises a pre-Independence literary culture in Punjab, presenting a rosy picture that becomes conceptually irreconcilable with the ravages of Partition. By reading post-colonial Punjabi writing

through the tropes of contestation and resistance embedded in literary tradition, I posit a move away from seeing the Partition as a totalising literary rupture, choosing instead to spotlight imaginaries that resist and counter bordering.

For Mir, "the Punjabi literary formation refers to a group constituted through its members' shared practices of producing, circulating, performing, reading, and listening to Punjabi literary texts…" (2010, 97) To elucidate her idea of a 'literary formation', Mir draws on Sheldon Pollock's notion of a "sociotextual community" (Pollock 1998, 9). Pollock suggests that a sociotextual community is one that derives part of its self-understanding as a community through reading, hearing, performing, reproducing, and circulating literary texts (Ibid). As Mir points out, devotional practices, social relations and occupations constituted the Punjabi literary formation alongside poetic texts like the qissa, pointing to Sufi shrines as sites where qawwali and other performative traditions enacted and interpreted key texts like the kafis of Bulleh Shah (Mir 2010, 100). She also highlights the central role played by the mirasis (traditional genealogists and musicians) in the performance, dissemination, and preservation of Punjabi literature (Ibid, 118). Moreover, Mir deploys Michael Warner's insights into publics and counterpublics to frame the Punjabi literary formation as "a social collective based not only on a shared language (which we might think of as simply a linguistic community) but also on shared literary practices and ideas" (Ibid, 98).

This distinction is crucial, as it separates the Punjabi literary formation from a 'Punjabi nation' or an amorphously defined 'Punjabiyat'. Although Mir has elsewhere argued for the value and viability of 'Punjabiyat' as a

category in the study of historical Punjab[9], in my reading, her own theorisation of the Punjabi literary formation resists the generalising implications of a dominant Punjabi identity or ‘Punjabiyat’. This is because the Punjabi literary formation is not merely based on the ethnic ties of language and region, rather, it demands an engagement with key texts and ideas. As Mir points out, “access to the Punjabi literary formation was open to anyone within the linguistic community but… belonging was secured by active participation in a tradition that inhabited a shared social space and focused selectively on particular, relevant concerns” (Ibid, 99). This transformed the Punjabi literary formation, and in particular, genres like the qissa, into sites that provided not only aesthetic expression, but also social commentary (Ibid).

Moreover, the notion of a ‘sociotextual community’ emphasises the socially embedded and collective nature of genres like the Hir qissa, the Bulleh Shah kafi, and the var, marking them as a powerful conceptual field for post-colonial dissidents to draw upon. For example, in Chapter Four, we see how the performative form of Sant Ram Udasi and Ustad Daman’s protest poetry drew on popular devotion around the Bulleh Shah lyric to critique caste and post-colonial authoritarianism, by subverting the tropes of dominant religion. Similarly, in Chapter Three, the role of the mirasi in re-invigorating literary tradition is an important part of Gursharan Singh’s *The Pulsating Drum*. In the play, the socially marginal figure of the mirasi offers a critique of the hero figure, deconstructing top-down notions of leadership in political struggles by indicting the casteist, feudal structure in which Dulla himself was embedded.

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[9] see Malhotra, Anshu and F. Mir (eds). *Punjab Reconsidered*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

Thus, when it came to deploying literary production as a mobilisation tool, and decolonising aesthetic form, the confluence of literary aesthetic, social relations, and cultural debate in the Punjabi literary formation fielded rich possibilities for oppositional intellectuals. It is this aspect that establishes its texts as crucial referents for post-colonial critique on the left. As we see in successive chapters of this dissertation, literary methods, symbols, and genres from the Punjabi literary tradition are interpreted, critiqued, and re-worked to offer feminist, anticolonial, Marxist, anti-caste, and antiracist visions in the contemporary. In light of these post-colonial reconstructions, Mir's notion of the 'formation' becomes even more important, as a literary public that is in the process of *being formed*, undergoing change and re-vision. Such a formulation precludes static conceptions of 'tradition' that one encounters in colonial knowledge on the vernacular cultures of colonised peoples with pre-modern origins.[10] It also counters anthropological approaches that emphasise the local, communitarian focus of regional oral and textual production, as we see how post-colonial Punjabi writing addresses literary tradition together with planetary debates around anticolonial liberation, global Marxism, and Third World feminism.

Although Mir's use of the term 'literary formation' allows for a dynamic and expansive view of Punjabi literature, and resists the sense of stasis that attaches to the word 'tradition', I have chosen the referent 'Punjabi literary tradition' in this dissertation. It is also the term deployed by Najm Hosain Syed in his influential treatise on the subject titled *Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry*, which I discuss in a later section alongside Gramsci's theorisation of 'folklore'. While I engage with the concept of 'folklore' via

[10] A prominent example of this is colonial official and anthropologist R.C. Temple's 1884 *The Legends of the Panjab.* For critical studies of folklore and popular literatures in post-colonial societies, see Finnegan, Ruth H. *Oral Literature in Africa.* , Open Book Publishers, 2012. Ong, Walter J., and John Hartley. *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*. Routledge, 2012.

Gramsci, I do not deploy it throughout the dissertation on account of its limiting, binary implications as a body of texts belonging *only* to the oral, functionally illiterate, and local or rural sphere, separated from 'literature proper'. Thus, I prefer the term 'literary tradition' to assert left-wing Punjabi writing's status as literature, as a canon with its own genres, forms and publics. At the same time, I retain the reference to 'tradition' as this rendering in English most directly captures how Punjabi intellectuals themselves defined the regional formation, as 'reet', a North Indian word that variously refers to a path or way of doing things, ritual, inherited tradition, or certain institutionalised cultural manners and structures. Rather than abandon the term to colonialist knowledge that deploys the term 'tradition' or 'folklore' to belittle and exoticise the histories of those it subjugated, the attempt is to re-claim it, faithfully presenting the spirit in which 'tradition' is invoked in Punjabi literatures of resistance.

Political Resistance and Literary Tradition

As mentioned before, Mir's framework of 'shared piety' fails to address the exclusions of caste, class, and gender. Viewed against this rosy picture of a cross-religious literary formation, Partition is bound to appear as a totalising literary and political rupture. This is clearest in the Conclusion to *The Social Space of Language,* where Mir grapples with the question,

> How do we reconcile the history of a vibrant vernacular culture anchored in shared practices and sentiments that cut across religious lines with the history of the Indian partition, an event that epitomized religious rupture? (Mir 2010, 183)

For Mir, despite the “longevity” of the Punjabi literary formation, its influence seemed to “wane at the cusp of Independence” and “diminish further during the postcolonial period” (Ibid). She cites Amrita Pritam’s famous poem, “Aj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu” (Today I Call on Waris Shah), noting how it invoked “something like the ethos of the Punjabi literary formation” (Ibid). However, she reads the poem as a nostalgic lament, befitting the demise of a Punjab defined by “shared notions of piety” (Ibid 2012, 9) and belonging that were “not just those of literate, middle- and upper-class, and upper-caste groups, but were forged through processes of interaction that included lower castes and classes as well” (Ibid, 97; 98).

This rosy picture of a pristine past with religious tolerance and peaceful co-habitation seals the finality of the Partition, aligning with dominant historiography around the event that metaphorises it as the ‘death’ and necessary ‘sacrifice’ of an older world for the birth of the nation. However, this framing of Partition Studies in South Asia largely ignores ongoing resistance to the border and its political, conceptual, and cultural divides. This can be traced in texts written as early as 1947 and as recently as 2020[11], and include Amrita Pritam’s “Today I Call on Waris Shah”, which I analyse in Chapter Two not as a lament, but as a stirring reminder of the ‘ethos’ of contestation in the Punjabi literary formation, as she invokes both Waris Shah and his female heroine, Hir, to indict the multiple patriarchies that underpinning the gendered violence of Partition, that require dismantling in the wake of formal decolonisation. Thus, the Punjabi literary formation is not obliterated by Partition, rather, its critical spirit and popular appeal can be traced in the literary resistance of post-colonial writers on the left.

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[11] See for instance, Zubair Ahmed’s *A Wall of Water,* Lahore: Kitab Trinjan, 2020. and Maqsood Saqib’s *You Should Go Home,* Lahore: Suchet Kitab Ghar, 2019.

Moreover, Mir's suggestion that Punjabi writing occupied an 'autonomous' (Mir 2006, 398) position vis a vis the colonial state takes a very narrow view of vernacular print culture, overlooking the volumes of proscribed and underground anticolonial texts that directly confronted the state and participated in the sub-continental and global struggle against capitalist imperialism. Mir writes how, even though

> The Punjabi literary formation… was relatively independent from the state, It was certainly imbued with a politics (articulated, not least, through its choice of language and genre), but these were not directed at the state, nor did the Punjabi formation engage the state as a site of alternative politics. This is perhaps the Punjabi literary formation's most unique feature: while it had amazing traction in Punjabi society; incorporated a diverse range of people around the practices of literature, and represented shared social and cultural values, these values *did not* translate into political action in state arenas. (Ibid, 99)

This view elides the variety of ways in which forms like the qissa, kafi, and var circulated in protest writing, galvanising anticolonial critique. The most important example of this is the poetry of the Hindustan Ghadar Party,[12] a militant anticolonial organisation founded by Indian exiles and migrant workers in North America. The movement's poetry, penned in the hundreds primarily by 'coolies' and indentured labourers from a Punjabi peasant background, appeared in the party's banned organ, *Ghadar*, and often

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[12] The Hindustan Ghadar Party was a militant anticolonial political party founded in 1913 in California, United States, primarily by Indian emigrant workers and exiles. For more, see Ramnath, Maia. *Haj to Utopia: How The Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism And Attempted To Overthrow The British Empire.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. For the poetry published in the party's organ, *Ghadar*, see Kesar, K.S. *Ghadar Lehar Di Kavita*, Patiala: Punjabi University Press, 1995.

deployed the very devotional, performative, and cultural forms that define Mir's notion of the Punjabi literary formation.[13] As Virinder Kalra observes, religious identities are almost always evoked to be condemned in Ghadarite poetry, calling on the reader to overcome communal differences to unite against the colonial oppressor (2017, 208). For example, one anonymous poet writes how "we do not need pandits or kazis for we do not want our ship to sink/ the time for prayers and contemplation is past, it is time to raise the sword" (Tatla 2013, 63). Similarly, another Ghadarite poem states:

The Guru established the Panth for selfless service,
He fought a marvellous battle
To remove tyranny from India, battles on many fronts
For this Hind, millions sacrificed their lives,
it is we who have forgotten the cause
The Tenth Guru sacrificed his whole family,
along with Nabbi and Ganni Shah for the cause. (Kesar 1995, 94)

As we see in these two poems, the shared practices of piety and popular devotion that Mir references are conspicuously invoked in a politics directed at the colonial state. In the second poem, Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru of Sikhism, is invoked in an exhortation to political action for 'the cause' of 'removing tyranny from India', while the first one frames both the qazi (Muslim cleric) and the pandit (Brahmin priest) as enemies of the freedom struggle, presenting them as symbols of communal division. The Ghadar movement and its cultural politics constitutes a powerful legacy of a distinctly Punjabi radicalism, articulating a synthesis between

[13] See for example, the songs of the anticolonial organisation, the Indian People's Theatre Association analysed by Sumangala Damodaran in *The Radical Impulse*. One of the most popular IPTA songs that protested the Bengal famine drew on the Hir qissa, deploying its traditional rendition style. For more, see Damodaran, Sumangala. *The Radical Impulse: Music in the Tradition of the Indian People's Theatre Association*. , New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2017.

anticolonial internationalism and regional cultures of protest. This poetic mode finds a successor in the anticolonial, anti-dictatorship protest verses of Ustad Daman, which are discussed in Chapter Four. Similarly, as I outline in Chapter Five, this legacy exercised a powerful influence on the poetry of the Indian Workers Association, due in part to familial links with Ghadarite exiles and activists, as well as the identical conditions of immigrant exploitation that Punjabis in post-war Britain faced. For instance, the text of *Hir Waris Shah,* the narrative that Mir also focuses on in her book, was an important part of Udham Singh's trial in London. As discussed in Chapter Five, Singh drew on the symbolism surrounding the text to transform the courtroom into a stage for enacting an anticolonialism rooted in regional histories of resistance.

Furthermore, Mir is right to assert that the Punjabi literary formation's "participants were diverse in religion, caste, class, and gender", and that it was shaped through interactions that "included lower castes and classes" (Mir 2010, 99). However, the word 'interaction' suggests a co-operation or consensus that cuts across caste, class, and gender, while in the texts of the Punjabi literary tradition, this 'interaction' takes the shape of resistance, critique, and subversion. I contend that while the Punjabi literary formation certainly provided a shared vocabulary for social commentary, its ethos, philosophy, and practice remains widely contested along the lines of caste, class, and gender. On the one hand, its languages and tropes are often co-opted by elite projects of hegemonising religion, culture, and regional identity. I elucidate this in Chapter Four, where I discuss dominant appropriations of Bulleh Shah through the political economy of shrines, as well as contemporary popular culture. On the other hand, as discussed in the same chapter, Bulleh Shah's figure also continues to exercise a formative influence on literary resistance against the nexus of dominant

religion and elite power, as we see in the dissident re-workings of Daman and Udasi, which reflect Bulleh Shah's poetic mode in their critique of caste and authoritarianism in post-colonial Punjab. Thus, dominant appropriations must be acknowledged to avoid fetishising regional tradition as an 'autonomous subaltern sphere'[14], approaching it as an island of primordial resistance insulated against dominant hegemony. However, with this caveat in mind, it is still possible to appreciate the tremendous potential that the Punjabi literary formation offers to literary dissidents today as a site for cultural expression relegated from an increasingly Arab-oriented, Urdu-centric Muslim nationalism in Pakistan, and its counterparts in India, where we see either a Sikh-focused regionalism in Punjab, or a fascist Hindutva.

Literary Tradition and Traces of Resistance: A Critical Engagement with Gramsci

To centre the role of class struggle, caste conflict, and anti-patriarchal resistance within the historical development of the Punjabi literary tradition, I critically engage with Antonio Gramsci's reading of 'folklore' as an oppositional conception of the world that offers a window into subaltern consciousness and houses the intellectual tools for critique in the form of traces left by historical struggles for hegemony. However, this Gramscian framework also presents a limitation through an insistence on the inherently 'contradictory' and 'incoherent' nature of folklore, which must be distilled by an 'organic intellectual' into a coherent 'philosophy of praxis.' The bias is further confirmed in his view of 'dialect' or vernacular languages as necessarily "limited and provincial" (Gramsci and Forgacs 2000, 326). This limitation can be overcome through recourse to Syed's delineation of literary tradition as a practice through which individual authors engage,

[14] For a critique of this theoretical tendency within the Subaltern Studies project, see Sarkar, Sumit. "The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies." *Writing Social History*. Oxford University Press, 1997, pp 82-108.

interpret and re-constitute what Gramsci refers to as 'folklore'. For Syed, 'folklore' is itself constituted through a process of interpretation and dialogue involving popular poets who function as 'organic intellectuals'. Thus, reading Gramsci and Syed together yields a framework that demolishes the hierarchy between the intellectual and the mass, and 'folklore' and a 'philosophy of praxis', placing both in a dynamic, co-constitutive relationship of interpretation, critique, and renewal.

My engagement with Gramscian notions of 'folklore' seeks to deprovincialise Punjabi writing, expanding interpretations of its thematics beyond a localised, ethnic ambit to address global debates around Marxism, anticolonialism, and revolutionary culture. Gramsci occupies a central position within debates on Marxist cultural politics and post-colonial theory, especially within South Asian Studies, where Subalternist analyses of culture and 'history from below' have been heavily influenced by his notions of hegemony, subalternity, and spontaneity.[15] I further explore this intersection of concerns within Subaltern Studies and left-wing Punjabi writing in Chapter Three, where I analyse left-wing theatrical interpretations of the var of Dulla Bhatti by Gursharan Singh and Najm Hosain Syed to spotlight the playwrights' engagements with the question of organic intellectuals and regional culture in the context of Communist organising and anti-authoritarian movements in 1970s Punjab.

For Gramsci, hegemony is "a way of marking out ever-shifting, highly protean relationships of power which can assume quite different forms in different contexts" (Crehan 2002, 101). Within these shifts that characterise

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[15] See for instance, Ranajit Guha's *The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Duke University Press, 1999; first published in 1983), and *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Harvard University Press, 1998). Guha was among the lead founding members of the Subaltern Studies school in South Asian history.

the hegemonic order in a society, ‘folklore’ becomes for Gramsci “a way of discovering how the subaltern sees the world” (Ibid, 99):

> One can say that until now folklore has been studied primarily as a 'picturesque' element ... Folklore should instead be studied as a 'conception of the world and life' implicit to a large extent in determinate (in time and space) strata of society and *in opposition* (also for the most part implicit, mechanical and objective) *to 'official' conceptions of the world*... that have succeeded one another in the historical process…. (Antonio Gramsci quoted in Ibid, 99) (my emphasis)

Thus, contrary to Mir’s formulation of the Punjabi literary formation that stresses a kind of harmonious ‘interaction’ between all classes, Gramsci’s notion of ‘folklore’ emphasises its oppositional potential and subaltern composition. Instead of approaching the Punjabi literary tradition as a kind of ‘patterned whole’ organised around notions of ‘belonging’ accruing to what Malhotra and Mir refer to as ‘Punjabiyat’, Gramsci pushes us to centre the relationship between the dominant and the dominated, eschewing the simple binary between modernity and tradition (Ibid, 108). Within the Punjabi literary tradition, this reading of ‘folklore’ becomes crucial to contemporary attempts at forging a revolutionary culture rooted in regional histories:

> Folklore must not be considered an eccentricity, an oddity or a picturesque element, but as something which is very serious and is to be taken seriously. Only in this way will the teaching of folklore be more efficient and really bring about the birth of a new culture among the broad popular masses, so that the separation between

> modern culture and the popular culture of folklore will disappear. (Gramsci and Forgacs 2000, 362)

Drawing on this framework for 'folklore', we can read the Punjabi literary tradition as a terrain where competing claims to hegemony are voiced, where dominant masculine, upper-caste, and feudal values often clashed against while they co-existed with resistance from the margins of gender, class and caste. For Gramsci, this "instability of folklore and its readiness to absorb elements from the dominant culture are important in that they give folklore a potentially progressive quality" (Crehan 2002, 108). While I hesitate to use the term 'instability' (more on this later), it is clear that this 'absorption' of dominant culture can readily transform into subversive appropriation. For example, in Chapter Two, we see how the form of the dialogue, a definitive literary structure in Waris Shah's qissa, enacts this tussle between the dominant and the alternative. Hir's debate with the Qazi, the village cleric, 'absorbs' and inverts the ideological tools of the dominant, re-interpreting Quranic verse and Brahminical mythology alike to challenge patriarchy. In the process, Hir furnishes a genre of feminist dissent that is then re-worked by Amrita Pritam and Nasreen Anjum Bhatti.

Moreover, in this framework, Pritam and Bhatti cease to be post-colonial writers instrumentalising the Punjabi literary tradition for their modernist ends. As the definitive dynamic becomes the struggle between hegemony and counter-hegemony, 'folklore' no longer represents "some primordial tradition handed down unchanged from the pre-modern world" (Crehan 2002, 108). Rather, we begin to see how "philosophy and modern science are constantly contributing new elements" and being "inserted into the mosaic of tradition" (Ibid, 108). This is echoed by Syed in his essay on thirteenth century poet Baba Farid, the first 'saint' named in the list that

appears in “Five Saints”. Syed reads “poetic tradition” as “a dynamic factor that asserts itself on its own, interpreting the present through its present shape, and assuming fresh shapes with every moment.” (Syed 1968, 34-35) Further, he clarifies that prevalent analysis is often tied to a “distorted view of tradition” (Ibid, 34), echoing Gramsci’s critique of frameworks that view folklore as ‘primordial tradition’. Syed posits that poetic tradition is often erroneously viewed as

> “a body of defined principles and accepted practices… thought to take concrete shape at an early stage in the hands of masters and then passed down to posterity who are to follow it to the detail with meticulous fidelity.” (Ibid)

Moreover, the category of ‘folklore’ as deployed by Gramsci inadequately applies to the Punjabi literary tradition, in which individual poets have interpreted and reworked the ‘folk’ repertoire, in turn contributing to the creation and circulation of more popular ‘folk’ and oral forms. This dialogue between individual poet, folklore, and material life is central to the Punjabi literary tradition, and is outlined by Syed in a passage from *Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry,* where he dissects the view of ‘folklore’ as a ‘simple’, ‘naive’ and ‘spontaneous’ expression of popular consciousness:

> On the surface a tone of simplicity is maintained. This simplicity is perhaps the result of choosing such varieties of forms as reflect the shared social experience of the community. But the tone of simplicity does not necessarily represent an internal naïveté of feeling and thought. On the contrary, the tone of simplicity is a mask of familiar folk colour under which the subtle artistry works undetected… *This outer simplicity often*

> *proves deceptive for many people and leads them to treat Punjabi poetry as an indistinguishable form of popular balladry. Their treatment of 'folklore' itself is superficial and they fail to distinguish between folklore as such and the extremely subtle uses poets have made of it*. (Syed 1968, 20-21) (my emphasis)

Thus, Syed reads the poets listed in "Five Saints", including Waris Shah, Bulleh Shah, and Shah Hussain, as Gramscian 'organic intellectuals' who present poetic interpretations *of* folklore. These interpretations in turn feed into folklore through oral and performative practices.

Hence, deploying Syed's expansive and dynamic understanding of 'folklore,' or literary tradition, allows us to trace the present-day development of the Punjabi literary tradition through tropes of dissent, internal critique, and contemporary references in the work of post-colonial dissidents. This reading of the Punjabi literary tradition is eloquently captured but also contested in "The Five Saints". Syed's focus on the anonymous mass of working people as the intellectuals of the literary tradition militates against the hierarchy that is implicit in most Marxist and Gramscian-inspired engagements with literary tradition. Specifically, his emphasis on the popular mass in 'all and sundry' as the inheritor and interpreter of 'folklore' or 'common sense' diverges from Gramsci's formulation, which stresses the essential role of Marxism, or the philosophy of praxis, in systematising 'folklore' and making it 'coherent'. While Gramsci's injunction to take folklore "very seriously" as a receptacle for an oppositional consciousness has compelled Marxist cultural theory to attend to aesthetic forms outside the fold of the modern, national, and urban, his emphasis on the crucial role of "an elite of intellectuals" (Gramsci and Forgacs 2000, 334) in systematising this "inherently fragmentary,

incoherent and contradictory" (Crehan 2002, 104) conception ascribes a unidirectional flow between literary tradition and contemporary writing. This view posits an instrumentalist relationship between literary tradition and post-colonial critique, in which the latter extracts, orders, and deploys facets of the former. Conversely, "The Five Saints" along with other texts analysed in this dissertation sketch the relationship between literary tradition and post-colonial writing as a terrain where *both* contemporary global Marxism and popular regional consciousness remake each other. This can be seen in Syed's emphasis on the co-creative relationship between Punjabi poets and Punjabi folklore in the making of regional literary tradition, which he describes as "a series of recurrent patterns in the work of preceding poets, with corresponding patterns in the popular consciousness" (Ibid).

Moreover, although Gramsci envisioned a dialectical relation between 'common sense' and the philosophy of praxis, his view of folklore as "inherently" and "by definition" incoherent and contradictory, a "confused agglomerate" (Gramsci and Forgacs 2000, 326) that is largely reactionary, hinders analysis of its revolutionary re-interpretations in the contemporary. This bias can in part be explained by a basic thread that runs through all of Gramsci's writings, which is the opposition between coherent and incoherent conceptions of the world, along with an insistence that any potentially counter-hegemonic ones *must* be 'coherent' (Crehan 2002, 113). Moreover, this demand on folklore stems from a privileging of modernity, and insufficiently addresses the specificities of cultural and political contexts shaped by colonialism. This is amply clear in the following excerpt from the *Prison Notebooks*:

> If it is true that every language contains the elements of a conception of the world and of a culture, it could also be true that from anyone's language one can assess the greater or lesser complexity of his conception of the world. Someone who only speaks dialect, or understands the standard language incompletely, *necessarily has an intuition of the world which is more or less limited and provincial, which is fossilized and anachronistic in relation to the major currents of thought which dominate world history.* His interests will be limited, more or less corporate or economistic, *not universal*. While it is not always possible to learn a number of foreign languages in order to put oneself in contact with other cultural lives, it is at the least necessary to learn the national language properly. A great culture can be translated into the language of another great culture, that is to say a great national language with historic richness and complexity, and it can translate any other great culture and can be a world-wide means of expression. But a dialect *cannot* do this. (Gramsci and Forgacs 2000, 326-327) (My emphases)

An assumption that modernity is inevitable, totalising, progressive, a decisive departure from the 'fossilized' past, and necessarily tied to the nation-state form, which in turn produces 'standard languages' and 'great cultures' is clear in the analysis above. On the other hand, a 'dialect' is seen as essentially provincial, never universalist, incapable of 'complexity' and in its untranslatability, unable to interact with other cultures. It follows that 'folklore' or common sense, enshrined in most cases in dialect, must eventually give way to the force of progress, represented of course by 'the major currents of thought which dominate world history'. Thus, while Gramsci offers a fruitful method for centring the role of contestation and

resistance within the Punjabi literary tradition, his narrow estimation of the philosophical and political potential offered by 'dialect' in transforming the world and furnishing a philosophy of praxis, coupled with his hierarchical view of 'folklore' as inherently fragmentary and incoherent unless systematised by organic intellectuals, leaves much to be desired. This reductive framing of regional vernaculars pervades both Marxist analyses and academic writing on the subject. The next section critically addresses these approaches, discussing the language politics that informs post-colonial Punjabi writing in addition to its living relationship with literary tradition.

De-provincialising Punjab: Language Politics and Literary Radicalism

> Whenever I speak about Punjabi
>
> He comes huffing and puffing
>
> Sighing and tutting
>
> 'Why are you always going on about Punjabi?!'
>
> He humphs and snorts, snorts and humphs.
>
> He walks off muttering to himself,
>
> Sewing my lips shut as he departs.
>
> This is a matter between mothers and sons
>
> Why does it concern any third person. (Daman, n.d.)

This short poem was written by Ustad Daman, whose anticolonial and anti-authoritarian poetry is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. It hints at the tensions that accompanied his choice of language, capturing the arrogance, and in some cases, outright hostility that Punjabi writers face to

this day. The exasperated question posed to Daman, combined with the strong annoyance expressed through sighs, snorts, and mutterings simultaneously creates a comical effect, embodying the fiery poet's signature style. However, in the midst of this tongue-in-cheek construction, the grim image of lips being sewn shut appears in sharp contrast, driving home the gravity of this exchange and its implications.

The question, 'Why are you always going on about Punjabi?!' sketches the contentious relationship between language, literature, and politics in the sub-continent. Despite the fact that Punjabi was Daman's first language, the literary choice for Punjabi needs to be defended and explained to a 'third person'. This 'third person', inserting themselves between the mother and son, the language and its speaker, remains unnamed. However, given the context and milieus that Daman inhabited, more than one character would fit the description: the coloniser, the nationalist, and even the progressive writer. In fact, the frank tone and informal structure of the dialogue strongly suggest it to be the latter, a conversation between a Punjabi poet and an Urdu writer of the same political persuasion. Much like other left-leaning Punjabi writers, Daman was deeply influenced by the anticolonial tradition of the All India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA). Founded in 1936, the AIPWA led "a hugely influential radical cultural movement that spanned several regions and languages across India… closely linked to debates over decolonisation and the nature of the postcolonial nation-state that was to come into being" (Gopal 2005, 1). In fact, Daman was a close friend and associate of Communist leader and AIPWA stalwart, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, whose lesser known Punjabi poetry is also briefly discussed alongside Daman's in Chapter Four. Unlike Daman, Faiz and other prominent Punjabi

progressives like Sahir Ludhianvi and Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi chose to write mostly in Urdu.

Thus, through the structure of an informal exchange, the poem captures an important debate between progressives on the relationship between language choice and literary radicalism. For most AIPWA members, Urdu and Hindi were modern, urban, standardised languages best equipped to serve as 'national' and cosmopolitan carriers of progressive culture. Conversely, for Punjabi intellectuals on the left, writing in Punjabi was imperative for decolonising literature to push back against the colonial hierarchisation of South Asian languages, and to counter the post-colonial imposition of a top-down 'national culture' centred around Urdu and Hindi and resist the bordering logics of Partition that divided Punjabi literary culture along communal and nationalist lines. In this section, I discuss this important question with respect to Punjabi writing under post-colonial conditions, sketching the connection between writing on the Left and regional language politics. The section begins with a review of existing literature on Punjabi language and literary movements, moving on to discuss the theoretical blinkers that restrict our vision of revolutionary writing to the form pioneered by the All India Progressive Writers Movement and its associated intellectuals in North India, who wrote primarily in English, Hindi, or Urdu. Drawing on colonial legacies of language hierarchies, Daman's poetry and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiongo's insights in *Decolonising The Mind,* the section will conclude by presenting a framework for reading Punjabi writing that de-provincialises regional literary production and approaches it as a crucial site for debating planetary visions of liberation.

De-linking Language and Ethnic Nationalism: Beyond 'Punjabiyat'

The connection between leftist literary production and Punjabi language politics has largely gone unacknowledged because writing in regional vernaculars in South Asia has been analysed primarily through the relationship between language and regional nationalism. This framework flattens the political divides that exist within regional literary publics, presenting a homogenous literature of 'Punjabiyat' with no regard to Marxist, feminist, Dalit, and anticolonial perspectives that contest dominant articulations of Punjabi identity. In a similar vein, Aijaz Ahmad highlights this issue with regard to the category of Indian literature. He stresses the need for

> The much more difficult task of assembling a history of 'Indian Literature' which does not derive its sense of unity from some transhistoric metaphysic nor from the territoriality of the existing nation-state, nor by simply assembling the discrete histories of the different linguistic traditions, but traces the dialectic of unity and difference… grounding that dialectic in the history of material productions, ideological struggles, competing conceptions of class and community and gender… (1992, 265)

In the same way, writing on 'Punjabi literature' must push beyond the narrow political and conceptual confines of 'Punjabiyat', and centre the history of struggle and critique that has animated literary tradition over the centuries. In particular, the history of empire and anticolonial resistance is crucial to the analysis of post-colonial Punjabi writing on the left.

Moreover, the theoretical emphasis on regional nationalism confines Punjabi writing to a ‘local’ phenomenon, incapable of articulating global concerns like literatures in English, Hindi, and Urdu, sealing off any possible comparison and connection with dissident writing in other contexts. As a result, leftist Punjabi poetry remains illegible to scholars of anticolonial and post-colonial literatures as a site for theorising the global politics of Marxism, anti-racism, feminism, and anti-imperialism. To insert the regional vernacular into wider debates around decolonisation and revolutionary culture, I place this body of Punjabi writing in conversation with Ngũgĩ Wa Thiongo’s manifesto for liberating the language of post-colonial literature. Reading the widely influential *Decolonising The Mind* alongside Daman’s marginalised oeuvre of Punjabi resistance poetry, I push existing canons within post-colonial theory and literary studies, connecting Gikuyu with Punjabi to present a vision for literary resistance that centres the particular in the imagination of the universal.

Beyond Methodological Nationalism: Language Politics in Punjab

As briefly mentioned in the preceding section, language politics in South Asia has primarily been analysed through the prism of nationalism, ethnic identity, and regional assertion. For instance, in the Introduction to *Language and Politics in India*, Asha Sarangi asserts that “the language question is obviously related to group and community rights and identities…”, and thus "linguistic politics has to be contextualised within the larger phenomenon of linguistic nationalism and its political economy” (2010, 5; 21). This emphasis pervades most studies on the topic, most of which focus on questions of language policy vis a vis education and government, or on ethno-nationalism in relation to regional language and

literary movements.[16] When it comes to literary studies, an author's choice of language, aesthetic form and political commitments are seldom analysed as mutually constitutive, a connection we see clearly in Daman's poem cited above, as well as Syed's "The Five Saints", whose image of the "word-boat" and the words being sown into barren tongues evoke the regional language alongside literary tradition. Further, theoretical concerns linking the nation-state and Anglophone writing overdetermine scholarship, with secondary attention being paid exclusively to Hindi and Urdu, which are mapped onto Indian/ Hindu and Pakistani/Muslim nationalisms respectively. As Aamir Mufti (2016) illuminates in *Forget English!,* the logic of Orientalisation of literature frames these two as polar opposites, Urdu becomes the Indo-Persianate 'alien', while Hindi is 'indigenised' through an emphasis on its links with Sanskrit. (Mufti 2016, 47) Any and all other linguistic cultures remain peripheral to scholarship. For example, regional vernaculars like Punjabi are also relegated from writing on Marxist, anticolonial, feminist and other radical literatures associated with political movements on the left, a field in which the English, Hindi, and Urdu writings of intellectuals associated with AIPWA dominate the discussion.

When it comes to academic commentary on language politics in Punjab, each of these disciplinary biases curtail our view of the deep link between language activism, literary radicalism, and left-wing politics in the region. Due to the emphasis on the institutional site of the state, the engagement of political elites in both East and West Punjab with the question of language has come to represent language politics in the region as a whole. In fact,

[16]See for instance, Davis and LaDousa's *Language, Education, and Identity: Medium in South Asia* (2021); Tariq Rahman's *Language, Ideology and Power: Language Learning Among The Muslims of Pakistan and North India* (2002); Paul Brass's *Language, Religion, and Politics in North India* (1974), and Lisa Mitchell's *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother Tongue* (2009)

writing by Alyssa Ayres (2008) and Christopher Shackle (1970) seems to go as far as to deliberately obscure the influence of left-wing perspectives. In his 1970 article, “Punjabi in Lahore”, Shackle contends that the Punjabi movement demonstrated “the typical modern development of linguistically identified local nationalisms” pointing to “the shadowy political movements of the period, aimed at securing greater political autonomy” (1970, 266; 245). Although Marxist intellectual Najm Hosain Syed features prominently in his article, Shackle chooses to ignore the context of left-wing literary production that shaped Syed’s Punjabi writing. Similarly, Ayres completely fails to mention Syed’s leftist leanings, reading his play *Takht Lahore*, which I discuss in Chapter Three, as an ethno-nationalist text that is part of a “Punjabiyat project”, one that presents a new kind of heroic Punjabi person through the character of Dulla Bhatti (Ayres 2008, 75). However, as my close reading of *Takht Lahore* in Chapter Four shows, Syed’s play does exactly the opposite, critiquing Dulla Bhatti’s heroism to centre the agency of subjects from the margins of caste and gender. Thus, while Ayres reads Syed as a “lone intellectual” and “cultural entrepreneur” (Ibid, 69), Chapter Four demonstrates his connection to a cross-border left-wing literary public, framing his writing as an exploration in revolutionary consciousness rather than a struggle for winning Punjabi prominence.

Thus, the framework of ‘Punjabiyat’ as ethno-nationalism has served to to erase left-wing literary engagements with language politics in West Punjab, and consequently, obscure articulations of linguistic identity in connection to a class-based politics. In an important article, Butt and Kalra address this gap by presenting the history of the Punjabi movement in 1960s West Punjab which focuses on the central contributions of the Mazdoor Kissan Party (Workers and Peasants Party) and the National Student Federation to

what they call “Punjabi language radicalism” (2013). The authors reveal how Punjabi’s association with low social status and the uneducated classes in Pakistan drew left-wing activists to deploy the language and its literature as a mobilisational tool in the countryside. Similarly, Anne Murphy, surveying writing from India, Pakistan, and the diaspora, has analysed how the choice for Punjabi has acted “to constitute a challenge to the national in… different contexts”, and can “speak to the crossing of borders, both in national terms and at intersection with class, caste and gender” (2019, 71).

On the other side of the border, in East Punjab, the obscuring influence of ‘Punjabiyat’ transforms into an over-emphasis on religious nationalism and Sikh identity to create a similar gap. As Punjabi is also the language of the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy scripture, the question of language has become entwined solely with issues of Sikh identity politics.[17] For example, the Punjabi Suba Movement, which led to the creation of a new Punjab state along linguistic lines in 1966, has eclipsed alternative articulations of language politics. The movement was led by the Shiromani Akali Dal, a political party focused almost exclusively on Sikh issues to secure regional autonomy as a minority population. The Akali Dal’s mobilisation for the Punjabi Suba drew a fundamental link between the Punjabi language, Sikhism, and the new Punjabi territory. This combination of language, nationalism, and religion by centre/Right formations is super-imposed on all cultural politics in the region, eliding perspectives on the left that sought to delink language and regional culture from nationalism to instead engage them alongside questions of class struggle and decolonisation. However, as

[17] The politics surrounding the Punjabi language in East Punjab is discussed solely in relation to the Khalistan insurgency, and the Akali Dal’s politics. See for example, J.S. Grewal’s Master Tara Singh: *Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Politics of Sikh Identity*; Paul Brass’s *Language, Religion and Politics in North India,* and Giorgio Shani’s *Sikh Nationalism and Identity in a Global Age*

the next section demonstrates, colonial language policy, combined with the post-colonial state's imposition of an Urdu/Hindi-centric national culture, created the conditions for a revolutionary articulation of language politics in the Punjabi literary sphere.

Liberating Language, Decolonising the Mind: Punjabi Language Politics and the Left

> Punjabi will be spoken here,
>
> Urdu will grow cold inside books…
>
> Even if it gains a million enemies,
>
> Day by day, Punjabi will grow from strength to strength.
>
> As long as a Punjabi lives and breathes
>
> Punjabi will not die.
>
> (Daman, n.d.)

> In fact, if it had been left entirely to this class [the petty bourgeoisie], African languages would have ceased to exist- with independence! But African languages refused to die. These languages, these national heritages of Africa, were kept alive by the peasantry… These languages were kept alive in the daily speech, in the ceremonies, in political struggles, above all in the rich store of orature- proverbs, stories, poems, and riddles. (Ngũgĩ 1986, 22-3)

In the poem and passage quoted above, Daman and Ngũgĩ affirm a vision for an anticolonial language politics that centres the popular mass, celebrating the collective strength of their cultures in the face of imperialism and neo-colonialism. Despite the machinations of the post-colonial bourgeoisie, 'Punjabi will not die', just as 'African languages refused to die.' The defiant tone of Daman's poem reads as a protest, framing the question of language as an important node of struggle. The opening line, "Aithay boli Punjabi *hi* jaye gi" (Punjabi *will* be spoken here) (my emphasis), creates an insistence and finality that is difficult to capture in English, spelling out resistance to the Pakistani state's relegation of the regional from a national culture constructed around Urdu and Islam. The failure of this hegemonic project is mocked in the succeeding lines, through the compelling image of Urdu "grow(ing) cold" and irrelevant, cloistered inside books. The image of books represents a range of institutional sites controlled by the state and ruling elite, including the education system, the structure of government, and dominant forms of knowledge, history and literature, consecrated in libraries and archives denied to Punjabi. Yet despite its 'lakh hareef', the 'million enemies' of the people's language, who have sought its erasure since the moment of formal decolonisation, the language will not die as long as its people live. The last two lines of Daman's poem tie Punjabi inextricably to the survival and spirit of its speakers. Moreover, he uses the word 'Punjaban', the feminine form for a Punjabi, subverting the masculinist construction in dominant nationalism of the language as 'mother' and the nation as 'son'. Thus, by wedding a marginal gender position with a marginal linguistic culture, Daman frames his Punjabi language politics around the exclusions of nationalist hegemony in post-colonial Pakistan.

Similarly, Ngũgĩ's emphasis on peasant struggle and orality as crucial sites for articulating language identity presents a clear departure from statist and elite framings of language politics. For our purposes, the focus on those denied access

to books, and excluded from the urban, middle-class respectability of Urdu literary and linguistic culture, whose consciousness finds expression in 'the rich store of orature' offers a theorisation of language as linked not only to ethnic identity, but also to class. This linkage is obscured by the linguistic genrefication of Punjabi literature, where 'Punjabiyat' or a regional nationalism threaten to veil the contestations of class and social status that also mediate language politics. It is important to note that in both the Indian/ Pakistani and Kenyan context, the relegation of Punjabi and Gikuyu did not end with formal decolonisation. In India, Pakistan and Kenya alike, the colonial language of English retained official status while Hindi, Urdu and Swahili, the languages of the urban, middle to upper classes were institutionalised as 'national languages'. Thus, when Daman frames the antagonism between Punjabi and Urdu rather than between Punjabi and English, his critique, like Ngũgĩ, is directed towards the post-colonial state and national bourgeoisie. In their ultimate analysis, both anticolonial intellectuals were well aware of the colonial origins of this subjugation of regional cultures. The next section provides a historical overview of colonial policies and knowledge around language in India, sketching the social, cultural, and ideological transformations that fashioned Punjabi and other regional languages into sites of anticolonial, counter-cultural literary production.

Language Under the Raj: Colonial Knowledge and the Marginalisation of Punjabi

Colonial knowledge and imperialist policy around languages crucially shaped the relationship between language, class, and popular struggle in India. As Javed Majeed's magisterial study of the 1898 *Linguistic Survey of India* shows, colonial knowledge served as an important arbiter of language and cultural rights, regional assertion, and community identity (2019). An intensive documentation of the hundreds of languages spoken across the sub-continent, the survey was led by

colonial administrator George Abraham Grierson. Majeed highlights how Indians engaged actively with the survey, pointing to its instrumentalisation by language associations and activist organisations seeking legitimation for “expressions of regional distinctiveness” and “the discreteness of their languages” (2019, 4). Thus, colonial knowledge on South Asian languages foundationally shaped processes of self-definition and articulations of regional identity. As Lisa Mitchell has shown, colonial scholarship like Grierson’s survey played an important role in the ‘objectification’ of Indian languages in the public arena (2009). Colonial studies of grammar, vocabulary, and linguistic history encouraged a move away from the ‘complementarity’ to the ‘parallelism’ of languages, whereby “practices that once moved across multiple languages began to be governed by the logic of parallel mother tongues” (Mitchell 2009, 445). In other words, a multilingual formation[18] came to increasingly be governed by the logic of ‘parallel’, i.e. comparable and distinct, ‘mother tongues’. For Mitchell, this consolidated the link between language and ethnicity in articulations of regional nationalism.

However, colonial knowledge did not merely impose a parallelism between South Asian languages. It also enforced a hierarchy. For instance, although the Linguistic Survey of India complicated homogenising conceptions of ‘India’ as a geographical entity, Eurocentric, imperialist logics of subjugation underpinned many of Grierson’s pronouncements on Indian languages (Majeed 2019). For example, in a discussion about Punjabi’s inclusion into the syllabus for the Indian Civil Service examinations, Majeed reveals how Grierson considered Punjabi unsuitable for this purpose on account of its lack of written literature. For Grierson, while Punjabi was “rich in ballads and folk poetry”, it could not develop a written literature as it remained “‘overshadowed by its near relation’, Hindustani,” and had been ruled by Delhi for centuries (Majeed 2019, 26). As

[18] For more on North India as a multilingual historical literary formation, see Orsini, Francesca. “The Multilingual Local in World Literature,” *Comparative Literature*, vol. 67, no. 4, 2015, pp. 345-374.

earlier sections in this Introduction and Farina Mir's work on the Punjabi print culture in colonial India demonstrate, such a distinction between a 'written literature' and 'folk poetry' remains untenable in the context of the Punjabi literary tradition, which synthesises both in its historical development. Moreover, this distinction is accompanied by an implicit hierarchy - a lack of written literature makes a language unsuitable for the bureaucracy, a dearth that in turn is assumed to have originated in the region's subjugation under pre-colonial empires. It follows that Punjabi's domination by 'Hindustani', a language that Grierson in a sense centres around Delhi, makes it simultaneously unfit as a language of administration and of literary modernity.

Thus, the exclusion of Punjabi and other regional vernaculars from the domain of power and the canons of literature went hand in hand. As Barnard Cohn's earlier work has shown, colonial knowledge about languages went as far as to institute a distinction between "classical" and "vulgar" languages (Cohn 1996, 33). Languages like Persian, Sanskrit, and Arabic were endowed with scholarly prestige akin to Greek and Latin, while regional vernaculars like Punjabi were viewed as "fallen, broken, or corrupt versions of some pure, authentic, coherent, logically formed prior language" (Ibid, 24; 33). This hierarchical classification of South Asian languages was widely prevalent among colonial administrators and intellectuals, as testified by Grierson's discussion of the apparent "rudeness" of the Punjabi language (Majeed 2019, 26). Ngũgĩ identifies this as colonialism's "most important area of domination", "the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and the world" (1986, 16). He writes about the inner world of the "colonial child", wrenched of her "tools of self-determination" by the consequent association of her native languages with "low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability or downright stupidity, non-intelligibility and barbarism" (Ibid, 18). Daman's "lips being sewn shut" spring to mind as a powerful image capturing this colonial condition.

It is important to note that Urdu and Hindi, which attained hegemonic status in post-colonial India and Pakistan as 'national languages' were not consigned to the same fate. In fact, as Cohn shows, Hindustani was developed into a "language of command" for the colonial state, identified as such for having a grammar, vocabulary and usage compatible with the demands of governance (Cohn 1996, 33). Despite British attempts to vernacularise the colonial administration towards the latter half of the nineteenth century, in Punjab, the regional language never became the language of the state. As Farina Mir elaborates, following Punjab's annexation in 1839, the colonial regime went against its own language policy to institute Urdu as the language of government (2006). According to Mir, this decision had both political and bureaucratic reasons. As a sacred language for Sikhs, Punjabi was seen as a symbol of Sikhism, and thus relegating it to a "rural patois", "inferior" and "inadequate" for British rule was seen as important for suppressing Sikh symbolic power (Ibid, 412). Moreover, by 1839, the Raj already commanded a vast network of native administrators who were readily absorbed into the bureaucratic management of Punjab (Ibid). Since most of the urban, middle-class employees of the colonial state who relocated to Punjab were educated and trained in Urdu, the decision to retain Urdu, rather than develop a 'vulgar' and 'inadequate' language like Punjabi seemed the most practical.

Thus, the colonial imposition of Urdu, a language native to North India, alongside English, created a contradiction between Punjabi as the people's tongue, and Urdu/ English as languages imposed by empire. This contradiction manifested itself in class relations, alongside articulations of culture and regional identity. As Tariq Rahman has shown, the preference for Urdu inscribed into colonial administration transformed the language into a desirable commodity with rich prospects of government employment (2011). Moreover, by its association with the affluent urban middle classes, Urdu also became a marker of prestige in

Punjabi. The “upper classes and educated people spoke Hindustani”, while Punjabi was the language of the “peasantry and lower classes in town only” (Ibid, 216). Thus, colonial policy re-organised the relationship between language and class in Punjabi society. While ethnic identity strongly informed the politics of language, class and collaboration with the colonial state also mapped onto linguistic landscapes.

Liberating the Language, Decolonising the Mind

For post-colonial Punjabi writing on the left, this colonial re-shaping of the linguistic landscape became an important node of subversion and critique. The progressive imperative to decolonise literature and produce writing that reflected the struggles, consciousness, and identity of the people had to incorporate a language politics, as the challenge posed to bourgeois aesthetics by the literature of liberation was incomplete without what some Punjabi intellectuals referred to as ‘the de-classing of language’. As left-wing Punjabi writer and critic, Shafqat Tanveer Mirza states in an interview:

> […] the more prominent [among the progressive writers] did pay lip service to the importance of Punjabi, but never wrote anything in it […] You need to de-class yourself to be part of a politics which seeks to create a classless society […]. This applies to language and literature as well. If you want to talk about literature for the people and language for the people, then you need to de-class yourself on a linguistic basis as well. (Pancham 2004: 347)

This insistence on linguistic form as essential to decolonising literature echoes Ngũgĩ:

> The question was never seriously asked: did what we wrote qualify as African literature? The whole area of literature and audience, and hence of language as a determinant of both the national and class audience, did not really figure: the debate was more about the subject matter and the racial origins and geographical habitation of the writer. (Ngũgĩ 1986, 6)

While Ngũgĩ's polemic engages the African writer of English, for Punjabi intellectuals, Urdu/ Hindi progressive writing became the focus of critique. This stemmed in part from the colonial imposition of Urdu in Punjab as discussed in the previous section, and also, because of the strong influence of progressive writing in Punjabi intellectual circles. As mentioned before, many prominent Urdu intellectuals of the AIPWA were Punjabi, and the region served as a stronghold of the cultural movement. Many dissident Punjabi writers responded directly to the choice for Urdu made by prominent progressives like Faiz, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, and Sahir Ludhianvi, in a dialogue between political allies that is captured in Daman's untitled poem on Punjabi analysed earlier.

This debate on language politics between progressive writing and left-wing Punjabi literature constitutes an important yet under-examined stream within anticolonial and dissident literary traditions in post-colonial South Asia. For their part, the progressives, including Faiz, did reckon with the important question of audience as identified by Ngũgĩ. While he recognised that Urdu was the first language of under seven percent of Pakistan's population, and therefore only accessible to those who had access to formal education, Faiz felt that Urdu writing could play an important role in politicising the urban middle classes: 'If the message of the progressive writers does not reach the uneducated workers at least it reaches the middle classes […] Are not we [as middle class writers] a part of society?' (cit. in Malik 1967, 653) As briefly stated before, this emphasis on Urdu/ Hindi was rooted in the Soviet-Communist and anticolonial nationalist legacy of progressive writing in South Asia, a literary movement that took shape in a world

that saw the sovereign nation-state as the natural and necessary result of anticolonial liberation. Thus, for the progressives, a common language was essential for forging a unifying 'national culture' that could dissolve regional particularities into a new post-colonial identity. Intellectuals like Faiz stressed that this revolutionary national culture could not be evolved from above, and must instead be constituted gradually through a dialectical process determined in part by the relationships between different groups of people within the nation (Toor 2005, 333). However, the eventual embrace of a single national language by the linguistically diverse masses, for which the most obvious candidates were Urdu in Pakistan and Hindi in India, was inevitable in this imagination. For Kamran Asdar Ali this also showed "how a North Indian Ashraf elite shared a consensus over the centrality of Urdu and its associated cultural norms, despite being on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum" (2011, 506).

Progressive writing played a crucial, unifying role in the anticolonial struggle in North India. However, in the aftermath of 1947, the progressive aspiration for a national culture constructed around a single, federal language called for re-evaluation as national elites consolidated their hold on the state and refurbished colonial infrastructures of control to discipline regional populations across the sub-continent. Urdu and Hindi, as symbols of Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India, became an important instrument in this subjugation through both coercion and consent. Although the specific political conditions that emerged in the two Punjabs varied considerably, writing in the Punjabi language, from a position of intimate engagement with the regional literary tradition, thus came to constitute a subversive literary practice in this context.

In post-Independence Pakistan, Punjab became the dominant region, with the Punjabi elite being over-represented across the bureaucracy, armed forces, and the national legislature. Movements for regional autonomy and Independence spanning from Balochistan to Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) rightfully

criticised the ‘Punjabi hegemony’ at the heart of the Pakistani state’s practices of internal colonialism. However, the dominant position of Punjabi elites did not translate into the same for Punjabi language and culture. In fact, Punjabi elites came to serve as custodians of the ‘Pakistan project’, promoting the adoption of Urdu and dominant Sunni Islam as part of a homogenous national identity. For instance, writing during the same period as Najm Hosain Syed and Ustad Daman, Punjab governor and chief minister Hanif Ramay presented the abandonment of Punjabi in favour of Urdu as a necessary sacrifice for the Pakistani nation (Ramay 2010). In this climate, owning a regional identity and writing in a language that transgressed the Indo-Pak, Muslim-Hindu/Sikh border became a subversive practice. In West Punjab, Punjabi writers were branded ‘traitors’ and ‘Sikh sympathisers’ (Rahman 1996, 206), their associations banned under the Ayub dictatorship. Thus, Daman’s defiant statement in “Punjabi *will* be spoken here” (my emphasis) must be read against this context of statist repression as well as colonial, elitist attitudes towards the regional vernacular.

In East Punjab, Punjabi was not erased from the public domain in the same way. In fact, Punjabi became the state language of the newly carved Punjab state, and hence the medium for education and official communication. However, the incorporation of Punjabi into the apparatus of the regional state defined by a Sikh identity within a larger ‘Hindu’ India has led to the selective re-working of the Punjabi language and literary tradition to conform to the politics of the Sikh elite. For instance, literary production in East Punjab has been increasingly Sanskritised with a conscious evacuation of Punjabi words of Persian and Arabic origin. These words point uncomfortably to a ‘Muslim Punjab’ across the border, disrupting the simple equation in dominant Sikh politics of Sikh = Punjabi = Punjab. Moreover, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, Punjabi writing and scholarship in post-colonial East Punjab has consistently stressed Sikh scripture and historical figures as the central, and sole exponents of the historical literary tradition, with little to no discussion of prominent texts attributed to Muslim Punjabi figures like Waris

Shah and Bulleh Shah. Yet despite the elite's successful forging of a link between Sikh regional nationalism and the Punjabi language, the colonial hierarchisation of languages continues to exercise its influence. Among the urban elites in particular, Hindi and English remain the languages of choice, and for the lower classes, escaping Punjabi and the drudgery of rural poverty and illiteracy it represents is the ultimate aspiration.

Against this backdrop, writers on the left such as Gursharan Singh, Sant Ram Udasi, and Amrita Pritam deployed a form of the language that conjured a pre-Partition imagination to subvert the borders of dominant nationalism and communal identity. As subsequent chapters demonstrate, their work engaged pointedly with Muslim literary and folk figures, and connected with the affective structure of popular devotion at the margins of dominant Sikh practices. They were joined by contemporaries across the border, Najm Hosain Syed, Nasreen Anjum Bhatti, and Ustad Daman, and abroad, namely Niranjan Singh Noor, Ajmer Coventry, and Avtar Sadiq, in an oppositional literary practice rooted in a critical engagement with regional tradition and a commitment to Punjabi grounded in an anticolonial, Marxist-inspired language politics. As the discussion and review in this chapter has shown, Punjabi writing on the left has been excluded from debates around progressive writing, anticolonialism, feminism, and socialism in the sub-continent, pigeonholed as a discourse of 'Punjabiyat' that speaks only to a regional audience and concerns of ethno-nationalism. This marginalisation is rooted in the colonial hierarchisation of languages in South Asia, which re-organised the relationship between language and class through its imposition of English and Urdu/ Hindi. This relegation of Punjabi and other regional vernaculars continued under the top-down forging of national culture by post-colonial elites following formal decolonisation. In this context, writing in Punjabi became a subversive move to decolonise literature that challenged the hegemonic designs of the nation-state, neo-imperialism, and elite culture. This body of Punjabi writing centred the role of contestation in the Punjabi literary

tradition, reviving and reinventing tropes of resistance embedded in key genres like the qissa, kafi, and var. Through a critical assessment of Farina Mir's notion of a 'Punjabi literary formation' and Gramsci's notes on folklore, we arrive at a de-provincialised, oppositional reading of vernacular literary production, situating left-wing Punjabi writing as a crucial site for debating planetary visions of liberation, feminism, anticolonialism, racialised capitalism, post-colonial authoritarianism, and Global South Marxism. In chapters that follow, I elucidate this framework through a range of Punjabi texts, authors, and contexts, tracing regional literary modes of dissent that fired the imagination of post-colonial intellectuals in the decades following decolonisation with the hope that today, they can once again galvanise the hopes and dreams of those who struggle against oppression.

Dissertation Overview and Chapter Breakdown

As such, the chapters, as well as sections within each chapter, do not follow a strict chronology. In terms of periodisation, the dissertation concerns itself with post-1947 Punjabi writing, pairing writers and poets who in some cases were contemporaries, like Singh and Syed, and in others, deeply influenced each other's work, as in the case of Nasreen Anjum Bhatti, who was greatly inspired by Amrita Pritam's interventions in feminist Punjabi poetics. Equal space is accorded to discussing, in a sense, an 'Ur-text' from which these post-colonial reconstructions emerge, straddling forms and contexts that stretch as far back as the fifteenth century in Punjab. This movement through time, and across space, may offend our academic proclivity for neat periodisations and clear-cut geographies. However, it captures the traversing of borders we encounter in this body of post-colonial writing, which is steeped in the idiom and methods of the centuries old Punjabi literary tradition. As Kalra and Purewal note in their pathbreaking study of religion in Punjab, the authors, figures, and texts of the "Punjabi poetic-philosophical tradition… circulate[d] in popular

discourse to puncture the hegemonic forces of dominant caste ideology and patriarchy…" "despite the existence of mutually exclusive nationalisms, a geopolitical border, and established, differentiated religious identities" (2020, 7; 5). Drawing on and developing often in close proximity to this popular discourse at the margins, post-colonial Punjabi writing on the left embodied a cavalier rejection of the Indo-Pak border, and those of time, demonstrating how borders are "in motion" by dismantling and resisting political boundaries that are being continually erected and enforced (Konrad 2015).

Moreover, my focus is not on offering an overview of Punjabi writing between the 1940s and '70s, and it is important to state that I do not approach the oral texts with pre-colonial origins discussed herein as historical sources. Rather, I am interested in tracing the genealogical journey of specific oral genres, and their reception and interpretation in contemporary modes of post-colonial critique. Thus, although post-colonial Punjabi writing on the left had its modernist litterateurs who advocated a break from tradition in the twentieth century spirit of progress, the authors discussed in this dissertation consciously cultivated their roots in the historical popular traditions of the land. I expanded on this difference in literary worldview in an earlier section in this chapter, by situating the Punjabi writers discussed in this dissertation within the larger legacy of anticolonial progressive writing in North India. This critical impulse, which can be read in their oppositional engagement with literary tradition and in their radical re-interpretation of popular genres, was grounded in their political positioning as 'movement intellectuals', as writers and poets whose work was shaped in a dialectic with ongoing struggles.

Thus, on the one hand, these writers had their feet planted firmly in the transhistorical Punjab of the regional literary tradition, and on the other,

they were anchored in the present, through their living commitment to political movements in the contemporary. Although providing exhaustive political biographies of the movements that these authors were embedded in is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is important to stress the intimate relationship these intellectuals had with the anticolonial, anti-dictatorship, left-wing and antiracist politics of the day. The authors whose work is discussed in this dissertation were all either card-carrying members or close associates of Marxist groupings and left-wing political parties. For example, Ustad Daman was a staunch anticolonialist and member of the Indian National Congress, Sant Ram Udasi belonged to the Maoist CPI-ML, and Avtar Singh Sadiq was among the IWA's most prominent leaders and organisers. Similarly, although Najm Hosain Syed never formally joined the MKP, he remained a close associate and sympathiser, and Nasreen Anjum Bhatti was actively involved with the anti-dictatorship movement against General Zia ul Haq as a student and feminist organiser.

These twin commitments, to both literary tradition and contemporary struggle, together shaped the form and themes their writing addressed. For example, the majority of texts analysed in this dissertation are poetic in nature, as the 'protest poem' or 'inquilabi nazm' (revolutionary poem) was the dominant genre in political circles on the left. The poem, which has both rhythm and brevity, was well-suited to the demands of a political rally or study circle. Moreover, poetry is the definitive form of the Punjabi literary tradition, which is in fact, a poetic tradition, as every single genre from the doha (couplet) to the qissa (story) is rendered in verse. Thus, as an established structure within the regional literary tradition, the poem spoke most forcefully to the Punjabi-speaking working class and peasantry. It also lent itself well to the form that political publications such as party newspapers and pamphlets took, which were often produced on a shoestring

budget under clandestine conditions. Most of the texts analysed in this dissertation were published in political magazines, such as the IWA organ *Lalkar* (Challenge), or as slim poetry pamphlets like Bhatti's *Nil Karaiyan Nilkaan* (Blue Cloth Dyed Blue). Still others primarily circulated orally, such as Pritam's iconic "Aj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu" (Today I Call on Waris Shah), which travelled across the newly created border in a letter (Faiz Ahmed Faiz read it in jail). It was only published in an English translation rendered by Khushwant Singh. Similarly, Daman's poems circulated through his fiery recitals at mass political gatherings, and were only compiled and published posthumously.

Thus, although I refer to this cultural production as 'texts' in my close readings throughout the dissertation, it is important to remember that their material form and mode of circulation was at the margins of print cultures associated with the canons of post-colonial literature. In keeping with the performative aspects of the Punjabi literary tradition, the cultural infrastructures of orality and performance crucially shaped the form and circulation of these contemporary Punjabi texts. For this reason, theatre also became an important genre in post-colonial Punjabi writing. Thus, for example, the two plays analysed in Chapter Three, Syed's *The Throne of Lahore* and Singh's *The Pulsating Drum*, incorporated elements from regional performative traditions. While Syed opens his play with a prelude that re-creates a bardic recitation of the traditional var, Singh makes heavy use of choral singing, using the folk song as a theatrical device to comment on the action. This melding together of regional 'raas' or theatre traditions with left-wing projects of revolutionary transformation also drew on the anticolonial legacy of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). Thus, the theatre produced by Punjabi playwrights on the left, much like the

poetry, was shaped by both oral traditions of performance and twentieth century Marxist art and counter-cultural practice in the sub-continent.

The literary genre that is conspicuous by its absence in this dissertation is the novel. The reasons for this are twofold. One, my aim was to purposefully de-centre the novel as the definitive genre of post-colonial literature. The Anglophone novel remains the most studied form of writing within post-colonial South Asia. This is closely followed by novels and other prose forms in the 'national' languages of Hindi and Urdu. Thus, by introducing readers to the alternative publics created around other genres like poetry, drama, and even the short story, I aim to expand analyses of post-colonial writing to include texts and authors that have hitherto been marginalised due to the focus on the novel. Moreover, the post-colonial novel, in particular in its Indian and Pakistani iteration, has "from its inception… been deeply engaged with the idea of India, perhaps much more so than other literatures of the region" (Gopal 2009, 13). There are of course, notable exceptions, for example, Dalit writing is fast emerging as a promising site for subverting the dominant form of the genre.[19] Nevertheless, the post-colonial novel in South Asia remains historically tied to the nation. Even at its most critical, its conceptual bounds constrain attempts to think outside the nation and across borders, resisting a geography that flouts statist and nationalist confines. For Priyamvada Gopal,

> This is perhaps unsurprising given its [the Indian English novel's] derivation from a (then) foreign language and new genre, both of

[19] See for instance, Balbir Madhopuriya's Punjabi autobiography *Chaangeya Rukh: Against the Night.* (Oxford University Press, 2010). For more on Dalit writing in India see, Gajarawala, Toral Jatin. 2013. *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*. New York: Fordham University Press

which were intimately tied to the project of British imperialism and native responses to it. (Ibid)

Thus, for the Punjabi writers discussed in this dissertation, the novel did not enjoy an organic relationship with the Punjabi literary tradition, and further, its very form remained tied to a construct they were committed to critique – the nation. All of them wrote profusely, but none ever composed a novel, a conscious choice that must be seen as both aesthetic and political. Further, unlike poetry or drama, the novel form remains primarily textual, presupposing a degree of literacy. Naturally, it did not always translate well into collective, oral modes of circulation.[20] For this reason, the novel's readership in Punjab has primarily been restricted to the middle classes, and a small section of the elite intelligentsia. Hence, for these writers, privileging poetry and theatre also flowed from their commitment to producing art for the working masses. The choice of genres therefore, stemmed from the political imperative to decolonise artistic form, by turning to regional traditions and popular modes of expression declared 'backward' and 'vulgar' by Empire, while also centring literary genres relegated from the 'national culture' forged by post-colonial elites.

Chapters 2,3 and 4 in the dissertation follow a similar format: poems and plays by two Punjabi writers, one from each side of the border, are analysed together through the prism of a seminal text from the Punjabi literary tradition. Thus, chapter two, titled "Contesting Gender, Nation, and Tradition: The Voice of Hir in Postcolonial Punjabi Poetry" closely reads

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This is not to say that novels do not feature in post-colonial Punjabi writing on the left. Scores of Punjabi novels have been written, including prominent classics like Jaswant Singh Kanwal's *Lahu Di Lo,* which is about the Naxalbari movement in Punjab. However, the novel's structure and function in the Punjabi context is at sharp variance with its national, bourgeois form. For example, novels serve primarily as a historical rather than aesthetic genre, a means to document the sacrifices and victories of left-wing struggles that faced brutal repression and erasure in dominant historiography. I am grateful to Sumail Singh Sidhu and Aditya Bahl for these insights.

the dialogue between the rebel heroine, Hir, and the Qazi or cleric, from the Punjabi qissa of *Hir Waris Shah.* The qissa is a poetic storytelling genre with roots in Arabic and Persian traditions. I trace how the voice of Hir constitutes a genre of disputation within Punjabi poetry, reworked by Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) in her iconic poem "Aj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu" (Today I Call on Waris Shah), and by Nasreen Anjum Bhatti (1943-2016) in her titular poem "Nil Karaiyan Nilkaan" (Blue Cloth Dyed Blue). While Pritam invokes *Hir Waris Shah* at the cusp of independence to fashion a feminist take on the debate on national culture in the aftermath of Partition, Bhatti builds on her insights to construct a vernacular feminist historiography that challenged the Islamist-patriarchal narrative of the military dictatorship in post-colonial Pakistan. Both poets accomplish this by unique yet related literary techniques; Pritam develops and inverts Waris Shah's symbolism surrounding poison, while Bhatti adopts Hir's voice to undertake a feminist revision of the myth of Bhaag Bhari, which is based on Waris Shah's alleged lover and muse for the Hir qissa.

In chapter three, I turn to two plays, *Dhamak Nagaare Di* (The Pulsating Drum) by Gursharan Singh and *Takht Lahore* (The Throne of Lahore) by Najm Hosain Syed. The plays present contemporary re-interpretations of the sixteenth century text, *Dulle Di Var*. The var is an epic, balladic historical genre, and *Dulle Di Var* or the var of Dulla Bhatti chronicles peasant rebellion against the Mughal king Akbar. I analyse how Singh and Syed interpreted the var to respond to the rising significance of the peasant as a radical political actor in the 1960s and '70s, both in the CPI-ML-led (Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist) Naxalite uprising in India and the Mazdoor Kissan (Workers and Peasants) Party in Pakistan. Both plays work to de-centre the protagonist, shifting the var's traditional focus on Dulla Bhatti as the hero to spotlight the agency of marginal characters –

women and Dalits. While Gursharan Singh accomplishes this through the characters of the mirasi and Nooramdi, Najm Hosain Syed expunges Bhatti from the cast of characters altogether, centring the action on a subaltern figure, Ramja.

Next, Chapter Four examines the poetry of Sant Ram Udasi and Ustad Daman, drawing on the kafi of eighteenth century poet-saint Bulleh Shah as a template for the critique of dominant religion. The kafi genre is usually a poem in stanzas with a refrain, and is tied closely to qawwali[21] practice in Punjab. While Ustad Daman invokes Bulleh Shah's irreverent and ironic treatment of the tropes of religion to attack the religiously inflected authoritarianism of the Pakistani state, Sant Ram Udasi's "Aj" (Today) ventriloquises marginal characters from Sikh hagiography to present a critique of dominant Jatt Sikh Punjabi identity, invoking Bulleh Shah's affective attachment to his marginal caste mentor, Shah Inayat. As poets whose politics was variously informed by the radical traditions of anticolonialism, left-wing politics, and Dalit assertion, connecting with a mode of dissent that playfully engaged the languages of faith allowed Daman and Udasi to critique the rise of dominant religion as a political force in both countries.

The fifth, and final main body chapter travels to the 'third Punjab', to Punjabi intellectuals of the Indian Workers' Association (IWA) in Britain. It aims to explore the forms that the Punjabi literary imagination transported to diasporic settings, embodying a migrant consciousness that exported regional genres and popular traditions abroad to fashion an anti-imperialist internationalism and antiracist solidarity rooted in a working class, migrant

[21] Qawwali is an Islamicate form of devotional singing popular throughout North India. For more, see Qureshi, Regula. "Qawwali: Music of Islamic Mysticism in Pakistan", *Performing Arts Program of the Asia Society,* vol. 4, 1977.

subjectivity. Reworking genres discussed in previous chapters, such as the Hir qissa, the historical var, and the Bulleh Shahi kafi, I show how British Punjabi poets routed a particularist regional identity into a universalist black working class consciousness. In particular, I analyse the forging of a kind of ‘vernacular internationalism’ in Niranjan Singh Nur’s epic poem titled “Ho Chi Minh,” which draws on both the qissa and the var form to knit together the Indian and Vietnamese anticolonial struggles. Further, I examine how political blackness is interpreted within IWA writing, surveying poetry and prose by Ajmer Coventry, Surjit Hans, and Avtar Sadiq to chart how immigrant Communists in Britain navigated the ideological tension between a racial/ immigrant identity and a universalist proletarian identity. Moreover, I also discuss Avtar Singh Sadiq’s short story, “Chimnian Di Chanvain” (In The Chimneys’ Shade) to discuss how vernacular structures of caste critique came to inform analyses of racism, and vice versa.

Finally, the Conclusion offers a recap and reflections on the contemporary moment. I touch on the enduring significance of cross-border solidarity via Punjabi literature in light of online spaces in the post-Covid world, with a particular focus on East-West political and cultural collaborations around the 2021 farmers’ protests in India.

2. Contesting Nation, Region, and Tradition: Hir as a Genre of Feminist Critique in the Poetry of Amrita Pritam and Nasreen Anjum Bhatti

> So, don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me
> your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three
> cultures-white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve
> and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to
> fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is
> denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a
> new culture-una cultura mestiza-with my own lumber, my
> own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.
> (Anzaldua 2012, 22)

O Hir,
The name of your Ranjhann,

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

O Hir,

The name of your Ranjhann. (Pritam n.d.: 2)

This poem from Amrita Pritam's "Navin Rutt*"* (The New Season) captures the tender, sensuous lyricism that characterised much of what is identified as her 'love poetry,' a form that dominates her highly acclaimed 1955 anthology *Sunehade* (Messages). In the poem cited above, Pritam references the narrative of Hir and Ranjha, a story that has circulated in oral, textual and performative form in Punjab since the sixteenth century. The playful tenor of the poem is established by the repetition of "naa" (name) and "laindaa/ laindee" (taking/ takes [the name of Ranjha]), a soothing mix of vowels and nasal sounds that mimics the cadences of a folksong. The quality of banter is accentuated by invoking the structure of the popular riddle in Punjab which is often designed around lists combining a series of negations (Syed 1968, 85). The poem lists the characters that 'take' Ranjha's name: mother and father (Hir's parents), maulvi (a village cleric who Ranjha has had an altercation with), and the brothers and their wives (Ranjha's brothers and their wives who dispossess him and exile him). The tone of lively teasing is augmented by Pritam's use of pet names for Hir ("Hiray") and Ranjha ("Ranjhann"), creating a sense of intimacy and endearment that culminates in, and in a sense affirms the enduring influence of the Hir narrative in popular memory today – "Even centuries later, girls today/ Name their lovers Ranjha."

In 1987 in Jhang, Pakistan, a prominent politician was pressured into boycotting a commemorative event celebrating two hundred years since Waris Shah is said to have written the story of Hir and Ranjha. (Mirza 1992, 13).[22] Abida Hussain, who was at the time serving as Member of the National Assembly for the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, yielded to angry demands by the Sial community. The

[22] *Hir Waris Shah*, written in the 19th century by Waris Shah, is the most popular and critically acclaimed rendering of the narrative, which can be traced back to fourteenth century Persian sources.

men of this Jatt sub-caste remonstrated that the story of Hir (who, in the narrative, belongs to the Sial clan too) made a travesty of the 'Punjabi values' of family honour and social propriety. As discussed in Chapter One, Mir argues that colonial-era re-tellings of Hir reveal a shared Punjabi ethos rooted in a sentiment of belonging and cross-communal notions of piety (Mir 2010; 2012). However, as this incident suggests, Mir's analysis obfuscates the history of contestation that has surrounded the Hir tale.

As the incident narrated above shows, the character of Hir presents a locus where Punjabi literary tradition can threaten the maintenance of gendered norms and patriarchal control in contemporary society. As can be expected, Amrita Pritam was well-aware of the oppositional associations around the character of Hir. This subversive, feminist reading of the Hir-Ranjha romance is embedded in Pritam's seemingly innocent poem reproduced above, "O Ranjha, your name." While the poem's title and first half is addressed to Ranjha, the second half shifts the focus to Hir. Before Ranjha undertakes exile, he was known as 'Dhido,' an affectionate title bestowed on him by his father. Pritam asserts that it is Hir who both names him 'Ranjha' and takes on the name for herself. In the poem, Pritam references a well-known kafi[23] by eighteenth century poet, Bullah Shah:

> Crying 'Ranjha, Ranjha,' I became Ranjha myself
> Speak to me as 'Dhido Ranjha'
> Don't call me Hir (2012, 4)

[23] There has been much debate about the origins of the 'kafi,' which is a popular genre in Punjabi poetry. Some scholars contend that it originated from the word 'kav' linking it to the Sanskrit 'kavita/ kavya,' others trace it back to the Arabic 'Qafiya,' which refers to rhymed verse, and yet others have pointed to its affinity with the 'Kafi thaat,' a musical scale in North Indian classical music. The latter is not surprising as the kafi is a musical form, and its defining feature is the refrain, called the "rahaa'o." See Bhutta, Saeed. "Kafi: A Genre of Punjabi poetry," *South Asian Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2008, pp. 223-229.

Read alongside the lines above, and Anzaldua's manifesto for a Chicana feminism quoted at the outset, Pritam's poem plays on Hir's re-naming of Dhido as Ranjha to centre her as the source of a feminist consciousness that can destroy and re-make both Dhido and her own self as structured by patriarchy, feudal family relations, and dominant masculinity. Thus, she claims her 'freedom to carve and chisel [her] own face' by insisting on her own name change, shunning the identity bestowed on her by her paternal family, who named her Hir. Moreover, her re-naming of Dhido transforms him from a propertied, masculine subject into a lover who forsakes all possession, including the identity he had received from his father, the tribal chief, Mauju Chaudhary. It is the name Hir gives to him that endures, as it is 'taken' even by the characters who stand opposed to their union such as Hir's parents, Ranjha's brothers, and the village cleric. Hir's word that is the moving force behind this transformation. She has the power to name, and it is through this power that she brings Ranjha into existence and gives him a place in history. When women *name* men Ranjha centuries later, they embody her constitutive power. This constitutive power, embodied in Hir's voice, become a template for feminist critique in the contemporary. 'Centuries later', post-colonial Punjabi feminists continue to forge a critique of patriarchy rooted in regional literary tradition – their own 'feminist architecture' constructed from their own 'lumber, bricks and mortar'. Afterall, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house", and neither will it serve for building our own (Lorde, 2007).

In her famous poem, "Aj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu" (Today I call on Waris Shah), Pritam builds on this feminist architecture by reconstituting Waris Shah to implicate regional and nationalist patriarchies in the gendered violence of the 1947 partition of Punjab. The same technique is deployed thirty years later by West Punjabi feminist poet Nasreen Anjum Bhatti, who builds on Hir and Pritam's interpretive interventions to "turn another page in the book of love" (Pritam

1947).[24] Bhatti creatively worked the tale of *Hir Waris Shah* into her verses to address the authoritarian context of a repressive military regime in Pakistan whose cultural foundations rested on the control of women's bodies. The story of Hir did not survive merely to irk the patriarchal egos of Sial men – it critically informed the feminist search for a poetics that could resolve the 'woman question' for regional literature in a post-colonial context. The question for Pritam and Bhatti was: How can we construct a feminist poetics of the regional vernacular that remains equally critical of nationalist, regional and communal patriarchies?

This chapter explores answers to this question by analysing feminist re-workings of the Hir qissa in post-colonial Punjab. Drawing on an analysis of the Hir-Qazi dialogue in *Hir Waris Shah*, I will argue that Hir texts from the Punjabi literary tradition furnish a de-centring of male authorship, a template for re-interpreting tradition, and a dialogic tension that facilitates feminist interventions by Pritam and Bhatti to address points of historical, political and cultural conjuncture in Punjab. Pritam invokes *Hir Waris Shah* at the cusp of independence to fashion a feminist take on the debate on national culture triggered by decolonisation and Partition in India and Pakistan, while Bhatti develops these insights to construct a vernacular feminist historiography that challenged the Islamist-patriarchal narrative of the military dictatorship in post-colonial Pakistan. Both poets accomplish this by unique yet related literary techniques: Pritam develops and inverts Waris Shah's symbolism surrounding poison from the folk classic, while Bhatti adopts Hir's voice to undertake a feminist revision of the myth of Bhaag Bhari (Waris Shah's lover). Together, their poems offer a historiographical and literary reconstruction of cultural identity to place women as active subjects and narrators of history.

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[24] This translation is adapted from two translations: Amrita Pritam, "I Call on Varis Shah!" trans. Giff Schreffler, *Journal of Punjab Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1-2, 2006, pp. 79, and Amrita Pritam, "To Waris Shah," Suresh Kohli, ed. and trans., *Alone in the multitude.* New Delhi: Indian Literary Review, 1979, 11.

In a broader sense, this exploration will also attempt to reconfigure the relationship between the regional vernacular and literary radicalism in post-colonial contexts. As Priyamvada Gopal argues, the hackneyed distinction between the 'politicals' and the 'men of taste' (2005, 3) flattens the complexity of texts that combine a universalist pursuit of social transformation with intimate, particular insight into experience and affect. While Gopal cites this flawed binary to critique simplified views of the Progressive Writers' Movement, women Punjabi writers such as Pritam and Bhatti faced a double bind –poetry in the regional vernacular is excluded from the purview of 'high/ national culture' that a language like Urdu or Hindi can occupy. Writing in the regional vernacular is ignored in debates on left-wing literary production, relegated to 'regional confines' and seen as 'subaltern discourse' (Kaviraj 2010) that is necessarily local in its political and cultural outlook. This relegation of Punjabi literature from important public debates around gender, national reconstruction and political transformation is rooted in the hierarchy of languages instituted by colonial knowledge in South Asia, which designated Urdu, Hindi and English as 'languages of command,' while Punjabi and other regional languages were consigned to 'vulgar tongues,' (Cohn 1996) or 'rural patois' (Mir 2006) unsuitable for government and cultural production.

Bhatti and Pritam were shrewdly aware of this linguistic stratification of Indian culture and society. For them, writing in Punjabi and paying homage to Hir stemmed from an attachment to their mother tongue as well as a political choice that responded to the imperialist marginalisation of vernacular literary culture. Moreover, by re-working Hir's voice into contemporary feminist critique, Bhatti and Pritam also challenged dominant nationalist critiques of South Asian feminism that viewed 'the woman question' as a western import imposed by colonial modernity. In a context where bourgeois national elites justified the

patriarchal mould of the post-colonial state through a narrow focus on the transfer of power entailed by formal Independence, Punjabi feminists like Bhatti and Pritam insisted on a feminist decolonising lens that could restore people's pride in regional literary tradition, while connecting to its genealogies of resistance to fire new visions of liberation.

Moreover, through their engagement with Punjabi literary tradition via Hir, Bhatti and Pritam also offered a regional feminist analysis to offer an internal critique to the male-dominated worlds of Communist politics and left-wing literary production in Punjab. Responses to Pritam's poem in the intellectual and progressive circles she moved in were telling indeed, as she writes in her autobiography how the Sikhs held her guilty for not addressing her invocation to Guru Nanak, while some Pakistani intellectuals viewed it as a scourge on the moral legitimacy of the Muslim nation (1994, 32; 24). The communists, on the other hand, were disappointed that Pritam chose not to call upon Lenin! (Ibid, 32) By refusing to address her poem to Guru Nanak, Pritam rejected the categories of dominant religion and the bordering logics of the Indian/ Pakistani state, which mapped her (given) Sikh identity onto the form of her literary critique. By refusing to address Lenin on the other hand, Pritam offered a corrective to the condescension reserved for regional literary tradition even among progressives, who primarily wrote in the national languages of Urdu/ Hindi, or English. Moreover, in her insistence on connecting with Waris Shah *while* wrenching away his male authorial privilege, Pritam also responds to progressive and Marxist dogmas around revolutionary transformation and anticolonial liberation in relation to 'the woman question.' More often than not, progressive men shared the bourgeois nationalist silence on the issue, giving precedence to class exploitation over patriarchal oppression. The assumption was that patriarchy, like caste, which remains another blind spot in South Asian Marxist praxis, will disappear in the wake of a socialist transformation of society.

Thus, unfortunately, left-wing Punjabi writing by men unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) viewed feminism as a 'liberal' or 'Western' construct that could augment, rather than constitutively inform revolutionary culture in Punjab. As subsequent chapters in this dissertation show, the world of left-wing Punjabi writing remained dominated by men in India, Pakistan, and Britain. This is not to say that Marxist intellectuals like Najm Hosain Syed and Gursharan Singh were anti-feminist in their outlook, as analyses of their plays show, their post-colonial reworking of the var (historical ballad) of Dulla Bhatti de-centred the hero figure to emphasise the agency of subjects at the margins of gender and caste. As my analyses of Sant Ram Udasi's poetry in Chapter Four, and of Avtar Singh Sadiq's "In the chimneys' shade' in Chapter Five show, gender and caste remain crucial, and under-addressed sites for internal debate in the milieus of left-wing Punjabi writing. Beginning my close readings of Punjabi literary dissidence with Amrita Pritam and Nasreen Anjum Bhatti, the only women writers in this dissertation, I hope to refract the reader's reception of other authors discussed in subsequent chapters through their feminist engagement with literary tradition.

The Voice of Hir in Punjabi Poetry: A Vernacular Genre of Critique

The character of Hir as portrayed in *Hir Waris Shah* inaugurates a literary mode of disputation through a hermeneutical challenge to the Qazi's moral and spiritual authority. This tussle for female voice, a thematic developed by Pritam and Bhatti, is embedded in the originary text itself. As Syed points out, the "plot of 'Heer' in bare outline is simple and conventional" (1968, 44): Dhido (Ranjha), after a dispute with his brothers over their father's land, leaves his hometown Takht Hazara with nothing but his flute in hand. He embarks on a journey that takes him to Jhang, where he meets Hir and they fall in love. On her suggestion, he joins her father's household as a cowherd, but the love affair is eventually discovered, at

which point Hir's parents marry her off to the wealthy clan of the Kheras. Ranjha, disguised as a jogi, follows Hir to her in-laws' house in Rangpur where the two decide to elope. The runaway lovers are eventually tricked by Hir's family through a false promise of marriage. While Ranjha returns to Takht Hazara for ceremonial preparations, Hir is poisoned. He dies of shock upon hearing the news (Ibid). However, within this seemingly trite love-story, writers of the Punjabi qissa have managed to enclose a critical ethnography of Punjab, a relentless exposure of the duplicity and exploitation that underpins social institutions, and a keen insight into subjectivities that can topple the structures of caste, patriarchy and class. The texts accomplish this through a variety of literary devices, ranging from characterisation and authorial comment, to the use of comedy and irony. This is clearly illustrated in the Hir-Qazi dialogue from Waris Shah's retelling of the story.

The Hir-Qazi exchange has been re-interpreted by many poets over the centuries. It is considered a defining episode in the Hir narrative, featured in all textual and performative tellings. The episode occupies a pivotal moment in the story – the love affair between Hir and Ranjha has been discovered and her parents have vowed to marry her off to Saida, a wealthy scion of the Khera clan. The narrative shifts geographically from Jhang to Rangpur, where Hir's in-laws reside, a spatial move that also symbolises a transformation in the ishq (love) between Hir and Ranjha. From this point on, we encounter a married Hir and a wandering mendicant Ranjha, the contradiction between love and society sharpens, and there are no further scenes depicting Hir and Ranjha frolicking freely in the grazing commons. Hir's dialogue with the Qazi foreshadows this darkening mood in the tale, and her battle with the Qazi represents her final clash with the patriarchy of her father's house, and her inaugural battle with the patriarchy of her husband's home. It is here that Hir furnishes the Punjabi literary formation with an Ur-text of feminist subversion. While Deol views Waris' heroine as a "markedly subdued Hir

who speaks from within the bounds of social and literary convention," (2002, 145) I will argue that Hir engages in a hermeneutical contest with the Qazi that ultimately leaves the Qazi's discourse subverted. Marshalling verses from the Quran and traditions surrounding popular spirituality in Punjab, Hir turns the moral legitimacy of patriarchal control on its head to force her way into domains of discourse traditionally denied to women.

At this point in the narrative, Hir and Ranjha have been separated by force as the council of elders, the panchayat, rules that Hir must be married off. Hir, locked up in her house, barred from seeing even her girlfriends, engages in charged arguments with her family, responding fiercely to the shame, insults and threats heaped upon her by her father, mother, and brother. Frustrated by Hir's intransigence, her father summons the Qazi to their aid. This is the second appearance of a qazi in the narrative, with the first one being summoned by Ranjha's treacherous brothers to divide their father's land. The Qazi in the first instance accepts a bribe from Ranjha's brothers to deprive him of his rightful share, so by the time he enters the scene to chastise Hir, Waris Shah has already framed the character as morally dubious. Waris Shah deliberately paints the Qazi's character as a generic type. He has no personal name and is described simply as 'Qazi' which means 'judge.' The Qazi symbolises the temporal authority of the Mughal state, as well as the spiritual power that legitimises its hold over its denizens, and Chuchak's (Hir's father and the local tribal leader) control over his daughter and his village. In his very first lines, the Qazi reminds Hir of the "stature" of her father, and thus marks himself out immediately as the upholder of social convention. The Qazi stands for all that is corrupt and worldly, for the instrumentalisation of God and religion in the service of selfish profit and political power.

The Qazi announces his arrival with a strong, imperious pronouncement highlighting his claim over orthodox religion, "Qazi declared in the court, obey the orders of the Shariah if you want to live" (Stanza 205).[25] By referring to his "declaration" in the "court," the Qazi also impresses upon Hir his access to the male public sphere. He then presents tenets of this patriarchal domain to Hir in the form of religious commandments: "After death, we will only enter heaven if we have faith/… Cover your head, have some shame, only so can you stitch up [your] transgressions." (Ibid) Hir's first blow in this hermeneutical contest works by turning the Qazi's religious discourse around the Day of Judgment on its head:

> Hir says, life is only worth living, if one has faith here and now, mister,
> This world is illusory, only God is real, that is His merciful command, mister,
> 'We have created everything in pairs', it has been mandated in the Quran, mister,
> My love is known to the Baashik serpent, the Pen of Destiny, heaven and sky, mister. (Stanza 206)

While the Qazi mandates that "faith" is essential to enter heaven after death, Hir counters this injunction with a conviction that faith is necessary, here and now, to do justice to life on earth. In a single line, Hir shifts the grounds of the discussion from the abstract, lofty heights the Qazi has adopted, to the messy materiality of human relationships. She also opens the floor for her re-interpretation of "faith" as love, as her unwavering commitment to Ranjha against all familial and social odds. This is hinted at in the Quranic verse she cites in the original Arabic, "We

[25] As with any text that has circulated orally, editions have been compiled by drawing on both orature and historical manuscripts. I have referred to the versions produced by Sheikh Abdul Aziz (1960) and Sharif Sabar (1985) for my translations. For this reason, my in-text citations for *Hir Waris Shah* do not mention author/ editor as I have selected from both Aziz and Sabar.

have created everything in pairs," (51: 49) and developed more fully in stanzas that follow.

As the dialogue progresses, Hir claims that she was given Ranjha through her pleas at the 'dargah,' the word commonly used to denote a shrine across all three major religions of Punjab, Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism. Hir's interpretive manoeuvre combines and thus reworks both scriptural Islam and popular spirituality, as she intersperses her utterances with snatches of Quranic Arabic and references to the 'dargah' and the 'qutb,'[26] which are institutions associated with the popular practices of Sufism, a domain abhorred by the likes of the orthodox, Shariah-wielding Qazi. In fact, in the last line of the stanza quoted above, Hir's instrumentalisation of tradition widens to include Sanskritic mythology through the invocation of the Baashik serpent, which was used as a rope to churn the oceans into existence before the beginning of life on earth. To the primordiality and creational significance of this great snake, Hir adds the testimony of the elements, sky and earth, and of 'loh qalam,' which translates directly as 'pen and tablet,' but also points us towards the 'Pen of Destiny' referred to in Islamic tradition, the hidden or indelible documentation of all of humankind's deeds since eternity. While the Qazi looks ahead to life after death and the day of judgment to buttress his position, Hir takes us back into time, to traditions of origin (the Baashik snake) and to the timeless, constant existence of nature (earth and sky). At the same time, while the invocation of 'loh qalam' strengthens her claim on antiquity and tradition, it also highlights the importance of Hir's human agency, signified by the literal meaning of 'pen and tablet.' The pen is after all a tool of the thinking, acting human, one who can write her own destiny. Thus, Deol's assertion that Waris Shah portrays a Hir who "demurely avoids conflict with social ideology" (Deol 2002, 152) and represents a "character who is not willing

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[26] The Arabic word "Qutb" literally translates as axis, or pivot. In Sufism, the term denotes the perfect human being, an individual who has attained the highest stage of spirituality.

(or perhaps not able) to engage the Qazi on his own terms" (Ibid, 156) misses her subversive mingling of religious and regional traditions otherwise considered disparate. Hir firmly establishes her interpretive authority despite her vulnerable position at the nexus of dominant religion, social convention and familial patriarchy.

In this dialogue spanning fourteen stanzas, Hir's rhetorical prowess continues to deliver master strokes one after the other, and she complements her appropriation of tradition with a materialist critique of the Qazi's role in aiding patriarchal control: "They habitually cleave those joined in love, these murderers know of nothing else/… They take bribes, and sell faith, that's all that these Qazis do" (Stanza 210). In return, the Qazi is exposed through his recourse to misogynistic attacks and threats of violence: "Your beauty and youth is temporary, you lusty, perfumed wench…" (Stanza 207) "I will burn you on a stack of hay with the whole village watching!" (Stanza 209) The exchange becomes more heated, and threats from the Qazi continue to pile, yet Hir refuses to back down ultimately leading him to conclude:

> Says Qazi, she is an unwielding stone, Hir cannot be defeated through arguments
> Tie her up, gag her mouth, and marry her off, she is making trouble with her stories
> Instead of mosques, she sits in councils,[27] she grazes hogs instead of sheep
> Waris Shah, Hir churns love's yogurt to refine ghee. (Stanza 218)

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[27] The word used here by Waris Shah is 'daira,' which translates as 'circle,' referring here to the practice of public debate and intellectual deliberation, where all participate as equals. More specifically, "sitting in dairas (circles)" points us to the regular, if not daily, congregation amongst the men of the village to discuss politics and other affairs pertaining to the community.

The Qazi loses the war of words, but prevails through recourse to sheer force. His admission that Hir 'cannot be defeated through arguments' is coupled with a deep anxiety regarding her hermeneutical challenge to the religious and patriarchal tradition he stands for. This is manifested by his anger at her brazen intrusion into the exclusively male sphere of 'councils,' an act he likens to domesticating pigs: a despicable, deviant practice because the animals are considered abhorrent to Muslims, and their consumption is forbidden in Islam. Waris Shah, as diegetic author, steps in here to have the last words: "Waris Shah, Hir churns love's yogurt to refine ghee." Yet that is not how ghee is made: milk is churned to obtain butter, which is then boiled slowly to yield ghee. In fact, it is impossible to obtain ghee from yogurt, because once the milk curdles, it cannot produce butter. Hir has accomplished the impossible, and this impossibility hints at a dialogic tension between author and character – Hir's rhetorical power looms large enough to threaten and overwhelm her creator, the poet himself. Encapsulated in Waris Shah's own concluding remark, this tension is also relayed to us through the Qazi, who becomes a mouthpiece for this authorial anxiety: "Accept the Khera [as your husband] by law and right, *you have become Waris Shah himself*, o stubborn woman" (my emphasis) (Stanza 207). Herein lies Hir's highest transgression – a female character indebted to the eloquence and wit bestowed by the qissa poet inevitably yanks the reins of narrative away from the male author and appropriates his voice into her own. This looming and overwhelming quality of Hir's voice becomes a topos in the Punjabi literary tradition, a dialogic play that is used to censure the nexus between dominant religion and social control, while also imposing limits on the authorial ego of the male poet.

This tussle for voice also manifests itself in the popular kafi form, a corpus in which Madhu Lal Hussain (1538-1599) and Bulleh Shah (1680-1757) are

renowned for reworking this theme. A Hussaini or Bulleh Shahi[28] kafi of this type will typically open with verses in which they deploy "vocal masquerade" to invoke the voice of Hir, yet end with what Carla Petievich terms a "formal unmasking"– the insertion of the 'takhallus,' or the poet's signature (Petievich 2008, 15). According to Petievich, this move "signals the poet's resumption of a 'waking self', and reminds the audience that there is a distinction between the actual poet and the persona of the masquerade" (Ibid). As evinced by our analysis of the Hir-Qazi dialogue in *Hir Waris Shah* above, it also brings into relief the gendered tussle for voice, as persona and poet grapple for authorial control. Moreover, the ending stanza containing this 'formal unmasking' often delivers the poem's punchline, the critical poetic juncture that connects the voice of Hir with the poet's particular, contextual critique, his re-interpretation of tradition that builds on our heroine's method. See for instance, this kafi by Bulleh Shah:

> I need a Ranjha, *(refrain)*
> Our love has lived since before He said 'be!', and it was,
> Our love is no secret, no deception, no lie
> …
> O Bullah, nothing divides Ahad and Ahmad
> Except the small secret, of the looping letter 'M'!
> I need a Ranjha… (Shah 2012, 10)

In the first stanza, Bulleh Shah ventriloquises Hir's claim to antiquity and divinity as spelled out in her dialogue with the Qazi. This intertextual re-working of the Hir-Qazi dialogue opens up the space for the kafi's own political intervention: the critique of dominant religion articulated through an affective, intimate relationship to the prophet of Islam. 'Ahad' translates as 'One' and appears in the Quran as one

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[28] I refer here to the kafis of Shah Hussain and Bulleh Shah as a multi-author corpus which includes texts that deploy the names of these poets as a thematic and a nom de plume. For a more expansive discussion of the Punjabi kafi and Bulleh Shah, see Chapter Four.

of God's names. However, it is not as widely invoked as 'Allah', which Bulleh Shah deliberately avoids. This allows the kafi to push against dominant Islamic expression, a technique and concern that resonates with Hir's eclectic compounding of diverse symbols like the Baashik serpent, the 'loh kalam' and the elements. 'Ahmad' here refers to the prophet of Islam, and once again, Bulleh Shah eschews referring to him as 'Muhammad,' choosing the less common variant of 'Ahmad' to humanise his figure and to engage in wordplay – a single letter, 'm' (Meem in Urdu/ Shahmukhi Punjabi), separates God and man, a 'bhet' or secret, that veils the hierarchy between God and humankind, and concurrently, legitimates caste, class and communal divides in society.[29] When Bulleh Shah returns to the refrain, 'I need a Ranjha', after his re-interpretation of humanity's relationship with the divine, the meaning of Ranjha stands transformed – Ranjha now represents an undoing of dominant religion, the rejection of a distant, king-like God orchestrated by Bulleh Shah through the template of Hir.

Despite being a rich terrain for contestation, most readings of *Hir Waris Shah* and the Punjabi kafi remain wedded to abstract frameworks of 'Sufism' or mysticism.[30] As Aijaz Ahmad has argued, literary and religious canonicity emerged at the same time and have overlapped in Indian history. This development emphasised the 'sublimity' of texts such as *Hir Waris Shah* to the point that they can no longer be "read in relation to the secular conditions of (their) production, (n)or as an ideological text whose main task is to offer an imaginary resolution in the secular, familial and material domains" (Ahmad 1992, 260-1). This produces an exaggerated bifurcation between literary tradition and contemporary writing, a distinction challenged by Pritam's reflexive approach to

[29] This literary deployment of 'secrecy' appears in Bulleh Shah kafis discussed in Chapter Four, particularly in "The thief in my shawl's folds."

[30] See for instance, Ramakrishna (1977), Schimmel (1975) and Shackle (2012). Petievich (2008), despite her gendered critique of Punjabi poetic tradition, also views the corpus as an instrument in the hands of the Sufis, yielded to pare down a theological message. For more on this discussion, see Chapter Four.

Hir Waris Shah in “Today I Call on Waris Shah.” In his essay titled, “Where Mirrors are Windows,” A.K. Ramanujan discusses the role of such a “reflexive intertextuality” in furnishing Indian literature with a “common yet creative language of dissent” (1989, 208). Pointing to the indictment of the Brahminical tradition in Bhakti literature, he unites the two in a shared repertoire in which texts mimic, reflect and critique each other. Prominent among the genres of this “web of intertextuality” (Ibid) are ‘akam-puram’ poems, texts that share the same poetic code and language, and use a similar structure to create different texts, hence responding to each other’s thematic content. For Ramanujan, “modernity disrupted [the] whole tradition of reflexivity with new notions of originality and autonomy of single works” (Ibid, 190). However, the relationship that Pritam establishes between her poem and *Hir Waris Shah* militates against this reading of literary modernity. Pritam’s poem connects with Waris Shah’s *Hir* as ‘akam-puram’ texts do, embodying all three facets of ‘reflexivity’ identified by Ramanujan – it responds to Waris Shah’s text by directly addressing him in its title and de-centring his authorial control, it reflects on his text by contextualizing its serpent/venom imagery in the contemporary era, and lastly, it is ‘self-reflexive’ in Pritam’s exploration of a post-colonial feminist poetics of the regional vernacular.

Reworking Hir: The ‘Poison’ of Patriarchal Nationalism in Pritam’s ‘Today I Call on Waris Shah’

Already a distinguished poet at the young age of twenty-eight in 1947, Amrita Pritam found herself relocating to East Punjab as riots broke out in the wake of the impending division of the sub-continent. Having made the journey on which countless others perished, the violence and destruction wrought by Partition would probe her to write her most well-loved and oft-quoted poem: “Today I Call on Waris Shah.” Celebrated across the border in both Punjabs, the poem elicits for

many the pangs of nostalgia and loss of being uprooted from their homelands. However, in my reading, Pritam's poem does not merely bemoan the violence of Partition: it provides an anticolonial feminist critique of both regional and national patriarchies. This is accomplished by an appropriation of Waris Shah's authorial privilege in the tradition of Hir's voice to present a poetic reconstruction of regional identity that contributed to the debate on national culture on both sides of the newly created border.

Pritam's initiation into the Indian literary sphere, and her interest in the themes of national reconstruction was shaped heavily by the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWA). As discussed in the preceding chapter, The PWA constituted "a hugely influential radical cultural movement that spanned several regions and languages across India… this movement was closely linked to debates over decolonisation and the nature of the postcolonial nation-state that was to come into being" (Gopal 2005, 1). This influence was seen most directly in Pritam's 1944 anthology, *Lok Peed* (People's Anguish), which criticised the colonial economy particularly in light of the Bengal famine of 1943. The PWA's anticolonial project resonated deeply with the young Pritam, as did the "particularly instructive" and "constitutive" role that gender played in the literature produced by her progressive contemporaries (Ibid, 5). Yet, writing in the regional vernaculars, like Punjabi, remained a marginal practice in the North Indian-dominated milieu of the PWA. Despite the fact that the organisation operated regional branches, it garnered most influence in North India, where Urdu dominated as a language of culture. Most leading members of the PWA, even those who were native Punjabi speakers, chose to write in Urdu. As discussed in Chapter One, this choice was tied to their class (most urban, middle-class Punjabis were educated in Urdu), as well as a political commitment to forging a unified national culture for India or Pakistan.

Pritam however, wrote extensively in her first language, claiming it was the only language she could write in with honesty. (Pritam 1994, 32) Her choice to write in Punjabi thus grafted the politics of a marginalised regional language and vernacular literary tradition to the imperative to decolonise gendered relations, women's roles, religious practice, caste practices and class divides that framed the progressive debate on national culture in the years leading up to and succeeding formal Independence. As "Today I Call on Waris Shah" insists, any literary project of cultural reconstruction following the gendered violence wrought by nationalist and communal forces during Partition must integrate the questions of regional culture, feminist politics and decolonisation. For this, Pritam turns to the motif of the serpent in *Hir Waris Shah,* and to Hir's confrontational mode of re-interpreting tradition.

Pritam's poem works by mimicking the structure and form of *Hir Waris Shah* to re-interpret its meanings. Much like Waris Shah's eighteenth-century text, "Today I Call on Waris Shah" powerfully conjures a sense of place by drawing on images of the Punjabi landscape and rural life: the fields, the river Chenab, the earth, the spinning wheels and the Pipal tree. Waris Shah's *Hir* begins in much the same way, with detailed descriptions of Takht Hazara, the village where Ranjha lived with his brothers and father. Hazara is described as "paradise on earth," a bountiful hamlet whose inhabitants, on the surface, seem to engage in little more than merriment. This exuberant description is followed by Waris Shah's first dose of ironic contrast, as he follows his hyperbolic description of Takht Hazara with a stanza exposing the corrosive jealousy of Ranjha's brothers towards him. The brothers are compared to venomous snakes that strike Ranjha's heart mercilessly, completing the biblical imagery by placing a serpent in paradise.

Pritam similarly evokes the geography of the land, complimenting her description of the landscape with tropes from the regional literary tradition such as Ranjha's

flute and the girls' 'trinjann'.[31] This juxtaposition of the physical landscape with symbols from the literary tradition conjures a counter cartography of Punjab - constituted neither by the imperatives of the colonial state, nor by the aspirations of the dominant nationalist movement. Her verse constructs a cultural geography of the region, its contours sketched in by the qissa of Hir. Yet Pritam's grounding in regional literary tradition does not lead to a romanticised view of region and community as the primordial, utopic martyrs of colonial oppression and nationalist modernity. As the poem progresses, Pritam's deployment of the Hir narrative deepens her analysis of the nexus between Punjabi patriarchy and dominant Indian/Pakistani nationalism. Just as in Waris Shah's *Hir*, the serpent and its poison become central to establishing this linkage.

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

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[31] The trinjann was the communal space where women from the village would gather and work. In the Punjabi poetic tradition, the trinjann has developed into a salient symbol, representing the spirit of collectivity and equality, and often a stage of innocence, where girls play before they are married off and have to leave their own villages.

> The mighty snatch the relations of the weak, the wretched, they cannot even speak
>
> Rendered helpless, hapless, *all they do is dissolve poison like a dying snake…*
>
> …The strength of the weak remains repressed, their grief directed towards one another…
>
> …Waris Shah, the weak are robbed in their own homes, they cannot even speak out of fear. (Stanza 190) (my emphasis)

This stanza, with a sub-heading titled, "The Cry of Ranjha,"[32] highlights his plight as he watches his beloved borne off to her in-laws' village in Rangpur, a captive of her own wedding procession. Thus, in an immediate sense, the victims here are Hir and Ranjha, yet Waris prefers the generic category of 'the weak' or 'the wretched' to paint this picture of suffering. The line "moay sapp vaangu(n) viss ghoalday ni," which I have translated as 'dissolving poison' refers to an idiom in Punjabi – the act of 'dissolving' or 'stirring' poison is used colloquially to refer to repressed anger, conveyed by the image of absorbing and concentrating poison, internalising rather than purging it. As the entire village, including its low-caste, low-class denizens, participate in Hir's wedding, the spread of this patriarchal venom is captured in the line: 'they dissolve poison like a dying snake.' Patriarchal authority stands internalised by society as a whole, it is no longer embodied solely by Ranjha's brothers and Kaido. The wretched and poor become both sufferers and perpetrators - as the pomp and splendour of Hir's dowry comes to stand in for economic exploitation, a regime under which 'they are robbed in

[32] In some editions, the stanzas of *Hir Waris Shah* appear with Persian headings that were found in some of the manuscripts from the nineteenth century. The Persian title for this particular stanza is 'Faryaad Ranjha' which translates as 'The Cry of Ranjha,' thereby attributing these lines to Ranjha as he watches Hir being paraded out of town in a wedding procession. However, some scholars such as Sharif Sabar and Najm Hosain Syed concur that the Persian sub-headings are a later addition to Waris Shah's original text, and have preferred to omit them in their edited versions of *Hir Waris Shah*.

their own homes.’ The victims are drawn from the same ranks that are mobilised to maintain the feudal patriarchal status quo.

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

> …Somebody dissolved poison into the rivers
> And those waters drenched the earth
>
> Poison then sprung from every pore of this fertile land
> Along every inch ascended anger, at every foot rose rage
> A noxious, whirling wind blew through the jungles
> Turning each bamboo flute into a snake
>
> With the first bite, the incantations of snake charmers were lost
> The second sting’s effect was felt by all
> The biting consumed everyone, and they bit and bit on… (Pritam n.d.)

Similar to the ‘stirred poison’ in Waris Shah’s verses, the venom is no longer an external agent acting on the body of Hir, who is eventually, significantly, poisoned

in the story - it is toxic matter that has seeped into the very substance of the body politic of Punjab. Polluting the air itself in the form of a 'noxious, whirling wind,' its destructive contents have been breathed in and ingested by the entire population, turning them all into snakes ('*they* bit and bit on') (my emphasis) that attack each other. Pritam also hints at colonial complicity in nurturing this beast through policies that communalized identity in Punjab, suggested by the othering tone of "*somebody* dissolved poison into the rivers" (my emphasis). In many ways, Pritam exaggerates and extends Waris's symbolism to mark the enormity of historical rupture created by Partition in Punjab, as the bamboo flute, the pristine symbol of Ranjha, also undergoes this heinous transformation. As Punjab is Partitioned in the name of decolonisation, the venomous serpent of patriarchal ideology has grown into a ferocious Hydra, it's many-headed form signifying the convergence of the "multiple patriarchies [national, colonial and communal] at work in women's lives" (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 210).

As Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin point out, "the location of women at the intersection of these forces, rather than at their periphery, cast(s) an entirely new light on the apparent fixity of defining features of identity like community, religion, nationality" (Ibid, 211). It is this intersectional position of gender that informs Pritam's feminist revision of Punjabi literary tradition. Partition may have been 'over', and the transition from colony to nation completed in a literal sense. Yet the process of cultural and social reconstruction has just begun, a challenge to which Pritam responds through Hir's mode of contestation, to inscribe women's agency into the Punjabi literary tradition. The opening and closing lines of Pritam's poem almost work like a kafi's refrain, drawing on the dialogic tension created by the insertion of the poet in the 'takhallus' or poetic signature. By addressing Waris Shah, Pritam reverses the 'vocal masquerade' (Petievich 2008) of Punjabi poetry in which men speak as women *to* men, to create a reflexive text in which women speak for themselves, addressing men:

> Today I call on Waris Shah, from beyond the graves, speak
> And turn today in the book of love, a new page
>
> When a single daughter of Punjab cried, you wrote and wrote lamentations
> Today, millions of them cry, and call out to you…
>
> …Today, all have turned into Kaido,
> Thieves of beauty and ardour
> Where can we find today
> Another Waris Shah, once more? (Pritam n.d.)

The hint of irony in the last two lines cannot be missed. Where can we find another Waris Shah to speak the unspeakable truths of Partition? Where can we find a man who can give voice to the ordeals of the 'voiceless' women? Where can we find a man who can decolonise cultural identity under a post-colonial state that has made abundantly clear that the burden of nation formation will fall so heavily, so literally, on the gendered body? "Today I Call on Waris Shah" in itself offers an answer to this question. Pritam appropriates the role of Waris Shah, a woman taking ownership of the centuries old literary tradition through Hir, reclaiming what has largely been the domain of male poets. She sets up her feminist critique from the very outset, as the poem's opening invocation of Waris Shah can easily be read in the tone of a sharp rebuke – speak Waris Shah, you are dead and long gone, but arise from your grave, for you must! Although the opening line is often translated as 'Today I invoke Waris Shah', the use of the colloquial 'aakhan', which translated simply as 'Today I said to Waris Shah' or 'Today I say to Waris Shah' is significantly devoid of reverence, addressing Waris Shah as an equal. The sheer scale of Partition violence, the uncountable rapes, abductions and murders of women calls for this macabre resurrection of the poet

who penned the most beloved ballad of the land. Yet this resurrection is not merely an act of nostalgia stemming from a romantic sense of cultural loss – it is also Pritam's attempt to prise away male authorial privilege to fashion a feminist reworking of cultural identity and nationalist critique that becomes imperative to the nascent process of nation-building. Much like Hir's hermeneutical challenge to the Qazi at the height of crisis in the narrative, a woman must rise to the task of re-interpreting tradition and appropriate the intellectual tools of the male at a time of great upheaval following decolonisation.

For Farina Mir, "Today I Call on Waris Shah," reads as an "elegiac" poem that mourns the demise of "the ethos of the Punjabi literary formation," that seemed "to wane at the cusp of independence and diminish further during the postcolonial period" (2010, 183). However, when read as a post-colonial re-working of the Punjabi literary tradition, we find that Pritam's poem does not merely bemoan the Partition. She re-invigorates the trope of argumentation and interpretive contest embodied in Hir's character to construct a poetic engagement with regional roots to furnish a revolutionary feminist cultural identity. Pritam lays the ground for Bhatti, who builds on Pritam's framework to confront the effacing of women in Pakistan's public sphere with a feminist historiography rooted in the vernacular.

Re-writing Hir, Resisting Authoritarianism: Nasreen Anjum Bhatti's "Blue Cloth Dyed Blue"

Nasreen Anjum Bhatti's (b. 1943) first book of poetry, *Neel Karaiyaan Neelkaan*[33] (Blue Cloth Dyed Blue) was published in 1979, mere months after a military

[33] The title, Neel Karaiyaan Neelakaan is not an easy one to translate. "Neelak" refers to a dark blue precious stone, as well as a piece of blue cloth worn wrapped around the waist to cover the lower body (a lungi). Neelak is also a richly embroidered cloth, of red or black background with yellow threadwork, a valuable item of clothing worn on festive occasions. In his article in The Friday Times, Waqas Khwaja points us towards another possibility, linking Bhatti's title to "Neelkar," a medicinal herb with blue flowers known as 'hound's tongue.' I have chosen to work with *Blue cloth dyed blue* to try to capture as many of its meanings as possible.

dictator, General Zia ul Haq, hanged the country's elected Prime Minister, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. Zia would then proceed to found a regime that pushed Pakistan into the Afghan jihad, Islamise law and government, and attempt a fundamental transformation of society along orthodox Sunni lines. Control over women's bodies and their participation in the public sphere became the cornerstone of Zia's draconian project of cultural reconstruction, forged through a perverse mix of regional patriarchy and "anti-female tenets" routed via Islam (Rouse 1986, 30). In this context, a radical women's movement emerged whose clarion call identified the patriarchal quad of 'men, money, mullahs and military' as the enemy of progressive, democratic forces in Pakistan. Bhatti was swept into politics by the wave of left-leaning, pro-democracy activism that accompanied the rise of the Pakistan People's Party in this period.[34] She was also an active member of various progressive women's groups that participated in the critical debates surrounding the intersection of feminism and democratic restoration. Framed by these concerns, *Blue Cloth Dyed Blue* also contained one of her most well-known poems, "Bhutto di var" (The ballad of Bhutto), a eulogy to the progressive promise that Bhutto held for many. "Bhutto di var" was relayed in the balladic idiom of the Punjabi literary tradition that celebrated quasi-historical heroes such as *Dulla Bhatti di var*, which is discussed in Chapter Three.[35] This reworking of an oral Punjabi genre to write an anthem of resistance against military dictatorship in Pakistan alerts us to her interpretive interest in the regional literary tradition. Her feminist reworking of Punjabi literary tradition is laid out in the first poem in *Blue Cloth Dyed Blue*, "Madhu Lal Hussain di Bhaint" (The Sacrifice of Madhu Lal Hussain).

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[34] Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) eventually turned out to be yet another 'stained dawn' for progressives, with his regime undertaking one of the most brutal repressions of the workers' movement in Pakistan's history.

[35] Dullah Bhatti rebelled against the Emperor Akbar, refusing to pay the hefty agricultural tax levied by the Mughal state. He was allegedly hanged in Lahore in 1599. See Chapter Three for a detailed analysis of the var or ballad of Dulla Bhatti, and its post-colonial re-interpretations by Marxist playwrights Gursharan Singh and Najm Hosain Syed.

Madhu Lal Hussain, or Shah Hussain, was the first poet to work Hir's voice into the kafi form.[36] Hussain hailed from a marginal caste background. However, he left the family's traditional weaver occupation to seek an education with a Sufi master, a decision that garnered considerable censure as the pursuit of knowledge was only deemed acceptable for upper castes. His challenge to caste hierarchy and patriarchy was embodied in his public and openly proclaimed romantic relationship with a Hindu boy named Madhu, whose name he took for himself, becoming Madhu Lal Hussain. That is the name his shrine in old Lahore bears to this day, and it is widely believed the two male lovers, the Hindu Brahmin and the marginal caste Muslim are buried there together. Out of all the Punjabi poets that have deployed the Hir narrative, Nasreen Bhatti chooses to address her opening invocation, her "bhaint," to Hussain – a significant choice for a feminist reworking of a literary tradition in which Hussain represented a powerful rejection of norms surrounding gender and sexuality.

Further, Bhatti prefers to use "Madhu Lal Hussain," his nom de plume that has been marginalised in canons of Sufi poetry that prefer the respectful epithet of 'Shah' to identify our rebel poet. The word 'bhaint' itself translates into both 'tribute' and 'sacrifice' – the title can thus mean 'a paean to Madhu Lal Hussain' celebrating and revering his poetic contribution, or, it can also be a sacrifice rendered by him, his verses of resistance helping pave the way, yet bowing out to cede space to a new voice, a woman's voice. This dyadic quality of the word "bhaint" is also reflected in the poem's structure through a tension between Bhatti's colloquial interjections and Hussain's historic rhymes. This movement re-enacts the dialogic play between Hir and Hussain in the traditional kafi, similar to what we saw in the Bulleh Shah kafi, "I Need a Ranjha", discussed earlier. In "The Sacrifice of Madhu Lal Hussain," Bhatti's interventions involve a sudden

[36] Hussein, Madho Lal. *Verses of a Lowly Faqir.* Trans by Naveed Alam. India Penguin, 2016.

shift in the linguistic register of the poem, as the measured rhyming of Hussain's kafi is interrupted by Bhatti's free verse:

> 'Ranjha's dwelling is across the river'
> 'I must go to Ranjha's abode'
> 'Someone come with me'
> …
> The pain of separation raised the battle cry
> I will call and howl, suffer all agonies
> Oi… I will never accept any violence (Bhatti 1979, 7)

Bhatti starts with one of Hussain's most popular kafis invoking Hir, "I must go to Ranjha's abode, someone come with me," echoing Hir's resolve in the face of the Qazi's threats and intimidation. Bhatti flags Hussain's original verses in quotation marks, separating her own interjections from the kafi to highlight the sense of dialogue with literary tradition. She responds to Hir's invitation to cross the river, abandon familiar territory and journey over to 'Ranjha's abode' – a space that can only be accessed through a critique of patriarchy as evinced by Hir's subversion of the Qazi. Bhatti joins Hir on her passage with her 'bhaint,' a critical engagement with poetic tradition that addresses Hussain as an equal. Through this conversational mode, deployed to address a hallowed saint-poet, Bhatti also echoes Pritam's dialogue with Waris Shah. Bhatti deploys a sharp, interlocutory tone akin to Hir's exchange with the Qazi in 'Oi… I will never accept any violence', marking her re-interpretation of tradition as a battle cry in its use of the aggressive 'Oi'. The repetition of the personal pronoun 'I' highlights the authority of the female poet in addressing the male, reproducing Pritam's departure from the traditional poetic form in which male poets often impersonate the female to address their audience.

Like Pritam, Bhatti exploits the dialogic tension between Hir and Hussain to de-centre male authorship. While Pritam's poem applies a gendered critique to a debate on cultural identity and regional roots, Bhatti fleshes out the historiographical revision that this feminist literary project is to take. She vacillates with such increasing rapidity between Hir's persona and her own interjections that a disembodied narrator emerges: "I am in ugliness, or perhaps I am method-less… Yet I know all your excuses" (Ibid). This poetic voice is almost like a female force, ventriloquising the goddess Kali or simply "Kaal" as she is referred to in texts of the Punjabi literary tradition.[37] The female character of Kaal is a mythological character, thirsting for blood and driving the hero to battle. She symbolises a force of creative destruction. 'Kaal' also means 'time', along with 'darkness'. Simultaneously, the "I" also drives home the individual female poet, inserting her voice into the into the very centre of the Punjabi literary tradition. Time, 'kaal', begins to collapse as Hir and Bhatti meet across the centuries, and the probing question to Waris Shah in Pritam's poem is transformed into a full-blown interrogation of the male lineage of the Punjabi literary tradition. In this imaginative confrontation by Bhatti, we are introduced to a 'hidden author' in Punjabi literary history - Bhaag Bhari, Waris Shah's forgotten muse.

Bhaag Bhari: Recovering 'Missing' Women in Punjabi Poetics

While Bhaag Bhari is never directly referenced by Waris Shah in his rendition of Hir, her legend has continued to circulate in popular memory. The story goes that Waris Shah as a young man fell in love with a woman named Bhaag Bhari. However, Waris himself belonged to a wealthy Syed family, and the differences in caste and status precluded his union with Bhaag Bhari. It is popularly believed that Waris Shah was thus inspired to write the qissa of Hir. There is little known

[37] See for instance, Najabat, *Najabat di vaar,* in which Kaal's character makes an appearance during the eighteenth century invasion into Punjab by Nadir Shah. Lahore: Suchet Kitab Ghar, 2010.

about Bhaag Bhari's life story. In her titular poem, "Blue cloth dyed blue," Bhatti revives Bhaag Bhari as the moving force behind a definitive text of the Punjabi literary tradition, *Hir Waris Shah,* by incorporating her persona into the poem's narrative structure.

Bhatti begins by invoking a well-worn convention of the Punjabi qissa. Qissas often begin with a declaration of intent and sources by the poet. For example, Damoodar Das, a sixteenth century poet of the Hir tale announces in his opening verses: "I write what I saw with my own eyes, I have no other craft…" Similarly, Waris Shah opens his eighteenth century version with, "Friends came and requested me/ Let's make the story of Hir anew." Echoing this method, Bhatti commences her historiographical revision of Hir and the Punjabi literary tradition with: "What can the military office tell you? The trees of stories are inscribed on my chest/ Shall I tell you if I am Noor Bhari or Bhaag Bhari?" (1979, 30) While Damoodar and Waris Shah emphasise the act of historical witnessing and revival, Bhatti's authorial claim expresses a historiographical urge rooted quite literally, as trees in the chest of the female poet. The challenge to the 'military office' is also not to be missed, an allusion to the military regime and its project of cultural reconstruction that sought to stifle marginalised voices – women, workers, religious minorities – to impose a Sunni hegemony that allied with the state's strategic alignment with Saudi Arabia to the detriment of 'Indic' and regional expressions of identity. By invoking a folk legend involving an ordinary woman like Bhaag Bhari, Bhatti simultaneously critiques the effacing of women from the public sphere and the erasure of regional histories in an Islamist state ideology.

Having destabilised both the patriarchy of the military regime and the male claims to authenticity inscribed in the Hir qissa tradition, Bhatti directs the persona of Bhaag Bhari towards an interrogation of Waris Shah as author and creator:

> Who are you, where are your guardians [your 'Waris']?
> Oh Waris, I sat at the hearth and burned all things to be guarded
> We have no possessions to guard, we are nomads after all
> But you, who are you, thief? Throwing the weight of your knowledge about? (Ibid)

While Pritam's poem de-centred Waris Shah by holding him to account, Bhatti's 'masquerade', borrowing Petievich's phrase, as Bhaag Bhari displaces him entirely. The verses imply that Waris Shah 'stole' his Hir from Bhaag Bhari, a suggestion reinforced by Bhatti's play on his name – 'Waris' is a given name, but it also means owner, and guardian. By accusing him of being a 'thief' wielding the weight of 'knowledge,' Bhatti calls into question the ossification of literary tradition into a male lineage of poets, drawing our attention towards the invisibilisation of women's creative potential in political, social and cultural developments over the centuries. To the Pakistani state's patriarchal re-writing of history that would confine women to 'chaadar and chaar diwari' (The veil and the home), Bhatti presents a literary method rooted in the dialogic tension pioneered by Hir that brings to light an alternative history of Punjab and tropes of dissidence in its poetic tradition. She interrogates and re-interprets key moments from the region's cultural history through a constellation of female characters from the folktales who converge around Bhaag Bhari and the poet to establish women as active subjects and authors of history.

Bhaag Bhari's indictment of Waris Shah paves the way for acknowledging the revolutionary agency of Ladhee who appears in the var of Dulla Bhatti, discussed

in greater detail in the next chapter.[38] In the narrative, Ladhee, Dullah's mother, is painted as a spirited and assertive woman with a sharp critique of Mughal power. She is pivotal to reminding Dullah Bhatti of his duty to rebellion, and as his mother, symbolises the birthing ground of his resistance against dominant authority. As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four, dominant tellings of the var of Dulla Bhatti valourise him as a masculine hero, a virtuous leader who led his people against Mughal tyranny. Dulla Bhatti's popular rebellion is widely understood as a peasant insurgency against a pre-colonial empire and is also commemorated in left-wing circles as a history of subaltern struggle. However, as my readings of Gursharan Singh and Najm Hosain Syed show, these Marxist re-interpretations of Dulla Bhatti de-centre his heroism to emphasise the agency of peripheral characters from the var taken from the margins of gender and caste. In a similar vein, Bhatti's poem offers a forceful feminist engagement with the Dulla Bhatti legend. Her poem implores us to "Tell Ladhee to bring a daughter into the world now, not a son," a nod to the rising women's movement, and a poetic reworking of regional history that focuses our gaze firmly on the gendered margins that are excluded in the commemoration of struggles (Ibid, 30).

This move from a male-centric view of literary tradition towards a feminist poetic practice is further emphasised in locating the origins of *Hir Waris Shah* in the open, creative expanses of the 'vast hinterlands, away from the closed confines of the courtyard' of the patriarchal father figure. Following Pritam, Bhatti addresses Waris Shah directly, asking "Are you scared of Bhaag Bhari?/ Where did you get your Hir, from the vast hinterlands, or from Chuchak's courtyard?/ Whose chest was it that birthed Hir, o Ranjha?" (Ibid, 32) The chest that birthed Hir connects

[38] According to the var, Dullah Bhatti followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather in resisting the Mughal throne in Pindi Bhattian, Punjab, attacking Mughal trade caravans and refusing to pay the hefty land tax imposed by the state's agrarian system in sixteenth century North India. Dullah Bhatti is said to have been finally captured by Akbar and executed publicly in Lahore. He has been celebrated as a regional hero and rebel in popular memory and the Punjabi literary tradition.

with the chest bearing ‘trees of stories’ – the chest of Bhaag Bhari that has nourished the roots of history and literary tradition, embodying the lived experience of the feminine subject. Bhatti’s “Blue Cloth Dyed Blue” goes on to question the distinction between Bhaag Bhari and Hir Sial, asking provocatively: “Am I Bhaag Bhari or Hir Sial?” (Ibid, 34). This move allows Bhatti to demolish the distinction between text and author, between woman as object and woman as subject. Taking her cue from Hir’s exegetical challenge to the Qazi’s ideological instruments, Bhatti reworks poetic convention to connect contemporary feminist concerns with genealogies of critique embedded in literary tradition.

Conclusion

Anshu Malhotra has shown how autobiography is understood as a modern genre requiring a framing of the self as a distinct subject exercising a certain agency, yet her study of the poetry of Peero demonstrates the difficulty of separating colonial and precolonial literary sensibilities in South Asia (2009). Peero was a Muslim woman in eighteenth century Punjab who disavowed her religion and joined the Gulabdasis, an unorthodox sect that drew on the ideas of Bhakti and Sufi devotion to criticise organised religion and caste inequalities (Ibid). Malhotra argues that Peero drew on an “earlier episteme” and its cultural resources to tell her tale, appropriating “an Indic and a regional alternative tradition to stitch legitimacy to her own rebellion” (Ibid, 544; 588). As our analysis of Bhatti’s “Blue Cloth Dyed Blue” shows, a woman living in post-colonial Pakistan in the 1970s was similarly able to insert her concerns into the narrative of Hir to return to and revise the generative roots of the Punjabi literary tradition. In a similar vein, Amrita Pritam’s “Today I Call on Waris Shah” trains a feminist lens onto the intersection between the universalist visions of liberation provided by left-wing perspectives with regional histories and vernacular identities. Her poem addresses both sub-continental progressive writing and the left-wing Punjabi literary sphere, drawing

on a decolonised feminist poetics to synthesise the concerns of both vis a vis the relationship between region and nation, vernacular and universal, and gender and revolutionary consciousness.

This return to roots has been grossly misread in studies of post-colonial Punjab and literary cultures in South Asia, an endeavour that is complicated by the fact that we are confronted with 'three Punjabs' today: Pakistani, Indian and diasporic. Studies of post-colonial Punjab have gone a long way in highlighting the distinct political developments in Sikh-dominated, separatist East Punjab and Muslim-dominated, centrist West Punjab, emphasising the state as the sole site for cultural expression and identity politics. This emphasis obscures our view of cross-border connections in dissident expression, clouding critical feminist engagements with Punjabi identity through the rubric of nationalism, or an all-inclusive 'Punjabiyat'.

For example, studies of the Punjabi literary movement in 1970s Pakistan view the Punjabi literary movement of which Nasreen Bhatti was a part as a literary sphere that cultivated an 'ethno-nationalist' consciousness to salvage the "lost valor" of a masculine "heroic Punjab" (Ayres 2012). This misreading results from a privileging of the interpretive lens of nationalism to explain *all* post-colonial Punjabi writing, confusing the critical deployment of literary tradition for a nostalgic revivalism.

As our readings show, the relationship of these poets with Punjab and Punjabi cannot be seen as a simplistic assertion of ethnic pride. Their engagement with Punjabi history and culture constituted a "complicated and resistant habitation" as Punjabi authors like Bhatti and Pritam remained "obstinately insistent on their locatedness" within the historical-cultural terrain of the Punjabi literary tradition, even as they offered "persistent and excoriating critiques" of regional patriarchy (Gopal 2005, 6). We are unable to see this because most studies of a post-colonial

theoretical persuasion, with their gaze firmly fixed on a homogenizing notion of 'nation', tend to elevate production in the 'cosmopolitan' languages of Urdu, Hindi and English above 'vernacular' writing which is lumped into an undifferentiated mass defined by amorphous ideas of ethnicity, regional identity and provincial politics. As Bhatti and Pritam show through their contemporary engagement with the Hir genre, the pre-colonial past and post-colonial present are often erroneously bifurcated in a way that prevents emancipatory projects today from connecting with the voices of literary resistance in our history.

3. Marxisms of the Margins: ‘Dulla Bhatti Di Var’ in the Plays of Gursharan Singh and Najm Hosain Syed

> “While Netaji [the first Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru] has decreed that the temple of the nation is being constructed, why do you need to celebrate Lohri?”(“Kranti Da Kalakaar”, Accessed 7 Feb. 2019.)

In the documentary, *Kranti Da Kalakaar* (The Artist of Revolution), veteran theatre activist, Punjabi playwright, and Communist Party member, Gursharan Singh (1929-2011) takes us back to his first production, *Lohri Di Hartaal* (The Strike of Lohri) (1954). The play was penned by Singh in response to a strike called by factory workers in Bhakra Nangal after the factory management refused to give them a night off to celebrate the rural festival of Lohri, in the words quoted above. The festival of Lohri celebrates Dulla Bhatti of the Sandal Bar, a sixteenth century ‘social bandit’ style figure who led a peasant rebellion against the Mughal throne (Hobsbawm 1969). In a single blow, the workers’ strike in Bhakra Nangal asserted the power of labour over capital and of popular tradition over national culture. It also highlighted the significance of rural culture for political resistance in post-colonial Punjab. This meeting of the cultural and the political inaugurated Singh’s journey into street theatre in rural East Punjab. He would return once again to the hero of Lohri, through a rewriting of the popular var, or ballad, of Dulla Bhatti in his play *Dhamak Nagaare Di* (The Pulsating Drum) during the 1970s. Joined by his contemporary across the border, Najm Hosein Syed (b. 1936), these playwrights re-worked the var to respond to the rising significance of the peasant as a revolutionary political actor in the 1960s and ‘70s, both in the CPI-ML-led (Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist)

Naxalite uprising in India and the Mazdoor Kissan (Workers and Peasants) Party in Pakistan.

As progressive writers and Marxist intellectuals of their time, Singh and Syed were closely embroiled in debates surrounding post-colonial critiques of formal decolonisation and polemics within Communist practice in the former colonies. These concerns resonate with conversations in the African context, where the likes of Ngũgĩ Wa' Thiongo[39] and Leopold Senghor were also exploring the relationship between regional roots, national culture and popular revolution. Similarly, our playwrights sought to connect with a regional literary tradition that provided the possibility of a critical relationship with national culture and post-colonial statehood, expanding identity beyond its ethnic, national formulations to include a local consciousness grounded in marginalised histories of struggle. As peasant movements erupted across South Asia, the village was re-constituted as a site of struggle against an authoritarian post-colonial state, and Singh and Syed turned to narratives from rural culture to provide contemporary struggles with a political vocabulary of dissidence rooted in the Punjabi literary tradition.

Given its location outside official historiography, *Dulla Bhatti Di Var* became a potent site for excavating marginalised histories and accessing regional cultural-historical resources for critiquing nationalist hegemony. Described by Jeevan Deol as "a type of narrative poem in stanzas often sung to the accompaniment of interspersed oral narration, which usually deals with conflicts and battles," the var is part of a long tradition of the literature of resistance in pre-colonial North India which fed into the much better known literature of anticolonial resistance (Deol

[39] See for instance, *Decolonising the Mind*. East African Publishers, 1992.

1997, 185).[40] Reading the var as a "counter-epic of resistance,"(Ahmad 1963, 473) our playwrights re-deployed the var's "common yet creative language of dissent," (Ramanujan 1989, 208) to subvert dominant historiography, and explore revolutionary subjectivity at the margins of nation, caste, and gender. This is accomplished by spotlighting marginal characters in the narrative as crucial interlocutors for Dulla Bhatti, in turn triggering an internal critique of the power relations that structure the world of the var and its focus on the masculinist hero. Singh de-centers Dulla Bhatti in *The Pulsating Drum* replacing him with the village bard, the marginal caste mirasi, in an ideological altercation with the local cleric who embodies Mughal spiritual authority, the mullah. Further, within the same scene, the structure of choral commentary in the play merges with the voice of Nooramdi, Bhatti's wife, to offer a gendered critique of the hero figure. Similarly, in *The Throne of Lahore*, Syed introduces two new characters into the traditional plot, namely Ramja, of "unknown caste, unknown parentage," (Syed 1972, 64) and the dissident Sufi poet Hussain, who steer the action as Dulla Bhatti himself does not appear at all in the play.

Together, these plays address key questions of political praxis surrounding leadership, counter-cultural production, and the role of intellectuals in the charged post-colonial contexts of the 1970s which saw a sharpening of the contradictions between statist appropriations of anticolonial nationalism, and South Asian Marxisms. A renewed impetus to decolonise politics and party organising led progressives like Singh and Syed away from the urban, middle-class intellectual, and towards those who they identified as the 'organic intellectuals' of marginalised regional formations, characters that dominate their theatrical re-

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[40] See, for instance, *Ghadar Di Goonj,* an anthology of poetry by workers and intellectuals of the transnational, anti-imperialist Ghadar Party. The poems have also been re-published by Kesar, K.S. as *Ghadar Lehar Di Kavita*. Punjabi University Press: Patiala, 1995. For more on the Ghadar movement, see Ramnath, Maia, *The Hajj To Utopia: How The Ghadar Party Charted Global Radicalism And Attempted To Overthrow The British Empire*. University of California: Berkeley, 2011.

workings of the var of Dulla Bhatti. Rather than analysing the Punjabi poetic tradition as an ossified repository of folk "origins," or a "subaltern sphere" located *outside* the discourse of dominant power, these authors located the "stratified deposits" of past revolutions in the Punjabi literary tradition, reading contestation as its key historical determinant (Gramsci and Forgacs 2000, 326).

Their oppositional reading of the var is underscored by the twin spatial metaphors of the 'bar,' the uncultivated hinterlands where Bhatti reigned supreme, and the 'sarkar,' the throne of Emperor Akbar. The bar also evokes the region's pre-colonial geography and cultural landscape, conjuring the lives of castes and tribes that were dispossessed and criminalised through colonial projects of agrarian settlement in 1880s Punjab. The tension between bar and sarkar functions as an organising principle for both plays, an anticolonial lens that skirts the pitfalls of a nationalist nostalgia for the past. By reading bar and sarkar as opposing political hegemonies with roots in a shared social formation, our playwrights embody a reflexive literary practice that helps sift the traces of emancipatory ideologies from hegemonic perspectives that are *also* inscribed in literary tradition.

The chapter will begin with an introduction to the var genre as a regional 'counter-epic of resistance', outlining the basic storyline of *Dulla Bhatti Di Var*. In particular, the characters of the Qazi and Nadhee Mirasan help unpack the var's subversive treatment of piety and caste hierarchy, furnishing a literary base for post-colonial interpretations of the var. Singh and Syed build on the var's oppositional spirit to constitute a cross-border poetics of dissent that challenged the authoritarian, divisive and neo-colonial thrust of dominant Pakistani and Indian nationalisms.

While eighteenth century vars such as Najabat's *Nadir Shah Di Var*[41] and Shah Muhammad's *Chattheyaan Di Var*,[42] bear the name of a single author and are composed as vars self-consciously inhabiting the realms of both text and performance, *Dulla Bhatti Di Var* is an older text that has no single 'original' author. The composition and popularisation of this var predates the advent of print culture in Punjab, and *Dulla Bhatti Di Var* remains firmly grounded in orality and folk performance. Portions of the var transcribed from oral performance by bards appear in H.A. Rose's *Glossary on Castes and Tribes* (1883), and have also been published by Saeed Bhutta (2007). Further, the var was also re-told in its traditional versified form by Kishan Singh in 1897[43], titled *Dulla Bhatti: Aslee Te Poora Qissa* (Dulla Bhatti: The True and Complete *Qissa*).[44] While I will refer to this text for my analyses of the var, I must stress that for the purposes of this chapter, and for Gursharan Singh and Najm Hosain Syed, this or any other version of the var does not serve as a consecrated, definitive text, rather, it is part of an evolving repertoire within the Punjabi poetic tradition that weaves together both textual and performative practices. The emphasis is on the literary structures of resistance that Kishan Singh's *Dulla Bhatti* references and embodies, that are also thereafter available for Singh and Syed's post-colonial reinterpretations. Thus, I treat Kishan Singh's text more as an example and template, given that it aligns

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[41] This var tackles the Iranian king Nadir Shah's (1688-1747) 1739 invasion into the Indian sub-continent.

[42] This var chronicles the battle between regional lords Mahan Singh and Ghulam Muhammad Chattha in late eighteenth century Punjab.

[43] For more post-colonial re-tellings that deployed the novel and short story form see Singh, Baldev. *Dhahva Dilli De Kingre.* Unistar Books, 2011. and Gargi, Balwant. *Dulla Bhatti.* Untitled Publishers, 1972.

[44] For a traditional musical rendering, see for instance, Aashiq Hussain Jatt's oral narration of the var: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1tXBu4s_6Q

closely with performative renderings in both form and plot. Further, as a text circulating through colonial-era print culture, it allows us to appreciate continuities in the poetics of dissent, in spite of, and in resistance to, the homogenising thrust of imperialist modernity.

Most versions of the var follow a similar narrative structure, with some minor modifications. Abdullah Bhatti is a regional lord whose domain stretches over a large area of the 'bar' land that is far from the seat of state power and primarily dependent on a pastoral economy, with a culture and social structure distinct from the medieval towns and urban centres of Mughal India. The bar area traditionally enjoyed a great degree of autonomy vis a vis the centralising control of North Indian empires, but under Akbar's reign, a regime of agrarian extraction was introduced that attempted to discipline the region to come under direct Mughal sovereignty (Singh and Gaur 2008). Dulla Bhatti's rebellion incorporated the hallmarks of classic peasant politics – a refusal to pay the exorbitant revenue demanded by the state and a resistance to the re-structuring of local relations of production. In the var, Dulla Bhatti refuses to pay the 'maalia', the agricultural tax, and also rejects Akbar's claim to sovereignty over his kingdom by declining to bow down to him and accept him as king. Further, much like the Hobsbawmian 'social bandit', Bhatti routinely raids Mughal trade caravans and distributes the goods among the poor, in a symbolic and material subversion of Mughal might and hegemony (Hobsbawm, 1959). In the narrative, Dulla's mother, Ladhee, conceals from her son his rebel ancestry, but the truth is eventually revealed to him by a mirasi woman in his village. Once the hero discovers the illustrious defiance of his father and grandfather, he embraces his 'destiny' wholeheartedly and declares war on the Mughals. Ultimately, he is deceived into capture by the king's forces, and is sentenced to death. He takes his own life by consuming poison prior to his execution.

Kishan Singh was born near Amritsar in 1836. He became a follower of the spiritually heterodox and socially transgressive Gulabdasia sect, with which Peero Preman, a nineteenth century Dalit Muslim female poet of Punjabi, was also associated. Kishan Singh used the pen name "Arif" (knowledgeable) and his repertoire comprised mostly versified narrations inspired by the popular qissa form, such as *Hir-Ranjha, Shirin-Farhad* and *Raja Rasalu* along with *Dulla Bhatti*. In *The Social Space of Language*, Farina Mir discusses Hir texts by literary figures like Kishan Singh Arif, which highlighted the existence of a 'Punjabi literary formation' that served as a space for "social engagement and commentary,"and embodied a shared "ethos of piety and devotion" (2010, 151). This shared culture is elided in most historical accounts of the period that have instead emphasised the consolidation of communal identity and modernist religious reform under colonialism. While Mir analyses Kishan Singh's *Hir-Ranjha* as a testament to the 'resilient' religious plurality that continued to thrive in "relative autonomy" from the colonial state's penetrating grip (Mir 2006, 398), an analysis of Kishan Singh Arif's *Dulla Bhatti* underscores the spirit of contestation and critique that was also inscribed in the literary formation. This allowed the var to function as a regional "literature of resistance" (Deol 1997,179) that challenged elite tradition through a subversive intertextuality.

Aziz Ahmad has argued that "Muslim impact and rule in India generated two literary growths: A Muslim epic of conquest and a Hindu epic of resistance...", contending that these two genres grew *autonomously*, in ignorance of each other, grounded in "mutually exclusive religious, cultural and historical attitudes" (1963, 470). However, not only does this analysis communalise the history of popular resistance against invaders and kings, it also neglects the web of '"reflexive intertextuality" (Ramanujan 1989, 189) that ties elite traditions with popular poetic practice. A.K. Ramanujan critiques approaches that place a distinct 'High Tradition' over a separate 'Low Tradition,' pointing out how common symbols are

deployed by Bhakti poetry to invert the Brahminical canon, challenging conceptualisations of separate linguistic literary traditions in South Asia (Ibid). Similarly, a direct, intertextual relationship of "challenge and response" (Ahmad 1963, 473) exists between the var and the Persian chronicle. This tussle is emblematised by the tension between the spatial metaphors of the bar and the sarkar.

The word 'bar' invokes a geography and cultural space at complete variance with the sarkar. At its most basic, the word 'bar' describes an obstruction or a block. The word has historically been used to describe the strip of land between two rivers, forming a kind of barrier between the settlements along the water. Thus, the word bar also connotates a "threshold," and can symbolise a liminal space (Soofi 2014). On the other hand, the word 'sarkar,' comes from two root words, 'sar' which literally means 'head,' and 'kar,' which refers to a 'doer,' an agent. Hence, the word 'sarkar' refers to a leader or chief, used in the Punjabi context for a village headman, a landowner in control of agrarian resources cultivated by tenant farmers. In common parlance, the word 'sarkar' is also used as a respectable form of address, reserved for someone in a position of authority.[45] Both 'bar' and 'sarkar' appear as inversions of each other in the var of Dulla Bhatti. The bar areas were sparsely populated, covered mostly by forest and grazing runs. As a space outside human settlement, the bar also furnished a rich imaginative topography for exploring alternative ways of being in the Punjabi literary tradition. Most romances in the qissa tradition, such as Hir-Ranjha, unfold in the bar, symbolising the protagonists' move outside the village, "away from the constraints of society, into a realm of freedom, a world of passion and dream" (Bhattacharya 1997, 81). This journey also becomes a quest for knowledge, about

[45] It also has spiritual connotations - 'sarkar' in the form of 'sacha sarkar' appears frequently in regional devotional poetry to refer to the Creator, and is often used as an epithet for holy men and saints in popular religion. In fact, it is also often extended to the shrine space where the saint is buried, becoming part of a place name.

self and the world. Thus, the bar embodied a terrain for social transgression and alternative epistemologies, making it a potent metaphor for exploring revolutionary subjectivity in *Dulla Bhatti Di Var*.

Despite the unique stamp each author brings to their rendering of the var, Dulla Bhatti's last words as relayed by Kishan Singh, Gursharan Singh and Najm Hosain Syed are almost identical. All three frame the feud between Dulla Bhatti and Emperor Akbar as a symbol for the bar-sarkar opposition, abstracting Dulla's person into a timeless essence akin to the wind and water:

> Listen, you Mughal, seated atop the throne of Lahore. All your eggs have cracked… I have become certain in this truth: you and I are mortal enemies. From the first breath, till the last. Before death, in death, and after death. Your blossom is my withering. My freedom is your noose… I will not die, you may execute me a hundred thousand times, yet my foot will grind down on your back… The bitterness of the bar's kikar trees will never fade. Their thorns will never shed… I will live. I will thrive. I am alive in the gaze of children, in the eyes of the young, in the hearts of the old… I am the wind, I am water, I am fire, I will continue to change forms, one after the other… Till there is a throne in Lahore, I, Dulla, live in the bar! (Syed 1972, 169-170)

Here, Dulla addresses us as the spirit of the bar, invoking the undying bitterness of its kikar trees, and the gusts that blow across its overrun plains. He connects the topography with the people that populate it, the young and old alike. Dulla's being, and the bar's very existence, is predicated on subverting the sarkar – till the throne rules over the lives of people, Dulla Bhattis will live, die and be resurrected in the bar. This unending tussle, immortalised in these stirring last words, is ever-present in the bar, structuring the action, driving the plot, and moulding the

characters. Bar and sarkar are tied together in a deathly intimacy, held together in a tension that yields an indictment of power through a single man's rebellion against the king. Yet, through his absorption into the landscape and its inhabitants, an immanent critique of his own dominant position within the social world of the bar is also made possible.

As Ahmad (1963) outlines, the 'sarkari' genre, or the "epic of conquest," rested on certain recurring themes. This included what he refers to as the "religio- political fervor" of the Muslim hero expressed through the destruction of idols and the construction of mosques, and his divine destiny to rule (Ahmad 1963, 471). Given the subversive entwinement of bar and sarkar, both these tropes are invoked and reversed through the person of Dulla Bhatti in the var. Through a mimetic method, the var invokes motifs from the dominant Persianate chronicle to invert their meaning. Thus, while Mir's analysis posits the 'Punjabi literary formation' as a space for plural, cross-communal expressions of piety and devotion outside the colonial public sphere defined by the reformist agendas of the Arya Samaj, Singh Sabha and Deobandi Madrassa, my reading of Kishan Singh's *Dulla Bhatti* highlights another aspect of literary tradition – its genealogy of critique against the structures of subordination that predated and persisted under colonial modernity. As the oppressions of caste, dominant religion and patriarchy survived, so did the cultural resources for their indictment, seized upon by Singh and Syed to connect contemporary struggles against the state with regional histories of protest. In particular, they draw on and rework Dulla Bhatti's dialogue with the Qazi, which reverses the religious logic of the "epic of conquest" through a round rejection of the cleric's attempts to discipline the bar in the name of the sarkar.

The Mughal king executes the infant Dulla's father and grandfather, and display their corpses outside the city gates for all to see. He spares Ladhee the life of her new-born son on condition that she "educate Dulla thoroughly," and "save him from bad company." (Arif 1970, 1) The infant is promised "royal service" and "titles" once he has gained the requisite "knowledge," to be imparted by the Qazi appointed by the king himself. As Farina Mir informs us, "the Qazi is a judge with state authority to adjudicate matters subject to Islamic law on the basis of his religious education and study of fiqh, or Islamic jurisprudence." (Mir 2010, 167) Qazis were "Muslim figures of local or translocal authority," but in texts of the Punjabi literary tradition, they "function(ed) as representatives of religious authority in general," subject to a "broader sociological and religious critique" (Ibid). While Mir focuses on the Qazi's centrality to "the critique of false piety" in colonial era Hir-Ranjha texts, my reading of his role in *Dulla Bhatti Di Var* expands this view to read him as an ideologue of the state, or sarkar, appointed to discipline the bar (Ibid, 166). The Qazi's direct link with the king, along with his structural role in society that brings together spiritual authority with stately power, pushes a critique of "false piety" not just as a "gap between intention and action," (Ibid, 167) but as dominant hegemony that combines spiritual legitimacy with political power.

Thus, the critique of dominant religion becomes inseparable from the indictment of the throne in Dulla's dialogue with the Qazi in the var of Dulla Bhatti. This exchange is a salient narrative element of both textual and performative tellings, and is among the earliest scenes that decisively sketch in the protagonist's character. The Qazi's discourse intertwines 'correct education' ("sabq") with 'order' ("hukm") and the 'service' ("sayva") of God, presenting true knowledge as that which underpins the maintenance of hierarchy. The Qazi echoes the king's

injunctions, yet veils them in the garb of devotion, invoking God and the virtue of piety:

> …Bow low in service of the one true God, this is the lesson I must teach you
> I shower the pious with love,, but skin the insolent alive, I warn you…
> … I smite those who flout order, that will be your fate, if such you do
> But if you learn your lessons dutifully, close to my heart I will bring you… (Arif 1970, 7)

The Qazi's lesson combines the lure of rewards, both worldly and spiritual, with the menace of threats. As the king's representative, his message to Dulla Bhatti is clear: accept Akbar's sovereignty and bend the knee as loyal vassal, else, perish and be skinned alive like your obstinate father and grandfather. The adolescent Dulla's response presents a ringing rejection of the Qazi's discourse. He provocatively questions the Qazi, asking whether his prescribed path will be taken by those whose glory is inscribed in history, and then goes on to physically thrash the Qazi, before stomping off to see the village carpenter, who fashions him a weapon. Flouting the Qazi's company for that of the humble artisan, choosing a weapon over instruction in courtly etiquette, and subjecting the throne's emissary to physical violence, together constitute an alternative political practice of the bar that critiques the knowledge of the sarkar and resolutely undermines the 'shared piety' the Qazi seeks to lay claim to. This exchange between Dulla and the Qazi is distilled into a larger theme of alternative knowledges of resistance by Singh and Syed in their plays, as their characters draw on and expand the template of critique encompassed in this altercation.

While Dulla's debate with the Qazi furnishes a literary mode for critiquing power, the var's treatment of the theme of 'heroic destiny' prompts an internal reflection

on the imbrications with dominant power *within* the space of resistance offered by the bar. Kishan Singh Arif opens with the twin births of Dulla and a Mughal prince named Maithoo, detailing how the king was advised by soothsayers to nurse his son at Ladhee's breast, Dulla's mother, as the milk of a "pure Rajput" would ensure the royal infant's ascent to greatness. This highlighting of his noble birth, combined with a framing of his heroic destiny signalled by the priest's pronouncement that "the light on his forehead will dazzle the world, he shall be a hero, know this, friends/" (Ibid, 2) also lays bare his position as lord and Rajput leader, whose very birth creates a situation in which Ladhee can forge a political alliance with the Mughal king to maintain a terse peace and retain some local power (Ibid). This entwinement with dominant structures, made conspicuous at the very beginning of the text, constructs Dulla as the masculine hero at the heart of the narrative. Yet this construction is assailed by a tension internal to the text, the antagonism between bar and sarkar, staged through characters that seem peripheral to the plot, yet appear at an important turning point to decisively drive the action and direct Dulla. For instance, while Ladhee, his mother, conceals his rebel ancestry, it is Nadhee Mirasan, the wife of the village mirasi, the local genealogist and bard, who reveals to Dulla the truth about his father and grandfather:

> …why does he pain the poor perpetually?
>
> This valiant hero born of his father and grandfather,
>
> Do you have no shame, warring with women here?
>
> Akbar slew your father and grandfather… why not turn your might against him instead? (Ibid, 10-11)

This revelation, framed in the genre of the 'boli,' or a challenge, is a taunt challenging the hero's courage. The fact that this intervention comes from a marginal caste woman also bears significance. The mirasis, also often referred to as 'dum,' 'daadhi' or 'Mir Alam,' are a hereditary caste group whose occupation is tied to performance, both poetic and musical, and the oral recording of

genealogies and local history. As a part of the web of patronage organised around the village leader or zamindar, the mirasi is a 'kammi,' which means worker, who can be called on at any time to perform 'begaar' or 'free labour' for the landlord. However, traditionally, the mirasi's occupation involves the maintenance of cultural and intellectual heritage, a position that places them outside the production process, strictly speaking. This peripheral position relative to the village economy accords the mirasi or mirasan a degree of autonomy, a critical distance that allows her to reflect on the social relations that surround her, and thus, on history and culture (Syed 2004). This critical distance, combined with the mirasis' role as 'organic intellectuals' of literary tradition, offers a method for an internal critique of Dulla Bhatti's lone agency as the hero in the var.

Together, Dulla's interactions with the Qazi and Nadhee Mirasan constitute a genre of social critique within the var corpus which is appropriated into contemporary modes of post-colonial dissent by Singh and Syed. Their intertextual engagement with the critical spirit of the Punjabi literary tradition directly subverts colonial histories of exploitation, which restructured bar and sarkar to serve imperial interest.

Re-Imagining the Var Under Colonial Modernity and Postcolonial Authoritarianism

In the post-colonial setting of *The Throne of Lahore* and *The Pulsating Drum*, evoking the bar geography, choosing lead characters from its criminalised inhabitants, and staging its way of life and political practice constituted a critique of colonial knowledge and an indictment of native elite complicity with its exploitative ends. When the British came to Punjab, the mainstay of their 'civilising mission became the 'reclamation' of the bar regions for agricultural cultivation. "In the Canal Colonies, over twenty lakh acres of grazing lands were

taken over by the state, pastoralists were expropriated, agricultural colonies were set up, canals were constructed, and blocks of land were granted to the 'sturdy peasants' of Central Punjab" (Bhattacharya 1997, 74). At the discursive level, colonial knowledge solidified the tension between the bar and the river settlements into an airtight opposition, as the inhabitants of the bar, termed pejoratively as "janglis" (wild-people) were declared vagrants and outlaws through the infamous Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. The Bhattis of Sandal Bar were included in this condemned list,[46] pitted against the "'sturdy industrious' Sikh peasant" (Ibid, 71). The bar that produced the brave rebel against Mughal tyranny was termed "dreary and ugly" on top of being "barren and desolate," a colonial aesthetic that also consigned the distinct dialects and cultural forms of the bar to marginality, through a language policy that increasingly privileged Urdu and English to the detriment of the regional vernacular (Ibid, 72).[47] Thus, a far-reaching transformation of the bar, its social relations and its culture was effected by the British sarkar.

Similar policies continued under the post-colonial developmentalist states of India and Pakistan, which introduced agrarian reform that hardly reflected an urge to decolonise and critique the British re-structuring of land. In fact, the canal colonisation of Punjab has remained a widely celebrated and unexamined history in terms of its cultural, ecological and agrarian consequences. In 1965, the Green Revolution was implemented in both Punjabs by the Indian and Pakistani state, further pushing the agenda of capitalist agriculture through mechanisation, technology and subsidies that strengthened the middle-peasant Jat figure consecrated by the colonial regime as the rightful owners of agricultural land.

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[46] See Ibbetson, Denzil. A *Glossary of the Castes and Tribes of the Punjab and North West Frontier Province.* Lahore: Sang-e- Meel, 1980. This was first published in 1883, as part of a census report by the British colonial government.

[47] For more see Mir, Farina. "Imperial Policy, Provincial Practices." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* vol. 43 no. 4, 2012, pp. 395–428.

Peasant struggles like the Naxalbari revolt in East Punjab began in the direct aftermath of the Green Revolution, as technological advances increasingly made sharecropping less profitable for big landlords and they rapidly began evicting their tenants, most of whom were drawn from the lower and 'jangli' castes.

Thus, through a return to the bar, both plays invoke a counter-narrative in Punjab's history, a Punjab disciplined, settled and marginalised by colonial modernity and post-colonial developmentalism alike. Singh and Syed responded to the immediate context in which questions of peasant insurrection against the Indian and Pakistani state assumed increasing political relevance. Their perspective took shape in the decades following Partition, a period preoccupied with the re-working of identity and national culture in the wake of decolonisation and the nascent nation-building process.

In addition, Singh and Syed also grappled with certain emergent contradictions within Communism in South Asia. In 1947, the Communist Party of India had split along religious lines, and the Muslim leadership, based primarily in the Central Provinces, journeyed over to the new homeland for Muslims to steer the newly constituted Communist Party of Pakistan. Sajjad Zaheer, one of the founders of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association, became the Secretary General of this new party and expounded an emphasis on mobilising the urban working class and trade unions (Asdar Ali 2015). In Punjab on the other hand, older trajectories of leftist radicalism still held purchase among progressive circles. The legacies of Ghadar and the Kirti Kissan Party had birthed a tradition of Communism rooted in agrarian politics with the landless peasant as its central subject, and an "eclectic ideological synthesis," that embraced a commitment to the universalist principles of anticolonialism, liberation and freedom against oppression inflected in culturally specific terms (Ramnath 2011). This internal tension was stoked by the widening Sino-Soviet rift in international communism

that had culminated in the formation of the Communist Party of India – Marxist (CPI-M) in 1964, which later split again in 1967 as its radical Maoist cadre led by Charu Majumdar went on to form the CPI-ML. In Pakistan, the National Awami Party split created the Mazdoor Kissan Party (MKP) in 1968, which merged with the pro-China Maoist group led by Ishaque Muhammad in Punjab. The CPI-ML became closely identified with the Naxalbari insurrection in Bengal, while the MKP helped organise the liberation of land in Hashtnagar in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Despite their origin in areas outside Punjab, the militant program of the CPI-ML and the MKP that trained its attention on the countryside, and towards a critique of nationalist development, resonated deeply with the older trajectories of peasant movements and anticolonialism in Punjab.

The Folk Roots of Maoist Cultural Practice: Gursharan Singh and Najm Hosain Syed

The September 1970 issue of *Liberation,* a CPI-ML organ, reported the beginning of armed struggle in Bhatinda, Hoshiarpur and other areas in East Punjab (61). Landlords were attacked, shamlats (commons) were occupied, and heroes of the nascent uprising were martyred as state repression heightened. These included Baba Bujha Singh, a stalwart of the Ghadar movement, (Ibid, 62) and Tarsem Bawa, whose memory is commemorated in Gursharan Singh's play "Mein Naxalbari Haan" (I am a Naxalite) (1993). Singh joined the Naxalite band of 'guerrilla poets', which included Sant Ram Udasi whose poetry is discussed in the next chapter, with his own version of 'guerilla theatre,' or 'thara theatre' as he called it (Ibid, 64). Born in Multan, in present day West Punjab in 1929, he began his lifelong relationship with people's theatre in 1954, with *The Strike of Lohri*. A committed member of the CPI, he gravitated towards the Naxalite view within the party during the 1960s, a position he held for much of his life. He founded the

Amritsar Natak Kala Kendar in 1964, devising a theatrical form that relied on minimalist sets - rough, ready and mobile.

In 1969, in tandem with the rising Naxalite movement in the Punjabi countryside, Singh began travelling with his troupe to villages across Punjab, a journey that would end only with his death in 2011. He wrote and directed almost two hundred plays, and in 1975, his Amritsar Natak Kala Kendar performed Najm Hosain Syed's *The Throne of Lahore* in Gandhi Ground, Amritsar (Singh 1993 Punjabi Tribune). Exactly a week after the staging of this play from across the border, on September 19, Indira Gandhi's government fired Gursharan Singh from his job. Recalling this memory in a column for the Punjabi Tribune, Gursharan Singh wrote how "Najm Hosain Syed invoked the ire of the state in Pakistan by writing this play, and I was also punished for performing it in India" (Ibid).

Najm Hosain Syed finished writing *The Throne of Lahore* in 1972, a play he began working on in the early '60s, when he first turned to writing in Punjabi. His first publication, *Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry* comprised a series of English essays of literary criticism, grounded in a materialist analysis of the salient tropes of the regional tradition (1968). After that, Syed, much like Ngũgĩ, forswore writing in any other language and took to writing exclusively in Punjabi. Syed was a central figure in the Marxist Punjabi movement during this period,[48] and his writing and activism was key to re-defining language politics in Punjab from a left-wing perspective.[49] In keeping with the progressive optimism that had swept Bhutto into power, Syed joined Punjab University in Lahore as head of its newly formed Punjabi department. Under Syed, the Punjabi department became a

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[48] For more, see Butt, Waqas and Virinder Kalra, "'In One Hand a Pen in the Other a Gun': Punjabi Language Radicalism in Punjab, Pakistan." *South Asian History and Culture,* 2014, pp. 1–16.

[49] For more, see Kazmi, Sara. "The Marxist Punjabi Movement: Language and Literary Radicalism in Pakistan." *South Asia Chronicle* no. 7, 2017, pp. 227-250.

hub for progressive Punjabi intellectuals involved with the MKP. Syed was also a close associate of Ishaque Muhammad, the MKP President and stalwart leader who also wrote a play on Dulla Bhatti's rebellion around the same time. Syed's first play, *The Throne of Lahore* was followed by countless others that tackled the peasant roots of cultures of protest, such as *Chog Kusumbay Di*, which develops a Bulleh Shah kafi to address the politics of women agricultural workers.

For Singh, the relevance of Dulla Bhatti in the historical moment that both playwrights found themselves in was "indicative of a shared ideology between both Punjabs."(Singh 1993 Punjabi Tribune) This shared ideology stemmed from the playwrights' commitment to left-wing politics and their deep engagement with the Punjabi literary tradition. Singh and Syed synthesised the two in a border-crossing cultural project that sought to rework a 'pre-colonial' history of rebellion to connect with contemporary struggles against the post-colonial state. Thus, Syed and Singh present a reworking of Dulla Bhatti that builds on the var's own self-reflexive methods, foregrounding the bar and sarkar divide. In so doing, their plays offer a cross-border analysis of resistance against dominant power.

Dulla De-Centred: The Missing Hero in Syed's The Throne of Lahore

While Gursharan Singh chooses a structure closer to the plot and narrative of the traditional var, Syed sets his play not in the rural peripheries where Dulla Bhatti reigns supreme, but in the heart of Mughal control, the urban seat of power that also gives the play its name, the city of Lahore. *The Throne of Lahore* works its magic through an unusual literary choice – the character of Dulla Bhatti does not appear at all in the play. This absence of the 'heroic leader', combined with Syed's use of an urban setting, and the related techniques of mirroring and repetition, help communicate the playwright's vision for revolutionary culture and left-wing organising in the postcolony. While the hero's absence helps highlight the agency

of political actors from the margins over a revolutionary 'leadership', the interplay between Ramja, the subaltern subject of rebellion, and Hussain, the 'organic intellectual' of the bar, emphasises the dialectic that must connect literary tradition with political action in the work of the revolutionary writer.

The Throne of Lahore follows the fate of Ramja, a protagonist fashioned by Syed to centre the margins of Punjabi society as the source for revolutionary consciousness. The play opens with a dialogue between two ordinary characters, framing public disaffection as the context around Bhatti's rebellion. Two sentries stand guard outside the jail where Dulla Bhatti is being held. As they talk, a man arrives, lean, quiet, with sharp eyes that dart around attentively. He is a common peddler bearing tobacco and some bottles of massage oil. He offers both a massage and a smoke, and soon, the guards find themselves dozing off into uncontrollable sleep. While they sleep, the stranger nicks the keys to the prison. As darkness envelopes the stage, we hear the door clanging open, and the sound of galloping horses. The man is Ramja, a character who appears in multiple disguises throughout the play. He is ultimately captured and indicted in court.

From there, the play takes us on a journey with Ramja, who befriends the poet Hussain at a madrassa run by a powerful ideologue of the Mughal state, Shah Saadullah. Ramja and Hussain together unearth the madrassa's complicity with the king's tyrannical designs, and help support a workers' strike in a tailoring guild. In the background, whispers of Dulla Bhatti's whereabouts and the state's manic search for him ensue. The charge sheet brought against Ramja in the final scene primarily accuses him of being 'Dulla Bhatti's man', and he is joined as accused by a host of characters who do not appear in the traditional var narration itself. These include the striking artisans who are employed at a workshop where the Mughal army's uniforms are being stitched. The artisans eventually all disappear, presumably to join Bhatti in the bar. The play ends with a dark

enactment of Bhatti's last words, using Malik Ali as the mouthpiece. Malik Ali is a state official who loses his mind after he finally captures the rebel. Bhatti's last words are ventriloquised through the craven, obsequious Ali, whose voice and manner transform completely as he repeats Dulla's last words for the king's closest aide: "Till there is a throne in Lahore, I, Dulla, live in the bar!" It is almost as if this servile pawn of the king has been possessed by Bhatti, whose words appear as a haunting[50] for the emperor and contemporary audience alike.

In *The Throne of Lahore* the figures of Hussain and Ramja draw on key resonances with characters and tropes of the Punjabi literary tradition to trigger a critical assessment of Dulla Bhatti. For instance, Ramja's figure connects with a character from the traditional var of Dulla Bhatti, Mehru Posti, a parallel that allows Syed to subvert the masculinist framing of Dulla Bhatti in folk culture. The character of Ramja is among the first to appear in the play, and he is described as being of "unknown caste, unknown parentage" (Syed 1972, 64) when he is presented in court on the charge of high treason. As he enters the play for the first time, the stage directions describe him as a man who "resembles Posti in countenance, and also does not." (Ibid, 7) The background to this resemblance is furnished in Syed's preface to the play, a rendering of the Dulla Bhatti tale in its traditional var form placing Mehru Posti, Dulla's elder brother, as the 'vari' or narrator.

Posti, like Nadhee Mirasan in Kishan Singh Arif's var of Dulla Bhatti, enshrines a critical distance from the bar-sarkar opposition, offering a potentiality for critiquing and transforming the contradictions of both. The character of Mehru Posti is in some senses an anti-hero, blood brother to Dulla Bhatti, yet his

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[50] See, Moffat, Chris. *India's Revolutionary Inheritance: Politics and the Promise of Bhagat Singh*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. for the ways in which such figures command a spectral presence in contemporary politics, creating ruptures that demand radical political action as a "debt" owed to their insurrectionary pasts.

complete opposite. Where Bhatti is chivalrous and upright, Posti is lazy, reluctant to engage in combat. Where Dulla's driving force is revenge for their father's killing, Posti would rather retire under the tree, drifting off in intoxication. Posti's character in the var takes its name from 'post,' referring specifically to the bud of the opium plant after the opiate has been extracted from it, and more generally, used as a name for opium itself. Dulla Bhatti is Pindi Bhattian's hero, Mehru Posti, its out-caste. Yet, Posti's relationship to opium also connects him with the traditions surrounding the use of intoxicants by faqirs, jogis and other mendicant figures that embodied the spiritual ethos of the bar and popular culture in Punjab.[51] This subject position did not necessarily embrace direct resistance against the sarkar, yet propagated detachment from it. Hence, Posti's character signals another layer of politics in the bar, a mode of being that opts out of the sarkar's framework of relations, yet also rejects the histrionics that inevitably plague the masculine, heroic leader. Moreover, Posti's figure, though peripheral, proves essential for ensuring the survival of Bhatti's rebellion. This is concretised as he rescues Bhatti at a crucial juncture, when the hero stands captured by the king's forces with no one to come to his aid.

Syed models Ramja on Posti to spotlight the critique of Dulla's dominant masculinity through sharp contrast. The parallel between Ramja and Posti is apparent from the very first scene, in which Mehru Posti's rescue of Dulla Bhatti is re-enacted by Ramja. His affinity with Posti is signalled again when he is referred to as "post deya dodheya" (opium bud). As the play progresses, Ramja undergoes a series of disguises and through this constant change in form, connects with a range of marginalised subject positions. For instance, his designation as a "behroopia" (a man of multiple guises) (Syed 1972, 35) connects him with the wandering bards of the mirasi castes, the organic intellectuals of the Punjabi

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[51] See for instance, Anshu Malhotra's important study of Peero's poetry in Malhotra, Anshu. "Telling Her Tale? Unravelling a Life in Conflict in Peero's *Ik Sau Saṭh Kāfiaṅ. (One Hundred and Sixty Kafis)*." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* vol. 46 no. 4, 2009, pp. 541–78.

literary tradition, who through Nadhee Mirasan, become crucial interlocutors for Dulla Bhatti in the traditional var. At the same time, in the play, Ramja is consistently identified with, and sometimes as, Dulla Bhatti. This is exemplified in the desperate pleas of the guards who had been tasked with guarding the jail: "Sir, this man is Dulla Bhatti himself, I can smell it!" (Ibid) Thus, through Ramja's shifting guises ranging from an ordinary soldier to an official's attendant, 'Dulla Bhatti' comes to represent the ordinary mass, a representation that connects his rebellion with the striking artisans to become a popular uprising. Moreover, by modelling Ramja on Dulla's inverse, his brother Posti, the play also pushes a critical reassessment of cultures of commemoration around masculinist hero figures.

Further, by setting the play in Lahore, the seat of power itself, Syed offers detailed commentary on how coercion and consent are balanced by the ruling elite, through a comparison between sixteenth century Mughal India and post-colonial Pakistan. While we are not privy to scenes depicting the armed struggle that rages in the bar, the sites of the madrassa, the court and the artisans' workshop draw a link between the modes of ideological and material control that together constitute 'the throne of Lahore'. Through this focus, the play translates the var form into 1960s Pakistan, where Islamist nationalism and post-colonial authoritarianism joined hands to quash the promise of liberation presented by decolonisation, cracking down on progressive forces in the country.[52] As Van Erven point out, Syed's play conjures direct parallels with the state's repression of left-wing radicals (1992). This is drawn out further in Ramja's disguises, mimicking the 'underground' tactics of Communist organisations active during the period. Through Ramja's character, guerrilla strategy is explored, a mode of politics that resonated with the aspirations of the MKP, which itself drew inspiration from the

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[52] For more, see Toor, Sadia. *The State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan.* Pluto Press, 2011.

successes of Naxalbari across the border in East Punjab. Thus, while the engagement with literary tradition via the var of Dulla Bhatti provided a conceptual vocabulary for left-wing critiques of the post-colonial state, on a practical level, masking political commentary as a 'historical drama' also helped Syed evade censorship and repression under military rule in 1960s Pakistan. Thus, *The Throne of Lahore* joins a genre of plays that routed mythological and historical themes to speak truth to power, which together constitute a well-worn convention in sub-continental theatre that emerged in response to the 1876 Dramatic Performances Censorship Act instituted by the British to silence anticolonial dissent.[53]

Hussain and Ramja: The Intellectual and the Mass

For Syed, as an artist and intellectual embedded in the Punjabi literary tradition as well as the 1960s resurgence of left-wing agrarian movements, the aesthetic practice and literary form that would define the accompanying cultural revolution became pressing concerns. To explore the relationship between intellectual labour and grassroots organising, Syed inserts the character of Hussain as a crucial interlocutor for Ramja. The historical figure of Shah Hussain or Madho Lal Hussain was briefly discussed alongside Nasreen Anjum Bhatti in Chapter Two. Hussain's importance to popular devotion and literary tradition in Punjab allows Syed to fashion him as a cultural icon representing the shift towards the peasantry and agrarian politics within the left. The Hussain that appears in the play is a young scholar enrolled at the foremost madrassa of the capital, studying under Shah Saadullah, a well-respected don of the religious-intellectual establishment. His character is based on the popular Punjabi poet, later known as Madho Lal

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[53] For more on the history of anticolonial and progressive theatre in South Asia, see Bhatia, Nandi. *Acts of Authority/ Acts of Resistance: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India.* University of Michigan Press, 2004.

Hussain,[54] at whose Lahore shrine a massive Urs festival, the Mela Chiraghan (Festival of Lights) takes place every year. Biographical information regarding Madho Lal Hussain is sparse. From what little is known and can be pieced together on the basis of his kafis, we know that Hussain rebelled against his formal education and took to roaming the streets, intoxicated, ecstatic, singing his poetry for his mass of followers as he went along. He became 'Madho Lal Hussain' for his love for a Brahmin boy, Madho, who is said to be buried in the same grave with Hussain. Hussain himself was from a marginal caste, a weaver or jolaha, thus, his openly proclaimed love for Madho flew in the face of norms surrounding both caste and sexuality in sixteenth century India. According to some Mughal-era sources, he was present in the crowd when Dulla Bhatti was hanged publicly. The content of his verses, coupled with the popular account that Mughal authorities attempted to arrest him there and then, thus suggests a synergy between Husain and Bhatti.

In *The Throne of Lahore,* Syed concretises this tenuous connection in popular history and literary tradition into a comradeship between Hussain, Ramja, and Dulla Bhatti to present a vision for revolutionary culture in post-colonial Punjab. By prominently featuring Hussain in a play structured around political action, Syed stresses the need to connect with dissident voices of the Punjabi literary tradition, excavating a genealogy of political critique that was relegated from the state-led forging of national culture. Moreover, for Syed, a turn away from the middle-class, urban professional to the illiterate, rural tenant as the revolutionary agent necessitated the creation of a political culture that resonated with the rural cultural context, while equipping the subject of this new consciousness to participate in global debates around socialist transformation. Hussain's presence in *The Throne of Lahore* thus symbolically connects rural vernacular poetics of

[54] For English translations of Hussain's entire known corpus see, Alam, Naveed. *Verses of a Lowly Faqir: Madho Lal Hussain*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2016.

dissent with contemporary political resistance. To a cultural-Marxist practice that privileged the place of Urdu as the national language, the lingua franca of the modernising, post-colonial subject, Syed offered a rejoinder grounded in popular history and literary perspectives from the margins. This intention to establish a connection between the Punjabi literary tradition and contemporary political praxis has continued to animate Syed's work. For instance, seven years after General Zia ul Haq seized power and enforced an oppressive authoritarian Islamist framework of governance, the playwright led a crowd of young students and activists to the shrine of Madho Lal Hussain, dancing and chanting, "Madho Lal, Madho Lal, mehengi roti, mehengi dal, ho gaye pooray saat saal." (Madho Lal, Madho Lal, expensive bread, costly dal, seven years have passed in all.)

Further, through the interplay between Hussain and Ramja, *The Throne of Lahore* also re-orients hierarchical conceptualisations of the relationship between intellectuals and the public that prevailed in urban elite Marxist circles. In the play, Ramja and Hussain create reflexive echoes through repetition. This mirroring effect, along with the symbiotic development of Hussain and Ramja's characters in the play captures the intimate relationship between cultural practice and political struggle, representing Syed's attempt to theorise the place of the Gramscian 'organic intellectual' in post-colonial Punjab – a figure grounded in the historical Punjabi literary tradition, yet closely in touch with characters on the margins to open up new vistas for revolutionary imagination. In a scene right before the workers' strike, Hussain and Ramja repeat the same lines after each other to conjure an eerie effect: "There is only emptiness within." This ominous harmony heralds the fall of the throne, it is almost as if the correspondence between Hussain and Ramja, intellectual and worker, creates the conjunctural possibility for the workers' strike. The 'emptiness' symbolises the hollow crown left in the wake of a revolt by the most downtrodden characters in the play, i.e. the workers at the royal factory for manufacturing military uniforms.

Moreover, as this echoing effect demonstrates, the relationship between Hussain and Ramja is not unidirectional, i.e. one in which Hussain, as the intellectual, 'extracts' the truth emanating from the materiality of Ramja's political action. At other times in the play, Ramja finds himself chastising Hussain, calling out the dangers of abstraction in the poet's utterances. This tension, which demolishes the distinction and hierarchy between intellectual and political labour, and thus between the 'organic intellectual' and the 'masses,' is relayed in an intimate dialogue between the two:

> Hussain (to Ramja): You are so content in your innocent, gullible choices. 'It's my choice.' Where is my choice, my will? The fruits of my choices lie somewhere, waiting to ambush me. But I have all the time in the world. Limitless, like the unending Thal [desert]. Where the camel-grazers make no homes.
>
> Ramja: Put your feet on the ground.
>
> Hussain: Why should I put my feet on the ground? Why was I driven out from this Thal?... The sun's eyes glimmer down, on one side there is the sun, on the other, myself. There is only sand, stretching endlessly. Sands upon sands. I am the only fish in this ocean of sand. A boundless freedom…
>
> Ramja: Why don't you leave this Thal and come out? (Syed 1972, 59-60)

The dialogue continues in this fashion. Hussain, meandering through picturesque, yet abstruse depictions of his 'Thal' while Ramja continues to puncture this

fanciful flight with the same words: ‘Put your feet on the ground.’ ‘Thal’ refers to the Thal desert in Punjab, a strip of sand running north to south between the river Jhelum and Sindh (Indus) rivers. For most of its history, Thal has been characterised by looming sand dunes and a small, itinerant population that speak the distinct ‘Thalochi’ dialect. Within regional poetry, the desert occupies a powerful symbolic place – traditions of wandering in the desert coalesce around the figure of Sassi, another heroine of Hir’s mould, who eventually takes to the Thal desert in search of her beloved Punnoo, who was taken away by his own tribesmen. Sassi is never heard from again in the qissa. Narrated by folk poets Hashim Shah and Hafiz Barkhurdar among others, several kafis and dohas interpreting her turn to the desert proliferate in the corpus of the likes of Sindhi poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai and Sachal Sarmast. Syed connects this entrenched metaphor of the desert with another key figure of the Punjabi literary tradition as Hussain’s Thal aligns with Sassi’s to signify a space of potentiality, the stark landscape emblematising a tabula rasa for exploring new articulations of being, alternative to the king’s sarkar. The desert by being outside settled patterns of human living also presents a return to origins, resonating closely with Posti’s philosophy of unattached distance, an anarchic refusal to build ties with the sarkar. Yet for Ramja, despite his recognition of the generative capacity of Thal, it is important to not dwell there for too long. Ramja operates on another terrain, one that gravitates towards the desert, yet one that is locked in combat with the sarkar. Ramja urges Hussain to leave Thal and join him in the bar, a topography of resistance where the messy materiality of Ramja’s struggle is grounded. The essence of Thal is actualised in the bar of Dulla Bhatti, and Hussain needs Ramja and the bar to ground his explorations of the Thal. This complicates the binary between the ‘coherence’ of the intellectual and the ‘spontaneity’ of the people – Ramja’s political action in the present is what brings coherence to Hussain’s dive into the abstract depths of folk symbolism. The relationship between theory and

political practice stands reversed, the hierarchy between intellectual and the mass inverted.

Through Ramja and Hussain's disputations of the nature of knowledge and the meaning of learning, Syed draws out the ideological tussle between bar and sarkar, revealing the deep imbrication of sites of struggle with structures of power, spotlighting internal contestation within popular traditions of protest. In *The Throne of Lahore,* the opposition between bar and sarkar is drawn out through clear caste and class lines that divide the ensemble of characters. Yet, in practice, the bar's subversion of the sarkar reveals a complex relationship of negotiation and appropriation. This is encapsulated for instance, in Ramja's proximity to Shah Saadullah, an elite intellectual who does the Mughal state's bidding. Further, this complex intertwinement can be seen in Syed's depiction of the madrassa, where Hussain is a student along with Malik Ali. By situating Hussain within the ideological apparatus of the madrassa, Syed demonstrates how critical imaginaries can arise in an intimate relationship to the dominant, and are not situated 'outside' the domain of hegemony. Thus, rather than viewing the bar as an essentialised, autonomous sphere of politics, *The Throne of Lahore* emphasises the importance of critical, contextual engagements with histories of resistance contained in the literary tradition.

Thus, in *The Throne of Lahore*, Ramja is not presented merely as a figure of 'spontaneous' political action, as he proves to be a critical interlocutor in Hussain's development, and by extension, that of the Punjabi literary tradition itself. While Hussain brings to the cultural politics of Dulla's rebellion the weight of historical memory embedded in the metaphor of Thal, Ramja has his own intellectual contribution to make, as he takes on the sarkar's foremost intellectual, head of the Mughal-endorsed madrassa, Shah Saadullah, on the question of knowledge and power. When pushed by the Shah to admit that he has been

reading some of his books, Ramja remarks how he "only read a few useful ones" (Syed 1972, 48). The Shah is inflamed at this insolence, insisting that "In the hands of a wise man, a book is a guide, an aid. In the hands of the unwise, a book can only be a snake" (Ibid). At this point, Ramja exposes the Shah's knowledge as a mere handmaiden to the king's power:

> Ramja: But Sir, wisdom and good sense come from reading books, don't they.
> Saadullah: You don't know anything about this. If you bring wisdom and good sense from your home, only then will a book reveal its secrets to you. Wisdom and sense are inherited, passed on from one generation to the next. Outcastes and bastards can gain no knowledge from books. (Ibid)

Ramja maintains a sly skepticism within his mock deference, a method of ideological subversion distinct from Hussain's, whose differences with Saadullah are expressed in the abstruse language of metaphysics. This treatment of Ramja's character also connects Syed's play back to the var of Dulla Bhatti, invoking its method of triggering internal critique through peripheral characters. The bar itself becomes a shifting, evolving terrain, shaped not just through its clash with the sarkar, but through internal contestation between its intellectuals and its marginalised denizens. The dialectic between bar and sarkar, viewed thus through the prism of knowledge and dominant power, is further explored in Singh's *The Pulsating Drum,* in which the author foregrounds the character of the mirasi as a critical interlocutor for Dulla Bhatti's rebellion.

Critiquing the Masculine Hero in Singh's The Pulsating Drum

Gursharan Singh's *The Pulsating Drum* opens with a choral song followed by an exchange between some village dwellers who have made their way to the king's court to plead respite from the hefty land tax. They are not granted an audience with the emperor, and are turned away from the gates where the bodies of Dulla Bhatti's father and grandfather hang for all to see. This scene immediately establishes the principle contradiction underpinning Bhatti's rebellion – the extractive relationship between the urban power centre and its agrarian periphery. From there, the playwright takes us to Bhatti's village, and the plot largely follows that of the traditional var, with some critical divergences facilitated by the role of choral commentary, and certain characters such as the mirasi and Nooramdi, Dulla Bhatti's wife. A brief yet revealing exchange between the mirasi and the maulvi that appears roughly halfway through the play furnishes a conceptual pivot along which Dulla Bhatti's transformation is effected, appearing soon after his mother has revealed the truth about his past to him. The maulvi or mullah is a Muslim religious leader who presides over the village mosque and madrassa, and operates as a local extension of the Qazi.

The chorus performs an important function in Gursharan Singh's play. The dialectic of convergence and tension between characters and chorus reveals the playwright's reading of the relationship between the individual agency of Dulla as 'leader' and the 'spontaneous' response of the people, and the symbiosis between theory and political practice. Each scene in the play opens with a choral song, the content of which often constitutes a critical foreshadowing on the events to unfold. It comments on the action indirectly almost entirely in song, and by its collective and musical nature, symbolises the Punjabi literary tradition itself. The chorus thus comes to stand in for the popular consciousness. As the choral song opens the scene, the stage directions describe "a typical village scene," (21) in

which Ladhee, Dullah's mother, and her daughter-in-law, Nooramdi, sit in their home, busy at work on one side, and on the other, a group of children are being taught by the maulvi. The children refuse to concentrate on the lesson, and begin squabbling amongst each other, and the maulvi gets up from his seat to deliver a few disciplining blows on the young boys. A song by Nooramdi and the chorus interrupts these proceedings, calming the children and casting a brief spell on their teacher as well.

Nooramdi's choral song is based on a poem by Najm Hosain Syed titled "Sajjan sanu akk da dudh piva" (My love, let us drink from the milkweed's poison.) The "aak" plant is indigenous to South Asia, and grows freely all over the Punjabi landscape, becoming here a botanical metaphor for the bar. Nooramdi's powerful evocation of the bar landscape as symbolic of a regional revolutionary inheritance thus precedes, and in a sense, provides the context for the hero's last speech. The aak root and leaves are used extensively for their medicinal value, yet the white, viscous liquid, the 'milk' that issues from its stem is intensely bitter, and considered poisonous. Thus, the choral song here expresses a counter-intuitive desire, a deathwish almost, that runs against 'common sense' and received wisdom: "Aak da dudh sanu ghutt pareeti..." (For us, [consuming] The aak's milk is to drink of love.) The chorus goes on to exhort: "Thinday mitthay kirak lahu vich, saanjh kurattan paa" (Yoke the bitter pungency of union to sticky, sweet, corrupted blood.) The choral song merges with the voice of a female character, Nooramdi, Dulla Bhatti's wife, ringing out against the maulvi's disciplining efforts. A drink of the aak's venom will lead to certain death – yet it is a death that symbolises freedom, a severing of ties with the sarkar to enter the domain of 'love.' The song draws on the well-worn theme of death-in-life/life-in-death to cement the bar-sarkar divide, replacing the metaphor of the 'tree of knowledge' with the humble, healing properties of the indigenous aak plant. The song also foreshadows Dulla Bhatti's death. Its jubilant welcoming of death resonates with

Dulla's affirmation of being intensely alive even as he mounts the gallows, the aak milk tied through its olfactory metaphor to the bitter kikars of the bar evoked as a symbol of the bar's resilience by the dying Dulla, a gnarly, thorny tree that can survive the worst drought and deprivation.

Following the song, the mirasi picks up the conversation, beginning with a blunt calling out of the maulvi's pedagogical and discipling methods: "Oi, what have you done to these boys?" (22) The mirasi has not been included in the preceding stage directions, and emerges almost organically from Nooramdi's song. Thus, the opposition between the mirasi and the maulvi is already hinted at in the very beginning of their dialogue: the mirasi is the 'organic intellectual' of the folk imaginary, the ideologue of the bar, defined as such on account of his critical distance from relations of domination within both bar and sarkar, and on the basis of his position as a custodian of culture, a bard of local histories excluded from the official epics of conquest. Much like the Qazi, the maulvi or mullah also constitutes an important archetype in the Punjabi literary tradition. Appearing often in the verses of key poets such as Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah, the figure of the maulvi circulates in orality and popular culture as a symbol for religious hypocrisy, an agent of a duplicitous morality who exists to buttress the status quo. In Mughal India, the throne drew a great deal of legitimacy from Islamic symbolism, invoking varying configurations of a hegemonic Muslim identity to maintain influence. The maulvi was also central to the village educational system, delivering the basics of reading, writing and religious education at the local level. Gursharan Singh's sketch of the maulvi in *The Pulsating Drum* plugs straight into this thematic corpus from the Punjabi literary tradition.

The exchange between the maulvi and the mirasi directly addresses the relationship between knowledge and the maintenance of power:

> Come on Mian jee, all your books have arrived from Lahore – written by the king and the greedy scholars he has in his pocket. And the knowledge and truth contained in these is the knowledge and truth of the rich. These books don't mention that those who endlessly enjoy the bounties of this life are growing fat on the labour of those whose toil joins the soil, who don't even get bread to eat. Why is this so? (24)

Here, the mirasi establishes the key opposition – the materialist contradiction between the throne at the centre and its subjects at the periphery. This maps onto the ideological antagonism between the bar and the sarkar, expressed through the unidirectional flow of what is considered 'knowledge and truth'. In 1970s Punjab, where the "barrens of the bar" (25) are long lost, replaced almost entirely with the disciplining drives of a colonial modernity and a postcolonial developmentalism, this dialogue prompts a search for a decolonising knowledge rooted in regional history. As the mirasi suggests, high culture, civilised values, ethical imperative and morality all flow from the cradle of power, where 'the king and his greedy scholars' align to cobble together 'the knowledge and truth of the rich,' ready to be disseminated by the likes of the maulvi to produce loyal subjects. The mirasi's castigating reference to the 'books from Lahore' illuminates how power structures knowledge, raising questions about the nature of learning generated in Lahore, which remained the regional centre for the writing of the Persian court chronicle and Islamic religious treatise. This reference to the 'books from Lahore,' the seat of Mughal power and the heart of elite intellectual production, along with the mirasi's mention of the boys' "ancestors [who] fought against their oppressors" (24) also stokes the question of rebel heritage, one that preoccupied Singh's own project of guerrilla-style theatre that dramatised histories of protest in Punjab. This is suggested by the mirasi's provocative advice to the maulvi: "Don't teach them the lessons from Lahore, teach them the wisdom that sprouts into life from the barrens of the bar" (25).

Further, a critique of the var genre itself is triggered by de-centring the focus on the male hero and locating a critical conception in subjects marginalised within the var corpus itself, Nooramdi and the mirasi. In the var of Dulla Bhatti, Dulla himself takes on the knowledge of the sarkar in a heated exchange with the Qazi. In *The Pulsating Drum* on the other hand, Singh introduces the character of the mirasi to reproduce that thematic, shifting focus away from the hero and directing our gaze to a subalternised social group subject to the twin marginalisation of caste and class. Similarly, Nooramdi presents a gendered critique of Dulla Bhatti himself, indicting him for taking off to enjoy a fair at his uncle's village after raiding a Mughal caravan, leaving the women behind as vulnerable targets for the Mughal army. As it turns out, Nooramdi is proven right, and the Mughals storm Pindi Bhattian while Dulla is away. His wife is taken captive, compelled to stave off her husband's enemies on her own.

By re-organising the characters in this defining episode, Singh's re-vision of *Dulla Bhatti Di Var* pushes against an insulated distinction between elite and subaltern spheres, highlighting the importance of struggle and critique both within the bar and against the sarkar. Thus, while Nooramdi questions the instrumentalisation of women's bodies in the hero's realisation of his destiny, the mirasi follows this up with a subversion of Bhatti's centrality along caste and class lines. This is underscored further in the penultimate scene, as the mirasi's critique of Lahore's imperial knowledge is routed through an indictment of regional power and local social relations. The mirasi lambasts the 'bhaichara' (brotherhood) in the bar, the model of land ownership considered traditional among the Jats of Punjab, which, in the name of 'brotherhood' or the collective, in fact entrenches unequal and individual control over agrarian resources. His critique is then extended to the 'patwar,' a system of revenue collection instituted by Akbar involving a local official called the 'patwari.' Finishing with a reference to the complicity of the

family institution in reproducing bhaichara and patwar by making women into sites where the competing masculinities of Punjabi males play out, the character of the mirasi deconstructs two sets of dominant identity – the imperial-national and the regional-ethnic. Dominant Punjabi identity, defined in terms of a masculinist rural subject is punctured here by the mirasi as organic intellectual, representing a knowledge that is relegated in *both* the pre-colonial cultural formation and the colonial modernity of the nation-state.

Moreover, much like Syed, Singh's reworking of the var also invokes the established tradition of historical fiction in South Asian drama (Bhatia 2004). This auto-critical moment in the play is aided by the setting – the exchange between the mirasi and the maulvi takes place as a crowd of the maulvi's young pupils look on as audience, creating a play within a play and joining the contemporary theatre of Singh with the traditional genre of the var *and* with trajectories of anticolonial performance championed by the likes of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). The presence of children prompts a look into the future, and the mirasi's stress on "proper education" and a pedagogy stemming from "lived experience" rather than the "hollow" edicts from Lahore that are "only allow flights of fancy, and do not help us join with the earth,"(23) raises the Fanonian question - what kind of intellectual and cultural liberation had an elite-led decolonisation brought in its wake? This was a pressing question for Gursharan Singh in 1970s India, when Indira Gandhi invoked the constitution's emergency provisions to supposedly protect the state from "internal disturbance" and to accomplish "progressive social change" (Prakash 2018, 74).

In *The Pulsating Drum*, Gursharan Singh presents a people's historiography that rejects nationalist time. By invoking the longer history of the Mughal empire in the region, which was appropriated by the modern Indian state as a symbol of its towering origins and glorious destiny, the play centres a cultural subject who

sutures an anticolonial consciousness to a critique of regional power relations. Moreover, the play suggests that any search for 'decoloniality' must at all cost avoid an uncritical return to the past, emphasising the internal fractures and contradictions that ordered indigenous modes of being and knowing in historical Punjab. Through the figure of the mirasi, who replaces Dulla in a critical takedown of the sarkar, Singh dramatises the Adornian injunction to us to "hate tradition properly," for which, ironically, yet necessarily, "one must have tradition in oneself" (Adorno 2005, 52). The relationship between struggles for political transformation under post-colonial modernity, and the pre-colonial cultural landscapes they often operated in, is thus reconfigured, focusing not on a static conception of 'cultural difference' and 'subaltern autonomy,' but on a dynamic mode of dissent and self-critique, in which the var tradition itself must yield the tools for its own interrogation.

Beyond 'Punjabiyat:' Concluding Thoughts on Border-Crossing Left-wing Publics

For Alyssa Ayres, Syed's reworking of *Dulla Bhatti Di Var* is grounded unquestionably in a nostalgia tied to a reactionary revivalist tendency toward a masculinist, Punjabi pride (2012). As I discussed in greater detail in Chapter One, in *Speaking Like A State,* Ayres argues that Najm Hosain Syed is a "cultural entrepreneur", the "fountainhead" of a post-colonial movement for Punjabi revival, a "Punjabiyat" that helps the regional elite secure "symbolic capital" for itself through the "cultivation of a well-respected literary sphere" (Ibid, 75; 69). Her work echoes previous work on the subject by Paul Brass (1974) and Christopher Shackle (1970), which locates the literature and language activism in Punjab solely in the domain of ethno-nationalism and provincial assertion within the post-colonial state.

However, as my reading of the plays show, these post-colonial readings of *Dulla Bhatti Di Var* did not represent a parochial Punjabi nationalism, nor did they reify and romanticise pre-colonial, indigenous genealogies of resistance. This is where the plays' critique of the sarkar becomes crucial. Represented in all the complexity embodied by its many meanings, this sarkar, the instrument of a past empire, is symbolised as a hegemonic formation that draws on both coercion and consent, combining spiritual authority with material gain to appropriate and silence Dulla Bhatti's rebellion. In this way, the playwrights call out the complicity of comprador elites in post-colonial Punjab, inflecting the idea of national liberation with an analysis along class lines. A critique of elite knowledge, but also of the post-colonial intellectual emerges, formulated by the 'organic intellectuals' of the folk imaginary.

Further, in re-writing *Dulla Bhatti Di Var* in a post-colonial setting, Singh and Syed participated in the political turn towards writing 'histories from below,' yet their contribution and that of similar authors remains under-studied due to the relegation of vernacular literatures from theoretical debates within Postcolonial Studies in South Asia. Writing in the 1970s, they anticipated the concerns of the Subaltern School, whose research manifesto centred on acknowledging the peasantry as the makers of their own rebellion, with a consciousness that was neither pre-political nor spontaneous (Guha 1983, 4). Subaltern Studies chose the colonial archive as its primary source for unearthing what were identified as "structures of resistance" in the subaltern sphere, declaring folklore too "meagre" for purposes of documentation, lacking in both "quantity and quality" as compared to the meticulously maintained official records of the Raj (Ibid, 4; 14). Ranajit Guha devised a sophisticated method for critically reading the colonial archive to retrieve the rebel consciousness buried within the "prose of counter-insurgency," yet declared "folklore" as representative of an "obviously landlord point of view," penned by upper-caste bards and balladeers "unsympathetic" to

peasant struggles, dependent on the rural gentry for patronage and thus reproducing the elite's "anxieties and prejudices in their compositions on the theme of agrarian disturbances" (Ibid, 3; 14). In contrast, Singh and Syed focused their energies entirely on mining folk tradition for retrieving subaltern histories of protest, and for providing contemporary struggles with a political vocabulary of dissidence rooted in regional literary tradition. This also allowed them to engage with the Gramscian view of popular practice as "common sense," which posits it as disjointed unless refined into a coherent conception of the world by an intellectual (Gramsci and Forgacs 2000). Further, close readings of the text that focus on the mirasi-mullah dialogue in *The Pulsating Drum* and the character of Ramja in *The Throne of Lahore* reveal an understanding of 'spontaneity' that demolishes the distinction between intellectuals and the political mass, complicating the notion of an 'autonomous subaltern consciousness' (Guha 1983). Read together, these plays challenge our assumptions regarding the relationship between regional literary tradition and revolutionary culture, constituting border crossings that conjure a shared regional imaginary to excavate histories of rebellion.

4. Critiquing Dominant Religion Through the Bulleh Shah Kafi: The Protest Poetry of Ustad Daman and Sant Ram Udasi

My country has two Gods,

La-Illah and martial law,

One of them lives in the Heavens,

The second one lives on the floor,

This one's name is 'Allah Mian,'

That one's name is General Zia,

Bravo, General Zia,

Who can tell you to leave from here?

This poem by firebrand anticolonial poet, Ustad Daman (1911-1984) became extremely popular during the military dictatorship of General Zia ul Haq, when Daman, in his characteristic spirited style, recited it at political rallies and public events as part of the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) in 1980s Pakistan. Daman's poem attacks the authoritarianism of the post-colonial state through a tongue-in-cheek reinterpretation of its purported founding ideology. He describes Pakistan, the self-identified homeland for South Asian Muslims, as a country with two Gods. The rhyme connecting the two becomes an ironic dig at the General who had himself proclaimed "Amir ul Momineen" (The leader of the faithful) as he heralded the alleged 'Islamisation' of Pakistan. What is interesting is that Daman exposes Zia's religious hypocrisy through a pronouncement that itself takes the form of 'shirk,' a blasphemous assertion that contrasts Pakistan's *two* Gods against the Islamic tenet of Tawhid, the

absolute ‘Oneness’ of God. He presents here a heretical qalima, proclaiming the existence of two Gods in the so-called ‘land of the pure.’ This brazen entwinement between the sacral and the political constitutes an important template for political critique in the Punjabi literary tradition. Daman draws significantly on the popular kafi genre for his subversive use of the registers of religion, in particular, on the kafis of eighteenth-century ‘Sufi saint,’ Bulleh Shah.

Succinctly defined as a poem in stanzas with a refrain, the Punjabi kafi has circulated in the region primarily through folk musical practice and qawwali performance. A popular genre that heavily references Bhakti/ Sufi-inspired idioms of popular devotion, the rejection of religious authority and social convention is a recurring theme in the Punjabi kafi. In the kafis of Bulleh Shah, the Qazi, mullah, pandit, sadhu, and even ‘Ram’ and ‘Rahim’ (another name for Allah) themselves are playfully addressed, berated, beseeched and re-interpreted against the mundane canvas of life at the margins of caste and class.

While dominant appropriations of the kafi corpus reproduce the exclusions of hegemonic religion, I argue that Bulleh Shah’s kafis challenge the governing notion of religion as an enterprise preoccupied with the transcendental. The kafis’ materialist deployment of the registers of religion, deliberate conflation of dominant religious categories, and centring of popular devotion constitutes a template for the critique of religion within the Punjabi literary tradition. This critique, in the case of Bulleh Shah, is routed through a structure of affect linking the upper-caste poet and his marginal caste Arain mentor, Shah Inayat. Their relationship, which is referenced playfully in the kafis, constitutes a mode of rebellious affect, premised on an intimacy proscribed by class and caste norms.

Combined with the kafi's everyday, colloquial construction, this literary method works to uncloak dominant religion as the hegemonic nexus between caste, class and hegemonic power. This genealogy of dissent is re-worked in the twentieth century protest poetry of Ustad Daman, where it constitutively informs his resistance against colonialism and post-colonial authoritarianism. Contrary to the strictures imposed by methodological nationalism on analyses of post-colonial writing in South Asia, this literary method also winds its way into the protest poetry of Naxalite Dalit poet Sant Ram Udasi (1939-1986).

While Ustad Daman invokes Bulleh Shah's irreverent and ironic treatment of the tropes of religion in "My Country Has Two Gods" and "My Heart Yearns to Speak" to challenge the religiously-inflected despotism of the Pakistani state, Sant Ram Udasi's "Today" and "Mardanan's Letter to Mardana" deploy the structure of affect that binds Bullah to Inayat to resurrect hagiographical figures from the margins of caste and class and critique dominant (Brahmin-Hindu) Indian identity. Moreover, Udasi's engagement with popular devotion furnished a regional vocabulary for Marxist critiques of dominant religion, caste, and post-colonial authoritarianism, constituting an important cultural stream within the Naxalite insurrection in Punjab. which was a peasantist movement involving the Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML) that spread across various parts of the country during the 1970s. More broadly, as poets whose politics was variously informed by the radical traditions of anticolonialism, left-wing politics, and Dalit assertion connecting with a mode of dissent that playfully engaged the languages of faith allowed them to critique the rise of dominant religion as a political force in both countries.

Thus, rather than proceeding from a point of religious difference to study Pakistani and Indian Punjab as 'Muslim' and 'Sikh/ Hindu' respectively, I deploy a cross-border reading of Bulleh Shah's method that centres regional traditions of dissent and contemporary struggles against the post-colonial state. I take my cue from the deliberate conflation of Allah, Bhagwan and Guru found in both Bulleh Shah's kafis (Kalra and Purewal 2019) and the protest poetry of Daman and Udasi. However, this is not to put forward a framework of 'religious syncretism.' As Kalra and Purewal clarify, this cross-border methodology does not serve to "evoke the comfort of a nostalgic yearning for a lost age of religious tolerance and cohabitation," (Ibid, 10) or simply a shared notion of piety (Mir 2012, 226). Rather, it centres the persistence of exclusion along the axes of caste and class, which, if overcome, intimates the potentiality of another type of commons (Kalra and Purewal 2019, 10).

As Kalra and Purewal contend, a myopic view of Indian and Pakistani societies as "irreducibly religious" (Ibid) has come to structure scholarship and public debate. As religion in South Asia, and indeed other former colonies, is increasingly framed as a site for political expression and identity defined by its opposition to a liberal, neo-colonial 'West', left-wing perspectives that critique dominant religion even as they connect with popular, subaltern forms of devotion are elided from academic analyses. This narrow view also permeates the field of postcolonial studies, in which the debates around the Rushdie affair and post 9/11 Muslim identity have overdetermined discussions of the treatment of religion as a theme in postcolonial writing. The secular/ religion binary remains the key conceptual node for critics across the ideological spectrum, a framework that is ill-equipped to read the complex interplay of religion and regional cultures of resistance. This limitation is all too obvious in Edward Said's

liberal humanist call for “Secular Criticism,” which posits a universalist vision with the lone, exilic intellectual at its centre, and ends up counterposing “democratic freedoms” against the ‘protection of Islam,’ framing them as irreconcilable opposites (Said 1989). Responding in part to Said, Talal Asad rightly raises the question, “Is Critique Secular?” as he skilfully lays out the colonial, Christian origins of the so-called secularism extolled by Said (Asad 2013). However, Asad’s demarcation of a neat divide between a “Western bourgeois” literary sensibility as opposed to the “popular aesthetic appreciation” of Muslims grounded in a “moral and religious perspective” (Asad 1990) flattens the specificities of subjects shaped by caste, gender, and regional history. In other words, indigenous dissent against dominant religion that draws on local traditions of critique figures nowhere in these accounts.

By reading Bulleh Shah’s subversion of religious symbolism as a methodological template for post-colonial protest poetry, I problematise understandings of how the religion/ secular binary operates in literature, pointing to regional vernacular modes of appropriating and critiquing faith that escape through the cracks wrought by the neo-imperial East-West divide and dominant nationalisms. Moreover, by centring the shared genealogies of critique that circulate in the regional literary formation as an analytical lens, this chapter also seeks to push our understanding of religion, politics and identity in South Asia.

Situating Bulleh Shah in the Punjabi Literary Tradition

While it is largely held amongst scholars that Bulleh Shah (1680-1758) lived during the eighteenth century near Lahore, Punjab, and was born in 1680, the paucity of historical sources makes it impossible to establish him

as a historical figure. Most biographical information we have about Bulleh Shah, said to have been born Abdullah Shah, comes from hagiographical sources, oral narrations and his own poetry. The same historical uncertainty surrounds his poetic corpus – the first written manuscripts of his kafis date back to a hundred and fifty years after his death. These manuscripts are transcriptions of musical performances of Bulleh Shah's poetry that contain apparent interpolations and elaborations by performers. In some cases, entire verses or poems by other poets are included, often with the signature line of these poets intact (Rinehart 1999, 59).

As with many other poets of the Punjabi literary tradition, Bulleh Shah is simultaneously spiritual figure and popular bard. Dominant appropriations of his figure span the diverse realms of devotional practice, pop music, and state-mandated 'Sufi' Islam. However, as my analysis of his kafi, and its resonances in contemporary protest poetry will demonstrate, these appropriations remain haunted by the spectre of his subversive verse.

Most writing on Bulleh Shah tends to compartmentalise the poet and the saint, adopting approaches that draw on either textual analysis to cement him as a definite, historical author (e.g. Syed 1962) or completely dispel with a close reading of his poetry, focusing instead on associated spiritual practices of Sufism to read Bulleh Shah (e.g. Schimmel 1975; Ramakrishna 1977) However, recent work by Kalra and Purewal suggests the importance of considering both together, as they document the circulation of Bulleh Shah's name and texts in popular discourse at shrine sites in Punjab, as part of a "Punjabi poetic-philosophical tradition" that threatens to "puncture the hegemonic forces of dominant caste ideology" (Kalra and Purewal 2019, 7). Thus, instead of attempting to sieve the 'authentic' Bullah from the 'popular adulterations' of his poetry, I emphasise how his circulation in the

social blends with the idioms of everyday resistance in the literary tradition to yield a genre for social critique. This emerges as a poetic template that is then re-deployed by Ustad Daman and Sant Ram Udasi.

Bulleh Shah's shrine is in Kasur, around fifty kilometres from Lahore. It is one of the busiest religious sites in Punjab, where his person and poetry circulate in both textual and musical practice. A major festival or urs celebration commemorating his death anniversary takes place in August every year, drawing thousands of devotees. As with other major Sufi shrines and religious sites, his (alleged) final resting place is also implicated in the maintenance of traditional authority associated with hereditary Pirs, custodians of the spiritual legacy or Sufi 'silsila' or order said to have been handed down by Bulleh Shah to his chosen devotees. In Punjab, the Pirs often belong to the agrarian elite, and draw formidable political power, social clout and material wealth from the political economy surrounding the maintenance of shrines. Since 1947, the post-colonial state has also carved out its share in the spirituality pie – the Auqaf department run by the government of Pakistan nationalised major shrines across the country in the 1950s, and now, a committee comprising both members of the Pir's family and government officials oversee the running of Bulleh Shah's shrine.[55]

Bulleh Shah's poetry has also found its way into Bollywood and pop music in both India and Pakistan. Here, his poetry is often invoked "in a spirit of voyeurism or a benign contrast to what is seen as 'fundamentalism'" (Kalra and Purewal 2019, 13), often presented as the 'soft' face of Islam or as a testament to the 'religious and cultural syncretism' of the sub-continent. This inter-faith, multiculturalist instrumentalisation of Bulleh Shah, often

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[55] For more detail on state management of shrines, see Ibad, Umber B. *Sufi Shrines and the Pakistani State.* Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.

marshalled to serve the vacuous liberal ideologies of the state, veils the strident refusal to reconciliation in his verses, diluting his revolutionary challenge to the status quo into “a search for a kind of tolerant plurality” (Ibid). As the next section demonstrates through a review of scholarship on Bulleh Shah, academic analyses have done little to push beyond these narrowing perspectives.

The ‘Portable’ Bullah: The Kafi as a ‘Religious’ Genre?

While Bulleh Shah’s poetry has received far more academic attention than that of other poets of the Punjabi literary tradition, most analyses tend to reproduce the logic of dominant appropriations. In short, most readings remain necessarily trapped within the methodological confines of religion studies. Robin Rinehart (1999) has described Bulleh Shah as a “portable” figure, arguing that scholarly analyses of his life and poetry tend to reveal more about the communal lens of contemporary commentators than about Bulleh Shah himself, who can be ‘ported’ into any ideological framework. Rinehart expertly points out the circular process of interpretation that underpins these appropriations:

> Many of the details that provide the raw material for Bulleh Shah’s biographies have been gleaned from his poetry; these details – now instantiated ‘ facts’ – in turn are used to explain other aspects of his poetry. Thus, interpreters use Bulleh Shah’s life to explain his poetry, and his poetry to explain his life. (58)

Various scholars have sought to claim Bulleh Shah within a particular religious tradition, be it Islam, Hinduism or Sikhism (Ibid, 260-1). For instance, Annemarie Schimmel dubbed him the “Rumi of Punjab,”

identifying him as a Sufi mystic (1975, 388). She describes his use of "folk tales as *vehicles* for the expression of mystical experiences" (my emphasis), reading his deployment of the everyday as an attempt to "appeal to the peasants and illiterates" and bring them into the fold of Islam (Ibid, 384). This evangelical and instrumentalist approach to folk practice in Bulleh Shah's poetry is assumed despite the lack of historical evidence needed to support this reading. It also reifies religion, and reproduces the trope of Islam's foreignness in the sub-continent, suggesting that the religion, as it existed in its 'pure' form had to be cloaked in 'Indic' cultural symbols for the local population. Tellingly, Schimmel mentions how Bulleh Shah lived through a time of great political transformations, yet emphasises how "he found peace in the *inner* world of peace and surrender" (Ibid). Through this move to this uncertain historical figure's so-called 'inner world,' the analysis also erases the material and social context that Bulleh Shah's poetry consistently engages to often violent, insurrectionary effect against dominant religion and feudal power.

In such analyses, normative religion becomes the sole lens for reading Bulleh Shah. Similar issues of reductionism plague Lajwanti Ramakrishna's (1938) study of Bulleh Shah, who emphasises his "Vedantic" outlook over his Sufi credentials, as well as Surinder Singh Kohli's (1990) assertion that Bulleh Shah belongs squarely within the Sikh tradition. The analytical move is from the normative classification of religion to the text itself, which is then deemed 'authentic' or otherwise based on its alignment with the chosen categorisation. However, if we turn to the popular circulation of Bulleh Shah's verses in marginal cultural spaces and centre the re-working of his method in regional protest poetry, a different picture emerges. A critique of dominant religion as structured by caste and class is unearthed as

we reverse the methodological move, and take as our beginning point the oppositional spirit of his kafi.

Dominant religion in Bulleh Shah's Kafis: Critiquing Caste, Resisting Authority

As mentioned previously, the manuscripts attributed to Bulleh Shah are transcribed from musical performances, and often incorporate verses from other poets. It is in this very creative and playful engagement with Bullah's verse that we find a hermeneutical method perfected by traditional performers, the organic intellectuals of the Punjabi literary tradition. This poses problems of 'authenticity' for those working from within religious classifications and conventional approaches to authorship. However, this performative mode expands the kafi form to stitch contemporary political and social concerns to its poetics, by sometimes establishing a direct intertextual relationship with Bulleh Shah and in other instances, drawing obliquely on the structures of feeling entrenched in the repertoire. In particular, this interpretive matrix, that circulates in both performative practice and protest poetry, enacts the affective relationship between Bullah and Inayat and the rejection of authority against the colloquial canvas of the everyday. This section sketches out this aspect of the Bulleh Shah kafi through close readings of selected poetry. The latter half of the chapter then connects Daman and Udasi with the insurrectionary tone of these themes, reading their poems as critiques of caste society and post-colonial authoritarianism routed through the defiant Bullah.

A brief analysis of the kafi genre, based on its performative and textual elements, reveals a form far more complex than a mere vehicle for expressing 'mystical' experience. The kafi is undoubtedly the most popular

form of the Punjabi literary tradition, with its most celebrated exponents being Bulleh Shah and his sixteenth century predecessor, Madho Lal Hussain, whose character we found imaginatively interpreted in Chapter Three in Syed's *The Throne of Lahore,* as an organic intellectual of Dullah Bhatti's rebellion against the Mughal throne. Hussain's kafis are the first to incorporate references to and episodes from the Hir qissa into the kafi form as well, a motif that is often referenced by Bulleh Shah.

An intertextual method knitting together different contexts and poets stands at the heart of the kafi corpus. Invariably, the kafi draws on a "dramatic mould of presentation", embodying a "vigilant realism" in presenting a narrative voice that relays its internal struggles in terms of some common experience shared by the community (Syed 1968, 20). Further, a tone of simplicity is maintained, reinforced by the use of everyday imagery and colloquial language, with quotidian settings derived mostly from the rural environment (Ibid). This deceptive simplicity helps create an ironic contrast with stanzas that forcefully reject the status quo, jolting the reader into reflecting on societal structures of oppression. The key to unlocking this critique, and indicating the possibility of a political alternative, is to be found in the kafi's staging of the transgressive relationship between Inayat and Bullah.

Shah Inayat figures prominently in the hagiographic and poetic corpus associated with Bulleh Shah. He is said to have been a spiritual teacher who established a school in Lahore. Previously, he had worked as a small farmer or gardener, a reflection of the traditional occupation of the Arain caste to which he belonged. While we don't hear directly from Inayat in the kafis, Bullah's rejection of hegemonic authority is concretised around Inayat's person. Bullah's intense, sensual attachment to Inayat is often referenced in

the kafi's refrain, the repeating strain that ties the stanzas together and is crucial to delivering the poet's decimating critique of oppression and injustice. Often, the refrain works by high contrast, juxtaposing Inayat against the avaricious Qazi and the callous pandit. While the affective relationship between Inayat and Bullah evokes the hallowed guru-chela or teacher-disciple bond, it is important to note how the kafis play with and subvert the conservative traditions that often underpin this association.[56] In contrast to what academic analyses grounded in the paradigms of religion studies posit, Bullah's love for Inayat does not simply represent the chela's unquestioning submission to the guru. Rather, Inayat is more a crucial interlocutor than an authority figure for Bulleh Shah, driving his rejection of caste society and its associated regimes of knowledge.

The subversive potential of their union is embodied in the fact that Bulleh Shah is an upper-caste Muslim, while Inayat belonged to a marginal caste. This relationship underscores the kafi's potentiality for a political critique, even as the poem draws on the symbolic apparatus of religion. Yet dominant categorisations of religion that locate caste exclusively within Hinduism do not allow for a framework that centres the poet's rejection of caste, as Bullah and Inayat are both Muslim, and therefore seen to be outside the 'Hindu' caste system. Viewing Islam solely as an Abrahamic faith with its roots outside the Indian subcontinent creates an ahistorical and essentialist dichotomy that distorts the complex, long history of migration, invasion, and popular practice that has shaped cultural and religious development in South Asia. This false dichotomy also maps neatly onto the hegemonic nationalist narratives of the Indian and Pakistani states that have

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[56] A queer reading of Madho Lal Hussain and Bulleh Shah is beyond the scope of the current chapter, however, it constitutes an important node of subversion in their kafi corpus. For instance, Anand Alam's translations and 'conversations' (bi-lingual poems that respond to Hussain directly) draw out the queer articulation of gender and sexuality in Hussain's kafis. See Alam, Anand. 2020. *The Others/ Nimaanay, Mastaanay, Te Kujh Pardesi Sawaniyan*. Lahore: Saanjh Publications.

increasingly distilled the incredible variety of subcontinental identities down to the Hindu-Muslim divide. This reductive logic begets and legitimates discursive, cultural and physical violence, masking the fact that the brunt is borne by those at the margins of caste, class and gender, where counter-hegemonic, heterodox devotional practices thrive. Centring Bulleh Shah's treatment of caste re-orients focus towards traditions of resistance within the Punjabi literary tradition, and away from these dominant communal and nationalist categories of identity. See for instance, the popular kafi, "Bulleh nu samjhavan aaiyaan" (They came to reason with Bullah):

Women of the family,
Tried to reason with Bullah:
'Heed our words,
Let go of the Arain's mantle,
Why do you insult
The family of the prophet and Ali?' (Shah 2013, 19)

The kafi follows the quintessential structure of a folk song, in which an elder woman in the family (usually the mother) instructs the daughter in social convention. Here, this societal voice is ventriloquised through the 'bhena te bharjaiyaan (the sisters and brothers' wives, which I have translated as the family's women), who demand that Bullah shun Inayat as his teacher. Inayat is here referenced not by name, but by his caste, 'Arain,' indicating the caste-based origins of the family's contempt. Choosing an Arain master, submitting to him in love, are equated to disparaging the 'aulaad-e-Nabi (the Prophet's offspring), a reference to the Syeds' claim to be direct descendants of Muhammad. Thus, by invoking the affective ties of blood and faith, the voices of familial authority draw on the symbolic ties

between a Syed Muslim and the Prophet to reinforce caste norms. Bulleh Shah responds in the second stanza thus:

Those who call me Syed,
May burn in hell,
Those who call me Arain,
In heaven will they thrive…

…If you seek the gardens of paradise,
Become the Arains' servant…

Countering this nexus of caste and dominant religion, Bulleh Shah presents an alternative structure of affect, which centres the poet's intense love for Inayat, an immediate, personal relationship that grounds his political critique of caste. He responds by proclaiming literal servitude to Inayat as the only path to salvation, a submission that entails a reversal of caste hierarchy. At the same time, he draws on religious imaginary by invoking heaven and hell, as he vows to visit the violence of hellish punishment upon those who enforce caste norms.

This mode of critique, which rests on a proscribed, transgressive love, is reproduced in other kafis that reference Shah Inayat, such as "Gaze upon my beloved Inayat," "Your love made me dance" and "The thief in my shawl's folds:"

The thief in my shawl's folds
The Muslims are afraid of fire
The Hindus dread the grave
Both die in this same body

This is their rancour

One is Ramdas and the other, Fateh Muhammad
This is the ancient quarrel
Suddenly, it all ended
When someone else emerged
The thief in my shawl's folds. (Shah 2012, 66)

The inner awakening of the poet is honed into a critique of dominant religious identity, indicated by the poet's wry observation on the futility of ritual difference for both the Hindu 'Ramdas' and the Muslim 'Fateh Muhammad.' The simple, matter-of-fact language describing the divides of dominant religion highlights the ironic notion that correct funeral rites may secure solace in the after-life, yet human suffering on earth continues unabated. For the poet, this 'ancient quarrel' ends suddenly as 'someone else emerged.' This 'someone else,' the thief in the shawl's folds, is none other than Inayat. The seed of consciousness that his love has sown in Bulleh Shah is expressed in another stanza thus:

The call sounded from the throne of light,
Was heard in The Throne of Lahore,
Shah Inayat, who cast the trap,
Now pulls the line, hidden from view,
The thief in my shawl's folds. (Ibid, 67)

Despite the gravity of the subject under discussion, the tone maintains its playful, affective structure, as "an atmosphere of secret knowledge pervades the kafi," with "the entire poem being in the manner of an aside," a whispered conversation between two women (Syed 1968, 29). The

‘bukkal’ or the shawl’s folds as they drape the body, “symbolizes the unexplored, unknown intricacies of the inner self” (Ibid, 30) that undergoes a complete transformation effected by ‘the thief,’ Inayat. The image of the thief evokes a sense of “undiscovered action” and “unforeseen development,” (Ibid) reinforcing the ominous portent that the ‘baang’ (call to prayer) from the ‘arsh munawwar’ (‘throne of light’) heralds for ‘Takht Lahore,’ (The throne of Lahore) the seat of state power in Punjab. The structure of the stanzas links the rule of light with the pull of Inayat, and “Takht Lahore” with the “ancient quarrels” of dominant religion. The violent tug of Inayat’s trap, who is here compared to a huntsman, creates a sensuous intimacy, yet it also foreshadows the violence that Bullah must consequently endure for his proclaimed rebellion against ‘Takht Lahore.’ This entwinement of love and violence can be found in all the kafis. In “Ishq di navion navi bahar,” (The Spring of Love is Fresh and New) it is also reversed, in a destruction visited upon the tenets of dominant religion by Bulleh Shah himself.

“The Spring of Love is Fresh and New” combines Bulleh Shah’s colloquial, carefree tone with the motif of insurrectionary violence as framed by the transforming power of transgressive love. This ‘fresh and new love’ calls for aggressively destroying, ‘scattering,’ ‘spurning’ and ‘burning,’ markers of Muslim piety, objects that would also distinguish Bulleh Shah as a devout holy man of the upper caste, a Syed pir. The kafi ties together his critique of caste, dominant religion and social power, providing a template for Daman and Udasi’s post-colonial poetics of protest:

Scatter the rosary, spurn
Ablutions, and the prayer-mat burn,

At the top of their voices, lovers proclaim
Reject the halal, and carrion consume
The spring of love is fresh and new (Shah 2012, 46)

The critique of caste is signaled by the injunction to reject the “halal” (kosher, permitted in Islam) and eat “murdaar,” which literally translates as carrion, or decaying meat, and invokes the stigma of ritual pollution that attaches to Dalit diets. In most translations, including the one rendered by famous poet Taufiq Rafat, “murdaar” is translated as “prohibited,” the opposite of ‘permissible,’ which is the Arabic ‘halal’ in Islam. While Bulleh Shah’s verse deliberately connects Muslim norms with caste rules to critique the larger structure of dominant religion, the omission of the reference to carrion in ‘murdaar’ elides his indictment of caste society. Thus, even literary translations that do not necessarily subscribe to the dogmas of dominant Islam can reproduce the hegemonic Hindu/ Muslim binary, which in turn narrows and indeed communalises our reading of South Asian literatures.

Thus, Bullah calls for a complete reversal of the moral order, turning on their head caste norms and Brahminical religion, which are not restricted to Hinduism as made emphatically clear in “We tire of reading the Vedas *and* Quran… /God is not in Teerath, nor Mecca” (my emphasis). This appropriation and reversal evokes Ranajit Guha’s discussion of a “rebel peasant consciousness," where he highlights “negation” as an ‘elementary aspect’ of insurgency, whereby “the peasants attempt to destroy or appropriate for themselves the signs of authority of those who dominate them” (1983, 28). Peasant revolts occupy a permanent place in the political landscape of the Punjab region, and “this recursive practice of insurgency” has helped “develop fairly well established structures of defiance over the

centuries" (Ibid, 12). As part of the oral and performative tradition rooted in the rural, Bulleh Shah's corpus both feeds into and draws on this 'structure of defiance,' distilling into poetic form a long history of subaltern protest. These literary tropes of the Bulleh Shah repertoire re-appear as traces in Daman and Udasi's contemporary protest verses, which draw on the same negative consciousness, violent rejection and subversive appropriation that we find in "The Spring of Love is Fresh and New."

The lovers' anti-caste proclamation in the kafi is cemented further by evoking the structure of proscribed affect linking Inayat and Bullah. Inayat, the teacher, is subtly referenced in the line, "When I *learned* the lesson of love/ My heart grew fearful of the mosque" (my emphasis) (Shah 2012, 45). In this kafi as in others, the motif of radical love is expanded to incorporate Hir and Ranjha, the star-crossed lovers from the Hir qissa who similarly flouted social norms. In the kafi, "Ranjha plays in the [Hir's] shawl's folds," (Ibid) which symbolically connects him with the 'thief' from the previous kafi. The structure of affect linking Bulleh Shah and Inayat is no longer confined to these two personas. Within the same kafi, it moves to encapsulate even the entity of God, who is addressed in the same frank, familiar tone in the last stanza: "Love made me forget prostrations to you/ So why now do you complain and argue?" (Ibid) Throughout Bulleh Shah's kafis, this transgressive affect resonates in references to Ranjha, Shaam (Shyam, or Krishna), and even Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. The same playful intimacy with Inayat that tumbles into an outright rejection of the social order defines the kafi genre's treatment of these literary and historical figures. Often, the relationship between Inayat and Bullah is completely generalised by invoking simply the epithet of 'shoh' for the former, which translates simply as 'beloved' and plays on Bullah's

last name, 'Shah.' His name, which marks the poet's high social status, thus stands subverted by radical love.

This structure of affect is reproduced in Sant Ram Udasi's poems where Guru Nanak Dev, the first of the Sikh gurus, is invoked to articulate a critical commentary on the post-colonial present. An ironic treatment of the same can also be glimpsed in Ustad Daman's "My country has two Gods," where Bullah's mode of addressing God directly is converted into a surprise move in the poem, as it turns out that Daman is addressing the other, worldly 'god', i.e. General Zia. Zia is then ridiculed in the same familiar, colloquial tone. For these poets then, Bulleh Shah is not a historical poet or revered spiritual saint. His kafis and person constitute a genre of poetic dissent, circulating in an oral culture and performative practice relegated to the margins of nation and literary modernity. The protest verses of Ustad Daman and Sant Ram Udasi embody this form, deploying not only its colloquial tone and everyday settings, but also connecting with its ironic, at times flippant, and rebellious take on the tropes of religion.

Ustad Daman and the World of Punjabi Anticolonial Poetry

In 1930, Mian Iftikharuddin, a noted anticolonial progressive, invited his tailor to recite his poetry at a public meeting that had been organised by the Indian National Congress. He was impressed by the man's ability to work shrewd political critique into thumping rhythms that drew on idiomatic forms of the Punjabi language. This tailor, who wrote under the pen name 'Humdam' initially, and later took on the nom de plume of 'Daman,' became a regular at the Congress' political gatherings. His fiery anticolonial verses, delivered in song with his signature gusto, earned him the title of 'Ustad,' or teacher. Thus began the poetic career of Ustad Daman.

Despite sharing a close friendship, politics, and the stage at many literary gatherings with his more celebrated contemporary, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Daman's poetic style stood in stark difference to Faiz's stylised Urdu oeuvre. As discussed in Chapter One, this emphasis on Urdu was rooted in the literary practices of the All India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA), whose anticolonial vision stressed the need for a unifying 'national' language. This in part originated as a specific legacy of the Indian Communist Party, which emphasised the need to speak and educate in the most advanced language of the time (Butt and Kalra 2019, 11). On the other hand, Daman's verses embodied a considered continuity with the living traditions of orality and popular poetry in the region. In particular, as mentioned above, his corpus consistently imbibed the Bulleh Shahi deployment of the registers of religion to challenge authority.

An uncompromising commitment to anticolonial struggle lies at the heart of Ustad Daman's poetry. Post-1947, despite the grief of losing his wife and daughter in the Partition riots, Daman did not give in to apathy, and spent the rest of his life combatting all illusions of 'independence' peddled by the post-colonial elite. His formative years as a poet were shaped by the increasingly militant form taken by the Indian nationalist struggle in the lead-up to formal decolonisation. Writing about colonial Lahore in the 1920s and 1930s, Chris Moffat describes

> The emergence – even in this pre-Independence conjuncture – of a peculiarly *paranational* sensibility… Para-national [being] used here to signify a relationship with nationalism that also exceeds it, which may be critical of its foundational assumptions. (Moffat 2019, 26)

While Daman remained closely associated with the Indian National Congress, these 'paranational' sensibilities, including Marxist and Internationalist inflections within the liberation struggle, were reflected in his poetry. During this time period, Bhagat Singh's Naujawan Bharat Sabha was active as a cultural front, popularising swadeshi, and proselytising against communal politics in Lahore. The city's political circles jostled with the "America-returned Sikhs," migrant labourers radicalised by their experience of racism and exploitation in the New World, most of whom were associated with the militant Ghadar Party (Ibid). In fact, poetry formed a bulk of the contents of the party's proscribed organ, *Ghadar*, from which an anthology of protest poems was later published as *Ghadar Di Goonj* (The Echoes of Rebellion).[57] Much like Daman's verses, the poetry of the Ghadar movement had a simple, colloquial tone, drawing heavily on the idioms of regional tradition to rework them into an exhortation to revolt (Kazmi 2018). Similarly, Virinder Kalra (2017) points out how in this poetry religious identities were almost always invoked to be condemned, which suggests a subversive deployment of regional and religious identity akin to Daman, and the oppositional legacy of Bulleh Shah.

This body of protest poetry continues to be relegated from accounts of anticolonial intellectual history in South Asia, which tend to focus on the writings of Communist intellectuals and Progressive writers who occupied a more elite, 'cosmopolitan' status within both nationalist and internationalist spheres. Daman's poetry represents these popular, anticolonial literary forms. His verses deriding Winston Churchill in his "Churchill Chur Chur German Di Rail Charheya*"* (Churchill 'Chug Chug' Climbed Aboard the German Train) drew on wordplay that mimicked a

[57] Singh, Kesar. *Ghadar Lehar di Kavita*. Punjabi University, 1995.

children's rhyme to heap scorn on the reviled British Prime Minister. The same playful technique can be seen in his "Sun Ja Jaandeya Raahiya" (Listen, O Traveller On Your Way), where he deploys the mahiya, a folk form that often addresses themes of war, to criticise the powerful Pakistani military:

Listen, O traveller on your way,
Ayub left, and trapped seems Yahya,
All work has stopped, so sing a mahiya,
Long may you live! My beloved warrior. (Daman, n.d.)

In this short poem, Daman reproduces the rhythms of colloquial Punjabi, injecting his contemporary, political commentary into the very heart of its folk cadences. The poem has a strong lyrical quality, with both internal and end rhymes. In the last line, Daman invokes the figure of the "Dhol Sipahi," which translates as the 'beloved soldier,' a recurring character in a genre of folk songs that addresses the separation and yearning experienced by the loved ones of a soldier at war. Combining the well-worn motif of the 'dhol sipaahi' with the names of two powerful military dictators, (Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan) Daman creates an intense irony driven home by the mock prayer of deference uttered by the poet: "Long may you live!" The contrast between the figure of the ordinary foot-soldier and the power hungry generals, Ayub and Yahya, dramatises Daman's indictment of the military's authoritarian role in the postcolonial state, translating his political critique into a form rooted in the popular regional imaginary. Similarly, in "Ae Ki Kari Jaana Ae?" (What Are You Doing?), Daman satirised Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, Pakistan's charismatic populist prime minister, whose socialist government revealed its authoritarian colours all too soon with a countrywide crackdown on left-wing activists, trade unions and progressive

political parties during the 1970s.[58] Even the country's first elected Prime Minister was not spared by Daman's relentless, biting wit.

Ustad Daman's anticolonial outlook cemented his unequivocal rejection of statist authoritarianism in postcolonial Pakistan. His commitment to remain a critic in the borders of the new power structure, and to keep alive the spirit of total liberation that animated radical anticolonialisms in British India often landed him in trouble. Daman was arrested by almost every regime, including Bhutto's. It also went hand in hand with his poetry's intertextual relationship to the kafis of Bulleh Shah, driving his deep engagement with literary structures of resistance in the regional poetic tradition.

My Heart Yearns to Speak: The Punjabi Kafi and Daman's Poetics of Protest

Several of Daman's hard-hitting poems invoke Bulleh Shah directly, referencing his verses almost verbatim in some cases. For instance, Daman's "Kujh kehn nu jee peya karda hai" (My Heart Yearns to Speak) reproduces the urgency of truth contained in Bulleh Shah's kafi, "Mun ayee baat na rehndi hai" (These Words Must Leave My Mouth). Both connect with the pregnant, pressing secrecy of Bulleh Shah's "the thief in my shawl's folds." "These Words Must Leave My Mouth" mentions 'the secret' twice, and "My Heart Yearns to Speak" uses a tightly structured refrain, similar to 'the thief in my shawl's folds', using repetition to heighten dramatic tension: "My heart yearns to speak/ My heart also fears to speak."

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[58] For more, see Asdar Ali, Kamran. *Surkh Salam: Communist Politics and Class Activism in Pakistan 1947-1972.* Oxford University Press, 2016.

Combining the burning desire to speak with fear conjures both excitement and foreboding. The colloquial, yet powerful construction of this refrain creates the same effect as the whispered urgency of the "thief in my shawl's folds," as it takes the form of an intimate conversation with a confidant, with whom the heart's urges are being shared. At the same time, when combined with the political critique in the intervening stanzas, the refrain is transformed into a public proclamation, a social commentary addressed to the society at large. This again bears striking similarity to Bulleh Shah's method, as demonstrated in "the thief in my shawl's folds," where ironic observations on the trappings of dominant religion meld with the intimate air of the refrain, bringing together the affective structure of the kafi with its oppositional politics:

My heart yearns to speak,
My heart also fears to speak. [Refrain]

They call me mad when I speak,
If I stay silent, my chest is scorched.

They strip bodies of clothes,
And make the naked perform,
All dignity is robbed,
Yet corpses are heavily adorned.

Wealth, property, religion, faith in here,
The Gita, Testament, Quran in here,
For this wealth's sake, all those in here,
Chuckling and laughing, embrace the noose.

Relations have no meaning in here,
When wealth is Ram Rahim in here,
The day is plunged in darkness in here,
At night, the sun rises high.

The leaders spin illusions in here,
A long history of loot in here,
At every moment, each person here,
Recites the qalima of money. (Daman, n.d.)

As mentioned in the preceding section, the thief in Bulleh Shah's kafi symbolises the inner self. This connects with the image of the heart in Daman's rendering. The sense of furtive excitement that accompanies these images creates an ironic effect, as the 'secrets' revealed in the stanzas, turn out to be the commonplace truths of society whose sources are all too obvious for everyone, yet remain unspeakable under dominant hegemony.

Further, the poem inverts images from the natural order, as "Stones float, and flowers drown/ In this world's Ganga, flowing upside-down," and the sun rises at night, with a day "plunged in darkness" (Ibid). These reversals reinforce Daman's dystopian description of the state of society around him, and highlight the absence of any given truths that are 'natural' or sacred. Daman's deployment of the listing form, where "Wealth, property, religion, faith" roll rapidly off the tongue, creates a close connection between these four, unearthing the structures of capitalist exploitation that co-exist symbiotically with dominant religion in post-colonial Pakistan.

In the stanza that follows, the corrosive influence of this exploitative nexus between dominant religion and elite interest is seen in the destruction of the

cultural fabric of society, as all relations lose their meaning. Moreover, in this stanza, Daman combines Ram and Rahim. Importantly, the two deities are mentioned without any grammatical conjunction separating their names. This conflation links methodologically with Bulleh Shah's "The thief in my shawl's folds," where a parallel poetic structure invokes 'Ram Das' and 'Fateh Muhammad' in the same breath, as two sides of a single 'ancient quarrel.' It also challenges hegemonic narratives of Pakistani nationalism, that invoke Islam as the panacea for the country's ills, and Allah (Rahim, the Merciful) as its protector against the 'enemy,' defined from the outset as 'Hindu India.'

Thus, Daman's poem unsettles Pakistan's construction of a dominant identity as tied to Islam. Taken together, many of his poems, including "My Heart Yearns to Speak," and "My Country has Two Gods," address the complicated history of Islam's entwinement with national identity in post-colonial Pakistan. Contrary to the dominant notion that Pakistan came into being as an 'Islamic state' or a 'Muslim Zion,'(Devji 2013) the contingencies of geo-political alignments and the imperative to repress left-wing and progressive voices were far more significant. Saadia Toor has highlighted how

> The tendency of the Pakistani establishment to turn to Islam… in order to undermine progressive politics was evident from the very beginning and created the conditions for the increasing power of the religious Right within Pakistani society and politics. (2011, 2-3)

Between the formation of Pakistan in 1947 and his death in 1984, Daman witnessed how Islamic discourse and religious organisations were weaponised by the military-political complex with each successive regime.

From the modernist Islam of General Ayub Khan's 'Decade of Development' in the 1960s, to Bhutto's empty promises of 'Islamic Socialism,' culminating in the 'Nizaam-e-Mustafa' (Law of Muhammad) of General Zia-ul-Haq – Islam was consistently deployed to buttress statist authoritarianism and defang what the establishment saw as the "viruses of secularism and socialism" (Ibid, 6). The extensive involvement of the United States in the country's domestic and foreign affairs, much like its interventions in newly liberated former colonies elsewhere, also helped institutionalise a Cold War discourse that "Islam would be an effective bulwark against communism," a "Third Way," that could serve as a "potential middle road between capitalism and communism" (Ibid, 85; 86). As Butt and Kalra highlight in their analysis of the 'Islamisation' of the Zia years,

> The multiple twists and turns that the Zia regime engaged in and the contrary nature of the general's own policy statements indicate(d) an obsession with power and its maintenance, rather than the implementation of a coherent [Islamic] philosophy. (Butt and Kalra 2019, 7)

Nevertheless, the Zia years managed to transform culture and politics significantly. Yet, despite this apparent hegemonic victory, neither the state nor the Islamists' were able to monopolise discourse around religion completely. As Toor points out "Islam is [still] far from being a monolith" and remains "a deeply contested ideological field" (2011, 4).

Daman's protest poetry critiqued dominant religion from a position of deep relationality with this ideological field. His anticolonial secular humanist outlook was rooted in a regional genealogy of resistance, connecting with

the dissident potentiality and popular spirituality surrounding Bulleh Shah's kafi. This vernacular literary mode does not operate within a secular/ religious binary. It plays with religious tropes to centre a critique of dominant religion, through a structure of affect that draws on the intimate and the everyday. In particular, Daman's poems such as "Meinu Das Oay Rabba Mereya" (Oi, Tell Me, My God) and "Hun Rabba Kithe Jaawan Mein" (God, Where Should I Go Now?) demonstrate the same method we see in "My Heart Yearns to Speak," and also incorporate a direct conversation with the divine. Just as Bulleh Shah's love for Inayat transforms into a mode of transgressive affect that extends to encompass the poet's relationship to God, Daman takes a frank, playful tone of intimate address when addressing both God and the public alike. It is also worth attending to his use of 'Rabb' in these poems, as opposed to his invocation of 'La-Illah' in 'My Country Has Two Gods.' While Rabb is the term commonly used in colloquial Punjabi across all religions, 'La-Illah' is specifically Islamic. The austere-sounding, quasi-scriptural connotation of the Arabic 'La-Illah,' when combined with the reference to General Zia, also hints at the regime's links with Saudi Arabia, and the consequent Sunni-fication/ Wahabi-fication of Pakistani culture forced through by Saudi aid. This tension between "La-Illah" and "Rabb" maps onto the tussle between dominant religion on the one hand, and the affective, intimate mode of interpreting the divine on the other.

Hence, Daman's poetry helps us identify an under-explored strand in anticolonial and progressive writing, a body of literature that otherwise tends to focus on the modernist and Socialist Realist influences on literary cultures in South Asia. For the most, progressive writing was dominated by a modernist secular aesthetic. In particular, its Communist-inspired founding manifesto sought a literary form that broke meaningfully with

tradition, liberating the masses from what was deemed the drudgery of ritual and superstition. However, it must be clarified that while this literary form dominated the agenda of the Progressive Writers Association especially during the colonial struggle, it never exercised a totalising influence on its legacies in the sub-continent. For example, Faiz Ahmed Faiz's celebrated poem, "Hum Dekhen Ge" (We Shall See) remains a popular anthem of resistance on both sides of the border and draws powerful on Islamic imagery and Quranic references. However, there is an important difference between Daman's poetics and Faiz's reworking of religious tropes in this poem. "Hum Dekhen Ge" roots itself in a specifically Islamic cosmology, its final stanza powerfully reworking Prophet Muhammad's overthrowing of the pagan clan, the Quraysh, who controlled Mecca. Written in 1979, two years after General Zia ul Haq's coup against Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's elected government, Faiz powerfully disrupts the state's monopoly over Islam, penning a counter-hegemonic appropriation of religious imagery. However, in Daman's "My Heart Yearns To Speak" we see a parallel and distinct poetic mode of drawing on the tropes of religion, rooted in a regional imaginary that deliberately conflates Hindu, Muslim and Sikh symbolism in its challenge to dominant religion. The dominant Islam of the Pakistani state is critiqued by conjuring a cultural-religious imaginary that was pronounced dead in 1947, invoking a dissident, regional past to expose the power-hungry machinations of the state in a so-called Muslim homeland.

In fact, this poetic genealogy is also reflected in Faiz's only Punjabi poem, "Rabba Sacheya, Tu Te Aakheya Si" (O True God, You Had Said), which he wrote towards the end of his life. In this poem, Faiz uses the informal form of address in Punjabi for conversing with God, and uses the word 'Rabb' (rather than Allah as in "Hum Dekhen Ge"). He ends the poem

saying: “If my wish does not reach you/ Then let me go look for another God,” a tongue-in-cheek retort that is also a challenge, and enacts the frank intimacy we see in Daman’s “Oi, Tell Me, My God,” and in Bulleh Shah’s final stanza in “The Spring Of Love Is Fresh And New.” Thus, comparing Faiz’s two poems, and putting them in conversation with Daman’s method helps us sketch in the specific forms of Urdu and Punjabi literary radicalism, and appreciate the multiple strands of anticolonial, anti-authoritarian poetics in South Asia. As Aijaz Ahmad points out,

> A great many constitutive texts in our literary traditions consist of centuries of sedimentation, in all aspects of their composition, from the linguistic to the ideological, *with the ideological frequently embedded in the linguistic itself*. (1992, 252) (My emphasis)

Thus, the change in poetic register as we move from Faiz’s Urdu to his Punjabi demonstrates Daman’s influence on Urdu progressive writing in his milieu, and also highlights the structural importance of the Bulleh Shahi kafi on regional poetics, as entrenched in the language and its usage itself.

This also urges us to consider the longue duree development of 20th century progressive writing, connecting its themes and forms to a vernacular poetics of dissent that has circulated since the pre-colonial period. These connections become all the more difficult to see in the aftermath of Partition, when the PWA and Communist Party itself is divided along the lines of the newly carved communal border. Muslim members and associated writers migrated to Pakistan, and Hindu and Sikh progressives made their journey to territories now declared independent India. Daman and Faiz, along with Saadat Hasan Manto, would become among the last of the pre-Partition generation of intellectuals, as the subcontinental,

anticolonial vision of progressive writing would increasingly find itself pressured to adjust to the ideological demands of a self-proclaimed post-colonial Muslim/ Hindu nation. In that context, Daman's "My heart yearns to speak" also constitutes a subversive border crossing, as the conditions of people on both sides of the communalised, militarised Indo-Pak border are revealed to be the same, a result of the betrayal by the leaders who "spin illusions" and have only continued the "long history" of colonial extraction and loot. This interpretation is further pushed through Daman's evocation of a historical geography through the image of the Ganga, and is captured poignantly in Daman's "Wahga and Attari" (The Division Of This Country):

Attari and Wahga have no dispute,
Neither do the Gita and Quran,
This is no fight between infidels and Islam,
It is all just about profit and costs. (Daman, n.d.)

Thus, while his verses spoke to the immediate political context of Pakistan, they routed a critique of the post-colonial state through a structure of feeling rooted in the kafis of Bulleh Shah. Across the border, in 1980s Punjab, a Naxalite revolutionary would echo the same method, deploying a hard-hitting, direct, informal form of address in his protest poetry, to reinterpret vernacular religion against its dominant, statist counterpart. In the next section of the chapter, we examine the poetry of Sant Ram Udasi, the Dalit Naxalite bard whose anti-caste poetry reproduces the transgressive mode of affect that ties Bullah with Inayat by re-interpreting Guru Nanak, the first Guru of Sikhism.

Sant Ram Udasi was born in Raisar village, in what later became Indian or East Punjab, in 1939. Udasi was a young man when the armed peasant insurrection led by the Communist Party of India- Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML) spread from the Bengali village of Naxalbari across the whole country in 1967. The Naxalite movement found eager recruits among the Punjabi left, large sections of which retained the memory of the militant anticolonialism of the Ghadar Party, and the agrarian communism of the Kirti Kissan Party from the pre-1947 era. As discussed in Chapter Two, these legacies embodied a Communist practice that centred the landless peasant as its subject, and was rooted in universalist principles of liberation inflected in culturally specific terms.

Born into an impoverished Mazhbi Sikh[59] family, caste became the primary prism for Udasi's analysis of exploitation and resistance. The Naxalbari uprising compelled sub-continental Marxism to address the countryside alongside the factory, demanding that its urban, often middle-class intellectuals turn to the revolutionary peasantry for envisioning emancipation in the postcolony. With this re-orientation, an analysis of caste became imperative, as caste relations formatively structured rural political economy, social relations and culture. However, aside from a handful of Dalit intellectuals like Udasi and Lal Singh Dil, most Punjabi Marxists failed to overcome the crude class reductionism that has historically plagued the primarily upper-caste leadership of Communist

[59] The Mazhbi Sikh community refers to marginal caste Sikhs. Some Mazhbi Sikhs trace their origins to a group of Dalit individuals who recovered Guru Tegh Bahadur's (the ninth Sikh guru, executed by Mughal emperor Aurungzaib) body and returned it to his son, Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru. In gratitude, he dubbed them 'mazhabi' which means faithful. The Persian word 'mazhab' denotes religion, or faith. Mazhbi Sikhs often face casteist discrimination from upper-caste Sikhs. Their position vis a vis dominant Sikhism is similar to that of the mussali community, which refers to marginal caste Muslims.

parties in South Asia. These ideological blinkers also limit Marxist playwrights Gursharan Singh and Najm Hosain Syed, whose plays were discussed in Chapter Two. Contemporaries of Udasi, they similarly drew intellectual inspiration from the renewal of peasant insurrection in India and Pakistan. Their plays present a critical interpretation of the var genre, exposing the contradictions of the hero figure via marginal characters in an internal critique of the power relations that structure the rural world of the var. Despite a deep understanding of the ruptures caused by post-colonial developmentalism in the Punjabi countryside, their exploration of the caste-class nexus remains peripheral at best. Singh's focus remains trained on the hero, Dulla Bhatti, and while Mirasi and Nooramdi offer crucial critiques of Dulla Bhatti, he maintains his position as protagonist through the focus on his honourable, heroic death in the final scene. Similarly, although the case of *The Throne of Lahore* is more complex as Dulla Bhatti is displaced altogether in the cast of characters, Syed's alternative protagonist, Ramja, flags, but does not adequately explore, the specificity of a Dalit political subjectivity.

Thus, while the Green Revolutions of the 1960s compelled Gursharan Singh and Najm Hosain Syed to turn to *Dulla Bhatti Di Var* as a poetic resource for critiquing post-colonial authoritarianism, with Udasi, the question of caste became much more central to articulating the subject of this new wave of political resistance. Udasi's almost singular contribution as a Naxalite poet in Punjab lay in his powerful sketches of quotidian life at the margins of caste and class in the Punjabi village. The Green Revolution consolidated the hold of the invariably Jat, middle farmer figure, earlier consecrated by the colonial regime as 'agricultural castes,'[60] deemed

[60] See for instance, Ibbetson, Denzil. *Panjabi Castes*. Books for All, 2008, as an example of a colonial anthropological survey of caste in Panjab.

rightful land owners and cultivators under the Land Alienation Act 1900. This act, which had followed the brutal 'reclamation' of land carried out by canal colonisation in the 1880s, disrupted the pastoral rhythms of the regional ecology,[61] dispossessing other castes and tribes, some of whom were declared 'criminal' by law. Following the transfer of populations along communal lines in 1947, the departure of mostly Syed, upper-caste Muslim landowners to West Punjab led to the emergence of Sikh Jats as the dominant agrarian class/ caste in East Punjab, a class that increasingly defined itself through the adoption of Brahminical social and cultural practices.[62]

"The Kammi's Yard": On Udasi's Mode of Caste Critique

Udasi's poetry expertly conjures this world. He presents vivid portraits of Dalit oppression as linked inextricably to peasant expropriation, marking these experiences as key to a Punjabi Naxalism that can comprehensively dismantle the casteist and classist structure of the authoritarian post-colonial Indian state. His iconic "Toon Maghda Rahi Ve Surja Kammian De Verhay" (Shine On, O Sun, in the Kammi's Yard), cycles from one poignant stanza to the other, furnishing moving depictions of the daily grind of hunger, shame, and violence in a day in the life of a village "kammi." The word 'kammi' derives from 'kam,' which is 'work' or 'labour,' but in the rural context the word connotes much more than just the literal 'worker.' 'Kammi' is laden with associations, it signifies both low class and low caste status, and is often deployed as a demeaning term describing the economic and social dependency of the rural working class on their

[61] Bhattacharya, Neeladri. *The Great Agrarian Conquest.* State University of New York, 2020.

[62] See, for instance, Ram, Ronki. 2007. "Social Exclusion, Resistance, and Deras: Exploring the Myth of Casteless Sikh Society in Punjab" *Economic and Political Weekly* 42 (40). pp. 4066-4074. doi: 10.2307/40276650.

landowning upper-caste patrons. Further, the word “kam” has the same root as the word “karma,” which refers to a person’s actions in the current or a previous life and determines their rebirth, a Brahminical concept intimately tied to the maintenance of caste hegemony.

Thus, Sant Ram Udasi’s choice of the word ‘kammi’ embodies the co-constitutive relationship between caste oppression and labour exploitation. At the same time, it is a word plucked from colloquial, rural Punjabi, conjuring the quotidian everyday as lived and seen through the eyes of a rural Dalit denizen like Udasi himself. The intervening refrain, “Keep shining, o sun, in the kammi’s yard,” imparts a dignity and compassion to the rendering, infusing the scene with a small, but certain, ray of hope. The active form of address in the refrain also prevents the poem’s Dalit subjects from being presented as hapless victims. This presents a marked departure from the voyeuristic pathos that is apparent even in progressive writing by upper-caste intellectuals. For instance, Akshaya Kumar has pointed out how progressive literary giant Munshi Premchand’s short stories present Dalit characters who appear “devoid of any agency and volition to participate” (2018, 310).

Udasi’s powerful, yet unsentimental tone resonates with the colloquial, direct form of address we see in the Bulleh Shahi kafi. Sant Ram Udasi’s method, like Ustad Daman’s, was deeply rooted in oral Punjabi genres, especially the kafi. He recited all his poetry in song, and deployed folk folks, everyday imagery, and rural idiom. His form had an intimate relationship to regional traditions of social critique, for instance, poems such as “Bajre Da Sitta,” (A Grain of Millet) and “Amrree Nu Tarla” (Pleading With Mother) draw on narrative moulds from Punjabi literary convention to depict Dalit landlessness. For instance, in “Pleading With Mother,” Udasi deploys the mother-daughter dialogue framework common

to Punjabi folk songs to indict the landowning upper-castes, imploring, “Do not give birth to me in a village, o mother, where the heart’s desires are chained.” The figure of the mother steps in for the voice of convention in the kafi genre, often instructing the daughter in matters of domestic duty. (Syed 1968) However, as can often be seen in Bulleh Shah’s kafis, and in songs and genres that draw on the character of Hir, the same familial frame can also serve as the perfect site for enacting rebellion against society, as was also discussed in Chapter One. For instance, in Bulleh Shah’s “The Women Came To Reason with Bullah,” which I analysed earlier, the figure of the mother is generalised into ‘the women of the family,’ who enjoin Bullah to forsake his low-caste mentor and preserve the family honour. The construction reveals the central role the family plays in maintaining caste hegemony, and sharpens the thrust of Bulleh Shah’s rebellion, dramatising the full extent of his rejection of caste and class norms as he breaks the most hallowed bonds of kinship to proclaim his love for Inayat. Similarly, Udasi is not merely creating pathos by addressing the poem to a mother. He invokes this poetic convention to signal his critical deployment of the familial, intimate conversational form in the Punjabi literary tradition.

Further, Udasi’s method also resonates with Bulleh Shah and Ustad Daman in its use of irony as a tool of social and political critique. The demand placed on the mother, to not give birth to a child that has already been brought into the world, is also absurd, and frankly, impossible. This bizarre remonstration, which is repeated after each stanza, also encapsulates the inescapable stigma of caste - the only way out seems to be through death, by being un-born. The refrain carries this crushing burden in a colloquial tone that addresses the mother with an affectionate diminutive (“Amree” instead of “Ma” or “Amma”), transforming the poem into the dark inverse of a traditional lullaby that usually voices a mother’s loving protection.

However, this connection in method between Udasi, Daman, and Bulleh Shah is impossible to make within the bordering confines of academic analysis. In the little writing on Udasi that does exist, debate rages on whether he was a Dalit poet, or a Marxist one. For some, his Naxalite politics automatically disqualifies him as a Dalit poet, and it is claimed that the development of a Dalit consciousness in his corpus remained overshadowed by his focus on economic exploitation and class conflict. (Kumar 2018, Singh 1985) On the other hand, those willing to claim him as a Dalit poet, struggle to reconcile his critique of caste with his commitment to a Marxist-Leninist-inspired project of political transformation. Both fail to appreciate Udasi's remarkable insight into the co-constitutive character of caste stigma and class society, neither of which can be analysed as separate concerns in his repertoire. The apparent tension between his Dalit perspective and Maoist ideology has more to do with the limitations imposed by the narrow manner in which the categories of 'Dalit literature,' 'Progressive writing' and 'protest poetry' are deployed in academic analyses. While Marxist or 'political poetry' is read almost entirely through the lens of the broader formation of sub-continental progressive writing, which privileges modernist, Social Realist prose forms, the more recent consolidation of Dalit literature as a genre telescopes a particular stream within Dalit writing that emphasises themes of Ambedkarism and Buddhism.[63]

Sant Ram Udasi's method grates against the established definitions of both progressive writing and Dalit poetics, yet his corpus lays claim and engages

[63] For more on the development and consolidation of Dalit writing as a genre in India, see Gajarawala, Toral Jatin. 2013. *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*. New York: Fordham University Press; Kumar, Akshaya. 2009. "From Confusion to Consolidation: Politics of Counter-aesthetics in Dalit Poetry," in ed. A. Kumar. *Poetry, Politics, and Culture: Essays on Indian Texts and Contexts.* Routledge, and Zelliot, Eleanor. 2008. "Dalit Literature, Language, and Identity," in eds. B. Kachru, Y. Kachru, and Sridhar, S.N. *Language in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press.

with both. To appreciate the rich dialogue between Marxist struggle, Dalit identity, and peasant rebellion in Udasi's work, one must attend to its intimate relationship with regional vocabularies of caste critique, and interpret his method through dissident genealogies within the Punjabi literary tradition. For this, we turn to a detailed analysis of his poem, "Aj" (Today).

Centring the Margins: Udasi's Dialogue With the Divine in "Aj"

"Today" is addressed to Guru Nanak Dev, the founding figure of Sikhism, and references hagiographical figures from the margins to critique the nexus between post-colonial authoritarianism, peasant expropriation, and dominant religion in 1970s India. Udasi's own dialogue with Guru Nanak in "Today," and his centring of the bond between Nanak and Bhai Lalo in his vision of 'true dharma' evokes the transgressive structure of affect between Bullah and Inayat, drawing on the kafi's method to root Naxalbari in the long history of popular resistance in Punjab. The poem deploys the hymn genre, in combination with its more critical variations such as the 'shikwa' (protestation/ complaint). The shikwa takes the form of a direct conversation with God in which the Divine is addressed, even indicted, for the suffering in this world. However, unlike the ceremonial form the genre takes in other interpretations, such as Muhammad Iqbal's "Lenin Khuda Ke Huzoor Mein" (Lenin In The Court of God), Udasi's tone chimes with that of Faiz in his "O Truthful God, You Had Promised" and Daman in "Oi, Tell Me, My God", by establishing a frank directness that takes the shape of a conversation within the frame of an intimate relationship.

The colloquialisation of Guru Nanak's holy figure is a crucial feature of Udasi's critique of dominant religion in "Today." The poem begins with

locating the roots of dominant religion as a political force in the history of imperialism:

This wave of religion has come crashing like a flood,
And swept away the true path.
The loving embrace between Muslim and Hindu,
Has been ripped asunder by imperial power. (Udasi, n.d.)

It is important to note that in the original Punjabi, the third line does not use any equivalent of the conjunction ‘and’, for which the Punjabi would be ‘te,’ or ‘aur’, between Hindu and Muslim. While this grammatical structure is common in Punjabi, especially in spoken, informal usage, the elision produced by the lack of a conjunction also indicates sameness, a lack of separation. This deliberate conflation of dominant religious categories connects Udasi with Bulleh Shah (Kalra and Purewal 2019), resonating with his parallel invocation of Hindu (“Ram Das”) and Muslim (“Fateh Muhammad”) names in the kafi “The Thief In My Shawl’s Folds”. It also resonates with Ustad Daman’s wry observation on how material wealth has attained the status of “Ram Rahim” in “My Heart Yearns To Speak”. Udasi builds on this subversive elision of the markers of dominant religion identity in stanzas that follow:

Qazis, padres, bhikshus, bhais, all
Are a fatal blow to the dharma,
Look! How many crowds of layabouts
Have devoured the bread of your Lalo.

The listing in the first line collapses four different figures of religious authority into one, critiquing dominant religion by distilling its pretensions

to difference and exclusivity into the single, exploitative drive for greed. By equating the destructive hypocrisy of the Qazi (Muslim scholar), the Christian priest (Padri), Jain monk (Bhikshu), and the Sikh saints (Bhai), Udasi depicts them as a single 'crowd' that has converged to exploit the hagiographical figure of Bhai Lalo.

In "Today", Udasi invokes Bhai Lalo to connect the Naxalbari movement with popular historiographies of resistance that centre subjects at the margins of caste and class. In the hagiography, Bhai Lalo, a carpenter by caste, had accompanied Guru Nanak to a lavish feast hosted by Malik Bhago, a powerful Mughal official. At the gathering, Nanak held out the bread served by Malik Bhago in his left hand, and the dry morsel cooked at Bhai Lalo's hearth in the other. Before the eyes of all present, he squeezed both his hands, and milk trickled from his right hand, while blood oozed from Malik Bhago's bread. In his poem, Udasi appropriates the character of Bhai Lalo into the revolutionary subject of the Naxalbari movement. The poem moves between references to Lalo and Naxal rebels, eventually collapsing the two:

If you sound the clarion call of truth,
The police will murder you, labelling you a 'Naxal'
and
Like you [Nanak], if someone utters the truth,
They are thrashed and ridiculed as 'atheists'…
The Lalos who fight for the truth, baba,
will carry you loyally on their shoulders. (Udasi, n.d.)

In the very last stanza, the "workers" who are "sick of the big thieves" become one with the "brothers of Lalo", both of whom "await" Guru Nanak, to come "this time with a sword" in his hand. The word "udeek"

(await) appears twice, reinforcing the rhyme and making explicit the connection between past and present, between popular tradition and contemporary resistance. This is further cemented by the dialogic and theatrical form of Udasi's poem, which ventriloquises Bhai Lalo and Guru Nanak in juxtaposition with the Naxalite revolutionaries in contemporary India. The form of "Aj" takes its cue from Bulleh Shah's dialogues with Inayat and with God. As mentioned before, the structure of transgressive affect that unlocks the kafi's social critique is generalised to figures as diverse as Hir and Ranjha, and Krishna and Muhammad. Udasi's conversation with Guru Nanak in "Aj" draws on this mode, in both his own dialogue with Nanak, as well as his referencing of Bhai Lalo. His mediations with Nanak chime with while also departing from traditions of engaging religion in both progressive writing and devotional poetry. He constantly refers to Guru Nanak as "baba," a term of respect and endearment commonly deployed in colloquial Punjabi for a male elder. "Baba" is far more informal and intimate than "Guru", the appropriate form of address for Nanak mandated by religious convention. At the same time, Udasi inform his 'baba' that he will "rebel against his divinity" if "cruelties continue in [his] name". He further declares that he will hold Guru Nanak accountable "in the open, to beating drums", reminding one of Bulleh Shah's indignant retort to God in "Love's New Spring," "Love made me forget prostrations to you,/ So why now do you complain and argue?" (Shah 2012, 46)

Further, through the focus on Bhai Lalo, Udasi's "Today" stages Guru Nanak's life through the prism of Dalit perspectives. This is a consistent theme in Udasi's ouevre, as evinced by multiple poems featuring other Dalit and lower caste hagiographical characters, such as Bhai Mardana. Bhai Mardana (1459-1534) was Guru Nanak's closest companion, and

accompanied him on all his travels. Mardana was a Muslim musician of the mirasi caste, a background that stands in stark opposition to dominant constructions of upper-caste Sikh identity. For instance, in his poem, “Mardanay Nu Mardanan Da Khat” (Mardanan’s Letter to Mardana), Udasi centres a Sikhism of the margins by structuring the poem as a letter to Bhai Mardana from his wife. Penned in the wife’s voice, the poem spotlights Mardana’s marginal caste and class status, clearly identifying him as “[her] dum”(a mirasi sub-caste) in its second stanza, while detailing the hunger and deprivation that prevailed in his household. Further, not only does the poem de-centre the figure of Guru Nanak, it also privileges the perspective of Mardanan over Bhai Mardana’s, boldly declaring her sacrifice to be the greatest of all. Focalising the figure of a marginal caste, working class, Muslim woman allows Udasi to contest the narrowing articulations of post-colonial Sikh identity. This is further emphasised in the refrain’s emphasis on Mardana’s Muslim faith: “aseen masaan hai langhaya chann eid da” (We have barely survived this Eid’s moon).

Situating Udasi: Marxist Critiques of Dominant Religion in South Asia

The period during which Udasi began writing and the Naxalbari movement took hold in Punjab also saw the rise of Right-wing assertions of Sikh identity that culminated in the Khalistani insurgency. In this context of the sharpening borders around Sikh identity, Sant Ram Udasi’s association with the so-called atheistic traditions of Marxism, alongside his public identification as an ‘Udasi’, a member of a popular sect within Sikhism, challenged dominant religion as shaped by upper-caste Jat elites. The movement for Khalistan, a separatist state for Sikhs in Indian Punjab, emerged during the 1970s and rapidly gained influence despite severe

repression under the Indira Gandhi regime.[64] The Khalistani demand stemmed from a sense of marginalisation within the federation, responding to Sikh minoritisation within India through an assertion of dominant religious identity. Within Punjab, the Khalistanis targeted any individual or group associated with the central government, as well as workers of the left. Udasi's fellow Naxalite poet, Avtar Singh Paash, was among the countless leftists murdered by Khalistani insurgents. Thus, emphasising his affective relationship with Bhai Mardana and Bhai Lalo, hagiographical figures increasingly marginalised within sanitised post-colonial articulations of Sikh identity[65] allowed Udasi to simultaneously critique dominant religion, regional elites and statist authoritarianism.

Same as Daman vis a vis Faiz, Udasi's poetry has not received the same degree of critical attention, or literary recognition. While Paash's "Sab Tohn Khatarnaak" (The Most Dangerous, in Hindi, "Sab Se Khatarnaak") much like Faiz's "We Shall See," has found its place in left-wing and progressive protest cultures in spaces like the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, Sant Ram Udasi is read and revered mostly in smaller literary circles of the Punjabi and Dalit left. As I discussed earlier with regard to Daman and Faiz, the latter's choice to write in literary Urdu, along with his class position, gave him an access and acceptability among mainstream literary elites that was denied to Daman's Punjabi verse by the structural privilege

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[64] The battle between Khalistanis and the Indian state found its horrific culmination in Operation Blue Star, a military operation ordered by Indira Gandhi in 1984 to remove Khalistani leader Jarnail Singh Bhindrawala and others from the Golden Temple. The brutal operation resulted in hundreds of casualties, including both militants and pilgrims. The targeting of a Sikh holy site shocked Sikh communities in India and abroad. Indira Gandhi was assassinated four months later by her Sikh bodyguards in the aftermath, which led to further communal violence with Hindu-Sikh riots in Delhi and other areas. Gurvinder Singh's 2015 film, *Chauthi Koot* (The Fourth Direction) grimly captures the fear and paranoia of the times.

[65] For more on colonial transformations in Sikh identity see, Mandair, Arvind-Pal. *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation.* Columbia University Press, 2016.

of certain languages over others. In the case of Paash and Udasi, although both of them wrote in Punjabi, a marked difference in register and tone sets their poetry apart, making Paash more palatable to mainstream, liberal cultures of literary consumption.

In comparison to his contemporaries like Avtar Singh Paash and Lal Singh Dil, Udasi's poetry embodies a significantly different relationship to religion and devotional practice. As comrades and peers, their poetry was formatively grounded in a Marxist analysis of class society and the comprador post-colonial state. Yet there is a discernible difference in their form and methodology. While Paash and Dil tended towards the modernist, free verse form, Udasi, as mentioned before, worked with the rhythms and genres of the Punjabi oral tradition. Further, Udasi's oeuvre stands out for its overwhelming focus on re-claiming devotional and religious practice for forging new cultures of resistance. That being said, it is important to note that Paash does write a couple of poems that invoke Guru Gobind Singh, yet these are hardly definitive to his corpus. Similarly, this distinction is not being drawn to suggest that the Dalit bard Lal Singh Dil did not address the question of religion in his poetry. In fact, for Dil, the nexus between religion, caste, and labour exploitation also held a deeply personal resonance. He eventually converted to Islam, decried his Marxist beliefs of yore, and wrote in his memoirs how, "the leather workers wash their face with water from the same lota used by those who write the Quran and those who spread the religious word' (Dutt 2012). As Nirupama Dutt explains, "he was trying to say that the Brahmin and the Chamar [a Dalit sub-caste] were using water from the same utensil" (Ibid), a reference to his deliverance, at last, from the stigma of caste. What is significant is the difference wherein each poet chooses to locate his critique of dominant religion. While Paash and the early Dil very much see it as the opium of the

people that must be wrenched away to liberate their consciousness, Udasi roots his dissent in the regional idioms of popular spirituality, attending more closely to the potentially subversive spaces in religion that make it at "one and the same time, the expression of real suffering, and *a protest against real suffering*." (Marx, 1970) (my emphasis)

Moreover, suggesting a literary confluence between Sant Ram Udasi and Bulleh Shah would pose a far greater problem to those who see the Sikh-Muslim divide as structuring a fundamental literary and cultural difference between the two communities. On the other hand, while Ustad Daman and Bulleh Shah have rarely been put into conversation, with the former being seen as a 'political poet' and the latter as a 'Sufi saint,' the connection is still far more palatable on account of their shared (ascribed) religious identity. However, once read through the prism of the Bulleh Shahi kafi, the separation between the religio-cultural worlds that Udasi and Bulleh Shah, or Daman, inhabit becomes untenable. This is despite the fact that Udasi's poems draw heavily on Sikh history and hagiography. At its core, it is not Islam, Hinduism, or Sikhism as theological entities that are subjected to critique in the verses of these poets. Rather, they expose and challenge the uniform structure of dominant religion in Punjabi society, with its roots in class and caste power.

Conclusion

To recap, this chapter traces critiques of dominant religion in the Punjabi literary tradition by reading the kafis of Bulleh Shah as a template that is re-deployed by post-colonial dissidents like Ustad Daman and Sant Ram Udasi. This poetic template works by subverting the concepts and practices of dominant religion, centring popular devotion from the margins of caste

and class through peripheral hagiographical figures, and the deliberate conflation of religious difference. This critique is often routed through an intimate, everyday structure of affect to challenge the hierarchy that governs relationships with the divine. Most importantly, as close readings of Daman and Udasi show, this mode of critique was a crucial part of their resistance against imperialism, post-colonial authoritarianism, and elite hegemony.

This genealogical link between Bulleh Shah, Daman, and Udasi also counters bordered understandings of religion in North India by pushing the analytical divide between Bhakti and Sufism. Dominant understandings of Bhakti, despite identifying it as a "creative language of dissent" (Ramanujan 1989, 208), nevertheless locate it squarely within a Hindu framework, a vernacular critique defined by its response to Brahmanical Sanskritic traditions. This understanding excludes dissident Sufi Muslim histories in the subcontinent, and upholds dominant categories of religion. It follows that 'Bhakti' is to Hinduism what 'Sufism' is to Islam, i.e. its popular, more egalitarian form, with each being easily appropriated into the more 'liberal' variants of Pakistani and Indian nationalisms. However, as Aditya Behl has argued, "the formulation of new religiosities in the new regional languages of the subcontinent… was an intensely interactive and plural affair, with genealogies that have to include Islam in a historically complex way." (2007, 322)

One way out of this reductive logic is to re-orient away from national geographies, and centre the regional literary formation. As Anne Murphy has argued,

> “Punjabi literary production provides an appropriate location for the examination of the conversations possible at the periphery, given that Punjabi was not adopted by any religious tradition as a primary and elite language of literary production” (2018, 245)

For example, ‘Bhakti’ influences have been identified in academic analyses of Udasi’s poetry, highlighting his routing of caste critique through the themes of counter-institutional, popular modes of devotion and religious practice (Kumar 2018). However, when read through the regional literary tradition, apparent issues around categorising Udasi as a Dalit, Marxist, Sikh or Bhakti poet recede into the background. Similarly, the distinction drawn in Daman’s posthumously published anthology between ‘Sufi Daman’ and ‘Syaasi Daman’ (Political Daman) also becomes untenable. The binary between secular and religious writing becomes irrelevant, and what comes to the fore is the poet’s critique of dominant religion, especially in its entwinement with elite hegemony. This critique is fleshed out with the help of folk forms and everyday language, and the appropriation of religious tropes, for example, by re-imagining revered spiritual figures ranging from Guru Nanak to more peripheral characters like Bhai Lalo.

Moreover, reading the protest poetry of Daman and Udasi through the Bulleh Shah kafi also enables a theoretical exploration of the place of popular religion in Marxist critique in South Asia. Prevalent analyses in post-colonial theory focalise the domain of the ‘secular’ as the necessary counter to the ‘religious’, a binary that maps onto a lineal distinction between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, where the latter necessarily opposes and eventually overpowers the former. Connections with the critique of dominant religion as embodied in pre-colonial vernacular traditions and popular religion are seldom drawn. Analyses of dominant religion and its

instrumentalisation by the authoritarian state and fascist groupings is reduced to the vacuous clash between ‘pro-West liberals’ and ‘traditional conservatives’. As a result, left-wing perspectives that link class critique with regional genealogies of dissent are collapsed into ‘secular’ voices, that are simplistically traced to Enlightenment ideas introduced through colonial modernity and contemporary Western imperialism. In a context where we see the simultaneous rise of global Islamophobia, Hindutva fascism in India and Right-wing Islamist groups in Pakistan, the mode of critique found in Bulleh Shah, Daman, and Udasi offers a way out of this reductive logic by centring devotional practices at the margins to indict the abuse of faith by the powerful.

5. Political Blackness and Anti-imperialist Internationalism in the Punjabi Writing of The Indian Workers' Association, Great Britain

> UDHAM SINGH (shouting): 'I do not care about sentence of death. It means nothing at all. I do not care about dying or anything. I do not worry about it at all. I am dying for a purpose.' Thumping the rail of the dock, he exclaimed, 'We are suffering from the British Empire.'…
>
> '…I have nothing against the English people at all. I have more English friends living in England than I have in India. I have great sympathy with the workers of England. I am against the Imperialist Government.'
>
> 'You people are suffering - workers. Everyone are suffering through these dirty dogs; these mad beasts. India is only slavery. Killing, mutilating and destroying - British Imperialism…' ("Udham Singh's Last Words" *Lalkaar* 1996)

In July 1940, Udham Singh awaited his execution in the Pentonville Prison in London. A few months earlier, he had shot and assassinated Michael O Dwyer, who had been serving as colonial governor of Punjab when the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre took place. O Dwyer died instantly, and Udham Singh surrendered himself to the police immediately. He was hanged shortly thereafter, joining the ranks of the shaheeds, the martyrs who had sacrificed their lives for national liberation. His speech, excerpts from which are quoted above, culminated in the reverberating cry of "Inquilaab Zindabad" (Long Live Revolution), followed by his last words before being sent to the gallows: "Down with British Imperialism! Down with British dirty dogs!" (Ibid)

The details regarding his trial, his last days in jail, and his utterances in court were seen as too incendiary by the British state to be made public. They were published finally in 1996, after a sustained campaign run by the Indian Workers' Association (IWA) of Great Britain. The IWA was founded in 1939 in Coventry, and eventually came to operate several branches across the country. Its ranks swelled considerably during the 1950s and '60s as Caribbean and Indian immigrants arrived in droves to re-construct a war-ravaged Britain. The organisation represented the interests of Indian factory workers whose access to white trade unions was barred. It also organised against racism in Britain and campaigned in support of anti-imperialist, Communist, and Black Power movements across the globe.

Udham Singh's figure held a special significance for the mass of predominantly rural Punjabi Sikh IWA members who landed on British shores in the first wave of post-war migrations from India. Singh was simultaneously itinerant revolutionary and immigrant worker - He was a card-carrying member of the militant anticolonial Hindustan Ghadar Party[66], and a factory worker in London. For Punjabi immigrants associated with the IWA who came to constitute a large chunk of Britain's post-war working class, Udham Singh encapsulated their subjectivity as both a migrant worker of colour, and an anti-imperialist activist whose politics and person connected anticolonial struggle in India with capitalist exploitation in the metropolitan centre.

Singh's speech and actions during his trial proceedings in London presented a template for an anti-imperialist, antiracist internationalism rooted in a migrant,

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[66] The Hindustan Ghadar Party was a militant anticolonial political party founded in 1913 in California, United States, primarily by Indian emigrant workers and exiles. For more, see Ramnath, Maia. *Haj to Utopia: How The Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism And Attempted To Overthrow The British Empire,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011; Raza, Ali. *Revolutionary Pasts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. and Puri, Harish. *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organization, and Strategy*. Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1983.

working class subjectivity. This template defined the IWA writing analysed in this chapter, which synthesised regional literary tradition, Indian anticolonialism, and British working class politics. As his trial commenced, Udham Singh requested to take oath on a copy of *Hir Waris Shah* rather than the Sikh holy scripture, and presented himself in court under the pseudonym, "Ram Muhammad Singh Azad". As Virinder Kalra points out,

> By insisting on his name change, and by asking for the book of Heer of Waris Shah, rather than a formal religious text from which to take his oath, Udham Singh's actions lay the basis for a revolutionary politic based in a sub-continental analysis of both secularism and anti-imperialist struggle (Kalra 2000, 93).

More specifically, these actions resonate with the spirit of resistance against dominant religion, authoritarian power, and colonialism seen in the poetry of Sant Ram Udasi, Ustad Daman, Amrita Pritam, and Nasreen Anjum Bhatti. The epithet 'Ram Muhammad Singh' brings to mind the deliberate conflation of dominant religious categories in the Bulleh Shah kafi discussed in Chapter Four. For Udham Singh, this cavalier collapsing of religious identities in his very name, his self-identification in a British courtroom in London, in a sense embodied the Fanonian "new man [sic]" who is birthed by national liberation, as suggested by the appendage of 'Azad', which means 'free' (Fanon 1961, 233). Thus, the construction 'Ram Muhammad Singh Azad' asserted the anticolonial unity of the people of the subcontinent and rejected religious difference as an essential marker of the Indian. Embodying this sub-continental expression of religious unity, Udham Singh addresses '*everyone* [who] is suffering under the British empire' as 'workers', making sure to include the 'workers of England', i.e. the white working class, as oppressed subjects of empire. In the context of the Punjabi diaspora in Britain, this linking of a particular, regional expression of anticolonial unity that

echoed the Punjabi literary tradition with a universalising call to all workers spoke to the solidarity between working class immigrants against imperialist capitalism, drawing attention to its exploitations both at home and abroad.

Moreover, Azad's displacement of a religious scripture with the Punjabi qissa of Hir Waris Shah indicates how the Punjabi literary tradition furnished the conceptual vocabulary for this workers' internationalism. As it was posthumously revealed, Azad spent his last days closely reading *Hir Waris Shah,* the Punjabi qissa analysed earlier in Chapter Two. Sources suggest that Azad was captivated in particular by the dialogue between Hir and the Qazi, the same passages that provided feminist poets Pritam and Bhatti with a template for critiquing the patriarchy of the post-colonial state via Hir's contestation of the Qazi's religio-moral and juridical authority. The parallels between Azad and Hir are obvious – both stood condemned before a judge whose sole purpose was to uphold the status quo, and both faced a certain sentence. One can even imagine the anticolonial revolutionary modelling his courtroom address on Hir's brazen expose of the Qazi's patriarchal abuse of the Quran and the Shariah, as he raged against the "so-called flag of democracy and Christianity"[67] that veiled colonial oppression and capitalist exploitation. Echoing this method, IWA poet Niranjan Singh Noor's balladic poem "Ho Chi Minh" invokes and re-interprets the qissa form of *Hir Waris Shah,* while also drawing on hagiographical figures from popular devotion in Punjab to connect the Vietnamese and Indian anticolonial struggles.

This chapter argues that anticolonial internationalism and immigrant worker politics came to mutually constitute each other in the works of IWA intellectuals including Niranjan Singh Noor, Ajmer Coventry, and Avtar Singh Sadiq. As my discussion of IWA writing will show, this body of work deployed tropes of

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[67] The full transcript of his statement can be found in the India Office Records housed at the British Library, London. For the full text, see: https://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv2n2/singh.htm#:~:text='%20Udham%20Singh%20continued%20more%20quietly,'

resistance from the Punjabi literary tradition to address questions of anti-imperialism, political blackness and working class trade unionism in Britain. I examine political blackness as a dominant theme within IWA writing to chart how immigrant Communists in Britain navigated the ideological tension between a racial/ immigrant identity and a Marxist-inspired proletarian consciousness. Re-working genres discussed in previous chapters, such as the Hir qissa, the historical var, and the Bulleh Shah kafi, British Punjabi poets negotiated a universalist black, working class consciousness through a a particularist regional identity. I contend that the widespread adoption of black identity by IWA poets, and their move to inscribe the trope of blackness into the idiom of the Punjabi literary tradition suggests that Black Power had a formative influence on IWA articulations of working class consciousness, as seen in Ajmer Coventry's poem "From A Black Emigrant Worker, To A White Worker". Moreover, I also discuss Avtar Singh Sadiq's short story, "In The Chimneys' Shade" to analyse how the IWA's antiracist organising compelled a critique of caste exclusions within the Punjabi diaspora and the IWA's own ranks. Thus, the IWA's brand of workers' internationalism provided an opening to interrogate inequalities within, grounding its antiracist, anti-imperialist politics in a Punjabi identity that emphasised the margins of caste and class.

In doing so, the chapter highlights the anti-imperialist resistance of South Asian diaspora populations located inside the bounds of the Global North. Immigrant voices are seldom included in studies of Afro-Asian solidarity and Third Worldism, which focus more closely on links between intellectuals and movements located in the post-colonial nation-states of the Global South. Although writing on the IWA and the Punjabi and South Asian diasporas in general tends to separate the politics of an earlier generation of Indian anticolonial exiles from the struggles of migrant workers who arrived in England after formal decolonisation in the sub-continent, I contend that IWA writing presented a terrain

where anticolonial internationalism, immigrant politics, and labour organising mutually constituted each other. Much like Udham Singh, and other anticolonial Indians in Britain in an earlier period, IWA workers and intellectuals served as a vital link between anticolonial resistance in the periphery and the emergence of such dissent in the metropole. (Gopal 2019, 27) As Priyamvada Gopal has argued, the presence of strong anticolonial black and Asian voices within the metropole who took on the function of interpreters between British dissent and anti-imperialist resistance in the colonies was crucial to shaping left-wing British politics (Ibid, 42). I contend that IWA writing continued this process of "reverse tutelage" initiated by anticolonial activists in the heart of empire, forging new connections between global anti-imperialism, Marxist politics, Indian anticolonialism, and black internationalism through the prism of their migrant, working class experiences in a racist post-war Britain (Ibid). Thus, by centring the voices of Asian factory workers and proletarian writers, this chapter also offers a corrective to their absence from discussions around global anticolonial thought, in which a certain class of transnationally mobile, 'cosmopolitan' intellectuals tend to be over-represented.

Focalising IWA's literary engagements with Black Power, Vietnam solidarity, and global Communism, I situate the particular, vernacular world of left-wing Punjabi writing within planetary debates around black internationalism and anti-imperialism in the 1960s and '70s. As a corpus produced in a marginalised South Asian language by writers who are not of African origin, IWA poetry remains illegible as 'black writing' where analyses are focused primarily on writing in English and the American context of Black Power mobilisations. Thus, this chapter is also an attempt to overcome this marginalisation by reading revolutionary British Punjabi writing "as a poetics of diaspora [that] can provide a point of entry to a critical understanding of globalisation", rather than a migrant nostalgia for the 'homeland' (Edwards 2007). Globalisation here refers to the

violent processes that accompany capitalist expansion, the displacement, dispossession, and exploitation of colonised populations across the globe, with what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called the "teleology of the market" as its master narrative (2004). IWA writing embodied this critical diasporic position, as a consciousness "inflected by its [historical] moment - above all in its complex negotiation with the discourse of international communism," while instancing "a yearning of the particular" through its deployment of "vernacular idiom" (Edwards 2007, 705; 703; 696).

In addition to engagements with Black Power and global Communism, the IWA's politics were also formatively shaped by the early twentieth century legacy of anticolonial internationalism embodied by the Hindustan Ghadar Party. The Ghadar Party was founded in 1913 in California, USA, by a group of Indian revolutionaries who had made their way to colonial destinations as far-ranging as Malaysia, Hong Kong, Fiji, and North America predominantly as indentured labour (Kamran 2013). Scholars have pinpointed the "interconnections and ideational continuities" between the Ghadar Party and the IWA, embodied, for example, in the person of Udham Singh himself, and often taking the form of direct familial links between Ghadarites and IWA activists (Kalra 2017, 203). As Maia Ramnath notes, Ghadar's distinct brand of anticolonial radicalism was rooted in

> The unique experience of its founding members, located as they were at a conjuncture of contexts enabling them powerfully to articulate American class and race relations to the economics and geopolitics of empire, by linking the grievances of discrimination against a low-wage immigrant labor force to the colonised status of their home country. (Ramnath 2011, 3)

This transnational, diasporic milieu was dominated by Sikhs from Punjab, and as Radha D'Souza has suggested, was also deeply informed by a regional historical consciousness that drew on Bhakti, Sufi, and Sikh formations in its articulation of dissent (2018). Thus, Ghadarite anticolonialism, proletarian internationalism, Black Power, and regional literary tradition came together in the IWA's working class critiques of racialised capitalism in post-war Britain.

The sheer volume of Punjabi writing produced by the IWA testifies to the vernacular as a place of "crucial ideological work" (Edwards 2007, 696) in articulating internationalisms from the margins, making the political point that "the common sense possessed by oppressed people gives them an appropriate experiential basis for understanding international politics." (Nelson 2003, 202) Moreover, by synthesising the idiom of political blackness with the forms of the Punjabi literary tradition, IWA intellectuals expanded the contours of left-wing Punjabi writing, and therefore, of revolutionary politics at home as well. The cross-border Punjabi literary public outlined in earlier chapters of the dissertation[68] also included intellectuals and progressive activists in the diaspora, whose writings were read in both Indian and Pakistani Punjab, as evidenced by locally printed editions of books by IWA poets Niranjan Singh Noor and Jagmohan Joshi, and other UK-based progressive Punjabi writers like Amarjit Chandan and Mazhar Tirmizi. While nation-centric categorisations of Punjabi writing into 'Indian' and 'Pakistani' literatures divide writing across the border, they exclude Punjabi literary production from the diaspora altogether. By analysing connections in both form and circulation between Punjabi writing in England and in Punjab, this chapter also attempts to overcome the double marginalisation wrought by an over-emphasis on the theoretical concerns of

[68] For example, Chapter Two shows how Gursharan Singh and Najm Hosain Syed conversed and collaborated through a dissident interpretation of sixteenth century rebel Dulla Bhatti, whose insurgency against the Mughal throne became a metaphor for contemporary peasant insurrection and cultural dissent, and a vehicle for the authors' critique of dominant nationalism and post-colonial authoritarianism.

‘Britishness’, hybridity, and post-colonial difference, choosing to instead situate the IWA’s Punjabi writing within its organising context in post-war Britain.

The Indian Workers Association in Post-war Britain: Poetics and Politics

The first Indian Workers’ Association was formed in Britain in 1938, in Coventry, to co-ordinate Indian efforts for the Independence movement (Gill 2013, 555). With the large influx of migrant labour from East Punjab in the 1950s and 1960s as part of Britain’s post-war reconstruction efforts, branches mushroomed in locations such as Southall, Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Huddersfield, and Leicester (Ibid). These local associations joined hands in 1958 to form a national body, the Indian Workers Association of Great Britain. Talvinder Gill describes the IWA’s membership as largely “Communist and Sikh,” (2013, 555) detailing their activities, which ranged from political agitation to serving as proxy trade unions for factory workers of colour who were not allowed into the white workers’ trade unions, as well as social and welfare activities within the immigrant community (Ibid). The IWA organised strikes and boycotts, forcing factories to overturn the colour bar, exposing the collusion of white workers and established trade unions. They co-ordinated their activities with similar organisations like the West Indian Standing Conference, the Pakistani Welfare Association, and the Black People’s Alliance. The IWA also played a crucial role in the protests against Harold Wilson’s Labour government’s draconian piece of immigration legislation, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968 that restricted the right to settle for Commonwealth citizens to those who had been born in the UK or had at least one British parent or grandparent.

Studies of the IWAs have tended to be driven by social policy and anthropology perspectives, a response, no doubt, to the ‘problem’ of their ‘assimilation’ that the British state perceived to be of paramount importance. Consequently, academic

analyses of the IWAs either over-emphasise the British context of white supremacy as the sole catalyst for the politicisation of Punjabi immigrants, or rely on frameworks that fetishise their ethnic particularity. For instance, Dewitt John's *Indian Workers' Associations in Britain* turns to kinship patterns in rural Punjab to explain the IWA's organising across the UK, with no regard to the explicitly articulated political ideas of anti-imperialism, Socialism, and Third Worldism that were foundational to the association. Similarly, while Gill does not fall into the trap of colonial "anthro-apologising", he nevertheless posits anticolonialism and anti-racism as separate "phases" in the IWA's political development, suggesting that the IWAs primarily attracted "political exiles" in their pre-1947 phase, a trend that gradually gave way to an increasing shift towards local issues of immigration laws, housing, racism, education, and policing (2013, 555).

However, as noted in the introduction, the IWA's antiracist immigrant politics must be contextualised within the legacy of Ghadarite anticolonialism, Indian Communism, and Black Power mobilisations during the 1960s and '70s. As noted briefly in the introduction, the IWA's genealogical links with the Ghadar movement took the shape of both family and community ties, as Ghadri networks abroad overlapped with those of economic migration. Further, Ghadar's ideology resonated with the material conditions that working-class Punjabi immigrants found themselves in. Ghadri anticolonial politics was crucially shaped by their experience of labour relations as refracted by race in North America, conditions that also defined working class immigrant life in post-war Britain, with discrimination in pay and work conditions in factories, and racist violence from far-Right groups (Ramnath 2011, 12).

The poetry of Ghadar, which left an indelible influence on progressive Punjabi writing in Punjab, and crucially shaped Punjabi immigrant assertion in Britain, similarly narrated the racialised experiences of Indian indentured workers or

‘coolies’ in a range of new contexts and labour relations, as plantation workers in Brazil or railway construction workers in Uganda. IWA poet Avtar Jandialvi’s poem “Farq” (Difference) references this genealogical connection with Ghadar, helping locate IWA’s struggles and literary output in a long history of Punjabi anticolonialism and internationalism. The poem sketches for us the sleepy, staid setting of a nondescript English town: some chicken simmering on the stove, the low buzz of the telly, and trips to the local market on weekends. Yet wedged right in the middle of this mundane scene, two clipped lines make a striking reference:

> Buried under the snow,
> The madness of the Ghadri elders (Chandan 1985, 68)

The poem’s almost monotonous listing of the routine trappings of a typical household in England grates against the ‘buried’ memory of resistance. The ‘madness”’of revolutionary predecessors contrasts against the sleepiness of snow that covers it, symbolising the anticolonial consciousness that continues to shape immigrant life in the UK.

Much as Ghadarite anticolonialism found affinity with American syndicalism in an earlier period, the IWA’s antiracist trade unionism in Britain developed organic links with the Black Power movement (Ramnath 2011). In post-war England, immigrant communities and antiracist organisations began to “strategically unite[d] under the collective political identity of ‘black’, despite differences across ethnicity, gender, and class, in order to navigate an increasingly exclusionary xenophobic climate” (Nasta and Stein 2020, 19). Deirdre Osborne notes how

> To counteract racism, and engender self-worth, resistance was mobilised under the ensign term ‘Black’ throughout the 1970s and 1980s, where it

> served as a unifying signifier for the multiple ethnicities racialised as 'coloured'. Collective identity politics enabled survival in a hostile surrounding society. (2016, 5-6)

The IWA became a leading voice in the Black Power movement in Britain, rallying under the banner of political blackness to unite African and Caribbean immigrants with South Asians to wage a united resistance (Samdani 2019). Both Stokely Carmichal and Malcolm X met with IWA leaders when they visited the UK during the 1960s. The IWA was also closely linked to the Black People's Alliance (BPA), particularly through the figure of IWA poet Jagmohan Joshi, who served as General Secretary of the IWA's Midland branch and was among the founders of the BPA. As subsequent sections in this chapter will show, political blackness came to represent much more than a 'strategic alliance' between people of colour in IWA writing, constituting a discursive site for internal debates around class identity, caste, and race within Punjabi literary circles in Britain and beyond.

Academic commentary on British Punjabi literature, in fact on most non-English poetry and fiction in the UK remains limited. With the exception of Joginder Shamsher's (1989) *The Overtime People*, which provides a detailed survey of the Punjabi poem, short story, novel, and folk song in the country, only a few short books and journal articles have attempted to discuss the literary output of the Punjabi diaspora (Chandan 1987, Gill 2013, Kalra 2017). Shamsher's singular study, published in English, but in India, indicates how British immigrant writing was connected to regional literary circles in the subcontinent. Yet, his decision to write in English also points to a readership closer to home, in Britain, and an imperative to situate British Punjabi writing within the literatures of Britain, especially immigrant writing. Published in 1989, Shamsher's *The Overtime People* joined titles like *A Reader's Guide to West Indian and Black British*

Literature (1987) by David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe, which represented early attempts to theorise the Black and Asian British writing coming out of the antiracist organising of the '60s and '70s.

A British Punjabi poet himself, Joginder Shamsher (1989) analyses British Punjabi writing as defined by the converging influences of the Black Arts movement, Marxist internationalism, and working class struggles in post-war Britain. However, connections with left-wing struggles in India, along with a deep engagement with tropes of resistance in the Punjabi literary tradition were equally important to shaping the form of IWA writing. For instance, the following poem by Joginder Shamsher charts a global geography of the excesses of racialised capitalism and neo-colonialism, yet ends with an image of a folk heroine, Sassi, whose figure is invoked to indict the violence of racist patriarchy. In the qissa of Sassi Punnoo, or simply Sassi,[69] the heroine wandered the parched stretches of the Thal desert in search of her lover who was taken from her, whisked away by his own brothers:

> From Dacca to the outskirts of Chicago
> The furnaces of tyranny are burning
> Consuming in their flames a thousand truths
> In the Sudan too truth is on the scaffold
> In Greece it faces jail
> And in India young men set out for college in the morning
> But return at night as corpses to their homes
> A Jackson is murdered in jail
> And in their fire the steel of truth is tempered.

[69] The story of Sassi, or Sassui in Sindhi, is believed to have Sindhi and Baloch origins. In Sindhi, the most popular narration remains that of eighteen century poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, "Sur Sassui". In Punjabi, it has been rendered in the qissa form by both Hafiz Barkhurdar (1658-1707) and Hashim Shah (1735-1843).

A black girl’s wrists are fettered

And her innocent life burns like Sassi’s in the desert. (21)

In this poem, the use of industrial imagery imbues the poet’s anticolonial internationalism with an anti-capitalist, working class aesthetic, as the very ‘furnaces', ‘flames’, and ‘steel of exploitative production are ‘tempered’ into truth. This singular truth that is forged together from ‘a thousand truths’ of resistance against tyranny ranging ‘From Dacca to the outskirts of Chicago’ encompasses both a reference to the repression of political freedoms in 1970s India under Indira Gandhi’s emergency regime, and a tribute to George Jackson. Jackson was a prominent member of the Black Panther Party, an author and activist whose iconic prison letters, published as *Soledad Brother,* fired the imagination of young revolutionaries of colour across the globe through its sharp indictment of American racism and the prison system in particular. By referencing Jackson alongside anti-emergency protests in India, and ultimately, collapsing the Punjabi heroine Sassi into the gendered, racialised subject of the 'black girl’, the poem connects a Punjabi vernacular imagination with black internationalism, routing cultural resources of resistance from the regional literary tradition into an engagement with black power. In particular, this synthesis of vernacular idiom, Indian anticolonialism, and black radicalism speaks to the British context of antiracist mobilisations, which saw the coming together of Asians and Afro-Caribbeans under the collective banner of ‘blackness’.

Thus, positing, as Shamsher does, a fundamental distinction of “form and content” between Punjabi poetry in Punjab and its counterpart in Britain, can draw an artificial separation between regional and internationalist imaginaries in literature, whose forms and tropes often fused together to create new iterations of literary dissent (Shamsher 1989, 2). Shamsher identifies British Punjabi poetry as defined by the working-class consciousness of most of its poets, “closer to the

realities of life than the poetry now being written in Panjab" (Shamsher 1989, 1). According to him, an immigrant subjectivity and the experience of racism are what set British Punjabi poetry apart from "the Punjabi poetry of Punjab, both in form and content" (Ibid, 1-2). For Shamsher, the experience of racism, the separation from the homeland, and the move from being a peasant or farmer in Punjab to a factory worker in England, transform the very poetics of the Punjabi literary tradition. See for instance, the following poem by Darshan Singh Gyani:

> Your whole-hearted laughter is still in my ears,
> It comes across thousands of miles to me
> Amidst this din of machines (Gyani quoted in Shamsher 1989, 4)

The poem draws on an aural technique, juxtaposing the 'whole-hearted laughter' of a loved one with the 'din of machines' that surrounds his workplace in a British factory, capturing the alienation of the immigrant industrial worker and the material conditions in which he labours: deafening, draining, in a land 'thousands of miles' away. While the form of the poem emphasises the strange newness of the surroundings and the life the poet finds himself in, it simultaneously invokes a familiar and well-worn genre, that of the dhola, or mahiya. The dhola and mahiya are folk songs, poems of separation that usually adopt a feminine voice, pining for a lover who has travelled to distant lands, pardes, often due to war.[70] Here, the poem reverses the gendered position at the heart of the traditional folk song, replacing the woman who awaits the return of the beloved with the vulnerability, fear, and longing that the male immigrant experiences on a factory floor in England. The clamour in the factory contrasts sharply with the loneliness of the

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[70] As seen in Chapter Three, Ustad Daman also deployed the mahiya form to critique the dictator General Zia ul Haq's military regime. For more on the military's domination of politics and the economy in Pakistan, see Jalal, Ayesha. *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, Sidiqqa, Ayesha. *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy,* Pluto Press, 2007, and Shah, Akil. *The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014.

worker. Thus, the re-working of popular, folk genres remains central to the forms of IWA poetry, adapted to versify the crowded conditions the worker-poets lived in, the harsh demands of long shifts and overtime on their bodies and the naked racism they met with at both the workplace and in social settings.

Further, as indicated above, the IWA's political outlook and literary resistance was also shaped by post-colonial left-wing and anti-authoritarian struggles in the subcontinent. IWA leaders remained deeply vested in the politics of the South Asian left, and maintained close organisational and intellectual connections with Communist circles in India. This is evidenced, for instance, by the sheer volume of poetry speaking to the excesses of the Indian and Pakistani states. These include Santokh Singh Santokh's verses protesting the imprisonment of the Pakistani Punjabi poet, Ahmad Saleem, who had spoken out against the Pakistani military's atrocities in Bangladesh, Joginder Shamsher's indictment of the crackdown on dissent during the Indian emergency, and verses by Jagmohan Joshi and Ajmer Coventry extolling the Naxalbari insurgency, both titled "Naxalbari Zindabad" as a nod to the slogans echoing across Indian villages during the 1960s. This confluence of South Asian anticolonialism, anti-imperialist internationalism and black anti-racism was also evident in the 1969 "March for Dignity" organised by the BPA, which took place during the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London. Jagmohan Joshi eloquently proclaimed in the pamphlet for the march,

> The Prime Ministers of the Commonwealth countries are no more than lackies of Anglo-American imperialism. They do not care about their nationals, whether at home or abroad. At home they shoot us, murder us, imprison us, and abroad, they ignore our sufferings in the face of racialist oppression. (Webb 2019, 267)

Thus, drawing a sharp distinction in terms of “form and content”(Shamsher 1989, 2) between Punjabi poetry in Punjab and Britain can also obfuscate the ideological and historical links between anticolonial liberation and immigrant labour politics (Shamsher 1989, 2). While earlier chapters in this dissertation noted the dangers of a nation-centric bordering logic that strictures our reading of post-colonial Punjabi poetry along the physical and conceptual confines imposed by dominant Pakistani and Indian nationalisms, in this case, a hard divide between British and Punjabi writing threatens to reify a British national border that overlooks the enduring legacy of empire in post-war Britain, obscuring the continuities between the immigrant and the colonised subject.

By the late 1980s, there was a discernible shift from ‘black’ to ‘black and Asian’ among immigrant activists and artists alike, and scholars began the project of disentangling the specificities of ‘Asian’[71] and ‘black’ identities that had been mobilised under the banner of political blackness in post-war Britain. An expansive discussion of that process is beyond the scope of this chapter, however, briefly put, this shift in identity politics reflected changes in the political landscape and the material conditions of immigrants in post-war Britain. This included, among other reasons[72], the mass closure of factories with rapid de-industrialisation, sites that had necessitated collaboration between African/ Caribbean and South Asian workers, and had thus emerged as the stronghold for the IWA and similar West Indian organisations.

However, during the period this chapter is concerned with, political blackness encompassed Asian communities, and black identity became an essential part of

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[71] The term ‘Asian’ itself has serious limitations when it comes to capturing the specificity of for example, British Bangladeshi or British East Asian experience.

[72] For example, upward social mobility among immigrants which led to an immigrant middle class, and cultural shifts in the second generation of British-born South Asians. These changes will be discussed in greater detail in the Conclusion in light of the IWA’s eventual decline.

IWA articulations of working class and immigrant Punjabi consciousness. Although Osborne (2016) and Nasta and Stein (2020) stress the strategic nature of this cross-cultural unity, my reading of IWA poetry suggests a more intimate engagement with the histories and project of black internationalism. As subsequent sections in this chapter demonstrate, black identity came to feature prominently in British Punjabi poetry, going beyond expressions of a tactical inter-ethnic alliance. Moreover, the interaction between anti-racism and IWA trade unionism provoked an internal debate on caste in progressive Punjabi circles in Britain.

Thus, anti-imperialist critique and immigrant resistance were not separate 'phases' in the IWA's trajectory. An anticolonial and internationalist legacy crucially framed immigrant resistance against rising violence by white nationalist groups, exclusionary workplace and public regulations, and the obvious complicity of the British state in the project of white supremacy. British Punjabi poetry was born in this milieu. The next section examines Niranjan Singh Noor's epic poem, "Ho Chi Minh", analysing its insertion of regional literary tradition into British articulations of anticolonial solidarity with Vietnam.

Niranjan Singh Noor: Anticolonial Internationalism and Punjabi Literary Resistance

Niranjan Singh Noor was among the IWA's most prominent members in the midlands. Based in Wolverhampton, he wrote several collections of poetry, and was also closely involved with the UK branch of the Progressive Writers' Association, a collective of mostly Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi immigrant writers. The PWA-UK, which remains active even today, takes its name from the Indian Progressive Writers Association founded in London in 1935, described by Priyamvada Gopal as "a radical cultural movement that spanned several regions

and languages across India... and… a movement that was closely linked to debates over decolonisation and the nature of the postcolonial nation-state that was to come into being" (2005, 1). While some studies have analysed the All-India PWA as a mere 'front' for the Communist Party, the writers and poets associated with progressive writing in the sub-continent and its diasporas abroad constituted a much more multivocal milieu that did not simply toe the "party line" despite sharing a broader commitment to socialist politics. The same can be said for the PWA-UK, and the IWA-GB as well.[73] This ideological eclecticism within the IWA circles is reflected in Noor's poetry and political organising as well. During the 1960s and 1970s, he was involved in numerous antiracist and anti-imperialist campaigns in Britain, working alongside other IWA members to push for Punjabi language instruction in British schools, for Sikhs' right to wear turbans, against the structural racism of the police, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Vietnam solidarity campaign, and trade union struggles by workers of colour.

Niranjan Singh Noor's melding of a Marxist outlook with regional genealogies of dissent can be gleaned from the preface[74] to his poetry collection, "Kavita Turdi Hai" (The Poem Walks). In this preface, Noor identifies three formative

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[73] In fact there is a long history of splits, and distinct factional tendencies within the organisation, detailed by DeWitt, John Jr. (1969) in *Indian Workers' Associations in Britain*.

[74] Further in the preface, Noor mentions two seemingly casual details, yet they merit attention for elucidating his critical understanding of the bordering logics of Indian and Pakistani nationalisms. This logic mapped both religion and language onto the newly carved boundary, with West Punjab being Urdu-speaking, and Muslim, and East Punjab being Punjabi-speaking, and Sikh/ Hindu. He notes how he wrote his first poem in the "Persian script" that has since 1947 been entirely replaced by Gurmukhi for reading and writing Punjabi in East Punjab - so much so that Punjabi as a language has become synonymous with the Gurmukhi script. Further, while talking about *Hir Waris Shah*, he describes it as his first lesson in "Pingal and Arooz." Pingal or Pingala refers to the ancient Sanskritic treatise on prosody, known as the *Chandashastra*, while arooz refers to al-aruz or Arabic prosody, ilm al shaer, "the science of poetry." This combination of the two militated against the state-led forging of national culture in both India and Pakistan, which was organised around the reductive equations of India = Hindu, and Pakistan = Muslim. Thus, Sanskritic traditions came to be identified as 'Indian', and Arabic and Persian ones as 'Pakistani', which is also reflected in the marginalisation of Urdu poetics in the Indian context, and of Punjabi in Pakistan, where it came to be seen as a Sikh language. Noor's bringing together of these two texts thus yokes together two poetic traditions that meet in the world of Waris Shah, yet were sundered by the divides wrought by dominant nationalism.

influences that shaped his poetry – his journey during the 1947 Partition, his childhood captivation with *Hir Waris Shah*, and his experience of racism and labour exploitation in the UK, where he arrived in 1965. This combination of influences speaks powerfully to the synthesis between regional literary structures of resistance and a black working class subjectivity that defined IWA internationalism. In a poignant disclosure, Noor writes about his first poem that he wrote as a schoolboy, which poked fun at the teacher for his sycophantic attitude towards the landlord's sons, who were also pupils at the same village school. The poem is discovered, and the headmaster levels a fine of 1 Rupee on the young, rebellious Noor. Yet the sum is never exacted. It is August 1947, and as a new state border comes into being, Noor and his family are compelled to make their way to what is now "another Punjab", in independent India. He goes on to recount how *Hir Waris Shah,* the same qissa that Udham Singh chose to take oath upon, had a constant presence in his childhood, as raas-dhariay*,* who are traditional theatre performers, or bards, could always be found reciting from the narrative in his village square. Thus, the Punjabi literary tradition deeply informed Noor's poetic outlook, shaping his contribution to the IWA brand of anticolonial solidarity and antiracist agitation. His poetic form, particularly as seen in the epic poem "Ho Chi Minh"*,* synthesises this regional aesthetic with a Marxist methodology that insistently inhabits the modern.

Regional Vocabularies of Anti-imperialist Solidarity: Niranjan Singh Noor's "Ho Chi Minh"

Noor wrote his epic poem, "Ho Chi Minh" in 1974. Spanning a few hundred verses, the poem was printed in book form, along with a couple of essays by Noor on the history of the Vietnam struggle and US imperialism in the region, as well as a Punjabi translation of Bertrand Russell's 1966. While the involvement of figures like British-Pakistani writer and activist Tariq Ali is well documented in

histories of global left-wing solidarity with Vietnam, little attention has been paid to internationalist critiques of US imperialism that circulated outside the spotlight occupied by 'cosmopolitan' public intellectuals like Ali. The IWA's Punjabi writing thus constitutes a valuable archive for examining a marginalised cultural sphere where anti-imperialist struggles interacted with and shaped the antiracist consciousness of working class immigrants, routed through the poetic forms of a regional literary tradition.

The Vietnam struggle emerged as a dominant theme in British Punjabi writing during this period, and Niranjan Singh Noor's poem on "Ho Chi Minh" was one among dozens penned by British Punjabi poets. This body of writing expressed solidarity with revolutionary Vietnam, and in turn, Vietnam became a poetic trope to represent and analyse the conditions of racism and exploitation that Punjabi workers encountered in Britain and the enduring violence that empire bequeathed to post-colonial states in South Asia. As Joginder Shamsher informs us, around the same time that Noor published "Ho Chi Minh," thirty-three Punjabi writers contributed poetry and prose to a volume dedicated to the Vietnam cause, which also included articles by Lawrence Daly, Phoebe Moberley, and Bertrand Russell translated into Punjabi (1989, 14-15).

In its form, Noor's "Ho Chi Minh" draws on storytelling traditions from the Punjabi literary tradition. In particular, narrative devices from the qissa and var genres, which I discuss in greater detail in Chapters Two and Three, are deployed by the poet in a playful manner that vernacularises Vietnam as it universalises regional Punjabi structures of critique. Through this process, a Punjabi literary aesthetic of anticolonialism emerges that de-centres the state as the site for enacting Third Worldist solidarity. It also pushes established conventions within socialist art by refiguring the relationship between form and content, tradition and modernity, and popular culture and revolutionary consciousness. The epic draws

on hagiography, regional histories, and archetypes from the Punjabi literary tradition to conjoin India and Vietnam, spotlighting their oppression under and resistance against imperialism as the bedrock for forging a South-South anticolonial Communist internationalism. In particular, this is accomplished through the poem's treatment of time, and its construction of imaginative geographies that link the lives and the lands of the colonised:

> Vietnam is like the hands of the east,
> A life-giving elixir, I pay tribute to Vietnam!
>
> Ni Tin
> Punjab's sword is Vietnam's arm
> The spirit is Vietnam's, the youth is Vietnam's
> The sunflowers and roses are Vietnam's
> The Ganga is Vietnam's, the Chenab is Vietnam's (Noor 1989, 200)

Noor's opening stanzas echo the conventional structure of the Punjabi qissa, in particular invoking the introductory verses from *Hir Waris Shah* which opens in much the same way with detailed descriptions of the landscape of Takht Hazara, the village where the hero, Ranjha, resides. In Noor's qissa of Ho Chi Minh as it were, references to the physical features of the land, like its rivers, its flora and fauna, and its fields, are paired with the symbols of the 'amrit' (sacred water, elixir) and the 'talwaar' (sword). These symbols are invested with a great deal of significance within Sikhism, as well as the broader traditions of popular spirituality and histories of resistance - 'Amrit' is water, a life-giving force, and the 'sword' the instrument of struggle symbolising the long history of mass uprisings against both the Mughal empire and British colonialism (the flag of the Hindustan Ghadar Party for instance, bears two crossed swords). By alternating between images of the landscapes of Punjab and Vietnam, Noor creates an effect

in which Punjab shades into Vietnam, yet this Punjab is represented through an imaginative geography, one that equally resists the cartographic imperatives of British colonialism, and of dominant Indian and Pakistani nationalism. This is evident in the poet's references to both the Ganga and the Chenab, rivers, 'amrit', that came to flow on opposite sides of the border erected in 1947. This counter-geography of Punjab conjured in the very first stanzas, develops into a broader poetic technique in Noor's "Ho Chi Minh," as he draws connections between anticolonial struggles across the globe, linking the capitalist exploitation of immigrant, working class populations in the Global North with peasantries in the post-colonial Global South, by mapping place names from the Punjabi literary tradition and regional histories of resistance onto distant sites of struggle – Anandpur, Takht Hazara, Beghampura,[75] Ireland, Vietnam, and Paris merge and meet in the pages of Noor's versified re-telling of Ho Chi Minh's struggle.

This spatial entwinement as an embodiment of anticolonial, internationalist solidarity is complemented by Niranjan Singh Noor's treatment of time. The narrative remains centred on Ho Chi Minh's life, tracing his footsteps from his very birth, through to his travels, culminating in the battlefield. Yet dates and years are not cited, and time is instead marked by referencing contiguous movements and liberation struggles. For example, he locates Ho Chi Minh's adolescence in time by referencing the birth of the Indian National Congress, so that Ho comes to inhabit a kind of global, anticolonial time. Another reference links the call for Swaraj (Home rule) to a turning point in Ho Chi Minh's father's life. Similar connections continue to crop up throughout the poem. This includes Noor's likening of the auditory 'magic' of Ho's 'lalkaar' (call, challenge) to

[75] Anandpur was the site of a historic battle between the peasant army of the tenth Sikh Guru,Gobind Singh, and the Mughal forces, Takht Hazara was the hometown of Ranjha, the hero from *Hir Waris Shah,* the love epic, or qissa, discussed in connection with Amrita Pritam and Nasreen Anjum Bhatti's feminist poetics in Chapter Two. Beghampura is an imaginative, topic settlement evoked throughout the verses of fifteenth century North Indian bard, Kabir. The word be-gham-pura literally refers to 'the city without sorrow.'

Bhagat Singh's bombs, hurled inside the hall of the Legislative Assembly in New Delhi to "make the deaf hear":

> Like Bhagat Singh's bomb,
> The magic of Ho's roar,
> Rent open the ears of the deaf
> From inside the reeking jail cell,
> The winds of truth declared war (Ibid, 201)

This treatment of time within the poem establishes a relationality between anti-imperialist struggles across contexts and periods and also constitutes an essential part of Noor's re-working of the popular Punjabi genres of the qissa and the var. For example, Noor's linking of the Jallianwala Bagh protest with the rise of the Third International is punctuated by his casting of Ho as a range of characters from regional hagiography and the Punjabi literary tradition. The parallels between the opening descriptions of Ho Chi Minh's village and of Takht Hazara in the qissa of *Hir Waris Shah* help frame Ho as Ranjha, an archetypal character, the son of a village lord who forsakes his stake in the patriarchal feudal structure to embark on a journey that makes him the definitive lover and rebel. This representation also overlaps with that of Krishna, the flute-playing deity around whom anti-Brahminical popular practices often converge. Noor's deliberate framing of Ho Chi Minh as Ranjha is thus an intertextual move that triggers associations of rebellion, liberation, and revolutionary transformation in the Punjabi literary tradition.

As the poem progresses, Ho appears in a dizzying range of guises including that of the Prophet Musa or Moses. Even Marx and Lenin are introduced using a language that draws on literary tropes of dissent and histories of anticolonial, anti-authoritarian struggles in Punjab – Marx, for instance, is described as "kirrt da

sannyasi," the "mendicant, or wise man, of labour," while Lenin is introduced thus:

> Someone tuned the organ of time
> And recited aasaa di var
> Then, the god of action's voice was heard (Ibid, 202)

The cosmic elevation bestowed on Lenin in these verses may seem like the hyperbolic eulogising of a fervent Communist. Yet what is significant is the vernacularised narration of his place in the history of liberation struggles. The grand span of history suggested by the 'samay da saaz' i.e. 'the organ of time' that harmonises Lenin's voice with 'Aasa Di Var', unites both in purpose and spirit. "Aasa Di Var" literally translates as the var, or ballad, of hope. The var appears in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh holy book, and is often attributed to Guru Nanak and features prominently as part of the morning service or paatth. Similarly, the poem also draws a connection between Ho's voice and another var from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, "Chandi Di Var." Said to be composed by Guru Gobind Singh, in this var the goddess, Chandi, takes the form of the sword that crushes the forces of falsehood and oppression: "Ho's voice was like Chandi di var/ Like the blossom of spring for life's autumn…" (201) The stress on the 'vaaj' (voice; sound) of Lenin and Ho joins them in chorus with the paatth, or the traditional musical recitation of the vars in the *Granth Sahib* that they are being compared to. Thus, Noor re-interprets Sikh religious history by inserting it into the longue duree trajectory of global struggles, articulating a language for Marxist internationalism premised on the very difference that defines the Punjabi community.

Similarly, at another point in the poem, Noor refers to Ho as 'dhanna bhagat,' a hagiographical figure whose poetry also appears in the *Granth Sahib*. Although

his verses appear in the *Granth*, dhanna bhagat is a marginal character within dominant Sikhism who resonates with popular devotional practice in Punjab. Significantly, dhanna bhagat was an illiterate farmer in the hagiographical texts, who would expend his entire crop on feeding faqirs and sannyasis, mendicant figures. Here, Noor's choice of hagiographical figure evokes comparison with Sant Ram Udasi, whose poem, "Today", analysed in Chapter Three, centres a similar figure, Bhai Lalo, to connect popular devotion with Naxalite ideology through the prism of Dalit perspectives.

"Ho Chi Minh" also stands out for its use of Buddhist hagiography, with Ho cast as both the Buddha, and Gautam Guru, the chief disciple of Mahavira and an older contemporary of the Buddha. In fact, when Noor's Ho delivers his first, formative words as a Marxist revolutionary in the epic, he ventriloquises one of the Buddha's fundamental dictums:

> Life is where grief and bliss reside,
> The mother of bliss
> Is the consciousness of collective pain,
> Our union is this game called life.
> The thorny vines of grief swell in the womb of loot
> These vines will never give shade… (Ibid, 203)

This moment is framed as a turning point in the narrative thus far, a crucial juncture in Ho's revolutionary transformation. The preceding lines cement his identification with the Buddha through some key re-workings that signal Noor's Marxist-inspired literary methodology – Ho, as Buddha, does not retreat from society, choosing instead to sit in the 'kirrt da mandir' (the temple of labour, or action), and turn to the 'karni da khuda', introduced earlier as V.I. Lenin (Ibid, 202). Further, highlighting Buddhist themes in a poetic world steeped in Punjabi

imagery and idiom grates against the bordering logics of dominant Indian and Pakistani nationalisms, and expands the canvas of regional traditions of resistance. While Buddhist philosophies and traditions have indelibly shaped popular spirituality and thought in Punjab over the centuries, they remain excised from discussions as they do not fit the Hindu/Muslim/Sikh schema for analysing cultural formations in Punjab and North India more broadly. For instance, 12th century poet Baba Farid, who is often described as the fountainhead of the Punjabi poetic tradition, similarly paraphrases the Buddha in a couplet:

> Farid, I believed only I suffered grief,
> Grief is all the world.
> When I climbed atop I saw
> The same fire consuming every home. (Fareed 2005, 10)

Noor melds Buddhist themes into a contemporary Punjabi epic poem that draws on the oral qissa and var genres to invoke a genealogy of social critique that has shaped and informed both Muslim and Sikh traditions in the region. This recourse to a 'Buddhist Punjab' thus subverts the binary, bordering imagination of regional culture. Further, these references to Buddhist themes complements the poet's geographical entwinement of Punjab and Vietnam in earlier stanzas, sketching in his vision of an internationalism 'from below' that unites popular spiritualities of the colonised. The historical connections that saw the spread of Buddhism into the Indo-China regions of Vietnam are also significant to Noor's vision. This reading of Buddhist thought thus constitutes an alternative to the nation-state for enacting solidarities between the wretched of the earth.

The centring of Buddhist hagiography and themes in Noor's *Ho Chi Minh* also brings to mind Ambedkarite analyses of caste[76] and their relationship to revolutionary politics in South Asian contexts. As the next section details, critical discussions around casteism within the Punjabi diaspora and the IWA itself became a corollary of the synergising influences of Afro-Asian anticolonial solidarity, Black Power, and Marxist internationalism. Studies of Black British and Asian writing (Osborne 2016, Nasta and Stein 2020) have emphasised the strategic nature of black identity as a unifier between Asian, African, and Caribbean immigrants in Britain. However, as the IWA's literary corpus testifies, political blackness was much more than a tactical choice, serving as a terrain that enabled internal reflection and critique along the lines of caste for Punjabi progressives in the UK. The next section analyses Ajmer Coventry's poem, "To A White Worker, From A Black Immigrant Worker" and Avtar Sadiq's short story, "In the Chimneys' Shade" to explore how solidarities of caste, class, and race were navigated by IWA intellectuals.

Political Blackness and Marxism: IWA Debates Around Race, Class, and Working Class Identity

Ajmer Coventry (1933-2013), born Ajmer Singh Bains, arrived in Coventry, England in 1964. Unlike most of his IWA comrades who worked in factories across the Midlands, he was able to find work as a teacher. Introduced to Marxist politics during his student days in Punjab, Coventry was immediately at home in the IWA's ranks, organising and writing for the movement. He was also actively involved with the Coventry Anti-Racist Committee. Coventry wrote at least a dozen books of poetry and prose, and served as editor of the IWA organ, *Lalkar*. He adopted the nom de plume 'Coventry' in line with South Asian naming

[76] See Ambedkar, Bhimrao R. *The Buddha And His Dhamma,* Oxford University Press, 2011. [First published in 1957], and Ambedkar, Bhimrao R. *The Annihilation of Caste,* General Press, 2020. [First published in 1936]

conventions around place names, common especially among poets and intellectuals. For instance, fellow IWA poet Jagmohan Joshi wrote under the pen name 'Asar Hoshiarpuri' as he hailed from Hoshiarpur, Punjab. Coventry's decision to take on an English place-name was certainly unique in IWA circles, and perhaps, in part motivated by a desire to reject the upper caste Jatt moniker of 'Bains'. Interestingly, his first name, 'Ajmer', is also a city in present-day North India, making 'Ajmer Coventry' a jarring union of place-names and associations, one that represents the 'double consciousness' (Du Bois 2007) that Coventry's poem "From A Black Emigrant Worker" evokes.

Ajmer Coventry's epistolary poem appears in one of his earlier anthologies from the 1970s.[77] It is directed towards an unnamed 'gora kama', a white worker, in the voice of a 'kala parvasi kama', a black emigrant worker. The poem's opening lines address the titular white worker as 'ae mere mazdoor saathi' ('my fellow worker', or, 'O comrade'). Although many IWA poems reference the particular experience of working class life in Britain, both the 'white worker' and the 'black emigrant worker' in the title and the poem itself remain anonymous, and Coventry purposely avoids pegging his verses to a specific context. This obscuring of the poem's setting in space and time is juxtaposed with the direct, colloquial tone of the poem, emphasised by the use of the individual 'I' and 'you' that imparts an intimacy to the exchange. The structure allows the poet to express his yearning for a proletarian internationalism that can extend to the white working class while recognising their complicity within a racialised colonial capitalism:

> O comrade, my fellow worker,
> I do not regret being here,

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[77] This is an estimated date, as most IWA poetry was printed in the form of small pamphlets that were cheap and easy to circulate among members. Often, publication details were not mentioned. My estimate is based on conversations with IWA members, some of whom were Coventry's contemporaries.

> But nor do I consider this my country.
> For a while now
> Whenever I am needed
> In any part of the world,
> Against my will
> I have been ripped from my mother land
> Packed into ships
> Like some traders' goods
> Or a lifeless stone.
> I and countless others among my comrades
> Pined for home… (Coventry n.d., 17-18)

The reference to 'for a while now' and the 'countless other comrades' provides a trans-historical lens for Coventry's depiction of racial slavery. The 'countless' people 'ripped from their motherland', 'packed into ships' and transported across the globe speak here in one voice. This dispossessed subject is at the same time the African slave, the indentured Asian, and the post-war Caribbean or Indian migrant. Through this figure, the poet establishes the blackness of the titular 'emigrant worker' as a political identity that encompasses the histories of slave resistance in the Americas, of Ghadarite anticolonialism in India, and of antiracist working class agitation by South Asian and Caribbean workers in post-war Britain. The descriptors provided represent the experiences of slavery, indenture, and post-war economic migration equally. This unity of historical experience between colonised, racialised masses across continents is emphasised by the symbolism of blood. Coventry writes how: 'Some devils have drawn the maps of their greed/in my blood…', concluding the poem with:

> The oppressors were consumed with the desire
> to don the [blood]stained garment

along with your pure blood!
Along with your pure blood! (Ibid)

Blood signals the most fundamental bonds, the intimacy of family, the ties of kinship. In the poem, the blood of the African slave, the indentured Asian, and the Indian or Caribbean immigrant, is one and the same. It is the black emigrant worker's blood - drained away to draw the 'hirs de khaakay' (maps of greed) that stain the garb of the oppressor. The word 'khaaka' translates most literally as a 'map', but it also denotes other kinds of documents, for example, a blueprint, a plan, or a sketch. A 'khaaka' is thus a representation, and can also refer to a short play or performance. Thus, when literally read as a 'map', it allows the poem to reference the history of colonialism through a cartographic idiom. The other associations of 'khaaka' further highlight Coventry's indictment of colonial modernity and its intellectual, cultural, and political projects, an exploitative 'blueprint' that was replicated in region after region to subjugate people of colour. The exclamatory ending deploys the imagery of blood once again, citing the 'pure blood' of the white worker to expose his complicity in the black worker's exploitation, after all, 'pure blood' remains a dominant trope of "racialised colonial reason and white supremacist terror" (Gilroy 1993, x). Yet, at the same time, the repetition of 'your pure blood!' enables another reading - one that suggests that the white worker may view the black immigrant as his enemy, but under capitalism, his 'pure blood' is as dispensable, and may adorn the ruling class's macabre garment for all they care. "From A Black Emigrant Worker" thus centres the racialised logic of capital and the specificity of black experience, even as it aspires to a universalist working class solidarity.

Ajmer Coventry's poem addresses a key ideological preoccupation of the IWA and its intellectuals, namely, the intersections of race and class in the British context and its implications for organising factory workers. The IWA's leadership

was dominated by Punjabi migrants with close ties to Communist groupings in India and a distinct Marxist mould defined both rank and file. Hence, a commitment to proletarian internationalism and working class unity loomed large in the IWA imaginary, yet their personal experience of racism and white supremacy in British society often grated against the dictates of dogmatic Marxism that emphasised class over race. This contradiction constituted a key theme within IWA poetry, as seen in Ajmer Coventry's poem and many others. For instance, Niranjan Singh Noor wrote: "White worker and black workers are both workers/ White ruler and black ruler are both rulers", lines that use a mirroring, repetitive structure to assert class solidarity over racial difference (1989, 24). Similarly, Surjit Hans also addressed the question of race and class in his poetry, taking a position in sharp contrast to Noor's. Hans draws on political blackness to emphasise the essentially racialised nature of capitalist exploitation:

> The black grime that covers white civilisation
> Is the grime of capitalism masked in human dress,
> Monopolising everything
> I am a worker: my ways of thought are black…
> This age of blackness is the black people's age.
> Make it the age of black power. (1989, 23)

In these lines, blackness does not appear as a racial or ethnic essence. The image of the 'black grime of capitalism' that 'covers white civilisation' locates the origin of blackness in capitalist exploitation and calls to attention the dominant construction of racial difference. The mention of 'white civilisation' as 'capitalism, masked in human dress' emphasises this and points towards the ideological cover of civilisational arguments marshalled by European imperialism. The stress in 'monopolising all' created by the line break sharpens into view the homogenising impulse of capitalism. Yet, this brutal universalising

oppression is met with a reclaiming of the ‘black grime’, transformed by then end of the poem into ‘black power.’ Thus, in the second half of the poem, blackness is reworked into a mode of working class consciousness, a ‘way of thought’ embraced by the worker that shall transform this ‘age of blackness’ into ‘the black people’s age.’ The term black is wrenched from its white usage as a slur, and fashioned into a pan-ethnic, cross-cultural emblem for people’s power. In comparison to Ajmer Coventry, Surjit Hans pointedly excludes the white worker from this dialogue, addressing his fellow comrades of colour only. This comes across most forcefully in the fourth line quoted above, ‘I am a worker: my ways of thought are black’, as the colon separating two definitive statements pushes an equation between the two: being a worker is being black. Moreover, the poet draws on the symbolism surrounding the ‘kaliyug*’* or ‘kaljug’ in Punjabi/ Indic traditions that divide history into four eras, or yugs, the worst and last of which is the ‘kaliyug.’ Further, ‘Kali’ refers to the goddess Kali or Kaal, a force of destruction, and is also the word for blackness, or darkness. In its conclusion, the poem reclaims blackness from colonial racial hierarchy and the kaliyug from Brahminical Hinduism, entwining regional tradition with an anticolonial solidarity between working people of colour.

Thus, political blackness introduced new symbolism and imagery to British Punjabi poetry that were synthesised with existing forms of the Punjabi literary tradition. IWA intellectuals engaged with political blackness to create a Punjabi literary vocabulary for debating prevalent Marxist framings of the relationship between class formation, racial identity, and capitalism. As the discussion of Avtar Sadiq’s short story, “In The Chimneys’ Shade” in the next section reveals, this synthesis of political blackness and Marxism also pushed an interrogation of caste alongside race and class in the IWA and the Punjabi diaspora.

Intersections of Caste, Class, and Race: Avtar Sadiq's "In The Chimneys' Shade"

The close integration of IWA activists with left-wing anti-authoritarian movements in India along with the cross-Atlantic affinities with Black resistance in the US fostered a productive nexus where the praxis of Naxalism, the Black Panther Party, and Dalit critique could meet. Further, as Dalit Shukra, a Dalit IWA activist based in Bedford and Birmingham during the 1970s explains, the material conditions of working class life that South Asian immigrants found themselves in in Britain also exerted pressure on caste boundaries:

> They had to co-operate with each other to find decent housing, to share accommodation, and to find jobs, which were scarce. There was also inter-faith collaboration. When money was needed for the Gurdwara, Jat Sikhs would go to Ravidasis and Valmikis (Dalit sub-caste), who would then contribute. (Shukra 2021)

Although the majority of IWA's leadership comprised upper-caste Jatt Sikhs from Punjab, a vocal contingent of Dalit organisers within its ranks pushed an internal conversation on caste discrimination in the diaspora and within the IWA's ranks as necessary to the movement's identification with political blackness. Dalit members of the IWA organised a conference on the origins of the caste system in Birmingham during the 1970s.[78] Balbir Dutt of Bedford, who served as Assistant General Secretary of the IWA-GB for two decades, went on to found the Bharati Dalit Mukti Alliance (Indian Dalit Freedom Alliance). During the 1970s, the Indian Dalit Freedom Alliance ran a magazine called *The Service* and organised against both racism and casteism. For instance, Balbir Dutt, or Bob Dutt as he was popularly known, set up the People's Defence Committee and People of Bedford

[78] This conference was also attended by Dalit Naxalite poet Sant Ram Udasi who was visiting England at the time, and whose anti-caste poetry was discussed in Chapter Three of this dissertation

Against Racism to combat the National Front. He also helped lead a boycott of an Indian shopkeeper accused of using casteist slurs, successfully running him out of business. However, Dalit organising within the IWA was concentrated in branches outside its traditional strongholds in the Midlands and London, in local units such as Bedford.

It is important to remember that despite the fact that many among the IWA's Jatt Sikh ranks saw solidarity with their Dalit comrades as essential to their anticolonial, antiracist, working class politics, an equally large number were plagued by the historical blindness of the South Asian left towards caste. The leadership remained dominated by middle class upper-caste Jatt Sikhs which included activists like Jagmohan Joshi and Niranjan Singh Noor. In memorialisations of the movement's heyday by its Jatt Sikh members, Dalit contributions and organising around caste are seldom highlighted and a narrow communitarian narrative that over-emphasises the organisation's Sikh roots is prominent. For instance, the IWA's office and archive in Birmingham, the Shaheed Udham Singh Centre, houses a library with dozens of books penned by a host of IWA writers and poets, yet pride of place is given to the works of prominent Jatt intellectuals like Jagmohan Joshi, Niranjan Singh Noor, and Ajmer Coventry. While I was able to track and interview Dalit poets and activists associated with the movement, accessing their writing proved extremely difficult[79] as it was doubly marginalised, first, as British Punjabi writing, and second, as Dalit voices within a literary milieu dominated by upper castes. Thus, my analysis of the IWA's ideological navigation of the connected oppressions of caste, class, and race will draw on a text by a Jatt Sikh ally, Avtar Sadiq, but will be framed by personal interviews I conducted with Dalit IWA activists Sukhdev Sidhu and Dalit

[79] This restricted access was of course compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic, due to which I could only conduct Zoom/ phone conversations and did not get to see personal papers or handwritten copies that the authors could have possessed.

Shukra, who were closely involved with pushing the debate on caste within the organisation.

Avtar Singh Sadiq (1941-2018) arrived in Leicester in 1964, and took up work at the Dunlop factory. He joined the local unit of the IWA within a year, and soon emerged as one of its most active members. Sadiq threw himself into the organisation's literary activities, and was elected cultural secretary of the Leicester IWA in 1966. He edited their magazine, *Lalkar* for many years and also re-constituted the Progressive Writers' Association in the UK. Much like Niranjan Singh Noor, Sadiq was also actively involved in antiracist organising and solidarity work with anticolonial struggles across the globe. In addition to publishing several books of poetry and short stories, Avtar Sadiq also penned a travelogue based on his visit to Cuba as part of a delegation of the Association of Indian Communists in Britain. His oeuvre, much like that of other IWA writers like Niranjan Singh Noor, demonstrated a keen engagement with anticolonial struggles across the globe. For instance, Avtar Sadiq also contributed a poem to the Punjabi volume on Vietnam published in Britain, which, as mentioned before, featured selections of Niranjan Singh Noor's poem. Deploying a similar poetic method to Niranjan Singh Noor's "Ho Chi Minh", Sadiq brings disparate geographies and distinct time periods together into a planetary vision for liberation through the specific, regional symbols associated with Sikh practice and popular spirituality in Punjab:

> Today the land of Vietnam
> Is a second Anandpur
> Where the story of Guru Gobind is being told again,
> Where a people oppressed by a tyrant's might
> Is rising to defend its honour

And once more taking up the sword. (Sadiq quoted in Shamsher 1989, 15)

The poem links the Vietnam struggle with the historical resistance of Sikhs against the Mughal empire. It connects anti-imperialism with a symbolic conjuncture in Sikh history, the 1700 Battle of Anandpur, during which the largely peasant army led by Guru Gobind Singh triumphed against the combined might of the Mughals and the local hill Rajas. The sword appears as a literal representation of the armed anti-imperialist struggle of the Vietnamese, while retaining its significance as an article of faith within Sikhism, counted among the 'Five Ks,' items that Guru Gobind Singh commanded Khalsa Sikhs to wear at all times. The fifth 'K' is the kirpaan, or the steel sword, and is thus simultaneously a marker for Sikh identity, an instrument of resistance, and an injunction of faith. In the context of 1960s Britain, where the right for Sikh men to wear turbans to work was fought and won by comrades in the IWA alongside other activists in the community, the assertion of the sword takes on another layer of significance. It celebrates the cultural difference of an immigrant community of colour in the face of dominant white society's pressures to 'assimilate,' and yokes the particularity of Sikh identity to an anticolonial solidarity with the people of Vietnam.

While the protest poem remained the preferred form for articulating anti-imperialist internationalism in IWA writing, the short story, arguably the second most popular genre in contemporary Punjabi writing,[80] came to focus closely on narrations of the immigrant worker's experience. This key thematic of post-war British Punjabi writing is addressed in Avtar Sadiq's, "In the Chimneys' Shade", which grapples with the complexities of organising in a diasporic setting where

[80] Poetry was virtually the only literary genre in pre-colonial Punjab, and retained its status as the most popular form during the post-colonial period. The short story proliferated in post-Independence Punjab, and although quite a few novels were also written, the Punjabi novel never attained the dominance that the genre has acquired in other national and post-colonial literatures.

caste remained a force of exclusion. The story is set in a nameless English town, with all of its action taking place at the "Richard Foundry", a factory where the majority of workers are immigrants and people of colour. It is narrated through the eyes of an upper caste Jatt Sikh, Mal Singh Lumbardar. Mal Singh struggles to reconcile his upper caste status with his working class material conditions. Inside the factory, Dalit men are his equals, his colleagues, and even his comrades. In fact, Mal Singh only manages to secure a job at the foundry through a Dalit man from his village, called Bachana, who is also the shop steward and leads the workers' action for better wages. Mal Singh on the other hand, resents Bachana, and over time chooses to cosy up to the white foreman, Charlie, who agrees to allot more overtime to the Lumbardar in exchange for inside information on the workers' union and their planned action. By the end of the story, the Lumbardar stands alone in his opposition to the strike and is ostracised by most workers, Jatt and Dalit alike, who choose to band together under the leadership of Bachana to fight the management.

It is significant that Sadiq chose to relay the story through Mal Singh's perspective. As an upper caste Jatt Sikh male, Mal Singh's figure aptly represented the majority of the IWA leadership who came from similar caste and class backgrounds. Through Mal Singh's character, Sadiq cautions against the crude Marxist reductionisms of class, highlighting how caste structures identity, social relations, and sites of political organising. He critiques the Marxist dogma that class exploitation takes precedence over caste oppression, a legacy of Indian Communist parties that parallels the orthodox position taken by white Marxism, which similarly denies the importance of race vis a vis class. In the short story, Mal Singh is mostly referred to by his title 'Lumbardar' [81], a marker of his

[81] A lumbardar or numberdar, is an inherited title for male members of landowning, politically powerful zamindar families, first instituted by British colonialism in the land settlement process in Bengal in 1840. The lumbardar exercises a range of governmental powers in his village, including revenue collection and policing.

dominant caste and class position within rural Punjabi society. His jealousy towards Bachana, who arrived in England fifteen years earlier, and even owns his own car, is articulated through casteist language: "How many generations of this kammi's[82] family would've spent their lives tossing firewood into my kilns[83] – but look how their fortunes have changed!" (1978, 81) Similarly, when the workers rally together to occupy the factory during a protest, he taunts the Jatt workers saying, "Do you have no shame? A kammi has become your leader!" (Ibid)

Mal Singh's odious behaviour was by no means mere caricature (Ibid, 83). Casteism remained rife within the IWA and the Punjabi communities it organised in. Dalit Shukra recalls how at a dinner hosted by comrades following the conference on caste discrimination in Birmingham, Dalit poet Sant Ram Udasi was treated with ridicule and contempt by Jatt comrades, a behavior Udasi immediately called out as casteist (Shukra 2020). Moreover, Shukra relays how, in a manner which is perhaps both tragic and comic, Jatt comrades would brandish copies of the Communist Manifesto in response to discussions on caste by Dalit comrades, asking to see 'where it is written'. As Shukra observes, this pointed to a major contradiction in the praxis of many IWA members, who:

> On the one hand… identified themselves as politically black, but at the same time, they denied the distinctive oppression and exploitation of Dalits – their distinctive blackness if you will – within the overall category of the politically black Indian. (Ibid)

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[82] The word 'kammi', derived most likely from 'kaam' which means work, in its literal sense refers to a 'worker'. However, in rural Punjabi society, the zamindar and kammi divide maps onto both caste and class boundaries, the zamindar belongs to the upper caste, landowning class, while kammi is landless and from among the lower castes, reliant on the zamindar for patronage and employment. The kammis make up the hereditary occupational lower castes in the village. For more on rural social structure in Punjab, see Ahmad, Saghir. *Class And Power In A Punjabi Village*. Monthly Review Press, 2000. [First published in 1977]

[83] 'Chubbha jhokan', tossing firewood into a small kiln, is considered a menial task, thus signalling the lumbardar's contempt for Bachana.

In this context, Avtar Sadiq's "In the Chimneys' Shade" takes an important step towards integrating an internal critique of caste into IWA articulations of political blackness. The Dalit characters in the story, Bachana and Lachu, are articulate, compassionate, and politicised, the vanguard of the workers' struggle in the factory. In particular, Lachu's conversations with Mal Singh are significant, as he draws conceptual links between caste oppression in the Punjabi village and racism in Britain:

> Lumbardar, respectable folks like you don't really let the poor live in peace, do they?... The poor have always been called foul, useless, and lowly by the powerful. They blame us for all that goes wrong in society. The same way that Powell insults us as inferior and lowly here – insisting that the state treat us like precarious daily-wage labourers. (Sadiq 1978, 82)

Lachu connects the exploitation of caste labour in the Punjabi village with that of immigrant labour under racialised capitalism in post-war Britain. He invokes Enoch Powell, the infamous Conservative MP for Wolverhampton South West, whose "Rivers of Blood" speech drew on and further stoked white nationalist sentiment against immigrants.[20] Powell and his speech became the ultimate symbol of Britain's deep-seated racism in the immigrant consciousness, becoming an important reference point in the antiracist and anti-imperialist discourse of organisations like the IWA. Thus, Lachu's allusion to the most stark contemporary example of racist hate is wielded as a conceptual node where the oppressions of race and class come to illuminate the related stigma of caste. In a diasporic context where categories ranging from 'black' to 'Asian' to 'immigrant worker' threatened to flatten the internal exclusions of caste and gender, Lachu's twin treatment of caste and race embodies an engagement with political blackness and

working class solidarity, critiquing exclusionary structures within the Punjabi community alongside those wrought by white fascism and racialised capitalism.

The story ends with the humiliation and complete isolation of Mal Singh – a warning for the future of an IWA that refuses to centre the most oppressed among its ranks. "We are all diharidars", the Punjabi workers declare to Mal Singh, a term that translates as "daily-wage labourers", and reflects a precarious status at the margins of both caste and class. Thus, "In the Chimneys' Shade" posits a discussion of caste as integral to the IWA's political program of combating both racism and labour exploitation, centring the Dalit immigrant worker in South Asian articulations of political blackness.

Conclusion

Although texts like "In The Chimneys' Shade" represent crucial attempts by IWA members to contend with inequalities within, caste and gender remained inadequately addressed. A robust feminist perspective never developed as part of the IWA's program, which remained dominated by Punjabi men. This is in part due to the structure of South Asian migration to England in the 1950s and '60s, as the majority of migrant workers were male, and many had left their families behind in Punjab. Eventually however, from the mid 1960s onwards, more and more women arrived to join their husbands in England, and also took up work in factories and became political organisers in their own right. For instance, they were heavily involved alongside Black Caribbean women in the Grunwick industrial dispute in which factory workers demanded union recognition. The dispute was widely seen as the biggest of such agitations since the General Strike of 1926, with the spotlight on the 'strikers in saris', the South Asian women who were at the forefront courting arrest and carrying out hunger strikes.

Thus, by the 1970s, immigrant women were crucially involved in the IWA's activities, yet none of them made it to prominent positions as leaders or intellectuals. Even more disappointingly, these female comrades remained almost invisible in IWA writing, with women appearing only in the form of wives and mothers who had been left behind in India, featured as objects of longing and nostalgia.[84] This perturbing absence of working women from the IWA corpus perhaps points towards the pressure being exerted on Punjabi patriarchy in the new setting of post-war England, as the rural family structure adapted to the demands of urban, working class, immigrant life. Thus, although the IWA must be celebrated for its towering contributions to antiracist agitation, working class organising, and anticolonial solidarity in post-war Britain, the failure to address the exclusions of caste and gender within the British Punjabi community emerged as prominent gaps in its revolutionary praxis.

For Dalit Shukra, the failure to address these internal contradictions was part of the reason for the IWA's eventual decline in the late 1970s. This was compounded by the widespread closure of factories from the 1980s onwards. Rapid de-industrialisation dealt a severe blow to the IWA's trade unionist roots, and as the second generation of British South Asians emerged, upward social mobility among certain immigrant groups also dented its working class base. As a South Asian middle class emerged, the antiracist solidarity that had united Afro-Caribbean and South Asian workers on the factory floor gave way to an identity politics that increasingly privileged ethnic and national origin over class background. The distinction between Asian and black solidified, and within the

[84] The other, equally problematic manner in which women are represented in IWA writing is through the trope of the 'gori mem', the white woman who is simultaneously an object of desire and a trope for the moral degradation of 'Western society'. Often, the English girlfriend, who in turn exoticises the immigrant man of colour, comes to stand in for the racist white order that exploits the black man. See, for instance, Niranjan Singh Noor's poem, "Thames De Kanday" (On the Banks of the River Thames), which is addressed in a pompous, masculinist to a 'white girlfriend' in the voice of an immigrant worker laying claim to the 'riches' of England that he has built with his labour.

category of (South) Asian itself, British Indian, British Pakistan, and post-1972, British Bangladeshi, emerged as separate identities. Further, in the cultural aftermath of 9/11 and rising Islamophobia in British society, British Muslim identity increasingly asserted itself as a marker of immigrant difference. More recently, galvanised by a Hindu fascist state in India, British Hindu identity has led to a further splintering of British South Asian identity.

Viewed against this contemporary context, in which articulations of racial, ethno-national, and religious identity have shifted profoundly, the IWA's enunciation of a project of working class internationalism represents a strand of immigrant cultural production relegated from existing canons of post-colonial writing and diaspora writing in Britain. This chapter presented a brief introduction to the political activities of the IWA and an overview of British Punjabi writing, followed by close readings of poetry and prose by IWA intellectuals Niranjan Singh Noor, Ajmer Coventry, Surjit Hans, and Avtar Sadiq. Noor's epic-length "Ho Chi Minh" fashions a kind of 'vernacular internationalism' that yoked together regional literary tropes with the global geography of anti-imperialist internationalism. Successive sections discussed the IWA's navigation of race and class in the labour movement in post-war Britain, discussing the range of IWA responses through the poetry of Coventry and Hans. Further, as an analysis of Avtar Sadiq's "In The Chimneys' Shade" shows, this conversation was symbiotically entwined with an interrogation of caste exclusions within the IWA and the British Punjabi community.

However, despite its rich history and heavy circulation in the British Punjabi community, Punjabi cultural production is entirely absent from analyses of British writing. Similarly, studies of left-wing, anti-imperialist aesthetics also remain focused on dominant literary forms like the novel, in languages like English. Despite the planetary vision for liberation espoused by IWA poetry, it has been

denied the universalist or ‘cosmopolitan’ status bestowed on other Marxist and antiracist struggles of the same period. By centring Punjabi writing by non-elite intellectuals, this chapter has sought to highlight marginalised voices within Britain’s histories of anti-imperialist organising and working class struggle. Further, this chapter also aims to push dominant categorisations of ‘British writing’ and ‘immigrant literature’, studies of which have remained dominated by post-colonial concepts like ‘hybridity’, ‘exile’, and ‘culture clash’ that tend to focus on the English novel, written in most cases by individuals who are established enough to appear in official histories. As this close reading of a forgotten body of immigrant writing demonstrates, a focus on ‘hybridity’ and ‘cultural identity’ can sometimes sideline questions of resistance and histories of inequality, delinking diasporic experience and struggles from the legacy of colonialism and the experiences of exploitation and racism that persisted well beyond the achievement of formal independence, in both the former colony and the colonial metropole itself.

6. Conclusion: Cross-border Solidarity Today

In November 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, forty farmers' unions in India joined hands to form the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (United Farmers' Front) to fight a new series of neo-liberal farm laws introduced by the Narendra Modi government.[85] After a round of failed negotiations with the government, hundreds of farmers packed into trucks and descended on Delhi to stage a peaceful demonstration against the impending attack on their livelihoods. Although farmers from all over the country joined, North Indian farmers, in particular those from Haryana and Punjab made up most of the crowd. As they neared the capital, they were met with heavy police presence. The message was clear: they would not be allowed to pass. Delhi was off limits. The Kisan Morcha refused to bow down. And so began a year-long siege of the Delhi border by these denizens of the rural periphery, giving rise to an unprecedented, massive infrastructure of protest, a tent city stretching dozens of kilometres along the state border, housing sleeping quarters, communal kitchens, libraries, union offices, theatre stages, and convivial spaces for the millions who camped there through the bitter winter and sweltering summer.

The 'morcha' (demonstration) frustrated all the government's attempts to bribe, cajole, and coerce the movement into silence, and in November 2021, Narendra Modi announced that the farm laws had been repealed in a historic victory for the farmers' movement. The significance of the defeat inflicted upon the Hindu-fascist capitalism of the Modi regime by an agrarian struggle led primarily by Punjab, the only other non-Hindu majority state other than Kashmir, cannot be understated. Of particular interest to this dissertation's study of post-colonial Punjabi writing

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[85] For more on the farm laws, and the farmers' protests, see https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/agrarian-crisis-punjab-and-making-anti-farm-law-protests

on the left is the galvanising impact of the farmers' struggle on the Punjabi literary tradition. The dozens of Punjabi songs on YouTube, hundreds of verses penned by farmers and left-wing organisers, and the emergence of print forms produced, edited, and distributed at the protest site itself point to nothing less than a cultural revolution. As progressive Punjabi poet Surjit Patar writes, "Ae mela hai" - This is a mela, a joyful coming together.

> As far as the eye can see,
> And beyond what it cannot see,
> People have come together…
> This is a mela.
>
> The earth has joined,
> The trees, the waters, the wind have joined,
> Our laughter, our tears,
> Our songs have joined.
>
> And you cannot even fathom
> Who has joined this [mela]
>
> It includes the many-hued pasts
> of our ancestors
>
> It carries myths that took shape
> In the popular mind
>
> It holds our truth, our courage,
> Our patience, our hope
>
> It includes Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist,

Jain, and Sikh

…

This mela shuns the 'I'

To embrace the 'Us' and 'We'

It holds within it the lessons of centuries

The seven earths and seven skies of the Sufis

…

This is a mela.

This 2020 poem echoes the literary method analysed across a range of texts in preceding chapters. Patar refers to the morcha as a 'mela', a festival or fair. The 'mela' lies at the centre of rural Punjabi culture, organised to mark a range of occasions ranging from the harvest season to death anniversaries of saints and devotional figures. Melas are sites of cultural, social, economic, and spiritual activity, an apt image for capturing the alternative political economy conjured by the farmers' protest at the very centre of power. Within the Punjabi literary tradition, the 'mela' is also a rich metaphor. The word 'mela' derives from 'milan' and 'mel' which means 'to meet', appearing often in the kafi, qissa, and folksong corpus to indicate the union of lovers. For instance, Madho Lal Hussain, the sixteenth century poet discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, implores listeners in a kafi to 'meet the beloved in a mela'. In the verses of eighteenth century poet Bulleh Shah, whose poetry was analysed in Chapter Four, the mela expands beyond the lover and beloved, becoming an invitation to all: 'Come, faqirs, let's go to the mela!' The faqir, the wanderer of Punjabi lands, who forsakes property, family, status to join the mela, invokes direct parallels with the farmers who left the comfort of their homes to lay siege to Modi's Delhi. Moreover, in its expression of cross-religious unity, and its reference to the 'seven earths and seven skies of the Sufis', Patar's verses also connect with the subversion of dominant religion and the re-working of popular devotion discussed in Chapter Four through Bulleh Shah, Sant Ram Udasi, and Ustad Daman. In its invocation of the earth, water, wind, ancestors, and their myths, it also evokes

comparison with Najm Hosain Syed's "The Five Saints", which opened this dissertation. The reference to the elements alongside songs and primordial pasts frames "This is a mela" as a story of origins, much like Syed's poetic connection of geography and everyday life with literary tradition. In doing so, the poem embodies a distinct relationship to tradition and time, as the birth of a new movement compels a return to the past, and the struggle for transformation finds its roots in a critical fidelity to tradition.

The Covid-19 pandemic created the conditions for West Punjabi and diasporic leftists to join the mela. As restrictions on public gatherings came into effect across the globe, literary gatherings and events were pushed online. Najm Hosain Syed, whose play was discussed in Chapter Three, was compelled to move the 'sangat' online, a weekly gathering he has hosted since the 1970s where key texts from the Punjabi literary tradition are read together through a Marxist-inspired lens. As the Sangat, which means 'collective', moved from Syed's stately colonial-era bungalow on Jail Road, Lahore to a Zoom link, participants or 'sangatis' thronged from East Punjab and the Punjabi diaspora abroad. Jasdeep Singh captures the cross-border spirit of such gatherings:

> "The pandemic has invigorated this desire to get together, read, understand, and learn from the shared history and literature beyond geography, religion, and script with the help of online history webinars, zoom conference calls and WhatsApp groups." (Singh, Sep 2020)

Over the course of the pandemic-year, the Sangat read, discussed, and sang the poetry of poet-saint Bulleh Shah, which was discussed earlier in Chapter Four, alongside Sikh saint Bhai Gurdas, and Dalit bard Ravidas. The farmers' movement remained a constant node of discussion in these online gatherings, constituting a discursive site that allowed a cross-border revolutionary Punjabi identity to be articulated, by renewing and reinventing the tropes of resistance in

the Punjabi literary tradition. Moreover, this online space also opened up pathways to cross-border collaboration and solidarity between the two Punjabs and the diaspora. As the farmers closed in on Delhi's borders, students, artists, intellectuals, and political organisers reached across the Indo-Pak divide. Sangeet Toor in Chandigarh and Asma Qadri in Lahore were joined by others in producing and publishing an online magazine dedicated to women's participation in the farmers' protest, under the name *Karti Dharti* (The Labouring Earth). Peasant members of the Kissan Raabta Committee (Farmers' Coordination Committee) in Pakistan piled into tractors and drove to the Wahga border near Lahore on the day the Indian farmers' movement gave a call for a 'tractor rally' against the government. Yet others in England worked on transliterating into Shahmukhi issues of the movement's newspaper, aptly titled *Trolley Times*[86], for hungry audiences in West Punjab eager to hear news of the glorious struggle being silenced and misrepresented by mainstream Indian media. As anthropologist Chakraverti Mahajan pointed out, this cross-border Punjabi digital sphere

> "provided a psychological space for sharing memories, anxieties and hopes for the future… Also, a space to share a sense of solidarity with each other across the border and to dream of a shared Punjab howsoever impossible it might seem given the political dispensations in both nations. The Lyallpur Young Historians Club [as an example of such cross-border dialogues] thus embodies the struggle of memory against forgetting, of people's voice, of folk traditions against the nature of nation states. In many ways it is the next version of what most peace activists in previous decades did by lighting candles on the border on important dates for both the nations." ("Being Punjabi in the Pandemic: Convivial Gatherings in the Digital Sphere")

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[86] For past editions and more, see https://trolleytimes.com/

Sitting in England, pouring over tattered poetry pamphlets from the 1970s, I found myself face to face with the imaginative un-Partitioned Punjab of dissidents discussed in this thesis. The Covid-19 pandemic and the farmers' movement invigorated the left-wing cross-border literary public analysed in preceding chapters, translating its oppositional engagement with literary tradition and its interrogation of the bordering logics of dominant nationalism into critiques of the neoliberal state in India and Pakistan in 2020. Although the digital sphere became a crucial site for this regional articulation of a cross-border revolutionary identity, this synthesis could be seen within movements on the ground as well. In early 2021, farmers in Lahore began organising against the Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project, which seeks to transform 102,074 acres of agricultural land into "high quality residential, industrial, commercial and recreation zones". (Alam et al, "Remaking A River, 2021) In other words, the mega-project is a government-backed land grab to facilitate accumulation by dispossession. These protesting farmers from the peripheries of Lahore closely followed the development of the farmers' movement in India, and articulated their struggle through the lens of a 'Saanjha Punjab' (undivided or shared Punjab), a collectivity expressed in songs and protest poetry that made their way across the border, blaring from loudspeakers at the morcha outside Delhi. From the 'throne of Lahore' to the 'throne of Delhi', the 'Saanjha Punjab' of the salt of the earth, united in resistance against the neoliberal and authoritarian imperative of the post-colonial state, became a powerful symbol of popular struggle.

It is clear that the subversive potential of the Punjabi literary tradition and its dissident vocabularies, tropes, and imaginaries stands far from extinguished. This dissertation has focused on texts written in the decades following decolonisation, between the 1940s and '70s. However, as the recent mobilisation of Punjabi literary and performative traditions around farmers' protests in both Punjabs has shown, the anticolonial, anti-border thrust of these earlier texts does not belong only in the past, to the heady revolutionary fervour of the 1960s when dreams of

socialist transformation and popular liberation did not seem as distant as they do today. The writings of left-leaning, oppositional intellectuals like Amrita Pritam, Nasreen Anjum Bhatti, Gursharan Singh, Najm Hosain Syed, Sant Ram Udasi, Ustad Daman, Ajmer Coventry, Avtar Singh Sadiq, and Niranjan Singh Noor continue to circulate in contemporary political spaces, providing the Punjabi left with the tools to construct the affective, intellectual, and cultural infrastructure for organising struggle.

In fact, now more than ever, progressive forces in South Asia need such cross-border collaborations and connections. In India, we are witness to a complete capture of the state by Hindu-fascists, while in Pakistan, the rising assertion of Right-wing Islamist groups retains tacit support from the establishment. On both sides of the border, aggressive Hindu-washing/ Islamisation seeks the total erasure of 'other' histories, articulating a dominant masculinist upper-caste Hindu/ Sunni Muslim identity on the backs of women, religious minorities, adivasis, Dalits, and political forces on the left. Owning and invoking a pan-South Asian historical consciousness as embodied in left-wing re-workings of a shared Punjabi literary tradition can allow progressives across the divide to subvert dominant nationalism, offering a revolutionary alternative to the affect of belonging peddled by jingoistic patriotism. On a global scale, the rift between 'identity politics' and the left seems like an ever-widening impasse, yet, as the dissident writing of Punjabi intellectuals discussed in this dissertation shows, progressive and Communist politics *must* embrace an identity politics, rooting itself in region, language, history, and community to furnish specific, embedded articulations of resistance. The universal must live in and through the particular, which is why these Punjabi texts intimately engaged the vernacular to debate planetary concerns around Marxism, anticolonialism, feminism, and anti-racism.

To recap, this dissertation analyses post-colonial Punjabi writing on the left as a critical engagement with literary tradition that re-works genealogies of resistance

embedded in popular genres that have circulated regionally for centuries. This body of writing embodies a literary practice committed to decolonising aesthetic form through a focus on regional tropes and narratives marginalised by colonial modernity and relegated from elite-led formulations of post-colonial 'national culture'. However, this turn to regional roots can by no means be read as a nostalgic paean to a pristine pre-colonial past, as resistance against the oppressions of caste, class, patriarchy, race, dominant religion and statist authoritarianism crucially inform these post-colonial interpretations of the Punjabi literary tradition. In particular, as Chapter Two, Chapter Four, and Chapter Five discuss, this critical engagement with literary tradition was deployed by feminist and Dalit voices to push internal reflection on the dogmas and blindspots of South Asian Marxism, Communist Internationalism, and Indian anticolonialism. This auto-critical aspect of the Punjabi literary tradition is crucial, and we must view the literary methodologies discussed herein as in process, as an evolving sphere of debate in a male-dominated and casteist Punjabi society where the exclusions of caste and gender, alongside class, require constant, vigilant interrogation even (and especially) by those who consider themselves allies in the fight for equality. As my fledgling attempt to sketch the contours of left-wing Punjabi writing rooted in regional poetics demonstrates, there is much work that remains to be done in terms of synthesising feminist, queer, and Dalit critiques into this oppositional literary practice.

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