

The colonization of the Punjab by the British ushered in economic, social, cultural and legal conditions in which Islamic identity came to assume new forms. In pre-modern times, Waris Shah's epic, *Heer*, was an integral part of everyday life; it was recited at social and literary gatherings. But the text had not yet become the object of intellectual critique. Rather, the critique embedded in the text suffused everyday conflicts and pleasure. In the modern period, however, the text was dis-embedded from the life-world. It became a site for the contestation of pre-modern and modern forms of Islamic identity.

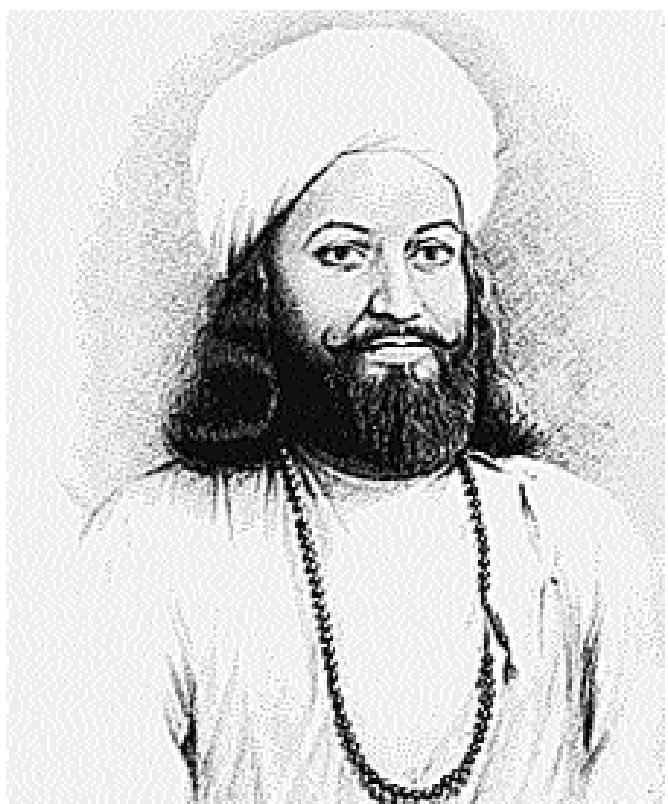


IMAGE: APNA

**Waris Shah, from
Heer Waris Shah
by Sharif Sabir.**

The re-Islamization that emerged during the colonial period had distinctive modern features. During this period both communal-based (Muslim, Hindu and Sikh) and multi-communal organizations appeared in the Punjab. In the first category these included the Muslim *anjumans*, and the *sabhas* of the Hindus and Sikhs; in the second category were the various academies, circles and societies. Both types developed as a result of British rule, and were the precursors of a separate, developing national consciousness among Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in the Punjab.

Even today, more copies of Waris Shah's *Heer* are sold in Pakistan than any other book – except the Qur'an. Waris Shah's classic Punjabi text (completed in AH 1180; AD 1766) is considered by many familiar with the work to be the greatest work in Punjabi, and one of the greatest classical literatures of the world.* Ostensibly a story of tragic love between Heer Sial, who is poisoned by her parents for wanting to marry Thidho Ranjha against their wishes, *Heer* is an extremely complex text which narrates the economic, social, political and religious conditions in the Punjab during the decline of Muslim rule. After about a hundred years of rule (1766-1849) by the Sikhs, the British annexed the Punjab in 1849, and this period marks the beginning of modernity, during which this immensely popular work began to be read differently from the pre-British era. The work became 'Islamized' within the context of Islamization of other aspects of life for the Punjabi Muslims. British rule thus witnessed the formation of newer forms of Muslim identity, which were defined in a more systematic and self-conscious manner than before, and in relation to the new institutions established by the British.

Modernity, Re-Islamization and Waris Shah's *Heer*

The reading of *Heer* during the period of modernity presented an enormous dilemma for Muslims (in ways it did not for the Hindus and Sikhs in the Punjab) because here was an extremely popular text among all classes of Punjabi Muslims, in which the main characters (Heer and Ranjha) were engaged in conduct that transgressed South Asian and especially Muslim norms, but who vindicated their conduct by seeking justification in the same sources – such as the *Shari'a* – as did their antagonists (the Qazis and Heer's family). For example, Heer says to the Qazi after her forced marriage: 'You have performed my *nikah* without my consent. Your act and fatwa are not in accordance with the Qur'an.' Later another Qazi declares this marriage null and void because it was contracted without Heer's consent.

'Re-Islamization' rather than 'Islamization' is emphasized because the period of British rule (1849 onwards) is considered by many scholars to be the time when the Islamization of Muslims in the Punjab took place. These scholars assume that Islamic tradition was either non-existent or poorly developed in the Punjab prior to British rule. What in fact happened was the re-interpretation of the Muslim tradition in the context of new conditions that emerged during British rule.

In this context newer forms of religious identities were developed which were recognized by the colonial state and embodied in legislation, law courts and so on. The reading of *Heer* was far more problematic for the Muslims than for the Hindus and Sikhs, among whom this text was and is popular also, but they read it differently from the Muslims by omitting or de-emphasizing the Muslim aspects. In fact, during the period under discussion the Hindus and Sikhs began to write their own *Heer* with Hindus and Sikhs as the main characters in the text. This was because Waris Shah's *Heer* began to be construed as a 'Muslim' text since it uses Islamic concepts and language – references to Islamic history and traditions, the Qur'an, *Shari'a*, etc. – and the main characters are Muslim. It describes love which is both *haqiqi* (spiritual) and *majazi* (physical); the latter being prohibited to those not married. Similarly, *Heer* contains definite notions of attire and conduct which either conform to, or deviate from, Muslim norms. The text also describes certain practices from which Muslims refrained in the 18th century, as for example the use of all-silk cloth, whilst silk mixed with cotton or wool, called *mashru*, was permitted (this practice is no longer adhered to in contemporary Pakistani Punjab).

'Modern' and 'traditional' responses

Heer and Ranjha's behaviour ostensibly both conforms to and contradicts Muslim tradition in that it permits a person to refuse marriage, but also stipulates that children

must obey their parents. So how was this extremely popular text to be reconciled with new forms of Muslim sentiments and identity that emerged during modernity? There were two main responses among Muslim scholars of *Heer* in the Punjab. These may be termed as those belonging to the 'modern' and the 'traditional' literary circles. It should be noted, however, that the 'traditional' scholars were also the product of modernity, and their presence and their intellectual concerns with regard to *Heer* are nowhere to be found prior to the period of modernity. In fact, the latter undertook the task of reconciling this text with re-Islamization; a task far more difficult than that undertaken by the 'modern' literary circles. The term 'traditional' here means those informal literary societies that were not self-consciously modelled on institutions introduced by the British, with written rules and regulations, formal membership and admissions procedures, and so on. To this could be added knowledge of the English language and participation in the institutions introduced by the British such as colleges, schools, and formally organized workplaces.

For the modern literary circles that developed during British rule (the Punjabi Adabi Academy and other *anjumans*), the main preoccupation with *Heer* was the editing out of what were considered indecent passages from the text and the bringing of balance and symmetry to the verses. But most of all they were concerned with the authenticity of the verses: they wanted to purge all verses which they suspected were not Waris Shah's own, i.e. included into the text after his death. Thus the 1863 edition of *Heer* published by the Punjabi Adabi Academy is entitled (in Punjabi) *Heer Waris Shah, Authentic and Purged of all False Verses*.

The traditional literary circles published the so-called Kashmiri Bazaar editions, such as those by Mian Hidayatullah, Nawab Sialkoti, Piran Ditta, and Maula Buksh Kushta. In contrast to the modern editions cited above, Sialkoti's edition, also published in the 19th century, is entitled (in Punjabi) *Heer Waris Shah, The Original and Largest Edition with Shari'a Sharif*.

For the traditional scholars of *Heer* the main problem was to make the transgressions of the text acceptable to Muslim readers, something which no one felt was necessary prior to the period of modernity. This was for two reasons. Firstly, the absence of a 'modern consciousness' lacking in pre-modern times meant that *Heer* did not have to be defended on 'modern' lines. But now the heightened consciousness of what was 'Islamic' or 'non-Islamic' made such a defence necessary. Secondly, during Sikh rule, Islamic tradition was weakened in public spaces and became more privatized. For example, the *azaan* was banned during this period. British rule created the conditions for the development of civic institutions whereby Muslims could publicly debate, dispute, and propagate what might or might not be con-

sidered Islamic. The educational system, newspapers, and reform societies all constituted such public arenas. For example, one of the first 'modern' Islamic societies in the Punjab, the Anjuman Islamiyah, was formed in 1869 to promote the interests of Muslims.

The attempt to make Waris Shah's *Heer* acceptable was made by relating the narrative in the text to Islamic tradition in general and to the *Shari'a* in particular. Thus the Kashmiri bazaar editions contain extensive notes and commentary relating the narrative in *Heer* to Islamic tradition. In fact, Sialkoti's introduction to his edition asks the question: 'Was Ranjha a pious person?' The answer is in the affirmative because Ranjha goes through trials and tribulations which many pious persons in Islamic tradition have had to go through, and analogy is drawn with Yusuf and Zuleikha. There is scarcely any evidence to suggest that Waris Shah's masterpiece was read in any way other than as entertainment, and that concerns about its moral standing in relation to Islamic tradition can only be observed after the onset of modernity – in spite of Waris Shah's comment on his own work: 'Ahe maine Quran kareem dhey nain, jaire shair mian Waris Shah dhey nain' (These verses by Waris Shah are an interpretation of the Qur'an).

The point to be stressed here is that a Muslim Punjabi modernity was not merely a repetition or a derivative of European modernity. Rather, it was a modern formation with its own specificity which fed into a European modernity.

Note

* The main portion of Punjabi literature prior to British rule was written by Muslims in Persian script. Most of the sacred Sikh literature was written in Braj (western Hindi) using Gurmukhi script. Of course sacred texts need not be judged on their literary merit, but according to the message they attempt to convey.

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