Varis Shah's *Hir*: An Epic or a *Kissa*?

Rana Nayar
Retired Professor
Department of English & Cultural Studies
Panjab University, Chandigarh

Introduction

Varis Shah's *Hir* is regarded as one of the most significant texts of Punjabi culture, a text that, like so much more, serves as a bridge between the *Charda* (Eastern) and the *Lahnda* (Western) Punjab, between the two scripts of *Shahmukhi* and *Gurmukhi,* between the oral and the written literary/cultural traditions. Its popularity can easily be assessed by the fact that though it was written way back in 1766, it continues to be read, recited and sung in rural, as well as urban Punjab (both East and West), with much the same gusto and enthusiasm as it was when it was initially created.

Varis' *Hir* is woven so intricately into the tapestry of Punjab's history and culture, that any effort to disengage the two would simply make both fall apart, almost in the same way in which the multi-coloured threads of *phulkari* often cut loose, if prised open. The cultural semiology of Varis' *Hir* is perhaps as difficult to decode, as would be the case with *phulkari*. Further, like the rich, complex patterns of *phulkari*, Varis' *Hir,* too, is a complex narrative, steeped in the soil of Punjab, with an astounding range of meanings, local as well as universal, inscribed in it.

If the local appeal of this text lies in the way in which it seeks to reconstruct the cultural sociology of customs, conventions, beliefs, values and folklore of a particular community or a specific region of Punjab, its universalism lies in its trans-historical, trans-national and trans-cultural interest in such eternal themes as 'love' and 'death.' It was Leslie Fiedler, who, in his classical work *Love and Death in the American Novel,* first printed in 1960 (and subsequently revised and reprinted in 1966), had underlined the significance of these twin themes in purely archetypal terms. He was of the view that the archetypes of 'love' and 'death,' like other cultural archetypes, have a recurring presence in the mythology of all world cultures.[1]

What Leslie Fiedler stated specifically in relation to the American culture can easily be extended, at least, in this particular case, to the Punjabi culture as well. This may help us understand both the thematic and structural complexity of Varis' *Hir*. Though all the versions of *Hir* don't necessarily end on a tragic note of 'lovers' death,' Varis Shah, in his *Hir,* does engage with both 'love' and 'death,' with the same passionate intensity. It is in this sense that he transcends the personal, local or regional, and becomes universal and/or archetypal. No wonder, its appeal cuts across all barriers of class, caste, creed or religion, and strikes a common chord in every human heart, be it that of young or old, man, woman or child.

Though Varis' *Hir* has had this unique distinction of being a 'classical' text that is also 'popular,' and its resonances are heard across time and space; it is its form that has been a subject of intense debate and discussion. One of the most crucial questions that critical debate has not been able to settle very conclusively is: How is *Hir* to be read? Is it to be read as a 'versified narrative' or as an extended, long poem? Is it to be read as a tragic, folk tale of 'passion, longing and unfulfilled love' or as an allegory of love, both human and divine? Is it a social or a historical document of its own times, or mainly an imaginative reconstruction of society and history of a particular age in which Varis lived?

Going beyond, it also raises some abstruse, philosophical questions such as: Is it mainly a human story, projecting human predicaments and conflicts, and thus important only as an end in itself; or merely a pretext for discussing metaphysical questions of life and death, and/or the possibility of man's union with God, his creator? The critical debate has also veered around this question of whether Varis Shah's *Hir* could be read as a *kissa* (in a typical Arabic/Persian tradition), or as an Epic (in a more conflated Euro-centric sense)?[2] These are all vitals questions, and unless we are able to find answers to some of these questions, our understanding of Varis' *Hir* would remain deficient, if not completely flawed.

Cultural Outsider V/s Cultural Insider

To me, it appears that the last question is a key, as it were, to all other questions, and if we are somehow able to answer it satisfactorily, the other answers might follow simply in a matter of course. The purpose of this paper, as the title suggests, is primarily to seek answers to this very loaded

question, and in the process, also offer, if possible, a re-reading of the original text, strictly from a nativist position. Like other Indian and Punjabi texts, especially the ones which are either classical or medieval in character, this particular text, too, has had a long history of 'mis-readings,' which were largely the handiwork of the Orientalist scholars. My purpose in this essay is not to belittle the efforts of the Orientalist scholars (for they did what they could within a certain historical context), but mainly to question their politics and their ideology, and thereby, the whole rationale of a jaundiced perspective that, I suspect, a cultural outsider often brings to bear upon his findings/observations.

And if this perspective is either that of a colonizer or in some devious ways, is sympathetic to the cause of a colonizer, then the burden of the nativist to defend his position easily gets doubled. It is with this sense of 'double burden' that I'm approaching this question of 'form,' which also explains why I have had to set up such an 'elaborate prelude' to this particular essay. So far in our theoretical efforts, I dare say, there hasn't been much of this superfluous suffix 'post' in our 'postcolonial practices,' as these have surreptitiously remained mere extensions of 'colonial practices' in our midst. The frame of reference for our theoretical questions has not changed dramatically, and therefore, our understanding of 'postcolonialism' has remained severely cramped, even self-limiting. Otherwise, it is rather difficult to explain why we should continue to flaunt the term Epic in our context in all our naïve innocence, without ever pausing to put it under an invasive, critical gaze.

Epic: A Euro-centric Literary Form?

Often in our context, we tend to use the term Epic rather liberally, without ever looking into its Eurocentric origins or its historical contextualization. In a manner of speaking, for most of us, it doesn't really matter how a particular text is described; as an Epic or as a *kissa*, for, we believe, it is not going to majorly change the way we may approach it, otherwise. After all, most of us are with the Bard who says, "A rose shall smell as sweet/even it had another name," aren't we? But those of us who think that it's only a question of nomenclature and nothing else, perhaps need to do some quick re-think on their feet. Literary forms, like so much else, are not hot-house plants that can be grown anywhere, but necessarily share an intimate and organic relationship with the culture in which they tend to grow and develop. For that very reason, literary forms can never be

transplanted from one soil to another or one culture to another, the way plants or even people sometimes are. Literary forms are embedded in the literary/cultural practices of a particular community, society or culture, and remain enmeshed with its literary traditions/contexts, too.

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

Colonial Modernity, Identity Politics & Self/Cultural Representation

Before I proceed any further, let me first make a larger point about 'colonial modernity' and the manner in which it has shaped our ways of self-representation and/or cultural representation. It's anybody's guess that 'colonial modernity' was not simply an intervention in our history, as some people would have us believe, but rather a major, cataclysmic disruption that has left us completely in a state of muddle. In a way, we are still trying, rather hopelessly, to recover from this muddle, but right now, as I see it, the way out seems to be quite a remote possibility. Apart from causing the 'proverbial amnesia' that Ganesh N. Devy[3] has spoken of, it has also cut us off from the pre-colonial context of self-representation/cultural representation, leaving us virtually in a limbo of self-inferiorization and cultural denigration. Despite concerted and repeated post-colonial gestures, we, as a cultural nation, haven't really recovered from its several attendant ills.

To put the whole question of self and/or cultural representation in perspective, I would like to invoke the case of *The Mahabharata,* and the way in which it has been received by the Orientalist scholars. Often the Orientalist scholars are given credit for translating Indian cultural texts

and thereby reviving interest of the world in them. However, a closer scrutiny of their approach to our cultural texts tells us a very different story. Franz Bopp saw *The Mahabharata* as a "flawed epic,"[4] while Soren Sorenson went to the extent of dubbing it as a "monstrous chaos."[5] Most of the Indologists agreed that in the process of its long history of accumulation and accretion, the text had acquired a thick overlay of digressions, which needed to be purged, thus paving the way for an Ur-text or a Critical Edition, a project that was later undertaken and completed by V.S. Sukhthankar at Bhandarkar Institute of Oriental Research, Pune in 1953.

It might seem as if I'm confusing issues by bringing in this digression about how *The Mahabharata*, a significant cultural text of ours, has been represented by the Indologists. This brief survey of its cultural misrepresentation essentially brings to our notice several points, some of which I'd like to encapsulate here. First, the terms of reference for the debate on *The Mahabharata* were fixed by the Indologists, and that has still not changed. Second, in their analysis of this text, they seem to have paid more importance to its form and less to its content. For them, *The Mahabharata* was an Epic, but a flawed one, as it didn't possess a Kantian sense of organic unity, an idea that had incidentally begun to emerge around the same time as the Indologists were working their way around this text.

Third, since Epic as a literary form originated in the West, and has been valorized as a canonical literary form in the Western cultural tradition, it essentially remains a dominant Euro-centric concept. (The canonicity of Epic can be judged from the fact that it has repeatedly been used as a point of departure/reference in discussions of other literary forms such as Drama or Novel (Aristotle and Bakhtin).[6] Fourth, one of the possible ways of approaching this Euro-centric form is to conflate it with the ideology of 'nation' or 'nationalism', something that Hegel has done in his discussion on Poetry.[7]

The point I'm making is very simple. So long as we remain trapped within the Euro-centric paradigms, our approach to our own cultural texts shall remain "flawed," even myopic. In this situation, our connection with our own cultural texts shall mainly be through the prism of Euro-centric, self-inferiorizing gaze. We may thus end up colluding with the miasma of 'colonial modernity,' taking it to be a significant milestone in our march towards progress and/or evolution. But I seriously think that the whole notion of 'colonial modernity,' with its complex ramifications, needs to be

critiqued, even deconstructed. This is necessary because of another fact, too. As I pointed out earlier, somewhere down the line, we need to realize that literary texts/forms have an organic relationship with the cultural context within which they are either born or created. And the only way in which we can possibly negotiate the 'disruptions of colonial experience' is by thus challenging the existing frame of reference of our debate, and also re-setting our agenda on our terms, not anyone else's.

So let me say, in so many words, that I'm extremely unhappy with the unproblematic way in which we often define the terms of our debate. The current debate in which we are engaged is no exception to this general rule. My plea is that we shed our all-too-innocent, Universalist notions of literary forms and start re-contextualizing them within our local/regional contexts. If we were to look at *The Mahabharata* again, from this nativist position, we shall discover that it is not an Epic (as is often presumed by most of us), but simply a *Mahakavya* (a long, ever-expanding poem) or *Itihasa* (an account of the way things happened), something it very self-consciously articulates. *The Mahabharata* is a highly evolved text that not only changes its character depending upon its audience, but also, in a rare self-reflexive gesture, reveals the complex processes of its own creation/construction. This is simply to reiterate the point that frames of reference are often embedded in the literary text itself, much in the same manner in which 'historical consciousness' is embedded in the texts which appear to be otherwise ahistorical. (Incidentally, it was the redoubtable Romila Thapar who made this point in relation to *The Mahabharata*)[7].

Let me now return to the point I made a little earlier, which is that literary forms do tend to share an organic relationship with the cultural context within which they are created. Whatever we may say, I believe that we neither did nor would we ever be able to think of ourselves as a 'nation,' and much less a unified, cohesive nation, either culturally or civilizationally. We are not a nation by choice, but only a nation by coercion. Constitution is perhaps the only document that binds us together into a nation, and that, as we know, is followed more in breach than in observance. (For today, if we were to allow the freedom of self-determination to most of our states, half of the Indian states would probably secede). The notion of 'nation' or 'nationalism' is alien to us, as we tend to construct our identity in either local, or at best, regional, even communitarian terms. (I know by professing this, I may earn the displeasure of Prof. Paranjpaye, for he is known to be a votary of India as a 'nation-in-the-making' thesis.)[8]

At this stage, all I'd like to emphasize is that we neither were nor ever will be a nation, as local and regional identities are not only of primary, filiative significance to us, but also govern the complex processes of acculturation and living cultural practices in our context. This kind of community-orientation or community-mindedness is reflected as much in the domestic sociology of 'kinship culture' as it is in its spill-over of 'patron-client relations' into the socio-economic or cultural space. That even in a so-called democratic, secular and modern society, we continue to insist upon feudalistic/paternalistic, personal/social relations is only a corroborative evidence of this fact, if such evidence is needed, at all.[9] In other words, the concept of 'grand narrative' of any kind is almost alien to us, and we are not able to relate to it, either experientially or culturally. Do I have to say in so many words that Epic, as it is often understood in the West, is a form of grand narrative, with its own mutations, even variations?

Well, one may raise a facetious question at this juncture, why so much of brouhaha about literary forms, and what's there in a name, after all? Does it really matter whether we call an *Epic* a long extended poem, or a *Mahakavya?* After all, aren't we indulging in the very superficial act of translating terms from one context to another? No, we aren't. This question becomes important once we realize that literary forms are not only culture-specific, but history-specific too, and further, that they have a distinct, easily recognizable, identifiable ideology tied to them.

It's this ideological twist that actually has far-reaching implications for the twin problems of 'self-representation' and/or 'cultural misrepresentation', something I have already mentioned, though only in passing, earlier. This is what compels me to make a strong plea for re-claiming both the historicity and the textuality of our pre-colonial poetic/narrative forms/traditions through Varis' *Hir*. This, to me, appears to be a way of building up a substantive and effective critique of 'colonial modernity' in our post-colonial context. My emphasis on reading Varis Shah's *Hir* as a *kissa* and not as an Epic must, therefore, be seen in this very context. It is not simply a whimsical gesture, but a theoretical maneuver, directed at a specific purpose.

History of the Legend

Now much before I start examining the ideological implications of reading Varis' *Hir* as a *kissa,* I would, very briefly, like to reconstruct the

history of the legend it is based upon. Varis Shah's *Hir* was written in 1766 (incidentally, in 2016 we completed 250 years of its continuous, uninterrupted dissemination in our culture). The legend of *Hir-Ranjha* that constitutes its kernel, has been with us much longer, of course, in its various mutating forms. Varis Shah, widely acknowledged as an exponent of Sufism, was only one among many poets to have written about it. Much before he recreated this popular love-legend into a multilayered text, Damodar Das, Shah Hussein, Hafiz Shah, Jahan Muqbil, and Ahmad Gujjar had already dealt with it in a variety of ways.

Though some scholars have been more concerned about the 'historicity' of this love-legend (as they have made repeated attempts to locate it in the actual/historical time-space),[10] to my mind, it is far more important to emphasize how different configurations of this love-legend have evolved over four hundred years or even more. Historically, different versions of the love-legend could roughly be said to cover this extremely significant, though turbulent, period in the history of Punjab, right from the 1450s to 1800. (This is the period dominated by the Sayyid and Lodhi dynasties of Dehi Sultanate {1420s} to that of the Mughal Empire {1857}, with the dominance of Ahmad Shah Abdali and Marathas over North thrown in for a good measure.) If we confine ourselves only to these popular Punjabi variants, probably we'd end up contextualizing this *kissa* in a very limited way.

Interestingly, the literary ancestry of this *kissa* has its roots in the mythical substratum of popular Indian/Hindu love-legends, too. Though this love-legend originated in the soil of Punjab and was articulated in Punjabi language (in Shahmukhi script, of course) and within the Arabic/Persian literary tradition (*kissa* as a form is typically Arabic-Persian), it has connections with the legendary love of Radha-Krishna, embedded in a much older Vaishnavite tradition. It was Damodar Das, the first Punjabi poet to have dealt with this particular love-legend, who established this cultural connection, something that Varis Shah's *kissa* also largely endorses. It's in the conception of Ranjha, the lover, that we find shades of Krishna, as both are conceived as pastoralists (cow-herds) and also as flute-players. Both end up alluring their respective beloveds, Radha and Hir, with the overwhelming power of the divine music they create.

Ranjha (whose real name was Dheedo) is a Muslim Jat from Takht Hazara (these Jats, according to some historians, were basically Hindu Rajputs who had converted to Islam around 1400 before settling down in

the western Punjab), and he falls in love with Hir from Jhang Siyal, the only daughter of Chuchak, a village headman. After the death of his father Maujoo, Dheedo, his youngest, unmarried son, who is constantly taunted by his *bhabhis* for his idle ways, decides to leave home. Having spent the night in a mosque, the next morning, when Dhido crosses the river Chenab, on the other side he is unexpectedly met with Hir, waiting for a boat-ride, surrounded by almost 60 of her *sahelis*. The love-sequence of Hir-Ranjha and even some of the later events and incidents of Varis' *kissa* are reminiscent of the mythical love of Radha and Krishna, blooming on the banks of river Yamuna, in the company of hundreds of *gopis*.

Cultural Sociology of *Hir*

The point I'm making is simple. The cultural sociology of Varis Shah's *Hir*, as I see it, is fairly complex and so is the philosophical/ideological substratum of this text. For one, the cultural sociology is not only historical, but mythical as well. Two, it is not merely a story of two clans of Muslim Jats, but also that of conversions of Hindu Rajputs under the dominant Muslim rulers, with strong, irrepressible resonances of Hindu mythology, even philosophical tradition(s), echoing in the distant background. Interestingly, this *kissa* is located in a period of Punjab's history, when the Sikhs, under the rule of Shah Alam II, were embattled with the Mughals. (The Sikhs, at that point in history, felt as besieged and embattled as Ranjha does, first at home and then in Jhang Siyal.) It is another matter that the Mughals themselves were crumbling rather fast under the dual pressure of their own internal strife, and the rising tide of the colonial power. The historical and political situation of Varis Shah was so complex that virtually the very notion of the 'dominant' had been rendered fluid. There was no single, fixed, identifiable, dominant monolith that could either be postulated or fought against. It was this complex political situation that made Varis Shah turn away from the idea of 'nation' to that of the community and patriarchy, as the ultimate source of oppression and subjugation.

Owing to its peculiar history, Punjab has had a long, established tradition of resistance, rebelliousness, and dissent. If there is anything that defines Punjabi character, it is this tendency to oppose the authoritarian mind-set, particularly within the local and regional context. One of the popular notions about Punjabis is that so long as they are out of power, they fight against the dominance of the political outfit in power, and once

they come into power, they start fighting against the tyranny of their own party chieftain. Though this might appear to be an overstatement of sorts, it does tell us a great deal about the Punjabi mind-set, and its problematic relationship with authority-figures, even visible symbols of authoritarianism.

It is against this backdrop that I'd like to position Varis Shah's *Hir*, as a cultural text that subverts the notion of patriarchy within the domestic, familial space, and by implication in the wider social, political, and cultural space, too. The manner in which this *kissa* develops, it does take on the classical form of love becoming hostage to two feuding families, fighting their internecine battles for local dominance and supremacy. One of the reasons why Hir's father is consistently opposed to marrying his daughter off to Ranjha is because he believes that the latter is from a lower caste and certainly not as well-heeled as his own family. (Incidentally, Ranjha had not only been turned out of his house by his brothers and *bhabhis*, but also deprived of his share in the landed property of his father Maujoo.) Apart from the considerations of inherent superiority that Hir's father Chuchak displays, as head of a land-owning class, it's a combination of caste, class, status, and patriarchy that works to the detriment of Hir-Ranjha's ultimate union.

This explains to a large extent, why Varis Shah has chosen to focus his attention upon the complex cultural sociology of Punjab and also, in a limited way, why it has become, over the centuries, almost a canonical text within our folk tradition. To my mind, despite being a Sufi, Varis Shah was aware of the fact that the Punjabi society of his times was torn asunder by a set of competing, communitarian ideologies, both empirically and experientially. Perhaps, this is what made him choose a legend that could communicate the message of "cultural fusion" (a term I owe to my historian friend I.D. Gaur, whose magisterial analysis of Varis' *Hir* is my main inspiration in developing this paper),[11] of how cultural identities are historically, even mythically constituted, and so can't be separated. He was conscious of the fact that in any given cultural space, it's always a mish-mash of identities, and the process of their hybridization is historically complex and mythically bewildering.

From this perspective, it is not very difficult for us to see how Varis Shah was definitely much ahead of his times. Much before 'colonial modernity' could make its advent in Punjab (which didn't happen until 1870s, almost a century after Varis' *Hir* had been composed), he had already begun to project an ultra-modern, progressive ideology. I have no

hesitation in saying that 'colonial modernity' largely promoted the cause of 'identity politics' in the 19th century Punjabi society, and by doing so, set off a process of 'cultural fission' in our society. It was this process of 'cultural fission' that manifested itself in form of 'separatist movements' in Punjab such as the Arya Samaj and/or the Singh Sabha.

Of course, it were these 'separatist movements' that ultimately culminated into a demand for a separate Sikh state in 1947, formation of Punjab in 1966, and rise of militancy and terrorism in the 1980s. As opposed to this, Varis Shah, through his *Hir,* emerged as a strong votary of "cultural fusion.' He propagated this message of intertwining of identities, of shared cultural space in a Punjabi society that was struggling rather hard to pull itself out of one of its worst ever political/cultural crises.

I have no hesitation in saying that the creation of the first ever Sikh state in Punjab, under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, in the early half of the 19th century, was nothing but a political articulation, even embodiment of Varis Shah's vision of how Punjabi society could possibly attain 'cultural fusion.' Since Maharaja Ranjit Singh recognized this historical fact, like Akbar the great before him, he, too, struggled to create a truly secular state in Punjab. In a way, he was simply trying to translate Varis Shah's cultural vision for the Punjabi society, first into political lexicon and then into a living socio-cultural reality.

In *Hir,* Varis Shah, like all true visionaries, has projected a redemptive vision of cultural co-existence of communities, in a cultural space called Punjab (as Punjab was then not a political space), where difference didn't necessarily signify antagonism or conflict. If on the one hand, Varis Shah's *Hir* shows amalgam of myth, legend, and history, on the other, it also tends to become a confluence of a variety of linguistic, literary, cultural, and philosophical traditions. Using an Arabic-Persian form of *kissa,* Varis has re-created this tale of 18th century Punjab in Punjabi language, but in Shahmukhi script, drawing heavily upon the philosophical and cultural matrix of Vaishnavism and Sufism. The cultural substratum of this text is so complex that it can only be compared to the complexity of the Punjabi society/culture of those times.

So far, in our reading of Varis Shah's *Hir*, we have overplayed one aspect of its cultural sociology, which is the kind of society it sought to portray, and the social/cultural message that was encoded in this text. Besides, we have also looked tangentially at the historical circumstances that gave rise to this text, apart from registering the fact of its

historical/cultural importance. In other words, so far we have only talked about the 'secular' aspects of this 'cultural sociology.' There is another, equally significant aspect of this cultural sociology, which we often tend to ignore, as it deals mainly with its 'religious/spiritual' aspects.

In case of Varis Shah's *Hir*, I dare say, we can ignore the religious/spiritual content of its cultural sociology only at our own peril. One of the questions that intrigued me through my readings of *Hir* is: why should a Muslim writer (for Varis Shah was definitely one), while creating this complex study of Punjabi society, not adopt a pro-Muslim stance in his writings? It was only once I became aware of the religious content of this *kissa* that I was able to get a somewhat convincing answer.

Varis Shah, we must understand, was essentially a Sufi saint, who believed in the principles of universal love, peace, and brotherhood. While the Mughal emperors of different shades and variety were busy wreaking havoc on the soil of Punjab, creating a pall of insecurity, fear, and gloom in the hearts of Punjabis, Sufi saints, through their poetic creations and philosophy, were slowly making inroads into the lives of the common people, teaching them to sink their 'differences,' knitting them together into a non-communal, non-sectarian community. To put it in words of I.D. Gaur, "Varis Shah's *Hir* is actually an embodiment of this very non-sectarian, non-communal, humanistic ideology."[12] (This is incidentally the central thesis of Prof. Gaur's book, *Society, Religion and Patriarchy: Exploring Medieval Punjab through Hir Varis, New Delhi:* Manohar, 2009.) The popularity of Varis Shah's *Hir* is largely a tribute to its non-communitarian philosophy of 'cultural fusion,' which, having seeped into the very roots of Punjabi culture has nourished it for close to eight hundred years or more.

Another point that needs to be made here is that Varis Shah's vision, as articulated in *Hir,* is vertical as well as horizontal. If on the one hand, he looks at the Punjabi society from the inside/outside perspective (which explains why he dwells on the minutiae of culture such as customs, rituals, festivals, costumes, food-habits, beliefs, ideas, living practices, et al.), on the other, he also looks at the cultural history of Punjab from below, critiquing the Muslim Jats, along with their absurd 'cultural notions' of class, caste, social superiority, and patriarchy. In fact, Varis Shah's is so consciously self-critical that he even goes to the extent of challenging some of the decadent practices of Islam, which, by then, the *qazis, mullahs,* or the Muslim clergy had already begun to give legitimacy to. In a way, *Hir* sets up the debate between the monolithic notions of the

qazi-controlled, conceptual Islam and the diverse living practices of the actual people on the ground, who, it seems, were more in the grip of Sufism. Needless to say, Varis Shah systematically interrogates the ideology of the dominant class, upholding in the process, the ideology of *pirs/fakirs/jogis,* prevalent among the common, rural folk.

Having explained the 'cultural sociology' of this seminal cultural text, I now return to the basic question I had raised in the beginning, which is, whether Varis' *Hir* should be read as an Epic or as a *kissa?* And also, what difference would it effectively make if it's read as the former and not as the latter? Though Varis Shah has definitely used terms like *watan* and *des* in his *kissa*, I don't think he did so with the idea of projecting either an "imagined" or a "real" construct of a nation. He was simply using these terms in much the same manner in which they are often used by the common folk, in our own times, as well.

When an illiterate fellow from UP, Bihar or Punjab declares that he is going to his *des,* he doesn't mean to say that he is going to his 'country,' but instead his reference is to his own village, his local habitation or his familial location. It's this conflation of *watan* and/or *des* with 'nation' that often misleads us into reading Varis' *Hir* as an Epic, dealing with the story of a nation. It was and shall always remain the story of a community or, at best, that of a region, where it was created and to which it essentially belongs.

Text as a Self-mirroring Context

So far, my attempt has been to create new kinds of contexts of meaning within which we could possibly position or situate this whole question of how Varis Shah's *Hir* has to be read, as an *Epic* (a grand narrative) or as a *Kissa* (a local narrative). By now, I think, it has been justifiably established that an Epic, being a Euro-centric literary form, is an importation, a borrowing and, at best, a superimposition that Indian texts do not admit of, either organically or culturally. What marks out an Epic, as Hegel suggests, is its linkage with the ideology of nation or nationalism. Hegel was of the view that an Epic becomes a cultural necessity at a strategic point in a nation's history, when it is either caught in the process of 'constructing' its nationhood or is facing an acute crisis of nationalism on account of a failure of such a process. Homer's *Iliad,* he points out, was born at a time when Greeks were creating a sense of nationhood, and

Virgil's *Aeneid* was born out of a sense of failure of the Roman society to sustain itself in the early half of the 2nd century BCE.[13]

My point in invoking Hegel here is not to digress from the main discussion, but merely to emphasize that regardless of how we choose or look at an Epic, there is no escaping the fact that it is closely tied to the notions of 'nationhood' and 'nationalism.' In context of Varis Shah's *Hir*, there is apparently no attempt to establish any linkage, implicit or complicit, with the ideology of nation or nationalism. As stated earlier, this text is rooted so deeply into the cultural sociology of the region of Punjab that if we have to respond to it, we need some prior knowledge and understanding of Punjab's history and its ever-changing, evolving rhythms and patterns.

In his essay, "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin puts forward three constitutive characteristics of an Epic, namely: (1) a national epic past – in Goethe's and Schiller's terminology the "absolute past" – serves as the subject for the epic; (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the epic; (3) an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives.[14] If we were to apply these three criteria to Varis Shah's *Hir,* it certainly would fail to measure up to Bakhtinian scale of what an Epic is, or what it does, and how. There is no attempt on the part of Varis Shah to either construct an idealized version of the past, or valorize it, or deal with what Bakhtin would like to term as "a national epic past."

Varis' concerns are limited in nature, circumscribed by the compulsions of the local geography and topography, familial lineages, regional demography, and its cultural sociology. Not only does *Hir* offer us an intimate account of the flora and fauna of the 18th century Punjab, but it also gives us an overview of the social classes, their hierarchical structures, economic occupations, and changing demography of a typical Punjabi village. Hir and Ranjha live in two villages viz., Jhang Siyal and Takht Hazara, separated by the river Chenab. They belong to two different Muslim Jat clans; Ranjha and Siyal. Interestingly, Ranjha is the character's family name, as his real name is Dheedo. Though they are both from land-owning families, Siyals look down upon the Ranjhas and refuse to marry their daughter off to them. In his *kissa*, Varis Shah gives a detailed account of the village society, its customs and rituals, its fairs and festivals, its local history, its physical landscape and/or topography.

Rather than invoke what Bakhtin calls "a national tradition" as "a source for the epic," Varis Shah focuses his attention upon a legend popular in the region, or at best, tries to synthesize legendary and mythical material from the historic past of Hindus and Muslims to weave a heteroglossic, polyphonic, multi-voiced text. In this respect, Varis Shah's *Hir* may come closer to becoming "novelistic discourse,"[15] but is certainly far from being an Epic. Further, unlike an Epic, *Hir* has a very close relationship with the contemporary reality of the 18th century Punjab, and Varis Shah has, undoubtedly, treated an interesting mix of past legends in such an artistic manner that his *kissa* becomes synonymous not only with his living, contemporaneous reality, but even that of our own times.

Varis Shah has written about Punjab that was culturally hybridized but politically divided and fragmented. That has been the story of Punjab right from the very beginning. While ordinary Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims were living under a constant fear and threat of marauders like Nadir Shah and Ahmed Shah Abdaali, Shah Alam II was presiding over the destiny of the crumbling Mughal Empire in Delhi, hopelessly dependent as he was on the Maratha warriors. East India Company was slowly making inroads into the Delhi Empire, trying to wrest control of power, which it ultimately did in 1818, after the third Anglo-Maratha war. It is important to underline these facts so as to emphasize how the notion of 'Empire' was crumbling and there was no clear centre of power in Delhi.

Closer home, the Sikhs, who then constituted a small fraction of the total population of Punjab (since Muslims were in majority and Hindus, only second to them in number) were trying to reorganize themselves into 12 *misls*, seeking to reclaim the territory they had lost to the Mughals during the campaigns of Banda Bahadur. These *misls* were constantly locked into internecine battles with each other. To make matters worse, the region of Punjab had to face invasions from the Afghan marauders as many as nine times between 1747 and 1769. If on one hand, Punjabis were being hounded and persecuted by the Muslim and Afghan rulers, on the other, they were also embracing the path of love advocated by the Sufi saints. The reason for their ready acceptance of Sufi thought and philosophy was that it had already been endorsed and venerated by the Gurus through its inclusion in the Guru Granth Sahib. It was in this kind of fissured Punjab, divided by conflicting loyalties, internal and external political subversions, social tensions, religious bigotry, and fanaticism

that Varis Shah encoded in his *kissa* a message of cultural fusion and universal 'love.'

Even if we were to think of Epic in terms of its conventions and codes, *Hir* doesn't seem to fit in there. For instance, one of the popular conventions of an Epic, both Western and Eastern, is an elaborate invocation of the Muses by the poet. This invocation is offered by the poet on the pretext that he is not only unequal to the task he has set himself, but he also finds the very act of writing an Epic a suprahuman act, and, therefore, a fairly daunting one. An epic poet has this sense that he has set himself a task that he can in no way complete without the direct or indirect mediation of the divine forces. For this reason, often an invocation is more of an apologia on part of the poet, an admission of the failure of his personal imagination, and also a personal act of humility on his part.

Though the *kissa,* too, begins with an invocation, but it is an invocation with a difference. Let's look at the opening lines of *Hir:*

> *"Awwal Hamad Khyudaye Da Virdd Kicche, Ishq Kita Su Jag Da Mool Miyan*
> *Pehlan Aap Hai Rab Ne Ishq Kita, Maashook Hai Rabi Rasool Miyan…."*[16]
>
> (In the beginning, God had an idea, Love he conceived as the root of all creation
> First, God it was who fell in love, and so God is the first lover, the first beloved)

Here there is no apologia, but rather an open acknowledgement of the fact that love is the root cause of all creation and that Rasool Miyan, the God Himself, was the first lover. Though the context is *Quranic*, and therefore Islamic, the notion of love is universal. Sufism offers two-fold perspective on love. It talks of *Ishq Mejazi* (love of man for God) on one hand, and *Ishq Haqiqi* (love of man for other human beings), on the other.[17] For Sufis, love can either begin as *Ishq Mejazi* or as *Ishq Haqiqi,* but ultimately, one form does get subsumed into the other. It is this kind of fusion of the two that makes 'love' into a generative, universal principle of all life and creation. If at one level, Varis' *Hir* is an enunciation of *Ishq Haqiqi* of two flesh-and-blood human beings, Hir and Ranjha; on the other, it is an equally powerful articulation of *Ishq Mejazi;* Varis Shah's own love, devotion and piety for Rasool Miyan.

In the opening lines, therefore, Varis Shah is not offering an invocation, a la an Epic, but simply reiterating and reaffirming his faith in

the Sufi ideology of love, conscious as he was of creating a *kissa* based on the thematic of love. Like all sane people, Sufis believed that love is the only true inheritance man receives from God, and that it is organically linked to all forms of creation. To that extent, Varis Shah's *kissa* is a poetic overture to Sufi ideology, which can be read at two different levels, depending on what form of love we privilege. At the same time, it also seeks to bridge the gap between the two differentiated though inter-related forms of love: *Ishq Mejazi* and *Ishq Haqiqi*. *Hir* is an eloquent testimony to the fact that earthly love, too, in its intense and purest form, can sometimes transform itself into selfless love for God as well. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh is right in saying that in its appeal, Varis' *Hir* transcends secular-metaphysical binary.[18]

The hero of an Epic is supposed to be a cultural hero of sorts, capable of immense courage and inner strength, someone who becomes an archetypal hero in the culture to which he belongs. If Ranjha's claims for the status of a hero are to be assessed (which again is doubtful as the poem is centred on Hir, and not Ranjha), he is more of an anti-hero than a typical hero. He refuses to fight his brothers, who fraudulently take away his share in the ancestral property, and is easily browbeaten by the barbs of his sisters-in-law who brand him as a lazy, good-for-nothing, wastrel. Rather than fight for his rights, he chooses to become a *jogi* and leave home. On moving to Jhang Siyal, he falls in love with Hir, even chooses to become a cow-herd for her father just to be able to gain proximity to her, and yet is unable to claim in marriage this woman he so desperately loves.

Ranjha is a prototype of a selfless, self-sacrificing lover, who believes that dying in love is far more important than living for it. From the perspective of *Ishq Mejazi,* he is an ego-less being, ready to dissolve (or *fanaa*) his identity into that of his beloved, whom he literally worships and treats almost synonymously with God or Rasool Miyan. From the stand point of *Ishq Haqiqi,* however, Ranjha is a woe-be-gone, despondent and emasculated lover (cast in the long line of tragic lovers celebrated in Persian poetry), who prefers martyrdom in 'love' over fulfillment or attainment of beloved in the worldly sense. Ranjha is not a cultural hero, someone often celebrated in an Epic, but rather an antithesis of a hero in every sense possible. Varis Shah, who knew that his *kissa* would be sung by and among the common folk, was simply trying to tell Punjabis how through long exposure to tyranny and oppression of the ruling class, they had internalized victimhood and emasculated themselves in the same

manner as Ranjha had done. *Hir* was Varis' wake-up call to a dispirited and despondent Punjabi *qaum* to throw off the internal yoke of victimhood and self-laceration.

The *kissa*, as pointed out earlier, is not so much about Ranjha's devotion and piety as it is about Hir's attempts to question and then rebel against the law-enforcing authority of her father, and by implication, that of a paternalistic, oppressive feudal order embodied in *qazi*. It is indeed, refreshing that Varis Shah has made a woman into a heroine of his *kissa*, thus subverting and de-legitimizing all known notions of 'heroism' endorsed by patriarchy. She is a free-spirited young girl, who is not confined to the four walls of her house, but roams freely across the village, and even goes for a boat ride along with her female companions. She falls in love with Ranjha the moment she sets her eyes upon him, and suggests that he should take up the job of a cow-herd with her father. When Ranjha goes into the wild pastures to graze their cows, she goes and meets him openly, without the fear of being questioned or caught. Unlike Ranjha, she is bold, courageous and self-willed, never daunted by the societal fears or pressures, always ready to initiate action, and forever willing to take responsibility for whatever she does.

Considering that Varis Shah was addressing an extremely conservative, tradition-bound and hierarchy-ridden Punjabi society in the 18th century, he has presented the image of a very unconventional, a maverick, almost a modern woman in *Hir*, who not only dares to challenge men but also the decadent system they embody. This bears testimony to the modernity as well as the revolutionary potential of Varis Shah's text. Hir was most certainly conceived as a woman, far ahead of her times than we often imagine. At a more political level, Varis Shah's point was simple. If Punjab has to rise from the ashes like a phoenix and recover from its decadent slumber, then it must re-discover the revolutionary potential and rebellious temper of Hir, something that it had once possessed in its cultural history, but had somehow lost through persistent neglect and oversight of its own strengths. Not only does Varis Shah give us a fine understanding of how tyranny works to dehumanize us, but also provides the cultural vision of how we could rebuild and reconstruct ourselves as a community or a society.

Unlike an Epic, there is no use of dues ex-machine in Varis' *Hir*, as Gods don't ever descend from the Olympian heights to fight for or against men in their battles. Quite simply, the theme of *Hir* is not war but love. It's another matter that 'love' is seen here as a form of individual rebellion,

and therefore, an anathema to the principles of social order and cohesiveness. The village community is so strongly knitted together that all outsiders, including Ranjha, are viewed with a great degree of suspicion and distrust. And love poses the greatest danger to the social cohesiveness of this well-knit community/society. Once Hir's 'love' for Ranjha comes out into the open, the two families turn hostile and become feuding families instead. There is a war between the two clans or familial groups, despite the fact both are Muslim Jats, and it finally ends in Hir's forced marriage to Saida of Khera clan. Though the main theme of *Hir* is love, it does explore the possibility of war within love, not outside it. As such, only the *qazis* and the *jogis* (who are very much the earthly symbols of temporal and spiritual authority, respectively) interfere in the love affair of Hir-Ranjha, while Varis Shah makes no effort, whatsoever, to bring divine beings into this conflict, directly or indirectly.

And finally, if one looks into the moral frame of an Epic, it can be argued that this form offers the possibility of an ideological conflict between two kinds of social/moral forces; the ones that promote anarchic, tribal consciousness, which threatens to become a law unto itself, and a cohesive, ordering, civilizing consciousness that is only too happy to submit itself to the rigors of law or codification. Paris abducted Menelaus' wife Helen and ran away with her, igniting a war between the Trojans and the Greeks. It would, therefore, not be wrong to say that the sociology of an epic is shaped by a consciousness that is trapped between the conflicting demands of a pre-agrarian, tribal society and an ever-evolving, post-agrarian, civil society. Epic is a conventional form, which ultimately valorizes law-enforcing agencies, thus affirming triumph of social order and conformity. We have already seen how Varis Shah's *Hir* is a happy exception to this rule.

Varis Shah's *Hir* doesn't configure any ideological conflict between the law-breakers and the law-makers within its cultural space. If anything, it is the *qazi* (the law-enforcer) whose role and function comes in for scathing denunciation in this *kissa*. Hir, the law-breaker, is, in fact, celebrated and also valorized as a strong, independent-minded woman. Far from dealing with an ideological conflict that defines the matrix of an Epic, this *kissa* focuses upon the internal contradictions and ambivalences of a predominantly insulated, agrarian, rural and pastoral society of the 18th century Punjab. This is the time when different wandering tribes of the Jats were looking for permanent land settlements, and consequently grappling with the question of a new, emerging personal, social, political

and/or religious identity. Sufism provided the necessary framework within which they tried, sometimes successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully, to negotiate or define this new identity. In this society, someone like Ranjha, who is merely a cow-herd and keeps playing his *wanjali* (flute) all the time, is truly lowly in social hierarchy, despite all his resonances with Krishna, the legendary, pastoral Hindu Godhead.

Conclusion

Thus conclusively we can say that Varis Shah's *Hir* can only be read as a *Kissa,* and not as an Epic. It is not merely a question of nomenclature as it might appear to be on the face of it, but a far more serious and complex question of ideology and its subtle workings and machinations within the text. It is different when we read our texts through the Western lens or approach them as cultural outsiders, and it is qualitatively different when we look at their cultural sociology and/or history, thus reading them as cultural insiders. Varis Shah's *Hir* is so deeply rooted in the oral and written linguistic, literary, cultural and philosophical traditions of Punjab and Punjabiyat, that it can justifiably be read only as a *kissa,* which is the way a cultural insider would have us read it, anyway.

Rana Nayar retired as Professor from the Department of English & Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh in 2017. E-mail: rananayar@gmail.com

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Notes & References

[1] Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in American Novel,* New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997.

[2] Most of the critics tend to use the term Epic in a non-ideological, context-free manner and therefore, are unable to see many contradictions that its unproblematic use tends to offer. In fact, it is this critical disposition that prompted me to undertake an alternative, against the grain reading of *Hir* as a *kissa*.

[3] G. N. Devy, *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism,* Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1993.

[4] Franz Bopp as quoted by V. S. Sukhthankar in his *The Meanings of The Mahabharata,* New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1998.

[5] Soren Sorenson, *An Index to the Names in the Mahabharata: With Short Explanations and Concordance with Bombay and Calcutta Editions & P C Roy's Translation,* New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963.

[6] It is a well-known fact that both Aristotle (in *Poetics*) and Bakhtin (in "Epic and Novel") have used Epic as a significant point of departure for their discussion of Drama and Novel, respectively.

[7] Romila Thapar, "Society and Historical Consciousness: The Itihasa-Purana Tradition," in *Interpreting Early India* (reprinted in *History and Beyond*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000). It is in this particular essay that she first made this all-important distinction between 'embedded history' and 'externalized history.'

[8] Makarand Paranjape, *Making India: Colonialism, National Culture and the Afterlife of Indian English authority, New York & London, Springer,* 2013. It is in this book that Makarand develops his thesis of how India is still a 'nation-in-the-making.'

[9] Robert W. Stern, *Changing India: Bourgeois Revolution on the Subcontinent, IInd Edition,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. My argument is based on the thesis Stern has developed in his book.

[10] See Farina Mir's *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab,* California: University of California Press, 2010 and Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh's Introduction to *Of Sacred and Secular Desire: An Anthology of Lyrical Writings from the Punjab,* London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012 for a more elaborate textual discussion of Varis' *Hir.* Among others, Muhammad Afzal Shahid has looked into several versions of Varis' *Hir* in an effort to establish the true version. He also engages with the question of historicity of this text. See his article, "Varis Shah and His *Hir"* in *Academy of the Punjab in North America* accessed on internet on August 14, 2018.

[11] I. D. Gaur, *Society, Religion and Patriarchy: Exploring Medieval Punjab through Hir Waris, New Delhi:* Manohar, 2009).

[12] Ibid, 14.

[13] Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics, Part III Section 3,* accessed on Internet on August 14, 2018. In this essay, Hegel offers a very comprehensive discussion on Epic poetry and its links with the political ideology of 'nation' and 'nationalism'.

[14] M. M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" (p. 52) in *The Essentials of the Theory of Fiction,* ed., by Michael J. Hoffmann & Patrick D. Murphy, London: Leicester University Press, 1996, pp. 43-62.

[15] "Novelistic Discourse" is a term attributed to Bakhtin again.

[16] *Hir* Varis, ed., by Jeet Singh Sheetal, Patiala: Pepsu Book Depot, no date of pub, all textual quotations are from this text and translations, wherever they occur, are mine.

[17] William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi,* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983. There are two chapters in Part III of this book, devoted exclusively to the exposition of love and its various forms in Sufism.

[18] See Introduction to Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh's *Of Sacred and Secular Desire: An Anthology of Lyrical Writings from the Punjab,* London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.