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# From Hallaj to Heer: Poetic knowledge and the Muslim tradition

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## From Hallaj to Heer: Poetic Knowledge and the Muslim Tradition

Nosheen Ali<sup>°</sup>

### *Introduction*

How do we comprehend the poetic universe of Muslim South Asia, and why is it important to do so? This is the larger question — at once historical, sociological, literary, and political — which forms the heart of the inquiry in this paper. In my attempt to address this question, I attend particularly to the themes of language, time, love, spiritual subjectivity, key figures, and resistance in understanding the place of the poetic in Muslim tradition. I then offer glimpses of the Seraiki poetic landscape from southern Punjab in Pakistan, to illuminate the continued power and politics of poetic practice in present-day Muslim lifeworlds.

First, a note on the process and path that led me to this inquiry. I became immersed in the world of South Asian, non-English poetry during my dissertation research in Pakistan's northern region of Gilgit-Baltistan, which forms part of the disputed territory of Kashmir. While researching how people negotiate life in the shadow of conflict, I came upon regional poetry as a significant yet under-studied site of being and negotiation, citizenship articulation, and political protest in a militarized border zone. The poets of Gilgit-Baltistan were not just writing deeply moving, critical poetry. They were organizing poetic festivals for the explicit purpose of peace-building in a highly sectarianized context, often at the cost of endangering their own safety. I was hooked, and following this research, began to explore what poets were thinking and doing elsewhere in Pakistan. From Tharparker in the south to Hunza in the north, I learnt about poetry that was passionate and pioneering, recited for recovery and resistance in devastated times.

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\*\* I am grateful to Dia Da Costa and Najm Hosain Syed for their feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. I am also indebted to students in my graduate seminar (*The Poetics of Knowledge in South Asia and the Middle East* at NYU Gallatin) for their productive engagements that helped me in refining the arguments of this paper.

Yet, the “mainstream” metropolitan audience was hardly listening. The reasons are several, and I can only gesture towards some intuitive ideas here. To begin with, as an aftereffect of English colonialism, educated city-dwellers in South Asia today have often become ignorant of their family languages. This means that more and more, we are alienated from the poetic heritage and present that continues to define the lifeworlds of the multitude. This alienation is sometimes reflected even in otherwise knowledgeable discourses within journalism and academia. Hence, for example, one finds an article by Zakaria in the daily Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* in 2014 titled “A poetless Pakistan,” which portends that Pakistan in its imminent future may well be poetless.<sup>1</sup> In this op-ed about Faiz, poetry, and Pakistan, the author does not mention even a single contemporary poet. On the other hand, Kaviraj explores compellingly the poetic threads connecting South Asia, but ends his piece by wistfully arguing that all that is left for us to hang on to are contemporary renditions of Kabir.<sup>2</sup>

There is thus a sense of mourning and nostalgia around a lost poetic past, whether of Pakistan or South Asia. I would argue that this sensibility is not just premature, but also a particularly middle-class one that is unable to see outside the continued popularity of Kabir and Faiz. There is an alive poetic present beyond these giants — a South Asian multiverse — and there always has been. Perhaps our simultaneous blinding by and disillusionment with bourgeois nationalism has meant that we have simply stopped seeing people for who they are and what they feel.

As a first step towards understanding poetic consciousness in South Asia, I began researching, documenting, recording, and translating contemporary poetic thought from Pakistan and India. This effort resulted in a multilingual digital humanities platform called UmangPoetry ([umangpoetry.org](http://umangpoetry.org)), which I founded in January 2014 and continue to curate with a team of collaborators. We have so far interviewed and recorded more than forty poets in Pakistan and ten in India, and published twenty-five video poems spanning the linguistic range of Urdu, Sindhi, Punjabi, Wakhi, Gujarati, Dharki, and Hindi, alongside blog posts examining the relationship between poetry, history, and society. By providing a meeting place for poets, writers, translators, learners and lovers of the poetic word, Umang seeks to amplify South Asian traditions of poetic reflection and nurture our capacities for empathetic, cross-cultural connection.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rafia Zakaria, “A poetless Pakistan,” *DAWN*, February 14, 2014, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1086977>. Faiz Ahmed Faiz was a renowned 20th century Urdu poet from Pakistan, celebrated across India and Pakistan especially in secular-leftist circles as the quintessential poet of progressive thought.

<sup>2</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, “A Strange Love of the Land: Identity, Poetry and Politics in the (Un)Making of South Asia,” *SAMAJ*, 10, 2014, <http://samaj.revues.org/3756>. Kabir is perhaps the most popular medieval Indian poet-saint. His satirical poetry defied religious dogmas, and promoted a vision of spirituality that redefined the meaning of faith across the subcontinent.

<sup>3</sup> The Umang collective also organizes on-the-ground initiatives for poetic education through seminars, festivals, and publications. These have included a poetry-awareness booth at the 2014 and 2015 Karachi Literature Festivals as well as the Creative Karachi Festival 2014, two discussion panels on contemporary poetic thought at

It is this immersive research and intervention in the poetic landscape of Pakistan that moved me to probe the historical relationship between poetic thought and senses of self and sociality in Muslim South Asia. My use of the term “Muslim” comes from my research on poetic practices in the predominantly Muslim cultures of Pakistan. However, as will become clear in the paper, my argument is relevant to poetic consciousness in South Asia at large because the poetic paradigms I highlight are neither limited to Muslims nor to present-day Pakistan — this is just the context I am most familiar with. For this reason, I would resist placing my scholarship solely under the rubric of “South Asian Islam” or the “anthropology of Islam.” Even “Sufi” poetry and culture cannot be solely subsumed simplistically under the category of the “anthropology of Islam,” given the religio-cultural lifeworld of premodern and modern times in which “Hinduism” and “Islam” were not taken to be mutually exclusive categories. As Devji has argued, it was only during the nineteenth century that Islam came to be used as a totalizing category, an “independent historical actor designating a new kind of moral community.”<sup>4</sup> And as he elaborates, “it would not have been possible to talk about the spirit of Islam before the nineteenth century, because Islam itself had not yet come to exist as a singular culture or civilization, the sum total of Muslim beliefs and practices.”<sup>5</sup> I thus feel unsettled by the sub-discipline of the “anthropology of Islam” — to which, now that the field exists, I nevertheless see this paper as a contribution! — and wonder if fields like the “anthropology of Hinduism” and “anthropology of Christianity” similarly subsume so much of history, society, and culture under the category of what is today recognized as a defined religion. All this is to say that the arena of analysis and intervention in this paper is best described as that of South Asian cultural-political lifeworlds centered around poetic thought and tradition.

### ***Mannkabat* or Poetic Knowledge**

When I asked the Sindhi artist-poet Ayaz Jokhio about the meaning of poetry, he said to me: “It is like fish trying to describe what the sea is.” This captures — summarily and quite poetically — the everywhere-ness and essentialness of the poetic mode of being in South Asia. The poetic is not merely a matter of literature in our region, individualized and privatized as it has become in the Western context. It is a multidimensional sea of knowledge that permeates our geographies and histories, defining individual sensibility as well as collective sentiment. Through everyday life environments as well as *mushairas*, *melas*, and *rat jagas* — verse festivals that take place across Pakistan, India and Bangladesh — poetic consciousness continues to

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the 2014 Islamabad Literature Festival, a South Asian multilingual poetry festival titled Liberation Mic/Mic Be-Lagaam at the Creative Karachi Festival 2016, the publication of a poetic video CD, and seminars on South Asian poetic thought in Pakistani and U.S. colleges.

<sup>4</sup> Faisal Devji, “Apologetic Modernity,” *Modern Intellectual History* 4:1, 2007, 64.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 65.

form the moral imagination in South Asia. More generally, in the non-West, poetic engagement plays a strong role in social interaction and political life.<sup>6</sup> Especially in Muslim Central and South Asia, poetic thought has been intimately connected with notions of the intellect, spirituality, music, and art. It has played a fundamental role in articulating the meaning of life and in offering a sense of history and community identity. For all these reasons, the rhythmic word is widely regarded as *ruh ki giza* or food for the soul in Muslim South Asia. The references used — it is the water, it is the food — reflect how the poetic is deemed as an eminently embodied need, not just a matter of leisure.<sup>7</sup> In view of this essentialness, it is understandable why poetic thought historically formed a foundational core of ethical, aesthetic, worldly and spiritual education in Muslim societies in South Asia as well as in the Perso-Indian cosmopolis more generally. Such centrality — as nourishment, identity, wisdom — is hardly captured in the English term “poetry,” and hence I propose the term *mannkabat* or poetic knowledge to capture the epistemic place of the poetic in South Asia.

What I am describing as “poetic” clearly goes beyond the aesthetic word of rhyme and meter. *Mannkabat*/poetic knowledge is a felt mode of seeing, being, and doing in the world that is expressed beautifully and truthfully through word, art, and action. This is still an intellectual, abstract definition because in an embodied, alive sense, the meaning of poetic knowledge can only be communicated in its own form, not as an explanation about its form. As a *desi* equivalent of poetic knowledge, I suggest the term *mannkabat*.<sup>8</sup> *Mann* is readily understood across the Indic landscape as the non-dual, heart-mind from which emerge thought-feelings and perception, and *kabat* means “to say” or “to communicate” in Hindavi. *Kabat* is also linked to, and resonates with *kabavat* which refers to a proverbial saying. Taken together, *mannkabat* denotes “heart-mind knowledge,” or what I have described as poetic knowledge in this paper.

I am taking this space and time to elaborate alternate concepts and vocabularies because poetic knowledge is both the object of my analysis as well as an analytic and method-philosophy. As the discussion so far highlights, I feel constrained by English in my attempt to discuss the poetic universe in South Asia. Dualities like heart and mind are the first bind, followed by narrow visions and divisions of Western theory and its academic episteme — such as the distinctions between literature and religion, literature and history, and literature

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<sup>6</sup> See Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) and Steve Caton, “Peaks of Yemen I Summon:” *Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) for examples from Egypt and Yemen, respectively.

<sup>7</sup> For a related argument about theatre, see Dia Da Costa, *Politicizing Creative Economy: Activism and a Hunger called Theatre* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> *Desi* is a readily understood term across South Asia, referring to the people of the land of the subcontinent and their indigenous ways of being.

and philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Poetic knowledge refers to a historical and ongoing oral-literary milieu which transcends these divisions. We have in South Asia, in perhaps every region, a tradition of poet-philosophers and poet-saints. Even in what are perceived as conservative Deobandi-Muslim seminaries, the religious curriculum Dars-e-Nizami was historically taught alongside the Dars-e-Masnavi — the study of poetic thought from the Sufi saint Jalal al-Din Rumi. Medieval Muslim historiography was likewise unwritable without poetic verse that served an intellectual as well as an interpretive purpose.<sup>10</sup> More generally, as Mignolo has argued, the concept of “literature” of which poetry is a part itself emerged at the end of the eighteenth century “contemporary of the imperial leadership of England and France,” and “now we talk about ‘literature’ as it were a universal practice.”<sup>11</sup> Following Mignolo, then, I take the concepts of “poetry” and “literature” as regional, not universal, and argue for a refusal to accept the use of these ready-made categories to understand ethnographic contexts in South Asia. My attempt at outlining the contours of historical and contemporary poetic knowledge is thus an effort in decolonial thinking. Extending Mignolo, we might say that the Western categories of “poetry” and “literature” are actually vernacular — or, at least, no less vernacular — and that there is something deeply ironic and imperialistic about using these vernacular Western episteme to analyze South Asian *bhashas* (languages) and *vasaib* (Seraiki: peopled landscape). As Ananthamurthy has argued, the word “vernacular” is an insulting term for South Asian *bhashas*, and as Rama Sundari Mantena has compellingly shown, the politics of the vernacular in South Asia is linked to a colonial history of simultaneously discovering, demeaning and “developing” South Asian *bhashas* which were presumed to be backward and not-properly-literary.<sup>12</sup> Alongside notions of poetry and literature, then, I consider the notion of the vernacular as also a problematic category for grounding my analysis of poetic knowledge traditions and cultures in South Asia.

Having described the basic nature and cultural significance of poetic knowledge, I would now like to offer some extended reflections on the character of their heart and practice. To begin with, it is important to appreciate the many facets of the relationship between

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<sup>9</sup> For relevant academic work on South Asia that has challenged these divisions, see Shail Mayaram, *Against History, Against State: Counterperspectives from the Margin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee, eds., *History in the Vernacular* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008), Francesca Orsini and Samira Sheikh, eds., *After Timur Left: Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth-Century North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Chitralkha Zutshi, *Kashmir's Contested Pasts: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Shahzad Bashir, “The Past in Poetry: Time, Subjectivity, and Aesthetics in Indo-Persian Narratives,” Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Asian Studies, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Mignolo, “The Prospect of Harmony and the Decolonial View of the World,” September 22, 2012, <http://waltermignolo.com/the-prospect-of-harmony-and-the-decolonial-view-of-the-world/>.

<sup>12</sup> U.R. Ananthamurthy, “Globalization, English, and ‘Other’ Languages,” *Social Scientist* 37: 7/8, 2009, 50-59, and Rama Sundari Mantena, *The Origins of Modern Historiography in India: Antiquarianism and Philology, 1780-1880* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

language, sound, and poetic knowledge. Recent work on South Asian literary cultures has illuminated well the multi- and inter-lingual character of literary production, and how blended languages, provincialized poetic forms and shared idioms have been a norm that contest notions of supposedly mono-lingual, mono-regional, and mono-religious cultures.<sup>13</sup> But at a most fundamental level, I wish to argue that the very soul of language needs to be understood as a form of poetic knowledge. A language reflects the lifeworlds of its speakers, their frames of meaning, thought, and value. And poetry is often regarded as the most profound form of language. However, while poetic thought surely comes from language, language in the first instinct itself came from poetic thought. We create from words, but first we had to create a language with which we could create. Language is thus in itself an act of creation, a practice of poetic vision and feeling. In other words, poetic potentiality is built into language. It is not a coincidence, for example, that the words *sukh* (joy) and *dukh* (sorrow) rhyme and constitute a pair of related opposites so often used in Braj, Hindavi, and Urdu-Hindi poetry. It is also not a coincidence that the word *ganj* (treasure, contentment) and *ranj* (sorrow) similarly rhyme in Farsi, constituting a common rhyme-pair in its poetry.<sup>14</sup> Metaphor, too, is often built into language. It is again, striking that the sounds of *ghat* (heart) and *gat* (community) resonate connectedly. In the Miskitu language in Nicaragua — to reference a different context — the word *taya* simultaneously means skin, the bark of a tree, and family. Hence, it is often a poetic understanding of the world that leads a particular pattern of words, sounds and rhymes to emerge as language — an apprehension that is illuminated and made fragrant through formal poetic verse.

The second point that I wish to make is the centrality of oral recitation and musical performance to poetic thought in South Asia. In the Chapursan village of Gilgit-Baltistan, once, I asked the well-known Wakhi poet Alam Jan Dariya about his literary “publications,” only to receive a quizzical expression in return. He then pointed to the rubab-playing singer next to him and said, “Just buy his CDs!” In Sindh as well, publicly-performed sung poetry that is put to music is inseparable from the literary imagination.<sup>15</sup> This is in sharp contrast with literary cultures in the Western world, where poetic thought is more about individual, written expression rather than an element of community-formation and aural/oral performance-for-the-collective.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), Zutshi (2014) and Orsini and Sheikh (2014).

<sup>14</sup> My use of Farsi instead of Persian here is both instinctive and intentional. It is intriguing that when writing about Urdu in English, we retain the native term of the language i.e. Urdu. The same applies to Sanskrit, Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil and other Indian languages. However, Farsi always ends up being translated as Persian. This is puzzling, and has the effect of circumscribing Farsi in a way that elides how geographically and poetically rooted the language has been in India.

<sup>15</sup> Ali S. Asani, “At the Crossroads of Indic and Iranian Civilizations: Sindhi Literary Culture,” in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 612-646.

A third feature of *mannkabat*/poetic knowledge is its conception of time. I have proposed to discuss “contemporary” poetic thought in South Asia and especially Pakistan in this paper, where the “contemporary” is readily understood as a synonym for the present, the current, the now. In the poetic domain, however, time and contemporaneity have widely different meanings. When I asked the eminent, Marxist-feminist Pakistani poet Nasreen Anjum Bhatti about who her contemporaries were, she was perplexed at my question — not unlike the Wakhi poet Alam Jan Dariyo referred to earlier — and replied, “*Lo! Baba Farid is my contemporary!*”<sup>16</sup> A linear-modern, social-scientific sense of periodization seemed utterly comical to her, as the past is always present and long-gone poets continue to have presence through their word. Indeed, “contemporary” poets conceive of themselves in conversation with the living word of poets, deceased or alive. A poet goes back and forth, back and forth, not *across vast swathes of time* — as we often hear — but *within eternal time*, in a manner as freeing and constrained as a child on a swing. This con-verse-ation is sometimes directly reflected in the content of poems as well. In one of his poems, for example, the Lahore-based Punjabi poet Arif Shah Prohna writes today in response to a famous line from the eighteenth-century Punjabi Sufi poet Bulleh Shah, *Bullab ki jaana mein kaun* (Bulleh, I do not know who I am) that *Bullab mein jaana mein kaun* (Bulleh, I know who I am).

The poetic sense of presence, time, and contemporaneity that is reflected in the thought of Nasreen Anjum Bhatti and Arif Shah Prohna also reveals a fourth dimension of poetic knowledge: the irrelevance of categories such as pious/progressive and religious/secular in grasping poetic agency. These are the binaries through which we have come to comprehend life and thought in South Asia. However, if Baba Farid is the co-present, contemporary of a Marxist-feminist Pakistani poet of today, what matters is the felt mode of poetic thought — what I have called *mannkabat*/poetic knowledge — not its sequencing, labeling and categorizing under colonial-capitalist modernity. These labels and categories are also often mirrored in the leftist rhetoric of secular-progressive activism which is also a result of this modernity even as it fashions itself in resistance to it. In the traditions of poetic knowledge past and present — and for the inhabitants seeped in these traditions — non-binary thinking is a way of being, and the coexistence of what-to-us-moderns-seems-paradoxical simply a philosophical and playful way of comprehending truth. It is this same poetics of knowledge that enables thought to be simultaneously sacred and sensual in mystical Bhakti and Sufi poetry, where heavenly and earthly phenomena freely interweave.

This leads me to a related, fifth thesis about *mannkabat*/poetic knowledge. Through my conversations with South Asian poets, I have learned that to understand poetic thought in my region, I need to place experience not just in a “social” context — as my academic training has

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<sup>16</sup> Baba Farid lived in the twelfth-century, and is venerated as the first Punjabi Sufi poet as well as a key saint in the Chishtiya Sufi order. His shrine is located in Pakpattan in Pakistan.



taught me — but also in what I would call a supra-social, spirito-poetic, transcendental context. In other words, there is a poetic dimension of reality, history, and context that embodies a different sense of simultaneous-universal time, space, and philosophy. It is because of the “continuity of lived time”<sup>17</sup> and thematic in this poetic mode of history that Nasreen Anjum Bhatti considers Baba Farid her contemporary, and the postmodern Seraiki poet Rifat Abbas wonders how I can publish his work till I understand that of the 19th century Sufi poet Khwaja Farid — “because everything is from him and in continuation of him.”

While it is particularly accentuated in Punjab and Sindh, I would argue that a spirito-poetic, transcendental sense of the world is key to poetic knowledge traditions more generally in South Asia. The aspiration for universal truth through poetic knowledge is historically linked to an affective, spiritual quest for the divine, especially as embodied in Bhakti and Sufi traditions that have fundamentally shaped notions of the self in the areas that today form Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. Poetic imagination and spiritual subjectivity are thus intrinsically linked. This “contemplative role of poetry”<sup>18</sup> is well-recognized in Sufi thought, which permeates Pakistan and its religio-cultural lifeworld. Indeed, “poetic creation constitutes in a sense a criterion of the spiritual maturity of the contemplative”<sup>19</sup> while also serving as a medium for its affective, sensory, and conscious experience. It is for this reason that poets have so often been considered as intermediaries between the human and the divine in Muslim societies at large.

The supra-social, transcendental context of poetic knowledge provides another reason for displacing the term “vernacular” as a referent for poetic-literary traditions, especially in the worlds of South Asian Muslims. Mansur al-Hallaj — the tenth-century martyr-mystic who is invoked across Arabi, Farsi, Urdu, Sindhi and Punjabi poetry — cannot be understood as some sort of a local, vernacular reference. The concern in Sindhi-Urdu-Punjabi poetry with universal spirituality, and then more “secularly” with global humanity in the last century, also works against comprehending poetic knowledge merely in terms of a region-based “social” or “vernacular” context.

This brings me to the sixth thesis on poetic knowledge traditions — their thematic essence and inclinations. Across the South Asian spirito-poetic landscape that defines our cultural-literary inheritance, love, humanism, freedom, and oneness constitute key themes in multiple languages and regions. These themes indicate a sacred, planetary sense of community and ethical responsibility that not only precedes but far exceeds contemporary discourses such

<sup>17</sup> U.R. Ananthamurthy, “Being a writer in India,” in *Tender Ironies: A Tribute to Lotbar Lutze*, eds. Dilip Chitre, Günther-Dietz Sontheimer, Heidrun Brückner, Anne Feldhaus and Rainer Kimmig (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003), 130.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Laude, “Islam: Sufism and Poetry,” in *Singing the Way: Insights in Poetry and Spiritual Transformation* (World Wisdom, 2005), 55.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid: 56.

as those of secular-left politics or human rights. We must strive to understand these themes in their own terms, spirits, and logics instead of through the derivative political leanings and value-systems that we have today come to consider as “progressive.”

The sixth thesis on the centrality of love in poetic knowledge is connected to the seventh and eighth thesis that I wish to offer, and hence I have combined them all in the section below.

### *Age of Love*

Love — *ishq* or *prem* — is the reigning motif and meta-concept of poetic South Asia. As Hallaj had established in Sufi thought for the first time, it is Love that is the “inner principle of divine life” and creation.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, as the poet Kabir amongst many others has illuminated in South Asia, it is to taste the *prem ras* (the nectar of Love) that we have been born in this world. And it is this love and desire for union that is the simultaneous joy, aspiration, and pain for the poetic-human lover. This search for Divine love has been metaphorically captured by mystical poets through the condition of *viraha* — the love-and-anguish-in-separation of the woman-soul — in which Radha longs for Lord Krishna, and the many heroines of folk romances pine for their lovers.

Importantly, this theme is not limited to the domain of Bhakti-Sufi, mystical poetry. If South Asian legends, poetic thought, and popular culture, particularly from Pakistan and north India are an indicator, then we might say that the history of all hitherto existing society is not the history of class struggles, but of love struggles. The struggles of legendary lovers — from Heer Ranjha to Mirza Sahiban, Laila Majnun to Sassi Punnu, and Shirin Farhad to Sohni Mahiwal — form the foundational subject in the dominant literary traditions of the Perso-Indian cosmopolis from the medieval period onwards. Narratives of love-martyrs embody the paradigmatic theme of separation and union, but also that of defiance and rebellion against patriarchal, priestly, and class oppression.<sup>21</sup> Performed through poetic storytelling and illustrated through painting, the power of love in these narratives embraces a transcendental spirit of piety and collective oneness, and serves to define the moral universe and cognitive hearts of local populations. Returning to my first point about the poetic significance of language, we might also grasp how cherished love is in South Asia by witnessing the many modes of referring to a beloved soul: *yaar, jaan, jaaneman, jigar, dost, rafeeq, habeeb, sanam, sajan, dildar, dilbar, piya, mehboob, saaqi, saheb, saiyaan, mahi, mitwa, mitr* — at least nineteen terms just in the Gujrati-Urdu-Hindi tongue that I am familiar with.

<sup>20</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *As through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 66.

<sup>21</sup> Ishwar Dayal Gaur, *Martyr as Bridegroom: A Folk Representation of Bhagat Singh* (Anthem Press, 2008).

Love in poetic knowledge, hence, cannot be reduced to an emotion. If it is the Divine principle, then it is also the the human principle, the natural principle. And as elaborated above, this principle is deemed inseparable from a sacred sense of oneness, an “all-embracing unity.”<sup>22</sup> The leitmotif of love in South Asian poetic thought is thus a social principle, a point that needs much further ethnographic and historical exploration. As a starting point, I would contend that the immense ethic of hospitality towards strangers that one encounters from Sindh to Gilgit-Baltistan — and of course in India — is linked to spirito-poetic understandings of the world that are centered on a transcendental valorizing of love and oneness. The surrender of self that comes from love is thus not just a spiritual quest; it is an ethical sensibility that one encounters in everyday lived practice in South Asia.

None of this means that I wish to overlook the horrific prejudices and divides within our region. What I wish to emphasize is that poetic knowledge traditions and their impact on cultural practice must be recognized as simultaneously co-existing with these divides. I would argue that we cannot apprehend the “local” in South Asia without attending to poetic knowledge, as the latter is an ethic-philosophy that fundamentally shapes the senses of self, community and identity in the region.

Poetic knowledge is not just thematically focused on love but also a medium for it. Indeed, poetry has often been considered the “best means of gaining access to Love”.<sup>23</sup> Rumi captures this well when he says:

Love lit a fire in my chest, and anything  
That wasn't love left: intellectual  
Subtlety, philosophy  
Books, school.  
All I want now  
To do or hear  
Is poetry<sup>24</sup>

The above passage also highlights the antipathy of true love in poetic knowledge to the cerebral intelligence of bookish knowledge. This is a critical aspect of love that travels from Farsi-Muslim poetic thought to South Asia, and finds its most ardent advocates in Punjabi Sufi poetry, especially that of the 18<sup>th</sup> century poet-saint Bulleh Shah. Throughout Perso-Indian non-courtly poetry, there is a parallel rejection of a ritualistic, theological, mind-based understanding of religion, in favor of heart-centered notions of spirituality that are driven by devotional feelings towards the *guru*, the *pir*, and other Beloved souls. From this anti-school,

<sup>22</sup> Schimmel, *As through a Veil*, 386.

<sup>23</sup> Laude, *Sufism and Poetry*, 76.

<sup>24</sup> Laude, *Sufism and Poetry*, 68-69.

anti-ritual bent of poetic knowledge comes its radical edge, history, and potential — encapsulating the reason why poets were celebrated as social revolutionaries and spiritual guides, while also pointing to the reasons why they were often feared, suppressed, and even killed by orthodox elites.

In this respect, it is worth attending to the figure of Mansur al-Hallaj in some detail. Born around 858, Hallaj is the exemplary revolutionary and love-martyr in the Muslim tradition.<sup>25</sup> His famous utterance “an-al-Haq” — I am the Absolute Truth — has reverberated across multiple poetic traditions in the Middle East and South Asia for more than a thousand years. Hallaj was beheaded in 922 in Baghdad for his controversial religious views, and he famously marched to the gallows becoming in the process the definitive image of daring love and fearless courage for later Sufis and poets across a staggering range of languages and regions. Indeed, apart from the established religious figures that are central to Islamic belief, no other figure commands such a presence in the poetic thought of Muslim societies as Hallaj.

We must ask: why did Hallaj come to have such a deep resonance? With his open and ecstatic declarations of nearness with God-as-Love through Love, Hallaj set the stage for a “dynamic, personal religion”<sup>26</sup> which no doubt appeared as a threat to the rising, legalistic regimes of orthodox Islamic authority that simultaneously held political power. These hierarchical regimes depended precisely on notions of command and obedience that Hallaj negated. Instead, his interpretation offered an empowering sense of *autonomy* and *freedom* to believers, and a radical subjectivity enfolded in love — at once individual and collective, spiritual and political. Hallaj also departed from established Sufi masters on the question of political and social involvement — he believed in engagement whereas his spiritual elders preferred indifference.<sup>27</sup> He traveled extensively to spread his teachings, and even visited Western India.<sup>28</sup> His eventual imprisonment followed by a public execution made him become, in the writings of later Sufis and poets, “the model for all those who were in conflict with the authorities and suffered or died for their convictions, be they religious or political.”<sup>29</sup> And it is for this reason that Pakistani progressive poets — from Faiz Ahmed Faiz to Haleem Baghi — have invoked Mansur Hallaj in their poems on the rights of the oppressed. We have thus in our region, a transcendental ethos of resistance built across “vernacular” geographies in the language of Islamic faith and spiritual love, and expressed through the poetic idiom.

Love as a poetic theme has of course been present in the Middle East and South Asia for a long time. But as a declaration of bold resistance against power and religious orthodoxy,

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<sup>25</sup> In Muslim tradition and history, the quintessential first martyr of course is the Prophet’s grandson Hussain who was killed in Karbala in 680. The story of his martyrdom forms a central motif for contemplating injustice and resistance in Muslim religious philosophy, discourse and poetry.

<sup>26</sup> Schimmel, *As through a Veil*, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Mohammad Ali Jamnia and Mojdeh Bayat, *Tales from the Land of the Sufis* (Shambhala Publications, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Schimmel, *As through a Veil*, 34.

the tenth century Hallajian Love signified a turning moment. Spiritual struggles centered on the reclamation of love and defiance of orthodox clerical religion had also begun to emerge in brahminical India around the same time, led by Bhakti poet-saints in Tamil Nadu and later in 12<sup>th</sup> century Karnataka.<sup>30</sup> This dissenting, devotional poetic culture continued to emphasize the primacy of love and oneness, and spread across the landscape of India encompassing radical spiritual-saints such as Kabir in 15<sup>th</sup> century Varanasi and Bulleh Shah in 18<sup>th</sup> century Punjab. We might characterize the social milieu of poetic knowledge in the sub-continent over this time — roughly from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century — as embodying the Age of Love.

I am employing the “Age of Love” as a useful descriptor following the argument that I have laid out so far, and as a juxtaposition with the accepted description of the Enlightenment as the Age of Reason. During the Age of Love in the Indian subcontinent, symbols of religious authoritarianism — akin to the church in Europe and America — were being resisted in South Asia as well through a love-centered poetic knowledge that challenged Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies. But the fascination was not with reason in the abstract. As I have elaborated, a mind-centered reason was in fact decidedly dismissed in favor of an emotional drowning in love. Likewise, the mantra of this age was not equality and tolerance, but self-transformation and oneness. The precepts of this age in South Asia also stand in sharp contrast to the romantic individualism that grew in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Instead, we might conceptualize the Age of Love as one of romantic-spiritual collectivism that was at once radically inward-oriented while espousing a socio-political consciousness of egalitarianism. The quintessential expression of this consciousness was in the poetic contestation of religious and social norms. Such a blended Hindu-Muslim-Sikh history of poetic knowledge in the Age of Love provides an alternative view on the communitarian histories that are often told — in India, as a narrative of the “golden age of Hinduism” and its “fall” at the hands of Muslim rulers, and in Pakistan as the warrior-glory of Muslim rulers and their “demise” at the hands of Hindu-British machinations.<sup>31</sup>

The key movers in the Age of Love were not just the poet-saints themselves, but also the legendary lovers/beloveds whom the poets glorified. Hallaj, interestingly, plays a pioneering role in the Muslim spirito-cultural imaginary of this Age both as a poet as well as a legendary *aashiq* (lover), who daringly embraces the tortuous path of love and truth even if it brings him his death. If Hallaj is an initial poet-rebel-instigator, the epitome of this Age and

<sup>30</sup> It is eminently possible that because of the presence of Arab trade in Karnataka, Sufi ideas had found their way to southern India and impacted the emergence of Bhakti movements in the region. Many features of the Bhakti-originating Lingayat tradition in 12th century Karnataka, for example, share a resemblance with Sufi philosophies. The very name of their patron poet-saint, “Allama” Prabhu, is revealing and perhaps signifies one of the first incidences of saints with blended identities in South Asia.

<sup>31</sup> I emphasize the notion of blended histories following the work of Yasmin Saikia, “The Muslims of Assam: Present/Absent History,” in *Northeast India: A Place of Relations*, eds. Yasmin Saikia and Amit Baishya (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

instigation is provided by the Punjabi folk heroine Heer, as represented in verse by the eminent 18<sup>th</sup> century poet-Sufi, Waris Shah. Hallaj and Heer neither share a linguistic nor a geographical bond, but their exemplary defiance of power in their respective contexts has made them key players in a poetic memorialization and spirito-poetic veneration of love that is central to Muslim tradition, thought and practice in South Asia. Our notions of what counts as “Islam” and “tradition” thus need to go beyond normative notions of theology, legal commentaries, and philosophical discourse to include such visions of poetic knowledge.

Just as Hallaj’s fame spans across regions and languages, the poetic story of Heer and her lover Ranjha is heard and revered by “millions in the northern part of the sub-continent”<sup>32</sup> – and not just by Muslims. Such is the popular *religious* significance of Waris Shah’s Heer that in the regions of Pakistan where Punjabi, Pahari and Seraiki are spoken, the poetic tale of Heer is often referred to as the *awaam ki Quran* (the Quran of the people) and those who know it by heart are called *haafiz* – a title normatively reserved for those who have memorized the Quran. There is also a shrine of Heer in the city of Jhang in Pakistani Punjab.



Figure 1: Outside view of the shrine of “Mai Heer”, Jhang, 2016

<sup>32</sup> Najm Hosain Syed, “The World of Waris Shah” in *Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry* (Lahore: Majlis Shah Hussain, 1968), 43.



Figure 2: Inside view of the shrine of “Mai Heer”, Jhang, 2016

Details have been discussed elsewhere, but at the heart of the Heer story is a female rebel who pursues her beloved Ranjha against the wishes of her family, and is eventually murdered by her uncle for her defiance. In Waris Shah’s telling, the Heer-Ranjha romance becomes a plot to expose the hypocrisy, pious pretensions, and moral decay in the Punjabi

society of the time. If Hallaj's love challenges puritanical, authoritarian and fear-based understandings of Islam, Waris Shah's Heer continues this critique not just by poking fun at religious self-righteousness but also by laying bare the *garz* (self-interest) that is seen to destroy love and sincere social relationships in an increasingly, property-oriented society. What emerges, therefore, is a poetic play in which the primacy of love simultaneously entails the challenging of divisions and repressions inherent in the reigning socio-political order. Love and resistance go hand in hand.

Hence, the seventh thesis I wish to offer is precisely this recognition that the sphere of poetic knowledge in South Asia has predominantly embodied a resisting and progressive spirit. From Hindavi poetry to modern Urdu poetry, across Seraiki, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashto poetry, poetic knowledge has served as a site of contestation and subversion, challenging the normative through satire and critique. This is true not just of recognizably spiritual poetry. Ramanujan considered the poetry and narratives of Indian oral cultures, and particularly of women as "counter-systems, anti-structures, a protest against official systems."<sup>33</sup> Wakhi, Balti, and Kashmiri poetic history is particularly rich with examples where the poetic expression of grievances against rulers — especially critiques of the tyranny of revenue systems — were *heard* by the raja or mir, and effected ameliorative changes.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the divide between literature and politics is another distinction that is sharply put to test in the realm of poetic knowledge, akin to the divides between literature and philosophy, literature and religion, and literature and history as I argued earlier in this paper. U.R. Ananthamurthy and Arundhati Roy have most poignantly argued for why the notion of a political writer or "writer-activist" is paradoxical for a place like India<sup>35</sup> where it has always been the job of a writer to be a "conscience-keeper" and a "critical insider" who "never feels afraid to swim against the tide."<sup>36</sup>

To acknowledge the inherent political-ness of literary thought in South Asia and recognize poetic knowledge as a contestatory mode of being also means that we should not bifurcate poetry into progressive and not-progressive, political and merely-romantic. Poetic knowledge is about life and intervention in the realm of experience — and when we are bent upon tagging certain poets or certain kinds of poems as properly "progressive" from the perspective of our modern sensibilities, we fail to understand the actual meaning, range, and power of poetic knowledge as it is practiced by poets as well as how it is received by its listeners. What happens in our insistence on seeing certain kinds of poetry as "resistance"

<sup>33</sup> A.K. Ramanujan, *Uncollected Poems and Prose*, eds. Molly Daniels-Ramanujan and Keith Harrison (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 55-56.

<sup>34</sup> For examples from Kashmir, see Zutshi (2014).

<sup>35</sup> Arundhati Roy, "I don't believe there are only two genders. I see gender as a spectrum and I'm somewhere on it," *Outlook India*, August 24, 2015, <http://www.outlookindia.com/article/i-dont-believe-there-are-only-two-genders-i-see-gender-as-a-spectrum-and-im-somewhere-on-it/295061>.

<sup>36</sup> Ananthamurthy, "Being a writer in India," 140-144.



poetry — subscribing to communism, feminism, or any other ism — is that we co-opt only a poet's most evidently political lyrics as part of their "politics" rejecting all else as non-radical. Our inherited paradigms of what counts as "political" and academic-activist desires to find and favor "radical" poetry in effect turns into an anti-poetic maneuver, doing a disservice to a deeper comprehension of poetic knowledge.

This is why it is important to see poetic knowledge not just in its contestatory mode but also in the creative-productive mode of what it promotes — a culture of love, freedom and collectivity more historically, but much more depending on the language, region and individual poetic leaning of the *kalaam* or poetic speech under consideration. This larger culture has also often been talked about through the terminology of *insaaniyat* or humanism, but I would add that a sacred sense of unity that is promoted in Muslim/South Asian literary humanism also necessitates attention to the animal or plant kingdom especially as we navigate thought in mountain-based indigenous languages. Poetic folktales and children's *loris* (lullabies) across the Hunza region of Gilgit-Baltistan, for example, include tales that tell of the plight of a young Himalayan ibex after its mother has been killed by a hunter.<sup>37</sup> Producing empathy and ethical reflection, these stories nurture an interconnected sense of the world and a moral stewardship of it by human beings. Indeed, I would contend that a key reason why Upper Hunza remains a global biodiversity hotspot today with the presence of rare endangered species is precisely its spiritual-ecological ethic that is cultivated in its poetic knowledge traditions. Such ethics and imaginings of stewardship would get missed in our search for obviously "radical" or "progressive" narratives.

This brings me to my final, eight thesis about *mannkbat*/poetic knowledge traditions — that these traditions are mainstream, not marginal. Characterizing the realm of poetic knowledge as "alternate" belies how dominant, pervasive, and mainstream a spirito-poetic, literary humanism has historically been in South Asia. Of course, so widespread has been the tendency in academic discourse to focus on what-all-is-wrong that the moment one points out the pervasiveness of poetic knowledge, one stands the charge of "romanticizing." An affective-theoretical recognition of the value and cultural import of love in poetic thought is not to argue that it shapes sociality in some pure, straightforwardly derivative way. My purpose, instead, is to suggest that what we think of as "mainstream" and what becomes then the "alternate" or "parallel" is significant to consider. I would argue that as a legacy of orientalist British knowledge-and-power production, we have become so used to accepting religious identities and boundaries as dominant, normative, and authoritative that whenever we encounter the

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<sup>37</sup> These might be in Wakhi or Burushaski, the two main languages spoken in the Hunza region. For a specific example from the Wakhi area of Shimshal, see Mehjabeen Abidi-Habib and Anna Lawrence, "Revolt and Remember: How the Shimshal Nature Trust Develops and Sustains Social-Ecological Resilience in Northern Pakistan," *Ecology and Society* 12(2): 35, 2007, 1-19.

ground of anti-authoritarian poetic universes we describe them as “alternate” or “parallel.”<sup>38</sup> This is in keeping with an earlier academic tendency of reducing spirito-poetic practices to “little traditions” and then to “syncretism”, defined in opposition to the presumably pure, high tradition of an a-cultural theological construct of “Islam.” What would it mean for us to consider modern, nationalist, imperialist, fundamentalist or simply categorical notions of religiosity as “counter-” while regarding South Asian spiritual-poetic multiverses as central?

I intend this as a historical and a political question, and as one of cultural memory and inheritance. In the last three centuries, social relations in South Asia have changed drastically. Exclusionary notions of sectarian-fundamentalist Islam have become especially dominant in Pakistan over the last forty years, as a result of the twin forces of imperialism and military nationalism. More than a dozen Sufi shrines have been bombed over the last seven years alone — unprecedented in the last thousand years — with the corresponding curtailment of women’s activities in the shrines alongside the construction of puritanical mosques within the very space of the shrine. Indeed, it is not unusual to hear in Southern Punjab and Sindh that there is a *gherao* (encirclement) of pluralistic, spiritual spaces in the region through a systematic campaign of “radicalization” involving the Pakistani military-intelligence establishment, extremist mosques and militant outfits, and sponsorship from Saudi Arabia. Faced with such agendas of violence and separation, it is even more important for us to remember and attend to the landscape of poetic knowledge that has historically sought to define a love-centered faith and sociality in the region.

It is likewise important to grasp how poetic knowledge traditions are being revisited, continued, and transformed by poets in present-day Pakistan, in response to what they perceive to be the key challenges of the time. This is a vast topic, and I have elsewhere offered an analysis of poetic engagements specifically from the region of Gilgit-Baltistan.<sup>39</sup> In the section that follows, I offer some glimpses of how poets are responding to the present in the Seraiki-speaking areas of Punjab in Pakistan. These responses embody poetic action that seeks to articulate and orient social subjectivities, as part of the struggles over identity and history that afflict Pakistan today.

### *The Seraiki Poetic Present*

In November 2014, I attended the *Seraiki Adabi Sakafati Mela* (Seraiki Literary-Cultural Festival) held in the small town of Mehraywala in the Rajanpur district of South Punjab,

<sup>38</sup> As an example, see Farina Mir, “Genre and Devotion in Punjabi Popular Narratives: Rethinking Cultural and Religious Syncretism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48(3), 2006, 727-758. In an illuminating analysis of how *qisse* (poetic romance stories) defined a shared cultural universe of piety in Punjab across religious divides, Mir argues that saint veneration constitutes a “parallel, alternate spiritual practice” available to all Punjabi inhabitants (p 755).

<sup>39</sup> Nosheen Ali, “Poetry, Power, Protest: Reimagining Muslim Nationhood in Northern Pakistan,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32:1, 2012, 13-24.

Pakistan. Founded by the poet-activist Ashiq Buzdar in 1989, the Seraiki Literary Festival is a three-day celebration of Seraiki political and poetic consciousness for non-elite, male audiences in the region. Attended by two to five thousand people over a period of three days, the festival is organized as a *ratjaga* — a night of wakefulness — that begins at ten p.m. each day and ends at around six a.m. *Ratjagas* happen all over South Asia, and most likely originated in spiritual contexts of nightly prayer, later extended to poetry and song recitations that may be organized for religious or cultural reasons — as part of marriage festivities, for example. The one I witnessed in Southern Punjab was decisively political, even though it was essentially promoted as a literary festival. This reflects the point I made earlier about poetic knowledge practices challenging Western-centric divisions between literature and politics — a divide that is particularly challenged in regions such as the Seraiki belt where regional resistance movements are active. At the *ratjaga* I witnessed, practices of Seraiki cultural pride mingled seamlessly with those affirming political solidarity, in what was essentially a night-long verse festival interspersed with political speeches, traditional music and dance performances, and politically and ethically-themed theatre. The poster below demonstrates the range of activities encompassed by this vibrant festival.



Figure 3: Poster advertising the Seraiki Literary-Cultural Festival, Mehraywala, 2014

The content in the circles identifies the key features of the festival as *tilawat* (Quranic recitation commonly used to begin an event), verse recitations from the revered Seraiki poet-saint Khwaja Ghulam Farid (1845-1901), the playing of *naubat* (a folk musical instrument), discussion/dialogue, drama, mimicry, poetry festival, book stall, *jhumar* (Seraiki folk dance), *kabaddi* (local sport), political resolutions, and songs. Such performative blending was visible also in the very personas that were on stage, not neatly categorizable in either/or categories such as “poets” and “activists.” Indeed, some well-known poets came on stage not to recite verses, but to present their critique of the contemporary moment and the Seraiki condition.<sup>40</sup>

The poet-thinker Ashu Lal, for example, focused entirely on the plague of the modern education system which devalues *desi* languages and “illiterate” knowledges. He spoke about his own turning point, when he consciously broke away from Urdu and decided to write in Seraiki. To resounding applause, Ashu Lal asked the audience:

“Why is it that we need a degree in a foreign tongue and abstracted disciplines to be recognized as capable, even human today? Did the Prophet Mohammad have a degree from any university? Did Khwaja Ghulam Farid need diplomas to prove his worth?”

Through these questions, Ashu Lal broadened the scope of political critique at the event beyond class and ethnic inequality in a Punjabi-dominated nation to the very problem of modernity and its linguistic, ideological, and educational oppressions. The reference to the Prophet and Khwaja Farid underscored that the language of truth and knowledge has had a different epistemic-spiritual history in Muslim societies, one that contests today’s dominant, degree-granting modes of Western knowing. It is important to note that Ashu Lal’s critique has a resonance not just because his largely rural audience perceives and experiences the hierarchical inequities built into and through systems of education. It resonates also because of the well-recognized, *poetic history of love and resistance* that rejects a mind-centered, bookish construction of intellect, as discussed earlier in this paper.

Indeed, the poetic and performative activity that is celebrated in the Seraiki Festival is itself an alternate to cerebral, educational knowledge. The overall message of the festival is to remember, revive, continue and celebrate that which is deemed original and precious: cultural self-confidence and connectedness, political autonomy, and a resistance to the divisive politics attributed to nationalism and modernity. This cultural confidence is grounded centrally in the veneration of verse.

The following poem by the Seraiki poet Rifat Abbas is a testament to this self-recognition of the centrality of poetic knowledge to regional identity and sociality, despite the

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<sup>40</sup> For more on the literature and politics of Seraiki nationalism, see Nukhbah Langah, *Poetry as Resistance: Islam and Ethnicity in Postcolonial Pakistan* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2012).

coming of colonial and scientific modernity. Titled “Suraiya Multanikar”, the poet bestows historical significance to the eminent female singer Suraiya Multanikar who belongs to the city of Multan in present-day Punjab in Pakistan.

Suraiya Multanikar<sup>41</sup>

Here, in spaces near,  
Two or three new things happened  
In this city, the English arrived  
In this city, Farid arrived  
In this city, Suraiya Multanikar sang

In this city, the gramophone is introduced  
There is sunlight, there are people, there are voices  
There are two railway stations in this city,  
the brightness of blue tiles  
and Belgian glass on the windows  
We light lanterns at night  
and have newly learnt to drink tea  
We are enchanted with cinema-houses  
We play 20<sup>th</sup> century songs on a machine  
But inside, there is a tabla-player  
who counts this century on his fingertips

There is a cantonment in this city  
An English civil court, an English commissioner  
And the clock of the English  
But underneath, a tune is being created  
A tune based on a poet’s thought

A poet’s verses are being honored  
The city’s female singer is being revered.

In the above poem, British history is acknowledged and so is Sufi history — “the English arrived...Farid arrived.” But it is the history in which “Suraiya Multanikar sang” that piques

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<sup>41</sup> Translated from Seraiki by Nukhbah Langah and Nosheen Ali.

the poet's interest. This history is simultaneously poetic and feminist, and transcends even the usual folk/indigenous histories that focus on the spiritual world of male Sufi saints. The feminist recognition within Rifat Abbas' celebration of the poetic is significant, and reflects both the influence of postcolonial-feminist thought on the poet as well as the broader emergence of revisionist, feminist interpretations in the historiography and literatures of South Asia. In a related example, Rifat Abbas tellingly mused at the Lahore Literature Festival in February 2015 that a First Information Report for Heer's murder has yet to be lodged.<sup>42</sup> This is a reference to the folk romance of Heer Ranjha which I discussed earlier, in which Heer is murdered by her uncle for loving and desiring the flute-playing Ranjha. Raising the issue of why folk romances celebrating "love" end without comment on a woman being murdered for "honour," Abbas is in effect questioning the patriarchal subtexts of folk poetry. His interpretation demonstrates the continued relevance and engagement with the figure and story of Heer. Drawing upon Rifat Abbas' work, the Seraiki journalist Rana Mehboob similarly wonders in a 2015 newspaper article about why the Sufi saint Hallaj is valorized as a martyr, but when the dead bodies of unknown women in Uttar Pradesh, India, are hung from trees, "no metaphors are being coined, no poems written."<sup>43</sup> Again, it is important to notice the invocation of Hallaj as a referent for poetic and political thought in the region today. Both Abbas and Mehboob seek to promote a "pro-women and pro-people narrative,"<sup>44</sup> revealing how Seraiki intellectuals are striving to re-engage with and re-imagine folk or classical poetic traditions instead of being confined to archaic celebration. Their engagements also highlight how the terrain of poetic narrative is always-already political, not just cultural. These engagements may be seen as poetic practices of decolonization that serve to challenge the cognitive imperialisms of the present and the past.

Alongside its feminist underpinnings, the poem "Suraiya Multanikar" is also a tribute to Multan's culture of living, enjoying, and honoring poetry and music — an "inside" and "underneath", cultural lifeworld that is deemed to continue, define, and nourish Seraiki identity throughout time and transformation. Hence, in poetic form itself, the honoring and reverence of poetic verse and song is being expressed as encapsulating an *other history* of Multan. My own argument in this paper mirrors, extends and honors such a rooted sense, arguing for thinking through a South Asian poetic history. In this respect, it is also interesting to note that in the example of the Seraiki intellectual Rana Mehboob quoted above, his point of reference regarding the promotion of a pro-women narrative is the sub-continent at large, not just the Seraiki area or Pakistan.

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<sup>42</sup> A First Information Report is a written document which the police prepare in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh when a complainant reports a crime.

<sup>43</sup> Rana Mehboob, "We tender an apology," *The Spokesman*, <http://thespokesman.pk/index.php/component/k2/itemlist/category/16-columnist?start=2>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Importantly, the continuation of poetic affect can no longer be assumed as an automatic process. For many poets in the South Asian multiverse, a lifeworld defined by poetic knowledge is a spiritual-cultural inheritance that must be actively remembered, honored, sustained, promoted and reimagined, particularly in times of enforced forgetting and suppression under the homogenizing conditions of nationalism, patriarchal violence, imperialism, and capitalism. Poets in the Seraiki region are hence not just writing poetry but increasingly turning towards practices that sustain and celebrate the lived and the cultural. The Seraiki Literary-Cultural Festival I discussed earlier is one example of such grassroots poetic action. Another example in the Seraiki region is an initiative called *Khamees Yatra* — Thursday Pilgrimage — which is co-founded by a group of Seraiki intellectuals including the poet Rifat Abbas whose poem I just discussed.

All over Pakistan, Thursday is recognized as a day of visiting shrines and paying respect to Sufi saints, and a day when giving and generosity towards the poor is especially encouraged and undertaken. Innovating on this theme, Abbas and his colleagues undertake walking journeys every Thursday, discovering and discussing old and new public spaces of Multan and its surround. In the *Khamees Yatra*, new walkers are welcome, and there is no membership. The destinations are sometimes pre-selected, and sometimes spontaneously decided based on suggestions from those present. The destinations may include Sufi shrines, as a means not just to partake in historical practices of spiritual-cultural reverence but also to maintain a vigilance on shrine spaces as these have come under renewed attack from anti-Sufi establishments operating in Pakistan and elsewhere. Other destinations include historic streets, bazaars, and buildings. A significant emphasis is also placed on everyday conversations with a diverse range of people in Multan whom one might ordinarily never stop to dialogue with and understand. Through such everyday inter-personal interactions, a sense of cultural awareness is aspired towards and concretized, and socio-cultural alienation countered.

### **Conclusion**

“Everything happens, as if, before the secondary dispersion of life, there had been a knotted primitive unity, the bedazzlement of which poets kept for themselves.” — Aimé Césaire, *Poetry and Knowledge*<sup>45</sup>

In the context of Muslim South Asia, over the last thousand years and more, poets have sought to unravel this “knotted primitive unity” through bedazzled verse-stories of love, oneness, freedom and humanism. I have called these traditions poetic knowledge or *mannkahat* in this paper. Even as oral cultures have become the “devastated and displaced phenomena of

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<sup>45</sup> Aimé Césaire, “Poetry and Knowledge,” in *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, eds. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (New York: Verso, 1996), 139.

epistemic violence in the colonial and postcolonial periods,”<sup>46</sup> poetic knowledge continues as an ethical mode of being and moral imagination across South Asia. My field research exploring the history and present of poetic knowledge in Pakistan has revealed to me that a poetic engagement with the word and the world is an everyday aspect of being. This way of being, seeing, and doing is perhaps removed only from those whose upbringing has solely been in big-city, English-centered, middle- and upper-middle class Pakistan — and I am half part of this very context. But even in this class, one generation ago, a poetic-proverbial understanding of the world would have been commonplace. As the notable Urdu writer Shamsur Rahman Faruqi says:

“There was a time, and it’s not too far away behind us, when the appreciation of poetry, of deriving enjoyment from the use of words, of creating inner and outer worlds which would hold meaning for more than a moment, was a necessary activity. It was something that we all did: we lived our language, we loved to read and make poetry in it. The biographical dictionaries of Urdu poets written in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries are full of the names of artisans, semi-literate persons, persons from so-called non-literary families, who wrote poetry and enjoyed poetry as a natural activity.”<sup>47</sup>

As I have argued in this paper, this world of poetic-natural space needs to be understood historically in a supra-social, transcendental context — one that is not limited by language, region or religion — but fluidly felt in devotional, folk and literary histories traversing several parts of South Asia and the Middle East. In this feeling-space-time, devotional poetry often embodied an eminently *historical and social consciousness* and became the very mode of anti-hierarchical thought, while love became the very principle of divinity, defiance and autonomy. Speaking similarly of devotion-as-dissent in India, Ramaswamy argues that the “spiritual realm has provided unexpected spaces for the marginalized voices in our collective social past.”<sup>48</sup> While I agree with her in essence, the “unexpected” in this above quote is worth reflecting on: for whom is such an understanding of the spiritual realm unexpected? Ramaswamy herself offers part of the answer when she says that the “monodimensional representation of religion within the ‘secular’ tradition (in India)” has damned religion as “‘intellectually bankrupt’” and “colored by fundamentalist ideology.”<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> D. Venkat Rao, *Cultures of Memory in South Asia: Orality, Literacy and the Problem of Inheritance* (Springer India, 2014), 5.

<sup>47</sup> Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, “The Meaning of Poetry in Our Lives Today,” Inaugural Lecture at the Thunchan Festival, Kerala, 2010, 3-4, [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00fwp/srf/srf\\_meaning\\_poetry\\_2010.pdf](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00fwp/srf/srf_meaning_poetry_2010.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Vijaya Ramaswamy, ed., “Introduction” in *Devotion and Dissent in Indian History* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press), 7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



Adding to her analysis, I would argue that a limited understanding of the spiritual realm comes both from secular-liberal ideologies of modernity as well as the secular-left assumptions of Marxian frameworks which first presume a category called “religion” and then fail to see it outside socio-economic forms of exploitation.

Based on the arguments in this paper, I contend that a renewed sense of radical politics needs to be grounded in a poetic politics and ethics — one that recognizes how spirito-poetic histories have been foundational to our social being in South Asia, and remain critical to the ways in which poets and other social actors are formulating new possibilities in the present. This radical poetics needs to be wary of three tendencies. First, the tendency to find the spirit of radicalism solely in poetry from obviously marginal locations such as low-caste groups, the working class, and women. This, of course, is *riwayati* and *zaroori* — traditional and necessary for a politics of solidarity. But we need to broaden our meanings of “political” and “radical,” drawing precisely upon the histories that I have touched upon in this paper. Basava was a Brahmin and a political leader, who became the foundational figure in the radically anti-caste, spirito-religious Bhakti movement in 12<sup>th</sup> century Karnataka. Similarly, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Sindhi poet-saint Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai belonged to an elite, Saiyyad family. Hence, a circumscribing of non-elite positionality as the sole ambit of “subaltern” and “radical” politics is simplistic. Positionality, of course, is critical to attend to, but it is the feeling of thought and action that has historically symbolized radical potential.

The second tendency is that of reducing the folk-poetic to utilitarian co-optation. Popularization, reinvigoration, and innovation are central to folk consciousness, and even at the commercial level, several Pakistani and Indian musicians are independently drawing upon the region’s rich poetic oeuvre for their own creative inspiration and sometimes to explicitly counter hate-centered, fundamentalist propaganda. We need to recognize, however, that culture today is also a terrain of neoliberal corporatization, occupation, and control. Keenly aware of this dynamic, several Pakistani poets — when I reached out to them for the digital humanities platform UmangPoetry — expressed concerns regarding “commercialization” and hesitated to be interviewed until they had ascertained what “interests” my project might serve. They are aware that in the age of Coke Studio, Sufi, folk, and regional poetry has become hearable not on its own terms but only when “fused” and packaged with Western aesthetics and corporate branding.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, a D.C.-based political figure recommended to me that instead of UmangPoetry, I should create “Pepsi Poetry.”

Finally, it is important to remember, again, that the religio-spiritual domain was never neatly classifiable into “Hinduism,” “Islam,” and “Sikhism.” Even the mystical message of

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<sup>50</sup> Coke Studio is a widely popular, Coke-sponsored, television series in Pakistan which showcases contemporary Pakistani music.

Islam is not limited to Muslims,<sup>51</sup> nor can “Sufi” be subsumed under the category of “Islam.” The Sindhi poet-saint Shah Abdul Latif “spent three years with a group of yogis, wandering through the country,”<sup>52</sup> and the Punjabi Sufi-saint Shah Hussain was so intoxicated by the Brahmin, Madho, that he is still remembered as Madho Laal Hussain — a composite of their names. Singh and Gaur have argued, in fact, that Sufism is historically the most significant feature of Punjabi culture<sup>53</sup> — an assessment that is regularly made for Sindhi culture as well. Hence, it is at the level of regional cultural practice and social being that we must find our poetics and our politics, at this moment of renewed ossification of communitarian prisms.

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<sup>51</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace: A Study Of Two Mystical Writers Of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications), 24.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>53</sup> Surinder Singh and Ishwar Dayal Gaur, eds., *Sufism in Punjab: Mystics, Literatures and Shrines* (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2009).