



Waris Shah's *Heer* as the Meme of Punjabiyyat and Punjabi Identity

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Abstract

The present paper dwells on the most celebrated classic of Punjabi literature – *Heer* (1766), the magnum opus of Waris Shah¹. Even more than two and a half centuries later the qissa as retained its ingenuity and charm. This paper attempts to analyze the characters in *Heer* and even the folktale itself as memes of Punjabiyyat and Punjabi identity. Meme is a popular unit of cultural transmission analogous to genetic transmission and spreads the information through imitation. Richard Dawkins introduced the concept of meme more than four decades ago and since then the term has travelled fairly well with its share of trials and tribulations. Waris begins the legend on a cheerful note but ends it tragically unlike the writers preceding him. The anguished fate of the lovers becomes the fate of the entire Punjabi community. It is as if Waris had foreseen the impending disasters that were to swallow his land and people. Hence the tragic ending makes the narrative even more realistic paralleling the destiny of Punjab. If the love affair of Heer-Ranjha had joyfully culminated into marriage, it would have been an ordinary story of happily ever after and a way too perfect to blend with the psyche of the masses or to be acceptable to them. Now they are lovers immortal and their legend a part of the collective memory.

Keywords: Meme, Punjabiyyat, Punjabi Identity, *Heer*, Tragedy

Introduction

Punjab's turbulent historical backdrop has fuelled the creative imagination of the writers with myriad themes – homeland, invasions, conquests, partition, identity crisis and misfortunes to mention a few. These themes come to light in the narrative of *Heer* as well when we refer to Heer as a rebel beauty, Sehti as defiance personified, feudal landlords as the adherents of patriarchy, Kaido as custodian of social norms, haping up our

perceptions. Thus, *Heer* as a meme robustly empowers and nurtures Punjabi identity. In his key note address to the Fourth Punjabi Conference (1993), Prof. Pritam Singh justly remarks, “It is worth remembering that the kind of concept of “Punjab” and “Punjabi” a person entertains, his “Punjabiyaat” will also be of the same type.” In Waris’s *Heer* Punjab, Punjabiyaat and Punjabi identity are all inclusive.

Primary Concepts – Punjabiyaat and Punjabi Identity

In the epilogue, Waris Shah mentions his home town “I, Waris Shah, a native of Jandiala” which is now in present day Pakistan (st.3). Is Waris Shah known by his birth place, caste or religion? Can borders restrict his popularity? No, because Waris is distinguished for and by his *Heer*. We may choose to actively participate in the process of identity formation or it may be ascribed to us. Stuart Hall writes, “identity is as much a process of becoming, as it is about what one is” (qtd. in Kidd and Teagle 26). Identity is both singular and plural, individual and collective contending multiple tags of race, religion, language, gender and ethnicity, etc. But Waris’ *Heer* has withstood the test of time and enables a construction of Punjabi identity that is composite and wholesome. A popular anecdote states that when Udham Singh was charged for the murder of Michael O’ Dwyer, the lieutenant governor of Punjab during the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (1919) and was presented in the court of law in London (1940), he took oath on Waris Shah’s *Heer* instead of any religious text, “While Udham Singh wore his Indian identity beyond the confines of any ethnic or religious group, by choosing to take his oath on the *Heer-Ranjha*, he also depicted his proud Punjabi identity. For him there was no conflict between these two identities” (Khalid). In *Heer*, we have interplay of both individual and group identities. On a more personal level, the readers have a desire to rebel and to imitate their protagonists in tasting the forbidden fruit and they also experience catharsis in the mirth and misery of the characters. Simultaneously, *Heer* also becomes the basis of identification, imparting a sense of solidarity and belongingness with the community.

Like the concept of identity, the concept of Punjab and Punjabiyyat are very challenging and tricky to define because of its unique geographical and historical backdrop. “The moment we use the word Punjabiyyat, it suggests a reference simultaneously to something that is very tangible while still elusive. This dual character opens the term to many imaginations and possibilities” (Pritam Singh 55). Is it ‘bhangra and giddha’ (the cultural dances), is it ‘sarson da saag and makki di roti’ (the national food), is it ‘gurwali cha or lassi’ (the hospitality), is it the warm ‘jhappi’ (the way to meet and greet) or the friendly abuses (vernacular expressions) Punjabiyyat is all of it coupled with sensibilities and idiosyncrasies of its people. In the context of geography and identity, with Waris’s *Heer*, the borders become obsolete, the divisions are softened and the fractured selves are reconciled. The love legends like Heer-Ranjha, Sohni-Mahiwal, Sassi-Punnu and Mirza-Sahiba enrich the canon of Punjabiyyat along with upholding its cultural legacy. The subsequent lines by popular Punjabi singer Ranjit Bawa reminds us how the evolution of Punjabiyyat is documented, kept culturally alive and promoted in music and cinema, the latest Punjabi discourse.

Mirze de jhand kareer diyan (Of Mirza under the wild caper)

Ja Khive Khaan Shameer diyan (Of Khiva Khan or else of Shameer)

Raanjhe te pai gayi bheed diyan (Of crowd befalling on Ranjha)

Jakise Chuchak jat ameer diyan (Or else of some wealthy jat Chuchak)

Ik tare waleya baba O! (Wise old man with Iktara)

Do tukka sunaja Heer diyan (Sing to us few verses from *Heer*)

(0:41-57) (Self-translated)

This song strikes a familiar chord and springs an intimate emotion in every Punjabi’s heart wherein we forget the hyphenated identities and sectarian divisions and visualize ourselves on a common platform.

Overview of the Plot

Before Waris Shah, the *qissa* or love story of Heer-Ranjha was recounted by Baqi Kolabi, Damodar Gulati, Saeed Saeedi, Ahmad Gujjar, Chiragh Awan and Muqbal beginning on different versions and ending on different notes. But it is Waris Shah's narration which adorns the crown. Dhedu, lovingly addressed as Ranjha, is the youngest son of Mauju Chaudhry, the head of village Takht Hazara. Ranjha's elder brothers feel envious as he is adored by their father the most. When Mauju Chaudhry dies, bitterness spills out in sarcastic remarks from Ranjha's brothers and their wives. Ranjha is deliberately given a barren piece of land from the ancestral property. Disappointed, he leaves everything behind and reaches Jhang, the land of his beloved Heer. Heer is the daughter of Chuchak Khan, the chief of Sayal clan. On Heer's request, his father appoints Ranjha as a herdsman to tend to his cattle. Thereupon, Kaido, Heer's villainous uncle spies on the lovers and incites Heer's parents against them.

Heer-Ranjha's love is not sanctified with marriage hood because a 'vagi'(cattle-drover) is no match to the wealth and status of the Kheras. So, Heer is forcibly wedded to Saida Khera leaving behind his downhearted lover. Ranjha decides to become a yogi and approaches Guru Bal Nath. With shaven head and ashes smeared over his body and big loops in ears, he reaches Rangpur where Heer anxiously awaits him. They elope with the help of Sehti, Heer's sister in-law. The Kheras follow behind and overtake them soon. The lovers are then taken to the court of King Adli where the Kazi pronounces that Heer belongs to the Kheras. Immediately afterwards the town catches fire surprisingly and the king alters Kazi's verdict in favour of Ranjha presuming he has supernatural powers. Both the lovers proceed towards their respective hometowns to be married rightfully. But Heer is poisoned by her family and upon hearing the news, Ranjha too collapses and dies.

Narratives are born out of tradition but are also in conflict with it. This continuous tension brings out the discursive space. For instance, we come across different types of conflict in *Heer-*

group vs individual identity, haves vs have-nots, male supremacy vs female subjugation, tradition vs modernity, arranged vs love marriage, outer turmoil vs inner struggle, kinship vs individual will. Though the central theme of the legend is love, the conflicts in the narrative bring forth other social vices, dilemmas and constraints making it multilayered. Waris neither reconciles the contestations nor untangles them. He lets his characters decide how to pursue. The nature of struggle or tension might have changed but it continues to persist to this day ensuring the continuity and survival of the legend. There is interplay of binaries throughout the text of magical and mundane, of virtues and vices, of positive and negative emotions. “The earthly and the mystical, the solemn and the wanton, sermon and slapstick, the religious and the ribald, literary refinement and coarse diction merrily coexist in the narrative” (Pankaj K. Singh 52). With his creative genius, Waris Shah assimilates the opposites gripping the narrative with a pragmatic approach.

Defining Meme

Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, introduced the term meme in 1976 in his book *The Selfish Gene*. The word meme is of Greek origin and is the abbreviated form of “Mimeme”, which means an imitated thing. To quote Dawkins, meme is the “new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*” (249). Dawkins observed that Charles Darwin’s principles of natural selection² are not restricted to only biological replication but can be extended and applied to the exchange of ideas as well. As the hereditary information is transmitted through genes from one generation to the other, similarly ideas are also replicated by means of cultural transmission. Basically, memes are the cultural counterparts of genes carrying information. A meme can be a song, a poem, a belief, a building design, a fashion style, a behavioural characteristic or mannerism which is quickly imitated from person to person becoming a popular phenomenon. Memes reproduce, multiply, mutate and behave in a manner similar to biological evolution.

With digital connectivity, meme has become the internet buzzword. For netizens, memes commonly means jokes, humourous videos or caricatures, etc. The term meme has been adapted, discarded and readapted in various academic disciplines. Memes as a genre is useful for cultural analysis as it promotes shared culture at the ethnic and the global level enhancing connectivity of ideas. “A meme,” as philosopher Daniel Dennett puts it, “is an information-packet with attitude” (qtd. in Gleick, *Smithsonian Magazine*). Memes not only circulate stories of our past but also connect them with the contemporary culture thus obliterating past-present distinctions. In rapidly changing socio-cultural environment memes evolve quickly precipitating the spread of information or an idea. Gradually memes become a part of the universal social and cultural experience.

Now the question arises how do memes reproduce or replicate? Dawkins’ writes, “Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body...so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (249). Memes very much require a tangible, physical medium to spread the information further, so they replicate by passing from one brain or person to another. Memes imitate both by oral and written means from word of mouth to inscriptions to paper. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “The replication and transmission of a meme occurs when one person copies a unit of cultural information comprising a meme from another person” (Rogers). However, the fidelity with which the genes replicate is somewhat missing in memes. The success rate of a meme replication depends upon how successfully a meme is copied and transmitted to the next host with or without mutation.

Addressing another important question as how memes survive in the cultural environment, Dawkins answers that the successful memes come with a “great psychological appeal” (250). Memes also face the selective pressure and compete with each other in the meme pool for greater space. It is as if memes also go by the law of “survival of the fittest”. The more adaptive

ones thrive vigorously in the socio-cultural environment increasing their longevity while others disappear quickly. As Jacques Monod, a French biologist puts it, “Ideas have retained some of the properties of organisms. Like them, they tend to perpetuate their structure and to breed...” (qtd. in Gleick, *The Information* 311). While analyzing *Heer* we observe that the legend chronicles the evolution of Punjabiyaat and maintains the stability of Punjabi identity by directing the cultural discourse through oral word in the form of music, cinema, recitations, aphorisms etc along with maintaining its supremacy in the written word.

Analysis of the Text

Punjab has borne the brunt of both external invasions and internal intrigues and Waris was chronicling these turbulent times in a love tale. Punjab was in a disheveled state from the loot and plunder by the Afghans, the simultaneous rising power of the Sikhs in the form of misls and the crumbling Mughal empire giving way to feudalism. The various analogies to raids on Punjab by foreign invaders like Nadir Shah, Turks and places like Qandhar, Kashmir, Iran etc. are memes revealing the socio-political, historical and cultural milieu of the times. The following words by Ranjha to Heer’s niece voicing his feelings illustrate how the state of Punjab, Punjabiyaat and the lovers are voyaging a similar fate. “Like Nadir Shah, the scourge of Ind / And the Punjab, you robbed my mind / Of all its peace and rest” (183; canto 5, st. 6). The influx of intruders has given adaptability to Punjabis in synthesizing different cultures and dialects. Culture as a collective entity is often in conflict with the individual. Culture plays an important role in formulating our identity and the latter in turn influences cultural processes too, thus sharing a symbiotic relationship.

Waris’s narrative is brimming with life. His descriptions are encyclopedic and come alive in simple activities like everyday household chores, men working in fields, women spinning cotton in courtyards, details of marriage procession, food items and delicacies, women bedecked in fineries, singers and dancers, details of trousseau comprising utensils and cattle

etc. Though the narrative is set in rural Punjab but it appeals to the readers and audiences of all age, caste, class and gender alike. Waris's greatest strength lies in keeping the common and familiar as selfsame. His imagery is evocative, language is rich in folklore, characters are realistic, dialogues are punched with dramatic effect and stanza's end with words of wisdom. As a matter-of-fact, the text is rooted in Punjabi consciousness. *Heer* is the womb nurturing Punjabiyat and Punjabi identity, the strongest umbilical cord with which we cannot swerve our ties ever.

Allegorical Characters

The narrative is replete with metaphorical symbolism and particularly Waris makes his characters allegorical and calls Heer-Ranjha the spirit and the body of Punjabiyat respectively, five saints are the five senses, Sehti is death, Kaido is Miltonic Satan, BalNath is Pir, Adli Raja is justice and Heer's friends are home, to lista few. The characters are delineated keeping in view the diversity of Punjabi society. They distinctly put forward different attitudes and ideals. For instance, Heer and Ranjha are both archetypal heroes and icons sworn on by the lovers as a testimony to their love and loyalty for each other. The detailed description of Heer's beauty – her “ruby” lips, teeth like “pearls”, and hands like “chinar leaves” – is infact the essence of Waris's Punjab (12; canto 1, st. 40). Heer is another name for love and romance but above all she is an exemplary figure of unflinching resistance. Both Heer and Ranjha are Muslim protagonists. But never does Waris let their religious identity overpower their Punjabi identity. They are neither Hindu nor Muslim nor Sikh; they are ubiquitous and pan-Punjabi.

Sometimes the characters are individual in their own unique sense and at times representative of an entire class or society. Waris's characters quintessentially exhibit the collective unconscious of Punjabiyat. Heer's father and brother, her parent's in-law and Ranjha's brothers embody the typical feudal values deriding any change. They are devotees of the established social and moral codes and their vested interest lies in

maintaining the status-quo. A well acclaimed Punjabi critic, Najm Husain Syed aptly points out:

In this world, Ranjha is a lonely figure, an outcast.... He is utterly disinterested in any materialistic motives.... So, he is out of place in a world where relationships are based only on utility and expediency. But if he is a victim of this world, he is, at the same time, the instrument of its exposure. Thus, Ranjha puts to a moral test the people who come into contact with him. The only person who survives this test is Heer. (53)

Thus, the locus of human relationships is economic prosperity most evident in wedding alliances. Ranjha has left his inheritance and being herdsman has further abated his status. Hence, he cannot be a prospective match for the beautiful and affluent Heer against the Kheras who supersede in wealth and social status. That is why against her wishes, Heer is given to Saida to which Waris poignantly remarks, “Gold makes the rank, the grade, the class” (39; canto 1, st.107).

The characters are conditioned in patriarchal mindset and are either wronged by or wrong the others. If we analyze Heer’s situation, as Harsaran Singh points out that she is oppressed by all the men in her life – father, lover, and brother – specially the first two whom she entrusted herself affectionately (Pankaj K. Singh 72). “In her (Heer’s) situation one finds the basic paradox of patriarchy: She is important for both but in herself she has no importance for them...” (93). Waris also highlights the gender inequality in his couplets and exposes the social pretentiousness where a girl or a woman is solely responsible for keeping the family honour intact, otherwise there are no qualms to poison, drown or bury her alive. Women like Heer and Sehti who dare to disturb the equilibrium by challenging or defying social norms are a huge threat to the entrenched power system. We conduct literary festivals, organize press conferences celebrating years and centuries of Waris Shah’s *Heer* but absurdly are at unease to accept any Heer in our family. Our collective psyche is still fraught with similar memes wherein we have fashioned

Heer as a perfect beauty relinquishing her of heroism and tenacity.

Even the womenfolk are coloured in patriarchal ideology. Ranjha's brothers' wives, Heer's mother and mother-in-law have imbibed patriarchal consciousness and speak the language of patriarchy. They are complacent with their socially and culturally constructed roles of women for the hearth and men for the fields. They are not allowed to think and act beyond these roles and are even training their next generation to accept similar providence. When the women of Jhang learn of Heer's affair with Ranjha, they chide her mother Milkhi to keep a check on her "disgraceful ways"; for they think their daughters too will follow Heer's precedent (26; canto 1, st. 79). Heer's mother-in-law too is unhappy with her. A daughter-in-law is the honour of the house. But she fears that Heer's laments will bring ill-luck to the family for she doesn't fulfill her "duties marital" (210; canto 5, st. 94). The patriarchal discourse puts women in double bind of having to abide by stereotyped gender roles otherwise they are declared unfeminine and very conveniently prosecuted in the name of social norms and codes.

"Freedom is always and exclusively the freedom for the one who thinks differently", writes Rosa Luxemburg, a twentieth century German economist in her book *The Russian Revolution* (1918 and published online in 1999). It is indeed apt for Waris who was a progressive writer ideating ahead of his times. He was radical in naming the epic after a female protagonist. He was well aware of the prevailing ill-practices and pretensions of the society and Sehti (Heer's sister-in-law) becomes his spokesperson to criticize them. Sehti is courageous like Heer but more unyielding with women's secondary status. We get a glimpse of her prudence in her banter with Ranjha where she defends women of the negative labels attributed to them:

Ah! Blessed are the women; they
Are honoured by the holy laws;
They are the grand primeval cause
Of man in life's eternal play. (189; canto 5, st. 24)

Sehti is more like Austenian protagonists. She is prudent and could easily see through Ranjha disguised as a fiendish fakir. With her shrewdness, Sehti devises a plan and helps Ranjha and Heer to elope and does “turn the devious course of fate” in their favour (221; canto 5, st.128). Keeping social constraints in mind, Sehti is apprehensive of her future with Murad, the Baloch lad. So she too sneaks away along with the duo. Meanwhile Murad’s camel miraculously strides in the same direction in which the trio is moving and he rescues Sehti bidding adieu to Heer and Ranjha. But neither does their successful elopement bring about any change in the coercive social structure nor do they make up a legend.

Kaido and Kazi, the Notorious Memes

Kaido, Heer’s uncle, shady in name and deeds is undoubtedly a very strong meme. He wields power in bringing about the climax of the story. Firstly, he deliberately provokes Heer’s parents and other kinsmen against the lovers. Secondly, he persuades Heer’s parents after their consent for her marriage with Ranjha, to poison her in the name of family honour. Najm Husain Syed in “The Fakir as Hero: Ranjha”, poignantly remarks that Kaido’s eccentricity stems from self-assumed, “cultural-intellectual function. He upholds the form of convention, (and) enjoins inhibitions” (154). He empowers patriarchy at all levels and in turn gets empowered. Kaido’s physical disability gets camouflaged with the ruckus he creates in and around the lives of others as a guardian of social norms. Kaido is a brand in himself, synonymous with venom and hatred. Waris too testifies Kaido’s idiosyncrasy by discrediting him with the following names, “vicious knave”, “raise the blinding fogs/of hatred”, “cripple crook” (24; canto 1, st. 73, 74). His journey continues beyond Waris’ narrative. Whenever some Heer is forcibly married off or killed to save the family prestige, thereupon Kaido’s in our society triumphs crushing the spirit of love. Not to anyone’s amazement, the Punjabi poet Amrita Pritam calls out to Waris Shah to save once again his Heer’s from Kaido’s, the robbers:

Despoilers of beauty and love,

each man now turned a Kedu
where can we seek another like
Waris Shah today? (3)

The Kazi and boatman Luddan are aides to Kaido. In an argument with Mullah at the mosque, Ranjha strips him off his fraudulent behaviour and calls him an imposter who “deceive(s) innocent folk” and accept bribes (7; canto 1, st. 25). Waris also chastises Kazi for idolizing caricatured religion. Without even slightest of remorse, Kazi advises Heer’s father to lure the witnesses with money to forgo the “bride’s consent” and “ratify the marriage rite(s)” hurriedly (69; canto 2, st.44). He goes a step further in mocking the religious practices by commanding to “gag” Heer and “marry her by force” (71; canto 2, st. 49). Punjabis have precipitated illusions around themselves to overcome imperfections of the past. They have developed affections for austerity while simultaneously enjoying pretence which is most evident in observing social practices like birth and wedding ceremonies which are celebrated like grand festivals.

Idea of a Community

A community as a whole is distinguished from the others with certain distinctive traits or characteristics that are associated with it. Gujarati and Punjabi communities in the sub-continent have been extremely mobile in exploring the globe. Waris himself writes about his travels to earn a livelihood and to “win a poet’s laurel crown” (77; canto 2, st. 61). Punjabis and the motif of journey are perfectly synonymous to each other. Critics have pointed it out for Ranjha as well. Ranjha’s excursion from Takht Hazara to Jhang Sayal to Bal Nath’s abode and then to Rangpur is significant of the Punjabis unquenchable wanderlust and love for migration. It has always pulled the Punjabis towards foreign territories simultaneously feeling nostalgic about their homeland resulting in dual emotions of euphoria for the new and heartache for the old. The image of Ranjha travelling afar is etched deeply in Punjabi psyche that they carry a bit of Ranjha everywhere with them.

Anthony Cohen writes, “People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity.” (qtd. in Kidd and Teagle 233). Cohen further says that the idea or concept of community is more of an “imagined” or a “symbolic” unit rather than ones drawn on maps or demarcated geographically. *Heer* is the legend of home (Punjab) or rather it brings us home whenever wherever it is read and recited. It is a pure Punjabi discourse reminiscence of the undivided Punjab. The medieval Punjab was a heterogeneous society with a predominant kinship or fraternal authority. The collective power of the community is absolute barely leaving any place for individual will or desire. This power play is the basis of all the conflict giving birth to the legend and its characters. Love is sacrificed at the altar of the magnified power of the kinship. *Heer* and *Ranjha* are on the other side of the continuum. The streak of rebelliousness from the lovers openly challenges the established system. Any deviance from social laws and codes is an offence and any aberration is strictly countered as fraternal authority is sovereign. The kinship system also raises an important question regarding the group and social identity – ‘Do I belong?’ as an individual finds it difficult to break ties.

Heer as a Devotional Meme

Almost all Sufi poets from Shah Hussain to Bulleh Shah and Ghulam Fareed have venerated on *Heer-Ranjha*. For Sufi poets, the love affair of *Heer-Ranjha* is divine and they act as devotional memes. *Heer* is the symbol of a true devotee seeking her beloved as Sufi poets seeking communion with the God. Bulle Shah sings for *Heer*:

Ranjha Ranjh akardi hun main aape Ranjha hoyi

Sakhiyo ni mainu Dheedo Ranjha, Heer na akho koyi

(Chanting the name of *Ranjha* I myself am *Ranjha* now

My friends call me *Dheedo Ranjha* not *Heer* anymore).

(Dutt)

Heer becomes one with her lover losing herself and her identity. *Heer* and *Ranjha* are buried in a single grave at the

shrine of Heer in Jhang. It is the ultimate symbol of union and victory of lovers in death. With metaphysical symbolism, Waris uplifts his characters spiritually and frees his narrative from the confines of time and space. What remains behind is the soul of Punjabiyaat, the eternal legend – timeless, dateless and ageless.

Punjabi scholar H. S. Gill says, “The narrative of *Heer* operates at two levels...the anthropological level and the cosmological level”; at the first stage, characters progress at the “cultural level” and at the second, “we encounter the same dramatis personae circumventing the realities of profane life with the sanctions of divine authority...” (319). Heer and Ranjha endure hardships with some solace in the form of divine intervention. The five saints bless both the lovers time and again with their grace. The patron saints reward Ranjha with five gifts and also protect Heer from Saida’s advances after marriage. The history of Punjab is rich in traditions of Bhakti so gurus are held in reverence along with their ability to perform miracles. Ranjha too persuades Bal Nath to attain monkhood to help him reunite with his beloved.

Heer has a wide readership base irrespective of class, caste, community. It is Punjabiyaat in macrocosm. As writes Balwant Gargi for folk drama (appropriating it to the legend), it “does not give a slice of life; it offers a panorama of existence” (qtd in Pankaj K. Singh 17). It is a common culture to recite a line or two from Waris’ *Heer* whenever the elderly gathers for evening chitchats in rural Punjab. Other than literary and scholarly analysis, Heer is potently alive in popular culture, in informal readings, maxims, songs, cinematic adaptations and paintings. The water of Chenab outflows bearing the love legend in its bosom decrying of the union and separation of the lovers. The places that we visit, the characters that we accompany in Waris’ *Heer* are all powerful memes reverberating in Punjabi lifeblood and sentiment

Conclusion

“When we die there are two things we can leave behind us: genes and memes...Our genes may be immortal but the *collection* of genes that is any one of us is bound to crumble

away...But if you contribute to the world's culture, if you have a good idea, compose a tune...write a poem, it may live on intact, long after your genes have dissolved in the common pool. Socrates may or may not have a gene or two alive in the world today, as G. C. Williams has remarked, but...meme-complexes of Socrates, Leonardo, Copernicus, and Marconi are still going strong" (Dawkins 258-59). Similarly, Waris and his *Heer* are the touchstone of Punjabi culture and identity. "May "Heer" be still the scholars' craze!" wishes Waris in the epilogue to the poem and it comes true (st. 5). *Heer* is tradition, culture, emotions, history and legend.

The dramatic history of Punjab has altered the face of Punjabi identity and the concept of Punjabiyyat. The events of the past have traumatized the community and its evolution and entrapped them in limited zones. When Punjabiyyat is battling with internal schisms and external censures, secular texts like *Heer* provide it a safe anchorage; an emblem of the past which the entire community owns with pride. Waris criticizes mortification of the institutions of marriage and religion by its highest authorities. He derides his characters from treading the beaten path and let them decide their destiny. They have flaws and face challenges, they succumb and resist to pressure, they are steeped in hubris and humility, they act, react and surrender and still continue to move forward. It seems as if the readers are transported inside the narrative. The characters undergo various ordeals; make choices, face consequences and experience emotions like a common man which becomes the basis of their affinity with the readers.

Heer challenges textbook orthodoxy and conventions. It does not imprint another set of commandments to be followed rather it allows the characters and the readers to take a leap of faith in fulfilling their "Personal Legend(s)"³. The ultimate justice of the lovers is their union even in death that leads them to heaven and gives them the "joy of immortality" (canto 6, st. 45). The readers too are encouraged to listen to their personal calling. The imperfection of human relations infuses courage in us to discover what we are and what more we can be. Perhaps,

the destiny of *Heer* is to cradle Punjabiyat with all its flaws and hopes and nurture it as a cosmic Punjabi dream. Though Punjabis dream of regaining the lost glory, it is their undying spirit and resistance that keeps Punjabiyat and their identity dynamic. In contemporary times when Punjabiyat is combating its own indoctrinations segregating Punjabi identity on geographical, linguistic, religious or ethnic fault lines, *Heer* turns up as a symbolic meme consolidating it.

End Notes:

1. The paper follows S.N. Dar's English translation of Waris Shah's *Heer* as the primary source of reference.

2. In his book *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin brings up the idea of evolution by natural selection. Each organism tends to adapt and change itself according to its environment. The beneficial changes increase the organism's chances of survival and reproduction by passing favourable traits to their offspring's as well.

3. The term is coined by Paulo Coelho in his fiction work *The Alchemist*. "Personal Legend" is one's destiny or ultimate purpose in life and when we pursue it we also help further the destiny of the universe which shows how interconnected we all are. According to the Coelho all living and non-living beings have a personal legend but not everyone/everything is able to realize it.

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