Modernity, Re-Islamization, and Waris Shah’s Heer

The colonization of the Punjab by the British ushered in economic, social, cultural and legal conditions in which Islamic identity came to assume new forms. In pre-modern times Islamic identity was mainly embedded in the text suffused everyday life while in modern times Islamic identity took on a more systematic and self-conscious form. At the threshold of modernity we are witnessing the formation of newer forms of Islamic identity. The work became ‘Islamized’ within the text. This was because Waris Shah’s Heer was the most popular work among Muslims (in ways it did not for the Hindus and Sikhs in the Punjab) because here was an extremely popular text among all classes of Punjabi Muslims, in which the main characters (Heer and Ranjha) were engaged in conduct that transgressed South Asian and especially Muslim norms, but who vindicated their conduct by seeking justifica- tion in the same sources – such as the Qur’an – as did their antagonists (the Qazis and Heer’s family). For example, Heer was immune to the Qazi after her forced marriage. ‘You have performed my nikah without my consent. Your act and fatwa are not in accordance with the Qur’an.’ Later another Qazi declares this marriage null and void because it was contracted without Heer’s consent.

Her parents,Waris Shah’s Heer by Shafiq Sabir.

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

Even today, more copies of Waris Shah’s Heer are sold in Pakistan than any other book – except the Qur’an. Waris Shah’s classic Punjabi text (completed in AH 1180; AD 1766) is considered by many familiar with the work to be the greatest work in Punjabi, and one of the greatest classical literatures of the world.* Osten-sibly a story of tragic love between Heer Sial, who is poisoned by her parents for wanting to marry Thidho Ranjha against their wishes, Heer is an ex- tremely complex text which narrates the economic, social, political and religious condi- tions in the Punjab during the decline of Muslim identity. The text also describes certain prac- tices from which Muslims refrained in the 18th century, as for example the use of all- silk cloth, whilst silk mixed with cotton or wool, called muslin, was permitted (this practice is no longer adhered to in contem- porary Pakistan and Punjab).

‘Modern’ and ‘traditional’ responses to Ranjha’s behaviour ostensibly both conform to and contradicts Muslim tradition in that it permits a person to refuse marriage, but also stipulates that children must obey their parents. So how was this extremely popular text to be reconciled with new forms and urban conditions? The key to the modernity that emerged during modernity? There were two main responses among Muslim scholars of Heer. One was the quest for modernity. They may be termed as those belonging to the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional’ literary circles. It should be noted, however, that both conform to and contradict modernity, and their presence and their intellectual concerns with regard to Heer are nowhere found prior to the period of modernity. In fact, the latter undertook the task of reconciling this text with re-Islamization; a task that may be undertaken by the ‘modern’ literary circles. The term ‘traditional’ here means those informal liter- ary circles that were not self-consciously modelled on institutions introduced by the British, with written rules and regulations, formal membership and admissions proce- dures, and a knowledge of the English language and par- ticipation in the institutions introduced by the British such as colleges, schools, and formally organized workplaces.

For the modern literary circles that developed during British rule the (Punjabi) Adabi Academy is considered Islamic. The educational system, newspapers, and reform societies all consti- tuted such public arenas. For example, one of the first ‘modern’ Islamic societies in the Punjab, the Anjuman Islamiyyah, was formed in 1869 to promote the interests of Muslims. The attempt to make Waris Shah’s Heer ac- ceptable was made by relating the narrative in the text to Islamic tradition in general and to the Shar’i in particular. Thus the Kash- miri bazaar editions contain extensive notes and commentary relating the narrative in the text to Islamic tradition. In fact, Saikot’s in- troduction to his edition asks the question: ‘Why did Waris Shah’s Heer become popular? This is an extremely important question especially in view of the fact that it was the first popular literary work through trials and tribulations which many pious persons in Islamic tradition have had to go through, and is an analogy with the Qur’anic heer nikah. There is scarcely any evi- dence to suggest that Waris Shah’s master- piece was read in any way other than as an entertainerment, and that concerns about its moral standing in relation to Islamic tradi- tion can only be observed after the onset of modernity – in spite of Waris Shah’s com- ment on his own work: ‘Ahe maine Quran kareem dhey nain, jaire shair main Waris Shah dhey nain’ (These verses by Waris Shah are an interpretation of the Qur’an). The point to be stressed here is that a Muslim Punjabi modernity was not merely a repetition or a derivative of European modernity. Rather, it was a modern forma- tion with its own specificity which fed into a European modernity.

The reading of Heer during the period of modernity presented an enormous dilem- ma for Muslims. It was not for nothing that the Hindus and Sikhs in the Punjab}