ANNE MURPHY
University of British Columbia

Locating a Punjabi Classic

Regional and Cross-Regional Affinities in Wāris Shāh's *Hīr* (18th c.)

Wāris Shāh's *Hīr*, widely considered a quintessentially Punjabi literary text, expresses complex linguistic and regional affinities that its designation as a singularly "Punjabi classic" might occlude. This article considers the diverse regional and cross-regional affinities expressed within the text, and the ways in which its linguistic character and textual referencing—with reference to diverse story-telling traditions from South and West Asia, and a multi-religious cultural domain—function to both localize and broaden these affinities, and to shape Punjabi at the intersection with Persian and vernacular traditions. Through recognition of this process, we can see the capaciousness of a designation of what is "Punjabi," at the intersection of diverse traditions and linguistic domains, at a time, in the early modern period, when the idea of Punjab as a cultural region was articulated across diverse texts and diverse terms. This enables us to consider the multiplicity that can be expressed in the formulation of the "region."

Keywords: Punjabi—Waris Shah—Qissā—Persian—Persianate—Punjab

Wāris Shāh's *Hīr* is widely considered a quintessentially Punjabi literary text.[1] Yet, this text expresses complex linguistic and regional affinities that its designation as a "Punjabi classic" might occlude (Gaur 2009; Matringe 2003; Sabir 1986; Shackle 1992, 2000; Syed 2006). This article considers the diverse regional affinities expressed within Wāris Shāh's text, and the ways in which its content and its linguistic form function to both localize and broaden these affinities, and to shape Punjabi at intersection with the Persianate in a far larger world, and at the intersection of the cosmopolitan and the vernacular in literary, linguistic, and imaginative terms. The vernacularization process associated with what Sheldon Pollock has called the "vernacular millennium"—which involved the emergence of nonclassical cosmopolitan languages in South Asia and other locations—was characterized by what Pollock calls "new conceptions of communities and places," by which the region came to be experienced in new terms (Pollock 2006, 6). I have noted elsewhere in preliminary terms how region emerges in texts produced in the Punjab region (and only some in the Punjabi language) in the early modern period; my effort here is to examine this question with greater depth in relation to this "Punjabi classic" (Murphy 2019).

Indeed, Wāris Shāh's mid-eighteenth-century rendition of the story of the star-crossed lovers Hīr and Rāṅjhā, whose love for each other is thwarted by her family's concern for status and ultimately ends in their deaths, is generally seen as quintessentially Punjabi. Its deep resonance with Punjabis of all religious backgrounds inspired the colonial-era revolutionary nationalist Udham Singh, who renamed himself Muhammad Singh Azād—in recognition of two prominent religions of Punjab, Sikhism and Islam, with the addition of "Azād" or "free"—to seek to take his oath on it, when at trial for the 1940 assassination of Michael O'Dwyer, who held the position of lieutenant governor of the Indian state of Punjab during the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919. Jeevan Deol has thus argued that the text is central to the "Punjabi episteme," and in this way has represented a symbolic opportunity to think beyond and across the religious identities that came to be defined in agonistic terms in the years leading up to independence and decolonization, and which defined the shape of the subsequent Partition of Punjab along religious lines (2002, 142). I focus here on Wāris Shāh's text, but it is one among many. In its Punjabi forms, the Hīr-Rāṅjhā story has been available in diverse versions, and in diverse scripts: both the Perso-Arabic script, known in Punjabi-speaking circles today as "Shāhmukhī," which

is utilized in the Pakistani Punjab and its diaspora communities to write Punjabi, and in the Gurmukhī script, which is used in the Indian analogue to write the language (Mir 2010; Murphy 2018a). There are many premodern Punjabi versions of the Hīr-Rāṅjhā story, including the sixteenth-century version by Damodar Gulati, and brief mention in the *Vārs* or historical ballads of Bhai Gurdās (also dated to the sixteenth century) and in the *Dasam Graṅth*, the early eighteenth-century text associated with the tenth and final of the living or embodied Sikh Gurus (Deol 2002). Farina Mir (2010) has explored colonial-period versions of the Hīr-Rāṅjhā narrative to understand the dynamism of Punjabi literary production in that time; the variety and number of Hīr-Rāṅjhā narratives in the colonial period, she argues, are testimony to Punjabi's fluorescence under colonial rule, and the continuing vibrance of the Hīr-Rāṅjhā tradition. This is in keeping, she shows, with the continuing relevance of and creativity visible in the *qissā* or narrative romance genre in South Asia, a genre with origins in Persian literature but which took both allied and distinctive forms in South Asia in the early modern period (Khan 2019; Pritchett 1985).

The full-length narrative by Wāris Shāh, which is known by the name of its heroine, Hīr, is considered a classic form of the larger Hīr-Rāṅjhā *qissa* or narrative story tradition. It was roughly contemporaneous to the time of Bulhe Shāh, a poet of lyrics that are much quoted across India and Pakistan even today (Murphy 2018b; Rinehart 1999; Shackle 2015). One prominent motif in those lyrics is the Hīr-Rāṅjhā narrative. While Bulhe Shah explored in particular Hīr's emotional state and her undying devotion to Rāṅjhā, with a focus on the experience of *viraha* or love in separation, the merging of lover and beloved, love beyond barriers, and the experience of love as a woman (for Bulhe Shah often wrote from that perspective, as was common in the period; Petievich 2007), Wāris Shāh's text is quite distinct in its narrative expression and orientation. Firstly, the text expresses (as will be discussed in brief, drawing on prior discussion) a range of social contestations and debates that are both locally and more broadly configured (Murphy 2018b). This leads me to the central point at issue here: that the text is marked both by distinctive Punjabi narrative elements and geographic ties, and those that reach far beyond the region, complicating the formulation of this text as a "Punjabi classic." This allows consideration of the notion of the "region" itself in more specific and complex terms. A close reading of the text with attention to the formulation of the region invites us to rethink the nature of what is "Punjabi," to locate a capacious, multilingual, and cosmopolitan breadth at the center of, not in opposition to, "Punjabiat" or "Punjabiness."

Social categories in Wāris Shāh's *Hīr* and their local and broader dimensions

The story of Hīr and Rāṅjhā (which, in the case of Wāris Shāh's text, is known by the title *Hīr*) revolves around the pair's surreptitious love affair. Both are from the Jaṭ caste—a prominent caste in Punjab associated with the control of agricultural land and with considerable social power—but with Hīr from a more prominent family, in the region of Syāl. This difference in status makes Rāṅjhā an unacceptable prospect as a groom when their love affair is discovered by Hīr's parents through the connivance of her uncle Kaido. Hīr is then duly married off to a more suitable groom: he is from

the Khera clan, in Wāris Shāh's text. Rāṅjhā calls upon and experiences visions of the five spiritual holy men, or Panj Pīr, who are named as a different set of pirs in different contexts. Rāṅjhā takes on the guise of a Nāth Jogī (the vernacular for "yogi") at Hīr's suggestion—inspiring, in Wāris Shāh's version, a lengthy debate about the nature of yoga and the nature and role of desire—and then Rāṅjhā travels to Hīr's marital village in search of his beloved (Murphy 2020a). After a spirited fight between Rāṅjhā and Sahiti, Hīr's sister-in-law, upon Rāṅjhā's arrival at her marital home, the two are reunited briefly and a plan is hatched for her escape. Hīr goes out for the day with the other young women of the village and feigns a snake bite; Rāṅjhā is called to care for her, as a Jogi-healer. They escape together, only to be caught again. In Wāris Shāh's version, the intervention of a local ruler ends with Rāṅjhā being granted Hīr—after the two threaten to destroy the ruler's city with fire—but under the guise of setting up their wedding ceremony, Hīr's family separates them and poisons Hīr. Rāṅjhā dies at the news of his beloved's death.

I have elsewhere discussed the ways in which Wāris Shāh's *Hīr* expresses emergent and contesting social imaginaries (Murphy 2018b). According to Jeevan Deol, it is the "erotic countercurrent" of the text that "forms a part of the poem's larger discourse of social critique, which has as its main target the hypocrisy of organized religion," but which he sees as "bound by literary convention" at the same time (2002, 146–47). I have also described my disagreement with this position: that the character of Hīr is not so subdued as Deol alleges, and that critique is configured not just against organized religion but in the spirit of farce overall, where all forms of social authority and privilege are questioned (Murphy 2018b). Francesca Orsini has noted the importance of the *naql* genre of folk performance tradition in the genealogy of the *qissā*, particularly for those with the markings of a less elite context; this observation resonates with Wāris Shāh's text, where satire and farce dominate (Orsini 2009, 114–15). Najm Hosain Syed, a prominent Punjabi-language literary critic in Pakistan, has thus called its primary mode "comedy," which is "unrestrained to the extent of boisterousness, still more a means of irony than hilarity" (2006, 45; see also Shackle 1992, 249). Farce and mockery are consistent themes, in diverse forms and with diverse objects of teasing and derision. These feature alongside description of social hierarchies and rules, in tension and in rupture. In their discussion of the satirical literary form in early modern South Asia, Monika Horstmann and Heidi Pauwels argue that it portrays and comments on social relations to "deconstruct in order to reconstruct"; Wāris Shāh's *Hīr* works along such lines, both to unsettle and to amuse (Horstmann and Pauwels 2012, 1; see discussion in Murphy 2018b).

This challenge to existing social categories in Wāris Shāh's *Hīr* centrally addresses gender, which acts as a focal point of tension and farce. The questioning of gender norms emerges here, however, within a broader range of debates around social roles and categories, and not in isolation. An additional central theme concerns caste and social status. Elsewhere, I have called attention to the congruencies between the preoccupation with caste in Wāris Shāh's text and contemporary discourses over caste that are visible in Sikh narrative texts dated to the same period, in the mid-eighteenth century (Murphy 2018c). One such text, the *Gurbilās Patshāhī Das,* articulates new kinds of social order within the Sikh community—outside of caste

hierarchy—designating the Sikh communitarian vision as opposed to caste. While some texts of this period in the same and other genres reassert the importance of caste—in keeping with caste discourses that prevailed in Vaishnava contexts, for example, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jaipur, as Monika Horstmann's (2011) work has attested—others continued to challenge these formulations. In Wāris Shāh's *Hīr*, we see both the articulation of operative social categories and their critique.[2] The positions in Wāris Shāh's text were therefore tied to a larger set of contestations underway across early modern north India, which could constitute both a challenge to and recognition and reinforcement of caste as a form of social hierarchy.

I reiterate these earlier observations on caste preoccupations within Wāris Shāh's text here not only to give a sense of the text overall, but also because of what some scholars have suggested they may indicate. Farina Mir has noted that caste was a recurrent feature of colonial-era narrations of the romance of Hīr-Rāṅjhā, whereby "*zāt* (caste or kinship group) . . . figures in these texts as the most salient category of social organization" (2010, 123). She sees this as expressing a set of localizing concerns, shared across religious communities in the colonial period. As Mir puts it, "[s]ocial life, as portrayed in these texts, is highly localized"; Ishwar Gaur concurs with this analysis of Wāris Shāh's text (Mir 2010, 127–28, 138–39; Gaur 2009, 20). It may be an overstatement, however, to see caste concerns as fundamentally localizing or regional. In part, the social contestation seen in Wāris Shāh's text may be indicative of the political turmoil in Punjab in the eighteenth century, as imperial Mughal authority fractured and successor powers sought control at the regional level, but it is also the case that a concern for caste and attendant social contestations was a dominant dynamic broadly across communities not only in Punjab during this period but also across the broader region of what is now North India and Pakistan, as already argued. This seemingly localizing mechanism was therefore part of a larger cross-regional concern and set of debates both challenging and reasserting caste. What we see as "localizing," therefore, needs to be read with sensitivity to its possible broader affinities that can complicate understanding of both the local and what is beyond it. In turn, this complicates understanding of this text's "Punjabiness."

Mapping the conceptual universe of Punjab

Punjab as a region was imagined in powerful ways by its residents—Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, and others—in the time probably before and certainly since Amir Khusrao called attention to it in linguistic and cultural terms.[3] Some have argued for Punjabi regional consciousness as a wholly modern invention: Harjot Oberoi argued in 1987 that "it was only in the 1940s, when the demand for Pakistan was articulated by the Muslim League, and when the cold truth dawned that the Punjab might after all be divided that the Sikhs with a tragic desperation began to visualize the Punjab as their homeland"; as such, he argues, the "affective attachment with the Punjab among the Sikhs is fairly recent, and it does not date back to the early annals of the Sikh community" (1987, 27). Such a claim, however, is difficult to support. It is undeniable that the notion of Punjab in national or territorial terms is new, since the idea of the

nation-state itself is entirely modern, and until the mass migrations of Partition Sikhs were not a majority in significant contiguous parts of the greater Punjab region, so Sikh articulations of possible Partition schemes prior to 1947 involved power-sharing and the numerical balancing of communities, rather than a Sikh majority territory (Murphy forthcoming). However, there is a long history of the affective attachment to the Punjab as a region among Sikhs, as well as other Punjabis. As I have argued elsewhere, the representation of the past was a particular concern for the Sikh community in the eighteenth century: the imagination of the physical landscape of the community formed a part of such representations, although they were never strictly coterminous with Punjab, and the landscape of the Gurus was far larger (Murphy 2012, 2020b). These attachments, again, suggest a notion of belonging to the region that does not neatly map to current national or regional boundaries; it also creates simultaneous kinds of mapping that produce overlapping regions. At the same time, such mappings of the region are not modern inventions.

As I have discussed elsewhere, we do see a conceptualization of Punjab as a region in the early modern period. In part, this emerges as an administrative and bureaucratic idea: the formal designation of the Lahore province in the Mughal administration was instituted under Akbar in 1580 to describe the region of the river Indus and its tributaries; the *ṣūbah* or province of Multan, in what is now southwestern Punjab in Pakistan, was designated as a separate area (Singh 1985, 31). The Braj seventeenth-century text the *Bachitar Nāṭak*, an autobiographical text attributed to the tenth Guru and contained within the *Dasam Graṅth*, features the term "*madra desa*," which refers roughly to Punjab. At the beginning of the fourth chapter of the text *madra des* is linked to the founding of the Sodhi and Bedi clans, the lineages associated most prominently with the Gurus (Murphy 2018c):

> *paṭhe kāgadaṁ madra rājā sudhāraṁ, āpo āpa mo baira bhāvaṁ bisāraṁ/*
> *nripaṁ mukaliyaṁ dūta so kāsī āyaṁ, sabai bediyaṁ bheda bhākhe sunayaṁ/*
> *sabai beda pāṭhī cale madra desaṁ, praṇāmaṁ kīyo ān kai kai naresaṁ*

> The Sodhi king of Madra sent letters, requesting that they forget past enmities
> The messengers sent by the king came to Kashi and revealed this secret to all the Bedis
> All those who recite the Vedas came to Madra Desa and paid their respects to the King. (*Bachitar Natak*, chap. 4)

At the end of the seventh chapter, describing the birth of the poet, the tenth Guru tells us that after his birth at Patna, "*madra desa ham ko le āe* / I was brought to Madra Desh," clearly again meaning Punjab. Here we do seem to see a sense of new kinds of culture boundaries (in Sheldon Pollock's words) associated with a "vernacular millennium"; they do not, however, map to the emergence of a regional polity at that time (Pollock 2006, 382–83). This is where Pollock's formulation of vernacular emergence is less useful for the Punjab region, where localized control came late and with peripheral commitment to Punjabi as a language. This section of the *Dasam Graṅth*, for example, is written in an influential, cross-regional vernacular called Braj (associated with the Mathura region, south of Delhi), not Punjabi, as were the majority of Sikh texts written in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; when

an independent polity was established with its center at Lahore in the Punjab region at the very end of the eighteenth century, under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Persian was instituted as the language of court, not Punjabi. The imagination of Punjab as a region, and the emergence of a Punjab-centered polity, therefore, were not closely linked to Punjabi language use.

Wāris Shāh's text is, however, written in Punjabi, and he opens *Hīr* in praise of the Lord, and the Prophet, and the Sufi saints who were so important to the cultural landscape of Punjab, creating Punjab as an Islamic domain:[4]

> *ma'udūda dā lāḍalā pīra cishatī, shakkara gaṅja māsa'ūda bharapūra hai jī*
> *bāīāṅ kutabāṅ de vicca hai pīra kāmala, jaiṅdī ājazī zuhada manazūra hai jī*
> *khānadāna vicca cishata de kāmalīata, shahira fakkara dā paṭaṇa ma'mūra hai jī*
> *shakkara gaṅja ne āṇi mukām kītā, dukkh darada paṅjāba dā dūra hai jī*

> The beloved of Moinuddin (of Ajmer), the Chishti Pir, he is full as a treasury of pure sweetness,
> He is the perfect saint among the 22 poles (*kutabāṅ*) [that guide the world], whose renunciation and humility is accepted by all,
> He is the perfection of the Chisht lineage, whose city has become civilized (*ma'mūr*) as a town of mendicants.
> Shakar-Ganj has come and made this his home (*mukām*), dispelling the sadness and pain of Punjab. (Sabir 1986, v. 5)

The territory or *vilāyat* of Punjab's most prominent Sufi saint Baba Farid is thus described, highlighting a feature of Punjab as a distinctive region and simultaneously making it a part of a broader Islamic imaginary (Murphy 2019, 320). This reflects a larger dynamic in the text: Punjab as a region does matter, but it does so at intersections with, and connected to, a broader cultural-geographical imaginary.

Exploring later versions of the Hīr-Rāṅjhā narrative in the colonial period, Farina Mir has highlighted how regional imaginaries prevailed within the *qissā* or story of Hīr and Rāṅjhā in that time to define a territoriality that "emphasizes the affective attachments people established with the local, and particularly their natal places" (Mir 2010, 123). In this context, Punjab emerges "as an imagined ensemble of natal places within a particular topography (rivers, riverbanks, forests and mountains) and religious geography (Sufi shrines and Hindu monasteries)" (ibid., 134). This is a mapping of Punjab through the places of the Hīr-Rāṅjhā narrative: Jhang, Takhat Hazara, Tilla Jogian, Rangpur; the places are enlivened by the always repeated and performed story of Hīr-Rāṅjhā, fixed in time and place in this region. Yet, Wāris Shāh's version of the text demonstrates that this mapping clearly predates the arrival of the British (Murphy 2019, 320).

Punjab as a place and a cultural sensibility—as a region—therefore mattered. It shaped Waris Shah's text, but also other texts in other traditions: the Punjabi landscape is enlivened also by the histories of the Sikh Gurus and other important figures from Sikh tradition, with sites commemorating these histories established across the region and beyond (Murphy 2012, 2020b). The region as an idea percolated through texts that were diverse in their religious formations and only at times reflective of a Punjabi vernacular linguistic form. As noted, many Sikh articulations

of a regional Punjabi sensibility, for instance, were expressed in Braj, an early modern linguistic form that had achieved a cosmopolitan status.

Yet we must also take into account the complexity of the landscape created in and around Wāris Shāh's *Hīr*. In linguistic terms alone, Wāris Shāh's text is multivalent. Although Punjabis generally regard the Hīr-Rāṅjhā story as quintessentially Punjabi, in linguistic and literary as well as regional terms it is also extant in Persian from the time of its earliest expressions in Punjabi; Hīr-Rāṅjhā had a vibrant life in Persian, as did many other Indic story traditions in the early modern period. The earliest extant Persian version is by the Tajik poet Hayāt Jān Bāqī Kolābī, which was composed between 1575 and 1579 during the time of Mughal emperor Akbar (d. 1605) and demonstrates characteristics of the larger Persian romance (*mathnawī*) tradition with a focus on dialogues between lovers—a tradition that was imitated and popularized by Amir Khusro (d. 1325) in South Asia from the thirteenth century onward (Murphy and Shahbaz 2019). By the time Wāris Shāh composed his narrative, there were already nine existing versions of Hīr-Rāṅjhā in Persian, among which four were contemporary to his work; this reveals the broad circulation and popularity of the tale in eighteenth-century South Asia, and in Persian (ibid., 2019). This Punjabi tale thus is also "very" Persian both in terms of the larger genre it relates to—the *qissā*, though it is a particular regional expression of that genre—and in terms of the language it was inscribed in from an early period.

Genre too tells us something about region, and how this text is both locally configured and also moves far beyond the local. Wāris Shāh's text is tied in terms of genre to a wide array of narrative traditions across South Asia and the Persianate world, many of which were first expressed in Persian in the *mathnawī*/*masnavī* poetic narrative form (Deol 2002; Khan 2019; Pritchett 1985). The tale is distinctive among other similar texts in the *qissā* genre in that its narrative core is unique to the Punjab region and environs: at least as we understand it today, it did not stem from a pre-existing Persian narrative tradition. Hīr-Rāṅjhā is thus fully geographically Punjabi in its origins, which is the basis for its identity as a "quintessentially Punjabi text," but as noted, it has been linguistically Persian from the time it was first inscribed in text in Punjabi (that is, the first Punjabi texts are contemporary to the first Persian texts). Further, the Persianate and the Punjabiat (a term generally used to describe "Punjabiness," but which I extend in meaning here) are linked through the text's form to a range of texts that were first expressed in Persian and/or Arabic, and later in South Asian vernaculars, such as the famous tale of the lovers Laila and Majnun. This is something the text itself expresses: references to the larger *qissā* narrative tradition abound in it, such as to the story of the lovers Sohni and Mahiwal, and Mirza and Sahibaan:

> Love delivers countless scandals, oh friends! Difficulties become one's intimate companions.
> What kind of tricks has love played, that all the young girls have been called?
> These memories have made kings into beggars, we have all become water-carriers.
> Hīr hasn't invented any new kind of love. All of human kind has loved in this way.
> Look—this love has laid down Farhad, and then it destroyed Yusef.
> Love also killed the likes of Sohni, who drowned in the river.

> Love also burned figures like Mirza, bringing flames to the desert.
> Look, this cruelty kills, and more friends go along with it.
> Wāris Shāh says, the ways of the world are strange, and so too are the ways of love.
> (Sabir 1986, v. 553)

This set of references occurs when the young women of Hīr's marital village, married and not, plot with Hīr and her sister-in-law Sahiti to help Hīr meet Rāṅjhā. They plan to take Hīr to the garden in the morning, as a group, so she can feign the snake bite that will allow them to call Rāṅjhā, the healer. (When they go, they go a bit wild, in a scene that certainly is meant to invoke laughter in the audience. That relates to observations made earlier about comedy and farce.) Through such references, the tale is embedded in other tales, a kind of genealogy of love and textuality alike. Such comparisons are made throughout the text: how Hīr is like the heroine Sassi (from the story of the lovers Sassi and Punnu), and how the suffering of love portrayed is like that experienced by Farhad, another great lover from the *qissā* tradition.

In another example, Hīr describes the terrible fate that comes to all those who sleep (because Rāṅjhā wants to take a rest while they are running away; Hīr is right, of course, and they get caught because of their nap). Her references draw broadly on Islamic tradition, as well as the *qissā* tradition:

> [And Hīr said:] those who have slept have all been robbed. Sleep has killed kings and queens.
> Sleep kills the saints, friends, and the pillars of the world; sleep steals the road from the traveler.
> This sleep has turned kings into beggars, and they weep at the passage of time.
> Sleep sets the lion, the god, and the priest for slaughter; sleep has killed the wise.
> Those who sleep are lost, like Adham, the black horse; sleep prevails and displeases the giant.
> Sleep threw down the great Solomon; sleep causes one to lose one's home.
> Sleep caused Jacob's son to be left in a well, and Joseph was bound in rope.
> Sleep caused Ishmael to be butchered, and Yunis/Jonah was found in the belly of a fish in the water.
> Sleep by accident (*qazā*) stops the Fajr early morning prayer, and stakes the camp of the devil.[5]
> Look what sleep got for Sassi, wandering in the desert searching.
> The Kheras have bound Hīr and Rāṅjhā, both, now they weep for their loss.
> Only the land of three and a half hands is yours as a grave, oh Wāris, why do you seek more? (Sabir 1986, v. 592)

We see, then, that Wāris Shāh's text positions itself within a regionally larger tradition, and it is a narrative one. It is linked both to local Punjabi tales, and those from the Persian canon; references from Qur'anic lore are numerous, with occasional quotation of Qur'anic verses (these are usually excised in Gurmukhi printed editions of the text, so they will not be visible to readers of published versions in that script). We also see references to the *Rāmāyaṇ* and diverse South Asian narrative traditions. These ground the text within Punjab but also link it to a far broader imaginative and textual universe. This is of course contrasted with the reference to the landscape in the last line of the verse above, where the concrete boundaries of our ultimate

inhabitation of space—the small size of a grave—represent the true borders we, as humans, live within.

There are multiple direct references to region and place, and to interactions between them, in the many versions of the Hīr-Rāṅjhā narrative. Discussing colonial-period versions of the story, Mir argues that these references "ground [the text] . . . in the topography and religious landscape of the five doabs and the cis-Sutlej territory of northwest India" (Mir 2010, 135). However, while the language of *des* (locality, land) and *watan* (country or homeland) may prevail in the colonial-period versions of the narrative that Mir examines, we do not see a singular articulation of "homeland" in Wāris Shāh's text (Mir 2010, 136ff.). Punjab as a region does not emerge alone in the regional affiliations and references within the text: thus, we can see the complexity of place and region in it, and of the traditions that are invoked therein. Deol has drawn attention to the martial connotations of the first *saropa*, or head-to-toe description of Hīr, in Wāris Shāh's text, noting that these utilize "the traditional equation between love and war," an interpretation that is suggested by the ending of verse 61 in Sabir (1986), which notes that

> *rūpa jaṭa dā vekha ke jāga ladhī Hira vāra ghatī sargardāna hoī*
> *vāriśa shāha naha thāoṅ dama mārne dī chāra chashma dī jadoṅ ghamsāna hoī*

> Seeing the shape of this Jaṭ, she has awoken, and Hīr sacrifices [herself] again, a helpless waif.
> Wāris Shāh says, no one can catch their breath, when two pairs of eyes are locked in battle.

Deol sees this use of "explicit and localized military references" as a foreshadowing of later violence, but that this is offset by the sexualization of the heroine in the same passages (2002, 153). In light of the social transgressions indicated in the text, we can also see the text's portrayal of violence within a larger logic of transgression; such sexual references too operate within that logic of excess. Further, across the text, such martial references work not in isolation, but to both localize and regionalize the text and relate it to a larger geographical imaginary.

We start, for a first example of this dynamic, with what begins as a more standard articulation of Hīr's beauty, but which quickly is put in martial terms (Deol 2002):

> She came, bringing 60 of her girlfriends with her, as if drunken with pride.
> With clusters of pearls hanging from her ears, with the splendor of a fairy.
> Dazzling in the red bodice she wore upon her bosom, leaving no one with their senses on earth or sky.
> That one whose nose ring shone like the pole star, drenched in the deadly storm of youth.
> Come, my friends, she has caused even the tents of the dead to stake in the sand.[6]
> Wāris Shāh, the Jat girl has laid waste to us, fueled by pride and ego.
> (Sabir 1986, v. 55)

Now the poet will praise Hīr: her forehead shines with the beauty of the moon.

> The plaits of her reddish hair are like the color of a streaming meteor in the night, crossing the moon.

> Her eyes are like narcissus flowers, beautiful like those of a bird or a deer, and her cheeks blossom like the rose.
> Her eyebrows arch like the bows of Lahore, there is no end to the accounting of her beauty.
> The beauty of the line of the Kohl upon her eyes is like the advancing line of the army of Punjab on the plains of Hind.
> Swinging freely in the open spinning circles of young women, like a Nawāb's drunken elephant.
> The lines and dots made on her beautiful face are like the calligraphy of the letters in a book.
> Those who have the pleasure of seeing, this is their great honor.
> Let us go on the pilgrimage on the holy day of Lailat-ul-qadar[7], Oh Wāris Shāh!
> This is just such an act of great merit. (Sabir 1986, v. 56)

What I would like to emphasize here are the geographical references that accompany this martial imagery: the plains of north India, Hind, and the bows of Lahore. These represent an important subtheme throughout the work, describing region, regions, and relationships among regions, embedding the text both in a sense of the region and in a set of larger interactions. We see this in analogies to describe Rāṅjhā's defeat, for example, that place the text in its historical context:

> The flag of love was black and white. In the middle of it, she has cast it the red of grief.
> In the same way that the Khaljis [rulers based in Delhi] swiftly attacked the camp and brought it to ruin,
> Having applied the heat of fire to the *t̤alā kuṅd* (gold thread), making it glow red through and through, inside and out
> You came after me like Ahmad Shah, to uproot and build your own foundation.
> Those who made [your new in-laws,] the Kheras, prosperous (full with seed: *bijālā*) have dismissed me as a cowherd (*mahīṅvāl*).
> Victory took up residence for the Kheras, and for Rāṅjhā there was only a place of enmity
> She ran away, abandoning me and the herds of Syāl, and came to the Kheras to entrap them
> When I went in their courtyard, where she had joined forces with Sahiti, I was caught like a thief.
> The same way Hind and Punjab shook from the forces of Nadir Shah, she shook me completely.
> It's all well that the Chaudhury's son became a cow-herder.
> She who was so cruel to me will get her accounting in God's court
> She gave grief at her pleasure—Wāris Shāh says, the Fakir delights in this. (Sabir 1986, v. 465)

Here we have a range of historical references that locate this text both in regional and supra-regional terms: the Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Abdali (the founder of the Durrani dynasty), who invaded Punjab in the 1750s and 1760s (in 1761, Abdali's forces defeated the Marathas at Panipat, and parts of Punjab were integrated into his empire); Nadir Shah, the Persian ruler who led a devastating attack on northern

India (both the central plains referred to here as "Hind," and Punjab) in 1739; and the Khaljis, who ruled from Delhi. Here in this verse we see both dimensions I have highlighted: the linking of the text to a particular set of political and martial conflicts, grounding it in the particulars of time and place, and both the local region and other regions and localities.

Later, the village girls who gather in support of Hīr are compared to those who might attack Punjab from Qandahar (in Afghanistan today), again referencing historical events from the eighteenth century, just before the composition of this text in the 1760s. We also see repeated references to the generalizing force of the *qissā* tradition through the story of Laila and Majnun, and Sassi Punnu again:

> Praying throughout, the night passed, see, what was meant to be came quickly.
> That which should be, that very thing was happening—all the bad things associated with destiny.
> This fate was as that of the king of Faqirs, who like Punnu, became drunk.
> Absorbed in the name like Majnūṅ, whom the princesses deprived of water.
> The lover is careless, and the beloved passes the night without a response.
> Just as Ali was killed by the slave, and the companions of the prophet (*asahābiyāṅ*) had no word of it.
> The girls of the village gathered and sat and made themselves into a force, like an attack on Punjab from Qandahar.
> Wāris Shāh, all the girls came and gathered at the door (*phale*) of the Kheras. (Sabir 1986, v. 552)

The text thus features references that both localize and link the Punjab region to a larger geography—often expressed through political conflicts and attendant relationships between Punjab and adjacent regions, and often invoked to denote conflict or tension between men and women—just as we have a capacious embrace of cross-regional narrative traditions and references. There are many such broader referencing traditions, such as the reference to the Panj Pir, which is framed as a "local" tradition but which is relocalized across the subcontinent in different ways, reimagined and rearticulated in relation to new "locales" (Snehi 2019).[8] The theme of the hero-as-Jogi, here in this tale in the form of Rāṅjhā taking on the Jogi guise to win back his beloved, is also a larger motif that is found across northern India and, much earlier, in the *prem-ākhyān* tradition from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century in Avadhi, a form of Hindavi (Behl 2012). It would thus be a mistake to regard Wāris Shāh's text as preoccupied only with Punjab, even as a sense of this region emerges within it. It is a diversely moored Punjab that we see expressed.

Having focused thus far on the regional affinities of the text, including how it reaches beyond Punjab and also relates this region to those outside of it, which itself entails a sense of boundaries on the region, it makes sense to return to the question of language and its relationship to regional articulation. Mention has been made of Persian versions of the story of Hīr and Rāṅjhā. Wāris Shāh's text exhibits a complex relationship with Persian, in linguistic terms, too. This is obvious from the linguistic character of the passages we have looked at so far in brief. Most are Punjabi in grammatical character. Persian vocabulary is used, but within a Punjabi linguistic frame. There are moments in Wāris Shāh's text when Persian logics prevail,

but overall the Punjabi frame holds. The linguistic formations of the text therefore match the complex textual referencing found in the text: grounded in Punjab and Punjabi, but at the same time much more than that. Punjabi's emergence in the early modern period therefore needs to be understood in this way, emphasizing its complex relation to Persian and other languages, such as Braj and Khari Boli (the basis for modern Hindi and Urdu; Murphy 2019).

Closing

My line of questioning in this article has addressed how and why the region emerges in Wāris Shāh's *Hīr*, and how this relates to larger affinities. I regard this as an effort to tease out "a different, plural, premodern logic of space," in Pollock's terms (2006, 16). There is importance to this. As I argue elsewhere, Punjabi language in the modern period, since the Partition of 1947, has been the object of various kinds of nationalizing or quasi-nationalizing forces (Murphy 2018a). Even when the national is in all practical terms impossible, such as today when the region is split between India and Pakistan—and this will not be changing soon—efforts along these lines continue in contingent ways, claiming Punjabi, for example, for one community, or defining Punjabi in opposition to other languages, like Persian. Persian in particular has been largely effaced from popular representations of the cultural history of the subcontinent, particularly in India. We can learn from Wāris Shāh's text that the story of Punjabi and its literature is more complex than such nationalizing narratives allow. If, as Pollock suggests, "The goal . . . is learning to understand how people conceptualized macrospaces in the past, and what work in the spheres of culture and power such conceptualization was meant, or not meant, to do," we need to understand Punjab as a region, and the Punjabi language as a language, as entities that were connected to other places and languages, in complex terms that cannot be fully understood in isolation (Pollock 2006, 17).

AUTHOR

Anne Murphy began her work on Wāris Shāh's *Hīr* as a fellow at the Max Weber Kolleg, University of Erfurt, in 2017, as a part of a larger project on the history of the Punjabi language and its expressions in the early modern and modern periods. She is currently working on a full English-language translation of the text, with reference to the earliest available manuscripts.

NOTES

1. *Pañjāb* represents the accurate transliteration of this word in Roman script, but in English I use "Punjab" because the English word "pun" is closer to the original in Punjabi than the English word "pan." This facilitates more correct pronunciation in English contexts. An earlier version of this article was presented as "Indian Narrative in a Larger Eighteenth Century World," at the 20th Annual International Conference on History & Archeology: From Ancient to Modern, May 30–31, 2022, Athens Institute for Education and Research, Athens, Greece. Attendance at

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2. I argue elsewhere that the dynamic social positions sketched out in Wāris Shāh's *Hīr* are indicative of a larger process of religious individualization in the early modern period. See Murphy 2020a.

3. This paragraph and the next draw on and expand discussion in Murphy 2019.

4. This article utilizes the Sabir 1986 printed edition of the text.

5. There is sexual innuendo in this line.

6. Deol suggests that this phrase has idiomatic secondary meaning of getting an erection (2002, 162). Arafat Safdar has suggested that the tents of the dead is a more appropriate translation. Personal communication, Spring 2020.

7. The 27th day of the month of Ramadan, when the Qur'an was first revealed to the Prophet.

8. He calls on the Panj Pir, five Sufi saints that are prominent in folklore across present-day north India and Pakistan, to assist (Sabir 1986, 41, and on the portrayal of the Panj Pir, see also 110–11, 122). The Panj Pir grant Hīr to Rāṅjhā. See Snehi (2019, 101ff) on the Panj Pir and their veneration in Punjab; Snehi provides a sense of some of the variety of constellations of these five figures (ibid., 110).

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