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Theatre of the Past:
Re-presenting the past in different genres

Anshu Malhotra

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Theatre of the Past: Re-presenting the past in different genres*

Anshu Malhotra**

Abstract

Historians today are more aware than ever before of the elusive nature of the past, as of the dynamic ways in which it is represented and used in the present, or the manner in which its memory is constructed. Between subjective truths and popular memory-making deeply charged with meaning in the present, and the apparently disinterested academic historian delving in the archives to reconstruct events, are vast contested spaces inhabited by multiple forms and genres — vernacular histories, if you will — all drawing from and redrawing the past. Here I will look at some of the "popular" forms in which Piro's story, which has caught the imagination of the Punjabi peoples at this contemporary moment, is being circulated among them. The story of this Muslim prostitute of mid-nineteenth century Punjab, who wrote her autobiographical verses, and went on to live in a Sikh sect of the Gulabdasis, though not entirely unknown among Punjabi academics, has received a fillip in recent years with a couple of plays written on her supposed life and her works compiled in devotional accounts. The question that I ask here is that in this welter of voices and forms—drama and literature in the devotional mode—is the historian's voice distinctive?

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Historians today are more aware than ever before of the elusive nature of the past, as of the dynamic ways in which it is represented and used in the present, or the manner in which its memory is constructed.[1] The professional historian is no longer the purveyor of "the past as it happened", but rather recognizes her limited and contested corner to espouse one among the many possible discourses about the past. In academia inflected with post-modernist derision of a single perspective, the monological utterance, what is the historian's task?[2] Speaking of his use of oral history and his invaluable reflections on it, Alssandro Portelli endorsed the historian's aspiration towards "reality" and "truth", not to establish positivistic "fact", but for greater attention to "subjective truths".[3] The making of memory, the recounting of tales with their "creative errors", was less about events as they happened, according to Portelli, and more about their "meanings", for those reflecting on them and processing them through their own lives, for posterity.[4] Between subjective truths and popular memory-making deeply charged with meaning in the present,[5] and the apparently disinterested academic historian delving in the archives to reconstruct events, are vast contested spaces inhabited by multiple forms and genres—vernacular histories, if you will—all in the business of drawing from and redrawing the past.[6]

[1] For the reconstruction of an event, its metaphorical use by nationalists, and its memory in the locality of its occurrence see Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor , Memory: Chauri-Chaura 1922–1992*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.

[2] On "monological utterance", the notion that texts have an essence, see Ronald Inden, "Introduction: From Philological to Dialogical Texts", in Ronald Inden, Jonathan Walters and Daud Ali, *Querying the Medieval: Texts and the History of Practices in South Asia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 3–28.

[3] Alssandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991, p. ix.

[4] Ibid., p. 50.

[5] See the comments of Pierre Nora on memory being a phenomenon of the present and history as a representation of the past in Partha Chatterjee's "Introduction: History and the Present", in Partha Chatterjee and Anjan Ghosh (eds), *History and the Present*, London: Anthem Press, 2006, p. 10.

[6] Partha Chatterjee, "Introduction: History in the Vernacular", in Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee, *History in the Vernacular*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008, pp.1–24.

In this section I will look at some of the "popular" forms in which Piro's story, which has caught the imagination of the Punjabi peoples at this contemporary moment, is being circulated among them.[7] The story of this Muslim prostitute of mid-nineteenth century Punjab, who went on to live in a Sikh sect of the Gulabdasis and earned for herself a place next to the guru Gulabdas, though not entirely unknown among Punjabi academics, received a fillip when Santokh Singh or Shahryar (his nom de plume) first discovered a rather tattered handwritten manuscript of her verses, and having become fascinated with her story, wrote a play on her, *Piro Preman*, in Punjabi.[8] In fact, he first wrote a script for a tele-film in Hindi, which never got made, and later wrote a play, as he tells us in his preface to the play. A few years later, another play was penned in Punjabi by a literary policeman, Swarajbir, *Shairi*,[9] (Poetry) which has been performed on stage by the theatre group 'Manch Rang Manch' in Amritsar and by the Ajoka Theatre Group of Lahore in Pakistani Punjab.[10] More recently still, looking at her growing popularity and the academic interest in her writings, Vijender Das of the Gulabdasi *dera*, Hansi, has compiled all the writings of Piro, transliterated in the Devanagari script, in a volume called *Sant Kavyitri Ma Piro* (Saint Poetess Mother Piro). Das not only does an exegesis of her verses in the book, but has also written an extensive introduction, whose burden is to tell the readers about her life, but more importantly, to guide us in perceiving her in an appropriate way.[11] A compilation

[7] When I speak of the Punjabi peoples here I am invoking the concept of Punjabiyat, an attachment to the idea of Punjab and Punjabi culture that works across religious, caste and class divisions, and in this case national boundaries as well. See Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir, "Punjab in History and Historiography: An Introduction", in their edited volume *Punjab Reconsidered: History, Culture and Practice*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. xv-lviii. Also see Anshu Malhotra, "The Importance of Being Piro in Punjab", in *The Tribune*, 6 December 2012.

[8] Shahryar, *Piro Preman*, Amritsar: Rawal Prakashan, 1999.

[9] Swarajbir, *Shairi*, Ludhiana: Chetna Prakashan, 2004.

[10] The cast of the play and its performance by 'Manch Rang Manch' is mentioned in the play *Shairi*, pp.198–9. I briefly met Madiha Gauhar of Ajoka in Delhi when they performed their play on Bulleh Shah in Delhi in 2012. The play on Piro was called *Piro Preman*, but the performance was based on Swarajbir's script.

[11] Sant Vijender Das (ed.), *Sant Kavyitri Ma Piro*, Panchkula: Satluj Prakashan, 2011.

of her writings in Punjabi, with a very brief introduction has also been brought out by Veer Vahab, who completed her M. Phil degree on Piro's life and writing and who lives in the town of Fazilka in Punjab.[12] The question that I ask here is that in this welter of voices and forms—drama and literature in the devotional métier—is the historian's voice distinctive? I will argue that the circulation of varied discourses in the mundane world, the heteroglossia of utterances that impinge on us every day in multiple ways, play a role in shaping what we choose to study or write about. That is to say, one's own present impacts the way in which we study the past. However, the methods and forms we adopt to lay forth our thoughts, peddle our ideas are different, and so do lend themselves to distinct tones. The historian's is one among the many voices competing to speak and be heard, though the privilege of being situated in the academia, and as connoisseurs of the past, historians might be keener than others to show that "their explanations are better than competing explanations".[13]

History, Fiction and the Autobiographical

The question about the distinctiveness of the historian's oeuvre has become more complex since history's "narrative" and "fictive" qualities have been pointed out. History is seen as a species of the genus story that is told retrospectively. It is the historical narrative which like a metaphor creates meaning rather than any "facts", in themselves selected from among a plethora, that speak in an unmediated way. Hayden White went so far as to suggest that historical narration is primarily an act of telling, and not of discovery, and that historical narratives are like "verbal fictions", with literary qualities. White's notion of "emplotment", the plot structure chosen by the historian to narrate the story, derives from pre-existing narrative strategies, generic story patterns.[14]

[12] Veer Vahab (ed.), *Piro Kahe Saheliyon*, Jalandhar: R.B. Printing Press, 2012.

[13] Raymond Martin quoted in Geoffrey Roberts, "Introduction: The History and Narrative Debate, 1960–2000", in Geoffrey Roberts (ed.), *The History and Narrative Reader*, London: Routledge, 2001, p. 8.

[14] Ibid. pp. 1–21. Also see Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact", in Roberts, *The History and Narrative Reader*, pp. 221–236.

Historians have protested what many consider to be an undermining of their profession, for by the "application of conventional historians' criteria regarding accuracy, adequacy, facticity, evidentiality, plausibility and so on", they can arrive at a good approximate of a historical truth.[15] However, the consensus at present seems to be a mix of agreeing that historians do deploy narrative inventiveness to tell their stories but also that their stories are tightly controlled by the sources at their command. Thus while they accept that narratives are "invented" by them, "in the sense that they are made", they however insist that "does not mean they are made-up in the fictional sense",[16] or that their narrative might be seen to add meaning to the past, but that does not make the narrative inaccurate. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, distinguishing between history-writing and fiction-writing, that "the conditions of plausibility remain entirely different in the two genres" as do the protocols that bind writer and reader.[17] The historian's method of deploying a variety of sources, of the use of the archives, of verification and referencing (the reader may ask how a historian knows) and of authenticating facts based on the protocols of their profession and its (albeit changing) practices and values, sets them apart from literary productions. The past for the historian is therefore not a "promiscuous past", in the manner described in a sexualized metaphor by Robert Jenkins, one that will go with anybody, ready to be moulded any way a writer may wish to. Rather, the historian aspires to some sort of a historical "truth", based on the sources, which may themselves be selective, interpretive, and literary, but nevertheless impact what a historian can say, even as she is conscious of the narrative quality of her writing.[18] Ann Curthoys and John Docker speak of this oscillation of history between its literary qualities (narrative of the historian) and its close scrutiny of sources (its professional grounding) as the "doubleness" of history, one that encourages self-reflexivity. In their words this doubleness is "the secret of history's cunning practice, an inventive, self-transforming discipline".[19]

[15] Roberts, "Introduction", p. 14.
[16] Noel Carroll quoted in Roberts, "Introduction", Ibid. p. 10.
[17] Chatterjee, "Introduction", in *History and the Present*, p. 9.
[18] Robert Jenkins discussed in Ann Curthoys and John Docker, "Introduction", in their *Is History Fiction?* Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2010, pp. 1–11.
[19] Ibid., p. 11.

In the present case the problem of sifting truth from fiction, and fiction from history, is more complicated because among our sources of information on Piro, the single most important one are her own autobiographical verses, the *Ik Sau Sath Kafian* or the *One Hundred and Sixty Kafis* (*160 Kafis*) written sometime in the middle years of the nineteenth century.[20] A life narrative that dwells on one contentious episode of her life, it may be seen as a tantalizing autobiographical fragment, titillating in the glimpse it gives of her life and personality through what filters out as a particularly trying time for her, but too partial to allow a reconstruction of her life, or even the said event. However, before one speaks of the specificities of Piro's verses in the *160 Kafis*, it is important to look at the genre of the autobiographical, the life narrative itself, and see how this further complicates the historian's task of attempting to reach the tangible, a "fact" that did happen in history, and the environment in which it could happen, from the autobiographer's subjective truth.

The autobiographical narrative, also retrospective in nature, is deeply implicated in the politics of self-identity/ies. A text where the self is both the subject of discourse and the object of inquiry, it pushes towards formulation of subjective truths, themselves based upon contingent circumstances of the present. Paul de Man calls prosopopeia the trope of autobiography, emphasizing the simultaneous presence and absence of the self in its narration.[21] The rhetorical nature of writing the self, often justificatory and legitimizing, explicatory of a life, event or a relationship, is weighted with many reasons other than merely recounting what happened. Thus transparency in relating a life is not the autobiography's forte as life is refracted through the autobiographer's experience. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have noted that to "reduce autobiographical narration to facticity is to strip it of the densities of rhetorical, literary, ethical, political and cultural dimensions".[22] It is for this reason too that the autobiographical can

[20] Ms. 888, Bhai Gurdas Library, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar.
[21] Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement", *MLN* (Vol. 94, No. 5), Comparative Literature, Dec. 1979, pp. 919–30.
[22] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 13.

be seen to be dialogical, composed with an audience in mind, what Smith and Watson call its "intersubjective" dimensions, its "refractive interplay" based upon an imaginary exchange with a putative audience.[23] Autobiographical narrative, i.e., its arrival at particular meanings, is in active concert with an audience in mind, including the self as spectator, to use a performance metaphor. As Ronald Inden has noted of texts generally, but in this case applicable to the autobiographical, that they are "articulative", an intervention on the part of an agent in the world.[24]

The autobiographical is also based upon memory, again, as noted, always constructed from the present, and so imbricated in meaning-making than in recollecting a past in an unmediated way. The telescoping of time, the conflating of past occurrences, the memorializing of particular events, and forgetfulness and silences, are all aspects of this presentist perspective, one that makes life meaningful to the narrator as to its reader/listener. Moreover, in many cultures, for example the Indian bardic tradition, memory-making may be an activity in the hands of the specialists, and so their generic methods may influence its particular form or reification, as in genealogical histories. Among such tropes may be that of, for instance, life connected through rebirths,[25] of lives meaningful only in relational terms rather than through individual characteristics,[26] or as in the case at hand, life understood and organized through mythological models, for example, Piro presenting herself as a putative Sita in her verses, the epic heroine of *Ramayana* considered to be the paragon of womanly virtues.[27] All this can make the

[23] Ibid., p. 16.

[24] Inden, "Introduction", p. 13.

[25] See the discussion on Bahinabai's *Atmanivedina* in Anshu Malhotra, "Miracles for the Marginal? Gender and Agency in a Nineteenth Century Autobiographical Fragment", *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Summer 2013, pp. 15–35. Also see Jeanne Openshaw, *Writing the Self: A Dissenting Bengali Baul Guru*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010.

[26] See the discussion on emphasis on relational lives in South Asia and the West in Kathryn Hansen, "Self and Subjectivity in Autobiographical Criticism", in her *Stages of Life: Indian Theatre Autobiographies*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011, pp. 299–314.

[27] For a comprehensive discussion of these various aspects of the autobiographical narrative see Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley,

autobiographical narrative, ostensibly the very stuff that defines an individual, a collective, or an intensely relational endeavour. Indeed modeling a life on "cultural scripts", the swirling of ideal lives in the discursive realm is not a peculiarity of South Asia and is available for imitation in virtually all cultures.[28]

The relational and intersubjective aspects of the life narrative also make it inherently performative. The term performative is used here both in the sense of its meaning in drama—the performing of a character according to a script, here authored by oneself; and in the way in which the philosopher Judith Butler has used it, to indicate the reification of gendered roles through bodily disciplinary regulation and reiteration in social life.[29] On the one hand, the (re)enacting of one's life through a self-constructed script, which is the autobiography, makes it at its core theatrical, as already noted, in this case on page rather than stage.[30] The script-drama, if drama is a specialized kind of script, makes the autobiographical life theatrical, when theatre is a specialized kind of performance, only in this case, the mise-en-scene is not on stage, but is created every time someone reads/listens to the narrative voice of the autobiographer.[31]

The naturalization of gender roles in society that Butler speaks of, on the other hand, that constructs woman or the feminine in certain ways, for example, as deferential, silent, or veiled in many cultures, means that the autobiographer has to negotiate societal expectations

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"Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia: An Introduction", in their (eds), *Speaking of the Self? Gender, Performance and Autobiography in South Asia* (forthcoming) Duke University Press: Durham, 2015.

[28] Jill Ker Conway, *When Memory Speaks: Exploring the Art of Autobiography*, New York: Vintage Books1999, pp. 6–7.

[29] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York: Routledge, 1993.

[30] The expression stage/page is taken from Sherrill Grace, "Theatre and the Autobiographical Pact: An Introduction", in Sherrill Grace and Jerry Wasserman (eds), *Theatre and Autobiography: Writing and Performing Lives in Theory and Practice*, Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2006, p. 13.

[31] Richard Schechner, "Drama, Script, Theater, and Performance", in his *Performance Theory*, London: Routledge, 2003 (1988), pp. 66–111.

in certain ways. This can of course mean adhering to those expectations; but the recourse to speech when society expects silence can be often read as a statement of defiance, of "talking back", as in the case of Piro to be discussed later.[32] It is for this reason that the life narrative is seen to be especially used by women and the oppressed like dalits in the Indian case.[33] This performative talking back occurs, one may suggest, despite what is often an overwhelming societal concern for ideal behaviour. For Butler it is the non-alignment of the different expectations of society from a person that creates the ruptures for individual expression and agency, for defiant speech.[34] However, between the force of societal ideals, gendered discourses and individual concerns, the autobiographical performance may present the self in a variety of ways, sometimes conforming and compliant, at others confrontational and contumacious.

Speaking about the distinctive quality of autobiography from fiction, Philip Lejeune had proffered the idea of an "autobiographical pact" between the autobiographer and the reader. By affixing a name to the related narrative, the autobiographer sealed the pact, so to speak, with his/her truth, underscoring that the events narrated in fact happened in history.[35] This idea is similar to that about history-writing and the protocols that bind the historian and the reader; that the narrative of the historian in fact speaks of a historical occurrence. Between truth-telling and a rehearsed performance, subjective truths and objective facts, the autobiographer (as the historian) inhabits a space in close proximity to fiction and its charms. Let us now turn to Piro's autobiographical account and its rendition in fictional avatars.

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[32] Patricia Hart and Karen Weatherman with Susan H. Armitage (eds), *Women Writing Women: The Frontiers Reader*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006, p. 3.

[33] Sharmila Rege,*Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006.

[34] Sidonie Smith, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance", in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds), *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, pp. 108–115.

[35] For a discussion on Philip Lejeune see Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 20.

Piro's Narrative and Narratives on Piro

In this section I will first summarize what Piro wrote in her *160 Kafis*, and then very briefly discuss the two dramas based on her supposed life, and a third hagiographical account of a Gulabdasi devotee and head of its Hansi branch. Two points need to be borne in mind at this stage. Firstly, Piro's repertoire of writings is larger than this autobiographical text, the others being more spiritually inclined verses, and our authors dip into them mostly without distinguishing between her different works, using them as uncomplicated factual sources to narrate her life. Secondly, there are a few significant, though mostly fragmentary sources on the Gulabdasis, Piro's sect, and the information available in them is used in the plays to construct her life, along with of course, a generous dollop of imagination. The specificities of the sources that were written in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, and their internal dynamics are of little concern to our authors, though a sharp historical consciousness informs their writing, in particular in the preface, afterword, and introduction used by our three authors respectively to address their audience. There are thus clear intentions in plotting their stories in the ways they do, and in addressing their audiences/readers, instructing them to read in specific ways.

This brief discussion will form the background for the next part of the paper where I will take up some common themes that appear in all accounts, including what the historian is drawn to, and bring out the nuances of the different treatments of these in the various scripts.This will also provide an occasion to show how Piro's story is developed by these authors. While the differences between what a historian can possibly say and the volubility of the fictionalized genres will be brought out, the endeavour will also be towards unpacking and teasing out the "meanings" of these differences, and the concerns which become visible in particular story-telling, and their significance in contemporary times. Historians have sometimes used fiction and the auto/biographical genres to illuminate an age, particularly when other sources are scanty or

[36] Jonathan Spence liberally uses the fiction of a seventeenth century writer P'u Sung-ling to tell us, among other things, about women's and widows' lives and womanly ideals in that society. Natalie Davis uses among her

when fiction is insightful of an age.[36] However, the question remains as to what extent and in what manner may "auto-fiction", or "faction", if we see the autobiographical as a performative mix of fact and fiction, be used to tell us of Piro's times, and ours.[37]

Piro's Story

In her *160 Kafis*, Piro writes not of her life as much as a series of events that follow after she came to live in the establishment of her guru Gulabdas at Chathianwala, near Lahore. She speaks of herself as both a prostitute (*vesva*) and a Muslim, while we know that Gulabdas, her guru, belonged to the capacious world of Hindu–Sikh asceticism. Piro also presents herself as a low caste woman (*sudra*), calling herself literally and metaphorically weak in comparison to her powerful guru. She also emphatically puts herself in the company of the Bhakti low caste male saints like Kabir and Saina—imbricating herself in the devotional movement that started around the fifteenth century in north India, and which was seen to be especially conducive to inducting within its folds the low castes and women.[38] Piro's arrival in Chathianwala is followed in her *Kafis* by that of her people, presumably her professional wardens, who persuade Gulabdas to let her come back with them to Lahore, which she does, ultimately at her own behest. Back in Lahore Piro describes an acrimonious confrontation with *mullahs* and *qazis*, religious guardians who assume her to not only have become an apostate, but also converted to the religion/sect of her guru, becoming a *kafir*. It might be noted that Piro not only does not deny apostasy, even conversion, but refuses re-conversion to Islam, abusing the *mullahs* (and Islam) while elevating the spiritual status of her guru. The unabashed use of language that

various sources the personal reminiscences of a character Jean de Coras of the court case he handled in her recounting of the life of Martin Guerre, a work that combined in her words the features of a "legal text and a literary tale". See Jonathan D. Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang*, New York: Penguin Books, 1978; Natalie Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.

[37] See Smith and Watson for the use of these terms.

[38] Anshu Malhotra, "Bhakti and the Gendered Self: A Courtesan and a Consort in Mid Nineteenth Century Punjab", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 6, 2012, pp. 1506–39.

might be considered vulgar among the respectable today, adds a colourful dimension to Piro's speech. Piro tells us that this recalcitrance on her part results in her abduction and forcible transportation from Lahore to Wazirabad where she is incarcerated, among others, by a woman named Mehrunissa. Piro then goes on to relate her resourcefulness, her befriending two women (Janu and Rehmati) and using their services, as well as that of an amanuensis, to send a missive to her guru to rescue her. The guru subsequently dispatches two of his disciples, Gulab Singh and Chatar Singh, to Wazirabad. They along with the help of these few sympathizers, and Piro's own resourcefulness are able to rescue her. Piro at the same time gives credit to her guru for her escape, speaking of his miracle that makes the locks to her room fall away, and the sentries guarding her room, as well as the city gate, become blind to their movements. The three disciples then make good their escape, though are pursued part of the way by Piro's captors. Once back in the guru's establishment the three justify and praise each other's actions in front of the guru, Piro underlining her unstinting loyalty towards him. She, also at this juncture, explicates the theology of her sect, criticizes other sects and makes place for herself as *shakti* (goddess/energy) of her guru.

This barebones summary of the events Piro presents in her *Kafis* does little justice to either her poetic skills or her literary imagination. The intertwining of the mythic and the miraculous in what is ostensibly a narration of a train of events is quite exceptional. Piro's *Kafis* are akin to a "conversion narrative", meant to illuminate the convert's sincerity towards her new community, the trial of faith that is conversion, or that all things of import happen only after, or because of it.[39] Her mythic world is animated with *Pauranic* imagery and epic characters, as she compares her abduction to that of Sita, the devoted wife of Lord Ram, her guru as Ram, and her rescuers as Angad and Hanuman. Similarly, she enhances the saintly status of her guru by attributing miracles to him, as already noted, including her unassisted release from

[39] David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (eds), *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life History*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004, p. 14; Peter Burke,*What is Cultural History?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008, p. 92.

a locked and guarded prison. It is quite remarkable that this woman with an apparently Muslim upbringing (and there are references to her Muslim past in her other writings as well) was so comfortable in the world of Hindu mythology, as she was with her sect's Hindu/Sikh heritage.

Shahryar's Piro Preman, Swarajbir's Shairi and Vijendra Das's Sant Kavyitri Ma Piro

Broadly following Piro's *160 Kafis*, Shahryar's play scripted in Punjabi (Gurmukhi script) is significantly invested in unearthing, indeed exhuming Piro from the metaphorical coffin (*tabut*) in which she lay buried. Having himself discovered her poetry by chance, Shahryar is keen to bring her poetry to an audience who can now take pride in the fact that Punjab produced a woman poet in the nineteenth century. As will be discussed in some detail later, the author and his protagonist share this quest of salvaging her poetry: the play develops around Piro's own consciousness of rescuing her poetry and poetic talent, which attracts her to her guru Gulabdas—the magnificent poet and philosopher of his age (*dhurander shayar aur phalsaphi*). So great is Piro's poetic flair that the relationship between the guru and the disciple overturns in Shahryar's drama, the guru acknowledging her poetic faculty as superior to his own. While Shahryar follows the broad events in Piro's *Kafis,* including her abduction, the play's central theme is that of poetic recuperation: recuperating Piro's poetry and her status as a poet. As the foreword to the play says of her and the objective of the play,—*bebak kavik virse di shanakhat*—recognition of a fearless heritage.[40] A second theme that emerges strongly is that of the presence of a woman—Piro—in what should ostensibly have been a monastic order sans women, an all-male enclave. How her presence leads to friction within the members of the *dera* is explored in the play. Through this theme the historically negative attitudes towards women, their sexuality as of their capability, are dramatized and her subjectivity and agency is sought to be established.

[40] *Piro Preman*, p. 11.

Swarajbir's *Shairi* also follows this formula of Piro as a self-conscious poet, quite determined to write and recite her poetry. However, the playwright creates a far more complicated plot than the rather straightforward one of Shahryar, teeming with characters. Not only does he give a wholly imaginary background story to Piro—a family and caste background—but also puts Piro on a double quest, for saving her poetic talent, along with that of finding a true lover. The two goals are intertwined in the play—for the one who would love her truly would also love her poetry—and so would not impose societal expectations of ideal womanly behaviour on her, defined among other ways, negatively as having nothing to do with pen and paper or poetic ambitions. In a convoluted plot that unfolds in six Acts, each of several scenes, Swarajbir takes Piro through four lovers, three of her own choosing and one not, as her first lover gifts (sells?) her to her second, a powerful social and professional superior of the first. It is only when she reaches Gulabdas that her journey, her search for true love and support, as also for an aficionado of her poetry ends. Her guru/*murshid* and lover is excessively appreciative of her poetry, in fact enamoured of it as of her, much like Shahryar's Gulabdas.

Again, as in Shahryar's play, the presence of a woman in the guru's *dera*, the monastic establishment creates a stir, the rumblings of a revolt among some disciples who feel their guru is treading the wrong path, having abandoned the right conduct becoming of a guru of his stature. However, the role this incipient rebellion plays in Swarajbir's *Shairi* is far more corrosive than in Shahryar's *Piro Preman*. In *Shairi* the disciples hatch a plot to get rid of Piro, having persuaded a loyal eunuch and servant (*sevadar*) of Gulabdas to poison her, a person who had been made responsible by Gulabdas for serving and protecting her. However, just as the protector of Piro turns her killer, so does the disciples' own conspiracy backfire on them, as their guru also drinks the poisoned milk partaken by Piro, and dies, unable or unwilling to contemplate life without her. Thus instead of saving/rescuing their guru, they actually abet/hasten his downfall/end. Irony and paradox are used to effect and enhance the dramatic elements in the play.

Moreover, the trope of dying together, in each other's arms, or more saliently, being buried in a common tomb or even grave, plays

to the "cultural script", imbibed from Punjabi *qissa* tradition, one of the most important literary traditions of Punjab.[41] The romantic characters of these *qissas* are not only part of common parlance in Punjab but have also been used by poets, including Punjabi Sufis, as ideals of maddened love (a love metaphorically for god, *ishq haqiqi*, rather than the more personal love, *ishq majazi*) or as self-sacrificing lovers necessarily doomed in a cruel and uncomprehending world. Most romantic Punjabi *qissas*—whether Hir-Ranjha (to which the play *Shairi* makes overt references as Piro is compared to *Hir saleti* for her beauty as her ability to speak for herself), Sohni-Mahival, Mirza-Sahiban, Shirin-Farhad, Sassi-Punnun or Layla-Majnun—revolve around an impossible love. For a variety of reasons, ranging from caste mismatch, debasing of self through following a degraded profession (for the pursuit of a lover), and the troubling womanly sexuality when outside of parental control, lovers are doomed to failure in Punjabi *qissas*. Indeed they are condemned to death; death signifying both a punishment for defying societal norms, as well as having the power of redemption. By making the ultimate sacrifice of life, the lovers are redeemed, idealized, and made icons of true love unafraid of death, a love that achieves the divine. By having Gulabdas and Piro die together in each other's arms, Swarajbir invokes as he fulfills the audience/readers' empathy/expectations towards a given cultural palimpsest. More so, because the two did share a common tomb, reminiscent of the *qissa* lovers like Sassi-Punnun or Sohni- Mahival.[42] One may even suggest that a true romance in the Punjabi literary context must not be allowed to end in any other way. Thus the inconvenient historical "truth", that Gulabdas died eight months after Piro in 1873, and both died of natural causes rather than unnatural ones; or that the two lived for many years together without any serious disciple revolt or tension, does not suit Swarajbir's particular mode

[41] See the discussion in Shemeem Burney Abbas, "Female Myths in Sufism", in her *Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 85–107. For the popularity of the *qissa* tradition see Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010.

[42] Abbas, *The Female Voice*.

of story-telling. As the play closes, through the device of *sutradhar* or story-teller, literally one who is tying the disparate threads of the story together, Swarajbir does mention the eight-month hiatus between the two deaths, but says that Gulabdas figuratively died with Piro, which can be interpreted as his life after her death was akin to a living death—*khoji dasde han ki Piro ji di maut to ath mahine bad Gulabdas vi akal chalana kar gaya. Par sada khiyal hai ki Gulabdas vi tadon mar giya si, jad Piro di maut hoi* (researchers tell us that Gulabdas died after eight months of Piro. But we believe that Gulabdas died when Piro died).[43]

While Shahryar in his play kept the eight-month gap between the two deaths, he did invoke the *qissa* tradition by having Gulabdas die while carrying a lamp towards her grave (*mazar*). He conjured the image of worship on a Sufi saint's grave, having Piro's devotee prostitutes sing her verses as *qawwali* (singing associated with Sufi *sama*) while Gulabdas, as her most worshipful devotee, carried the lamp, falling dead on her grave, where he too wished to be buried. The irony that Shahryar wished to underscore was that this guru/*pir*, this philosopher of his age, ended up being nothing more than a devotee of Piro. Shahryar put it thus—*oh sanyasi banya, udasi banya, vedanti banya, vam margi banya, te shayad kuj vi na ban sakiya....oh kamyaab pir si lekin Piro da ban ke reh gaya* (he became an ascetic, an *udasi*, *vedanti*, *vam margi*,[44] but perhaps he could not become anything. He was a successful *pir* but he ended up becoming Piro's).[45] The play on the words Pir/Piro, a Sufi adeptand his lover/disciple Piro, was very much a part of Swarajbir's play as well, where his protagonist is called Ayesha, but who gives herself the name Piro, when she makes Gulabdas her *pir*, *murshid* or guru. Among the very many possibilities her name conjured, she could have been Peeranditti or Pirunissa as all our authors speculate, the most romantic

[43] *Shairi*, p. 184.

[44] *Udasi* refers to followers of Sirichand, the elder son of Guru Nanak. *Vedanti* refers to Gulabdas' belief in *advaita* or non-dualism derived from the Vedanta. *Vam Margi* refers to followers of *Tantra*, here evoking sexual practices, normally seen as forbidden to ascetics. Shahryar believes that Gulabdas was a follower of the hedonistic and materialist *Charvak* tradition.

[45] *Piro Preman*, p. 62.

version seemed the punning Pir/Piro combination, latched on by our two playwrights.

That two of the texts under discussion are plays, dramas scripted to be performed as to be read, needs further elucidation. As mentioned before, at least two theatre groups have performed Swarajbir's play, the more dramatic and complex of the two plays, with its many twists and turns. It is in *Shairi* that Piro struggles to say her poetry as a right, tries to find in various lovers her true friend and benefactor, and in a nascent fashion, tries to locate her own agency and voice, even as the world at many levels conspires to strangulate her incipient revolt against given feminine conduct. The telling of Piro's story through a drama does a few things: it plays with, enhances, and amplifies the dramatic elements present in Piro's own theatrical *160 Kafis* even if this is done by introducing many fictional characters and situations not present in her verses; by invoking certain cultural scripts it creates an environment of empathy to which the audience responds; and it attempts to reach out to large audiences, those who can read the script as a story, and those who can watch the story unfold on stage.

The fragmentary nature of Piro's *160 Kafis* that obsess about her travails—her focus on arrival at the guru's establishment, her going back to Lahore because of the appeals of her kin/wards, her confrontation with religious authorities, her abduction, her rescue—can be seen as the unfolding of an elaborate melodrama, stage-managed by her. Drama available as a script and a play, the doubled effect of "stage and page", would supposedly reach out to more people, who the playwrights feel ought to be familiar with Piro's tale. And that is the nub—as I will discuss further in the next section—Piro's story, as the discovery of her *160 Kafis* and other texts are themselves such dramatic and important events, that her having happened in history becomes a compelling reason to celebrate her with as large an audience, of viewers and readers, as possible. Once again, it is Swarajbir's play that uses many tools of drama that can be enacted, to envisage the possibility of, in fact, staging it. Through the device of a *sutradhar*, the storyteller who links and takes forward the story; or the *gayak mandli*, a singing group, which also performs a similar task of explaining a situation, emotion, or pushing the tale to the next stage, the playwright

envisions the mise-en-scene, conjuring the proscenium where the story can be told, history brought alive, performed for those so far ignorant of its particular treasure, Piro. Within the performative context when a tale unfolds built on a story thread that has cultural precursors, in this instance the *qissa* tradition among other themes, the performers and singers can involve the audience in a uniquely empathetic atmosphere in that moment. This is similar to the creating of *sama*' or environment, for example, that Abbas speaks of when her performers sing of Sufi poetics deeply entrenched among the audience for whom they perform.[46]

Vijender Das's *Sant Kavyitri Ma Piro*, as the title suggests, is a completely different text. Hagiographical and devotional in makeup, it sets out to correct the misapprehensions people may have of Piro, indeed to undo to some extent the canard of multiple lovers, rebellious disciples, or the taint of prostitution as a profession that may be seen to stigmatize Piro. Piro is addressed as "Ma" or "Mata", a mother, underlining her respected maternal status among the Gulabdasi heirs, not to mention one shorn of asexualized attitude associated with a former prostitute. Vijender Das adopts at least two strategies to overcome the debilities that afflict the perception of Piro. Though mostly relying on the same material as the two dramatists, he accrues greater authority for his voice, by assuming for it the role of an insider within the Gulabdasi tradition. He attributes knowledge about Piro's background from not only the historical sources and academic discussion around her, of which he is acutely aware, but also from an old and venerated Gulabdasi with an impeccable lineage within the sect to whom only he has access. Introducing the chapter on her character and her guru, he writes—*Mata Piroji ke janamkal ke vishay mein Gulabdasi Sampradaye ke vridh sant Milkhishah shishya Budheshah shishya Gulabdasji ne is prakar varnan kiya hai*…(On the subject of Mother Piro's birth the old saint of the Gulabdasi sect Milkhishah, the disciple of Budheshah, who was the disciple of Gulabdas, has described it thus…).[47] The second, a corollary to the first, is to speak with an authoritative demeanour. The tone adopted

[46] Abbas, *The Female Voice*. pp. 93, 100.
[47] *Sant Kavyitri*, p. 20.

by Vijenderji has little place for ambiguity, speculation or hearsay at most junctures, though may pander to an academic discussion at times. As noted, our two dramatists at various points in the texts of their plays bring in the element of their own speculation and fictionalized depiction. The Afterword of Swarajbir's *Shairi* for instance begins by frankly admitting that the play is not a description of the life of Piro or Gulabdas, but rather picks up some known episodes of their lives, whose sequence he has manipulated (*main ina ghatnavannun age pichhe kar ke vartiya hai*—I have used these episodes in my own sequencing).[48] By adopting a voice of certainty Vijender Das dismisses any doubt about the devotion-worthy status of Piro as of Gulabdas, because devotion, by its very nature, must be based on absolute faith. However, being aware of the academic debate around her, Vijender Das is keen to give his work academic acceptability, carefully footnoting and using other professional devices to adduce its academic authority. He may begin his discussion by conceding that a variety of opinions prevail over an issue, but as he proceeds, this multiplicity of utterances is abandoned, and a single voice emerges. This can be demonstrated through the example about Piro's origins as discussed by him.

Swarajbir in his Afterword begins by voicing the opinion of various sources and scholars on Piro's origins. These range from her birth in the Gujranwala province of Punjab to her birth in the *bar*/jungle area, with her parents being small landholders. He goes on to say that all scholars and sources are agreed on one aspect of her life, that she ends up a prostitute plying her trade in Lahore (*sare vidvanan di sanjhi rae iho bandi hai ki Piro kanjri/randi si, te Lahore vich pesha kardi si*).[49] Vijenderji starts by discussing these prevailing opinions on the place of Piro's birth, and that her parents were small landholders, but then goes on to speak with certainty about her early education with *maulvis* in Islam and Arabic language, thereby perhaps explaining her ability to compose poetry.[50] He then goes on to speak

[48] *Shairi*, p. 185.
[40] Ibid.
[50] A mere hint in one of Piro's verses of having been taught with mullahs is interpreted in this authoritative way. The contradiction that all her poetry comes to us in manuscripts written in the Gurmukhi script, and not the Perso-Arabic that must have been taught in schools attached to mosques is never brought up.

about the misfortunes of her early life (discussed in a speculative voice by others as well, that she may have run away with an itinerant religious man). However, how she lands up in a brothel of Lahore, ambiguous in other accounts, is explained with complete authority by Das, even though it overturns his earlier statement of her parents' landholding origins. After becoming an orphan, and also after the death of the religious man, a *sadhu*, who had offered her shelter, Piro, we are told, is pushed into prostitution by her father's younger brother (*chacha*). Indeed Vijenderji avoids using the term prostitution, preferring to say that her *chacha* pushes her into performing *mujra*, the dance form associated with prostitutes. Thus despite the speculation of landholding origins, this endorses a statement he had made earlier of her birth in a low caste *mirasi/dom* family. Piro's tale in Vijender Das's recounting has a tone of pathos, and she emerges as a poor orphan, a helpless innocent woman, forced into a profession because of destitution (*bholi bhali abala Piro* [innocent helpless Piro]).[51] The question of Piro's agency is an important one and I have elsewhere discussed it as significantly visible and asserted in her *160 Kafis*.[52] Depicting her as helpless and a victim of fate, in the face of Piro's voluble speech as seen in her verses, her "talking back" is done to diminish the disapprobation associated with her career. For victimhood is the opposite of purposive choice (though we have no source that can tell us how she comes to be in a brothel) and showing Piro as victim of sexual predators works better as a "cultural script" that expects women's sexuality to be under control, rather than women as sexually in-charge of their own lives. Brought up in an environment where her parents apparently kept company of various holy men, Vijenderji tells us that even in the brothel she not only constantly tried to find a way out of her misery, but also sang Sufi compositions, for that was the poetry she wrote! And so he can vouch for a stainless character of Piro, an assertion that brooks no alternative opinion—*charitra ki ukta kasauti par mata Piro ka jivan purnata pavitra evam nikhra hua pratit hota hai* (on the touchstone of character mother Piro's complete life seems pure and bright).[53]

[51] *Sant Kavyitri*, p. 22.
[52] Malhotra, "Miracles for the Marginal?"
[53] *Sant Kavyitri*, p. 23.

Finally, the broad contours of Piro's story, not just as told by her but as gathered from her and other Gulabdasi sources and oral accounts can be summarized as built around these issues and events: her birth and parental occupation; her becoming an orphan; her running away/ abduction by a holy man; her plying customers in a Lahore brothel; her wish for a release from her sleazy environ; her getting to know of Gulabdas's establishment and its openness towards all castes; her reaching Gulabdas and his attraction towards her and her poetry (for Vijenderji there was no physical side to their relationship); the incipient rebellion among his disciples; and her living out the rest of her life with him in Chathianwala. These were picked and fictionalized by Shahryar and Swarajbir, both playing on the *qissa* romance of her life; and sanitized and made into a morality play by Vijender Das, demonstrating how if one's devotion and spiritual quest is strong enough, redemption is bound to happen. Interestingly, all the story-building elements described above were, in fact, present in the first academic short article published on her by a scholar of Punjabi literature Devinder Singh "Vidyarthi" in 1974.[54] One may suggest that he created the master template that became the basis for subsequent representation of Piro. His article was based on his early research on Punjabi women poets in the 1940s in a still undivided Punjab, and a few sources on the Gulabdasis compiled around the fin de siecle. His conversations with scholars familiar with Punjabi literary traditions, both before and after 1947, and those like Shamsher Singh "Ashok" responsible for collating handwritten manuscripts for the government of the Indian Punjab, were an important source for him. However, what Vidyarthi did not write about was Piro's abduction and escape from Wazirabad, which is available in her own *160 Kafis*, which he may not have read in its entirety or dismissed it as imaginary, but which became an important part of subsequent narratives. The important point here is about the persistence of a representational template once it is patterned, patented. To use the concept of White, the story of Piro was organized in a particular "plot," a reworked Punjabi romance if you will. However, the details of the romance, which in themselves borrowed from available cultural scripts, as for example of the *qissas*, or of devotional

[54] Devinder Singh "Vidyarthi", "Punjabi di Paheli Istri Kavi", *Khoj Darpan*, Vol. 1, No. 2, July 1974, pp. 89–95.

hagiography where a budding saint finds her guru/god fighting all social odds, were worked out by individual authors, who represented her story with a lilt of tragedy, or a tilt of morality. How far any of these elements might also be seen in the script developed by a historian? There were some themes that were systematically worked into these accounts. In the next section particular themes and their treatment and representation by various authors will be discussed.

II

Representing Piro: Some themes

A Woman Poet and a Feminist Quest

The most significant aspect of Piro's life that Shahryar and Swarajbir, even Vijender Das, set out to represent to the world is the fact that she is a poet. She is presented as a poetess par excellence, the first Punjabi woman poet, self-conscious of her talent, and keen to preserve it. The titles of all the authors highlight this aspect of her life. Shahryar calls his play *Piro Preman*, basing it on what was apparently her nom de plume, *Preman*, though I have not come across it in her manuscripts. Swarajbir calls his play *Shairi* (poetry) and casts Piro as a proud poet, conscious of her talent and confident of her ability to leave a mark on history. Swarajbir underlines the fact that she is a woman poet by noting his surprise when he realizes that the poet he had been reading was a woman and not a man writing as a woman, referring to the trope of masquerading in a feminine persona, common in Sufi and Bhakti poetry of male poets addressing a masculine God.[55] Vijender Das's book's title simply points to the saint poet Piro.

Piro's poetic outpourings, in the view of all our authors also put her among the women Bhakti (and Sufi) poets in these plays, and thereby place Punjab on the map of women *bhaktas* who sang their songs. It may be pointed out that while many parts of India produced

[55] *Shairi*, p. 7. On the trope of a feminine persona of male poets see Carla Petievich, *When Men Speak as Women: Vocal Masquerade in Indo-Muslim Poetry*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007.

women saints whose songs and poems are remembered to this day,[56] Punjabi society and culture did not throw up any such poet, despite the emergence of the Sikh gurus influenced by Bhakti ideas. In the face of contemporary discourse about gender relations and women's place in society, wherein Punjab emerges as an especially patriarchal society, the discovery of Piro's poetry may be seen as refreshing good news.[57] For popularizing Piro allows Punjab a modicum of reprieve from its status as a culture inhospitable to women, making a beginning towards redressing its society's egregious gender imbalance. All our authors are therefore keen to put her on the map of women *bhaktas* of India. Vijender Das, for example, inducts Piro in an impressive all-India list—"In Rajasthani and Hindi literature Mira, in Gujarati literature Ganga Sati, Marathi… Janabai, Bangla… Chandravati, Oriya… Madhavidasi, Kashmiri… Lal Ded, Tamil… Andal and Telugu… Vaikamma… the same honoured place in Punjabi literature indubitably belongs to Piroji".[58]

Shahryar's play is dedicated to Lalleshwari—Lal Ded—the famous fourteenth-century woman mystic of Kashmir, whose *vakhs* or sayings are still popular there.[59] He clarifies this allusion to Lalla in his preface, underlining the close resemblance between Piro and her: Lalla was the Hindu disciple of a Muslim *pir* according to Shahryar; and Piro was a Muslim disciple of a Hindu *pir*.[60] This is a reference to the popular belief that Lalla, with her Kashmiri Shaiva antecedents, discarded these and became a wandering ascetic seeking god. In popular understanding she is also meant to have been a mentor to the famous Nuruddin Rishi (and not he as her *pir*, though for Shahryar perhaps it was more poetical to make a more straightforward relationship of inversion between

[56] Some of these have been discussed by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita in their *Women Writing in India Volume I: 600 BC to the Twentieth Century*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991. Also see A.K. Ramanujan, "On Women Saints", in J.S. Hawley and D.M. Wulff (eds), *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 316–24.

[57] Anshu Malhotra, "The Importance of Being Piro in Punjab", *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 6 Dec. 2012.

[58] *Sant Kavyitri*, p.11.

[59] Ranjit Hoskote, *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded*, Delhi: Penguin, 2011.

[60] *Piro Preman,* p. 9.

Hindu/Muslim guru/disciple) who in one apocryphal account is said to have refused to be breast-fed by his mother, Lalla nursing him instead.[61]

Our authors also make a reference to Mirabai, by far the most popular of women *bhaktas* of north India, and Piro is presented as her worthy successor who, like Mira, surmounted many social constraints to follow her heart.[62] In fact, in Piro's entire poetic repertoire there are only two allusions to Mira's poetry, and Mirabai herself is never mentioned. However, one reference is clear enough, "*Piro pi pyalrra matvari hoi"*, invoking the taking of the poisoned cup sent to Mira by those embarrassed of her flouting social norms, though it turned to ambrosia on her drinking from it.[63] This reference emerges

[61] *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lalleshwari accessed 6.3.2014.* Scholars, however, look at Lal Ded as a contemporary of the great Sufis Saiyid Husain Simnani and Mir Saiyid Ali Hamadani of Kubrawiyya order. Her close association with these Sufis is so strong that she is often remembered as a Muslim saint, and an apostle of Islam in Kashmir. See Mohammad Ishaq Khan, *Biographical Dictionary of Sufism in South Asia*, Delhi: Manohar, 2009, pp.189–190. According to Hoskote, Lalla was appropriated by the Hindus as Lalleshvari and Lalla Yogini, and Muslims as Lal-'arifa. The more communally neutral terms for her were Lal-Ded ("Grandmother Lal", or "Lal the Womb"). She was also affectionately called Lalla. Hoskote, *I, Lalla*.

[62] There is a lot of literature available on Mira. For a short succinct account see J.S. Hawley and M. Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008 (2004), pp.119–42. Also J.S. Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas and Kabir in Their Times and Ours*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, For a reading of Mira from the perspective of her contemporary followers see Parita Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

[63] This in her *30 Kafis*, Kafi number 18, available in Ms. 888. The other reference in the same set of verse is far more oblique, where she writes, "*bhuk nangkabul ke darvesi kali; darsan karne vaste main jogan hoi*" (accepting hunger and nakedness (I) have becoming a lone ascetic; to find (god) I have become an ascetic). She invokes the Islamic mystical tradition of becoming a *darvesh*, as also the Nath one of becoming a *jogi* (feminine form *jogan*). This is reminiscent of some of Mira's poetry where she speaks of herself as a *jogi*. See J.S. Hawley, "Mirabai as Wife and Yogi", in his *Three Bhakti Voices*, pp. 117–38. Also *Songs of the Saints*, p. 133.

in verses that explored Piro's mystical awakening, and spoke of the intoxication of the mystical experience. In the *160 Kafis*, and some of her other poetry, Piro compares herself to low caste Pauranic women characters, like Bhilani, Kubjan, or Karmabai, who were all emancipated by Vishnu despite their base backgrounds, rather than place herself among women *bhaktas* as such. As mentioned earlier, it is male *bhaktas* of low caste like Kabir or Saina, she refers to. However, our authors evoke Mira as the archetype of a north Indian woman *bhakta* many times. Shahryar refers to Mira in his preface as representing social revolt, as does Piro in his understanding, a social overturning so radical that even the twentieth-century society could not bear to see Mira's story, alluding to a TV program on Mira that was apparently withdrawn after protest.[64] Vijender Das, besides making direct references to various women *bhaktas*, also anachronistically says that had Piro's poetry been recognized in her own time, she would have found reference in Nabhadas's *Bhaktamal* and James Tod's work, besides being discussed by various well-known contemporary scholarly figures who have studied Bhakti poets![65] In the desire to promote Piro as one worthy of the company of those like Mira, Vijenderji quite misses that Nabhadas's biographical sketches of Bhakti saints belongs to the early seventeenth century, and that Piro would have been a contemporary of Col. Tod's later life, a colonial scholar who worked on Rajasthan (Mira's region) rather than Punjab!

It is in Swarajbir's play that the self-conscious poet Piro is put on an almost feminist quest. At the heart of his play is his protagonist Piro/Ayesha on a voyage of expressing her poetic talent (not of discovering it for she already knows she has it), and the playwright throughout the script uses both Piro's own compositions, and his own penmanship to give her verses to recite and say. The play traces her search for a lover who would appreciate her talent. While there are moments in the play when Swarajbir attempts to give Piro unfettered agency, for instance, after her sojourn with her third lover, she vows to live by herself, but this comes to nothing as she soon finds herself in the company of Gulabdas, her last lover and guru. To be fair to the

[64] *Piro Preman*, p. 9.
[65] *Sant Kavyitri*, p. 14.

playwright, he does depict her taking many decisions on her own, running away with her first lover, a horseman in Ranjit Singh's army, or her third, an itinerant holy man, but despite the playwright's feminist awareness, he cannot quite imagine Piro/Ayesha alone. Such a situation in the play perhaps emerges from circumstances that do not allow a woman to live by herself, nor earn her livelihood, except as a prostitute, though it might also be the playwright's imaginative limitations. And so it seems Piro needs a man who will give her support so she may fully realize her poetic potential. However, Swarajbir wishes to emphasize her agential self through assertion of her poetic skills, a facility that includes and exceeds her other identities of caste and gender. He put these words in her mouth—*main kanjri vi an te shaira vi…shaira vi an te tivin vi* (I am a prostitute and a poetess…a poetess and a woman).[66]

This acceptance of her multiple identities by Piro in Swarajbir's play is an aspect of her embracing all women as (akin to) herself. The notion of a Punjabi sisterhood or womanhood that emerges is also given the hue of a Punjabi romance, making Piro the quintessential heroine of Punjabi *qissas*, referred to earlier. In a small scene introduced solely to emphasize poetic exchange and dialogue (*sawal-jawab*) between Gulabdas and Piro, representing their joint verses or *Sanjhi Siharfi*, the two discuss the nature of a woman. While the guru offers the more traditional reading of women—as responsible for making beggars of men, for starting wars, or as embodying desire, maternal affection, love and hatred—Piro replies by claiming to be all (*qissa*) women. Her reply—*Ayesha, Piro, Hir te Sahiban, sab diyan iko batan* (Ayesha is Piro, Hir and Sahiban, they are all the same), referring to the heroines of the *qissas* Hir-Ranjha and Mirza-Sahiban, and that she represents them all.[67] When the guru further tries to distinguish between good and bad women, Ichhran and Loona, the good and the bad mother of another popular *qissa* Puran Bhagat, rewritten in this period by the poet Qadir Yar in Ranjit Singh's court, Piro once again, encompasses these women in herself. *Ichhran, Loona, Sundran, Sohni, iko chole vasan* (Ichhran, Loona, Sundran and Sohni wear

[66] *Shairi*, p. 91.
[67] Ibid. p. 127.

the same garment/body) Piro replies, emphasizing her embodying them all, trying to wipe out artificial differences men and circumstances weave into their lives.[68] By claiming to be these women, Piro gives them a voice through her own speech and verses. Thus the playwright celebrates that a woman, Ayesha/Piro, has initiated a poetic conclave, a *majlis*, drawing attention to its novelty as a cultural institution, and through it signaling an unstoppable cultural change where women will speak up for themselves and for other women.

That Swarajbir puts his heroine in the feminist mould, even while indicating that feminism may be a ruse to categorize women who do not fit into culturally sanctioned roles, can be seen from his epigraphs—a verse from Piro's spiritual poem, and a quotation from the early suffragette, journalist, literary figure and feminist of the twentieth century, Rebecca West, who says she is labeled a feminist because she doesn't fit into the roles of a doormat or a prostitute.[69] Swarajbir implies that men look at women as fitting only into these two roles, and at many points in his play, he alludes to both the cultural attitudes towards women, and Piro's determination to break and overturn these norms. Her first two lovers in the play are shown to be repeatedly irritated by her insistence on pursuing poetry, asking her to leave this to men, and do what women do, look after homes, and at the most sing women's songs.[70] Her second lover, Ilahi Bakhsh, a powerful general in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army, becomes angry when she expresses her desire to meet Hashim Shah, a poet in the Maharaja's court. This exchange between them, on the one hand, portrays her notion of her place in society, in the company of other poets; and on the other, becomes a reason for the playwright to introduce societal attitudes that see women as inferior to men. The latter is done by the "paratextual"[71] intervention

[68] Ibid. Sundran nurtured unrequited love for Puran in the *qissa* Puran Bhagat. Sohni is the heroine of the *qissa* Sohni-Mahiwal.

[69] "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is. I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute." *Shairi*, p. 8.

[70] *Shairi*, p. 31.

[71] This refers to the text that is outside the narrative proper, here, playwright's use of the singing troupe to push the story forward, or to explain a situation or an attitude. I am borrowing from the discussion in

of the *gayak mandali*, or the singing troupe that vocalizes social attitude: *ih duniya mardan di duniya…tivin tan hai nivin* (this world belongs to men, women are inferior). To this Piro/Ayesha replies that neither is a woman inferior, nor will she remain silent, but claim her speech—*hun bolegi tivin* (now a woman will speak). Again, making an oblique reference to Mira and her inebriation on the poisoned cup, the playwright makes her assert that she will drink the poisoned cup of poetry, and revel in its intoxication (*sukhan piyala vish da jana, ghut ghut kar ke pivan; lun lun de vich nasha jo hove, us nashe vich jivan*. [I know poetry to be the poisoned cup, and I'll drink it sip by sip; and the resulting intoxication in my every pore, I'll live by that inebriation]).[72]

For all our authors Piro also carried forward the Sufi poetical tradition as represented by the renowned Sufi mystic Rabia of Baghdad, Swarajbir proffering before Piro/Ayesha, the role-models of Rabia and Mira in the same breath, as women who by following asceticism had the doors of knowledge (*ilm*) opened for them.[73] Swarajbir in particular, by imitating certain well-known phrases, what one would even call the imprint of the poetry of the Sufis beloved of Punjabis, made her implicitly an inheritor of that legacy as well. By using the words "*lun lun"*, for example in the line quoted above, he made a reference to the poetry of Sultan Bahu, a seventeenth-century mystic of Punjab. Later, Bulleh Shah is alluded to when the *gayak mandli* comments on the poetic exchange between Gulabdas and Piro, using the phrase "*nach nach yaar manaya Piro"*, (Piro danced and placated her friend/*murshid*)[74] reminiscent of Bulleh's "*tere ishq nachaya kar*

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the Introduction of Tony K. Stewart, *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs: Tales of Mad Adventure in Old Bengal*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 9.

[72] *Shairi*, pp. 54–5. Significantly, the use of "*lun lun*" or bodily pores/hairs, is reminiscent of the poetry of Sultan Bahu, the seventeenth century Punjabi Sufi, whose Punjabi *kafis* remain very popular to this day—*lun lun de mur lakh lakh chashma*. This makes more dense the signification embedded in the words Swarajbir gives to Piro. For Bahu's verse see Jamal J. Elias (translated and introduced), *Death Before Dying: The Sufi Poems of Sultan Bahu*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998, p. 25.

[73] *Shairi*, pp. 69–70.

[74] *Shairi*, p. 137. For Sultan Bahu see fn 61.

ke thaiya thaiya", (your love made me dance) and in popular understanding his mad dancing to please his *murshid* Shah Inayat.[75] At other places our authors make references to Punjabi women poets, whose names begin to appear in some nineteenth-century treatises, for instance, the little known Sahib Devi "Arori" (mentioned in Ganesh Das's *Char Bagh-i-Panjab*),[76] and Piro's contemporary Nurang Devi, who, like Piro wrote poetry living in the sect of Wazir Singh, and like her too wrote jointly with her guru—*Sanjhi Siharfi*.[77] Through this compact intertextuality that evokes Punjabi *qissas*, Sufis, and even little known women poets, Piro was not only made the inheritor of this diverse and loved legacy, but also her worthiness, as deserving of canonization, was underscored by these linkages. Thus in Swarajbir's play when Piro cries out her pain that the world looks at her as a prostitute and a low caste, the playwright through the words of Gulabdas reassures her that she will be remembered by posterity as she is the first woman poet of the five waters/rivers of Punjab and its language—*panjan paniyan di zaban di pehli aurat shayar*.[78] As Shahryar put it, she is no longer to remain buried and forgotten in a coffin, but is to be respected and celebrated.

Though Piro was a skilled poet able to compose in some popular poetic forms of the period, such as the *kafi* and the *siharfi*, the first, a flowing rhymed verse, and the second composed of thirty verses each starting with the first and then the subsequent Perso-Arabic alphabet; much more could be said on the form of her*160 Kafis*, an autobiographical fragment that did not really belong to any given poetic genre even though she called it *Kafis*. Though the verses rhymed, the autobiographical content gave it a uniqueness that is surprising as it is innovative. While this is not the place to discuss the specificities of this

[75] Namvar Singh (ed.), *Bulleh Shah ki Kafiyan*, Delhi: National Institute of Punjab Studies, 2003, pp. 152–3.
[76] J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga (tr. and eds), *Early Nineteenth Century Panjab: From Ganesh Das's Char Bagh-i-Panjab*, Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1975, p. 31.
[77] Shamsher S. Ashok, *Siharfian Sadhu Wazir Singh Kian*, Patiala: Punjabi University, 1988.
[78] *Shairi*, p. 134.

text, it may be taken as indicative of her inventiveness, perhaps a necessity for those like Piro clawing their way in a world not presented to them on a platter. The bending of rules of prosody as the *160 Kafis* indicate, along with perhaps the mending of her life, a process of healing and recovery, which may have initiated its writing, does show a relatively tentative poetic journey for Piro.

It is in this context that the portrayal of Gulabdas by Shahrayr and Swarajbir as a mawkish figure, totally smitten by Piro and her poetry seems rather excessive. For Shahryar there is a reversal of roles of the *murshid* and the *murid*, the guru and his disciple, for after encountering Piro and her poetry, Gulabdas acknowledges her to be his guru, ready to beat the drum (*tabla*) to the singing of her verse.[79] After her kidnapping, he is shown to pine for her, and after her death, his empty life finds meaning only in being buried in her grave. Swarajbir too depicts Gulabdas as being awestruck by Piro and her poetic talent. After her coming back to his *dera* in the aftermath of her abduction, he longs to hear her recite her verses, wishing that till his last breath, she should sing, and he listen.[80] In complete divergence from the playwrights, Vijender Das invests in showing Gulabdas as a powerful, miracle-making saint, a Gnostic of his age who lived in excess of 150 years.[81] As an incumbent on the Gulabdasi seat at Hansi, Haryana, it was important for Vijenderji to present himself as an inheritor of the legacy of a powerful saint. At the same time, being conscious of the need to present historical facts, Vijenderji gives a long list of around forty-seven available writings and manuscripts of Gulabdas with his sect. As discussed elsewhere, there is no doubt that Gulabdas was both a prolific writer and a powerful guru.

Though a significant poetic oeuvre of Piro is available, it is very small in comparison to the writings of Gulabdas. Its importance is also attributable to who she was, her writing and talent developing despite her many social and gendered disabilities. Far from the maudlin figure our playwrights sketch, Gulabdas is consistently portrayed in Piro's

[79] *Piro Preman*, pp. 13–15.
[80] *Shairi*, p. 161.
[81] *Sant Kavyitri*, p. 35.

poetry as a powerful, miracle-working saint, in whose presence Piro deprecatorily refers to herself as a slave. Almost all of her repertoire consistently speaks of him in awe-inspiring terms, the multiple references to his puissance emphasized in her verses. In the face of this one can only conclude that his sappy portrayal in these plays is a deliberate foil to highlight Piro's poetical achievement.

Piro the Prostitute

Though Piro calls herself a *vesva*, prostitute, once in her *160 Kafis*, it is our other sources on the Gulabdasis that make this point rather strongly, using multiple terms including *kasbi, randi, besya, kanchani*, to underline her background in prostitution, and those of her ilk who apparently became the disciples of Gulabdas.[82] However, there is no information on her years in prostitution, or how she came to be a part of this profession, though there has been plenty of speculation. There are also references to dancing girls in another of her works, the *Raag Sagar*, composed of songs set to *ragas* which describe the celebration of the *holi* festivities in her guru's establishment, including the performances of dancing girls.[83] Any reference to her early years then falls in the realm of speculation, hearsay, and imputation, beginning with Vidyarthi as noted earlier. The suggestion that Piro had a suitor in one Ilahi Bakhsh, a gunner and a general in the army of Ranjit Singh comes from a later, but an important, source.[84] However, Piro's *160 Kafis* do harp on conflict around her person, and that a powerful person such as Ilahi Bakhsh sponsored her professional guardians who created the trouble she mentions cannot be ruled out.

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[82] The important reference here is that of Gian Singh's Panth Prakash, where he wrote: *Piro ki sabab tai besya bi murid bahu hoi; sama vich mujra karne ko hajar raihe soi* (Because of Piro many *besyas* became disciples; Organizing *sama* they were ever ready to do *mujra*). Giani Gian Singh, *Sri Guru Panth Prakash*, Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1970, p. 1294 (1880).

[83] This is available as "Ath Raag Sagar Granth Mata Guru Piroji", in *Sant Kavyitri*, pp. 212–339.

[84] Ganesha Singh, *Bharat Mat Darpan*, Amritsar: Vaidyak Bhandar, 1926, pp. 127–30.

In the face of lack of adequate information, how do our authors construct a prostitute, and specifically Piro as one? Vijender Das's insistence upon seeing Piro as a victim of circumstances that propel her towards a brothel in order to survive has already been discussed. Her spiritual awakening, and her consistent efforts to leave her surroundings, makes an important part of his story of her redemption, for like a lotus she blooms in the mud, he has told me on many occasions.[85] Shahryar too hints at her years in the profession to be marked by misery, the need to nurture her poetry keeping her going. He also depicts her as having run away from home with an elderly *sadhu*, who died after a few years, leaving her to fend for herself, when she turned to prostitution.

Swarajbir, in his fictional rendering of Piro's life, constructs the term "prostitute" a little differently. In his drama, as shown, a restless Piro runs away from home in order to discover herself, nurture her poetry, and find true love. It is a woman who over the course of a few years ends up with a quartet of lovers that makes her a *kanjari*, a prostitute, in Swarajbir's rendition, rather than any association with a brothel. When a woman decides to run away from home, it is understood by all the characters in the play, she becomes a woman easily available, and so a target of predatory men. She has therefore willfully foregone the safety of her parental house, without acquiring the security of a husband's home, a deliberate forsaking of male sexual surveillance. Swarajbir also underscores the physical nature of Ayesha/ Piro's relationship with all her lovers, the lovers' lust,their physical "thirst" (*treh*) underscores a woman falling out of line as her sexuality finds expression outside marriage. Thus after describing Ayesha/Piro and her first lover's physical hunger for each other, the *Gayak Mandli*, highlights the ambiguity of her sexual-social status—*na viahi na kuwari* (neither married nor a virgin).[86] And so her first lover Rehmat Ali's friends Visakha and Murad ask him to share his sugar-candy (*gur*) with them, since he has managed to get a *kanjari* for his pleasures.[87]

[85] I have been in touch with Vijenderji since 2006. See the Chapter on "Fantasticating Fables".
[86] *Shairi*, pp. 18–19.
[87] Ibid., p. 33.

Piro's defiant statement, referred to earlier, where she calls herself a *kanjari* (prostitute), *shayra* (poet) and a *tivin* (woman), while a cultural challenge that demands acceptance of her multifaceted personality, at the same time also inadvertently accepts the society's branding of her as a loose, unchaste, woman.

Piro as a victim of predacious men (*deh ke saudagar* [traders of flesh]),[88] or her own ability to attract men, is built by all our authors by presenting her as very beautiful, and in the peak of youth. Piro's own writings do not speak of her looks and the available iconic representations of Piro are neither realistic nor explicit to settle the matter. In the plays, however, she is targeted by men because of her inordinate beauty. The implicit message that emerges in this archetypal construction of the sexually desirable according to the male gaze is that the sexuality of a pretty woman is more vulnerable than that of a homely one. In the very first account of the Gulabdasis of the late nineteenth century, Piro is presented as having great beauty (*rup bad*).[89] Again, it is in Swarajbir's play that his fictionalized Ayesha/Piro is presented as a sexually-charged beauty, as gorgeous as the mythical Hir, a "mistress of beauty" (*husn di malika*).[90] One of the men from her village describes Ayesha/Piro as having bright eyes like lamps lit at night, and her body nearly bursting from her bodice.[91] Interestingly in the Prefatory notes of Veer Vahab, a young scholar who is clearly obliged to all our authors discussed here, she refers to Piro's beauty as an established fact—*Piro mata di sohni surat nun rab ne rijhan nal ghariya* (Piro mother's beautiful face was chiseled by god with great affection).[92]

Significantly, Vijender Das and Swarajbir, taking a cue from Vidyarthi, quote one of her own verses as proving the point about men's voluptuous desire centering upon her, and her rejection of their uncontrollable libido. For Vijenderji and Vidyarthi, this verse represents her victimization by men's rapacity proving her need to become free

[88] *Sant Kavyitri*, p. 8.
[89] *Panth Prakash*, p. 1293.
[90] *Shairi*, p. 36.
[91] *Shairi*, p. 15.
[92] *Piro Kahe Saheliyon*, p. 9.

of her circumstances and as an example of her spiritual yearning. For Swarajbir, it showed both her ability to choose her own sexual partners, and her rejection of unwanted attentions. However, they all unequivocally took it as representative of Piro speaking of her past in prostitution.

> *Thiriyan hoiyan de pas na baithiye ji, tishna apni kad sunavde ni*
> *Piro pare dhakeliye panbaran nun, jale aap te auran jalande ni.*
> (Let's not sit with stragglers, they tell you of their desire.)

Piro says, "shove away such lowly, they burn themselves and make others burn".[93]

It is of course possible that Piro meant just what she is attributed to by our authors—a past in Lahore's brothels, in retrospect seen as time spent with despicable and base men. Indeed Piro's various verses undoubtedly carry a flavor of her life as she lives it or had lived it. While the *160 Kafis* relate an incident, a period in her life; her *Siharfis* are collections of stray thoughts, spiritual inclinations, and her sect's attitudes towards social institutions whether of caste or religion, strung together by the genre need of composing a verse on a given alphabet. The diversity of the topics within them cannot be seen by the historian as indicative of any one thematic development. The first part of this verse, for example, speaks of running after shadows like material goods, and it is not necessary that desire here must necessarily speak of a bodily one, though it might. The certainty of a fictive or a moral tale, then, is not the mien a historian can adopt.

An interesting twist in both the plays under discussion is the projection of a rebellion in the establishment of the guru with the arrival of a prostitute in their midst. An ascetic's camp ought to nurture celibates, Gulabdas's disciples explain, and it should not have a place for a former prostitute. A verse of Gulabdas's disciple, Ditt Singh, which castigates a holy person for "keeping" a prostitute, is the reason for introducing this dramatic element in these plays—*randi aur fakir ka sada anadi vair, jab aye ghar sadh ke, kahan gujare khair* (A prostitute and a holy man are enemies forever, when can there be

[93] Piro Siharfi, *Sant Kavyitri*, p. 97.

well-being when she arrives in the home of a holy man). While Shahryar merely suggests the brewing of such a rebellion, suggesting Piro would win this conflict, in Swarajbir's play, as discussed earlier, it becomes its theatrical denouement. Vijender Das, on the other hand, is at pains to show the acceptance of Piro by the Gulabdasis, indeed the respect they accord her by putting her on the pedestal as a mother.[94] I have suggested elsewhere that though the verse in question does indeed hint at disapproval of such a relationship between an ascetic and a whore, Ditt Singh could not have been with Gulabdas in Chathianwala until the very last years of the latter's life, by which time any scandal associated with the coming of Piro to Gulabdas was probably long dead, and any tensions smoothened out. Moreover, these lines appeared in a set of verses, conventional in nature, which are meant to see women's sexuality as dangerous, leading men astray.[95] Thus what the hinging of the dramatic element in the plays on the arrival of a prostitute does is to compress time, impute meanings not necessarily present in Piro's lifetime, or not present in the way they have been dramatized here. The theatrical rebellion in these plays underlines the changed priorities of Gulabdas—from a teacher to his disciples to a lover of Piro—reducing his life and work to his relationship with her. The playwrights, it seems, work to illuminate Piro's poetic talent by diminishing both Gulabdas's poetic skills, as well as his stature among his disciples.

Piro, a Low Caste

In the *160 Kafis*, Piro repeatedly calls herself a low caste woman (*sudar nari*). The self-representation as a low—*sudar*—woman is a multifaceted expression, with metaphoric and literal connotations. To be a prostitute in Punjab is to be in the ranks of the *kanjars* or the

[94] Das has a section where he gives the verses of some disciples of Gulabdas in praise (*upma*) of mother Piro, for example, Sant Attar Singh. *Sant Kavyitri*, p. 56.

[95] Anshu Malhotra, "Telling her Tale? Unravelling a Life in Conflict In Peero's One Hundred and Sixty Kafis (160 Kafis)", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 46, No. 4, 2009, pp. 541–78. These lines appeared in Ditt Singh's *Abla Nind*.

low caste associated with pimps and prostitutes, whether one is born into the caste or inducted into it at a later date. Thus calling herself a *sudar* underscores the literally low status position she occupies in a stratified society. Moreover, the term *sudar* carried with it the metaphoric understanding of a "woman" who, across castes, was akin to a *sudra* of the *dharmashastras*, denied a high status. Additionally, to call oneself base in relation to one's guru was entirely appropriate. Within both Bhakti and Sufi traditions, disciples often had to efface, even humiliate themselves, in the presence of the sheikh or the guru to show the suppression of the ego, a sense of the self, which would initiate the novice's commencement on the spiritual path. Further, the use of the Bhakti trope by Piro—of being one among the low caste saints like Kabir or Saina— made possible this fluid connotative multiplicity of the word *sudar* to come through. Similarly Piro deliberately compares herself to low-born women of the Pauranic literature on whom god showered favour.

Vijender Das interprets this overloaded *sudar* of Piro in the most literal sense—she is born in the house of *mirasis*, and her uncle forces her to perform their traditional function, dancing the *mujra*. In Shahryar's play both the literal and the allegorical meanings of being *sudar* are tapped. However, he is at pains to show how Gulabdas's "golden self" (*swaran hau*), referring to his higher caste and social status as he was a Jat, bows before the ostensibly base self of Piro.[96] His chastised ego recognizes the superior poetic and spiritual talent of Piro.

Swarajbir follows Shahryar in making Gulabdas recognize Piro's innate superiority, but makes this recognition more dramatic by making her belong fictionally to a low-caste family of oil-pressers (*teli*). Swarajbir makes Piro aware of her low caste, as she is shown to initiate a dialogue over caste with Rehmat Ali, her first lover and a Jat, whom at that point she hoped to marry. She speaks of the caste mismatch between them, a possible problem in marriage, as alike castes are meant to marry each other, evoking the rule of endogamy. Ali acknowledges his own caste of a Jat, while at the same time mouthing

[96] *Piro Preman*, p. 9.

the theoretical position that there is no caste among the Muslims. Ayesha/Piro, however, enumerates the many Muslims in her village who claimed to be Saiyads, Jats, Rajputs, Chamars, Arains, Telis and Musalis, and that Telis are often called *sudars*. As noted, this reference to her low social status is perhaps meant to highlight the degree of her poetical achievement. At the same time her reference to Bhagtu Chamar of her village who sang the songs of Raidas or Bhagat Ravidas, a "guru of Chamars", and so aired the pain and grievance of being born in his caste, must be seen as a comment by the playwright on the politics of caste in contemporary Punjab.[97] The self-assertion of dalit communities, particularly the former Chamars, and the elevation of the status of Guru Ravidas as their saint, with separate places of worship established by them, is a significant innovation of a more recent past.[98] Importantly, there is much in Piro's poetry that rejects *varnashramadharma*, the structure of caste and stages of life central to Brahmanical society, making explicit her sect's acceptance of all castes, and offering redemption to all. However, Swarajbir makes little reference to this aspect of her writing or quotes her works directly here. Rather, his stand on caste is seemingly driven by the present dalit politics in a state that has the largest percentage of dalits in it (over 28%).[99]

It is in this context we must see his deliberate construction of the establishment of Gulabdas, his *dera*, as antithetical to the traditional norms of caste and status. The *dera* of Gulabdas in Chathianwala is presented as a deliberate attempt on his part to create a "court"(*darbar*) inverting that of Ranjit Singh in Lahore, after his clash with Ilahi Bakhsh in the play and after Ranjit Singh's men order him to vacate Lahore. This initiates a conflict—*hakam te faqir di larai*—(a battle between a governor and a mendicant), we are told. So instead of an abode of soldiers and courtiers, Chathianwala is set up as a place of saints and disciples, where instead of the high castes, the low castes dwell (*nivian jatan*). Further outlining the differences, Swarajbir

[97] *Shairi*, pp. 26–7.

[98] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Social Vision of the Untouchables*, Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1988.

[99] K.S. Singh(ed.), *People of India – Punjab – Vol. XXXVII*, Delhi: Manohar, 2003, pp. xxvi, xliv.

brings in an element of indigenousness in Gulabdas's ostensible court. Unlike Lahore, where Persian is the official language and is patronized, Punjabi is spoken in Chathianwala, and moreover written in the Gurmukhi script as against the Perso-Arabic one of the court.[100] This recourse to an autochthonous culture is significant and will receive further comment later, though for the moment it is worth making a note of what is owned (saints, low castes, Punjabi, Gurmukhi) and what is shown as alien (courtiers, high castes, Persian, Perso-Arabic script).

While working out these binary oppositions, Swarajbir focuses on the many low-caste disciples of Gulabdas, including Ditt Singh, though he does not delve on his relatively higher caste followers. Thus a place is made for a woman—Ayesha/Piro—in his court as a woman is amongst the low, a *sudra*. When some of his disciples reject her presence in the *dera*, calling her a woman, a prostitute, a Muslim and a low caste, Gulabdas reminds them of his monist philosophy, the *advaita* principle of non-dualism he adhered to, where all beings, animate and inanimate, are made of the same divine substance: *randi, chandi, jiv, atma, parmatma, admi, mitti, hava, ag, akash, pashu, panchhi…ih sab iko tat hai* (prostitute, goddess, life, soul, god, man, soil, wind, fire, sky, animals, birds…are the same substance).[101] In his Afterword where he writes with a historical perspective, Swarajbir makes the point about how in many ways Gulabdas was ahead of his times. The seeds of feminist thinking (*narivaadi*), and of the place of dalits in society (*dalit chintan*), in his opinion, can be traced to his *dera*, and other like-minded gurus of the time,[102] for in these establishments low castes and women were respected. Calling his establishment an independent-minded one, Swarajbir emphasizes its rebellious nature against the courtly courtesies of the time. He is appreciative of the poetic talent of many poets like Mayya Das, Shamdas Arif, Kishan Singh Arif in the *dera* of Gulabdas, and makes the point that these intellectuals of his time are attracted to Gulabdas because of this element of revolt and independence in the latter's thinking. While there is no doubt that the Gulabdasi establishment

[100] *Shairi*, p. 97.
[101] Ibid., pp. 102–3.
[102] Ibid., p. 196.

espoused some of the more radical ideas of this age, it may be a touch anachronistic to call it feminist or dalit oriented. The diatribes against *varnashramadharma*, and the social salience of mixed-caste community, did throw a social challenge, but as Wendy Doniger has discussed, could also co-exist in pockets with otherwise socially conservative norms. In other words, alternative societies that ignored caste rules were formed, but to what extent they could challenge or change caste norms remains debatable.[103]

Religion and Identity

The question of religious identity, of apostasy and conversion, in many ways drives Piro's *160 Kafis*. Piro's "conversion narrative" revolves around her entry into the establishment of a guru, who belongs to a broad Hindu–Sikh ascetic tradition, and the problems this creates for her. Her confrontation with Islamic religious and judicial authorities, her subsequent abduction on refusing to be reincorporated into Islam, and her escape from captivity to get back to her guru and sect, form the crux of her *Kafis*. Though there are other salient questions that emerge in a relatively muted fashion, for instance the question of treatment of daughters, Piro foregrounds her angst in the religious idiom.[104] It is the crossing of the threshold of religion, then, that brings on a train of events that cause her to suffer. These events also present her with an opportunity to prove her mettle before her guru—her steadfast loyalty towards him in the face of mental agony and physical confinement. To justify her place next to her guru as his consort, Piro uses Hindu mythology to give examples of godly couples who belong together, speaking of Rama/Sita, Krishna/Radha or Shiva/Parvati as her role-models. In her *160 Kafis*, and other writings, outward religiosity is also rejected as a meaningless carapace in relation to inner awakening as achieved by Bhakti saints. Using sharp words, as did Punjabi Sufis, to lampoon religious figures, Islamic and Hindu, she revels in her guru and sect, who see the Hindu and Muslim, high and low caste, man and woman with equal eyes.

[103] Wendy Doniger, *On Hinduism*, New Delhi: Aleph, 2013, p. 489.
[104] Malhotra, "Telling her Tale?"

For both Shahryar and Swarajbir, the question of conversion, or of the resultant conflict, never assumes a centrality that it has in Piro's own telling of events. In many ways Piro, born a Muslim, stays as such in their depiction, despite her sojourn and stay at Chathianwala with the Gulabdasis. It is the thwarting of the pride and will of the powerful Ilahi Bakhsh, in Swarajbir's play, her second lover, which initiates her problems: her abduction in Shahryar's play, and a confrontation between Gulabdas and Ilahi Bakhsh in Swarajbir's drama. It is in Vijender Das's writing that the question comes up, and though he does not refer to her conversion as such, he hints at it, mentioning her getting "*diksha*", an initiation into discipleship, by being given a *mantra* and a name to chant. In his telling the dwelling of a Muslim woman in a non-Muslim establishment (*gair Muslimon ke dere*) does create a conflictual situation, handled by Ilahi Bakhsh by calling a *panchayat* or a council of important Islamic religious authorities of Lahore. They ask for Piro to be sent away from Gulabdas's establishment, for otherwise this would result, in Vijenderji's words, in "*mazhabi jhagre*" (religious confrontation/riots). It is only once Piro leaves the Gulabdasi *dera* that she is asked to reconvert (*use mazhabi shiksha lene ko kehte hain* [they ask her to take religious education]), and marry Ilahi Bakhsh. On this Piro replies that she is already married to her god-guru (*isht guru*) Gulabdas.[105] Whether Das here is referring to an actual or a metaphorical marriage remains unclear. Significantly, later Vijender Das defends what he calls "real" Islam by saying that in it there is no place for using force in religious matters (*dharmic kattarta*, literally, religious bigotry) referring to the forceful abduction of Piro. Interestingly, he later refers to Piro displaying the qualities of a "true Muslim", for in the face of the fanaticism of those who wanted her to revert to Islam, she remains calm and peaceful. In her Gulabdasi avatar, it follows, the differences between Hindus and Muslims have ended or become meaningless.[106] Das goes on to speak of the Gulabdasi faith in Vedantic philosophy which is free of communal differences (*sampradayik matbhed*).[107]

[105] *Sant Kavyitri*, pp. 8–9.
[106] Ibid., p.15.
[107] Ibid., p. 16.

Vijender Das's narrative is thus cautious in the handling of a crisis in Piro's life that emanated from her crossing religious boundaries. He can be said to be writing with the awareness of the contemporary problem of religious conflict between Hindus and Muslims, as seen in his use of terms like *sampradayik matbhed*, as also contemporary sensitivities on religious questions. Despite Piro becoming a Gulabdasi after having forsaken Islam, he very carefully suggests that true Islam is not bigoted. He goes on to speak of the Gulabdasi sect being open to Hindus and Muslims,where religious differences are immaterial. At the same time, Das may be seen to be subtly "Hinduizing" the Gulabdasi historical bequest, when he describes Gulabdas's and Piro's graves, lying parallel in a tomb in Chathianwala, not as graves, *kabr* or *gor*, but *samadhi*, connoting the more Hindu practice of interring ashes of a holy person.

As noted earlier, for Swarajbir, Piro remains a Muslim, even when with Gulabdas in his *dera*, as for example when she starts calling herself Piro, referring to her Muslim background where their holy men are called *pir*. Throughout the play, Swarajbir uses various devices, sometimes subtle, and at others consciously articulated, to underline Piro's "Muslimness". He gives her the name Ayesha, her namesake being the young, favourite, educated and politically conscious wife of the Prophet, perhaps hinting at the same qualities in his heroine. She is shown to wear a veil (*naqab*) in the opening scene, is presented as offering *namaz* five times a day, her worship inevitably referred to as *bandgi*, a Persian-derived word indicating in this context a Muslim practice.[108] The question of language, and the signifiers it releases and constructs, is an important one, as I have already indicated when speaking of Swarajbir's comparison between the apparently wholly indigenous Punjabi/Gurmukhi of Gulabdas's court and the Persian/Urdu of the Maharaja's. The ownership of Punjabi as the language of the people is important, but when it gets to be associated with only the Gurmukhi script, it acquires religious overtones. Historically, Punjabi was written in at least three scripts—Perso-Arabic, Gurmukhi and Devnagari. The promotion of Punjabi in Gurmukhi, conjointly, as the language of the Sikhs, began only in the late nineteenth century, and

[108] *Shairi*, p. 14.

is promoted as a policy in the Indian Punjab today.[109] TheIslamizing signifiers, particularly when associated with Piro, work as a sub-text, because at an overt level, Swarajbir consciously attempts to create a secular outlook. This can be seen in the linking of Piro with the Punjabi Sufi poetic tradition as represented by Bulleh Shah and Shah Hussain, as well as the *qissa* tradition with her comparison to Hir. She is also shown to imbibe in the Gulabdasi mien the disregard for religious differences between the Hindus and Muslims, without necessarily giving up her own cultural inheritance.[110] One may therefore surmise that a subliminal tension prevails in *Shairi* between the "owning" and the "othering" of the Indo-Islamic legacy. At the same time by overplaying Piro's Islamic upbringing he can make us marvel at the secularity of Gulabdasi history.

In many ways Shahryar too continues to emphasize Piro as a Muslim, particularly in his Preface where he mentions this Muslim woman's *murshid* being a Hindu, as discussed earlier. The most theatrical statement of Piro's Islamic patrimony comes in his description of Gulabdas's death, eight months after Piro's. Shahryar tells us that this Hindu man, forgoing cremation, the practice among Hindus, left instructions to be buried in the same grave as Piro—*Piro di kabar khol ke mainu us diyan haddiyan de nal hi kabar vich utar ke pher donan di mitti nu vi ik bana dena* (opening Piro's grave place me with her bones in the grave and then mix the earth), at once evoking the Muslim custom of burial and the Punjabi romance of dying/lying together.[111] From one of our sources on the Gulabdasis we know that Gulabdas died eight months after Piro in 1873 and that they were buried in a single tomb (*makbara*), the remains of which are still extant (though barely so) in Chathianwala in Pakistan.[112] A single tomb is transformed into a single grave in Shahryar's imagination (even Swarajbir mentions the same grave/*kabar*),[113] enhancing the effect of a romance that supposedly defied boundaries of religion. Defying

[109] Malhotra and Mir, "Punjab in History and Historiography", p. xxix.
[110] *Shairi*, p. 145.
[111] *Piro Preman*, p. 8.
[112] *Panth Prakash*, p. 1293.
[113] *Shairi*, p. 184.

religious rituals enhances the appeal of romantic love, the element of thwarting the norm nevertheless points at the normal and the natural for the ordinary, who do follow their own religious rituals.

The Miraculous and the Enchanted World

The literary imagination of Piro relies on allusion and allegory that relates to the epics, *Pauranic* stories, and the legends, including the miracle-working powers of the Bhakti saints. This is not only important to the manner in which her narrative moves forward, but also pivotal to how she constructs characters, more specifically her own. By assuming the role of Sita, for instance, she allows Sita's characteristic devotion to her husband to be impressed upon her in relation to her guru Gulabdas, or use Sita's righteousness to condemn those who perpetrate Piro's "abduction". In the same vein she attributes miraculous powers to her guru Gulabdas at the time of her rescue from her incarceration in Wazirabad, powers that enhance his saintly credentials, in a world-view where the saints announce their elevated status by performing such feats.[114] The relationship of holy persons to a higher consciousness, their near-godly status, needed to be displayed in order to establish their superiority among mere mortals. In the early modern period, this could often mean competitive miracles, as holies of different hues might use miraculous deeds to enhance their status, as that of their sect.[115] Among the many epithets Piro uses to describe her guru, she calls him *jani-jano* and *antaryami*, both connoting him as all-knowing, *abnasi*, indestructible, and *bihad*, limitless, all attributes that extol his extraordinary status.[116] The guru himself is shown to be aware of his powers in her *160 Kafis*. When he sends his two disciples to engineer her escape from Wazirabad, he tells them that her rescue is preordained, but that they will earn credit for it by actually performing the task. Thus in Piro's recounting of the story of her rescue, the locks in the room where she is imprisoned fall away

[114] Malhotra, "Miracles for the Marginal?"
[115] Simon Digby (tr.),*Wonder-Tales of South Asia*, Jersey: Orient Monographs, 2000.
[116] Anshu Malhotra, "Bhakti and the Gendered Self: A Courtesan and a Consort in Mid Nineteenth Century Punjab", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 6, 2012, p.1531.

on their own, the sentinels keeping vigil outside her room are blinded even as they open the doors and she walks away. Later, as Piro and her two rescuers make their way out of the city gates, the guards there too are blinded, and the chase of the three disciples is initiated only when they are well out of the city. All these wonderful occurrences Piro clearly says are because of her guru, a miracle-working perfect man (*kamil*).

Vijender Das comes closest to acknowledging the guru's miracle-working powers, as is appropriate in his devotional account, but is still constrained enough to speak of some of the unusual occurrences in ways that can be at least explicated. Thus the blinding of the guards is explained as both as a result of a dark, black, stormy wind, and because the guards fall asleep— *tabhi achanak kali syah andhi chal pari…bandigrah main jab pravesh kiya to kehte hain pehredar so gaye* (suddenly a dark black stormy wind blew…when they entered the prison, they say the guards fell asleep).[117] The insertion of "they say" is an interesting stratagem for giving this particular recounting a quality of hearsay, quite contrary to his normally authoritative tone. This allows him both a rational distance from what he relates, while maintaining the extraordinary status of his guru.

Miracles have no place in the telling of Piro's story by either Shahryar or Swarajbir. Shahryar who follows the broad outline of Piro's story in his drama, does speak of the two disciples going to rescue her. However, exactly how Piro is released from her captivity is not portrayed, for the next scene shows her having reached Chathianwala and Gulabdas. Swarajbir's fictionalized story has no place for either abduction as recounted by Piro, nor her release, and so no dilemma of explaining miracles or the impossibility of their occurrence. In plays typically addressed to "disenchanted" twenty-first century audiences, the playwrights do not presumably wish to get caught in situations that seem wholly irrational, and impossible to elucidate. The central episode of Piro's *160 Kafis*, her kidnapping, enforced imprisonment and miraculous release, one may suggest, gets a short shrift, as modernity and its need for rational explanation demands a rescinding of an aspect

[117] *Sant Kavyitri*, p. 9.

of the event as represented by Piro. What of the historian? Groomed in a discipline that has repeatedly made a distinction between faith and reason, what is the meaning of Piro's guru's miracle as it intervenes in and changes her life?[118] I have elsewhere discussed Piro's representation of this miracle in terms of her establishing her agency, in the specific context of Bhakti devotion as she experiences it in the mid-nineteenth century.[119] However, the subjective nature of specific "meaning-making", an idea this paper began with, needs to be borne in mind along with disciplinary constraints.

Conclusion: Storying a story—historians and others

"To tell a story is to take arms against the threat of time, to resist time, or to harness time," wrote Portelli highlighting some significant aspects of orality and how memory is constituted by cultures.[120] In another context A.K. Ramanujan spoke of the salience of transmitting stories in cultures: if you have a tale and do not tell it, then it will make you miserable until you find a way to relate it.[121] The transmission of stories in cultures is linked to both resisting the erasure by time, of perpetuating cultural values, of harnessing old, past stories to transfuse them to new generations, and also oft times to transmute them to newer forms. The questions of transfusion and transmutation are important, as these emphasize a dialogical relationship with texts/stories. When we interact with texts from the past we engage "in a process of criticism, appropriation, repetition, refutation, amplification, abbreviation and so on", i.e., an active process of "supplementation", that underscores our engagement from the present.[122]

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[118] For a recent statement discussing the distinctness of faith and scholarship, the latter based on logic and rationality, see Romila Thapar, "Good Times are Gone", *Outlook*, 24th March 2014, pp. 70–2.
[119] Malhotra, "Miracles for the Marginal?"
[120] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 59.
[121] See Ramanujan's discussion of the folktale "Tell it to the Walls", in A.K. Ramanujan, "Towards a Counter-System: Women's Tales", "Telling Tales," and "Tell it to the Walls: On Folktales in Indian Culture", in Vinay Dharwadker (ed.), *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013 (1999), pp. 429–84.
[122] Inden, "Introduction", p. 10.

Piro told her own story. Rather, she told one story, among the many stories of her life that she could possibly tell. To her, in retrospect, it may have been the most important story of her life. So she worked carefully on crafting it. Epic characters, Bhakti saints, Sufi poetics, Pauranic women became the templates she used, as she filled it with characters—her mighty guru with his marvelous powers, some disciples who pitched in her rescue, her antagonists and religious authorities, her friends and source of succor. She legitimized the place she came to occupy next to her guru.

Piro's lost story when rediscovered excited those who heard/read it. Here was a woman's story, told in her own words, from a time when women's subjectivity hardly ever found expression in the written word, particularly in Punjab, not to speak of being preserved in historical records where women's voice was rarely available. Moreover, here was a woman vociferous and voluble, not mincing words when it came to speaking against her agonistic interlocutors, deeply respectful when it came to her guru, and remarkably steeped in and able to bring out the nuances of her sect's learning and her own varied cultural heritage. This "wow" moment of finding Piro, the recuperation of her voice, therefore set off many to recount her tale—from her own story, and from what could be gathered from the frugal sources at their command. This paper has therefore been about the retelling of Piro's tale. The tale that Piro fabricated, the warp and weft of her life that she chose to memorialize, and the memories being created today of her life and times, is examined here. The questions that drive this paper focus on who says (can say) what, how and why?

Narratives embedded in the historian's oeuvre have been increasingly brought to the fore in recent times. The knitting of the narrative and the unfolding of the plot—"the way in which the story materials are arranged by narrators in order to tell the story",[123] or the design and intention of the narrative[124]—are perhaps common to fiction

[123] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 50.

[124] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, p. xi. Meaning, temporality and transmission are the other important aspects of a narrative plot that Brooks discusses. See the chapter, "Reading for the Plot", pp. 3–36.

writers and historians. In other words, whatever the form or the medium of relating it, the genre, the story imbricated in it is recognizable.[125] However, as the paper has discussed, historians are tightly controlled by their sources—they may say some things with certainty, suggest and hint at others, even indulge in informed speculation on some questions, but cannot do more than that, though they may arrange their materials in a way that itself may follow a plot, say a story. The protocols of their discipline keep a leash on the historians, even making them tentative when sources are fragmentary. In Piro's case, the plausibility of Piro's story, the contexts of her writing, the stories available in other sources, can only hint at a fascinating story of her remarkable adventure, but say little with certainty.

The writing of fiction or fictionalized "true" stories (to work with an oxymoron)[126]—the histrionics of the dramas and the pathos of the devotional account—is comparable to the genre of oral history in at least one way, the fictional plots that develop with free play to imagination have much to do with meaning-making. The way we recall a story, or the way we wish to relate it, and how we wish the others recollect it, has a lot to do with what sense we make of it. Fiction, much like oral narration, can mix up historical, poetical, and legendary narratives.[127] In the fictionalized accounts of Piro's story, the density of her own allegories come doubly packed with cultural materials that can lend themselves to her tale, the "supplementarity" that opens it up to a variety of meaning-making.

Further, our present sensibilities—whether feminist, dalit, secularist or whatever else—also shape our stories, our meaning-making, we are attracted to particular stories of the past. The cultural past we have inherited, at the same time, imposes its own limitations. We cannot make the past say more than it yields, unless we fictionalize it. But what Portelli calls "shuttlework", the telling of a story with the present in mind, perhaps is common to all raconteurs, including the historian.[128]

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[125] Ibid., p. 4.

[126] Shahryar, for example, is consciously writing from what he calls Piro's autobiography (*swajivangatha*). *Piro Preman*, p. 10.

[127] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 49.

[128] Ibid., p. 65.

The recuperative nature of the historian's as well as the litterateurs' projects here is a case in point. For the feminist historian as for the others, the thrill of a newly discovered woman's voice acts to energize new creativity. Further, the same aspects of Piro's life—her acknowledging a past in prostitution, her allusions to her low caste, and to her womanly self in the establishment of an ascetic—draw attention and are commented on. Yet the constraints working on a historian—the use of various sources, their verifiability, and their acceptance in the academic world and among peers—perhaps are different from those that might curb the litterateur.

The fictional accounts here amplify and work with pre-fabricated cultural frames. The steeping of Piro's story in *qissa* romance, the placing of Piro with women *bhaktas*, the patriarchal notion of women's sexuality or the understanding of the tragic transactions of prostitution, for example, are made to work because they play with familiar cultural sensibilities. But Piro's own account needs to be fictionalized in order that specific meanings may come forth. Piro's *160 Kafis* do not speak of her life as a *qissa* romance, though she may be seen to make oblique references to Hir when she confronts religious authorities. Piro finds more in common with low caste women in Bhakti legend than she finds with legendary women *bhaktas*. She does not chafe against all patriarchal authority as a modern feminist, only that of her guardians who kidnap her. At the same time she does not portray herself as a helpless woman, an *abala*, but confronts her abductors with equanimity and guile, rejecting the sordid transactions that may have been made on her behalf. The "velocity" of narration, what gets amplified, and what short shrift, is then somewhat different for historians and others.[129]

Writing of the post-modern turn within history, and the loss of innocence it has entailed, Patrick Finney notes "that we have no access to the past except through the sedimented layers of the previous textualisations".[130] This is true of how fictional accounts may work with cultural legacies as how historians may work with historical accounts, including the sources with which they deal. A woman's

[129] On the concept of velocity in oral narration, see Ibid., p. 49.
[130] Patrick Finney quoted in Roberts, "Introduction", p. 15.

subjectivity as communicated through a serried autobiographical fragment allows for many textualisations, each working with its own cultural signifiers. All however, contribute to the discursive life of a subject. In this plethora of voices, historians, even when dependent on previous textualisations, must remain alert to the principles of their own discipline.