

Sympathy and the Unbelieved in Modern Retellings of Sindhi Sufi Folktales

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines Sindhi Sufi folktales as retold by five “modern” individuals: the nineteenth-century British explorer Richard Burton and four Sindhi intellectuals who lived and wrote in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Lilaram Lalwani, M. M. Gidvani, Shaikh Ayaz, and Nabi Bakhsh Khan Baloch). For each set of retellings, our purpose will be to determine the epistemological and emotional sympathy the re-teller exhibits for the plot, characters, sentiments, and ideas present in the folktales. This approach, it is hoped, will provide us a glimpse inside the minds of the individual re-tellers and allow us to observe some of the ways in which the exigencies of a secular western modernity had an impact, if any, on the choices they made as they retold Sindhi Sufi folktales. A central guiding principle of this thesis is its attention to preserving and reproducing the worldviews encapsulated in the primary sources it uses.

Keywords: Sindh; folktales; the Unbelieved; sympathy; modernity

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Introduction

Sindh in Contemporary Western Historiography

For historians of South Asia (like for those of the Islamic world), the primary interest of Sindh lies in the fact that it has traditionally been known as the gateway of Islam into India; the seventeen-year-old Arab general Muhammad bin Qasim conquered Sindh in 711 AD, creating the first Muslim polity on the Indian subcontinent.¹ Sindh has had few other claims to pan-South-Asian prominence and has, consequently, lost out in historiographical significance to other parts of South Asia – a trend that can be seen across scholarship on medieval, early-modern, and modern South Asian history. For instance, in their survey of pre-European Indian history, Catherine Asher and Cynthia Talbot call Sindh “a backwater region,” suggesting that paying attention to it would not achieve much because “developments in Sind had little effect on the rest of South Asia.”² Historians of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire often only mention Sindh in passing, listing it as a site of occasional military excursions by the emperors based in Delhi, Lahore, or Agra.³ Sindh fares slightly better in general histories of the British period, but does not earn significant attention until 1947, when its largest city, Karachi, is made the capital of the newly created Dominion of Pakistan – at which point it enters the literature as an arena of ethnic and linguistic conflict.⁴

¹ Jamal Malik, *Islam in South Asia: A Short History* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2008), 39.

² Catherine Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India Before Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 18.

³ See, for instance, John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴ E.g. Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011 [1997]) and Farhan Hanif Siddiqi, *The Politics of Ethnicity in Pakistan: The Baloch, Sindhi and Mohajir Ethnic Movements* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

In contrast to this uneven and sometimes neglectful treatment of the region in more general histories of South Asia, there exists a small but rewarding body of work dedicated solely to the study of Sindh and its cultural sphere. The period which follows the Arab conquest is best served by Derryl MacLean's *Religion and Society in Arab Sind* and, more recently, by Manan Ahmed's *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia*. The British conquest and its aftermath, for their part, are most extensively treated in Sarah Ansari's *Sufi Saints and State Power: The Pirs of Sind, 1843-1947* and Matthew Cook's *Annexation and the Unhappy Valley: The Historical Anthropology of Sindh's Colonization*. Ansari's *Life After Partition: Migration, Community and Strife in Sindh, 1947-1962* and Julien Levesque's unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Être sindhi au Pakistan : nationalisme, discours identitaire et mobilisation politique (1930-2016)*, cover Sindh's transition to, and career as, a province of Pakistan.⁵

Although the works listed above are largely concerned with politics and society, Sufism and literature have also featured prominently in western scholarship on Sindh. One of the most important authorities in this regard is Annemarie Schimmel who, in addition to several articles both in English and her native German, wrote *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India*, half of which is devoted to the life and poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (see next section).⁶ More recently, Hasan Ali Khan's *Constructing Islam on*

⁵ Derryl MacLean, *Religion and Society in Arab Sind* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1989); Manan Ahmed, *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016); Sarah Ansari, *Sufi Saints and State Power: The Pirs of Sind, 1843-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and *Life After Partition: Migration, Community and Strife in Sindh, 1947-1962* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Matthew Cook, *Annexation and the Unhappy Valley: The Historical Anthropology of Sindh's Colonization* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2016); and Julien Levesque, "Être sindhi au Pakistan : nationalisme, discours identitaire et mobilisation politique (1930-2016)" (PhD dissertation, l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2016).

⁶ Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1976).

the Indus: The Material History of the Suhrawardi Sufi Order, 1200–1500 AD and Michel Boivin’s *Le soufisme antinomien dans le sous-continent indien. La’l Shahbâz Qalandar et son héritage, XIIIe- XXe siècles* have each explored a central theme of Sindh’s Sufi past.⁷

Of the nine works listed in the last two paragraphs, four date from 2016. This suggests that the amount of scholarly interest being paid to Sindh has increased rapidly in recent years (keeping in mind that what has been presented above is a representative, not summative, list of extensive scholarly engagements with Sindh in the last few decades), and that we might soon expect to see this scholarship more closely inform general studies of South Asian history.

Folktales: Indic-Islamic Encounters

Historians of South Asia are often keen to emphasise the unorthodox nature of much of Indian Islam. Removed from the Islamic centres to the west and surrounded by a majority Hindu population, Indian Muslims are said to have turned to the practice of Sufism as a doctrine that could help them see the world in a more benevolent and peace-seeking light.⁸ Sufism in medieval and early-modern India was receptive to Hindu thought and culture, a fact which has led scholars to investigate whether several prominent strands of the two faiths were similar enough to be considered “identical twins.”⁹

⁷ Hasan Ali Khan, *Constructing Islam on the Indus: The Material History of the Suhrawardi Sufi Order, 1200–1500 AD* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) and Michel Boivin, *Le soufisme antinomien dans le sous-continent indien. La’l Shahbâz Qalandar et son héritage, XIIIe- XXe siècles* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2012).

⁸ See, for instance, Raziuddin Aquil, ed., *Sufism and Society in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁹ Marc Gaborieau, “Incomparables ou vrais jumeaux ? Les renonçants dans l’hindouisme et dans l’islam,” *Annales HSS* 57, no. 1 (2002): 71-92.

Sufi masters often used local, Indic motifs to convey the message of Islam to their followers. A common way of doing this was to retell existing Indian folktales in a Sufi idiom, by keeping the characters and narrative intact, but overlaying the two with a metaphorical layer that spoke of the fundamental Sufi idea of the quest of the human soul for union with God or the eternal truth. This idea is perhaps best illustrated in the scholarship of Aditya Behl, which, while focused on one region in South Asia, speaks of a trend that was present in several parts of the subcontinent, including Sindh.¹⁰

Behl explores narrative poems written in Hindavi (a historical name for Hindi-Urdu) by Sufis based at medieval North Indian courts. He calls these poems “Sufi Romances,” as they are epic love stories that also educate the listener and reader about the basic tenets of Sufi belief:

Love’s subtle magic can change nature, and even tame that most intractable of human beasts, human nature. This is the simple mystery (*sahaja bheda*) that the Sufis (Islamic mystics) of sultanate India taught through their spiritual and worldly practice, the principle they illustrated through composition and recitation of their verse romances, written in Hindavi and sung in courts, salons, and Sufi shrines from the fourteenth century onward. Their challenge was to make their spiritual agenda comprehensible and appealing in an Indian cultural landscape, using local terms, symbols, concepts, techniques, and gods.¹¹

In Sindh, this same task was undertaken several centuries later by Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (1689-1752), who gathered popular folktales from all over the region, and retold them as poems in the Sindhi language. Bhitai was also a musician, and he composed melodies for his poems to create songs that have since been sung widely, both in Sindh and beyond. The

¹⁰ Aditya Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379–1545* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Sufism was not the only Indian religious tradition to engage with folktales in this fashion: Islamic Ismaili and Hindu Bhakti movements embarked upon similar engagements with folk culture. See, respectively, Ali Asani, *Ecstasy and Enlightenment: The Ismaili Devotional Literatures of South Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002) and John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Times and Ours* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹¹ Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic*, 1.

collection of all of Bhitai's poems is called the *Risalo* or *Shah jo Risalo* and is, in its book form, a sacred or near-sacred object for many Sindhis.¹²

Like with Behl's Hindavi Romances, there are two layers in Bhitai's poems: the characters and plot of the folktale in question and the Sufi message of unification with God. For a demonstration of this idea, we can turn to a description of an episode from one of Bhitai's poems in Schimmel's *Sindhi Literature*. The heroine of this poem and tale, Sassui, has woken up to find that her husband is missing from her side, that he has, in fact, been kidnapped and taken far away:

Punished for the "sleep of heedlessness" she sets out for her journey which, in turn, represents the journey into the interior of one's heart where alone the Beloved can be found. All the simple Sindhi girls appear in Shah Latif's poetry as representatives of the human soul . . . the searching and longing soul is always a woman who yearns for her Divine bridegroom, for her eternal husband. In order to find him, she takes upon herself incredible hardships—swimming through the waves of the ocean of this world, crossing the desert with bleeding feet, she has only one goal: to be reunited with God, the Beloved, who has elected her at the day of the Primordial Covenant.¹³

The lover's quest for her mate is the allegorical equivalent of that of the believer for God. This allows Sufi folktales to have two readings: an earthly one that is, in essence, a love story, and a divine one that speaks of the extra-worldly aspirations of the human soul. Both these readings provide listeners, readers, and – as we will witness in this thesis – re-tellers of Sindhi Sufi folktales with opportunities to express sympathy, both on an emotional and on an epistemological level (see next section).

¹² Annemarie Schimmel, *Sindhi Literature* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1974), 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

Modernity, Sympathy, and the Unbelieved

Sindhi folktales continue to be retold in the modern age, including by individuals who are not Sufis, do their retelling in prose, and are able to write with the anticipation of much larger audiences than most re-tellers in previous centuries.¹⁴ Starting from the early nineteenth century, we can, in addition, detect the beginning of a change in the avenues available for, and the methods employed in, the transmission of Sindhi popular culture. This change is connected to two related developments that transpired around this time: 1) Sindh began to be frequented by European (largely British) travellers, many of whom, once they had returned to Europe, were to publish accounts of their voyages and their reflections on Sindh and 2) in the region itself, the British conquest of 1843 heralded a new form of engagement with popular culture, which was enabled by the changes set in motion by British rule and resulted in the creation of a minor renaissance.¹⁵ These two respective developments provide the cues for the two chapters that follow this introduction. In chapter one, we will examine a set of retellings of Sindhi Sufi folktales that were undertaken by a European traveller for a European audience, and in chapter two we will examine four instances in which local Sindhis have retold Sufi folktales during and after the minor renaissance referred to above. Our purpose will be to determine, in particular, the epistemological and emotional sympathy exhibited by each re-teller for his subject. This approach, it is hoped, will provide us a glimpse inside the minds of these five individuals, and

¹⁴ Bhitai's poetry is, by no means, the only channel for the transmission of folktales in Sindh in pre- or extra-modern settings. There also exists a tradition of oral storytelling, practiced at the village-level by individuals who have been trained in this craft. For more on this, see the *Nachwort* in Anemarie Schimmel, *Märchen aus Pakistan* (Munich: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1980).

¹⁵ For more on both these phenomena, see the introductions to chapters one and two of this thesis.

allow us to observe some of the ways in which the exigencies of a secular western modernity had an impact, if any, on the choices they made as they retold Sindhi Sufi folktales.

What do we mean by a “secular western modernity?” Starting in 2016, Clossey et alia have published a series of articles titled “The Unbelieved and Historians.”¹⁶ In them, Clossey et al. argue that the tendency of contemporary historians to deny agency to supernatural creatures – whether they be gods, fairies, angels, dragons, ghosts, etc. – can be traced back to the European enlightenment when scholars and thinkers embraced a new form of scepticism. Scepticism, Clossey et al. tell us, had traditionally consisted of doubting any and all aspects of knowledge. Starting about the year 1700, however, “once an uncertainty about all knowledge, scepticism became a certainty that some kinds of knowledge are obviously false.” By “some forms of knowledge,” Clossey et al. are referring to a belief in the possible existence of supernatural beings as creatures endowed with agency who can interfere in the affairs of humans. Taking their cue from the place of the supernatural in contemporary scholarship, Clossey et al. call supernatural beings “the Unbelieved.”¹⁷ The Eurocentric frame of mind that decides, *a priori*, to discount the reality of the Unbelieved is, in Clossey et al.’s words, a dogmatic secularist mind. The present thesis deploys the idea of the Unbelieved in its examination of modern retellings of Sufi folktales, determining whether or not, and to what extent, each re-teller shares the stance of

¹⁶ Luke Clossey, Kyle Jackson, Brandon Marriott, Karin Vélez, and Andrew Redden, “The Unbelieved and Historians, Part I: A Challenge,” *History Compass* 14, no.12 (2016): 594–602; Luke Clossey, Kyle Jackson, Brandon Marriott, Karin Vélez, and Andrew Redden, “The Unbelieved and Historians, Part II: Proposals and solutions,” *History Compass* 15, no.1 (2017); and Roland Clark, Luke Clossey, Simon Ditchfield, David M. Gordon, Arlen Wiesenthal, and Taymiya R. Zaman, “The Unbelieved and Historians, Part III: Responses and Elaborations,” *History Compass* 15, no.12 (2017).

¹⁷ Ibid., 595.

the patrons of “the coffee houses of western Europe around 1700” when it comes to the involvement of supernatural beings in human affairs.¹⁸

I define epistemological sympathy in relation to Clossey et al.’s idea of the Unbelieved: epistemological sympathy is the willingness to share the orally transmitted belief of the Sindhi people that these folktales, including the supernatural episodes they contain, are historical accounts of events that actually transpired.¹⁹ In addition to epistemological sympathy, this thesis also makes use of emotional sympathy as an idea that can help us access the worldviews of the five modern re-tellers of Sindhi folktales whose works we are going to examine: for each retelling, we will look at the extent to which the re-teller appears to share in the pains and pleasures that the characters of the folktales are experiencing, and in the moral, aesthetic, and spiritual messages that the events in the folktales contain.

By adopting this approach, the present thesis aims to complement current trends in the scholarship which, as we will see in each chapter, emphasise consequences and not intentions, and absorb human idiosyncrasies into social-scientific generalisations. While both emphases on consequences and social-scientific generalisations have great value and can further our understanding of the past, they do not give us the complete picture on their own: They run the risk of subordinating the thoughts and ideas of our historical subjects to our own assumptions about the world, which deprives us of the chance to obtain genuinely new information about the past – information that can potentially modify and enrich the way in which we look at life. As we

¹⁸ Ibid., 595.

¹⁹ That most Sindhi people believe in the historical truthfulness of their folktales and the supernatural episodes they contain is best demonstrated in this thesis by the fact that the author of each retelling we examine feels compelled to accept (Gidvani, Ayaz, and Baloch), dispute (Burton), or feel conflicted about (Lalwani) the storylines that call upon the Unbelieved to exercise agency. In each of these cases, the re-teller positions himself with respect to a default unqualified acceptance of the supernatural events contained in the folktales.

will see over the course of this thesis, ascertaining levels of emotional and epistemological sympathy of each re-teller can help us avoid this loss. In using, rather than explaining away, the categories and ideas which belong to the people I write about, I am following Clossey's first principle of historical scholarship: "a historical work should be interesting to its subjects." In this regard, this thesis is a small attempt at redressing the current imbalance in contemporary scholarship between "knowledge about the subject and knowledge known by the subject."²⁰

A Note on Sources and Terminology

The distribution of re-tellers across the two chapters that follow is lopsided: chapter one examines one and chapter two four. This was not a deliberate decision on my part, but a constraint imposed on me by the nature and availability of sources. The only complete retelling of Sindhi folktales that exemplifies the first development we referred to above and was available to me for examination was Richard Burton's; *Tales of Old Sind* by Charles Kincaid is presented as a storybook for children and contains no clues to Kincaid's own stance on the veracity of the tales, which renders it largely irrelevant for the specific aims that are guiding this thesis.²¹ I do not believe, however, that an exclusive focus on Burton negatively impacted my investigation: Burton's retellings are extensive and full of character, and, as we will see in the next chapter, readily responded to my investigation concerning sympathy and the Unbelieved. A focus on Burton has also allowed me to engage with the extensive secondary literature concerning Burton's life and actions. Sources for the second chapter presented the opposite problem. In the

²⁰ Luke Clossey, "Asia-Centered Approaches to the History of the Early Modern World: A Methodological Romp," in *Comparative Early Modernities: 1100-1800*, ed. David Porter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 77.

²¹ Charles Kincaid, *Tales of Old Sind* (London: Wentworth Press, 1922); Also of interest may be T. Hart-Davies' *Sind Ballads* which, while not a collection of folktales, does contain a translation of select Sindhi poems into English (see Schimmel, *Sindhi Literature*, 8).

century and half since the minor Sindhi renaissance began, there have been innumerable attempts by local Sindhis at retelling Sindhi folktales. I have chosen four sets of retellings from among these, so that I have at my disposal a sizeable sample which, at the same time, is not too vast to allow me to enter into the depth I can for Richard Burton's retellings. This has, needless to say, entailed an omission of the examination of various potentially rewarding local Sindhi engagements with Sindhi popular culture. Of particular note are those of Mirza Kalich Beg (1853-1929) and Hotchand Moolchand Gurbaxani (1883-1947) who, respectively, translated and edited Bhitai's *Risalo*.²² While unfortunate, these omissions were necessary because the nature of this project necessitated an in-depth interaction with each retelling that was chosen for examination; it would not have been possible to enter into this depth if a longer list of texts had been chosen. The four sources that *were* selected were done so carefully. Between them, they represent two major phases of Sindh's cultural history (the minor renaissance and the decades that followed the creation of Pakistan), and are drawn from three major languages of literary creation in modern Sindh: English, Urdu, and, of course, Sindhi. Encompassing differing approaches and perspectives, they underscore for us the ability of individual Sindhis to engage with folktales in their own individualised ways.

Before the 1980s, the more commonly used spelling of Sindh was "Sind," though "Sindh" had been in occasional use even before then, just as "Sind" has not completely disappeared from scholarship even now. Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai is variously known as Bhitai, Latif, Shah Latif, and the Shah. In the chapters that follow, I refer to folktales by the Hindi-Urdu and Punjabi word for folktale, *qissa* (plural: *qissay*, but anglicised in our case to *qissas*), rather

²² For Kalich Beg, see Schimmel, *Sindhi Literature*, 29-31 and for Gurbaxani, see Amaresh Datta, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature: Volume II* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1987), 816.

than the Sindhi *qisso* (plural: *qissa*) to help any readers of this thesis who are familiar with the Hindi-Urdu or Punjabi word to avoid confusion.

Chapter 1.

Richard Burton and the Sindhi Sufi *Qissas*

In the 1830s and 1840s, Sindh played host to a large number of European travellers and adventurers, several of whom left behind published accounts of their voyages and experiences.¹ From their many fascinating and informative works, this chapter singles out Richard Burton's translations and retellings of Sindhi Sufi qissas, and explores some of the sentiments, attitudes, and tensions present within these. Burton was not only unique among British travel writers in Sindh for his extensive treatment of Sindhi folklore, but his books and essays also betray an understanding of Sindhi culture that is fraught with contradictions. In Annemarie Schimmel's words, Burton's writings on Sindhi literature showcase "a strange mixture of criticism, misunderstanding, and admiration."² This chapter aims to demonstrate that this "strange mixture" of attitudes was a consequence of the inherent contradiction between Burton's instinctive ability to sympathise with certain elements of Sindhi culture and his equally firm footing in the post-Enlightenment understanding of the demands of rationality, especially as expressed in a belief in a certain form of scepticism. The tussle between these two forces will be

¹ In addition to Burton's own scholarship, the most prominent among these are, James Burnes, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Court of Sindh etc.* (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1831); Alexander Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara. Being an account of a Journey from India to Cabool, Tartary and Persia. Also, narrative of a Voyage on the Indus from the Sea to Lahore* (London: John Murray, 1834); James McMurdo, *McMurdo's Account of Sindh* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, [1834] 2007); Thomas Postans, *Personal Observations on Sindh: The Manners and Customs of Its Inhabitants; and its Productive Capabilities* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, [1843] 1973); Leopold von Orlich, *Reise in Ostindien in Briefen an A. v. Humboldt und Karl Ritter* (Leipzig: Mayer und Wigand 1845); Marianne Postans, *Travels, Tales and Encounters in Sindh and Balochistan, 1840-1843* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Edward Eastwick, *A Glance at Sindh Before Napier: Or, Dry Leaves from Young Egypt* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, [1849] 1973).

² Annemarie Schimmel, *Sindhi Literature* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974), 18.

measured against (and through) the rise and fall of Burton's ability to sympathise, both emotionally and epistemologically, with the different aspects of the qissas he relates.

Between Biography and History

The life and writings of Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) can lend themselves to multiple interpretations, some more intuitive than others. It is, for instance, easy to see Burton in a romantic light – as a fearless adventurer and formidable scholar who travelled to and beyond the furthest reaches of the British Empire, picking up no fewer than twenty-five languages along the way and putting them to excellent use in uncovering and recording the histories and cultures of the people he met. Nearly all Burton scholars have, in some shape or form, attested to the veracity of this description.³ At the same time, however, nearly each one of them has been keen to emphasise that this picture, however true, is far from complete: such succinct, triumphant terms do not, on their own, do justice to the complex and often inscrutable nature of the man. Journalist and biographer Frank McLynn, for instance, presents Burton as a tortured soul who

³ This trend starts off with late Victorian and Edwardian accounts of Burton's life and continues down into the twenty-first century, culminating most importantly perhaps in Dane Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man: Richard Burton and the Victorian World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), which I refer to elsewhere in this chapter. Some noteworthy biographical works concerning Sir Richard Burton are Frances Hitchman, *Richard F. Burton, K.C.M.G.: His Early, Private and Public Life with an Account of his Travels and Explorations* (London: Sampson and Low, 1887); Isabel Burton, *The Life of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton KCMG, FRGS* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1893); Thomas Wight, *The Life of Sir Richard Burton* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1906); Allen Edwardes, *Death Rides a Camel* (New York: The Julian Press, 1963); Byron Farwell, *Burton: A Biography of Sir Richard Burton* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963); Fawn M. Brodie, *The Devil Drives: A Life of Sir Richard Burton* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1967); Michael Hastings, *Sir Richard Burton: A Biography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978); Jean-François Gournay, *L'Appel du Proche-Orient : Richard Francis Burton et son temps* (Paris: Didier-Erudition, 1983) and *Richard F. Burton : ambre et lumière de l'Orient* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991); Frank McLynn, *Burton: Snow upon the Desert* (London: John Murray Publishing, 1993); and Mary S. Lovell, *A Rage to Live: A Biography of Richard and Isabel Burton* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998). There are, in addition, several works which focus on particular stages of Burton's long and colourful career. Tim Jeal, for instance, has recently written about Burton's search for the source of the Nile in *Explorers of the Nile: The Triumph and Tragedy of a Great Victorian Adventure* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011). The only book-length study of Burton's time in Sindh I could find, Christopher Ondaatje's *Sindh Revisited: A Journey in the Footsteps of Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1996), unearths little in terms of new source material or analytical insight and is therefore of limited academic interest.

was weighed down by the burden of a repressed and unorthodox sexuality.⁴ Byron Farwell often lays a similar emphasis on Burton's sexuality and sexual exploits, as, for example, when he details Burton's investigation of a male brothel in 1840s Karachi.⁵ Fawn M. Brodie, an American historian who came to Burton through her study of his time among the Mormons of Salt Lake City, emphasises Burton's "catholicity of . . . interests." Brodie calls Burton "a true man of the Renaissance," citing that he was a "soldier, explorer, ethnologist, archaeologist, poet, translator, and one of the two or three great linguists of his time. He was also an amateur physician, botanist, zoologist, and geologist, and incidentally a celebrated swordsman and superb raconteur."⁶ Brodie's claims avoid re-echoing empty triumphalism by the virtue of the fact that her minutely researched biography not only contains ample material to illustrate each one of these facets of Burton's career and personality, but also draws our attention to the constant presence of contradictions in the way Burton reacted to the people he met over the course of his life, including those he encountered in Sindh.⁷

Richard Burton makes a minor appearance in Edward Said's influential book *Orientalism*. Like Burton's biographers, Said, too, comments on the uniqueness of Burton's personality and actions.⁸ Unlike most of Burton's biographers, however, Said only addresses a single aspect of Burton's multi-faceted and richly detailed writings, viz. that they were used (if

⁴ McLynn, *Burton: Snow upon the Desert*.

⁵ Farwell, *Burton*, 29-48. Farwell gives the chapter in which he describes the Karachi brothel incident the colourful title of "Sin in Sind," a fact that Dane Kennedy remarks upon in his own biography of Burton (Kennedy, *The Highly Civilised Man*, 29).

⁶ Brodie, *The Devil Drives*, 15-16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 57-70. I use the expression "over the course of his life" instead of, for instance, "in his travels," because Burton turned a critical eye upon people of every culture, not just those who he would not have had cause to encounter had he never travelled beyond England.

⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).

not necessarily always designed for) to help the West cement its imperial hold over the Orient.⁹ Said argues that it was Burton's self-assuredness which paved the way for his complicity in the British imperial project, and, by way of illustration, draws our attention to the confidence and sense of his own superiority Burton displays in his account of his travels through Arabia: "Every scene in the *Pilgrimage* reveals him as winning out over the obstacles confronting him, a foreigner, in a strange place. He was able to do this because he had sufficient knowledge of an alien society for this purpose." This mixture of confidence and ability, Said claims, cannot but have a wider implication: it "elevates Burton's consciousness to a position of supremacy over the Orient." This apparent fact, too, translates itself into a further claim: because Burton is conscious of his supremacy with regard to the people of the Orient, his "individuality encounters, and indeed merges with, the voice of Empire" – and thereby helps the West oppress the Orient.¹⁰

Said's analysis about Burton is of limited use to this project because we are not concerned here with the effects of Burton's writings on the course of the British Empire: this chapter is about Burton's attitude to certain aspects of Sindhi culture, and the ways in which this attitude manifested itself in his retellings of Sindhi qissas. In this regard, of greater use to us is more recent scholarship on Burton, which, in many ways, picks up from where Brodie and others left off, and attempts to engage with Burton's own personality and intentions while, at the same time, placing them in a wider historical context.

⁹ The "West" for Said consists of Europe and North America, though he mostly focuses on Britain, France, and the USA for much of his analysis. The "Orient," for the purposes of his book, is, for the most part, the Arab-speaking heartlands of the Arabian Peninsula, the Fertile Crescent, the Levant, and Egypt. (*Orientalism*, especially pages 4-6.) These choices are insufficiently and unsatisfactorily explained, and come across as being arbitrary.

¹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 196.

Dane Kennedy has written what is perhaps the most well-researched and in-depth study of Richard Burton to have appeared in the past two decades. Kennedy believes that other Burton scholars have largely failed to place the scholar-adventurer in his social and political context, and his own book is an attempt to redress this. As he makes explicit in his introduction, “for all his [i.e. Burton’s] unusual talents and contrarian character, he was very much a man of his time, a product of nineteenth-century Britain and its imperial encounter with the world.” Nineteenth-century Britain itself, Kennedy tells us, was defined by its attachment to the idea of difference: “linguistic difference, racial difference, religious difference, sexual difference, and much more.”¹¹ Burton consequently deployed the idea of difference to observe the people and cultures he encountered in Sindh and elsewhere.¹² This is what led Burton to allow his work to be “instrumentalized” in the service of the British Indian Empire; Kennedy tells us that Burton “appreciated the political implications of his linguistic and ethnographic inquiries . . . [he] summarized his purpose in terms of ‘the popular axiom, “knowledge is power.””¹³

Kennedy’s approach differs from Said’s in the former’s decision to pay attention to Burton’s own stated intentions wherever this might prove helpful.¹⁴ Most importantly in this regard, we are told early on in *The Highly Civilised Man* that “it would be simplistic and misleading to attribute [Burton’s] lifelong preoccupation with this issue [that of difference]

¹¹ Dane Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man: Richard Burton and the Victorian World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 2.

¹² The parallels between Kennedy’s idea of “difference” and Said’s preferred term, “othering,” are obvious. Kennedy does not give us a reason as to why the former is an improvement upon the latter.

¹³ Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 27. Kennedy is citing a remark that Burton makes in the preface to his *Sindh and the Races That Inhabit the Valley of the Indus*.

¹⁴ It is important to note here that Kennedy does not question the importance of looking at Burton as an agent of British imperialism (a fact that is repeatedly made more-or-less explicit in Burton’s own writings), but simply that we must also look at other aspects of his person. This is the approach I undertake as well.

entirely to the instrumentalist purposes of the imperial enterprise.”¹⁵ This point can, perhaps, best be illustrated with the use of an example. When referring to one of Burton’s final publications, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, Kennedy tells us how “in the preface to the third edition of the *Personal Narrative*, which appeared in 1879, [Burton] declares in bitter defiance of his critics that ‘the Moslem may be more tolerant, more enlightened, more charitable, than many societies of self-styled Christians.’” This leads Kennedy to draw the conclusion that “no one can read the *Personal Narrative* without recognizing that its author has great respect for the doctrines and rituals of Islam.”¹⁶ A more Orthodox Saidian analysis, i.e. one that looks only at the effects of Burton’s actions, might consider this insight to be of little interest.

In his attention to Burton’s individuality, Kennedy has much in common with Farwell, Brodie, and other pre- and non-Saidian biographers of Burton. Two recent essays on Burton’s time in Sindh, Indira Ghose’s “Imperial Player: Richard Burton in Sindh” and Paulo Lemos Horta’s “Richard Burton’s Sindh: Folklore, Syncretism, and Empire,” draw, in turn, upon Kennedy’s idea of Burton’s individuality and extend it in two further directions.¹⁷ Ghose draws our attention to Burton’s practices of disguising himself in Oriental attire to mingle with the natives of Sindh and treating everyone he wrote about, whether Sindhi or British, with sharp irony to make the claim that, for Burton, Empire was nothing but a game: “He ironically exposed

¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁶ Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 79.

¹⁷ Indira Ghose, “Imperial Player: Richard Burton in Sindh,” in *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century: Filling in the Blank Spaces*, ed. Tim Young (London: Anthem Press, 2006); and Paulo Lemos Horta, “Richard Burton’s Sindh: Folklore, Syncretism, and Empire,” in *Interpreting the Sindhi World: Essays on Society and History*, eds. Michel Boivin and Matthew A. Cook (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

the justificatory myth of empire as a sham. What his solipsistic games laid bare was the unpleasant truth that empire might not, after all, serve a higher moral purpose.”¹⁸ In a similar fashion, Horta underscores the importance of understanding Burton’s individuality (or, as Ghose would call it, “solipsism”) as the necessary first step in exploring Burton’s time in Sindh: “Burton is present in Sindh not just as an agent of imperialism, but also as an agent of the self: there he finds a syncretic substance that gives him the means to rebel against Britain and [its] stereotypical notions of culture and belonging”¹⁹

Horta claims that in underscoring the importance of Burton’s individuality, he is going a step further than both Said and Kennedy, in that his own analysis is to be “a more nuanced understanding of the aesthetic and political case for empire that [Burton] espouse[d]”²⁰ While I believe that Horta unfairly downplays the analytical sharpness of Kennedy’s work, I agree with his (and Ghose’s) idea that a useful reading of Burton will be one that looks at the man on his own terms, i.e. through the prism of his individual traits, ideas, and actions as they appear in his writings. I hope to stay true to this principle as I examine Burton’s retellings of Sindhi Sufi qissas.

Literary versus Popular Storytelling

Richard Burton relates many of the more famous Sufi qissas he encounters in Sindh in chapters three, four, and five of his monograph *Sindh and the Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus*.²¹ These accounts are interspersed with lengthy descriptions of, and comments upon, other,

¹⁸ Ghose, “Imperial Player: Richard Burton in Sindh,” 84.

¹⁹ Horta, “Richard Burton’s Sindh: Folklore, Syncretism, and Empire,” 151.

²⁰ Ibid., 151.

²¹ Richard Burton, *Sindh and the Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, [1851] 1973), 56-133. Burton went to Sindh as an officer in the British East India Company, and served as “a translator for the company and intelligence gatherer for the region’s conqueror and governor, Sir Charles Napier”

related aspects of Sindhi life and culture, such as the various dialects of the Sindhi language and the past and contemporary literary practices of the Sindhi people.²² As elsewhere in the book, Burton's meticulous and detailed observations are accompanied by his wry, and often scathing, sense of humour. These two aspects of Burton's approach (the meticulousness and detail on the one hand and the wry sense of humour on the other) complement each other well and produce a narrative that is engaging and convincing, and by turns sympathetic and unsympathetic.

Burton believes that Sindhi storytelling culture exists in two parallel streams. The first consists of refined and elegant Bhitaian poetry, and the second of the popular, non-standardised songs and qissas which Burton sees being sung and narrated in all of Sindh. Each stream has its separate audience; Burton best illustrates this idea when he talks about the popularity of the tale of *Sassui Punhun*, which, like many others, exists in both the Bhitaian and the popular form:

The beautiful verses of Shah Abdel Latif upon the subject of this tale have made it a favourite one among the higher order of Sindhis, and there are not many of them who cannot cite passages from this work of their great countryman. [On the other hand,] very few of the wild tribes of Sindh and Belochistan are ignorant of the legend: the camel man on his journey, the herdsman tending his cattle, and the peasant toiling at his solitary labours, all while away the time by chaunting in rude and homely verse the romantic adventures of Sassui and Punhu.²³

from 1844 to 1849. (Horta, "Richard Burton's Sindh: Folklore, Syncretism, and Empire," 150.) *Sindh and the Races* was published soon after Burton left India for Europe in 1849, frustrated with his superiors for failing to value his skills as highly as they deserved. (Brodie, *The Devil Drives*, 69-70.)

²² The means by which Burton learnt Sindhi and navigated Sindh can be found in the postscript to a different book about his experiences in Sindh: "The first difficulty was to pass for an Oriental, and this was as necessary as it was difficult . . . After trying several characters, the easiest to be assumed was, I found, that of a half Arab, half Iranian, such as may be met with in thousands along the northern shore of the Persian Gulf. The Scindians would have detected in a moment the difference between my articulation and their own, had I attempted to speak their vernacular dialect, but they attributed the accent to my strange country . . . Besides, I knew the countries along the Gulf by heart from books, I had a fair knowledge of the Shieh form of worship prevalent in Persia, and my poor Moonshee was generally at hand to support me in times of difficulty, so that the danger of being detected, — even by a "real Simon Pure," — was a very inconsiderable one. With hair falling upon his shoulders, a long beard, face and hands, arms and feet, stained with a thin coat of henna, Mirza Abdullah of Bushire — your humble servant, gentle reader — set out upon many and many a trip." Richard Burton, *Falconry in the Valley of the Indus* (London: John van Voorst, 1852), 99-100.

²³ Burton, *Sindh and the Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus*, 57.

Burton's respect for the "beautiful verses" of Bhitai is in line with the high regard he has for Sufism and the literatures associated with it, both in Sindh and elsewhere in the Islamic world.²⁴ This regard is equally apparent in the several pages he dedicates to describing the state of learned scholarship in Sindh (i.e. as practised by those he calls "the higher order of Sindhis"), both in the Sindhi and the Persian language – even if he does not hesitate to cast a disparaging remark upon Sindhi literary practices when the need behooves him.²⁵ As can be imagined, and will be seen later on in this chapter, Burton's engagement with what we might term "highbrow" Sindhi culture is for us a useful point of entry into his sympathy for the people of Sindh. Burton's treatment of the "rude and homely" verses of the "wild tribes of Sindh" (a category which for Burton includes all the non-elite inhabitants of Sindh²⁶), on the other hand, is more ambiguous. The passages in which he deals with this subject not only give us a sense of what Horta might call Burton's "agency of the self,"²⁷ but also appear to display a fair quantity of antipathy, both on the emotional and the epistemological scale.

The Qissas

Burton divides the qissas he narrates into three makeshift categories. He first relates a few of what he calls "Specimens of Satire" and follows these up with "the Prophecies of the Samoi."²⁸ Then comes a more extensive treatment of more canonical (i.e. more Sufi) stories like *Sassui Punhun*, *Umar Marui*, and others.²⁹ We are told in a footnote to the Prophecies that the

²⁴ Kennedy, *The Highly Civilised Man*, 82.

²⁵ Burton, *Sindh and the Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus*, especially 63-80.

²⁶ Ibid., 56.

²⁷ Horta, "Richard Burton's Sindh: Folklore, Syncretism, and Empire," 151. Also see above.

²⁸ Burton, *Sindh and the Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus*, 81 and 84-92.

²⁹ Ibid., 92-133.

written sources for the qissas in this category are “in a rough and rugged style,” and so “a literary translation will not be attempted.” Instead, “the verses are given as usually quoted by the people, though to all appearances many of them are in a mutilated state.”³⁰ Similarly, regarding the last, canonical category, Burton does not give us any clues to the identity of the source he is working from beyond the fact that it is a manuscript “of about thirty pages composed in excellent Sindhi and occasionally in execrable Persian.” We are told that the stories told in it are in verse: Burton refers to the problems posed to him by the “particularities of sound, metre, [and] construction” while he was translating. Burton warns us, however, that this manuscript is not his only source for the canonical qissas. He is, in addition to it, making free use of “well-known Bardic effusions” from poets like “Mir Bahar [and] others.”³¹ In his narration, Burton frequently refers to “the poet” or “the bard” as, for instance, when he prefaces quotations with the statement “the bard says.”³² This poet or bard is the author of Burton's primary thirty-page manuscript, and is not to be confused with the “Bardic effusions” of Mir Bahar and the others. Burton does not refer to any written source when he talks about the latter grouping, implying therefore that he has only encountered them as oral texts. The state of these can perhaps be surmised by looking back to what Burton says about the sources he uses for the qissas contained in his section on the Prophecies: a diverse, mismatched, and “mutilated” oral collection that still manages to make sense if narrated carefully.

³⁰ Ibid., 388.

³¹ Ibid., 389. An internet search revealed no results for a nineteenth or pre-nineteenth-century Sindhi poet called Mir Bahar.

³² Ibid., e.g. 108.

It is the section on canonical qissas which holds the greatest interest for us, treating as it does stories that also appear in Bhitai's *Risalo* and in the retellings in the second chapter of this thesis. Burton begins this section by recounting the tale already referred to above, *Sassui Punhun*, to which he devotes considerable space (fourteen and a half pages). If we use the number of pages as an indication of Burton's criteria for a qissa's worth, next in importance to *Sassui Punhun* are *Mumal Rano* and *Umar Marui*, the retellings of which take up eleven and just over six pages respectively.³³ Together, they have much to say about the extent to which Burton was able to sympathise with Sindhi literary culture, and where and how he failed to do this.

The following investigation is divided into two parts. I first examine Burton's engagement with those aspects of the qissas which do not involve the Unbelieved, and then proceed to examine the aspects in which the Unbelieved *are* involved. As we will see, Burton finds it easier to show (an albeit considered) sympathy for non-supernatural elements of the qissas than he does for the supernatural elements.

In Burton's telling of *Sassui Punhun*, when Sassui first hears of the Baloch prince Punhun from the Hindu trader Babiho, she unhesitatingly asks for Punhun to be brought to Bhambore as she is desirous of seeing his beauty firsthand: "My little Babiho, only bring that Baloch for me to see, / And I will pay the taxes and duties for all thy caravan."³⁴ Burton does not let Sassui's forwardness pass without comment; he tells us that in making this demand, Sassui displayed "a vivacity more striking than commendable."³⁵ Burton makes another comment on Sassui's apparently uncertain and unpredictable morals when he points out that she is reluctant to

³³ Ibid., 92-124.

³⁴ Ibid., 94. Every now and then Burton interjects direct quotes from the anonymous manuscript he mentioned earlier. He usually gives both the original Sindhi and his own translation into English.

³⁵ Ibid., 94.

meet Punhun after Babiho has done as asked and arranged for the Baloch prince to be brought all the way to Bhambore. This behaviour of hers, Burton strongly implies, is a demonstration of double standards: “The [Baloch] camp was pitched in Sassui’s garden, but for some reason or other the lady’s modesty would not allow her to meet her lover after sending for him from his home.”³⁶ In both these cases, and in most of those that follow, Burton seems to be dictated to a large extent by his desire to make the reader laugh.

Both Sassui and Punhun, along with Mumal and Rano from *Mumal Rano*, also come in for another kind of criticism when they are revealed to be behaving less perfectly than ideal lovers are expected to behave, or when their story leaves something to be desired from an aesthetic point of view. For instance, when Sassui and Punhun finally meet and embark on their courtship, their words and actions become uninteresting and are clearly not worth being recounted in detail: to win Sassui’s hand, Punhun takes on the disguise and work of a humble washerman, “and his ignorance of the craft, together with sundry love-passages between him and his mistress, and certain sem-miraculous events which favoured his disguise, gave rise to many somewhat lengthy scenes.”³⁷ Burton dispenses with any description of these lengthy scenes. He also finds the climax of the story boring and predictable. The courtship ends, leaving Sassui and Punhun married and set to live happily ever after, when suddenly Punhun’s father, the Jam of Kech, learns of their union and angrily demands that Punhun be captured and made to return to Kech. To this end, he sends his six other sons to Bhambore; “their adventures are somewhat lengthily detailed but conclude, as usual, with their administering an intoxicating potion to

³⁶ Ibid., 99. Curiously, Burton refers to Punhun as Sassui’s lover even though the two have not, as yet, met. He is, perhaps, conveying the idea that Sassui and Punhun were fated to be lovers, so much so that this fact existed even before they had laid eyes on each other.

³⁷ Ibid., 100.

Punhu and his spouse, and carrying off the former at midnight, tied on the back of a camel.”³⁸

The “as usual” is a humorous reference to the fact that intoxicating poisons are a predictable staple of Sindhi romances (they make appearances elsewhere in Burton’s retellings).

In *Mumal Rano*, the hero, Rano, has to undertake a number of adventures before he can secure the affections of the heroine, Mumal. Burton’s rendition of these adventures does not show Rano in a purely heroic light: he is often helped by chance and ultimately shown to be as motivated by the prospect of a free meal as by his wish to prove himself worthy of Mumal: “Puzzled by the similarity [in the appearance of the many young women ranged before him], he [i.e. Rano] nearly failed to discover Mumal, when a Bhonwr, or large black bee, opportunely buzzed around her head. Rano’s superior intellect thus provided him with a supper and a fair companion.” It is safe to assume that the reference to Rano’s “superior intellect” is somewhat (but by no means exclusively) sarcastic.³⁹ Mumal, too, exposes herself to thinly disguised criticism when, later on in the story, she decides to lessen the pain of her separation from her lover by instructing her sister to put on men’s clothing and pretend to be Rano. Burton questions the efficacy of “this curious expedient,” before going on to relate the unfortunate consequences it had for Mumal and Rano when the latter suddenly pays the former a sudden and unexpected visit in the night:

The fair Mumal, in order to beguile her grief, had hit upon the curious expedient of dressing her sister Sumal in Rano’s old clothes, and of causing her to sleep on the same couch. As it was night when the lover arrived, he merely saw that the bed contained more than one occupant, and in the fury of his jealousy, drew his sword to kill the pair. After a few minutes’ reflection, however, he put up the weapon, and planting a stick by the side of the couch, left the house in silence.

³⁸ Ibid., 102.

³⁹ Ibid., 118.

When Mumal awoke and saw the sign, she guessed the full extent of her misfortune.⁴⁰

Perhaps motivated by his conviction that Mumal had not acted very rationally in this instance, Burton fails to fully sympathise with the tragedy that now faces her. This can be seen in the way he chooses to continue his narration: “The bard now indulges in rather a prolix account of the sorrow and mourning of Mumal and her sisters.”⁴¹ Burton does not reproduce this account for us. The reasons behind this decision, one assumes, are the unnecessary indulgence and prolixity of it.

In each of these episodes, we see Burton either laughing at the expense of the heroes and heroines of Sindhi folklore or failing to extend his sympathy to them when they need it. Both these acts betray emotional antipathy. At the same time, however, it is worth noting that Burton does not use the personal failings of Sassui, Punhun, Mumal, and Rano, or the inadequacies of the narratives constraining them, to posit a larger claim about the inadequacy of Sindhi literature or culture in general, something he would have done if his attitude to Sindhi culture was entirely antipathetic. In addition, all of these judgements are anchored in particular and identifiable aspects of Burton’s source material; they neither emanate from nor serve as fuel for any prejudices Burton might harbour for Sindhis. Far from showing contempt, these interventions testify to Burton’s wish to bring to the qissas all the intelligence and sympathy he can muster: he refuses to cast a false exotic light on the events he finds ridiculous or wanting, but tries, instead, to comprehend them on their own terms. Unlikely as it sounds, this mockery and criticism could only have come from a (admittedly sporadic and unreliable) belief in the ability of Sindhi and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 121.

⁴¹ Ibid., 122.

British cultures to speak to each other. While this belief seems to abandon Burton when he encounters supernatural elements in the qissas (something we will examine later on in this chapter), it is constantly present when he talks about the non-supernatural elements.

We will now turn to the many instances in which Burton's efforts to understand and sympathise did bear fruit, allowing him to display a remarkable level of sympathy for the joys and predicaments of the individuals whose stories he recounts. It might be helpful to think of the following episodes as indicators of Burton's willingness to locate bridges between Sindhi and English cultures. They convey ideas that he expects will elicit the same feelings and reactions in his English readership as they have done in the "wild, semi-barbarous" people of Sindh to whom these qissas belong.

Given the nature of these three qissas, it is perhaps unsurprising that Burton makes repeated references to the experience of being in love. As will become apparent, Burton is capable of emotionally tapping into this experience, and it would not be unreasonable on our part to assume that he would have expected his readers to be able to do the same.

When Babiho tells Punhun of the depth of Sassui's passion for him, Punhun, too, falls in love with Sassui. Burton tells us how Punhun confides these feelings in Babiho:

Fired with sympathetic ardour by the recital [of Sassui's love for him], Punhun prepares to visit Bambhora, and expresses to Babiho his anxiety and affection in the following terms . . . "My friend! kettledrums, cymbals, and assemblies are all poison to me, / Even if my father permit me not, still will I journey with thee."⁴²

A few pages later, when Sassui finds herself suddenly deprived of Punhun's company, Burton seems to share in the poet's sense of pain at the desperation and helplessness of her plight:

⁴² Ibid., 96.

The author becomes very pathetic in describing Sassui's conduct when she awakes to the consciousness of her misfortune . . . "Then she weeps tears of blood, as if sprinkling the hills (over which her husband was travelling); / Crying, 'Alas! alas!' she scatters the red gulal over her head. / How shall the wounded heart survive the loss of him , whom the Balochis have torn away from her?"⁴³

We can deduce Burton's sympathy from the fact that he does not qualify these episodes in any way, but simply transmits the sentiments they express.

At the start of *Mumal Rano*, Rano and his friends are accosted by a pitiable blind beggar on his way back from Mumal's homeland, Kak: "A Babu met them in the wilderness, one watch after sunrise, / When speaking of the Kak, he wept tears of blood, (and cried) / 'Let no one go to Kak, lest he become what I am.'" The beggar was apparently once a prince of Kashmir, but had since been driven to madness and destitution by his unrequited love for Mumal. Turning to Rano and his companions, he says, "She ruined all, my friend! I now go forth alone, O Mendhra; / Shun thou the road of Kak, and avoid the pit into which I fell." Burton drily remarks that this "advice was, of course, disregarded by the friends, who instantly started, and journeyed on till they reached the waters of Kak."⁴⁴

Burton makes his most explicit reference to the universality of the experience of being in love a few pages later when he excuses the ways in which Rano breaks his promises to his family and ruler so that he can, against their wishes, enjoy once again the company of Mumal: "But Jove is supposed, in Sindh as well as elsewhere to laugh at lovers' perjuries, and Rano no sooner found himself at liberty than he visited the lady of his heart."⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., 102.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 120.

Love and longing are not the only common denominators that bring out the universality of the experiences of the heroes and heroines of Sindhi qissas. Following upon the passage from *Sassui Punhun* quoted above, Sassui is reminded of other worldly duties and pleasures at her disposal now that Punhun seems to be lost to her forever: “Sassui’s mother reminds her of her household duties, the love of her female friends, and the impropriety of giving way to grief.”⁴⁶ (These implorations are sadly to no avail. Sassui will not be distracted from her grief: “My spinning-wheel gives me no pleasure, now that my husband is gone, / Nor feel I joy from the conversation of my companions; / My soul is among the hills, where the Balochis urge their camels.”⁴⁷) In *Umar Marui*, the shepherd Phog is promised the hand of Marui in marriage and is angry when this promise appears to have been broken. Consequently, “in his wrath [Phog] travels from the Tharr to Omerkot, a long journey, and appears before the monarch, exclaiming, ‘O King, brave as Dodo, aid thou the helpless hind! / After promising me a wife, they deceitfully change their minds. / Enough for me of Marui now, she is a present to thee, O Sumra!’”⁴⁸ Umar, however, like any reasonable man – regardless of whether he were Sindhi or British – would have done, simply “remarked that this was a peculiar way to punish a breach of promise.”⁴⁹

We can see that as far as the non-supernatural realm is concerned, the ways in which Sindhi people (along with the individuals who populate their folklore) look upon and experience life are intelligible to Burton and, by implication, to the imagined audience of *Sindh and the Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus*. In fact, Burton at times seems to go a step further to

⁴⁶ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 108

⁴⁹ Ibid., 109. (As the narrative proceeds, Umar *is*, eventually, persuaded over to Phog’s way of thinking.)

claim that Sindhi society, when it comes to certain cultural practices, is superior to European society – as for instance, when he talks about prostitutes or “courtesans.” Having introduced Mumal as a courtesan, Burton goes on to say that “the European reader must not, however, confound the idea of this class with that of the unhappy beings in his own country, whom necessity or inclination have urged to break through all restraints human and divine.”⁵⁰ Even a topic like bigamy, a practice quite abhorrent to British tastes (as is attested by the sensational popularity of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, published a mere four years before *Sindh and the Races*⁵¹), gets a sympathetic treatment in Burton’s account. In his footnotes to *Sassui Punhun*, Burton asks his European readers to exercise (what we would recognise as) a form of cultural relativism when they are surprised with the fact that when he sets out to woo Sassui, Punhun leaves behind him not just one, but two, wives:

The reader must bear in mind the peculiarities of Mussulman society. Amongst us it might be considered an effectual antidote to romance for the author to inform his readers that his hero has left two wives at home and set out in quest of a third. So also in the present instance, the husband’s peccadilloes are recited without a word of blame or reproach.⁵²

Even though there is a hint of humour in these statements, they are, at their most basic, meant to help clear up any misunderstandings that might occur in the transmission of Sindhi culture to Burton’s British readers.

When he turns to the subject of the supernatural, however, Burton pays little or no heed to the virtues of sympathetic or culturally relativist approaches, and it is here that his humour is at its unkindest and here that he most drastically (to borrow Saidian language) “others” the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 114.

⁵¹ Maia McAleavey, “The Plot of Bigamous Return,” *Representations* 123, no. 1 (2013): 87-116.

⁵² Ibid., 391.

people and culture of Sindh. In Burton's retelling of them, each of the three tales contains two episodes that unambiguously demonstrate the involvement in human affairs of what we would recognize as supernatural forces. Three of these six episodes occur at the conclusions of the respective stories, and three during the course of them. Focusing on the style in which Burton relates these instances allows us to examine the state of his sympathy for Sindhi culture from an angle we have not encountered before. While Burton maintains a level of emotional sympathy that is commensurate with that he exhibits for the non-supernatural elements of these qissas, he shows himself to be epistemologically antipathetic to the content of these six episodes.

Fortunately for us, Burton's account makes clear the reasons behind this lack of credulity. Before we go on to examine these, however, it will be useful to cast a brief eye on the ways in which he engages with the supernatural to see how this matrix of emotional sympathy and epistemological antipathy plays out in practice.

As will become evident, Burton does not believe that the supernatural can interfere with contemporary Sindhi life or play a role in the stories of the Sindhi past. He, nevertheless, reserves this disbelief for the three concluding supernatural episodes, and relates the three supernatural episodes that occur *during* the course of his three qissas in a matter-of-fact, seemingly credulous tone. This tone sometimes betrays Burton's real beliefs when (perhaps in order to keep his readers entertained) he makes the underlying irony obvious by saying something markedly humorous, but is, on the whole, geared to maintaining the aesthetic integrity of the qissas by keeping such sentiments, by and large, out of sight.⁵³ The three concluding episodes, on the other hand, are accompanied by Burton's comments on why he, in a break with

⁵³ It almost goes without saying that the possibility remains that readers who share Burton's secular dogmatic worldview can read humour and ridicule into the very ordinariness of his language, even when Burton has made efforts to disguise his irony.

his sources, does not grant agency to the supernatural.

In *Mumal Rano*, Mumal's various suitors are required to overcome several obstacles in order to reach her abode and be able to court her. This episode is fairly typical of romances both oriental and occidental, and features one or two creatures a great many of us would consider supernatural:

Presently, the friends received an invitation to sup with Mumal, but to come singly, beginning with the bravest. The Hamir was permitted to start first, but on the road, he was startled by so many horrible forms of snakes and dragons, lions and ghoos, that he returned home supperless. The courtiers followed, but with no better effect. Rano, when at last it came to his turn, took the natural precaution of securing a guide . . . Undaunted by the figures on the road, which he saw were put there merely to frighten him [i.e. they had been instructed to do no actual harm], the successful adventurer reached Mumal's abode, and was desired by her slaves to sit upon the Khatolo or couch.⁵⁴

In *Umar Marui*, Burton tells us about a prophecy made to Marui's mother, Mihrada, a few days after she gave birth to Marui:

The bard describes that event [i.e. the birth of Marui], and in the person of Munajjim, or Astrologer, predicts the most remarkable occurrence in her [i.e. Marui's] life. 'On the sixth day and the sixth night, after the child's birth/He predicted in these words, "Your daughter's fate shall be such/That to you, O parents! Umar shall apply with joy."'”⁵⁵

Continuing with his narration of the story (and this time displaying a light irony) Burton tells us that “the young woman, whose destinies had thus been settled for her, grew up, became very beautiful, and excited several *belles passions*.”⁵⁶ Supernatural elements are similarly introduced in *Sassui Punhun* when Punhun, to Sassui's distress, is successfully seduced by Bhagula, “the fair and frail spouse of a Sonar, or goldsmith.” We are told that “Bhagula was so wicked, that not

⁵⁴ Ibid., 118.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 107.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 107.

contented with seducing Punhun's affections from his wife, she tried to persuade him that the latter was unfaithful to him." Sassui was understandably "indignant at such accusations" and "proposed to her rival to decide their quarrel by the trial of fire." This turned out to be a literal trial by fire and involved "a pile of three or four maunds of cotton, steeped in oil and clarified butter."⁵⁷ Sassui and Bhagula were both expected to step on this cotton once it had been set on fire, and the one who had truth and virtue on her side was expected to escape unhurt:

The unhappy Bhagula turned pale at the sight [of the burning mounds of cotton], and would have fled, but Sassui seized her ears and compelled her to enter. Virtue of course triumphed, and the Sonar's dame was burnt to ashes; her ears, which were in the pure hands of her rival, being the only portion which escaped. Punhun acknowledged his wife's chastity, and returned with her to her father's house.⁵⁸

Each of the three tales ends on a similarly fantastic note, and after each miraculous concluding episode, Burton (perhaps sensible of the freedom he can enjoy from any obligation to preserve the aesthetic wholeness of the qissa he has just finished relating now that he has faithfully acquitted this task) interjects to register his epistemological antipathy for what has just passed.

Umar Marui ends on a Romeo-and-Juliet-style note with Marui dying of grief when she hears "a false report of the Hamirs's [i.e. Umar's] death as she was preparing to visit him." Burton tells us that "such was her grief, that her soul incontinently its tenement of clay."⁵⁹ The sarcasm present in this statement (as indicated by the play on the double meaning of the word "incontinently") is also to be found in the way Burton tells us of Umar's fate: "Umar, on his part, as in duty bound, no sooner heard of the fair one's decease, than with equal facility of exit, he

⁵⁷ Ibid., 101-102.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 102.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 112.

also departed this transitory life.”⁶⁰ Burton concludes his *Umar Marui* by directly quoting (though not without suitably qualifying) a sentence from the manuscript he has been using: “The relator concludes this Tale of the Tharr with the appropriate but somewhat hackneyed quotation, ‘Verily we are God’s, and to Him (we are) returning.’”⁶¹

This gentle mockery morphs into an almost explicit rejection of otherworldly readings of human actions when Burton arrives at the even more (to a dogmatic secularist ear at any rate) unbelievable claim made by the “bard” at the conclusion of *Mumal Rano*. Both Mumal and Rano have died in tragic love-related circumstances, and at this point, Burton tells us that “the bard remarks, ‘True lovers are they who ever behave truly to each other, / And whose hearts are crimsoned with the dye of affection. / The fires of such love as this open the way to the realms of futurity.’” This quotation is immediately followed by the words: “The reader may possibly think otherwise.”⁶² Burton clearly does not want to burden his readers with an obligation to believe in a Sindhi notion of the afterlife. In its place, he offers up a more mundane explanation for the story’s themes and events by asking his readers to read them in light of the social realities of Sindh – to, in effect, apply a symbolic lens to the tragic deaths of Mumal and Rano: these, he tells us, are inspired by “the insecurity of the East and the every-day dangers of an Oriental life.” Such dangers “are too real for the [Sindhi] mind to take any interest in the fine-drawn distress and the puny horrors which are found sufficiently exciting to the European novel reader.”⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid., 113.

⁶¹ Ibid., 113.

⁶² Ibid., 123.

⁶³ Ibid., 124.

While these remarks are insightful, it is Burton's conclusion to *Sassui Punhun* that most satisfactorily explains his opposition to granting the supernatural any reality. The climax of *Sassui Punhun* is perhaps the most dramatic and miraculous of those of all three tales. Desperate to find the kidnapped Punhun, Sassui recklessly sets out barefoot across the desert in his quest. On the way, however, she meets a lecherous goatherd, who she fears will try to have his way with her. Burton relates:

And now Sassui, driven to despair, offered up earnest prayers to Heaven to preserve her honour; begging to be admitted into the bowels of the earth, if no other means of escape existed. Heaven heard her supplications, and suddenly she sank into the yawning ground. The wretched goatherd then perceived his mistake, but unable to cancel the past, occupied himself in raising a Lorh and Manah in honour of the departed fair one. As usually happens in such cases, a few hours afterwards, Punhu, who had escaped from his brothers, together with one Lallu, a slave, and was travelling in hot haste towards Bambhora, passed by the spot. Attracted by the appearance of the Lorh, he went up to it and would have sat down there to rest, had he not heard the voice of his bride calling him from the tomb . . . [Punhun] prayed to Heaven to allow him to join his Sassui; which Heaven did by opening and swallowing up the lover.⁶⁴

In an arch and convoluted way, Burton lets us know that he cannot bring himself to believe that this episode took place; he invokes "certain sceptical Sindhis" who, in an Enlightened European way, suggest an alternative ending for the story: they "declare that the recreant Lallu, when caught by Punhu in an intrigue with his bride, slew his master to prevent exposure. Moreover, it is asserted, that after this abominable action, the ruffian spent a week in the company of the beautiful Sassui, murdered her to keep the affair quiet, and concluded by inventing a pretty story to impose upon the credulity of the old Jam [Punhun's father] and his family."⁶⁵ It is clear that Burton's own sympathies lie with these so-called sceptics. Speaking

⁶⁴ Ibid., 105-6. In his notes, Burton tells us that "The Lorh is a peculiar kind of tomb: the Manah is a place to sit in and watch the country around." (Ibid., 391.)

⁶⁵ Ibid., 106.

ironically, he tells us that “we must rank these unbelievers with those doubters who have not scrupled to treat as myths such veritable stories as the Siege of Troy, and the wanderings of Aeneas.”⁶⁶ We are, in short, given to understand that sceptical Sindhis are the intellectual equals of the foremost classicists of post-Enlightenment Europe, who, like them, appreciate canonical myths as pieces of art, and not as factual reports of events that actually transpired.⁶⁷ At this point we may ask ourselves: who exactly are these “sceptical Sindhis” and why does Burton find it easy to sympathise with them?

We are given a clue as to what “scepticism” meant for Burton in a later chapter of *Sindh and the Races*. Speaking of the religious inclinations of the Sindhi people, Burton tells us that:

Superstition is rife throughout Sindh; scepticism, rare. Among the learned, one may occasionally meet with a Daliri, or materialist; and some few of the Sufi persuasion have so curiously mingled Atheism with Pantheism, its contrary, that the European mind can hardly conceive or follow out the combination. These cases, however, are rare, and confined to those who have read themselves out of their depth in logic, or who have attempted the science of Hikmat (philosophy).⁶⁸

As we can see, Burton talks about two categories of Sindhi people: the superstitious (i.e. the vast majority) and the less numerous sceptics. He then furnishes us with two examples of Sindhi sceptics: the “learned” materialists and the Sufi atheist-pantheists. It almost seems as if Burton is following Clossey et al.’s understanding of the post-Enlightenment conception of scepticism to the letter. In “The Unbelieved and Historians: Part I” Clossey et al. tell us that during the Enlightenment, scepticism went from being, “an uncertainty about all knowledge,”

⁶⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁶⁷ For the mid-nineteenth century scholarly consensus on the inaccuracy of the Trojan legend, see Sarah B. Pomeroy, Stanley Mayer Burstein, Walter Donlan, and Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Ancient Greece* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11.

⁶⁸ Burton, *Sindh and the Races*, 174.

(which they argue is the logical definition of the term) to “a certainty that some kinds of knowledge are obviously false.”⁶⁹ These “kinds of knowledge” that were singled out for targeted attack were the ones that endowed truth and agency to the supernatural. For Burton, too, scepticism is not “an uncertainty about all knowledge” but the antithesis of what he calls “superstition.” We see, therefore, that Burton ridicules and criticises the supernatural episodes present in the qissas he relates not because he is unwilling to be sympathetic to Sindhi culture, but because they (the supernatural episodes) contain forms of knowledge that ask for him to abandon his attachment to a dogmatic secularist worldview – a demand that he obviously cannot meet. In keeping with this mind-set, Burton is fully prepared to sympathise with “learned” or “sceptical” (in the Enlightenment sense) Sindhis who see the world as he does.

Conclusion

Burton’s writings on Sindh are extensive and much more remains to be said about them; the retellings we have discussed above only make up a fraction of his scholarly engagement with the region. Burton’s thoughts on Sindhi religious practices, particularly the Sufi orders, betray a similar mix of epistemological antipathy and sporadic emotional sympathy that can lend itself to the kind of methodological approach we have employed above. In addition, like with other European travel writers in Sindh, Burton’s works are useful (if highly problematic) historical records about the society and culture of mid-nineteenth-century Sindh.

It has not been the goal of this chapter to disagree with the Saidian anti-Orientalist thesis, but look beyond it to uncover a newer way of observing an understudied facet of the modern European-Indian encounter.⁷⁰ It is vital that we re-emphasise here that Burton was fully

⁶⁹ Clossey et al., “The Unbelieved and Historians: Part I,” 595.

⁷⁰ For similar approaches to different (but still South-Asia-related) subjects, see Tara Mayer, “Cultural Cross-Dressing: Posing and Performance in Orientalist Portraits,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain &*

implicated in the British imperialist project: he was arrogant, inquisitive, immensely knowledgeable, and believed that his scholarship could be of use to the British Indian Empire. In this chapter, we have supplemented, and perhaps somewhat complicated, this image by observing the conclusions that are to be drawn from an analysis of Burton's retellings of Sindhi qissas that examines this explorer's instinctive ability to sympathise with a non-European culture, and how this sympathy was often compromised by his equally firm footing in the dogmatic secularist thought of Enlightenment Europe.

Ireland 22, no. 2 (2012): 281–98 and Sumit Sarkar, "Orientalism Revisited: Saidian Frameworks in the Writing of Modern Indian History," *Oxford Literary Review* 16, no. 1 (1994): 205-224.

Chapter 2.

A Minor Renaissance and Local Retellings of Sindhi Sufi

Qissas

Sindhi society underwent several major changes in the decades that followed the conquest of the region by the British in 1843.¹ Among these was a transformation in literary culture, a phenomenon that has been commented upon by, among others, Annemarie Schimmel, Ali Asani, and Michel Boivin, and which consisted of a rapid increase in the number of books being written in the Sindhi language, the institution of Sindhi prose as a mainstream genre of literary production, new ways of engaging with the *Risalo* of Bhitai, and an increase in the number of people reading books in Sindhi.² This literary transformation was, in my opinion, vast and consequential enough to earn the epithet of a minor renaissance, a designation that is as convenient as it is apt, for it furnishes us with a single label with which to describe the late-nineteenth-and-early-twentieth-century transformation in Sindhi literary culture to which the retellings of Sindhi qissas we explore in this chapter are, directly or indirectly, related.³ We will

¹ For accounts of British rule in Sindh, see Sarah Ansari, *Sufi Saints and State Power: The Pirs of Sindh, 1843-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and Matthew Cook, *Annexation and the Unhappy Valley: The Historical Anthropology of Sindh's Colonization* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2016).

² Annemarie Schimmel, *Sindhi Literature* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1974); Ali Asani, "At the Crossroads of Indic and Iranian Civilizations: Sindhi Literary Culture," in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Michel Boivin, "Le qalandar et le shâh: les savoirs fakirs et leur impact sur la société du Sud Pakistan" *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 154, no. 2 (2011).

³ Thinking of the Sindhi cultural transformation in terms of a renaissance would, theoretically, also enable us to draw comparisons with similar cultural movements that transpired around this time period and in similar circumstances – most notably perhaps in Bengal.

now turn to a brief historiography of this minor renaissance, and, in the following section, observe how two contemporary scholarly understandings of Sindhi popular culture relate to it.⁴

Outside the Subcontinent, the Sindhi renaissance has been most comprehensively dealt with by Annemarie Schimmel, in an essay from 1974 called “Sindhi Literature.”⁵ It makes sense to devote more space to the findings presented in this essay because more recent works on the topic seem to draw on Schimmel’s arguments and ideas, even when, as we will explore below, they aim to provide new interpretations and analyses of the Sindhi renaissance. In addition to its comprehensiveness and perdurability, Schimmel’s essay is also important for the extensive use it makes of both locally written Sindhi, Urdu, Persian, and English-language sources and those written by nineteenth-century European scholars in English and German.⁶

Schimmel argues that the Sindhi renaissance was underpinned by two specific consequences of the British conquest of Sindh. The transformation in Sindhi literature and culture “would have been impossible without two renovations [sic] introduced by the British. Their conquest of the country in 1843 brought about a complete change in the literary outlook,” i.e. by the means of these two innovations. The first innovation was the creation by the British of a functional and universally recognisable script for the Sindhi language: “By abolishing Persian as the official language in the Subcontinent (1837) they encouraged the development of regional

⁴ We will, for the sake of convenience, and for the purposes of this chapter, henceforth refer to this minor British-era Sindhi renaissance simply as “the Sindhi renaissance.” This should not be taken to mean that this literary movement was more significant than others in the history of Sindh.

⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, *Sindhi Literature*.

⁶ Schimmel’s Sindhi sources are too numerous to list here; examples of her European sources include the many publications of the nineteenth-century German Orientalist Ernest Trumpp and those of British administrators like George Stack. It is also important to note here that Schimmel devotes only a part of this essay to the Sindhi renaissance.

languages and therefore took the necessary step of providing Sindhi with a proper alphabet.” Prior to the creation of this alphabet, each religious group had chosen to write the language in its own script; in addition to not having much currency outside the religious groups that used them, these different scripts were also often unable to meet the phonetic demands of the Sindhi language.⁷ The second innovation was dependent on the first: “The official unification of the alphabet gave the Sindhis the opportunity of establishing printing presses in Bombay, the then capital of the presidency to which Sind belonged, [and] in Karachi, Sukkur and Hyderabad.”⁸

Schimmel lists and describes the major trends in the Sindhi renaissance, and how these were manifested in the works of individual writers. Starting from the 1850s, the British commissioned individuals like Diwan Nandiram to assist them in translating works such as Aesop’s fables and the Gospels of Matthew and John into Sindhi.⁹ These translations proved to be an impetus for the Sindhi people to compose original prose works in their mother tongue. The early trendsetters in this in this regard were Syed Muhammad Miran Shah I (1829-1892), Diwan Korumal Chandani (1844-1916), Shamsuddin Bulbul (1857-1919), and, the most prominent and prolific of all, Mirza Kalich Beg (1853-1929); they were accompanied and followed by numerous others. These individuals dealt with subject matters as diverse as the life of Christopher Columbus and moralistic children’s literature. They belonged to both Hindu and Muslim communities, and forged a new literary sensibility that celebrated, among other things, Sindh’s syncretic Indic-Islamic history and culture.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁰ Ibid., 25-37.

The Sindhi renaissance gets a brief mention in Ali Asani's essay "At the Crossroads of Indic and Iranian Civilizations: Sindhi Literary Culture." The focus of this essay is "the precolonial period," and Asani only talks about the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in regard to "the manner in which contemporary constructions of religious and national identities have influenced Sindhi scholars in their interpretations of medieval Sindhi literary culture."¹¹ Asani's account of the Sindhi renaissance is a less positive assessment of the British contribution to the Sindhi renaissance than Schimmel's was. Where Schimmel talked about the British technological advances that made possible the Sindhi renaissance, Asani focuses, instead, on the imposition of British ideas of literary production upon the Sindhi intelligentsia: "Sindhi scholars were influenced by concepts of literature prevalent among British colonial officers and Orientalists, which included the idea that literature was the 'complete' (totalized, totalizable) expression of the 'character,' 'spirit,' or 'racial and cultural identity of a nation.'"¹²

When Michel Boivin talks about the Sindhi renaissance in his article "*Le qalandar et le shâh : les savoirs fakirs et leur impact sur la société du Sud Pakistan*," he presents a synthesis of the Schimmel and Asani approaches, and pays equal attention to the technological innovations of British rule and the transmission of British ideas about the totalising nature of literature to the newly emerged Sindhi elite. Of particular interest to Boivin are the writers and publishers who were the driving force behind the Sindhi renaissance. He outlines a number of qualities specific to "these new elites": they were often "either civil servants or tradespeople (*soit de fonctionnaires soit de commerçants*)" and, for the most part, "untrained in religion" – although

¹¹ Ali Asani, "At the Crossroads of Indic and Iranian Civilizations," 612.

¹² Ibid., 615. Asani is quoting Vinay Dhawarkahar, "Orientalism and the Study of Indian Literatures," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, ed. Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

they were likely to have attended one of the new universities established by the British.¹³ These new elites used Bhitai's poetry to make permanent the shift from Persian to Sindhi as the dominant literary language of Sindh, going so far as to give Sindhi an unprecedented sacred character and using it to forge a new collective identity: “These new elites wished to crown Sindhi as the sacred language [of Sindh] by the means of the canonisation of the *Shāh-jo risālo*, a process that shows their willingness to construct a regional identity.” This willingness soon bore concrete results: “learned and popular cultures converged in the framework of the construction of a regional identity – a process that consisted of the absorption by the elite [Sindhi] culture of themes and motifs sprung from popular literature.”¹⁴ As Boivin argues, this new identity was an amalgam both of elite and popular culture, and of Indic and Islamic cultures.

Popular Culture and Collective Identity

In his discussion of the Sindhi renaissance, Boivin mentions a book called *The Life, Religion, and Poetry of Shah Latif: The Greatest Poet of Sindh*, which was originally published in Karachi in 1890.¹⁵ Its author, Lilaram Watanmal Lalwani (1867-1941), combined sources in Sindhi, Persian, and Sanskrit with the latest European indological scholarship of his day to analyse the life and work of Bhitai. An important component of this endeavour was retelling in prose the qissas upon which Bhitai's poems are based.¹⁶ According to Boivin, *The Life, Religion, and Poetry of Shah Latif* was “a decisive step” in the process of making Bhitai's *Risalo*

¹³ Michel Boivin, “Le qalandar et le shāh: les savoirs fakirs et leur impact sur la société du Sud Pakistan,” 114.

¹⁴ Ibid., 115.

¹⁵ Ibid., 115.

¹⁶ While this fact is vital to the purposes of this thesis, it is (understandably) not something that is of direct interest to Boivin.

accessible to the Sindhi public, an act that would help popularise the idea that “the Hindus and Muslims of Sindh share a single culture (*les musulmans et les hindous du Sindh partagent une culture unique*).”¹⁷ Boivin goes on to tell us that a similar function was performed by Jhamatmall Narumall Wasanani’s *Notes on Shah jo Risalo* (1895), which was specifically written as an aid for students taking exams in Sindhi at the University of Bombay.¹⁸ Pointing out how Wasanani draws his readers’ attention to the virtual sameness of Sindhi Sufism and the Sindhi understanding of the Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy, Boivin seems to suggest that this, too, was a step in the creation of a collective Sindhi identity that insisted on the ability of Sindhi culture to transcend religious divides.

Popular culture and collective identity serve similar roles in a 2014 article by Julien Levesque and Camille Bui called “*Umar Marvi* and the Representation of Sindh: Cinema and Modernity in the Margins.”¹⁹ This article is an exploration of a 1956 film adaptation of the qissa *Umar Marui*. Paralleling Boivin’s approach, Levesque and Bui believe that members of the Sindhi elite strategically deployed popular culture to “forge identity markers” that created or cemented the idea of a collective Sindhi identity.²⁰ Unlike Boivin, however, Levesque and Bui are concerned with a post-British, Pakistani Sindh – a Sindh that had lost the majority of its Hindu population to post-partition India. Consequently, a collective Sindhi identity could presumably no longer be held together by ideas of religious syncretism alone, and Levesque and

¹⁷ Michel Boivin, “Le qalandar et le shâh: les savoirs fakirs et leur impact sur la société du Sud Pakistan,” 115. The process of making the *Risalo* accessible entailed explaining the poet’s Quranic references and providing a glossary for help with Bhitai’s frequent use of rustic Sindhi vocabulary.

¹⁸ Ibid., 116.

¹⁹ Julien Levesque and Camille Bui, “*Umar Marvi* and the Representation of Sindh: Cinema and Modernity in the Margins” *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 5, no. 2 (2014).

²⁰ Ibid., 120.

Bui offer us a much broader base for what they perceive to be the totalising, constructed collective Sindhi identity: the “narrative” that both engendered and was perpetuated by *Umar Marvi* (the film) portrayed “Sindhis as a people continuously occupying the mythicized land of the Indus and characterised by a specific, peaceful, and syncretic folk culture, the highest expression of which lay in the region’s Sufi poets, and most particularly in Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai.”²¹ Sindhi intellectuals felt the need to concoct this identity, we are told, because they needed “to assert themselves in defence of their language and culture” in the face of the majority non-Sindhi population of Pakistan.²²

As we can see, Boivin, Levesque, and Bui argue for a direct link between popular culture and Sindhi collective identity in British and post-British Sindh. This argument is premised on the fact that with the onset of modernity (best symbolised perhaps in the printing press, the cinema, and ideas about the totalising character of literature), Sindhis, in a sense, broke away from their past and coined new ways of engaging with their popular culture. Crucial in this process were the cultural changes that Sindh underwent over the course of the Sindhi renaissance. While I do not aim to directly contradict this view, this chapter will, nevertheless, show that theories about constructed collective identities do not, on their own, sufficiently explain the encounter between modernity and popular culture in Sindh; this will be attempted through an analysis of four specific modern Sindhi retellings of Sindhi Sufi qissas.

In the examination that will follow after the next section, we will attempt to explore each of these four sources from both the identity-formation perspective advocated by Boivin,

²¹ Ibid., 121.

²² Ibid., 119.

Levesque, and Bui and through our lens of epistemological and emotional sympathy. The latter helps us to move away from an exclusive reliance on the former – as we will see, the claims made by an identity-formation perspective, while often verifiable and correct, never give us the complete picture on their own. This chapter will also, it is hoped, demonstrate the difficulty present in entertaining a universalising definition of modernity in the Sindhi literary context.

Four Retellings

As discussed in the introduction to the thesis, the process of choosing primary sources for this chapter was less straightforward than that for the first chapter. What binds these four sources together is the fact that each is a retelling of traditional Sindhi qissas by a Sindhi individual, and claims to be based on orally transmitted traditions. We can divide these sources into groups of two.

The first group contains two sets of retellings which were written during the period of British rule in Sindh, i.e. while the Sindhi renaissance was taking place. They are both in the English language, and we know that their authors were Hindu men who had had the benefit of an extensive education in English. We have already referred to one of them above: Lilaram Watanmal Lalwani, who authored *The Life, Religion, and Poetry of Shah Latif*.²³ The other is M.M. Gidvani (birth and death dates unknown), author of a short volume titled simply *Shah Abdul Latif*.²⁴ Each book contains a brief biography of Bhitai, along with a discussion of his

²³ Lilaram Watanmal Lalwani, *The Life, Religion, and Poetry of Shah Latif* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, [1890] 1978).

²⁴ M. M. Gidvani, *Shah Abdul Latif* (London: The India Society, 1922).

poetry and its relation to Sufism in Sindh. Crucially for our purposes, both Lalwani and Gidvani include in their books prose accounts of the qissas upon which Bhitai's poetry is based.

The few facts we have about Lalwani's life tell us that "he was appointed a sub-judge in Sindh and worked in the judicial department up to his retirement. In 1913, he embraced [the] Khalsa (Sikh) sect and called himself Lilaramsingh." He published from Karachi, was friends with Mirza Kalich Beg, and, in addition to his book on Bhitai, wrote a number of plays and some poems.²⁵ Gidvani was a professor at Elphinstone College in Bombay, and probably traced his descent from Diwan Gidumal, a contemporary of Bhitai's.²⁶ He published his study of Bhitai from London, and the foreword was written by Sir Thomas Arnold, the first person to hold the chair of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies.²⁷ The references to theosophy in both men's works suggest that, like many Sindhi intellectuals of their time, they were probably members of the Theosophical Society, and connected to the thriving intellectual scene of turn-of-the-century Karachi.²⁸

The two sets of retellings in the second group were both written in the decades that followed the creation of Pakistan, long after the changes made to Sindhi literary culture by the renaissance had acquired permanence. The first was written by Shaikh Ayaz (1923-1997) in

²⁵ Amaresh Datta (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature: Volume III* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1987), 2248.

²⁶ Derryl MacLean, personal communication.

²⁷ "Thomas W. Arnold," The Open University, accessed May 19, 2018. <http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/thomas-w-arnold>

²⁸ For an account of the merging of Sufism and theosophy in British-era Sindh, see Michel Boivin, "The New Elite and the Issue of Sufism: A Journey from Vedanta to Theosophy in Colonial Sindh," in *Sindh through the Centuries, Part II: Proceedings of the Second International Seminar Held at Karachi in March 2014 by Sindh Madressatul Islam University* ed. Muhammad Ali Shaikh (Karachi: Sindh Madressatul Islam University Press, 2015).

Urdu, and accompanies Ayaz’s translation of Bhitai’s *Risalo* into that language.²⁹ Like Lalwani and Gidvani before him, Ayaz’s purpose in composing these retellings is to provide an introduction and accompaniment to the *Risalo* itself. The second is not a collection of qissas, but the retelling of a single Sindhi Sufi qissa, viz. a Sindhi-language retelling of *Sassui Punhun* by Nabi Bakhsh Khan Baloch (often abbreviated to N.A. Baloch, 1917-2011) in an introductory chapter to volume 34 of his compilation of the folk stories of Sindh.³⁰

Ayaz’s and Baloch’s engagements with Sindhi popular culture came about at what must have been a critical period for the Sindhi intelligentsia: since 1947, Sindh’s urban centres had been flooded with Urdu-speaking migrants from north and central India, and the entire region was subjected to rule by the Pakistani state, which laid great emphasis on the country-wide use of Urdu as a language that could help unify its linguistically and ethnically diverse citizens. Both Ayaz (perhaps the most widely read Sindhi poet from the second half of the twentieth century) and Baloch (an Aligarh-and-Columbia-educated administrator and scholar) were instrumental in the creation of institutions like the Sindhi Adabi Board and the Institute of Sindhology, which tried to safeguard Sindhi’s status as a literary language by publishing, for instance, works like the ones to which we will turn our attention in the section after next.³¹

²⁹ Shaikh Ayaz, *Risala Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai* [translation in verse of the *Shah jo Risalo*], (Karachi: Sindhica Academy, [1963] 2012).

³⁰ N. A. Baloch, “Muqaddimo” in *Sassui-Punhun*, ed. N.A. Baloch (Hyderabad Sindh: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1976).

³¹ For an account of the state of the Sindhi society in the decades that followed partition, see Sarah Ansari, *Life after Partition: Migration, Community and Strife in Sindh, 1947-1962* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2005). For the activities of the Sindhi Adabi Board and the Institute of Sindhology, see Schimmel, *Sindhi Literature*.

Lalwani and Gidvani

It is easy to find evidence for Boivin's Hindu-Muslim identity formation thesis not only in Lalwani's, but also in Gidvani's work – even if the latter does not feature in Boivin's article, and was writing several decades after what Boivin seems to consider the formative decades of the late nineteenth century. Both Lalwani and Gidvani are careful to emphasise the syncretic nature of Sindhi Sufism, and its frequent near-indistinguishability from Hindu forms of devotion. In the words of Lalwani, “it [is] the opinion of several learned men that the sufism of the Mahommadans is nothing but the Vedantism of the Hindus, the only real difference lying in their terminology.”³² Lengthy descriptions of Sufism and Vedantism (relayed over three chapters) let us know that Lalwani agrees with these learned men.³³

We are further given to understand that Lalwani's view of Sindhi Sufism is not one that commands universal acceptance. Among its detractors are mainstream Muslim clerics, who seem to have disapproved of Lalwani's attempts to portray Bhitai as a figure equally significant for Hindus and Muslims. Before he started writing *The Life, Religion, and Poetry of Shah Latif*, Lalwani had felt the need to learn more about the Quran in order to “know . . . the real meanings of the Arabic verses that occur so often in the Shah jo *Risalo*,” which he could then transmit to those of his readers who did not possess enough knowledge about Islam to appreciate all the themes and motifs of Bhitai's poems. Lalwani duly sought out “Kazis and Mullas” who could provide him the instruction he desired. These, however, “were loath to initiate a *Kafar* into the mysteries of their holy book,” forcing Lalwani to make his own way through books in order “to

³² Lilaram Watanmal Lalwani, *The Life, Religion, and Poetry of Shah Latif*, 23.

³³ Ibid., 23-44.

study the same by myself.” (Lalwani is pleased to inform us, however, that this was not necessarily a bad thing, for his “labours in this direction [were] . . . not . . . useless, [as can be] seen from a cursory glance over the pages of part I of volume II.”)³⁴ These disclosures help us to see Lalwani caught, as it were, in the laborious act of forming a collective identity in the midst of the still-persisting old order of things, and substantiate Boivin’s argument.

The same efforts are to be found in Gidvani’s *Shah Abdul Latif*, where they are characterised, above all, by the rapturous tone the author consistently employs when talking about the universal relevance of the *Risalo*. According to him, Sindh, “an awkward appanage” of the Bombay Presidency is “a small wild desert,” that can, nonetheless, boast of great things, for “here has lived and worked a band of inspired Sufis who sang of Love and Union, and transformed their desert into a rose-garden filled with the plaintive notes of Bulbuls wailing in separation from their Beloved.”³⁵ These songs and stories of love and union, we go on to learn, influence, in their turn, the society that has created them:

It is impossible to exaggerate the unifying influence which these mystic poets have exercised on the different communities of their province. Thus, divided, as the Hindus and Musulmans are, in their daily life by separate creeds, ritual, and dogma, yet they resemble the Ganges and the Jumna flowing apart and under different names, but the same in essence and merging into one another, becoming after all, one and the same.³⁶

This enthusiasm follows Lalwani and Gidvani into their accounts of the qissas, where it is mediated, in part, through their respective levels of epistemological sympathy for the Unbelieved. As we will see below, Lalwani often betrays a mild scepticism of the existence of

³⁴ Ibid., v.

³⁵ Gidvani, *Shah Abdul Latif*, 11.

³⁶ Ibid., 12.

the supernatural, whereas Gidvani seems to have no problem in recognising the implication of the Unbelieved in human affairs. Their two approaches do, nevertheless, have some similarities.

It is evident that in addition to looking at the qissas in an aesthetic and spiritual light, Lalwani and Gidvani evaluate them in a purely historical sense as well. When recounting *Sassui Punhun*, Lalwani begins by relating the more commonly accepted initial biography of Sassui as an ordinary young woman of Bhambhore (a city in southern Sindh) who was raised by a washerman and his wife after she was discovered, Moses-like, in a cradle in the river Indus when still a baby. Lalwani follows this up with the following sentence: “Another version of the story is that when the child grew up a little, the chief of Bhambhor, hearing of her beauty, adopted her himself, and afterwards gave her the reigns of the government of the place.”³⁷ Lalwani seems to imply that it is important to relate both these versions (one in which Sassui is an ordinary young woman and one in which she is the governor of Bhambhore) to the reader because this allows him (Lalwani) to show why he privileges one over the other; considering the second version of the story, he says “This seems to be more probable. Otherwise, it is difficult to believe that a washerman’s daughter could rule over the country [i.e. the city of Bhambhore] and exact custom duty from persons exporting corn.”³⁸ It would not have made sense for Lalwani to evaluate the historical truthfulness of either of these versions if he had been under the impression that he was recounting a fictitious, if important, tale.

³⁷ Lilaram Watanmal Lalwani, *The Life, Religion, and Poetry of Shah Latif*, 75.

³⁸ Ibid., 75. Sassui needs to wield these powers in order for the rest of the story to make sense. As Lalwani says, “when Sassui was in her full vigour, the people of *Kech* [Punhun’s homeland], hard pressed by famine, came to Bhambhore for the purchase of corn, and she demanded an extortionate duty from them” – a demand which sets in motion the main action of the qissa and brings Sassui into contact with Punhun. (Ibid., 75.)

To the contemporary ear, it might appear odd that Lalwani goes to such pains (relatively speaking) to establish Sassui's economic and social standing in Bhambhore, but lets the beginning of her story, in which she floats down the Indus (after being abandoned to its currents by her birthparents, who live upstream from Bhambhore) pass without comment upon its improbability. Indeed, unless there are contending traditions involved, Lalwani relates his qissas without comment or interjection about the historical probability of any of their episodes. There is, however, one set of circumstances under which he is (subtly) prepared to break this rule: when the actions in the qissas call for the involvement of the Unbelieved.

When Lalwani has to relate the miraculous earthquake that provides the conclusion for *Sassui Punhun*, he begins with the words "it is said." When this episode spills over into a second paragraph, it is similarly prefaced, beginning with the words, "it is further related:"

It is said that Sasui did not reach Kech, but on her way she met with a shepherd, named Elpowhar who attempted to outrage her modesty, whereupon she prayed to God to take her unto Him, and the earth opened before her, and she went down and the breach was covered up. A tomb was erected at that place by the passers-by.

It is further related that at Kech Punhu became quite mad with after his separation from Sasui . . . At last he managed to escape . . . When he reached the place where the newly erected tomb of Sasui stood, he was fully informed of Sasui's wanderings and wailings [sic, probably "wailings"] and her departure from the world. He wept most bitterly, and at his prayer the tomb opened itself, and he also went in and was united with Sasui in the Everlasting unknown.³⁹

Lalwani uses this simple device to establish distance between the worldview of those who have "said" and "related" these miraculous events to him and his own apparently more sceptical (in the modern sense) understanding of the universe. In line with this approach, Lalwani simply omits miraculous episodes wherever he can afford to without compromising the narrative

³⁹ Ibid., 77. The italics are mine.

wholeness of the tale. His *Mumal Rano* and *Umar Marui*, in stark contrast to every other text I have examined for this thesis, do not feature any supernatural interventions. At first sight, these facts would seem to indicate that Lalwani, under the influence of British thought and culture, approaches the qissas with the post-Enlightenment dogmatic-secularist worldview outlined in the introduction to this thesis. Further investigation, however, reveals that this might not be true. Not only does Gidvani, who, like Lalwani, was part of the new, British-influenced elite, approach the supernatural in a seemingly non-dogmatic-secularist fashion, but, as we will see below, the state of Lalwani's epistemological sympathy, too, is more complex than we are first given to suspect.

The state of Gidvani's epistemological sympathy is, initially, harder to ascertain. There are no interventions resembling Lalwani's "it is said" in Gidvani's rendition of the qissas, and nor are there any signs to indicate whether or not Gidvani believed in the historical truth of the qissas he was relating. It might, nevertheless, be safer to imagine that he did indeed believe that the qissas are historical – because he uses them to illustrate Bhitai's poetry, which he gives us to understand carries a true message. Indeed, Gidvani wonders if it was God (whether he had the Muslim, Hindu, or Christian variant in mind is unclear) who decided that the British should conquer Sindh, for this act brought Sindh into closer contact with the wider world and has made it easy for Bhitai's message of divine love to be spread everywhere: "The time is not far when the unknown great of India, and among them the Sufi mystics of Sind, shall rise, as it were, at the trumpet-call of the angel Israfil, and shall serve as 'ambassadors of goodwill and understanding between East and West.' A higher Providence rules mortal destinies than we can conceive of, and perhaps it was well that Sir Charles Napier 'sinned' in annexing 'Sind.'"⁴⁰ Since the qissas

⁴⁰ Gidvani, *Shah Abdul Latif*, 13. Gidvani is referring to an apocryphal incident that immediately followed the British conquest of Sindh: pleased with what he had done, but conscious of the illegitimacy of his actions, the conqueror of Sindh Sir Charles Napier sent a telegram to his superiors in London containing only the Latin *Peccavi*, i.e. I have sinned (a play on words with "Sind").

are an indispensable foundation for this divinely ordained propagation of Bhitai's ideas, it is unlikely that Gidvani would consider their contents to be fictitious.

Lalwani's and Gidvani's approach to the life of Bhitai himself offers us valuable clues about their outlook on the world, and complicates what we are able to deduce about their epistemological sympathy for the Unbelieved from the qissas alone. Along with establishing the basic biographical facts of Bhitai's life (e.g. "Shah Latif was born in A.D. 1689 in a small village in the district of Haidarabad (Sind), in a Sayyid family"⁴¹), Lalwani and Gidvani provide us with several anecdotes from Bhitai's life in order to illuminate the character of, and the divinity associated with, the poet. Gidvani, for instance, tells us how

A blind man once went to Latif for blessing to regain his lost vision. At that moment the poet was in a state of mental absorption and wholly oblivious of the external world. After a short while the blind man received light in his eyes, and began rejoicing over his good fortune. Latif, now gaining consciousness, inquired the reason of so much joy, whereupon the man said, 'Sire, I came here blind and asked for your blessing. Now I have attained light by your favour.' Latif, disclaiming all knowledge of the matter, said that gratitude and thanksgiving were due to God, who had heard his prayer."⁴²

This incident is related in the same tone, and with equal certainty, as the more mundane biographical facts of Bhitai's life.

As we saw above, Lalwani was cautious to distance himself from the more miraculous episodes in the qissas he had undertaken to retell. Most of this caution follows him into his account of Bhitai's biography, where, with a few extra, innocuous words like "it is said," he is

⁴¹ Gidvani, Shah Abdul Latif, 14.

⁴² Ibid., 19.

able to establish distance between himself and an unqualified belief in the supernatural events which abounded in Bhitai's life.

We conclude this section with the single exception to this pattern. In it, we find a striking deviation from Lalwani's predilection for distancing himself from the supernatural, which, if hard to explain at first, gives us room to speculate further about Lalwani's epistemological sympathy for the Unbelieved, a theme we will revisit in the conclusion of this chapter.

Citing an unnamed, rival study of Bhitai, Lalwani points out that the author of this work is mistaken in believing that Makhdum Nuh, a saint who lived in Hala (a city near Bhitai's own place of residence) once turned one of his own disciples into a snake and sent this snake to bite, poison, and kill Bhitai. Instead of attacking the dependence of this event on the supernatural, however, Lalwani appeals to our reason by telling us that a renowned saint like Makhdum Nuh could never want to harm "our poet," an equally, if not even more, saintly man. In any case, Lalwani informs us that Makhdum Nuh had already died before Bhitai was even born, and while a saint can wield much divine power while still alive, it is difficult for him to hold on to this power after his death. In short, "Makhdum was a very great saint and above any tricks like these, if such posthumous tricks are at all possible."⁴³

Shaikh Ayaz and N. A. Baloch

Shaikh Ayaz's translation of Bhitai's *Risalo* into Urdu is accompanied by an extensive introduction (written by Ayaz himself) that contains an elaboration of the themes present in the poems that follow, a brief biography of Bhitai, and retellings of all the qissas that feature

⁴³ Ibid., 15.

prominently in the *Risalo*.⁴⁴ This introduction is, in turn, preceded by several prefaces and an essay, each by a different authority on Bhitai.⁴⁵ The following examination will focus on this series of introductions with, an especial emphasis, of course, on the qissas.

In popularising Bhitai and Bhitai’s poetry, Ayaz is engaged in a task that is quite similar to Lalwani’s and Gidvani’s – but where the latter were concerned with underlining the importance of Bhitai to the Sindhi people in particular, the former focuses more on the universal aspects of Bhitai’s poetry, as well as the relevance it has for people who are not Sindhi. He talks, for instance, about the “poetic transcendentalism (*shairana mawraiyat*)” of Bhitai’s work, and how Bhitai builds on stories of ordinary village happenings in Sindh to create a poetry and a message that speaks of a higher truth – that of Sufism.⁴⁶

This mind-set is clearly anticipated in one of the prefaces, written at the time of the original publication of Ayaz’s *Risala*, and authored by Syed Hassam-ud-Din Rashdi (1911-1982), a noted Sindhi intellectual.⁴⁷ In it, Rashdi recounts his own role in the commissioning and publication of this volume, revealing to us that Ayaz was not working on his own initiative, but on a brief from the federal government of Pakistan. Rashdi tells us that federal government is collaborating with members of the Sindhi intelligentsia like Rashdi and Ayaz to promote Bhitai in the Urdu language so that his status as a spiritual and aesthetic icon can be extended outside

⁴⁴ Shaikh Ayaz, *Risala Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai*, 27-108.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1-26.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 46-47.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 17-19. Rashdi gives this preface the title of *Guzarish* (literally, “request,” but in this instance probably closer to “explanation”).

Sindh (and, as we will see later on in this section, this direction from above might help explain some of the choices Ayaz makes when relating the qissas):

The Shah is not a poet of Sindh or of the Sindhi language alone. He is a universal personage (*in ki shakhsiyat alamgir hai*). Because of the coincidence of language and birth, he has, indeed, endowed an immortal honour (*lafani sharf*) on Sindh, but, in reality, neither his being nor his message are the property of any one region, and nor are they the inheritance of any one group of people. Bhitai is the inheritance of the entire human race, and his message will strengthen and bring solace to the soul and intellect of each person who possesses a heart, regardless of whether (s)he lives in the east or has his/her abode in the west.⁴⁸

Rashdi goes on to note that Bhitai should, for this reason, be translated into as many languages as possible, and that it makes sense to start with Urdu as it is

not only the national language [of Pakistan], but is also widely read, written, and understood in all parts of the country. I am, therefore, confident that thanks to this translation, Pakistan's educated classes (*Pakistan ka parha likha tabqa*) will become completely familiar with the thought of the Shah, and be introduced to an immortal personality of their country.⁴⁹

Interestingly, Rashdi never makes clear why it is that Bhitai's message should be thoroughly spread around Pakistan before it can embark on its global journey. One can only imagine that he is relying on his readers to understand and share his zeal for the induction of Bhitai into the Pakistani national psyche. This reveals an act that is, in a sense, contradictory to the Levesque-Bui thesis about the uses of Sindhi culture: instead of using elements of Sindhi culture to rigidify the boundaries of an internal Sindhi identity, individuals like Rashdi and Ayaz are offering them up to non-Sindhi Pakistan as ballast that can help add substance and stability to the newly created collective *Pakistani* identity. Ayaz's treatment of the qissas, particularly through its deficiencies, offers us a demonstration of this idea.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 17. (N.B. third person singular pronouns in Hindi-Urdu are gender free.)

⁴⁹ Ibid., 17.

The question of epistemological sympathy is, at first sight, easy to settle when it comes to Ayaz's retellings. Ayaz situates the qissas in specific points in Sindh's history, producing a matrix of names and dates which provide verifiable historical reference points for the events related in the qissas. His *Umar Marui*, for instance, begins with the words, "In the time of Umar Soumro (which they say lasted from 1355 to 1390 AD), Malir was a green and fertile (*sarsabzo shadab*) region of Thar."⁵⁰ A further investigation, however, reveals that this abundant sympathy is undermined by Ayaz's equally urgent need to present efficient, almost simplistic renditions of the qissas, and that the overall impression is an underwhelming one, both on the emotional and on the epistemological level.

Ayaz does not display any of Lalwani's unease vis-à-vis the Unbelieved, and relates their doings in the same equanimous breath he uses for the more mundane aspects of the qissas. Indeed, Ayaz employs a consistent monotone which, combined with improbable plot turns, non-sequiturs, and an almost total absence of comments upon larger aesthetic and philosophical questions that underlie the qissas, makes for an uninspiring and uninvolved read. The following episode from *Mumal Rano*, for instance, left the present reader reeling not from the improbability of the existence of the magical boar tooth, but from the gaping and unsatisfying hole in the narrative which appears when Ayaz simply fails to mention how the fakir learnt of its existence, and the inane yet efficacious means he devised to get hold of it:

One day Raja Nanda was occupied in hunting and relaxing along the banks of the Indus with his companions, when he happened to see a wild boar in the river. Wherever this boar would proceed, the water would part ways to let it through. Having seen this incredible phenomenon, . . . he shot the boar with an arrow. He thought to himself: "There must be a powerful thing in the body of the boar which

⁵⁰ Ibid., 71.

parts the river.” So, he sliced the body of the boar into tiny pieces and experimented with dipping each piece into the river.⁵¹

Raja Nanda discovered that the magical properties of the boar resided in one of its teeth, and proceeded to take this tooth back with him to the palace. Here, he kept it safely hidden away, taking it out only at night to bury his riches and treasures, bit by bit, underneath the bed of the Indus. One day, however,

A fakir learnt about the existence of this treasure . . . [A few days later,] this fakir found out that Raja Nanda, accompanied by his companions, was seen setting out on a voyage to a far-off land. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the fakir came up to the palace and started letting out piteous cries. When Mumal [one of Nanda’s daughters and the heroine of this qissa] learnt about this, she had the fakir brought in and asked him, ‘O venerable one, what can I do to serve you?’ The fakir replied, ‘O daughter! I suffer from a strange illness that can only be cured with the help of a boar’s tooth and nothing else . . . This is all I have to say.’ Mumal remembered that her father perhaps owned such a tooth. She went in and, after some looking around, found and brought out the tooth, and gave it to the fakir.⁵²

This is but one sample of Ayaz’s almost entirely plot-driven and ultimately unmoving storytelling, all of which is at odds with the approaches of the other writers being examined in this thesis.⁵³

Ayaz tells us that the qissas in this volume serve one function: to illustrate the *Risalo*. Since Bhitai’s poems often start in the middle of a qissa, or sometimes just refer to the actions of its hero and heroine, relying on the reader to know the backstory, it is necessary for the novice, Urdu-speaking reader of Bhitai to have access to this collection of qissas, retold from start to finish, in the same volume as the *Risalo*.⁵⁴ As we have just seen, this functional approach to the

⁵¹ Ibid., 63.

⁵² Ibid., 64.

⁵³ For a “better” version of the same episode from *Mumal Rano*, see, for example, any of the orally transmitted accounts recorded in N.A. Baloch’s *Mumal Rano* (Hyderabad Sindh: Sindh Adabi Board, 1975).

⁵⁴ Shaikh Ayaz, *Risala*, 48.

qissas is replicated in the way they are narrated. Stripped of their complexities, they can perhaps be more easily transmitted to the non-Sindhi, Urdu-reading public that Ayaz and Rashdi have in mind.

As far as the retellings of qissas are concerned, emotional and epistemological sympathy both seem to be irrelevant to Ayaz's purposes (it is important to note that he shows both elsewhere in this book).⁵⁵ His focus is transmitting these qissas to the specific readership he has in mind, not exercising sympathy for the sentiments and experiences of the characters that populate the qissas.

This is not the approach of Nabi Bakhsh Baloch, whose study of *Sassui Punhun* is the last text we will examine in this section. Baloch's 513-page book is a compilation of several orally transmitted versions of *Sassui Punhun*. These are preceded by a long commentary on the qissa. Although Baloch does, in line with the authors we have already examined, exhibit a distinct pride in the fact that *Sassui Punhun* is a part of Sindhi culture, he does not use this sentiment to make the case for constructing a collective Sindhi identity, neither in the Boivin nor in the Levesque-Bui sense. Consequently, the brief exploration of Baloch's account of *Sassui Punhun* which follows below will only be interested in exposing the state of Baloch's emotional and epistemological sympathy for the characters and themes of the qissa.

Baloch informs us from the outset that *Sassui Punhun* is a story that celebrates the remarkable ability of human beings to love each other, especially as husband and wife:

This is the love story that destroyed all distances and enmities, the story that, in the primacy of love, forgot the claims of mother and father . . . A wife and a husband are each other's shelter, are each other's right – this is the reason why in the Sindhi of olden days wife and husband used to be called each other's "right"

⁵⁵ See, for instance, Ayaz's perspective on the Sufi power of Bhitai's poems (see above).

(*zaale ta wara-i murse khay "haq" sadyo wayo*). When Punhun is carried away from Sassui in his incapacitated state, Sassui breaks all her ties to home and family in order to set out in search for her right – she sets out in great courage and determination

and ends by sacrificing her life in his quest.⁵⁶

Though not as important as the marital bond, parental love is also something that *Sassui Punhun* teaches its listeners and readers. When talking about the Jam of Kech's love for his son Punhun, Baloch draws an analogy with another father-son relationship, that of the prophets Yaqub and Yousef (Jacob and Joseph in the Bible): "Just like Yaqub had immense love for Yousef, so too did the Jam have limitless love for Punhun."⁵⁷ We are made to feel sorry for the Jam, even as we recognise the harmful consequences this misdirected love has had for Sassui and Punhun. These observations, and many others like them, indicate that, for Baloch, the primary worth of *Sassui Punhun* lies in the ability of this qissa to convey fundamental truths about human life to its audience.

This emotional sympathy is equaled by Baloch's epistemological sympathy. Baloch never feels the need to prove the truthfulness of the tale, even where the Unbelieved are involved. On the contrary, he uses *Sassui Punhun* to establish or confirm the veracity of *other* episodes and entire historical processes from Sindh's past. For instance, under the subheading "*Qissay ji Qadamat* (literally, The Antiquity of the Qissa)," he uses facts recorded in the oral transmission of *Sassui Punhun* to postulate that a king called Dilurai ruled in Sindh in the eleventh century AD. The fact that "history has still failed to establish [details about] the reign of Dilurai" is not a very troubling inconvenience, but something that is bound to be corrected

⁵⁶ N. A. Baloch, "Muqaddimo," 1. Another, perhaps related translation of the word *haq* would be "the truth."

⁵⁷ Ibid., 19.

sooner or later.⁵⁸ Similarly, Baloch uses details from *Sassui Punhun* to establish a time-frame for the migration of tribes from Balochistan into Sindh, arguing that the timing of Punhun’s arrival in Bhambhore means that there was a significant Baloch migration to Sindh at the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh centuries. Indeed, “the fact that a Baloch leader [i.e. Punhun] was prepared to settle down permanently in Bhambhore (*Bhambhore mein ghar kari hamesha la-ay wayhi raharn*) is itself historically important.”⁵⁹

Baloch’s “historical” approach follows him into the episodes which involve the Unbelieved, which he views as real events that are comprehensible, and at times almost tangible, to those of us who talk about them today. Most significantly in this regard, Baloch pinpoints the exact location of Sassui and Punhun’s miraculous earthquake deaths, letting us know that their joint grave is perfectly accessible by road and that one can perform pilgrimage to it.⁶⁰

In Conclusion: Ways of Being Modern

One of the many issues Boivin addresses in his wide-ranging book *Le soufisme antinomien dans le sous-continent indien. La'l Shahbâz Qalandar et son héritage, XIIIe-XXe siècles* is that of modernity in the Sindhi context.⁶¹ As the title suggests, this book is an exploration of the ways in which the people of Sindh have engaged with the life and legacy of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, a thirteenth-century saint who is buried in Sehwan, a city in western Sindh. The question of modernity comes up as Boivin’s investigation moves into the twentieth

⁵⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 28.

⁶¹ Michel Boivin, *Le soufisme antinomien dans le sous-continent indien. La'l Shahbâz Qalandar et son héritage, XIIIe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2012).

century. Here, Boivin discusses what he believes is the first recorded “modern” approach to the life of a sacred subject by a Sindhi individual. Speaking about Fateh Muhammad Sehwani’s 1904 biography of Lal Shahbaz, Boivin tells us that

with this book, Fateh Muhammad Sehwani has published the first modern biography of a sacred figure in the Sindhi language. By modern, I mean to say a biography that uses its sources critically (*une biographie qui fait un usage critique des sources*), thereby situating itself in the tradition of the biographies of the prophet Muhammad published by Sayyid Ahmed Khan and Amir Ali, which were themselves indirect imitations (*des épigones indirects*) of the *Life of Jesus* by Ernest Renan.⁶²

Continuing in this vein, Boivin brings to our attention a fact that, to him, seems to exemplify the modern nature of Sehwani’s book: “the titles of several chapters contain the word *tahqiq*, which signifies ‘true’ or ‘authentic.’ For example, the author proposes to talk about the ‘true’ spiritual affiliation of La’l Shahbaz.”⁶³

As we can see, Boivin believes that the advent of modernity made Sindhi intellectuals behave in certain new ways: it inspired them to pick their sources carefully, and to prize truthfulness in their research and writing. The obvious implication of this idea is that pre-modern Sindhi scholars were not overly concerned about whether the claims they were making were true or false. I would like to suggest that the collective identity thesis we have explored above is rooted in this understanding of Sindhi history: that changes made to Sindhi society at the time of the Sindhi renaissance caused a major break with the past, and that it was this attention to detail that purportedly led to new mind-sets. Both these theories contain broad claims that are often

⁶² Ibid., 65.

⁶³ Ibid., 67.

difficult to verify and which this chapter has sought to supplement with the application of newer, hopefully more modest approaches.

Boivin (in “*Le qalandar et le shâh*”) and Levesque and Bui argued that the modern conditions they were subjected to conditioned Sindhi intellectuals to behave in specific, predictable ways. At the beginning, these took the shape of an impulse to unify Hindu and Muslim identities, and, after 1947, they were channelled into creating a false, homogenous, rural, “folkloric” collective identity. While there are times when these understandings are fully applicable to particular instances of individual Sindhis engaging with Sindhi popular culture in a modern setting, this is not always the case. Our exploration of retellings of Sindhi qissas by Sindhi intellectuals has revealed that a more fail-safe method for tracing the course of Sindhi literary scholarship in the modern age is through the lens of sympathy. Using it, we learn that Lalwani and Gidvani’s zeal for celebrating the ability of Sindhi culture to transcend religious divides was anchored in their belief in the divine truth of Sufism – that this belief was, at one point, powerful enough to compel Lalwani to defy his self-imposed secular dogmatic restraints to acknowledge the ability of a saint to, should he wish, turn one of his followers into a snake. Attention to sympathy also revealed to us the reasons behind Baloch’s regard for the tale of *Sassui Punhun*: its observations on the human condition and its ability to clarify the history of Sindh. In Ayaz’s case, a lack of sympathy almost counterintuitively showed us that the identity he was engaged in forming was one that existing scholarship on Sindh could not have readily anticipated.

While there is no doubt that the British-era minor renaissance changed Sindhi literary culture in significant ways, it is less easy to use these changes to construct a nomothetic model. The effects of processes like modernity are varied and complicated, and human beings, for their

part, are endowed with the capacity of individual thought: it is only by keeping these facts in mind that we are able to do justice to our sources.

Conclusion

In chapter one, we discovered that Richard Burton's understanding of the qissas revealed an engagement with western modernity that complied neatly with the findings presented by Clossey et al. in their first Unbelieved article. For Clossey et al., the post-Enlightenment western mind-set called for an exclusion of the agency of the Unbelieved from realm of the possible (or, at least, the entertainable), which it justified by reconceptualising the idea of scepticism. Burton, too, does both: most memorably, he refuses to believe that a miraculous earthquake could have claimed the lives of the hero and heroine of *Sassui Punhun*, and presents in its stead what he considers to be a more sceptical account of the same event. One of the authors we examined in the second chapter, Lilaram Watanmal Lalwani, seemed, at first, to share Burton's approach, but, on closer inspection, was revealed to have hidden epistemological sympathies for the Unbelieved. M. M. Gidvani, despite his involvement in post-Enlightenment British culture, demonstrated an unproblematic acceptance of the Unbelieved – a trait he shared with Nabi Bakhsh Baloch, who went a step further by using the qissas and the supernatural episodes they contain to verify and substantiate episodes and processes from Sindh's historical past. Shaikh Ayaz's acceptance of the Unbelieved, while total and unqualified, lost out in conviction by being coupled with Ayaz's apparently low threshold for believability where non-supernatural events were concerned.

In addition to epistemological sympathy, we also examined each re-teller's emotional sympathy vis-à-vis the qissas he was narrating. A rejection of the Unbelieved need not entail direct antipathy for those who believe in them.¹ Those who employ a secular modernist lens to

¹ See, for instance, almost every scholar examined in Clossey et al., "The Unbelieved and Historians, Part I," especially 599.

look at religious phenomena often have respect for non-western and non-modern frames of mind, seeing value in them in aesthetic, philosophical, and social terms. This respect, or emotional sympathy as I have termed it, is all the more evident when non-western and non-modern frames of mind are employed in talking about non-supernatural matters. Hence, Burton was able to feel (and express his ability to feel) the pains and pleasures of the people whose stories he was relating when these fell in love, got married, and were forcibly torn apart – refusing, all the while, to falsely exoticise their experiences. Emotional sympathy can, naturally, also coexist with epistemological sympathy, and, in the second chapter, the two often intersected in the re-tellers’ description of Sufism and of the benefit this belief system could have for humanity as a whole. In addition, in Baloch’s retelling, we witnessed an ability equal to Burton’s to appreciate the feelings and sentiments of the characters that populate the qissas.

This thesis is beholden to the existing scholarship on both Burton and modern Sindhi engagements with Sindhi popular culture. Knowledge of the consequences for the British Indian Empire of Richard Burton’s presentation of Sindhi culture allows us to recognise the power dynamic at play in British India, and that of the prevalence of the Sindhi need to construct collective identities in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries allows us to trace the nature and shape of Sindhi society in modern times. Since both these approaches are adequately represented in the literature (in a proportional, if not absolute, sense), they have not been given another extensive treatment in the present work. We have, instead, used them as stepping stones to help establish the groundwork for our search for authorial sympathy, which has, in turn, functioned as a pathway to help us better access and better understand the frames of mind and sentiments that belong to each of our re-tellers.

This thesis has only been able to focus on a fraction of the primary source material, much of it literary in nature, from British and post-British Sindh that is available for historical analysis. Sufism has only played a tangential role in this thesis, refracted as it has been through several layers of literary transformations and retellings; future endeavours might consider approaching Sufism head-on and observe its treatment at the hands of explorers like Burton, and by the many writers who engaged with it during the minor renaissance and after the creation of Pakistan. Of equal interest would be an examination of the studies of Bhitai and his *Risalo* that date from this period. Cultural output of other shapes also remains to us: songs, plays, paintings, churches, and the occasional palace. These can all serve as rewarding primary sources for a study of the cultural history of modern Sindh. Of more anthropological interest would be a study of oral story-transmitting traditions of rural Sindh; such a project could obtain the voices of people whose gender or class meant that they are less likely to have been given the opportunity to write and publish their retellings of Sindhi Sufi qissas.

Closely et al. originally presented the Unbelieved as a historiographical tool that could be used to critique contemporary historians' disinclination for taking seriously a fundamental assumption about the workings of the universe – an assumption shared by almost all non-western and non-modern people studied by these historians. The present study has used the Unbelieved not as a historiographical, but as a historical, tool. With its help, we have uncovered the state of sympathy of five individuals for the emotions, ideas, and events present in Sindhi Sufi qissas. The fluidity and universal applicability (i.e. across the non-modern and non-western world) of the idea of the Unbelieved suggest that its use has many such unexplored applications, some of which will undoubtedly become apparent in the near future as historians look for new ways to democratise and diversify their scholarship.

Information and ideas proffered by primary-source voices can easily become obfuscated underneath excessive layers of social-scientific and theoretical analysis. While such analysis is an essential ingredient of history writing, it is possible to exercise care and caution so as to make sure that our interpretive frameworks do not disguise the distinctive nature of each unique historical subject we set out to study. Some forms of historical analysis, such as the sympathy-Unbelieved framework used in this thesis, can bring us closer to achieving this aim.

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