

Myth and Religion in Kṛṣṇā Sobtī's *Zindagīnāmā*

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Introduction

Kṛṣṇā Sobtī's¹ masterpiece, *Zindagīnāmā* [A book of life, 1979 (375 pp. in the 1998 edition from which the quotations have been taken)] is a very complex text, made up of a series of episodes that are cemented together like the tesserae of a mosaic.² The book is about life in a Panjab village, before partition, between 1900 and 1916 – dates that are not given, but may be inferred from the events related. The name of the village does not appear in the text (it is, in actual fact, the village of Dhul Jatt [Dhūl Jatt]).³ The district is Gujrat [Gujrāt] (which, after partition, became part of Pakistan), lying between the rivers Jhelam and Chenab. The village is located on the banks of the river Chenab, and on its outskirts runs a *coh* (a seasonal waterway).

At the heart of the village is the *havelī* (large walled house) belonging to Śāhjī,⁴ a Hindu Khatri who is the biggest landowner and moneylender in the area, and to whom the Jat Muslim peasants, who form the majority of the population of this Muslim-dominated village, are in debt.

When the story begins, Śāhjī's family is made up of Śāhjī himself, his second wife Śāhnī (whom he married after the death of his young first wife), Śāhjī's younger brother, Kāśī Śāh, with his wife Bindrādāī and their two children, Gurudās and Keśolāl, and *Cācī* Mahrī, a Sikh widow whose second marriage was to Śāhjī's uncle, Gaṇpat Śāh, who died prior to the events related. Living with the family are others who help in the running of the household: Mābībī, a Muslim woman whose husband has left her but later comes back; a Hindu orphan girl, Kartāro, who lives with the Śāhs until they arrange a marriage for her; and several men, including the Hindu Bāggyā, who is one of the servants, and two Muslim retainers – Navāb, the groom, and Muhammadīn, who also works in the stables.

Later on in the narrative (pp. 130-131) Śāhnī's son, Lālī Śāh, is born, and Rābyā, a girl of Arai Muslim caste (a caste of gardeners) becomes more or less a member of the family when she is taken on, at the age of what we can guess to be thirteen or so, to care for the child. Rābyā, who appears throughout the book, is an extremely beautiful and intelligent girl, with a sweet voice, who sings passages from the Sufi poets and composes and sings her own poetry. From her first appearance in the novel on page 32, in the night-time spinning scene in the basement of the *havelī*,

when she replies to Śāhnī in verse, she is portrayed as a poet. Śāhjī falls in love with Rābyā, and although he dares not admit his feelings even to himself, towards the end of the novel, when it seems likely that she will be married off to separate her from Śāhjī, Rābyā declares her love to him: “I’ll die, Śāhjī, I cannot live without you!” (p. 370). It is a love which, a few lines later, is expressed in the manner of a Sufi mystic: “Śāh *sāhib*, I have put you in my heart as a disciple (*bhagat murīd*) puts his Lord (*Sāī*) there.” (p. 370). We may notice in passing that her name recalls the greatest woman Sufi mystic poet, Rābī‘a of Basra (c. 717-801), who introduced the concept of Divine Love.

For the male characters, the heart of the *havelī* is the large room (*baīṭhak*, reception room) where gatherings (*majlis*) are held, at which Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs chat and discuss various issues. For the females, it is the women’s rooms and, on special occasions such as the “spinning (*triñjan*) night” in which the village girls take part, the basement.

The link between the *havelī* and the outside world comes through the events recounted in the dialogues – with the outside world ranging from the village to the entire Panjab and even Bengal or foreign countries such as France, Britain, Canada, Tibet or Hong Kong.

The text is at once fragmented and compact. It is fragmented because it is constructed of dialogue which, by its very nature, allows passing thoughts and feelings that are not sequentially related to slip in. It is compact because Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s narrative drive is so powerful that we are always drawn to a focal point, whether this be an isolated fact or feeling, or a combination of facts and feelings. The reader immediately identifies this focal point and is left with the sense of freedom to complete the text himself.

The partition of the Panjab, which took place when the two sovereign states of India and Pakistan were declared in August 1947, was based on religious factors – I will not go into the economic reasons here⁵ – and religion is one of the things that holds the novel together.

Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s quite reasonable message is that the Panjab culture cannot be split into two. You can break up a piece of land, but not its traditions, its music, art and literature, because they are not geographical areas, she says in an interview in which she mentions, amongst others, Nānak, Bābā Farīd, Bulle Śāh, Vāris Śāh and Śāh Latīf.⁶ Nānak (1469-1533) was the Sikhs’ first guru, the founder of a religion that aimed to combine the best of the Hindu and Islamic faiths. The others are Sufi Muslims. Both they and Nānak used poetry to express their love of God.

Of the names mentioned in the interview, those playing an important role in the novel are the Sufi mystics Bābā Farīd (1173-1265; his shrine is at Pakpattan; his poems appear in the Sikh holy book, the *Guru Granth*, and so he is important to Sikhs), Bulle Śāh (1680-1758) and Vāris Śāh (1735-1798, through the story of Hīr [*Qissā Hīr*], completed in 1766 at Malika Hans, not far from Pakpattan). Other Sufi mystics are woven into events in the novel. Most important is Sakhī Sarvar (?-1174), followed by Śāh Daulā (1554-?1674, whose shrine is in Gujrat City), Śāh

Madār (14th-15th cent.?) and Miyā Mīr (1550-1635). Another Islamic figure, the legendary Khvājā Khizr, is also very significant.

It is essentially Khvājā Khizr who opens the novel. Khvājā Khizr is the first mythical figure to appear in the first episode of the text. The second episode, in which the character of Śāhnī appears for the first time, opens with the *azān*, the Muslim call to prayer.

In the interview mentioned above, Kṛṣṇā Sobtī responded as follows to an observation by Ālok Bhallā, who was referring to the claim by Panjabi writer and critic Sant Singh Sekhō (1908-1997) that, in the Panjab countryside, no Muslim was permitted publicly to make the call to prayer (*azān*): “Not at all. My novel *Zindagīnāmā* actually begins with the *azān*. It is an important part of village life. It didn’t irritate anyone. We respected it. Totally. Remember that Hindus always used to go to the Muslims’ holy places to be blessed. Pregnant women always used to go to the Pīr shrines.” Ālok Bhallā asks: “Did Muslims go into the Hindus’ religious places?” Kṛṣṇā Sobtī: “Yes, I’ve seen Muslims wearing red fez caps sitting alongside the people in the gurudvārā (Sikh temples) in towns and villages. It wasn’t an unusual sight. For we children it was both curious and interesting. It was their ‘differentness’ (*unkā ‘dūsrāpan’*) that intrigued me.”⁷

And it was the sound of the *azān* that echoed through her mind as she sat before the blank sheets of paper, inspiring her to write the first words: “I open my pen, wipe it. I fill it with ink. I bend my head in front of the blank papers. And all of a sudden, like lightening, from the window of childhood the village flashes in my eyes, and the *azān* begins to ring in my ears ... *Allāhu akbar / Allāhu akbar* (...). This echo was the beginning of *Zindagīnāmā*.”⁸

The bonding of people of different religions is highlighted on a number of occasions through the events and feelings that are recounted. While the various characters are clearly allied to a specific faith (Muslims and Hindus in particular; the borderline between Hindus and Sikhs is less clear-cut), there is a distinction between the religions, but no conflict. This distinction is based on community spirit and a mutual respect for people of different religions. When conflict does arise – caused not by religious diversity but by economic factors that emerge in several passages of the novel – it leads to the tragedy of partition.

One particular image sums up the fellowship among Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. It is a fellowship which, given the nature of this image, was a distinguishing feature of Sufism. It appears in the episode which describes the return of Jahādād Khā, a Muslim who has been discharged from the army after serving for three years (pp. 123-130). The image illustrated by Jahādād is that of the shrine of the Sufi saint Sakhī Sarvar, which he visits on his way home with a fellow dischargee, Sāhib Khā, who has asked a favor of the saint. Taking part in the conversation are Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. The characters who speak are Jahādād (Muslim), Kāśī Śāh (Hindu), Karmilāhī (Muslim), Maiyā Singh (an elderly Sikh who, because of his advanced years, is usually addressed with the respectful title of Uncle [*tāyā*, father’s elder brother] throughout the novel) and Maulādād (Muslim). At the end,

Jahādād has the consecrated sweet crumbled bread (*cūrmā*) that he has brought from the shrine handed out, and everyone raises it to their lips as they invoke the saint. Sharing the same food means belonging to the same community. This tallies with Kāśī Śāh's conclusion that there is just one God, regardless of the names given to Him by Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, which, in the words of Kāśī Śāh in this passage are, respectively: *Rabb-rasūl* (literally, God and Prophet) and *Kartā-kāraṇhār* (literally, prime cause and instrumental cause – elsewhere, Kāśī Śāh uses “instrumental cause” to signify man [see below the dialogue in which he advises Śāhjī to recite the *Sukhmanī*]).

[Jahādād]: “It’s a very big shrine! On one side, the site of *Garībnavāz* Sarvar Śāh. On the other, that of Bābā Nānak. *Bādsāho* (sirs!, lit. emperors!), seeing the spinning wheel and stool of the mother of Sakhī Sarvar *sāhib*, Āyśā, is a sight for sore eyes. Listen. Nearby there is a *ṭhākurdvārā* (Hindu temple). On one side there is a Bhairō temple.”

Kāśī Śāh nodded his head: “You’d scarcely believe it if you didn’t see it with your own eyes. It shows that all divisions and communalisms came later. It was man who created them. *Rabb-rasūl* and *Kartā-kāraṇhār* are one and the same.”

Karmilāhījī had a thought: “*Bādsāho*! On this side, the *pañj pīr* (five *pīr* [Muslim saints]), and on the other, the *pañj Pāṇḍav* (five *Pāṇḍav* [Hindu, a reference to the Mahābhārat). On this side, the *pañj auliyā* (five [Muslim] saints), and on the other, the *pañj pyārā* (Beloved Five, the first members of the Khālsā, regarded as the embodiment of the Guru).”

At number five, Maiyā Singh exclaimed: “*Barkhurdāro* (sons!), our Panjabi region must undoubtedly have some connection with God (*Rabb*), too. I’ll tell you why! It’s because God (*Rabb*), too, has bestowed five rivers on the country of Panjab. What can one say of such a land, gentlemen, where nature itself has placed number five!”

Kāśī Śāh was very pleased with *Tāyā* Maiyā Singh. Getting up, he touched his knees: “*Tāyājī*, you’ve said something that’s worth gold!”

Even Maulādādājī seemed happy: “Śāhjī, our country (*vatan*) has always been very fine, truly it has! Brave people have come and gone all through the ages. There have been great *pīr*, *auliyā*, *murīd* and *śahīd* (saints, holy men, disciples, martyrs).”

(...)

Jahādādājī sent Navāb home to fetch the small earthenware pot, filled with *cūrmā*, that he had brought from the shrine (*darbār*) of the *Lakhandātā* (bestower of hundreds of thousands, epithet of Sakhī Sarvar) and, giving it to Choṭe Śāh (Kāśī Śāh), said: “Please hand this out so that everyone can enjoy it. May God (*Rabb*) will that everyone seated here at the gathering (*majlis*) should go to the *darbār* of *Garībnavāz*.”

Everyone raised the *cūrmā* to their lips: “*Lakhandātā*, may your mercy be blessed!” (pp. 129-130)

1. MYTH

Myth is not a theme that flows through the book as strongly as religion; in fact, compared with religion, and seen in the context of the work as a whole, myth plays only a very small part. Myth appears in the first scene (pp. 16-23), and subsequently is referred to either indirectly or through a character who personifies that myth. The myth of the sun and moon is brought briefly into the story which Vaḍḍā Lālā, the oldest man in the village, tells to some boys and girls, in front of a few adults, in the opening pages of the novel (p. 22). This myth returns, mainly in relation to Śāhnī, and notably when she is saddened to hear the story about the moon that carries all sorrows in its heart (p. 22), and when Rābyā— who does not know that Śāhnī is pregnant – sings a strophe for her which suggests that she has guessed that Śāhnī is to be a mother: “The joys of the living / oh, beloved, the loves of dear ones, / those who have the sun in their heart / have sunlight in their hand, / those in whose house is a son / have the moon on their foreheads.” (pp. 72-73).

Another myth, touched on at greater length, and also recounted to the youngsters in the opening scene, is linked to the concept of *avtar* (p. 19). However, it is not related to the various myths and legends surrounding Viṣṇu's *avtar* in the Hindu faith, where *avtar* signifies Viṣṇu's descent to earth in various forms in order to fight against the domination of evil. In the novel, the *avtar* myth is actually about incarnation, the intention being to highlight the continuity of life: every [male] child will, across the generations, be the *avtar* of his father, emphasising the unbroken flow of life. This continuity is also expressed through the myth of the tree of creation (*sr̥ṣṭi-rūkh*) which is told alongside that of the *avtar* in the same scene, slipped into the conversation that takes place between Vaḍḍā Lālā and the children (p. 20).

These myths are not dealt with at length, but they underlie the entire novel. The myth of the tree of creation that I have just mentioned is not explicitly re-introduced into the book, yet it actually underpins the whole narrative, given that its full title is *Zindagīnāmā: zindā rūkh* (A book of life: the living tree). Of the remaining two myths, the one that relates to the sun and moon pervades the entire novel because of its association with Śāhnī; and the myth that illustrates the concept of *avtar* is implicit, because the village's continuity, as witnessed in the lives of its inhabitants, past, present and future, is a theme which, throughout the book, is bound up with that of the indivisibility of the Panjabi culture – expressed in the religious context as a multi-layered dialogue between Hinduism, Sikhism and Sufism. This indivisibility emerges in two ways in the story: firstly, it emerges inevitably as people of different faiths rub shoulders with each other; and, secondly, it comes through more occasionally out of the mouths of some of these characters. Both are subtly conveyed, for they are expressed not through contrast, but through the many facets made possible by dialogue, the device on which the novel is built, and which fragments the thoughts and actions of the characters.

The above-mentioned myths are Hindu, and they are narrated by a Hindu character, Vaḍḍā Lālā. One myth that is not narrated by Vaḍḍā Lālā also appears in

the first scene – and, in fact, is the first to appear (p. 17) – but, unlike the others, it crops up relatively frequently at different points of the narrative. This is the myth of *Khvājā Khizr*, sometimes invoked as Pīr of life (*zindagānī kā pīr*) and sometimes as living Pīr (*zindā pīr*): living, as in immortal. He is an Islamic figure, linked to the water of life or the fountain of life, which he is said to have discovered and whose water he drank. The Sufi mystics regard him as immortal, and some of them even claim to have seen him. In the novel, he first appears as Pīr of the river (*dariyā pīr*) whose boat never sinks, someone who creates eddies in the rivers and helps boats reach the opposite bank (p. 17). He reappears later on, once again as a protector of those who cross the river (both ferrymen and passengers), when he is mentioned by a criminal, Hīrā Sāsī, who is on his way back from committing a murder and a robbery (Hīrā Sāsī says to the ferryman who transports him and his booty-laden camel: “Look, the Pīr of life, *Khvājā Khizar*, rules the rivers. Invoke the Pīr of the river and take the boat beyond the eddies. *Khvājā Khizar* will make everything all right!”; p. 117). And again, Śāhnī calls upon him to protect her life – by which she means the happiness of her marriage, which is jeopardised by her husband Śāhjī’s passion for the young Muslim girl, Rābyā (p. 322).

To summarise the subject of myth, here is a list, in the order in which they appear, of the myths referred to in the first scene of the novel. They are woven into the children’s conversation (the myth of *Khvājā Khizr*) and into the words of Vaḍḍā Lālā, with constant interruptions from the children, who make infantile remarks; these, too, interrupted by their mothers and uncles, with the odd scolding.

1.1. *Khvājā Khizr* – an Islamic character whose tale is not related by the Hindu Vaḍḍā Lālā. He appears in the dialogue between several children who are standing on the top terrace of the Śāhs’ *havelī*, watching the river.

“Look, there’s Allāh Rakkhā’s boat – the Śāhs’ boat has landed.”

“Look, the Pīr of the river’s (*dariyā pīr*) boat is still rocking in the middle of the eddy.”

“No one can see it, but it’s there!”

Coming up behind him, Cannī tugged her brother’s shirt (*kurtā*): “Let me see, brother! Doesn’t the Pīr of the river’s boat ever sink?”

“Put your hands together, Cannī. *Khvājā Khizar* is the Pīr of life (*zindagānī ke pīr*). It is he who creates the rivers’ eddies and he who gets the boats across to the opposite bank.” (p. 17)

1.2. *Avtār* – a Hindu concept which Vaḍḍā Lālā, a Hindu, brings into his conversation with the children. He begins with the sentence: “Listen, my children, every son is the incarnation (*avtār*) of his father.” Vaḍḍā Lālā is immediately interrupted by the children, who start touching their heads: “Me too ... me too ... me too.” After two further interruptions, Vaḍḍā Lālā resumes his story and explains what an *avtār* is: someone with two hands, two feet, a face, a body, and so on, someone

who ploughs and irrigates the land, who sates it, who sows and who makes the crops appear. Asked to continue, he starts with the person he calls the first *avtar*, Prajāpati. Prajāpati was both man and woman; he/she split into two, giving birth from one part to a bull, and from the other to the mother cow (p. 19). And so on, with various interruptions. Then the tree of creation (*ṣṛṣṭi rūkh*) came into being. Various interruptions occur. From the tree of creation came the earthly world. The earth (*prthvī*). Our earth (*dhartī*), the four directions, then the sky, then Aditi begot Dakṣ. Interruptions follow. Aditi is the mother of the entire universe, she is also the earth (*dhartī*), she is everything. Various interruptions take place. Then Vaḍḍā Lālā introduces the three sets of gods: gods of the earth, the sky, and the heavens – followed by the four eras which he lists, starting from the current one: *kaljug*, *dvāpar*, *tretā*, *satjug* (p. 20).

1.3. The myth of the sun and moon – told by Vaḍḍā Lālā during the course of his conversation with the children. The moon is lonely and friendless; solitary man considers it a friend and companion. The moon's heart is sad when it sees the earth, but tells no one of its sorrow, holding all the pain within, which is why its heart has turned to stone. “Śāhnī breathed a gloomy sigh and *Cācī* Mahrī's heart grew sad.” (p. 22). The sun does not use its heat to thaw the moon but keeps away, knowing that, should the moon's sorrow melt, there would be a great flood (*pralay*). There is only one moon; what appears in the river Chenab is a reflection. The moon and the Chenab are twin brothers. But they lost one another: one (the moon) stayed where it was while the other tumbled into the courtyard of the king of the snows (Himvān *rājā*). Saddened, the moon grew cold and the sun began to melt the snows. Himvān thought about sending it into the underworld (*pātāl*), but it leapt down from the mountain and started to play on the earth, acting arrogantly (p. 22-23).

2. RELIGION

2.1. Spirituality: Kāśī Śāh

Kṛṣṇā Sobtī uses the character of Kāśī Śāh to convey the spiritual element of the religious theme. From the point of view of Śāhnī, Śāhjī's wife, the two brothers, Śāhjī and Kāśī Śāh, are the brothers Rām and Lakṣmaṇ (*Rām-Lakhan kī joṛī*, p. 85): in the eyes of Hindus, they offer the greatest example of brotherly love and of the devotion of a younger brother (Kāśī Śāh or Lakṣmaṇ) to his older brother (Śāhjī or Rām). However, the analogy is not entirely fitting for Kāśī Śāh's character, failing as it does to capture its depth.

The family of landowner and moneylender Śāhjī is Khatri Hindu by caste and religion, as is, officially, Kāśī Śāh. However, he does not really behave as such and acts more like a Sufi. In several episodes, the older brother and head of the family, Śāhjī, addresses him as *Sūfījī* or *Bhagatjī*. So he is a mystic, or devotee – but not so much a Hindu devotee (*bhagat*, *bhakt*) as a Sufi mystic who is not tied to any institutional religion. He respects all religions in both institutional and popular

form, but invariably seizes upon their spiritual core. So, when the preacher of the Ārya Samāj, the *ārya pracārak*, visits the village and angers the paṇḍit, Bhagvān Pāndhā (*pāndhā*,⁹ a Brahman priest) he intervenes, respectfully asking the *ārya pracārak* not to use the Vedic religion he preaches to criticise idolatry, but to talk, instead, about spiritual matters:

Bhagvān Pāndhā flew into a rage: “Shut the mouth of this *samājī*. Also at Bhera Miyani the Dayānandī desecrated a *śivling* (phallic emblem of Śiva). These *ārya-pracārak* are snakes in the bosom of the Hindus.”

Choṭe Śāh (Kāśī Śāh) intervened: “Sir (*mahāśayjī*), talk about knowledge and meditation, about the holy hymn and fire oblation (*mantr-havan*). Forget about arguments and controversy!” (p. 256)

In Kāśī Śāh’s eyes, a Hindu temple is no different from a mosque. When a letter arrives from old Maulvi of Jal, saying that minarets will appear in the village if financial aid is given for the mosque, Śāhjī leaves it to Kāśī Śāh to make a decision:

“*Sūfījī*, tell me what you think. In cases like these, we have to do as you think best.”

“Brother (*bhrājī*), what is there to think in a well-deserving case like this? The temple and the mosque are both houses of God (*Mālik*)!” (p. 87)

Śāhjī conscientiously carries out his business as a moneylender; he has no intention of making concessions when it comes to collecting debts and interest payments. He defines himself as a man of the world, and calls Kāśī Śāh a pure *fakīr* who is cut off from the world:

Śāhjī kept shaking his head and laughing: “*Bhagatjī*, if you have a hand in improving someone’s destiny, tell me why I should stop you! Your heart is a river, but who will settle the accounts? Who will help get these Jatt tenant farmers through difficult times?”

“We are the instrumental cause; God (*Ūparvālā* [He who is above]) is the First Cause!”

“Kāśīrām, over the heads of men is the authority of not one but two [beings]. One authority is that of He who is above (*Ūparvālā*) and the other is that of the government below!”

“But He who is above is greater. For as long as he looks on kindly, every little thing in the world is strong. If oppression grows, the greatest empires are destroyed in an instant.”

“Kāśīrām, you are a pure *fakīr*. I am a man of the world.” (...)

Kāśī Śāh became serious: “Brother, make sure you recite the *Sukkhmanī* once a day. In this ephemeral world, the Name itself is a reward. Not the riches of the *māyā* (the illusory world)!” (p. 88)

When Kāśī Śāh asks his brother Śāhjī to recite the *Sukhmanī* [Psalm of Peace (lit. Consoler of the mind)], a long psalm composed by the fifth guru, Arjan Dev (1563-1606, guruship 1581-1606), which has an important place in the Sikhs' holy book, the *Guru Granth*, it is one of many passages in the book that highlight the blurred boundaries between Sikhism and Hinduism in Hindu religious practice in the pre-partition Panjab – a subject I have already touched upon.

Kāśī Śāh does not confine himself to spiritual counselling; he has a deep love of mankind and so is a kind of medicine man for the villagers, whom he treats, free of charge, with herbs and other natural products. But in addition to this, his renown as a holy man means that troubled people often turn to him for help. An example of this may be seen in the episode involving a Sikh woman, Nacchatr Kaur, Vadhāvā Singh's first wife, who is jealous of his younger second wife. Vadhāvā Singh has married for a second time in order to have the child that Nacchatr Kaur was unable to give him. One evening Nacchatr Kaur, acting like a madwoman, visits Kāśī Śāh to ask him how she can soothe her broken heart.

This episode gives a fully-rounded picture of Kāśī Śāh's character – bearing in mind that there are many scenes showing various facets of his personality, which has only positive traits, no darker ones. In this episode, in fact, his character stands neither for conflict nor protest, but for inclusion, as we see when he advises Nacchatr Kaur to follow the rules of her religion. As Nacchatr Kaur is a Sikh, Kāśī Śāh advises her to devote herself to the service of the gurudvārā and to say her prayers (which, obviously, will be Sikh prayers). For his own part, Kāśī Śāh breaks through the boundaries of his religion of birth – Hindu – by using all the Sufi terms for God when he invokes the Lord in this passage: *Garībnavāz* [Cherisher of the poor], *Garībparvar* [Nourisher of the poor], *Parvardigār* [Sustainer], *Sāhabe-kamāl* [Possessor of perfection].

At the same time, the character of Nacchatr Kaur herself highlights the interpenetration of the two faiths. This is due to the influence which Kāśī Śāh, behaving as he does like a Sufi, has over her. As far as Nacchatr Kaur is concerned, the interpenetration of the two faiths is based on popular belief. Kāśī Śāh gives her a dried rose petal to place her under the protection of Zāhirā Pīr Sakhī Sarvar, a Sufi saint, said to have performed miracles.

Like a madwoman, Nacchatr Kaur tore the veil from her head and started beating both of her fists against her chest: "Give me a *mohrā* (a stone used to disperse a snake's poison), *devrā* (lit. younger brother-in-law), I can't stand my co-wife! I try to persuade myself to, but my heart is in such turmoil. My only fault is that I have failed to conceive."

For a long time, Kāśī Śāh was lost in thought; then he advised her: "*Bharjāī* (lit. older sister-in-law), devote yourself to service in the *kuṭiyā* (= gurudvārā, Sikh temple). Pray. This world and *māyā* are completely false."

Nacchatr Kaur's eyes grew troubled. Pulling her hair, she began to wail: "*Devrā*, you are a saint (*sādhu purukh*). The words that come from your mouth will not be

futile. Give me a *mantr* (magic formula) that will either tear my husband away from my co-wife, or soothe my heart.”

“*Bharjāī*, hold your tongue and cover your head!”

After covering her head, Nacchatr Kaur begged: “*Devrā*, if you want me to go home and not drown myself in the well, give me a *mantr* so that my heart can find peace. My hatred for my co-wife has addled my wits.”

Kāśī Śāh, his eyes closed, bowed his head and prayed to the Lord (*Garībnavāz* [Cherisher of the poor]): “Lend patience to the troubled heart of this blameless woman, Lord (*Garībparvar* [Nourisher of the poor])!”

He opened his eyes and, rummaging in a little box, pulled out a small packet. He raised a dried rose petal to his forehead, then placed it in the palm of Nacchatr Kaur’s hand: “*Bharjāī*, now you are under the protection of Zāhirā Pīr! Now you will have no pain, no worry, no sorrow. Bāggyā, take the *bharjāī* home.”

Nacchatr Kaur folded her hands: “*Devrā*, from today you are my Master (*guru pīr*). When I arrived, I was as restless as a fish. With Zāhirā’s rose petal, my seething breast has grown light. I accept his will.”

Kāśī Śāh folded his hands: “Possessor of perfection (*Sāhabe-kamāl*), Sustainer (*Parvardigār*), this is your splendor. In your Name is every virtue.” (pp. 90-91)

Kāśī Śāh is pure of heart. Śāhjī leaves it up to him to decide whether to organise a concert of song and dance to celebrate the birth of Lālī Śāh. The request is made by a Muslim, Caudhrī Fatehālī, who is also keen to know who the leading performer will be (it should be mentioned that dancers and singers were regarded as women of easy virtue). Śāhjī replies: “Kāśīrām is in charge of that department. If the *Bhagatjī* so pleases, your desires will be fulfilled.” Another Muslim, Karmilāhī, reminds Kāśī Śāh: “*Sūfījī*, you know that they have singing and dancing in pilgrimages, too! Some amusement, occasionally, as long as a man watches the dancing and entertainments after invoking God’s (*Rabb*) name.” (p. 150)

Later on, in the scene when the two dancers who have been invited, Buddhā and Husnā, arrive, Kāśī Śāh rides down to the riverbank to meet them. He does not view the two women as sexual objects but as the tools of an art form which, by its very nature, can only be a divine gift – he sees their dancing as a spiritually elevating performance. When he comes across the village lads impatiently waiting to see the women – who, for them, represent a forbidden dream – he gives them a warning in a speech that is free of reproach:

“*Barkhurdāro* (sons!), you might think this is just a display of song and dance (*nāc-mujrā*), but it is actually a very profound lesson (*tālīm*). Remember, singers and dancers are the masters of a very noble art. For this reason they must always be respected.” (p. 166)

And when, at the end of the episode, after the women have alighted from the boat and the youths are enraptured at the sight of them walking, he answers a silly question about the kind of slippers they wear in an innocent tone.

When Buddhā and Husnā walked towards the pavilions, swaying voluptuously, the young men cried: Wow! Wow!

Bakhtāvar exclaimed: “O Lord God (*Rabbā*), if only we knew whether the slippers on their feet are lucky *poṭhohārī* or *salīmśāhī*!”

Kāśī Śāh turned round to look, and said in a pure, clear tone: “*Barkhurdār* (son!), these are not *poṭhohārī*, they are *salīmśāhī*.”

Then he set off as though there was not to be a *mujrā* (musical performance by a dancing girl) in the village, but a *sarud-samā* (spiritually elevating performance). (p. 168)

In the episode in which the two young Muslims, Fateh (Rābyā's sister) and Śērā, elope (pp. 193-195) Kāśī Śāh, despite his realising that the pair have spent the night together, hiding in the cornfields, and that they have therefore misbehaved, stops to listen, spellbound, to the sound of Śērā singing. Kāśī Śāh says, of the lovers' elopement, that Śērā has a “very sweet” voice (p. 194). If, for a Sufi, music is a means of achieving ecstasy, the sweetness of that music is one of its basic ingredients: the divine experience which a Sufi has during ecstasy is described, amongst other things, as sweet. For Kāśī Śāh, Śērā's uplifting song turns the lovers' sexual experience into a Sufi mystic experience.

Emerging from the river, Śērā stopped on the sand. Tightening his *tahmad* (a cloth, worn by men, wrapped round the waist and falling to the ankles), he stretched. Holding out his arms, it was as though he had called the river. Then he sang in a pure, clear voice:

Getting on to the palanquin of love my heart beats hard
the *hājī* go to Mecca to perform *hajj*, I look at your face.

Seated on horseback, Choṭe Śāh (Kāśī Śāh) became lost in the contemplation of God (*yāde-ilāhī*). Contemplation so powerful that the Holy Master (*gurupīr*) appeared before his eyes!

When he came back to his senses, the stars were glimmering in the sky and on the edge the crescent moon embellished the scene. Opposite, the river flowing like a divine blessing (*rabbī baqśāś*) seemed joined with its banks like a path of life.

At that moment, Kāśī Śāh, standing there motionless, saw the door to that divine court (*dargāh*) of the future, where anyone who is suffering will be united with his divine lover (*mahbūbe-khudā*). (p. 195)

As noted above in the discussion about religion, Kāśī Śāh does not stand for conflict or protest, but for inclusion. He has a similar role in the structure of the novel. Apart from their spiritual gifts, the Sufi saints are worshipped because of their miracle-working powers, whether these be regarded as supernatural or magical powers.

Kāśī Śāh does not just cure the villagers, free of charge, with natural remedies, but also performs a kind of magic – or, at least, is believed to have magical powers.

When, in the Sunār house, the son of Divān Sunārā and Vīrāvālī, Gulzārī, is stabbed and seems sure to die, Kāśī Śāh behaves first like a doctor, then like a Sufi and, lastly, like a witch-doctor: first he checks Gulzārī's pulse and chest, then he takes a pinch of powder out of a box and puts it in his mouth; finally, he blows into his mouth. That this is regarded, at least by the onlookers, as the work of a person with supernatural – or even magical – powers is evident from the words of a Sikh man who has hastened to console Gulzārī's parents:

“Ask for pity from He who is above (*Ūparvālā*). Kāśī Śāh has blown the lion's heart into his mouth. Lord (*Sacce Pātsāh* [True Emperor, an epithet for Vāhguru]), protect this son.” (pp. 184-185)

In this way, in the structure of *Zindagīnāmā* the connection between Kāśī Śāh and the various Sufi saints mentioned in the novel is complete. Moreover, because these saints usually appear in scenes focusing on women's lives, Kāśī Śāh's character forges a link between the male and female spheres in the religious discourse.

2.2. Everyday Life: Śāhnī

Śāhjī's wife, Śāhnī, is a complex character in the religious discourse. A Hindu of Khatri caste, she worships at the Sikh *kuṭiyā*, and often mentally invokes Vāhguru (the Sikhs' name for God [lit. wondrous preceptor]); during a pilgrimage she visits the shrine of the Sufi saint Bābā Farīd (pp. 40-41) to ask for help in conceiving a child; she does conceive, after a dream in which she sees a child, bathed in light, crawling around the courtyard and who she believes could be the son of a sage (*ṛṣikumār*), or possibly Kṛṣṇa followed by a herd of cows (pp. 70-71). She recites the *vāṇī* of Bābā Farīd (p. 41), bows before the *khānqāh* of the Sufi saint Śekh Saddō and leaves money to pay for oil for the lamp (p. 41); she regards the two brothers, Śāhjī and Kāśī Śāh, as the “Rām and Lakṣmaṇ couple” (*Rām-Lakhan kī jorī*, p. 85). When a powerful sandstorm blows up, she calls on Śāh Sulemān for protection – the same Hazrat Sulemān, Allāh's prophet, who is invoked at the same moment, and for the same reason, by the women of the Muslim Nai (p. 248).

These episodes are some of many that reveal every facet of Śāhnī's relationship with religion. Two of these facets – Hindu and Sufi Muslim – are brought together in the brief scene in which Śāhnī bathes in the river. In this scene, before going underwater, the newly-pregnant Śāhnī and *Cācī* Mahrī cup the river water in their hands and pay homage to the Sun God (*Sūryadev*): “In all the worlds and universes your shining glory, *Mahārāj* ...!” *Cācī* goes under the water, while Śāhnī, turning to the mountains opposite, hails Gaurā Bhavbhāminī (a title of Pārvatī); then Śāhnī goes under, too, and *Cācī* Mahrī – who, without being told, has guessed that Śāhnī is pregnant and does not want her to get tired – suggests that she gets out of the water and bows her head to ask *pīr* and *fakīr* for health and happiness (*khair*). Closing her eyes, Śāhnī meditates on Bābā Farīd: “It is thanks to your benevolence and favor, *Bābā*, otherwise how would this barren land have grown fertile? Continue to grant

your favor. Bring this day to fulfilment.” When the two women head back to the village, Śāhnī sings a *bārahmāsā*¹⁰ by Bulle Śāh (p. 72).

Taken as a whole, Śāhnī's character pulls together Hindu, Sikh and Sufi Muslim sentiments – the convergence of three worlds or cultures: 1. Sikh as a mix of Hindu and Muslim elements; 2. Sufi as a mix of Muslim and Hindu elements; and 3. Hindu – although this is kept separate from the other two and is not contrasted with them, except in the episode of Lakhmī (pp. 232-234).

Ceremonies that form part of the Hindu lifestyle are performed in the *havelī* by a paṇḍit, Bhagvān Pāndā (properly: Pāndhā¹¹): the ceremony celebrating the birth of a child (specifically, the birth of Śāhnī's son, Lālī Śāh, p. 134); the ceremony in honor of ancestors (*śrāddh*), at the end of which the women carry pitchers of water to the *Satī* pool to dispatch their forbears to paradise: “Divine ancestors, depart now for the heavens (*baikunṭhō ko*).” (p. 252). The same paṇḍit performs the rites of *Lohṛī*, the festival celebrating fertility (p. 39); and, in the presence of the Brahmans, the rites of *Baisākhī*, the festival celebrating the harvest season (pp. 77-80) – on this occasion, when the paṇḍit recites the Sanskrit hymn of praise *Viṣṇu sahasranāma* (The thousand names of Viṣṇu) it is as though “incomprehensible divine words keep the two worlds [earthly and celestial] bound together. Hail to Queen Sanskrit (*sanskṛt mahārānī*), that even though ignorant people like ourselves don't understand anything, but just by listening we are filled with light, light-filled within and outside the mind.” (p. 80).

The preacher of Ārya Samāj, the *ārya pracārak*, also arrives in the village. He preaches the Vedic religion which denounces the paṇḍits' hypocrisy, idolatry, ceremonies such as the *śrāddh* and, according to some of the women, speaks only “slandorous words against the Brahmans” (p. 255). However, Śāhnī believes that even his most explosive speech – where he claims to be as much, and even more of, an iconoclast as the Muslims – comes from a religious spirit. In fact, Śāhnī's attitude towards him is fundamentally kind, as can be inferred from the following words she addresses to *Cācī* Mahrī: “*Cācī*, the *samājī āryā* [sic!, hindi *āry(a)*, panjabi *ārīā*] arrives at this time every year. He's bound to come round either before or after the *śrāddh*. But he doesn't ask for any donation or *dakṣiṇā*, he neither takes nor asks. All he does is recite sacred texts (*mantr*). He gives a sermon.” (p. 252).

There is just one important instance that marks Śāhnī as a true Hindu: the episode concerning Lakhmī, a young Brahman widow who has fallen in love with a Muslim, become pregnant by him, and is helped to lose the baby by *Cācī* Mahrī and, indirectly, by Śāhnī, who knows that the miscarriage was brought on by a potion that *Cācī* Mahrī obtained from Jamālo, a Muslim woman who often acts as a kind of witch in the novel. Up to this point, however, Śāhnī has been acting to safeguard the honor of Lakhmī and, above all, her family. Only when she realises that Lakhmī has no intention of giving up her lover – who wants to take her into his house through the front door (“I've promised you, Lakhmī, do say yes, I'll take you home through the front door”, pp. 232-233) – Śāhnī uses language borrowed from the lowest form of Hinduism, calling the Muslim *mlecch*.

“Alas, Kaljug is here. By giving your body to an infidel (*vidharmī*) your brain has clouded. Think about it. Will you eat in his kitchen? Oh, you *brāhmaṇī* (Brahman woman) by birth, you’ve let a *mlecch* feed on your body!” (p. 233)

Also in the face of *Cācī* Mahrī’s sympathy towards Lakhmī (for *Cācī* Mahrī herself has been in love), Śāhnī still takes a tough stance.

Cācī Mahrī, lost in thought, who knows about what, continued to muse. After dozing off briefly, she opened her eyes and said: “Child, if people start to think, what kind of Bagdādī Saiyad can be the *Śekh* of Nauśahrā. They will have recited the *kalmā* (confession of faith) a hundred or two hundred years ago. They will be Brahmins or fish-eaters or cucumber-eaters, or whoever else you want!”

Śāhnī was astonished at these words: “*Cācī*, are you talking in your sleep? Contamination means the end of religion. Even after a hundred or two hundred years, will the original lineage (*prajāpati gotr*) of the Saiyad remain linked to their name? It’s a disgrace. *Cācī*, just think of it ...”

“What do you want me to think, my child? Thinking has made this old woman’s brain turn to mush. I was the one who asked that bitch, Jamālo, to give me the potion to save the honor of the *bāhmaṇī*. You tell me whose fault it is. Mine, all mine! My heart is in turmoil. I’m the murderer. That wretched girl is still playing fast and loose and I’m in disgrace!”

“*Cācī*, it’s Lakhmī’s destiny. We did what we had to. Now the matter is in the hands of the men, they’ll do what they think is right.”

Lying down on the cot, *Cācī* began to sing:

Past times and life do not come back
past actions and life do not return
the parted wave in the seas, the shot arrow
past joys do not return
the spoken word does not come back
past bodies and souls do not return. (p. 234)

Śāhnī’s behavior towards Lakhmī (a Śāhnī different in this scene than elsewhere in the novel) relates not so much to the wider subject of religion and its associated issues, as to the subject of women: social mores dictate that women are the protectors and instruments of men’s honor, and are subservient to them. Śāhnī does not protest when she realises that her husband, Śāhjī, has fallen in love with the young Muslim, Rābyā; she simply asks for protection from the Pīr of life, *Khvājā Khizr* (interestingly, her invocation of this Islamic figure contains the image of a deer – in the *Rāmāyaṇ*, Rām chases after a demon disguised as a golden deer that has been sent by Rāvaṇ to separate him from Sītā, whom Rāvaṇ plans to abduct):

O Pīr of life *Khvājā Khizar*, whenever have clay puppets [= men] been capable of joining river banks. Reaching a landing stage, again the boat! No ... no

... Pīr of the river (*dariyā pīr*) don't make this deer run in front of my lord!
(p. 322)

Furthermore, returning to the theme of religion in the pre-partition Panjab, let's turn away from the character of Śāhnī as we see her in the story of Lakhmī and look at the words of *Cācī* Mahrī. In these words – and, consequently, in the novel and in life in the pre-partition Panjab – we see a glimmer of a chance that the Hindu and Muslim faiths might come together, even in the form of inter-faith marriage or, at least, as partnerships that exist even if they are not sanctioned by orthodoxy. The mourning for the past that echoes through *Cācī* Mahrī's song tells us not to reject happiness; and Lakhmī's fondness for her Muslim lover might bring such happiness.

2.3. Human love and divine love: Rābyā

Human love and divine love are interwoven in the novel. In the narrative, Kṛṣṇā Sobtī uses the character of Rābyā to express the relationship between human and divine love. (As noted above, her name reminds us of the greatest woman Sufi mystic poet, Rābi'a of Basra [c. 717-801], who introduced the concept of Divine Love). The external device she slips into the narrative is the Panjabi Sufi poet, Bulle Śāh.

It must be said that a great many other Panjabi Sufi poets are brought into the story through their works – love-romances in particular (*Sassī Punnū*, *Sohnī Mahīvāl*, *Mirzā Sāhibā*).¹² Vāris Śāh is unquestionably the most important of these Sufi poets. The most obvious external device used by Kṛṣṇā Sobtī is Vāris Śāh's love-romance, *Qissā Hīr*. Vāris Śāh wrote the well-known tale of the Panjabi Muslim lovers, Hīr and Rājāhā, verses from which are chanted in the novel. The link with Bulle Śāh is more subtle and unstated; this is a special skill of the author, who is adept at creating different layers of interpretation.

The theme of divine love is closely linked to Sufism. It was the Sufis who made popular a "Persian romance genre of the court brought to India by Islam. (...) historically (...) in India this essentially Persian court narrative has been used to incorporate elements that arose out of the interaction between Hindus and Sufis."¹³ The Panjab was the first region in India to fall under Muslim rule and, therefore, to become acquainted with Persian, which became the language used at court in the early 11th century when Mahmūd of Ghazni annexed the Panjab to his Afghan domain. There followed mass conversions and, as the Panjab became Islamised, the poetised romances known in Persian as *masnavī* appeared. Over time, these blended into the folk stories (*vār*) that were popular in the Panjab from the 11th century; they formed part of the oral repertoire of the bards and minstrels who sang them as they wandered from village to village.¹⁴ In this way, love stories of hybrid form developed, their leading characters Muslim, their influences Hindu, and their flavor essentially Panjabi. What makes this genre unique is the fact that the stories can be read at two levels: as allegory, in which the lover-beloved

relationship is that between God and worshipper; and, in human terms, as pure romance.

The first Panjabi love romance in written form is the story (*qissā*) of Hīr and Rājḥā by Dāmodar (Dāmodardās Aroṛā), completed in around 1605. Dāmodar, a Hindu shopkeeper, was probably influenced by Sikhism: at the beginning of the story he calls upon God as “Sāhib” (Master) without naming any of the deities from the Hindu pantheon.¹⁵ The tale was then picked up by Muslim writers: Ahmad Gujjar in 1682 and Muqbal (Śāh Jahā Muqbal) in 1746; set between the two is a work written in 1711 by a lesser-known Muslim, Miyā Cīrāg Aman.¹⁶

However, the story of Hīr and Rājḥā was known in the Panjab from at least the 16th century. It appears in partial form in works by the Sufi poet Śāh Husain (c. 1539-1599) and the Sikh writer Bhāi Gurdās Bhallā (c. 1551-1633/1636), scribe of *Guru Granth*. The tale of Hīr and Rājḥā is more widely explored in a Persian work by Bāqī Kolābī, written in around 1575. A quarter of a century later, in about 1605, there came the first complete version in Panjabi, the work of the aforesaid Dāmodar.¹⁷

But the most famous version of Hīr and Rājḥā’s story is, beyond a doubt, that of Vāris Śāh (1735-1798) who, as the completion note of his *Qissā Hīr* shows, finished it in 1180 Hijri (1766 AD).¹⁸ While Dāmodar – who came from Jhang, as did Hīr – and Muqbal both contrive a happy ending, with the couple marrying and then travelling to Mecca, Vāris Śāh’s tale ends on a tragic note, with the death of the two lovers.

Vāris Śāh’s story opens with a series of invocations; the first, addressed to God (*Khudā*), is also an ode to love: “First of all I contemplate God the almighty / He who made love the first principle of creation / He, who was the primeval lover. He fell in love with Rasūl, the prophet. / Love is the hallmark of all men of high spirituality / love is the fundamental quality of man / gardens blossom in the bosoms of those who cherish love.”¹⁹ There follows an invocation to the Prophet, and then to the Four Jewels of the Prophet, Abū Bakr, Umar, Usmān and Alī. Lastly, there is an invocation to Bābā Farīd, who “has his abode in Pakpattan / I bow before him whose benign presence here has rendered the Panjab free of all ills and ailments.”²⁰

The story is set in three villages: Takht Hazara, where Rājḥā’s family are based; Jhang, the home of Hīr’s family; and Rangpur, the village where Hīr’s in-laws live. Mistreated by his brothers and their wives after his father’s death, Rājḥā leaves the village. During his journey, he stops off at a mosque where he quarrels with a corrupt mullah. Vāris Śāh comments: “In secluded corners they, the Mullahs, commit dirty acts and plough deep in long stretches.”²¹ Reaching the banks of the river Chenab, Rājḥā asks Luḍḍan, the ferryman, to row him across. The boat belongs to Hīr. Luḍḍan initially refuses, but allows him on board after hearing him play the flute. Rājḥā falls asleep on Hīr’s bed. Coming down to the river with her friends to bathe, Hīr is angry with the ferryman; she wakes up Rājḥā and quarrels with him, accusing him of getting her bed dirty. Rājḥā asks her for kindness, and Hīr falls in love with him. The scene changes to Jhang, where Hīr takes Rājḥā, who becomes a cowherd for her father, Cūcak. The pair meet each day outside the

village, in the forest where Rājāh takes the cattle to graze. Hīr's lame uncle, Qaido, discovers their secret and persuades Cūcak to force his daughter into an arranged marriage. Hīr is sent off to the village of Rangpur to marry Saidā Kheṛā, the man to whom she had been promised as a child. The scene shifts to Rangpur. Meanwhile, a distraught Rājāh goes to Tilla (Balnath Tilla or Gorakh Tilla [*tillā*, hilltop]), home of the yogi Bālānāth, and himself becomes a yogi with pierced ears. A former Muslim converted to Hinduism, wearing the clothes of a beggar saint, Rājāh arrives in Rangpur. Hīr and Rājāh are reunited and run away together. The Kheṛā family manage to find them and haul them before an Islamic judge, who orders Hīr to return to her husband. Thanks to divine intervention, the town goes up in flames and the verdict is overturned. The couple return to Jhang, where Hīr's relatives pretend to agree to their marriage. Rājāh returns to Takht Hazara to prepare to come to Jhang with the marriage party. In the meantime, a plot is hatched to prevent the wedding from going ahead. Qaido brings Hīr false tidings of Rājāh's death. Hīr faints, and when she regains consciousness she is given a poisoned drink. Hīr dies calling out Rājāh's name. After learning the news, Rājāh dies of a broken heart.

From various episodes in *Zindagīnāmā* we can identify a thread leading down from Bābā Farīd to Vāris Śāh and Bulle Śāh. Bābā Farīd is pre-eminent because he is the patron saint of the Panjab, and so is regarded as an ancestor of Śāhjī's family (p. 29); it is after his blessing that Śāhnī conceives and gives birth to her longed-for son, Lālī Śāh (pp. 130-131). As patron saint of the Panjab, he is the ancestor of all Panjabis; after losing the first four of her babies, his blessing enables Fakīrā Luhār's wife, Husainā, to conceive and bear a child (p. 143). A blessing from Bābā Farīd does not discriminate between Hindus and Muslims, and so Lālī Śāh, a Hindu, and Fakīrā's son, a Muslim, are regarded as brothers (*birādar*) (p. 143).

What links Bābā Farīd (1173-1265) to Vāris Śāh (1735-1798) is the fact that Vāris Śāh looks on Bābā Farīd as his mentor. Born in the village of Jandiala Sher Khan, near Shekhupura, Vāris Śāh received a religious education at Qasur. Afterwards, he moved to Bābā Farīd's shrine in Pakpattan for his spiritual training. Later, he went to Malika Hans, not far from Pakpattan, where he wrote *Qissā Hīr*.²² Of the four invocations that open *Qissā Hīr*, the fourth is directed at Bābā Farīd (see above).

The thread linking Vāris Śāh (1735-1798) and Bulle Śāh (1680-1758) is, nominally, that, according to a tradition which appears to have disregarded the gap between their ages, the two were classmates in Qasur under the tutorship of Gulām Murtazā.²³

However, there is another link between Vāris Śāh and Bulle Śāh, and it is much stronger. Vāris Śāh's *Qissā Hīr* gave the Sufi poets the two symbols of Hīr (*āśiq*, lover) and Rājāh (*māśūq*, Beloved). In the novel, Bulle Śāh clearly reveals himself to be a rebel who is above any form of organised religion which, indeed, he condemns and which led, on his death, to his being secretly buried in the middle of the night because the mullahs refused to give him an Islamic funeral.²⁴ But it was love, the central theme in his poetry, that truly made Bulle Śāh a rebel: a love consisting of total surrender to the Lord, the Beloved, whom he realised through ecstasy. In a

kāfi he says: “When I learnt the lesson of love (*īsq*) / my soul feared the mosque / I ran towards the temple (*thākardvārā*) / I realised the Beloved in my own home. / When I came to know the secret of love / mineness and thinness were destroyed / I became pure inwardly and outwardly / I see the Lord everywhere. / Hīr and Rājḥā have met / Hīr led astray searches for him in the wilderness / but beloved Rājḥā is sporting within her enclosure / I lost control over the senses.”²⁵

Identifying himself with Hīr and the Lord with Rājḥā is the way Bulle Śāh realises love outwardly. He writes not only of the love of God (*īsq haqīqī*) but also of physical love (*īsq majāzī*): “As long as *īsq majāzī* is not observed, one is not successful in his love for God / just as the needle does not sew without the thread, / *īsq majāzī* is benefactor, / by the virtue of which one experiences ecstasy.”²⁶

In *Qissā Hīr*, two further links may be found in the reference to Rājḥā: the first is that Rājḥā plays the flute wonderfully; the second is that Rājḥā, wandering about in a distraught state after Hīr marries, becomes a yogi with pierced ears. These are two examples of the religious synthesis that characterised the pre-partition Panjab: the former is a krishnaite element, and the latter a Nāth element. For this reason, Bulle Śāh can address his Lord as Kāhaṇ (Kṛṣṇa) or he can identify himself with the yogini and the Lord as yogi. I quote a couple of examples from Denis Matringe’s English translation: “Kāhaṇ plays the flute wonderfully. (...) / Flute-player, cowherd Rājḥā / Your melody unites with everything, / Your pleasures are in me, / Our appearances themselves have mingled. / Kāhaṇ plays the flute wonderfully.”²⁷; “Rājḥā has come, having made himself a yogi (*jogīrā*), / (...) When I saw his face, misery and the pangs of separation went away. / (...) Rājḥā is the yogi and I am his yogini (*Rājḥā jogī te māt jogiānī*). (...)”²⁸

Popular images in Panjabi Sufi poetry include that of *triñjan* (spinning) and *jhanā* (the river Chenab). The virgin (the lover) has to spin cotton on the spinning wheel to build up the dowry she will take to her bridegroom’s (the Beloved) house. Bulle Śāh says: “O virgin, pay attention towards spinning / the spinning wheel has been made for you / (...)”²⁹ And again, for Bulle Śāh the Chenab is a symbol of love because Hīr and Rājḥā’s romance was played out on its banks.³⁰

I have talked about the way human love and divine love intermingle in the novel, and how Bulle Śāh is an external element brought into the narrative to illustrate the relationship between human and divine love; and how Rābyā is the internal element.

First of all, Rābyā is of Arai caste, just like Bulle Śāh’s spiritual master, Śāh Ināyat. Second, Rābyā first appears in the novel (p. 32) in the *triñjan* scene. Third, Rābyā, as she sings one evening “in the shadow of the stars” (*tārō kī chāh*) on the banks of the Chenab, becomes “an enfolding wave of the Chenab” (*Canāb kī kolak lahar*, p. 321). Bulle Śāh often calls his teacher, Śāh Ināyat, some of the names he uses for God, one of which is *māhī* (Rājḥā). In the first case (Arai caste), therefore, Rābyā would identify herself with Rājḥā. In the second (*triñjan*) there is a direct analogy between Rābyā and Hīr. In the third (the river Chenab), Rābyā might be said to identify herself with the love-couple, Hīr and Rājḥā. This play on switched

identities and interlinking characters is like a never-ending circle which, by its very nature, has neither a starting nor a finishing point. Bulle Śāh, as seeker or lover, often identifies himself with Hīr, but when it comes to the final union he himself becomes Rājāhā as the Lord or Beloved: "Repeating 'Rājāhā, Rājāhā', I have myself become Rājāhā. / Call me Dhīdo Rājāhā! Nobody should say Hīr any more."³¹

In *Zindagīnāmā*, Hīr is perceived in different ways by various characters: 1) by women, as the personification of romantic love; 2) as the personification of beauty by Śāhnī's husband, Śāhjī, who is in love with Rābyā; 3) as an example of supreme pure love – that is, idealised love – by young men who, not yet married, are waiting for love.

Rābyā is a chaste young girl, a contrasting figure to Śāhnī, a woman and mother. Rābyā is the counterpart of Sarasvatī, the goddess of speech and learning, who, earlier still, was a river and a goddess of purifying river waters (*sarasvatī*, watery, elegant).³² Rābyā is Hīr as the personification of beauty. Rābyā has a divine gift: the art of writing poetry. She worships Śāhjī, performing a bow (*salām*) to him so lengthy that *Cācī* Mahrī comments on it. Yet she is self-assured enough to gaze at Śāhjī without lowering her eyes.

When, her eyes closed, [*Cācī* Mahrī] bowed her forehead in the *darbār* of Vāhe-guru, Rābyā suddenly appeared before her, staring intently at Śāhjī's fair-skinned face. *Cācī* began to tremble. Claspings her hands together, she implored: "My God (*Dātā*), this relationship has no sense. Lord (*Jānī-jān*), one, a new mother, and the other, a young girl. Don't let this game be played, Lord (*Rabb*). The Śāhs' name has never been sullied!" (p. 287)

Śāhjī continued to stare at Rābyā: "(...) The blessing hand of Sarasvatī (*Sarastī kā virad hatth*) is upon her." (p. 109)

Barē Śāh (Śāhjī) continued to gaze at Rābyā.

A coarse garment, and above it the radiance of a pure silk! Oh divine power (*vāh qudrate*)!

Śāhjī was about to say something, but it was as though his heart had whispered in his ear: "Who has seen Hīr?" (p. 187)

(...) Śāhnī fondly said: "Sing, Rābī. May Gomā be filled with light, too."

"Yes, Śāhnījī, what should I sing?"

Cācī ordered: "Child, sing the song you composed during the last Ramadan!"

Seated on the cot, in the shadow of the stars, Rābyā became an enfolding wave of the Chenab. In the moonlight, her braided hair lent a rare charm to her delicate nose. Her veil was perched so casually upon her head, it was as though a florican had alighted upon a railing.

Alas

in which direction must I drive my *ḍācī* (she-camel)!

Four directions
four lamps
how can I bear the flame
four radiances.

A lamp
my beloved (*māhī*)
a lamp
my Lord (*sāī*)
a lamp
my heart
my burning eyes
have become a flame
alas

how could I not go
to meet the flame!
Wherever I look the flame burns
wherever I look
the flame rises
my eyes
my heart
all my body and mind
burning
have become a flame
alas

in which direction must I drive my *dācī*!
Rābyā's tremulous voice fell still, and suddenly the voice of Kāśī Śāh was heard:
"Magnificent (*vāh-vāh*), Rābī, may the Lord God (*Rabb Sāī*) enhance your radiance,
fill you with light."

The women lowered their veils over their foreheads.

Chote Śāh (Kāśī Śāh) came close, and placed his hand on Rābyā's head: "The *bībī rānī* has the gift of the Lord (*Mālik*). Your heart is a pure lake." (pp. 321-322)

(Śāhnī:): "May God (*Sāī*) protect you, Rābyā, you have a divine gift (*tumhē Rabb kī den*)! Let us hear something else, child!" (p. 35)

Seeing Śāhī walking towards the *baiṭhak*, Śāhnī didn't know what had got into her. Stopping him, she said: "First, listen to a *sāvan* by Rābyā. Sing, come on, sing, sing that *dohrā*!"

The fine month of *sāvan* has brought rain to the earth
the rainclouds reverberate, the heart is happy
(...)
the Lord (*sāiyā*) has come to congratulate me
Śāh Ināyat has embraced me.

When *bhādo* comes, o friend, the meeting will take place
 When I open the ewers, you will be within each ewer.
 As she sang, Rābyā's voice began to quaver. Her eyes filled with tears.
 (...)

First, Rābyā stopped in front of Śāhjī, then she raised her hand and bowed (*salām kiyā*) before Śāhjī.

On her face two jewels continued to shine brightly. At length.

Cācī saw: "Child, Śāhjī has seen you bow! Lower your hand down!"

Bashfully, Rābyā hid her face in her hands.

Śāhjī set off in silence towards his *baiṭhak*. (p. 111)

Once inside the hall, in front of him Śāhjī saw Rābyā slip through the door: "This beautiful face is like that of a heavenly nymph!"

"*Salām, Śāhjī!*"

"Rābyā, child, go upstairs! There are celebrations!"

"Yes, Śāhjī!"

Rābyā's shining eyes gazed upon Śāhjī's forehead. Her eyelids did not move, they neither quivered, nor blinked.

Śāhjī cast a surreptitious look at this girl. She is young, but she is not a baby.

When, after this prolonged stare, Rābyā moved towards the staircase, for Śāhjī it was as though a great mynah bird in flight was bearing an omen.

Away with it! Away with it! (*shubh ho!*, lit. "may it be auspicious" – an expression to dispel a misfortune). (p. 135)

Rābyā's love for Śāhjī is like Hīr's love for Rājīhā. It can be interpreted on two levels, human and allegorical. In the novel, Rābyā is a far from ordinary person; she is different from the other girls who, it emerges in the *triñjan* scene, see the tale of Hīr and Rājīhā as a romantic love story ("Mihandī of the Aroṛā burst out laughing: 'Just listen to *Cācī* ! What has God got to do with love stories?'", p. 33). In the character of Rābyā, human love and divine love are intertwined. Her love is not to be consummated in either *Zindagīnāmā* [A book of life, 1979] or *Uttarārddh* [Second half, published in 2005 in *Śabdō ke ālok mē* (In the light of words), pp. 238-274], which Kṛṣṇā Sobtī intended as part two of *Zindagīnāmā*. As noted above, towards the end of *Zindagīnāmā* Rābyā declares her love for Śāhjī with the same feeling as a Sufi mystic: "Sāh *sāhib*, I have put you in my heart as a disciple (*bhagat murīd*) puts his Lord (*Ṣāī*, Lord, Master) there." (p. 370). Rābyā expresses her human love in the style of divine love: she is the disciple (*bhagat murīd*) and Śāhjī is the Lord (*Ṣāī*, Lord, Master).

Rābyā's story does not end in *Zindagīnāmā*. Almost as though she were being prodded by Rābyā, Kṛṣṇā Sobtī was to write *Uttarārddh* because it had to be explained why the love between Rābyā and Śāhjī could never come to anything: "Two souls. Two pairs of eyes. No equality. Caste, religion, faith, family, lineage, class. Rābyā, an enraptured young virgin, and Śāhjī, a husband and father to a boy,

Lālī: how will they endure, this affection, this love? How? How is this union, in whose hands does it lie? In the power of Śāhjī? In the eyes of Rābyā, daughter of the Arai? Rābī, Rābyā, come here, come towards me!” (*Śabdō ke ālok mē*, p. 236).

The answer to this question becomes apparent at the end of *Uttarārdh*. During the course of the narrative, flood waters drag Śāhjī and his horse into the river. Rābyā witnesses the scene and plunges into the river to try to rescue him. The two are pulled out at different spots. For a few days, Śāhjī hangs between life and death. With the intervention of Kāśī Śāh, Rābyā goes through an informal marriage ceremony, becoming the second wife of the dying Śāhjī. When Śāhjī dies, Rābyā throws herself into the river.

The closing lines of *Uttarārdh*, describing the scene in which Rābyā drowns herself in the river, contain images mirroring those that open *Zindagīnāmā*: the unconcerned moon, the flowing river. The cycle that began with the myth of the sun and moon, recounted by Vaḍḍā Lālā, now closes, as does the cycle that started with the myth of *Khvājā Khizr*.

Closing at the same time, in both human and allegorical terms, is the circle that drew Rābyā and Hīr together. Allegorical because – just as the ecstatic Sufi Bulle Śāh (Hīr) yearns for a final union with his Lord (Rājāhā) – Rābyā, the “disciple” (*bhagat murīd*), is united with her “Lord” or “Master” (*Sāī*), Śāhjī: “Śāhjī, I am coming to you. (...) Take my hand. Why should I be afraid, you are with me.” (*Uttarārdh*, p. 274). Human because, just as Hīr, in Vāris Śāh’s *Qissā Hīr*, dies on learning the false news of Rājāhā’s death, so, too, does Rābyā die after Śāhjī’s death. And, like Hīr, Rābyā “merged into the old tales (*purāne qissō mē jā milī*).” (*Uttarārdh*, p. 274).

In *Zindagīnāmā*, Koklā, meeting up with other youths on the river bank as they await the arrival of the two dancers who have been invited to celebrate the birth of Lālī Śāh, says: “Every time the sorrowful notes of Hīr ripple through the air, so will the spirits of Hīr of the Sayāl clan and Rājāhā of Takht Hazara join in these gatherings (*majlis*).” (*Zindagīnāmā*, p. 163).

In *Zindagīnāmā*: the image of water (“the land of Chenab and Jhelam”, *Canāb aur Jehlam kī dhartī*, p. 9) in the poem which leads into the narrative; the image of the water of immortality underlying the image of *Khvājā Khizr*, the living – that is, immortal – pīr. In *Uttarārdh*: the image of water (“the Chenab carried on flowing”, *Canāb bahtā rahā*, p. 274) which ends the narrative; the image of Rābyā merging into the old tales (*purāne qissō mē*, p. 274) and, consequently, of her love becoming immortal like that of Hīr and Rājāhā in a meeting of human and divine love. And so it is that the circle of the Chenab, real and allegorical, closes: the actual river Chenab, on whose banks lies the village at the heart of the story; the real and allegorical Chenab on whose banks Hīr and Rājāhā met in the best-known Panjabi romance, *Qissā Hīr*; by the Sufi poet Vāris Śāh; and the allegorical Chenab which, for the poet and ecstatic mystic Bulle Śāh, is a symbol of love because Hīr and Rājāhā’s romance was lived out on its banks.

Notes

- ¹ For the life of Kṛṣṇā Sobti [Krishna Sobti], born in Gujrat (more precisely, in the village of Dhūl Jatt) in western Panjab (now Pakistan) on 18 February 1925, see Mariola Offredi, “*Zindagīnāmā*: The Undivided Panjab of Krishna Sobti,” 369-370. For an overall analysis of Kṛṣṇā Sobti's creative writings, see Mariola Offredi, “Kṛṣṇā Sobti. A Journey from *Bacpan* to *Samay sargam*,” 337-357.
- ² For the structure of the novel, the dialogue format and the language (a mixed vocabulary of Hindi, Urdu and Panjabi), see Mariola Offredi, “*Zindagīnāmā*: The Undivided Panjab of Krishna Sobti,” 352-356. The novel has been translated into Urdu and Panjabi. Because of its complexity and the difficulty of the language, no English translation has yet appeared. Information available on the websites (*Zindaginama*, English translation by Neer Kanwal Mani, Delhi: Katha, 2002) is not correct. Publication by Katha may be released in 2009/2010. English translation of passages can be found in Kumul Abbi, *Discourse of Zindaginama. A semio-anthropological analysis*, Delhi: Harman, 2002.
- ³ Information from Kṛṣṇā Sobti. Dhūl Jatt is the village where she was born (her family lived in Gujrat town, but, in accordance with custom, her mother went to her own mother's home for the delivery), and where she used to spend her summer holidays. The village is now registered in the English maps of the Gujrat district of Pakistan as Dhool [Dhūl] (www.gujratpolice.gov.pk/page.asp?id=263). As far as *Zindagīnāmā* is concerned, there is much confusion about the name of the village. First of all, the name is purposely not given in the novel because Kṛṣṇā Sobti did not intend to narrate the story of a particular village. In an interview with Kamāl Ahmad, she states: “*Zindagīnāmā* is not the story of any particular village. In that period the Indian countryside, despite various regional differences, might have been almost just the same [‘*Zindagīnāmā*’ *kiśī ek gāv kī kahānī nahī hai. Us kālkhand mẽ Bhārat kā dehāt vibhinn kṣetrīy vibhinnṭāō ke bāvjūd lagbhag ek-sā hī rahā hogā*].” (Cf. *Kamāl Ahmad kī bātcūt*, 334. The quotation is part of Kṛṣṇā Sobti's answer to Kamāl Ahmad's question concerning the village: “You have woven the entire story through a village of Gujrat (district), ‘Dera Jatt [Dērā Jatt]’. Was it your village? [*Āpne sārī kathā Gujrāt ke ek gāv ‘Dērā Jatt’ ke mādhyam se bunī hai. Kyā yah āpkā gāv thā?*].” (*Kamāl Ahmad kī bātcūt*, 334). It is to be noticed that Dera Jatt [Dērā Jatt] is not a village, neither is it an area of Gujrat district: it is a trans-Indus cultural region, situated between the Indus river and the Sulaiman range, while the Gujrat district, lying between the rivers Jhelam and Chenab, is located in the north-east of western Panjab on the border with Jammu Kashmir. A misunderstanding is also to be found in another source, where, however, instead of Dera Jatt, the name Deva Jatt is given, which is likely to be a misprint: “The focal point of the novel is the culture and style of life of the people of Deva Jatt, situated between the rivers Chenab and Jhelam.” (*Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*, vol. 5, quoted in *Chavi-saṅgrah* – 3, *Kṛṣṇā Sobti: kṛti kṛtikār aur kṛtittv*, 6).
- ⁴ Sāhjī = Sāh jī, *jī* is an honorific suffix. The suffix *jī* is written separately throughout the text in the 1998 edition from which the quotations have been taken, while it is joined to the names in later editions (for example, in Rājkamal Paperbacks, 2007).
- ⁵ For the economic factors, see Mariola Offredi, “*Zindagīnāmā*: The undivided Panjab of Krishna Sobti,” 362-363.
- ⁶ Cf. Kṛṣṇā Sobti's interview with Ālok Bhallā: *Smṛti aur itihās*, 121-143, quoted in Mariola Offredi, “*Zindagīnāmā*: The undivided Panjab of Krishna Sobti,” 352.
- ⁷ *Smṛti aur itihās*, 135.
- ⁸ Kṛṣṇā Sobti, *Sobti ek sohbat*, 384-385, quoted in Mariola Offredi, “*Zindagīnāmā*: The Undivided Panjab of Krishna Sobti,” 370.

- ⁹ While mostly in the novel, instead of Pāndhā we find Pāndā, in this episode the correct form Pāndhā has been used. The exact word, according to the Panjabi dictionary, is *pāndhā*, pronounced as *pāndā*. In later editions, however, Pāndā is used throughout the text (for example, in Rājkamal Paperbacks, 2007).
- ¹⁰ A composition of twelve stanzas describing each month in connection with the suffering of separated lovers.
- ¹¹ For the two forms Pāndhā / Pāndā, see note 9.
- ¹² For a narration of these and other love-romances, see Gurbakhś Singh, *Kāgā sab tan khāiyo*. The title is taken from the following lines that introduce the book: *Kāgā sab tan khāiyo cuni cuni khāiyo mās / dui ākhiyā mat khāiyo piyā milan kī ās* ["Ravens, eat all my body, peck and eat my flesh / do not eat my two eyes, as I hope to behold my Beloved"]. The two lines are a free rendering of a poem by Bābā Farīd incorporated in the Sikh holy book, the *Guru Granth*. The poem would prove that Bābā Farīd, in his search for God, performed the extreme penance of inverted suspension (*cillā-e-mākūs*), in which the mystic is hung upside-down (*mākūs*) for forty (*cillā*) nights in a well. For the relevant lines of the original poem, see Balvant Singh Ānand, *Bābā Farīd* (Hindi transl. from English: Jagdīs), 27. For the English translation by Macauliffe, see Balwant Singh Anand, *Baba Farid*, 22.
- ¹³ Cf. Vijay Mishra, *Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime*, 156.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Gurcharan Singh, *Warris Shah*, 16.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ¹⁷ www.bookrags.com/research/hir-ranjha-story-ema-02/
- ¹⁸ Cf. Gurcharan Singh, *Warris Shah*, 8.
- ¹⁹ English transl. Gurcharan Singh, *Warris Shah*, 30.
- ²⁰ Gurcharan Singh, *Warris Shah*, 32.
- ²¹ English transl. Gurcharan Singh, *Warris Shah*, 39.
- ²² Gurcharan Singh, *Warris Shah*, 7-8.
- ²³ Cf. Surindar Singh Kohli, *Bulhe Shah*, 18. Elsewhere, we find that the pair were students "of the same seminary", cf. Ali Usman, "Spiritual peace: teachings of lovers", *Daily Times*, July 25, 2007, in *Sufi News and Sufism World Report*, July 26, 2007 (sufinews.blogspot.com/2007_07_01_archive.html).
- ²⁴ Cf. Denis Matringe, "Kṛṣṇaite and Nāth elements in the poetry of the eighteenth-century Panjabi Sūfī Bullhe Śāh," 199.
- ²⁵ English transl. Surindar Singh Kohli, *Bulhe Shah*, 79-81. For the original transliterated, 78-80.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.
- ²⁷ Denis Matringe, "Kṛṣṇaite and Nāth elements in the poetry of the eighteenth-century Panjabi Sūfī Bullhe Śāh," 191.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.
- ²⁹ English transl. Surindar Singh Kohli, *Bulhe Shah*, 62.
- ³⁰ Surindar Singh Kohli, *Bulhe Shah*, 62-63.
- ³¹ English transl. Denis Matringe, "Kṛṣṇaite and Nāth elements in the poetry of the eighteenth-century Panjabi Sūfī Bullhe Śāh," 198. Rājāh is the caste name by which he is called, Dhīdo is his given name (Denis Matringe, *Ibid.*, 203).
- ³² Cf. John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature*, 284.

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