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Abstract

Although Punjabi is written in two different scripts in India and Pakistan, there are striking parallels between the literary work in Punjabi produced on both sides of the India and Pakistan border that divides Punjab. Modern Punjabi literary works on both sides of the border express a generally progressive (*pragatīvādī, taraqqi pasand*) set of political and social commitments; this is in keeping with the broader history of modern vernacular literary production in South Asia (Gopal, 2005). This essay explores further dimensions of the parallel literary commitments on both sides of the border, read against the legacy of the Partition, though a close reading of the works of Najm Hosain Syed (b. 1936), a leading writer in the Punjabi language advocacy movement in Pakistan. This exploration seeks to analyze the ways the Partition is configured in Syed’s work, and how he works to bring the past into the present — and the present into the past — against a kind of sentimental nostalgia that disengages from the political present.

Keywords

folk, Najm Hosain Syed, nostalgia, Punjabi, Pakistan, Sufism

The Punjabi language fared dramatically differently in the postcolonial states of India and Pakistan. In India, a highly contentious movement for the formation of a Punjabi language state emerged to fulfil the commitment of the Indian National Congress for a linguistic reorganization of states; this was not achieved until 1966 and was broadly seen as a Sikh political project. In Pakistan, Punjabi was marginalized in favour of Urdu: in the words of Julien Columbeau, “Urdu was placed at the center of a language ideology that merged language and nation. Challenging the higher place of Urdu would thus be considered an attack on the nation” (2021). Supporters of Punjabi did remain active at the margins into the 1960s in Pakistan and have grown in prominence and number since then; nonetheless, the language has not achieved the level of state support that exists in India. Despite such differences, however, there are striking parallels across the border. One is the generally progressive (*pragatīvādī, taraqqi pasand*) set of political commitments that animate modern Punjabi literature on both sides of the border (Murphy, 2018a). These commitments are in keeping with the broader history of modern vernacular literary production in South Asia and, in that sense, are relatively well known (Gopal, 2005). There are other dimensions to cross-border connections that invite consideration, however; this essay represents an effort along such lines, through a close reading of the works of Najm Hosain Syed (b. 1936), a major figure in the Punjabi movement in Pakistan, read in relation to broader trends that move across the border.

Bhaskar Sarkar notes that “the event we call Partition stretches all the way to the present moment”, emphasizing the ways in which memories of and from the Partition continue to haunt (2009: 14–15). Sarkar’s approach allows for a broad appreciation of the impact of the Partition on cultural production in the postcolonial states of Punjab in India and Pakistan, beyond the immediate testimonial mode that describes and attests to the violence of the Partition experience. For Sarkar, this allows treatment of the Partition not in isolation, but instead as “a particularly harrowing moment within a larger trauma of the Indian modern” (2009: 5). My recent analysis of the stories of Lahore-based author Zubair Ahmed engages such a reading, to explore literary choices and motifs that resonate with the impacts of the Partition (Murphy, 2018b). While the Partition is not an explicit subject within Ahmed’s work, except in one very recent story, “The Wall of Water”, its mark is visible in his treatment of time and presence, in the ways his stories “resonate with the lingering effects of the Partition, with the haunting of memories of a once-shared past that impinges on the present”, their portrayal of the “experience of loss, displacement, and betrayal”, and their exploration of temporal and locational displacement (Murphy, 2018b: 238; see Murphy trans. 2022).

The recent works of Najm Hosain Syed, a leading writer in the Punjabi language advocacy movement in Pakistan, present their own way of addressing, and seeing through and across, the Partition’s divisions. The Marxist affiliations of Syed and other allied Punjabi cultural workers have been the focus of most readings of Syed’s corpus, as we can see in the work of Sara Kazmi and Virinder Kalra and Waqas Butt, as will be discussed in the first section of this essay. These important readings counter those that see his work in broad culturalist terms and instead foreground inequality and oppression as fundamental features of human society in a capitalist mode of production. This article considers such commitments in the context of Partition remembrance. It examines recent poems from Syed’s extensive body of poetry and one recent short drama that have not been examined in the limited English-language literature on Syed’s work, which has focused on iconic plays, to consider the configuration of the partitioned present and pre-Partition past that emerges within this work (Kazmi, 2018a; 2018b). Connections will be made to broader cultural practices that emerge on both sides of the border: an engagement with the “folk” as a category, and the rendering of the past as a response to the divided present. I argue here that in speaking back to the Partition, often indirectly, Syed engages in a memorial practice beyond sentimental nostalgia, to seek out moments for action that must be located in present, as well as past, experiences of loss and violence.

Punjabi literature and its moorings in the Left

As Kazmi describes, at the core of the praxis of “Sangat”, a literary study circle organized around Punjabi writer and critic Najm Hosain Syed, is “a theoretical approach which a) links language essentially with class, and b) critiques the cultural politics of the organized Left in Pakistan for their use of an elite language (Urdu), and for ignoring local traditions of dissent” (2018b: 115). Sangat’s engagement with the Punjabi language is grounded in Marxist thought and activism, which was a founding crucible of the Punjabi movement in Pakistan as well as in India. Hafeez Malik notes that in the early years of the postcolonial state, “the embryo of an organized left, which indicated vitality and creativity through its literary forum in the first decade of Pakistan’s life, was almost totally destroyed” (1967: 664). Yet, as Kalra and Butt (2013: 544–546), and later Kazmi (2018a; 2018b: 235–237), have described in detail, communist political

organizations such as the Mazdoor Kisan Party or MKP, which was founded in 1968 and “erupted in the background of limited land reforms (introduced in 1959 and again in 1972) and the introduction of new agrarian technologies”, played a central role in promoting Punjabi on a national level (Ali, 2019: 271). In this period, Punjabi was instituted as a postgraduate course of study at the University of Punjab, Lahore, with Syed, the focus of this essay, as its first chair. Over his long career, Syed, a pioneer in the Punjabi language and cultural advocacy movement of Pakistan (Ahmed, 2006), has produced an astonishing number of works — theatre, criticism, and poetry, over 70 published books — and has played a foundational role in Punjabi language activism, in accordance with the broad cultural commitments of the MKP (Kazmi, 2018a).

Alyssa Ayres (2008, 2009) and Julien Columeau (2021) show that there were other positions, apart from that of the Left, in support of Punjabi, and thus the Left and the Punjabi movement cannot be conflated, despite sharing a strong connection. As described in detail by Columeau (2021), a Leftist critique of the nationalist position in support of Urdu emerged by the end of the 1940s, seeing the imposition of Urdu as a tool of the bourgeoisie, and the development of regional languages as a tool to empower the poor and working classes. By the 1950s, another pro-Punjabi and nationalist position was staked out in ethnic terms “structured around the binary of Urdu-speaking settlers versus Punjabi natives and promoting Punjabi as a language of an ethnic community facing cultural and linguistic invasion” (Columeau, 2021: n.p.). Advocates in this group were generally accepting of the importance of Urdu; they sought to establish Punjabi’s place as a regional language, without displacing the national status of Urdu.

Leftist commitments define Najm Hossain Syed’s work as a whole, as Kazmi (2018a; 2018b) has detailed. Kazmi sees the role of Punjabi as somewhat counter to the broader work of the progressive movement, arguing that “debates around the Left and literary radicalism in South Asia almost solely revolve around the activities and ideology of the progressive writers’ movement, whose purview was limited to writing in the ‘cosmopolitan languages’ of Urdu and Hindi” (2018a: 238). The dominance of the progressive spirit in the diverse vernacular languages in postcolonial India, including not only Punjabi but Kannada, Malayalam, and others, however, demonstrates the active role that vernaculars have taken at the regional scale; progressive ideas captured the imagination of Punjabi-language authors, who embraced the literary as a means to address gender, caste, and class hierarchies, and to portray the harsh realities of rural life. Within Pakistan, regional languages such as Sindhi too welcomed the progressive spirit. Punjabi novelist and short story writer Kartar Singh Duggal (1917–2012) tells us that after the Conference of Indian Progressives in Lucknow in 1935, “the old concept of art for art’s sake was formally abandoned [... marking] a conscious shift in new writing in Punjabi from the portrayal of the privileged to that of the under-privileged” (Sekhon and Duggal, 1992: 117). In his long career, Duggal produced a wide range of works that were, in the words of Raghbir Singh, “marked by impartiality with regard to religion, the rejection of feudal social and cultural values, concern for the freedom of women, and nationalism” (forthcoming).

Ayres draws a parallel between Syed’s mobilization of the past as an effort “to reclaim strong Punjabi heroes for the current generation”, and the cinematic passion for such figures, as seen in the Pakistani Punjabi language film *Weshi Jat* (Translation; 1975) and its sequels and parallels; she notes that this is done with a broad view of the past, beyond the founding narrative of

Pakistan as a nation (2009: 96, 102; on the films, see Sevea, 2014). She argues that the Punjabi case moves against a “classic” linguistic nationalist model, and:

offers the unusual situation of a living counterfactual: without clear instrumental motivations, or other functionalist explanations that rely on the usage of language politics to achieve other kinds of power, it becomes easier to perceive that the Punjabiyyat ethno-reclamation project is a movement to elevate a Punjabi linguistic and literary sphere from a position of marginality in the national aesthetic order — again, a strategy entirely focused on increasing symbolic capital as *an end in itself*. (2009: 1000; emphasis in original)

Kalra, Butt, and Kazmi have countered this view, arguing that Punjabi mobilization is grounded in a commitment to fundamental social change, through Marxist analysis: “[A]s the language of the uneducated — of the peasants and working class, it is shunned by the nationalist elite. Yet it is precisely this status that provides the rationale for its appeal to Left-wing groups and parties” (Kalra and Butt, 2013: 539). Instead of representing “regional” heroes, the figures that operate in Syed’s work, Kazmi argues, act as:

symbols of collective resistance, an emblem for mass movements whose protagonists are subaltern characters, marginal both to mainstream nationalist historiography and to the progressive revolutionary narrative in Pakistan that identified the urban, industrial working class as the central actor in a socialist revolution. (Kazmi, 2018a: 243)

This interpretation of Syed’s work asserts a strong grounding in Marxist analysis, thus providing a welcome counter to the decontextualizing portrayal of his work by Ayres. In this manner, Kalra and Butt as well as Kazmi enrich our understanding of the resonance of the past for Syed. Ayres is therefore right to say that a “new spirit of Punjabiyyat [that] has been nurtured by activists and intellectuals on both sides of the border as well as by the Punjabi diaspora” may “hold the promise of a more peaceful future” in the highly militarized relationship between India and Pakistan, but this is not so only because of its ability to “foster ties of affection and fellow feeling between Punjabis on both sides of the border” (2005: 65–66, 68). Instead, the grounds for this engagement are located in the commitments to social justice of those invested in Punjabiyyat, in India and Pakistan and beyond (see also Purewal, 2003; Murphy, 2018a).

The quest for shared ground

In debates over language in the Pakistani Punjab in the post-independence period, Urdu was presented by Urdu advocate Maulvi Abdul Haq as that which is common, and not regionally divided: “A local language (*Maqāmī bolī*) is only the language of a specific place (*Maqām*). A National Language (*Qaumī zubān*) is the language of an entire Nation (*Qaum*)” (*Daily Imroz*, 29 March 1948; qtd. in Columeau, 2021: n.p.). Urdu was thus posited as a ground for commonality across regional identities, rooted in Islam. While one might dismiss this position for its easy alignment with the nationalizing state, Kamran Asdar Ali points out that the “political stance of the communists was at times dangerously close to that of its own opposition, the Pakistani state and the Islamists [...] they too were seeking to create a universalist politics of social identity and homogeneity and a rational society” (2011: 20).

As I have argued elsewhere with reference to cultural production in India (Murphy, 2015), folk or subaltern cultural formations in South Asia have been presented as representing a form of commonality or universality, cutting across religious and other forms of difference. As Shumaila Hemani (2011) shows, the folk has been configured in both homogenizing and non-homogenizing statist terms in the Pakistani context. Deep parallels are visible in India, where, Rustom Bharucha argues, the representation of the folk on the national stage is “fragmented, dispersed, and ruptured through the mediations of ‘national culture’, festivals, intercultural exchange and cultural tourism” (1998: 38). As I have noted with reference to Indian Punjabi cultural production, “there are many cloths in modern theatre, art and literature woven from the thread of the folk” (Murphy, 2015: 243). Art critic and theorist Geeta Kapur has argued that one can view “the appropriation of the folk as an indigenist project [... as] a way of deferring the drive for a westernizing modernism until it can be handled by a more independent, properly middle-class intelligentsia” (Kapur 2000: 271–272; qtd. in Murphy, 2015). Elite representations of the folk have thus “fashion[ed] the cultural self-image of a new nation declaring its resistance towards imperialism through a homogenizing representational schema of their own”; in this way, they can be seen as a kind of “plunder” (Kapur, 2000: 273; qtd. in Murphy, 2015). The folk, and the formulation of the past in relation to the present, have thus functioned to undermine elitist cultural formations while also acting as an aspect of them, in both Punjab and in India and Pakistan in general. Observing a similar dynamic in Japan, Marilyn Ivy notes that the search for a “true” non-Western Japan is itself also a modern endeavour “essentially enfolded within the historical condition that it would seek to escape” (1995: 241). In Punjab, these forms of representation have been configured as a way to articulate a position of commonality, beyond nationalizing forces of various kinds. I earlier described this dynamic in the specifically literary context in the Indian Punjab, whereby the folk operates as “the spectre of critique, always already present, always prior and after at the same time, always modern and that which is not”; modern Punjabi literature in this context acts as a form of “critical cultural historical practice”, engaging with folk and subaltern cultural forms with a commitment to social change (Murphy, 2015: 455, 444).

“Folk forms and subaltern history,” Kazmi (2018b: 115) argues, are mobilized “as tools for commenting on contemporary politics” in Syed’s theatrical work, such as the famous play *Takhat Lahor* (The Throne of Lahore; Syed, 2000/1970). Kazmi calls these part of the articulation of “a radical political subject embedded in the language, land and lives of the people”, connecting Syed’s work to “wider traditions of radical art” (2018a: 245–246). This links Syed’s approach to the broader engagement with the folk discussed above; we also see broader trends in the subcontinent whereby the past was the crucible through which the present was negotiated, and the past was mobilized as a domain for the articulation of commonalities and communities effaced in the modern period. This is visible, for instance, in some of the historical narratives written by Indian progressive writer Kartar Singh Duggal, where at times sectarian histories are visible, and at other times clearly anti-communal positions are staked out, which embrace the pre-Partition religious diversity of the Punjabi landscape (Murphy, 2021).

We can see awareness of this dynamic in Syed’s recent poetry, in his engagement with Punjabi folk-classical Sufi poetry, most famously represented by the early modern Sufi poets Bulhe Shah (seventeenth century) and Shah Hosain (eighteenth century), where, in Syed’s words as a critic, “the tone of simplicity is a mask of familiar folk colour under which the subtle artistry works

undetected” (Syed, 2003/1968: 20). This seemingly contradictory formulation of the “folk-classical” is central to the pre-modern Punjabi literary ethos: compositions sung and performed in a local idiom, expressing highly developed Sufi ideas in accessible language and imagery. Such compositions are both classical, in that they represent a “high culture” of pre-modern Punjabi literary production, and also “folk”, in their relationship with vernacular life-worlds and expressive cultures. In Syed’s view, the folk is always already ours, a kind of repressed memory within us that nationalizing and commodifying forces seek to appropriate. We can see this articulated in the poem below:¹

Untitled

The time of Madho Lal Hosain
has opened the door to the unconscious
to look inside.
This time of ours crawls by.
It happens naturally:
the past that was sleeping inside has been awoken.
The body of his time touches the body of ours.
Then in that one astonishing moment of experience, time itself is complete. (Syed, 2019: 59)

Here it is the time of the Sufi poet Shah Hosain — who goes by the epithet “Madho Lal” in honour of his beloved male companion — that has opened up our awareness, not Hosain himself, or even his poetry. It is the merging of that time with ours that allows for the achievement of a new experience of time and self. It is the source of a new kind of living, but only in so far as it merges with the present.

Such a cultural program cannot be pursued without concern for appropriation, by state and other actors, or by elites themselves, as has been discussed. The folk, as a category, has too often been used by the state as well as by liberatory political projects; nostalgia has too often been configured in ways that efface critical engagement with both the past and present. Theorist Svetlana Boym (2001) distinguishes between two types of nostalgia that constitute the modern condition: restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. Through such a distinction, Boym moves beyond the designation of the nostalgia of modernity as inherently problematic; it is the orientation, the end-goal of nostalgia that represents its relative value. Restorative nostalgia, she argues, “proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps”, while reflective nostalgia “is more oriented toward an individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself” (2001: 41, 49). Dennis Walder’s recent work on postcolonial nostalgia extends on this recognition of the productive dimensions of nostalgia, in reflective terms, in postcolonial contexts, where nostalgia can be “deeply implicated in the political life of people, [and] part of their historical sense of themselves” (2011: 3).

Syed’s work can be seen to reflect Walder’s plural configuration of postcolonial nostalgia, deeply aware of the tension intrinsic to the representation of the folk, of the ways in which the past and the folk have been commodified and reproduced, and then fed back to us by the state and by capital, for consumption, as in this poem:

Untitled

Those poems that the fakīrs sang: they are close to us.
They have been blasted through the loudspeakers of ownership, from generation to generation,
and have become strangers to our ears.
You have turned it all into a performance.
In this very moment, I wish that we could sit down and talk. (Syed 2019: 61)

In the Pakistani context, Punjabi as a language is key to the position being staked out here. Most activists in the Punjabi language movement stress that their primary concern is not literary. They emphasize the need for Punjabi in primary education, to enable social and educational mobility for students; Tariq Rahman notes that the commitment to education in Punjabi has been a consistent feature of the Pakistani Punjabi movement since its inception (2002: 399).² At the same time, literary and activist interests are tied. In such terms, Kazmi calls Punjabi “a vessel for channeling pre-colonial traditions of resistance” and a “working class language”, which writers self-consciously embrace as a means to portray marginalized persons and communities, and to position folk traditions as a counter to dominant narratives and elitist positions (2018b: 115). Syed does this in his theatrical work and historical criticism, such as his treatise on the Punjabi historical narrative tradition, the *Vār* (2010). Kazmi argues that these efforts are non-nationalizing: she cites the assertion of Punjabi language advocate and member of the Sangat circle, Maqsood Saqib, that “Language as an object, as ‘Panjabi’, can only lead to the ‘peddled lie’ and ‘mockery’ that is ‘Panjabiyat’ or ethnic nationalism” (qtd. in Kazmi, 2018a: 239). But while “Panjabiyat” or “Punjabiness” may bear links to ethnic nationalism, it is most often invoked as a kind of aspiration, to bring together Punjabis divided by border, class, gender, and other hierarchies. In India, I have argued elsewhere, Panjabiyat evokes a “complex set of commonalities, across the intelligibility caused by script difference” across the border (Murphy, 2018a: 81). The non-dominant/folk narratives represented above by the figure of the fakīr are denied a nationalizing force, where the nation stands as the universal that undergirds our coming together as individuals with commonalities. This distinguishes them from the state-making and religion-making forces that share an interest in the folk. The figure of the fakīr is one that returns, representing a folk-classical figure that denies difference. This is why it is the time of Madho Lal Hosain that connects with ours.

The past to the present, and the figure of a different Punjab

How is the Partition approached, then, in the sweep of radical cultural critique that Syed embraces? While direct references to the Partition are not frequent in his poetry, there are numerous ways in which the past is invoked, and the present is interrogated in relation to this past. The folk, too, is invoked to reference a time before and outside of the Partition, before and outside of division. We see this too in the short play under discussion here, *Āne Bahāne*³ (Syed, 2016b). It is a radical and viscerally shifting temporality that accompanies engagement with the folk or subaltern in Syed’s work, to critique the differential dimensions of power that constitute our social worlds. He does not present a simple choice of past or present. He joins pre-colonial narratives to current political and economic struggles, and represents a contrast to a now-partitioned Punjab within both the past and present: if there is a time before that we must reach towards, it is located also within the present of our own experience. Evocation of the pre-colonial

constitutes a response to the division of Punjabis from each other, based on religious identity, across the border that divides Punjab; it represents a challenge to both past and present.

We can see a kind of return to a lost and ideal time in the following poem:

Untitled

We sit on the stoop, munching on the sesame brittle and sucking on sugar cane pieces.

We heard our histories
and we examined our problems and sorted them out.
We remembered our mistakes and what we had forgotten.
That was where we looked closely at our troubles,
and weighed our commitments and actions.
Storms, they come and go.
Now the doors and plazas are open.
Listen, here are these girls, dancing in the street.
We need that time again,
Where in front of every house, there was such a gathering place. (Syed, 2019: 17)

Just as the mobilization of folk and marginalized positions can serve nationalizing as well as radical interests, such a look back might provide for both nostalgic and anti-nostalgic renderings of the past on both sides of the border. In this poem, the past is indeed configured as the reserve of a way of living that is now lost. However, this is not the only dimension of the past that is invoked, and it is more often invoked in altogether different terms. Syed's approach to the past and present thus can be read in a kind of self-conscious counter-factual way. This can be seen as characteristic of Partition representations, a gesture towards the "composite culture" of the pre-Partition world, which operates within progressive literature as a counter to a partitioned cultural world, the "critical counter-factualism" invoked by Anna Bernard as a feature of representations that engage with the Partition to celebrate the *before*, "to consider other forms of social and political organization that could have (or still could) come into being" (2010: 11).⁴ However, in Syed's work, this counter-factualism is directly linked not to the past, but to a contemporary political practice.

More typical of Syed's work, then, is an approach that refuses to characterize past and present in simple opposition, and which connects them in the way Madho Lal Hosain's time is said to connect with ours, in the poem cited above. In this way, the past moves outside of nostalgia, and there is no "easy" past to return to. At the same time, there is a structure of critique that also persists across time: we see connections made explicitly, for example, to the anti-colonial, secular revolutionary Bhagat Singh, who came "to colour us all with one colour, so that we can live beyond life" (Syed, 2015b: 13–15; for another example, see Syed, 2016a: 20–21; this is also evoked in the play *Āne Bahāne*, discussed below). In this we see yet another connection to radical thought in India, as Chris Moffat's (2019) important work on representations of Bhagat Singh has explored. This sense of possibility moves across time. Such an understanding of the workings of power across time and political regimes is strikingly evident in the following poem, where British colonial power is portrayed as part of a larger dynamic of the abuse of power. It

addresses the temporal flux that sits at the core of Syed's call to action, his vision of the past and present as a continuity, and his refusal to see any one form of oppression as unique and complete:

Untitled

You say "that's true".
In every error, truth enters in and sits.
And in every set of "truths", there is some error somewhere.
If someone said,
1947 started in 1847, when the Lahore state was lost to the British,
this is true.
But if someone said,
it started when
one person first put someone else under their knee, and
dehumanized them,
that is also true.
And in both of those "truths" the error is not the same.
But they also aren't different.
They pulled and suppressed them, as a whole.
The work of sharing and that work of togetherness, if we come together and touch it now.
That is a work of the ages.
But as old as it is, it is also current.
"Is that not true?"
"That is true. But forgetting mistakes is also just as old.
Just as old as it is for someone to be forced to work for someone else." (Syed, 2015a: 11–12)

Here we see the play of time: the radical historicity of that which happens, happening fully in itself and as "true", and the dynamic of repetition that does not allow one to ignore the patterns of oppression that are repeated within the event, within the happening.

In this context, it is useful to think — or rather, to rethink — the Partition in Syed's work. When we look at Syed's rendering of the past, there is no yearning for that which is out of reach and free of the trials of historical happening. Instead, the pains of the present are connected to those of the past, and the pain of colonial occupation is linked to the economic and social orders of exploitation that preceded, and followed, it. The sense of the continuity of oppressive social formations, despite ostensible political change and the trauma of the Partition, is striking in the next poem, where the inequalities of caste, gender, and class hierarchies operate unchanged. The structural violence of these social divisions thus travels through the violence of the Partition's divide.

Untitled

My grandfather was a Mazahabi Sikh.
All that fuss happened, and they fixed the border just 3 *pelis* from our house.⁵
And so the Sardars left.⁶

After that, their laborers went with them.
My grandmother was adamant.
“I am not leaving my home.
I will read the Kalima and become a *Musalan*.”⁷
“Some Sikh will kill you,
Here so close to the border,” grandfather said.
“Even if they do, I won’t go. You do what you like.”
There was a church in the nearby village.
The Padre said: “Come, I will make you a Christian.
England and America will stand by you, and you can live in peace.”
Grandmother said, “You can have your England and America.
I have all the protection I need.”
Padre smiled, and said “It’s OK, come. I am also *desi*.”⁸
After that my grandfather, and then my father, started sweeping out the church.
They had to take the shit away for the new rulers who had come.
My father fought with my mother all the time.
She went to the city.
She married someone else.
And her husband’s group killed a friend of my father’s.
So, my father killed one of his elders.
They said he had to spend life in jail.
That left me to take care of my grandmother.
He managed to get through 15 years of his sentence, and then he came back.
My mother returned.
The fights started all over again.
One day he beat her, and she fell.
She had a heart attack and died.
Then he set up a marriage exchange.
He gave me to someone who was blind, while the blind man’s niece, who was my equal in age,
was married to my father.
That man wanted to devour me alive.
So, after going to the blind uncle’s house, I slipped away. My father’s eyes turned red with anger
“I will do to you what I did to your mother.”
I was terrified, and ran away to the city.
My mother’s second husband accepted me as a daughter. I started working for 15 different
houses.
Two times I got pregnant and had to have an abortion.
I ran away with his son.
He used to call me his sister in front of other people.
Then, in front of me, he would take money from his friend for me. Then, one day, I don’t know
what happened.
I stabbed him in the stomach with a knife.
I was put in the police station.
At night, the officer too wanted his turn.
So, I gained his trust, and then smashed his head on the floor.
I was sent to a woman’s jail.

I had to sweep that jail for 20 years.
Then I came out.
Every night I have the same dream:
The city is on fire, and
The whole world has burned and turned into ash.
The broom leaves my hand, and my chunni is wrapped around my head. The broom gathers all
of the ash together,
And then pisses and cleans everything away.
A huge thick forest suddenly grows up.
My broom and I have become trees in the forest.
In some kind of language we have a secret conversation.
The taste of our language cannot be fathomed.
If you were with us, you would understand.
(Syed, 2016a: 24–27)

Such a poem denies an easy portrayal of a pre-Partition/folk/pre-modern past as being of a different or better order. The violence of the present is fully grounded in a past and repeats itself; the Partition occurs within it and as a part of it. The terms of that violence are carried through, for a family made to act as sweepers, generation after generation, who after the Partition “had to take the shit away for the new rulers who had come”. The experience of sexual violence moves through relationships and contexts, a persistent oppression that travels through different forms of identity making.

At the same time, the question of division emerges. Syed is clear in his poetry, as shown in the following two examples, about the source of such division: it is enacted by powerful elites, who promote division among people as a means of control:

Untitled

“You are so right.
It has grown.
We ourselves gave birth to the pinch of hunger at home
and placed this danger upon their heads.
That is what has allowed these people to come together
to break the dais of Order.
There is only one solution.
Age after age we have seen this before.
Bring forth an enemy from among them, and draw them out.
These people who have come together will then scatter, and they will call them- selves before the
Law.”
(Syed, 2019: 8)

The matter of Mauju, the master craftsman⁹

This thought occurred to me, thus:
Let them take off their monkey-caps.
They are all fakers.

Dancing before us, they show us our own selves. Maybe they mock us.
It is all the same, if the hat is big or small.
When you take up with a group,
you abandon your search for the world.
(Syed, 2019: 14)

In both of these poems we see how division is produced and imposed, how people are divided to serve the interests of those in power. This is linked to a kind of spiritual division that can only be resolved through transformative realization of one's inter-connections, and of the fluidity and connectivity of time itself, as we have seen. The fakir or Sufi renunciate is an important figure in this regard, operating through the specificity of the figure of Madho Lal Hosain, as seen in the poems above, as well as in the principle of *fakīrī* itself. Figures like Shah Hosain are known for their rejection of worldly matters, and of social mores and norms. Shah Hosain was known to have flouted conventional patriarchal mores: he danced in women's clothes, and he was in love with a young man. *Fakīrī* itself is presented as an alternative to the economic, social, and political divisions of our world and we see this articulated in Syed's play *Āne Bahāne* (Syed, 2016b: 81–96).

The play is set in 1946, the year before the Partition, though it is never explicitly mentioned; division, however, is addressed throughout. The opening scene of the play revolves around the performance of the ritual of the *khārā*, the overturned basket upon which brides and grooms are made to sit, washed, and readied as a part of the wedding ritual. Asma Qadri's analysis of the play elaborates on the significance of this bathing ritual: it is like the water that surrounds a child in the womb, allowing the bather to be born anew (2018: 76; see Qadri, 2018: 74–88 for a full description and analysis). The four characters in the play are: Kammi, a woman from the *Nāī* or barber community; Chetū, the son of the landowning Sayyid community for whom Kammi works; Saggu, who appears at first to be a beggar, but later is revealed to be a revolutionary or *ghadarī*, fighting for independence from British rule; and Tephā, Kammi's son. When Chetū asks Kammi about the *khārā*, this leads to a wide-ranging discussion of the dynamics of power in their shared, yet uneven, world. Saggu is associated with Bhagat Singh. He brings awareness and liberation to the lives he touches, through a "party" that has no name, no leadership, and no sign, and he works to make the impossible possible (Syed, 2016b: 92–93, 89–90). It is Kammi who dressed Saggu as a *fakīr*, she tells Chetū, and he is described as having no home, and being at home everywhere, and doing all kinds of work (Syed, 2016b: 89–90). As Qadri puts it, "Kammi understands this *fakīrī* tradition of the soil" (2018: 82). In Kammi's vision, the barber — deemed low-caste by those who claim high-caste status — is leader, law, and justice: the one who shows the way (Syed, 2016b: 87).

Gender operates in a central capacity in Syed's work; it is a prominent theme in this play. When discussing how men (including her own son) want to fight, Kammi says that there is something beyond this: "Whoever truly meets, does not remain 'man' or 'woman'" (Syed, 2016b: 91). *Fakīrī* dissolves the distinction between men and women. This theme runs through the play: it is visible in Kammi's role as a keeper of wisdom, a supporter of revolution, and as a realized political actor, and in the way marriage acts as the central metaphor for both the potential for full connection and its denial when the marriage is forced and choice is not allowed. As Syed articulates in a more recent work, entitled *Āīāñ* (meaning the women have come or, perhaps a

voice calling out, “I/we women have come”), there is a kind of truth in women’s gatherings: “If they come into the circle of women, just one time/Wherever they go, the circle is born anew” (2019: 7). He thus valorizes the gathering place of women, the *trinjan*, the *athan*, as a place outside of capitalist economic and social relations, but also as a place where traditional culture can persist. He also relates this to the position of the figure of Hir from Punjabi folk- classical culture, whose love for Ranjha defied the social norms of her time, and ultimately led to her death at the hands of her own family, for her defiance:

Untitled

“Father,
You are living here in the village.
You have put together a story and come to tell it.
One that our elders had told.
Your stories don’t get published, and don’t sell.
Nowadays, who has the time to remember anything?
Everyone is addicted to their phones.
No one talks with anyone else, and nobody listens.”
“Brother,
We are only feeding our needs.
As for the rest:
A Hir sits inside every woman.
Having gotten her own thatched hut,
any woman — born in a mansion,
or in a street —
her fathers, brothers, and husbands live in fear.
Lest the time might come:
That our daughter, sister, or wife,
might get her own place, and become a Hir.
And for those of us living in Jhang Maghyane, where Hir’s family lived, and Rangpur, where her in-laws lived,
that she would get up and unravel everything, and turn it on its head.” (Syed, 2019: 50–51)

Hir is a complex figure. In the mid-eighteenth-century version of the text by the Sufi poet Waris Shah, she speaks out boldly against her parents to argue for her right to marry the person she loves. She eventually joins forces with her sister-in-law Sahiti, after she is married to another man, and Sahiti speaks out boldly on behalf of women (Murphy, 2018c). Here, Syed invokes Hir to critique the patriarchal order, and she haunts the present as a kind of subversive possibility. This is a feature of the play analyzed above: the women participate in the *khārā* ritual cry as they sing the line “I myself have climbed about the boat with Ranjha”, voicing Hir’s decision to go with Ranjha, in defiance of her family’s wishes (Syed, 2016b: 81, 83). This is why Cheṭū has come to see Kammi: to ask why the women cry while singing this line; Kammi tells the young Cheṭū that they cry because these Hirs have not been able to board onto Ranjha’s boat (Syed, 2016b: 83–84). Cheṭū asks further, “Has some Kaido come in between them?”, here referring to Hir’s interfering uncle in the story, who reports on her to Hir’s parents and initiates the cascade of events that result in her being married off to someone else. “The whole world is Kaido” (Syed,

2016b: 84), Kammi answers, and those who have a Ranjha, and those who do not have one, cry alike for this loss. Here, too, the folk-classical tradition operates, offering a rebellion that is of the present, as it is of a past.

In Syed's works we see the fluidity of time: references to the recurring structural violence of the present in relation to the past, and of the commonality of experience in the face of loss and change. We see the grounding of the present in the past, and the ways in which change is configured as a constant. There is no before, and no after. There is no easy past to resort to, and the need for change is both societal and personal, past and present; this situation evokes Walder's configuration of the positive dimension of nostalgia, which "admits the past into the present in a fragmentary, nuanced, and elusive way, allowing [...] for self-reflexivity or irony" (2011: 16). Syed's work shows how the spectre of the "before" that operates in the partitioned Punjab can function as a response to both the past and present, whereby pre-colonial and folk references can constitute a response to and grounding beyond the partitioned landscape, within the politics of today. At the same time, there is no before, and the trials of the past and present are one. Each poem acts as a kind of meeting point, a joining of time grounded in the commonality of the experience of power. This temporal flux allows his work to move beyond nostalgia, and the easy answer that it provides to the division of the self.

Conclusion

Fahmida Riaz attributes to Najm Hosain Syed a kind of "mystical Marxism" that is "pre-occupied with the 'reality of the self', an undefined goal that transcends the issue of democracy and human rights"; as a result, she sees his ideas as "impossible" (2011: 92, 95–96; see discussion in Murphy, 2018a). Such a reading rejects Syed's political interventions and misreads the literary as a retreat from the political. This misreading reflects a broader division between the "modernist" and "progressive" that has been imposed on South Asian cultural production and that warrants further interrogation, as Sean Pue has pursued in the context of Urdu literary production (2011, 2012). Syed's commitment to theatre, as well as to poetry, reflects a concrete connection between action and reflection, the political and the literary. The terms of the discourses he engages deny such binaries. Such a position evokes Aamir Mufti's articulation of a contingent position outside of identity itself, to embrace "the possibilities of living *with* this crisis [of authenticity] and coming to understand the social and ethical stakes in the struggle to live" (2000: 96; emphasis in original).

It is the very impossibility of a national formation of Punjab across an international border in the current geopolitical configuration that gives the idea of "Punjabiyaat" a meaning that can deny the nationalizing discourses that would otherwise thwart its transformational potential. The ongoing tragedy of the Partition might easily be configured as a form of nostalgic yearning, akin to the nationalizing formulations of the folk and the past mentioned earlier. The divided self operating in Syed's work, however, denies such an easy position. Ultimately, Punjabi in Pakistan converges with Punjabi interests in India in ways that are perhaps only possible because of its relative marginalization in both locations. Christine Everaert has noted the "converging" and "diverging" forces that have both maintained commonality and enforced difference between Urdu and Hindi, with division grounded in the different nationalizing forces undergirding each (2010: 225). A parallel can be seen here regarding the ways Punjabi is pulled in different

directions in different national contexts, but with strong commonalities among them based in a commitment to addressing social inequality and in the impossibility of the nation itself. This is the making of an impossible — and in that, truly liberatory — Punjab, beyond the nation form.

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Notes

1. All extracts from Syed’s works are translated by the author and Qadri.
2. Interviews with Punjabi language activists Mustaaq Soofi, Zubair Ahmed, Saeed Bhutta, and Maqsood Saqib, February 2014, in Lahore. See: <http://blogs.ubc.ca/annemurphy/research/modlit/lahore/>.
3. This enigmatic title evokes the idea of saying something in different ways, to make it understandable, or to change the subject. It also can suggest the role of money, the now obsolete currency the *ānā*, and its relationship with the telling of a story.
4. See a parallel discussion with reference to Faiz’s work (Mufti, 2007: 224–225). For valuable discussion of alternative ways of configuring the idea of shared cultural moorings, and for more discussion of modernist/progressive cultural discourse in Pakistan, see (Pue 2011: 588 ff.).
5. A short distance.
6. Land-owning Sikhs.
7. A *musalan/musali* is a Muslim lower-caste person.
8. Local or “of the country”.
9. Mauju is one of the recurring characters who appear in Syed’s poetic works. Personal communication, Asma Qadri, June 2021.

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