



CONTEXTUALIZING UMAR SOOMRO

THE VILLAIN IN WEST INDIAN FOLKLORIC TRADITION

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Abstract : This paper explores the evolving portrayal of Umar Soomro, a mythological villain in Western Indian folklore, tracing his transformation across three key narratives: Umar-Marui, Dhola Maru ra Duha, and tales involving Charani goddesses like Avad and Khodiyar. Initially depicted as a redeemable anti-hero in Umar-Marui, Umar later emerges as an affluent outsider in Dhola Maru ra Duha, and finally as a fully integrated villain punished for his transgressions in Charani lore. The analysis highlights how shifts in socio-political contexts, such as Rajput identity formation, regional power dynamics, and the patron-client relationships between elites and peripatetic communities, influenced these changes. Additionally, the paper examines symbolic elements like the choice of mounts (camels vs. horses) as markers of power and identity. Through Umar Soomro's shifting roles, the study reveals broader processes of cultural and moral order crystallization in early-modern Western India

IndexTerms - Component,formatting,style,styling,insert.

I. INTRODUCTION

Villainy, in literature at large and folklore in particular, is used to enunciate the bad, the immoral, and the dishonorable. The villains, through their transgressions, impress on the audience the contours of the moral order they, and by extension the audience exist in. Villainy, like heroism, drawing upon the existing representations in literature tends to become formulaic and existing in forms of tropes. Of the more popular tropes of villainy (and also the subject of discussion here) is the 'bad king' or perhaps the 'lustful king' seen most popularly in the figure of Ravana, who transgressions are motivated by want of woman who become victims of attempts of abduction (Sita in Ravana's case) or perhaps some other forms of violence. This transgression invites an avenger who causes for the downfall of the villain.

The subject of this article, the character of Umar Soomro (alternatively, Hamir) is portrayed in the trope of the 'bad king' who attempts to abduct women, and this transgression leads to his downfall and destruction. While there was a historical Soomro dynasty based in Sindh, it becomes aptly clear when looking at the oral tradition of Western India that Umar Soomro is a mythological and timeless figureⁱ, and represents a traditionⁱⁱ of villainy flourish in Western Indian oral literature. Umar, and his alternate Hamira, seems to have been borrowed from the Arabo-Persian nomenclature where they were synonyms for high-ranking officials, Umar and Amir. The mythological Umar Soomro was the ruler of Sindh and became famous as a villain who operated in the geographical, political, cultural, literary and moralistic space of Western India.ⁱⁱⁱ

II. THE UMAR OF UMAR MARUI

The Thar desert was a vast yet interconnected space which was linked not just by the way of life i.e. nomadic-pastoralism, but also by culturally, politically and socially.^{iv} The trades routes linked not only the towns in the region, but also developed religious and cultural connections, forming circuits where trade, faith and polity intermingled. Placed in the west of this larger geo-cultural region, Sindh was also the seat of power of our mythical figure Umar Soomro.

Vernacularization of the Sindhi language takes place in the fifteenth century, and intricately linked to the Sufi movements in the region. The scholars of Sindhi tend to accept Qazi Qazan (1463-1551) as the author of oldest Sindhi poetry.^v Shah Abdul Latif's (1689-1752) '*Shah Jo Risalo*', a classic of Sufistic Sindhi poetry, popularized the tale of Umar Marui.^{vi} Latif, also known as Shah Sahib was a cosmopolitan figure, and drew his inspirations from a number of literary repertoires, ranging from Vedanta, Quran, Gita to the folklore of western India.^{vii}

In its makeup Umar Marui is like other many other multi-layered Sufi romances, it still seems older. While some arguments about this being an older text rely on the historical Soomro dynasty that ruled Sindh^{viii}, I will here attempt to make historical argument

from within the text. The story in its makeup is pretty simple. Marui is a beautiful girl in the betrothed to boy named Khet. Phog, another villager, gets jealous and informs Umar Soomro of the girl's beauty. Umar abducts the girl while she is drawing water from a well on his camel. Marui is captured and kept in luxury at Umar's fort in Umarmkot, but she laments of her village, the simplicity of her place and its people. Umar keeps her there for a year but his proposal is still rejected. Marui tells Umar of them being siblings in a later revelation, and this knowledge and her dedication touches Umar's heart who returns her back to her village.^{ix}

A few things about the narrative stand out. The first is the commonality of heroine, Marui, and her accessibility to Umar in her abduction. The later folklores where Umar is cast as a villain, he tries to abduct or propose marriage to women who are princesses (in Dhola Maru ra Duha) and even goddesses (in case of Avad and Khodiyar). As opposed to them, Marui is common village girl who goes to draw water from the well. Perhaps, insignificance of her social origins allows not only to abduct her but also for Umar to escape the destructive fate he meets in other legends. The reason for her abduction is a jealous lover who informs the Soomro king of her. This also allows the space for Umar Soomro's redemption in the story, and thus making him more of an anti-hero who eventually stands chance at redemption.

Secondly, Umar here is abducting her on a camel and he is accompanied by Phog who points out Marui for him. The Umar Soomro's of other tales ride a horse, and have an army following him. Firstly, on the subject of camels and horses, camels, especially the double-humped ones (which would be used as a beast of burden and of travel in Thar), were introduced in the region after the conquest of Sindh in eighth century and their use became frequent in the following centuries.^x Camel was predominantly the burden and travel animal of choice in the desert, given lack of options and camel's superior adaptability. Once the horses were abundant, they became the choice animal for travel in the region. The horses were integral to the processes of Rajput state formations, especially in the case of Marwar where they made them a dominant force.^{xi} Even in the oral traditions, we see Charani devis providing warriors with horses^{xii}, and not camels. The number of Rajput warriors who were immortalized as gods also rode horses, for instance Pabuji. This is not to say that horses were absent from region of Thar, but here we are looking at popular imagination in oral and literary traditions, and what we find is that Umar of Umar-Marui rode a camel and not a horse. This can perhaps be seen as a mark of inferiority, although regional identities did play a role in the choice of the mount. The point that I stress is that when the change in the public perception of what a personage of power (be it a bad king or a good king) rode occurred, it perhaps was marked by an abundance of horses who would've formed an important part of the armies. Additionally, it would have occurred early in the process of formation of Rajput identity formation as martiality would become central part to Rajput identity, and horses were an indispensable to this martiality. This is perhaps the reason why Chunda Rathore is equipped with a horse and weapons by Charan Alha Rohadiya before presenting him to Maloji.^{xiii} Coming back to Umar-Marui, we can thus make a claim of it being an older narrative, perhaps belonging to the earlier periods of the not just tradition of Umar as a villain, but also of Rajput identity formation, if not predating it.

III. THE CHANGED UMAR OF DHOLA MARU

In *Dholā-Mārūrā Dūhā* (DMrD from now on), Umar Soomro sends his Charan proposing marriage to Maruni, who is already married to Dhola. This causes the meeting between Dhola has left Narwar for Pugal and Charan of Umar Soomro carrying the message of rejection of Soomro's proposal. The Charan, filled with jealousy, describes Maruni as in unflattering terms to Dhola who grows concerned. The Charan's description of Maruni's beauty is in contrast to that of the Dhodhi's from Pugal. This concern is eased by another Charan called Visu who clears the truth about Maruni's beauty to Dhola who then continues his journey to Pugal.^{xiv}

Later, Umar learns of the return of Dhola with Maruni back to Narwar and Umar meets Dhola with his army and deceives him by treating him as a guest and later planning of snatching Maruni from him. A female singer from Maruni's maternal home reveals to Maruni of the plot of Soomro. As Maruni learns of the plot, she alongside Dhola make an escape on Dhola's camel.

In DMrD we see Umar Soomro is riding a horse, and has acquired a Charan. The earliest Arab conquest of Sindh dates back to 712 CE, and their victories were based on their skills as great horsemen. Being in the sphere of influence of the Arabic and later Islamic armies, who rode predominantly on horseback, could have perhaps altered the popular imaginary of the powerholder of Sindh as being on a horseback.

On the flipside, Dhola rides a camel. But his camel is no ordinary camel, and is able to outrun the Soomro army even with its hind legs tied. The choice of camel could either be attributed regional identities that influenced such choice, or lack of availability of horses, or perhaps both. A point to note is that Dhola's camel possesses supernatural speed which could indicate developing popular imagination of a hero blessed with supernatural object i.e. the camel. The two heroes can then be seen as contrasts. Where Umar rides a horse and commands an army, Dhola rides alone but on a camel exhibiting supernatural capabilities. Could this be seen as a difference in the resources that a king like Umar Soomro and Dhola could command? Also, perhaps the supernatural abilities of the camel were an attempt to provide Dhola with some respite against the much greater military capacity of the Soomra army.

If we were to strip the narrative of its moralistic overtones and see the three kingdoms of Narwar, Pugal and Sindh from a purely pragmatic lens of political marriage alliances, Sindh seems to be the most affluent and powerful, followed by Narwar, and Pugal. The position of Pugal automatically puts it in a position of a junior alliance partner. If Pugal were to form a marital alliance, it would make more sense to marry into the kingdom of Sindh rather than Narwar, especially when Dhola has forgotten about the marriage. Yet Raja Pingal of Pugal prefers to send a reminder to Dhola through Dhadhis than marry Maruni to Umar. One reason could be that of a sense of loyalty king Pingal might feel towards king of Narwar and Dhola because they sheltered them in their

times of hardships. But could it also be, if we're to ignore the earlier marriage of Dhola and Maruni, that the choice of the prince of Narwar could be informed by the idea of Umar Soomro as being an outsider?

Harold-Tambs Lyche has argued that the Umar Soomro is an 'insider' to the moralistic order of the larger Thar region and is thus meted with punishments for his transgressions.^{xv} But Umar in DMrD escapes any forms of punishment. In fact, violence in DMrD markedly absent. Dhola never fights, and chooses to flee with Maruni when Umar tries to capture him. A transgression here goes unpunished. Also is lacking any moralistic order that is so prevalent in the tales of Charani goddesses.

Whatever might be the case, Umar's relative affluence is visible in the story. He has a Charan who takes his proposal of marriage to Pugal. While acquiring a Charans was a central part of the process of Rajputization, the patron-client relationships between peripatetic communities were a common feature of the economy of Thar.^{xvi} The position of Charans as the priests of Charani goddesses, as traders^{xvii} and their skills as poets that made Charans an appealing option for the Rajputs to cement their social position. Charans would have remained an influential community even before their employment by the Rajputs and employing one would have required affluence. This could perhaps be the reason why king of Pugal employs Dhadhis, a lower class of musicians to Charans, to remind Dhola of his marriage to Maruni. The employment of a Charan by Umar Soomro in DMrD, thus, can be seen as a patron-client relationship common in Thar, that predates Rajputization and a marker of the affluence of the Soomros

The figure of Umar Soomro in DMrD thus seems like an alien (albeit affluent) figure in the contrasting imagery of much humbler kingdoms Narwar and Pugal. His role here is that of a villain and no more. Him escaping punishment also forces us to conclude that the mere escape of Dhola and Maruni is to be seen as a fruitful ending. The universe of DMrD is one which is still untouched by the process of Rajputization. Dhola has no attributions that would become the mainstay of later Rajput warriors. There's no martiality, no battles, and more importantly, no dishonor in running away. And Umar, here seems like an outsider. Can his 'outsideness' be attributed to a distinction of faith and a varying system of religiosity between the muslim Umar and non-muslim (not necessarily Hindu, but rather the religious traditions of the region) others? As already noted, Sindh remained in the sphere influence of Islamic empires which sprang up in Central and Western Asia. We find mentions of battles with the Arabs from the times of Pratihara Nagabhata I^{xviii}, with Sindh supplying as a faultline. The medieval traveler Sulaiman notes that muslims were also known to have been persecuted in the Pratihara dominions. Could it be that the imagination of Umar Soomro turned to that of an outsider muslim aggressor in DMrD?

In one way which Umar Soomra can perhaps be seen as an 'outsider' is in the way Tambs-Lyche argues that Mahmud of Ghazna is an 'outsider', in that there is an understanding that he belongs to a radically different moralistic order and thus doesn't need to be punished for his transgressions like the destruction of Somanatha.^{xix} Umar is thus an outsider not in the sense of some Hindu-Muslim dichotomy that became prevalent under colonialism, rather an outsider to moralistic order specific to the region and period of DMrD. There are still significant gaps in research to answer the question of place of Umar Soomra in DMrD with sufficient conviction, but what can be said with significant certainty is that the Umar Soomro of DMrD was significantly different from that of Umar-Marui.

IV. THE UMAR SOOMRO WHO WAS DESTROYED

The Umar Soomro that we find in the legends of Charani goddesses like Avad and Khodiyar is one who is well integrated into the moralistic order of the Thar society.^{xx} In case of Avad, he unfairly levies taxes on salt merchants (presumably Charans) passing through his territory. He takes over the land of Charans and forces them to give Avad and her sisters in marriage to him. His transgressions are met with the changing of course of Sutlej from Sindh, leading to the desertification of his domains, and a later defeat of his army against an allied army of Summas, Bhatias and an army of goddesses led by Avad herself.

A third tale of Umar Soomro and Charani goddess involves Khodiyar, who was also the goddess of pastoralist Ahirs. Who help Naughan regain his throne in Junagarh. Naughan's half-sister is abducted by Umar. Here Naughan serves as the avenger who defeats Umar Soomro with help from goddess Khodiyar and Varudi. Later, he is also joined on his way back by Shikotar, the goddess of Soomro, who had left the clan given his sinful acts.

The Umar Soomro that we see in the opposition to Charani goddesses seems to be in a sense the final evolution that the Soomro king goes through. He is fully integrated into the world of Charani moralistic order, and all his transgressions are punished. This figure of Umar Soomro is contiguous with the processes of Rajputization and the Rajput state formations.^{xxi} These stories of Charani goddesses were immortalized by Charans and patronized by the Rajput kingdoms with whom they were linked, thus making Umar Soomro a full-fledged villain in this Charan-Rajput lore.

Ramya Sreenivasan on her work on the literature coming from hinterland courts from the late fourteenth to mid sixteenth century notes that the local chiefs that became the new center of patronage for the poets in this period due to a lack of an overarching central authority. These new elites distinguished their ranks by firstly, maintaining large households, and secondly, patronizing poets. The poets of this period adopted and altered the classical models of genres like *masnavis* and *mahakavyas* to fit the aspirational motifs of their new patrons. This new literature took form in protagonists going out on quests, to win over their beloved and focused on the tensions between the protagonists and their overlords.^{xxii}

Perhaps we can see the villainous figure of Umar Soomro of Charani lore as a part of similar forms of regionalization and/or localization of the villain tropes when classical models were altered to the new. Since the maintaining of large households and the

control over women became the status markers for the new elite, a villain who attempts to abduct women needed to be punished, hence punishments became prevalence in these stories involving Umar Soomro.

More importantly, the character of Marui (a commoner), lacks any agency, and her abduction has no outward impact on Umar. Maruni, on the other hand, is a princess, and while she escapes the kidnapping attempt by Umar, she shows considerable agency in informing Dhola of Soomro's plot and even takes the lead in running away on the camel. In the stories of the Soomro destruction, we see goddesses helping avengers or becoming the avengers themselves. Could this have been because of a change in the importance accorded to women in royal households? The new importance shouldn't be seen in that they were given more important positions (while that might have been the case), but rather what Sreenivasan has argued as the control over women of the new elites. Their lack of accessibility of these women to Umar Soomro then becomes directly proportional to their importance for as the status markers of the new elites. A lacuna in research on the patron-client relationships between the Rajput elites and the Charan-Bhats of the leaves us short of drawing any more conclusions from these developments.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is interesting to note that looking at how villainy is being imagined in the figure of Umar Soomro. We see him turning from a villain who can be redeemed, to one who perhaps lying outside the cultural and moralistic order of the region, to who is fully integrated into it. With time, as the regional identities are being shaped and reshaped, villainy also undergoes a similar change in character. Also, in these processes of change we see shaping of accessories or tools of identity markers, like the camel and the horse, which themselves are shifting in meaning. It would perhaps not be too far-fetched to suggest that it will be through changes of popular imagination like we see in the figures of Umar Soomro, in response to the shift in socio-political and cultural movements that the later identities like those of Rajputs, and Hindus and Muslims would also be crystallized in early-modern and modern periods.

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