



Stereotypical Portrayal of Women in Pashto Songs, Ghazal, and Tappa

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Abstract

This study examines the portrayal of women in Pashto songs, with a specific focus on how it reflects and reinforces the gender roles within Pashtun society. Recognising the cultural importance of Pashto music, the research explores how lyrical content contributes to the construction of women's identities through a feminist cultural lens. Employing a qualitative content analysis, specifically thematic analysis, the study analyses a purposively selected sample of Pashto songs known for perpetuating gender-based stereotypes. The findings of the study show that women are often portrayed as passive, submissive, and dependent figures, with their roles mostly confined to the home. In many songs, women are often celebrated primarily for their beauty, while their individuality, decision-making abilities, and intellectual strengths are often overlooked. This narrow focus reduces women to decorative symbols rather than recognising them as full participants in society. Such portrayals continue to reinforce traditional gender roles and support patriarchal thinking. As a result, these representations become a barrier to promoting gender equality and limit the possibility of more balanced and respectful portrayals of women in cultural expression. The study contributes to the broader dialogue on gender, media, and cultural reform, emphasising the need for more empowering and multidimensional portrayals of women in Pashto songs.

Keywords: music, Pashtun women representation, patriarchal society.

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Introduction

Pashto is an ancient language with a history dating back over 5,000 years. It has a diverse and rich literary tradition and is widely spoken in Afghanistan and Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. This research study focuses on Pashto music, exploring how songs and poetry reflect cultural values and contribute to the stereotypical portrayal of women within Pashtun society. Pashto, also referred to as Pakhto or Pukhto, is an Indo-European language that is primarily spoken by the Pashtun people, who reside in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It belongs to the Iranian branch of the language family. Worldwide, there are approximately 38 million speakers of the Pashto language. It is the first language of about 12 million people in Afghanistan and almost 90% of the population in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan (Tegey and Robson 14). Additionally, there are Pashto speakers in Baluchistan and Karachi, where approximately two million people speak Pashto. Furthermore, Iran is home to about fifty thousand native Pashto speakers (Rahman 51).

The Pashtun are an ancient nation with their unique code of life. In the local language, the code is also known as Pashtunwali, as well as "Pashto." Pashto serves as both the language and the code of conduct in life. Pashtunwali encompasses various aspects of Pashtuns' lives, including customs, attire/dressing, hospitality, honour, bravery, honesty, and promise-keeping. It also includes decision-making through *Jirgas*¹, offering asylum and security, and other vital aspects of the Pashtuns' lives. Pashtuns have an inherent tendency to observe their cultural traditions and norms. They strictly follow the customs of their ancestors. These cultural traditions shape every aspect of their lives, including the way they use language and express themselves in literature. Music and poetry, in particular, play a significant role in their daily lives. They connect with them not only on an emotional level but also with thoughtful reflection, making these forms of expression deeply meaningful to them. That is why their fields/*hujras* and all other recreational places are decorated with various musical instruments like guitars, *tambals*², pitcher, and flute, showing their love for music (Khalil 29).

The origins of music can be traced back to the dawn of human civilisation, where it has long served as a means of both entertainment and communication. The definition and significance of music vary across cultural and social contexts, shaped by differences in its creation, performance, and societal role. Therefore, it is possible to categorise music into genres and subgenres; however, the boundaries between these genres are often overlapping, open to personal interpretation, and may be subject to controversy. Within the realm of art, music can be categorised into three main areas: the performing arts, the fine arts, and the auditory arts. It can further be divided into folk music and art music. Music can be recorded, played, and heard live, and it may be part of a motion picture or film. It is often regarded as the song of life, reflecting the emotions, values, and cultural identities of its people. It is widely appreciated in Afghanistan, the northwestern regions

¹ a traditional assembly or council of elders

² a type of hand-played goblet drum

of Pakistan, and among the global Pashtun diaspora, holding a unique place in the cultural landscape of these regions. Known for its melodious and captivating nature, it is deeply influenced by Sufi traditions, emphasising themes of peace, love, spiritual devotion, and universal harmony. It incorporates both classical and Western musical instruments, with the *rabab*³ serving as its foundational instrument. Beyond its aesthetic appeal, it conveys powerful themes of romanticism and nationalism, resonating deeply with its audience and reinforcing cultural pride and identity (Khan and Khattak 55). Despite the vast popularity and cultural significance of Pashto music, it faces controversies such as gender stereotypes and the marginalisation of women. In it, women are depicted as delicate, subservient, unassertive, and overly romanticised. By examining the link between music, gender, and culture, this study thoroughly analyses Pashto songs within cultural contexts to highlight the diverse and nuanced representations of women.

Gendered Language and Poetic Structures in Pashto Musical Traditions

In examining the stereotypical portrayal of women in Pashto songs, *ghazal*, and *tappa*, this review deliberately centres on lyrical content rather than peripheral musical or dance elements. The poetic language within these genres often presents women in narrowly defined roles: symbols of honour, passive devotion, or idealised beauty, thereby shaping and reinforcing gender norms within Pashtun society. *Tappay* and *ghazals*, in particular, serve as cultural vessels where recurring metaphors and narrative frames subtly embed patriarchal expectations into everyday expressions (Momand and Rahimi 46). As Hooks emphasises, lyrical discourse in any media fundamentally influences societal assumptions about gender identities (72). Focusing on the exact words, metaphors, and narrative structures of these songs is thus essential to uncovering how female identity is both shaped and constrained by traditional poetic forms in Pashto culture.

Music has been regarded as a dynamic mode of gender (Taylor 603); it is fundamentally gendered speech, a marker of sexual identity, and meaningful only in context (Treitler 18). It is related to gender concerns (McClary 54). The essential structures of music have been thought to be gender-related qualities of the music itself (Green 139), the gendered meanings of absolute music (167), and the cultural cast of femininity (McClary 124). They have been seen as depicting a gendered order of political and social power (Shepherd 98). Hargreaves et al. identify gender, age, and nationality as essential characteristics of composers in the music communication process (15-17). Rycenga suggests that music is erotic due to culturally encoded signals (284). Green finds a direct link between gendered information contained in the composition and the composer's gender: music can define femininity or masculinity based on the composer's gender (131). Similarly, the Pashto songs, *Tappa*, and *Ghazal* effectively communicate the previously mentioned social consequences. They convey this message and depict stereotypes based on gender. *Tappa* is

³ a traditional stringed musical instrument

characterised by a distinct two-line structure, where the first line consists of nine syllables and the second line comprises thirteen syllables (Dinakhel and Ul Islam 67).

***Tappa* as the Cultural Mirror of Pashtun Society**

Khalil analysed ‘Pashtun culture in Pashtu *Tappa*’⁴ and stated that the impact of folk poetry on the Pashtun community has been profound, resonating with individuals of all ages and genders. Women, in general, and girls, in particular, often vocalise melodious songs during their routine activities, such as muddling, baking, cleaning, washing, and grinding. During weddings and other celebrations, girls from the entire village sing in harmony with the rhythmic beat of the drum. Similarly, men also find comfort in these musical expressions. Pashtuns have been deeply stirred by music and poetry, intellectually as well as emotionally. All these genres collectively represent Pashtun culture, with *Tappa* being the most comprehensive, as it encapsulates romantic, social, economic, religious, political, and various other aspects of Pashtun culture. In short, it is said that *Tappa* serves as a reflective mirror of Pashtun society, capturing the essence of Pashtun culture, including romances, patriotism, freedom, loving nature, kinship relations, and other norms and traditions of Pashtuns (30).

Additionally, *Tappa* is the true reflection of Pashtun society’s mindset, depicting women in a manner that aligns with societal expectations, often portraying them as passive and subordinate to men (Khan and Naz 9). Similarly, Pamir et al. also researched aspects of Pashtun culture, discussing how it has a rich and diverse element that has evolved over centuries, shaped by a rich history and traditions. Likewise, folklore has a significant impact on national values, providing insight into ethnic and national identity. A community’s folklore reflects the individual and collective values of its people. Pashtuns have their history and culture, and their folklore plays a vital role in shaping their national identity.

Cultural Reflections in Pashto Songs

According to Khan et al., the gender modelling paradigm evident in collected Pashtu proverbs is decidedly masculine in both intent and content. The display of valour, power, and energy is associated with masculinity, while feminine virtues are exemplified by patience, perseverance, and submissiveness. In a cultural context, females are confined to the four walls of the home, while men are associated with the outside world. Proverbs encompass all aspects of Pashtun life and language, providing a rich instructional framework for guiding gender development within the context of Pashtunwali (74).

Pashto songs often perpetuate gender stereotypes, objectification, and women’s marginalisation. In it, women are depicted as weak, obedient, voiceless, and dependent entities, bound to men for their needs. Women are often overly romanticised, with a focus on their physical appearance and beauty. The literature mentioned above demonstrates

⁴ A traditional two-line Pashto poetic form

that music is an integral component of society, one that cannot be isolated from it, and that it strongly reflects a society's cultural values, conventions, and ideologies. Therefore, this research study analysed Pashto music, specifically *Tappa*, *Ghazal*, and songs, to critically examine the stereotypical portrayal of women.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach to explore the stereotypical portrayal of women in Pashto music. It contributed to an in-depth examination of Pashto songs to identify prevalent themes and patterns in the representations of women. The methodology involved a systematic process of data collection and theme identification to delve deeply into the portrayal of women in various genres, such as *Ghazal*, *Tappa*, and songs. With a focus on the contentious aspects of Pashto music related to women, this research aimed to contribute to a broader discussion on gender equality, cultural values, and the need for positive change in the portrayal and valuation of women within the Pashtun community. Moreover, data were collected through a purposive sampling of popular Pashto songs, including *Tappa*, *Ghazal*, and songs, highlighting those that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and stereotypical portrayals of women. The collected songs included 'Gul Panra & Rahim Shah, *Patasa*, Pashto Song 2021, and Gul Panra, *Geela*, Pashto.' Additional examples that directly affect women in society were gathered from local Pashto *Ghazal* and *Tappa*.

This study adopted Butler's theory of gender performativity, as presented in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler questions the traditional, binary view of gender, which sees it as something natural and unchanging. Instead, she argues that gender is not something we are born with, but something we become through repeated behaviours, social interactions, and cultural practices. In other words, gender is not a fixed identity but a performance shaped and reshaped over time by the way we speak, act, and engage with the world around us. This framework investigates how Pashto music reinforces patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes. By analysing it in its cultural context, this study shows how women are stereotypically portrayed.

Discussion and Analysis

According to Wordsworth, "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquillity." Poets write about what they observe and experience in real-life situations by adding their artistic flavour to it. Moreover, Pashtun poets address societal and cultural issues in poetry through genres such as *Ghazal* and *Tappa*, as well as other forms of music. They frequently address prevailing societal and cultural themes, such as honour, love, familial issues, revenge, and so on. Furthermore, Pashtun poets often engage critically with the prevailing ideologies of their society through their poetry. One of the most prominent themes reflected in Pashto music and verse is the patriarchal structure that continues to shape social norms and gender roles. Many poets portray a male-dominated society where traditional expectations reinforce the

centrality of men in both public and private spheres, often leaving limited space for female perspectives and agency. Pashto poets such as Ghani Khan, Khushal Khan Khattak, Rehman Baba, Hamza Khan Shinwari, Sahib Shah Sabir, Rehmat Shah Sail, and many more portray the image of Pashtun society in a positive light in their poetry. However, this research study analysed those Pashto *Ghazal*, *Tappa*, and songs that perpetuate gender stereotypes and women's marginalisation, limit women's activity, and contribute to patriarchal norms in Pashtun society. It also studied the stereotypical portrayal of women in those Pashto songs, which depict women as passive, humble, delicate, fragile, and overly romanticised. These themes are often portrayed in some Pashto songs, reflecting societal attitudes towards women within the Pashtun community. In addition, Butler's theory is supported by the examples below, which demonstrate how gender is constructed in society in various ways rather than being inherent.

Physical Appearance of Women Used as a Tool for Attraction

Numerous Pashto songs focus on the physical appearance and beauty of women, by neglecting the individuality of women, like in the *Tappa*; *Your white wrists are visible—how delightful and attractive is this black shirt you wear—* (Ahmad, writer)

متی دی سپینی پکینی ښکاري - گپنی دا تور قمېص دی څومره خوند کوښه

The lyrics focus on the physical appearance of a woman, particularly through the phrase 'white wrists against a black shirt', which highlights visual beauty while overlooking her individuality and inner qualities. This lyric emphasises the woman's fair skin, presenting her beauty as a visual symbol. According to Butler, gender is not an inherent truth, but rather a performance enacted through repeated actions and discourse. In this line, femininity is performed through whiteness and visual contrast. The woman is seen, not heard, a passive image rather than an active subject. This is close to Beauvoir's view of a woman being treated as "the Other" defined only through male perception (26). Similar portrayals can also be found in Punjabi songs. Anwar et al. observed in Punjabi music that women are reduced to fair-skinned, decorative objects, often denied individuality (106).

Such representations often reduce women to objects of male desire, reinforcing the notion that a woman's worth lies primarily in her physical attributes. For instance, the lyrics express longing for her lips, illustrating how women's bodies are frequently romanticised and idealised to cater to the male gaze, rather than acknowledging their full personhood: *The tongue of my wounds has blistered – I speak of your warm lips—* (Sahib Shah Sabir)

د پرهر ژبه می تیاکی شوله - ستا د تودو شونډو قېصه کومه

This lyric portrays a lady as an object of amusement and reflects a man's desire. In it, expressions such as 'warm lips' are often used to symbolise the intimacy between a lover and their beloved, suggesting that emotional comfort and peace can be found after hardship through romantic connection. However, the portrayal of women frequently centres on their physical appearance. Features such as lips, hair, eyes, height, and body shape are

commonly compared to pleasing and attractive objects. These lyrics place male suffering at the centre, with the woman existing merely as a comforting image. Here, her lips are symbolic, not of speech, but of sensuality. Butler's concept of performativity applies as the lyric reiterates gender roles: men express; women are expressed through. Abu-Lughod similarly found that in Arabic love songs, women serve as emotional mirrors; their presence is necessary for male narrative arcs, not their development (84).

These comparisons reflect a broader trend in which women are idealised primarily for their physical beauty, often sidelining their emotional depth, individuality, and inner strength: *Your red lips are burning, cheeks ablaze like a spark; you are a candy rock, girl! You are a true candy rock*— (Gul Panra and Rahim Shah, singers)

سری شونڊی دی انگار انگی لمبه لمبه یی پتاسه یی پتاسه جینی سمه پتاسه یی

Likewise, this example places a strong emphasis on a woman's beauty. In it, a woman is compared to sweetness; her red lips are mentioned, and her cheeks are likened to a burning spark. The girl is compared to a candy rock, symbolising that men hold a desirous view of women. This vivid metaphor turns the woman into an object of sweet consumption. The phrase "candy rock" implies desirability, temptation, and passivity. According to Butler, femininity is performed here as something meant to be admired and consumed, not engaged with. Mulvey's concept of the male gaze is also relevant in this regard (75). Women, as depicted in these lyrics, are not subjects but objects of spectacle.

Similarly, women also judge themselves based on their physical appearance, promoting the idea that beauty is the primary value for women. They comment about their beauty in the song: *My cheeks are red, my narrow lips are like flowers, my eyelashes are arrows, and my eyebrows are like bows. I smile beautifully*— (Laila Khan)

سرہ می انگی دی نری شونڊی می گلونه غشی می بانه دی روخی کمانونه دی خکولی می خنده

In the given lyrics, women take pride in their physical appearance and openly express their appreciation for their beauty. The emphasis is placed on physical features, suggesting that beauty is considered a central part of a woman's identity.

Here, a woman herself vocalises pride in her physical features. Even when women are the singers (e.g., Gul Panra), the lyrical content often reinforces external beauty as the primary marker of identity. This is a clear case of internalised performativity, where women take part in their objectification (Butler). Mulvey's concept of "to-be-looked-at-ness" is also reflected here, illustrating how feminine self-worth becomes tied to one's appearance (91).

Women also acknowledge and celebrate their attractiveness through such lyrics, often singing lines that highlight their charm and appeal: *I am a sorceress of charm, queen of beauty, the moon of the 14th night, no doubt I am a candy rock, a candy rock*—

نازونو جادوگره يم د حُسن مَلِكه يم سپوگمى د سوالسمى يمه هرچاته بڼكاره يم بے شكه پتاسه يم
(Gul Panra and Rahim Shah, singers)

In many Pashto songs, both men and women sing about women's beauty and physical appearance, often placing it at the centre of their identity. This repeated focus tends to limit women's agency and individuality, reinforcing the idea that a woman's primary value lies in her looks. This lyric reinforces the idea that a woman's power is rooted in her charm and beauty. Even metaphors like "sorceress" and "queen of beauty" place emphasis on allure rather than intellect, agency, or individuality. Butler's theory of gender performativity aligns with this: femininity is rehearsed through phrases that equate power with appearance. Ammar similarly notes in Pakistani media how such roles confine women to beauty and desirability (134).

The theme of beauty is especially prominent in the traditional poetic form *Tappa*, which reflects how deeply society is concerned with and shaped by ideals of female beauty: *When a boy is black, he looks good—but when a girl is black, she is only good to sell bangles—* (Ahmad)
هَلَك چى تور وي بڼه بڼكاريزى - جينى چى توره وي بڼگرې دى خرسوبينه

In addition, it describes the hypocrisy of Pashtun society that the standards of beauty are only established for women, while men are free from such restraints. Men are acceptable in either condition, whether they are looking good or bad, but the case is not the same for women; they are socially unacceptable if they do not align with the beauty standard. This lyric highlights a glaring double standard. Men are allowed to exist outside of beauty norms, while women are judged primarily on appearance. Krishnan argues that South Asian media reinforces such aesthetic discrimination, particularly colourism, linking female worth to fairness (94). This enforces Butler's claim that societal norms and punishments regulate gender performance.

The examples above are consistent with Butler's theory, which posits that gender is determined by one's repeated acts, language, behaviour, and culturally formed images. A similar attitude can be found in numerous examples of Pashto music, where women are often represented as objects of desire, with a limited realm of influence, emphasising physical attractiveness, and serving as a form of entertainment.

Pashto Paradox in Songs

Pashto music is contradictory and paradoxical in that it explores cultural heritage and perpetuates hurtful attitudes towards women. The lyrics depict this notion: *After getting his sister married, the brother became carefree—now he doesn't even ask about anyone's well-being—* (Ahmad)
خور يى واده كړه خان يى خلاص كړو - ورور يى اوس نه كوي د روغ رنځور پوښتنه

In traditional Pashtun society, women are often viewed as a responsibility or burden before marriage. Once a brother arranges his sister's marriage, he is seen as relieved of that duty, as she is handed over to her husband. This mindset reflects a deeper form of misogyny, where a woman's well-being is no longer considered her brother's concern after marriage. This lyric illustrates the idea that women are viewed as burdens. This aligns

with de Beauvoir's view of women as property exchanged in patriarchal structures, devoid of autonomy (103). Such patriarchal attitudes are also echoed in Pashto music, where women are frequently portrayed in a way that highlights their dependence on men. This is especially evident in songs about widows, where the lyrics often depict them as helpless and sorrowful, emphasising their vulnerable status in a male-dominated society: *A widow's veil is light—if I wear it heavily, still the wind will carry it away—* (Ahmad) د کونډۍ پرونۍ سپک وي - که زه یې دروند پسرورم سيلي ی ورېښه

Not only that, the lyrics also portray the difficult life of a woman after the death of her husband. Without his presence, she appears powerless and vulnerable, facing numerous challenges on her own. This poetic expression metaphorically captures the vulnerability of widows in Pashtun society. Without a husband, the woman is presented as powerless. Butler notes that social frameworks often determine vulnerability by linking identity to relational presence (i.e., with a man).

Powerless Nature of Women in Pashto Songs

In many Pashto songs, women are often portrayed as marginalised and dependent, which reinforces traditional gender stereotypes. These portrayals support and reflect the structure of a male-dominated society, where women are seen as lacking agency and relying on men for protection and support. The powerless nature of women is depicted in the given *Tappa*: *A brother is the veil of a sister's honour—without a brother, the sister is always in tears—* (Ahmad)

ورور خو د خور د سر څادر وي - بے وروره خور به همیشه په ژړا وېښه

These lines comment on the power dynamic of Pashtun society. Power is centred on men; without a brother, a woman is depicted as defenceless. She depends on men, whether they are her father, brother, or husband. This lyric reinforces the notion of male guardianship as the foundation of female dignity. Women without male protection are portrayed as emotionally shattered. Such dependence reflects patriarchal structures that regulate femininity as secondary and protected. Beauvoir and Butler both highlight how cultural narratives shape and restrict women's perceived capabilities. Moreover, women are represented as submissive, and they have to bear all the hardship silently: *Even though I am beaten and hurt, I can't tell anyone—cruel beat me and hit me, yet you don't let me cry—* (Ahmad)

وهل که ټکول دي چاته هيس وييلے نه شم - ظالم می هم وهي هم می ژړا ته نه پريږدي

In contrast to male portrayals, female characters are often depicted as dependent and passive. She is also powerless in decision-making; even her opinion is being neglected when choosing her life partner. She has no power to deny her father's or brother's decision. She is lamenting on her helplessness in the following words: *Look at the Pashtun code of honour – like cattle, they decide the fate of daughters and sisters—* (Ahmad)

د پښتنو پښتو ته گوره - چی د لور او خور لکه ساروی بعیه کوښه

This chilling line reflects normalised violence and silencing. The woman is subjected to abuse and denied the right even to express pain. Hooks would argue this reflects the brutal cost of romanticising male dominance. Here, the woman is not a subject of care, but an object to be disciplined (69).

Patriarchal Control over Women

Patriarchy is a recurring theme in Pashto songs, as men have traditionally held the dominant position in the power structure of Pashtun society. Women are considered to be weak, subservient, marginalised, and dependent on their male counterparts. Women are often confined to the home and are expected to care for their families. This view is described in the given *Tappa*: *You will have complaints about me, but I swear, dear! I have been imprisoned at home*— (Ahmad)

ستا به زما نه گپله کیږي - قسم دے یاره نظر بنده می ساتښه

Furthermore, this example illustrates deeply ingrained societal assumptions about gender roles. It shows that a female is not allowed to meet her lover, as she is confined to the home, reflecting the strong patriarchal control over women's mobility and choices. This situation highlights how women are often denied autonomy and are expected to depend on men for their basic needs and decisions in life. They need men to buy things for them as given in the *Tappa*: *If you bring me henna – I will sit cross-legged beside you*— (Ahmad)

که دی نکرېزی رته راوړی - بیا به دی په سنگ کښی غونډه موندنه ناسته ومه

Additionally, the fate of women has been determined mainly by men. They accept the men's decision without showing resistance: *My locks are hanging on my eyebrows – my father will decide who I can marry*— (Ahmad)

اوربل می په پاسوریو خور دے - واک می د پلار دے چی می چاله ورکوښه

The Pashtun society is so patriarchal that when a gorgeous and talented girl marries a man who is an unskillful and vain person, the girl lives with him after the marriage. A girl prayed to God: *O! God, take him away – he is not like a true man, yet, I am bound to him*— (Ahmad)

پاک مولا ته یی واخلی - سرے سرے نه دے په بند یی ناسته یمه

These examples eloquently illustrate how gender functions in society and how manufactured and recurring images of women serve as markers of gender-based identity. They support Butler's argument that women are portrayed as they are, albeit through culturally manufactured ideas. They are never assigned their active position in society, but they are constantly placed where they should be.

The examples, as mentioned above, directly critique the commodification of women, comparing them to cattle. They reflect a deeply embedded patriarchy, where women are

exchanged or controlled. Butler's idea of performativity here intersects with Foucault's theory of power and knowledge: discourse shapes the roles women are allowed to occupy. Further, they also address female seclusion and control under the guise of protection. Gendered space is a powerful regulatory tool where women are literally and symbolically hidden. Anwar et al. discuss similar portrayals in Punjabi song videos, where women are often passive figures confined to domestic or romantic spheres. The above lyrics also romanticise male initiative and female compliance. The woman's emotional or physical availability is framed as a reward for male action (106).

Objectification and Celebration of Beauty by Limiting Women's Agency

Women are represented as the object of men's desire. Men do whatever they want to her; even men go out of their way in the case of women. *Her hopes were buried in the graveyard of her heart— a young girl was married to a seventy-year-old man—* (Javed Shah Darman)

هیلې یې د زړه په هدیره کښې دفن کړې دي – پیغله د اویاو کاله بوډا ته واده شوی ده

In Pashto songs, women's physical attributes are often highlighted, primarily to attract male attention. This deeply disturbing lyric exposes forced child marriage, highlighting how gendered power systems exploit young girls. This connects with Hooks' argument that patriarchy often disguises exploitation through cultural norms like marriage or honour (70).

Women are frequently portrayed as existing to fulfil the emotional and physical needs of men. This idea is reflected in the *Tappa*: '*O quiet and introvert girl – come close to quench my thirst—* (Ahmad), which suggests that a woman's role is to satisfy male desire, reducing her identity to that of a passive and serving figure.

په خوله خاموشه کلیوالې - لږه راپټه شه چی می تنده ماته شپنه

In this context, the word '*thirst*' symbolises the sexual desires of men, emphasising how women are portrayed as objects meant to fulfil those desires. This reinforces traditional gender roles and deepens the objectification of women in Pashto musical narratives. This lyric uses metaphor to sexualise and objectify the woman. The phrase "quench my thirst" reduces the female to a vessel for male satisfaction. Mulvey (94) and Butler both critique such imagery for sustaining masculine desire as the dominant narrative. Similarly, women also have the same view of themselves as they are the object of desire for men. They also judge themselves as the object of males' desire. This has been better highlighted in the lyrics: *the pomegranates have all blossomed—I will save the pomegranate of my breast for my lover.—* (Ahmad) انارو ټولو ځلان وکړل - زه به خپل یار له د سپنې انار ساتمه

This is another example of objectification, equating the female body to fruit—sweet, ripe, and ready for consumption. The lyric centres male desire and female availability,

reinforcing femininity as passive and consumable. Likewise, in Pashto songs, beauty is celebrated, and it is limited to the physical appearance and object of a male's desire as depicted: *I will kiss you forcefully and then hand over a gun to your father to come* — (Ahmad) خوله به په زوره درنه واخلم - بیا دی دادا ته توپک ورکړه چی راینه

The given lyrics exclude the woman's perspective on what happens after the act of kissing, presenting it as something done to her rather than with her. The man is shown as fulfilling his desire, even by force, while taking full responsibility for any consequences. This reflects a broader pattern in Pashto songs, where women are overly romanticised and reduced to symbols of beauty and desire. Their individuality, emotions, and intellectual qualities are often overlooked, and they are primarily identified by their physical appearance. They are overly romanticised as: *The moon disappeared, it's getting dark—move ahead, dear, I walk by your light*— (Ahmad) سپوږمۍ پناه شوه تباره کپړې - جانانه مخکې شه چی ستا په رڼا ځمه

The woman is guided by the man's light, indicating dependence. It reflects the symbolic hierarchy in gender roles—man as leader, woman as follower. Such metaphors perpetuate the notion that women require male guidance to navigate life. It focuses on the physical appearance of women and exaggerates women's beauty; this paradox is depicted and critiqued by one of Gul Panara's songs (*Da Shayer Na Geela*), written by Khalid Hasrat (Gul Panra).

*“Besides me, you have seen nothing else
You have heard nothing but my praise
From my black hair, you create black serpents
At times, you become a blacksmith, forging the swords of Iran from them
Sometimes, you mention my eyes as pestle and bullets
Sometimes, from lips, you create pomegranate flowers
From my red cheeks, by your command, you create an apple
Sometimes, you compare my chin to the red apples of Kabul
Sometimes, from my neck, you designed the pitcher of Lebanon
You have power, yet I, powerless, have you found
I am like a lost thing; you found me on the path”* (Gul Panra).

Conclusion

Pashto music is a significant part of Pashto literature, offering a vivid platform for expressing social issues, especially those related to women, more directly than other literary genres. Its wide appeal and melodic charm attract a large audience, making it a powerful cultural tool. This research examines the stereotypical portrayal of women in it, specifically in *Tappa*, *Ghazal*, and popular songs. Using a feminist cultural approach, the study examines how these musical forms reflect and reinforce patriarchal values within Pashtun society.

The analysis reveals that women are often depicted as powerless and dependent on men, with their roles confined to caregiving and domestic responsibilities. They are overly romanticised, and their physical appearance, such as lips, hair, cheeks, and body shape, is frequently praised, while their individuality and intellectual qualities are largely ignored. This portrayal contributes to the perception of women as passive and obedient, unable to make independent decisions, with their lives often controlled by male figures. In contrast, men are shown as dominant, independent, and authoritative.

In conclusion, Pashto music offers valuable insights into the gender norms and cultural expectations prevalent in Pashtun society. Recognising how it reinforces hurtful stereotypes is a step toward challenging these portrayals. This study calls for a shift in narrative, one that values women for their full humanity and promotes gender equality within both music and society at large.

Furthermore, this study delves deeper into how Pashto songs shape society's understanding and expectations of women's behaviour. Using Butler's theory that gender is something people learn and repeat via cultural practices, the study demonstrates that song lyrics do more than merely entertain; they help define what it is to be a "woman" in Pashtun society. These findings remind us that music is not neutral; it can either reinforce or challenge traditional gender stereotypes. By fostering more diverse and empowered representations in cultural expressions, we may transform perceptions and promote greater gender equality.

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