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Pashto Poetry in the Twenty-First Century: Voices of Identity, Resistance and Revival

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Abstract

Contemporary Pashto poetry offers a rich literary record of the changing experiences, anxieties, and aspirations of Pashtuns in the twenty-first century. Focusing primarily on poets from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, this article examines how poetry represents ethnic, linguistic, cultural, historical, regional, economic, and religious identities while responding to conflict, displacement, political corruption, gendered customs, and restrictions on expression. Alongside poems of grief and resistance, the article considers the affirmative work of cultural memory: the celebration of Pashtunwali, the defence of Pashto, the reworking of folk narratives, cross-border belonging, and the demand that education and peace replace violence. Read together, the poems do not present Pashtun identity as fixed or internally uniform. They reveal a dynamic field in which inherited ideals such as honour, hospitality, courage, and attachment to place are defended, questioned, and reinterpreted in relation to contemporary social realities. Poetry thus becomes both a record of collective trauma and a medium for imagining a more just and peaceful future.

Key words: Pashto poetry; Pashtun identity; Pashtunwali; cultural memory; resistance; war; gender; peace, Pashto literature

Introduction

Pashto poetry has long provided a medium through which Pashtuns articulate cultural values, historical memories, political aspirations, and intimate experience. Themes such as homeland, honour, courage, hospitality, love, social responsibility, and the preservation of language recur across literary periods. In the twenty-first century, these concerns have been reshaped by armed conflict, displacement, political instability, international intervention, social change, and the pressures of modern public life.

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Contemporary poetry therefore offers a valuable point of entry into the relationship between inherited cultural forms and changing realities. The verses considered here, drawn principally from published collections by poets associated with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, address the destruction of peace, the costs of war, the conduct of political leaders, women's position in customary structures, the status of Pashto, and the survival of cultural memory. Some poems lament homes, schools, fields, and social institutions destroyed by conflict; others challenge hypocrisy, assert women's dignity, or insist that peace and education offer stronger foundations for collective flourishing than weapons do. The result is not a single, unified political statement but a set of poetic interventions into contested questions of belonging. This article develops the initial discussion of identity, resistance, and revival by incorporating further material on Pashtunwali, linguistic and cultural identity, historical memory, regional solidarity, economic life, and religious discourse. Original Pashto verses are retained alongside English translations. The article treats poetry as literary evidence and does not assume that a poetic speaker necessarily represents every Pashtun viewpoint.

Homeland, Cultural Belonging, and Collective Identity

Homeland is a powerful marker of belonging in Pashto poetry, but in contemporary writing attachment to place is often expressed through grief over damage and loss rather than through idealised landscape alone. In "Da Swat Naawe" ("The Bride of Swat"), Sheheryar Zahir figures Swat as a young bride whose future has been injured by circumstance:

نن هغه د سوات ناوې خزان میراته کړې ده
ملا ورله حالاتو په ځوانۍ کې ماته کړې ده

Today, the bride of Swat has been left without an heir; circumstances have broken her in the prime of her youth. (Zahir, 2012)

Here, "mirat" evokes a person left without children who might support them and take responsibility for their property or legacy. The image therefore suggests not only premature decline but also anxiety about continuity and inheritance. The bride is young, yet the conditions around her have deprived her of the future through which life, care, and social memory would ordinarily continue. Homeland becomes more than territory: it is a shared emotional and intergenerational inheritance (Zahir, 2012).

Sabir similarly gives the landscape a voice, linking damage to the environment with emotional injury:

چينې چنار ته په ژړا کښې ويل په سوات کې ولې فسادونه اوشو
ستا په گوليو تنه سوري سوري ده زما په زړه کې هم غارونه اوشو

The spring asked the plane tree through tears: why has turmoil come to Swat? Bullets have pierced your trunk, and hollows have opened in my heart as well. (Sabir, 2012)

The spring and plane tree are not decorative scenery; they become witnesses to violence. The tree's pierced body and the poet's wounded heart mirror one another, making environmental destruction inseparable from collective trauma. This image expands the meaning of cultural belonging: to belong to a place is also to grieve for its damaged ecology, built environment, and social relationships.

Pashtunwali, Honour, and the Limits of Ethnic Pride

The poetry foreground Pashtunwali as a language of ethical conduct, honour, truth-telling, and responsibility. Such poetry often presents honour not merely as pride in ancestry but as a duty that must be enacted. Khaliq Ziyar's lines connect personal integrity to the obligation to defend what is valued:

بيا د ډېران د غورځولو به يم
زه که په تا باندې هم ننگ نه کووم

I would be no better than refuse to be cast away if I failed to stand up for you in honour. (Ziyar, 2019)

د ژوند لاره
پت پاللو، حق وئيلو له پېدا يم
په دې نه يم، ژوند که سم شي او که وران شي
داسې کار مې دې خداي و نه کړي د لاسه
چې خفه رانه په قبر کښې سعد خان شي

The path of life is to uphold honour and speak the truth. I was not born to remain indifferent, whether life goes well or badly. May God never let me do anything that would cause Saad Khan, even in his grave, to be displeased with me. (Ziyar, 2019)

The reference to his father, Saad Khan, places conduct within a remembered moral community. The poet identity is shaped by accountability to inherited standards, but those standards are meaningful only when translated into truthful

action. Pashtunwali is thus represented as an active ethical code rather than a label. Tribal lineage and collective honour are also invoked through a refusal to accept subordination:

خړه دې وتړي په سيوري که خوک غواړي
چې پښتون په زور زياتي د چا غلام شي
نه په مال وي نه په سر دا هغه قام دے
چې خبره د وطن د ننگ و نام شي

Let whoever wishes tie up their donkeys in the shade; no Pashtun should be made another's slave through force and oppression. This is a people who will not bargain away everything—wealth or life—when the honour and good name of the homeland are at stake. (Ziyar, 2019)

The rhetoric of defiance expresses resistance to coercion, while also revealing the potential tension between collective honour and the plural obligations of modern civic life. Honour can motivate opposition to domination, but it can also become exclusionary if defined through rigid hierarchies or a narrow idea of who belongs. The poem's force is strongest when its rejection of subjugation is read as a broader claim to dignity and political agency. Poetic pride can also reproduce stereotypes about Pashtun courage and martial strength. In a short poem headed "Wyaar" ("Pride"), the speaker links the raised turban-tail (shamla) to readiness to sacrifice for the homeland:

وياړ مې وگرځي په سر کښې
شملة جگه مې په دې شي
چې وطن ئې کله غواړي
اول وينه زما توې شي

Pride rises within me, and my turban stands high for this reason: whenever the homeland calls, my blood is the first to be shed.

د ښائست صفت دې مۀ کوه کل پانې
يم پښتون گورے پردی زمکې په زور خورم

Do not praise my beauty, flower-petal; look, I am a Pashtun—I take my sustenance from foreign lands by force. (Qais, 2007)

The first verse idealises self-sacrifice; the second is more ambiguous, invoking a stereotype of forceful expansion. Read together, they show that ethnic pride is not ideologically simple. The same symbolic vocabulary can affirm courage and belonging or expose a troubling association between masculinity, territorial power, and coercion. Contemporary civic identity requires that honour be reconciled with justice, consent, and respect for others.

Linguistic Identity: Pashto as Love, Labour, and Responsibility

Language is a central medium of cultural continuity, yet the poems suggest that affection for Pashto is not enough to guarantee its institutional strength. Shamsul Qamar Andesh addresses the intimate bond between the beloved and the language:

اندېشه! سترګې پورته کئ خو پورته کول نه شي
اشنا پښتون باندې مټين دے، په پښتو باندې هم

Andesh, raise your eyes—but they cannot be raised; the beloved is in love with the Pashtun and with Pashto as well. (Andesh, 2015)

The verse places language alongside personal attachment: Pashto is not simply a tool of communication but an object of affection and a sign of shared belonging. Yet Andesh also questions the distance between literary production and practical language empowerment:

رښتيا چې مونږه ډېره شاعري وکړه پښتو کېږي
منو چې مونږه خپله دلداري وکړه پښتو کېږي
پښتو مو په خپل کور نه کړه واکمنه د خپل کور
کي نو مونږ خو هر رنگ له خواري وکړه پښتو کېږي

It is true that we have written much poetry in Pashto; we acknowledge that we have consoled ourselves through Pashto. Yet we did not make Pashto authoritative in its own home, although we worked hard for it in every way. (Andesh, 2015)

This is a pointed distinction between symbolic celebration and language planning. A language may enjoy a substantial poetic tradition while remaining underrepresented in homes, schools, administration, publishing, and other domains of public life. The poem asks whether cultural pride is matched by sustained institutional practice. Linguistic revival therefore requires more than praise: it requires literacy, education, publication, and the everyday use of Pashto

across domains. Oral narrative also survives through poetic reworking. Ziyar invokes the familiar love-story tradition of Farhad and Shirin:

څه وکړم خدای یم پېدا کړی فرهاد
سود د خپل سر به په شپږینه کووم

What can I do? God created me as Farhad; I will stake my own life for Shirin. (Ziyar, 2019)

Andesh likewise uses the legendary intensity of Qais to describe the power of imagination:

ستا وحشت د قېس جنون سره سیالي کړي
خو د خیال په بیابان کېنې بهر نا

Your wildness competes with Qais's madness, yet it wanders out in the wilderness of imagination. (Andesh, 2015)

Such allusions keep oral and popular narratives in circulation while adapting them to modern poetic expression. The reference is recognisable even when the poem changes its emphasis, showing how inherited stories remain available as a shared cultural vocabulary.

Cultural Identity: Dress, Folk Belief, and the Imagination

Cultural identity is communicated not only through explicit statements about ethnicity but also through everyday signs such as clothing, modesty, music, dance, and folk belief. In the supplied verse, Qais refers to a veil and the pleasures or tensions associated with modesty:

زما غلۀ کانه دا پټه په بورقه کېنې
په حیا کېنې له حیا خوندونه اخلم

My stolen glances remain hidden beneath the burqa; within modesty, I find its own pleasures. (Qais, 2007)

The verse can be read as a compact depiction of the negotiation between desire and social codes. The burqa is both a garment and an imposed cultural sign, while the poet's pleasure depends on the limits through which desire is expressed. Rather than treating dress as a fixed emblem of identity, the poem reveals the emotional complexity that can exist within culturally prescribed forms. Folk beliefs and supernatural motifs also continue to animate poetic language. Qais reworks the figure of the *peri* (fairy or supernatural beloved) and the legendary hero Ghazni:

خه دے پریانو ته غزنه جانانه
درېسې مات به کړم بې شماره غرونه

What are fairies to Ghazni, beloved? For your sake, I would break countless mountains.
(Qais, 2007)

تعویذ لا اوس هم گرځوي په غاړه
ډېر کۀ مې پوئ کړه چې پریان نشته

They still carry an amulet around the neck, even though I have explained to them many times that there are no fairies. (Qais, 2007)

The first verse draws on legendary strength to dramatise devotion; the second introduces a more sceptical voice that questions persistent belief. Their juxtaposition shows that contemporary poetry can preserve folklore and interrogate it at the same time. Cultural continuity does not require every inherited belief to remain unquestioned; tradition can survive through reinterpretation, humour, and debate.

Historical Identity, War, and Collective Memory

Historical identity in these poems is shaped by the memory of earlier political encounters as well as by more recent wars. Qais evokes the distant threat of an approaching force:

چېرته د لرې نه بڼې وهي
راپسې جنگ له اوس لښکر نه راځي

Someone is taunting or signalling from far away, yet no army now comes to fight us. (Qais, 2007)

These suggest the afterlife of military threat in collective imagination. Contemporary poetry often makes history present not through a detailed chronicle but through traces of fear, inherited memory, and expectations of conflict. The destructive effects of modern warfare are more direct in Andesh's lines:

يا لېونه وم يا مستي راخستې
په سر مې اخستل پردې جنگونه
هره کوڅۀ کښې د انسان د سر ده لوبه گرمه
هره جولى ده د ټوپک د مردکو نه ډکه

Either I was mad or seized by intoxication when I took others' wars upon my head. In every street, human lives are being gambled; every lap is filled with rifle cartridges. (Andesh, 2015)

The poet's retrospective self-questioning challenges the glamour of participation in wars not of one's own making. The image of every lap filled with ammunition brings militarisation into intimate, everyday space. The lines resonate with the wider experience of Pashtuns affected by the Soviet-Afghan war, the US-led war on terror, and Taliban-era violence, without reducing the poem to a single conflict. The key point is the cost of importing or inheriting wars: civilian life becomes saturated by weapons and insecurity. The same concern is present in Saqib's account of mourning and in Nadan's catalogue of ruined institutions. Saqib writes:

خندا مو ورکه ده د هر کور نه وېرونه خېژي
قراری نشته د توپونو آوازونه خېژي

Laughter has vanished; mourning rises from every home. There is no tranquillity—only the sounds of cannons. (Saqib, 2012)

Nadan expands the field of loss from the household to the institutions that make a community sustainable:

سکولونه، مدرسې او مکتبونه زمونږ ړنگ شو
ورشې او گلدرې پټي فصلونه زمونږ ړنگ شو
چیني او حجرې څه چې کورونه زمونږ ړنگ شو

Our schools and religious seminaries were destroyed; our orchards, fields, and crops were ruined; our streams and hujras—and even our homes—were destroyed. (Nadan, 2013)

The list encompasses education, agriculture, gathering places, water, and domestic security. The hujra is especially important as a social institution associated with hospitality, discussion, and community life. Its destruction represents a rupture in the relationships through which culture is reproduced. By preserving these images, poetry becomes testimony against the erasure of civilian experience.

Regional Identity and Cross-Border Belonging

Pashtuns live across state border, and the poetic imagination often represents the region through the paired terms “lar aw bar”—the lands on either side of the border. Ziyar’s verse associates the raised turban with movement through this shared space:

ګورم شملي ګرځم په لړ او بَر کښې
خلل پوهېږم چې لرم په سَر کښې

I look around and travel through both lar and bar; I know that I carry a distinction or mark in my head. (Ziyar, 2019)

The couplet presents regional movement as a way of affirming shared identity. Ziyar then names two cities as beloved places:

زما د جګې شملي شان دے پکښې
يو پېښور بل مې کابل خوښ دے

My raised turban finds its honour there: one place I love is Peshawar, the other Kabul. (Ziyar, 2019)

Peshawar and Kabul become linked through language, memory, and cultural affinity despite their location in different states. This regional imagination need not deny political borders; rather, it shows that linguistic and cultural belonging can exceed them. A further couplet invokes Khushal Khan Khattak as a model of literary and ethical inheritance:

زۀ د خوشحال بابا په پل روان يم
زۀ په خونخوارو لارو ځم يوازې

I follow in the footsteps of Khushal Baba, though I travel alone along blood-soaked roads. (Ziyar, 2019)

The reference to Khushal Baba makes literary ancestry a guide through a dangerous present. The poet’s solitude is not necessarily a rejection of community; it may signal the difficulty of sustaining ethical or literary commitments in violent conditions.

Economic Identity, Livelihood, and Migration

Economic identity appears through concern for home, livelihood, rural work, and migration. In a prayer-like passage, Ziyar asks that a loved one not be made a permanent traveller:

خدایه
د سترگو تور د زړه ټکور جانان
مسافر مه کړې خدایه نور جانان
تندې نهرې تېره وو به خبر دے
خو چې مېشته شي په خپل کور جانان

O God, the beloved, the light of my eyes and comfort of my heart—do not make the beloved a traveller any longer. Let hardships and hunger pass safely; above all, may the beloved settle in their own home. (Ziyar, 2019)

The verse frames migration not as adventure but as exposure to hardship, hunger and separation. The wish to settle at home evokes the importance of security, rootedness, and the ability to build a future in one's own community. In a region affected by conflict and limited economic opportunities, mobility may be necessary, yet the poem registers its emotional cost.

Andesh's reference to farming links rural labour to the economy of love:

چې په بنائست ئې اباد نه دے گلستان د مینې
ما دهقانی له یار د زړه نیولے نه دے کنه

If beauty alone cannot make the garden of love flourish, it is not that I have failed to win my beloved through the labour of farming. (Andesh, 2015)

The image of cultivation suggests that affection, like a garden, requires work. It also preserves the farmer as a meaningful figure within modern poetry, even as rural livelihoods are changing and people move toward urban employment. Economic identity is thus not merely occupational: it includes the dignity of work, the desire for stability, and the social relationships sustained through labour.

Religious and Spiritual Identity: Faith, Authority, and Conflict

Pashtun identity is often discussed through the relationship between Pashtunwali and Islam. In the selected poems, religious language can express devotion and ethical aspiration, but it can also become a subject of criticism when religious authority is associated with violence, coercion, or political manipulation. Andesh combines the language of love with a demanding spiritual path:

مینه کوو خو د پښتو پل صراط باندې ځو
مونږ د دیدن شراب کوټو اشنا د پال په سیوري

We love, yet we walk upon Pashto's bridge of the Sirat; beloved, we sip the wine of vision beneath the shade of the beloved's care. (Andesh, 2015)

The image of the Sirat bridge—associated in Islamic tradition with the path over the inferno—sits beside the metaphor of wine as ecstatic vision, a familiar feature of mystical poetry. The verse blends religious and literary vocabularies rather than setting them in simple opposition. Such imagery allows Pashto poetry to explore devotion, longing, and moral risk through a shared spiritual language. Ziyar, by contrast, criticises the entanglement of religious authority and conflict:

خیال مې نشته چې د بڼې ورځې خاوند شم
چې تر څو پورې ملا شته او منبر شته

I cannot imagine becoming the possessor of better days for as long as the mullah and the pulpit remain as they are. (Ziyar, 2019)

ملا تعویذ به په زعفرانو لیکه
اوس ئې زما او ستا په وینه لیکي

The mullah once wrote amulets in saffron; now he writes them in your blood and mine. (Ziyar, 2019)

که په کعبه کښې ئې د روغې قسمونه کړي
د پښتنو ملیانو بیا هم دي جنگونه کړي

Even if they swear oaths of reconciliation at the Kaaba, Pashtun clerics still wage their wars. (Ziyar, 2019)

وعظونه ډېر دي، ږیرې هم ډېرې دي
خو بس چې نشته یې ایمان نشته

There are many sermons and many beards, but what is missing is faith itself. (Ziyar, 2019)

These lines distinguish outward signs of piety from ethical conduct. The image of an amulet written in blood transforms a protective religious object into a symbol of harm, while the reference to the Kaaba highlights the contradiction between sacred vows and continuing violence. The criticism is directed at the misuse of religious authority, not necessarily at faith itself. It is a demand that

religious identity be measured by peace, integrity, and responsibility. Andesh's verse makes the consequences of this contradiction explicit:

د دين په لاره كېنې زمونږ وه دغه لوبه توده
يو مسلمان بل مسلمان په سلام هم نه نمانځه

In the name of religion, this was the game we kept playing: one Muslim would not even greet another Muslim with peace. (Andesh, 2015)

The greeting of peace becomes a test of social and religious ethics. The failure to offer even a greeting signals a breakdown in the basic practices of coexistence. Together, these poems distinguish moderate spirituality and ethical religion from extremism and the use of religious symbolism to legitimise conflict.

Cultural Memory and the Colonial Gaze

Sahib Shah Sabir's "Baghi" ("Rebel") is particularly important because it stages a dialogue between a voice that demeans Pashtuns and a speaker who answers the accusation. The opening taunts reproduce a familiar colonial stereotype in which Pashtuns are represented as savage, uncultured, and imprisoned by ignorance:

هغه وي چې ته وحشي ئې
د فطرت غلام قيدي ئې
بې تهذيبه بدحصلته
د خپل جهل زنداني ئې

He said that you are savage, a captive slave of nature; uncultured and ill-fated, imprisoned by your own ignorance. (Sabir, 2021)

دا چې ستا کوم ثقافت دے
دا خو ظلم دے وحشت دے

Whatever culture you possess, they say, is nothing but oppression and savagery. (Sabir, 2021)

The poem exposes the power of naming: cultural practices are judged in advance through a vocabulary that denies complexity and civilisation. Sabir's reply does not simply reverse the insult. It offers a different account of Pashtun identity based on human dignity, freedom, knowledge, artistic achievement, and care for one's homeland:

په تيارو کښې به خړوب يم
 خو بيا هم په سړيتوب يم
 د خپل ملک د تندې خال يم
 په خپل کور کې خوشال يم
 د انسان ازادې غواړم
 د هر قام ازادې غواړم
 د هر علم قدردان يم
 د فنونو ثناخوان يم

I may be soaked in darkness, yet I remain human in my conduct. I am a mark upon my homeland's brow, content in my own home and village. I desire freedom for human beings and freedom for every people; I value every kind of knowledge and praise the arts. (Sabir, 2021)

This response shifts the terms of identity away from the external stereotype. The poet acknowledges hardship without accepting the denial of humanity. Freedom is not claimed only for Pashtuns but for every people, and knowledge and the arts are explicitly valued. The poem therefore offers a civic and humanist answer to the colonial gaze. Historical memory is another element of the dialogue. Sabir invokes Khushal Khan Khattak's account of Pashtun rule in India:

د بهلول او د شېرشاه خبرې اورم
 چې په هند کښې پښتانه وو بادشاهان
 شپږ اوه پېړۍ ئې هلته بادشاهي وه
 چې په دوی پورې درست خلق وو حېران

I hear accounts of Bahlul and Sher Shah, of Pashtuns who were rulers in India; for six or seven centuries, they held sovereignty there, and people marvelled at them. (Sabir, 2021)

The lines invoke a remembered history of political power to counter narratives of cultural inferiority. Such historical claims function in the poem as a resource of collective pride; they should be understood as part of its rhetorical argument rather than treated, without independent historical verification, as a complete chronology. The poem also mentions a discourse against Pashtun historical figures.

اېمل خان د تورې نه وو
دريا خان غريب د څه وو
مېروېس ځان دنيا ته پر کړو
چې گورگېن غريب ئې مر کړو
احمدشاه جهان لتار کړو
گوره ټول هند يې ويجار کړو

They say that Aimal Khan was no swordsman, and ask what poor Darya Khan amounted to; they claim Mirwais disgraced himself before the world by killing Gurgin, and that Ahmad Shah devastated the world and laid all India waste. (Sabir, 2021)

The taunt compresses a complicated past into accusation, portraying resistance and political achievement as barbarity. Sabir answers the judgement with a memorable admission of historical darkness coupled with a refusal to surrender ethical worth:

د تاريخ اېن به ډنډ وي
د تهذيب لاس به مې لنډ وي
په تيارو کښې به خړوب يم
خو بيا هم په سړيتوب يم

The mirror of history may be clouded, and my reach in civilisation may be limited; I may be steeped in darkness, yet I remain human in my conduct. (Sabir, 2021)

The emphasis on “sariatob” (humanity, decent conduct, or manliness in its ethical sense) is significant. The answer to prejudice is not solely a claim of past empire but a claim to moral personhood. Sabir’s also contests the reduction of Pashtun culture to mountains and stones, recalling the region’s poets and artists, including Khushal, Rahman Baba, Mirza Khan, and Daulat Lwana. The poem thus treats literature itself as evidence of cultural achievement. Economic exploitation completes the dialogue. The hostile voice describes the land’s resources as benefits that the dominant power provides:

هغه وي چې اے سړيه
اے کم عقله ليونيه
دا هر څه ستا د فائده دي

ستا تيارو کښې دا ډيوې دي
دا ستا سره کانيز غرونه
درنې کندې گړنگونه

They say: O man, you foolish madman, all of this is for your benefit; these are lamps in your darkness—you red, stony mountains, your deep ravines and precipices. (Sabir, 2021)

هغه وې چې ته وحشي ئې
خپل اختيار غواړې باغي ئې
خه خبر د خپل انجام ئې
ته بنده زما غلام ئې
ماسره بلها طاقت دې
زما ډېر لوئې برکت دې
زه چې خه غواړمه کېږي
که څوک مري که پاتې کېږي

They say: you are savage; because you want self-determination, you are a rebel. You do not know your fate—you are my servant and slave. I possess great power and immense resources; whatever I desire will happen, whether someone dies or survives. (Sabir, 2021)

The passage exposes the logic of domination: the demand for autonomy is recast as irrational rebellion, while the powerful claim the right to decide who may live or die. The poem's final response is uncompromising:

ما وي دا ژوند خو ډېر گران دې
ستا هر سود زما تاوان دې
ازادۍ کښې لوئې سکون دې
غلامي خو زړه چاودون دې
ستا د علمه وحشي ښه يم
له غالمه باغي ښه يم

I say: this life is painfully costly; every profit of yours is my loss. There is great peace in freedom, while slavery breaks the heart. I would rather be called uncivilised by your standards than be a slave; better a rebel than a slave. (Sabir, 2021)

“Baghi” makes freedom the decisive measure of identity. It rejects a model of civilisation that legitimises domination and instead values self-determination, learning, cultural creativity, and human dignity. Its rhetorical strength lies in the dialogue form: the insulting voice is allowed to speak, but its assumptions are exposed and answered. The poem consequently links ethnic pride with a broader critique of imperial hierarchy and economic exploitation.

Political Corruption, Freedom of Expression, and Civic Accountability

Resistance in contemporary Pashto poetry also takes the form of criticism directed at local political leadership. The poems question leaders who exploit public trust, abandon responsibility, or use patriotic language to conceal unequal power. Rahim Shah Rahim’s satirical questions unsettle the vocabulary of formal politics:

څه قانون څه سیاست
څه وطن څه حکومت
تش په نوم جمهوریت دے
شاته پټ ترې امریت دے

What law, what politics? What homeland, what government? ... It is democracy in name only, with authoritarian rule concealed behind it. (Rahim, 2007)

The poem challenges the gap between political labels and lived reality. Institutions cannot claim legitimacy through terminology alone; they must be accountable to the people they purport to represent. Qais expresses the resulting breakdown of trust:

په رهبرانو مو نور ځای د باور پاتې نه شه
مونږ به په یو رنگ کې لیدل هغه به نور اوځاته

There is no longer any room for trust in our leaders; we thought they were one thing, but they turned out to be something else. (Qais, 2007)

Political belonging is therefore conditional rather than unquestioning. To care about a community is not necessarily to defend its leaders; it may require exposing betrayal and demanding accountability. The right to speak is central to this responsibility. Baryalay writes:

هېڅ نه شم ویلی په ویلو پابندي ده
خوار ته په قدم پورته کولو پابندي ده

I cannot say anything; speaking is forbidden. The poor are forbidden even to take a step forward. (Baryalay, 2005)

The silenced speaker and the constrained poor reveal the connection between freedom of expression and social inequality. When people cannot speak, challenge authority, or improve their circumstances, political identity is reduced to obedience. Poetry becomes a form of civic resistance by preserving criticism and making suppressed grievances publicly legible.

Peace as Resistance and Cultural Revival

The poetry does not only record damage and injustice; it also imagines alternatives. Peace is represented as a condition for love, beauty, education, community, and the restoration of ordinary life. Ziauddin Yousafzai's "Aman Ting Satal Jihad Day" ("Maintaining peace is a jihad") directly redefines the moral meaning of struggle:

امن ژوند دی امن ساز دی
امن مینه ده، ښکلا ده

Peace is life; peace is harmony. Peace is love; peace is beauty. (Yousafzai, 2007)

جنگ د کرکې نتیجه ده
جنگ فتنه ده وسوسه ده
جنگ هېڅ حل د شخړو نه دی

War is the result of hatred; war is turmoil and temptation; war is no solution to disputes. (Yousafzai, 2007)

The poem refuses to equate courage with violence. Peace is not passivity but a demanding ethical practice that requires restraint, responsibility, and coexistence. Qasim Sarhadi makes the reciprocal character of peace explicit:

که ستا نه امن غواړم، تا له به امن درکړم
که ما نه امن غواړې، راکوې امن به ته

If I ask peace from you, I must offer you peace; if you want peace from me, you too must give peace. (Sarhadi, 2009)

Peace cannot be secured by demanding concessions only from others. It depends on reciprocal action and recognition. This position complicates any stereotype that defines Pashtun identity through militancy alone; the poems also claim hospitality, dignity, affection, and the right to live without fear. Qais contrasts the gun with the pen and presents learning as an alternative form of strength:

ته د قلم په دې وړوکي ژبه
د ارتقا دغه جنگ وگټي نو
دنیا به ټوله ستا نه "امن" غواړي

If you win this struggle for progress with the small nib of the pen, the whole world will then ask peace of you. (Qais, 2007)

The pen stands for education, intellectual achievement, and peaceful agency. It offers a model of public influence that does not reproduce the destruction caused by weapons. Cultural revival therefore means more than restoring an idealised past: it requires schools, functioning institutions, language development, public debate, and opportunities for younger generations.

Women, Custom, and the Reinterpretation of Identity

The poems also examine women's lives and the restrictions imposed by customary practices. They show that identity is debated within Pashtun society itself: traditions may provide solidarity and continuity, yet particular customs can also reproduce inequality and deny women autonomy. In Didar Yousafzai's poem "Swara," the female speaker describes her unequal position:

د ادم ځامن بالادي د هر رنگه بندشونو
د حوا مجبوره لور يم ځکه ښکار د نفرتونو

The sons of Adam are free of every kind of restraint; I am Eve's helpless daughter, and therefore a victim of hatred. (Yousafzai, 2002)

The contrast between male freedom and female constraint reveals an imbalance in social power. The speaker is treated as an instrument for settling disputes rather than as a person with her own wishes. The poem continues:

خو به کپري په جرگو کې، وېش زمونږ د تقدیرونو
خو په نوم به د واده ځي، جنازې د ارمانونو

How long will our destinies be divided in councils? How many times will weddings in name become funerals for our hopes? (Yousafzai, 2002)

The wedding-as-funeral image exposes the difference between a socially recognised arrangement and the woman's own experience. A practice defended as reconciliation can impose its costs on women. Qasim Sarhadi's "Da Adam Lor" ("Daughter of Adam") similarly describes confinement:

وخت او رواجونو په پنځرو کښې بندي کړي يم
ظلم او زیاتو زه د حالاتو ژړنده کړي يم

Time and customs have imprisoned me in cages; oppression and injustice have made me a millstone ground down by circumstances (Sarhadi, 2009).

Yet the poem also asserts women's contribution to collective life:

ما همېش ورکړې قربانۍ انسانیت له ده
وینه څه؟ چې ما مینه ورکړې شجاعت له ده

I have always made sacrifices for humanity; I have given not only blood but also love and courage. (Sarhadi, 2009)

The female voice claims a place within the community's moral identity rather than accepting one defined solely by restriction. These poems do not simply oppose tradition to modernity; they ask which traditions uphold dignity and which need to be challenged. Such internal criticism is itself a form of cultural renewal.

Resistance, Cultural Continuity, and Revival

Across these different themes, resistance appears in several forms: defence of homeland and heritage; refusal of domination; testimony to civilian suffering; preservation of Pashto; critique of oppressive custom; challenge to political hypocrisy; and rejection of religiously justified violence. The poetry also reveals tensions within the very ideals it celebrates. Honour can support courage but can become entangled with coercive masculinity; pride in history can counter

colonial stereotyping but may simplify complex pasts; cultural continuity can sustain belonging while some customs constrain women. The most compelling poems do not resolve these tensions by presenting identity as unchanging. Instead, they show identity being negotiated through literary memory and social argument. Pashtunwali is interpreted through truth-telling and dignity; Pashto is celebrated while its limited public authority is questioned; folk narratives are preserved and playfully revised; regional belonging extends across borders; and religious identity is measured against ethical conduct.

Conclusion: Between Inherited Values and a Peaceful Future

The selected poetry portrays contemporary Pashtun identity as dynamic, contested, and historically situated. Attachment to homeland, language, honour, and collective memory remains central, but poets also foreground the need for political accountability, gender justice, economic security, freedom of expression, and peaceful coexistence. The poems register the devastation of war in homes, schools, fields, and hujras, while also challenging the leaders and ideologies that perpetuate violence. Their resistance is not limited to armed confrontation. It includes the act of remembering, the defence of cultural heritage, the insistence on speaking, the critique of practices that harm women, and the demand that Pashto be used and supported beyond the poetic page. In the linguistic, spiritual, and regional poems, cultural continuity is not passive inheritance; it is a responsibility requiring institutions, education, and ethical renewal. The article's central argument is that Pashto poetry functions simultaneously as testimony and intervention. It records the pain of displacement and conflict, but it also contests imposed stereotypes, affirms human dignity, and imagines futures in which freedom and knowledge matter more than domination. Cultural revival is therefore not a simple return to an idealised past. It is the ongoing effort to protect language and literary traditions while creating social conditions in which people can live, learn, write, and belong with dignity.

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