

Women's (Re) Imagining of Pashtun Space through *Tappas*: Resistance and Postcolonial Contestations

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Abstract

The *Tappa*, a concise yet evocative form of Pashto folk poetry, has long enabled Pashtun women to voice love, longing, grief, and endurance. Read within a postcolonial lens, *tappas* emerge as subaltern articulations of resistance, where women negotiate and reclaim spaces constrained by patriarchy and colonial legacies. This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach combining ethnographic insights with textual analysis to examine how women use *tappas* to (re)imagine Pashtun space through gendered and political resistance. Drawing on James C. Scott's notions of "everyday resistance" and "hidden transcripts," the analysis shows how themes of love and longing mask critiques of honour codes, religious divides, and patriarchal authority. References to war and martyrdom sustain collective memory, while verses on daily life challenge social hierarchies, clerical control, and gendered labour. Invocations of homeland and exile convey both the pain of displacement and a reimagined Pashtun geography as nurturing and worth defending. In this study, we argue that *tappas* function as a cultural archive of women's agency and communal resilience, where grief, defiance, and hope converge in poetic form.

Keywords: Tappa, Pashto folk poetry, Resistance, Gendered spaces,

Introduction

The *Tappa*, a dense and deeply evocative form of Pashto folk poetry, has long served as an expressive vessel for Pashtun women. Despite its conciseness, typically just a couplet, it carries a

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profound amount of emotional and cultural weight. Traditionally passed down orally, these verses reflect the lived experiences of love, longing, grief, and endurance. Interestingly, regardless of socio-demographic status, Pashtun women identify and uphold various characteristics and values recognised, practised, and transmitted across generations (Aziz et al., 2021). However, within a postcolonial framework, tappas can be read not only as artistic expressions but also as subaltern articulations of resistance, as women negotiate and reclaim spaces otherwise constrained by patriarchal norms and colonial legacies.

Within the larger corpus of Pashto folklore, the tappa holds a particularly foundational position. Unlike other folk genres associated with particular regions, lineages, or performers, the tappa is a collective creation, belonging to all Pashtuns regardless of class, geography, or gender (Rahimi, 2017). Indeed, its roots are considered as old as Pashtun cultural memory itself, making it one of the earliest and most enduring poetic forms (Daud, 2012). Known interchangeably as *Tappa*, *Landai*, or *Misra*, the form takes its name from its distinctive structure: the first line is shorter than the second, comprising 22(9+13) syllables, which has led communities in Afghanistan to describe it as *Landai*—literally meaning “short” (Bettani, 2017; Enevoldsen, 2004). Khan and Ahmad (2014) in *The Express Tribune* cite Israr Attal, renowned Pashto poet and author, that “It [Tappa] is indeed an entire poem written in just two sentences.”. Unlike elite literary genres, tappas are considered communal property. No single author can claim ownership, since they circulate in everyday life, sung, recited, and shared across settings from fields to households, from mourning rituals to celebratory gatherings. Their popularity cuts across age, class, and gender, though women are recognised as their primary creators (Enevoldsen, 2004; Tair, 1987). This universality not only secures the tappa’s place as a living tradition but also underscores its emotional resonance: it is simultaneously an outlet of sorrow, a vehicle of joy, and a mirror of collective sentiments.

Folk genres like the tappa allow marginalised voices to emerge subtly yet powerfully, what James C. Scott calls “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 2008), wherein the oppressed employ everyday cultural forms to disrupt dominant narratives (similar in spirit to themes found in post-9/11 Pashto poetry confronting militancy and war) (Ahmad et al., 2021). These poetic interventions resist silencing and affirm women’s agency within both private and communal spheres. Moreover, Pashtun women have historically operated within structures of *purdah* and *ghairat*, which often confine bodily presence and speech (Israr et al., 2024). Yet, through folk expression—*landays* and

tappas—they have repeatedly voiced grief, longing, and political commentary (for example, in narrating familial loss or collective suffering) (Grima, 1986). Such expressions are not merely aesthetic but ethical acts of remembrance and identity assertion, especially in the face of colonial and militarised trauma.

In the wake of intensified conflict, post-9/11 militancy, state violence, and ecological disruption, Pashto poetry has evolved to counteract oppressive forces. Archival research indicates that contemporary poets have increasingly articulated themes of resistance, peace, and resilience, challenging both militant suppression and state narratives using the cultural potency of poetry (Rahman et al., 2024). Though most studies focus on longer poetic forms, the *tappa*'s capacity to serve similar functions for women remains underexamined. Therefore, in this study, we ask: How do Pashtun women utilise the *tappa* to (re)imagine Pashtun space through subtle acts of gendered and political resistance within a postcolonial context? To address this, we first situate the *tappa* within the cultural and historical fabric of Pashto folk literature. It then analyses selected *tappas*, highlighting themes of emotional resistance, coded critique, and communal identity, to demonstrate how these short poems function as spaces of agency for women. In doing so, our study connects to broader theoretical concerns in postcolonial feminist thought, folklore studies, and the ethics of oral expression in resisting erasure.

History, Women, and Tappa: A Literature Review

The *Tappa* occupies a central place in Pashto folklore, often regarded as one of the oldest and most resilient poetic forms in South and Central Asia. From its inception, the *Tappa* functioned not merely as art but as a repository of lived realities. Women employed it in daily routines, spinning, weaving, or domestic labour, embedding poetry into life's rhythms. Its themes span the spectrum of human experience, love, longing, labour, loss, and homeland—what Rahimi (2017) notes as the genre's distinctive emotional palette. *Tappas* circulate anonymously through oral performance; they function as communal property: they are composed, transmitted, and re-voiced in everyday settings, and thus reflect collective sentiment rather than individual literary prestige (Ahmad & Alam, 2023; Daud, 2012).

Scholars working from literary, linguistic, and cultural perspectives emphasize the *tappa*'s rootedness in everyday life. Ethnographic and linguistic analyses demonstrate that women, in

particular, have been the primary composers and performers of these short couplets, using them during domestic labour, social gatherings, and rites of passage to articulate feelings that formal public discourse often marginalises (Khan & Nusrat, 2020; Daud, 2012). Cognitive-semantic work on large corpora of landays shows recurring source domains, journey, war, container, fire—through which speakers map intimate states such as love, loss, and separation; this figurative economy makes the *tappa* especially apt for condensed testimony (Khan & Nusrat, 2020).

Tappas have been especially important during historical crises. Colonial incursions, successive regional wars, and later the post-2001 milieu of militarisation and displacement shaped both the content and circulation of tappas: couplets memorialise absent fighters, mourn lost resources, and articulate the endurance of those left behind (Ahmad et al., 2021; Ahmad & Alam, 2023). Studies that examine poetry produced in the post-9/11 context show how Pashto poetic practices, both extended and short forms, were redeployed as cultural counterspeech to militancy and state violence, taking up themes of resilience, peace, and denunciation of coercive authority (Ahmad et al., 2021). Scholars argue that Pashto folklore, including the *Tappa*, constituted a subtle yet powerful counter-discourse against the colonial state's attempt to dominate the cultural imaginations of the Pashtuns and a non-violent resistance to necropolitics, a mode of life-affirming testimony against structures that expose populations to premature death (Khan et al., 2025). In these moments, *tappas* operate simultaneously as personal lament, communal chronicle, and moral exhortation.

Scholars working on emotion, performance, and gender in Pashtun contexts identify a recurring pattern: surface themes (romance, domestic complaint) can encode deeper critiques of honour politics, forced migration, or male absence in war. Such elliptical double-voicing allows women to register protest and grief while avoiding open confrontation with social sanctions (Grima, 1986; Ahmad & Alam, 2023). Finally, because tappas are orally transmitted across generations and across the Durand Line, they perform archival work: they preserve episodic memory that written histories often omit. As cognitive, affective, and performative archives, tappas keep a trace of labour patterns, brideprice and marital customs, displacement narratives, and the gendered burdens of recurrent violence (Daud, 2012; Khan & Nusrat, 2020). Studies of *tappa* collections point to the genre's continued vitality: even in mediated and digitised publics, tappas remain a portable idiom through which Pashtun women and communities rehearse identity, loss, and resistance (Ahmad &

Alam, 2023). Conclusively, the *tappa* emerges as a culturally central, gendered, and crisis-sensitive form: compressed in style, expansive in function, and vital to understanding Pashtun women's poetic practice as both testimony and tactic.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon James C. Scott's conceptualization of "*everyday resistance*" and "*hidden transcripts*" to analyze the ways in which Pashtun women employ the *tappa* as a form of cultural resistance. Scott (1992, 2008) demonstrates that oppressed groups rarely rely solely on overt rebellion; instead, they cultivate subtle practices, irony, rumor, metaphor, euphemism, and coded language that allow them to critique authority while minimizing the risks of direct confrontation. These hidden transcripts enable subaltern voices to negotiate dignity and agency under hegemonic conditions. In the Pashtun context, where gender norms of *purdah* and *ghairat* often restrict women's visibility and speech, the *tappa* provides a socially permissible yet subversive channel to articulate grievance, passion, and protest. Women's verses, though seemingly personal or romantic, often encode a critique of militarization, displacement, and patriarchal constraint, which align closely with Scott's theorization of covert cultural resistance.

At the same time, this research situates the *tappa* within the broader frame of cultural alternatives in social movements. As Sørensen and Vinthagen (2012) argue, art and cultural production constitute strategies of nonviolent resistance, creating spaces for marginalised groups to challenge dominant discourses and imagine alternative futures. Richard Bartlett Gregg (2018) similarly identifies symbolic and cultural acts as integral to strategies of nonviolent struggle. In this sense, the *tappa* can be read not only as an individual act of self-expression but also as a collective practice of cultural resistance, one that has historically accompanied Pashtun responses to colonial intrusions, war, and displacement.

Recent scholarship on Pashtuns and Pashto poetry (Khan et al., 2021; Ahmad & Alam, 2023) extends Scott's framework by highlighting how informal spaces of cultural production, literary forums, oral performances, and digital networks have enabled Pashtun communities to contest both state narratives and militant discourses in the post-9/11 era. Within these spaces, women's voices have often been doubly marginalised, yet the persistence of *tappas* in oral tradition illustrates how

gendered expressions of loss, love, and resilience continue to shape the contours of Pashtun cultural politics.

Bringing these strands together, the theoretical framework of this study views the *tappa* as both a *hidden transcript* of women's everyday resistance and a *cultural alternative* that contributes to broader struggles over identity, space, and power. In this dual role, the *tappa* exemplifies what Spivak (1988) identifies as the subaltern's mode of speaking through culturally embedded forms, while also resonating with postcolonial feminist insights into the ways women appropriate tradition to critique and transform patriarchal and colonial legacies. This framework enables the study to analyse Pashtun women's poetic agency not as isolated aesthetic expression but as a dynamic form of resistance, subtle, gendered, and deeply rooted in the historical interplay of folklore, colonial encounter, and contemporary conflict.

Methodology

We adopt a qualitative, interpretive approach that combines elements of ethnographic engagement with textual and poetic analysis. While our study is not based on long-term immersive fieldwork, we draw on a range of empirical materials: published anthologies and folklore collections, scholarly works on Pashto oral traditions, first-hand observations at cultural gatherings and university events where *tappa* was performed, and a small set of poems circulating on digital and social media platforms. This mixed set of sources allows us to examine both the classical repertoire of women's voices preserved in oral traditions and the genre's continued resonance in contemporary contexts.

Our sampling strategy was purposive. We prioritised *tappas* that explicitly or implicitly addressed themes such as gender, love, longing, labour, displacement, resistance, and socio-political critique. This process was further refined through a form of theoretical sampling: informal discussions with peers in cultural forums, along with close readings of folkloristic and anthropological accounts, helped us narrow the corpus to a set of representative artefacts. Although anonymous and fluid in transmission, we treat these *tappas* as cultural texts that embody women's perspectives within a patriarchal and conflict-affected society.

Analytically, we employ critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) alongside feminist folkloristics to interpret metaphors, symbolic tropes, and rhetorical strategies within the poems.

James C. Scott's concepts of "weapons of the weak" (2008) and "hidden transcripts" (1992) provide a framework to understand how voices excluded from the formal public sphere find coded expression in oral poetry. A feminist folkloristic perspective further enables us to read these poems not as static artefacts but as gendered interventions that challenge both cultural and political domination. Historical contexts, colonial incursions, wartime displacements, and the hierarchies of rural Pashtun life are also taken into account when situating these poetic fragments.

The analysis involved close reading and iterative coding. Metaphors and symbolic images were grouped into thematic categories such as desire and defiance, domestic labour and constraint, exile and longing, and war and survival. These clusters were then situated within broader socio-political discourses to trace how women reimagine Pashtun space through cultural expression. Triangulation was achieved by engaging ethnographic accounts, oral histories, and conversations in cultural forums, which ensured that our interpretations remained grounded in local cultural logics.

We acknowledge the absence of extended fieldwork and direct interviews with women performers as a limitation. Nonetheless, our approach foregrounds the *tappa* as a cultural archive of resistance where anonymity, repetition, and collective authorship reflect both the silencing and resilience of Pashtun women. We remain attentive to ethical sensitivity by avoiding essentialist portrayals and recognising *tappa* as a site where agency and constraint coexist in complex ways

Discussion and Analysis

Love and Longing as Coded Resistance

Love and longing are central tropes in Pashto *tappa*, yet their apparent simplicity often conceals deeply political and gendered meanings. In the context of Pashtun women, who historically have been denied direct participation in the formal public sphere, expressions of romance, grief, and intimacy often become symbolic sites where resistance to patriarchy, colonial domination, and religious authority is articulated.

One such example comes from a *tappa* in which a young woman anticipates her family's punishment for her love affair but implores her beloved not to disown her:

سبا مي ستا په تهمت وژني

چي د رشتيا په خاڼه منكر نه شي مښه

(Alam, 2013)

My association with you is triggering my death;

Be steadfast and do not deny your love affair.

Here, love is not merely a private sentiment but an act of defiance against family honour codes. The woman accepts death as the likely outcome of her transgression, yet frames loyalty to love as a greater value than submission to coercive kinship structures. Through the language of romance, she encodes a critique of patriarchal violence, an argument that could not be voiced openly without fatal consequences.

Another tappa illustrates the silence women are forced to maintain under communal scrutiny:

ستا نه په غم کي کمه نه يم

کمسله نه يم چي به کلي خبرومه

(Shaheen, 1984, p. 461)

I am no less in grief than you

But I am not ill-bred to let it be known to the village.

Here, grief is personalised but socially constrained. The speaker admits her emotional pain but refuses to display it publicly, which signals awareness of gendered expectations that equate female expression with shame. Yet, the very act of articulating this inner struggle in *tappa* form transforms silence into coded speech. What cannot be displayed in the village square becomes encoded in oral poetry, a form simultaneously public and intimate.

The motif of cross-boundary love further illustrates how women's voices destabilise social and political divisions. One tappa narrates:

يار مي هندو، زه مسلمان يم
د يار لپاره درمسال جارو کومه

My beloved is a Hindu, and I am a Muslim,

Yet I sweep the floor of his temple for love of him.

This couplet collapses religious binaries, offering an alternative vision of belonging through the language of devotion. Within the colonial and postcolonial contexts of communal divisions, such articulations resist the hegemonic use of religion as a boundary marker of identity. Feminist folkloristics allows us to read this *tappa* not as a naive love song but as a gendered intervention in inter-religious politics, where the female voice asserts the primacy of love over sectarianism.

At times, longing becomes inseparable from collective suffering. Consider the verse:

زما په تا پسي رنگ زېر شو

کم عقله مور مي د زيري دارو کوبنه

(Tair, 1980)

My colour and freshness have been lost after you;

My innocent mother gives me medicine for hepatitis.

Here, bodily illness metaphorically conveys the social costs of love. The mother's misreading of her daughter's grief as medical sickness underscores the cultural silencing of female desire. Yet, the daughter's lament captures the tension between private emotion and collective misrecognition, showing how women inscribe their struggles into shared cultural memory.

Taken together, these *tappas* reveal how themes of romance and longing operate as cultural disguises for resistance. What appears as personal grief, loyalty, or affection is, in fact, a rhetorical strategy to critique coercive honour codes, religious divisions, and patriarchal control. By embedding resistance within love poetry, Pashtun women create what Scott (1985) calls "weapons of the weak"—everyday practices that erode the legitimacy of domination without directly confronting its enforcers.

Thus, love in *tappa* cannot be reduced to sentimentality; it is an idiom of resistance. It encodes what cannot be openly voiced, transforming silence into song and individual longing into collective critique. In this way, women's reimagining of Pashtun space begins not on the battlefield but in the intimate register of whispered grief and disguised defiance.

War, Honour, and Collective Memory

War and collective memory occupy a central place in Pashtun cultural discourse, often intertwined with the gendered codes of *ghairat* (honour) and *nang* (dignity). Women, through the medium of *tappa*, emerge not as passive figures but as active agents who invoke sacrifice, courage, and resistance. Their voice becomes a rhetorical tool to mobilise men for war, sustain collective morale, and frame cowardice as dishonour. This gendered mobilisation is crucial to understanding the nexus of necropolitics and cultural memory in Pashtun society.

One of the most cited *tappas* from the Maiwand battle illustrates this:

که په مېوند کېنې شهيد نه شوي

گرانه لاليه بي ننګې له دې ساتينه

(Enevoldsen, 2004, p. 34; Shaheen, 1984, p. 541; Shaheen, 1988-9, p. 53)

If you came back alive from the battlefield of Maiwand,

my darling! I fear the enemy is sparing you to taste humiliation.

Here, the woman's voice glorifies martyrdom while stigmatising survival without honour. In Mbembéan terms, this reflects necropolitics, where life and death are politically charged, and women position themselves as arbiters of what constitutes an honourable death. The battlefield becomes not merely a military space but a cultural space inscribed with gendered expectations.

Similarly, another *tappa* declares:

په تور توپک ویشتلې راشي

د بي ننګې اواز دي رامشه مښينه

O my lover, it is better to see you dead than hear the news of your showing your back in war.

This illustrates how women employ rhetorical strategies that merge intimate desire (*my lover*) with political obligation (*fight bravely*). Love and war collapse into one narrative, where the woman's affection is conditional upon the man's performance of martial honour.

The colonial era in the Pakhtun region significantly influenced Pashto *tappa*, with the historical events of that time illustrated within this poetic form of Pashto folklore. The colonial powers encountered fierce armed resistance in the highlands of the Pakhtun areas. They have been struggling for many years to gain control over these regions. Chitral, known for its mountainous and remote terrain, remained unconquered and held strategic importance for the British due to its proximity to Afghanistan (Enevoldsen, 2004). The British made extensive efforts to seize it, and when they eventually succeeded. This colonial chapter of history, too, finds its way into *tappa*:

چرته چترال چرته لندن دے

بېننگي زور شوہ پېرنګيان چترال ته ځينه

Chitral and London are worlds apart,

but our dishonour is paving the way for the British to enter Chitral.

Here, the woman links local defeat with imperial expansion. The rhetorical move illustrates how women, through poetic utterances, construct colonialism as not merely external aggression but as facilitated by male failure to uphold *nang*. The political becomes personal, and personal failures are projected onto collective vulnerability.

The historical depth of women's resistance is further highlighted through references to earlier anti-Mughal struggles:

د مغل ظلم به نسکور شي

چي پير روخان توره په لاس جنگ له ورځينه

The cruelty of the Mughal will end;

When Peer Roshan fights them with a sword in hand.

By evoking figures such as Bayazid Ansari (Pir Roshan), women situate themselves as carriers of collective memory, reminding men of past resistance while demanding continuity in the present.

What emerges, therefore, is a pattern: women's *tappa* fuse affect, memory, and honour into a cultural weapon of resistance. They inscribe necropolitics into the domestic and intimate sphere,

where the politics of life and death are shaped not only by rulers and armies but also by the voice of women. In doing so, Pashtun women assert their agency, not by directly participating in war, but by shaping its moral grammar and embedding it within the fabric of collective identity.

Gender, Love, and Everyday Life

Beyond the domains of war and collective honour, *tappa* also becomes a medium through which Pashtun women negotiate and resist entrenched gender norms. These voices, often disguised in intimate or humorous tones, articulate a critique of patriarchy, social hypocrisy, and gendered inequalities. Through subtle resistance, women embed their grievances and aspirations within the cultural matrix without directly transgressing societal boundaries.

One *tappa* bluntly criticizes patriarchal control over women's lives:

د پښتنو پښتو ته گوره

چي لور او خور لکه څاروي بيه کوينه

(Shaheen, 1984, p. 299)

Look at the Pakhtu of Pashtuns;

Like cattle, they decide the fate of sisters and daughters.

This verse functions as a commentary on arranged marriages, exposing how women's agency is curtailed under the guise of *Pakhto*. The metaphor of "cattle" denaturalises the honour discourse, presenting women as victims of commodification. Such rhetoric is a form of what Scott (1992) calls a "hidden transcript": resistance that emerges in cultural and informal spaces, veiled yet potent.

Another *tappa* underscores gendered double standards in aesthetics:

هلک چي تور شي ښه ښکار پري

جینی چي توره شي ښکري دي خرسوینه

(Shaheen, 1984, p. 637)

A young man, when black looks good;

a girl, if black is only good to sell bangles.

Here, female voices resist colourism and gender discrimination by mocking the unequal standards of beauty. What is valorised in men (dark skin, ruggedness) is often stigmatised in women. The satirical tone destabilises these norms while voicing collective frustrations of women subject to restrictive ideals.

Yet women also celebrate their role in social recognition. In one *tappa*, a lover's bravery elevates the woman's own honor:

جانان پہ جنگ کی تورہ وکرہ

ما تہ همزولي پہ تندي سلام کوبہ

(Shaheen, 1984, p. 183)

My love proved his mettle in battle;

My friends salute me with their hands on their foreheads.

Here, women's social standing is relational, tied to men's performance of courage. This verse reflects both complicity and critique: while affirming the honour code, it also exposes women's dependence on men's actions for their social visibility.

Resistance is not limited to gender relations but extends to clerical authority. A striking *tappa* declares:

ملا دی خپلہ ملائی کری

ما له دي واخلي تمبلے چي بي وھمہ

Let the mullah (cleric) do his own religious duty;

I shall beat my own drum.

In this verse, the woman resists religious rigidity that seeks to regulate her cultural practices. Her assertion to "beat her own drum" is a symbolic act of reclaiming joy, music, and agency against ascetic piety. Within Scott's framework, such *tappas* represent everyday forms of resistance that challenge authority without direct confrontation.

Pashtun women's *tappa* constructs a discursive field where gender, aesthetics, and religion are interrogated through humour, satire, and metaphor. They embody a repertoire of subtle resistance by situating women as cultural critics whose voices travel across generations, ensuring that dissent remains woven into the collective fabric of Pashtun identity.

Homeland, Displacement, and Imagined Futures

The theme of homeland and displacement is deeply woven into the corpus of *tappa*, where the loss of land is articulated not only as the destruction of a physical shelter but also as the erosion of existential belonging. As Murcia (2021) observes, displacement results in a “loss of people’s place in the world” that transforms home into an irreplaceable site of meaning rather than merely property (p. 1361). In Pashtun oral tradition, *tappa* embodies this condition of loss and yearning, with voices of the collective dislocation of people who often find themselves “out of place within their own country.” The following *tappa* portrays the same theme:

کادې دا هېڅ چه نه بارېگي

يو پښتانه دي کدې ښکته پورته وړينه

Nowhere else does displacement occur;

only the Pashtuns are endlessly uprooted, driven from place to place.

This sense of dispossession is counterbalanced by an ethos of defence and sacrifice. In one verse, women pledge to defend the homeland when men falter:

که د ځوانانو پوره نه شوا

گرانې وطنه جينکښي به دي گڼينه

(Abid, 339, Roheela, 1988, p. 14, Shaheen, 1984, p.549).

If the young could not defend you,

O my motherland, your maidens will defend you against your enemy.

Here, women's voices challenge conventional gender roles by claiming agency as defenders of the land, which aligns patriotic sacrifice with feminine virtue. This poetic inversion not only resists patriarchal silencing but also reframes displacement as a site where women assert symbolic guardianship of the homeland.

At times, the imagery of *tappa* transforms distant geographies of exile into metaphors of estrangement. One couplet laments:

په تور دکن دي ځلي جوړ شه
د بي ننگي اواز دي رame شه ميننه

(Shaheen, 1984)

O my lover, it would be better to become a heap of dust in far-flung Deccan than to hear the news of your cowardly flight from battle.

The Deccan, geographically distant from Pashtun territory, becomes a metaphorical space of exile where death is preferable to dishonour. Displacement is thus inscribed not only as a physical reality but as an affective wound, framed through the honour code of *Pakhto*.

Colonial incursions and contemporary state violence deepen this motif. Like the British colonials, the Pakistani state has represented Pashtun lands as unruly, harsh terrains to legitimise airstrikes, drone attacks, and indiscriminate military operations (Khan et al., 2025; Jan et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2023; Ashraf & Shamas, 2020). Against this necropolitical logic, *tappa* reimagines the land through delicate imagery:

د گلاب تر گل نازک دي
گران که خوست دي که رزمک دي

More delicate than the rose are,

Dear Khost and Razmak, by far!

This verse resists the militarised framing of geography by presenting Khost and Razmak not as hostile frontiers but as spaces of beauty, intimacy, and life. Thus, the homeland in *tappa* emerges as both a site of suffering and resilience. Displacement, exile, and violence are acknowledged, but

the verses also imagine futures where women defend, preserve, and re-symbolise the land. Homeland is not reduced to territory; it is lived, embodied, and continually re-enanted through poetry. In this sense, *tappa* transforms the trauma of displacement into a collective archive of endurance, weaving together loss and hope in the imagined futures of Pashtun identity.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how Pashto *tappa*, a deceptively simple yet deeply layered oral poetic form, encodes women's voices, social critique, and collective memory within a patriarchal and conflict-affected society. Through a qualitative and interpretive methodology that combined folkloristic analysis, critical discourse perspectives, and feminist lenses, we examined selected *tappas* across four thematic registers: love and longing as coded resistance, war and honour as collective memory, gender and everyday life, and homeland, displacement, and imagined futures.

What emerges is that *tappa* operates not merely as folk entertainment or lyrical expression but as a cultural archive that preserves both women's agency and the community's resilience. Themes of love and longing reveal how women transformed private emotions into subtle forms of defiance against rigid codes of honour and silence. Verses invoking war and martyrdom highlight women's role in sustaining collective memory, where honour and sacrifice were simultaneously valorised and contested. In everyday life, *tappas* voice critiques of social hierarchies, clerical authority, and gendered labour, reflecting Scott's (1992) notion of "hidden transcripts" where resistance is woven into the texture of daily discourse. Finally, invocations of homeland, exile, and displacement capture the pain of uprooting but also reimagine Pashtun geography as delicate, nurturing, and worth defending, which challenges state and colonial depictions of the land as unruly or disposable.

By situating these couplets within broader socio-historical contexts, colonial wars, contemporary displacement, and enduring patriarchal codes, our analysis demonstrates that *tappa* is neither timeless nor apolitical. Rather, it is a living discourse where anonymity and collective authorship amplify silenced perspectives, especially those of women, while also articulating communal aspirations. In this way, the genre continues to serve as both memory and imagination: a site where grief, defiance, and hope coalesce in poetic form. The strength of our approach lies in highlighting *tappa* as a dynamic repository of women's cultural and political thought, often overlooked in

dominant historical and literary narratives. While limited by the absence of extended fieldwork and direct performance ethnography, our study affirms that even in fragmentary form, *tappa* offers crucial insights into Pashtun lifeworlds and the subtle ways in which marginalised voices negotiate power.

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