

DOING PUKHTU: INSTITUTIONS AND NORMS OF PUKHTUNWALI IN PUKHTUN FOLKTALES

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of Doing Pukhtu—abiding by the norms, standards, and institutions of Pukhtunwali—through a textual analysis of Pukhtun folktales. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, this study examines prominent folktale collections by Aisha Ahmed, W.L. Heston and Mumtaz Nasir, and Charles Swynnerton to understand how cultural codes such as *melmastia* (hospitality), *nanawati* (unconditional surrender), and *badal* (exchange or revenge) are represented and perpetuated. Furthermore, the research investigates the depiction of traditional institutions, specifically the *hujra* (guest house) and *jirga* (tribal council), within these narratives. By treating Pukhtunwali as a floating signifier, the study argues that these cultural codes are not static dogma but rather dynamic, context-dependent norms that adapt to various socio-economic conditions. Finally, the paper discusses the complex interplay between Islamic principles and tribal traditions as depicted in the tales, ultimately challenging stereotypes of the Pukhtun as inherently vindictive by highlighting themes of mercy, generosity, and communal harmony.

Keywords: Pukhtunwali, folktales, Jirga, Hujra, Badal, floating signifier, ethnic identity

“The tribesmen strictly adhere to their customs and traditions, the way of the fathers, called *Riwaj* which is sacred and followed religiously and every tribesman endeavors, hopes and prays to be like the fathers” (Daur, 2014, p. 60).

Introduction

Doing Pukhtu (*Pukhtu Kawal*) is the essence of Pukhtunwali. Pukhtu is not only the language of Pukhtuns, but it is also the set of normative behaviors, their code of conduct, and their way of life that makes them unique among the comity of nations. Doing Pukhtu means that a Pukhtun abides by the norms, standards, and institutions of Pukhtunwali. It demands complete submission to the norms and traditions of the community.

Doing Pukhtu constitutes certain norms that become a hallmark of Pukhtun identity. These norms include *nanawati* (unconditional surrender), *paighor* (taunt), *mashar* and *kashar* (senior and junior), *melmastia* (hospitality), *badal* (exchange or revenge), *panah* (asylum), *cheegha* (call for action), *kalay kaliwali* (communal life), *shariat*, and *pat* (to keep friendship, relations, and links). These norms make up the Pukhtun code of conduct called Pukhtunwali and are perpetuated and preserved for posterity by the institutions of Pukhtunwali. The *jirga* (council) and *hujra* (guest house) are the major institutions of Pukhtunwali.

Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature and is based on a textual analysis of *Pashtun Tales from the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier* by Aisha Ahmed, *The Bazaar of Storytellers* by W.L. Heston and Mumtaz Nasir, and *Folktales from the Upper Indus* by Charles Swynnerton. This study traces Pukhtunwali as a floating signifier through the analysis of Pukhtun folktales and argues that Pukhtunwali is not a concept carved in stone, but rather a dynamic code that changes meaning according to shifts in socio-economic and cultural conditions.

Secondary sources in this study include anthropologists such as Frederick Barth, Akbar S. Ahmed, James Spain, and Mountstuart Elphinstone. Pukhtun poets, such as Ghani Khan and Khushal Khan Khattak, will also be used as secondary sources.

Folktales, Ideology, and Community: Review

Pukhtun folktales as a medium for the promotion of Pukhtunwali need to be explored further. There is a dearth of critical literature in English regarding Pukhtun folktales and their depiction of Pukhtunwali.

Stuart Blackburn, in his book *Print, Folklore, and Nationalism in Colonial South India*, deals with Tamil folktales as they came to be known through print technology across India. Blackburn explores the role of folktales in the debate on tradition, modernity, and nationalism in 19th-century India: "Folklore represented what modernity would have to leave behind; on the other, it supplied the materials for constructing a nationalist identity" (Blackburn, 2003, p. 145). Pukhtun folktales have received little attention in scholarly discussions of this debate.

Regarding Tamil folklore, Blackburn notes that they "were expressed in the language of loss, mixing claims of buried history with forgotten texts and history" (Blackburn, 2003, p. 15). To Blackburn, folktales provide quintessential ingredients for the unity of any community because they represent "a shared tradition or at least recognition that is shared, which is a key criterion for a shared identity" (Blackburn, 2003, p. 147). A study of Pukhtun folktales can provide

valuable insight into their ways of life and shared identity.

Blackburn also elaborates on the factors contributing to the mixed reaction Tamil folktales received from people. One of the first reasons Blackburn cites is the feeling of embarrassment associated with folktales. Folktales were considered a "badge of backwardness, of the habits, beliefs and speech that were uneducated and superstitious" (Blackburn, 2003, p. 156). On the other hand, a sense of familiarity was greatly admired and invoked in discussions on folklore. This ambivalence towards folktales can be an interesting subject of inquiry in Pukhtun folktales.

The Institutions and Norms of Pukhtu (Pukhtunwali) in Pukhtun Folktales

"So if you find the Pathan folk-songs too brutal and naked and direct, do not forget that he lives a straight and primitive life in a lonely valley or a small village, and is too busy worrying about the next thing to shoot, to find time to be civilized" (Khan, 1994, p. 14).

Ghani Khan's reference to the simple and primitive Pukhtun life provides an interesting basis for discussing Pukhtunwali norms in folktales. Folktales, according to Ghani Khan, are the spiritual portrayal of a nation (Khan, 1994, p. 15). Considered an integral part of the human psyche, folktales offer a window into the cultural, social, and political values of a civilization.

This section begins with Alan Dundes's remark that folktales act as an autobiographical ethnography and permit a view from the inside-out rather than from the outside-in (Dundes, 2007, p. 19). Before discussing the main institutions of Pukhtunwali, it is important to clarify that the term institution is used here in the sense of a consistent and organized pattern of behavior or activities (established by law or custom) that is self-regulating in accordance with generally accepted norms. The *hujra* and *jirga* are the two prominent institutions of Pukhtunwali because they have played active roles in implementing customary laws. First, I examine the institution of the *hujra*. I return to the *jirga* later in this section.

The Institution of Hujra

The first and foremost important institution of Pukhtunwali that permits an inside-out view is the *hujra*. Before analyzing its depiction in Pukhtun folktales, a brief overview of the traditional *hujra* in Pukhtun society is imperative.

The *hujra* is popularly known among Pukhtuns as a community space, usually attached or situated close to their mosque. As a community meeting place, the traditional Pukhtun *hujra* is not an individual possession; rather, its maintenance and preservation are a communal responsibility. The maintenance of the *hujra* acts as a status symbol and at times determines male authority. As an active platform, all ceremonies—ranging from feasts and marriage festivals to political, cultural, and social discussions—are held in the *hujra*.

These arrangements are overseen by community elders known as *mashrans*. *Mashrans* are the true and spirited guardians of Pukhtunwali norms, as these *spin giris* (white-bearded elders) not only supervise and regulate the conduct of their *kashrans* (juniors), but also preserve and perpetuate the norms.

The Norms of Hujra in Pukhtun Folktales

Melma in Pukhtu refers to a guest, and *melmastia* means showing hospitality to the guest. It is binding on every Pukhtun to show hospitality and treat guests in the best possible way. J.W. Spain observes that *melmastia*:

is observed by the tribesmen to a degree frequently embarrassing to the guest—whether he be foreigner who knows he will never be in a position to return it, or fellow-tribesman who may fear that he will not be in a position to return it adequately when the occasion demands (Spain, 1972, p. 57).

Spain's observation highlights the obligation of returning *melmastia* among Pukhtuns. Any negligence in showing hospitality in the expected manner is considered a disgrace to family and clan honor, and the Pukhtunness of the person is severely criticized.

The depiction of the *hujra* and its norms in the folktales reinforces the striking hospitality of ordinary Pukhtun life. These practices are purely cultural and born out of a spirit of generosity. In the tale of "Ramdad Khan" (Ahmed & Boss, n.d.,

p. 165), Ramdad Khan, despite his rivalry with his paternal cousins, extends his generosity to them. The story revolves around *tarboorwali* (agnatic rivalry), where Ramdad's cousins plot to kill him and oust him from his respectable seat.

During the first battle, he and his companions put up a sturdy fight. They slay most of their enemies and take some of them alive, placing them in safe custody inside his fort. Ramdad Khan orders his troops not to harm anyone and extends generosity to everyone in the following words: "Do not let any harm happen to these men. They are guests, be hospitable to them and give them hospitality in good style" (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 169).

This act of supreme generosity is in line with the norms of Doing Pukhtu, as a true Pukhtun is not only kind and hospitable to his people but also extends these traits to his enemies. Ramdad Khan performs the obligation of *melmastia*, which ensures the protection of the guest. Because captives are considered weak, it is against the norms of *shujat* (bravery) to be unkind to them. Therefore, Ramdad Khan tells his troops that "they should have no concern in their hearts about me, for guests are as precious to me as my own life" (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 170). At the end, the prisoners are set free under the protection of Ramdad's troops.

Ramdad Khan performs another important norm of Pukhtu, *badragah* (escort), which is primarily associated with *melmastia*. James Spain states that it is "a formal escort or guarantee of safe conduct to a stranger, emissary or even enemy" (Spain, 1972, p. 158). *Badragah* provides both guidance and protection to a guest. Ramdad Khan's act of securing his arch-enemies is a direct conformity to tribal Pukhtu norms.

Similarly, other essential norms of *melmastia* include *nanawati* (unconditional surrender) and *panah* (asylum). Ramdad Khan forgives his enemies because they give up their hostility and make peace with him. Ghulam Qadir defines *nanawati* as "entering, like enter into submission or unconditional surrender" (Daur, 2014, p. 112). However, *nanawati* is not accepted if the culprit is involved in dishonoring the *namus* (honor) of a family. In that case, the aggrieved party is honor-bound to reject it (Daur, 2014, p. 112).

Panah (asylum or sanctuary) is also an essential element of *melmastia*, granted to a person who asks for it. Ghulam Qadir notes that “when a person is under duress he/she asks for asylum” (Daur, 2014, p. 127). Elphinstone and Caroe (1972) rightly observe that “the denial of sanctuary is impossible for one who observes Pukhtu; it cannot be denied or refused even to an enemy who makes an approach according to *Nanawati*” (p. 157). Unconditional surrender requires the guest to follow the rules and regulations of the host; they are bound to behave according to the area’s norms. In the tale of “The Parrot and the Starling” (no. 18), the parrot’s nest is demolished by a stormy rain. With no place to take shelter, he decides to enter the house of a nearby starling. Under duress, the parrot fails to seek permission, breaks the *purdah* of the house, and takes unwanted refuge. The angry mother of the starling drives him away, screaming: ‘Leave my house immediately, for you have broken my daughter’s *purdah*’ (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 127).

The parrot receives harsh treatment because he fails to observe the norm of *panah* (obtaining the host’s consent) and breaks the *purdah* of the house, which is “an unpardonable sin among Pukhtun tribes” (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 89). The starling’s mother eventually grants him permission to stay on the condition that he marries her daughter, successfully forcing him to observe the norms of her house.

Usually, *nanawati* takes place when there is an uncalled-for casualty and the harm involved does not constitute a major crime. Violations of *nang* and *namus* are inexcusable and do not fall under the norms of *nanawati* (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 35). However, there is a difference between *nanawati* and *panah*, as stated by James Spain: “*Nanawati* is surrender while *panah* is providing with sanctuary” (Spain, 1972, p. 156). He further explains that “it is a going in or a giving in to an enemy, carrying with a connotation of great shame for the one who undertakes it and no obligation to accept it on the part of the one whom it is offered” (Spain, 1972, p. 157).

The depiction of *nanawati* in the folktales sometimes differs from conventional practice, omitting traditional formalities like slaughtering

sheep. Instead, it is offered in its simplest form: the guilty party asks for pardon, and the aggrieved person is not bound to accept it. Here, *nanawati* is portrayed in the modern sense of the words “forgiveness” and “informal apology.”

This variant form is illustrated in “The King’s Dream” (no. 25). Four demons are instructed to guard a prince and princess. One of the demons, in cahoots with others, abducts the princess and hides her. The master demon locates her in the house of his subordinates. Upon seeing their master, they fall at his feet and ask for his heartfelt apologies. Since the demons belong to his tribe and owe him allegiance, he accepts their *nanawati* and frees the princess.

Almost all the Pukhtun folktales reviewed in this study depict the *hujra* merely as a resting place; its traditional essence as a community center is largely absent. With the exception of one tale, “The Adventure of Ulphoo and Shurppo” (Swynnerton, 2009, p. 92), where the *hujra* serves as a community center, the tales depict it as an individual space. However, it must be noted that the respect and regard for the Pukhtun norms associated with the *hujra* remain strictly followed.

Hospitality Code as a Floating Signifier

The *hujra* is a Pukhtun community center where guests are honored, served food, and given protection regardless of caste, creed, or color. However, some anthropologists impart their own meanings to these cultural codes depending on the context, making the hospitality code a floating signifier.

To Frederick Barth, the hospitality code is prevalent because “this striking hospitality and reckless spending only seems intelligible if we recognize that the underlying motives are political rather than economic” (Barth, 1981, p. 12). Barth’s analysis attaches political significance to the *hujra* but fails to observe its sociocultural importance. His understanding of the *hujra* as a “medium of maximizing power” underestimates the pride Pukhtuns take in serving people. Akbar S. Ahmed rebuts this, stating:

If political support alone is the reason for the hospitality then this argument cannot be sustained in explaining the ‘striking hospitality’ of the

ordinary Pukhtun villager to any passing stranger or foreigner (Ahmed, 2013, p. 58).

The tale of "Fuzzle Noor and The Demons" (no. 24) authenticates Ahmed's stance. Despite extreme poverty, Fuzzle Noor offers *melmastia* and requests his harsh wife to be kind to strangers (Swynnerton, 2009, p. 298). The aspect of hospitality is ingrained in the Pukhtun psyche and "has passed into the mythology of Pukhtun history and society" (Ahmed, 2013, p. 58).

Barth's analysis can also be discounted regarding *nanawati* and *panah*, which cannot be denied even to an enemy. Overemphasizing the political role of the *hujra* ignores that these norms "are at least as much a cultural phenomenon as a political one" (Ahmed, 2013, p. 58).

James Spain offers another interpretation, contending that "*melmastia*, it must be confessed, is more a matter of personal prestige and self-aggrandizement than of charity or brotherly love" (Spain, 1972, p. 159). Contesting Spain and Barth, Ahmed argues that *melmastia* is deeply rooted in the "larger consciousness of Islamic society" and is represented in popular parlance and Quranic verses that encourage believers to practice it (Ahmed, 2013, p. 58). He observes that "hospitality is an admired social virtue" (Ahmed, 2013, p. 60).

These conflicting views make the hospitality code an interesting floating signifier. A floating signifier is "a word that does not point to any actual work or an agreed upon meaning" (Hall, 1996).

Jirga: An Institution of Pukhtunwali

The *jirga* is another crucial conflict-resolving institution, highlighting the ubiquitous culture of debate among Pukhtuns and their respect for the argumentative ethos. The *jirga* generally consists of a group of elders (*spin giri*) who mediate and try to decide an issue after evaluating the opinions of all concerned parties. Ghulam Qadir states, "Normally the Jirga gives a consensus verdict; if for some reason consensus cannot be reached then the Jirga is replaced with a new Jirga" (Daur, 2014, p. 145). The decision of the *jirga* is binding on the disputants.

The significance of such an assembly is crucial in a society where formal law and state institutions

have a minimal presence. The *jirga* plays a cordial role in ordering society and preventing it from disintegrating.

The *jirga* is primarily divided into three types. The first grand type is known as the *Qami* or *Ulsi* (local representative *jirga*). The *Sarkari* or governmental *jirga*, as the name indicates, is government-sponsored. The origin of the governmental *jirga* dates back to the notorious British pronouncement known as the Frontier Crime Regulation (Ahmed, 2013, p. 71).

Jirga in the Folktales

The depiction of the *jirga* in most of the tales reveals a fluidity, often referring to routine gatherings. While the traditional *jirga* is an assembly of village elders, in the tales, a simple gathering of people is referred to as a *jirga*. In the tale of "Youssef Khan and Sher Banu" (no. 69), the family members of Yousaf Khan arrange his marriage and decide on a day for grand celebrations. The women of Yousaf Khan's family refer to Sher Banu and use the term *jirga* for the gathering: "We are coming to you as a *jirga*, my lady, for who will do deeds like Yusaf?" (Nasir & Heston, 2009, p. 86). Later, Yousaf Khan references the actual role of the *jirga* when he sets scores with his rivals and asks for intervention. The village *jirga* concedes that his rivals had wronged him. With previous debts paid and revenge taken, they sue for peace. Eventually, Yousaf and his rivals leave behind their bitter past (Nasir & Heston, 2009, p. 87).

Unlike the traditional *jirga*, some tales highlight its weaknesses. Traditionally, *jirga* members employ tactics like going as a *nanawati* to bring aggrieved parties to the table. In case of disobedience, the *jirga* reserves the power to impose strict measures. Akbar S. Ahmed notes, "The Jirga's sanctions may include ostracism and disobedience would result in extreme opprobrium leading to fines that might even include burning of the house" (Ahmed, 2013, p. 91).

The tale of Ajab Khan Afridi displays a helpless and weak *jirga*. Ajab Khan planned to disgrace the colonial official Major Ellis and abducted his daughter, Molly Ellis. Authorities approached a

tribal *jirga* to demand recovery. The English commanders imposed heavy fines and demolished houses, but to no avail. The *jirga* made requests and sent *nanawati*, but failed. Compelled by circumstances, Ajab Khan released Molly and preferred self-imposed exile, returning only after the British rule ended. The policing and judicial role of the *jirga* met with total failure against the obstinate Ajab Khan. James Spain argues that "The *Jirga* ordinarily does not determine guilt or inflict punishment but seeks to achieve a settlement" (Spain, 1972, p. 50). In Ajab's case, the *jirga* not only lacked authority but also exposed its weakness in achieving a settlement.

The Code of Badal

Badal is an essential norm of Pukhtunwali and the most important code for restoring justice in tribal areas. Ghani Khan writes, "In the tribal areas where nearly four million people live without law courts, policemen, judges and hangmen, you seldom hear of adultery or murder. Elopements are rare, for the risk is great and the price heavy for rare lips and beautiful eyes" (Khan, 1994, p. 26). Emphasizing one side of *badal* as revenge has accentuated attributes that cast Pukhtuns as "rigidly unruly, primitive and warmongering" (Widmark, n.d., p. 3).

Taken out of context, the fluidity of the code of *badal* has been ignored. Pukhtuns associate *badal* with words like exchange, change, and retaliation. As the following lines state:

Consider what might compel a man
To kill himself, or another.
Does oppression not demand?
Some reaction against the oppressor? (Dost, 2007, p. 34)

Code of Badal in Folktales

Honor is the single most significant code of Pukhtunwali regulating Pukhtun behavior. References to honor-based revenge are frequent in the folktales. Ghulam Qadir observes that "it will never be forgotten or forgiven, so, no matter how much arms or fighting force a family has, it is careful not to use it indiscriminately" (Daur, 2014, p. 104).

Any threat to the honor of an individual or family is met with strong force, no matter how mighty the opponent. As the tale of "The Barber and the Farmer's Wife" (no. 35) illustrates, when the barber mishandles the farmer and indiscriminately cuts off his moustache, the farmer is unable to strike back and helplessly sits at home. His brave wife, camouflaging herself as a man, strongly reacts and avenges the affront. When a male member is unable to avenge an insult, women rise to restore the family's honor.

In the absence of an active authority, unjust killing demands individual retaliation, inviting a neutral interpretation of revenge. It "gives rise to a personal and unilateral sense of satisfaction, strongly directed towards all the inequalities of life and against all the perceived wrongdoings" (Widmark, n.d., p. 6). However, the calamitous effects of honor-based violence are largely missing from the reviewed tales. Retaliation in tales like "Musa Khan Deo" (no. 14) and "Yousaf Khan and Sher Banu" (no. 69) is strongly emphasized.

Other *badal* situations highlighting "exchange" are also related. The common word used for exchange is *tal ratlal* (going and coming). Doing Pukhtu becomes an obligation to return favors. Pukhtuns constantly quote the proverb: "If Pukhtu were the highest mountain they would climb it" (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 92). Here, Pukhtu can mean exchanging gifts and following community norms. Returning a favor becomes an act of honor. The tale "Ramdad Khan" (no. 7) illustrates that "good actions require corresponding actions in return" (Rzehak, 2011, p. 14). Ramdad Khan lets his enemies go and shows them hospitality. Years later, when his enemies regroup and attack, one opponent, Asaf Khan, remembers this generosity. He calls out: "Get ready, I remember your goodness. That goodness of yours is continually before me and real men always return favors" (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 173). Lutz Rzehak argues that "In Pukhtunwali, it is sinful to be given something good without reciprocation," adding that "Doing Pukhtu means to settle one's debt when the opportunity arises" (Rzehak, 2011, p. 14). Other tales, such as "Adam and Dur Khanai" (no. 1) and "Sher Alam and Memunai" (no. 2), highlight exchange as an essential norm.

Code of Badal: A Floating Signifier

The original meaning of *badal* is 'exchange,' but over time, it acquired meanings of compensation and retaliation (Rzehak, 2011, p. 14). In Western writings, it is exclusively understood as revenge. Spain (1972), Barth (1981), and Ahmed (2013) have rigidly translated and interpreted the code of *badal* as *tarboorwali* (agnatic rivalry), arguing that cousin rivalries ignore all other sanctions. This rigid interpretation emphasizes "desire of revenge stressing or vindictiveness to be a main characteristic of Pukhtun's collective identity" (Widmark, n.d., p. 7).

Pukhtun authors point to a more fluid interpretation. Khadim Hussain associates *badal* with *tlal ratlal* (socializing with people), arguing that "good deeds and bad deeds require corresponding action in return" (Rzehak, 2011, p. 67). Similarly, Ghulam Qadir (Daur, 2014) calls *badal* the "greatest commandment of Pukhtu" and brings to light other meanings such as *qarz* or *por* (debt), *bakhshish* (mercy), and reconciliation. *Badal*, therefore, means different things depending on the context, making it a floating signifier where celebrations "manifest the concept of Badal in its meaning of reciprocity in social relationship" (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 141).

Depiction of Islam in Folktales

Islam plays an important role in Pukhtun life. James Spain writes: "Islam came to the Pathans earlier than to most other peoples of the subcontinent. Since the tenth century all of them have been Muslims. The Mullah or priest plays an important role in their life..." (Spain, 1972, p. 139).

However, Louis Dupree argues that Islam as seen in villages bears a superficial resemblance to the literate Islam of the Quran (Dupree, 1980, p. 114). Dupree further writes that "the villagers know the *dramatis personae* and many of the incidents related in the Quran, but give both a local twist" (Dupree, 1980, p. 114). This can be seen in "Hazrat Ali Sahab" (no. 27), which twistingly illustrates the advent of Islam in Pukhtun territory. The Prophet summons Hazrat Ali and tells him that there is an unbeliever heading a tribe in Khyber: "Go and bring him into the fold of

Islam. If he refuses to become a Muslim, then you may kill him" (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 236). Dupree refers to this as an attempt to "bring Islam closer to the Afghan" (Dupree, 1980, p. 115).

While Ahmed argues that Islamic symbols are highly visible (Ahmed, 2013, p. 123), the mullah's role in the tales is often limited to the call to prayer, as seen in "Ramdad Khan" (no. 7) and "Kamal Khan" (no. 9). The mullah is not portrayed as the sole authority. Conversely, "The Parrot and the Starling" (no. 18) highlights the flawed judgment of an illiterate mullah who gives two separate verdicts on the same dispute, pronouncing both claimants correct (Ahmed & Boss, n.d., p. 237).

Most Pukhtu norms can be found in sync with Islamic norms. The tales reiterate the Islamic notion that "the unbridled fighting spirit of young men has to be directed to reason and responsibility" (Glatzer, 1998, p. 9). However, they avoid Islamic warfare terminology, taking pride instead in Pukhtun *nang* (honor).

This conflicting adherence becomes evident because Pukhtu, at times, contains both Islamic and un-Islamic norms. Pukhtuns may violate Shariat without qualms in matters of inheritance while upholding *riwaj* (custom) in cases of adultery. Pukhtun folktales emphatically articulate Pukhtu norms in both positive and negative aspects, attaching primary importance to the tribal code over strict Islamic concepts.

Final Comments

This paper addressed the norms and institutions of Pukhtunwali, examining how they have been depicted in Pukhtun folktales. The depiction of these norms strengthens the contention that Pukhtunwali is dynamic, its meaning depending on context and situation. Because its dynamic character is often ignored, the Pukhtun continues to be stereotyped as a noble savage or inherently vindictive. Pukhtun folktales strongly negate this view. Locating the fluidity of Pukhtunwali through these narratives, this study concludes that Pukhtunwali is not solely about violence and bloodshed; rather, mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation are equally fundamental.

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