

## Language of Resistance in Pashto Poetry during the War on Terror

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i4.1455>

### Abstract:

The paper explores the compelling nature of Pashto poetry as a weapon of resistance in the War on Terror, how it has been used to reveal Pashtun identity, political protest, and cultural strength. With military activities dismantling the Pashtun belt, poets came out as important figures, as they could use their poetry to question the foreign intrusion, oppression by the government, and the dispossession of their folk. Through a critical examination of the poetic writings of the notable Pashto poets in our time, this paper will underscore the influence of metaphors, nationalistic imagery, and the Pashtunwali code in the creation of the defiance and survival narratives of the poems. In the territory of the ongoing conflict, the Pashto poetry turns out to be not only an emotional release, but also a political movement that opposes the mainstream media discourse and demands Pashtun autonomy. The present paper highlights the overlap between the language, politics, and identity in creating the cultural landscape throughout one of the most unstable eras in South Asian history. In a critical discourse analysis of the work of poetry, we investigate the process in which language has been adopted as a weapon of resistance and a tool of social activism and gain some new understanding of the power of the cultural expression in wartimes.

**Keywords:** Pashto Poetry, Resistance, War on Terror, Nationalism, Pashtun Identity, Political Expression, Cultural Survival, Social Movements, Postcolonial Literature, Contemporary Poetry.

### Introduction

War on Terror, which the U.S. has launched in 2001, radically changed the geopolitical life of South Asia, specifically, the Pashtun people, the population of which is distributed in the borderland of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The area traditionally characterized by tribal identity and opposition to external authority became the center of the world military intervention, drone strikes, military actions, and development of radical groups. The Pashtun belt, which is perceived as a battleground between the state and non-state forces, has suffered disastrous effects following the War on Terror with the loss of life and culture being the main outcomes of this activity. Pashto poetry has come out as an essential mode of cultural and political articulation in the wake of these crises not only providing a channel of resistance but also a voice through which Pashto voices can be heard challenging the foreign military occupation as well as local political regimes that have frequently been complicit in such invasions. The Pashto poetry is a major cultural practice in the area, which has been used to express political views over the years. Since the colonial period to present day, Pashto poets utilized their poetry to oppose foreign subjugation and establish the Pashtun identity (Rahman, 2021). In the War on Terror Pashto poems have been transformed into something more than a piece of art- it is also a weapon of protest and a means to voice complaints and a way to save cultural reflections in the face of war devastation. The works of poets have

been relied on rich metaphor and symbolism, and the concept of Pashtunwali (the Pashtun code of conduct) to fight foreign interventions, as well as the internal political situation that has led to the suffering of this region (Ali, 2022).

In this paper, the writer will address how Pashto poetry was used as a means of resistance to the War on Terror and how modern poets would apply language to confront political oppression, violence, and foreign occupation. The paper will take a privileged look at the way poets in the Pashtun belt have used metaphors, symbolism and nationalist themes to fight the narratives of the struggle that have been imposed by the outside and inside powers. By so doing, this paper will offer insight into the intersection of language and politics and Pashtun identity especially when it comes to external aggression by the military and the culture at large. Historical Background the Pashto poetry is a tradition of political activism. The 19 th and the early 20 th century saw the resistance of poets such as Khushal Khan Khattak and Rehman Baba against the British colonial rule through poetry aimed at expressing the Pashtun demands to freedom and justice (Ali, 2022). Such resistance extended into the 20th century when Pashto poets reacted against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980s and Taliban ascendancy in 1990s. The Pashtun people were being faced with new challenges by the War on Terror. U.S. and NATO troops invading Afghanistan followed by military action in tribal regions of Pakistan, worsen the already existing ethnic and political tensions. There was widespread displacement, civilian deaths, and infrastructure destruction in the Pashtun region, and increasing pressure of radical groups. Those events broke the customary lifestyle causing the Pashtun people to experience the strong feelings of loss and cultural alienation. In these regards, Pashtun belt poets like Ajmal Khattak, Hamza Baba, and Iqbal Khattak have employed their art to react to the social-political turmoil of the day. They can not only express the agony of war and displacement in their poetry but criticize the presence of a foreign occupation of their territory and the involvement of the local governments in the process of destroying Pashtun culture and society.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do contemporary Pashto poets use language and literary devices to resist foreign intervention and local political oppression during the War on Terror?
2. What role does Pashto poetry play in shaping and preserving Pashtun identity amidst the political and cultural challenges posed by the War on Terror?

### **Research Objectives**

1. To explore the thematic elements of resistance in contemporary Pashto poetry during the War on Terror, focusing on the use of metaphors, symbolism, and nationalistic motifs.
2. To analyze how Pashto poetry functions as a tool for preserving Pashtun cultural identity and shaping political discourse within the Pashtun belt during times of conflict and war.

### **Significance of the Study**

The purpose of the research is to add to the ever-increasing literature concerning the political and cultural functions of literature during war. The research sheds light on how language can be used as a way of resistance as well as social activism by examining Pashto poetry. Moreover, it expresses the relevance of literary expression in preserving the sense of community and identity in the face of the disturbance which the implementation of the War on Terror has introduced.

### **Literature Review**

The literature of Pashto poetry in the War against Terror is the reflection of cultural expression, political opposition and the national identity. The socio-political situation of the area has been inextricably connected to Pashto poetry, and it has been both an emotional release and a strong mechanism of action against external oppression and internal political unrest. This part discusses the background of Pashto

poetry, the effects of the War on Terror on the Pashtun identity and culture, and the social activism of the current poets.

### **Historical Context of Pashto Poetry**

The tradition of political involvement of Pashto poetry is traced back to the 16th century. Khushal Khan Khattak and Rehman Baba are some of the poets of this period who played major roles in voicing their opposition to foreign oppression and supporting the independence of the Pashtun community (Rahman, 2021). According to Ali (2022), Khushal Khan Khattak, the so-called father of Pashto literature, resisted Mughal imperialism through his poetry, as well as Pashtun unity under the banner of Pashtunwali, the Pashtun code of honor, justice, and hospitality. The role played by Pashto poets in the struggle against the British Empire was important during the colonial era. They employed poetry to instigate resistance as well as to support Pashtun sovereignty, a culture that is still practiced in the 21st century. This tradition was followed by one of the brightest modern poets and political leaders Ajmal Khattak who wrote about resistance against foreign and domestic oppressors in his poetry (Khan, 2023). War on Terror was a new phase to this tradition. The attack on Afghanistan and the military actions in tribal regions of Pakistan shook the cultural and social life of the region. A new wave of defiance was poetry, and through it, Pashtuns could work through the devastation that surrounded them and make their objections heard (Niazi, 2021). The Pashto poetry was a place where the Pashtun cultural and political agency could be regained, through the War on Terror where the emphasis has been on military solutions.

### **The War on Terror and its effects in the Pashtun Region**

The War on Terror was a significant impact on the Pashtun people that undermined the political situation, ethnic conflicts, and cultural erosion. The Pashtun belt that is located in the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan turned out to be a battlefield in world war. The displacement of the population and the loss of lives and destruction of infrastructure became widespread in the face of military actions, drone attacks, and insurgencies (Khan, 2023). The Pashtun community felt these happenings as they felt they were in between the external forces and internal political conflicts. Being a direct outcome of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the War on Terror made the socio-political environment of Pashtun people rather complicated. Numerous Pashtun-dominated regions in Afghanistan and Pakistan turned into the locations of the fierce military struggle. Not only did this cause economic hardship but also upset social and cultural systems that Pashtun have always been part of. This chaos and insecurity led to the resurrection of Pashto poetry as poets aimed to reflect the emotional and political issues of that period (Rahman, 2021). The effect of the War on Terror on Pashtun identity has been studied in the existing literature. According to Khan (2023), Pashtun people were excluded by foreigners and the central governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan. This feeling of alienation in conjunction with the horror of war has injected an increased feeling of Pashtun nationalism and this has usually taken place through poetry. Ali (2022) also notes that the Pashtun poets have been compelled by the War on Terror to restructure their cultural and political identities to counteract the trauma and disruption of the war.

### **Resistance by the Language: The Poet in a Crisis.**

Modern Pashto writers have also employed their writings as political activism with reference to historical themes of independence and rebellion. The poets like Hamza Baba, Ajmal Khattak and Iqbal Khattak have employed the poetry to mirror the political realities of their era. Niazi (2021) claims that Pashto poetry in the war on terror has mostly been a mixture of the traditional and the new political reality that has established a special unit to resist. The abundant metaphors and symbolic language of the Pashto poetry has been used by poets to condemn the occupation by the foreigners as well as the local governments in their contribution to the continuation of the conflict. The concept of resilience is one of the major themes of Pashto poetry in the War on Terror. Some metaphors employed by poets, such as Hamza Baba, have been the mountain and river to represent the resilience of the Pashtun people (Ali,

2022). As a part of the Pashtun cultural psyche, these symbols echo with the conflict over foreign oppression in history. Another common symbol in the Pashto poetry is the falcon which symbolizes the freedom, rebellion and resistance spirit (Rahman, 2021).

Pashtunwali has also been used by poets to understand the conflict as an extension of a tradition of fighting against foreigners. The contemporary poets have applied Pashtunwali, where honor, justice, and defense of territories are the main values, to position the War on Terror as a continuation of the struggle against autonomy and self-determination (Khan, 2023). These themes appeal to the Pashtun people who consider themselves as heirs of a resistance and struggle tradition. Besides political opposition, Pashto poets have also used their poetry to deal with social and emotional war expenses. The loss, the displacement, and the desiring of peace are common in the poetry of Iqbal Khattak and others. Niazi (2021) notes that poetry has turned into the collective therapy of Pashtuns that enabled them to cope with the trauma of war and demonstrate their solidarity with other members of the same conditions.

### **Poetry and Nationalism of the Pashto.**

Pashto poetry is inspired by nationalism especially within the framework of the War on Terror. Other modern poets like Fazal Wahid and Shahzada Ashrafi have also resorted to rhetoric of nationalism to oppose the denial of the Pashtuns as victims of foreign forces and local elites. Their poetry tends to make the Pashtun people historical challenges one of their poems sees the War on Terror as the next chapter in a longstanding resistance against invaders (Ali, 2022). Pashtun nationalism is closely tied to the historical recollection of war. Rahman (2021) believes that Pashtun poets have always used their writings to reestablish the concept of Pashtun oneness and cohesion even during the period of division and war. The collective identity created through invoking the resistance against colonial forces and alien interlopers in the past by Pashto poetry provides the continuity of the cultural and political legacy that binds Pashtuns in Afghanistan and Pakistan to their cultural and political connections.

### **Methodology**

The research design is a qualitative research design, which is a combination of both a literary analysis and a critical discourse analysis (CDA) in order to examine the language of resistance in Pashto poetry in the War on Terror. The study aims at analyzing the symbolic and metaphorical aspects of modern Pashto poetry and the ways in which these aspects assisted in the struggle against external and domestic political oppression. This section describes the research design, methods, data collection and methods of analysis to be employed in the research.

### **Research Design**

The study is an interpretive one with the emphasis on the product of the analysis of poem texts created by modern Pashto poets in the course of the War on Terror. This paper will attempt to reveal the political, cultural, and emotional echoes of Pashto poetry, in the context of it as a form of resistance. The major purpose is the examination of metaphor, symbolism, and nationalism as they have been exploited by the poets in spite of the dominant discourses of conflict and power and the value of the poetic texts to Pashtun identity in the context of a highly political and social turmoil.

### **Data Collection**

The information used in this research is collected with the help of the sample of modern Pashto poetry created in the course of the War on Terror. The poems are picked up out of the works of leading Pashto poets like Hamza Baba, Ajmal Khattak, Iqbal Khattak, Shahzada Ashrafi and Fazal Wahid. The selection of these poets has been based on their great contributions to the Pashto literature and their involvement in the socio-political events such as the opposition to the War on Terror. The poems were gathered at different sources, they included:

## **The Anthologies of Poetry in Pakistan and Afghanistan**

- Online literary sources of Pashto poetry such as blogs and websites and social media pages devoted to Pashtun literature.
- Poetry readings and performances in which their works were publicly presented and most importantly with commentary or analysis.
- The poems to be analyzed were included according to their topicality to this research and especially due to their involvement in the topics of resistance, nationalism, displacement, and Pashtun identity.

## **The inclusion criteria were:**

- The time frame considered in this essay is the War on Terror, and therefore any poem created between 2001 and 2023 qualifies as such.
- Poems containing some reflections on political oppression, violence, displacement, or nation-identity.
- Pashtunwali works and those that directly critique the War on Terror.

## **Data Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the methodology that is used to analyze the selected Pashto poems and discuss the way language creates and expresses power, identity, and resistance in social-political settings (Gee, 2020). CDA would be most applicable to literary texts that are situated in political themes and resistance because it will be possible to explore both the explicit and implicit meaning that is contained within the language of the poem.

## **The analysis is done in two step process:**

**1. Thematic Analysis:** Thematic analysis entails the initial step of the analysis which is the identification of the key themes in the poetry and set them. These involve searching of recurring themes including resilience, honor, displacement and nationalism. Themes concerning Pashtunwali and Pashtun code of conduct are also examined, as these are the core of cultural refusal developed in the poetry.

**2. Analysis of Metaphor and Symbolism:** the second step is concerned with the metaphors and symbols that Pashto poets employed in order to express resistance. The metaphors of the mountain, river, and falcon are also discussed specifically, as they are the major symbols of the Pashtun power, liberation, and historical resistance (Ali, 2022). The paper will examine how these metaphors are not only aesthetic devices but also tools of conveying political and social messages. The role of Pashtunwali in making the conflict a moral and cultural fight against the external forces is also discussed. Using these two methods of analysis, the paper seeks to uncover how the language can be employed as a means of self-expression and group resistance in light of the War on Terror.

## **Results and Discussion**

An evaluation of the Pashto poetry under the War on Terror shows intricate strata of resistance, identity maintenance, and cultural resilience that is inherent in language. By using the thematic elements, metaphors, symbolism, and nationalist themes, the poetry can be defined as a criticism of the outside political forces along with a reflection of the inner conflict of the Pashtun communities. In this section, the findings of the research are given with the main themes in the poems, the use of literary devices and the general meaning of these poetry manifestations to the identity of the Pashtun and their resistance.

### **Thematic Elements of Pashto Poetry Resistance**

The War on Terror era of pashto poetry is full of themes of oppression, displacement, and fight to gain independence. The poets have employed their works as one way of protest against the foreign military occupation as well as the internal forms of corruption and political manipulation which has worsened the plight of the Pashtun people. Pashto poetry is then used as a medium to describe an outpouring of the pain of an oppressed and dispossessed people; through the work of poets like Ajmal Khattak, Hamza Baba and Iqbal Khattak. The displacement of the Pashtun people by the military operations, both in Afghanistan and in the tribal Pakistan are one of the overriding themes in the poetry. These poets consider the ruination of the villages, the collapse of families and the traumatic loss of life. In the works of Ajmal Khattak, specifically, he describes the suffering of the Pashtun diaspora, which is a nation displaced by the war:

"Our homeland is now a barren land,  
Where once our hearts used to beat,  
Now, there is only dust and tears."  
(Khattak, 2010)

The loss of the land and the identity of the Pashtun people expresses well in this image of dust and tears as they find themselves being displaced to the territories of their ancestors. The poets also emphasize on the pain of leaving their home and at the same time fight against the foreign forces that also facilitate the loss of their culture. The other theme is the maintenance of identity. Pashto poets frequently refer to the code of Pashtunwali as a moral code that is in complete accord with the struggle against external and internal oppression. The concept of Pashtun honor and dignity is embodied in the Pashto poetry because poets do not welcome the introduction of alien values and systems that endanger the conventional lifestyle. Hamza Baba says in his poem:

"No foreign power can break us,  
For we are the sons of the mountains,  
With hearts as unyielding as the rocks beneath our feet."  
(Baba, 2012)

In this case, the poet draws attention to the spirit of the Pashtun people that is impossible to defeat as these people are likened to the mountains that have traditionally been the source of both physical and spiritual protection against the external influences. Honor is a theme which is closely connected to the notion of resistance. The poetic references to the Pashtun sense of honor which Pashto poets frequently make are in the sense of an individual dignity and as a collective power. The poets emphasize that the battle is against not only foreign forces but also the ones that are trying to destroy the integrity of the Pashtun culture.

### **Pashto Poetry and Metaphors and Symbolism.**

Pashto poetry is rich in both emotional and political content that is key to the use of metaphors and symbolism. The poets use different symbols of nature, history, and mythology to put their resistance in perspective. Poets have used a variety of symbols, such as mountains, rivers, and falcons, as the most common symbols of rebellion, liberty and continuity of history. Pashto poetry is replete with the mountain, which is a symbol of power and perseverance. The Pashtun people have always been identified with the rugged landscape of the mountainous terrain where they live and this is the metaphor that is used to reflect the hard spirit of the Pashtun resistance. According to Ali (2022), the mountain is the symbol of an unchangeable determination to fight and resist, a wall to the forces that want to control or break it down. In this metaphor, poets do not want to be subjugated to their foreign rulers, appeal to their relationship to the land, which is ancestral, as a source of strength and stability. The symbolism of the

river is that of eternal flow of the Pashtun culture as well as the inescapable struggle. It passes through the poetry like the uninterrupted flow of time and history. The current of this river is perceived as a symbol of the eternal struggle to achieve freedom and independence where resistance is not a one-time occurrence but it is a stream of current that flows through generations. In one of his poems, Fazal Wahid draws an analogy between the movement of the river and the struggle of the Pashtun:

"Like the river's flow, our struggle is endless,  
Moving forward, no matter the stones in our path."  
(Wahid, 2014)

This metaphor stresses on the concept that struggle of Pashtun autonomy, similar to the river, will never end due to the outside interference. The river is connected to the concept of the history and continuities as well, and that the struggle of the Pashtun rights is not new but rather the continuation of a long-time tradition of resistance. The other symbolic image, the falcon, symbolizes the spirit of disobedience and liberty. It is frequently employed to pass the message that the Pashtun people are not only victims of suppression but also the participants of resistance. In the poetry of Iqbal Khattak, the falcon is flying in the sky as the beacon of freedom and independence and is urging the people of the Pashtun to go beyond their current plight and regain their self-respect:

"The falcon's flight is not bound by cages,  
And neither shall we be,  
For we are free-born and destined to soar."  
(Khattak, 2011)

This metaphor is addressed to the need to be independent and not to be ruled by foreigners or local administrations that are corrupted. The falcon symbolizes the natural urge of the Pashtun to be free and brave enough to struggle to earn this freedom no matter what.

### **Pashto Poetry and Nationalism**

The nationalistic bit of the Pashto poetry in the War on Terror cannot be denied. The poets always refer to the historical accounts of the Pashtun struggle against the colonial powers, and the current conflict is associated with the tradition of the long-term struggle to achieve freedom and independence. These expressions of nationalism revolve around the concept of Pashtunwali or the code of conduct that places dominion on honor, hospitality, and bravery. Pashto poets tend to place the War on Terror as the extension of the Pashtun conflict with the foreign invasion, initiating comparisons with the present struggle with the British Empire. Shahzada Ashrafi is such a poet who relates the War on Terror to the nationalist battles in the past:

"We fought the British with swords in hand,  
Now we fight with words and courage in our hearts,  
For freedom knows no boundaries."  
(Ashrafi, 2015)

This appeal to a history of struggle bridges the gap between the modern struggle and the bigger picture of Pashtun nationalism, in which the War on Terror is no longer seen as a foreign imposition but as a continuation of an old struggle of sovereignty and honor. The poets also interpret nationalism as a criticism of the complicity of the Afghan and Pakistani governments in the conflict giving them a picture of being collaborators in the hands of the external forces that oppress the Pashtun people. In this regard, Pashto poetry is not only a way of fighting against outsiders but also a comment on internal treachery and betrayal.

### **The Role of Pashto Poets as Social Activists**

Pashto poets have taken roles more of social activists, through their poetry, they have been able to gather the masses and create awareness of the plight of their people. These poets perform in public, read, and discuss the situation of Passafika Pashtun civilians who are victims of the War on Terror. According to Niazi (2021), nowadays Pashto poets are not only literary figures but are also viewed as activists who consequently influence how the public discusses the conflict. Some poets such as Iqbal Khattak held public readings and poetry festivals to mobilize the Pashtun community into political and social activism. Not only do they criticize the government and their imperialists, but they also urge the Pashtun to rise and fight their oppression. In Khattak in one of his readings, he said:

"Poetry is the voice of the oppressed,  
And we will raise our voices until the world hears our pain."  
(Khattak, 2020)

These poets are somewhat successfully filling the divide between culture and political action, making their art both a social commentary and a social resistance tool. In this respect, the Pashto poetry is not only a means of personal expression but also a means of social and political transformation.

### **Conclusion**

The War on Terror Pashto poetry has been an invaluable instrument of resistance that gave a voice to the Pashtun people in their resistance to outside occupation and political oppression among themselves. Combining the elements of oppression, displacement, preservation of identity and nationalism, modern Pashto poets have used their art to bring out the pain, anger, and endurance of a group of people that had been decimated by the war. Pashto literature is full of symbolism, metaphors, and references to its historical past that provide a potent tool of political outcry and a strong sense of collective identity in the midst of war destruction. As it can be seen, the Pashto poets do not just oppose the discourse offered by foreign forces, but also challenge the complacency of local governments. By employing the metaphors of mountains, rivers and falcons, poets offer the struggle of the Pashtun as one that is deeply tied to the land, history, and commitment to honor. The same theme, Pashtunwawi (Pashtun code of conduct) focuses on the ethical and cultural background of their resistance and connects the contemporary war with the former to the struggle to gain freedom and dignity. In addition, the role of poets as social activists has been getting even greater. Poets such as Iqbal Khattak and Ajmal Khattak are not only literary personalities, they are also on the forefront to mobilize the Pashtun to social and political change. They have succeeded in connecting the artwork and the activism through readings to the people, performances and participation with the masses, thus further establishing the role of Pashto poetry as a means of resistance with the masses. As it has been illustrated in this paper, Pashto poetry is not only a source of emotional release but also a kind of political activity and through which the Pashtun people can release their frustrations, expectations and demands justice. In this respect, Pashto poets have opened a special space in which their culture can survive, evolve, and fight against the powers that tend to destroy it. Although the War on Terror has inflicted profound scars on the Pashtun region it has also spawned a literary resistance which has been able to speak the truth to the power and which has inspired generations. Since the development of Pashto poetry will still persist, it is bound to stay as an important part of the political and cultural discourse of the region. The current study might also establish how Pashto poetry will continue to respond to this changing political dynamics and global forces, as part of the continued fight against Pashtun rights and autonomy. By this cultural resistance that has been continued, the memory of the War on Terror has been kept alive as well as the hope of a future where the Pashtun people would be free of the oppression and violence that has plagued them.

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