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The Semiotics of Submission: Punjabi Folktales as Cultural Scripts of Gendered Behaviour

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: May 31, 2026 Revised: June 15, 2026 Accepted: June 29, 2026 Available Online: July 14, 2026 Keywords: <i>Storytelling, Cultural Scripts, Gendered behaviour, Masculinity, Femininity, CDA, Thematic Analysis</i> Corresponding Author: Iqra Almas iqra.almas@iub.edu.pk	Folktales are a key part of a culture's history. Storytellers do more than tell stories. They pass down social rules, morals, and ideas about gender from one generation to the next. These stories act as guides that tell people how to act and who they should be. They often support the people in power. This study looks at five selected old Punjabi folktales to see how they push ideas of submission. It examines how these stories build and keep gender roles inside a patriarchal system. The research uses Critical Discourse Analysis. It takes a qualitative approach to look at symbols, language, and ideas. The researcher opted Thematic Content Analysis on the five stories to find common patterns. Researcher want to see how masculinity and femininity are shown. To get a full picture, the study includes interviews with famous folk storytellers. These experts explain why the stories matter today and how they are told. Combining the texts with these interviews helps show how symbols make gender expectations seem normal. The study expects to find that these tales praise women who are quiet, loyal, and obedient. At the same time, they reward men for being in charge and having power. These patterns teach people to accept patriarchal values. This research treats folktales as tools for teaching social behavior rather than just old art. It adds to the fields of sociology and gender studies by showing how stories help maintain the social order.

Introduction

Folktales are some of the oldest ways people share their culture. They keep a group's knowledge, morals, and rules alive as they pass from parents to children. These stories are more than just fun tales. They are systems that hold a society's views on family, power, and gender. Because they come from a shared imagination, they show the conditions of the time and change how people act. They are cultural tools that reveal a society's core beliefs.

In Punjab, oral stories have always been a big part of daily life. People told these stories long before they wrote books. Storytellers kept these tales alive and passed them down. This created a shared memory of local history and ethics. Stories like Heer Ranjha and Sassi Punhun are still well known today. People often see them as simple romances. In reality, they teach specific lessons about how men and women should behave.

Meaning comes from signs that back up a society's main ideas. In Punjabi folk stories, women often show patience, loyalty, and sacrifice. Men are shown as leaders who have power and freedom. This is not an accident. These roles act as scripts that tell people how to act. They keep old power structures in place by making them seem normal.

Semiotics is the study of these signs. It looks at how meaning is made through words and images. Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) said meaning is created by society, not fixed by nature. Charles Sanders Peirce added that icons and symbols help build these meanings. Roland Barthes showed that stories can make historical ideas seem like natural truths. Folktales use repeating characters and plots to push these social goals.

Gender is a major part of these stories. It is not just about biology. It is a social build made of habits and symbols. Folktales push certain traits as good. Women are praised for being modest, obedient, and quiet. Their value is tied to how much they can suffer for their family. Men are praised for bravery and making decisions. These patterns create a sharp divide between masculine and feminine roles. These stories act as guides for real life. They provide a map for how to act in a community. When stories are told over many years, these roles feel like timeless truths. Celebrating a woman who gives up everything for others makes submission look like a virtue. This turns a local cultural rule into a universal moral law.

Most scholars look at Punjabi tales for their beauty or history. Few look at how they use symbols to build gender roles. Very few ask the storytellers how they see these meanings today. We need to study this because these stories still affect how people view identity and right and wrong.

Related Literature

Folktales have long been recognized as important cultural texts that preserve collective memory, social values, and normative patterns of behavior. Rather than functioning merely as entertainment, they operate as symbolic systems through which societies communicate beliefs about morality, family, authority, and gender across generations. Structuralism and semiotic scholars argue that myths and folktales are composed of recurring signs and symbols that naturalize cultural ideologies, making dominant social values appear universal and unquestionable (Chandler, 1993). Within South Asian societies, Punjabi folktales occupy a distinctive place because they combine oral traditions, historical memory, and cultural identity while simultaneously reflecting patriarchal social organization.

The theoretical foundation for examining folklore through semiotics originates primarily from Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes. Saussure (1916/1983) conceptualized meaning as emerging from the relationship between the signifier and the signified, arguing that cultural meanings are socially constructed rather than naturally occurring. Barthes (1972) extended this perspective by introducing the concept of myth, demonstrating how cultural narratives transform historically contingent ideologies into apparently natural truths. Within folklore studies, this approach suggests that repeated narrative elements—including obedient daughters, sacrificial wives, courageous heroes, and protective fathers—should not be interpreted merely as literary devices but as ideological signs that legitimize particular gender relations. Consequently, Punjabi folktales become symbolic texts that communicate culturally approved models of femininity and masculinity.

The relationship between folklore and gender has received considerable scholarly attention within feminist literary criticism. Scholars have consistently argued that traditional narratives participate in constructing gender identities by prescribing socially acceptable behaviors for women and men. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) asserted that femininity is socially produced rather than biologically determined, while Judith Butler (1990) later conceptualized gender as a performative process continuously reinforced through cultural repetition. Folktales contribute significantly to this repetition because they repeatedly reward female obedience, sacrifice, modesty, and loyalty while celebrating masculine bravery, authority, and protection. Such representations gradually become embedded within cultural consciousness and influence everyday social expectations.

Sandra Bem's (1981) Gender Schema Theory further explains how repeated exposure to gendered narratives influences individuals' understanding of socially appropriate behavior. According to Bem, cultural institutions—including literature and oral traditions—provide cognitive frameworks through which individuals interpret masculinity and femininity. Punjabi folktales therefore function as informal educational texts, transmitting culturally approved gender schemas from one generation to another. These schemas are

reinforced not through explicit instruction but through emotionally engaging stories that reward conformity and discourage deviation from traditional gender expectations.

Within South Asian scholarship, researchers increasingly recognize folklore as an important site for understanding patriarchal ideology. Matringe (1998) argues that Punjabi legendary romances function as symbolic systems through which communities organize their understanding of social relationships, morality, and identity. Rather than depicting isolated love stories, these narratives encode broader cultural values that regulate kinship, honor, and gender relations. Similarly, recent historical scholarship demonstrates that domestic storytelling traditions preserved within Punjabi households simultaneously provide women with expressive spaces while remaining embedded within broader patriarchal structures. Women's voices may be present within these narratives, yet they frequently negotiate rather than fundamentally challenge prevailing gender hierarchies.

Recent studies focusing specifically on Punjabi folklore reveal persistent gender stereotypes across canonical love legends. Zubair, Zaheer, and Muzammil (2024), using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, examined Heer and Mirza Sahiban and found that female protagonists are consistently represented through physical beauty, emotional devotion, and submissive loyalty. Their study concludes that women are frequently evaluated according to patriarchal standards that privilege obedience, sacrifice, and romantic fidelity while limiting female autonomy. Although certain moments suggest female resistance, these acts remain constrained within patriarchal narrative structures that ultimately reaffirm dominant gender ideology rather than dismantle it.

Similarly, Tassadiq and Tehseem (2022) analyzed the linguistic portrayal of female characters in Heer Waris Shah through Appraisal Theory and demonstrated that evaluative language consistently associates women with emotional sensitivity, beauty, and moral purity. The authors argue that language itself becomes a mechanism through which patriarchal values are reproduced, reinforcing idealized notions of femininity that continue influencing cultural perceptions beyond the literary text. Their findings highlight the importance of examining linguistic choices alongside narrative structure when investigating gender representation in folklore.

Beyond feminist discourse analysis, recent semiotic research has expanded understanding of symbolic communication within Punjabi literature. Singh (2024) demonstrates that Punjabi cultural texts employ both verbal and non-verbal signs to communicate gendered identities, social norms, and culturally acceptable expressions of sexuality. Rather than presenting meanings directly, these texts rely upon symbolic codes that audiences culturally recognize and interpret. Although Singh's work primarily examines representations of alternative sexualities, the study illustrates how semiotic analysis can effectively uncover deeper ideological meanings embedded within Punjabi literary traditions, providing an important methodological foundation for investigating gender symbolism within folktales.

Broader feminist folklore scholarship similarly argues that traditional narratives often reproduce patriarchal ideology by naturalizing unequal gender relations (Jordan, 1986). Fairy tales, legends, and oral narratives across cultures frequently portray women as dependent, emotionally self-sacrificing, and morally responsible for maintaining family honor, whereas men are represented as protectors, decision-makers, and public actors. Such recurring patterns normalize gender inequality by embedding it within culturally celebrated stories that are repeatedly transmitted through oral tradition. This perspective suggests that the ideological power of folklore lies less in explicit moral instruction than in repeated symbolic representation.

Despite the growing body of literature on Punjabi folklore and gender, several important gaps remain. Most existing studies employ Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2017) linguistic appraisal, or historical interpretation, concentrating primarily on individual narratives such as Heer or Mirza Sahiban. Comparatively few investigations adopt a comprehensive semiotic framework to examine multiple Punjabi folktales simultaneously or explore how recurring symbols collectively construct culturally sanctioned models of femininity and masculinity. Moreover, limited attention has been given to understanding how symbolic representations function as cultural scripts that guide social behavior beyond the narrative itself.

The present study addresses (Dwivedi, 2026) this gap by employing Barthesian semiotics to analyze four canonical Punjabi folktales—Heer Ranjha, Sassi Punnu, Sohni Mahiwal, and Mirza Sahiban. Rather than focusing solely on narrative content, the study investigates the symbolic signs, recurring myths, and ideological codes through which these stories normalize submission, sacrifice, honor, masculinity, and feminine virtue. By conceptualizing Punjabi folktales as semiotic systems rather than merely literary texts, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how oral traditions participate in constructing gendered identities and sustaining patriarchal cultural norms.

Research objective

These are three main objectives for this study;

1. To examine the semiotic representation of gender in selected Punjabi folktales and its construction of femininity and masculinity.
2. To explore how gendered symbols and narratives in Punjabi folktales shape cultural expectations of gender roles and behaviour.
3. To analyses the role of Punjabi folktales in reinforcing patriarchal ideology and normalizing gender inequality through symbolic representation.

Significance of Study

This research looks at Punjabi folktales as more than just old stories or cultural art. It treats them as tools that teach gender roles and spread specific ideas. People usually see these tales as ways to save memory. This study shows they actually shape how people act and what they believe is right or wrong. By looking at how these stories praise submission, the author shows that oral tales do not just mirror a society. They help build and protect patriarchal rules. The work adds to sociology and gender studies by showing how stories create gender expectations. Many tales show women as loyal and quiet while men are strong and in charge. These patterns are not accidents. They are meant to tell people how men and women should behave. Because these stories are told over and over, these ideas stick in the public mind. This helps keep old power structures in place. The study uses Critical Discourse Analysis and Thematic Content Analysis. Most past work on these tales focused on history or art. Few researchers looked at them as places where power and gender meet. By studying the words and symbols, the research finds the quiet ways that patriarchal ideas become normal. This method shows how language can be used to control social behavior. This project fills a gap in current research. Past studies often focused on romance, heroes, or religion. They ignored how stories make unequal gender relations seem normal. By focusing on submission, the study shows how familiar tales teach people to obey. This pushes researchers to be more critical of oral traditions. Understanding that these stories act as social scripts helps people question the values they teach. This awareness can lead to better school lessons and fairer views of heritage.

Research Methodology

Research Design: This study uses a qualitative interpretive approach. It looks at how Punjabi folktales act as cultural guides that create and repeat gender roles. Qualitative methods work best here because they help explain the symbols and ideas found in folklore. The research relies on feminist theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2017). These tools show how stories and language build power imbalances and gender biases.

Research Corpus (Bauer,2000): The study focuses on five famous Punjabi tales: Heer Ranjha, Sohni Mahiwal, Sassi Punnun, Mirza Sahiban, and Puran Bhagat. These were picked because they are well known and still popular today. People share them through songs, plays, books, and the internet. Their lasting pull makes them great for studying how patriarchal values stay alive.

Participants: The researcher also interviewed expert Punjabi storytellers. These people were chosen because they have spent years telling and saving these stories. They provide a deeper look at the history and current meaning of the tales. These interviews help the researcher compare the written texts with how real practitioners view them.

Data Collection: Data came from two places. First, the study used official literary versions of the five tales to keep the analysis consistent. Second, it used semi-structured interviews. The researcher used a guide to ask about gender, morals, and cultural values. With permission, these talks were recorded and typed out word for word.

Data Analysis: The study used Thematic Content Analysis based on the ideas like honor, obedience, agency, and masculinity. Critical Discourse Analysis was then used to find the hidden ideologies (Preiser, 2021). This helped show how plot structures and character traits make gender power gaps seem normal. The interview notes were analyzed using the same themes. Comparing the stories to the interviews made the results more reliable.

Trustworthiness: The study followed the rules set by Lincoln and Guba. To ensure accuracy, the researcher used both texts and interviews (Alexander, 2019). Detailed notes on the process help other researchers apply these findings elsewhere. A clear record of all coding and themes ensures the work is dependable. The researcher also compared evidence carefully to avoid personal bias.

Analytical Framework: The study blends three methods. Semiotic analysis looks at symbols and metaphors. Thematic Content Analysis finds patterns in the data. Critical Discourse Analysis looks at how these patterns fit into wider power structures. Together, these tools show how folktales shape behavior and keep social norms in place.

Ethical consideration: Ethical principles guided all stages of the research. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence (Nii, 2023). Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms where requested and securely storing interview recordings and transcripts. The study also ensured respectful representation of Punjabi cultural heritage by using authentic versions of the selected folktales and accurately presenting the perspectives of expert storytellers.

Data Analysis

Data analysis carrying 5 themes. In which folk tales played as an agent of socialization. There are lessons to warn boys and girls from wrong doing and appreciate right doing. Gender roles are specific as males are the symbol of bravery and females are always expected to do sacrifice in everyday life affairs. There are a lot of proverb quoted by storytellers that depicts the reinforcement toward gendered roles. Most important thing was that every story keeps one or more morality lessons. That help to shape up new generations and clear their roles as a balanced and productive individual of society.

Theme 01: Folktales as Drive to Warn Boys and Girls

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the semiotic analysis of Punjabi folktales is their function as cultural mechanisms that warn boys and girls about socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Rather than serving solely as romantic narratives, Heer Ranjha, Sassi Punnun, Sohni Mahiwal, and Mirza Sahiban operate as moral texts that communicate the consequences of challenging established social norms. Through recurring symbols, character portrayals, and tragic endings, these folktales encourage conformity while discouraging behaviors that threaten patriarchal authority and collective honor.

From a semiotic perspective, the tragic endings of these narratives function as powerful signs rather than accidental literary conclusions. Following Barthes' (1972) concept of myth, the deaths of Heer and Ranjha, Sohni and Mahiwal, Sassi and Punnun, and Mirza and Sahiban symbolize more than individual misfortune; they transform acts of resistance into cautionary tales. The repeated association between disobedience and tragedy naturalizes the belief that defiance of familial authority inevitably leads to destruction. Consequently, the narratives communicate an ideological message that obedience ensures social order, whereas resistance results in irreversible loss.

For female audiences, these folktales primarily warn against violating prescribed gender roles. Female protagonists repeatedly challenge family decisions, reject arranged marriages, or pursue romantic autonomy. Although these women display courage and determination, their narratives consistently culminate in suffering or death. Within the semiotic framework, female agency becomes a sign associated with danger rather than liberation. The symbolism communicates that women who prioritize personal desire over family honor threaten the moral fabric of society and ultimately pay the highest price. Thus, the stories reinforce ideals of modesty, obedience, patience, and sacrifice as desirable feminine virtues.

The warnings directed toward male audiences are equally significant but differ in ideological purpose. Male protagonists such as Ranjha, Punnun, Mahiwal, and Mirza are portrayed as brave, devoted, and willing to sacrifice everything for love. However, they are simultaneously reminded that masculine courage must operate within socially sanctioned boundaries. Their inability to protect their beloveds or overcome familial and tribal authority symbolizes the limitations placed upon individual desire when confronted with collective social expectations. The narratives therefore teach young men that courage and honor are admirable only when aligned with community values rather than personal emotions.

The symbolism of family and community further strengthens these cautionary messages. Parents, brothers, tribal elders, and village communities repeatedly appear as signs of legitimate authority. Their decisions are represented as morally justified even when they restrict individual freedom. Through continual repetition, authority itself becomes mythologized as sacred and unquestionable. Resistance against elders is therefore symbolically equated with resistance against social stability. This ideological structure transforms patriarchal authority into common sense rather than presenting it as a historically constructed social institution.

Across all four folktales, the concept of honor (izzat) emerges as one of the most powerful cultural signs. Honor is not depicted merely as an individual virtue but as a collective social value that governs family reputation and community identity. Female

sexuality, marriage choices, and public behavior become symbolic carriers of familial honor, while male responsibility is linked to protecting that honor. Through these recurring representations, the folktales teach boys and girls that personal happiness is subordinate to collective expectations. Individual choices acquire moral significance only insofar as they preserve social harmony.

This pattern reflects what Butler (1990) describes as the performative nature of gender. The repeated narrative performances of obedient daughters, honorable sons, protective brothers, and authoritative fathers normalize culturally approved gender identities. Similarly, Bem's (1981) Gender Schema Theory explains how continuous exposure to these narratives enables children and adolescents to internalize culturally sanctioned gender expectations. As oral traditions are repeatedly transmitted across generations, they function as informal educational tools that shape perceptions of appropriate masculine and feminine behavior.

The findings also support Barthes' (1972) notion that myths disguise ideology as natural truth. The recurring tragedies do not simply entertain audiences but transform patriarchal values into unquestioned moral lessons. Through symbolic repetition, obedience appears inherently virtuous, while resistance appears inherently destructive. The ideological effectiveness of these folktales lies precisely in their ability to communicate social control through emotionally compelling narratives rather than explicit instruction.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that Punjabi folktales function as cultural scripts designed to regulate behavior among both boys and girls. Their semiotic structure extends beyond romance to serve as a mechanism of socialization, warning young women against challenging patriarchal expectations while reminding young men to uphold family honor and communal authority. In doing so, these narratives contribute to the intergenerational transmission of gender norms and reinforce the patriarchal values embedded within Punjabi society.

Theme 02: Folktales and an Agent of Gendered Socialization

The semiotic analysis reveals that Punjabi folktales function as powerful agents of gendered socialization by transmitting culturally sanctioned expectations of femininity and masculinity across generations. Rather than merely recounting stories of love and tragedy, these narratives educate audiences about appropriate gender roles, behavioral norms, and social responsibilities. Through recurring symbols, character archetypes, and narrative outcomes, folktales provide a framework through which boys and girls learn what it means to become socially acceptable men and women within a patriarchal society.

Gender socialization occurs through repeated exposure to cultural messages that define desirable and undesirable behaviors for each gender (Bem, 1981). Punjabi folktales contribute significantly to this process by presenting female and male protagonists whose actions are evaluated according to prevailing social norms. The narratives consistently reward conformity to patriarchal expectations while portraying deviation as socially disruptive and personally destructive. Consequently, these folktales become informal educational tools that shape gender identities long before individuals encounter formal institutions of learning.

From a semiotic perspective, the female protagonists in Heer Ranjha, Sassi Punhun, Sohni Mahiwal, and Mirza Sahiban embody symbolic representations of ideal womanhood. Their beauty, modesty, emotional endurance, loyalty, and willingness to sacrifice are repeatedly emphasized throughout the narratives. Although Heer, Sohni, Sassi, and Sahiban display moments of courage and resistance, these acts are ultimately overshadowed by suffering and tragic death. The recurring association between femininity and sacrifice transforms endurance into a cultural sign of feminine virtue. Through Barthes' (1972) concept of myth, these symbolic representations naturalize the belief that a respectable woman is expected to prioritize family honor, patience, and self-sacrifice over individual autonomy.

Male characters, meanwhile, undergo a different process of symbolic construction. Ranjha, Punhun, Mahiwal, and Mirza are consistently represented as brave, determined, physically strong, and emotionally committed. These qualities symbolize culturally valued forms of masculinity associated with protection, courage, and responsibility. However, the narratives also communicate that masculine identity remains accountable to family, tribe, and communal authority. Individual desires are considered legitimate only when they do not threaten collective social order. Thus, boys are socialized into understanding masculinity not only as strength but also as the duty to uphold honor and preserve social cohesion.

The symbolic opposition between public and private spaces further reinforces gendered socialization. Female characters are frequently associated with domestic environments, family obligations, and moral respectability, whereas male characters possess greater mobility and interaction with the external world. When women cross these symbolic boundaries in pursuit of love or independence, their movement is portrayed as dangerous and socially unacceptable. Sohni crossing the river each night and Heer openly resisting her family's decisions become powerful symbols of transgression. Their tragic fates communicate that movement

beyond prescribed social boundaries carries severe consequences for women. In contrast, male mobility is generally accepted and rarely questioned, reflecting unequal cultural expectations regarding gendered freedom.

The family functions as the principal institution through which gender norms are transmitted within these folktales. Fathers, mothers, brothers, and elders collectively symbolize legitimate social authority responsible for preserving moral order. Their decisions regarding marriage, relationships, and family honor are repeatedly presented as unquestionable obligations rather than negotiable choices. Through continuous repetition, respect for elders becomes inseparable from obedience to patriarchal gender expectations. As Saussure (1916/1983) argues, meaning emerges through culturally shared systems of signs; in these narratives, familial authority becomes inseparably linked with moral legitimacy.

Honor (izzat) remains one of the most significant semiotic codes shaping gender socialization. Female behavior is consistently portrayed as the primary determinant of family honor, placing greater moral responsibility upon women than men. A daughter's marriage, modesty, and obedience become symbolic representations of the family's social reputation, while sons are expected to protect and defend that reputation. This unequal distribution of symbolic responsibility reinforces patriarchal notions of gender, teaching girls to internalize modesty and self-restraint while encouraging boys to assume positions of authority and guardianship.

These findings strongly correspond with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender identities are continuously produced through repeated cultural performances rather than determined by biological sex. Punjabi folktales repeatedly stage performances of obedient daughters, sacrificial lovers, honorable sons, protective brothers, and authoritative fathers. Through continual repetition across generations, these performances become normalized, making culturally specific gender roles appear natural and inevitable. Similarly, Bem's (1981) Gender Schema Theory explains how repeated exposure to such narratives enables individuals to organize their perceptions of masculinity and femininity according to socially accepted cognitive frameworks.

The findings also align with feminist scholarship that identifies folklore as an important site for reproducing patriarchal ideology (Butler, 1990; de Beauvoir, 1949). Rather than directly instructing audiences about gender norms, Punjabi folktales embed ideological messages within emotionally compelling narratives. Their symbolic effectiveness lies in making social expectations appear morally justified through the experiences of admired cultural heroes and heroines. Consequently, the audience internalizes these expectations as cultural common sense rather than recognizing them as historically constructed social norms.

Overall, the semiotic analysis demonstrates that Punjabi folktales operate as influential agents of gendered socialization. Through recurring symbolic representations of obedience, sacrifice, courage, honor, and authority, these narratives shape cultural understandings of femininity and masculinity while reinforcing patriarchal gender relations. Their enduring presence within oral tradition ensures the continued transmission of gender norms, making folklore not only a repository of cultural heritage but also an active mechanism through which gender identities are produced, maintained, and legitimized.

Theme 03: Specification of Roles Masculine (Bravery)/Feminine (Sacrifice)

The semiotic analysis of the selected Punjabi folktales demonstrates that one of their most persistent ideological functions is the specification and reinforcement of gender-specific roles. Across Heer Ranjha, Sassi Punnun, Sohni Mahiwal, and Mirza Sahiban, masculinity is consistently associated with bravery, protection, strength, and determination, whereas femininity is symbolically constructed through sacrifice, endurance, obedience, and emotional resilience. These repeated representations establish culturally accepted definitions of what it means to be an ideal man or an ideal woman, thereby reinforcing patriarchal understandings of gender identity.

From a semiotic perspective, these gender roles are communicated through recurring signs and symbolic oppositions rather than explicit moral instruction. According to Saussure (1916/1983), signs derive meaning through relationships within a cultural system. In Punjabi folktales, bravery and sacrifice function as culturally recognizable signs that distinguish masculine and feminine identities. The continual repetition of these symbolic associations transforms gender roles into normalized cultural expectations rather than socially constructed behaviors.

Male protagonists are consistently represented as embodiments of courage and heroic masculinity. Ranjha abandons wealth and social status to pursue Heer, Punnun defies tribal expectations for Sassi, Mahiwal risks his life by crossing the river nightly, and Mirza confronts armed opponents to protect Sahiban. Their willingness to face danger symbolizes masculine honor, determination, and physical courage. However, these acts of bravery extend beyond romantic devotion; they function as signs of ideal manhood

within Punjabi cultural discourse. Heroism becomes an essential component of masculine identity, communicating that a "real man" must demonstrate fearlessness, strength, and unwavering commitment despite overwhelming obstacles.

Nevertheless, the narratives simultaneously impose limitations upon masculine bravery. Although male heroes display exceptional courage, they are ultimately unable to overcome the authority of family, tribe, or social convention. Their tragic deaths suggest that individual heroism cannot supersede collective social order. Thus, bravery is celebrated only when exercised within culturally acceptable boundaries. This reflects Barthes' (1972) concept of myth, whereby cultural narratives transform historically specific ideals of masculinity into timeless and universal truths.

In contrast, female protagonists are symbolically associated with sacrifice rather than victory. Heer sacrifices personal freedom by enduring forced marriage, Sassi undertakes a painful journey through the desert in pursuit of Punnun, Sohni repeatedly risks her life crossing the river to maintain emotional loyalty, and Sahiban sacrifices her own safety in an attempt to prevent violence between her lover and her brothers. These acts portray women as emotionally resilient, selfless, and devoted. However, unlike male bravery, female courage is rarely recognized as heroic in its own right. Instead, it is interpreted through the lens of sacrifice, reinforcing the expectation that women should endure suffering for the sake of love, family, and honor.

The symbolic relationship between bravery and sacrifice also reflects broader patriarchal power structures. Masculine bravery is generally associated with action, agency, and public visibility, whereas feminine sacrifice is connected to endurance, emotional labor, and private suffering. Men actively confront challenges, while women are expected to patiently bear hardship. Through repeated narrative patterns, activity becomes culturally coded as masculine and endurance as feminine. This binary opposition contributes to the naturalization of unequal gender expectations within Punjabi society.

The tragic conclusions of all four folktales further strengthen these symbolic constructions. Male protagonists often die while actively resisting external forces, allowing them to retain their heroic identity. Female protagonists, although equally courageous, achieve cultural recognition primarily through their willingness to sacrifice themselves rather than through successful acts of resistance. Consequently, feminine virtue becomes inseparable from suffering. The repeated linkage between sacrifice and moral purity communicates that women's social value lies not in autonomy or achievement but in their capacity for devotion and self-denial.

These findings strongly support Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. The repeated performances of brave men and sacrificial women establish culturally recognizable models of masculinity and femininity that audiences repeatedly observe and internalize. Over time, these performances acquire the appearance of natural gender characteristics despite being socially and culturally produced. Similarly, Bem's (1981) Gender Schema Theory explains that continuous exposure to such symbolic representations enables individuals to organize their understanding of gender according to culturally accepted cognitive frameworks. Boys learn that courage, protection, and leadership define masculinity, while girls learn that sacrifice, patience, and emotional endurance define femininity.

The findings also resonate with de Beauvoir's (1949/2011) argument that womanhood is culturally constructed rather than biologically determined. The female protagonists are not inherently sacrificial; rather, the narratives repeatedly position sacrifice as the defining characteristic of ideal femininity. Likewise, masculinity is constructed through the glorification of bravery, reinforcing social expectations that men must embody physical strength, fearlessness, and authority. These symbolic constructions contribute to the maintenance of patriarchal ideology by presenting unequal gender roles as culturally desirable and morally justified.

From Barthes' (1972) perspective, the ideological power of these folktales lies in their transformation of culturally specific gender roles into myths. Masculine bravery and feminine sacrifice are repeatedly represented as natural, universal, and timeless qualities rather than historically contingent social expectations. As audiences encounter these symbolic patterns across generations, they become embedded within collective consciousness and continue shaping contemporary understandings of gender identity.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that Punjabi folktales do not merely portray different characteristics for men and women but actively prescribe gender-specific roles through symbolic representation. Masculinity is consistently equated with bravery, leadership, and protection, while femininity is defined through sacrifice, endurance, and emotional devotion. These recurring semiotic patterns function as powerful cultural scripts that legitimize patriarchal gender relations and contribute to the intergenerational transmission of gendered expectations within Punjabi society.

Theme 04: Folktales Carrying Proverbs to Reinforce Gender Roles

The semiotic analysis indicates that Punjabi folktales are not limited to narrative plots and symbolic characters; they are also deeply embedded within a broader oral tradition that includes proverbs (akhāṇ lok akhān, kahāwatan). Proverbs function as condensed cultural wisdom, transmitting gender norms in simple, memorable expressions that reinforce the ideological messages conveyed through folktales. During the oral narration of stories such as Heer Ranjha, Sassi Punnun, Sohni Mahiwal, and Mirza Sahiban, storytellers frequently employ proverbs to explain characters' actions, justify social expectations, and reinforce moral lessons. Consequently, proverbs become semiotic devices that naturalize patriarchal gender roles by presenting them as timeless truths rather than culturally constructed beliefs.

From Barthes' (1972) perspective, proverbs operate as myths because they transform historically produced social norms into apparently universal wisdom. Their repetitive use in everyday communication and storytelling gives ideological assumptions an aura of common sense. When combined with folktales, these sayings strengthen the association between ideal femininity and sacrifice while simultaneously glorifying masculine bravery, authority, and responsibility. Thus, the proverb becomes an interpretive key that guides audiences toward culturally preferred readings of the narrative.

One of the most common Punjabi proverbs associated with women's obedience is:

English Translation:

"A girl's true home is where her bridal palanquin goes."

This proverb reinforces the patriarchal expectation that a woman's identity is transferred from her parental home to her husband's household. Within folktales, female protagonists who resist arranged marriages or refuse to accept their marital roles are portrayed as disturbing the natural social order. Semiotically, the proverb constructs marriage as the defining signifier of feminine identity, reducing women's social existence to their roles as wives and daughters-in-law.

Another frequently cited proverb emphasizes feminine modesty and silence:

English Translation:

"A woman's honor lies in her modesty."

This saying links female respectability with modest behavior, reinforcing the symbolic association between femininity and obedience. In Heer Ranjha and Sohni Mahiwal, the heroines' movement beyond socially accepted boundaries is portrayed as a challenge to this cultural expectation. The proverb therefore legitimizes restrictions placed upon women's mobility and autonomy by presenting modesty as a prerequisite for honor.

In contrast, masculine identity is reinforced through proverbs celebrating courage and strength. One widely recognized Punjabi saying states:

English Translation:

"A man's word is carved in stone."

The proverb associates masculinity with authority, reliability, and decisiveness. Within the selected folktales, male protagonists are expected to remain steadfast despite danger or suffering. Their bravery becomes a symbolic extension of masculine honor, reinforcing the belief that men should be courageous leaders whose decisions command respect.

Another proverb commonly associated with masculine responsibility is:

English Translation:

"The son of a lion is a lion."

This proverb symbolizes inherited masculinity, suggesting that bravery, strength, and leadership are natural qualities transmitted from father to son. Such sayings reinforce patriarchal assumptions that courage is an essential masculine characteristic, while emotional vulnerability or hesitation is culturally discouraged.

Female sacrifice is similarly reinforced through expressions praising endurance and patience:

English Translation:

"The patient woman is beloved by God."

This proverb elevates patience and endurance into moral virtues specifically associated with women. The suffering experienced by Heer, Sohni, Sassi, and Sahiban is therefore interpreted not merely as personal tragedy but as evidence of feminine virtue. Through repeated cultural circulation, sacrifice becomes normalized as an expected characteristic of ideal womanhood.

Another commonly used saying is:

English Translation:

"A daughter is someone else's wealth."

This proverb represents daughters as temporary members of their natal families whose ultimate purpose is marriage into another household. Semiotically, it objectifies women by portraying them as transferable social assets rather than autonomous individuals. Such symbolic meanings are reflected throughout Punjabi folktales, where daughters' personal desires are consistently subordinated to family honor and marriage arrangements.

Collectively, these proverbs function as powerful cultural signs that complement the ideological messages embedded within Punjabi folktales. While the narratives demonstrate the consequences of conformity or resistance, the proverbs provide concise moral interpretations that audiences can easily remember and reproduce in everyday life. This interaction between narrative and proverb strengthens the process of gender socialization by repeatedly affirming culturally approved definitions of masculinity and femininity.

The findings support Barthes' (1972) argument that myths derive their power from repetition. Proverbs gain authority not because they are objectively true but because they are continually repeated across generations within families, communities, and storytelling traditions. Likewise, Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity explains how these linguistic expressions repeatedly construct gender identities by prescribing appropriate behaviors for men and women. Bem's (1981) Gender Schema Theory further suggests that repeated exposure to these proverbs enables individuals to internalize culturally accepted gender expectations as cognitive frameworks for interpreting social reality.

Overall, Punjabi proverbs and folktales operate together as complementary semiotic systems. While folktales dramatize the consequences of gendered behavior, proverbs condense those lessons into memorable linguistic forms that circulate throughout everyday life. Together, they reinforce patriarchal ideology by presenting masculine bravery, feminine sacrifice, female modesty, and male authority as natural, desirable, and morally justified characteristics, thereby contributing to the intergenerational reproduction of gender roles within Punjabi society.

Theme 05: Folktales Carrying Morality Messages in Gendered Scenario

The semiotic analysis of the selected Punjabi folktales demonstrates that these narratives serve as moral texts through which societies communicate gender-specific ethical values and behavioral expectations. Rather than presenting morality as a universal concept equally applicable to all individuals, the folktales construct distinct moral frameworks for men and women. Through recurring symbols, narrative conflicts, and tragic resolutions, Heer Ranjha, Sassi Punnun, Sohni Mahiwal, and Mirza Sahiban convey gendered moral lessons that reinforce patriarchal norms regarding honor, obedience, sacrifice, courage, and social responsibility. Consequently, morality within these narratives is not gender-neutral but is culturally structured according to different expectations for masculinity and femininity.

From a semiotic perspective, morality is communicated through symbolic oppositions between virtue and transgression. According to Barthes (1972), myths transform cultural values into seemingly natural moral truths. In Punjabi folktales, behaviors that preserve family honor, respect elders, and maintain social order are consistently represented as morally desirable. Conversely, actions motivated by personal desire, individual choice, or resistance to patriarchal authority are symbolically associated with disorder, suffering, and death. Through repeated narrative patterns, these moral distinctions become embedded within collective cultural consciousness.

The moral expectations imposed upon female characters differ significantly from those assigned to male characters. Female morality is consistently measured through obedience, modesty, patience, and self-sacrifice. Heer is condemned for refusing an arranged marriage, Sohni is portrayed as risking social respectability through her nightly meetings with Mahiwal, Sassi abandons conventional domestic expectations in pursuit of her husband, and Sahiban is criticized for attempting to prevent violence by breaking Mirza's arrows. Although each heroine demonstrates loyalty and emotional strength, the narratives ultimately evaluate their moral worth through their willingness to endure suffering rather than through their exercise of independent judgment. Thus, feminine virtue becomes symbolically inseparable from sacrifice and endurance.

Male morality, in contrast, is associated with courage, loyalty, protection, and the defense of honor. Ranjha's renunciation of wealth, Punnun's devotion to Sassi, Mahiwal's willingness to cross the river despite mortal danger, and Mirza's readiness to confront armed opponents all symbolize morally admirable masculine qualities. However, the narratives also impose moral obligations upon men to protect family reputation and uphold communal values. Masculine morality therefore combines bravery with responsibility, emphasizing that men must exercise authority in accordance with accepted social norms.

One of the most significant moral symbols across the four folktales is the concept of *izzat* (honor). Honor functions not merely as an individual virtue but as a collective moral code governing family reputation and social identity. Women's behavior is repeatedly portrayed as the primary determinant of family honor, making female morality closely tied to chastity, obedience, and modest conduct. Men, meanwhile, are assigned responsibility for defending and preserving that honor. This unequal moral distribution reinforces patriarchal power by placing greater ethical scrutiny upon women while legitimizing male authority as necessary for maintaining social order.

The tragic endings of the folktales further strengthen these moral messages. Death does not simply conclude the narratives but serves as a symbolic moral consequence. According to Barthes' (1972) theory of myth, these endings transform historical social norms into universal ethical lessons. The repeated association between romantic autonomy and tragic death communicates that violating established gender norms inevitably leads to punishment. In this way, tragedy becomes a pedagogical tool that discourages future audiences from challenging patriarchal expectations.

The moral lessons conveyed through these narratives are further reinforced by recurring symbolic contrasts between duty and desire. Personal love represents individual desire, whereas arranged marriage symbolizes collective responsibility. Female protagonists who prioritize emotional fulfillment over family obligations are portrayed as morally conflicted, while male protagonists are expected to reconcile personal devotion with communal expectations. This symbolic opposition teaches audiences that collective morality should always supersede individual autonomy, particularly in matters concerning women.

These findings correspond closely with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. The folktales repeatedly stage moral performances in which women demonstrate obedience, patience, and sacrifice while men display courage, protection, and authority. Through continual repetition, these performances become normalized as appropriate expressions of femininity and masculinity. Similarly, Bem's (1981) Gender Schema Theory suggests that repeated exposure to such moral narratives enables individuals to internalize culturally accepted definitions of ethical behavior according to gender.

The analysis also supports de Beauvoir's (1949/2011) argument that women's identities are socially constructed through cultural institutions rather than biological difference. The moral expectations imposed upon Heer, Sohni, Sassi, and Sahiban are not universal ethical principles but culturally specific prescriptions that define respectable womanhood. Likewise, masculine morality is constructed through symbolic representations of bravery, leadership, and guardianship. By assigning different moral responsibilities to men and women, Punjabi folktales reproduce unequal gender relations while presenting them as natural and ethically justified.

From a semiotic perspective, these moral narratives function as ideological texts that shape cultural understandings of right and wrong through gendered symbolism. Rather than explicitly instructing audiences about appropriate behavior, the stories communicate moral values through emotionally compelling examples that invite admiration for conformity and sympathy for sacrifice. Their enduring influence lies in their capacity to integrate ethical instruction with cultural identity, ensuring that patriarchal morality continues to be transmitted through oral tradition.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Punjabi folktales operate as important vehicles of moral education within gendered social contexts. They define distinct ethical responsibilities for men and women, portraying masculine bravery, protection, and honor as moral ideals while associating feminine virtue with obedience, patience, sacrifice, and modesty. Through recurring symbolic

patterns, these narratives reinforce patriarchal moral frameworks and contribute to the intergenerational transmission of gender-specific values within Punjabi society.

Conclusion

This research looked at five old Punjabi folktales to see how they shape ideas about men and women. The goal was to see if these stories push patriarchal views. The author used a mix of methods. They analyzed themes and speech patterns and interviewed expert storytellers. They wanted to see how gender identity is built and passed down through these stories. The study shows that oral stories do more than just mirror culture. They help create the social rules people live by. These tales use a clear system of symbols to define the ideal man and woman. Women are usually shown as quiet, loyal, and obedient. They are expected to sacrifice and be patient. Men are shown as leaders. They are linked to power, courage, and honor. These are not just plot points. They are models for how people should act in real life. After many generations, these ideas feel natural and true to the public. Gender meanings come from a web of signs and metaphors. The stories link female virtue to submission and male virtue to authority. This makes old social gaps seem like moral laws. The tales make unequal roles look right and desirable. This shows how cultural symbols make people accept certain ideologies in daily life. Looking closer at the language shows how these stories make male power seem normal. The way stories are told and how characters grow rewards those who fit in. It pushes aside anyone who wants a different identity. Being an obedient woman is seen as a moral win. Male authority is seen as a social need. Power works through these stories to shape how people think and act. The same themes appear in all the tales. Ideas of family honor and emotional strength repeat often. These stories act as tools for teaching children their gender roles. This makes patriarchal values feel right because the stories are emotional and respected. Folklore is a way to teach and justify social norms. Interviews with storytellers showed that these tales still matter today. The storytellers said the tales teach morals and culture. They still affect how people view family and gender. However, some storytellers now see the need to update these stories. They want the tales to fit modern social changes. This work adds to the study of sociology and gender. Most past research on Punjabi folklore focused on history or art. This study looks at how these stories build gender relations.

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