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TECHNOLOGIES OF GENDER IN SOUTH ASIAN ROMANTIC FOLKTALES:A FEMINIST NARRATOLOGICAL READING THROUGH BACCHILEGA CASE STUDIES OF HEER RANJHA,SASSUI PUNNHUN,UMAR MARVI,AND ADAM KHAN-DURKHANI

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Abstract:

This study utilizes Cristina Bacchilega's feminist narratology, as articulated in Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies, to examine four canonical South Asian romantic folktales: Adam Khan and Durkhani, Heer Ranjha, Sassui Punnhun, and Umar Marvi. Although these stories have long been regarded as cultural treasures and romantic archetypes, scholarship has primarily focused on their poetic, moral, or symbolic value, ignoring the narrative structures as ideological systems that construct and regulate femininity. To close this gap, the current study uses Bacchilega's concepts of "technologies of gender," "narrative containment," "voice and silence," and "bloody chambers" to show how these folktales both glorify and constrain female agency. The analysis reveals that female characters are portrayed as embodiments of beauty, loyalty, endurance, and moral authority in all four cultural traditions. Nonetheless, these qualities are narratively intended to maintain patriarchal social orders. Voice is permitted, but it is always framed in masculine terms, whereas silence, suffering, and sacrifice emerge as the ultimate markers of authentic womanhood. Symbolic spaces—rivers, deserts, havelis, and pastoral landscapes—begin as sites of empowerment but eventually function as mechanisms of containment through narrative closure. Comparative findings show significant regional variation. Pashtun and Punjabi stories resolve female resistance through romantic martyrdom or tragic transcendence; Sindhi tradition prioritizes spiritual disappearance; and Thari folklore allows for community reintegration, but only with divine validation. These differences point to culturally specific strategies that share a common ideological goal: to celebrate women's strength while keeping it non-threatening to patriarchal structures. By reimagining South Asian folktales as active "technologies of gender," this study broadens Bacchilega's framework to non-Western traditions and emphasizes folklore's ongoing role in shaping cultural understandings of women. It contributes to feminist narratology by emphasizing the ideological machinery embedded in narrative form and lays the groundwork for future comparative, intersectional, and reception-based studies of folklore, gender, and cultural identity.

Keywords: Feminist Narratology, South Asian Romantic Folktales, Technologies of Gender, Narrative Containment, Voice and Silence in Folklore, Heer Ranjha and Umar Marvi, Sassui Punnhun and Adam Khan Durkhani, Cultural Constructions of Womanhood

INTRODUCTION:

Folktales have long been acknowledged as essential cultural relics, encapsulating the moral principles, social structures, and symbolic values of the societies from which they originate. Romantic folktales hold a special place in South Asia, serving as both archives of shared memory and platforms for the expression of love, devotion, sacrifice, and honor. These stories, which are often passed down orally and then written down, serve as more than just entertainment; they teach, socialize, and normalize specific conceptions of gender roles and morality. Although they often portray women as brave, devoted, or pure heroines, they also contribute to the regulation of feminine conduct, thereby creating womanhood within socially acceptable bounds. However, in spite of their cultural prominence, these folktales are also firmly rooted in patriarchal systems. By giving the female character moments of apparent agency and then containing them through narrative closure, they create ideals of womanhood that both celebrate and limit the female figure. This dual purpose of highlighting and stifling

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women is essential to comprehending how gender functions in South Asian storytelling customs.

Research on South Asian folktales has mostly concentrated on their historical roots, cultural symbolism, and thematic richness; however, only a small number of studies have examined the narrative devices that influence how women are portrayed in these tales. Although feminist interpretations have emphasized the subjugation and defiance of female characters, the narratological aspect—how storytelling techniques themselves contribute to the formation of womanhood—has not received enough attention.

Thus, there are two main gaps that motivate this study:

1. The sparse use of feminist narrative theory in romantic folktales from South Asia.

2. The lack of a cross-regional analysis that looks at how the narrative structures of Pashto, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Balochi tales differ or converge in their construction of womanhood.

By bridging these gaps, the study aims to advance from thematic interpretations to an integrated examination of ideology, voice, and form.

The subject matter of this research is:

Adam Khan and Durkhani (Pashto): A story of young love, tribal honor, and the conflict between individual aspirations and group responsibilities.
Heer Ranjha (*Punjabi*): The epic poem by Waris Shah about forbidden love, rebellion against family authority, and the ultimate tragedy of lovers who are split up by social conventions.
Sassui Punnhun (*Balochi*): The quest of a loyal wife across a desert to find her kidnapped husband, representing perseverance, innocence, and spiritual development.
Umar Marvi (*Sindhi*): A village woman who is kidnapped by a ruler and refuses to marry him because she is loyal to her country is a story of moral resistance and steadfastness.

Every story features a heroine whose deeds have gained cultural resonance but whose storyline is ultimately influenced by gendered moral standards.

In order to conceptualize fairy tales and folktales as narrative systems with ideological functions rather than as neutral cultural expressions, this study uses Cristina Bacchilega's feminist narratology as presented in Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies (1997). Bacchilega focuses on how stories create femininity through techniques like narrative containment, which permits brief female resistance but eventually reinstates patriarchal order; symbolic closure, which resolves the heroine's arc in terms that are acceptable to the culture; and mirroring, which normalizes gender norms. She examines who has the right to speak, how speech is constructed, and how silence itself can serve as an ideological weapon through her focus on voice and silence. Additionally, this study's approach to South Asian settings, like the river in Heer Ranjha or the desert in Sassui Punnhun, is informed by Bacchilega's analysis of symbolic spaces—forests, deserts, and rivers—as gendered sites of testing or transformation. Although Bacchilega's work is rooted in Western traditions, its ideas are modified here to study romantic folktales in Pashto, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Balochi, allowing for a cross-cultural examination of how narrative form both reflects and governs womanhood. By doing this, the study reveals the interaction between gender ideology and narrative structure, bridging the gap between textual analysis and feminist cultural criticism.

Academically, this study advances feminist literary criticism and folklore studies by utilizing a narratological lens that is rarely employed in South Asian settings. By applying Bacchilega's

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theories—which were first developed in the context of Western fairy tales—to the rich and varied oral traditions of South Asia, it enhances feminist narratology. By showing how common narrative techniques can encode regionally specific gender ideologies, the comparative method also advances cross-cultural folkloristics. In terms of culture, this study provides a better understanding of how the cultural contexts of famous South Asian heroines have influenced and been influenced by them. The study encourages audiences to consider the cultural legacy of these stories by examining the ways in which they both uphold and reinterpret gender norms. It clarifies how individuals such as Heer, Sassui, Marvi, and Durkhani serve as cautionary tales, romantic ideals, and moral role models in their communities. The study adds to broader discussions about gender representation in world folklore on a global scale. Despite being a universal cultural form, folktales have very localized gendered meanings. The research provides comparative insights applicable to folklore traditions around the world by examining South Asian stories using a feminist narratological framework. By showing how narrative containment and symbolic closure function across cultural boundaries, it also contributes to global feminist scholarship by highlighting the cultural specificity of women's narrative roles as well as their universality.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Over the past two decades, the study of romantic folktales in South Asian traditions—especially from a feminist narratological perspective—has developed significantly. In the past, these tales were often seen as sources of cultural wisdom or poetic heritage. However, recent scholars have started to question them as ideological structures that shape ideas about gender, power, and cultural norms.

Cristina Bacchilega's *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (2005) is a key text in feminist narratology. Although she mainly focuses on Euro-American tales, her ideas about narrative containment, symbolic resolution, and gendered voice can also be applied to South Asian romantic folktales. Bacchilega shows that fairy tales often create the illusion of female agency, only to limit or erase it through endings like marriage, death, or sacrifice. This framework is especially useful for examining stories like *Heer Ranjha* or *Sassui Punnhun*, where the female leads seem powerful but are eventually drawn into moral structures that uphold patriarchal values.

In a more region-specific context, Wan and Hussain's edited volume, *Muslim Women's Lived Experiences and Intersectional Identities* (2025), expands the discussion by using ethnographic and narrative studies. It explores how Muslim women in South Asia navigate gender norms in both daily life and storytelling. Their approach treats regional folklore not just as a cultural artefact but as a living framework that shapes how women understand themselves. One chapter focuses on the figure of "the silent loyal woman" in Urdu and Sindhi oral poetry. It argues that silence in folklore serves both as a sign of moral virtue and as a tool of control. Although the book does not center entirely on romantic folktales, its analysis of culturally shaped femininity helps us compare characters like Marvi and Durkhani, whose goodness is shown through quiet endurance.

Recent thesis-based research has also started exploring digital narratives and informal storytelling practices. In her 2025 thesis *They Call Themselves Brave Women*, Shimu examines how Bangladeshi women bikers use Facebook to create gendered stories of resistance and courage. Although her focus is on digital platforms, she links these modern narratives to traditional Bengali folktales, especially those featuring brave female figures. Shimu argues that older folkloric ideals of feminine endurance still influence how South Asian women imagine

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strength and virtue today. This idea connects with the symbolic endurance of characters like Sassui and Marvi, whose suffering is seen not as a failure but as a mark of moral strength.

Bhutia and Venkatesan (2024) also explore feminist reinterpretations of folklore, focusing on regional South Asian cinema. In *Toppling the Tables*, they argue that even modern retellings of traditional tales often maintain patriarchal endings, despite featuring stronger female leads. Their research supports the use of Bacchilega's idea of narrative containment in analyzing both oral traditions and contemporary visual storytelling.

Felarca-Villanueva's (2025) thesis, though centered on fantasy storytelling in digital games, identifies narrative patterns that are also present in traditional folklore. She focuses on themes like feminine sacrifice, silence, and the use of symbolic spaces such as rivers and thresholds. These metaphors appear in tales like *Sassui Punnhun* and *Umar Marvi*, where spatial imagery reflects cultural ideals of femininity.

Chakraborty (2024) examines Chandrabati's retelling of the Ramayana from Sita's point of view in her gripping article, A Ramayana of Her Own. The narrative voice is altered by this uncommon epic written by a woman, providing insight into how gender and authorship interact in oral traditions. Chakraborty's gendered reading illuminates how voice, silence, and authority shift when women assume the role of narrators instead of subjects. This supports Bacchilega's theory of "narrative framing" and draws attention to a central problem in your research: the female protagonist's agency is partially textual and partially interpreted in all four of the folktales you are studying because they are framed by a male narrator or cultural voice.

Niazi, Naz, and Akhtar (2025), in their article *Analysis of Pedagogical Approaches to Pakistani Women Writers*, explore feminist themes in Pakistani English literature. While the article mainly focuses on contemporary texts, it also positions folklore as a core narrative framework that still shapes the work of Pakistani feminist writers. The authors argue that tales like *Heer Ranjha* have strongly influenced feminist imagination in Pakistan, yet their patriarchal endings are rarely questioned. Their study reinforces the need to revisit such folktales through Bacchilega's lens, to examine how narrative closure can either restrict or open up space for feminist reinterpretation.

DeNapoli (2024) examines how oral traditions become sacred myths in How Becoming a Myth Leads to History, which explores the reimagining of goddess figures in modern Indian performance. She highlights how gendered spaces such as rivers, mountains, and deserts serve as spaces where women are transformed from individuals into mythic figures. This process of change is reflected in Heer's fate by the river or Sassui's trek across the Baloch desert. Bacchilega's theory of symbolic containment is in line with DeNapoli's work, which advocates interpreting spatial metaphor as a means of ideological resolution.

Farooqui's (2025) collection *Feminisms of Our Mothers* examines how characters like Heer and Marvi are remembered in Pakistani cultural narratives. She critiques the way their acts of resistance are often stripped of political meaning and recast as symbols of quiet loyalty instead of feminist defiance. This view supports Bacchilega's argument that female resistance in folktales is frequently absorbed into the story's structure and reshaped into moral virtue.

Finally, Vernon and Edwards (2024), in a comparative feminist article published in *Women's Restorative Medievalisms and Decoloniality*, examine how feminine resistance is portrayed in oral histories. Although their focus is on East Asian sources, their concepts of "counter-memory" and "narrative reclamation" are highly relevant to South Asian romantic folktales. They argue that narrative containment can be challenged when stories are re-read through marginal perspectives. This supports the use of Bacchilega's framework not just for critique, but also as a means of recovering hidden forms of agency within these tales.

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This review shows that while feminist scholarship in South Asia has explored issues of gender, resistance, and narrative power, it has rarely used formal narratological frameworks like Bacchilega's to study traditional romantic folktales. Most existing research tends to focus on themes, rather than on the narrative techniques—such as voice, framing, and symbolic resolution—that shape female experience in these stories. Your project addresses this gap by applying a feminist narratological approach to *Adam Khan and Durkhani*, *Heer Ranjha*, *Sassui Punnhun*, and *Umar Marvi*, revealing how narrative structure both restricts and defines womanhood across different cultural settings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

This study examines how South Asian romantic folktales create, govern, and occasionally defy conventional notions of womanhood by drawing on Cristina Bacchilega's feminist narratology. Bacchilega's work, especially in *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies (1997),* provides a critical lens through which fairy tales and folklore can be understood as narrative systems with ideological functions, rather than as innocent or apolitical cultural expressions. As Bacchilega argues, *"What interests me, then, is how the narrative construction and manipulation of the tale of magic contribute to making different ideological effects possible within specific historical and social contexts" (p. 8).* Although the majority of her analyses center on Western customs, her theoretical ideas provide useful instruments for analyzing gendered narrative structures in a variety of cultural contexts, such as Balochi, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashto folktales.

A fundamental concept in Bacchilega's writing is that fairy tales, and consequently folktales, are cultural scripts that actively contribute to the formation of femininity. These texts, which are frequently presented as morality, virtue, or love, encode not only roles for women but also the acceptable bounds of female behavior. Bacchilega demonstrates that *"this mirroring, or highly distilled mimesis, is no value-free or essential distillation of human destiny, but a 'special effect' of ideological expectations and unspoken norms—a naturalizing technology that works hard at, among other things, re-producing 'Woman' as the mirror image of masculine desire" (p. 32).*

She also highlights the role that folktales play as "*technologies of gender*," arguing that *"feminists can view the fairy tale as a powerful discourse which produces representations of gender—a 'technology of gender,' for de Lauretis; and studying the mechanisms of such a production can highlight the dynamic differences and complex interdependence between 'Woman' in fairy tales and 'women' storytellers/writers and listeners/readers" (p. 10).* In many stories, the narrative arc restores order through symbolic closures like marriage, death, sacrifice, or spiritual transcendence, even when the female protagonists appear to be independent or rebellious. This pattern can be seen in the South Asian stories that are being examined: Adam Khan and Durkhani, Sassui Punnhun, Umar Marvi, and Heer Ranjha. All of these stories feature instances of female resistance that are eventually mediated, assimilated, or contained within conventional moral frameworks.

Bacchilega highlights how crucial narrative structure is in determining gendered meaning. Her idea of "narrative containment" in particular draws attention to the ways that storytelling itself can restrict female agency. As she observes, *"As a mimetic narrative, 'Snow White' claims to tell us the truth about the world: the human world mirrors nature. More specifically, by silently assuming a set of social conventions, the narrative strategy of mirroring sustains, among many other social norms the re-production of gender construction. Such mirroring frames and freezes Snow White as an image of beauty and suffering—the 'innocent persecuted heroine'"*

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(p. 34). Although stories give women the opportunity to express themselves, take action, or resist, they frequently organize this resistance in ways that promote social validation rather than change. Bacchilega notes how this operates through narrative voice: *"Snow White rarely has a voice of her own, and when she does speak, she merely accepts things as they are... Otherwise, in an indirectly silencing move, her speech is reported and summarized. It is as a silent image that she arouses the Prince's love" (pp. 34-35).* In Heer Ranjha, for instance, Heer's expression of romantic desire and defiance of patriarchal authority is finally silenced by death, making her love both potent and pointless. Similar to this, Sassui Punnhun and Marvi both feature heroines who suffer greatly, but instead of questioning the standards that initially required such endurance, their fortitude serves to uphold ideals of feminine loyalty, purity, and sacrifice.

Bacchilega's emphasis on voice and silence is an equally important part of her narratology. Gender representation revolves around the construction of who speaks, who is silenced, and who tells the story. Bacchilega explains that *"though in an oral context the teller of 'Snow White' is often a woman, the genre's conventions require her to narrate in what is awkwardly called the 'third person,' a form of ventriloquism that highly complicates the issue of narrative accountability" (p. 34)*. By reducing women to subjects to be told rather than narrators of their own experiences, this narrative framing frequently deprives them of interpretive power.

Based on the work of Hélène Cixous, Bacchilega suggests that transformative feminine subjectivity depends on what Cixous refers to as "*voice*" rather than on traditional speech: *"both 'writing' and 'voice' are thus 'the experience of not-me within me'... and represent a different subjectivity, which since it is not propre (as both 'own' and 'proper') does not rely on the authority of presence" (pp. 14-15).* Although the female characters in the four South Asian stories under study exhibit defiance, loyalty, or desire, their subjectivity is always constrained by the narrative framework. Even when there is a heroine's voice, the story's larger moral universe frequently limits it.

Bacchilega also highlights the ideological function of symbolic locations in folktales, such as rivers, mountains, forests, and deserts.

The governing metaphor of the "magic mirror," which "conflates mimesis (reflection), refraction (varying desires), and framing (artifice)" (p. 10), is how she conceptualizes fairy tales. These areas are often feminized and linked to purification, testing, or metamorphosis. Bacchilega's symbolic containment analysis shows how spaces serve as *"bloody chambers"—"Bluebeard's forbidden room, a high-class bedroom, a windowless cell, the grandmother's house, a castle's vault; but also the legislative assembly which—as village, family, 'man 'kind, or Lacanian mirror—sets developmental and social norms" (p. 141).*

According to Bacchilega, folktales serve as a moral framework-encoding socialization tools. She demonstrates that *"the fairy tale's magic act requires not only social violence and appropriation but a careful balance of threats and rewards" (p. 6).* These stories serve as warning tales that, through *"Clever and industrious boys, dependent and hard-working girls, and well-behaved 'normal' children in general—such products" (p. 6)*, propagate cultural norms.

Crucially, Bacchilega's theory recognizes that stories' meanings are dynamic and that cultural context, narrative framing, and interpretation all work together to negotiate their ideological function. The impact of this change, she contends, *"is to resituate responsibility not within individual intention, but in the network of ideologies articulated in a performance as interpreted within multiple frames" (p. 19).* This makes room for contradiction and ambivalence in the texts themselves. This ambivalence is frequently reflected in South Asian

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romantic folktales, where female desire is both glorified and punished. Although the heroines' love is admired, it turns tragic and results in their deaths or disappearances. This supports a cultural rationale that idealizes women not when they achieve but when they suffer honorably, and that only honors passion when it is restrained by loss.

Through the application of Bacchilega's feminist narratology to South Asian folktales, this study reveals how narrative techniques like framing, closure, repetition, and metaphor are used to encode particular ideals of womanhood in addition to telling stories of love. As Bacchilega notes, *"by showcasing 'women' and making them disappear at the same time, the fairy tale thus transforms us/them into man-made constructs of 'Woman'" (p. 9)*. These values, which are influenced by gender norms, regional moralities, and symbolic traditions, are culturally specific rather than universal. However, Bacchilega's structural patterns enable a cross-cultural examination of how storytelling both represents and controls femininity.

In this framework, Adam Khan and Durkhani's heroines, Heer Ranjha, Sassui Punnhun, and Umar Marvi are narrative functions positioned concerning love, honor, loyalty, and voice, rather than mere characters. Although their agency is frequently textualized in ways that reinforce the community's moral order, it is not completely absent. This analysis aims to understand how folklore, as a living and culturally embedded form, simultaneously preserves, reflects, and occasionally subverts the gender ideologies it inherits. It does not seek to dismiss these stories as simply patriarchal.

Thus, a methodologically sound and critically rich approach to examining South Asian romantic folktales is offered by Bacchilega's feminist narratology. Her ideas provide the means to go beyond superficial thematic interpretations and toward a more profound comprehension of the ways in which narrative form itself contributes to the cultural construction of womanhood.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. How are ideals of womanhood constructed and regulated in South Asian romantic folktales like Adam Khan and Durkhani, Heer Ranjha, Sassui Punnhun, and Umar Marvi using narrative techniques like framing, mirroring, and symbolic closure?

2. How do the female protagonists in these stories express their voice, desire, or resistance, and how are these moments silenced or contained within the story's moral logic?

3. In these folktales, how do symbolic landscapes—like rivers, deserts, or mountains—function as narrative metaphors for moral virtue, perseverance, and femininity?

4. How much does Bacchilega's idea of "showcasing and making disappear" relate to how women are portrayed in these stories, and how does this represent gender ideologies unique to the region?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive methodology that draws inspiration from Critical Practice (1980), where Catherine Belsey discussed poststructuralist theory. The approach places a strong emphasis on how text and ideology are inextricably linked, as well as how critical thinking actively reveals the cultural codes woven throughout narrative structure. In contrast, Belsey views texts as places where meanings are created, debated, and controlled through discursive practices, rejecting the idea that literature is a clear mirror of reality. This theoretical approach is particularly relevant to the current study, which uses Cristina Bacchilega's feminist narratology to analyze South Asian romantic folktales.The analysis, which adheres to Belsey's framework, emphasizes the folktales' constructedness by viewing

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them as dynamic signifying systems that contribute to the ideological production of gender rather than as static archives of cultural truth. The approach entails closely examining four classic romantic folktales—Adam Khan and Durkhani, Heer Ranjha, Sassui Punnhun, and Umar Marvi—in order to pinpoint the voice/silence dynamics, symbolic spaces, and narrative techniques that define femininity in each of their cultural settings.The interpretive process is guided by Belsey's emphasis on "reading against the grain," which calls for examining the narrative gaps, silences, and closures that serve to contain these representations in addition to tracing overt depictions of female agency and virtue. In line with Bacchilega's notion of folktales as "technologies of gender," this means examining both the text's overt content and its underlying ideological mechanisms. Comparative in nature, the methodology looks at how similar narrative devices work differently in Pashtun, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Thari cultural contexts. The method recognizes contradiction, multiplicity, and the reader-critic's role in meaning production rather than striving for a single "true" reading. This enables the study to emphasize the ideological function of folktales while staying aware of their capacity for re-signification and resistance.

DISCUSSION:

According to Bacchilega's feminist narratology, folktales are not merely innocent stories; rather, they are *"technologies of gender"* that actively create femininity through purposeful narrative manipulation. According to her argument, *"What interests me, then, is how the narrative construction and manipulation of the tale of magic contribute to making different ideological effects possible within specific historical and social contexts" (p. 8).* The mechanism by which these narratives function is *"this mirroring, or highly distilled mimesis, [which] is no value-free or essential distillation of human destiny, but a 'special effect' of ideological expectations and unspoken norms—a naturalizing technology that works hard at, among other things, re-producing 'Woman' as the mirror image of masculine desire" (p. 32).* Using narrative techniques, the four South Asian folktales under study—Adam Khan-Durkhani, Heer-Ranjha, Sassui Punnhun, and Umar Marvi—create culturally particular ideals of femininity while concealing these ideological purposes behind the veneer of moral or romantic celebration.

In each of the four stories, beauty serves as a major narrative commodity, economic, social, and spiritual capital, but its definition varies depending on the cultural setting. In Adam Khan-Durkhani, Durkhani's physical description serves as mystical currency: "Malik Taus Khan's daughter, Durkhani, is one in millions." *You look at her and you can't take your eyes off her."* The male gaze examines her features—"Does she have a mole on her left cheek?" *"Is there a scar on her forehead?"*—producing her as the *"mirror image of masculine desire"* that Bacchilega identifies, where authenticity is defined not by her selfhood but by how precisely she matches a pre-existing masculine ideal. This construction frames women as desirable possessions rather than independent agents, reflecting Pashtun cultural values that celebrate beauty as both status and destiny.

The beauty cliché does appear in Heer-Ranjha, but it is somewhat undermined. Heer turns into a visual consumer, stating that Ranjha's appearance was a feast for him: *"Exuberant youth, long, wavy and black shiny hair, pink face, and captivating smile on his lips."* Heer is positioned as an active chooser rather than just an object in this scene, which is still framed by aesthetics but suggests a Punjabi cultural script that permits women to express romantic preference. The larger storyline, however, ensures that this agency remains within the bounds of conventional

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romantic resolution, thereby supporting Bacchilega's theory that folktales can mimic female freedom while directing it in an acceptable direction.

By introducing prophecy at birth, Sassui Punnhun further muddies the beauty motif: Sassui is *"beautiful as the moon itself."* She is elevated above the norm as a result, but her suffering is also predestined. In this case, beauty serves as a supernatural marker that determines her destiny before any decisions are made, rather than just being an object of desire. This story's Sindhi cultural logic honors exceptional women while cautioning that such gifts bring hardship and uprooting. Therefore, Sassui's beauty turns into a burden masquerading as a benefit, an ideological device that frames women's unique traits as both their strength and their weakness. Umar Marvi, on the other hand, disagrees with the idea that beauty determines value. Unlike the other heroines, Marvi's abduction is not sparked by the mystical idealization of beauty; rather, her value is established by her moral integrity and class loyalty: *"My bare threads are more than the gold chain."* The cultural ideal is thus changed from aesthetic perfection to honor rooted in the community, implying that in the Thari context, feminine virtue comes from fidelity to one's roots rather than physical elegance. Even so, the story keeps this virtue within patriarchal recognition; she is only ultimately vindicated after receiving divine validation through the fire ordeal.

Bacchilega would interpret "love at first sight," a crucial narrative device in all four stories, as a containment mechanism. This cliché creates the appearance of choice; love seems impulsive and self-guided, but in reality, it predetermines women's fates. In Adam Khan-Durkhani, Adam Khan chooses Durkhani solely because she fits his romanticized vision; there is no room in the story for her to make her own decisions. Heer's quick romantic attraction to Heer-Ranjha gives her a brief sense of agency but sets her on a path that is blocked by family and social resistance. By completely eliminating choice, Sassui Punnhun strengthens the containment; prophecy is interwoven with her union with Punnhun. The trope is only broken by Umar Marvi, who makes no romantic choices at all. However, this lack of romance itself serves a narrative function by portraying virtue as unrelated to romance, thus reinforcing a distinct set of gendered expectations.

At last, suffering is revealed as the ultimate demonstration of the moral value and authenticity of women. Sassui's experience in the desert, Heer's famine, Durkhani's illness, and Marvi's physical austerity all turn physical stamina into virtue. Here, suffering turns into a *"naturalizing technology"* that validates femininity through sacrifice rather than fulfilment, serving an ideological purpose that is very similar to Bacchilega's framework. All of the stories uphold the patriarchal logic that women's greatest value arises through endurance within, not outside, socially sanctioned boundaries. The only way the stories differ is in how they reward this suffering, martyrdom in Adam Khan-Durkhani and Heer-Ranjha, spiritual transcendence in Sassui Punnhun, and social restoration in Umar Marvi.

According to Bacchilega's analysis, narrative voice plays a crucial role in the creation of gendered meaning, where women are allowed to express themselves but constantly have their voices diverted to suit patriarchal purposes. As she observes, *"though in an oral context the teller of 'Snow White' is often a woman, the genre's conventions require her to narrate in what is awkwardly called the 'third person,' a form of ventriloquism that highly complicates the issue of narrative accountability" (p. 34).* Even when speech is delivered by female protagonists, it is styled, reported, or framed to maintain the ideological purpose of the story. Bacchilega's observation that *"Snow White rarely has a voice of her own… it is as a silent image that she arouses the Prince's love"* (pp. 34–35) finds striking resonance in the South Asian romantic

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folktales examined here, where moments of apparent verbal agency often mask deeper structural silencing.

In Heer-Ranjha, Heer's voice is perhaps the most assertive of the four protagonists. Her declaration *"No, I don't. My nikkah has already been recited… when five peers had given my hand to Ranjha while he was still on the other bank of the Chenab"* appears to assert spiritual and romantic authority that transcends social convention. However, this authority is expressed solely through the legitimizing language of male religious institutions. Bacchilega's framework helps to reveal the containment here: the story allows Heer to sound radical while keeping her defiance within patriarchal discourse. Her earlier outburst, *"Who are you, and how dare you go to my bed?"*, indicates potential resistance, but the narrative quickly neutralizes it through romantic capitulation: "*Heer had surrendered herself to the magnetic charm of handsome Ranjha."* This shift from confrontation to submission exemplifies how the story employs voice not to destabilize gender hierarchies, but to dramatize their eventual reestablishment.

Adam Khan-Durkhani demonstrates a more troubling pattern in which the feminine voice gains prominence solely by endorsing male action. Durkhani's line, *"Don't forget that, apart from a rubab, you possess a gun. We are made for each other",* casts her as a perpetrator of masculine violence, giving her narrative visibility while promoting patriarchal solutions to social conflict. Bacchilega's insight into the ventriloquized nature of female voice is especially relevant here: Durkhani's words emphasize Adam Khan's agency rather than her own. Her final cry, *"Adam Khan, where are you?*", is elevated as her most powerful expression, but it only becomes culturally significant at the time of her death, reinforcing the notion that the truest feminine voice is the one permanently silenced.

The most prominent way in which Sassui Punnhun expresses voice is through poetic lament. Lines like *"All are enemies, camels, camel men, and brother-in-laws; the fourth enemy is the wind that removed Punhoon's footprints"* show a mastery of imagery and emotional articulation that elevates Sassui's suffering to the level of cultural poetry. However, Bacchilega's framework aids in revealing the containment mechanism: despite being culturally celebrated, this voice cannot effect social change. Isolated in the desert, Sassui's laments are stripped of their communal context and reinterpreted as aesthetic rather than political actions. By transforming her suffering into art, the story eliminates its potential for resistance, transforming it into a timeless symbol of endurance rather than a challenge to the conditions that caused it.

Umar Marvi appears to deviate from this pattern by giving a heroine who resists throughout the story a consistent voice. Marvi's refusal: *"I will not accept any other husband..." My bare threads are more than the gold chain"* Her authority stems from class solidarity and moral integrity, not romantic longing. Her speech is not only consistent but also confrontational, as she rejects the abductor's wealth and power. Even here, the story insists on divine confirmation: Marvi's truth is ultimately validated not by her words, but by the fire ordeal. This reveals the final layer of containment: female speech, no matter how unequivocal, is insufficient without supernatural confirmation within the patriarchal moral order.

Throughout the four stories, voice is permitted but rarely dominant. Bacchilega's interpretation of the fairy tale as a "*technology of gender"* is particularly relevant here: these narratives create elaborate systems in which women can speak, lament, and even challenge, but only within frames that either redirect their speech toward male-centred goals or require extraordinary validation to carry authority. For this reason, silence often has greater narrative weight than speaking. Durkhani's illness, Heer's hunger strike, Sassui's desert trek, and Marvi's physical endurance all convey moral value without using words. The ideological work of these folktales

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is precisely this inversion: they appear to honor female voices while teaching that the most virtuous femininity is found not in what women say, but in how they suffer silently.

Bacchilega's concept of "narrative containment" emphasizes how a folktale's physical and symbolic spaces function as ideological structures that shape and limit female agency, rather than as neutral settings. She observes, "As a mimetic narrative, 'Snow White' claims to tell us the truth about the world..." *Such mirroring frames and freezes Snow White as an image of beauty and suffering—the 'innocent persecuted heroine'"* (p. 34). These spaces, which she calls "bloody chambers," are not merely backdrops but *"Bluebeard's forbidden room, a high-class bedroom, a windowless cell… but also the legislative assembly which—as village, family, 'man 'kind, or Lacanian mirror—sets developmental and social norms"* (p. 141). In the four South Asian folktales examined here, rivers, deserts, havelis, and pastoral fields serve as culturally specific "bloody chambers" that appear to empower women while ultimately keeping them within patriarchal boundaries.

In Heer-Ranjha, the Chenab River is both a symbol of feminine autonomy and its demise. The boat is more than just a mode of transportation; it is a threshold space that Heer controls, allowing her to challenge male intrusion and control access. Her confrontation, *"Who are you, and how dare you go to my bed?"* is possible because she lives in a liminal, quasi-independent space. However, the same river that empowers her later serves as the site of her death, transforming from a source of agency to a liquid tomb. In Bacchilega's terms, this is a classic *"bloody chamber"* dynamic: the space of female power is re-scripted into the space of female containment, ensuring that autonomy results in romantic martyrdom rather than social transformation.

Adam Khan-Durkhani defines its spatial dynamics through the architecture of the haveli and its controlled boundaries. Although Durkhani's agency is exercised within the confines of her home, sending messages and planning romantic encounters, this authority is limited by geography. Her one outing outside the haveli to attend a wedding sets off the series of events that ultimately result in her demise. This transgression's disruptive potential is diffused by the closure, which involves burial in a communal grave that turns into a miraculous tree. Thus, the haveli reflects Bacchilega's metaphor of the *"legislative assembly"*: a closed space that permits controlled forms of agency while upholding the larger framework of gender hierarchy.

The Sindhi desert plays the most intricate symbolic role in Sassui Punnhun. On one level, it is a huge, open area that gives Sassui the freedom to act in ways she has never done before: travelling by herself, freely expressing her desires, and surviving by willpower. On another level, it's a lethal space that swallows her whole, with the earth opening to claim her. This duality demonstrates how patriarchal ideology can transform even the most expansive landscapes into places of closure. The desert provides a stage for feminine self-definition, but that selfhood is only realized through disappearance, a divine containment that completely removes Sassui from the social sphere.

The most obvious divergence in spatial logic is provided by Umar Marvi. Here, Marvi's identity and resistance are closely linked to the pastoral landscapes of Thar, including fields, herds, and village life. It is impossible to separate her refusal, *"My bare threads are more than the gold chain,"* from the rural setting that underpins her moral authority. In contrast to the other heroines, Marvi returns to this location following her trial, having been found not guilty and reintegrated into her community. Even this seemingly freeing spatial story, however, is subject to patriarchal logic: her reintegration depends on surviving the supernatural fire ordeal, a divine endorsement that upholds rather than questions the current moral order.

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Symbolic spaces function as precisely calibrated cultural tools in the *"technology of gender"* throughout these stories. Moments of female autonomy are allowed by the river, the haveli, the desert, and the pastoral field, but they are narratively reframed into resolutions that support patriarchal stability. The underlying ideological function is encapsulated in Bacchilega's *"bloody chamber"* metaphor: the containment mechanism and the space of empowerment are inextricably linked. Different cultural paths to the same goal are illustrated by regional variations, such as the Pashtun martyr's grave, the Punjabi river death, the Sindhi lore of the divine disappearance, and the Thari culture's trial-by-fire. All of them make sure that women's strength is never allowed to reshape the social order, but is instead remembered and even honored.

Bacchilega's observation that fairy tales *"showcase 'women' and make them disappear at the same time" (p. 9)* is especially relevant when we compare how the four South Asian folktales create their heroines in different cultural and geographical contexts. While each tale serves the same ideological function, creating idealized femininity while containing it, the methods for achieving this balance differ significantly across Pashtun, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Thari traditions. The interplay of space, closure, and cultural ideals generates various "technologies" for producing womanhood that appear to be rooted in local values but serve a common structural purpose.

In the Pashtun context of *Adam Khan-Durkhani*, womanhood is constructed around romantic loyalty and mystical beauty, with agency framed as dangerous when exercised beyond architectural boundaries. Durkhani's life within the haveli reflects controlled agency sanctioned by the domestic order, but her public appearance initiates fatal consequences. The closure, a shared grave that transforms into a legendary tree, functions as a form of symbolic purification, recasting her socially disruptive romance into a spiritually acceptable narrative. This strategy converts individual female defiance into a communal symbol, neutralizing its challenge to patriarchal norms while elevating it into regional lore.

The Punjabi *Heer-Ranjha* offers a more openly assertive heroine whose agency is initially celebrated. Heer's control of the Chenab ferry and her ability to confront Ranjha signal a cultural ideal that permits women a degree of authority in certain public or liminal spaces. Yet this latitude is carefully managed: the same river that enables her agency becomes the site of her death. The tragic ending reframes her assertiveness into martyrdom, aligning with Punjabi cultural aesthetics that valorize passion and defiance, but only when sealed by sacrifice. The ideological effect is to sanction feminine agency as admirable yet ultimately incompatible with lasting social integration.

The Sindhi *Sassui Punnhun* shifts the focus from public assertion to spiritual transcendence. Sassui's journey across the desert elevates her as a figure of unwavering devotion and moral purity, aligning with Sindhi reverence for endurance and mystical union. Yet the desert's role as the site of her divine disappearance ensures that her empowerment is permanently removed from the social world. This form of closure reflects a cultural preference for sacralizing feminine virtue, transforming it into an object of reverence while eliminating its capacity to affect communal structures in lived reality.

The Thari *Umar Marvi* represents the most socially reintegrative model. Marvi's identity is deeply rooted in her rural community and class solidarity, and her rejection of royal luxury, *"My bare threads are more than the gold chain,"* frames virtue as loyalty to origin and collective identity. Unlike the other heroines, she returns to her community alive and vindicated. Yet even here, the supernatural fire ordeal mediates this restoration, placing ultimate judgment in divine hands rather than Marvi's own authority. While the Thari context

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allows feminine integrity to triumph without death, it still relies on an external, patriarchal source of legitimacy to confirm that integrity.

This comparative perspective reveals differences not only in cultural conceptions of womanhood but also in the containment strategies themselves. Tragic martyrdom is favored in Pashtun and Punjabi traditions, turning female resistance into a legend that can be safely remembered. The heroine is completely removed from the social sphere in Sindhi tradition, which sanctifies feminine suffering through mystical disappearance. Social restoration is permitted by Thari tradition, but only after the heroine's virtue is confirmed by divine arbitration. Bacchilega's framework reveals how these endings all serve the same technological purpose, which is to portray women as strong, memorable, and admirable while making sure that their power never leaves the narrative's controlling frame.

By defining folklore as a *"technology of gender,"* Bacchilega provides a critical perspective that highlights the ideological function of the four South Asian folktales. "Feminists can view the fairy tale as a powerful discourse that produces representations of gender—a *'technology of gender,' for de Lauretis; and studying the mechanisms of such a production can highlight the dynamic differences and complex interdependence between 'Woman' in fairy tales and 'women' storytellers/writers and listeners/readers" (p. 10)*. By presenting folktales as active creators of gendered subjectivity, this framing disavows the notion that they are passive cultural mirrors and instead creates an ostensibly natural femininity that is actually a carefully constructed ideological construct.

The earlier parts of this analysis show how Umar Marvi, Heer-Ranjha, Sassui Punnhun, and Adam Khan-Durkhani use different but structurally related narrative technologies. Three interlocking processes enable these mechanisms to function.

- The stories center femininity on beauty, loyalty, and suffering, elevating these qualities to the status of supreme virtues. However, this celebration is never self-contained: Durkhani's mystical beauty exists to fulfill Adam Khan's desire; Heer's defiant love is redeemed only through death; Sassui's suffering becomes a path to divine union; and Marvi's loyalty gains legitimacy only after supernatural testing. The "virtues" are valuable not in and of themselves, but in how they ultimately serve male desire or the patriarchal social structure.
- Feminine voices appear vibrant and present, but they are contained by narrative framing. Heer's declaration of spiritual marriage, Durkhani's romantic persuasion, Sassui's poetic laments, and Marvi's firm refusals all imply moments of agency. However, these voices operate within constraints, directing their power toward reinforcing existing power dynamics. Bacchilega's concept of ventriloquism, in which even female narrators speak in the "third person" voice of genre conventions, demonstrates how, despite appearing autonomous, such speech remains bound to patriarchal scripts.
- Symbolic spaces such as rivers, deserts, havelis, and rural fields serve as sites for women to exercise temporary agency. However, Bacchilega refers to these spaces as "bloody chambers" (p. 141), where feminine autonomy is ultimately contained or erased. The closures—martyrdom, disappearance, or divinely mediated restoration—convert potentially destabilizing events into culturally acceptable legends, saints' stories, or moral exemplars.

Viewed through this lens, the previously discussed regional variations are refinements tailored to each culture's social fabric rather than deviations from the technological function. Pashtun

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martyrdom, Punjabi romantic tragedy, Sindhi mystical transcendence, and Thari divine restoration all serve the same purpose: to portray women as powerful while ensuring that such power is either removed from or subordinated to the patriarchal order.

This technological interpretation also explains why these stories endure and maintain cultural authority. They operate under the guise of celebration, inviting readers to identify with heroines whose passions, sufferings, and moral fortitude appear admirable and empowering. However, this identification has a double edge: while it provides women with cultural scripts for strength and endurance, it also normalizes frameworks that restrict the scope of feminine autonomy. Bacchilega warns that these narratives reproduce 'woman' *as the mirror image of masculine desire (p. 32).*

The implication is that folklore is not a static cultural inheritance but rather an ongoing ideological machine capable of adapting to different regional traditions while still producing compliant forms of womanhood. Recognizing this does not imply dismissing the stories; rather, it allows us to engage with them critically, identifying both the moments where they genuinely subvert and the moments where they subtly reinforce patriarchal structures. Bacchilega's observation that folktales *"simultaneously preserve, reflect, and sometimes subvert the gender ideologies they inherit"* (framework) serves as the foundation for a nuanced reading—one that neither romanticizes nor dismisses these stories, but rather maps the complex cultural work they do in constructing gender across South Asian contexts.

CONCLUSION:

This study sought to examine four South Asian romantic folktales—Adam Khan and Durkhani, Heer Ranjha, Sassui Punnhun, and Umar Marvi—through the lens of Cristina Bacchilega's feminist narratology, specifically her concepts of "narrative containment," "technologies of gender," and the ideological function of symbolic spaces.. The results show that even though each story honors feminine virtues like moral conviction, loyalty, beauty, and endurance, these same traits are narratively constructed to uphold patriarchal order rather than challenge it.

The stories use techniques that allow women to speak, act, and resist in Pashtun, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Thari cultural contexts, but ultimately negate this agency through tragic closure, miraculous disappearance, or conditional social reintegration. The regional variations—Pashtun tragic transcendence, Sindhi spiritual absorption, Thari community restoration, and Pashtun romantic martyrdom—showcase various but overlapping strategies for limiting female agency.

The interaction between voice and silence is essential to these processes, as women's words—even when assertive—are reframed within patriarchal discourse, and silence or embodied suffering is frequently given more cultural authority than speech. Rivers, deserts, havelis, and pastoral fields are examples of symbolic locations that become important for creating and enclosing feminine subjectivity. These locations serve as Bacchilega's "bloody chambers," which seem to respect women while guaranteeing their narrative obliteration.

The study emphasizes how these stories actively shape cultural ideals of womanhood by presenting them as "technologies of gender," upholding norms while disguising them as romantic celebrations. Even though there are instances of subversion, they are assimilated into a broader ideological framework that honors women's strength without permitting it to question ingrained gender hierarchies.

Recommendations for Future Research:

The results of this investigation provide a number of avenues for further research. It would be easier to determine whether comparable containment techniques work in other narrative

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contexts if the corpus were expanded to include lesser-known oral traditions from throughout South Asia. In order to investigate how caste, class, and religious identities interact with gender to shape folktale narratives, future research could also take a more intersectional approach.
Comparing South Asian romantic folktales with those from African, Middle Eastern, or East Asian traditions could help identify which containment strategies are transnational and which are culturally specific. It would be possible to determine whether modern retellings resist, reproduce, or reframe these gendered structures by looking into contemporary performance and media adaptations, such as theater, film, and digital storytelling.
Last but not least, community-centered ethnographic research could look at how audiences today understand these stories, revealing whether the ideological frameworks mentioned here still shape gendered lived experiences or whether new interpretations are emerging that reclaim these heroines as transformational rather than restricting figures.

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