



Wisdom Picks and Oral Literature: A Critical Study of Oral Stories from Punjab (Pakistan)

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to illuminate the elements of wisdom embedded in twelve oral narratives shared by ten esteemed elders of the community. These stories serve as symbolic reservoirs of guidance for younger generations, offering insights into values such as honesty, integrity, and moral discernment. Central themes of honesty and wisdom recur throughout the narratives, alongside a pronounced emphasis on religious dimensions—particularly prayer, hope, and faith in God. A qualitative research methodology underpins this study. The storytellers were purposefully selected for their reputations as wise men within Narowal’s cultural landscape. The original Punjabi stories were translated into English using ChatGPT, which generated preliminary translations. These were then carefully reviewed to ensure the preservation of moral teachings, cultural nuances, and linguistic subtleties. The collected wisdom from Narowal’s elders is critically examined to address a gap in the documentation of indigenous ethical discourse. By analyzing how these tales encode social norms, resolve moral dilemmas, and reinforce cultural continuity, the study positions them as a form of indigenous wisdom literature.

Introduction

Oral literature, the ancient fabric of human wisdom, has preserved cultural values, moral codes, and collective identity for thousands of years. Many aspects of life are closely linked to oral literature. Its functions are quite diverse. Some functions include serving as religious means, such as prayers and hopes directed to the power of God. Prayers are offered to God to ask for their wishes and hopes. Another role of oral literature is entertainment, which is essential to the community’s needs. A vital function of oral literature is related to education. Parents have a duty to pass on messages of goodness to the younger generation. They communicate these messages

through oral literature. Parents also share their own life experiences. Advice and moral messages embedded in oral literature make it more meaningful.

In South Asia, particularly in Punjab, Pakistan, this tradition thrives through folklore, proverbs, and didactic narratives known locally as "wisdom picks": concise, orally transmitted stories designed to impart ethical lessons. Narowal, a culturally rich city in Punjab's heartland, serves as a living archive for these narratives, where elder storytellers (*rāvīs*) safeguard ancestral wisdom through performative storytelling.

This study bridges this gap by critically analyzing wisdom picks collected directly from Narowal's elders. It positions these stories as indigenous ethical literature, examining how they encode social norms, resolve moral dilemmas, and reinforce cultural continuity. Through ethnographic fieldwork and narrative analysis, we argue that Narowal's wisdom picks are not mere anecdotes but functional tools for communal cohesion, blending Sufi ethics, agrarian pragmatism, and Punjabi worldview.

Literature Review

Oral literature constitutes humanity's primary knowledge-transmission system, predating writing by millennia. Walter Ong's (1982) seminal work, *Orality and Literacy*, established the psychodynamics formulaic expression, additive composition, and participatory performance. In South Asia, the *Vedas* exemplify oral literature's sacrality, preserved through guru-shishya parampara (teacher-disciple tradition) for over 3,000 years (Staal, 1986). Albert Lord's *Singer of Tales* (1960) further demonstrated how oral narratives employ "theme and variation" structures, allowing adaptation, a feature evident in Punjab's ever-evolving folklore. Colonial ethnographers like Richard Temple (1884) documented Punjabi oral traditions but often filtered them through orientalist lenses, obscuring indigenous meaning-making systems. Meanwhile, Ruth Finnegan (2012) highlighted its adaptability across cultures. In Punjab, oral traditions- epics like *Heer-Ranjha*, proverbs (*akhan*), and folk songs (*mahiya*) have preserved history and ethics for agrarian societies (Ahmed, 2010).

"Wisdom picks" are a distinct micro-genre within oral literature. Over many centuries, the accumulated wisdom was preserved orally and passed on from parents to children. In many parts of the world today, among various cultures and ethnic groups, and in particular tribal cultures of Africa and among indigenous people of Latin America, the same process continues. Communities then use this proverbial wisdom as a guide and conduct their lives according to the experiences of their ancestors (Walter de Gruyter, 1974). Wisdom involves knowledge and is experientially gained. To distinguish wisdom from Old Testament traditions (R.N Whybray) calls wisdom an intellectual tradition, produced by the individuals in every generation who thought about life's most profound questions and passed their thoughts on to others.

Unlike epics, they are short, parable-like narratives with unambiguous morals. They function as: Pedagogical tools for moral socialization (Ben-Amos, 1971). Social regulators enforcing norms (e.g., respect, honesty). Cultural mnemonics embedding place-specific values (Basso, 1996). Punjab's oral ecosystem includes: *Qisse* employs romantic historical chronicles having extended length like *Heer Ranjha* -*Vaars* heroic ballads, mostly sung, not spoken like *Vaar of Shahbaz Qalandar*- *Boliyan* (ritual songs) -*Dohre*, poetic riddles having metrical constraints popular in weddings -*Wisdom picks* moral pedagogy distinguished by brevity, everyday relevance, and accessibility are concise, giving solutions to problems.

Narowal's stories reflect its geography: Sufi shrines promote themes of patience (sabr); farming life highlights resourcefulness; and its proximity to India enhances storytelling syncretism. However, earlier studies (e.g., Temple's Punjabi Folktales, 1884) tend to overlook Narowal's unique contributions, focusing instead on central Punjabi cities like Lahore. While Punjabi qisse and songs are well-recorded, wisdom picks from outer regions like Narowal lack detailed analysis. These wisdom picks are often grouped under "folktales" rather than studied as distinct ethical literature (Qureshi, 2007). Border districts like Narowal are underrepresented in oral archives (Punjabi Adabi Board, 2003–2020 reports). This research explores the thematic depth of Narowal's moral stories and their role in preserving local identity amid globalisation. It also examines performance dynamics between storytellers and audiences.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach to explore and interpret the moral wisdom embedded in oral stories. For this purpose, 10 carefully selected elder storytellers from Narowal were chosen. These individuals are respected community members with a strong connection to the region's oral traditions. Locals helped identify these storytellers to ensure that the voices captured were authentic and culturally rich. Their storytelling sessions were recorded with audio devices, with the participants' permission. Prompts like "Ik kahaṇi sunao jo neki sikhavē" ("Tell a story that teaches goodness") were used. The stories, originally told in Punjabi, specifically in the Narowali dialect, were later translated into English using ChatGPT as a helpful tool. The process involved inputting the original Punjabi text into ChatGPT to produce initial English versions, which were then reviewed to ensure the cultural meanings, nuances, and moral lessons were maintained. The stories were analysed by identifying common themes such as filial duty and honesty. Narrative structures and social functions of the stories were examined through Dell Hymes' "ethnography of speaking" framework, focusing on context, participants, purposes, and norms governing storytelling practices, who was involved, why they were told, and the social rules shaping these storytelling moments. This approach helped to understand not only what the stories say but also how they function in people's daily lives.

Analysis

For this study, the researcher collected a set of oral stories from elders in Narowal, each told in Punjabi and steeped in the everyday realities and dreams of village life. Later translated with care, these stories cover a range of themes: family, friendship, courage, honesty, and the power of words. The researcher focused on the stories, each offering a window into the values that matter most in the community.

Recurring Moral Themes are extracted as:

1. In the Old Man and the Wooden Box, the pain of being cast aside by one's own children is unimaginable, but so is the wisdom in the old man's words. His patience and quiet dignity remind us that how we treat our elders reflects our own future. The story gently reminds us to honor those who raised us, for the care we give today may be the care we need tomorrow.
2. The story of the quarrelsome woman and the jinn, paired with the saying, "Do not be so sweet that people lick you, nor so bitter that people spit you out," is both funny and wise. It shows that extremes, whether harshness or softness, can bring trouble. The message is clear: moderation in behavior is key to a peaceful life.

3. Despite all odds, Saba's journey to school is a moving reminder of how education can change lives. Her determination inspires not just her own family, but her whole village. The story celebrates the courage it takes to break barriers and the ripple effect of empowering even one girl.

4. The bond between Nayab and Nimra is tested in a moment of crisis, and Nayab's selfless act keeps Nimra's dreams alive. Later, when the tables turn, Nimra is there for her friend. Their story is a testament to the kind of loyalty and support that defines real friendship.

5. Grandfather's life story is one of quiet endurance through hardship. Orphaned young and faced with many trials, he never gave up. His patience and faith became the bedrock for future generations, teaching us that resilience is its reward. Tale is a reminder that true greatness is not just about physical power. His sense of justice and compassion earned him respect that outlasted any show of strength. In the end, it is characterizing that people remember.

6. The Echoing Cave is a magical story, but its lesson is very real: What we say matters. Words can heal or harm; once spoken, they often return to us unexpectedly.

7. Zayd's fear of telling the truth is met with kindness and understanding in The Broken Clock. The story reassures us that honesty builds trust and self-respect even in difficult moments.

8. The story of the woman accused of black magic is chilling, but it is also about community strength. When people come together and confront fear, justice prevails.

9. Silent Revolution explores the themes of perseverance, humility, and moral integrity in the face of hardship. It highlights how true greatness is achieved not through revenge or pride, but through silent endurance, faith in Allah, and unwavering commitment to justice. The story beautifully shows that real strength lies in patience and sacrifice, not power or retaliation.

10. The story of Karim paints sustenance not as a guaranteed right but as a trust from God. At the heart of this story is a strong contrast between gratitude and ingratitude. Sughra, though blessed with plenty, took her blessings for granted. In contrast, Zainab, Karim's second wife, appreciated every morsel. This contrast reminds us that blessings increase when they are valued and diminish when they are ignored.

Most of these stories follow a narrative device and formulaic structure: a problem or conflict, a turning point, and a resolution that leaves the listener with a clear message. Elders often use vivid imagery, humor, and hyperbole to make the stories memorable. Many tales end with a proverb or direct moral, making the lesson easy to understand.

These stories are more than just entertainment. They are a way for elders to teach, guide, and comfort the younger generation. Whether it is about resolving conflicts, encouraging honesty, or reinforcing the value of education, each story serves a purpose. They help shape the community's sense of right and wrong and bind people together through shared wisdom. These stories offer cultural insights rooted in the rhythms of village life: fields, family gatherings, and local customs. Local proverbs and references to everyday experiences make the lessons relatable. These stories keep the community's values alive even as the world changes.

Applying Hymes' framework, it is clear these stories are usually told by elders to younger listeners in communal settings, such as homes and village squares. The purpose is to entertain and educate, passing on values that help maintain social harmony. The relationship between the storyteller and the audience, as well as the shared understanding of cultural values, all shape the meaning and

impact of the stories. To summarize key findings, we can say that their warmth and wisdom stand out most from these stories. They teach us to respect our elders, value education, cherish friendship, and speak with kindness. They remind us that patience, honesty, and courage matter and that the lessons of the past still have the power to guide us today. These stories are not just memories but living guides for everyday life.

Conclusion

Listening to these twelve stories from Narowal's elders has shown how much wisdom lives in our everyday lives. Each tale, whether about respecting elders, the value of honesty, or the power of friendship, carries a lesson that feels timeless and close to home. These stories are not just old memories but gentle reminders of what matters: kindness, patience, courage, and looking out for one another. The lessons are woven into simple moments like a girl walking to school, a friend sharing what little she has, or a family learning why elders should be cherished the hard way. The morals are not forced; they come naturally from the ups and downs of real life. As the world changes and life gets busier, it is easy to forget the simple truths our elders tried to teach us. However, these stories keep those truths alive. They connect us to our roots and remind us that respect, honesty, and compassion will always guide us right, no matter how much things change. Narowal's wisdom picks are living ethical textbooks. However, this heritage faces extinction. Urban migration, digital media, and declining elder storytellers threaten transmission. Preservations are recommended. This study validates oral literature's role as active cultural stewardship. As someone has said, "*Stories are like seeds; nurture them, and they sustain you*".

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