



FROM FOLKLORE TO SUBJECTIVE HUMAN EXPERIENCE: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF TRADITIONAL AND MODERN PUNJABI POETRY

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Abstract

This study examines how thematic concerns in Punjabi poetry have shifted from the traditional folk and Sufi corpus to the popular Punjabi music of the early 2020s. Three classical texts, Waris Shah's "Heer" (1766), Bulleh Shah's "Sufi kafi Tere Ishq Nachaya", and the folk tragedy "Mirza Sahiban" first recorded by the seventeenth-century poet Pilu, are compared with three widely circulated contemporary songs: Brown Munde (2020), Excuses (2020), and Pasoori (2022). Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of reflexive thematic analysis, the study identifies the dominant themes in each corpus and traces the changes between them. The analysis argues that traditional Punjabi poetry foregrounds collective values such as honour, kinship obligation, fate, and devotional love, situating the individual within a moral and communal order. Contemporary Punjabi songs, by contrast, foreground individualism, interior emotional experience, diasporic identity, and globalised aspiration. A consistent thread of emotional intensity links both corpora, suggesting that the shift represents an evolution of poetic voice rather than a rupture with the tradition. The study also notes that the increasing presence of English and globalised idioms in modern lyrics raises questions about linguistic and cultural continuity. The paper does not claim the superiority of either corpus; it offers a comparative thematic reading of how poetic expression in Punjabi has moved from communal storytelling toward subjective human experience.

Keywords: *Collectivism, Cultural Identity, Folk and Sufi Poetry, Globalisation, Individualism, Modern Punjabi Songs, Punjabi Poetry, Subjectivity, Thematic Analysis.*

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1. Introduction

Poetry is among the oldest forms of human expression, capable of compressing emotion, cultural memory, and philosophical reflection into heightened language. Across cultures it has served as a vehicle for storytelling, a repository of folk wisdom, and a means of articulating what ordinary speech cannot easily carry. Critics have long argued that the force of poetry lies in its capacity to bind form to feeling, allowing a relationship between text and reader through which both general and particular truths can be mediated (Abrams, 1999). Whether oral or written, poetry functions as a cultural repository that holds the values, fears, hopes, and imagination of a given era.

Within South Asian literature, poetry has played a distinctive role in shaping social awareness through its philosophical depth and aesthetic appeal. Punjabi literature in particular displays a rich historical and cultural texture, drawing on folklore, mysticism, romance, and social commentary. Because it grew out of a strong oral tradition, Punjabi literature developed over centuries through communal narration, devotional discourse, and creative performance (Shackle, 2005). Its thematic range, extending from love and devotion to struggle and identity, confirms that poetry continues to act as a mirror to human experience even as the surrounding culture changes. Modern critics suggest that the relevance of poetry rests in its power to translate private feeling into shared meaning, allowing a sense of self to be constructed out of a cultural narrative (Eagleton, 2012; Rauf & Hassan, 2025). Poetry, in this view, is less a fixed art form than a continually shifting mode through which the world is made intelligible.

1.1. Tradition: Folk Romance and Sufi Poetry

Traditional Punjabi poetry, especially its folk and Sufi strands, grows out of a worldview oriented toward community and religious reflection. The great folk romances illustrate this orientation clearly. Heer Ranjha exists in several poetic narrations; the earliest is attributed to Damodar Gulati in the early seventeenth century, while the most celebrated version, Heer, was composed by Waris Shah in 1766 as a verse epic (SikhiWiki, n.d.). Mirza Sahiban, another of the four classic tragic romances of the Punjab, was first set down in literary form by the seventeenth century poet Pilu. These narratives entertained and morally instructed their audiences, and in doing so they preserved the emotional and ethical texture of pre-modern Punjabi society (Singh, 2012). Their recurring concerns are love, sacrifice, predestination, and social duty. A famous line from the Heer tradition expresses the mystical fusion of the self with the beloved, as Heer declares that in constantly invoking Ranjha she has herself become Ranjha. The same negotiation between individual desire and social demand recurs across Mirza Sahiban, where personal choice collides with the obligations of clan and honour.

Sufi poetry extended these folk themes into spiritual and metaphysical inquiry. In the work of Bulleh Shah (1680–1757), the notion of divine love operates as a

transformative power that dissolves the boundary between human and spiritual passion. His widely performed kafi Tere Ishq Nachaya, literally “your love has made me dance,” frames the surrender of the ego to the beloved as a kind of ecstatic dancing, where longing and pain become the medium of union (folkpunjab.org, n.d.). Traditional Punjabi poetry thus emerges as a fusion of spirituality, romance, and collective knowledge, shaped by oral performance and communal memory. Its use of metaphor, symbolism, and repetitive rhythm reflects an aesthetic in which poetry was a social rather than a private experience. Scholars note that the thematic richness of this tradition lies precisely in its ability to express universal human emotion through culturally specific narrative (Shackle, 2005).

1.2. Modernity: Subjectivity, Diaspora, and Globalisation

Contemporary Punjabi poetry and music register a different set of pressures, namely globalisation, migration, urbanisation, and a growing emphasis on the individual. Modern artists engage with identity negotiation, psychological conflict, diasporic belonging, and material aspiration in ways that resonate with younger audiences. Brown Munde, released in 2020 by AP Dhillon, Gurinder Gill, and Shinda Kahlon, blends globalised trap production with a narrative of success and self-assertion, becoming an anthem of diaspora pride and ambition. Its hook, which pairs “brown” youth with international fame, articulates an emotional world driven by digital culture and transnational mobility.

Pasoori, performed by Ali Sethi and Shae Gill for the fourteenth season of Coke Studio Pakistan in 2022, fuses Punjabi folk idiom with reggaeton rhythms to frame a complex narrative of longing and prohibition. Sethi has described the song as a deliberate response to the idea that true love is always forbidden, written to subvert orthodoxy through pun and double meaning (Al Jazeera, 2023). Excuses, released in July 2020 by AP Dhillon and Gurinder Gill with producer Intense, turns inward toward emotional alienation and the failure of communication between lovers. In each case, the focus rests on individual introspection rather than collective storytelling, a trend that aligns modern Punjabi poetry with broader contemporary uses of song as a medium of psychological and social self-expression (Grewal, 2019).

Scholars argue that this hybridity, in which global themes and sounds are woven into local cultural roots, marks the twenty-first century cultural landscape, where art becomes a site for negotiating tradition and modernity (Kaur, 2020). The movement from traditional to modern Punjabi poetry is bound up with broader historical, cultural, and technological shifts. Where the older corpus was inseparable from oral performance, communal storytelling, and devotional reflection, the newer corpus is increasingly preoccupied with subjectivity, urban life, and global circulation. This reflects a wider change in social organisation, from identities formed within the group to identities formed by the individual, with art serving as a means of voicing personal emotion, hope, and

struggle (Eagleton, 2012). Digital platforms have accelerated this change, carrying Punjabi music to a global audience and thereby shaping its form and content (Kaur, 2020).

At the same time, modern Punjabi poetry retains much of the emotional core of its predecessor, often reworking classic themes such as the nature of love or the assertion of cultural identity. This suggests that the trajectory of Punjabi poetry is better understood as evolution than as rupture: societies repeatedly integrate new genres and styles into inherited traditions rather than abandoning them outright (Singh, 2012). The shift from folkloric tale toward subjective expression therefore demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of the Punjabi poetic form rather than its decline. It is this shift, from collective cultural narrative toward individualised human experience, that the present study sets out to examine. Traditional texts such as Heer and the poetry of Bulleh Shah articulated and reinforced shared cultural values, whereas modern songs such as Brown Munde and Excuses foreground personal feeling, individual identity, and global aspiration. The question of whether this transition enriches or erodes the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of Punjabi poetry has not been examined through a direct comparative thematic reading, a gap this study addresses (Singh, 2012).

2. This study examines how traditional Punjabi poetry expresses societal norms and collective values, how contemporary Punjabi songs reflect subjective experience, individualism, and globalised identity, and what thematic contrasts emerge when the two are compared. Through a comparative thematic analysis, it traces the shift from collective to individual identity, situating Punjabi poetry within a broader cultural frame in which inherited communal values give way to the fragmented realities of globalisation and dispersion. In doing so, it contributes to literary scholarship and reaffirms poetry's role in processing identity, values, and emotion (Latif & Akhtar, 2021; Singh, 2012). The analysis is restricted to six texts, three traditional and three released between 2020 and 2022, and attends only to thematic content, making no claim about the superiority of either form.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in thematic analysis as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), an approach well suited to examining how themes shift from normative values in traditional Punjabi poetry to interior experience in modern song. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to move past the surface content of lyrics toward deeper layers of cultural meaning, emotion, and ideology. Applied to the traditional corpus, it helps reveal how texts such as Heer, Tere Ishq Nachaya, and Mirza Sahiban construct communal identity, ethics, and shared values. Applied to the modern corpus, it brings out the emphasis on subjectivity, autonomy, globalisation, and psychological complexity in songs such as Brown Munde, Pasoori, and Excuses.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six phases: familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming

themes, and producing the report. Following these phases, the study systematically examines the thematic structure of both corpora. The value of this framework for the present research lies in its capacity to support a comparative thematic reading that illuminates the movement of poetic voice from communal storytelling toward individual human experience, while keeping the analysis consistently thematic rather than formal or biographical.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative design. Purposive sampling was used to select two contrasting bodies of Punjabi poetic text, one traditional and one contemporary, so that thematic change over time could be traced. The unit of analysis is the lyrical or poetic content of each text, examined in its original Punjabi form.

4.2. Corpus and Sampling

The traditional corpus comprises Waris Shah's *Heer* (1766), Bulleh Shah's Sufi kafi *Tere Ishq Nachaya*, and the folk tragedy *Mirza Sahiban*. These texts were selected for their cultural centrality, their representation of collective identity and ethical values, and their enduring presence in Punjabi oral and literary tradition. The contemporary corpus comprises Brown Munde (2020), *Excuses* (2020), and *Pasoori* (2022). These songs were selected because they epitomise youth culture, subjective experience, individual identity, and globalisation in the contemporary Punjabi soundscape, and because of their wide circulation across digital platforms. All texts are publicly available, and the lyrical content was analysed in the original Punjabi. Table 1 summarises the corpus.

Table 1: *Composition of the Traditional and Contemporary Corpora*

Text	Author / Performer	Date	Form and Note
<i>Heer</i>	Waris Shah	1766	Verse epic; best known version of the Heer Ranjha legend
<i>Tere Ishq Nachaya</i>	Bulleh Shah	18th c.	Sufi kafi on divine love and surrender of the ego
<i>Mirza Sahiban</i>	Pilu (first recorded)	17th c.	Classical folk tragedy; one of the four great Punjabi romances
<i>Excuses</i>	AP Dhillon, Gurinder Gill, Intense	2020	Diaspora pop; emotional alienation and heartbreak
<i>Brown Munde</i>	AP Dhillon, Gurinder Gill, Shinda Kahlon	2020	Trap-influenced anthem of diaspora pride and ambition
<i>Pasoori</i>	Ali Sethi, Shae Gill	2022	Coke Studio Pakistan, S14; longing and prohibition

Note. Dates for the traditional corpus refer to the best known recorded version; the underlying legends are older and oral in origin.

4.3. Procedure for Data Analysis

Analysis followed the six phase model of Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the lyrics were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with their themes, symbols, and mood. Second, initial codes were generated by marking recurring motifs, metaphors, and expressions of emotion. Third, related codes were grouped into candidate themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined against the texts to ensure they were well grounded. Fifth, each theme was defined and given a conceptual label. Sixth, the themes were integrated into the comparative report presented below.

Coding produced two clusters. In the traditional corpus the salient codes were cultural norm, social responsibility, family honour, collective identity, fate, devotional love, and selfless sacrifice. In the contemporary corpus the salient codes were individualism, emotional autonomy, psychological conflict, urban lifestyle, diasporic identity, and romantic fragility.

5. Findings

Thematic analysis of the six texts yielded three overarching themes that together capture a substantial transformation in Punjabi poetic expression. The findings reveal a clear difference between the two corpora in how love, identity, and emotion are framed.

5.1. Theme 1: Collective Norms and Communal Identity in Traditional Poetry

In the traditional corpus, love and human experience are represented as collective and culturally mediated. Emotion is bound to social norm, and the individual self tends to merge into the community. In the Heer tradition, Heer's repeated invocation of Ranjha culminates in self-transformation, as she declares that in calling out his name she has herself become Ranjha and asks no longer to be called by her own family name. The line stages a tension between familial honour and personal love, in which love is figured as a transformation of the self into a symbol of devotion rather than as private feeling alone. A representative line from the tradition reads:

رانجھا رانجھا کردی نی میں آپے رانجھا ہوئی

(Repeating "Ranjha, Ranjha," I have myself become Ranjha.)

In Bulleh Shah's Tere Ishq Nachaya, love is conceived as a spiritual and communal experience that unites the self with the symbols of Sufi devotion rather than as ordinary romantic suffering or joy. The ecstatic image of dancing under the force of the beloved's love expresses the dissolution of the ego into a larger devotional order. Likewise, in Mirza Sahiban the concept of fate, deeply rooted in Punjabi culture, mediates the protagonists' experience of struggle, so that personal hardship is read through a social and moral lens rather than as purely individual misfortune.

5.2. Theme 2: Individualism and Interior Experience in Modern Songs

In the contemporary corpus, love and identity are depicted as highly subjective and personal, shaped more by internal states than by cultural expectation. In Brown Munde, identity is expressed through lifestyle and self-projection, as the song pairs the image of “brown” youth with international fame and success. Here self-image, personal freedom, and a globalised cultural identity take precedence over collective honour. In Pasoori, emotional conflict is presented as an interior struggle rather than a negotiation with the surrounding community; the lyrics convey pain, longing, and frustration arising from a particular relationship rather than from social order at large. In Excuses, the emphasis falls on emotional alienation, miscommunication, and heartbreak, all framed as personal rather than communal problems. Across these songs the self becomes the centre of meaning, and psychological experience displaces shared moral narrative.

5.3. Theme 3: From Collective Culture to Personal Emotion

Read together, the two corpora reveal a tangible thematic shift. In the traditional texts, love is bound up with obligation, honour, fate, and devotional surrender. In the contemporary texts, love is represented as individual experience, psychological struggle, and a process of identity negotiation. This movement reflects the broader transition of Punjabi poetry from communal storytelling toward the subjective experience of human life, driven by globalisation, migration, and modernisation. Table 2 summarises the contrast across the three themes.

Table 2: *Comparative Thematic Summary of the Two Corpora*

Dimension	Traditional Poetry	Contemporary Songs
Locus of meaning	The community and moral order	The individual self
View of love	Obligation, honour, devotional surrender	Personal emotion, attraction, heartbreak
Source of conflict	Social duty versus desire; fate	Interior psychological struggle
Identity	Collective, rooted in kinship and clan	Individual, diasporic, globalised
Language register	Dense Punjabi idiom and Sufi symbolism	Punjabi blended with English and global pop idiom
Mode of circulation	Oral performance and communal memory	Digital platforms and transnational audiences

Note. The dimensions summarise tendencies across the corpora and are not absolute; emotional intensity remains common to both.

6. Discussion

The findings can be read against the generational shifts shaping Punjabi poetry. Because the traditional corpus places such emphasis on honour, social roles, expectation, and predestination, it views love, identity, and emotion through the prism of communal and moral order. Heer and Mirza Sahiban show how tightly the experience of love is interwoven with cultural and ethical roles, while Bulleh Shah’s kafi channels personal

longing into a devotional framework in which the individual is absorbed into a spiritual whole. In these texts, the self is rarely an autonomous centre of meaning; it is constituted through its relations to family, community, fate, and the divine.

Contemporary Punjabi songs, by contrast, present love as a subjective emotional experience. Feelings such as frustration, heartbreak, self-assertion, and loneliness are given priority over social responsibility, and the self becomes the principal site of meaning. Brown Munde foregrounds self-image, freedom, and a global identity, while Excuses and Pasoori dwell on interior turmoil and the strains of intimate relationships. These emphases are consistent with broader social trends toward individualism produced by urbanisation, migration, digital media, and the international music industry. The result is a poetic world in which the listener is addressed as an individual navigating personal experience rather than as a member of a moral community.

The contrast is therefore one of orientation rather than of emotional depth. Punjabi poetry has moved from social structure toward interior experience, from cultural norm toward individual emotion, and from the group toward the individual. This suggests that the representation of emotion and relationship in Punjabi culture is shifting in step with comparable changes elsewhere. Songs that narrate personal struggle appear to resonate more strongly with present day listeners than texts organised around moral or communal narrative, while the traditional corpus continues to offer a window onto the social ideals of earlier generations. Taken together, the analysis indicates a transformation of the Punjabi poetic genre that tracks changes in Punjabi social life, from collective narrative toward personal interpretation, without implying that either mode is aesthetically superior to the other.

7. Conclusion

A thematic reading of traditional and modern Punjabi texts points to a significant shift in the cultural and linguistic work that poetry performs. Traditional poetry maintained a close link between the Punjabi language and a shared world of values built around honour, love, fate, and devotional symbolism. Texts such as Heer, Tere Ishq Nachaya, and Mirza Sahiban were not only works of art but carriers of social memory, transmitting communal ideals and the language itself across generations. In this sense, the traditional corpus played a central role in sustaining Punjabi cultural continuity.

Contemporary Punjabi songs are oriented differently. Personal emotion, lifestyle, and the construction of a global identity tend to take precedence over the preservation of inherited culture. Songs such as Brown Munde, Excuses, and Pasoori speak primarily to individual experience and transnational aspiration, and their increasing incorporation of English vocabulary and globalised idiom loosens the tight bond between language and culture that characterised the older corpus. This shift is in keeping with broader processes of urbanisation and globalisation, but it also raises questions about linguistic continuity:

as the specifically Punjabi cultural content of popular song thins, so too may the role of the language as a vehicle of cultural transmission.

The study therefore concludes that modern Punjabi lyrics register genuine changes in human experience while, at the same time, contributing indirectly to a weakening of Punjabi cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. This conclusion is offered as an interpretive observation rather than as a value judgement, and it is limited by the small, purposive sample of six texts. Future research might widen the corpus, incorporate audience reception, or examine performance and musical form. If the Punjabi language is to remain a living cultural inheritance rather than a residual marker of style, there may be value in consciously renewing Punjabi cultural themes within contemporary poetry and song.

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