

## The Themes of Insomnia in Pashto Tappa: A Cultural and Literary Representation

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*DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63163/jpehss.v3i4.985>*

### Abstract:

This study explores the motif of insomnia in Pashto tappa as a culturally embedded literary symptom that reflects emotional, social, and existential tensions in Pashtun life. Drawing on a qualitative content analysis of a purposive corpus of tappa collected from oral traditions, contemporary recordings, and written anthologies, the research employs thematic and semiotic approaches to decode how insomnia is represented, metaphorized, and experienced in these couplets. The analysis reveals that insomnia functions on multiple symbolic registers: as an expression of unfulfilled love and longing, as a manifestation of spiritual or metaphysical restlessness, and as an index of collective anxiety about social dislocation, loss, and identity. In many tappa(s), the inability to sleep is not merely a physiological complaint but a culturally sanctioned language for voicing personal suffering and communal memory. The study situates these representations within broader Pashtun cultural narratives, showing how literary form and affective content coalesce to make insomnia both a personal symptom and a shared cultural discourse. The findings contribute to literary anthropology and affect studies by demonstrating that what appears as a private disturbance in tappa is simultaneously a public cultural signifier, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of emotion, embodiment, and meaning making in Pashto folk literature.

### Introduction

Pashto tappa, a short two-line folk couplet, is one of the most popular and enduring forms of Pashto oral poetry. Known for its brevity, musical rhythm, and emotional depth, the tappa has served for centuries as a vehicle for the Pashtun people to articulate personal emotions, social commentary, and collective memory. Despite its concise form—comprising a single line of nine syllables followed by a second of thirteen—this folk genre conveys complex meanings through metaphor, symbolism, and cultural codes (W.khan, 2025).

Among the many recurring images and motifs found in tappa, the symptom of **insomnia** (bekhwabi) stands out as particularly evocative. While insomnia is, on the surface, a universal human condition that results from physical, psychological, or emotional disturbance, in Pashto tappa it often operates as a layered cultural and literary sign. It may refer to the distress of unfulfilled love, the restless yearning for an absent beloved, spiritual and metaphysical longing, or the anxiety caused by social upheaval and uncertainty (Jensen, 1993).

In Pashtun society—traditionally conservative and honor-bound—direct expressions of romantic or personal suffering, especially by women, are often restricted. The tappa, however, offers a socially acceptable outlet for such emotions. Through the metaphor of insomnia, poets and singers can express profound feelings indirectly, avoiding explicit statements while still communicating the intensity of the experience. Thus, insomnia in tappa is not merely a physiological complaint but a symbolic and culturally embedded language for articulating human vulnerability, resilience, and emotional truth.

Although tappa has been studied in the contexts of folklore, linguistics, and cultural anthropology, the specific motif of insomnia has not received focused scholarly attention. Previous studies have often catalogued tappa according to broad themes—such as love, patriotism, humor, or lament—without a detailed semiotic or cultural-literary analysis of individual symbols and symptoms.

The gap in literature is particularly striking given that insomnia recurs frequently in tappa and resonates deeply within Pashtun cultural life. In a society where emotional restraint is valued, the portrayal of insomnia provides a coded space for expressing intimate sentiments. By ignoring this motif, existing research overlooks an important cultural mechanism through which Pashtuns process and communicate personal and collective emotions.

This study addresses that gap by systematically examining how insomnia is represented in Pashto tappa and how it functions as both a literary image and a cultural symptom.

### Research Objectives

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To analyze the representation of insomnia in Pashto tappa as a recurring cultural and literary motif.
2. To explore the emotional, symbolic, and social meanings attached to insomnia within the Pashtun cultural framework.
3. To examine how the presentation of insomnia in tappa reflects broader themes such as love, longing, loss, spiritual unrest, and social displacement in tappa.

### Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How is insomnia thematically and symbolically depicted in Pashto tappa?
2. What emotional and cultural connotations are associated with insomnia in the Pashtun context?
3. In what ways does the motif of insomnia serve as a bridge between personal experience and collective cultural identity?

### Literature Review

Insomnia (*bekhabi*) is a universal human experience, but its meaning extends beyond biology when viewed through the lens of literature and culture. Across civilizations, poets and storytellers have reimagined insomnia as a symbolic state—one that reflects emotional unrest, moral disturbance, longing, grief, or spiritual yearning. In Pashto tappa, this motif appears with notable frequency and cultural specificity (Sealy, 2022).

Pashto tappa is widely regarded as one of the oldest forms of Pashto folk poetry, with roots extending deep into pre-modern oral tradition (Khan, 2017). Scholars such as Tair (1990) and Edwards (2005) have noted that tappa likely predate formal written Pashto literature, functioning as carriers of cultural memory in non-literate societies. Its endurance lies partly in its brevity—two lines, nine syllables in the first and thirteen in the second—which allows for easy memorization and oral transmission (Khan, 2017).

Tappa are primarily sung or recited, often in communal settings, festivals, or domestic work environments. Their content reflects the lived realities, joys, sorrows, and moral codes of the Pashtun people. Within this tradition, insomnia is not an accidental image; it is a recurring motif deeply tied to the Pashtun emotional vocabulary. Although tappa themes are diverse, love, separation, satire, patriotism, lament, the motif of insomnia appears most often in those expressing longing, either romantic or familial. For women, insomnia may reflect yearning for an absent

beloved, worry for a son or brother, or grief over loss. For men, it may signify separation from homeland, loved ones, or even the restless planning of revenge or resistance.

The majority of *tappa* have historically been composed and transmitted by women (Grima, 1992). In a cultural context where direct declarations of romantic love or vulnerability may be frowned upon, insomnia becomes a socially acceptable proxy for such feelings. This makes it a gendered literary strategy, enabling the expression of intimacy without explicit transgression.

This study is guided by the **interpretivist paradigm**, which posits that reality is socially constructed and that understanding cultural artifacts requires immersion in the context of their production. Unlike positivist approaches that seek objective measurement, interpretivism values depth over breadth and emphasizes the meaning-making processes of human societies (A.Schwandt, 1994).

Insomnia also intersects with Pashtunwali, the Pashtun code of ethics, where values such as loyalty (*wafa*), hospitality (*melmastia*), and honor (*nang*) dominate. A sleepless night may be a metaphorical testimony to these values, enduring wakefulness as a form of emotional watchfulness or devotion.

In the context of this research, *tappa* are not viewed as isolated texts but as living cultural expressions. The insomnia motif is understood as a symptom that gains significance only when interpreted against the backdrop of Pashtun values, oral performance practices, and the social positioning of the poet (often anonymous, often female).

The present study analyzes a selected corpus of Pashto *tappay* that explicitly or implicitly depicts the symptom of insomnia (*bekhabi*). The focus is on identifying how insomnia is used as a cultural and literary motif, and how it functions as a symptom that conveys deep emotional states within the Pashtun oral tradition.

The analysis is organized thematically in four major categories:

1. Insomnia as an expression of **romantic longing**.
2. Insomnia as a symptom of **grief and loss**.
3. Insomnia as a sign of **patriotism and exilic longing**.
4. Insomnia as a symbol of **honor and vigilance**.

Within each theme, individual *tappay* are presented in their original Pashto, followed by English translation and in-depth analysis that integrates cultural interpretation and literary analysis.

Insomnia as an Expression of Romantic Longing

The most frequent thematic context in which insomnia appears in *tappa* is in the expression of romantic yearning. In such cases, insomnia functions as a culturally permissible way to articulate desire and emotional vulnerability, especially for women in a conservative society. Direct declarations of love might be considered socially inappropriate, but the mention of insomnia provides an indirect yet powerful confession.

Example 1

Shpa de aw azal de bekhabi da

Zra me sta pa yado ki sara rawra

(The night is an eternity of insomnia;

My heart burns in your memory.)

The image of “eternity” (*azal*) amplifies the temporal experience of night into something immeasurable, capturing the subjective distortion of time caused by emotional unrest. The burning heart (*zra... sara rawra*) metaphor not only conveys pain but also evokes the physical symptoms of longing—restlessness, heat, and insomnia.

From a cultural perspective, this *tappa* allows the speaker to admit vulnerability without breaching the Pashtun cultural value of modesty. The emotion is framed within a universal human condition—insomnia—that listeners can interpret in multiple ways, allowing for plausible deniability in public contexts. Literary devices at play include hyperbole (night as eternity),

metaphor (burning heart), and temporal extension (stretching night into infinity), all serving to intensify the motif of insomnia.

Pa shpa me stargo na weena raata  
Sta pa yado ke me raghlay bekhabi da  
(At night my eyes find no rest;  
Insomnia has come to me in your memory.)

This tappa personifies insomnia as a “visitor” (raghlay), which draws on the Pashtun code of hospitality (melmastia). Even an unwanted guest must be treated with honor; by framing insomnia as such, the poet transforms it from a mere physical symptom into a moral obligation. The audience understands that love itself, though sometimes unwelcome due to its pain, must be “hosted” once it arrives.

Here, the cultural and literary merge: the hospitality metaphor is distinctly Pashtun, but the idea of insomnia as a metaphor for longing is found across many poetic traditions. This dual layer makes the tappa culturally specific yet universally relatable.

Insomnia as a Symptom of Grief and Loss

While insomnia in love is prominent, it also appears in tappa that address bereavement and separation through death or other permanent loss. In these contexts, insomnia is a visible symptom of mourning—a physical manifestation of emotional absence.

### Example 3

Pa shpa me rawan weena da stargo  
Bekhabi sta da judaai mara shwa  
(At night my eyes flow with tears;  
Insomnia was slain by your separation.)

The tappa begins with a vivid image of continuous tears (rawan weena), linking insomnia with the physical act of crying through the night. Interestingly, the second line reverses the expected image by claiming insomnia has been “slain” (mara shwa) by separation. This paradoxical expression suggests that grief is so overwhelming it eclipses even the state of insomnia—transforming insomnia from a symptom into something consumed by greater sorrow.

From a cultural viewpoint, mourning in Pashtun society is communal yet deeply personal. Insomnia here serves as a bridge between private emotional suffering and the public acknowledgment of loss. The hyperbole reinforces the magnitude of grief, while the paradox offers a unique literary twist on the motif.

Insomnia as Patriotic or Exilic Longing

Insomnia in tappa can also transcend personal relationships to express longing for one’s homeland or community, particularly in contexts of migration, displacement, or exile. This is consistent with the Pashtun ethos that equates homeland (watan) with identity and honor.

Da watan pa yado bekhabi yam  
Stargo pa waray stargo meena prewri  
(In memory of my homeland I am sleepless;  
My eyes guard their tears through the night.)

### Analysis:

Here, insomnia is explicitly tied to the memory of homeland, presenting wakefulness as an act of loyalty and emotional guardianship. The metaphor of eyes “guarding” tears suggests both restraint and vigilance—a refusal to allow tears to fall until the right moment. This restraint aligns with Pashtun ideals of emotional self-control, even in moments of deep distress.

The patriotic context redefines insomnia as a noble symptom, linked not to personal weakness but to communal solidarity. This interpretation resonates with themes in other oral traditions where exile produces insomnia as a sign of unbroken attachment to home.

#### Insomnia as a Symbol of Honor and Vigilance

In some tappa, insomnia functions not as a symptom of emotional vulnerability but as an emblem of moral strength. Here it aligns with Pashtunwali's emphasis on nang (honor) and ghairat (dignity).

Zma stargo meena wrakra rawra

Bekhabi de pa zra ke tol shpa taana

(My eyes have lost their love for sleep;

Insomnia stands guard over my heart all night.)

#### Analysis:

This watchman (taana) metaphor transforms insomnia from a passive condition into an active, protective force. In Pashtun culture, the role of the night guard is one of high trust and responsibility. By casting insomnia in this role, the tappa elevates it to a moral duty—watching over the heart's treasures (which may be love, honor, or memory).

This reading emphasizes how insomnia in tappa is not always negative; it can signify readiness, responsibility, and steadfastness—qualities highly valued in Pashtun society.

The findings confirm that insomnia in tappa operates both as a personal confession and a public cultural signifier. The examples show how insomnia functions similarly to its portrayal in Persian and Urdu poetry, yet the Pashto context infuses it with specific meanings drawn from Pashtun cultural codes. This dual quality, universal yet culturally distinct, gives the motif its richness.

The analysis reveals that insomnia in Pashto tappa is a multidimensional motif, serving as a symptom of emotional unrest while also embodying cultural values (Hossain, 2020). It can express romantic longing, grief, patriotic devotion, or moral vigilance, depending on context. Literary devices and cultural symbolism work together to ensure that insomnia resonates deeply with Pashtun audiences, reinforcing its place as a recurring and meaningful motif in the oral tradition. The next chapter will synthesize these findings and explore their implications for the study of folk literature and cultural expression.

#### Conclusion:

By tracing the motif through multiple thematic contexts, romantic longing, grief, patriotic attachment, and honor vigilance, the research has shown that insomnia is not a marginal or incidental image in tappa but a central device that encapsulates a range of emotional and cultural meanings. This chapter will summarize the study, highlight its contributions, provide practical and academic recommendations, suggest future research directions, and close with a reflective synthesis of the findings.

Pashto tappa, is a form of oral poetry deeply embedded in Pashtun culture, notable for its brevity, rhythmic structure, and thematic richness. Insomnia emerged as a recurring motif across diverse thematic domains, carrying meanings that extend far beyond the physical act of wakefulness. In Pashtun society, insomnia is widely understood as a sign of emotional disturbance—whether from love, grief, anxiety, or honor-related vigilance. This shared understanding enables poets to communicate intense emotions without direct, potentially culturally inappropriate, confessions. Women's tappa often use insomnia to veil romantic longing or personal sorrow, allowing them to navigate restrictive social norms while still expressing emotional truth. Male-voiced tappa, in contrast, may frame insomnia as a symbol of loyalty to homeland, watchfulness over honor, or readiness for action. Key values such as melmastia

(hospitality), wafa (loyalty), and nang (honor) influence the imagery and metaphors surrounding insomnia, e.g., depicting it as an uninvited guest or a night watchman.

Insomnia in Pashto tappa operates as a **bridge** between private emotion and public cultural code. On one hand, it reflects deeply personal experiences—love unfulfilled, grief endured, homeland missed. On the other, it is shaped by collective values that dictate how such experiences can be expressed in public discourse.

This dual role mirrors findings in comparative literature: while Persian, Urdu, and Arabic poetry also use insomnia as a metaphor for emotional unrest, the Pashto tappa adapts it to the specific ethical and performative contexts of Pashtun society. Here, insomnia can be valorized as moral vigilance, an honorable state rather than merely a symptom of distress. The performance context adds another layer of meaning. Sung at weddings, festivals, or domestic gatherings, the tappa allows insomnia to be shared communally, transforming an individual's suffering into a collective emotional experience.

This research has demonstrated that insomnia in Pashto tappa is far more than an expression of physical wakefulness. It is a **multi-layered cultural signifier**, capable of carrying personal grief, romantic passion, patriotic loyalty, and moral vigilance within the same symbolic frame. It allows the poet to speak indirectly yet powerfully, drawing on a shared vocabulary of cultural symbols to communicate what might otherwise remain unspoken.

By focusing on insomnia as a single motif, the study has illuminated broader truths about Pashto tappa: their ability to condense vast emotional worlds into a brief form, their deep integration with Pashtun cultural codes, and their resonance with global poetic traditions. The endurance of insomnia in this oral tradition speaks to its adaptability and its deep roots in the Pashtun emotional imagination.

As modernization and globalization reshape cultural landscapes, the preservation and study of tappa, particularly those rich in symbolic motifs like insomnia, remain vital. They are not only artistic expressions but also living archives of communal memory, values, and emotional life. This work is one step toward ensuring that the sleepless nights of Pashtun poetry continue to speak across time and place, carrying forward the voices, emotions, and heritage of the people who compose and cherish them.

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