

RESEARCH ARTICLE



COMMUNITIES AT THE MARGINS: THE BARREN LAND IN BALOCHI POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Shortly this paper attempts to speak about the Baloch tribe, a community that has been for ages somehow at the margins and away from education and academic progress. This tribe, previously with Khans and Sardars ruling over them, holds a rich and long tradition of its own. Their love for their homeland, yet their hospitality, is phenomenal and so is their nomadic life. Their land is mountainous and mostly desert area. This barren land in the Baloch context is, however, associated with different themes such as patriotism, nationalism, purity, freedom, infiniteness, strength, existence and spirituality and so on. Such ideas have been depicted in Balochi oral songs, stories, folklore and literature and recently in their written works. The choice of the desert looks like a real aesthetic option for the Baloch poets, narrators and writers, which gives them the chance to offer a vast symbolic and creative freedom in the power of imagination. Though other landscapes have their own spell and beauty, the barren land and the vast desert hone the talents to a finer edge.

Key Words: Motherland, Desert and Mountains, Love, Patriotism, Balochi Oral Tradition, Poetry and Music

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The Baloch homeland which is known as Balochistan is an arid, desert and mountainous region divided up with pieces going to three countries: south-western Pakistan, south-eastern Iran, and south-western Afghanistan. The land, now located on the border of the three countries, has often been inhabited with groups of nomadic and semi nomadic pastoralists. The historical name attributed to the southern part of Balochistan is known as Makran.

Though recently notable attempts have been observed, the native Baloch, living in the desert areas and on the mountains with a nomadic life, have no actual and formal written language. During

history they were under the attack of outsiders and different ruling governments and hence could not establish a formal language. Their tales and folklore stories are mostly oral, passed by minstrels from tongue to tongue. However, accustomed with the harshness of the desert and firmness of mountains, Baloch nation bears great heroes and a rich literature, music and *oral tradition*¹ of their own. The mountains and sands of Baloch desert are saturated with prolific poetry, songs, and tales and with good reason.

From ancient time traditional poetry has been an integral part of the Baloch and their intelligence was

also judged by their command of the art of poetry. Most of the poems have been transmitted from generation to generation by a class of professional minstrels and common Baloches with no help of the written word (Badalkhan 254). The dry land, mountains and the related sceneries were often portrayed in a way to show the simple and nomadic life of this tribe and their religious and combative spirit.

In the modern, highly-censored Baloch world, however, the Baloch may use poetry as a way to highlight indirectly their despair with their governments and in fact with any form of corrupt authority, whether internal or external. In such poetry, images of the desert often depict the destructions and wastelands generated by these authorities: war, slavery, lack of freedom, human alienation, and social corruption. In other words, the desert represents the loss of a traditional way of life on a personal level and the loss of a community on the social level.

Patriotism among the Baloch is observed much more than any other tribe and history has attested it well. Their fabulous wars against enemies and invaders are fantastic and worth narrating. Jan Muhammad Dashti comments

The love of a Baloch for his homeland has been phenomenal. "Although barren, the fatherland is worth anything", goes the saying, and folk traditions refer to the presence of the finest and costliest things in places once inhabited by the Baloch. According to tradition, Bebagr, a folk hero of the 16th century, while bringing the daughter of one of the Afghan nobles from Kandahar very proudly describes the land of the Baloch to his Afghan sweetheart. "Let us go to the land that is of the Baloch, the town of Sibi is pleasing to our heart", he says. This reflects a deep sense of pride and lasting regard not only for the country but for everything attached to it.ⁱⁱ

Similarly in the well-known story of "Hani and Shey Mureed"ⁱⁱⁱ, Mureed leaves his homeland for thirty years but its pull, besides other things such as love for Hani, drives him back after his very regret and self-purification.

Javed Haider Syed writes in *The Baloch Resistance Literature Against the British Raj*

Even a cursory glance at the history of Balochi literature, manifests the pride and dignity that Baloch poets and epic writers have shown for their heroes. This literature also demonstrates anger and resentment against the intruders and ridicule against traitors. Notwithstanding historical accuracy, the Baloch self-perception as the guardian of noble values is perpetuated in their literature. (75)

Naturally, the barren deserts of the Baloch homeland are areas of freedom and happiness. The simple life of nomads inspires independence and a unique cultural tradition. By the appearance of intruders and Sardars, however, sadness, constraints and servitude overcomes the vast vistas. The beautiful desert will be changed to an uncomfortable wasteland. Haider remarks

In [a] poem, *Balot-a-Sair*, [Mir Gul Khan] Naseer saw it as his duty to make the Baloch aware of their slavery: "Your plain and open fields are subjugated; The barren plains and deserts are enslaved; Your hearts and your souls are in chains. You are worse than slaves."^{iv} However, Gul Khan Naseer was hopeful that the brave and heroic Baloch will be able to shake off the yoke of slavery of the foreign masters and that of their oppressive Sardars. In *Dil Mazan Kan*, again, he paints an optimistic picture of future when he says: "The oppressive government of the infidels will come to an end, suffering and trouble and affliction will come to an end. Light will come and darkness will come to an end."^v (89 & 90)

Gul Kan Naseer (1914-1983) is one of the salient modern Baloch poets and is regarded widely as the Malek o- sho'ara Balochistan. His poetry filled with revolutionary and anti-imperialist themes and it reflects his progressive nature and socialist ideals. He is against class differences and his poems exhibit his dislike attitudes of the rich towards the poor. A famous work in his collections is *Gul Baang* (1951) which was his first collection of Balochi Poetry.

In one of his poems called *Jirga*, Gul Khan Naseer criticizes strongly corrupt systems. The institution of 'Jirga' was strengthened by the British and was used in collaboration with the Sardars to punish the freedom fighters and those who refused to tow the British line. Such a system prevents the Baloch tribes, their mountains and deserts to flourish, blossom and turn green. (Haider, 90 & 91):

The irony of fate with the Baloch,
Because of *Jirga*, eliminate the Baloch,
Strengthen *Jirga*, "Allah-o-Akhar",
Has no place in Sardari system,
Disbelief and paganism shows its face in
Jirga,
Patriotism and love for land becomes a
crime,
Heads of these lovers roll through the
sword of *Jirga*.
If we stop, the hammer of Sardar crushes
us.
Escape one cannot,
We are chained by *Jirga*,
Those who want the flowers to blossom in
our desert,
Their hearts are pierced by the arrows of
Jirga,
It is nothing but the enemy of laws,
principles and *Shari'ah* for us,
Straight from the Hell has come the penal
code,
That is *Jirga*.
Naseer! worry not; it is bound to be
eliminated,
Absurd, absurd, those who say that,
God has decreed *Jirga*.^{vi}
(see Haider Syed, Javed. " Baloch Resistance
Literature
Against the British Raj".

Another great Baloch poet is Sayyid Hāshimi. According to Dashti, one may find more patriotic and nationalistic material in Sayyid Hāshimi's multi-volume poetry. The following pieces are chosen from his *Sistageñ dastunk*. Sayyid is deeply shocked to see the Baloch losing their national sovereignty: as their hills and fields surrounded and their camels snatched. One day, however, the deserts will turn green. The pure blood of Baloch fighters will finally quench their very interior and exterior deserts.

My heart bleeds

to wet the barren land of my miserable
people
In the hope that one day these lands will
turn green
and there will grow red flowers
I will gather the seeds of those flowers
because these are from my blood.^{vii}

I am like those brave youths
Who have been ambushed by the enemy.
Injured by sword, they are lying hopeless
in a vast desert without water.
Hungry wolves are waiting to eat their flesh
after they breathe their last breath.
But I tell them [(the enemy)] not to be off
guard:
Revered mothers will bear
such invincible sons again.^{viii}

The one, whose hands are red
with my blood, says he is pure;
The other, like a jackal who has stolen my
pouch,
boasts of being a tiger;
The third who has snatched a portion of my
shawl,
and has an eye on my shirt,
says: "I am your brother";
The fourth one is so courteous
that I am frightened.^{ix}

We [,the Baloch,] do not want your
buildings
do not set our huts on fire;
We do not require your forts,
do not surround our hills;
We do not need your stores,
do not ravage our fields;
We do not demand your ships,
do not destroy our boats;
We do not desire your crafts
do not snatch our camels;
We do not aspire to your armours,
do not break our arms;
Do not oppose us lest you may be
oppressed by a superior spirit.^x

In *Popular Poetry of the Baloches* we can observe some of the fine and elegant poems and stories, lullabies, epic ballads, religious and love poems and etc. of the Baloch with different themes, while the nature illustration is vividly presented. In

this book M. Longworth Dames writes that the Baloch identity is not adapted to an urban mind but commixed with nomadic life:

In judging the Balochi love-verse, however, we find that the bazaar atmosphere is to some extent tempered by a breeze from the desert: the Baloch is not a born towns-man, but only a chance visitor, and although his love may be set on a lady of the bazaars, he often draws his images from nature. The clouds, the rain, . . . show that the author is not a town-bred man.
(Dames xxvii)

Bālāch in reply to Bivaragh sings as below:

. . . Our drink is from the flowing springs,
Our cup the leaf of the dwarf palm (peesh),
Our bed the thorny brush, The ground we
make our pillow. (Dames 45)

In another part of the book, in a poem attributed to Mir Chākūr and his adversary Gwaharām, we observe the lines

Gwaharām sings of the day on which Mir-Hān was slain.

Let us meet on the bare desert foot-hills,
and have
our interview on the barren plain, the
grazing ground of
wild asses. Let the Rinds and Dombkis come
together,
let the Bhanjars and Jatois repeat their
gibes! The
Rinds came with booted feet, with their
slaves they
alighted. From every hamlet they took their
blood, and
the far-famed Malik Mir- Hān was slain !
(Dames 20)

Since the desert and mountains have often been the place where wars happen in the Baloch world, an association of such places with war, pride, bravery and boldness seems natural. Referring to Bijrani Marri, Javed Haider, remarks

Balochistan has a long tradition of maintaining its identity, dignity and pride. The Baloch always take pride in two things: being Baloch in the true sense of the word and showing bravery against the enemy.^{xi} Even the lullabies of Balochistan convey these feelings . . . [A] lullaby that comes from the heart of a mother, [for example,] says that “when there is a battle in the deserts, my son will be standing under shade of the swords.”^{xii} (82)

Likewise Bālāch’s song as a reply to Bivaragh highlights the Baloches’ very friendship and familiarity with the mountains and the barren land. This has achieved them great victories, like sand storm and flood, over intruders and among themselves in wars.

The mountains are the Baloches' forts,
the peaks are better than an army ;
the lofty heights are our comrades,
the pathless gorges our friends. . . . (Dames 45)

Mir Chākūr, son of Shaihak, the King of the Rinds, sings in a reply to Gwaharām:

We are the Rinds of the swift mares ;
Now we will be below you and now above ;
We will come from both sides with our
attacks,
And demand a share of all you have. . . .
(Dames 23)

Another ballad pictures a fight between Mazāris and Gurchānis and their war tactics:

Like a black-wind dust-storm springing from the
hard-baked soil, so the Tigers poured like a
flood
through the pleasant mouth of the pass. . . .
(Dames 70)

Since antiquity and among different cultures the desert has often been connected with mysticism, spirituality, renunciation of worldly desires, purification and seeking the self and God. The Baloch with the seal of the desert already in their blood are humble and contented people following the path of God ascetically and simply. We see in Balochi story "Hani and Shey Mureed" that, after his very mistake and loss of his beloved, Shey Mureed, a real desert-bred hero and a poet, takes an oath and decides to leave his place for the unknown lands. He followed a group of mendicants going to perform their pilgrimage at the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in Arabia. As tradition has it, he remained in Arabia for 30 years, a long time during which he truly became a mendicant and lived the life of an ascetic. While departing his hometown, he left all his staff and belongings in a mystical manner:

And, with hands joined and head bent, I swear that on account of that blow from Mubāarak's shoe I will cut off my hair, and will at once depart and go to a far land. I will lay down my noble weapons, put off my rustling clothes from my body, and I give them to Mir Mando, Hāni's royal father. Fair Hāni will keep them white from the moisture of storms and clouds. My carpet I give to 'Ali, my cross-bow to Isā. And I leave my horses tied up, tethered inside my hut, I leave them to Mir Chākur. Myself I will go with a cubit of cloth for a waist cloth. I am a mendicant and beggar, and go with those men, the naked brotherhood; I will go as a pilgrim to salute the blessed shrine of the prophet.

(Dames 56)

Or in another account:

I will leave my royal bow on earth / fasten my horses on their place / I will leave all the staff of mine in the tent, for Mir Chakar / I take a vow to live as a Dervish / Actually I will leave for Mecca and visiting Kaaba as a pilgrim / I will accompany naked ones whose abdomens are empty / their food pieces of bread and crumbs / They earned these crumbs via beggary / They do sit on teasel and thorn bush / do sleep on bare

land / I am in their group going pilgrimage to Mecca / I touched all the holy things / stayed there for thirty years and one month / with an exceeding love, yet sinful hands^{xiii}. (Yadegari 268-9 ; 278-9)

[I] shook the ropes at Mecca
With my sinful hands and fingers,
I spent 30 years there, and
I composed 55 poems,
My intention is to make them 60 (i.e.,
before leaving
Mecca). (Badalkhan 263)

It is said that after Mir Chakar's trick and his own mistake Mureed was a wanderer of the desert like an insane. He was roaming the wilderness and mountains saying his love and mystical poems. Solitary played its spell on his flesh and spirit. After spending 30 years on exile, Dames writes, he returned to Sibi in the middle of an archery contest organized by the Rind nobles, in shabby clothes with his hair hanging down to his waist (56 & 57).

Yadegari writes that near the end of the story and after Murid's recognition, Mir Chakar had realised his mistake and has now freed her so that they (i.e. Sheh Murid & Hani) could be together. After his recognition Mureed speaks to Hani and told her that he had now reached a different level and cannot step down from that level to take her. The mysticism, exile and solitariness in the mysterious deserts put their very spell on him. He addressed Hani as a go-between, in fact, by which he had reached closer to Allah (273 & 283):

I cauterized all twelve joints of my body roasted / for being away from beloved and heart rending sufferings / I roasted them one by one with red hot iron and rub off my virility (manhood) / I am not a proper husband for you now.^{xiv}

There are different narratives about end of the story. Some accounts state that the lovers both died in the desert and became saints and there are claims that after hundreds of years some people saw them in mountains and deserts guiding the wanderers and thirsty people.^{xv} Another account depicts Mureed took leave of her. On the following

day he visited his father's camel herd, chose a white she-camel, mounted her, and disappeared from mortal eyes (departure to the unknown world). Tradition says he has become the immortal saint of the Baloch, and the common belief among the Baloch is that:

ta jahan ast, Sheh Murid mast ---- Until the living world, Sheh Murid remains immortal

The narrative of another story, "Daastaan-e-Dostain o Sheereen" (1964), is considered to be one of the best books of Mir Gul Khan Nasir. In this book he has penned the classical Balochi love Story of Dostain and Sheereen. Bausani in *Baluchi Language and Literature* comments on this love story as follow

The cycle of Dosten and Shiren is particularly noteworthy among the poetic *dāstān* about love and romance. Dosten, a soldier of Mir Shakar, chief of the Rind, is delivered as a hostage to the Turks. His cousin and fiancée, Shiren, waits for him faithfully for many years until she is obliged to marry against her will. But just as they are about to celebrate the wedding, Dosten released from prison, returns, having ridden his steed madly through the mountain gorges. (50)

Bausani then adds how Dosten tells the chief who held him prisoner that his mare could no longer live in the plains and longed for the highlands (disdain for the hot plains of Sind and love for the mountains is a common theme of Baluchi poetry) :

"Zanghi is my chief; Gwaharam is my leader and friend, owner of marvelous mares. I swear by your beard, by the new- sprouted hair of your face, my mare, pursuer of wild asses, is sad. She does not want to drink the water of the Indus, nor eat the reeds and grass of Karjal of the Sind. She longs for the herds of wild asses of the highlands and misses the sweet pastures, the wild asses of the Pass of Phitokh and wells filled with fresh water. The flies and mosquitos of the desert irritate her. The reptiles do not let her sleep. The Malwari barley is too coarse for her." (50)

Last but not least we should mention another poem which highlights many of the main themes mentioned earlier. Baloč Páhwál o Šáer (Baloch Peasant and The Poet) is another beautiful poem by Nasir on the love of the barren land and nature. He projects his dislike for modernity and westernization through the immediacy of this poem. The poem is in two parts namely the peasant and the poet. The first part is about the proud Bloch people in their homeland living freely and as kings while the second part rebukes those Baloch who lost their dignity to the West (*Farang*):

The Baloch Peasant Says:

These plains, these fields are mine
These prairies and pastures are mine
These Basils and Spikenards are mine
These mountains and deserts are mine
These meadows and wastelands are mine
I am the King of this land

My camel is strong
The Mahpal on its back is a bed of flowers
I load it, ready it then I set off
I go anywhere, I go everywhere
Spending a night here and a day there
I am the King of this land

I stop wherever I want to stop
Wherever beauty or greenery I see
I sit and am embraced by thoughts
Enjoying nature's picturesque scenery
This moment I forget all of my worries
I am the King of this land

Meadows and fragrant, musk-scented lands
Greenery, clouds and the beauty of spring
Rain, (lightning) and the sound of thunder
Sightseeing, picnics and game to be hunted
Oil and milk and dates
(All of these are found here)
I am the King of this land

My dreams and wishes are realized here
My enemy is weak whenever he's here
My foes can never reach this place
No one can stop or question me here
Everyone here knows who I am
I am the King of this land
I have got knives and shining swords

I have got guns and elegant daggers
I always clash with evil
And attack like a lion
No one survives a fight with me
I am the King of this land

I am my own chief and ruler
I am my own Khan and king
My faithful sword is my aid
My trusted gun a wise advisor
Long live O Nasir!
I am the King of this land

The Poet Says:

You! You are nothing but a coward
A naked and hungry beggar
Lacking even an ounce of dignity
I am telling you the truth
As far from a King as can be
You are worse than a slave

Your plains, your fields are occupied
Your prairies and pastures are occupied
Your Basils and Spikenards are not yours
Your mountains and deserts are occupied
Your heart and soul are chained
You are worse than a slave

You go everywhere, anywhere you can
Just like a beggar, a tramp
You are wretched, you're hungry and nude
This was done to you by the Farang
May the serf be damned!
You are worse than a slave

Your meadows and musk-scented lands
Call out for you, just listen
"O brave lion!" Just as you called yourself
Still you are not ashamed
For pulling these thieves' carriages
You are worse than a slave

Your knives and shining swords
Have rusted in their sheaths
Your back has been broken, eyes are blind
You're nothing but a humble servant
Do not be fooled by your colour
You are worse than a slave

Coward and weak and timid
Ignorant, illiterate and blind
Frail and fragile, alone
Scrawny, wounded and bankrupt

You are weaker than weak
You are worse than a slave

Alas! O Prisoner of the Farang!
Famished and naked beggar
Sacrificial lamb for your sardar and chief
A means of income for the Mullah and Pir
Who says you are Nasir?
You are worse than a slave^{xvi}

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ⁱ For more information refer to Sabir Badalkhan, "Balochi Oral Tradition". *Oral Tradition* 18.2 (2003): 229-235. Print.

ⁱⁱ See *Patriotism: A Baloch Cultural Tradition as Depicted in Modern Balochi Poetry* by Jan Muhammad Dashti, Chairman of the Balochi Academy, Quetta, Pakistan. You can find also the same essay in: (Jahani, Carina. *Language in Society: 8 Sociolinguistic Essays on Balochi*. Uppsala Univ., 2000. p 107. Print.)

ⁱⁱⁱ It is a famous tragic love story and a beloved epic ballad of Balochi folklore. Many songs have been composed on this heart touching story. The story dates back to the 15th century, which is considered to be the heroic age of Balochistan and the classical period of Balochi literature. It also embodies philosophical ideas of pure love, self, God, evil, existence and predestination. The story resembles 'Romeo and Juliet' in the West, and 'Laila and Majnun' as well as 'Shirin and Farhad' in the East.

^{iv} See Paul Titus, ed., *Marginality and Modernity, Ethnicity anti-Change in Post-Colonial Balochistan* (Karachi: 1996), pp. 118-19.

^v *Ibid.*, p.119.

^{vi} Mir Gul Khan Naseer, *Balochi Dunya*, November-December, 1984, p.43.

^{vii} Sayyid Zahūr Shāh Hāshimī, *Sistageñ dastunk*, p. 28

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 63

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 64

^x *Ibid.*, p. 66

^{xi} See Mir Khuda Bakhsh Bijrani Marri, *The Baluchis Through Centuries, History Versus Legend* (Quetta: 1964), Vol. II, p.7.

^{xii} See Marri, *The Balochis, op.cit.*, p.7.

^{xiii} See "The Baloch Epics" by Yadegari. The book is originally written by Yadegari in Persian along with poems in Balochi. Translation of the title of the book and that of these poems from Balochi and Persian to English are my own.

^{xiv} For the same accounts on Mureed's vagabondage manner and entanglement you can refer to pages 65-69 in *Balochi Love Poems* written by Jahandideh in Persian:(Jahandideh, Abdolghafour. *Balochi Love Poems*. Tehran: Moeen, 2011.Print.

^{xv} See Jahandideh, *Balochi Love Poems, op.cit.*, p.70.

^{xvi} See "Baloch Peasant and The Poet." *People's Poet of Balochistan Gul Khan Nasir - Official Website*. Web. 1 Jan 2014.

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<https://sites.google.com/site/gulkhannasir/poems/balochi/baloch-shepherd-and-the-poet> >.

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