

Pashto Proverb Collections: A Critical Chronology

Dr Noor Sanauddin *

ABSTRACT

This article presents a critical review of Pashto proverb scholarship, especially proverbs compilations. It reviews the work of well-known foreign and local scholars on Pashto proverbs and argues that while the large number of Pashto proverb collections is encouraging, most of them lack academic rigor. The article shows that most of the Pashto proverbs collectors have simply listed proverbs without providing contextual explanations; most of the authors have failed to provide enough methodological details of how proverbs were collected; and, while collection of proverbs (Paremiography) is a well-established field, the analytical study of Pashto proverbs (paremiology) need significant attention from folklorists. Along with others, the article particularly evaluates the two-volume “Ruhimataloona” of Mohammad Nawaz Tair (1975-81) and points out a number of shortcomings of the same. The article also provides a few proposals for improving Pashto proverb collections and points out new lines of research for those having academic interest in Pashto proverbs.

Keywords: Proverbs, Pashto, *Ruhimataloona*, Collections, Paremiology, Folklorists.

Introduction

Proverbs occupy a special place in oral literature of Pashtun society and are the most widely used of all folklore genres (Tair, 1975; Akhtar,

* PhD from the University of Glasgow, UK and has worked intensively on Pashto proverbs. He is working as Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Peshawar. He can be reached at noor.sanauddin@upesh.edu.pk

1997). Rather than relics of the past, Pashto proverbs are still widely spoken and play an important role in the everyday lives of Pashtuns. They are found in textbooks, radio and television dramas, in “conversation in bazaar and home, between and among men and women” (Bartlotti, 2006:iii), and a “wiser man is considered to be the one who speaks more proverbs” (Khattak, 2006:x).

Proverbs are considered the most ubiquitous genre of folklore, found among all cultures of the world. Milner has noted “the nearly universal distribution” of proverbs throughout the world, “almost irrespective of time, place, level of technical and economic development, language or culture” (1969:200; see also, Mieder, 2004, 2005).¹ Because of their central role in many aspects of traditional, non-literate societies, the study of proverbs has attracted scholars for centuries.

While the seventeenth century is regarded as the “golden age of proverbs” in the West (Obelkevich, 1994), proverbs collection continued throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Whiting, 1994:75). Some scholars believe that in the Western world the use of proverbs in literature fell down significantly after the eighteenth century, the era associated with reason and enlightenment. However, Wolfgang Mieder (1993, 2004), Mokitimi (1995) and Sanauddin (2015) have convincingly shown that while some proverbs have been dropped because their language or metaphor does not fit the modern time, new proverbs are emerging constantly to reflect contemporary social patterns. Mieder (1993) argues that even the most sophisticated and best educated people appear to be in need of the pithy wisdom contained in metaphorical proverbs, and as such, there has been no general collapse of proverbiality and no blackout of proverbs during the time of reason and rationality (Mieder, 2000). Whether or not the time of proverb collection and proverb usage in the West is over, it is certainly not in most parts of Asia and Africa, where much work is still necessary to collect the scattered proverbs from people, and “where proverbs retain not only their currency, but their value as cultural and rhetorical expressions” (Bartlotti, 2000:1).

¹ Although proverbs are universally found, the Native Americans are the only exceptions, where anthropologists have found very few expressions to be counted as proverbs. In the words of Wolfgang Mieder (2005), “this is a truly astonishing phenomenon” and “yet unsolved conundrum”.

Proverb scholarship can be broadly divided into two distinct but parallel fields, that is *paremiography* (the collection of proverbs) and *paremiology* (the study of proverbs).²In addition, linguists of various schools have created an entire new field of inquiry called “phraseology” that deals with all formulaic language or phraseological units including proverbs, proverbial expressions, quotations, idioms, twin formulas, and other such fixed expressions. Paremiology is much broader than phraseology because it not only looks into the linguistic structure of proverbs, but also deals with their collection and classification, tracing the nature and origin of individual proverbs and investigating their socio-historical significance (Jamal, 2009). In other words, paremiologists usually look at proverbs from a more inclusive point of view as they draw on such fields as anthropology, art, communication, culture, folklore, history, literature, philology, psychology, religion, and sociology (Mieder, 2004). For linguists of the nineteenth century, proverbs were the source material for the comparative philological study of rural “archaic” dialects (Bartlotti, 2000). Historians treated proverbs and other forms of folklore as “immaterial relics”, surviving remnants among the peasant “folk” of the “savage ideas and ways” from which civilisation had evolved (Dundes, 1978:3-4). Sociologists and anthropologists took interest in proverb studies in the hope to find the reflection of national characters in these small pieces of ‘public philosophies’. The main interests behind the study of proverbs was the idea that “the proverbs of a people would provide valuable clue about their character and culture and open paths of communication” (Webster, 1982:173), because proverbs most clearly and abundantly express the social thoughts of traditional societies (Horton, 1967; Mieder and Dundes, 1994). Seitel (1976) has highlighted the importance of proverb study:

“[B]y pushing around these small and apparently simply constructed items, one can discover principles which give order to a wider range of phenomena. Proverbs are the simplest of the metaphorical genres of folklore— songs, folktales, folk play etc. – a genre which clearly and directly is used to serve a social purpose. By investigating the relatively simple use of metaphorical reasoning for social ends in

² From Greek, *paremia* = *proverb*.

proverbs, one can gain insight into the social use of other, more complex metaphorical genres” (Seitel, 1976:141).

Given the above discussion on the cultural importance and academic value of proverbs, the following section presents a critical review of Pashto proverb scholarship. The approach adopted here is critical in order to point out the good and the bad of Pashto proverb scholarship so far. The purpose is to initiate a debate and indicate a fresh direction for the new generation of folklorists interested in the collection and study of Pashto proverbs.

Collection of Pashto Proverbs

Naeem (2007:21) has noted that there was a “complete silence in study of Pashto folklore till 1850.” After this, European scholars, mostly in the form of British colonial officers-turned-writers and Christian missionaries started collecting Pashto folklore and translated them into European languages, primarily for the purpose of understanding the local culture and facilitating communication between the colonial administrators and the local people (Naeem, 2007; Tair, 1975). Almost all contemporary scholars of Pashto literature agree that the first formal attempt to study Pashto proverbs was made by S. S. Thorburn, a colonial administrative officer of the British Raj whose book *Bannu, Or Our Afghan Frontier* (1876) is dedicated to the world view of the Pashtun people as evident in their folktales, ballades, riddles, and proverbs. He collected some 400 Pashto proverbs and arranged them according to various themes such as ethics, ethnic rivalry, customs and traditions, individual and national character, household affairs, women, and ‘miscellaneous’. Thorburn also include some background explanation to a particular proverb where necessary and sometimes explain if a certain proverb is associated with a specific Pashtun tribe. However, the author does not provide the Pashto version of the proverbs, which makes it difficult to know the exact words of proverbs in the original Pashto. The main significance of the book lies in being the first book on Pashto folklore and the first book to introduce Pashto folklore to the English world which opened the door for further collection and study of Pashto folklore.

The French scholar James Darmesteter is another distinguished name of that period whose two volume book *Chants populaires des Afghans* (1888) includes abundant amounts of Pashto folk poetry and proverbs as well as linguistic notes, in which he treated Pashto folk poetry as a reflection of social conditions, national character, and political life of Pashtuns. In 1932, Major George Gilbertson produced a two volume dictionary of Pashto idioms in which he included many Pashto proverbs and proverbial expressions along with English translation. Jens Enevoldsen is another popular name in the list of orientalist whose small book *Sound the Bells, O Moon Arise: Pashto Proverbs and Folk Songs* (1969) is a mixture of a hundred Pashto proverbs and a hundred short-songs (*tappas*) written in Pashto script with English translation. One important aspect of this book is that the author believes that the selected proverbs are truly Pashto proverbs in their origin. Given that the origin of proverb is not a straightforward matter, one wonder how the author has reached the conclusion to declare the one hundred proverbs as truly Pashto proverbs.³

There is an impressive volume of work on Pashto folklore by local scholars which could be broadly divided into two categories: those conducted by academicians under the auspices of research institutions and those conducted by individuals throughout the Pashtun regions.

³Other significant scholarly works on Pashto language and culture includes those of Henry George Raverty and Sir Olaf Caroe. Though these works are not related directly to proverbs, these authors have abundantly used Pashto proverbs in their works. Raverty must be credited for undertaking the most comprehensive work on Pashto language during the colonial period, publishing his first book on Pashto grammar in 1859, *'A Grammar of the Pukhto, Pushto or Language of the Afghans'* (2 volumes.) and *'A Dictionary of the Pukhto, Pushto, or Language of the Afghans'* (1860). *'The Pathans'* (1958) by Sir Olaf Caroe – now rated a classic – is the last standard reference work of significance about Pashtun produced by an official who served during the colonial period. Jan (2009) has comprehensively reviewed 'Pashto under the British Empire' in which all major works on Pashto language and literature, including Pashto proverb collection and compilation by British and other European writers have been listed (see Jan (2009) for further detail).

The following pages presents a slightly more critical examination of work by local scholar on Pashto proverbs.

The establishment of the Pashto Academy in Kabul in 1937 and Pashto Academy in Peshawar in 1955 gave a formal beginning to the collection and publication of Pashto folklore. An annotated bibliography of Pashto folklore scholarship by local researchers compiled by Hidayatullah Naeem (2007) lists a total of 320 publications. A critical review of this bibliography would lay bare the current state of affairs of Pashto proverbs. It must be noted at the outset that Naeem himself does not seem to be very much happy with the available literature on Pashto proverbs which is evident from his resentful comments on certain books (see Naeem, 2007). Out of the 320 books, only 7 are specifically about proverbs, with the rest about other genres of folklores such as folktales, children stories, ballads, folk songs, and superstitions. The author himself has acknowledged that 142 out of 320 annotated books “are currently either out of print or difficult to find” (Naeem, 2007:27). Many of the annotated books are actually booklets, some comprising as little as 20 pages. Moreover, most of the books have been self-published by their respective authors in the shape of chapbooks without any academic supervision and standards. A good number of books annotated by Naeem bear neither the name of the publishers nor the publication dates which shows the poor state of Pashto folklore scholarship. Furthermore, not all these books can be categorised as ‘folklore’ in the true sense. Sadly, Naeem has badly disappointed the readers by not proving a concise definition of ‘folklore’. While attempting to define folklore, he simply says “folklore is folklore” [*folklore folklore hi hai*]” (Naeem, 2007: 2). This indicates his failure to clarify folklore and shows his escape from the burden of clarifying the subject matter of his book. As a result, he include everything that says something in *Pashto language* about the *past* of Pashtuns people or the *rural* aspect of Pashtun culture. While the book provides an easy access to many good works on Pashto language, literature, and culture, it confuses the readers on what constitute Pashto folklore and what not.

Much of the literature on Pashto folklore can thus be said to lack academic merit and rigour. Nevertheless, some valuable work has been done by individuals and academics on proverbs. One example is

Muhammad Din Zhwak (1965) collection which includes around 2500 Pashto proverbs. Another good source among the earlier collections is that of Akbar S. Ahmad (1975) containing some 200 proverbs with literal translations in English and sporadic mentions of equivalents in other languages. These and other such collections, though valuable in the time of their publications, have partly lost their importance because of the publication of Tair's massive collection of Pashto proverbs, discussed below.

The most important work on Pashto proverb has been accomplished by Muhammad Nawaz Tair, who compiled a two volume book on Pashto proverbs - '*RuhiMataloona*' (1975-1981) - under the patronage of the Pashto Academy, University of Peshawar. This collection was subsequently translated into Urdu language and in 1982 Tair's collaboration with T. C. Edwards produced an English translation of the collection in which 1350 proverbs were translated into English⁴. Because this is hitherto the most comprehensive book on Pashto proverbs, a slightly critical and elaborated review of this collection is presented here.

Tair's *RuhiMataloona* (Pashto Proverbs) is the first major contribution of Pashto Academy, University of Peshawar since its establishment in 1955. Explaining how the proverbs were collected for the book under discussion, Syed KhialBukhari, the then director of Pashto Academy, writes in his forward to the book:

“We made announcements in our magazine in which we requested people to send us items of Pashto folklore. We also set out a small remuneration for those who send us proverbs... which showed very encouraging results in the shape of a large number of proverbs that we received” (Bukhari, in Tair, 1975:2, translation mine).

This compilation exceeds twelve thousands proverbs, more than any other collection of Pashto proverbs. However, Tair seems to be aware that this compilation is still not complete:

⁴ The same book was recently re-edited by Bartlotti and Khattak (2006) with a slight revision and expansion.

“We have the belief that even still there is a large stock of proverbs that is yet to be gathered. Pashtun women and rural peasants can help with Pashto academy a lot by sending us proverbs, because they are the true preservers and protectors of our folk literature, and it is because of them that a large number of Pashto proverbs are preserved today” (Tair, 1975:12, translation mine).

The quotes above and a careful read of the book reveal some important aspects of the collection. Tair believes – quite rightly – that a large number of Pashto proverbs are still to be collected and published. Tair’s view is validated by my own research on Pashto proverbs and gender relations as a significant number of ‘new’ proverbs have been collected for the first time during the course of my research (for detail, see Sanauddin, 2015). The above quote shows that Tair also considers “women and peasants” as the true preservers (and users) of proverbs. They are the ‘true folks’ according to Tair. It is disappointing there fore to see that women and peasants did not contribute significantly to this proverb collection. In fact, on pages 13-16, Tair lists those people who sent proverbs to the academy, and no woman could be found in the long list of proverbs-contributors. This may be because of women’s limited access to the academy due to illiteracy and cultural restrictions. This makes the compilation a gender biased, if not gender blind. The same also goes for the peasant class, who has not contributed significantly to the compilation because they are mostly uneducated and could not write letters to the academy. A look at the names and locations of the proverbs contributors further reveals that they do not equally represent all areas of Pashtuns. From some districts (such as Kohat) a large number of people contributed proverbs while some other areas (such as Dir, Swat, and Tribal Areas) are either underrepresented or not represented at all. An important aspect of the book is that the author states that some proverbs were purposely excluded from the book because of their offensive or “obscene language”, or because their contents “could cause insult to members of certain Pashtun tribes” (p.12). However, when it comes to offensive proverbs about women and racist proverbs about peasant class and other ethnic groups such as Punjabis and Hindus, Tair did not employ any censorship. This shows that the author had not used a clear criteria of what proverbs to include and what to exclude from the compilation. Furthermore, one may ask:

what happened to those proverbs which were collected but not included in the compilation? Tair says that they are preserved in Pashto academy, but according to the best of my efforts, I could not find those proverbs in the academy. Another flaw of the compilation is that while the proverbs number over twelve thousand, a lot of them have been repeated again and again, sometimes mistakenly, other times due to slight variation in the form of a proverb. Tair himself acknowledges this on page 12 of the collection. This is one of the most disturbing aspects of Tair's "*RuhiMataloona*". Lastly, but more importantly, no contextual explanations have been provided to explain the meaning of a certain proverb or how a particular proverb might be used in actual life. Another problem with Tair's compilation is the ordering of proverbs. He has chosen to arrange proverbs alphabetically, which is a frustrating matter for some readers and researchers who are interested in proverbs on a specific topic. For example, during my own PhD research work, I was interested to make a list of Pashto proverbs on the topic of gender relation which proved a difficult work because of the alphabetic ordering of proverbs in Tair's collection. This shortcoming of the compilation has also been noted by Bartlotti (2000). Moreover, the alphabetically listed proverbs have not been numbered. The last but not the least, Tair's collection suffers from the issue of cross-referencing between/among different related proverbs. A standard rule in most proverb dictionaries is that whenever a proverb is related to another proverb in the collection, the compiler give reference, such as a footnote. Sadly, Tair has not taken this pain due to which the whole collection looks like a haphazard activity. Hidayatullah Naeem has crisply summarised his unfavorable observations about the books by saying: "this is a good collection; however, Tair has carelessly mixed up this precious treasure of the academy with his '*teegh-e-qalam*' (spear of the pen), so that now we do not know which proverb is in its original shape and place and which one is not" (Naeem, 2007:93). Naeem has used the Urdu word '*teegh-e-qalam*' (spear of the pen) which is a strong expression used to criticise a writer for his wild treatment of a subject. I cannot agree more with this particular observation of Naeem.

These observations aside, *RuhiMataloonais* still the most complete, the most accessible, and the most well-known of all collections of Pashto proverbs. The collection is complete in the sense that it has incorporated

most of the previous smaller collections produced by foreign and local researchers. The author acknowledges at least nine such earlier collections from which he has benefited (see Tair, 1975:13). Because of these multiples qualities, this compilation is one of the most recommended one for those interested in the study of Pashto proverbs. I myself have benefited a lot from the books during my own research on Pashto proverbs. Leonard Bartlotti (2000) has also used this book as the primary source for his research.

As said earlier, Tair's collection has summed up earlier collections of Pashto proverbs. However, Pashto proverbs continued to be collected and published. Most of these works lack academic rigor and suffers from multiple issues. For example, *Writings on the Stones* by Sayed Nawaz (n.d) contain proverbs and other 'wise quotes', as evident from the title of the book. The academic poverty of this book is evident from that fact that the book bears no publication date. M. Nawaz Khan (2005) has written a very small book (20 pages) on Pashto proverbs under the title "*A Garland of Proverbs*" which contains 350 proverbs. The book contains literally nothing new. All the proverbs he has mentioned are part of earlier collections. The only thing new is his claim that these proverbs comes from his own memory that he or his elders have been using in day to day life. Akhtar (1997) has collected proverbs which according to him are known and spoken in district Swat, though most of them are well known in other parts of Pakhtunkhwa as well. Similarly, Alkozi (2007) and Zahir (2010) have published small books on Pashto proverbs in which almost all proverbs they have mentioned are already listed in earlier collections. Hence, such books adds little value to proverb collection efforts.

In addition to specific proverb collections, smaller selections or citations of Pashto proverbs can be found in other works dealing with Pashto language, history and culture. For example, volume II of QaziRahimullah Khan's *The Modern Pushtu Instructor* contains a selection of two hundred "proverbs in common use" with variants and English glosses (1943:148-172). Similarly, Dawood (1990 and 2006) also cites a number of proverbs. The most recent collection of Pashto proverbs is the 10 page *Pashto Proverbs Booklet* by Andrew D. Belyea (2012), a staff member of the NATO forces currently engaged in Afghanistan. The author's main purpose behind this booklet is to

facilitate communication and negotiation between the coalition forces and the local Afghan people. The author believes that the “overwhelming majority” of enemy “have to be persuaded”, not killed or driven into hiding. For this purpose, he found proverbs as the “most appropriate tools”, especially to “broach a sensitive subject” (Belyea, 2012:167-181).

Some writers have taken a different approach by explaining the background stories behind proverbs. The assumption is that each proverb is in fact a short summary of a long story, anecdote or personal experience of a person or group in a particular time and locality. Two such examples are Zaland (1985) and Shinwari (1999) which include proverbs along with background stories behind proverbs. The authenticity of these stories, however, is essentially a debatable issue. Shinwari (1999) for example has claimed to have carried out a ‘painful research’ for collecting the stories for his book, but fail short of explaining any detail of his ‘research’- its methodology, time line, location, etc. One wonders if some of the stories in such books have been made-up by the authors themselves!

To summarise the above discussion, it is evident that these collections provide an excellent resource for Pashtun proverbs. However, their usefulness could have been further enhanced by taking care of the following points. Firstly, most of the Pashto proverb collectors have simply listed proverbs without providing contextual explanations. Proverbs are essential contextual in nature (Norrick, 1985; Hasan-Rokem, 1982; Abrahams, 1972; Seitel, 1976); they are rooted in a socio-cultural setup from where they draw their rich meaning. Proverb collections must also give some explanation as how a particular proverb might be used in a conversational context. Proverb performance in *context* will put spirit into the otherwise dry *text* of proverb. In other words, “texts alone without reference to the cultural context in which those texts were written yields only limited knowledge about culture and cultural attitudes, especially when the texts may be chosen in a random and superficial way” (Jordan & de Caro, 1986: 503). Unfortunately, most of the Pashto proverb collections suffer from this shortcoming. Secondly, almost all Pashto proverb collectors have failed to provide details of how proverbs were collected. Failure to explain methodological details in an academic

work weakens the authenticity the work. Thirdly, overall, there seems to be substantial work on proverb collection (paremiography). However, no significant work has been done on proverbs study and analysis (paremiology). Pashto proverb scholars need to move from a ‘collection approach’ towards an ‘analytical approach’ in dealing with Pashto proverbs. With the exception of a few (e.g. Bartlotti, 2000; Sanauddin, 2015), so far there is no significant work on the study and analysis of proverbs in everyday usage. The time for this shift from paremiography to paremiology overdue.

Conclusion

An impressive number of collections have been published by foreign and local scholars. A critical review of these collections, however, reveals that most of these collections lack academic rigor. The most widely known compendium of Pashto proverbs by Muhammad Nawaz Tair (1975-1981) also suffers from some very basic shortcomings. The most important of the shortcomings include the lack of contextual explanation with proverbs, failure to explain methodological details, haphazard ordering of proverbs in the collection, lack of cross referencing among similar and related proverbs, and unnecessary replications of proverbs within and among different collections. A comparative review of these collections reveals that most of them have been written by non-academics and seem to have copied proverbs from each other without acknowledging this fact.

Suggestions

1. It was explained in the article that Pashto proverb scholars have mostly collected proverb text, lacking the particular context in which proverbs are actually used. More studies are needed to collected proverbs texts in their natural habitat, i.e., the social, cultural, and linguistic context in which proverbs are used by people. In other words, the new generation of Pashto proverb scholars should answer the much repeated call by folklorists, originally issued by Arewa and Dundes (1964:82), “Let’s put the folk back into folklore”.
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2. It was noted in the article that despite its many shortcomings, “*RuhiMataloona*” is truly a national treasure and a pride of the Pashto Academy. The new generation of Pashto folklorists, especially the faculty and research staff of the Pashto Academy must try to further improve it. This can be done, for example, in the following ways: (A) Recompiling the collection by removing repetitions of proverbs, including some contextual explanations where required, providing cross referencing between related/similar proverbs. (B) Updating the compilation by adding proverbs that were intentionally excluded from its first edition by author and by adding new proverbs collected by subsequent scholars. (C) Computerizing the proverbs and creation of an online proverb repository where scholars and general readers can not only read the compilation online on the official website of the Pashto Academy, but can also comments on a specific proverb. In this way, the old “*RuhiMataloona*” will get a ‘new life’ and people’s comments/additions/explanations on the website will make the proverb corpus younger and richer with every passing day. In addition, it will open an avenue for further analysis of the Pashto proverbs as scholar will find it easier to search the repository for proverbs on a certain topic of their interest.
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