

Repository of Human Values – A Critical Study of Select Bhojpuri Folktales

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Abstract

This study critically examines selected Bhojpuri folktales as culturally embedded moral texts that transmit ethical values, shape community identity, and preserve regional knowledge systems. Drawing on insights from Indian ethical philosophy, moral psychology, and narrative theory, the research investigates how Bhojpuri oral narratives encode relational ethics rooted in dharma, karma, intention, and communal responsibility. A qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is employed to analyse linguistic patterns, narrative structures, and discourse features within tales collected through fieldwork in the Buxar district of Bihar. The stories such as The Pandit and His Dog, Two Sisters, Two Friends, The Hunter and His Hawk, Two Houses, and Chhatpal were selected for their cultural familiarity and prominent moral themes.

The analysis reveals that Bhojpuri folktales construct moral meaning through evaluative vocabulary, character contrasts, symbolic spaces, and culturally intuitive consequences. Linguistic cues guide listeners toward interpreting virtues such as loyalty, humility, patience, compassion, devotion, and self-discipline as socially desirable traits, while framing greed, stubbornness, impulsiveness, and hostility as disruptive behaviours. Narrative patterns demonstrate karmic logic, where virtuous actions result in reward and unethical behaviour leads to loss or suffering. The tales also function as instruments of cultural socialisation, reinforcing collective identity by naturalising ethical values through emotionally resonant and culturally familiar story outcomes.

The findings affirm that Bhojpuri folktales operate as active moral discourses that not only entertain but also educate, preserve cultural memory, and sustain intergenerational transmission of values within the community. This study highlights the continued relevance of regional storytelling traditions in shaping moral consciousness, especially in the context of globalisation and changing social structures. It contributes to the limited scholarly work on Bhojpuri folklore and demonstrates the importance of documenting vernacular narratives as repositories of human values and cultural knowledge.

Keywords: Bhojpuri folktales, Moral values, Cultural identity

Introduction

Folktales constitute one of the oldest and most enduring forms of human expression, preserved through oral transmission long before the advent of writing. Their definitions vary across academic traditions and reflect the perspectives and methods of different disciplines. As Sabahuddin Ahmad (2024) explains, folk

literature represents “the oral and written expressions of a culture, passed down from generation to generation through informal channels,” and it simultaneously serves as “a repository of collective wisdom and identity” as well as “a medium for transmitting essential knowledge, moral lessons, and societal values.” Bascom’s classic formulation, which is widely cited in contemporary research, likewise describes folktales as narratives that “reinforce morals and values” and “validate culture.” This understanding links storytelling directly with ethical formation and the regulation of communal life. Structuralist scholars such as Vladimir Propp (1968) approach folktales from a formalist perspective and argue that tales are identifiable through recurrent narrative functions and sequences, regardless of the cultural variations found in characters or settings. For Propp, the “uniformity beneath multiformity” reveals how societies encode values through patterned actions rather than solely through plot or character. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that folktales cannot be reduced to a single definition. Instead, they should be understood as a genre that conveys cultural memory, moral pedagogy, aesthetic expression, and social imagination, each emphasized differently across literary, anthropological, linguistic, and cultural-psychological traditions.

India presents one of the richest and most diverse landscapes of folktales in the world. Its vast linguistic plurality, which includes Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, Munda, and several other language families, has produced regionally specific yet thematically interconnected narrative traditions. Indian folklorists emphasize that oral traditions are “deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of societies,” shaping identities, strengthening social cohesion, and continually adapting to historical and environmental change. Indian folktales also bear the influence of ancient textual cultures. The Vedas, Puranas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata have profoundly shaped regional oral traditions by providing themes, archetypes, and cosmological frameworks that storytellers have reinterpreted across centuries. As noted in the Overview of Folk Literature in Indian Languages, these epics function not only as literary models but also as “repositories of religious knowledge,” and their motifs “permeate Indian folk literature” through repeated retellings and localized adaptations [11]. The relationship between oral tradition and classical texts illustrates how Indian folk narratives evolve while preserving ancient ethical frameworks and incorporating contemporary concerns, local experiences, and region-specific values.

A central dimension in understanding folktales is the form of moral cognition they express, which differs significantly between Indian and Western cultures. Research across anthropology, psychology, and philosophy highlights this contrast. In *Morality East and West*, Hwang (2015) explains that Eastern moral systems shaped by Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian traditions emphasize the ethics of community and divinity. These systems privilege duty, relational harmony, respect for hierarchy, and the fulfilment of social obligations. Western moral systems, in contrast, prioritize individual autonomy, rights-based reasoning, and utilitarian calculation, placing moral authority in personal choice rather than communal responsibility.

These philosophical differences align closely with findings in moral psychology. Jonathan Haidt (2001) argues that people do not primarily reason their way into moral judgments but rely instead on intuitive and culturally embedded emotional responses. Haidt’s research shows that collectivist cultures, including India, emphasize loyalty, authority, sanctity, and community welfare, whereas Western cultures place greater weight on fairness, autonomy, and individual rights. As a result, Indian folktales often encode ethics relationally through themes that emphasize family loyalty, karmic causality, respect for elders, and communal harmony. Western folktales, on the other hand, frequently centre individual heroism, personal virtue, or justice defined through individual rights. By bringing Haidt’s (2001) psychological theory into

dialogue with Hwang's cultural analysis, it becomes clear that moral cognition in India is fundamentally relational, contextual, and rooted in intention, while Western ethics largely relies on rule-based and individualistic models.

Regional and vernacular folktales in India further demonstrate the cultural significance of localized ethical frameworks. These narratives reflect ecological settings, social structures, linguistic identities, and local histories. Although the Tribal Folklore of India focuses primarily on tribal groups, its broader observations regarding regional folklore are highly relevant [12]. The text describes folklore as a "repository of customs, ethics and, in a general way, the whole society," because regional tales preserve moral worldviews and transmit them organically from one generation to the next. Such stories reveal how universal ethical themes, such as justice, compassion, deceit, and reciprocity, are articulated through local metaphors, characters, and social expectations. They also show how values are not simply inherited but are actively negotiated within everyday life. The lived realities of storytellers, their social environments, and their cultural practices continuously shape these folktales, demonstrating how narrative traditions serve as dynamic expressions of regional moral experience.

Within this broader framework, the present study focuses on a selected corpus of Bhojpuri folktales, drawn from collected Bhojpuri narratives. These stories, though simple in form, encapsulate complex reflections on human intentions, community norms, interpersonal conduct, and karmic consequences. Bhojpuri oral narratives occupy a significant position within North Indian folklore, especially because they function as moral instruction within everyday communal settings such as village gatherings, festive performances, and intergenerational storytelling in rural households.

This research critically examines how these Bhojpuri tales encode ethical teaching, shape value systems, and convey messages about human life. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study explores how linguistic choices, narrative structures, character roles, and consequence patterns construct moral meaning; how listeners interpret and internalize these meanings; and how such tales remain culturally relevant as vehicles of moral socialization. In doing so, this study positions folktales not as passive cultural artifacts but as active discursive practices through which values are reproduced, contested, and transmitted across generations.

Literature Review

Gupta & Kaur (2002) in 'Indian Ethics: Essence, Theory and Praxis' present a comprehensive philosophical explanation of Indian ethics (Nīti). Gupta and Kaur argue that Indian ethical thought is rooted in ṛta (cosmic order), dharma (moral responsibility), and karma (action and consequence). Unlike Western moral systems, which emphasize fixed universal rules, Indian ethics is contextual, intuitive, and intention based. The authors emphasize that folktales are powerful tools for understanding Indian ethical reasoning because they present real-life situations where decisions depend on relationships, context, and inner conscience. Their discussion of tale like Mahosadha's judgement demonstrates how stories teach ethical discernment by showing moral ambiguity rather than rigid right–wrong binaries.

Olugbemi-Gabriel, et al. (2023), in 'The Signifying Culture: Intercultural Analysis of Tiv and Yoruba Folktales' examine African folktales from Tiv and Yoruba communities; they emphasize how oral storytelling functions as moral instruction and character formation for children. The authors argue that folktales serve as cultural self-descriptions ("symbolic autobiography") and mirror community values such as cooperation, honesty, and social responsibility. They emphasize that globalization is eroding traditional storytelling practices, which threatens the transmission of moral values. 'Storytelling as a Tool

of Learning and Teaching' by Geeta Ramanujam (2015) argues that storytelling is a fundamental human practice that enriches learning, identity formation, and emotional development. She criticizes modern schooling for suppressing children's "own voices" and disconnecting them from lived experience. Storytelling restores this connection by validating children's emotional and cultural worlds. Stories encourage imagination, empathy, communication, and self-expression.

Jonathan Haidt (2001) in 'The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment' argues that moral judgment is driven primarily by intuition rather than reasoning. Emotions, cultural norms, and social environments shape how people understand right and wrong. His Moral Foundations Theory shows that collectivist cultures (like India) emphasize values such as loyalty, authority, respect, and community welfare more strongly than Western individualist cultures. Martha Nussbaum (1990) in 'Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature' argues that literature is a form of moral philosophy because it presents complex human experiences that abstract principles cannot capture. Stories cultivate empathy, imagination, and practical reasoning. By encountering moral dilemmas through characters, readers learn to interpret situations ethically and to navigate ambiguity.

Goraya, et al. (2025) in 'The Role of Folk Narratives in Moral Education: An Interdisciplinary Approach' look at the role of folk stories in the context of moral education. This study demonstrates how folktales teach character values such as compassion, friendship, responsibility, perseverance, and courage. The authors show that oral storytelling also not only shape the emotional learning of children but also the moral learning. Wu, Wang & Mihalcea (2023) in Cross-Cultural Analysis of Human Values, Morals, and Biases in Folktales analyse 1,900 folktales across 27 cultures, highlighting cross-cultural similarities and differences in moral values, gender roles, and societal expectations. They confirm that folktales universally reinforce social values but do so through culturally specific emphases. The most common global values are social connection, community, responsibility, and respect.

Berezkin (2016) in The Spread of Folkloric Motifs as Information Exchange uses motif distribution to demonstrate how cultures interact through storytelling. Folkloric motifs spread across regions due to historical contact, trade, migration, and cultural exchange. The study shows clear distinctions between Eastern and Western narrative traditions as well as internal variation within Eurasia. 'Morality East and West: Cultural Concerns' by Kwang-Kuo Hwang (2015) explains the philosophical and cultural differences between Eastern and Western moral systems. Eastern morality prioritizes duty, social harmony, respect, and collective welfare. Western morality prioritizes individual rights, autonomy, and rational choice.

Vladimir Propp's (1968) 'Morphology of the Folktale' shows that folktales share consistent functional patterns regardless of culture. He argues that tales are composed of recurring narrative functions (absentation, villainy, testing, reward, return, etc.). His framework reveals that moral messages are embedded not only in content but in narrative structure itself. Sabahuddin Ahmad (2024) in 'An Overview of Folk Literature in Indian Languages' provides a comprehensive overview of Indian folk literature, emphasizing its diversity and cultural importance. It highlights that folk literature preserves cultural heritage, transmits values, fosters social cohesion, and adapts to historical change. It also underscores regional specificity and linguistic richness across India.

Saba Syed (2024) in 'Tribal Folklore of India: Importance and Influence' although focused on tribal folklore, this paper highlights how regional storytelling preserves ethical norms, community traditions, and cultural identity. The author argues that folklore acts as a "prominent bearer of customs, ethics and... the whole society," reflecting local worldviews and shaping community behaviour.

Based on the above review of literature, there is a lack studies on the folk element in the Bhojpuri language. This analyses how the Bhojpuri folk tales transmit ethical values and life lessons. The paper shows how the folk tales act as a tool for teaching ethics among a community. It answers questions related to the way folk tales shape value systems in society.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how Bhojpuri folktales encode moral values, ethical orientations, and socially embedded behavioural expectations. CDA is chosen because it allows the researchers to explore how narratives construct and reinforce cultural ideologies, power relations, and value systems through language and storytelling patterns. This approach aligns with the study's aim of understanding not only what ethical messages are present in the stories but how they are discursively produced and transmitted within community narratives. The data for this study was collected through fieldwork conducted across multiple localities in the Buxar district of Bihar, an area known for its vibrant oral storytelling traditions and strong Bhojpuri cultural identity. The researcher visited various community spaces where storytelling and informal discussions commonly occur, including:

- Evening gathering spots such as chaupal areas, tea shops, and community courtyards
- Schools and educational spaces where teachers and older community members often recount folktales
- Local cultural clusters, including temples or village squares where seasonal stories are narrated

These sites were chosen because they represent natural storytelling environments where folktales continue to circulate orally and informally among residents. The selection of these spaces allowed the researcher to observe living storytelling traditions and gather versions of narratives directly from the community, ensuring authenticity and cultural relevance.

The participants in this study were local storytellers, teachers, young adults, elders, and other community members who voluntarily shared their knowledge of Bhojpuri folktales. Although respondents varied in background, the primary age groups represented were:

- 20–24 years (younger generation familiar with the tales through parents, school, or community interactions)
- 50 years and above (older generation considered custodians of oral traditions)

This age distribution provided an intergenerational perspective, allowing the study to compare how different age groups understand, remember, and transmit moral lessons embedded in the tales. The diversity in respondents helped ensure a broader understanding of the stories' ethical implications and their role in shaping value systems across generations.

From the stories collected during fieldwork and from the provided compilation of Bhojpuri folktales, a set of selected narratives—including The Pandit and His Dog, Two Sisters, Two Friends, The Hunter and His Hawk, and Chhatpal have been chosen for detailed analysis. These stories were selected based on:

- Frequency of mention among respondents
- Cultural familiarity within the Buxar region
- Clear presence of moral or ethical themes
- Narrative completeness and recognizability

The selected tales represent a mixture of moral dilemmas, karmic teachings, interpersonal conflicts, and ethical resolutions, making them suitable for focused discourse analysis.

Analysis

Upon reading critically the selected Bhojpuri folktales, one can see how linguistic choices, narrative structures, and culturally grounded interpretive practices work together to form a system of ethical communication through storytelling. These tales are part of a long-standing oral tradition in North India and continue to guide ethical conduct within the community.

The language used in Bhojpuri folktales consistently constructs ethical meaning by deploying specific evaluative terms that assign moral value to characters and their actions. In the story of ‘The Pandit and His Dog’, the dog is repeatedly described as loyal and innocent, while the Pandit’s response is framed through words that signify anger, haste, and poor judgment. Such linguistic markings guide the audience toward an intuitive moral interpretation, a concept supported by Jonathan Haidt’s (2001) argument that moral judgment is largely intuitive and emotionally grounded rather than shaped by deliberate reasoning. The eventual regret of the Pandit aligns with Gupta and Kaur’s (2022) assertion that Indian ethical reasoning privileges inner awareness and intention as essential moral determinants. Similar linguistic work occurs in the wife’s habit of opposing her husband’s every statement. Her contradictory behaviour is framed not as playful but as a persistent flaw. The repeated use of oppositional verbs such as “सिलसिला चलते रहल” “ना माने,” or “उल्टे करे” positions her behaviour as socially inappropriate within the Bhojpuri cultural context. The Pandit, by contrast, is portrayed through terms that imply patience and awareness, such as “समझ गैलन,” “जॉन चाही ओकर उल्टे कहस,” or “knew the पश्चिम धारा रहे.” These lexical choices guide the audience to interpret the wife’s opposition as unreasonable and the Pandit’s strategic response as justified. The ethical structure of the story becomes clearer through its narrative progression. According to Propp’s (1968) ‘Morphology of the folktale’, tales frequently construct moral meaning through the relationship between an action and its consequence. In this story, the wife enters the dangerous western side of the river because she insists on opposing her husband. Her drowning is not merely an accident but a narrative device signalling the predictable outcome of stubborn behaviour. This structure reflects the Indian ethical view described by Gupta and Kaur (2022) that morality is not simply rule-based but experiential and relational. The wife’s suffering is not framed as divine punishment but as the natural outcome of ignoring relational guidance and practical wisdom.

Narrative structures within the folktales function as vehicles through which cultural and social values are reproduced. The stories shape ethical norms by presenting predictable narrative patterns where virtues lead to positive outcomes and moral failings result in loss, suffering, or regret. In ‘The Hunter and His Hawk’, the hunter kills his loyal companion out of impulsive anger and only later discovers the hawk saved him from poisoned water. The narrative thus establishes patience, self-control, and reflection as valued moral qualities. Gupta and Kaur’s (2022) description of Indian ethics as contextual and experiential is reflected here, since the tale teaches that wisdom emerges from recognizing the consequences of one’s actions. The Bhojpuri folktale ‘Two Friends’ employs a carefully crafted narrative structure that allows cultural and social values to be reproduced in a manner that appears both natural and inevitable to its audience. The tale juxtaposes two contrasting habitual paths: one friend consistently attends satsang, a symbol of moral discipline and spiritual refinement, while the other spends his days visiting a prostitute, representing a life directed toward sensory pleasure and moral negligence. This structural opposition is central to the story’s ethical function, for it dramatizes the tension between virtue and vice in a culturally familiar form. Such narrative contrast illustrates what Vladimir Propp (1968) identifies as the “binary arrangement of moral forces” within tales, through which audiences are prompted to interpret characters not only by their actions but by the symbolic spaces they inhabit. ‘Two Friends’ demonstrates how

Bhojpuri folktales function structurally to reproduce cultural values. The tale affirms karmic justice, reinforces the long-term moral consequences of human behaviour, and socializes listeners into an ethical worldview in which spiritual practice, self-discipline, and moral consistency are upheld as enduring goods. As such, the story does not merely tell of two individuals with different habits but constructs a narrative environment through which the community reaffirms its deepest ethical commitments. The moral logic of the story resonates with Martha Nussbaum's (1990) argument that narratives cultivate moral imagination by asking listeners to emotionally inhabit the experiences of virtuous characters.

Through these stories, we can see the role of storytelling as a practice that shapes community identity. Folktales are traditionally narrated within shared spaces, and these performances teach listeners how to understand themselves as members of a moral community. The story of 'Two Sisters' illustrates this clearly. The kind and humble sister is rewarded by the community, while the greedy sister faces rejection. The narrative presents humility, cooperation, and emotional generosity as central components of Bhojpuri cultural identity. 'Two Houses' serves a similar purpose. The peaceful and cooperative household prospers, while the quarrelsome household suffers. The audience learns that domestic harmony and collective responsibility are not only desirable but necessary for social well-being. Such tales reflect the broader cultural orientation described by Hwang (2015), who argues that Eastern moral systems emphasise the welfare of the collective over the wishes of the individual. Ramanujam's (2015) understanding of storytelling as a tool for validating shared experiences is also visible here, since these narratives allow listeners to locate themselves within a continuous cultural tradition.

In these cases, storytelling can also be seen as a discursive practice through which community identity is shaped by the embedding of cultural expectations within shared narrative experiences. Bhojpuri folktales are traditionally told in communal settings, such as evening gatherings, festivals, and agricultural rest periods. These practices allow listeners, especially children, to learn how their community defines desirable character traits and acceptable social behaviour. The story of 'Two Sisters' provides a clear illustration of this identity-shaping function. The kind and humble sister is portrayed using positive evaluative terms that signal moral approval, whereas the proud and greedy sister is characterized through descriptors that imply social deviance. These linguistic and narrative contrasts reinforce the idea that humility, cooperation, and emotional generosity are core Bhojpuri virtues. At the same time, behaviours such as envy, selfishness, or disrespect are framed as threats to familial and social harmony and are therefore rejected by the community within the story.

The identity-shaping function of Bhojpuri folktales becomes even clearer when the narrative of 'Two Houses' is examined with attention to its discursive structure. In this story, one man persistently throws garbage in front of his neighbour's house, while the neighbour quietly disposes of it without complaint. When the wronged neighbour later brings fruits as a gift, he explains, "You can only give what you have." This exchange constructs a moral lesson in which ethical identity is formed not by reacting to hostility but by embodying one's own values. The narrative positions patience, forgiveness, and inner moral richness as defining attributes of a virtuous Bhojpuri individual. The story challenges listeners to consider that ethical action originates from internal character rather than external provocation. This aligns with Hwang's (2015) discussion which emphasize self-cultivation, relational duty, and the maintenance of communal harmony rather than retaliatory justice or individual assertion. The tale therefore contributes to Bhojpuri moral identity by presenting non-retaliation and generosity as culturally admired responses.

The story's structure further supports the communal identity-forming function described by Ramanujam (2015), who argues that storytelling validates emotional experience and allows audiences to internalize

ethical values through narrative empathy. In this tale, listeners are guided to identify with the man from the small house, whose moral character remains stable regardless of mistreatment. His actions are not framed as weakness but as evidence of moral abundance, signified symbolically through the fruits he offers. The man from the big house represents the opposite condition: he gives garbage because he possesses nothing better within himself. Through this symbolic contrast, the story naturalizes the belief that one's actions reflect one's inner moral resources. Such a message reinforces the cultural expectation that ethical behaviour should originate from self-discipline, emotional maturity, and a commitment to maintaining social harmony. By embedding these ideals into a simple domestic narrative, 'Two Houses' teaches that moral identity is not reactive but generative, and that goodness is measured by what one chooses to give back to the world even when confronted with negativity.

Bhojpuri folktales naturalize moral lessons by presenting them as outcomes that follow a coherent moral order grounded in cultural expectations. The events of each narrative unfold in ways that make ethical consequences appear inevitable and instinctively understandable to listeners. The narrative reveals a central ethical teaching: acts of compassion toward living beings are equivalent to acts of devotion toward the divine. This reinforces the Indian ethical principle, described by Gupta and Kaur (2022), that moral intention carries greater significance than external ritual performance, and that dharma is realized through compassionate action rooted in awareness and relational responsibility. A similar moral logic appears in the story Chhatpal, although expressed through entirely different narrative means. Here, the protagonist mistakenly believes that fate and social worth are determined by one's name. The basket-weaver named Lakshminiya, the hardworking farmer named Dhanpal, and the deceased man named Amar all demonstrate that identity and destiny emerge from lived experience rather than from labels. The narrative gradually guides Chhatpal, and by extension the audience, to understand that self-worth and moral value are not externally assigned but internally cultivated. This aligns with Nussbaum's (1990) argument that literature teaches practical moral reasoning by enabling individuals to interpret and re-evaluate their assumptions in light of new human experiences. Chhatpal's transformation is not dramatic but reflective; he returns home accepting his name and recognising that moral character, effort and humility matter more than symbolic associations.

Together, these stories reveal how Bhojpuri folktales naturalize ethical messages. They accomplish this not through explicit instruction but by embedding moral insights within narrative events that appear socially and emotionally intuitive. Compassion, humility, self-understanding and the re-evaluation of rigid beliefs emerge as naturally validated truths. Because these lessons are woven into narrative outcomes that feel both culturally familiar and morally satisfying, they become internalized as part of the community's common-sense understanding of ethical life.

Through this analysis it becomes clear that Bhojpuri folktales operate as culturally embedded moral discourses. They rely on linguistic cues to construct ethical meaning, employ narrative structures that reproduce social values, reinforce collective identity through recognizable patterns of behaviour and consequence, and naturalize moral messages through narrative outcomes that seem both emotionally and culturally inevitable. Supported by theoretical insights drawn from Gupta and Kaur, Haidt, Nussbaum, Hwang, Ramanujam, and Propp, these stories can be understood as active instruments through which Bhojpuri communities educate younger generations, transmit ethical knowledge, and maintain cultural coherence. Far from simple entertainment, they are part of a larger moral tradition that shapes how individuals understand human relationships, social obligations, and the consequences of ethical and unethical behaviour.

Findings

The analysis of Bhojpuri folktales reveals several significant patterns related to moral communication, cultural identity, and the reproduction of social values. The stories consistently demonstrate that language is employed not merely to narrate events but to construct moral meaning. Evaluative vocabulary shapes audience perception by distinguishing virtuous characters from flawed ones. Across the corpus, characters described with terms such as loyal, innocent, patient, or humble are positioned as morally admirable, whereas words like stubborn, greedy, impulsive, or contradictory indicate behavioural failure. The tale of 'The Pandit and His Dog' illustrates this pattern clearly. The dog's innocence is emphasized repeatedly, while the Pandit's rash decision is framed through words associated with anger and misjudgement. This linguistic asymmetry steers the audience toward a moral interpretation before the story explicitly reveals the consequences of his actions. This finding aligns with Haidt's (2001) view that moral judgment often arises from intuitive and emotional responses rather than analytical reasoning.

The narratives also reveal a consistent pattern in the reproduction of social and ethical values. Each story demonstrates a predictable moral structure in which actions produce consequences that are culturally intelligible to the audience. Stories such as *The Hunter and His Hawk* and *Two Friends* illustrate that virtues including patience, self-control, devotion, and self-discipline eventually lead to positive outcomes. Similarly, moral failings such as impulsiveness, neglect, and lack of restraint result in suffering or loss. This reflects Gupta and Kaur's (2022) argument that Indian ethical reasoning is experiential and relational. The folktales rely on lived consequences rather than abstract moral rules to communicate ethical lessons. The analysis further uncovers how identity formation is embedded within narrative content and performance traditions. Stories such as *Two Sisters* and *Two Houses* present moral identity as inseparable from community expectations. The tales articulate a shared vision of the ideal Bhojpuri individual, one who embodies humility, generosity, emotional maturity, and a commitment to social harmony. Negative behaviours such as envy, pride, or hostility are presented as disruptions to collective life and are ultimately rejected within the story world. The messages embedded in these tales concur with Hwang's (2015) distinction between Eastern and Western morality, as Bhojpuri narratives consistently foreground relational obligations over individual assertiveness.

Discussion

The findings indicate that Bhojpuri folktales function as complex moral and cultural discourses rather than simple entertainment. Their linguistic construction reveals a systematic use of evaluative terminology that guides listeners toward particular moral interpretations. The moral weight assigned to characters such as the faithful dog, the wise Pandit, the patient neighbour, or the humble sister demonstrates that the tales rely on culturally familiar adjectives and narrative cues to produce expected ethical judgments. This confirms Haidt's (2001) claim that moral understanding is grounded in intuitive responses shaped by cultural learning and emotional resonance.

The narrative structures of these tales reinforce their ethical purposes. Bhojpuri folktales consistently rely on narrative contrast to dramatize the tension between virtue and vice. In *Two Friends*, the stark opposition between religious devotion and sensual indulgence allows the story to present ethical lessons through a symbolic contrast that feels natural to listeners. The moral force of the narrative arises not from explicit instruction but from a structure in which consequences unfold according to culturally intelligible moral principles. Such findings support Propp's (1968) theory that folktales rely on recurrent functional patterns

to encode social values. They also demonstrate the alignment between narrative consequence and the relational ethics described by Gupta and Kaur.

The discursive function of storytelling becomes particularly visible in the construction of collective identity. Bhojpuri folktales reaffirm traits that the community finds desirable in its members: humility, cooperation, patience, devotion, and generosity. By portraying characters who succeed because they embody these values, the stories position these traits as the foundation of communal identity. Stories such as Two Houses, which elevate non-retaliation and emotional maturity as signs of moral strength, contribute to an understanding of ethical selfhood grounded in internal character rather than external circumstances. This corresponds to Hwang's (2015) argument that Eastern cultures emphasise self-cultivation and relational duty as primary sources of moral authority.

The naturalization of moral messages within the tales suggests that Bhojpuri folktales operate as socializing agents that shape ethical consciousness from an early age. Their lessons are absorbed not through formal instruction but through emotionally compelling narratives that present moral truth as self-evident. In Devotee of Lord Shiva, compassion toward a creature becomes indistinguishable from devotion toward the divine, thereby reinforcing the culturally familiar idea that relational empathy has spiritual significance. In Chhatpal, the protagonist's journey toward self-acceptance and moral maturity demonstrates that true worth arises from consistent ethical action rather than external labels. These messages reflect Nussbaum's claim that literature strengthens moral reasoning by allowing individuals to evaluate their assumptions and internal dispositions.

Conclusion

This research has examined how Bhojpuri folktales transmit ethical values, construct moral meaning, and shape the value systems of the communities that preserve them. By employing Critical Discourse Analysis, the study demonstrated that these narratives operate as culturally embedded moral texts rather than simple expressions of entertainment. They reveal how language, narrative structure, and communal storytelling practices work together to encode relational ethics derived from local cultural contexts and the broader Indian moral tradition.

The literature reviewed in this study highlighted the theoretical foundations that support these findings. Indian ethical philosophy, as described by Gupta and Kaur, emphasizes the relational nature of moral reasoning, the primacy of intention, and the experiential understanding of dharma and karma. Haidt's theory of moral intuition provided further insight into how listeners interpret folktales, suggesting that audiences respond to stories through emotional and culturally conditioned processes rather than formal reasoning. Nussbaum's conception of narrative as a form of moral philosophy helped illuminate how these stories cultivate moral imagination, enabling listeners to engage empathetically with characters and moral dilemmas. Hwang's distinction between Eastern and Western moral systems further clarified why Bhojpuri folktales highlight duties, social harmony, and relational obligations as core ethical values. These theoretical perspectives collectively strengthened the analytical framework of the study.

The CDA-based analysis of the selected Bhojpuri stories revealed several important patterns. First, the stories construct moral meaning through deliberate linguistic strategies that guide listeners toward ethically framed interpretations. Words that signify loyalty, innocence, patience, or humility consistently cast characters in a positive moral light, while terms relating to greed, impulsiveness, or stubbornness signal moral error. Second, the narrative structures of these folktales reproduce culturally recognized ethical norms by aligning virtuous behaviour with reward and moral failings with loss or suffering. Stories

such as *The Hunter and His Hawk* and *Two Friends* demonstrated how Bhojpuri narratives embed karmic logic and moral consequence within their plots, thereby teaching self-control, devotion, and spiritual discipline. Third, the tales contribute to the formation of community identity by emphasizing virtues considered essential within Bhojpuri culture. Stories such as *Two Sisters* and *Two Houses* promote humility, emotional generosity, forgiveness, and harmony as signs of ethical character, encouraging listeners to internalize these values as elements of their social identity. Finally, the folktales naturalize moral messages through narrative outcomes that appear both culturally familiar and intuitively meaningful. Tales such as *Devotee of Lord Shiva* and *Chhatpal* show that compassion, sincerity, thoughtful reflection, and acceptance of one's circumstances are not only morally correct but are presented as natural truths within the moral universe of the stories.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that Bhojpuri folktales serve as active cultural instruments that reinforce communal ethics, guide moral behaviour, and enable intergenerational transmission of culturally grounded value systems. They function as informal pedagogical tools that shape how individuals understand human relationships, moral responsibility, and the consequences of ethical and unethical actions. Furthermore, the use of Critical Discourse Analysis proved effective in uncovering these processes, as it highlighted the interplay between language, narrative form, and social context in shaping moral meaning.

This research affirms that folktales in regional languages, such as Bhojpuri, continue to carry important messages about human life and remain integral to the ethical life of the communities that nurture them. They preserve cultural memory, articulate moral expectations, and cultivate the moral imagination of younger generations. As globalization and rapid social change challenge traditional modes of knowledge transmission, the preservation and study of regional folktales become essential not only for safeguarding cultural heritage but also for understanding the ethical frameworks that shape everyday life in local communities. These stories, enriched by centuries of lived experience, remain vital guides for navigating moral complexity and sustaining cultural identity in the contemporary world.

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