

Adam Khan-Durkhani:¹ A folk tale from Pakistan

Translated by Muhammad Sheeraz

About *Adam Khan-Durkhani*:

The mighty mountains, green grasslands and fresh waters of Swat proudly sing a song of pure love: the love tale of *Adam Khan-Durkhani*. This legend has lived for about five hundred years till today in the hearts of millions who sing it on festive occasions. It is a story about royal romance between a tribal prince and princess. Owing to the universality of the themes of love and romance, parallels have been drawn between *Adam Khan-Durkhani* and Shakespearean tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*.² The historical context, thematic universality, stylistic evolution, and content variations of the tale have been widely studied by various researchers. Most of the romance took place in the villages of Bazdarra Payan and Bazdarra Bala in Sawat. It ends, however, in the village of Misri Banda on the banks of the River Kabul.³

Travelling via oral traditions, this love tale first appeared in a poem by Saddar Khushhal Khan⁴ in 1118 H.⁵ While this version of the tale still enjoys great critical acclaim, the one composed by Sayyid Abu Ali Shah in the 19th century commands more popular acclaim. The first prose version of *Adam Khan-Durkhani* was written by a Pashto prose writer, Masood, in 1130 H.⁶ Second

¹ This spelling has been adopted from: Khattak, K. K. (Ed.). (1991). *Qissa Da Adam Khan Au Durkhani*. Peshawar: Khalid Kitab Khana.

² Tair, M. N. (1981). *Adam Durkhani: Yava serrana*. Peshawar: Pashto Academy.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Abid, A. J. (2012). *Pashto Zuban-o-Adab ki Mukhtasar Tareekh*. Peshawar: University Publishers. "H" refers to the Hijri calendar.

⁶ Rashteen, S. U. (n.d.). *Da Pashto Nasar Hindara*. Peshawar: University Book Agency.

prose version of the tale was written by Moulvie Ahmad of Tangi⁷. Publication of the first edition was arranged by a Christian missionary, Hues, in 1872. The second edition was published by Khalid Khattak in 1991.⁸ Owing to its colloquial language, it is more popular than the earlier prose version. Several other versions of *Adam Khan-Durkhani* are also available in Pashto prose and poetry, including those by Shaukat Ullah Akbar, Munshi Ahmad Jan, Hamesh Khalil, Fakhr-ud-Din Sahibzada, Muhammad Gul Khan Noori, Akbar Shah Peshawari, Burhan, Mulla Nemat Ullah, Fida Mutahar and Mulla Saidan⁹.

Adam Khan-Durkhani has also been translated into Urdu by various translators, including Sahibzada Hameed Ullah Pasheenvi¹⁰, Farigh Bukhari and Raza Hamdani¹¹ and, more, recently by Shafi Aqeel.¹² An online version of an English translation has also been made available by Afaq Shariq.¹³

My translation of *Adam Khan-Durkhani* into English benefits from all the above-mentioned versions of the tale available in poetry and prose in Pashto and Urdu. The primary source text for this is, however, Shafi Aqeel's *Pakistan ke Lok Dastanain* (Folk Tales of Pakistan).

In 1971, the legendary tale was made into a film called "Adam Khan aw Durkhaniye" that stars Badar Munir and Yasmin.¹⁴ It was also made into a play

⁷ Abid, A. J. (2012).

⁸ Abid, A. J. (2012).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Pasheenvi, S. H. U. (1970). *Pashto ke Roomaan*. Quetta: Published by the author.

¹¹ Bukhari, F. & Hamdani, R. (1955). *Pathanoon ke Roomaan*. Peshawar: Naya Maktaba.

¹² Aqeel, S. (2008). *Pakistan ki Lok Dastanain*. Islamabad: National Language Authority.

¹³ See <http://kaliwaltaki.blogspot.com/2013/07/amazing-love.html>

¹⁴ https://en.wiki2.org/wiki/Adam_Khan_Dukhaniye

called *Adam Khan Durkhani*, written by Arbab Abdul Wakeel. A dramatized version is also available in book form.¹⁵

Translation:

Adam Khan was the most handsome man in his village, Upper Bazdarra. He was the only son of a tribal chief, Hassan Khan, and thus wealthy and worry-free. His passion was playing the *rubab*,¹⁶ the sweet melodies of which echoed all over Swat Valley. With masterful strokes of his fingers would magically spring mellow songs that could seize flying birds and move the still trees. Beautifully blending with music from the *rubab*, the words of his *tappas*¹⁷ would turn the whole aura of the valley charmingly exotic. Adam became prince of all girls' hearts. His songs sweetened their dreams. Indifferent to them, Adam Khan remained drunk with love for his *rubab* and an imaginary beloved.

His parents were proud of him, but they knew he was grown up now. It was time they searched for the most beautiful woman who would bring joy to their home. A bride who would lighten up Adam Khan's heart and give them grandchildren. One day they sent for him and said: "Son, you have grown up so handsome. We are proud that this brave generation of tribal chiefs is going to continue through you. It is time for you to get married." Adam Khan gracefully declined their advice. He wanted to wait for his imaginary beloved who was the reason behind the creation of his songs and the pain and pleasure in them. His parents decided not to press him while he kept playing his *rubab* to the one he had neither seen nor known.

Lost in thought, daydreaming about his imaginary beloved, one day, Adam Khan overheard someone whispering in his house. He learnt that it was an old woman from Lower Bazdarra. She was trying to describe the beauty of the only daughter of the chief of her village, Taus Khan: "Malik Taus Khan's

¹⁵ Wakeel, A. A. (2011). *Da Pashto Drama Adam Khan Durkhani*. Peshawar: Art Point.

¹⁶ A musical instrument with great significance in Pashto music.

¹⁷ *Tappa* is one of the oldest genres of poetry in Pashto. It consists of two unequal lines and reflects human feelings and emotions.

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daughter, Durkhani, is one in millions. You look at her and you can't take your eyes off her. I have never seen such a beautiful girl in my life," Adam Khan heard.

He had heard words of praise for other girls, too, but this time it was different. The very name 'Durkhani' captured his mind. And his heart! It was as if this was the princess of his heart, the one for whom his melodies were waiting for, the one whom his *tappas* had always invoked. He sent for the old woman and interviewed her.

"Does she have a mole on her left cheek?"

"Yes," said a surprised old woman.

"Is there a scar on her forehead?"

"Yes, yes," the old woman said. "Have you seen her, Adam Khan?"

"No!" a jubilant Adam Khan said, "just heard about her from you."

The old woman smiled.

"In fact, this is how she looks like in my dreams. This is the face that stimulates my songs. This is the beauty that listens to them."

The old woman was suddenly sad: "Probably you don't know that she is engaged to Payo."

Adam Khan felt devastated, as if struck by lightning. As if Payo had stabbed him un-warned. He turned pale. For a while he was paralyzed, but like all brave men of his tribe he soon recovered. However, instead of shrugging away her thoughts, he decided to go after her. His *rubab* turned sadder. His *tappas* and songs were soaked in pain. His heart was heavy! For the first time in his life, he began singing war epics!

They say the fire of love is never one-sided. It burns in two hearts. Its flames burn on both sides.

The old woman returned to her village to break some lovely news to Durkhani. She described the power of Durkhani's beauty and Adam Khan's love by relating what she had heard from him.

"I have never set foot out of this *haveli*¹⁸. How does he know about the mole on my cheek and the scar on my forehead?" Durkhani was surprised.

Within moments the light glow of love in her heart turned into a bright flame of *ishq*¹⁹. She had already heard about the love songs from the most handsome youth in Upper Bazdarra. Now she learned who these songs were meant for.

Then and there arrived the gift of that pleasing pain in Durkhani's heart.

"Looks like I have seen him too. He has full lips. Right?"

"Right."

"Does he have large blue eyes?"

"Yes, yes."

"Is Adam Khan's right cheek dimpled?" Durkhani buried her finger into her right cheek and the old woman almost fainted.

Durkhani was beside herself. She could see Adam Khan playing his *rubab* to her, singing his *tappas*. Her eyes started day dreaming the one who had stolen her sleep. She began talking to him, from far away.

One day, as Adam Khan was stitching beads from his *tappas* onto the strings of his *rubab*, he saw the old woman approaching him. This messenger of love revealed that Durkhani was listening to his songs. She sees him in the flowers of her *haveli*. The old woman gave him a bouquet, saying: "This is a token of her love for you. She is soon coming to grace a wedding in your village.

¹⁸ A mansion

¹⁹ Deep passionate love

Coming out of her home for the first time since early childhood ... the rest is up to you.”

The news gave added life to Adam Khan's love, a new tune to his songs, and a new edge to his tone. He was about to see the queen of his dreams. Time passed, slowly. The wait was endless. Finally, the day arrived. He was invited to play his *rubab* during the ceremony. There, they saw each other. Neither of them saw anyone else. She was exactly as he had imagined. Same youthfulness, same delicacy. His music had always maddened its listeners. All were convinced of its magic. Today his strings had attracted their real recipient. The tunes touched her ears and went on dancing, round and round. Adam Khan touched the strings and all hearts danced. The excitement of the listeners knew no bounds. He had played his masterpiece! Everyone thought he was celebrating the wedding. Only Durkhani knew he was celebrating her!

The wedding ceremony ended. All the guests left, one by one, including Durkhani. They took away with them all of Adam Khan's songs and their cheerfulness. He was left with heartache, loneliness. He had been burning the candle of her love for an eternity, but now, after having seen her, and seen her go away, he began burning himself. Within a few days, he looked pale. His parents thought he was sick. They called for *hakeems*²⁰. But his cure lay with no physician. It lay with Durkhani, whom he was unable to reach. When his condition grew worse, two of his close friends, Mehru and Balu, planned to rescue him from this madness. They worked out a plan, and on a moonless night under the thick shawl of darkness, they transported him to his beloved. On the other side of the twin villages, Durkhani had the support of the old woman, the messenger of their love, and reached a prearranged point.

The restless souls met and the pain of being separated turned into pleasure. If it had been in his control, he would have hidden Durkhani in the strings of his *rubab*. If it had been in her control she would have hidden Adam Khan behind the mole of her left cheek. Both were now unable to bear further separation.

²⁰ Experts of traditional healing practices

“You are engaged. You will be someone else’s bride. Won’t all my songs die forever?” Adam whispered into her ear.

“Don’t forget that, apart from a *rubab* you possess a gun. We are made for each other.” Durkhani tapped his gun.

Now, after this meeting, it was Durkhani’s turn to being lovesick. Her condition became a serious concern for her family. She was put on bed rest. She was glad her sickness had postponed her wedding. But she was wrong. The elders of the family suggested that marriage was the cure! She tried to convince her mother, her father, everyone! To no avail. She was put in the *doli*²¹ and sent away to her in-laws. When they were celebrating her possession, she was lying in the *doli* as if it were her coffin. As she reached the house of her husband, her lovesickness turned into physical sickness. This upset her husband and his family. They tried to treat her disease. *Hakeems, Veds*²², physicians were brought. All tried their best but were unable to diagnose the disease, not to speak of a cure. Eventually, they decided to send her back for a while to her parents’ home. The change of climate might work wonders.

Adam Khan received constant updates on Durkhani's health. Her wedding, her sickness, her return; all these events added to his restlessness. He was becoming thinner and paler every passing day. His mother cried for him all the time. His father, Hassan Khan Malik, though a very strong tribal chief, was also unable to bear it anymore. By now he knew what was causing this, and was ready to take any steps to please his son. He wanted the opinion of his friend, Mirmai.

“Mirmai, you are my great friend and well-wisher. You know Adam Khan’s condition. I can’t bear to see him sick. You tell me what to do.”

Mirmai ventured, “We have no choice but to bring Durkhani, by force, to Adam Khan.” Hassan Khan Malik agreed with him, and so, one day, accompanied by armed men, they left silently for Lower Bazdarra to attack Taus Khan’s house.

²¹ *Doli* is a colorfully decorated palanquin used to transport the bride from her parents’ house to her husband’s house at the occasion of her wedding.

²² A healer

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Taus Khan was not ready for this onslaught. Yet, he fought bravely. Hassan Khan Malik had to defeat him. He had to save his son. The heir to his chieftdom. So he took no time to forcefully pick Durkhani up.

Durkhani's arrival let Adam Khan's breathe again. His sadness vanished. Smiles returned. His *rubab* came alive! His lips staged the dance of his *tappas*. Durkhani was also happy. Her rosy cheeks returned. Her love had reached its destination. She had found her Adam Khan. She would sit by his side and listen to songs of love. Her laughter would echo in the valley. Her heart was filled with joy.

Unaware of what was in store for them, they kept playing songs of love. Fate laughed at them as they happily planned their future. Taus Khan was furious at his defeat and disgrace. He was burning in the fire of revenge. Hassan Khan and his companions had dishonoured him. He was planning to take revenge on them. He knew it was impossible to defeat Hassan Khan on the battlefield, so he planned to trick him. Taus Khan had to buy the loyalty of Hassan's friend, Mirmai.

Mirmai was not a poor man, yet he was trapped by his greed for wealth and ready to deceive his faithful friend. He cunningly arranged the return of Durkhani, who still trusted him as Hassan Khan's friend. So Durkhani was once again in the prison of her father. Her health that was improving at Adam Khan's house began deteriorating again. She would curse Mirmai and cry all day in memory of Adam Khan. She was losing hope in life.

Adam Khan's condition was no better. The strings of his *rubab* had broken. He was insensitive to everything. His parents lost hope in him. Everyone on his side was without hope, except for his two friends: Mehru and Ballu. They had faith in Adam Khan's love, and their loyalty. They were certain that, one day, they would fix the broken strings of his *rubab* and bring songs back into Adam Khan's life. They devised a plan and convinced Adam Khan that it would surely work.

All three of them, Mehru, Ballu and Adam Khan, disguised themselves as beggars and *dervishes*²³ and quietly left their village for Durkhani's. They sat outside the village at Shaheed's shrine, and acted as *faqees*²⁴. The news of the arrival of three *faqees* spread like wildfire in the village. People believed they were spiritually blessed *dervishes* as they had shunned worldly pleasures and preferred sitting at the shrine.

They attracted many people from the village, who came to ask for their blessings. People brought meals for them, and made offerings to them. They were also visited by the old woman, who was the messenger of love. Immediately, she recognized them and resumed her old role of being a confidante.

The old woman went to see Taus Khan one day and said: "Taus Khan you might have heard that some *faqees* have arrived in our village. They are staying at Shaheed's Shrine. All the people believe that they are very pious and can pray to fulfil everyone's desires and cure all diseases."

"Yes. I too have heard this."

"Why don't you ask these *dervishes* to pray for Durkhani? Their prayers may bring health back to our child."

Concerned about Durkhani's health, Taus Khan agreed at once. The old woman hurriedly went to Durkhani and broke the great news.

"Congratulations, my daughter! Adam Khan will soon come to see you in the disguise of a *faqeer*. Be careful. No one should doubt it. If a rose falls from your hands this time, every single petal will scatter and you will gather nothing. Decorate this rose flower carefully in your hair and bathe your soul in its fragrance."

The old woman then went running to Shaheed Shrine and said to Adam Khan, "Hurry up and go with me to Durkhani's home. The closed door of your

²³ Sages

²⁴ A mendicant dervish

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fate is about to open. The darkness of your fate is about to turn into the dawn of your life. Lady Luck awaits you!”

She brought Adam Khan, disguised as a dervish, to Taus Khan’s home. Durkhani was lying on her bed. Her face gloomy. But as soon as she heard Adam Khan's heartbeat, her heart began pounding joyously. Adam Khan’s eyes were on his love. She opened hers and stole a quick look at his face. She identified his eyes. A repressed tear from her left eye washed the mole on her cheek, and welcomed him. She had totally changed. Changed so much that he could not bear it. He fell down, senseless. His disguise could no longer work. Taus Khan stood nearby, watching it all. He was enraged to see that Adam Khan had again crept into his house. He stepped forward to behead him with a single flash of his sword. The old woman again jumped at this.

She stopped him and said, “Taus Khan, aren’t you in your senses? Why are you inviting disgrace for your family? Do something so that the snake dies and the stick remains intact.”

The old woman’s piece of advice worked. Taus Khan stopped. Adam Khan came to his senses only to see Tause Khan enraged. The old woman sat there, frightened. Durkhani was crying.

“O you cunning man!” Taus Khan roared, “Your plans have failed. I wanted to kill you at once but I feel mercy for my daughter.” Then he said, decidedly, “If you want to stay alive, go back to your village at once.”

Adam Khan looked helplessly at Durkhani, half dead on her bed, and left Taus Khan’s house. He returned to his friends at Shaheed’s Shrine. They were scared to hear about all that had happened to him at Taus Khan’s house. Now it was advisable for them to leave Lower Bazdarra at once. As Adam Khan left Durkhani’s village, he carried his body but his soul was left behind, he carried his *rubab* but its songs were left behind.

Back in the village, he found himself living aimlessly. He was sick of the world, the distance, the meaningless wars between tribes. Nothing interested him

now. His eyes saw Durkhani. His breath called for Durkhani. He was heading towards death.

The only son of the tribal chief, Hassan Khan Malik, was dying. Hassan Khan Malik was worried about the future of his son, his family, his tribe. The future was Adam Khan. He must revive him. His death had to be avoided. Taus Khan had to be defeated. One possible solution to the situation could be his marriage. Hassan Khan Malik began a search for the prettiest girl for his son. His eyes spotted Gulnaar. She was the most beautiful of all girls of the tribe. As she sat among her friends it looked as if the moon was surrounded by stars. She stood out gracefully, even among a big crowd of young girls. Her eyes were like a deer's, her posture like a cane. When her hair moved in the air, shades of dark clouds descended down to kiss them. Her face bloomed like a rose. She walked like an excited peacock. Whoever saw her fell in love with her. She was in the dreams of all the young men of the tribe. She was their dream! Hassan Khan Malik hoped Adam Khan would forget Durkhani once he was in Gulnaar's company. This might bring him back to life. But he was mistaken. Adam Khan did not even look at her. His eyes were home to Durkhani, no one else could enter them. His heart was filled with pain for Durkhani, nothing could replace it.

Adam Khan's condition worsened every passing day. The love that had added meaning to his life was now slowly killing him. The only remedy was his union with Durkhani. That was impossible now, at least in this world. He was surrendering his life to fate. Every night he had to labour to fetch Durkhani to mind. By the time she came alive Adam Khan was out of breath. For a brief moment, his eyes would light up. A flicker, then all was dark again. As soon as her image vanished, Adam Khan's heart sank. His lungs struggled to catch their fill of oxygen.

One night, the world learned: "Adam Khan has died."

"Bazdarra's melody has died."

"Malik Hassan Khan's dreams have died."

"*Rubab's* strings have broken."

“Beads of Adam Khan’s breath have scattered.”

The news spread all over the village, and then the whole valley. The valley fell silent. Mountains were awed. Trees were still. Pastures were orphaned: loveless, soulless, rubabless.

Everyone praised the deceased, naming him the *shaheed*²⁵ of love. It seemed as if life ceased to be. Existence buried itself in silence.

On the other side of the valley, Durkhani was slowly breaking the strings of her breath in Adam Khan’s name. She had dreams of eternal union with Adam Khan. Apart from these dreams, she found some solace on the shoulders of the old woman, the messenger of her love.

One day she had a dream. She was in a beautiful garden with her friends when she heard a tune on a *rubab*. She looked toward where the sound was coming from and joyfully spotted Adam Khan in a silver boat floating on a clear water lake. He was singing the song of their love. He spread out his arms to hug her. She swam through the waves and pulled herself into his arms. Then suddenly the lake turned into an ocean. An ocean that was stormy. The boat was jolted by the storm. It shook violently. Durkhani was scared. She gave a loud shriek, and woke up. The old woman was sitting next to her, consoling her. She hugged the old woman and asked, crying: “Mother, Adam Khan’s boat has not sunk, has it?”

“Daughter, your Adam Khan is no more. He has given his life to your love.” The old woman sobbed.

Scared, Durkhani shrieked and loudly called for him, “Adam Khan, where are you?” The whole village heard her calling Adam Khan. Everyone could see her heading his way!

With this she turned her face away from this world. The old woman shook her hands, attempting to wake her. But she had set out on a journey to where her Adam Khan was.

²⁵ A martyr

Storytellers say that people witnessed the reunion of these true lovers, as there were two dead bodies in Durkhani's grave. Durkhani and Adam Khan's shrine still exists in Swat Valley. People still pay tribute to these martyrs to love. It is also said that two trees grew from their grave. Their branches are in an eternal embrace. They say that people who make a *rubab* with wood from these trees become the best musicians, as their songs have the tunes of Adam Khan's *rubab*.

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