



The Folklore of *Challa* in Popular Culture: A Psychoanalytic Exploration

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Abstract

The Punjabi folk song *Challa* emerges as a dynamic cultural symbol, evolving from its rural origins and placed into a global phenomenon that reflects the fluidity of cultural memory and identity in a globalised world. Over time, *Challa* has been reinterpreted and reimagined across diverse contexts, from traditional folk versions to Bollywood adaptations. These adaptations reflect shifting representations of masculinity, migration, and identity, with *Challa* functioning as a metaphor for the diasporic experience and the existential crises faced by individuals in the context of globalisation. From a Lacanian perspective, *Challa* symbolises the human condition of lack and desire. The grief of the father and the drowning of the son mirrors the cultural and existential crises faced by Punjabi families in the context of migration and economic displacement. Through its various adaptations, *Challa* highlights the tension between tradition and modernity, local and global identities, and past and present dimensions of Punjabi folklore. *Challa* emerges as a potent symbol that represents a generation of sons fractured by migration, economic precarity, collectively mourned by Punjab.

Keywords: Alienation, *Challa*, Global Identity, Migration, Psychoanalysis

Introduction

Challa, a quintessential Punjabi folk song, has transcended its regional roots to become a folk mutant—a dynamic cultural artifact that traverses time, space, and identity. As Chawla observes, “Folk mutants . . . have traversed a long distance, both in time and space,

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reincarnated in many avatars, each as valid and potent as the earlier form, each unfolding myriad subjectivities and each a pertinent milestone in constructions of glocal identities” (7). This description aptly captures *Challa*’s evolution: from its origins in rural Punjab to its reinterpretations in Bollywood and beyond, the song has continually adapted to new contexts, reflecting the fluidity and preservation of cultural memory in a globalised world. Whether through the melodies of traditional folk singers like Arif Lohar, Gurdas Maan, or the Bollywood style reimagining of Shah Rukh Khan in *Jab Tak Hai Jaan*, or a hedonistic masculinity encouraged by foreign locales embodied in the protagonist of the movie *Crook* played by Emraan Hashmi, *Challa* has roamed not only across native regions but also Western lands, mirroring the diasporic experiences of its protagonists.

The word *Challa* carries multiple layers of meaning in Punjabi culture. Literally, it refers to a ring—a token of love gifted to a beloved with the promise of marriage or as a keepsake of love. Metaphorically, it represents connection and loss, themes central to the folk song *Challa*. Structurally, *Challa* deviates from conventional Indian poetry, which typically features a *Mukhda* (introductory lines) followed by four-line stanzas (*Antraa*), instead, *Challa* is composed of three-line stanzas followed by two closing lines, creating a unique five-line verse structure in a fixed metre (*The Story of Challa*). The repetitive rhythm and meter facilitate memorisation, allowing the song to be passed down through oral tradition. For the purpose of this paper, all the verses from the various songs have been translated into English by the author.

Historical Origins: The Story of *Jhalla* and *Challa*

The rivers in Punjab have not only helped in livelihood but also shaped the cultural identity carrying symbolic meaning that have evolved throughout the historical context wherein the rivers have facilitated various migrations and invasions throughout history, which have, in turn, enabled the creation of folklore around it. The origins of *Challa* lie in the tragic tale of *Jhalla*, a sailor who ferried passengers and goods across the rivers of Punjab. When *Jhalla* fell gravely ill, his teenage son, *Challa*, volunteered to row across the

river to fetch medicine from a neighbouring village. Though inexperienced, *Challa* set out at dawn, attempting to row straight across the powerful current. Unaware of the river's flow, he failed to account for the downstream force and tragically drowned. *Jhalla*, waiting endlessly for his son's return, succumbed to grief and delusion. He wandered the streets, singing verses of loss and longing, which later became the foundation of the *Challa* folk song (*The Story of Challa*). This story encapsulates the fragility of human connection and the irreversibility of loss, themes that resonate deeply in Punjab's collective consciousness due to the migrations in and out of the region.

Modern Adaptations of *Challa*

Over the decades, *Challa* has been reimagined and remodelled by numerous artists, each infused with distinctive placement of *Challa* in accordance with diverse spatial and temporal landscapes. In the 1970s, Pakistani folk singers like Shaukat Ali, Inayat Ali, and Alam Lohar popularised the song, with Alam's son, Arif Lohar, continuing the legacy (*The Story of Challa*). Earlier, in 1934, a version written by Fazal Shah and sung by Aashiq Hussain Jatt was released on an LP by HMV, marking one of the earliest recorded renditions (*The Story of Challa*). In Punjab, artists like Gurdas Maan, Rabbi Shergill, and Babbu Maan have reimagined *Challa*, inserting it with contemporary themes of migration and identity. The cinematic representation of *Challa* in Bollywood films has been contextually constructed to serve the narrative purposes of each movie, yielding two distinct recapitulations of masculinity: one characterised by a softer, romanticised portrayal, wherein *Challa* is depicted as a sentimental figure searching for lost love, and another marked by a more aggressive, lascivious, and hedonistic representation, in which *Challa* is portrayed as an epicurean figure driven by carnal desires, with little regard for emotional attachment, placed in foreign locales. These two divergent representations of *Challa* can be observed in the Bollywood films *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* (2012), where Shah Rukh Khan embodies a softer, romanticised portrayal of *Challa*, and *Crook* (2010), where Emraan Hashmi depicts a more aggressive, lascivious, and hedonistic iteration of the character.

Lacanian Analysis of *Challa*

From Lacanian perspective, *Challa* can be analysed as a narrative of lack and desire—the father’s endless search for his son mirrors the human condition of seeking wholeness in a world defined by absence. The river, where *Challa* drowns, symbolises the Real, the chaotic, unrepresentable void that disrupts the Symbolic Order (the realm of language and societal norms). *Jhalla*’s delusional wandering after his son’s death reflects a collapse of the Symbolic Order, as he is unable to reconcile his loss within the structures of meaning. Modern adaptations of *Challa*, particularly those addressing migration, extend this Lacanian framework: the son’s departure abroad represents a rupture in the familial and cultural fabric, leaving parents in a state of perpetual lack and longing. The ring (*Challa*), once a symbol of connection, becomes a token of absence, embodying the phallic loss that destabilises patriarchal continuity. The father’s loss is not just personal but a cultural crisis, especially in Punjabi context with migration and diaspora. In the modern renditions, for instance *Challa in Chandigarh*, desires to escape the father’s phallic control. The gap he encounters when faced with expectations of the capitalistic world mirrors Lacan’s idea of the split subject, forever alienated from their true self after entering the Symbolic but fills it with the fantasies provided by capitalism. *Challa* is not just lost in the Symbolic but drowning in the Real’s unmanageable demands for instance, assimilation pressures and identity erasure. It is the illusion of being in control which topples down revealing a lack. *Challa* confronts the Real world’s chaos embodied in the rivers causing death, fears and angst experienced in foreign lands, all of which reflects the traumatic excess of globalisation. In the foreign world, he drowns in the unspeakable trauma of dislocation—neither Punjabi nor global, he becomes a subject of the Real, eternally circling the void of his own desire. *Challa*’s inability to express his inner turmoil points to Lacan’s Real—the traumatic, indescribable void that escapes language. His drowning (literal or metaphorical) in the foreign Real (e.g., migration, alienation) reflects the collapse of Symbolic structures. This existential crisis parallels with *Bullah Ki Jana Main Kaun* in which existential crisis of Bullah stems out of rejecting the construction of identity through structures of meaning in the symbolic realm and to further search for the real, both grapple

with the unanswerable lack at the core of subjectivity, questioning identity in a world where meaning is unstable. The desire to return to the pre-Oedipal world (union with the mother, before Symbolic law) is a key Lacanian tension. However, *Challa*'s longing for home could symbolise this pre-Symbolic unity, but his drowning in the Real (foreign world) makes this return impossible—the Real destroys fantasies of wholeness. It reflects the broader socio-cultural crisis of Punjab, marked by agrarian and economic losses, exacerbated by government policies that corporatise farming and further loss of male lives in protests.

Thematic and Visual Analysis

The collaborative rendition of *Challa* by Gurdas Maan and Diljit Dosanjh blends traditional folk motifs with contemporary issues of migration, creating a layered narrative of love, longing, and societal constraints (Maan and Dosanjh). The song opens with a plea, *Javo Ni Koi Morh Liavo, Ni Mere Naal Geya Ajj Lad Ke* (Someone bring him back, he left after fighting with me today), immediately grounding the narrative in the anguish of separation. The invocation of divine intervention—*Allah Kare Je Aa Jave Sohna Dewan Jaan Qadman Vich Dhar Ke* (O Allah, if you bring back my love, I'll give my life at his feet)—elevates the beloved to a divine figure while alluding to the concept of devotion as known in Sufi singing. The metaphor of *Challa* as a bud yet to flower meaning yet to fulfil expectations and desires—*Challa Beri Oye Boor Eh, Ve Watan Mahi Da Door Eh* (*Challa* is the flower (of which fruit is yet to come), the beloved's land is far away)—captures the tension between love's fragility or ephemeral nature and its enduring promise. The well (*khoo*h), a recurring motif in Punjabi folk traditions, becomes a site of clandestine intimacy: *Challa Khoo*h *Te Dhariye, Ve Gallan Mooh Te Kariye* (Meet me at the well, let's speak face-to-face). The depth of the well also parallels the profundity of the conversations. Historically tied to women's labour, the well is reimagined here as a space of romantic rebellion, where societal norms are momentarily suspended. The imagery oscillates between sweetness and sorrow, as seen in lines: *Challa Kaaliyan Mirchan, Ve Mauhra Pee Ke Marsaan, Ve Tere Sir Chadsan* (*Challa* is like black pepper, I feel like dying by drinking thornapple), where love is both a source of

vitality and pain. The earlier version of *Challa* had the line *Puttar Mithde Meve, Allah Sab Nu Deve* (Sons are sweet, may Allah bless everyone with sons), and the later version by Gurdas Maan and Diljit Dosanjh had an added line *Dhian Sab Nu Deve* (May daughters be born to everyone), it reflects a shifting societal attitude which underscores a move away from a son-centric society, where only males were seen as capable of carrying forward family lineage. The separation from *Challa* is mourned in the lines: *Challa mud ke ni aaya, ve malleya des paraya, ve rona umran da paya, ve gall sun challeya, dhola, ve saad ke kita e kola* (*Challa*, never returned, left for a distant land, gave a lifetime of grief, listen *Challa*, this parting has burnt me like a coal), it evokes a sense of perpetual grief, sung in a ballad-style rendition and use of word *dhola*, usually reserved for a male beloved, indicate that *Challa*'s absence is lamented by his lover. The lyrics explore the themes of cultural continuity, through objects passed down to generations; the transient nature of the material world and the bond with loved ones—*Challa gal di ve gaani/ ve tur gye dilaan de jaani/ meri dukhan di kahani/ ve aa ke sun ja zubaani* (*Challa*, the chain that adorned my neck, my beloved has departed, come and listen to the story of my sorrows, in my own voice); *Ho challa paya e gehne/ ve Sajjan belli ni rehne/ ve sir te maape ni rehne/ ve dukh jindadi de sehne/ ve gall sun challeya dhola ve kahda paana e rola* (*Challa*, presented jewels, friends and mates will leave, parents will pass, life is forever bound in sorrow, listen *Challa*, why then you lament). *Gaani* (neck chain) that once adorned the neck, touching the heart in a literal sense, just like people who touch our hearts in a metaphorical sense, neither lasts forever. *Gehne* (jewellery) passed down through generations symbolises not only material wealth but also the cultural heritage and emotional bonds tied to them. The lyrics highlight the inevitability of loss and the impermanence of worldly possessions and relationships. It calls to reflect on the futility of clinging to material possessions and relationships that are destined to fade. The narrative of *Challa* expands to encompass universal themes, transcending personal love and loss to touch the common human thread. The collaborative nature of the song, with Maan's earthy folk timbre complementing Dosanjh's modern cadence, mirrors the interplay of tradition and innovation in Punjabi music, making *Challa* a bridge between the past and present.

The music video *Challa in Chandigarh* by Sarthi K and Sachin Ahuja employs a narrative technique, where the chorus serves as an omnipresent narrator, recounting the story of a young protagonist who after passing grade twelve comes to Chandigarh for higher studies: *Challa karke plus 2 pass/ te baapu de paa ke tarle pahunch janda hai Chandigarh* (After passing 12th grade, Challa begged his father and reached Chandigarh) (K and Ahuja). This narrative style creates a sense of detachment, underscoring the chorus's role as an external observer. The story of *Challa* begins with his transition from rural village life to urban city life, as he leaves his hometown to pursue higher education. This movement is symbolic of *Challa's* desire for upward mobility and his quest for freedom and urbanity: *Chandigarh Padhan main jaun/ degree karke aaun/ banu patwari main baapu* (I will go to Chandigarh to study, earn a degree and become a *Patwari*, father). However, as he becomes increasingly entrenched in city life, *Challa's* values and priorities begin to shift, reflecting the influence of capitalist ideologies. The character of the girl serves as a sign of the allure of urban capitalism, representing the temptation of upward mobility at the cost of abandoning one's rural roots. *Challa's* relationships with his friends, who introduce him to drinking and drugs, further reinforce the notion that city life is inherently corrupting: *Nashe de paale chaske/ oh ik kaala maal vi chhakda* (He developed addiction to drugs and relishes black-coloured drug substance). Throughout the narrative, the chorus provides commentary on *Challa's* moral degeneration, highlighting the tension between his rural upbringing and his adoption of urban values. *Challa* meaning "ring" shaped in a circle reflects the protagonist's circular journey, moving from rural to urban and back again with lessons learned. This circular motion serves as a metaphor for *Challa's* existential search, as he navigates the complexities of identity, morality, and belonging. In this version, *Challa's* journey begins with a movement away from the Symbolic Order—the patriarchal structure embodied by his father's authority. His desire to escape the father's phallic control (the Law-of-the-Father) disrupts the generational pact, propelling him into the alienating realm of the Symbolic, where he seeks new structures of meaning. However, instead of finding coherence, he encounters a moral degeneration—a collapse of the promise of stability in the Symbolic. This rupture exposes the fragility of meaning, as the fantasies of urban life and

capitalist aspirations fail to fill the gap left by his departure from the familial order. The Real—Lacan’s domain of the unrepresentable and traumatic—shatters his illusions of wholeness, revealing the emptiness beneath the promises of modernity. *Challa*’s journey, thus, becomes a metaphor for the migrant’s disillusionment, where the search for identity in an urban world only deepens the sense of dislocation and loss.

The song *Challa* from the 2012 film *Jab Tak Hai Jaan*, directed by Yash Chopra, presents a poignant narrative that explores the complexities of identity, love, and existential crisis (Shergill). The protagonist, Samar Anand, played by Shah Rukh Khan, is placed against the alienating backdrop of London. Following a chance encounter with Meera, played by Katrina Kaif, Samar’s life is forever altered as he navigates the intricacies of love, loss, and self-discovery. The song “*Challa*” serves as a poignant reflection of Samar’s existential crisis and fragmented identity seeking to fill the lack. The lyrics of *Challa*—*Challa ki labh da phire?* (Wanderer, what are you searching for?)—is sung in almost a Sufi inflected melody. The repeated questioning of *Yaaron mera ghar kehda?* (Where is my home?) reflects the sense of displacement when faced with existential struggle. The use of antithesis: *Challa hasda phire . . . rounda phire* (Wanderer, you roam happily . . . in sorrow) and *Challe tu sab da . . . tera koi nahi* (You belong to everyone . . . no one is yours), highlights tension between conflicting identity formations, oppositional forces that shape the fragmented self. Samar’s search for home is metaphorically tied to Meera, whose fleeting appearances—*Dikhda ni ohdi khushbuan sunghda* (I can’t see her but smell her fragrance)—position her as a Lacanian *objet petit a*, the unattainable object of desire that propels his endless wandering. The camera’s focus on Katrina Kaif—framed as the elusive home—symbolises the impossibility of union in a world where belonging is reduced to transient encounters. Samar’s performative existence, juggling odd jobs amidst a carnivalesque London (statue mimics, circus performers), reflects the hyperreal absurdity of modernity, where identity is a pastiche of borrowed roles. The protagonist’s navigation of different worlds, both physical and metaphorical, is exemplified by his interactions with children, where he appears to be suspended between a state of childlike

carefreeness, the pre-oedipal stage and concealed adult restlessness, the encounter with the symbolic. The bridge scene, where Samar sings *Na visaal hoya kadi . . . Na judai hoi* (No union, no separation), the bridge, a liminal space between past and present, becomes a metaphor for his suspended state: neither rooted nor free, he is *Ishq da kaidi* (prisoner of love) trapped in the Symbolic order's language, articulating absence through presence. The closing scene, where Meera tosses a coin into his guitar case at dusk, offers a false resolution: Samar momentarily halts his search *Challa ki labh da phire*, only to dissolve into the void of unfulfilled desire. Through this, *Challa* becomes a meta-commentary on Bollywood's commodification of folk trauma, where the ring (*challa*) of cultural memory is both preserved and commodified. The song employs a pastiche of traditional folklore, recontextualising it within a modern framework.

The song *Challa* from the movie *Crook*, featuring Emraan Hashmi and sung by Babbu Mann, presents a narrative that explores the inhibitions of the libidinal desire. The music video opens with the protagonist's migration from India to a foreign land, where he seeks to earn a living as a taxi driver: *Raat-din taxi chalaunda/ Ve mote dollar kamaunda* (He drives a taxi day and night/ Earns a handsome sum in dollars) (Mann and D'Mello). The lyrics and visuals of the song embody a spirit of epicureanism, as the protagonist indulges in drinking and revelry with friends: *Challa akhiyan seke/ Goriyan mema'n dekhe/ Labh ke naina de theke/ Jaam rajj-rajj ke bharda/ Pooriyan aishan karda, haaye* (*Challa* finds pleasure in the sight of white girls, he drinks to his heart's content, embraces a hedonistic life). The music transitions from traditional Punjabi folk sounds to a more contemporary disco beat, underscoring the protagonist's cultural displacement and his desire to assimilate into the foreign culture, he opts to indulge in the hedonistic pleasures of the foreign land. The use of female figures in the song as signs of the protagonist's desire and complex interplay of exoticisation, objectification, and cultural inscriptions undercut through a nuanced and equitable perception. The foreign girls he encounters in the clubs serve as embodiments of the exotic and the unknown, while the female love interest back in India represents a loss of connection with his cultural heritage and traditional values. The final stanza, sung

from the perspective of the female lead, subverts the traditional power dynamics of romantic relationships, as she asserts her independence and autonomy, declaring that she does not need the protagonist: *Challa, tu nahi, na sahi/ Hor vi mukhde ne kayi/ Jinnhaan 'te akh jehi aa gayi/ Tu jaana hai taan hun ja/ Saanu nahi teri parwaah* (*Challa if not you, then someone else will do, there are plenty of other faces out there, so leave if you want, I do not care*). This narrative twist underscores the complexities of desire, identity, and cultural displacement that are central to the themes of the song.

Sidhu Moosewala's cover of *Challa* takes on a more personal significance, as it seems to symbolise the artist's own tragic demise (Moosewala). Moosewala's embodiment of the spirit of *Challa*, marked by struggles and hardships, invokes a poignant image. *Challa* has also been adapted across different genres and cultural contexts as presented in Bob B Randhawa's portrayal of *Challa* in a rap style, a Punjabi hip hop genre reflecting the versatility of *Challa* as a cultural symbol (Randhawa). In a public service announcement produced by the Chandigarh Police on YouTube, *Challa* is portrayed as a reckless driver who meets with an accident, serving as a cautionary tale about the dangers of rash driving (B Singh). These diverse interpretations of *Challa* underpin the diversity, complexity and richness of the character, allowing it to be recontextualised and reinterpreted in various ways.

***Challa* and *Jugni*: Parallel Folk Narratives**

The *Challa* narrative serves as a versatile framework for exploring themes such as identity, morality, and the human condition which also aligns to another cultural symbol of Punjabi folk, *Jugni*. *Jugni* defies singular identity markers such as religion, caste, or region, her only defining characteristic is her gender—a fluid, universal archetype. Similarly, *Challa*, is stripped of specific identity markers and reinterpreted across time and space (S Singh). While *Challa* embodies a fixed tragedy—a son lost to the river, a father trapped in grief—*Jugni* represents fluidity and movement “because she is a woman liberated from the home and hearth and undertakes free travel as she participates in this community space with verve and gusto” (S Singh). As a wandering female figure, *Jugni* transcends the

boundaries of the Symbolic Order that defies patriarchal constraints. Where *Challa*'s narrative is one of irreversible loss, *Jugni*'s journey is open-ended, reflecting resilience and adaptability. This contrast highlights the gendered dimensions of Punjabi folk traditions: while *Challa*'s story is rooted in male-centric themes of lineage and duty, *Jugni*'s narrative offers a subversive counterpoint, celebrating the unbound feminine spirit. The folklore of *Challa* and *Jugni* has been perpetuated through various musical renditions in Urdu, Hindi, and Punjabi, reflecting their enduring presence in the popular imagination. These narratives have been reinterpreted and recontextualised across different mediums, including film, to reflect the resilience and agency of their female protagonists. Together, they illustrate how folk narratives can evolve into glocal symbols, resonating with universal themes while remaining deeply rooted in the cultural imagination of Punjab.

Conclusion

Challa as a symbol provides a space for the representation of the plight of young Punjabi males in contemporary time faced with economic challenges that compel them to migrate. The songs portray two kinds of migration: internal migration, where *Challa* moves from a rural setting to an urban setting which shows the moral degeneration associated with city life; and, external migration outside the nation, where he is placed in a foreign culture and thus, the consequent experience of loss, alienation and degeneration. The gloomy tone of the song *Challa* by Gurdas Maan and Diljit Dosanjh resonates with the contemporary experiences of Punjabi families who have lost their sons to the challenges of migration, visa processes, and global politics. Similarly, the themes of alienation and loss are experienced by the parents and Punjab emerges as a poignant image of homeland which mourns the absence of its sons and the resultant economic precariousness. The loss of sons to fathers is not only an emotional trauma but also a symbolic emasculation, representing the disruption of patrilineal lineage and the loss of phallic power. The Bollywood adaptation of *Challa* embodies the image of forlorn, wandering lover seeking to resolve the existential crisis through the desire for stability in the materialisation of his love. The analysis from a Lacanian standpoint on the human condition highlights the inherent tension

between lack and desire. While *Challa* represents loss and longing when he leaves his homeland, *Jugni*, on the other hand, emerges as a symbol of feminine liberation breaking free from patriarchal constraints. Her connection with the real world marks the beginning of her journey as *Jugni*, embodying the tensions between the symbolic and the real, the local and the global. These narratives offer a nuanced understanding of the complexities of identity and culture.

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