

## Urdu Literature and Politics: An Inextricable Tapestry of Narrative and Power

1. Dr. Zahid Akhtar Shaheen. Assistant Professor Urdu (Visiting)
2. Dr. Shazia Andleeb Assitant Professor Urdu (Corresponding Author)
3. Muhammad Waseem (Azad)
4. Muhammad Ahmad
5. Tanveer Ahmad
6. Awais Ghani

**Abstract:** *This comprehensive study explores the deeply intertwined relationship between Urdu literature and the political milieu, emphasizing their mutual influence across various historical epochs in the Indian subcontinent and Pakistan. Urdu literature, known for its rich poetic tradition and extensive corpus of prose, has been an integral cultural component, articulating political resistance, fostering national identity, and reflecting social dynamics from the time of the Delhi Sultanate through the Mughal era, colonial period, and into the contemporary political landscape of Pakistan. The research initially contextualizes the advent of Urdu literature in the socio-political ambiance of the Delhi Sultanate, followed by its proliferation during the Mughal reign. This period witnessed Urdu literature, particularly poetry, gaining prominence as a tool for both subtle political dissent and endorsement within royal courts. The study examines literary contributions from iconic figures like Amir Khusrau and Mirza Ghalib, exploring how their works transcended mere artistic expression, encapsulating the political zeitgeist and societal norms. Progressing into the colonial era and the subsequent fight for independence, the paper underscores a paradigm shift where Urdu literature transitioned from the elite's cultural pastime to a force for political awakening and social reform. It discusses the works of Allama Iqbal, whose poetry fueled nationalist fervor, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, whose leftist ideology and opposition to authoritarianism resonate in his writings. The analysis extends to Saadat Hasan Manto's poignant short stories that lay bare the chaos and human cost of Partition.*

*Post-independence, the research delves into the evolution of Urdu literature in Pakistan, amidst alternating democratic and authoritarian regimes. The paper dissects how state narratives influenced literary expression, especially during the dictatorial reigns when literature became a subversive act, challenging state oppression and societal injustices. Herein, the study investigates the literary responses to political events like military coups, the imposition of martial law, and movements for democratic rights, highlighting the works of writers and poets who continued the tradition of dissent and social commentary. Furthermore, the research analyzes the contemporary role of Urdu literature in the political*

*discourse, considering the impact of globalization, the War on Terror, and the digital revolution. It elucidates how contemporary Urdu literature navigates issues of identity, secularity, and radicalism, continuing its legacy as a commentator on and reflector of political dynamics.*

*Conclusively, this study reaffirms Urdu literature not just as a vehicle of cultural expression but as an active participant in shaping and critiquing the political narrative. Through a diachronic review of literary works across different political eras, it highlights the enduring power of Urdu literature as a medium that reflects, resists, and, at times, reinforces political ideologies and actions.*

**Keywords:** Urdu Literature, politics, inextricable Tapestry, Narrative and Power

## Introduction

Urdu literature, a luminous beacon of cultural expression emanating from the heart of the Indian subcontinent, has, for centuries, played a profound role in echoing the socio-political zeitgeist of the region. With origins intricately linked to the amalgamation of Persian, Arabic, and local Indian dialects, the language of Urdu became not only a reflection of this rich tapestry of cultural convergence but also a vital tool for political dialogue and discourse.

The inception of Urdu can be traced back to the bustling camps and marketplaces of the Indian subcontinent, where soldiers, traders, and poets from diverse linguistic backgrounds converged, laying the foundation of what would eventually blossom into a full-fledged language. As Urdu literature began its nascent journey, it was initially cradled in the courts of Delhi, with the Sultanate and subsequent Mughal Empire patronizing poets and writers. This patronage enabled Urdu poetry, especially the ghazal, to flourish as a favored form of intellectual and artistic expression. However, what is often overlooked is the undertone of political discourse embedded within these poetic verses, subtly commenting on governance, social justice, and the occasional decadence of the royals.

As history progressed, so did the landscape of the Indian subcontinent. With the onset of British colonialism, Urdu literature found itself at the crossroads of resistance and reform. The introduction of printing presses and widespread literacy campaigns provided Urdu writers with a platform to reach a broader audience. This democratization of literature allowed Urdu to transition from the elite confines of the royal courts to the homes and hearts of the common populace. This shift had a twofold impact: it spurred Urdu literature to play an active role in the fight against colonial oppression, while simultaneously turning it into a mirror reflecting societal upheavals, particularly during the tumultuous period leading up to the Partition in 1947.

Post-Partition, with Pakistan's establishment, Urdu acquired a new political dimension. Declared as the national language, it became a symbol of national unity, even as regional linguistic identities resisted its

imposition. Literature in this era became a battleground, where state narratives of identity and ideology were both promoted and challenged. Urdu writers and poets, while navigating the often treacherous waters of censorship and state pressure, continued to produce works that highlighted societal disparities, critiqued authoritarian tendencies, and celebrated the resilience of the human spirit.

This paper, therefore, seeks to embark on a detailed journey through the annals of Urdu literature, tracing its evolution in tandem with the political events and ideologies that shaped the region. Through a comprehensive exploration of literary texts, historical records, and political documents, the study aims to unravel the symbiotic relationship between Urdu literature and politics, emphasizing how one has continually shaped and been shaped by the other. In doing so, we will delve deep into the myriad ways in which Urdu literature has been both a reflection of and a catalyst for political change, weaving a rich tapestry of narrative and power that spans centuries.

### **The Advent of Urdu Literature in the Socio-Political Ambiance of the Delhi Sultanate**

**Historical Backdrop:** The Delhi Sultanate, spanning from the 13th to the 16th century, represented a transformative period in the history of the Indian subcontinent. Marked by the establishment of Muslim rule, it brought together diverse cultures, religions, and languages. The emergence of Urdu during this period can be viewed as a direct result of this intricate interplay between the native and foreign influences. **Formation of Urdu:** The word 'Urdu' itself is derived from the Turkish word 'Ordu', meaning 'camp'. It hints at the language's origin in the military camps and bazaars, where soldiers, traders, and travelers from Central Asia, Persia, and various parts of India intermingled. As these diverse groups interacted, a linguistic amalgamation began to take shape. Drawing primarily from Persian, Arabic, and local Indian dialects, especially Khari Boli, this new vernacular became an essential medium of communication, bridging the linguistic gap among the diverse populace.

**Literary Evolution in the Sultanate:** Literary pursuits during the early Delhi Sultanate primarily revolved around Persian, the court language. However, as the Sultanate expanded its territories, incorporating regions with a multitude of languages and dialects, there arose a need for a common linguistic thread. Urdu, due to its hybrid nature, effortlessly fit this role. Its adaptability and fluidity made it a popular choice for poetic expressions, leading to the birth of genres like the ghazal and masnavi.

Notably, Amir Khusrau, a towering figure of the Delhi Sultanate era, played a significant role in shaping early Urdu poetry. Often hailed as the "father of Urdu literature", his works encompassed a range of genres, from riddles and quatrains to elegies and romantic poems. Khusrau's writings reflected the socio-political environment of his times. While his poetry celebrated the cultural confluence of India and Persia, it also subtly touched upon the complexities and intricacies of governance, societal norms, and

spirituality.

**Urdu's Socio-Political Significance:** Beyond mere poetic expression, Urdu began to serve as a tool for socio-political discourse. As the Delhi Sultanate's administrative machinery expanded, there was a growing need for a language that could be easily understood by both, the ruling elite and the masses. Urdu's ability to absorb words and expressions from different languages made it particularly suited for this role. In many ways, it became the voice of the common people, articulating their hopes, anxieties, and aspirations. Moreover, the use of Urdu in popular tales, folklore, and Sufi narratives further solidified its place in the socio-cultural fabric of the period.

The Sufi movement, which gained momentum during the Delhi Sultanate, was instrumental in promoting Urdu as a medium for spiritual and philosophical discourse. Sufi poets opted for Urdu over Persian, recognizing its accessibility and appeal to the masses. Their verses, imbued with messages of love, unity, and divine connection, often carried underlying tones of social criticism and calls for justice and equality.

### **Progressing into the Colonial Era and the Subsequent Fight for Independence: Urdu Literature's Vital Role**

**Setting the Stage: The Colonial Era:** The colonial era, particularly marked by the establishment and subsequent expansion of British rule in the Indian subcontinent from the mid-18th to the mid-20th century, presented a socio-political landscape drastically different from the Delhi Sultanate. The British Raj, with its imperialistic agenda, sought not just to dominate politically but also to reshape the cultural and linguistic fabric of the region. English became the language of administration, education, and privilege. Yet, in this very milieu, Urdu emerged not just as a language of cultural persistence but also as a powerful voice of resistance.

**The Print Revolution and Urdu Literature:** The introduction of printing technology in the 19th century revolutionized the dissemination of Urdu literature. Suddenly, poems, novels, and essays could be mass-produced and made accessible to a broader audience. The democratization of literature that followed played an instrumental role in the anti-colonial movement. Newspapers, journals, and pamphlets began circulating nationalist ideas, critiques of British policies, and calls for mobilization. Urdu publications, such as "Tehzeeb-ul-Akhlaq" by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, played pivotal roles in awakening political consciousness and shaping reformist thinking.

**Poetry as a Form of Resistance:** During the freedom struggle, Urdu poetry became an influential tool for political mobilization and dissent. Allama Iqbal's philosophical and motivational poetry laid down the ideological foundation for the creation of Pakistan. His works like "Lab Pe Aati Hai Dua Ban Ke Tamanna Meri" became anthems for young revolutionaries, encapsulating aspirations for freedom.

Another stalwart, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, combined his leftist ideologies with a rich Urdu poetic tradition, producing works that denounced imperialism, war, and economic injustices. His celebrated poem "Subh-e-Azadi" (Dawn of Freedom) poignantly captures the bitter-sweet reality of the dawn of independence, with its inherent sacrifices and unrealized dreams.

Prose, Short Stories, and the Realities of Partition: As the struggle for independence culminated in the 1947 Partition, Urdu literature bore witness to the immense human cost of this geopolitical division. Saadat Hasan Manto, perhaps the most iconic Urdu writer of this era, penned harrowing tales like "Toba Tek Singh" and "Khol Do", reflecting the horrors, absurdities, and profound human tragedies associated with the Partition.

Role of Urdu Literature in Constructing Nationalism: The freedom struggle was also a period of robust nation-building, and Urdu literature contributed significantly to this endeavor. It worked on dual fronts: while poets like Iqbal galvanized a distinct Muslim nationalism leading to the creation of Pakistan, other writers utilized Urdu to promote a syncretic Indian identity that transcended religious boundaries. The Progressive Writers' Movement, with members like Ismat Chughtai and Ahmed Ali, championed causes of communal harmony, women's rights, and social justice.

Women in Urdu Literature: The colonial era and fight for independence also witnessed a surge in female literary voices in the Urdu realm. Poets like Parveen Shakir and Ada Jafri and writers like Qurratulain Hyder and Rashid Jahan confronted societal norms, critiqued patriarchal structures, and provided unique perspectives on political and social events.

## **Urdu Literature at the Crossroads of Resistance and Reform during British Colonialism**

### **Historical Context**

The onset of British colonialism in the late 18th century precipitated vast changes in the socio-political and economic dynamics of the Indian subcontinent. As the British East India Company and subsequently the British Crown fortified their rule, their policies aimed to consolidate British hegemony, notably through the "divide and rule" strategy and the establishment of English as the dominant language and educational medium.

### **Initial Literary Responses**

In the shadow of British dominance, Urdu literature, with its rich Mughal and Persianate heritage, grappled with these seismic shifts. With English sidelining regional languages in officialdom and education, Urdu faced an existential threat. However, this adversity invigorated Urdu writers and poets, who discerned a dual role: resisting the cultural imperialism of the British and pioneering societal reform.

### **Poetry as Subtle Defiance**

The traditional ghazal format of Urdu poetry evolved into an instrument of veiled resistance. Poets

layered their criticism of British policies in allegory and metaphor, all the while mourning the decline of the Mughal era and meditating on the shifting socio-political milieu.

### **Reformist Endeavors in Literature**

Simultaneously, Urdu literature became a vessel for enlightenment and reform, absorbing influences from Western education. Figures like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan championed a harmony between age-old values and contemporary education, emphasizing rational thought and progressivism.

### **Emergence of Print and its Impact on Urdu**

The advent of the printing press in the 19th century transformed Urdu literature. Prose, particularly novels and short stories, became widely accessible. This democratization of literature spurred discussions on reform, critiques of societal norms, and political discourse, which frequently tilted towards anti-colonial activism.

### **The Feminine Narrative in Reformist Discourse**

This era was also marked by an increased focus on the plight and potential of women. While male writers like Deputy Nazir Ahmad used their works to champion female education and societal change, pioneering women writers such as Rasheeda Nisa began etching the female perspective in Urdu literature, challenging established norms.

### **Cultural Synthesis in Literature**

Despite the overarching resistance to British cultural hegemony, Urdu writers exhibited an astute ability to assimilate the best of Western thought, leading to an intriguing literary fusion. European literary works were frequently translated, and Western genres, notably the novel, were localized and woven into the Urdu literary tapestry.

### **Urdu's Role in Nationalism**

As the call for independence intensified in the 20th century, Urdu literature played a pivotal role. Allama Iqbal's writings sowed the seeds for a separate Muslim nation, while concurrently, Urdu was harnessed to foster Hindu-Muslim unity, symbolizing the composite culture that defied British divisive tactics.

Urdu in Post-Partition Pakistan: A New Political Dimension:

Historical Overview: The tumultuous events of 1947, culminating in the Partition of British India, led to the creation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. This monumental geopolitical transformation imbued Urdu with a fresh political significance, as it was appointed the national language and sought to unify a diverse populace spanning from the mountains of the North to the shores of the Arabian Sea.

Urdu as a Binding Force: The choice of Urdu as the national language was multifaceted. Urdu, with its historical significance as a language of the Muslim elite during the Mughal era and as a powerful literary and communicative medium during the anti-colonial struggle, was seen as a tool for national unity. It

was intended to bridge ethnic, regional, and linguistic divides, creating a singular Pakistani identity. **Controversies and Linguistic Politics:** However, this decision was not devoid of controversies. The Bengali-speaking population of East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) resisted the imposition of Urdu, leading to language movements and eventually playing a role in the larger socio-political discord between the Eastern and Western wings of the country. The struggle culminated in the tragic events of 1971 when East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh.

In West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan), the imposition of Urdu was met with varying degrees of resistance and acceptance. While Punjabis, for the most part, assimilated with the Urdu-driven national narrative, other ethnic groups like Sindhis, Baloch, and Pashtuns had reservations.

**Literary Evolution in the New State:** Urdu literature in the nascent state of Pakistan began reflecting the hopes, dreams, and challenges of a new nation. Poets like Faiz Ahmed Faiz penned verses that critiqued military regimes and authoritarianism, pushing for democracy and social justice. The literature became a space for political commentary, introspection, and an exploration of what it meant to be Pakistani.

**Urdu and the Education System:** The education system of Pakistan was also overhauled to incorporate Urdu as the primary medium of instruction. Textbooks were rewritten, not just linguistically but ideologically, as the state attempted to craft a particular historical and moral narrative for its citizens.

**Media, Cinema, and the Promotion of Urdu:** The Pakistani state invested heavily in promoting Urdu through media and cinema. Radio Pakistan and, later, the state-run television channel PTV broadcasted programs exclusively in Urdu, aiding in its popularization. The film industry, Lollywood, based in Lahore, produced movies that helped cement Urdu's cultural and linguistic dominance.

**The Quest for Modernity and Globalization:** By the turn of the century, as Pakistan grappled with modernity and globalization, Urdu began absorbing English words and phrases, reflecting the nation's aspirations and its challenges. The rise of the urban middle class, especially in cities like Karachi and Lahore, transformed Urdu into a dynamic, evolving language, mirroring the socio-political shifts of the nation.

## **Conclusion**

The intricate tapestry of Urdu literature, woven through centuries of socio-political upheavals and cultural renaissances, stands as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of a language and its people. Beginning in the culturally vibrant courts of the Delhi Sultanate and flourishing amidst the politics of the Mughal empire, Urdu bore witness to an age of empires and the tides of change they brought.

The advent of British colonialism added another layer to this narrative. Urdu found itself grappling with the dual challenges of a shifting socio-cultural landscape and the political imperatives of an external power. Yet, rather than be subdued, Urdu literature transformed into a platform of resistance, reform,

and reflection. The confluence of Eastern and Western ideas, the struggles for identity amidst colonial policies, and the quest for modernity, all found their voice in the verses of Urdu poets and the prose of its writers.

Partition, an event that seared the subcontinent, breathed a new life into Urdu, albeit with challenges. As Pakistan's national language, Urdu was laden with the enormous task of unifying a diverse nation, while simultaneously navigating the political intricacies and regional sentiments. The resulting journey has been fraught with tensions, but also with moments of profound cultural synthesis.

Throughout its journey, Urdu literature has remained deeply interwoven with the socio-political realities of its times. It has mirrored the aspirations, conflicts, and soul of the subcontinent, echoing the joys and sorrows of its people. Whether chronicling the fall of empires, railing against colonial oppression, navigating the challenges of nation-building, or exploring the depths of human emotion, Urdu has remained an enduring and dynamic force.

In summation, Urdu literature, with its rich legacy and profound adaptability, exemplifies the symbiotic relationship between language, culture, and politics. Its odyssey, marked by trials and triumphs, serves as a mirror to the ever-evolving narrative of South Asia and stands as a beacon of its cultural heritage.

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