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THE ROLE OF URDU LITERATURE IN SHAPING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SOUTH ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Urdu literature has played a pivotal role in shaping national identity in South Asia, particularly in the historical and socio-political contexts of the 19th and 20th centuries. This study explores how Urdu literary works have influenced national consciousness, cultural identity, and socio-political movements in the region. Through poetry and prose, Urdu writers have articulated themes of nationalism, resistance, identity, and historical transformation, contributing significantly to the discourse on belonging and collective memory. The paper examines the historical development of Urdu literature, from its Persianate roots to its role in the colonial and postcolonial periods. It highlights the contributions of key literary figures such as Ghalib, Iqbal, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, who used poetry as a medium for political and ideological expression. Additionally, the study explores how Urdu literature fostered a sense of unity among diverse linguistic and cultural communities, reinforcing the idea of a shared national identity. By analyzing key themes such as nationalism, religious identity, social justice, and cultural integration, this research underscores the impact of Urdu literature in shaping narratives of national identity. It also discusses the role of literary movements, such as the Progressive Writers' Movement, in advocating for social reform and political change. Ultimately, this study argues that Urdu literature remains a crucial medium for exploring and contesting ideas of identity and nationhood in South Asia. As new socio-political realities emerge, Urdu literary traditions continue to adapt, reflecting evolving perspectives on identity, resistance, and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Urdu Literature, National Identity, South Asia, Colonialism, Post Colonialism, Nationalism, Progressive Writers' Movement, Urdu Poetry, Cultural Heritage, Identity Politics

Introduction

Urdu literature has played a significant role in shaping national identity in South Asia. This essay aims to explore the influence of Urdu literature on the concept of nation or national identity in the subcontinent, focusing on works from the 19th and 20th centuries. It will begin by discussing the historical background of Urdu

literature before delving into the theme of national identity. Language, culture, and identity are intertwined in South Asia, making it crucial to examine Urdu literature's impact on national consciousness (Orsini, 2017).

Several critical questions guide this inquiry. How does literature shape national consciousness? What role does it play in fostering societal values, objectives, and a shared sense of belonging? Can literature function as a medium that transcends time and space, bringing together individuals who have never met or experienced a common episode? While these questions may seem abstract, they are central to the discussion of Urdu literature's role in shaping national identity (Lahiri, 2017).

These questions hold immense significance in the South Asian context, especially when we consider the myriad transformations that have occurred across the region over an extended period, which have included deeply entrenched and multifaceted conflicts surrounding issues such as identity, language, culture, and literature. These conflicts have remained pronounced and pronouncedly relevant, particularly since the momentous partition that transpired in 1947. This historic event was not merely a mere change in borders; it led to a profound reshaping of societal interactions and drastically altered the very fabric of cultural narratives in ways that continue to resonate. Over the decades, a plethora of urgent and pressing issues regarding exclusivity in identity, culture, and literature have emerged and evolved, gaining increasing pertinence and significance in society; all of these factors necessitate critical examination as well as thoughtful analysis to fully grasp their wide-ranging ramifications.

Throughout the years, South Asia has been the backdrop for a dramatic and significant rise of various nationalist movements, which began in the late 19th century. During this crucial time, literature was not merely a form of artistic expression but instead was strategically harnessed and widely utilized as a potent weapon for mobilizing communities, igniting the passion of the masses while bringing people together around common narratives and shared aspirations that transcended geographical boundaries (Matthews, 2023). In this dynamic and continually evolving environment, Urdu literature, with its rich, diverse, and deeply expressive heritage of poetry and prose, assumed an incredibly vital role. It significantly shaped and nurtured the national consciousness of Muslims across the entire subcontinent, serving as a crucial vehicle for emotional expression, cultural affirmation, and a deep sense of pride. The nuances, subtleties, and profound meanings captured within the poetic lines and narratives crafted by

Urdu writers articulate the emotional landscape of their respective eras in powerful terms.

In this paper, we will examine a carefully selected and thoughtfully curated array of Urdu literary texts, providing an in-depth analysis of how such literature has greatly contributed to the expansive evolution and heightened understanding of the complex concept of nation or national identity across the entire region. This exploration strives not merely to uncover the rich historical context that shaped the creation of these literary works rooted in personal struggles and collective experiences but also to dive deep into the profound and lasting influence of literature on the intricate processes of national identity formation. By engaging thoroughly with these texts, we endeavor to provide rich insights into the intricate ways in which various literary expressions have deeply influenced collective identities and eloquently articulated the heartfelt aspirations of diverse communities throughout the vast landscape of South Asia.

Moreover, this effort aims to enrich our understanding of this multifaceted and ever-evolving situation while simultaneously enhancing our appreciation for the cultural richness that characterizes the region as a vibrant tapestry, intricately woven by countless diverse threads. We seek to spotlight the interconnectedness between literature and socio-political movements, illustrating how the words, sentiments, and narratives encapsulated within these literary forms resonate profoundly with the lived realities of individuals (Aboi, 2024). Ultimately, these literary works serve to bridge divides and foster a sense of unity amid diversity, allowing a multitude of voices and perspectives to emerge and find expression within the broader narrative of the South Asian experience. Through careful reflection on these significant connections, we hope to unveil the remarkable role literature plays in shaping and guiding national identity amidst the complexities and fluctuations of the South Asian socio-political landscape.

The paper will first provide a brief historical background of Urdu literature, discussing its rural and urban development in the northern part of the subcontinent. It will then explore Urdu literary texts from the 19th and 20th centuries, highlighting the role of poetics and aesthetics in shaping the concept of nation and national identity.

Historical Development of Urdu Literature

Urdu is an Indo-Aryan language that emerged as a result of a fascinating confluence of various languages, rich cultures, and diverse peoples in the vibrant South Asian region. This language

developed as a distinct entity during the early part of the thirteenth century, significantly influenced by the splendid Persian and Arabic literary traditions that were flourishing at that time. Over the span of its extensive history, Urdu has undergone numerous stages of development initially serving as a spoken language, transitioning to become an important literary medium, and ultimately achieving recognition as a national language (Mir, 2022) This evolution took place during what can be described as a thousand-year journey filled with rich experiences and cultural exchanges.

To fully grasp the intricate and complex historical development of Urdu literature, it becomes absolutely essential to delve deeply into the socio-political changes that took place throughout South Asia, as these changes profoundly impacted the literary landscape of the region and ultimately shaped Urdu into a significant literary instrument. The entry of the Turks into South Asia notably paved the way for the establishment of Muslim rule, which dramatically transformed the future trajectory of the subcontinent's socio-political and religious affairs in ways that were both profound and lasting (Islam, 2021). As a result of this widespread political upheaval, Urdu emerged as a direct consequence because it originated in the military camps established by immigrants who brought with them their unique religion, influential arts, and sophisticated Persian culture, all of which left a lasting mark on the language.

These early immigrants, who are commonly known as Mughals, established a vast empire that spanned across a significant portion of South Asia. This expansion, in turn, enriched the linguistic tapestry of Urdu immensely, adding numerous new words, diverse expressions, and elements from various cultures. During this transformative era, the region witnessed numerous conquests, intermittent skirmishes, and notable battles, creating a complex social environment where rulers and the ruled interacted continuously. Consequently, there was a mass migration of the native populace toward urban centers, where they cohabitated and interacted closely with the conquerors.

Among these interactions, simple and rudimentary forms of communication gradually emerged within the military camps, laying the groundwork for the evolution of a proper language that came to be referred to as 'Zaban-i-Urdu-i-Mu'alla,' which translates to the Language of the Exalted City. This language, which later came to be known simply and affectionately as Urdu, served as an extraordinary medium for the intermingling of various faiths, diverse cultures, and rich customs. It fostered an

environment of dialogue and creative expression, allowing for the sharing of stories and experiences that reflect the beauty of this multifaceted language and its vibrant literary heritage. Through this process, Urdu became not only a means of communication but also a vehicle for artistic expression and cultural exchange among the diverse peoples of South Asia (Lahiri, 2017).

The Mughal Empire marked a golden era for Persian literature, as the Turkic ruling class promoted Persian poetry and prose. Persian was not only a literary language but also a *lingua franca* influencing non-Persian populations, especially the emerging Urdu literary class. Urdu began as a literary medium in the sixteenth century with the ghazal form and matured in the seventeenth century under Persian influence. By the end of the Mughal era, Urdu evolved into a distinct literary language, initiating a new phase in its development. Urdu literature started to free itself from Persian dominance, striving towards a national identity during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Understanding Urdu's literary growth during colonial times necessitates acknowledging the preceding Mughal influence, as genres and literary forms from that era persist today (Tahir, 2021).

Thus, examining Urdu's literary evolution under Mughal patronage becomes essential from 1526 till the colonization by the Britishers in the early nineteenth century, the subcontinent was ruled by the Mughals. Between 1526 and the early seventeenth century, the Mughals established a vast empire in South Asia, bound together by trade, political patronage, and a shared cultural milieu (Ramesh2024). The Mughals are best remembered for their contributions to painting, architecture, and literary production in Persian, Turkic, and Indian vernaculars. The Mughal Empire reached the zenith of cultural flowering during the reign of Shah Jahan, when several monumental architectural marvels including the Taj Mahal were built. In addition to these monumental structures, several Persian histories and works on poetics were produced during this period. The Mughal patronage of Persian literary production was so great that the mid-seventeenth century is considered a golden period for Persian literature in South Asia. Because of the large Persian-speaking ruling class, Urdu literature suffered during the early colonial period. However, during the high imperial phase of consolidation (around 1857), Urdu literature began to flourish again.

The nineteenth century was a period of profound significance in the history of India. The British colonial impact on South Asia had far-reaching consequences for each of its languages and literary traditions. Urdu literature, too, was affected by the socio-political

changes that accompanied the coming of the British colonizers. Urdu literature underwent powerful transformations during the colonial period, with the emergence of new genres and institutions that reshaped its cultural landscape (Akter, 2024). But it is critical to note that this transformation cannot be understood solely in terms of colonial impact. Urdu literature, with its own set of literary and cultural sensibilities and idioms, negotiated, resisted, and reformulated colonial interventions. Urdu poetry is religious and spiritual in its orientation, while prose is didactic and moral in character. Urdu literature, literary institutions, and personalities played an important role in social reform and modernization during the nineteenth century, as well as in colonial resistance and nationalism in the early twentieth century.

Themes and Motifs in Urdu Literature

The presence of a rich and diverse variety of themes and motifs is indeed an integral and vital part of the complex and intricate fabric of Urdu literature, contributing significantly to its allure, depth, and richness. These themes and motifs are not simply artistically woven intricately into the elaborate tapestry of Urdu poetic and prose creations; they also serve as profound reflections of the multifaceted cultural, social, and historical realities inherent in this diverse and compelling part of South Asia, which boasts a long and storied history of dynamic exchange and interaction among various communities (Ali & Samarah Nazar, 2024).

For centuries, Urdu poets, novelists, storywriters, and dramatists have deftly and skillfully dealt with a wide range of well-defined and established themes and motifs within their literary works, thus contributing significantly to the evolution and ongoing enrichment of Urdu literary traditions over time. Prominent among these recurring themes are love, tragedy, nationalism, the intricate fiction of civilization, devastation, philosophy, spirituality, socio-political awareness, communal harmony, and the significant economic injustices and struggles found within society, all interwoven with great care and artistry by the writers (Farooq, 2025).

A substantial bulk of Urdu literature produced during the challenging and tumultuous times of the British Raj powerfully reflects themes of romantic love intertwined with tragic circumstances, showcasing the emotional depth and complexity of human experience during a period marked by adversity and sorrow. Many authors courageously tackled the pressing and urgent themes of socio-political injustices while advocating for the quest for communal harmony; sadly, their invaluable and impactful works often faced neglect or even outright bans, which

significantly limited their overall reach and influence within the broader society. The theme of Islamic nationalism, which was carefully and thoughtfully developed during the illuminating and transformative era of Waheed Ulla Shah, took on even greater prominence, particularly with the emergence and consolidation of the two-nation theory, significantly shaping the cultural discourse and narrative of the time while influencing generations to come.

The literary works crafted under the guidance and influence of these profound themes and motifs are subjected to meticulous contextual and critical analysis, which highlights their significance not only in the historical setting but also within the rich cultural backgrounds from which the Urdu writers hail. This comprehensive discussion also reveals how these recurring motifs have been skillfully utilized by the writers to articulate both personal and collective identities, demonstrating a complex and intricate interplay between individual experiences and broader societal issues highlighted through their narratives (Abbasi et al.2023). The rich literary tradition of Urdu has often created a unique and thought-provoking entanglement of textual and social realities, giving rise to a vast and multifaceted world where life and artistic expression coalesce seamlessly into a beautiful narrative fabric. That is precisely why socio-political issues are intricately and deeply woven together with the literary expressions found within Urdu texts, creating profound layers of meaning and significance that resonate with readers on multiple levels.

A significant portion of Urdu literature engages deeply with the themes and motifs pertinent to its time; however, these themes and motifs possess the remarkable ability to continuously modify, respond to, and coincide with the evolving societal norms and pressing challenges faced during different eras. By coalescing textual and social realities effectively, the selected examples from Urdu literature collectively demonstrate how the themes and motifs have been artistically employed, allowing writers to address and explore complex human experiences in a profound and meaningful manner that remains relevant and impactful. Some notable literary pieces serve as enduring testaments to the remarkable versatility and adaptability of Urdu literature within both the literary and socio-political realms, making them essential reading for anyone wishing to delve deeper into the rich narrative landscape. Ultimately, the themes and motifs found within poetic and prose creations leave a lasting and indelible impact on readers and society at large, influencing cultural narratives and providing insightful reflections into the shared human condition that

connects us all, transcending time and space in a rapidly changing world (Orsini, 2017)(Burney, 2019).

Key Literary Figures and Movements

The trajectory of Urdu literature as an evolving and vibrant genre, as well as a profound vehicle for national expression, cannot be fully grasped without making reference to the remarkable literary figures who have significantly shaped it over the years, along with the pivotal movements within the literary domain that directed its course. Urdu poetry, novels, dramas, and the illustrious writers behind them are just as integral to South Asia's national consciousness as its historical events, influential political leaders, and the various socio-religious reformers that have emerged throughout the region's tumultuous history (Zaib et al.2023). A comprehensive survey of this rich literary landscape reveals a myriad of well-known literary figures whose works transcended mere artistic expression; they became national texts that informed and enriched the sensibility of a nascent nation, emerging in the heart of the subcontinent. Renowned poets such as Ghalib, Iqbal, and Faiz, along with influential novelists like Rajinder Singh Bedi and Rashid Minhas, and distinguished playwrights including Agha Hashrat's Anwar Kanoon, Habib Tanvir, and Ratan Kumar Lok Raj, represent just a few examples of the many talented writers who profoundly shaped the national consciousness during their respective eras, particularly in the aftermath of the partition of 1947.

Equally noteworthy are the movements within Urdu literature, such as the Progressive Writers' Movement (PW) and the Modernism movement (Naya Adab), both of which dramatically impacted national thinking and literary practice along with cultural attitudes. These movements generated new literary forms, promoted fresh artistic expressions, and provided incisive commentary on the socio-political milieu they inhabited (Kamali, 2024). The Progressive Writers' Movement, in particular, resonated deeply with those who found themselves dispossessed and marginalized by the demands of history, while the Modernism movement sought to extend a literary refuge to those bewildered and disoriented by the cataclysmic changes that followed the year 1947 a momentous year marked by mass migration, bloodshed, partition, and a profound sense of loss of home.

The latter group of writers, crucial and significant in their own right, often finds their contributions eclipsed by the towering figures of the PW Movement, and sometimes they are unfairly caricatured as elitist, unintelligible, or distant from the pressing realities faced by society. Yet, despite facing such criticism, the

Modernism movement envisioned political and economic redress through its literature, rendering it just as relevant today as it was at its inception back in the 1930s. A critical examination of this rich literary discourse reveals how individual writers have grappled with the contemporary realities of their time, using the fictional form to comment on their lived experiences, while simultaneously striving to contain and shape these experiences according to their own worldviews.

Moreover, the contributions of Urdu feminine voices in shaping national consciousness are frequently overshadowed by their male counterparts or regrettably overlooked altogether. It is essential to clarify that the discourse surrounding women's contributions to Urdu literature is not entirely absent. Indeed, an abundant wealth of material exists in the form of detailed biographies and analytical discussions centered on the impact of women writers in Urdu literature. However, the significant role that women have played in shaping national consciousness through their literary expressions remains largely neglected and minimized in broader discussions. By deliberately selecting a few representative women writers, this effort aims to fill this notable gap in the discourse (Ahmad et al.2021).

While traditionally recognized figures like Mohammed Iqbal, Ghalib, Anwar Maqsood, or Ahmed Faraz are canonized as the quintessential Urdu nationalist voices, it is crucial to recognize that Urdu national voices can also be discerned through the works of writers such as Phulan Devi, Patricia Aakash, and Zainab Almas, who represent Urdu voices within the contexts of India and other provincial narratives. On another level, and this is not meant to diminish the profound impact of colonial or national contexts, acknowledging the localization of the Urdu literary voice underscores the inadequacies of relying solely on Euro-centric frameworks, which have historically shaped both the discipline of Urdu literature and the criticism surrounding it.

Not only do Urdu writers make their mark, but many writers from other linguistic traditions such as Bengali, Persian, Kannada, Marathi, and Hindi also grappled with the complexities brought on by colonial modernity. They wrote heartfelt prayers, soulful piyyas, or reflective saans as creative refuges from the anxieties stirred by ink and pen. The cultural exchanges and intellectual discourses that traverse religious and linguistic divides have continuously sculpted and influenced Urdu literary practices throughout history and beyond.

The most significant figures in Urdu literature, from the celebrated Ghalib, Iqbal, to the revered Azad, have initiated compelling

debates within their literary critiques. These figures often advocated for, and contributed to, literature in more than one vernacular, extending beyond just Urdu and Persian expressions (Ashraf, 2023). Furthermore, the literary genres they have embraced are multifaceted, including quawwalis, poems, ghazals, plays, parnas, narratives, and novels, all written in an array of languages such as Urdu, Hindi, Arabic, Persian, and English. Recognizing this serendipitous complexity and the plurality of Urdu literary practices, along with their shaping influences, not only enriches the understanding of this literature but also offers hope for the enduring legacy of these writings, as well as for the ongoing contributions of critics navigating contemporary literary landscapes (Akif Hasan et al., 2012).

Urdu Literature and National Identity in South Asia

The poignant and powerful poetry of Urdu literary figures from South Asia finds resonance beyond the boundaries of language, state, and nation. It is this relevance and significance of Urdu literature, in its modern form, that is sought to be examined here in the light of the writings of poets such as Iqbal, Faiz, Ghalib, and several contemporary Urdu poets, while closely looking at the concerns around national identity from the colonial to the postcolonial times (Hashmi et al.2024).

National identity, as imagined in the literary works of Urdu poets, traverses the spaces of doubt, questioning, and reflection. It moves from the articulation of the collective as an imagined community to a searching solidarity through diasporic experiences in the postnational global world. The literary constructs of national identity in poetry reflect the geo-historical pathways of the nation, its movements, and the struggles in reclaiming it. (Carbone, 2022) While distinctive and varied in expression, these poetries converge at the possibility of national identities imagined through inclusiveness, equity, and a sharing of multiple diversities cohabiting in the same territorial space.

In the South Asian context, Urdu emerged as a language of resistance to hegemonies, beginning with its appropriation by the reformist elites while liberally drawing from Persian high culture on the one hand and the popular cultural practices between the towns and the Para cosmic villages on the other. In the colonial encounter, Urdu's resistance finds articulation as a literary discourse in shaping a cultural national identity through the poetries of Iqbal, who moves from an imagined 'Hind' as the 'Pride of Asia' to a questioning of the very idea of the Indian nation, Faiz, who globally locates the national freedom struggle, to Ghalib whose poetry interrogates and subverts the dominant

colonial and hegemonic discourses. In the postcolonial and postnational narratives, Urdu literature, largely through the medium of poetry, negotiates, reclaims, and asserts its national and cultural identities in a multi-linguistic, multi-religious, and multi-communal landscape afflicted by ethnic sectarian and national conflicts, while at the same time echoing the concerns of the dispossessed elsewhere and in new lands of diasporas (Kazmi, 2022).

As diverse as it is, Urdu literary discourse, particularly poetry, interrogates and counters the constructions of national identities as hegemonic, exclusive, and divisive while giving voice to the marginalized, the question of the 'subaltern' and shaping a national imagining as inclusive, peaceful, and harmonious cohabiting of diversities. Urdu poetry intervenes into the nationalist movements challenging their dominant articulations and asserts the own rights of the marginalized communities to speak, becoming a site of struggle as much with the dominant as within the community itself (Kazmi, 2022). Alongside, Urdu poetry also traverses through the colonial anxieties of the literary as a public space seeking to resolve the contradictions between the cultural and the national by imagining alternate public spheres.

The emergence and growth of Urdu in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a literary discourse and literary public is intricately linked with the socio-historical formations, the changes and upheavals wrought by the transition from a Mughal empire to a British colonial empire in South Asia. The literary discourse produced in Urdu during this period, much of its poetic, straddles new genres and forms bringing in new audiences, new social classes and communities, new tastes and sensibilities to the fore. Alongside, it also addressed the political anxieties of the transitioning social spaces, new modes and avenues of communities seeking to claim their rights, and alternative epistemic and social hierarchies where the literary public, in the wake of its materiality, akin to what was happening in Europe, became sites for the emergence of new forms of communal identities, either nationalist formations or reformist counter-nationalism as this literary public imagined nation-states.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Urdu literature has played a crucial role in shaping and negotiating national identity in South Asia. From its historical beginnings in the courts of Mughal emperors to its present-day literary festivals, Urdu literary traditions have offered thematic depth to South Asia's literary heritage. Literary figures and movements have contributed to a vibrant cultural discourse,

advocating for social reform and progress while addressing the most pressing issues of their times. As a result, Urdu literature has informed the societal values of the communities that produce and consume it. The significance of Urdu literature in shaping national identity cannot be overstated. What began as a discussion around the relevance of Urdu literature to national identity in contemporary South Asia unfolded as a more general inquiry into the role of literature in shaping and negotiating identity? While focusing on Urdu literature, several insights related to the broader relationship between literature and identity were highlighted, as well as areas for future research. Urdu literature's historical significance and literary merit aside, it continues to be a space where notions of identity and belonging are debated, contested, and negotiated. The engagement of contemporary Urdu writers with these ideas underscores the ongoing relevance of this literary tradition in shaping national identity.

With the emergence of new social landscapes, the need for a re-examination of identity in general is highlighted and Urdu literature is acknowledged as a dynamic site where notions of identity are taken up, questioned, and responded to. Fortunately, and hopefully, this exploration of Urdu literature's role in shaping national identity will prompt further consideration and scholarship on the relationship between literature and identity. Urdu literature is a vital and vibrant component of South Asia's rich literary heritage. Although national identity seems to be a cause for concern, discussion, and debate within Urdu literary circles, it is hoped that Urdu literature will continue to be a space where cultural pride is fostered and difference is embraced rather than used as a basis for division. Urdu literature is an enduring testament to the plurality that has characterized South Asia and its cultures. As minority languages struggle to survive in the face of globalization and the cultural homogenization it engenders, Urdu literature reminds us that culture ultimately belongs to the people who create it and that, despite political boundaries, it will continue to flourish if there are those willing to nurture it.

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