

Chapter 3

Urdu: A Cultural Bridge in Asia's Multilingual Tapestry

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1. Introduction

Asia is the largest and most populous continent in the world. It is a home to a remarkable linguistic diversity that reflects its complex history and rich cultural tapestry, with over 2,300 languages spoken across its vast territory. Asia serves as a living testament to the human capacity for communication and the importance of language in shaping identity and community. This essay highlights the importance of multilingualism in Asia, in particular the Urdu language, its cultural diversity, its historical significance, the challenges it faces in the present day and the ways in which it enriches the lives of its inhabitants.

The linguistic landscape of Asia is incredibly diverse, encompassing several major language families, including Sino-Tibetan, Indo-European, Altaic, Dravidian, and Austro-Asiatic, among others. Mandarin Chinese, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Arabic, and Japanese are among the most spoken languages, each serving as a primary means of communication for millions of people in Asia. Beyond these prominent languages, numerous regional and minority languages also contribute to the continent's rich linguistic fabric.

In the Indian subcontinent alone, over 122 major languages and more than 1,600 dialects are recognized. Besides Sanskrit, there are 21

modern Indian languages: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Urdu, Kashmiri, Kannada, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Odia, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, Santali, and Sindhi. This multilingual environment fosters a sense of regional identity and cultural heritage, while also reflecting the historical influences of colonization, partition, migration, post-colonization, religious, and trade issues.

It is commonly known that language is deeply intertwined with culture and identity. In Asia, multilingualism often signifies a rich cultural heritage. For instance, in countries like Pakistan and India, the coexistence of Hindi, Urdu, Chinese, Tamil, English and local languages illustrates the multicultural dynamics of these nations. The ability to speak multiple languages enables individuals to navigate different cultural, traditional and historical contexts, facilitating social cohesion and mutual understanding.

2. The Cultural Dimensions of the Urdu Language and Literature

Urdu, with its rich tapestry of culture and history, stands as a language that reflects the amalgamation of diverse influences that are rooted in the Indian subcontinent. Urdu has evolved into a linguistic canvas that beautifully captures the cultural diversity of multiple regions. This essay also explores the cultural dimensions of the Urdu language, examining its historical development, linguistic influences and the way it has become a symbol of unity amid cultural multiplicity.

Urdu, a language that originated in the Indian subcontinent, is more than just a means of communication; it is a vibrant cultural artifact that embodies the history, emotions, and identities of its speakers. With its roots in Indo-Aryan languages and influences from Persian, Arabic, and

Turkish, Urdu has evolved into a rich linguistic and literary tradition. Thus, the cultural dimensions of the Urdu language and literature reflect the diverse influences that have shaped it over centuries, highlighting its role in expressing human experiences, fostering social cohesion, and preserving its cultural heritage. This essay explores the multifaceted cultural aspects and dimensions of Urdu language and literature, focusing on their historical significance, literary contributions, poetic and prose traditions, their social impact and contemporary expressions.

3. Urdu: A Language of History and Heritage

Urdu has great historical significance that cannot be overstated. It developed in the medieval period in the context of Mughal India, where various cultures and languages converged. In the past, it was a beloved language of poets, so it had a unique historical journey that reflects the beautiful synthesis and expressions of Persian, Arabic and local dialects. It evolved in the Indian subcontinent. As a result, Urdu emerged as a language of communication among different communities, particularly in urban centres. This linguistic evolution reflects the historical amalgamation of diverse cultures and traditions that made Urdu a symbol of unity amidst diversity.

During the Mughal era, it served as a lingua franca for diverse communities. It embodies the essence of South Asian culture and acts as a powerful unifier among people of diverse linguistic communities and multicultural backgrounds. It also serves as a mother tongue to millions of Pakistanis and is the 10th most widely spoken language in the world. This essay also examines the impact of historical events on the development of Urdu as a language that unites people from various backgrounds. As Dr. Tabassum Kashmiri says:

Turks, Iranians and Arabs, who came from outside and settled in India, and made it their homeland, so the Urdu language here became the language they used in their homes and businesses, and thus the cultural diversity of the language increased immensely. (Tabassum 2009, 20)

Urdu's vocabulary, script and literary expressions are deeply influenced by various cultures and religions, including Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Sikhism. As a result, Urdu serves as a linguistic bridge that connects people of diverse cultures and backgrounds, contributing to the rich tapestry of multiculturalism. As Dr. Jameel Jalibi says:

The connection and association of Urdu with different languages and the claim of different language areas over this language are proof that it has given its existence individuality by taking advantage of all. That's why this language is the language of all the languages of the subcontinent, and as such, it is the only lingua franca of the entire continent. (Jamīl 1975, 3)

4. Urdu Poetic Traditions

Urdu literature, especially in poetry, boasts a rich and diverse tradition that has significantly contributed to the cultural and artistic landscape of South Asia. Its rich narrative and poetic traditions continue to resonate with huge audiences both in South Asia and worldwide, making it an enduring part of global literary heritage.

(1) Urdu Ghazal: A Dialogue of Cultures and Social Narratives

The poetic traditions of Urdu are a cornerstone of its cultural

dimensions. Poetry in Urdu is not just an art form; it is a means of exploring deep emotional and philosophical themes in a refined, expressive way. The influence of Sufism on Urdu poetry is profound, as many poets have drawn upon Sufi concepts to articulate their spiritual experiences and seek a connection with the Divine. Poets such as Bulleh Shah¹ and Amir Khusro² have left an enduring legacy, using the language to express love for God and humanity.

As Ameer Khusro says:

ہر قوم راست را ہے دینے و قبلہ گاہے
من قبلہ راست کر دم ہر سمت کج کلا ہے

Translation: Every sect has a faith, a direction (Qibla) to which they turn, I have turned my face towards the crooked cap of (Nazimudin Aulia), the whole world worships something or the other, some look for God in Mecca, while some go to Kashi (Banaras), so why can't I, Oh wise people, fall at my beloved's feet? Every sect has a faith, a Qibla. (Narang 2008)

Ghazal is a distinct form of Urdu poetry, often addressing themes of romantic love and existential contemplation. The structure of the

1 Sayyid Abdullah Shah Qadri (1680–1757), known popularly as Baba Bulleh Shah and Bulleya, was a 17th and 18th-century Punjabi revolutionary philosopher, reformer and a Sufi poet, universally regarded as the “Father of Punjabi Enlightenment.” He spoke against powerful religious, political and social institutions.

2 Abu'l Hasan Yamin-ud-din Khusrau (1253–1325 AD), better known as Amir Khusrau, was an Indo-Persian Sufi singer, musician, poet and scholar who lived during the period of the Delhi Sultanate. He is an iconic figure in the cultural history of the Indian subcontinent. He was a mystic and a spiritual disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi, India. He wrote poetry primarily in Persian, but also in Hindavi that was the ancient form of Urdu.

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Ghazal is characterized by couplets that can stand independently, allowing for a fluid exploration of feelings and emotions. This poetic form has transcended cultural boundaries, resonating with audiences beyond South Asia. The beauty of Urdu poetry lies in its ability to evoke universal emotions, creating a profound connection among speakers of different cultures and backgrounds. As Daag Dehlvi says proudly:

نہیں کھیل اے داغؔ یاروں سے کہہ دو
کہ آتی ہے اردو زباں آتے آتے

Translation: Oh Daagh, make it known, it is no child's play, the learning of Urdu happens by and by. (Dāgh 1961)

Urdu Poetry, especially Ghazal, collects and encapsulates the experiences and emotions of various communities and cultures. Classical iconic poets like Meer Taqi Meer, Mohammad Ibrahim Zauq, Mirza Ghalib, Daag Dehlvi, Momin Khan Momin, Allama Iqbal and Faiz Ahmed Faiz have left an indelible mark on Urdu poetry by addressing universal themes of love, humanity, peace and social justice in their poetry. Their words still resonate with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, fostering a sense of shared humanity and promoting multiculturalism.

Urdu Ghazal encompasses a diverse range of varieties and bodies of work; its literary contributions cover a wide array of themes, including love, patriotism, social justice, and humanity. The emergence of the Ghazal, which is characterized by its lyrical quality and exploration of complex emotions, as a prominent poetic form in Urdu literature has always been particularly significant. The Ghazal allows poets to convey feelings of love, longing, and loss in a uniquely expressive and cultural manner. As Dr. Ibadat Bareilvi says:

There was a tradition of Urdu Ghazal for about two hundred and fifty years, and as the caravan of our lives passed through whatever paths, our civilization came to light; thus, the true and correct picture of our lives could be found in our Urdu Ghazal. ('Ibādat 1955)

The genre of Ghazal is specific to certain countries of the East. It took its current form in Iran. But the style of Urdu Ghazal, especially in the form of Qasida, is found in Arabia even before that. However, the genre of Urdu Ghazal under the influence of Iran took hold in India, and it found such a reception that it was practiced in Persian and Urdu at the same time. It received what no other genre could get ('Ibādat 1955, 6). Many notable figures of Urdu Ghazal have enriched Urdu Ghazal by allowing it to flourish as a medium for philosophical and existential exploration.

Urdu serves as a unifying force by transcending linguistic, religious, and regional boundaries. In a multicultural society, where people speak different languages and follow distinct customs and traditions, Urdu acts as a neutral platform for communication. Its inclusive nature allows individuals from various linguistic backgrounds to communicate with each other, share ideas, and express themselves without losing their cultural identity. Urdu poetry, in particular, has a universal appeal that resonates with people across different cultures, contributing to a sense of unity and expressing the universality of love and pain that are a true reflection of one's emotion, as Mirza Ghalib says:

دل ہی تو ہے نہ سنگ و خشت درد سے بھر نہ آئے کیوں
روئیں گے ہم ہزار بار کوئی ہمیں رلائے کیوں

Translation: This heart is not a brick or a stone; why shouldn't it

feel pain?

Let none tyrannize this heart, or I shall cry again and again
(Ghalib 1967)

Through their masterpieces, they not only shared and expressed human experiences of love, fate, sorrows, and grief, but also transcended cultural boundaries and resonated with people of different regions. In such a way, Allama Muhammad Iqbal's poetry influenced a wide range of people, including Indians, Turks, Iranians, Afghans, Germans and many others by expressing universal feelings of love, peace and relationships between the individual and society. Here are a few couplets *from Allama Iqbal's poetry* for example:

نگہ بلند، سخن دل نواز، جاں پر سوز
یہی ہے رختِ سفر میرِ کارواں کے لیے

Translation: High ambition, Winsome speech, a passionate soul,
this is all the luggage for the leader of the Caravan. (Iqbal 2017)

ستاروں سے آگے جہاں اور بھی ہیں
ابھی عشق ے امتحان اور بھی ہیں

Translation: Beyond the stars, many a world, Before love is
proved, many a test. (Iqbal 2017)

(2) Urdu Nazm: A Cultural Lens on Human Experience

Urdu Nazm is a significant and vibrant poetic form that embodies the multicultural dynamics of South Asia. It draws influences from diverse linguistic, cultural, and philosophical traditions. Free-verse poetry enables poets to express a diverse range of themes, from personal

experiences to social issues, reflecting the region's rich tapestry of identities and cultures. Poets like Altaf Hussain Hali, Nazeer Akbar Abadi, Akbar Alabadi, Allama Iqbal, Sahir Iudhyanvi, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, Meera ji, Noon Meem Rashid and Majeed Amjad have utilized Nazm to explore universal themes of love, resistance, humanity, peace and social justice by fostering connections across cultural boundaries from all around the world. As Shamim Hanfi says:

Hali (Altaf Hussain Hali) and Azad's (Mohammad Hussain Azad's) commitment to new ideas in Nazm was the result of a conscious contact with the dominant trends of the era. Iqbal was also a poet of commitment, and his relationship with his faith was not merely conscious; it had dissolved into his blood and become an indispensable part of his personality. (Hanafi 2008, 41)

The multicultural essence of Urdu Nazm is evident in its ability to resonate with audiences from various backgrounds by encouraging dialogue and understanding in an increasingly interconnected world, through its innovative style and thematic artistic diversity. Urdu Nazm serves as a powerful medium for celebrating cultural plurality and promoting shared human experiences from all around the world. According to the famous critic of Urdu literature, Shamim Hanfi, it is also true that meaningful poetry does not exist without a meaningful idea, and even the finest idea is unable to become a poem without the high capacity of artistic interpretation. (Hanafi 2008, 42)

Here is an example of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's famous poem, *Bahar Aai* filled with universal emotions of love, sorrow, joy and sadness.

بہار آئی تو جیسے یک بار
لوٹ آئے ہیں پھر عدم سے
وہ خواب سارے شباب سارے
جو تیرے ہونٹوں پہ مر مٹے تھے
جو مٹ کے ہر بار پھر جنے تھے
نکھر گئے ہیں گلاب سارے
جو تیری یادوں سے مشکبو ہیں
جو تیرے عشاق کا لہو ہیں
ابل پڑے ہیں عذاب سارے
ملال احوال دوستان بھی
خمار آغوش مہ و شاں بھی
غبار خاطر کے باب سارے
ترے ہمارے
سوال سارے جواب سارے
بہار آئی تو کھل گئے ہیں
نئے سرے سے حساب سارے
(Faiz 2012, 55)

Translation: It is spring, and the ledger is opened again.

From the abyss where they were frozen,
those days suddenly return, those days
that passed away from your lips, that died
with all our kisses, unaccounted.

The roses return: they are your fragrance;
they are the blood of your lovers.

Sorrow returns. I go through my pain
and the agony of friends still lost in the memory
of moon-silver arms, the caresses of vanished women.

I go through page after page. There are no answers,
and spring has come once again asking

the same questions, reopening account after account. (Faiz 1995)

The historical context of Urdu Nazm is intertwined with social movements, political changes, and cultural shifts, illustrating how language and literature are influenced by the larger socio-political landscape.

Poets like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ahmed Faraz, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Habib Jalib and Majeed Amjad harnessed the power of their verses and poems to address social inequalities, political oppression, and human rights issues, becoming prominent voices in the struggle for democracy and social justice in South Asia. They have used Urdu Nazm effectively to express their thoughts, emotions, and societal critiques. That is why the literary history of Urdu is marked by significant contributions from various poets and writers.

(3) Urdu Prose: Literary Traditions

Urdu prose has a dynamic literary form that encompasses a wide range of genres, including novels, Afsana, essays, humor, travelogues and plays. Its rich tapestry reflects the cultural diversity of South Asia, drawing influences from various linguistic, regional, and social contexts. Eminent writers have utilized Urdu prose to explore themes of identity, social justice, and human emotions, often highlighting the experiences of marginalized communities. This diversity enables Urdu prose to resonate with readers from diverse backgrounds worldwide, fostering a deeper understanding of the region's complex social fabric by weaving together various cultural narratives. Urdu prose serves as a grand and vital medium for celebrating the richness of human experience and promoting cross-cultural dialogue.

(4) The Art of Storytelling: Cultural Legacy of Urdu Dastan

The cultural and multilingual diversity of Urdu is evident in its literature, such as Dastan, where words echo with Persian grace and unfold their meanings as “a tale” or “a story.” This ancient tradition was loved by diverse nations, including Iran, Afghanistan, India and regions of Central Asia. The charm of Dastan finds its home in the hearts of different communities through communal participation. In different villages and towns, ordinary individuals or multiple storytellers came together and began weaving the fabric of tales, creating an atmosphere of wonder and mystery; they gathered a circle of eager listeners. Dastan thrived in the intimate spaces where all communities gathered, fostering a deep sense of belonging and tradition.

Telling and listening to stories has always been a favorite pastime for people around the world. In their early days, *Dastangos*³ narrated charming and captivating tales of love, mystery, magic and adventure of wars. Then, through drawings and paintings, they encouraged a love of listening to Dastans from diverse sources, such as the tales of *The Arabian Nights*.⁴ People came from far and wide to listen to these famous stories from Arabian culture. The tradition of storytelling, like the ancient Indian *Panchatantra*,⁵ stories of the ancient Greeks, *Aesop's*

3 A “dastango” was a person who narrated the most amazing and splendid stories, in the true form and spirit of dastan, in an exciting and mysterious way.

4 “Arabian Nights” is actually the famous collection of “One Thousand and One Nights” tales that were called “Alif Laila.” It is a collection of Middle Eastern folktales compiled in the Arabic language during the Islamic Golden Age. It is often known in English as “the Arabian Nights,” from the first English-language edition (c. 1706–1721). This work was collected over many centuries by various authors, translators, and scholars across West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, and North Africa.

5 “The Panchatantra” is an ancient Indian collection of interrelated animal fables in Sanskrit verse and prose, arranged within a frame story. The surviving

Fables,⁶ and stories from all around the world travel to India where they all get translated or merged into the land of India and thus become a part of Urdu literature and cultural diversity.

The land of India has always been rich in intellectual wisdom. One of the most popular Dastans ever written in this region was *Kalila-wa-Dimna*,⁷ written in Sanskrit. It was actually part of the Sanskrit *Panchatantra* or “Five Discourses” written in the fourth century (Jain 1986, 26) by the Brahmin philosopher and pandit, Bidpai. This Dastan was written for a King, advising him to hold his kingdom wisely, and concealed great practical wisdom in the form of animal fables, in easily digestible form, which caused the king to rule judiciously. After two hundred years, Khosrow I (Anushirvan),⁸ a Sasanian Persian king, asked his Wazir to send his personal physician Burzoe, to find this world-famous book which was being kept in secret in India because of its magical and miraculous effect for ruling the kingdom. During

work is dated to approximately 200 BCE, but the fables are likely much older. It is undoubtedly the most frequently translated literary product of India, and these stories are among the most widely known in the world.

6 “Aesop’s Fables,” or the *Aesopica*, is a collection of fables credited to Aesop, a slave and storyteller who lived in ancient Greece between 620 and 564 BCE. These simple tales, renowned for their charm and simplicity, feature the adventures of animals, birds, and beasts, with each story conveying a moral lesson. For centuries, children and adults have treasured and learned from these fables.

7 “*Kalila wa-Dimna*” or “*Kelileh o Demneh*” is a collection of fables. The book consists of fifteen chapters, each containing numerous fables with animal heroes. A remarkable animal character is the lion, who plays the role of the king; he has a servant ox, *Shetrebah*, while the two jackals of the title, *Kalila* and *Dimna*, appear both as narrators and as protagonists. Its likely origin is the Sanskrit “*Panchatantra*,” which we mentioned above. The book has been translated into many languages, with surviving illustrations in manuscripts dating back to the 13th century.

8 “Khosrow I” also spelled *Khosrau*, *Khusro* or *Chosroes*; Middle Persian king, traditionally known by his epithet of “Anushirvan,” meaning “the Immortal Soul,” was the Sasanian King of Kings of Iran from 531 to 579.

his visit to the palace on the pretext of playing chess, Burzoe secretly copied this Dastan and brought it back by hiding it in his chess box. The king welcomed this wise Dastan with open arms and ordered it to be translated into Pahlavi, a form of Old Persian, and valued it so much that he enshrined this translation in a special room of the palace (Jain 1986, 26).

Three hundred years later, after the Muslim conquest of Persia, this Dastan was translated into Arabic by a Persian convert to Islam, named ‘Abdullah Ibn al-Muqaffa’. His Arabic translation was so eloquent that it is still considered the best model of Arabic prose. Kalila and Dimna are actually two jackals, who are the main protagonists of this Dastan, which was principally intended as guidance for the purpose of governing the state (Ibn al-Muqaffa’ 2022, 18). Upon entering the Muslim world, this wise and entertaining Dastan became extremely popular, and was even carried by the Arabs to Spain and translated into Spanish in the 13th century. Later, the Arabic version was translated into Greek, Latin, German, Old Church Slavic, Ethiopic, Syriac, Turkish, Persian, Malay, Laotian and Siamese. Then, in the 16th century, this Dastan finally returned to India after completing a cycle of 1700 years, in its Persian translation named *Anwar-i Suhaili* (*Anvār-i Suhaylī*) by Husayn Wā‘iz Kāshifī. Then in 1587 it was translated once again into Persian, due to the interest of Mughal King “*Jalal-ud-Din Akbar*,” by one of his worthy historians Abū al-Faḍl, under the name of ‘*Iyār-i Dānish*’.

In the 18th century, Hafiz-ud-Din translated this Dastan into Urdu, at the request of Dr. John Gilchrist, who was the principal of Fort William College, Calcutta, in 1803. Later, it was also published by that institute under the name of *Khird Afroz*. After that, a chain of Urdu translations of this Dastan followed, exhibiting diverse cultural intellectuality and excellent expression of multicultural Wisdom (Ibn al-Muqaffa’ 2022, 20).

In the 13th century, the Dastan were deeply rooted and flourished in India during the opulent era of the Mughals. As was the tradition at that time, a storyteller, who was known as a *Dastango*, crafted and delivered fascinating and immersive experiences. Every tale was a carefully selected fine gem, delivered with grand expressive gestures and vocal cadence, especially accompanied by deep, emotive facial expressions. These performances were not just recitations but living, breath-holding artworks that painted brilliant, vivid and glowing pictures in the minds of the listeners.

Thus, Dastan's journey begins in various regions and places, featuring epic heroes, mythical characters, mysterious creatures, historical sagas, and timeless folklore. With the passage of time, these native narratives became steeped in poetic eloquence and were then adorned with deep metaphors and sound allegorical nuances. Each tale carries the echoes of a past or a bygone era, which resonates with the diverse culture and literary influences of that time.

During the 14th century, Persian *Dastangos* focused on the life and adventures of *Amir Hamza*. At that time, the Dastangoi incorporated some unique storytelling techniques and elements such as "aiyyari," which means trickery in the Indian context. This adaptation enriched the narrative of the story, making it more interesting and enchanting; it added depth and intrigue to the tales being told. Through this evolution, Dastangoi became a culturally diverse and dynamic oral tradition by intertwining its elements from various sources and cultures to create vibrant and rich storytelling experiences.

In the 19th century, the earliest documented references to Dastangoi were found in a text comprising 46 volumes of *Dastaan-e-Amir Hamza*, the story of Amir Hamza's adventures (Lakhnāvi and Shāhid 2011). This Dastan was woven from Persian and Urdu and originated in medieval India. The journey of this Dastan began from Arabia, spread to Iran and

then eventually reached Delhi, the heart of India, due to the remarkable features of Urdu and its ability to preserve and showcase cultural diversity.

After that, this narrative genre, Dastan, got such a boost in India that stories and tales from many languages and regions of the world were translated or merged into Urdu, which not only expanded its cultural diversity but also brought the different communities of the world together. There is a beautiful cultural combination in *Sab Ras* by Mullah Wajhi, *Nau Tarz-e-Murassa* by Hussain Ata Khan Tehsin, *Bagh-o-Bahar (Qissa Chahar Darwaish)* by Mir Aman, *Aaraish-e-Mehfil* by Haider Bakhsh Haidri, *Fasana-e-Ajaib* by Rajab Ali Baig Saror, and many more.

Dastan always stands as a profound and captivating form of literature, which is still alive in the oral traditions of storytelling. It is a literary artistry that is woven into the very fabric of cultural heritage, from which the words transcend the boundaries of time and space, and thus create a captivating tapestry of charming tales. Its literary richness lies not just in the stories but also in the art of storytelling, the rhythm of speech, and the choice of words and the subtleties of expressions that afterwards became crucial elements of this literary form. Thus, these oral traditions, historical events, myths, and moral lessons were not merely recounted but also reimagined, revitalized, and passed down from one generation to the next.

(5) Urdu Novel: Cultural Diversity and the Spectrum of Society

Urdu novels are a relatively recent addition to the rich tapestry of Urdu literature. It has emerged as a powerful medium for storytelling that transcends social, cultural and geographical boundaries. Since the inception of the Urdu novel in the 19th century, it has evolved

significantly by reflecting the socio-political changes of the Indian subcontinent. The first novel of Urdu literature was “*Miraat-ul-Uroos*” by Deputy Nazeer Ahmed in 1869. That offered profound insights into human experiences. Afterwards, through its narrative techniques and thematic diversity, Urdu novels have not only shaped the literary landscape of South Asia but have also facilitated cross-cultural dialogue and understanding.

The emergence of the Urdu novel coincided with the rise of modernity in the Indian subcontinent. Writers like Prem Chand, Krishan Chandar, Ismat Chughtai, Quratulain Hyder, Intezar Hussain, Abdullah Hussain, Shoukat Siddiqi, and Mustansar Hussain Tarrer pioneered this genre by addressing contemporary issues such as the postcolonial period, problems before and after partition, migration, social injustice, identity, and the struggles of marginalized communities. The novel’s ability to capture the complexities of life in a rapidly changing society made it a most famous and popular form of expression, allowing authors to explore the intricacies of cultural identities, social and moral issues, gender dynamics and communal tensions.

Themes that are explored in Urdu literature often resonate with universal human experiences that make them relatable to readers from diverse backgrounds from all around the world. Novels like *Aag Ka Darya* by Quratulain Hyder, *Udas Naslain* and *Nadar Log* by Abdullah Hussain, *Basti* by Intezar Hussain, *Bahao* by Mustansar Hussain Tarrar and *Khuda Ki Basti* by Shoukat Siddiqi explore the colonial period, Partition, Migration, postcolonial issues, wars between India and Pakistan, dominated historical narratives, existential questions, love, hate, loss, and social critique. These narratives not only reflect the cultural context of their time period but also address themes that transcend cultural boundaries by inviting readers from different backgrounds to engage with their stories and characters.

As Urdu novels have gained much popularity beyond South Asia, they have facilitated cultural exchange and developed a dialogue. Translations of eminent Urdu novels into English and other languages have allowed non-Urdu speakers to appreciate the beauty and richness of Urdu language and literature. This exchange promotes a greater understanding of South Asian culture, tradition and history by fostering connections between diverse communities and cultures. Readers from various cultural backgrounds of the world can find common ground in the themes and emotions that are portrayed in these novels by enriching their understanding of the human condition. As Dr. Naeem Virk says:

The relationship between novel and culture plays an important role in their shaping each other. The structure of the novel, the rituals, the ways of creating the characters, the behavior of the characters, the dialogue, all these are influenced by the culture of any region. (Virk 2019, 102)

The cross-cultural effect of Urdu novels has extended beyond literature, as they have also influenced social and political discourse. Many contemporary Urdu writers address global issues, such as partition, migration, identity, and human rights, by reflecting the interconnectedness of today's world. Urdu novels contribute to global conversations by engaging with themes of cultural identity, resilience, and the question of justice.

The popularity of Urdu novels is found in literary festivals and academic circles around the world, underscoring their impact on cross-cultural issues and dialogues. When events celebrate Urdu literature, they attract diverse audiences by encouraging discussions that bridge cultural divides. Through such events and engagements, readers and writers share broad perspectives by fostering mutual respect and

understanding among different cultures.

For many decades, Urdu novels have served as a significant medium for cross-cultural communication and understanding. Through their rich narratives, cultural diversity and exploration of universal themes, they transcend linguistic and cultural barriers by inviting readers from various backgrounds to engage with their stories. As the genre of Urdu novels continues to evolve and reach new places and audiences, its cross-cultural effects will undoubtedly contribute to a more interconnected global community. Thus, the Urdu novel stands not only as a testament to the literary heritage of the Urdu language and literature but also as a catalyst for fostering cross-cultural dialogue, peace and harmony in an increasingly globalized world.

(6) Urdu *Afsana*: Capturing the Essence of Multicultural Narratives

Urdu *Afsana*, or the short story, is a diverse literary form that has emerged as a powerful medium for exploring human experiences, social issues, and cultural narratives. Originating in the early 20th century, Urdu *Afsana* has gained prominence through the literary works of eminent Urdu writers such as Allama Rashid-ul-khairi, Sajjad Haider Yelderam, Prem Chand, Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Baidi, Ismat Chughtai, Hajra Masror, Saadat Hasan Manto and Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi. This literary genre not only reflects the socio-cultural landscape of the Indian subcontinent but also serves as a catalyst for cross-cultural communication and understanding.

Urdu *Afsana* is characterized by its brevity, focusing on a single event, and conveying profound insights into human feelings and emotions with societal norms. This short and to-the-point method of storytelling allows writers to capture the complexities and issues of life in a condensed format, creating an Urdu *Afsana* that is both impactful

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and accessible. Themes that are explored in Urdu Afsana often address issues such as power and imperialism, partition, migration, identity, gender, social injustice, and the effects of historical events by making them relevant across different contexts and time periods.

For instance, Saadat Hasan Manto's stories about partition and migration painfully affect the feelings and highlight the trauma and chaos experienced by individuals during that disruptive and troubled period. These narratives resonate with universal themes of loss, sorrows, grief, displacement and resilience. They invite readers from diverse backgrounds to engage with the emotional realities of others.

The cross-cultural effects of Urdu *Afsana* are very profound, as these compelling stories often transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries. The translation of Urdu short stories into other languages has allowed a global audience to appreciate the richness and depth of Urdu literature. Readers from various cultures from all around the world can find common ground in the themes of love, hate, conflict, social and psychological issues, and human struggle that permeate these narratives.

Urdu *Afsana* actually serves as a platform for fostering empathy and understanding among its readers. It often comprises and presents the lives, issues and struggles of marginalized communities. These stories encourage their readers to reflect and understand their own societal contexts, problems and challenges. The ability to connect the characters of stories with their own experiences can lead to increased awareness and compassion among people from different cultures and backgrounds. As Dr. Anwar Ahmed says:

The reputation of every genre of literature is in the hands of its great creator. The experience and style of this creator or writer expand the semantic world of this genre of literature, and the diversity of his experiences calls for new forms and techniques. This is the reason

for the mental and emotional training of the readers of fiction.
(Anwar 2017, 26)

Literary festivals and cultural exchanges celebrating Urdu literature also play an important role in promoting cross-cultural dialogues. These events bring together writers, scholars, and readers from diverse cultural backgrounds by facilitating discussions that highlight shared human experiences while celebrating cultural differences. Such interactions enrich, enhance, and develop the literary landscape, fostering mutual respect among participants.

The rise of digital media has expanded the reach of Urdu *Afsana*. Many online platforms are available to enable writers to share their works with a global audience. They encourage discussions and collaborations that further enhance and enrich cross-cultural understanding. The accessibility of Urdu literature in the digital age has created many opportunities for its readers and writers to engage with one another, regardless of their geographical locations and countries.

Urdu *Afsana* stories remain a concise and powerful literary form that contributes significantly to cross-cultural communication, contemporary issues, and mutual understanding. They are brief in form but comprehensive in scope, and that is why it has narratives and exploration of universal themes. Urdu *Afsana* transcends cultural boundaries by inviting readers to engage with the complexities of human experiences. As Urdu literature continues to reach new audiences, its cross-cultural effects will foster greater empathy, awareness, peace, harmony and appreciation for the rich tapestry of diverse cultures. By encouraging and celebrating the power of Urdu *Afsana*, we can promote a deeper understanding of our shared culture and humanity in an increasingly interconnected world.

(7) Other Literary Contributions

The Urdu Language and literature boast a rich and diverse body of creative work, encompassing poetry, intellectual prose, riveting drama and joyful stories. The literary contributions of Urdu writers encompass a wide array of themes, including love, partition, migration, patriotism, social injustice, and the pathetic human condition. The emergence of Urdu Ghazal as a prominent poetic form of Urdu literature has been particularly significant. Characterized by its lyrical quality and exploration of complex emotions, Urdu Ghazal allows poets to convey feelings of love, sorrow, engagement, Sufi thought, and loss in a unique expressive manner.

In addition to Urdu Ghazal, Urdu literature includes various narrative forms, such as short stories, novels and other genres. Great writers like Qurat-ul-Haider, Abdullah Hussain, Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai have used their works to challenge societal norms and also to shed light on the struggles faced by marginalized communities. Their narratives in their writings reflect the cultural realities of their time. They have made Urdu literature a powerful tool for social commentary and change.

5. Social Impact and Identity

Urdu language and literature play a significant role in shaping social identities and community cohesion. For many speakers, Urdu is such an important marker of cultural identity that it particularly develops cultural harmony among Muslims and other communities in South Asia. It serves as a basic means of expressing cultural values, beliefs, and traditions by reinforcing a sense of belonging.

In Pakistan, where Urdu is the national language, it serves as

a unifying force among the country's diverse ethnic groups and communities. The promotion of Urdu in education, media, and government fosters a sense of national identity and cultural pride among its people. Similarly, in India, Urdu holds a special, unique and distinctive place within the broader context of Indian culture, particularly in literary and artistic circles in the country. Literary festivals, events, poetry recitals, conferences and cultural events centred on Urdu provide valuable platforms for speakers to celebrate their historic heritage and culture and connect with one another.

Moreover, in history, Urdu literature has also played a significant role in political and social movements. Writers and poets have used their creative work to advocate for the struggle for freedom from British imperialism, social justice, peace and equality, drawing attention to the class system and human rights by contributing to larger struggles for independence and empowerment. The voices of Urdu writers and poets have become instruments of resistance against oppression and imperialism by illuminating the cultural dimensions of activism and social change.

Urdu plays a crucial and central role in fostering, understanding and developing tolerance and acceptance among diverse communities, with eloquent expressions and refined, nuanced vocabulary. It facilitates meaningful and insightful dialogue in social and cultural exchange by promoting the appreciation of different perspectives through literature, poetry, and artistic expressions. The Urdu language, from its inception, has contributed to breaking down stereotypes and dispelling misconceptions and misinterpretations among different communities. In a multicultural society, understanding, patience, and tolerance are essential for harmonious coexistence; thus, Urdu plays a fundamental and vital role in nurturing these values.

The strength and power of Urdu lies in its historical significance. Its

actual role is preserving cultural diversity and contributing to fostering peace, understanding, tolerance, and cultural harmony. Urdu transcends and breaks down the borders of hate and bigotry, bringing people together with its inclusive nature and rich artistic and literary heritage. It provides a shared space where diverse communities and cultures can coexist. As the prominent Pakistani political scientist Iqbal Ahmad remarked:

Urdu is neither a Muslim nor a Hindu language. It developed in response to the necessity of two peoples to discover a common language. It developed out of an honest, genuine, meaningful, creative encounter between Islam and India. Out of that multicultural, multi-religious encounter, a language has developed that is our common heritage.” (Ahmad et al. 2001)

6. Contemporary Expressions

In contemporary society, Urdu continues to evolve and adapt to new social, global and cultural contexts. The rise of digital media, social platforms and informative global literary events has provided opportunities for young writers and poets to engage audiences with their literary work in creative and innovative ways. Contemporary Urdu literature often addresses contemporary themes and issues such as identity, globalization, wars, human insecurity regarding artificial intelligence,⁹ and the complexities of modern urban life. Modern Urdu

⁹ Artificial Intelligence (AI) has completely changed the literary landscape by introducing sophisticated machine learning algorithms and natural language processing techniques. These algorithms have not only changed the creation of new works and technologies but also it has given new topics for discussion and creativity in literature and art.

writers are exploring diverse genres, from novels to short stories and blogs, by reflecting the dynamic, energetic and vital nature of Urdu as a living language.

The global reach of Urdu literature has been enhanced and expanded by translations into other languages, allowing non-Urdu speakers to engage with its richness. Literary translations foster cross-cultural and multilingual appreciation by creating connections among diverse communities and cultures, contributing, encouraging, and promoting a greater understanding of Urdu's cultural significance.

7. Urdu: A Cultural Thread in Asia's Linguistic Tapestry

In conclusion, the historic cultural dimensions of Urdu language and literature are quite profound and multifaceted. From its deep historical roots to its contemporary expressions, Urdu serves as a basic tool for cultural identity, artistic creativity, narration, and social engagement. The true face of Urdu literature is revealed in its creative poetic traditions and diverse narratives that reflect the complexities of human experiences and social norms that are the cultural heritage of South Asia.

As Urdu continues to emerge and evolve in the modern developed world, its role as a language of unity, peace, tolerance, expression, and cultural richness remains indispensable and vitally important by contributing to the broader linguistic and cultural landscape of not just South Asia but the world as a whole. Embracing, welcoming and celebrating the cultural dimensions of Urdu will definitely ensure its continued relevance, importance and significance in a rapidly changing global environment.

In conclusion, it is essential to highlight the ongoing relevance of Urdu as a bridge between cultures worldwide. This can be achieved

by encouraging readers to appreciate, celebrate, and contribute to the promotion of the Urdu language, fostering a more harmonious, peaceful, and inclusive global society. Although there are issues in shaping the future of Urdu, such as language preservation, the impact of globalization, and the role of modern information and artificial technology, this language has endured many challenges in the past and continues to face them in contemporary times. As we celebrate the nuances, distinctions and expressions embedded in Urdu, we acknowledge the profound role it has played in uniting diverse cultures and communities by fostering a sense of shared identity with the traditions and culture we have been following for decades.

*English translations are by the author.

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3. Dr. Hina Jamshed



Chapter 3. Urdu: A Cultural Bridge in Asia's Multilingual Tapestry

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