

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF URDU LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

This paper critically explores the multifaceted challenges faced by the Urdu language and literature in the 21st century, particularly in the wake of globalization, Western cultural dominance, and the increasing disconnect of native speakers from their linguistic heritage. The study identifies key issues such as the declining use of Urdu as a medium of instruction, the erosion of its grammar due to the influx of foreign structures, the neglect of Urdu script in early childhood, and the lack of inclusion of linguistic experts in curriculum development.

Furthermore, the paper highlights the significance of Urdu in shaping moral, cultural, and intellectual identity. Drawing on the philosophical insights of Allama Iqbal, it argues for a cultural revival rooted in love for one's language and script. The research also proposes practical strategies including the promotion of Urdu through modern technology, digital libraries, media platforms, and grassroots efforts such as using Urdu in public signage and everyday communication. The paper concludes that while the 21st century poses serious challenges to Urdu, it also offers opportunities for renewal, provided that policymakers, educators, and society at large act with commitment and vision. The preservation and promotion of Urdu is not merely a linguistic concern, but a cultural imperative for the generations to come.

Keywords:

Urdu Language, 21st Century Challenges, Cultural Identity, Urdu Literature, Linguistic Heritage, Grammar Preservation, Urdu Script, Curriculum Reform, Allama Iqbal, Urdu Medium Education, Language Policy, Western Influence, Digital Urdu

Introduction:

The 21st century has emerged as an era of rapid globalization, technological advancement, and intense cultural intermingling. In this dynamic context, the Urdu language—once a powerful medium of literary, cultural, and political expression—now faces unprecedented challenges. The spread of English-medium education, increasing reliance on foreign vocabulary and grammatical structures, and the weakening of foundational language skills among children have contributed to the gradual erosion of Urdu's status in society.

While Urdu remains one of the most widely spoken and appreciated languages in the world, it is ironically being neglected by its own native speakers. Parents from Urdu-speaking backgrounds are increasingly distancing their children from the language, favoring English for perceived socioeconomic advancement. This disconnection has led to a cultural and intellectual gap, threatening the continuity of Urdu's literary legacy and its relevance in the modern era.

This paper seeks to examine the contemporary challenges faced by Urdu language and literature, including linguistic dilution, the marginalization of Urdu in educational systems, the declining mastery of Urdu script, and the limited institutional support for its promotion. Through reference to classical and modern thinkers—especially Allama Iqbal—the study argues for a revival of Urdu not only as a language, but as a **cultural force** capable of addressing the spiritual and societal needs of the Muslim world. The discussion further explores practical strategies for reintegrating Urdu into educational curricula, media, digital technology, and everyday life, ensuring its survival and flourishing in the 21st century and beyond.

The Ideal of the True Believer and the Role of Poets in Shaping Society

The problems of literature and life are, on the one hand, delicate, subtle, and elusive, and on the other, deeply interconnected, multifaceted, and expansive. The moment we begin to explore the relationship between literature and life, a multitude of questions emerge. What is literature? Is it an end in itself, or a means to achieve a higher purpose? Does literature merely reflect personal emotions and sentiments, or does it also embody collective social consciousness? In literary expression, is form more significant, or does content and subject matter hold primary importance? The answers to these questions essentially lead us to understand the intrinsic relationship between literature and life. Throughout different eras, diverse theories have been presented regarding the purpose and function of literature. However, underlying all such theories is a shared understanding: literature and life are so profoundly intertwined that it is difficult to conceive one without the other. Literature is not only a reflection and critique of life—it is, in fact, an essential part of our social and cultural existence. As one critic aptly stated, **"It is a social manifestation of the human."**

In essence, literature is deeply and inseparably connected with life; indeed, literature is another name for life itself.

As we step into the 21st century—our collective future—it becomes imperative to build a stronger and more enlightened future based on the foundations of the past. Today, in an era where computers have woven all nations into a single thread, any event or scientific advancement occurring in one part of the world instantly reaches the rest of the globe. We must learn to benefit from this global interconnectedness and technological advancement.

Ethical and Linguistic Challenges in the 21st Century

As we stand at the threshold of the 21st century, this era promises to usher in unprecedented scientific discoveries and technological awareness. Yet, amidst such progress, one of the greatest challenges facing modern society is the preservation of **morality and ethical values**. Literature, in its truest form, must serve as a custodian of these values. To effectively confront the complexities of the 21st century, it is imperative that we urgently bridge the widening gap between our people and the Urdu language and literature.

Today, common Urdu vocabulary is increasingly being replaced by English equivalents—"chair" for "کرسی", "speech" for "تقریر", "language" for "زبان", "room" for "کمرہ", and "pen" for "قلم". The language that was once pure and indigenous before 1857 has now been heavily infused with foreign linguistic elements, diluting its originality and identity.

The importance of literature in human society is akin to the soul in the human body. The literature of any nation mirrors the daily lives, cultural values, and aspirations of its people. Their needs, desires, and luxuries are reflected through their literary expressions. To understand the social and cultural rhythms of any nation, one must study the living standards, educational systems, and

cultural upbringing of its populace. In this regard, language holds a fundamental position—serving as the primary medium for intellectual and moral development.

Despite gaining independence over seven decades ago, Pakistan remains mentally subjugated by colonial influence. In the 21st century, it is essential to break free from this lingering colonial mindset. Our foremost priority must be the **revival and promotion of our national language**, placing it at the center of our educational and cultural policies.

Today, the Muslim world stands overawed by external influences and is increasingly alienated from the truth. This spiritual disconnection has led to a collective moral and emotional stagnation. The modern Muslim lacks awareness of this condition, entangled instead in materialistic pursuits. Yet, it must be remembered that material constructs are mortal—subject to decay and death. What is immortal and divine is the soul. The survival and prosperity of nations lie in their **spiritual growth**, and such growth demands the revival of qualities associated with the **true believer (mard-e-momin)**—a symbol of courage, integrity, and divine consciousness.

The Ideal of the True Believer and the Role of Poets in Shaping Society

The *Mard-e-Momin* (True Believer) is the secret behind the divine command *Kun Fayakoon*—the creative power of God. A man of spiritual strength and vision, he leads his nation through his attributes of *Jalal* (majesty) and *Jamal* (beauty). He begins his journey with a negation of falsehood, rejects oppressive forces, and builds his world through his own creative potential. As Dr. Allama Muhammad Iqbal aptly stated:

**“Create your own world if you have life within you;
The essence of life is the divine spark that breathes existence.”**

— *Iqbal*

In the 21st century, the world longs for Iqbal's concept of *Mard-e-Hur*—the spiritually liberated and morally upright individual. This *Perfect Man* is not just a visionary of his time, but a divine secret, a savior of turbulent eras. His mission is to dismantle the colonial mindset and reawaken the dignity of human existence. No worldly power can subdue such an individual. It is in the 21st century that such a *Kamil Insan* (Perfect Human) has the potential to heal humanity—and his influence is not confined to one century but transcends time.

Unfortunately, today's youth—molded by Western educational frameworks—are unaware of the achievements and legacy of their great historical figures. The moral and spiritual state of this generation is deeply concerning. Co-education has, in many cases, opened the door to social problems. Women have increasingly adopted an unrestricted lifestyle, surpassing even Western norms in terms of immodesty and a disregard for traditional values. Modern electronic and social media further exacerbate this situation, leading the youth away from religion and towards moral confusion.

In every era, the reformation of society has been profoundly influenced by exceptional poets. Among them, **Akbar Allahabadi** holds a distinguished position for his unique and insightful thought. His ideas, when examined in light of present times, appear strikingly relevant and prophetic. One might say he was a poet ahead of his time—truly a poet of the 21st century. Akbar's keen foresight exposed the emerging societal flaws more than a century ago. For instance, he famously observed:

**"Yesterday a few unveiled women appeared in public,
Akbar buried himself in shame for his nation.
When asked, 'Where is your veil?' they replied,
'It is the men who have lost their senses.'"**

In another instance, he wrote:

**"These present-day trends will lead us to ruin;
A new civilization will emerge with new instruments.
Among women, the custom of modesty will vanish—
Veils will no longer be needed, even idols will replace them."**

Akbar's poetry not only critiqued the social transformations of his time but also predicted the moral decay that characterizes much of the contemporary world. His work remains a vital reference for any meaningful discourse on cultural identity and moral revival in the modern Muslim world.

Educational Reforms, Linguistic Criticism, and the Future of Urdu Grammar

Akbar Allahabadi offered a profound and piercing critique of the socio-cultural implications of the national education system of his time. In the context of the 21st century, there arises a pressing need for reforms—particularly regarding **separate educational institutions for women**, so as to prevent unnecessary gender intermingling. Such segregation, it is argued, would reduce social impropriety, discourage voyeurism, and contribute to a morally unblemished society. As Dr. Muhammad Arshad Owaisi insightfully remarks:

“Akbar Allahabadi left no aspect of modern life untouched. His golden ideas on education, politics, democracy, civilization, society, religion, women's education, veiling, science, and technology will continue to awaken the moral consciousness of Muslims in the present century and beyond.” (*Dr. Muhammad Arshad Owaisi*)

Turning to linguistic matters, the field of **Urdu grammar writing** (قواعد نویسی) has thus far focused heavily on morphological and syntactic rules. Most traditional approaches have aimed at providing a prescriptive framework, often without fully accounting for cognitive development and linguistic diversity among students. However, the 21st century has transformed the world into a **global village**, where those who fail to adapt to evolving communicative demands risk becoming obsolete. This transformation necessitates rethinking and modernizing traditional grammar models to suit contemporary linguistic realities.

Previous works on Urdu grammar have largely remained confined within the boundaries of classical rule-based systems. Dr. Suhail Abbas Khan, in his analytical critique, highlights this limitation by referencing earlier scholars:

“In the preface to his famous book *Qawaid-e-Urdu*, Dr. Molvi Abdul Haq noted that most contemporary grammar books merely imitate Arabic grammar. A major shortcoming of his own work lies in its limited focus on terminology and the absence of syntactic discussion. Later, Ali Abbas Jalalpuri's *Aam Fikri Mughalatay* emerged, but many conceptual fallacies still remain to be addressed.” (*Dr. Suhail Abbas Khan*)

In the 21st century, it is imperative to align Urdu grammar with **modern linguistic principles**. This includes analyzing sentence structures by reordering lexical units to study their semantic transformations. Special attention must also be given to **auxiliary verbs**, whose nuanced use in Urdu reflects complex semantic layers, comparable to patterns found in global languages. A noteworthy contribution in this domain is **Ismat Javed's** *Nayi Urdu Qawaid (New Urdu Grammar)*, which represents a progressive step towards syntactic clarity. However, one notable shortcoming of this work is its lack of sufficient examples to support theoretical constructs.

Another valuable addition is *Bunyadi Urdu Qawaid (Fundamental Urdu Grammar)* by Dr. Suhail Abbas Baloch. Renowned literary figure **Iftikhar Arif** remarks on its significance:

“This book provides a comprehensive list of verbs with both literal and contextual meanings. It also presents an organized account of prefixes and suffixes. While not merely a grammar book, it

serves as a meaningful contribution to the field of linguistics. Its most prominent feature is the integration of grammar and lexicography.”

Such scholarly endeavors highlight the urgency and importance of **revamping Urdu grammar studies** to meet contemporary educational, linguistic, and cognitive standards. This transformation is essential if Urdu is to maintain its relevance and rigor in the modern academic and technological age.

Grammatical Evolution and the Role of the Ghazal in the 21st Century

An important contribution to Urdu grammatical studies is *Urdu Afaal* (Urdu Verbs) by **Sonia Pronikova**, in which she systematically explores the different conjugational forms and semantic contexts of Urdu verbs. Her analysis reveals that the **semantic structure of sentences is profoundly shaped by the use of auxiliary verbs**. In this context, **Tamanna Imadi's** seminal work *Af'aal-e-Murakkaba* (Compound Verbs) remains foundational, although it was published over fifty years ago and calls for a contemporary revisitation.

In the domain of poetry, particularly the **Urdu Ghazal**, poets of the 21st century have adeptly encapsulated the myriad challenges faced by modern humanity. The ghazal, as one of the most celebrated poetic forms in Urdu literature, now mirrors the complete spectrum of contemporary socio-political realities. Despite enduring criticism across different eras—being labeled at times as “half-savage poetry” or even threatened with literary extinction—the ghazal has never lost its popularity or cultural resonance.

"It continues to rise, only to lift you higher."

Over time, the **Urdu ghazal has evolved**, shifting from the traditional domain of romantic longing (*koocha-e-mehboob*) to themes of socio-political resistance (*koocha-e-daar-o-rasan*). Entering the 21st century, it faces a host of new challenges. Global events, political upheavals, and social transformations have deeply altered public attitudes and intellectual currents. **Mansoor Khoshtar** observes:

"The 21st-century Urdu ghazal has moved beyond the confined frameworks of progressivism, modernism, and postmodernism. The poet of this new era refuses to be restricted by any particular ideology or literary movement. Today's poets seek individuality in tone, diction, expression, and thematic diversity. The intellectual evolution of the ghazal is still ongoing, and only time will reveal its full trajectory. Yet, it is already rich with elements of suffering, protest, mysticism, complaint, silence, and whispers. It reflects both cultural splendor and the chaos of societal unrest."

The richness of the ghazal in addressing contemporary concerns is not merely thematic—it is also profoundly emotional and symbolic. Consider the poetic reflection of **Bedil Haidari**, who translates the economic anxieties of the present into striking visual metaphors:

*Children, their faces marked by hunger yet radiant like the moon,
Sell balloons in alleyways to survive.
The heart of the tyrannical sky cooled at last—
For children died of thirst on the riverbanks.*

Such verses vividly illustrate how poets use the ghazal as a vessel for **social critique**, particularly in addressing **economic injustice**—a recurrent theme in 21st-century poetic discourse. Take, for instance, the expression of anguish by **Azhar Faragh**:

*Even those who seem content are struck by fate;
Laughing at Indra, we suddenly begin to weep for ourselves.
How easily we grow accustomed to deprivation—
Even half a meal somehow becomes enough for our household.*

In summary, the **ghazal remains a pivotal literary form**, whose cultural significance and contemporary relevance are both undeniable and enduring. Far from being an antiquated poetic tradition, it continues to reflect, challenge, and transform in response to the intellectual and emotional demands of the present age.

Sectarianism, Spiritual Decline, and the Linguistic Legacy of Urdu in the 21st Century

The 21st century has witnessed the proliferation of **sectarianism**, a social affliction that has torn the fabric of Muslim unity. Trivial theological disagreements have become sources of conflict, leading to religious fragmentation—symbolically reflected in each group establishing its own ideological "mosque." Many Muslim rulers today appear to be spiritual disciples of Western imperial powers, metaphorically shackled in the chains of modern subjugation. The passion, spiritual longing (*soz-o-gudaz*), and devotion that once characterized Muslim identity are fading rapidly.

The heart of the Muslim Ummah has grown cold, devoid of the fire of divine love. In pursuit of material gain and loss, the Muslim has become estranged from the **madness of love** (*junoon-e-ishq*), stripped of the dignity that accompanies spiritual poverty (*fakr*). Yet *fakr* is the true heritage of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ—embodying the strength of Ali, the humility that brings both kings and beggars to bow at its threshold. This spiritual strength once gave us the might to conquer Khyber while subsisting on coarse bread. The essence of *fakr* is the **Holy Qur'an**, but the modern Muslim has become bereft of this inner wealth. Ironically, the endurance of faith hinges on *fakr*, as Iqbal expressed:

*The wisdom of religion lies in the grace of poverty;
The power of religion flows from the self-sufficiency of poverty.
— Iqbal*

By embracing Iqbal's philosophical vision, Muslims in the 21st century can achieve remarkable success in both spiritual and worldly domains.

From a linguistic standpoint, the 21st century compels us to differentiate between **orthography (spelling)** and **script (writing system)**. Scholars engaged in linguistic research must be acquainted with the historical evolution of orthographic styles to maintain methodological accuracy. Urdu's script is among the richest in the world, incorporating vocabulary and phonetic elements from multiple languages. No other script rivals its depth and flexibility.

Urdu script demonstrates **remarkable universality**. It seamlessly accommodates **Arabic letters**, phonetically renders **Devanagari characters**, and includes **Persian calligraphy**. Even the sounds of the English language can be phonetically assimilated within the Urdu system. For instance, novels and stories by **Premchand**, when published in **Nastaliq script**, are considered Urdu; when printed in **Devanagari**, they are classified as Hindi. This adaptability reflects the comprehensiveness of Urdu script.

Despite its richness, Urdu script has faced criticism—most commonly about the ambiguous count of its alphabets, challenges with diacritical marks (a'raab), and the issue of homographs. However, these critiques overlook the expansive, resourceful, and **semantically inclusive** nature of Urdu. Its script continues to meet the demands of the 21st century and must be embraced with confidence and pride.

Online libraries have emerged as crucial tools in the digital era. They not only provide access to rare and valuable literary texts but also serve as repositories for preservation. To confront the challenges Urdu faces today, it is essential to engage with these platforms. They play a key role in the dissemination, revival, and global presence of Urdu literature. Some significant online Urdu

repositories include. Equip Urdu literature with such trends that represent a beautiful blend of Eastern and Western thoughts.

- Introduce Urdu language to modern technology.
- Make Urdu the medium of instruction at all levels.
- Simplify the process of terminology development.
- Assign the leadership of institutions established for the promotion of Urdu literature to technocrats instead of bureaucrats.
- Develop the art of translation according to modern principles.
- Promote Urdu journalism.
- Activate electronic, print, and social media for the promotion of Urdu language and literature.
- Organize literary gatherings.
- Organize literary seminars, conferences, and sittings.
- Establish literary libraries.
- Strengthen provincial literary institutions.

In the 21st century, Western civilization is trying in every possible way to weaken Islamic civilization. Through radio, television, newspapers and magazines, music and films, internet, books, art and fashion exhibitions—Western civilization is asserting its dominance over Islamic culture. From Iqbal's ideology, we learn the lesson of safeguarding Islamic civilization. His poetry and prose deal with human issues. Iqbal never taught to submit to the materialism of Western civilization. He predicted that Western civilization would, through its own instability, cause its own destruction:

*O dwellers of the West! God's world is not a marketplace.
What you consider pure will soon turn out to be base.
Your civilization will commit suicide with its own dagger.
A nest built on a fragile branch will never last.*

Iqbal presented his theory of change in the light of the Holy Qur'an, wherein he revealed the truth of the survival of nations and the permanence of their civilization. In the 21st century, it is observed that Western civilization is far ahead of Islamic nations in science and technology.

However, its scientific advancement was achieved by drawing from Islamic civilization and culture. The Arabs were the first to progress in the field of science. But due to falling into the slumber of negligence, the West awakened and advanced by benefiting from Islamic sciences and arts. Meanwhile, the same Islamic civilization failed to act upon its own sciences, arts, and the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah—which is its greatest failure. The Qur'an emphasizes reflection, research, and experimentation, but the failure to act upon it is the biggest shortcoming of the Muslim world.

*As the assembly of the white-clad nation dimmed,
The lamp of modern civilization was lit.*

It is essential to benefit from the thoughts and ideas of Iqbal and to act upon the values taught by Islamic civilization. In the 21st century, where the world has become a global village, the protection of language and culture has become a major concern. Introducing the younger generation to Urdu and finding solutions to their issues has become the need of the hour. Along with this, it is also necessary to align Urdu with the demands of the present age—like computers, the internet, and more.

Titled “**Urdu Literature in the 21st Century: Challenges and Remedies,**” this topic was selected for the seminar at **Government Degree College Nizamabad** keeping in view the needs of the present era. The objective of this seminar is to discuss the future of Urdu and the preservation of its script. Due to its sweetness, Urdu is becoming increasingly popular across the globe, and new communities are being established in foreign lands like the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, etc.—a highly encouraging sign for the future of Urdu.

In the same way, although English is the most widely spoken and read language globally, the unfortunate reality is that today, the very speakers and beneficiaries of Urdu are enrolling their children in English-medium education. As the saying goes, "The house was set on fire by its own lamp"—the custodians of Urdu are strangling it by distancing their children from it. In this era, educating one's children through Urdu medium is itself the greatest challenge.

"Good names lead to good outcomes."

In the 21st century, a significant issue for the Urdu language is how to link it with employment opportunities, and how to integrate Urdu vocabulary with machine technology. These are important challenges that must be addressed with a forward-thinking approach. We must identify the shortcomings of the 20th century and rectify them. Urdu will remain alive as long as its grammar remains intact. However, Urdu speakers are incorporating words from other languages along with their grammatical structures, which is reshaping Urdu.

For instance, consider the word "challenge." How should its plural be formed in Urdu? Should it end with "ز" (z) or with "س" (s)? Similarly, how do we form the plurals of "college" and "university" in Urdu? Urdu can borrow words from other languages, but it should not adopt their grammar. Urdu speakers must never abandon their own grammatical system.

One of the most important issues in this century is the **preservation of Urdu script**. A child, especially under the care of a mother, begins to develop familiarity with script at home. If it is not taught there, it will not be learned elsewhere. A mother must adorn her child with the beauty of Urdu script from her lap—just as the saints of Islam attracted people toward faith with love, so too must people be drawn toward their script with love.

Various efforts have been made for the correction of Urdu spelling (imla). In 1950, significant measures were taken in this regard. Today, there is a need to revisit and reimplement those steps. In training courses like B.Ed. and M.Ed., there should be a dedicated subject on spelling accuracy—this is a proposed recommendation.

Special attention must be given to **children's handwriting and letter formation**. Among Urdu speakers, there are disagreements regarding the **number of alphabets**: some say 34, others 37, while some linguists argue for 52, 53, or even 56 letters. Hence, a **national-level seminar** should be conducted to resolve this.

In curriculum design and development, linguists are often not included, which leads to recurring flaws in the syllabi. Therefore, in **curriculum development committees**, expert linguists must be included to ensure quality content.

Another key issue for Urdu in the 21st century is the **creation of readers** within the Muslim nation. We must cultivate Urdu readers and prevent their alienation. As for how to achieve this:

We should instill **the habit of reading** in children by providing them with **resources, books, newspapers**, and indirectly encouraging them through subtle strategies. This habit will develop over time.

Children are imitators by nature. Regardless of ideology or literary genre, it is essential to keep three points in mind:

1. Nothing should revolve around blind fashion-following.
2. The genre selected must conform to the standards of Urdu literature and be properly adapted within it.
3. One must not rush into including a genre or ideology into Urdu without due process.

As we move toward a logical conclusion of this discussion, it is not enough to merely state that Urdu language and literature are capable of facing every challenge of the 21st century with ease. For this, **Urdu speakers must be vigilant on all fronts**. To promote Urdu language and literature, we must contribute through our thoughts, speech, and actions with sincerity.

We must start using Urdu in **invitation cards, visiting cards, house nameplates, vehicle number plates**, and so on. **Revolution always begins at the grassroots level**. If Urdu lovers sincerely work toward implementing Urdu on an individual and public level, the future will witness Urdu surpassing other languages in its **richness and comprehensiveness**.

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