

Tracing a Millennia-Old Voice: Periodizing the Evolution of Pashto Literature**Muhammad Ali Dinakhel**¹**Abstract**

Pashto, a language with an ancient and rich literary heritage, traces its roots deep into folklore and oral traditions. Despite its long-standing history, the absence of adequate documentary evidence has compressed what is believed to be a millennia-old literary trajectory into only a few centuries. Scholarly efforts to categorize the evolution of Pashto literature have generally divided it into five distinct periods. The first spans from 756 to 1494 AD, followed by a second phase from 1550 to 1650 AD, marking significant early literary consolidation. The third period, extending from 1650 to 1900 AD, encompasses major linguistic and poetic developments, while the fourth era, from 1901 to 2000 AD, reflects modern literary transformations. The fifth and ongoing period, beginning in 2001, represents contemporary trends shaped by globalization, conflict, and digital communication. This briefly paper explores these periods to offer a structured understanding of Pashto's literary evolution and to highlight the gaps created by limited historical documentation.

Key words: Pashto literature, literary history, Pashto prose, Pashto poetry, literary periods.

A Brief History of Pashto Literature

Pashto is a language with thousands of years of long literary tradition having its roots in Pashto folklore. The lack of documentary evidence has shrunk the thousand-year history into hundreds of years. The history of the development of Pashto literature is divided into five periods. The first period starts from 756 AD and ends on 1494 AD. The second periods start from 1550 AD and end on 1650 AD. The third period is counted from 1650 AD to 1900 AD. Fourth period starts from 1901 AD and ends on 2000 AD. The fifth and last period starts from 2001 Ad and continues till to date. Various writers have described different periodization of Pashto literature. Some of them have divided prose and poetry in separate periods. They have mentioned three main periods of the development of Pashto prose. Among them the first one is from 612 AD to 907 AD, the second one is from 900 AD to 1000 AD and the third one is 1000 AD to present day. The last period is further divided into two eras; 1000-1300 and 1300-present day (Abasi, 1969: 104-5)

First Period: 756 AD-1494 AD

Due to lack of historical sources, this period is not fully explored and actually there is no ascertainable information about the starting point of this period. The only source which provides supporting evidence about this period is the book *Pata Khazana* (The hidden treasury) written by Muhammad Hotak bin Daud (Pata Khazana). This book, to some extent, provides some information. Another important tazkira of this period is *Majmaul Ashaar* (Dinakhel, 2016, 2021). Another book which helps in providing information about this period is *Tazkirat-al-Awliya* written by Suleman Maku in 1216 AD (Maku, 1216). Only seven pages of this book is discovered. The

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available literature of this period seems to have been influenced by Persian as well as Arabic languages. The author who wrote first poetry piece in this period is Amir Kror Suri (Pata Khazana). The only sources provide information about this earliest piece of Pashto poetry is Pata Khazana has also been made disputed and is considered by some as forgery (Qalandar). Prominent poets and writers belong to this period are Amir Kror, Shaikh Asad Suri, Tayamni, Baba Hotak, Akbar Zamindawri and Khalil Niazi (Abid: 2011:47).

Second Period: 1500 AD – 1650 AD

Bayazid Ansari (1525-1581/85) and Akhund Darweza (1533-1638) are two prominent authors of this period. Bayazid Ansari founded his own sufi school of thoughts and started preaching it (Ansari,1967). He gave to Pashto literature a new and powerful tone with a rich literary legacy. Bayazid Ansari authored his famous book *Khair-al-Bayan* which is the first available complete book in Pashto language (Dinakhel, 2021b)). It is also the first book on Sufism in Pashto language (Dinakhel, 2022). He also wrote some other books in Arabic and Persian languages (footnote Rafiullah BL). Significant contribution of Bayazid Ansari to the Pashto language is the introduction of thirteen special letters for writing Pashto language to epitomize those sounds which were uncharacteristics (Ansari,1967). Some of his newly introduced alphabets also covered the phonetic differences between the various dialects of Pashto and thus a standard and unified orthography was introduced by him. He realized that all the sounds could not be represented in Arabic alphabets. His disciples include distinguished poets such as Arzani, Mukhlis, Mirza Khan Ansari, Daulat Lwani, and Wasel Roshani.

Akhund Darweza (1533-1615) wrote his book *Makhzan-al-Islam* in Pashto to counter the book and movement of Bayazid Ansari (Darwezah, 1969). He also authored other books in Persian such as *Tazkirat-al-Abrar wal Ashrar*, *Irshad-al-Muridin* and *Irsha-al-Talibin*. He and his disciples enriched the Pashto literature by writing books in prose and poetry (Dinakhel, 2021c).

Third Period: 1650-1900

This is a prolific and glorious period. It is also called Golden Period in the history of the development of Pashto literature. It was extremely prolific and enriched the literature with multiplicity of topics. Khushal Khan Khattak is the central figure of this period. He introduced new forms and trends in Pashto literature. He wrote on multiple topics such as religion, mysticism, medicine, peace and war, and the arts of hunting and falconry. The list of the prominent poets and writers of this period includes Khushal Khan Khattak (1613-1689), Abdul Rahman (1653-1711), Ashraf Khan Hijri, Abdul Qadar Khan Khattak, Sadar Khan Khattak, Sikandar Khan Khattak, Ma'zullah Khan Momand, Ahmad Shah Abdali, Yunas, Hussain (Dinakhel, 2018), Khwaja Muhammad Bangash, Abdul Hamid Baba, Kamgar Khan Khattak, Muhammadi Sahibzada, Pir Muhammad Kakar, Hafiz Alpuri, Qanbar Ali Khan, Kazim Khan Shida, and Ali Khan (Abid: 2011: 63). Rahman Baba is the most popular poet of this period. Pashtuns even today use his poetry as proverbs. The Sufism of Hafiz Shirazi found an echo in Rahman Baba's poetry. Style and literary genres of Persian influenced poets of this period. This period was dominated by poetry. Romantic stories and versified tales gained popularity in this period. Political rivalries were at their worst during this period. The decline of Mughal hegemony in India, the rise of Marhattas and

Sikhs, British machination and Russian incursions greatly changed the outlook of people which is reflected in the literature of this period. Numerous Pashto romantic tales were written in this period (Gohar, 2021, Noori, 2017). In this period as well as the following period is known for the contribution of the orientalist to the Pashto language and literature (Kanray, 2015).

Fourth Period: 1900-2000 AD

This period begins with the dawn of twentieth century. It is also called modern period. The twentieth century proved very fertile, rich and flourishing for Pashto literature. Khilafat, hijrat and Khudai Khidmatgar movements also influenced poetry and prose of this period (Khan, 1994, Archiwal, 2019). This period is very important because almost all of the new modern literary genres such as novel, short story, drama, *takal*, *khaka*, travelogue, reportage, haiku, and free verse were introduced and developed in Pashto literature in this period (Dinakhel, 2023a). Pashtun women also contributed to the Pashto literature in this period (Rafiqi, 2015). Early novels have been written in Afghanistan in this period (Dinakhel, 2023b). Rahat Zakheli wrote the first novel *Mah Rukhi* as well as first short story *Konda Jinai* (widow girl). One of the first play written in Pashto in this period by Abdul Akbar Khan is *Dre Yatiman* (Three orphans). It was staged in 1927 (Hasrat, 2014:11). Western literature also influenced Pashto literature in this period. Pashto became official language in Afghanistan in 1936 followed by Swat state in 1937 (Dinakhel:2021a, 2020b, 2012). Pashto poetry and prose developed in Swat state (Dinakhel, 2013, 2016, 2020). Abdul Ghaffar Khan also known as Bacha Khan and his movement *Khudai Khidmatgar* also contributed to the development of Pashto literature of this period. Literary organizations also took birth in this period. Ulasi Adabi Jarga, the first ever organized literary organization of Pashto, was founded by Sanobar Hussain Kakaji, Dost Muhammad Kamil and Hamza Shinwari in 1949. It made remarkable contributions to Pashto literature. it introduced literary criticism and research in scientific lines. It produced great men of letters like Qalandar Momand, Murad Shinwari, Saifur Rahman Salim and Hamesh Khalil etc. another literary society was founded by Qalandar Momand by the name of *Da Sahu Likonko Adabi Maraka* in 1962. It also rendered invaluable services to Pashto. The first ever Pashto to Pashto dictionary, Daryab, was compiled by Qalandar Momand in this period. Pashto Academy University of Peshawar and Kabul Adabi Tolana also rendered invaluable services in this regard. Prominent poets and authors of this period are: Samandar Khan Samandar, Amir Hamza Shinwari, Fazal Haq Shida, Syed Rasul Rasa, Abdul Ghani Khan, Wali Muhammad Topan, Abdul Akbar Khan Akbar, Khadim Muhammad Akbar, Abdul Samad Khan Achakzai, Abdullah Bakhtani Khidmatgar, Abdul Khaliq Khaliq, Rahat Zakheli, Khan Mir Hilali, Fazal Mahmud Makhfi, Sanobar Hussain Kakaji, Dost Muhammad Khan Kamil, Qalandar Momand, Lal Zada Nazir Shinwari, Latif Wahmi, Ashraf Maftun, Ayub Sabir, Sahibzada Faizi, Qamar Rahi, Ajmal Khattak, Yunas Khalil, Murad Shinwari, Saifur Rahman Salim, Khatir Afridi, Hamesh Khalil, Preshan Khattak, Shamsul Qamar Andesh, Rabnawaz Mayel, Rahmatullah Dard, Abdul Rahim Majzub, Dr. Israr, Sadullah Jan Barq, Salim Raz, Hasham Babur, Ikramullah Gran, Muhammad Azam Azam, Saeed Gohar, Rahmat Shah Sayel, Rajwali Shah Khattak (Dinakhel, 2019), Iqbal Nasim Khattak (Dinakhel, 2020a) Salma Shaheen, Darvesh Durrani and Abasin Yusufzai (Abid, 2011:200-265). Writers and poets from Afghanistan such as Gul Pacha Ulfat, Abdul Hai Habibi, Abdul Rauf Benawa, Qaimuddin Khadim, Abdul Shakur Rashad, Sadiqullah

Rishtin and many more also produced significant literary works in this period. Pashtun women writers also produced poetry in this period (Dinakhel, 2020c).

Fifth Period: 2000 to date

International community focused on Pashtun and Pashto language and literature after the incident of 9/11. War on terror brought Pashto to the limelight. Technological developments and media also played significant role in the development of Pashto language and literature in this period. Prominent authors of this period include Zubair Hasrat, Abdul Rauf Rafiqi, Ali Khel Daryab, Sher Zaman Seemab, Hanif Qais, Sahib Shah Sabir, Mumtaz Aurakzai, Rahmat Shah Sail, Aziz Manerwal, Fazal Subhan Abid, Khan Zaman Kakar, Iqbal Shakir, Ismail Gohar, Sajid Afghan, Abdur Rahim Roghanay, Hayat Roghanay, Humayun Huma, Noor Ul Bashar Naveed, Dr. Israr, Painda Muhammad Khan, Rahim Shah Rahim and many more.

Conclusion

The history of Pashto literature reveals a rich and evolving intellectual tradition shaped by diverse cultural, political, and linguistic influences. From the early, partially documented beginnings to the vibrant literary activity of the modern era, Pashto literature reflects the resilience and creativity of its speakers. Despite limited historical sources for the earliest period, works like *Pata Khazana*, *Majmaul Ashaar*, and *Tazkirat-al-Awliya* provide glimpses into the foundational stages of Pashto writing. The second period marked a turning point with Bayazid Ansari and Akhund Darweza, who not only enriched the literary heritage but also introduced reforms in orthography and prose. The golden third period brought unmatched literary brilliance through figures like Khushal Khan Khattak and Rahman Baba, whose writings continue to define Pashtun cultural identity. The modern era of the twentieth century witnessed the introduction of new genres, institutional development, women's literary participation, and influences from global literature. The contemporary period further expanded the literary landscape due to technological growth, global attention after 9/11, and the emergence of new voices. Altogether, the five periods demonstrate that Pashto literature is not static but a living, dynamic tradition that continues to grow, adapt, and inspire.

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