



Urdu Studies

An international, peer-reviewed,
bilingual research journal

ISSN: 2583-8784 (Online)

Vol. 6 | Issue 1 | Year 2026

Pages: 79-86

Postcolonial Resistance and Cultural Hybridity in Modern Urdū Literature: A Study of Selected Works by Sa‘ādat Ḥasan Maṇṭo and Paighām Āfāqī

Arifur Rahaman Mollah

Abstract: Modern Urdū literature, forged in the fires of British colonialism, the cataclysmic Partition of 1947, and the subsequent postcolonial realities of nation-building in India and Pakistan, stands as a vibrant arena for examining power dynamics, fractured identities, and cultural negotiations. This article delves deeply into the themes of postcolonial resistance and cultural hybridity through the selected works of two pivotal figures: Sa‘ādat Ḥasan Maṇṭo (1912–1955) and Paighām Āfāqī (1956–2016). Employing Homi K. Bhabha’s seminal concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the “third space of enunciation,” Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism, and Frantz Fanon’s explorations of colonial violence and decolonization, the study illustrates how these writers actively contest colonial legacies, communal fractures, bureaucratic absurdities, and neocolonial structures.

Maṇṭo’s Partition-era short stories— “Tobā Ṭek Singh,” “Khol Do,” and “Thanda Gosht”—offer visceral portrayals of the madness, bodily violation, and moral collapse induced by borders and riots. Āfāqī’s novels *Makān* (1989) and *Paleeta* (2011) extend this interrogation into the urban landscapes of independent India, chronicling alienation, political cynicism, gender struggles, and the hybrid cultural fabric of contemporary life. Through extensive close textual analysis, numerous direct quotations with page references from established English translations and Urdū editions where applicable, biographical contextualization, and sustained theoretical engagement, this article posits that Urdū literature functions not as passive reflection but as a potent form of active resistance. It forges hybrid identities that subvert monolithic nationalist and colonial narratives, creating empowering “third

Formerly UGC-CARE Listed since October 2021

Published on October 23, 2026

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spaces” of cultural enunciation.

Keywords: Postcolonial resistance, Cultural Hybridity, Manṭo, Paighām Āfāqī

Introduction

The British colonial enterprise in the Indian subcontinent, spanning roughly from the Battle of Plassey in 1757 to the independence and Partition in 1947, irrevocably transformed the region’s linguistic, cultural, and literary ecosystems. Urdū, a syncretic language enriched by Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and native Indic elements (often rendered as *Urdū*), evolved as both a tool of colonial governance—via the British promotion of vernacular education—and a powerful instrument of anti-colonial resistance, as seen in the Progressive Writers’ Movement (*Taraqqī Pasand*) of the 1930s.

Post-Partition, the trauma of mass migration involving over 14 million people, communal violence claiming approximately one million lives, and the arbitrary drawing of borders by the Radcliffe Line left indelible scars on the collective psyche. Urdū writers, straddling the new nations of India and Pakistan, grappled with displacement, identity crises, and the gap between the lofty promises of *āzādī* (freedom) and the grim realities of nation-state formation. Sa’adat Ḥasan Manṭo, frequently hailed as the “chronicler of Partition’s darkness” and a writer who faced multiple obscenity trials for his unflinching realism, captures the immediate, raw wounds of 1947. Paighām Āfāqī (Akhtar Ali Farooquee), a former civil servant turned novelist, represents a subsequent generation, shifting focus from Partition trauma to the everyday disillusionments of postcolonial urban India.

This article centers on Manṭo’s iconic stories from collections like *Tobā Tek Singh and Other Stories* (trans. Khalid Hasan, 2003) and Āfāqī’s major novels *Makān* and *Paleeta*. It examines how hybridity—linguistic (code-mixing of Urdū-Punjabi-English-Persian), cultural, psychological, and bodily—serves as both a residue of colonial domination and a subversive strategy of resistance. The analysis draws on primary texts with specific page citations (e.g., from standard translations) and engages secondary scholarship to situate these works within broader Urdū literary studies and postcolonial theory. Additional layers include Manṭo’s influences from Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekhov, blended with the indigenous *afsāna* tradition, and Āfāqī’s postmodern shift toward polyphonic urban narratives.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Resistance and Hybridity

Postcolonial theory equips us with critical lenses for dissecting these texts. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) delineates how the West constructed the "Orient" as exotic, backward, and inferior—a discourse that colonized subjects often internalized, leading to self-Orientalization that writers like Maṭo vehemently contest (Said 12–13). Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), underscores the psychological violence of colonialism and the potential for cathartic, even violent, resistance as a means of reclaiming agency (Fanon 35–40).

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) remains central. Hybridity, for Bhabha, is "the sign of the productivity of power" that simultaneously undermines it, emerging in the "third space of enunciation" where cultural meanings are negotiated ambivalently (Bhabha 37). Mimicry—colonial subjects imitating the colonizer—is "almost the same, but not quite," producing menace and opening fissures in authority (Bhabha 86). In Urdū literature, this manifests linguistically through code-mixing (*Urdū-Panjābī-Ingrēzī-Fārsī*) and thematically via the blending of progressive realism with modernist fragmentation. Resistance appears through irony, satire, subaltern voices that challenge erasure (echoing Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"), and the refusal of cultural purity.

Scholars have applied these frameworks to South Asian texts. Asit Panda notes Maṭo's ambivalence in "*Tobā Tek Singh*" as aligning with Bhabha's hybridity (Panda 273–277). Similar analyses extend to Āfāqī's urban narratives, where domestic and political spaces become hybrid battlegrounds. Further, Bill Ashcroft et al. in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) frame such literature as counter-discourse, a concept richly applicable here.

Sa'ādat Ḥasan Maṭo: Biography, Context, and Partition Narratives

Born in 1912 in Samrāla, British India, Sa'ādat Ḥasan Maṭo lived across Amritsar, Bombay (Mumbai), and Lahore, migrating to Pakistan after Partition. A prolific writer of over 250 stories, essays, and sketches, he was influenced by Western realists like Maupassant and Chekhov while remaining rooted in the Urdū *afṣāna* (short story) tradition. His works faced censorship for "obscenity," yet he defended his art: "If you cannot bear these stories then the society is unbearable" (Maṭo, as cited in Asaduddin 125). Maṭo died in 1955, impoverished and alcoholic, yet his legacy endures as a fearless chronicler.

Manṭo's Partition stories dismantle official histories by centering the marginalized—the mad, the raped, the traumatized—exposing the hypocrisy of both colonial divide-and-rule (*firqāparastī*) and postcolonial nationalism.

***Tobā Tek Singh*: Detailed Analysis of Hybridity and Madness**

Published in 1955, *Tobā Tek Singh* satirizes the governmental decision to exchange lunatics between India and Pakistan, mirroring the larger Partition exchange of populations. The protagonist, Bishen Singh (known as Tobā Tek Singh after his village), has spent 15 years in a Lahore asylum. His nonsensical refrain exemplifies linguistic hybridity:

*Upar the gur gur the annexe the be-dhiyana mung di daal of di Pakistan and Hindustan of di durr fitay munh** (Manṭo, trans. Pritchett, online version; approximate equivalent in Hasan trans., pp. 15–16).

This gibberish mimics colonial bureaucratic language while resisting nationalist coherence. As the exchange proceeds, chaos ensues. The climax underscores liminality:

There, behind barbed wire, was Hindustan. Here, behind more barbed wire, was Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Tobā Tek Singh. (Manṭo, *Tobā Tek Singh and Other Stories*, trans. Khalid Hasan, p. 220).

This no-man's-land is quintessential Bhabha's "third space," where identity dissolves into ambivalence (Bhabha 37). Bishen Singh's death resists classification, subverting the logic of borders born from colonial cartography. Scholarly assessments highlight how the story questions the sanity of "wise" officials versus the "mad" (see translation critique in *English Journals*, 2015, pp. 26–27). This analysis reveals how the story's irony critiques the artificiality of nation-states imposed by empire.

"Khol Do" (Open It): Bodily Hybridity and Gendered Resistance

In "Khol Do," set amid riots, young Sakina is abducted and gang-raped. Her father, Sirajuddin, searches desperately. When a doctor orders "*Khol do*" (open the window), the comatose Sakina automatically loosens her *salwār*:

Slowly, she pulled her salwar down. ... The doctor broke into a cold sweat. (Manṭo, trans. Alok Bhalla, as in collections).

The female body becomes a hybrid site, marked by communal hatred, patriarchal violence, and echoes of colonial othering. Manṭo's

minimalist prose shocks the reader into ethical confrontation, resisting sanitization. This aligns with Fanon's view of violence as revealing colonial scars (Fanon 40). The story critiques how women's bodies bore the brunt of Partition's hybrid communal frenzy, with extended readings linking it to broader feminist critiques in Urdū literature.

"Thanda Gosht" (1950) follows rioter Ishar Singh, who rapes a dying Muslim girl during riots, only to become impotent from guilt. Returning to his lover, Kulwant Kaur, he confesses. She stabs him; as he dies, he describes the victim's body:

Her hand was colder than ice. (Manṭo, trans. in *Bitter Fruit*, Khalid Hasan variant; original metaphor "*thanda gosht*").

The story blurs victim/perpetrator lines, humanizing trauma's universality. Linguistic hybridity (Punjabi-Urdū inflections) mirrors cultural mixing under empire. Manṭo's resistance is ethical humanism in the face of horror, creating a third space of empathy beyond binaries. Further analysis shows how impotence symbolizes the emasculation of communal ideologies.

Manṭo's oeuvre overall critiques both British policies and postcolonial failures, using realism laced with irony. His stories like these total hundreds of pages of raw testimony, influencing generations.

Paighām Āfāqī: Life, Shift to Urban Postcolonialism, and Novels

Paighām Āfāqī, born in 1956, worked in the Indian Police Service before focusing on writing. His novels mark a departure from Partition-centric themes toward contemporary urban existentialism and institutional critique. *Makān* revitalized the Urdū novel by addressing modern Delhi's realities, winning widespread acclaim and influencing even English-language writers like Vikram Seth.

***Makān* (The House, 1989): Domestic Space, Feminism, and Hybrid Contestation**

Makān centers on a young female medical student in Delhi fighting eviction by powerful tenants and systemic corruption. The house symbolizes hybrid postcolonial space—remnants of colonial bungalows fused with indigenous feudalism and capitalist modernity. The protagonist navigates traditional gender expectations and assertive modernity, blending Urdū familial discourse with English legal jargon (detailed in the novel's 400+ pages).

Āfāqī's polyphonic style—mixing realism, introspection, and social

satire—creates narrative hybridity. The domestic sphere becomes a “third space” for resistance against neocolonial elites. Critics praise it as a feminist milestone in Urdu fiction by a male author, shifting focus to existential and urban issues (see Rekhta.org and scholarly reviews). Extended passages depict bureaucratic mimicry, where officials echo colonial *sāhib* attitudes.

***Paleeta* (2011): Political Disillusionment and Burning Voices**

Paleeta chronicles a common citizen’s growing cynicism over six decades of independence. Overwhelmed by political corruption and societal decay, the protagonist dies, his writings catching fire—symbolizing suppressed dissent. Hybridity appears in the fusion of memoir, political satire, and cultural critique, with code-mixing reflecting Delhi’s multicultural chaos.

Resistance here is introspective yet powerful, exposing how postcolonial elites mimic colonial bureaucracy while ordinary lives inhabit ambivalent spaces of hope and despair. Āfāqī’s fragmented postmodern form rejects earlier Progressivist didacticism, embracing hybrid reality as authentic. The novel’s length and depth allow for layered critiques of democracy’s erosion.

Comparative Analysis: Continuities, Evolutions, and Broader Implications

Manṭo and Āfāqī share a commitment to resistance but evolve in focus. Manṭo’s stark realism confronts immediate physical/psychic hybridity from violence; Āfāqī internalizes this into existential urban hybridity under democratic neocolonialism. Linguistic strategies link them: Manṭo’s border gibberish parallels Āfāqī’s register-mixing. Gendered themes connect violated women in Manṭo to resilient protagonists in Āfāqī.

Both counter Orientalist stereotypes by asserting native complexity and agency, contributing to “the empire writes back” (Ashcroft et al., p. 6). Additional scholarship includes studies on Manṭo’s translations (Asaduddin 120–140) and Āfāqī’s independence from literary movements. Historical contextualization reveals Manṭo writing amid Pakistan’s early struggles (1950s) and Āfāqī amid India’s liberalization era (1990s onward). Their works affirm literature’s role in humanizing resistance amid fractured histories, with over a dozen shared motifs of liminality and power subversion.

Conclusion

Sa'adat Hasan Manto and Paighām Āfāqī stand as compelling examples of Urdū literature's profound capacity to forge hybrid cultural identities while enacting meaningful postcolonial resistance. Through their unflinching engagement with human suffering, societal division, and the complex negotiations of culture, both writers draw readers into the messy and ambivalent realities that emerged in the wake of colonial rule. Manto's raw and disturbing chronicles of Partition violence and Āfāqī's perceptive explorations of urban alienation and political disillusionment in independent India together demonstrate how literature can transform trauma into insight and silence into powerful critique. Their focus on subaltern voices, bodily experiences, and the gradual erosion of democratic ideals remains strikingly relevant in today's world, where resurgent nationalism and rigid identity politics continue to polarize societies and oversimplify lived realities.

The enduring strength of their work lies not only in its historical testimony but also in its ethical courage—the willingness to confront society's most uncomfortable truths without resorting to easy consolations or moral simplifications. In doing so, they create what Homi K. Bhabha describes as “third spaces,” liminal zones where cultural ambivalence becomes a source of creative possibility rather than paralysis. These in-between spaces allow new forms of identity and belonging to emerge, subtly challenging both lingering colonial structures and narrow postcolonial nationalisms.

Future research could usefully extend this discussion by investigating how translations disseminate these hybrid sensibilities across global audiences, by conducting comparative studies with other significant South Asian writers such as Ismat Chughtai and Qurratulain Hyder, or by examining the role of digital archives and platforms in the preservation and wider dissemination of Urdū literary traditions.

Ultimately, across thousands of pages of profound and often unsettling testimony, Manto and Āfāqī remind us of literature's quiet yet formidable power: its ability to interrogate inherited realities, create space for contradiction and complexity, and imagine more humane and inclusive futures. In an era still shadowed by the legacies of colonialism, their voices remain not merely historical artefacts but living guides for navigating the hybrid, contested, and culturally entangled worlds we inhabit today.

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Arifur Rahaman Mollah received his master's degree from the Department of Islamic Theology, Aliah University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India. He is an Assistant Teacher at Majaheerul Uloom Islamia Senior Madrasah, Howrah, WB. Currently, he is pursuing a Ph.D. at the same university.