

After Rekhta: A Narrative Study of Urdu Fan Fiction on Wattpad and Tiktok Public Aesthetics, Digital Economy, and New Modes of Reading.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the post-Rekhta transformation of Urdu literary culture, in which the production and consumption of narrative increasingly shift from print-based institutions to digital platforms such as Wattpad and TikTok. It situates Urdu fan fiction within the frameworks of public aesthetics, participatory culture, and digital emotional economies. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines content analysis of 300 Wattpad novels, each exceeding 100 episodes, and 500 TikTok videos with over one million views, ethnographic interviews with 50 writers and 200 readers, and an economic analysis of platform systems including coins, gifts, and engagement metrics. The findings suggest that contemporary Urdu fan fiction functions less as conventional literary creativity and more as formula-driven narrative production shaped by audience interaction. Readers act as co-authors through comments and feedback that influence plot development. The study concludes that Urdu digital fan fiction reflects a participatory literary democracy grounded in emotional capitalism, challenging traditional literary institutions and redefining authorship, readership, and textual authority in the digital age.

Keywords: Urdu literary culture; fan fiction; digital literature; Wattpad; TikTok; participatory culture; public aesthetics; emotional capitalism; digital authorship; reader participation; platform economy; post-Rekhta Urdu literature.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLING FRAMEWORK:

Sampling Procedure and Representativeness:

1. Wattpad Corpus (n=300 novels): Drawn from Wattpad's "Urdu" tag, January 2020–March 2026. Inclusion criteria:
 - (a) "Completed" status with ≥ 100 episodes;
 - (b) $\geq 50,000$ reads;
 - (c) publication dates stratified by year to avoid recency bias. Stratified random sampling by genre — Romance 60%, Mystery/Thriller 20%, Social/Family Drama 20% — reflecting platform distribution. This reduces selection bias toward viral texts.
2. TikTok Corpus (n=500 videos): Collected via TikTok search API using "Urdu poetry", "Urdu story", "Urdu afsana", "#UrduSadPoetry", January 2020–March 2026. Inclusion:
 - (a) ≥ 1 million views;
 - (b) creator self-identifies as posting Urdu content;

(c) 15–60 seconds. Stratified by format — poetry recitation 50%, flash fiction/monologue 30%, micro-drama 20%.

3. Ethnography: 50 writers and 200 readers recruited via Wattpad discussion boards and TikTok comments with opt-in consent. Purposive sampling ensured representation: age 16–45; gender female 78%, male 22%; geography Pakistan 70%, India 25%, Gulf 5%.

4. Economic Analysis: Engagement metrics from Wattpad public API and TikTok Creator Center. "Coins" and "gifts" converted to PKR using April 2026 interbank rates. Author income self-reported and cross-verified with screenshots where available.

Operational Definition – Formula-Driven Narrative Production:

Defined as storytelling with:

- (1) recurring plot templates identified via inductive coding of the 300-novel corpus;
- (2) reader-directed plot modification, operationalized as $\geq 30\%$ of sampled episodes showing plot changes explicitly requested in prior comments;
- (3) serialization timed to platform monetization cycles. Intercoder reliability $\kappa=0.81$.

Comparative Context

Preliminary comparison with Hindi and Bengali Wattpad corpora ($n=100$ each) shows similar formulaic structures but distinct thematic regulation due to platform policy differences. Future work will extend this comparative analysis.

Economics – Coins, Gifts, And Emotional Capitalism

This literature is not "free". It operates within a platform economy. Data for this section were collected from three sources:

- (1) Wattpad public API and Creator Portal, accessed March 2026;
- (2) TikTok Creator Center analytics for 50 Urdu poetry accounts, with consent;
- (3) self-reported income from 50 authors, cross-verified with payment screenshots where provided. Currency conversion used State Bank of Pakistan interbank rate, April 1, 2026:

1 USD = 278 PKR. Coin values are taken from Wattpad Pakistan pricing as of Jan 2026.

Platform Earnings

Wattpad's "Paid Stories" program: readers purchase "coins". Observed rate in Pakistan: 1 episode = 3 coins = 10 PKR. Revenue split: author 50%, platform 50%. Case: Top Urdu author "Mahi Malik" reported 42 lakh PKR earnings in 2025 [24], verified via screenshot. By platform split, Wattpad earned equivalent. Total transaction volume $\approx$ 84 lakh PKR from one novel. We term this an "emotional microtransaction": small payments triggered by narrative suspense.

Author Earnings

Survey of 50 authors (March 2026): Mean monthly income = 28,000 PKR ($SD=61,000$). Distribution is highly skewed: Top 5% earn 2–4 lakh PKR/month; bottom 70% report 0 PKR. This reflects a "Winner-Take-All" economy [25]. Interviews suggest the top 50 authors function as role models, sustaining participation of unpaid writers — a "lottery economy" where perceived odds of success drive labor.

Reader Spending

Survey of 200 readers (Feb 2026): Mean monthly spend on coins = 300–500 PKR [26]. Qualitative data: readers who refuse to buy an 800 PKR book report no psychological barrier to 10 PKR/day. This "micropayment" model reduces transaction friction and exploits serial gratification, analogous to behavioral economics of tobacco: low unit cost, high cumulative spend.

Tiktok Gift Economy

TikTok live gifts: "Rose" = 1 cent; "Lion" = \$500. From 50 observed live mushairas, Jan–March 2026: 70% of gift value came from accounts geolocated to Gulf states, 20% from housewives in Pakistan. Ethnographic interview: Gulf worker sending \$20 (5,560 PKR) receives name-shout: "Salman Bhai Dubai Wale, thank you" [27]. In the labor camp he is "Salman"; in the live he is "Salman Bhai". Two minutes of public respect for \$20. This exemplifies "emotional capitalism" (Illouz, 2007): affect converted directly into capital.

Critical Review – Is It Literature Or Not?

1. The case of high literature. Intizar Hussain: "Literature is that which escapes the dust of time" [28]. Wattpad novels are time-stamped by references to "makeup, mobile, Insta". They may not age well. However, the objection assumes durability as the sole criterion.
2. Character depth. The hero/heroine are "types", not "round characters" per E. M. Forster [29]. Yet, as Bakhtin [31] notes, the novel historically absorbed market forms. Don Quixote was sold on the street. Ghazals were composed for immediate "wah-wah" in mushairas. Durability is conferred post-hoc by institutions.
3. Language. "Roman + emoji": "She started to ❤️" [30]. Purists call it chat. Linguistics terms it a "digital dialect". Amir Khusrau wrote "Hindavi"; Mulla Wajhi wrote "Deccani". Both were called "degenerate" in their time. Today they are "classical". In 2050, "Us ne 🥰 kiya" may be canonical [32]. Language change is not decay.

The Third Path: "Public Aesthetics"

We propose a new evaluative scale with four criteria:

1. Impact: 2 million people cried/laughed. This is measurable affect.
2. Access: Reached the poor, the remote, women. Democratization of readership.
3. Participation: The reader co-writes. This is literary democracy.
4. Speed: Captures contemporary temporality.

By these criteria, this is "literature". Not "high", but "public". In a democracy, the public is the origin.

From Rekhta To Rail: Conclusions

Rekhta digitized Urdu. Wattpad democratized Urdu. Rekhta preserves the dead: Mir, Ghalib. Wattpad creates the living: Mahi, Areeba, Sahar. Between 2020–2026, the center of Urdu literature shifted from the university to the hostel bed, the labor camp, and the bus seat.

Main results:

1. Form: The novel is now episode-based, collaborative, multimedia. The ghazal is now one couplet, visual, 60 seconds.
2. Social: Writer and reader are predominantly 16–25-year-old women. This is "girls' literature". Male critics' tools do not capture it.
3. Economic: This is "emotional capitalism". Coin, gift, vote. The author is an "entrepreneur".
4. Aesthetic: Exaggeration, speed, direct address. This is the DNA of the dastan.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES

1. Stop calling Wattpad "worthless". Fund doctoral research on it.
2. Create a "Digital Literature" course. Require students to publish on Wattpad.
3. Develop a critical model of "Public Aesthetics". European models fail here.
4. Facilitate dialogue between Rekhta and Wattpad: Ghalib + Mahi Malik.

Intizar Hussain: "Civilizations do not die, they change shape" [33]. Urdu literature did not die. It wore the Wattpad blouse, applied the TikTok filter. Those who recognize it will live. Those who cling to the "book" will be museum pieces. Literature is what is read. In 2026, what is read is on mobile. Everything else is a "research paper".

Wattpad Vs Tiktok – Two Aesthetics, One Reader

Wattpad is for "reading", TikTok for "watching". Yet 78% of respondents use both [35]: Wattpad on the bus, TikTok in bed. This is "media mix".

1. Time and patience: Wattpad episode $\approx$ 1,800 words, 7-minute read. TikTok video: 45 seconds. Wattpad climax at episode end; TikTok climax in first 3 seconds [36]. TikTok poet opens: "I got your wedding card, congratulations". Then explanation. Wattpad uses 5-episode build-up. Wattpad reader has "patience"; TikTok user is "impatient".
2. Character: Wattpad — hero described: "6 feet, gray eyes, black Land Cruiser" [37]. Reader imagines. TikTok — hero shown: boy in black glasses, background music. No name. A "type", not a character. Wattpad = "novel"; TikTok = "poster".
3. Economy: Wattpad = "slow money" — coins, monthly payout. TikTok = "fast money" — gifts, immediate [38]. Hence Wattpad has "writers", TikTok has "performers".
4. Gender: Wattpad — 94% writers female, 88% readers female [39]. A "female world". TikTok — 60% poets male, 40% female; 55% of likes from boys. "Face" sells. Boy's face + sad poetry = viral. This is "physical capital".

Conclusion: Wattpad is the "daughter of the digest"; TikTok is the "son of TV drama". Both are children of "dastan". One is read, the other watched. The future favors "watching". Therefore, TikTok will dominate.

Comparison With Global Fanfiction – Where Do We Stand

Western Fanfiction Vs Urdu Formula Fiction

Aspect	Western fanfiction (AO3)	Urdu Wattpad fiction
Source	Harry Potter, Marvel, K-Pop	99% original characters [40]
Theme	LGBTQ, alternative sexuality, violence	Marriage, modesty, family [41]
Hero	Anti-hero, gray shade	Army officer, perfect
Reader demand	"More scenes"	"Stay within limits" [42]
Purpose	Rebellion from canon	Canon creation

Analysis: In the West, fanfiction is a "deviation from the central narrative". In Urdu, it is a "search for the central narrative". The Western writer makes Harry Potter homosexual. The Pakistani writer makes the unknown hero "praying, obedient to his mother" [43]. Our society is still building a "foundation", not staging a "rebellion".

Comparison With Chinese Web Novels

China's "Qidian" functions like Wattpad. There, the fantasy of "cultivation" dominates: martial arts, becoming immortal [44]. In Urdu, it is not "cultivation" but "nikah". The Chinese hero becomes "God". The Urdu hero becomes "Husband". This is a cultural difference: Confucian society emphasizes "development of the individual"; Islamic society emphasizes "consummation of the family" [45].

Comparison With Korean Webtoon

Korean webtoons are visual, colorful. Urdu is still text. Why? Korean digital literacy is 98%, Pakistan 36% [46]. Our reader cannot load images easily; text is data-cheap. When internet becomes cheaper, Urdu webtoons will emerge.

Future – Will This Literature Survive Ai?

1. Threat: AI writer. Prompt ChatGPT-5: "Army officer + poor girl + slap + Istanbul, 100 episodes". It writes in 2 minutes [47]. 70% of Wattpad writers report anxiety. AI can replicate the "formula". It is not ashamed; it does not tire.
2. Opportunity: AI as a tool. Savvy writers use AI as "assistant": "Give me 10 arrogant hero names". "Suggest the climax for episode 45" [48]. AI is a "typist", not a "writer". Those who use it will survive. Those who fear it will not.
3. New reader: Gen Alpha. A 12-year-old on TikTok in 2026 will be 16 in 2030. He has not read a book. For him, "literature" = 30-second video + AI voice. "If we don't give him ghazal, he will listen to rap. Urdu must accept AI rap, AI ghazal, AI afsancha. Otherwise, the reader will disappear" [49].

Role Of The Academy:

Universities have three tasks:

1. Preservation: Archive 1,000 novels annually from Wattpad. Otherwise authors delete them and they are lost. This is "digital folk literature" [50].
2. Understanding: Develop critical theory for "TikTok Poetry". Do not dismiss exaggeration; theorize its aesthetics.
3. Teaching: Introduce "Wattpad Writing" in MA Urdu. Teach students to earn coins. Then literature becomes employment.

CONCLUSION

Literature Is Not Dead, The Address Has Changed

This paper demonstrates three major changes in Urdu literature, 2020–2026:

1. Institution: From university/publisher to platform/algorithm.
2. Format: From chapter/ghazal to episode/reel.
3. Economy: From royalty to coin/gift.

Is this "degradation"? No, it is "transition". When Amir Khusrau wrote in "Hindavi", Persian scholars called it "deterioration". Today he is the "Bawa Adam of Urdu" [51]. Mahi Malik's Roman Urdu may be "classic" in 2126. Condition: someone preserves it.

Final argument: Literature is not what sits in the "library". Literature is what lives on "the people's tongue". In 2026, Ruposh Mohabbat Episode 88 is on the people's tongue, not Aab-e-Gum. Whether critics accept it or not,

this is literature. Universities have two options: bring Wattpad into the "curriculum", or be left out of the "curriculum" themselves. The decision is theirs.

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