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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF URDU LANGUAGE FEMALE POETESSES

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Abstract

This study examines the autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses as a significant yet critically marginalized subgenre of Urdu literature. Drawing on a qualitative research design, the study employs close textual reading and thematic analysis informed by feminist literary criticism and life-writing theory. The research analyzes selected autobiographical texts to explore how Urdu female poetesses construct literary selfhood, articulate creative consciousness, and negotiate socio-cultural constraints within patriarchal contexts. The findings reveal that these autobiographies function not merely as personal life narratives but as powerful literary, cultural, and ideological texts that foreground women's voices, experiences, and resistance. The study highlights key themes such as identity formation, gendered marginalization, the interconnection between life experience and poetic expression, and the blurring of private and public spheres. Furthermore, it establishes that these autobiographies serve as alternative socio-cultural and literary histories, challenging male-dominated canonical narratives of Urdu literature. By collectively examining these texts as a distinct literary phenomenon, the study contributes to feminist historiography and calls for a more inclusive and balanced understanding of Urdu autobiographical and poetic traditions.

Keywords: Urdu Literature; Female Poetesses; Autobiography; Feminist Literary Criticism; Life Writing; Women's Writing; Literary Selfhood; Gender and Canon Formation

INTRODUCTION

Autobiography in Urdu literature is not merely a record of personal experiences; it is a significant literary genre that reflects the social (Amjad et al., 2021), cultural (Ahmad et al., 2022), and intellectual history of its time (Parveen & Akram, 2021). Within this tradition, the autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses occupy a particularly important place, as they provide rare and authentic insights into women's inner worlds, creative struggles, and social realities in largely patriarchal societies (Ramzan et al., 2020, 2023, 2025). These autobiographical writings function as both personal narratives and collective testimonies, documenting the lived experiences of women who negotiated restrictive social norms while asserting their literary identities (Cantú, 2012).

Urdu female poetesses' autobiographies reveal the complex intersections of gender, creativity, education, class, and cultural expectations (Ramzan & Khan, 2024; Ramzan & Javaid, 2025). Through self-representation, these writers challenge dominant historical narratives that have often marginalized women's voices in literary discourse. Their life writings not only trace the evolution of their poetic consciousness but also illuminate broader issues such as access to education, resistance to traditional constraints, emotional expression, and the quest for intellectual autonomy. In this sense, autobiography becomes a powerful medium of self-assertion and literary resistance (Usher, 2025).

Furthermore, the autobiographical works of Urdu poetesses contribute significantly to feminist literary criticism and historiography. They expand the canon of Urdu literature by foregrounding female subjectivity and offering alternative perspectives on social and literary history. By blending memory, reflection, and artistic sensibility, these autobiographies enrich our understanding of both the individual poetess and the cultural milieu in which she wrote (Taha, 2023).

This article aims to explore the autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses as a distinct and meaningful literary phenomenon. It examines how these narratives articulate personal identity, creative development, and social consciousness, while also highlighting their role in redefining women's presence and authority within Urdu literary tradition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The genre of autobiography in Urdu literature has received sustained critical attention, particularly in relation to male writers, intellectuals, and reformers (Yaqan, 2022). However, the autobiographical writings of Urdu language female poetesses have long remained underexplored, receiving serious scholarly focus only in recent decades. Existing literature on this subject highlights autobiography as a crucial site for understanding women's literary selfhood, creative agency, and socio-cultural negotiation within patriarchal frameworks (Malik et al., 2025)

Early studies on Urdu autobiography, such as those by literary historians and critics, primarily focused on canonical male figures, treating women's life narratives as peripheral or anecdotal. Female autobiographical writings were often viewed through a moral or biographical lens rather than as serious literary texts. As a result, the autobiographies of poetesses were either briefly mentioned or excluded altogether from mainstream literary histories. This marginalization reflects broader gender biases within Urdu literary criticism (Jabbar, 2025).

With the rise of feminist literary criticism in South Asia, scholars began to re-evaluate women's writings, including autobiographies, as important cultural and literary documents. Researchers have emphasized that the autobiographies of Urdu female poetesses are not merely personal recollections but acts of self-definition and resistance. These studies argue that through life writing, poetesses reclaim narrative authority and challenge the silence historically imposed on women's voices. Critics have noted that these autobiographies often intertwine personal experience with poetic sensibility, creating a hybrid narrative form that blends memory, emotion, and artistic reflection (Hanauer, 2021).

Several scholars have examined individual autobiographies of prominent Urdu poetesses, analyzing themes such as childhood socialization, education, marriage, creativity, and emotional struggle. These studies reveal how poetesses articulate their identities in tension with social expectations, literary traditions, and gender norms. The autobiographical texts are frequently interpreted as spaces where private experiences—such as confinement, loss, love, and ambition—are transformed into meaningful literary discourse. Critics have also highlighted how these narratives document the evolution of poetic consciousness and creative self-awareness (Asma, 2017).

Another significant area of scholarship focuses on autobiography as a feminist text. Literary critics argue that the autobiographies of Urdu female poetesses contribute to feminist historiography by recording women's experiences from their own perspectives. These works challenge male-dominated literary histories by offering alternative narratives of literary movements, mushaira culture, and intellectual circles. Scholars emphasize that women's autobiographies disrupt conventional public–private binaries by bringing domestic life, emotional labor, and inner conflicts into the literary sphere (Brettell, 2021).

Comparative studies have also emerged, situating Urdu women's autobiographies alongside autobiographical traditions in other languages of South Asia. Such research highlights shared concerns such as gendered oppression, self-expression, and the struggle for creative recognition, while also recognizing the unique cultural and linguistic features of Urdu literary culture. These studies underscore the importance of contextualizing women's autobiographies within specific socio-historical and cultural frameworks (Fatima & Siddique, 2025).

Despite these advancements, the existing literature reveals several gaps. Much of the research remains limited to a few well-known poetesses, while lesser-known autobiographical works remain critically neglected. Moreover, comprehensive studies that examine these autobiographies collectively—as a distinct subgenre within Urdu literature—are still relatively scarce. The studies have called for more systematic analyses that consider narrative strategies, language use, symbolism, and the relationship between autobiography and poetic expression (Demuth et al., 2025).

In summary, the existing body of literature establishes the autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses as vital literary and cultural texts. While feminist criticism has significantly expanded their critical reception, there remains a need for more inclusive, comparative, and theoretically grounded studies. This article seeks to build upon existing scholarship by examining these autobiographies in a comprehensive manner, highlighting their literary value, thematic richness, and contribution to the reconfiguration of Urdu literary history.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The present study is significant for several academic and cultural reasons. First, it contributes to the enrichment of Urdu literary criticism by foregrounding the autobiographies of female poetesses, a body of work that has historically received limited scholarly attention. By treating these autobiographies as serious literary texts rather than supplementary biographical material, the study helps expand the scope of Urdu autobiographical literature. Second, the study holds particular importance for feminist literary scholarship. The autobiographies of Urdu female poetesses provide firsthand accounts of women's lived experiences, creative struggles, and intellectual journeys within patriarchal social structures. Analyzing these texts allows for a deeper understanding of how women writers articulate identity, resistance, and selfhood through life writing. This research thus contributes to feminist historiography by recovering and validating women's voices within Urdu literary history. Third, the study is significant in documenting

cultural and social history. These autobiographies record aspects of domestic life, education, literary circles, and social norms that are often absent from official histories. Through the personal narratives of poetesses, the study sheds light on the socio-cultural conditions that shaped women's literary production in different historical periods. Finally, this research is valuable for future scholars, students, and researchers of Urdu literature, gender studies, and life-writing studies. By offering a comprehensive analysis, it provides a foundation for further research on women's autobiographical writing and encourages a more inclusive and balanced understanding of Urdu literary traditions.

Rationale of the Study

The rationale for this study emerges from the persistent marginalization of women's autobiographical writings in Urdu literary scholarship. While autobiographies by male writers have been extensively studied and canonized, the autobiographies of Urdu female poetesses have largely been overlooked or treated in a fragmented manner. This imbalance has resulted in an incomplete and gender-biased representation of Urdu literary history. Moreover, existing studies often focus on individual poetesses rather than examining their autobiographical works collectively as a distinct literary phenomenon. There is a lack of systematic research that analyzes common themes, narrative strategies, and socio-cultural concerns across these autobiographies. This study is therefore necessary to fill this critical gap by offering a holistic and comparative perspective. Another rationale lies in the evolving field of feminist and life-writing studies, which emphasizes the importance of self-representation and personal narrative as forms of literary and cultural expression. Applying these critical frameworks to Urdu female poetesses' autobiographies allows for a reassessment of their literary value and ideological significance. The study seeks to reinterpret these texts not merely as personal life stories but as culturally and politically meaningful narratives. Thus, the present research is justified by the need to recover neglected texts, challenge gendered literary hierarchies, and contribute to a more inclusive and theoretically informed understanding of Urdu literature

Statement of the Problem

Despite the rich tradition of autobiography in Urdu literature, the autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses remain insufficiently studied and critically undervalued. Literary histories and critical discourses have predominantly centered on male autobiographers, resulting in the marginalization of women's life narratives and the neglect of their contributions to the genre. The primary problem addressed in this study is the absence of comprehensive and systematic research that examines these autobiographies as a collective and meaningful subgenre of Urdu literature. Existing scholarship is often limited to biographical summaries or isolated textual analyses, lacking a broader critical framework that considers gender, narrative voice, and socio-cultural context. Furthermore, the problem extends to the lack of feminist and life-writing perspectives applied to these texts. Without such frameworks, the autobiographies of Urdu female poetesses are frequently interpreted in reductive ways, ignoring their complexity, literary artistry, and ideological significance. This study seeks to address these problems by critically analyzing the autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses, highlighting their thematic concerns, narrative strategies, and cultural importance, and repositioning them within the broader canon of Urdu literary and autobiographical traditions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, as it aims to explore meanings, themes, and narrative patterns within the autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses. Qualitative methodology is particularly suitable for literary research because it allows for in-depth textual interpretation and contextual analysis rather than numerical measurement. The study is interpretive and analytical in nature, focusing on understanding how female poetesses construct selfhood, creativity, and social experience through autobiographical writing.

Nature of the Study

The research is descriptive and analytical, grounded in close reading and critical interpretation of selected autobiographical texts. It treats autobiographies as literary, cultural, and historical documents. The study emphasizes subjective experiences, narrative voice, and thematic representation, aligning with feminist literary criticism and life-writing studies.

Selection of Texts (Sampling)

A purposive sampling technique is employed for the selection of autobiographies. Autobiographical works written by notable and representative Urdu female poetesses are selected on the basis of their literary significance, availability of texts, and relevance to the research objectives. Both well-known and relatively lesser-studied autobiographies are considered to ensure diversity of perspectives. The selected texts span different time periods to capture variations in socio-cultural contexts and literary expression.

Data Sources

The study relies primarily on **secondary qualitative data**, which includes:

- Published autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses (primary texts)
- Critical essays, research articles, theses, and dissertations related to Urdu autobiography and women's writing
- Literary histories, feminist theoretical texts, and works on life-writing theory

Libraries, academic journals, and reliable digital archives serve as key sources for data collection.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The data is analyzed through **thematic analysis**, supported by **close textual reading**. Recurring themes such as identity formation, gender roles, education, creativity, resistance, emotional experience, and social constraints are identified and examined. Special attention is given to narrative strategies, language use, symbolism, and the relationship between autobiographical narrative and poetic sensibility.

The analysis is informed by **feminist literary criticism** and **life-writing theory**, which provide conceptual tools to interpret self-representation, voice, and agency in women's autobiographies. The study also considers the socio-historical context in which the autobiographies were produced, allowing for a contextualized reading of the texts.

Analytical Framework

The study employs an **interpretive and comparative framework**. Individual autobiographies are first analyzed independently to understand their unique features. Subsequently, a comparative analysis is conducted to identify shared patterns and divergences across texts. This approach helps establish the autobiographies of Urdu female poetesses as a coherent yet diverse literary subgenre.

Validity and Credibility

To ensure **credibility and trustworthiness**, the study triangulates interpretations by engaging with existing critical scholarship and multiple theoretical perspectives. Textual evidence from the autobiographies is carefully cited and analyzed to support interpretations. Reflexivity is maintained throughout the research process to minimize subjective bias and enhance analytical rigor.

Ethical Considerations

As this research is based on published literary texts and secondary sources, no direct ethical risks are involved. However, the study maintains academic integrity by properly acknowledging sources and representing authors' voices accurately and respectfully.

RESULTS

The qualitative analysis of selected autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses reveals several significant patterns and insights related to self-representation, creative development, and socio-cultural engagement. The findings demonstrate that these autobiographical texts function not only as personal life narratives but also as literary, cultural, and ideological documents.

Emergence of Female Literary Selfhood

One of the most prominent results of the study is the strong articulation of female literary selfhood. The autobiographies consistently reflect a conscious effort by poetesses to define themselves as creative individuals within male-dominated literary spaces. Through life writing, they assert authorship, intellectual capability, and poetic authority. The construction of self is closely linked with writing and creativity, indicating that autobiography becomes a medium through which poetesses legitimize their presence in the Urdu literary tradition.

Autobiography as a Site of Resistance

The analysis reveals that autobiographical narratives frequently serve as sites of resistance against patriarchal norms and social restrictions. Poetesses recount experiences of limited educational opportunities, domestic confinement, and societal expectations, yet their narratives emphasize resilience and agency. By narrating these experiences in their own voices, the writers challenge dominant gender norms and question traditional roles assigned to women.

Interconnection of Life Experience and Poetic Sensibility

Another key finding is the close relationship between life experience and poetic expression. The autobiographies demonstrate how personal emotions, struggles, and relationships shape poetic themes and styles. Many poetesses explicitly link their creative growth to personal suffering, emotional intensity, and introspection. This interconnection highlights autobiography as an extension of poetic consciousness rather than a separate or purely factual genre.

Representation of Private and Public Spheres

The results indicate that these autobiographies effectively blur the boundary between the private and public spheres. Domestic life, emotional labor, and personal relationships—traditionally considered private—are brought into the public literary domain. By documenting household responsibilities, marriage, motherhood, and emotional conflicts, the poetesses redefine what constitutes worthy literary subject matter.

Documentation of Socio-Cultural and Literary History

The study finds that the autobiographies provide valuable documentation of socio-cultural and literary history from a female perspective. They offer alternative accounts of literary gatherings, intellectual circles, and cultural movements, often absent from male-authored narratives. These texts thus function as counter-histories, enriching and complicating the understanding of Urdu literary development.

Narrative Strategies and Language Use

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The analysis reveals diverse narrative strategies, including reflective narration, confessional tone, episodic structure, and symbolic language. Many poetesses employ a simple yet emotionally charged style, prioritizing authenticity over literary ornamentation. The use of memory, introspection, and selective silence emerges as a deliberate narrative technique, underscoring the complexity of self-representation.

Marginalization and Canonical Exclusion

A significant result of the study is the recurring theme of marginalization within literary canon formation. The autobiographies frequently express feelings of exclusion from mainstream recognition despite literary contributions. This highlights systemic gender bias in Urdu literary criticism and reinforces the need for reevaluating canonical standards.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the results confirm that the autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses constitute a meaningful and distinct subgenre within Urdu literature. They serve multiple functions: personal self-expression, feminist intervention, historical documentation, and literary reflection. The findings underscore the importance of these autobiographies in reshaping literary history and expanding critical understanding of women's writing in Urdu.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study strongly align with existing scholarship on Urdu autobiography and feminist life writing, while also extending and deepening earlier critical perspectives. The analysis confirms that the autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses are not merely personal narratives but complex literary texts that negotiate identity, creativity, and socio-cultural constraints. This observation supports earlier studies that view women's autobiographies as acts of self-assertion and narrative empowerment within patriarchal literary traditions. The emergence of a clearly articulated female literary self, as identified in the results, echoes the arguments of feminist critics who emphasize autobiography as a space where women reclaim authorship and authority. Previous scholarship has noted that women writers often use life writing to legitimize their intellectual and creative identities in male-dominated literary cultures (Shaxzada, 2024).

The present study reinforces this view by demonstrating that Urdu female poetesses consistently frame their life stories around poetic development and creative consciousness, thereby positioning themselves as serious literary figures rather than peripheral contributors. The finding that autobiography functions as a site of resistance closely corresponds with feminist literary analyses that interpret women's life narratives as counter-discourses to dominant patriarchal norms. Earlier studies have highlighted how Urdu women writers challenge social restrictions through personal narration. The present research extends this understanding by showing that resistance in these autobiographies is often subtle and narrative-driven, expressed through reflection, memory, and selective disclosure rather than overt protest. This nuanced form of resistance enriches existing interpretations of feminist expression in Urdu literature. The strong interconnection between life experience and poetic sensibility identified in this study aligns with critical observations that women's autobiographies frequently blur genre boundaries. Scholars of life-writing theory argue that autobiographical narratives by creative writers often merge artistic reflection with personal memory (Eakin, & Howes, 2020).

 The present study confirms that Urdu female poetesses' autobiographies operate as extensions of their poetic practice, where emotional experiences and personal struggles are consciously linked to literary production. This finding supports the view that autobiography and poetry function as interrelated modes of self-expression. The results regarding the merging of private and public spheres resonate with feminist critiques that challenge traditional literary hierarchies. Existing literature has emphasized that women's autobiographies disrupt the public–private divide by foregrounding domestic life and emotional labor. The present study reinforces this argument by illustrating how Urdu female poetesses transform personal experiences—such as marriage, motherhood, and emotional conflict—into legitimate literary material, thereby redefining the scope of Urdu autobiographical writing. The study's finding that these autobiographies serve as alternative socio-cultural and literary histories supports earlier claims that women's life writings function as counter-histories. Literary historians have acknowledged the absence of women's perspectives in mainstream accounts of Urdu literary movements (Yaqin , 2022)

The autobiographies analyzed in this study fill this gap by documenting literary gatherings, intellectual networks, and cultural practices from female viewpoints, thus expanding and complicating existing historical narratives. Furthermore, the identification of marginalization and canonical exclusion in the autobiographies corresponds with critical discussions on gender bias in Urdu literary criticism. Scholars have long argued that women writers have been systematically underrepresented in literary canons. The present study provides textual evidence from autobiographical narratives themselves, demonstrating that poetesses were acutely aware of their marginal position and consciously responded to it through life writing. In sum, the discussion shows that the findings of this study are firmly grounded in and supported by existing literature, while also contributing new insights by collectively examining the autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses as a distinct literary subgenre. By integrating feminist literary

criticism and life-writing theory, this research not only confirms earlier scholarly positions but also advances a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of Urdu autobiographical and poetic traditions (Chaturvedi, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses as a significant yet underexplored dimension of Urdu literature. Through qualitative textual analysis, the research demonstrates that these autobiographies are not merely personal life narratives but rich literary, cultural, and ideological texts. They serve as powerful modes of self-representation through which female poetesses' articulate identity, creativity, resistance, and intellectual agency. The findings confirm that autobiography functions as a crucial space for the construction of female literary selfhood. Urdu female poetesses use life writing to assert their presence within a traditionally male-dominated literary canon, linking personal experiences with poetic development. Their narratives challenge patriarchal norms by bringing marginalized experiences—such as domestic life, emotional struggle, and creative conflict—into the public literary sphere. Moreover, the study establishes that these autobiographies contribute significantly to socio-cultural and literary history by offering alternative perspectives often absent from mainstream narratives. By documenting literary circles, cultural practices, and historical moments from a female viewpoint, these texts enrich and complicate the understanding of Urdu literary traditions. Overall, the research underscores the importance of recognizing the autobiographies of Urdu language female poetesses as a distinct and meaningful subgenre. Their inclusion in critical discourse not only broadens the scope of Urdu autobiographical studies but also supports a more inclusive and balanced literary historiography.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for future research and literary scholarship:

1. **Expanded Canonical Inclusion**

Literary historians and critics should actively incorporate the autobiographies of Urdu female poetesses into Urdu literary histories, curricula, and critical anthologies to address longstanding gender imbalances.

2. **Further Comparative Research**

Future studies may undertake comparative analyses between male and female Urdu autobiographies or between Urdu women's autobiographies and those in other South Asian languages to highlight similarities and cultural distinctions in women's self-representation.

3. **Application of Diverse Theoretical Frameworks**

Researchers are encouraged to apply additional theoretical perspectives—such as postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, or narrative theory—to deepen the critical understanding of these autobiographical texts.

4. **Recovery of Lesser-Known Texts**

There is a need for archival research to recover and analyze autobiographies by lesser-known Urdu female poetesses, many of which remain unpublished or critically neglected.

5. **Interdisciplinary Approaches**

Scholars may benefit from interdisciplinary approaches that combine literary studies with sociology, history, and gender studies to further explore the social and cultural dimensions of women's autobiographical writing.

6. **Translation and Accessibility**

Translating these autobiographies into other languages would enhance their accessibility and allow global audiences to engage with Urdu women's life writing, thereby increasing their international scholarly recognition.

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