
**Fragmented Lives and Moral Echoes: A Reading of Joginder Paul's
*New Urdu Fictions***

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Abstract

This article examines Joginder Paul's *New Urdu Fictions* (2004) as a transformative intervention in contemporary Urdu narrative, arguing that the anthology reconceptualizes the short story as a site of ethical, psychological, and formal inquiry rather than a vehicle for moral instruction or social realism. The central hypothesis is that Paul's editorial and authorial vision foregrounds fragmentation, moral ambiguity, and interiority to reflect the uncertainties of modern life, post-Partition consciousness, and the complexities of human identity. Focusing on recurring themes such as the instability of reality, the fluidity of selfhood, the ethical burden of witnessing, and the limitations of language, the article demonstrates how the stories employ narrative experimentation—including disrupted chronology, symbolic imagery, and elliptical endings—to evoke reflection rather than closure. The analysis finds that *New Urdu Fictions* systematically challenges conventional realism, destabilizes binary moral frameworks, and renders ordinary experiences of loss, grief, and dislocation ethically and aesthetically significant. Ultimately, the anthology emerges as a literature of inquiry, suggesting that fiction's enduring power lies not in providing answers but in sustaining the difficult questions of human life and moral responsibility.

Key words: Post-Partition, displacement, uncertainty, moral ambiguity, memory, identity, persistence, language

Introduction: From Explanation to Inquiry

New Urdu Fictions, a short story collection compiled and edited by Joginder Paul weaves together thirty-six short stories that carry intricate themes of Post-Partition struggles, memory, identity, death, loss and persistence of ordinary lives. It pictures an evolving landscape of modern Urdu literature where diversity in voices, themes and styles and narrative experiments are celebrated. By highlighting the multiplicity of human experiences through diverse stories, this collection serves as an important gateway to understanding new directions in Urdu storytelling. In this way, it bears a torch to contemporary Urdu literature making it highly relevant even in the present global scenario.

The opening "Introduction," functions less as a conventional beginning and more as a theoretical statement about the nature of storytelling itself. Rather than showing the reader a stable fictional world, it foreshadows hesitation and uncertainty, suggesting that the act of narration is itself problematic in a fragmented modern reality. This narrative situation signals a departure from the descriptive tradition that characterized earlier phases of Urdu fiction. Instead of clarifying social reality or offering ideological guidance, the anthology announces its commitment to disturbance, doubt, and incompleteness.

This direction is reinforced in the concluding stories "Reflection" and "Epilogue," which frame the collection as a circular rather than linear experience. In "Reflection," the self becomes an object of interrogation rather than recognition, while "Epilogue" resists closure altogether and maintains the anthology's commitment to leave things unconceded. These framing texts establish that *New Urdu Fictions* does not aim to resolve meaning but to sustain inquiry, positioning the reader within an ongoing ethical process forcing them to raise more questions internally.

1. Reality as Fracture and Symbol

In *New Urdu Fictions*, reality is hardly showcased as a clear, external structure waiting to be represented. On the other hand, it appears fractured, mediated through objects, symbols, and subjective perception. This shift reflects a broader scepticism toward realism as an adequate mode for representing contemporary experience.

The story, "Black and White Feathered Pigeons" subverts moral and perceptual binaries through visual imagery. The pigeons, neither fully black nor fully white, subtly symbolize a world in which clarity is distorted. Reality is no longer organized around obstructions but exists in ambiguous, unstable zones. In "Tower of Babylon," the metaphor of vertical progress exposes the deception of collective

advancement. As the tower rises, communication deteriorates. Reality becomes a structure built on misrecognition and failed negotiation, reinforcing the anthology's critique of grand narratives and totalizing truths.

The harsh reality of poverty and destitution of the ordinary lives is well showcased in many stories like "The Funeral" and "The Shroud". In "Black and White Feathered Pigeons", Hazrat expresses his frustration and helplessness, "My existence is not sufficient to prove that I am alive. Instead, some lifeless papers from the government office will prove it" (Paul, 37). This shows how lives of the ordinary are crushed in the face of rigid governmental policies and power structures.

2. Inheritance, Identity, and Burdened Selves

Identity in *New Urdu Fictions* is shaped less by autonomy than by inheritance—understood not as continuity, but as burden. In "Inheritance," what is passed down across generations is silence, guilt, and unresolved memory rather than material security. The old man in tattered clothes carrying "an old copy of Baghdadi Qa'eda, the Arabic First Reader...as though it were his only child" (Paul, 21) stands symbolic of one's desperate wish to hold on to one's legacy or heritage. The old man's silence becomes formative, shaping the self through absence rather than presence. Identity emerges as something carried, endured, and negotiated rather than chosen.

In the story "Witness", the character voices out one's loss of identity or familial roots saying, "I'm totally destitute, I have no identity of my own, just as my parents had none. They were born, they lived and they died, as do millions of faceless people in the world. These people have brought a fellow like me who has no identity of his own to identify another person!" (Paul, 98). In "The Dressing Table", when Brijmohan forcefully looted the dressing table from Nasseem Jaan, "he felt a great satisfaction in the knowledge that they had succeeded in robbing a community of its heritage" (Paul, 41).

Regarding the story "Name Plate," the translator M Azaduddin himself suggests, "Though the central plot here hinges on the protagonist's failure to recall his dead wife's name, the story throws up complex questions of memory, forgetfulness, identity, self, and conjugal and filial bonds" (Paul, 13). Identity is reduced to a surface inscription detached from inner life and the loss of memory that raises the question of one's identity: "That name plate which keeps falling off from his mind so often. What's written on it? Nothing can be seen on it... Everything has faded" (Paul, 263). The story exposes the gap between social labeling and lived experience, suggesting that names no longer guarantee selfhood. This erosion of

individuality intensifies in “Faces,” where difference collapses into repetition and identity becomes interchangeable, anonymous, and fragile.

3. Memory, Displacement, and Post-Partition Consciousness

Displacement in *New Urdu Fictions* is hardly dramatized through explicit migration narratives. Instead, it operates quietly through memory, emotion, and psychological dislocation. The story “Across the Ravi,” is a compelling narrative of exile, displacement and loss. The desperate need for survival amidst the chaos, and the helpless state of the victims during migration, the cries of mothers at the state of adversity are pictures that are subtly portrayed in the entire story.

Similarly, “To the Evening of Friend’s City” portrays nostalgia as a painful encounter rather than a comforting return. The city remembered no longer exists, and memory deepens loss rather than re-establishing belonging. These narratives suggest that displacement is not resolved by settlement; it endures as an internal condition. Stories like “Refuge” and “Across the Raavi” also carry themes of insecurity, displacement, loss of family and future uncertainty.

4. Language, Silence, and Failed Communication

Language in *New Urdu Fictions* repeatedly proves inadequate to convey emotional and ethical truth. In “Telephone,” the frustrated couple juggle between failed communication and never-ending silence that ultimately leads to unhappy relationship. The story reveals distance rather than connection in a marital relationship. In “The Sea and the Word,” also language is overwhelmed by experience. Silence here is not emptiness but honesty, acknowledging the limits of articulation.

Performance replaces communication in “The Last Show,” where spectacle fails to generate understanding. Across these stories, silence, pauses, and breakdowns emerge as more powerful and truthful than fluent speech.

5. Ethics, Justice, and Moral Ambiguity

Ethical inquiry in *New Urdu Fictions* is central, yet it refuses tidy resolution. The stories prove that moral clarity is often unachievable, both in human experience and narrative representation. In “Justice,” Paul scrutinizes institutional systems that promise fairness but fail to address the human suffering they adjudicate. The helpless state of the mother in front of law and her inability to retain her son with her, is intricately crafted that gains empathy from the readers. Here, law functions mechanically, closing a case while leaving emotional and moral fractures unattended. The story exposes the gap between formal justice and lived experience, highlighting that ethical responsibility extends beyond official verdicts. The protagonist’s

continued inner turmoil reflects a universe where human suffering cannot be neatly quantified or controlled by procedural closure.

Similarly, "Good and Evil" challenges binary moral frameworks. Characters are presented in their ethical contradictions, performing actions that blend kindness and harm. By subverting the very categories of good and evil, the story suggests that ethics is situational, liable, and deeply personal. The reader is forced to confront the uncomfortable reality that moral judgment is never absolute; human actions must be interpreted within context, history, and psychological complexity. The story thereby creates a moral universe that mirrors real human ambiguity, resisting simplified ethical representations.

In "The Witness," the act of seeing itself becomes ethically fraught. Witnessing is not a neutral activity; it imposes responsibility and, paradoxically, a burden of silence. The story cross-examines complicity, emphasizing that ethical awareness can lead to paralysis rather than action. The tension between perception and intervention highlights a recurring concern in the fiction. Historical and symbolic consciousness is interrogated in "Karbala Is Far Off." While the story invokes the moral resonance of historical events, it juxtaposes symbolic memory with contemporary inaction.

6. Death, Loss, Uncertainty and the Persistence of the Ordinary

Death and loss in *New Urdu Fictions* are neither spectacularized nor mythologized; they are absorbed into the ordinariness of life. In this sense, Death in the anthology is stripped of grandeur. In "Funeral," mourning becomes routine: "*The prayers were complete, but grief had not yet arrived.*" ("Funeral"). Here, the ritual of death fails to encapsulate emotional reality. The mechanical performance of mourning juxtaposed with the absence of felt grief highlights the ordinary persistence of life in the face of death. Loss is absorbed into everyday life without transformation.

In "Black and White Feathered Pigeons", Hazrat repeated the sentence to himself, "Tribulations are tests from god. Persevere with them steadfastly" (Paul, 23) emphasising the importance of persistence in a life full of challenges. The story "The Second Shroud," situates loss as an enduring condition, one that resists narrative resolution, reflecting a philosophy of lived human temporality where death and memory intertwine. It gives a harsh reminder of that life goes on for those who are living. On the other hand, the story "Munni of Bengali House," not only reflects Munni's struggle for survival and her suffering throughout life but her never ending persistence despite continuous ordeals.

Uncertainty of life is yet another predominant theme that echoes through stories like “The Last Show”. Uncertainty due to poverty and struggle for survival is reflected in the lines: “One minute there’s life, another, there’s death. And we swirl among these eddies. Life is just in interlude in the circus” (Paul, 267).

Conclusion:

The closing texts, “Reflection” and “Epilogue,” reaffirm the anthology’s refusal of closure. Meaning remains suspended as the stories sound incomplete. Taken together, *New Urdu Fictions* redefines Urdu prose as a literature of inquiry—one that embraces fragmentation, ethical ambiguity, and emotional restraint. Joginder Paul’s editorial vision asserts that fiction’s deepest responsibility lies not in providing answers, but in sustaining the tough questions of modern life.

In conclusion, *New Urdu Fictions* stands a symbolic evidence of the dynamic and transformational phase of modern Urdu literature. The collection reaffirms the enduring relevance of Urdu literature in the current global context, by painting an intricate picture of symbolic narratives that showcase complex human relationships, failed communication, moral ambiguity and fragmented reality. Though many of the stories do not have an obvious happy-ending, they still bear light to better questions of human existence and morality.

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