Amandemen

Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Studies

ISSN: 2987-0038 (Online) Vol. 4 No. 2 (2026)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.61166/amd.v4i2.120 pp. 113-125

Research Article

Rewriting the History of Pashto Literature: New Perspectives on Its Origins, Evolution, and Intellectual Legacy (A Critical Historiographical Reassessment)

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Received : August 13, 2026 Revised : September 17, 2026
Accepted : October 15, 2026 Available online : November 07, 2026

How to Cite: Asadullah Khogyani, & Nuhzatullah Adil. (2026). Rewriting the History of Pashto Literature: New Perspectives on Its Origins, Evolution, and Intellectual Legacy (A Critical Historiographical Reassessment). *Amandemen: Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Studies*, *4*(2), 113–125. https://doi.org/10.61166/amd.v4i2.120

Abstract. The historiography of Pashto literature has long been organized around a linear, biographical narrative that begins with the semi-legendary warrior-poet Amir Kror Suri, proceeds through the sixteenth-century Roshani movement associated with Bayazid Ansari, and culminates in the seventeenth-century corpus of Khushal Khan Khattak, conventionally styled the "father" or "national poet" of Pashto letters. This periodization, inherited largely from twentieth-century Pashto Academy scholarship and popularized in general reference accounts, tends to treat Pashto literary history as an internal, ethnically bounded unfolding rather than as a literature produced at the

intersection of Persophone courtly culture, Islamic textual practice, and Indo-Afghan diasporic circulation. Drawing on recent codicological and literary-critical scholarship — most significantly Mikhail Pelevin's manuscript-based studies of early modern Pashto writing — this article argues for a revised historiographical framework in which the "emergence" of Pashto literature is treated not as a point of origin but as a contested, self-authorizing textual strategy: early Pashto authors explicitly argued, within their own prefaces and colophons, for the legitimacy of composing literature in a vernacular overshadowed by Persian. The article situates this reassessment within literary historiography, reception theory, and world-literature frameworks, arguing that Pashto's early modern "minor-to-major" trajectory offers a case study relevant to broader theoretical debates about vernacularization in Persianate Asia. It identifies a series of gaps in the existing literature — a documentary gap around the earliest strata of the tradition, a historiographical gap in the field's continued reliance on hagiographic and nationalist framings, and a comparative gap in the near-total absence of Pashto from generalist world-literature scholarship — and proposes a periodization keyed to textual production and circulation rather than to a sequence of heroic authorial biographies. Because Afghanistan-based access to specialized manuscript catalogues and Pashto-language secondary literature is constrained, the article is explicit about where its evidentiary base is provisional and where further archival and philological work, ideally conducted by scholars with native command of Pashto, is required.

Keywords: Pashto literature; literary historiography; manuscript studies; vernacularization; Persianate world; Khushal Khan Khattak; Roshani literature; comparative literature

INTRODUCTION

Pashto occupies an unusual position among the literary languages of the Persianate world. Spoken across a contiguous territory straddling present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan, it produced a substantial written literature only from the sixteenth century onward, entering the field of Indo-Persian letters as what Pelevin (2021) describes as a vernacular whose earliest authors felt obliged to justify, in their own prefaces, the very act of writing in it. This is a significant historiographical fact, and one that the dominant narrative of Pashto literary history — a narrative of continuous, five-thousand-year unfolding from oral antiquity to modern print culture, still repeated in general encyclopedic accounts — tends to obscure rather than illuminate.

The problem is not that claims of deep antiquity are necessarily false; oral tradition is, by definition, difficult to date and easy either to overstate or to dismiss. The problem is methodological: a historiography built on a chain of heroic authorial biographies (Amir Kror, Bayazid Ansari, Khushal Khan Khattak) tends to treat literary emergence as a series of individual achievements rather than as a social and textual process embedded in courtly patronage, religious controversy, and the competitive prestige of Persian as the dominant literary language of Mughal India. Recent codicological and literary-critical scholarship on early modern Pashto manuscripts — most importantly the sustained body of work produced by Mikhail Pelevin over the past two decades and synthesized in his 2025 monograph Love, Honour and

God — allows for a more textually grounded account of how Pashto writing actually emerged, circulated, and argued for its own legitimacy (Pelevin, 2025a).

This article has three aims. First, it reviews the state of English-language and internationally indexed scholarship on Pashto literary history, identifying where the field's periodization rests on secondary consensus rather than primary textual evidence. Second, it proposes a revised historiographical framework that treats the sixteenth-to-eighteenth-century emergence of Pashto letters as a case of vernacularization within a Persophone literary field, drawing on theoretical resources from literary historiography, reception theory, and world-literature scholarship. Third, and most importantly for a piece of this kind, it is explicit about its own evidentiary limits. A genuinely comprehensive rewriting of Pashto literary history would require sustained engagement with Pashto Academy and Pashto Tolana publications, with Pashto- and Persian-language manuscript catalogues, and with oral-literature fieldwork — resources that are not accessible through English-language bibliographic search and that properly belong to scholars, such as the present author, working from within the Pashto-speaking academic community. Where this article's argument depends on such material, that dependency is flagged rather than concealed behind an invented citation.

The research questions guiding the discussion are: (1) how should the documented origins of Pashto literature be distinguished from its projected origins in nationalist and encyclopedic historiography; (2) what historiographical assumptions have shaped existing accounts of Pashto literary periodization; (3) how did political, religious, and specifically Persophone literary pressures shape the emergence and early development of Pashto writing; and (4) what does the Pashto case contribute to broader comparative and theoretical discussions of vernacularization in the Persianate world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Twentieth-century Pashto literary historiography was substantially shaped by Pashto Academy and Pashto Tolana scholarship in Peshawar and Kabul, whose biobibliographical dictionaries — such as Hamish Khalil's directory of Pashto authors — established the basic corpus of named writers still used by researchers today [AUTHOR TO VERIFY/SUPPLEMENT: primary bibliographic details of Khalil's directory and comparable Pashto Tolana reference works]. This scholarship performed indispensable archival labor, but it inherited, and in places reinforced, a nationalist framing in which Pashto literature is presented as the continuous cultural expression of a single ethnic community stretching back to pre-Islamic antiquity. Encyclopedic accounts that circulate widely today largely reproduce this frame, presenting a sequence from oral tapa poetry through Amir Kror Suri (eighth century), the Roshani movement of Bayazid Ansari (sixteenth century), and Khushal Khan

Khattak (seventeenth century) to twentieth-century literary organizations such as the Olasi Adabi Jirga, founded in 1949.

A methodologically distinct body of scholarship has developed around the philological and codicological study of the surviving early modern manuscript corpus. David Neil MacKenzie's mid-twentieth-century work on Pashto verse and the standardization of the Pashto script remains foundational: his 1958 study of Pashto verse in the Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies established basic metrical and textual criteria still used to authenticate early poems (MacKenzie, 1958). Georg Morgenstierne's contemporaneous study of Khushal Khan Khattak situated the poet within a comparative Persianate frame rather than treating him purely as a national figure, describing his poetry's relationship to Persian courtly models (Morgenstierne, 1960). These works, though dated, model a philologically disciplined approach that more recent scholarship has extended.

The most significant recent contribution is that of Mikhail Pelevin, whose sustained manuscript-based research over two decades culminates in the 2025 monograph Love, Honour and God: Pashto Writings of Early Modern Times, which traces the development of Pashto writing from approximately 1530 to 1830 as, in the author's own framing, a considered pursuit of an educational mission and a verbal affirmation of ethnic identity carried out against the background of Persophone literary dominance (Pelevin, 2025a). Pelevin's earlier article-length studies substantiate this framework in detail: his 2021 study of the inception of literary criticism in early modern Pashto writings shows that seventeenth-century Pashtun authors, including poets of the Roshani religious community and Khushal Khan Khattak himself, engaged in explicit authorial self-justification, borrowing the Persian rhetorical conventions of self-praise (fakhriyya) and statement-of-purpose (sabab-i taʾlīf) to defend the legitimacy of composing literature in Pashto within a cultural space dominated by Persian (Pelevin, 2021). His 2023 study of a hagiographical collection embedded in the Tārīkh-i Khānjahānī wa Makhzan-i Afghānī (a 1613 general history of the Pashtuns compiled in the Indo-Afghan diaspora) demonstrates that even Pashtun communal self-understanding, and by extension the literary articulation of Pashtun identity, took shape substantially within the Indo-Persian environment of Mughal India rather than solely within the tribal homelands (Pelevin, 2023).

A second relevant strand of scholarship addresses Pashto within the broader context of language policy and the Persianate world. Andreyev's (2010) chapter on the classical period of Pashto literature, published within Ehsan Yarshater's multivolume History of Persian Literature series, treats Pashto letters as one node within a wider Iranian-language literary field rather than as an isolated national tradition. Hakala (2012) surveys the secondary literature on the very category of "Pashto" as a marker of language and identity in Afghanistan, cautioning against treating that category as historically stable. Nichols (2012) examines the colonial-era

politics of Pashto-language policy in the North-West Frontier Province, showing how British administrative choices shaped which forms of Pashto literary production received institutional support. Taken together, this scholarship suggests that Pashto's literary historiography cannot be adequately written as an internal history; it must be written as a history of a vernacular literature negotiating its position relative to Persian prestige, Mughal and later colonial administration, and Pashtun diasporic circulation.

Scholarship internal to Pashto studies in Afghanistan and Pakistan continues to produce valuable close readings of individual authors, particularly Khushal Khan Khattak. Recent journal literature includes cultural and civilizational readings of his poetry (Khan & Shah, 2023) and studies situating his poetic corpus within Pashtun cultural codes of honor, hospitality, and resistance produced by departments of Pashto at Pakistani and Afghan universities, including Nangarhar University's own journal of arts and humanities. This literature is valuable but remains largely descriptive and author-centered; it has not, on the whole, engaged with the comparative and theoretical questions raised by Pelevin's codicological work or by broader world-literature scholarship.

Identified Gaps

From this review, several gaps can be specified. A documentary gap exists around the pre-sixteenth-century strata of the tradition: the frequently cited figure of Amir Kror Suri and the disputed manuscript Pata Khazana rest on evidentiary foundations that remain genuinely contested among specialists, and generalist accounts routinely present them with more certainty than the primary scholarship warrants [AUTHOR TO VERIFY/SUPPLEMENT: the specific codicological literature debating Pata Khazana's authenticity]. A historiographical gap exists in the continued organization of the field around a nationalist, biography-centered narrative inherited from twentieth-century academy scholarship, which is in some tension with the more textually grounded, Persophone-embedded account emerging from recent manuscript studies. A comparative gap exists in the near-total absence of Pashto literature from generalist world-literature and comparative-literature scholarship (Damrosch, 2003; Casanova, 2004; Moretti, 2000), even though its early modern trajectory offers a clear case of vernacularization under conditions of a dominant cosmopolitan language, directly relevant to those fields' central concerns. Finally, a regional gap exists in the comparatively thin connective scholarship linking Pashto literary development to parallel and interacting Persian, Urdu, and broader Indo-Islamic literary formations, despite the shared Mughal-era institutional and courtly context documented by Pelevin (2021, 2023).

Historical Foundations of Pashto Literature

Any historiographical reassessment must distinguish carefully between the deep oral background attributed to Pashto verbal art, the earliest attested written strata, and the substantial, well-documented literature of the early modern period. Pashto's oral tradition of short lyric couplets, generally known as landay or tapa, is widely described as ancient and continuous, but by its nature this tradition is transmitted rather than dated, and claims about its antiquity should be treated as claims about cultural continuity rather than as datable historical fact [AUTHOR TO VERIFY/SUPPLEMENT: specific ethnomusicological or folkloric scholarship on landay/tapa dating and transmission].

The earliest written strata are more securely, if still only partially, documented. Bayazid Ansari's Khayr al-Bayān, associated with the sixteenth-century Roshani religious movement, is widely treated as an early landmark of Pashto prose and Sufi doctrinal writing; MacKenzie (1964, as cited in Pelevin, 2021) undertook philological work on this text specifically. The Roshani movement generated a wider circle of religious poets — among them figures identified in the manuscript record as Arzani, Mukhlis, Mirza Khan Ansari, Dawlat, and Wasil — whose extant Diwans have been edited and studied within the Pashto Tolana tradition and, more recently, incorporated into Pelevin's comparative account of Roshani poetics (Pelevin, 2021, 2025a). A counter-current emerged in the work of Akhund Darweza, whose Makhzan al-Islam represents an orthodox Sunni response to Roshani doctrine and stands as an important, still under-examined, example of religious controversy shaping early Pashto prose style.

The seventeenth century produced the corpus most securely documented and most extensively studied: the writings of Khushal Khan Khattak, together with those of his son Ashraf Khan Khattak and the Sufi poet Abdur Rahman (Rahman Baba). Khushal Khan's biography — a tribal chief imprisoned by the Mughal court and subsequently active in anti-Mughal military and political life — has made him a figure of enduring symbolic importance, but Morgenstierne (1960) and Pelevin (2021) both caution against reading his poetic corpus purely through that biographical lens; both scholars situate his verse technically within Persian courtly poetic conventions (the ghazal, the qasida, and prose genres such as the nāma) that he adapted, rather than invented, for Pashto composition. Rahman Baba's Sufi lyric poetry represents a parallel, doctrinally distinct strand, generally read in relation to the wider Persian Sufi lyric tradition associated with Hafez.

Manuscript survival and circulation are themselves historiographically significant. As Pelevin's (2025a) codicological work documents, Pashto manuscripts of the classical period survive dispersed across libraries in Peshawar, Kabul, London, and continental European collections, with cataloguing efforts going back to James Fuller Blumhardt's early twentieth-century work and continuing through MacKenzie.

This dispersal, and the uneven state of cataloguing, itself shapes which texts have been available to scholars and therefore which texts have entered the historiographical canon — a methodological point with direct implications for how confidently any periodization can be asserted.

Reassessing Literary Origins

The question of Pashto's origins has historically been entangled with the ethnolinguistic question of Pashtun origins, producing a historiography in which competing theories of ethnic descent (Semitic/Israelite, Aryan/Indo-European) have been mapped onto competing theories of literary origin. This entanglement is itself worth foregrounding as a historiographical problem rather than treating it as settled background. Linguistically, Pashto's classification within the Eastern Iranian branch of the Indo-European family is not seriously disputed among historical linguists, but the popular and pseudo-historical literature associating Pashtuns with a Semitic or Israelite genealogy has continued to circulate and, at points, to shape literary-historical narrative, including claims about pre-Islamic textual production for which no manuscript evidence survives [AUTHOR TO VERIFY/SUPPLEMENT: current historical-linguistic consensus citations, e.g., specialist Iranian-linguistics literature on Pashto's subgrouping].

A revised approach to literary origins should, this article argues, separate three analytically distinct questions that existing historiography tends to conflate: the antiquity of Pashto as a spoken language, which is a matter for historical linguistics; the antiquity of a continuous oral verbal art in Pashto, which is a matter for folklore and cultural-memory studies and is necessarily approached through inference rather than documentary proof; and the origin of Pashto as a written literary medium with an identifiable corpus of authored, transmitted texts, which is a matter for codicology and textual history and is, on present evidence, a sixteenth-century phenomenon. Conflating these three questions is what allows the popular "five-thousand-year" formulation to coexist, without apparent contradiction, with a documentary record that begins meaningfully only with the Roshani corpus. Treating them separately does not diminish the cultural significance of Pashto oral tradition; it simply prevents an inference about oral antiquity from being silently converted into a claim about written literary history.

On this reading, the meaningful historiographical question is not "when did Pashto literature begin" but "under what conditions, and for what purposes, did Pashtun authors begin to commit literature to writing, and why did they feel compelled to justify doing so?" Pelevin's (2021) analysis of early modern Pashto authorial self-reflection is directly relevant here: the fact that Roshani-era and Khattak-era authors repeatedly explained and defended their choice to write in Pashto, borrowing Persian rhetorical conventions to do so, is itself evidence that literary Pashto emerged as a self-conscious, minority-language intervention into an

established Persophone literary field, rather than as the natural continuation of an unbroken written tradition stretching back centuries earlier. This reframes Pashto's literary emergence as an act of vernacularization comparable to — and analyzable through the same theoretical lens as — other vernacularization processes documented across the Persianate and broader Islamicate world.

Evolution of Pashto Literature

Building on the periodization implicit in the codicological literature, this article proposes four broad phases, offered as a heuristic revision rather than a final taxonomy. The first phase, religious and doctrinal (approximately 1526–1600), is dominated by the Roshani movement and its Sunni orthodox opponents; its literature is primarily didactic and polemical prose alongside devotional verse, and its central historiographical significance lies in establishing Pashto prose as a vehicle for serious doctrinal argument (Pelevin, 2021, 2025a). The second phase, courtly and martial classical (approximately 1600–1700), is dominated by the Khattak family and by Rahman Baba, and is characterized by the naturalization of Persian courtly verse forms into Pashto alongside a distinctive tribal-political prose genre (exemplified by Khushal Khan's own historical and didactic prose works); this is the phase most thoroughly documented in existing philological scholarship (MacKenzie, 1958; Morgenstierne, 1960).

The third phase, diasporic and provincial consolidation (approximately 1700–1830), corresponds to the period Pelevin's (2025a) monograph frames as the outer chronological boundary of "early modern" Pashto writing, during which Pashto literary production continued among Pashtun communities settled in North India — a geography and social context that existing popular historiography, focused on the Afghan-Pakistani tribal territories, has generally underweighted (Pelevin's 2018 UCLA lecture on Pashto literature in North India between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries makes this point explicitly). The fourth phase, modern institutional and national literature (approximately 1930–present), corresponds to the establishment of formal literary institutions — the Pashto Academy in Peshawar, the Pashto Tolana in Kabul, and organizations such as the Olasi Adabi Jirga founded in 1949 — and to the emergence of print journalism, the modern short story and novel, and, most recently, diasporic and digital Pashto literary production following successive waves of displacement from Afghanistan.

Several transformations cut across these phases and deserve treatment as continuous processes rather than as period-bound events. Language standardization was a recurring project rather than a single achievement: MacKenzie's (1959, as cited in the Cambridge University Press reference apparatus accompanying Pelevin's 2021 study) mid-twentieth-century proposal for a "standard Pashto" was itself one moment within a much longer and still unresolved negotiation between the Peshawar/Yusufzai and Kandahari dialect traditions, a negotiation with

real consequences for which texts are treated as canonical [AUTHOR TO VERIFY/SUPPLEMENT: recent sociolinguistic literature on Pashto dialect standardization debates]. Court patronage shifted from Mughal-era tribal-military patrons to twentieth-century state and academy patronage, altering what kinds of literary production were institutionally rewarded. Colonial administration in the North-West Frontier Province shaped Pashto-language policy and, by extension, which literary and educational materials received official support (Nichols, 2012). Twentieth-century nationalism, in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, reshaped the historiography itself, encouraging the retrospective construction of a continuous national literary tradition of the kind this article seeks to qualify. Finally, sustained conflict and displacement since 1978 have produced a large Pashto-speaking diaspora whose literary production, including emerging digital and social-media literary culture, remains comparatively understudied in the scholarly literature consulted for this review.

Intellectual Legacy

Pashto literature's intellectual legacy is inseparable from the religious and ethical debates that shaped its early modern emergence. The Roshani–Darweza controversy was not merely a literary episode but a genuine theological dispute about religious authority, prophecy, and the proper interpretation of Islamic doctrine, conducted substantially through vernacular prose aimed at a lay Pashtun readership rather than through the Arabic or Persian scholarly registers typically used for such disputes (Pelevin, 2021, 2025a). This suggests that early Pashto prose functioned, from its inception, as a vehicle for extending religious and ethical argument beyond a narrow literate elite — an intellectual-historical function distinct from, though related to, its literary-aesthetic function.

Khushal Khan Khattak's corpus carries a related but distinct legacy: it fuses personal, tribal-political, and didactic registers, using poetry and prose alike to articulate an ethical code of conduct, honor, and resistance to external domination that later readers — including twentieth-century Pashtun nationalist movements — would draw upon as a foundational cultural reference (Khan & Shah, 2023). Whether this later reception accurately represents Khushal Khan's own seventeenth-century intentions, or represents a retrospective ethical and political reading projected onto his work, is itself a question in reception theory that existing biography-centered scholarship rarely poses explicitly.

In the modern period, Pashto literature's intellectual legacy is bound up with debates over national identity and education in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, where Pashto-medium instruction, script standardization, and literary canon formation have carried direct political stakes (Nichols, 2012; Hakala, 2012). The field's ongoing production of scholarship — including recent work at Afghan and Pakistani university departments of Pashto and English on figures such as Khushal Khan

Khattak — indicates that this literature continues to function as a live site of identity construction and pedagogical transmission rather than as a closed historical corpus.

Comparative Perspectives

Positioned against Persian literature, Pashto's early modern emergence exemplifies what world-literature scholarship describes as vernacularization under conditions of cosmopolitan-language dominance: a minority literary language achieving textual legitimacy by borrowing and adapting the prestige forms of the dominant language rather than by rejecting them outright (Moretti, 2000; Casanova, 2004). Pelevin's (2021) demonstration that early Pashto authors used Persian rhetorical self-justification strategies to defend Pashto composition is a precise empirical instance of this general theoretical pattern, and one that has not, to this article's knowledge, been substantially integrated into the comparative vernacularization literature centered on South Asian languages such as Hindi, Bengali, and Urdu.

Against Urdu, the comparison is instructive precisely because the two languages' vernacularization trajectories diverge: Urdu developed as a literary language substantially within urban Mughal and post-Mughal court culture and achieved comparatively rapid institutional consolidation, whereas Pashto developed at what Pelevin (2023) shows to have been the geographic and administrative periphery of Mughal power, among a socially dispersed tribal and diasporic population, producing a more fragmented and provincially distributed manuscript record [AUTHOR TO VERIFY/SUPPLEMENT: comparative Urdu literary-historiography scholarship, e.g., specialist studies of early Urdu vernacularization, for a fully developed comparison].

Against Arabic and the broader Islamic textual tradition, the relevant point of comparison is less direct literary influence than shared genre and rhetorical inheritance: the didactic and hagiographic prose genres used by Roshani and Sunni-orthodox authors alike draw on conventions of Islamic religious writing transmitted through Persian intermediaries rather than directly from Arabic sources, a point consistent with Pelevin's (2021) tracing of specific rhetorical devices to Persian rather than Arabic literary-critical vocabulary.

Against Sanskrit and the broader Indic literary sphere, the comparison remains largely unexplored in the sources available for this review; Pelevin's (2023) study of Pashtun communities' Indo-Afghan diasporic self-understanding gestures toward shared social space with Indic literary culture in North India but does not extend to detailed literary-textual comparison, and this represents a genuine open avenue for future comparative research rather than a claim this article can substantiate on present evidence.

Critical Discussion

The central interpretive claim advanced here is that Pashto literary historiography has conflated two distinct kinds of continuity: cultural-ethnic continuity, which is a matter of collective identity and memory (Assmann, 1995), and documentary-textual continuity, which is a matter of surviving, datable, authored texts. The popular "five-thousand-year" historiography performs important cultural work — it affirms Pashtun collective identity and situates a modern linguistic community within a deep historical horizon — but it does this by treating the first kind of continuity as though it were evidence for the second. Reception-theoretical and cultural-memory frameworks suggest this is not unique to Pashto historiography; comparable conflations recur across national literary historiographies constructed during periods of nation-building (Assmann, 1995; Bourdieu, 1993). What distinguishes the Pashto case, and what this article suggests is analytically productive, is how explicitly the early modern textual record itself documents authors' anxiety about legitimacy — an anxiety that a purely continuity-oriented historiography has tended to smooth over rather than examine.

The theoretical implication is that Pashto literature offers a comparatively well-documented case study for testing world-literature models of vernacularization (Damrosch, 2003; Moretti, 2000; Casanova, 2004) against a body of primary self-reflective textual evidence, rather than only against external sociological indicators such as printing, translation, or institutional patronage. This is a genuine methodological contribution: much vernacularization scholarship works from indirect evidence (circulation figures, patronage records, translation counts), whereas Pelevin's (2021) work shows that Pashto authors left explicit first-person statements about the legitimacy problem they perceived themselves as solving.

The historiographical implication is a call for periodization keyed to documented textual production and circulation, of the kind sketched in Section 5, rather than to a sequence of individually heroized authors. This does not require abandoning attention to major figures such as Khushal Khan Khattak, whose documented corpus remains central to any periodization, but it does require situating such figures within the institutional, religious, and cross-linguistic context that produced and constrained their work, following the model set by Morgenstierne (1960) and extended by Pelevin (2021, 2023, 2025a).

This article's principal limitation is evidentiary and linguistic rather than theoretical. It has been written and researched primarily through internationally indexed, English-language scholarship, supplemented by what could be independently verified through available bibliographic search; it has not undertaken direct manuscript examination or systematic engagement with Pashto Academy, Pashto Tolana, or Da Pashto Tolana journal literature, the Pata Khazana authenticity debate, or the wider body of Pashto- and Persian-language secondary scholarship that a fully realized rewriting of the field's history would require. Claims about pre-

sixteenth-century textual production, about dialect-standardization debates, and about detailed comparison with Urdu and Sanskrit literary history are accordingly flagged in the text above as requiring the author's own specialist verification rather than presented as settled. Future research — ideally combining the codicological rigor of the Pelevin-MacKenzie-Morgenstierne line of scholarship with the native-language philological and archival access available to Pashto-speaking scholars in Afghanistan and Pakistan — could close these gaps directly.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the conventional historiography of Pashto literature, organized around a continuous chain from oral antiquity through a sequence of heroic authors to modern institutional literature, conflates cultural-ethnic continuity with documentary-textual continuity in ways that recent codicological scholarship allows us to disentangle. Reframed through the lens of vernacularization within a Persophone literary field, and grounded in the manuscript-based work of Pelevin and the earlier philological foundations laid by MacKenzie and Morgenstierne, Pashto's early modern emergence appears not as the natural continuation of an ancient written tradition but as a self-conscious, textually documented act of literary legitimation, carried out under conditions of Persian cultural dominance and articulated through borrowed Persian rhetorical strategies. This reframing carries theoretical significance for comparative and world-literature scholarship, which has largely overlooked Pashto as a case study in vernacularization, and historiographical significance for the field's own periodization, which this article suggests should be organized around documented textual production and circulation rather than around a sequence of individually heroized authorial biographies. The argument's evidentiary base is, by design, limited to independently verifiable sources; a fuller realization of the revisionist program sketched here depends on sustained engagement with Pashto- and Persian-language primary and secondary literature that lies beyond the scope of this article and that the author is well positioned to undertake in subsequent work.

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