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LITERARY SOFT POWER: A RESEARCH STUDY OF THE CIVILIZATIONAL AND NARRATIVE POTENTIAL OF PAKISTANI URDU NOVELS

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Abstract

Soft power has increasingly emerged as a significant framework for understanding how states and societies shape international perceptions through culture, values, narratives, and non-coercive influence. This study conceptualizes Pakistani Urdu novels as a potential form of literary soft power and examines how selected fictional narratives communicate civilizational, ethical, historical, social, and cultural meanings beyond conventional diplomatic channels. The study draws primarily on Joseph S. Nye's Soft Power Theory and extends it through the concepts of literary soft power and narrative soft power. Using a qualitative research design, ten Pakistani Urdu novels are examined through close textual reading, thematic analysis, and comparative narrative analysis. The data are interpreted through categories of cultural representation, narrative empathy, ethical imagination, historical memory, identity construction, and potential international reception. The findings indicate that Pakistani Urdu fiction possesses substantial latent literary soft power through its representation of Islamic ethics, civilizational memory, social realities, human experiences, cultural diversity, and ecological consciousness; however, its international influence remains constrained by inadequate translation, global circulation, institutional promotion, and literary diplomacy. The study recommends systematic translation programs, international publishing partnerships, academic circulation, literary-rights mechanisms, and coordinated literary diplomacy. It concludes that Pakistani Urdu novels can become an important component of Pakistan's broader soft-power architecture when literary value is effectively converted into international cultural influence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of power in global politics has undergone a significant intellectual transformation during the past few decades. Military capacity, economic pressure, and material resources continue to matter in the international system, yet the ability of states to shape outcomes is no longer assessed solely by the extent to which they can compel others. It is equally important to examine how far their civilizations, values, intellectual traditions, cultural expressions, and national narratives generate attraction and meaning for external audiences. Within this changing intellectual landscape, soft power has become a major concept in contemporary international relations. Recent scholarship has extended the discussion beyond formal diplomacy to include culture, translation, publishing, literature, and global narrative formation. Roig-Sanz, Campanella, and Carbó-Catalan argue that translation should not be viewed merely as linguistic transfer; it also contributes to the formation of collective identities, cultural perceptions, and transnational accessibility (Roig-Sanz et al., 2025, pp. 1–23). Similarly, Gefen and Jderu locate world literature within contemporary political and geopolitical debate and observe that "World literature is a remarkable lens through which to observe contemporary political and geopolitical debates" (Gefen & Jderu, 2026, p. 447). This position provides a conceptual foundation for examining literature not only as an aesthetic practice but also as a medium of international perception and civilizational influence.

Literature is distinctive because it introduces a nation or civilization not through an official communiqué, political speech, or diplomatic declaration, but through human beings, characters, memories, emotions, conflicts, and imagination. This capacity distinguishes literature from many other instruments associated with soft power. Film, music, tourism, and mass media can project visible cultural forms, whereas the novel can place a reader inside the moral and emotional world of a society. It can make fear, hope, religious experience, historical trauma, class inequality, cultural memory, and private aspiration experientially available to readers who may otherwise encounter a country only through news, policy discourse, or strategic narratives. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes publishing and literary institutions as non-coercive cultural actors. Codina Solà and McMartin demonstrate that literary prizes and transnational publishing can shape political and cultural narratives through non-state institutions (2025, pp. 162–183). Szpilbarg and Riveiro, in their study of Argentina's PROSUR translation program, show that the subsidized translation and global circulation of national literature can become an instrument of cultural identity and international visibility (2025, pp. 143–161). In this sense, the novel becomes more than a literary object: it becomes a cultural space in which a society is experienced rather than merely described.

Translation occupies a decisive position in the transformation of literature into international soft power because a national literature cannot generate sustained transnational influence if it remains confined within its original linguistic boundaries. Literary soft power therefore cannot be reduced to the intrinsic quality of a text. Translation, publishing, circulation, scholarly reception, and intercultural reading are equally important. Carbó-Catalan's analysis of translation policies adopted by states and international organizations links translation to collective identity and national image, suggesting that translation programs may increase a society's cultural visibility and attractiveness (2025, pp. 24–41). Xu and von Flotow similarly examine the Chinese literary journal Pathlight and demonstrate how translating selected Chinese works into English functioned within a broader project of literary cultural diplomacy (2025, pp. 201–214). Such studies indicate that translation is not simply a technical bridge between languages; it is also a process through which

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cultural meaning is reframed for new readers. Consequently, the existence of outstanding novels in a national language does not automatically guarantee international soft power. The central questions are which works are translated, who publishes them, how they circulate, where they are taught, and what kinds of cultural impressions they create within receiving societies.

These questions are particularly important in the Pakistani context. Pakistan possesses substantial civilizational, religious, linguistic, historical, and regional diversity, yet its cultural resources have not always been transformed into an integrated international cultural narrative. Shah's analysis of Pakistan's foreign cultural policy argues that cultural assets alone are insufficient; effective soft power requires a functioning cultural ecosystem, institutional coordination, value creation, and organized external presentation (Shah, 2022, pp. 74–91). More recent research by Anwar and Akbar identifies Pakistan's heritage, tourism, creative industries, and diaspora as potential soft-power resources, while also emphasizing the constraints created by weak institutional structures, negative international perceptions, and limited global reach (2026, pp. 203–224). This raises a central question for the present study: when Pakistan's soft power is discussed in relation to tourism, music, heritage, media, or national branding, why has Urdu literature, particularly the Urdu novel, remained comparatively marginal to this policy and scholarly conversation despite its historical, intellectual, and civilizational richness? The problem is not simply one of literary prestige; it concerns the conversion of cultural meaning into international recognition.

The Pakistani Urdu novel is especially important because it contains a wide range of pre- and post-Partition civilizational experiences. It addresses migration, national identity, Islamic ethics, urban life, class inequality, women's experience, colonialism, modernity, civilizational crisis, regional cultures, spiritual consciousness, memory, and questions of human existence. This intellectual plurality provides a basis for reading the Pakistani Urdu novel as a potential form of literary soft power and, more specifically, narrative soft power. Narrative soft power is used in this study to describe the non-coercive capacity of literary narratives to translate collective experience into stories, characters, symbols, and emotional worlds through which readers encounter a society at a human rather than merely informational level. Raza and Noreen's study of cultural diplomacy in Pakistan-India relations similarly recognizes literature, theatre, film, and cultural exchange as possible means for reducing social distance and misunderstanding (2024, pp. 2036–2044). The significance of literature therefore does not lie in direct political advocacy. Its deeper potential lies in enabling readers to enter the interior world of another society and to revise simplified or one-dimensional assumptions through sustained narrative engagement.

The present study proceeds from the proposition that Pakistani Urdu novels contain substantial literary and civilizational capital, but that a gap persists between this capital and its effective transformation into international soft power. The study terms this condition latent literary soft power: cultural and literary capacity that possesses the potential to generate international influence but remains underactivated because of limitations in translation, global publishing, academic circulation, literary festivals, cultural institutions, and coordinated literary diplomacy. Recent international scholarship supports the broader proposition that literature, translation, publishers, cultural institutions, and non-state actors can jointly contribute to the global construction of national and cultural identities (Roig-Sanz et al., 2025, pp. 1–23; Gefen & Jderu, 2026, pp. 447–458). On this basis, the Pakistani Urdu novel needs to be examined not only through literary aesthetics, style, and thematic criticism, but also through the interdisciplinary lenses of international relations, cultural

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diplomacy, and global circulation. The study therefore asks how the Islamic, historical, social, ecological, and humanistic narratives of Pakistani Urdu fiction can function as literary soft power and what institutional, translational, publishing, and academic mechanisms are required to transform latent literary capital into sustained international cultural influence.

2. Literature Review

Recent scholarship on soft power has shifted from treating it as a secondary instrument of state attraction toward examining the resources, channels, institutions, and stages through which non-coercive influence is produced. Ohnesorge reworks the concept of soft power through a more systematic typology and methodology, emphasizing that attraction cannot simply be equated with power unless the mechanisms through which resources influence preferences and behavior are specified (Ohnesorge, 2020, pp. 85–225). From this perspective, literature does not become soft power merely because it represents a culture; it becomes politically and culturally consequential when it reaches other societies and produces recognition, curiosity, attraction, or perceptual change. Bell and Kennan extend this institutional logic by examining libraries as possible soft-power actors. Their review suggests that knowledge and cultural institutions may facilitate international access to national cultural resources, although they also identify a continuing shortage of theoretical and empirical work in this area (Bell & Kennan, 2022, pp. 706–716). These studies are important because they broaden the conceptual field from governments and diplomatic agencies to the cultural institutions that preserve, circulate, and legitimize intellectual production. They also imply that literature's soft-power capacity must be studied relationally, through the institutional conditions that enable texts to travel and acquire meaning beyond their original cultural settings.

Research on literary translation offers a more direct connection between literature and soft power. Batchelor's study of African literature in Chinese translation examines the political and cultural significance of literary translation within China-Africa relations. Although many translations emerged from commercial motivations, some projects were clearly connected to broader political relations, narratives of friendship, and the promotion of a favorable image of China (Batchelor, 2020, pp. 401–419). The importance of this work lies in its demonstration that translation can participate in diplomatic and ideological formations without ceasing to be a literary practice. Jiang further analyzes translation as cultural diplomacy from a Chinese perspective and argues that over-politicized translation can weaken intercultural communication when target audiences perceive cultural material as state propaganda rather than autonomous cultural expression (Jiang, 2021, pp. 892–904). Together, these studies suggest an important principle for literary soft power: effectiveness depends not simply on the presence of translation, but on the quality, credibility, and cultural sensitivity of mediation. For Pakistani Urdu fiction, this means that translation must be more than linguistic conversion. It must preserve literary complexity while enabling target readers to encounter the social and philosophical worlds of the original texts without feeling that they are receiving a state-managed message.

The concept of literary diplomacy provides another relevant strand of scholarship. Yıldırım examines literature, literary festivals, translation activities, and public diplomacy in Turkey and argues that literary texts can introduce other societies to a country's cultural heritage and human experience (Yıldırım, 2021, pp. 14–40). This work moves literature from the margins of official cultural activity toward a more deliberate role in relationship-building and intercultural understanding. Meijen's study of the European Union's literary translation projects, however, introduces an important critical qualification. She demonstrates that translation can promote common values, cultural diversity, and shared

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identity, but that policy frameworks may also flatten historical difference if they impose an overly coherent or normative narrative on complex cultural traditions (Meijen, 2020, pp. 942–958). This caution is highly relevant to Pakistan. A Pakistani literary diplomacy project should not attempt to manufacture a single, sanitized national image. Its strength would lie in presenting the country's religious, regional, class, linguistic, historical, and intellectual diversity through aesthetically serious works. Literary diplomacy can become credible soft power only when it allows literature to retain ambiguity, dissent, ethical complexity, and narrative independence.

Within Urdu literary studies, substantial work exists on the relationship between fiction and culture, but the dominant analytical frames remain literary, social, linguistic, or civilizational rather than international-relations oriented. Noshair and Razzaq examine cultural diversity in Pakistani women's Urdu novels and identify religious traditions, festivals, customs, arts, social practices, and regional cultural forms as significant elements of fictional representation (2022, pp. 291–302). Their work confirms that Pakistani fiction already contains recognizable cultural resources. Ansari's study of Tahira Iqbal's novel Girran similarly explores the relationship between regional language and culture, demonstrating how local vocabulary, rural experience, and cultural symbols embed Urdu fiction within specific social and regional identities (Ansari, 2023, pp. 39–57). These studies are important for the present research because they establish the presence of cultural capital within Pakistani Urdu novels. However, they do not examine how such cultural material reaches external readers, how it may affect international perceptions, how translation and circulation mediate its reception, or how it may function as a soft-power resource. The present study therefore connects an existing body of literary and cultural analysis to a distinct interdisciplinary problem: the conversion of literary representation into transnational cultural influence.

Empirical work on cultural communication in Pakistan further strengthens the case for examining reception and circulation rather than content alone. Larik, Mangi, and Bukhari analyze China's cultural diplomacy efforts in Pakistan through internet-based sources and conclude that Urdu-language cultural content contributed to accessibility and the creation of a relatively favorable cultural image, although the effectiveness of different channels varied considerably (2022, pp. 407–436). This finding is significant for literary soft power because it shows that the mere existence of cultural content does not ensure impact; active, appropriate, and continuous channels of transmission are essential. Overall, the existing literature separately addresses the conceptual development of soft power, translation, literary diplomacy, cultural institutions, Urdu fictional culture, and communication strategy. What remains insufficiently explored is the Pakistani Urdu novel as an integrated form of literary soft power and, more specifically, as a source of narrative soft power whose effects depend upon the interaction of text, translation, circulation, and reception. The present study addresses this gap by asking how religious, historical, social, environmental, and civilizational capital embedded in Pakistani fiction may move through identifiable stages toward international cultural attraction, understanding, and recognition.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is Joseph S. Nye's Soft Power Theory, according to which states and societies can influence others not only through military or economic coercion but also through culture, values, attraction, legitimacy, and non-coercive persuasion. The present study extends this theoretical premise to the literary domain through two analytical concepts: literary soft power and narrative soft power. Literary soft power refers to the cultural and intellectual

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capacity of literary texts to communicate a society's historical, religious, ethical, civilizational, and human experiences in a manner that may shape readers' perceptions, sympathies, curiosity, and cultural understanding without coercion. Narrative soft power refers more specifically to the internal literary mechanisms through which this influence becomes possible: characterization, plot, symbolism, dialogue, memory, setting, narrative voice, emotional identification, and ethical imagination. The framework therefore treats literature as a potential resource rather than an automatic outcome of soft power. Pakistani Urdu fiction becomes operationally significant only when civilizational capital is transformed into aesthetically compelling narrative, encountered by readers through translation and circulation, and received in ways that generate recognition, curiosity, respect, empathy, or perceptual change. This framework underpins the five-stage Pakistani Literary Soft Power Model proposed later in the study.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design and uses selected Pakistani Urdu novels as its primary textual corpus. Ten novels were purposively selected because they represent distinct civilizational, historical, ethical, social, intellectual, environmental, and urban dimensions of Pakistani and South Asian experience: Aag Ka Darya, Udas Naslain, Khuda Ki Basti, Basti, Raja Gidh, Zameen, Bahao, Ghulam Bagh, Kai Chand Thay Sar-e-Aasman, and Aagay Samandar Hai. The analysis combines close textual reading, thematic analysis, comparative narrative analysis, and interpretive textual analysis. The corpus is examined through thematic categories including cultural representation, Islamic and ethical values, historical memory, migration, national identity, social realism, class relations, narrative empathy, environmental consciousness, symbolic expression, and potential international reception. Because the data are non-quantitative, interpretation is based on recurring patterns of meaning, narrative structures, ideological tensions, cultural symbols, and comparative thematic emphasis rather than statistical measurement. Secondary scholarship is used to contextualize the theoretical discussion, assess existing work on translation and cultural diplomacy, and support the interpretive findings. In the comparative stage, the study identifies the dominant soft-power orientation of each novel and evaluates the conditions under which literary value may move from latent cultural capital toward internationally circulating cultural influence.

5. Findings

The findings indicate that Pakistani Urdu novels constitute more than literary representations of social, historical, or cultural experience; they contain significant potential for both literary soft power and narrative soft power. The ten selected novels demonstrate that civilizational memory, Islamic and ethical values, national identity, historical consciousness, social realism, human empathy, spiritual reflection, intellectual complexity, and ecological awareness can function as non-coercive sources of cultural influence. The corpus also confirms that novels do not produce a single, uniform type of soft power. Some texts derive their strength from historical and civilizational memory, others from social critique and human dignity, others from moral and spiritual inquiry, and still others from environmental or urban experience. The analysis further establishes that literary value does not automatically become international soft power. Translation, publication, academic circulation, literary festivals, institutional support, rights management, and literary diplomacy are necessary for local literary capital to acquire sustained global visibility. Much of Pakistan's Urdu fiction therefore exists as latent literary soft power: it possesses internal cultural and narrative capacity but remains only partially activated

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internationally. A coordinated translation and circulation strategy could convert this latent resource into a more credible, plural, and intellectually substantive international image of Pakistan.

6. Discussion

6.1 Literary and Narrative Soft Power in Pakistani Urdu Fiction

A comparative reading of Pakistani Urdu fiction demonstrates that the novel is not merely a mirror of national and civilizational life; it is also a medium through which collective meanings, historical experiences, and cultural values may be transmitted in ways that affect readers' understanding without compulsion. The ten novels examined in this study—Aag Ka Darya, Udas Naslain, Khuda Ki Basti, Basti, Raja Gidh, Zameen, Bahao, Ghulam Bagh, Kai Chand Thay Sar-e-Aasman, and Aagay Samandar Hai—differ substantially in theme and technique, yet they share a common capacity to humanize the historical, social, religious, and cultural experiences associated with Pakistan and the wider South Asian world. In Aag Ka Darya, history is treated as a long civilizational continuum in which Partition appears not simply as a political event but as a rupture within an older historical flow (Hyder, 2012, p. 421). The later sections of the novel deepen this rupture by linking migration and new national identities with psychological dislocation and the persistence of cultural memory (Hyder, 2012, pp. 462–479). Such literary transformation gives national history a human and civilizational form, thereby creating one of the principal conditions for literary soft power: the ability to make historical meaning experientially accessible to readers beyond the society in which the text originated.

A similar process is visible in Udas Naslain, though its historical imagination operates through colonialism, war, land, political awakening, and Partition. Abdullah Hussain does not present national formation as a sequence of public events alone; he embeds it in the psychological and social transformation of individuals and generations. As Partition approaches, uncertainty and loss reveal the human cost that accompanies state formation (Hussain, 2012, p. 405). Zameen introduces a related but post-Partition perspective. Khadija Mastoor's treatment of the newly created state brings migration, class hierarchy, social instability, and the erosion of expectations into tension with the political promise of freedom (Mastoor, 1995, pp. 31–33). These novels are important to literary soft power because they resist the temptation to reduce national identity to triumphalist self-description. Instead, they make visible the costs, contradictions, and unresolved experiences of historical transition. For international readers, such narrative honesty may produce credibility rather than weakness. A literary culture capable of representing its own historical wounds, social conflicts, and political disappointments can communicate intellectual seriousness and ethical self-awareness, both of which are important components of cultural respect.

Narrative soft power becomes especially visible when collective history is translated into memory, fear, longing, and moral experience. In Basti, the remembered world of Rupnagar is not simply a geographical place but a civilizational structure embedded in Zakir's consciousness. The early representation of Rupnagar as a world in which religious, natural, and mythic forms coexist provides the imaginative foundation for the later sense of loss (Intizar Hussain, 2013, p. 22). The recurring movement between past and present gradually turns nostalgia into a question of identity itself (Intizar Hussain, 2013, pp. 83–84). This is significant because narrative does not ask the reader to accept a political interpretation of Partition. Instead, it allows the reader to encounter displacement through memory, broken continuity, and emotional estrangement. In this sense, literature performs a distinctive form of cultural mediation: history becomes lived experience. The reader is not instructed what to

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think about Partition, migration, or national identity; rather, narrative form creates the conditions for empathetic and reflective engagement. This indirectness distinguishes narrative soft power from propaganda and helps explain why the novel can influence perception even when it does not explicitly promote a national image.

The critical dimension of Pakistani fiction is equally significant. Khuda Ki Basti does not present Pakistan through idealized national imagery; it foregrounds poverty, class exploitation, urban deprivation, and the vulnerability of marginalized people. The early sections of the novel establish social and economic conditions in which the lives of the poor are repeatedly shaped by exploitative structures (Siddiqui, 2013, pp. 32–33), while later developments intensify the relationship between deprivation, moral breakdown, and structural injustice (Siddiqui, 2013, p. 93). From a soft-power perspective, such criticism should not be understood as the negation of national influence. On the contrary, literary self-criticism may become a source of credibility when it demonstrates the intellectual maturity of a society that is willing to confront its inequalities and failures. A cultural system that can represent its own contradictions through serious literature may be regarded as more trustworthy than one that exports only celebratory narratives. Thus, the soft-power potential of literature lies not in producing a uniformly positive image, but in making a society legible as complex, self-aware, morally contested, and human.

Raja Gidh introduces a further dimension by transforming Islamic ethics into philosophical and psychological inquiry. Bano Qudsia connects halal and haram, livelihood, desire, love, madness, and moral disorientation within an existential narrative rather than presenting them as doctrinal abstractions. The novel's sustained reflection on the possible relationship between unlawful sustenance and moral or psychological disorder forms part of its central philosophical structure (Qudsia, 1998, pp. 210–212), while later passages extend this concern to broader forms of imbalance in human behavior (Qudsia, 1998, p. 344). This is important for the idea of Islamic soft power. The novel does not demand immediate ideological agreement from the reader; instead, it makes Islamic moral categories intellectually discussable through human experience. In this form, Islamic ethics becomes narrative rather than proclamation. The soft-power potential therefore lies not in the intensity of religious assertion but in the ability of literary form to convert values into questions, dilemmas, and consequences that a reader can contemplate voluntarily. Pakistani literary soft power, in this sense, is strongest when religious, historical, social, and philosophical dimensions coexist within a plural literary field rather than being reduced to a single national message.

6.2 Comparative Analysis of Ten Selected Novels and Their Soft-Power Orientations

The comparative analysis confirms that Pakistani literary soft power is not uniform. Aag Ka Darya is primarily concerned with civilizational continuity, historical memory, and identity; Udas Naslain converts colonialism, war, political awakening, and Partition into human experience; Khuda Ki Basti foregrounds social inequality and human dignity; Basti locates migration and rupture within memory; Raja Gidh links moral philosophy, spirituality, and desire; Zameen examines the social contradictions of a new state; Bahao connects civilization to water, ecology, and survival; Ghulam Bagh stages crises of identity, knowledge, and modernity; Kai Chand Thay Sar-e-Aasman reconstructs linguistic, aesthetic, and historical culture; and Aagay Samandar Hai explores the city, migration, violence, and unstable identity. Their thematic differences demonstrate that the international literary image of Pakistan should not be built around a single ideological or cultural register. Its strength lies precisely in plurality. As Table 1 shows, each novel generates a different dominant soft-power

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orientation and a distinct form of global relevance.

Table 1. Comparative Forms of Literary Soft Power in Ten Selected Urdu Novels

Novel	Primary intellectual/civilizational dimension	Dominant literary soft power	Global significance
Aag Ka Darya	Civilizational continuity, history, identity	Historical and civilizational	Shared South Asian civilizational memory
Udas Naslain	Colonialism, war, freedom, Partition	Historical and humanistic	Colonial experience and national formation
Khuda Ki Basti	Poverty, class exploitation	Social and humanistic	Human dignity and social justice
Basti	Migration, memory, civilizational rupture	Memory-based and civilizational	Migration and identity
Raja Gidh	Islamic ethics, spirituality, desire	Ethical and spiritual	Islamic moral imagination
Zameen	Migration, class difference, new state	Social and national	State formation and migrant experience
Bahao	Water, environment, civilization, survival	Ecological and civilizational	Environmental crisis
Ghulam Bagh	Identity, knowledge, modernity	Intellectual and existential	Crisis of modern subjectivity
Kai Chand Thay Sar-e-Aasman	Language, aesthetics, historical civilization	Aesthetic and civilizational	Aesthetic richness of Urdu civilization
Aagay Samandar Hai	City, migration, violence, identity	Urban and humanistic	Modern city and migration

The table also shows why literary soft power cannot be reduced to celebratory national representation. Zameen, Khuda Ki Basti, and Aagay Samandar Hai all depict difficult realities that would rarely appear in official national publicity. Yet their critical force can strengthen cultural credibility. A society that possesses literature capable of exposing inequality, political disappointment, or urban violence demonstrates that intellectual self-criticism exists within its cultural life. From this perspective, literary soft power includes critical credibility: the capacity of a national literature to present social complexity without sacrificing artistic independence. If cultural diplomacy selects only texts that conform to an idealized or affirmative image, it risks turning literature into publicity. The stronger strategy is to present literature that combines aesthetic quality with intellectual seriousness, including works that challenge the society from which they emerge. Such texts create a more mature and credible cultural presence because they allow external readers to encounter Pakistan not as a monolithic image but as a contested, plural, and self-reflective society.

A second comparative dimension concerns historical depth. Aag Ka Darya, Udas Naslain, Basti, and Kai Chand Thay Sar-e-Aasman demonstrate that the cultural foundations of Pakistan and Urdu literary culture cannot be confined to the post-1947 state. The long civilizational history of South Asia, Muslim political formations, colonial experience, linguistic interaction, literary traditions, courtly

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culture, and Partition all contribute to a deeper historical identity. For global audiences, this matters because Pakistan is often represented primarily through contemporary political or security frameworks. Urdu fiction can expand that frame by demonstrating a far older and more complex historical consciousness. In Aag Ka Darya, this appears through the persistence of cultural memory across changing political formations (Hyder, 2012, pp. 462–479). In Kai Chand Thay Sar-e-Aasman, language, etiquette, aesthetics, poetic culture, and social ritual reconstruct a sophisticated civilizational world whose meaning survives political decline (Farooqi, 2011, pp. 225, 443, 623). Such works extend the temporal depth of Pakistan's cultural image and therefore constitute significant resources of historical and aesthetic soft power.

A third dimension is the connection between local specificity and global human relevance. Bahao addresses water, ecology, civilization, and survival in a way that connects an ancient cultural environment with contemporary global anxieties. The gradual disappearance of water becomes more than an environmental event; it signifies the destabilization of an entire civilizational order (Tarar, 1992, p. 151). As scarcity intensifies, social organization, livelihood, and mobility are transformed (Tarar, 1992, p. 157), and the later relationship between the decline of the river and the fragmentation of civilization becomes increasingly explicit (Tarar, 1992, pp. 230–240). Ghulam Bagh similarly gives Pakistani fiction a different kind of global relevance through questions of identity, knowledge, reality, and modernity (Baig, 2012, pp. 377, 405, 428). These novels suggest that Pakistani literary soft power becomes most persuasive when local experience is not diluted for foreign readers but connected to wider human concerns. The global significance of a Pakistani novel therefore lies not in its ability to imitate international themes but in its capacity to make locally grounded experience intelligible within universal debates.

The same principle applies to urban and migratory experience. Aagay Samandar Hai presents Karachi as a city shaped by multiple historical, linguistic, and migratory identities that remain bound together yet deeply unsettled (Intizar Hussain, 2007, p. 1). Violence, insecurity, and the search for the past gradually turn the city into a site of civilizational and psychological dislocation (Intizar Hussain, 2007, p. 114). In later sections, the sea and the memory of Andalusia connect contemporary urban displacement with a wider historical imagination of loss (Intizar Hussain, 2007, p. 152). The novel thus moves from a local urban crisis to themes that have global relevance: migration, violence, belonging, memory, and the unstable cultural identity of modern cities. The broader implication is that literary diplomacy should not be organized around a single "representative" image of Pakistan. Different works open different doors: history, ethics, environment, class, migration, spirituality, aesthetics, or urban modernity. A diversified literary portfolio would therefore create a more credible and sustainable international cultural presence than any single national narrative.

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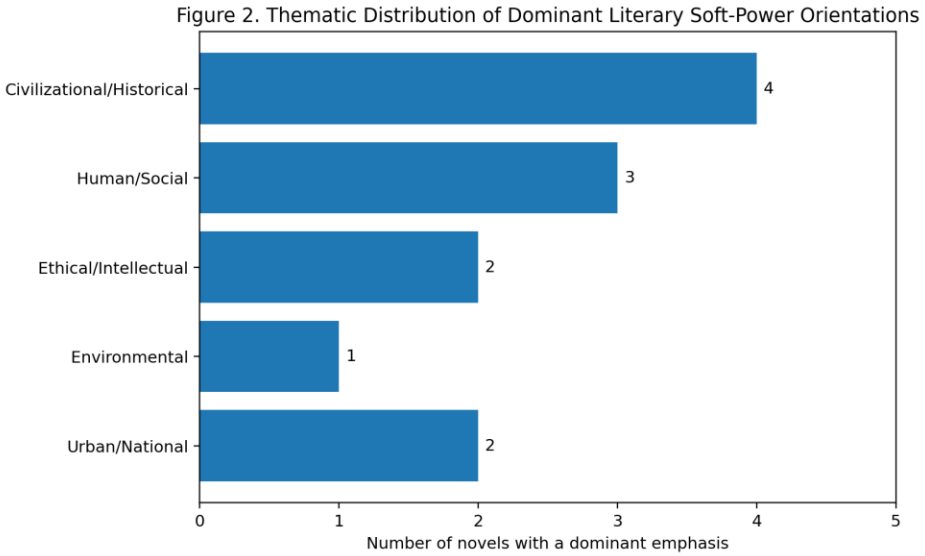


Figure 2. Thematic distribution of dominant literary soft-power orientations across the selected corpus.

6.3 From Latent Literary Soft Power to International Cultural Influence: The Proposed PLSP Model

The analysis of the ten novels leads to a central conclusion: the principal problem is not a shortage of civilizational, historical, ethical, or intellectual capital in Pakistani Urdu literature, but the weakness of the institutional architecture required to make that capital accessible and influential internationally. The study defines this condition as latent literary soft power. The term refers to literary capital that contains the potential for cultural attraction, intellectual influence, and intercultural dialogue but has not been fully converted into international effect because of limitations in translation, global publishing, academic teaching, rights management, critical reception, and coordinated literary diplomacy. Zameen, for example, preserves social and migratory experiences of the early Pakistani state that remain outside celebratory national histories (Mastoor, 1995, p. 182), while Khuda Ki Basti provides a powerful literary account of economic and social exploitation that can be connected to global debates on inequality and social justice (Siddiqui, 2013, pp. 297, 354–355). The literary material therefore exists; the challenge lies in converting it into sustained international circulation and recognition.

To explain this conversion process, the study proposes a Five-Stage Pakistani Literary Soft Power Model (PLSP Model). The model distinguishes clearly between cultural resources and actual soft-power outcomes. Its first stage is civilizational and intellectual capital; the second is literary and narrative formation; the third is emotional and perceptual influence; the fourth is translation, publication, and global circulation; and the fifth is the soft-power outcome itself. As illustrated in Figure 1, each stage depends on the previous one but introduces a distinct process. The model therefore rejects the assumption that the existence of excellent literature automatically constitutes soft power. Instead, literature becomes internationally influential only when meaningful cultural capital is transformed into aesthetically compelling narrative, encountered by readers in emotionally and intellectually engaging ways, circulated through credible institutions and translations, and received as a source of cultural recognition, curiosity, respect, or perceptual change.

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The first stage, civilizational and intellectual capital, includes the historical, religious, linguistic, social, regional, and environmental experiences from which literary meaning is created. The selected corpus demonstrates the breadth of such resources. Aag Ka Darya contains centuries of civilizational continuity; Udas Naslain presents colonial and national experience; Basti preserves civilizational memory; Raja Gidh engages Islamic ethical thought; Zameen represents the social crises of a new state; Khuda Ki Basti addresses class injustice; Bahao links ancient civilization with ecological vulnerability; Ghulam Bagh engages epistemological uncertainty; Kai Chand Thay Sar-e-Aasman reconstructs language and aesthetics; and Aagay Samandar Hai explores urban migration. Basti provides a particularly clear example of how cultural memory is internalized through Zakir's continual movement between past and present (Intizar Hussain, 2013, pp. 126–127, 192). Civilizational capital, however, is not a static archive. It becomes culturally significant only when writers transform it through literary imagination into characters, plots, symbols, scenes, narrative structures, and ethical conflicts.

The second and third stages of the model concern literary formation and narrative influence. Historical, religious, or social material does not become soft power simply by appearing in a novel. It becomes influential when literary form enables readers to engage with it intellectually or emotionally. Raja Gidh, for example, derives its significance not simply from the presence of Islamic categories of halal and haram but from their relationship to desire, love, madness, livelihood, and psychological breakdown (Qudsia, 1998, p. 409). In Bahao, water is transformed from a natural resource into a civilizational metaphor of survival (Tarar, 1992, p. 269). In Aag Ka Darya, history becomes a process of recurring identity formation across different eras rather than a fixed chronology of events (Hyder, 2012, p. 479). These transformations generate narrative influence because readers encounter moral, historical, or ecological meaning through lived situations rather than through direct political statements. Soft power at this stage is therefore interpretive and relational. It may produce empathy, reflection, curiosity, disagreement, recognition, or renewed understanding, but it remains fundamentally non-coercive.

The fourth stage—translation, publication, and global circulation—is the most fragile point in the Pakistani context. A novel may possess exceptional literary value in Urdu and still generate little international influence if it is not available in high-quality translation, published by credible presses, distributed effectively, reviewed internationally, taught in universities, and discussed within literary festivals or comparative-literature networks. Translation alone is not enough. Publisher reputation, distribution, metadata, rights management, academic adoption, digital availability, literary criticism, and the international visibility of authors all contribute to reception. Some Pakistani Urdu novels have achieved wider transnational recognition, while others remain largely confined to domestic or regional readerships despite substantial literary importance. This disparity demonstrates that literary value and international influence are not identical. The institutional role of literary diplomacy should therefore be enabling rather than controlling: identifying strong works, supporting translation, facilitating rights, building partnerships, and creating access without converting literature into a vehicle of official propaganda.

The final stage is the literary soft-power outcome. The present study does not define this outcome simply as a "positive image" of Pakistan, since such a definition would be too narrow for serious literature. More plausible outcomes include cultural curiosity, intellectual respect, empathy, historical understanding, stereotype disruption, recognition of complexity, and sustained intercultural dialogue. Khuda Ki Basti may not produce an idealized image of Pakistan, but it can

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demonstrate the existence of powerful literary consciousness against exploitation. Ghulam Bagh can position Pakistani fiction within philosophical and postmodern debates. Kai Chand Thay Sar-e-Aasman can communicate the aesthetic sophistication of Urdu civilization. Bahao can connect Pakistani literary imagination to global ecological thinking. Basti and Aagay Samandar Hai can make migration, memory, and displacement emotionally intelligible. The model therefore confirms the central proposition of this study: Pakistani Urdu fiction can become active international soft power when civilizational capital, literary formation, narrative influence, translation, global circulation, and intercultural reception operate as an integrated system.

Figure 1. Five-Stage Pakistani Literary Soft Power Model (PLSP Model)

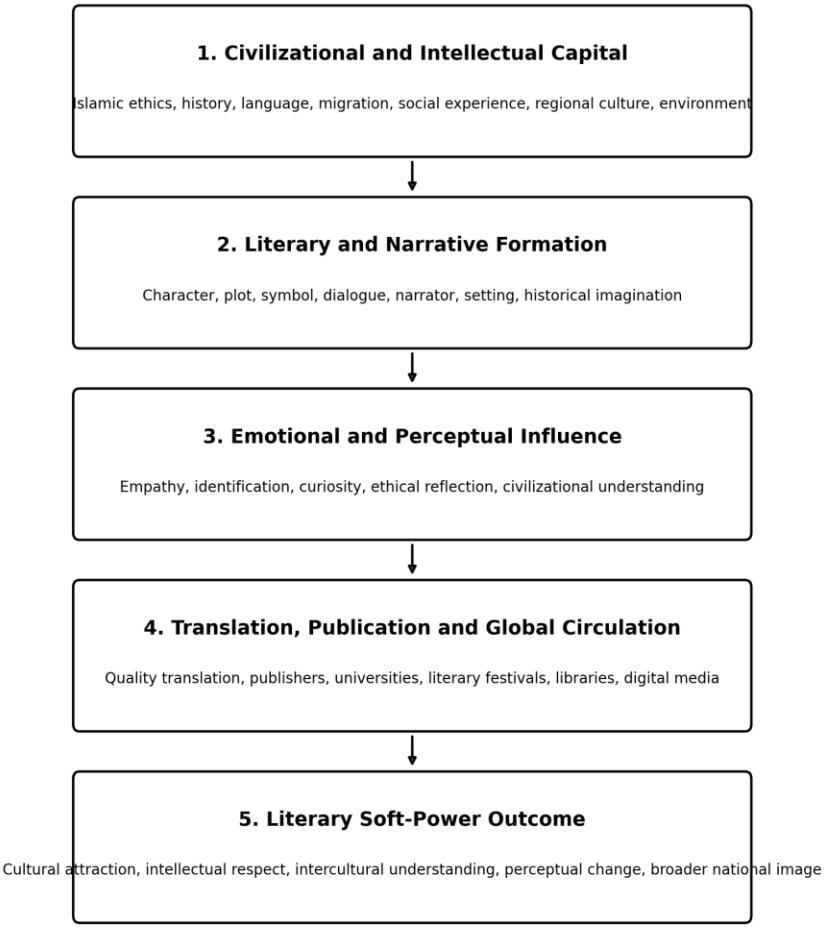


Figure 1. Five-Stage Pakistani Literary Soft Power Model (PLSP Model).

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7. Recommendations

In light of the findings, Pakistani Urdu novels should be treated not merely as items of national literary heritage but as potential resources within a coordinated strategy of literary soft power and literary diplomacy. A permanent national translation program should support high-quality multilingual translations of significant Urdu and regional-language works, while institutional mechanisms should be developed for international publishing, literary-rights management, and sustained global distribution. Greater coordination is required among the Pakistan Academy of Letters, National Book Foundation, universities, cultural centers, diplomatic missions, private publishers, translators, and international academic partners. Pakistani novels should be promoted within foreign university curricula, literary festivals, translation programs, writer residencies, scholarly conferences, and digital platforms. Text selection should not be based on official publicity value alone; literary quality, civilizational diversity, intellectual depth, human significance, and global thematic relevance should remain primary criteria. Balanced representation of Islamic, historical, social, ecological, aesthetic, and humanistic dimensions can contribute to a more credible and multidimensional image of Pakistan. A national translation fund, an international literary-rights desk, a multilingual digital repository of Pakistani literature, and structured partnerships with foreign universities are particularly recommended. The broader objective should be to convert latent literary soft power into sustainable cultural influence through translation, publishing, academic circulation, and independent literary diplomacy.

8. Conclusion

This study concludes that Pakistani Urdu novels possess significant potential as resources of literary soft power because of their civilizational depth, historical consciousness, ethical inquiry, social realism, environmental sensitivity, intellectual diversity, and narrative complexity. The comparative analysis of ten novels demonstrates that Pakistani and South Asian experience is not represented through a single national image but through plural, self-critical, historical, religious, ecological, aesthetic, and human perspectives. Their significance therefore extends beyond literary value alone: they can shape cultural understanding, historical perception, ethical reflection, and human empathy through non-coercive narrative experience. At the same time, the study confirms that literary excellence and international soft power are not synonymous. High-quality translation, global publishing, academic circulation, institutional coordination, literary-rights mechanisms, and credible literary diplomacy are necessary for literary capital to acquire sustained international visibility. Much of Pakistani Urdu fiction consequently remains in the condition described here as latent literary soft power. If this literary capital is connected to systematic translation, publishing, academic, and cultural strategies, it can contribute to a more credible, diverse, and durable international presence for Pakistan. The central policy and scholarly question is therefore no longer whether Pakistani literature can function as soft power, but how its existing literary depth can be converted into sustained international cultural influence without compromising the autonomy, complexity, and critical integrity of literature itself.

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