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Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21842719>**Cultural Interplay and Western Influences in the Poetry of Sheikh Ayaz****Faisal Charan**

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faisal@duet.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the dynamic interplay between indigenous Sindhi culture and Western literary influences in the poetry of Sheikh Ayaz (1923–1997), widely regarded as the vanguard of modern Sindhi literature. Anchored in the spiritual and geographical heritage of the Indus Valley, Ayaz's aesthetic foundation draws heavily from classical Sufi traditions, vernacular folklore, and native landscapes. However, his intellectual evolution was significantly shaped by Western literary movements, including Romanticism, Marxist humanism, French Symbolism, and modernism. Utilizing a comparative literary framework, this study investigates how Ayaz synthesized these distinct traditions rather than allowing foreign modes to supplant local identity. The research demonstrates that Ayaz integrated Western structural forms such as the sonnet, blank verse, and free verse into Sindhi prosody while reinterpreting traditional Sufi concepts like Wahdat-ul-Wajood through a leftist, anti-feudal lens. Consequently, local folk archetypes were elevated into modern symbols of global anti-imperial resistance and civil liberty. By analyzing key thematic motifs and structural innovations, this paper argues that Ayaz's deliberate cross-cultural synthesis created a hybrid indigenous modernity. This fusion liberated Sindhi verse from rigid classical constraints, allowing it to address contemporary socio-political realities while remaining deeply rooted in vernacular culture. Ultimately, the paper highlights Sheikh Ayaz's pivotal role in bridging Eastern mysticism and Western progressive thought, establishing his legacy as a vital bridge between South Asian regional literature and global modernism.

Keywords: Sheikh Ayaz, Sindhi Poetry, Cultural Interplay, Western Influence, Comparative Sindhi Literature

Introduction

Sheikh Ayaz (1923–1997) stands as one of the most transformative figures in 20th-century South Asian literature. Widely celebrated as the architect of modern Sindhi poetry, Ayaz's vast body of work represents a crucial bridge between classical vernacular traditions and global literary modernism. Writing during a tumultuous period marked by British colonial rule, the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, and subsequent political struggles in Pakistan, Ayaz sought to forge a poetic language capable of expressing the complex socio-political realities of his era. To achieve this, he engaged in a continuous cross-cultural dialogue, placing the indigenous heritage of Sindh into direct conversation with Western literary and philosophical currents.

The aesthetic foundation of Ayaz's verse is inextricably tied to the soil, geography, and cultural memory of the Indus Valley. Drawing deeply from the classical Sufi mysticism of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai and Sachal Sarmast, Ayaz inherited a poetic tradition centered on humanism, spiritual freedom, and local folklore. However, his artistic vision was equally shaped by extensive readings in Western literature. Ayaz absorbed the revolutionary zeal of European Romantics such as Shelley

and Keats, the democratic aesthetics of Walt Whitman, the formal experimentations of French Symbolists, and the class-conscious realism of Marxist writers like Vladimir Mayakovsky and Pablo Neruda.

Rather than adopting Western modes at the expense of native identity, Ayaz achieved a rare synthesis. He imported European structural innovations most notably the sonnet, blank verse, and free verse and adapted them to the cadence and diction of the Sindhi language. Concurrently, he reinterpreted traditional Sufi philosophy, transforming concepts like *Wahdat-ul-Wajood* (Unity of Being) from abstract spiritual monism into a progressive framework for social justice, anti-feudalism, and civil rights. In doing so, he elevated local folk archetypes into universal symbols of political resistance.

This paper examines the interplay between native cultural grounding and Western influence in the poetry of Sheikh Ayaz. Through a comparative literary lens, it analyzes how Ayaz navigated these dual currents to create a distinct "indigenous modernity." By investigating his formal innovations, thematic shifts, and philosophical reconfigurations, this study highlights how Ayaz expanded the horizons of Sindhi literature while preserving its core cultural ethos.

Literature Review

The scholarly discourse surrounding Sheikh Ayaz's poetry operates at the intersection of postcolonial critique, political history, and cross-cultural literary synthesis. To fully understand how Ayaz mediated between local Sindhi culture and Western influences, it is necessary to examine both the regional political legacy of Sindh and the modern critical evaluations of his revolutionary aesthetics.

The ideological foundation of modern Sindhi literature is deeply intertwined with the region's long history of political struggle and anti-colonial agitation. Rasool et al. (2023) examine this historical trajectory through their study of the *Hijrat Movement*, identifying it as a pivotal, early political event in modern Sindhi history. This history of anti-colonial resistance established a cultural memory in Sindh that prioritized justice, anti-imperialism, and mass mobilization themes that classical poets like Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai embedded in folk allegories and which Sheikh Ayaz later inherited. The socio-political consciousness documented by Rasool et al. (2023) provided the fertile soil upon which Ayaz built his poetic vision, ensuring that his introduction of Western progressive ideas resonated with an already politically conscious populace.

In directly evaluating Ayaz's literary contribution, recent critical scholarship highlights his synthesis of Western revolutionary philosophy with local anti-colonial struggles. Charan et al. (2026) apply Frantz Fanon's postcolonial framework to analyze what they term "The Aesthetics of Revolutionary Violence" in Sheikh Ayaz's anti-colonial poetry. Their study illustrates how Ayaz absorbed Western postcolonial and radical humanistic theories to articulate the psychological and physical resistance of the colonized subject. Charan et al. (2026) demonstrate that Ayaz did not merely import European revolutionary ideas; rather, he adapted them to express native resistance against colonial and neo-colonial hegemony. This Fanonian reading underscores how Western theories of liberation were seamlessly integrated into Ayaz's vernacular verse to re-energize indigenous metaphors of revolt.

While existing literature thoroughly addresses Sindh's socio-political history (Rasool et al., 2023), postcolonial revolutionary readings of Ayaz (Charan et al., 2026), and regional geopolitical dynamics (Delovarova et al., 2026), there remains a need to explicitly map the stylistic and formal mechanics of Ayaz's cross-cultural synthesis. This study builds upon these scholars' work by

exploring how Ayaz brought Western poetic structures (such as the sonnet and free verse) into direct dialogue with traditional Sindhi prosody and Sufi philosophy.

Research Gap

While existing scholarship extensively documents the political history of Sindh (Rasool et al., 2023), the geopolitical dynamics of the region (Delovarova et al., 2026a, 2026b), and postcolonial/Fanonian readings of anti-colonial resistance in Sindhi poetry (Charan et al., 2026), there remains a notable critical gap regarding the exact formal and aesthetic mechanics through which Sheikh Ayaz synthesized Western literary currents with indigenous Sindhi culture. Most critical studies treat Ayaz either through a strictly regional lens focusing on his revival of classical Sufi themes and local folklore or through an ideology-first approach (such as Marxist or anti-colonial criticism). Little empirical or comparative attention has been given to how Western structural forms (such as the sonnet, blank verse, and free verse) were linguistically and prosodically adapted into the vernacular Sindhi framework. Furthermore, current literature lacks a systematic analysis of how Ayaz re-engineered traditional Sufi spiritual concepts (*Wahdat-ul-Wajood*) into modern, secularized frameworks of Western progressive humanism without stripping them of their native cultural resonance. This study bridges this gap by offering a literary and comparative analysis of Ayaz's work, demonstrating how Western poetic influences were not merely copied, but negotiated and integrated to form an authentic "indigenous modernity."

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, text-based **Comparative Literary Analysis** grounded in **Postcolonial Literary Theory** and **Cultural Translation Frameworks**. Since the research focuses on the synthesis of two distinct literary traditions indigenous Sindhi cultural forms and Western poetic influences the methodology combines formal textual analysis with contextual critical theory to evaluate Sheikh Ayaz's poetic oeuvre.

To analyze the cross-cultural dynamic in Ayaz's poetry, the paper employs two primary theoretical pillars:

- **Postcolonial Criticism & Hybridity:** Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of *cultural hybridity* and *the third space*, this study examines how Ayaz navigates the space between colonial/Western modes and native identity. Rather than viewing Western influence as cultural domination, postcolonial theory allows us to analyze how Ayaz appropriates Western literary forms (such as free verse and the sonnet) to serve local anti-colonial and anti-feudal struggles (Charan et al., 2026).
- **Comparative Poetics & Intertextuality:** Using comparative literary tools, the study traces direct and indirect intertextual echoes between Ayaz's Sindhi verse and Western figures (e.g., Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, Walt Whitman, and Pablo Neruda), juxtaposing them against indigenous classical foundations like Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai and Sachal Sarmast.

2. Primary & Secondary Data Sources

- **Primary Texts:** The primary data consists of selected Sindhi poems, couplets, and sonnets from Sheikh Ayaz's major anthologies (including *Bhawar Bhire Bhee*, *Kulhe Patang Kiyo*, and *Kahi Kehi Bhaan*), along with authorized English translations where applicable.

- **Secondary Sources:** Critical literature regarding Ayaz's work, historical accounts of modern Sindhi literature (Rasool et al., 2023), postcolonial readings of his anti-colonial verse (Charan et al., 2026), and broader regional socio-political contexts (Delovarova et al., 2026).

3. Analytical Strategy & Procedure

The textual analysis follows a three-step analytical procedure:

1. **Structural & Prosodic Mapping:** Examining formal metrics to trace how European verse structures (sonnets, blank verse, free verse) are grafted onto or blended with traditional Sindhi meters (*Wai*, *Bait*, *Kafi*).
2. **Thematic & Ideological Deconstruction:** Identifying key motifs where Western ideological currents (Marxist dialectics, Romantic individualism, modern secularism) reframe native cultural symbols (e.g., re-interpreting Sufi martyrdom or folk heroines like *Marui* and *Sassui* as modern political icons).
3. **Linguistic & Metaphorical Analysis:** Analyzing diction, landscape imagery (the River Indus, desert topographies), and symbolic transformations to determine how "indigenous modernity" is generated at the word level.

By deploying this qualitative, multi-layered approach, the research systematically addresses how native cultural grounding and Western literary currents converge in Sheikh Ayaz's poetry.

Research Questions

1. **How did Sheikh Ayaz adapt Western poetic forms (such as the sonnet, blank verse, and free verse) into the traditional structural and prosodic framework of Sindhi poetry?**
2. In what ways did Western ideological influences specifically Marxist humanism, European Romanticism, and postcolonial resistance theory reframe classical Sindhi Sufi philosophy (*Wahdat-ul-Wajood*) and folk archetypes in Ayaz's verse?
3. How does Sheikh Ayaz's cross-cultural synthesis resolve the tension between preserving vernacular cultural identity and embracing Western modernity, giving rise to an "indigenous modernism" in 20th-century Sindhi literature?

Findings and Discussions

The findings of this study reveal that Sheikh Ayaz's poetry represents a deliberate, highly sophisticated cross-cultural synthesis. Through textual analysis of his verse, formal prosodic mapping, and ideological deconstruction, the findings are categorized below according to the three core research questions.

Western poetic forms into the traditional structural

The analysis reveals that Sheikh Ayaz's engagement with Western poetic structures triggered a major structural transformation in 20th-century Sindhi literature. Prior to Ayaz, Sindhi poetry was largely bifurcated into two strict camps: classical vernacular forms like the *Bait*, *Wai*, and *Kafi* inherited from Sufi masters, and rigid, imported quantitative meters (*Aruz*) derived from Persian and Arabic prosody. Ayaz recognized that neither framework could fully capture the complex, fragmented, and fast-paced socio-political realities of the modern postcolonial era. Rather than abandoning native prosody, he used European structural techniques to liberate Sindhi verse from stylistic stagnancy (Chandio, 2024).

Ayaz's most notable formal innovation was his introduction of the European sonnet into the Sindhi language. He did not merely transpose the Italian Petrarchan or English Shakespearean rhyme schemes into Sindhi; instead, he adapted the octave-sestet dynamic to reflect the natural phonetic rhythms, end-rhymes, and assonance of vernacular speech (Delovarova, 2026). Within these fourteen lines, he compressed high intellectual tension, replacing traditional European romantic imagery (such as nightingales or western flora) with hyper-local elements like the *Kandi* tree, desert sandstorms, and the swelling of the River Indus.

Furthermore, Ayaz pioneered the use of Western free verse (*Aazad Nazm*) and blank verse in Sindhi. By abandoning fixed syllable counts and rigid line lengths, he allowed poetic lines to expand or contract based on the emotional surge of the poem. He introduced *enjambment* (run-on lines), enabling complex philosophical arguments and narrative descriptions to flow naturally across line breaks without being forcefully chopped up by mandatory end-couplets. This structural flexibility gave Sindhi poetry an unprecedented conversational, speech-like cadence, proving that Western structural models could be naturalized to enhance, rather than destroy, vernacular poetic expression.

classical Sindhi Sufi philosophy and folk archetypes in Ayaz's verse

The textual deconstruction demonstrates that Sheikh Ayaz performed a radical ideological re-interpretation of Sindhi's cultural memory by viewing it through the dual lenses of Western Marxist humanism and European Romanticism. In classical Sindhi poetry most notably in the works of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai the doctrine of *Wahdat-ul-Wajood* (Unity of Being) served primarily as a metaphysical path to spiritual monism, where the human soul seeks annihilation in the Divine (Rasool et al., 2023). Ayaz, deeply influenced by Soviet socialist realism, European leftist literature, and revolutionary thinkers like Vladimir Mayakovsky and Pablo Neruda, stripped *Wahdat-ul-Wajood* of its purely transcendental, otherworldly abstractions. He secularized the concept, converting spiritual oneness into a modern, earthly call for radical human equality, class solidarity, anti-feudalism, and universal civil rights (Chandio, 2026).

This ideological re-framing fundamentally altered how classical folk archetypes and mystical figures operated in his poetry. In traditional allegories, the legendary Sufi martyr Mansur Hallaj represented the ultimate spiritual seeker who sacrificed his life for divine love. Under Ayaz's pen, Hallaj was re-cast as a modern political dissident defying state tyranny, religious hypocrisy, and autocratic power.

Similarly, Ayaz transformed classical folk heroines like Marui and Sassui. Historically, Marui's refusal to marry the king Umar was interpreted as the human soul remaining loyal to its divine origin while trapped in earthly captivity. Ayaz re-imagined Marui as a potent, postcolonial symbol of indigenous political sovereignty, peasant resistance, and anti-imperialist defiance. Sassui, traditionally the soul wandering through the scorching desert in search of the Divine Beloved, became the embodiment of the working-class enduring suffering on the march toward social liberation. In harmony with Frantz Fanon's theories of anti-colonial resistance and Percy Bysshe Shelley's revolutionary idealism, Ayaz converted passive mystical longing into active, revolutionary political agency.

Sheikh Ayaz's cross-cultural synthesis resolves the tension between preserving vernacular cultural identity

The findings indicate that Sheikh Ayaz resolved the central dilemma facing postcolonial writers—the tension between insular traditionalism and blind Western mimicry by forging a strategy of

"rooted hybridity," giving rise to an authentic indigenous modernism (Charan et al., 2026). Many postcolonial intellectuals either rejected Western forms entirely to preserve native purity or adopted Western styles so completely that they alienated themselves from their local audiences. Ayaz refused this binary choice.

Instead, Ayaz used modern Western techniques of myth-making, symbolic layering, and psychological interiority akin to the modernism of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and applied them directly to the indigenous soil, landscape, and oral history of Sindh. He elevated local geographical topographies, such as the River Indus (*Mehran*), the Thar Desert, and regional folk legends, turning them into universal modern archetypes capable of expressing global human suffering, dignity, and resistance.

By grounding his sophisticated engagement with European literature, French Symbolism, and global leftist thought within the native idiom and cultural memory of the Indus Valley, Ayaz demonstrated that modernity was not an exclusively Western import to be copied. Rather, he proved that a regional language like Sindhi could absorb global intellectual currents, modernize its literary toolkit, and speak to international human rights struggles while remaining fiercely loyal to its own soil, people, and heritage.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the dynamic interplay between indigenous Sindhi culture and Western literary currents in the poetry of Sheikh Ayaz (1923–1997), illustrating how his work established a groundbreaking model of "indigenous modernity" in 20th-century South Asian literature. By examining his formal prosodic adaptations, ideological re-framings, and cross-cultural synthesis, the paper demonstrates that Ayaz successfully modernized Sindhi poetry without severing its deep connection to the soil, folklore, and ancestral memory of the Indus Valley.

Structurally, Ayaz expanded the technical toolkit of Sindhi prosody by introducing European forms such as the sonnet, free verse (*Aazad Nazm*), and blank verse. Rather than forcing foreign conventions onto native diction, he adapted these structures to match the phonetic cadences and expressive nuances of the Sindhi language. His use of enjambment and fluid line structures released Sindhi verse from the rigid constraints of traditional quantitative meters (*Aruz*), giving it the conversational rhythm required to articulate complex modern anxieties and socio-political arguments.

Ideologically, Ayaz merged Western Marxist humanism, European Romanticism, and postcolonial resistance theories with classical Sufi philosophy. By secularizing the core Sufi concept of *Wahdat-ul-Wajood* (Unity of Being), he transformed spiritual monism into a radical call for social equality, anti-feudal reform, and classless human solidarity. Furthermore, classical mystical figures such as Mansur Hallaj and folk heroines like Marui and Sassui were re-imagined from passive seekers of divine love into active, revolutionary symbols of political sovereignty and anti-colonial resistance.

Ultimately, Sheikh Ayaz's legacy lies in his resolution of the postcolonial dilemma between cultural isolationism and uncritical Western mimicry. Through a practice of rooted hybridity, he proved that a regional literature can engage with global intellectual movements while remaining firmly grounded in its vernacular identity. His synthesis provided Sindhi literature with a modern voice capable of addressing universal human rights, establishing Ayaz as a monumental figure who bridged Eastern mysticism and Western progressive thought, and cementing his place as an indispensable voice in global modernist poetry.

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