

First Urdu Novel: Contesting Claims and Disclaimers

IN 1992 Qurratulain Hyder, the foremost living practitioner of the art of the novel in Urdu, translated into English Ḥaṣan Shāh's *Nashtar* (ca. 1790),¹ a fictional work originally written in Persian in India. Flushed with the excitement of a discovery, she called it the first novel in any Indian language. This gave a new twist to the story of the first novel in India, for which the claimants are numerous. Hyder's pronouncement led to some counterclaims and rebuttals in the months that followed the publication of her translation, mainly in Urdu literary circles.² What emerges from these fierce debates and discussions is the essentially provisional nature of such claims on behalf of fictional texts. The question of the first novel seems to be an eternally open one, unresolved and perhaps unresolvable. The flexible nature of the genre allows a number of works to be classified as such by writers and critics. In this paper I propose to examine the validity of such claims in relation to some Urdu works.

¹ *The Nautch Girl: A Novel*, trans. Qurratulain Hyder (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, Ltd., 1992); the title of the American edition is *Dancing Girl*. The Persian original by Ḥaṣan Shāh is known as *Qiṣṣa-e Raṅgīn* or *Afsāna-e Raṅgīn*. *Nashtar* is the title of its Urdu translation/adaptation by Sajjād Ḥusain Kasmandvi (ca. 1894).

²For a fuller account of this debate see Qurratu 'l-'Ain Ḥaidar, "Khānam Jān kā Safar: *Afsāna-e Raṅgīn* sē *Ḍānsīng Garl* tak" in *Jāmi'a* (Delhi), 91:8–9 (Aug–Sept, 1994), pp. 18–32; 'Azīmu 'sh-Shān Ṣiddīqī, "*Afsāna-e Raṅgīn* sē *Ḍānsīng Garl* tak: Afsāna yā Ḥaḳīqat" and Qurratu 'l-'Ain Ḥaidar, "Khānam Jān kī Tauba," in *Jāmi'a*, 92:1–3 (Jan–March, 1995), pp. 7–20 and 21–55, respectively; and Yūsuf Sarmast, "*Nashtar* : Pahlā Hindustānī Nāvīl?" in *Saughāt* (Bangalore), No. 5 (1993), pp. 455–463.

To do so, we must first arrive at a workable definition of the genre. The novel has made immeasurable progress in the West, from Rabelais and Cervantes to Flaubert, Dostoevsky and Joyce to Gunter Grass, Marquez, Kundera and Eco, making it the most protean genre in literature,³ and providing inspiration to theorists and historians of the novel as diverse as Ian Watt, Lukác, Bakhtin, David Lodge, Robbe-Grillet and others. However, for the limited purpose of this paper I will use the simplest and most conventional definition of the novel as a sustained prose narrative of a certain length which contains a realistic⁴ portrayal of individuals and events in society and presents a particular worldview. Furthermore, I will concentrate on a generic analysis of early works, keeping in mind certain normative principles about which there has always existed and, I hope, still exists some consensus, however limited that consensus may be.

The growth and development of the Urdu novel should be seen as a complex interface of Western impact on a literature which was already a fertile ground for absorbing and assimilating this impact. The rise of the novel in Europe was attributed, by Ian Watt and other historians and critics of the genre, to the decline of feudalism, the rise of the bourgeoisie, the growth and development of periodical literature which lead to the formation of a sizable reading public, the growth of individualism, and so on. In the case of Urdu, some of these factors obtain. The rise of the Urdu novel parallels the introduction and spread of the printing press, the emergence of periodical literature, and the spread of education which lead to the growth of a reading public and the urge for social reform. The concept of individualism, associated with the rise of the novel in English, does not seem valid in the Indian situation, at least not in the context of Urdu. Also, the “middle class” as the analogue of its Western counterpart,

³It will be instructive to remember what Carlos Fuentes said about the scope of the novel in modern times: “I think the novel is basically a genre without genre. It cannot fit into any genre, because at that moment it fixes, solidifies and ceases to be the protean genre of genres or dialogue of genres.” [The contributor didn’t provide the source for this quote. —*Editor*]

⁴Realism is now a contested concept. Though mimetic or documentary realism as a mode of artistic representation is discredited in modern times, valorizing magic realism of one kind or the other, the fact still remains that in nineteenth-century India novels in many languages were used as handmaidens for social reform, and to that extent at least, the novel tried to exploit the mode of representational realism.

or in the sense of a Marxist bourgeoisie, did not exist as a unified class in North India at the time.⁵

In Urdu, the emergence of the novel was preceded by a long-standing tradition of *qiṣṣa* or *dāstān* narration. If it is true that the novel is a peculiarly Western import mediated by the English-educated Indian intelligentsia, it is equally true that a readership nurtured on the earlier forms of storytelling took to it quite naturally, without any great sense of shock or novelty. Furthermore, as in the case of many other literatures of India, in Urdu the early phase of prose-fiction writing was marked by romances—historical or otherwise—and edifying or instructional tales.

Qissa and Dastan

In Persian “*qiṣṣa*” or “*dāstān*” simply means a tale or a story. However, in its specific literary usage, it denotes the lengthy cycles of medieval romances which consist of heroic and adventurous tales of great courage and valor that include the deployment of supernatural machinery, magic and enchantment (*ṭilism*) and adhere to the medieval code of chivalry. These tales were immensely popular and constituted a significant segment of Urdu oral tradition. They were written down largely because of the initiative taken by Munshi Naval Kishore, a famous Lucknow publisher. The most widely known of the *dāstāns* is *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*, a 46-volume work,⁶ each volume averaging 900 pages, which is regarded as the

⁵For a comprehensive and definitive account of this view see C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁶*Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza* is available in many Persian, Devanagari and Urdu versions. The reference here is to the most celebrated Urdu version narrated by three famous *dāstān-gōs* of Lucknow—Muḥammad Ḥusain Jāh, Aḥmad Ḥusain Qamar and Taṣadduq Ḥusain—who were hired by Munshi Naval Kishore. The volumes were published between 1881–1905. For a study of the *dāstān* tradition as it developed in South Asia see the following: Gyān Čand Jain, *Urdū kī Naṣrī Dāstānēn*, 2nd ed. (Karachi: Anjuman-e Taraqī-e Urdū, 1969); Shamsu ’r-Raḥmān Fārūqī, *Amīr Ḥamza: Zubānī Bayāniya, Bayān-Kuninda aur Sāmi’in* (New Delhi: Maktaba Jamia, 1998); *Romance Tradition in Urdu: Adventures from the Dāstān of Amīr Ḥamzah*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Frances W. Pritchett (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); and Musharraf Farooqi, “The Simurgh-Feather Guide to the Poetics of *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza Ṣāhibqirān*,” in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 15 (2000), pp. 119–67.

largest single romance cycle in world literature. The most popular book (*daftar*) in the cycle being *Tilism-e Hōshrubā* by Muḥammad Ḥusain Jāh. This *dāstān* celebrates the valor and heroism of Amīr Ḥamza, who bears the name and some of the traits of the Prophet Muḥammad's uncle. He is in love with Mehrnigār, the daughter of Naushērvān, the Persian king who brought him up as his protégé. Accompanied by two of his childhood friends, 'Amr 'Ayyār, a dazzling trickster, and Muqbil Vafādār, a great archer, Amīr Ḥamza vanquishes his enemies in many far-off countries. The *dāstān*-narrators, as expected in the oral tradition, constantly improvised and embellished their tales. A high-pitched tone and ornate, rhythmic, rhyming prose characterized their style. Despite its great popularity, at times *dāstān* literature can be tendentious and full of prejudice against non-Islamic communities, particularly the Christian community, undoubtedly a legacy of the age of the Crusades. There is little realism of any kind in it, the laws of probability are ignored. As a matter of fact, while novels aspire to represent "reality," *dāstāns* attempt to shut it out as hermetically as possible. *Dāstān* characters are flat, two-dimensional figures, lacking in development and complexity. However, at the time *dāstāns* seemed to satisfy people's psychological needs and natural desire for stories. As Ralph Russell points out:

It is noteworthy that the *dāstāns* flowered in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the Mughal empire was in headlong decline and where every principle of conduct in the medieval code was everywhere and every day being violated. Men who knew no other code, including those who were daily offending against it, could escape from the sordid reality around them into the world of the *dāstāns* where everything was splendidly simple and where the true Muslim warrior not only behaved unflinchingly as a true Muslim should, but by doing so achieved the most eminently satisfactory results.⁷

Whatever the psychological or political circumstances were which influenced the emergence and popularity of this genre in India, it played an important role in the development of Urdu prose. The *dāstān* narrators/writers were men of great linguistic skill and verbal accomplishment and *dāstāns* provided ample scope for exhibiting these abilities. Not only that, many of the narrative strategies employed by the practitioners of

⁷Ralph Russell, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 86.

dāstān-gō'ī can be seen to contain precursors of strategies used later in the novel. It is a pity that “uninformed criticism based on petty rationale has kept Urdu fiction from exploring the powerful content of the *dāstān* for its narrative strategies.”⁸

Fort William College, Delhi College and the Development of Urdu Prose

It may be appropriate at this point to recall that when Fort William College was established in Calcutta in 1800, it commissioned the writing and translation of a number of Indian texts. The objective was to provide materials to teach Indian languages to newly-arrived English agents of the East India Company. This objective required that the prose in which these texts were written and translated be simple, lucid and fluent. Though the Fort William Urdu was derided by Urdu writers in Delhi and Lucknow, who still considered Rajab ‘Alī Bēg Surūr’s⁹ highly-stylized prose the ideal, it had considerable impact on subsequent prose literature. One of the College’s publications in Hindustani,¹⁰ *Bāgh-o-Bahār* (1801,

⁸Farooqi, p. 167.

⁹He is famous for his *Fasāna-e ‘Ajā’ib* (printed between 1838 and 1842, though written much earlier), which imitates the highly ornate Persian prose style. According to his own admission, Surūr first tried to make his name by writing in Arabic and Persian, but realizing that he could not excel in them he subsequently turned to Urdu, rather like Ghālib.

¹⁰Although Hindustani was intended to encompass both Hindi and Urdu, a cleavage soon occurred between them. Hindustani, written in the Perso-Arabic script, was regarded by some as the language of Muslims and John Gilchrist, though appointed as a professor of Hindustani, soon felt the need to make provisions to teach the language in the Devanagari script. “Gilchrist thus foiled his own attempt to propagate Hindustani as the comprehensive language for both Hindus and Muslims.” [The contributor didn’t provide the source for this quote. —*Editor*] The available studies of the origins of both Urdu and Hindi are highly contentious and riddled with misconceptions and historically invalid and unverifiable conjectures. To me, the most lucid and convincing account so far is Vasudha Dalmia’s *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harischandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997). For a full idea of the debate see also: Amrit Rai, *A House Divided: The Origin and Development of Hindi/Hindavi* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991); Christopher King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in*

also known as *Qiṣṣa-e Āhār Darvēsh*) by Mīr Amman, achieved phenomenal popularity. Prose writing in Urdu was stimulated further by the establishment of the Vernacular Translation Society at Delhi College, established in the late 1820s. This Society published numerous translations of material pertaining to what were then referred to as the realms of *ilm* (sciences) and *adab* (literature). Thus, along with the revival of literature through translations of *The Thousand and One Nights*, *Laila and Majnun*, *Dharma Shastras* and so on, students of Delhi College discovered new areas of learning opening before them because of the literature of the sciences brought to them in a language which was easily accessible. Highlighting this aspect of the College's contribution, Gail Minault says:

In the development of textbooks and other forms of scholarly prose, Delhi College was at the center of a major effort of translation.... This linguistic mediation involved translating texts into Urdu out of Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit for the oriental section, and out of English and other western languages for the anglo-vernacular section.¹¹

Periodical Literature and Urdu Prose and Fiction

However, it was only in the latter half of the nineteenth century that periodical literature in Urdu began to have a significant impact, as Urdu prose began to develop its texture through writings published in magazines and newspapers. Those periodicals which were most influential included: *Avad^b Akhbār* (an Urdu weekly published by Munshi Naval Kishore, Lucknow, 1859); *Alīgar^b Inṣṭīṭūt Gazaṭ* and *Tehzībū 'l-Akhlāq* (the Urdu journals founded by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, 1866 and 1870 respectively); *Avad^b Panč* (the nationalist Urdu newspaper edited by Munshi Sajjād Ḥusain, 1877); and *Akhhār-e Ālam* (Meerut).¹² Samples of writings

Nineteenth Century North India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Shamsū 'r-Raḥmān Fārūqī, *Urdū kā Ibtidā'i Zamāna* (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēn, 1999).

¹¹"Delhi College and Urdu" in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 14 (1999), p. 126.

¹²These journals played a seminal role in social reform, enlightenment and the articulation of the new aspirations of the Muslim community. In his *Khuṭabāt-e Gārsiyān Dī Tāsī* (Aūrangābād: Anjuman Taraqqī-e Urdū Hind, 1935), Garcin de Tassy (1794–1878), the noted French Indologist, has this to say about the quality of materials published in *Avad^b Akhbār*, "They are of such high stan-

from them reflect the terrible mental and psychological trauma the North-Indian Muslims had to undergo after the failed Mutiny of 1857. The defeat—political and cultural—was complete. In the writings of thinkers and writers of the time, such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–98), Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād (1830–1910), and Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837–1914), one notices the great awe of a vanquished people and the often uncritical acceptance of the values and norms of the West, even in the realm of literature. Their literary/discursive writings, as well as the writings of their contemporaries, shaped the literary and intellectual climate of the time, imbibing Western influence freely, though occasionally offering a critique of it, however feeble and muted. Many of the writers appearing in these periodicals, while being firmly grounded in their own language(s) and intellectual tradition, could also access the fruits of Western scholarship through their painstakingly acquired knowledge of English. The intellectual-cultural-literary encounter between the East and the West, which first took place in the pages of these periodicals, made way for broader colonial transactions later on. Both in their advocacy of English education and their adoption of Western values, and sometimes their opposition to them, these periodicals became a vibrant and contested site for negotiating the terms of colonial modernity.¹³ Many future Urdu authors honed their art by writing for these journals and newspapers, which occupied the greater part of the discursive space at that time. According to Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Askarī, one of the most perceptive Urdu critics: “The great tradition of Urdu prose developed through the pioneering efforts of Mīr Amman, Ghālīb, Sarshār, Naẓīr Aḥmad, Sajjād Ḥusain and Sharar.”¹⁴ Moreover, translations of European, mainly English literature, published in the pages of these journals also provided Urdu authors with new models, paving the way for imitation, adaptation and reconstruction. Noting the contributions of periodical literature and its implications,

dard that they can be put side by side with those published in our journals” (p. 619). Likewise, Maulānā Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī felt that *‘Aligarḥ*^b *Gazaṭ* had inaugurated the change in popular thoughts and new awareness in northern India. Cf. His *Ḥayāt-e Jāvēd* (Lahore: Punjab Academy, 1957), p. 185.

¹³For a complementary view on this in the context of western India see Veena Naregal, “Colonial Bilingualism and Hierarchies of Language and Power: Making of a Vernacular Sphere in Western India,” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Delhi, 34:49 (Dec. 4–10, 1999).

¹⁴Āṣif Farrukhī, “Ḥairatī Hai Ye Ā’ina ...: Urdū Nāvil kī Dāstān,” in *Saugḥāt* (Bangalore), No. 5 (1993), p. 144.

Vasudha Dalmia points out:

The mutual actions and reactions of the colonial and the indigenous worlds found their most creative expression in the adoption of newer literary genres from the West, such as the short story and novel but also in editorials and essays which thematised the issues raised by the encounter. This adaptation and assimilation of Western genres to the Indian tradition and situation were part of a larger shift in social and historical consciousness. To view the phenomenon as a mere imitation of formal conventions would reduce its meaning, for the new forms signalled new areas of literary occupation. If there was a greater awareness of social differences, of social milieu in the details observed and newly organized in a range of narrative forms, there was at the same time an expansion and growth of more autonomous private space occupied by the individual.¹⁵

It has always been taken as an axiomatic truth that the novel as a genre is a peculiarly Western import. The claim has never been seriously contested. Two book-length studies of the growth and development of the Urdu novel—*Urdū Nāvil kī Tārīkh aur Tanqīd* by ‘Alī ‘Abbās Ḥusainī (1944) and *Urdū Nāvil kī Tanqīdī Tārīkh* by Aḥsan Fārūqī (1951) endorse this view.¹⁶ What needs to be stressed, however, is that before the Western novel made its impact in the nineteenth century, either in the original or through translation, India already had a rich tradition of storytelling. What was missing were some features of formal equivalence, a certain conception of character and a worldview. Whenever a new genre is introduced to supplant or supplement an old one, a consensus has to be negotiated between the writers and the reading public. The periodical literature in Urdu which published both fictional and non-fictional prose and translations of Western fictional texts, mediated the emergence of the novel in the Urdu language. However, this did not happen overnight, nor

¹⁵Dalmia, p. 224.

¹⁶For a critique of these two books, see Farrukhī, pp. 77–150. Farrukhī draws attention to fictional works such as Navāb Saiyad Muḥammad Āzād’s *Navābī Darbār*, Mirzā ‘Abbās Ḥusain Hōsh’s *Afsāna Nādir Jahān*, and so on, which are usually dismissed as “minor” by historians and critics of the Urdu novel. The essay goes beyond the traditional categories of plot and character as determiners of novelistic excellence and makes a fervent plea for examining the merit of the Urdu novel by also applying the Bakhtinian categories of dialogism, discourse and polyglossia.

in a strictly linear fashion. The writers were faced with the challenge of reconciling the Western form with Indian sensibility. A convention had to develop for which a gestation period was needed. All the features of the Western novel did not appear in a single work or at one time. In the beginning only some features of the Western style of fictional writing were discernible, and those too in a crude form. Gradually they acquired sophistication, realism became a virtue, and a notion of individualism developed along with a complex view of good and evil, leading to the consolidation of the genre. There is also a colonial angle to the development of this genre. The British encouraged and facilitated writings of “approved design and style” in the Indian languages and the most privileged genre in this regard was fiction. In an illuminating essay, “The Arrangement of an Alliance,” Susie Tharu alludes to several texts to demonstrate that a number of novels in Indian languages were written in response to “an ideological ambience in which a totally new sense of the responsibilities of the writer as well as the social function of literature and literary study featured prominently.”¹⁷

Ratan Nāth Sarshār (1846–1902) certainly marks one step forward in the development of the Urdu novel. His *Fasāna-e Āzād* is a four-volume work inspired by such books as *The Pickwick Papers* and *Don Quixote*. Though it has many of the characteristics of *dāstāns*, it marks an improvement upon some of them, particularly in its engagement with contemporary life and in its use of a language different from the highly ornate and embellished language of the *dāstān*. Sarshār had an intimate knowledge of the social and street life in Lucknow and instead of fixing his gaze on some distant or fictional past, he delighted in portraying the teeming life of the city in vivid details. Muhammad Sadiq is generally correct when he says:

Just as the isolated sketch led in time to the Sir Roger de Coverly papers, and then to the realistic English novel; in a similar way, the realistic accounts of fairs, festivals, and pastimes in Lucknow, e.g., *Muharram*, *chihlam*, *basant*, *divali*, a municipal election, cock-fighting, law courts, paved the way for the *Fasana*. Sarshār’s contemporary essayists had given isolated pictures of life as they knew it. Sarshār, in the *Fasana*, knits his observation and criti-

¹⁷Quoted in K. Satchidanandan, *Indian Literature: Positions and Propositions* (Delhi: Pencraft International, 2000), p. 16.

cism into a larger unit by presenting the life of Lucknow, through a central figure.¹⁸

However, this scheme operates only in the first section of the work, for the first three hundred pages or so out of a total of about three thousand pages. After that the scheme changes and this is usually surmised to be because of the influence of *Don Quixote*, which Sarshār had translated (or rather “transcreated”) into Urdu. The central character, Āzād, and his sidekick, Khūjī, offer a direct parallel to the Don and Sancho Panza. Sarshār, with a keen eye on his readership/audience, also exploited the excitement generated by contemporary events such as the Turko-Russian War (1877–78) and the Pan-Islamic impulse it gave rise to. Āzād has been portrayed as a contemporary man of the Victorian period embodying the values of Victorian England uncritically. However, in his physical attributes he resembles the hero of a *dāstān*. He is a champion of Islam who fights alongside his fellow Muslims, the Turks, in their battle against the Russians. He also participates in the Crimean War with the British, and even helps them in their conflict against the Muslims in Afghanistan. He does so because he is unambiguously on the side of modernity and for him the British symbolized progress and modernity. As in a *dāstān*, Sarshār’s narrative flows along as a succession of episodes, without much inner logic or coherence. There is also not much effort to introduce causality in the plot. However, the narrative is comparatively free of the medieval trappings of the *dāstān*—of which the most prominent is the use of supernatural elements and magic. The events described and the details of characterization have a greater resemblance to reality than one finds in *dāstāns*.

In Āzād’s unquestioning acceptance of British values one can see the psycho-pathology of a vanquished people. For many, the British conquest of India implied the inherent superiority of their culture, their sciences and their values, and therefore these ought to be emulated. Āzād, to a great extent, exemplifies the aspirations of young, educated Muslims of the late Victorian period in northern India. These aspirations were formed partly, if not wholly, by the “New Light” (*Na’ī Rōshnī*) movement spearheaded by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. Sections of *Fasāna-e Āzād* (1878–79) deal with the debates of that period regarding the merits, as

¹⁸Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 419.

well as the deleterious effects, of Western education, values and ways of life. In those sections, and in the sections portraying different facets of life in Lucknow at that historical moment, we find good specimens of realistic writing. Critics and writers call *Fasāna-e Āzād* a novel but with some reservations.¹⁹ However, despite their exploitation of some of the features of novel writing, *Fasāna-e Āzād* and other fictional works by Sarshār—which, to a large extent, are variations on the themes and modes of the *Fasāna*—cannot be called novels proper for the following reasons: First, the hold of a *dāstān*-like atmosphere is still very strong on the story. *Āzād* appears to be more a hero of romance than a flesh and blood character from real life. Second, there is no clear perception of a plot. The narrative has been constructed using a seemingly endless succession of episodes, it is often chaotic, and it lacks the coherence and causality of a plot. Third, good and evil are depicted in black and white terms. Good is unalloyed good and evil is unalloyed evil. Their conflict, as in the *dāstān* tradition, is devoid of any ambiguity. Fourth, except for the principal characters who have been individualized, the rest are flat, stylized figures. They do not seem to be real people living in a real society.

After this phase of romances—oral, written, historical—in the journey of Urdu fiction, we see the emergence of what may be called “Novels of Purpose.” In her book, *Realism and Reality*, Meenakshi Mukherjee draws attention to the similarity in the historiography of the novel—from traditional moral fables to novels of purpose to social novels—as it obtains in several languages of India.²⁰ This similarity is adequately corroborated by the accounts of the rise of the novel in various Indian languages found in Sisir Kumar Das’s *A History of Indian Literature*. At a certain phase in India’s national life the novel was certainly used as a

¹⁹I mention here two instances as illustrations of this view. In vol. 8 of his monumental *A History of Indian Literature*, Sisir Kumar Das, writes: “It [*Fasāna-e Āzād*] was not only the largest novel published in any language at that time” (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1991, p. 211); and C.M. Naim begins an article on the book as follows: “*Fasaana-e Āzād* (The Tale of Āzād) is a four volume picaresque novel....” (“*Fasaana-e Āzād*,” in K.M. George, ed., *Masterpieces of Indian Literature* [New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997], vol. 2, p. 1514). After characterizing the work as a novel both writers, however, go on to demonstrate how the legacy of the *dāstān* still hangs heavily on it and thus works against classifying it as a novel proper.

²⁰Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985).

means for social awareness and uplift. This is also the case with Urdu.

Nazir Ahmad, a senior contemporary of Sarshar brought Urdu fiction writing close to the social realm. He was a man of considerable learning and vigorous intellect. He was in deep sympathy with Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's movement for social reform through the educational upliftment of Muslims. What is more, he was also committed to the idea of female education. As an officer in the Education Department, he was well aware of the lack of entertaining reading material for women which would, at the same time, help them formulate a set of values for their ideal conduct. When his own daughters grew up he wrote instructional tales for their edification. According to Nazir Ahmad this was how *Mir'atu l-'Urūs* came to be written for private circulation. The second part was written about eighteen months after the first part when the author's daughter, having finished the first part, was pestering him for more. When his eldest daughter was married a copy of the manuscript was included in her dowry and it was read with eagerness in her in-law's house and was praised by the listeners. The manuscript was accidentally discovered by Nazir Ahmad's British superior, Matthew Kempson, who had it published in 1869. This account is given by Nazir Ahmad in his preface to *Mir'atu l-'Urūs* and in his lectures²¹ and it is the most prevalent view among the Urdu reading public and literati.

However, another account has been put forward by Iftikhar Ahmad Siddiqi in his well-documented book, *Maulvi Nazir Ahmad, 'Abd-o-Āṣār*. He feels that the autobiographical twist given to the genesis of *Mir'atu l-'Urūs* is just another indication of Nazir Ahmad's "penchant for the telling of tales."²² According to Siddiqi it was written in response to a Government Notification (791A of 20 August 1868 by R. Simson who was Secretary to the Government of North Western Province) instituting cash prizes of up to one thousand rupees for books judged suitable for use in classrooms. The Notification laid special emphasis on "books suitable for the women of India" saying they "will be specially acceptable."²³ Siddiqi

²¹Nazir Ahmad, *Lekḥarōn kā Majmū'a*, (Delhi, 1918), vol. 2, p. 438.

²²Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqi-e Adab, 1971.

²³Siddiqi writes "... Nazir Ahmad's early tales are related to the movement for educational and social reform. When the notification was issued for the first time in 1868 announcing prizes, this movement was strengthened and literary writings gained momentum. After this announcement Nazir Ahmad wrote *Mir'atu l-'Urūs* and submitted it for the award. However, by referring to the

contends that Naẓīr Aḥmad had his eye on this prize, which he won in 1870. Whichever account is the true one, the impact *Mir'ātu 'l-'Urūs* had on the society, particularly in the field of female education, was considerable. Among other things it is credited with spawning similar works in other Indian literatures, particularly Hindi.²⁴

Mir'ātu 'l-'Urūs is a cautionary tale based on the life history of two sisters—the never-do-well Akbarī and the ever-competent and high-minded Aṣgharī. The objective of the book is to instruct young girls regarding the conduct of a virtuous family life. It preaches the merits of what may be seen as a kind of Protestant ethic—socially useful, productive work, frugality, a strong moral sense and an overall attitude which celebrates work and responsibility in life and frowns upon indulgence in pleasure or flippancy of any kind. Naẓīr Aḥmad wrote a sequel, *Banātu 'n-Na'sh* (1872), apparently inspired by Thomas Day's *History of Sandford and Merton*, and won the prize a second time. A third book, *Taubatu 'n-Naṣūḥ* (1874),²⁵ which was based on Defoe's *Family Instructor*, also won the award. Of Naẓīr Aḥmad's seven fictional works, *Mir'ātu 'l-'Urūs* and

familial anecdote he wants to demonstrate his originality and independence of thought and to show that he was not influenced by contemporary trends. He takes the circumstances of writing *Mir'ātu 'l-'Urūs* several years back. This attempt to predate the writing of *Mir'ātu 'l-'Urūs* to the issue of the notification for prizes is intended to show his lack of reliance on the external circumstances of the time" (pp. 225–226).

²⁴It is generally believed that fiction related to female education, which is a distinctive sub-genre in India, owes much to the legacy of *Mir'ātu 'l-'Urūs*. See Annemarie Schimmel, *Classical Urdu Literature from the Beginning to Iqbal*, ed. Jan Gonda, VIII:3 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), pp. 232–3. There is also the evidence of Matthew Kempson, Director of Public Instruction, Government of North Western Provinces: "Maulvi Naẓīr Aḥmad's ... *Mir'ātu 'l-'Urūs*, or Bride's Mirror, created a sensation, and has reached a third large edition. Many imitations were attempted, and it has become fashionable commencement of an Urdu tale to say in as many words that a certain man had two daughters, one wise and the other foolish. The Hindi versions I have seen are failures..." (*North Western Provinces Educational Proceedings*, Oct. 1874, Index no.21).

²⁵A detailed study of the circumstances in which Naẓīr Aḥmad wrote his fictional works, particularly the prize-winning ones, is available in C.M. Naim, "Prize-winning Adab: A Study of Five Urdu Books Written in Response to the Allahabad Government Gazette Notification," Barbara Metcalfe, ed. *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 290–314.

Taubatu 'n-Naṣūḥ became the most popular. In *Taubatu 'n-Naṣūḥ*, which some consider his masterpiece, and in *Ibnu 'l-Vaqt* (1888), where the narrative shows greater complexity and questions the manners and morals of the time, particularly the great upheaval of 1857, one finds Naẓīr Aḥmad's interest in human beings being given precedence over the moral implications of their deeds.²⁶

It is significant that Naẓīr Aḥmad did not set out to become a novelist, nor did he ever claim to be one. There was never any doubt in his mind that he wrote to instruct and he chose the fictional form of the narrative because he thought that that would make the instruction enjoyable. The fact that posterity came to regard him as Urdu's first novelist is largely because he, almost intuitively, made use of some of the features of novel writing. Among them was his vigorous style of narration and his use of simple, lucid language as encouraged by Fort William College about seven decades earlier, but which had few takers at the time. He also made extensive use of dialogue and had each character speak a language appropriate to his socio-economic milieu and educational status, which added to the verisimilitude. "The authorial voice gets submerged in the dialogue and it subverts the didactic intention of the writer and firmly restores the novelistic discourse."²⁷ He makes a complete break with the language used in the *dāstān* and in historical romances, and with the worldview they projected. In contrast to the monologic and authoritarian mode of the former, Naẓīr Aḥmad's mode acquired a certain dialogism in the Bakhtinian sense of the word.²⁸ This seems to be the reason why his works became so popular despite being overtly didactic. His sense of realism raised his works from the status of mere allegory to that of interesting human documents. This point has been made most eloquently by Ralph Russell:

...the content of Naẓīr Aḥmad's writing owes nothing to the *dāstān* and its world of fantasy, and his prose style reflects that fact. For the most part he writes in the vigorous near-colloquial which the Fort William writers had

²⁶Naẓīr Aḥmad's reputation is truly pan-Indian. An interesting study of *Ibnu 'l-Vaqt* and its critical treatment of 1857 is available in Bangla in Gautam Bhadra's "1857'er Abhyutthan Ebong Deputy Naẓīr Aḥmad," *Baromash*, Puja Special Number, 1989, pp. 106–117.

²⁷Farrukhī, p. III.

²⁸M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

pioneered seventy years earlier; but it acquires in his hands an ease and flexibility which they in their day had not yet been able to impart to it.... His great contemporaries Hali and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan are simply not in the same class. Sarshār has an impressive command of racy Lucknow colloquial, but this language is too lightweight to sustain serious themes. And Sharar ... is fluent but pedestrian.²⁹

In Naẓīr Aḥmad we see the promise of a novelist in the proper sense of the term. But because of his peculiar bent of mind, he preferred to be a moralist rather than an author concerned with the literary and aesthetic demands of art. It is almost by default that he has come to be recognized as Urdu's first novelist. It was not the existential reality of his characters that interested him but rather their representational value as mouthpieces for his ideology. He drew the outer dimensions of his characters and did not focus on their psychological reality. The message took precedence over his medium, thus depriving his narrative of the desired complexity.

'Abdu 'l-Ḥalīm Sharar (1860–1926), Naẓīr Aḥmad's immediate successor in the field of fiction, was a great admirer of this Western genre. By the time he began writing in the pages of *Avadh Panč* in the eighties, English novels had become fairly popular in India, both in the original language and in translation. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Johnson's *Rasselas*, Maria Edgeworth's *Simple Susan*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* had already been translated into Urdu.³⁰ Sharar himself translated Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Bengali novel *Durgeshnandini* in 1885. His favorite novelist was Walter Scott whose *Talisman* offended him by the way it portrayed Muslims during the time of the Crusades. This prompted him to begin writing books that would rectify this image. However, instead of making an advance in the art of novel writing, Sharar, in his historical romances, reverted to the mode of the *dāstān*. An admirer of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and in deep sympathy with the Aligarh Movement, Sharar took upon himself the task of reminding Muslims of their illustrious past and he was often carried away by his enthusiasm. In 1887 he started his own journal, *Dilgudāz*, which he continued to publish, except for brief intervals, until his death. He made his mark in Urdu literature mainly as a writer of historical fiction. Almost all of his fictional works have an

²⁹Russell, p. 98.

³⁰For a chronological, though incomplete, study of English prose literature translated into Urdu, see Mirzā Ḥāmid Bēg, *Maḡhrib sē Naṣrī Tarājīm* (Islamabad: Muqtadira Qaumi Zubān, 1988).

underlying objective, namely recreating the past glories of Islam and demonstrating the superiority of Islamic civilization over other non-Muslim, especially Christian, civilizations. His most celebrated work, *Flōrā Flōrindā* (1899), which, interestingly, he self-consciously calls a “*nāvil*,” illustrates this.³¹ It portrays the abominable excesses of the Christians in Moorish Spain, emphasizing the deep corruption which existed in the monastic system prevalent there. The rule of the Moors is depicted as equitable and just, in contrast to Christian rule which was oppressive and corrupt. The contrast between “Muslim” justice and “Christian” depravity has been described in such simple terms that it appears laughable to a modern reader. It seems evident that Sharar became popular because he reminded Muslims of their magnificent history, a balm they sorely needed in their ruined state. However, it goes to the credit of Sharar that he widened the horizons of Urdu fiction by making a large part of the globe—Italy, France, Russia, Spain, Africa—accessible to Urdu readers by weaving together fiction and history. But his works also cannot be designated as novels proper for the same reasons alluded to earlier.

After this considerable gestation period for Urdu prose fiction, Mirzā Muḥammad Hādī Rusvā (1858–1931) appeared on the scene. His *Umrā’ō Jān Adā* (1899), allegedly modeled on *Rosa Lambert* by G.W.M. Reynolds (1814–1879), changed the complexion of Urdu fiction. To this work certainly goes the distinction of being the first novel in Urdu in the most comprehensive sense of the term. Rusvā successfully translated quite a few novels from English into Urdu, including at least three by Marie Corelli (1855–1924). He was a self-conscious artist and he set out deliberately to write narrative prose works which scrupulously shunned both the world of fantasy and enchantment popularized by the *dāstān* and the overt didacticism of some of his contemporaries. He was also the first theorist of the Urdu novel in that his comments about the art of the novel, as he practiced it, made his readers aware of the novel as a distinct genre, despite the fact that his statements did not constitute a coherent and comprehensive theory of the art of the novel in general. In the preface to his novel *Žāt-e Sharīf* he sets down his own standards, in opposition to the standards that preceded him. He wrote:

I do not possess the inventive power to delineate events that happened

³¹ *Flōrā Flōrindā* opens with the statement: “Our interesting *novel* begins about the year AH. 230 (about 845 CE),” emphasis added.

thousands of years ago. Besides, I consider it improper to portray a picture which agrees neither with present day conditions nor with those of the past....³²

And about the didacticism found in the works of some of his contemporaries, he said:

The art of some contemporary writers is—construct a plot to convey a message and then fill in the details accordingly. I have no quarrel with them; however, my method is the opposite of theirs. My objective is to portray reality as faithfully as I can and I do not concern myself with the conclusions that are to be drawn from them.³³

And finally, Rusvā ends *Ẓāt-e Sharīf* with the statement: “My novels should be regarded as a history of our times, and, I hope, it will be found a useful one.”

In the writing of *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* Rusvā follows the tenets articulated by him in these statements to a considerable degree. This novel is a realistic account of contemporary life conveyed through a well-constructed plot and through characters that are life-like and credible. Set in the mid-nineteenth century, it is written as a first person narrative of an accomplished courtesan of Lucknow. By that time Delhi had lost its former glory as the Mughal capital. Poets and men of art and culture had begun congregating in the opulent and prosperous Lucknow, making it the center of sophistication and refinement. Umrā'ō Jān's comment that many people made their living by flaunting their association, genuine or false, with Lucknow makes the reader aware of the extent of the city's reputation in this regard. Through the life of its protagonist, the novel portrays the decay of this culture and the demise of an entire epoch. By the end of the book, Lucknow has been ravaged and the center of power and excellence has gradually shifted to Hyderabad. In a long critical essay on this novel, which has remained unsurpassed in its eloquence and sociological exploration even after almost fifty years, Khurshīdu 'I-Islām suggests that the real hero in *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* is Lucknow with its culture of poetry, music, *mushairas*, evening soirées, *imāmbāras*, *marṣiyas*, Muḥarram, Holi, the fair at 'Aish Bāgh and so on, and that the novel is an

³²(Lucknow: Ashrafi Book Depot, n.d.), pp. 3–4.

³³*Ibid.*

elegy on the demise of that hero.³⁴ We may or may not agree with Islām on the question of the novel's real protagonist. However, Rusvā himself has resolved the issue by naming the novel after its central character. In any case, the theme of the novel is certainly the fall of Lucknow and its ethos at a certain period in Indian history.

Though it is Umrā'ō's life which is the pivot around which most of the incidents in the novel revolve, Rusvā has woven into its texture the entire socio-cultural life of Lucknow and, to a lesser extent, vignettes of life in smaller towns such as Kanpur and Faizabad. Rusvā is not interested in the courtesans in the *chowk* for their own sake but because of the way they bring to light the different facets of the socio-cultural life of Lucknow and the countryside around it. They do this through their association with individuals from different segments of society. Rusvā chose Khānam's establishment because, as Islām points out,

This shop contained all kinds of commodities and its customers came from far and near, and from all classes of society. The level of their cultural refinement was different from one another. Among them were the connoisseurs of fine arts as well as barbarians. It was the vantage point from where Rusvā could witness the vast decay.³⁵

The urbane Navāb Sulṭān Ṣāhib, the dashing Navāb Čḥabban, the loyalist Rāja, the small-town parvenu Rāshid 'Alī alias Rakkḥan Miān, the wily Navāb Muḥammad 'Alī Khān, the highway robber Faiḏ 'Alī, the sanctimonious lawyer's attorney Akbar 'Alī Khān, the Maulvī Ṣāhib who teaches Umrā'ō and has been in love with Ḥusainī for years, the old Navāb who is the butt of Bismillah Jān's ridicule—all converge on Khānam's house of ill repute. Through their reactions and responses and through their use of an idiom peculiarly their own they all offer different perspectives which help the reader look at the society from different angles. They have been individualized and each of them has been given distinctive traits that make them memorable. Furthermore, Rusvā's genial, sometimes wry, humor makes even the most ordinary characters endearing. For instance, the feckless, dimwitted imam of the mosque in Kanpur whom Umrā'ō Jān teases constantly even though she needs his help. Using fine brushstrokes Rusvā has immortalized this otherwise banal

³⁴"Umrā'ō Jān Adā," in Khurshidu 'l-Islām, *Tanqīdīn* (Aligarh: Educational Publishing House, 1977; 1957), pp. 80–194

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 100.

character.

Even the *ṭavāifs*, all taught by the same teachers and practicing the same skills, have been individualized so that they each have their own identity. Bēgā Jān excels in music, Khurshīd in dancing. Umrā'ō Jān excels in both, besides being an accomplished poet. Bismillah Jān's sole asset is her body. Khānam Jān suits her role perfectly; she is every inch the powerful mistress of a reputable brothel, unmatched in her seduction and cunning. Būā Ḥusainī serves as a perfect foil to her. Rusvā's novel presents a truly realistic account of the courtesans' life. His intimate acquaintance with this life helps him create characters and situations that are lively, interesting and entirely credible. Recent studies of the life and times of courtesans in Lucknow confirm that the mores, manners and professional ethics of courtesans, and the role they played in the society of that time as depicted in the novel, are generally correct and authentic.³⁶

The Mutiny of 1857 which occurs in the second half of the novel gives it a special poignancy. However, the enormous changes brought about by this cataclysmic event have not been described directly, only suggested through its effects on the fate of the characters and on social life. The presence of some historical personalities, such as Bahū Bēgam, Bēgam Malika Kishvar, Navāb Vājid 'Alī Shāh, Prince Mirzā Sikandar Hashmat, and Prince Mirzā Birjīs Qadr, enhances the verisimilitude, though it must be said to the credit of Rusvā that he does not strain for effect in this regard.

Apart from the historical accuracy and the debate about whether Umrā'ō Jān herself was a historical personality or not (the presence of a mosque between Bondi and Nanpara in Uttar Pradesh called "Umrā'ō Jān kī Masjid" is cited by some as giving credence to the view that Umrā'ō Jān had indeed existed in real life),³⁷ what is significant is Rusvā's portrayal of individuals and events as credible and convincing. Historical accuracy and

³⁶See Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow," in *Lucknow: Memoirs of a City*, ed. Violette Graff (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 136–154; about *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* Oldenburg says: "The influence this novel has exerted on the popular imagination is enormous; it is the single most important source of information on the courtesans of Lucknow, and by extension, the entire profession as it was practised in the nineteenth century, in northern India" (p. 141). See also Oldenburg's *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856–77* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

³⁷Qurratu 'l-'Ain Ḥaidar, "Khānam Jān kī Tauba," *Jāmi'a*, 92:1–3, p. 41.

mimetic realism are not virtues sufficient in themselves for determining the literary merit of a work. It is what the writer makes of them in terms of his overall vision that determines their value. Rusvā integrates history and fiction and weaves the destiny of his characters in a way that creates an enduring work of literature.

Umrā'ō Jān Adā also presents a more complex and sophisticated portrayal of human character and of good and evil. Whereas in the earlier works of Urdu prose fiction characters were depicted in black and white terms without any shades of grey, this novel offers much more. Through the vicissitudes of her life Umrā'ō acquires a deep knowledge of human nature and this brings her wisdom and peace:

Personally, I think that no one is wholly bad, and there is some good to be found in everyone. You have probably heard it said about the thieves of the past that if you make a friend of them, then you will always get along very well. Without some element of goodness, life would be impossible. (151)³⁸

Similarly, Umrā'ō Jān's perception of virtue and sin is also more subtle. Though she makes ritual obeisance to the tenets of religion and regrets that she is living in sin, these seem to be mere rhetorical flourishes. Her more complex understanding of moral issues comes out in several places through her defense of her own way of life. When the narrator asks her what punishment she anticipates for her sinful existence which has required hurting many hearts, she says: "There should not be any. In the way that I harmed hearts there was also much pleasure, and the pleasure makes up for the pain" (152).

Rusvā is a storyteller par excellence. His first person narration strikes a note of intimacy with the reader and contributes to the story's realism. The narrative moves forward mainly by means of a dialogue between Umrā'ō and Rusvā. However, the discerning reader must distinguish between Rusvā the man and Rusvā the narrator because he appears in different masks at different times. The plot is tightly constructed and coherent, except for the rather contrived opening of the novel and the narrator's long, gratuitous peroration concerning the virtue of wedlock,

³⁸There are many Urdu editions of the novel. I have used the Maktaba Jamia, New Delhi, edition. The quotations in English are from *Umrāo Jan Adā*, trans. David Matthews (Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 1996), with page numbers in parentheses.

which seems to be no more than a kind of pandering to conventional morality. The passage of time is deftly indicated through Umrā'ō's reminiscences and remembrances of past events in her own life or of some contemporary historical event.

In the above, I have endeavored to outline the circumstances that led to the growth and development of the Urdu novel and to describe the different stages of this development. The answer to the question of which work should be regarded as the first Urdu novel will depend on the features considered essential for a novel. As pointed out earlier, it was not simply a matter of formal features being borrowed from the West. Rather it was a certain concept of human character and a particular kind of worldview which facilitated the gradual sophistication of the genre in the late nineteenth and in the twentieth century in India. It would be a mistake to view the development of the Urdu novel as an isolated event, divorced from its socio-historical context. It must be looked at in terms of its relationship to other significant developments in society, brought on primarily because of the colonial encounter—viz., the urge for social reform, the translation of Western fiction, colonial bilingualism, the development of periodical literature, etc. I have tried to demonstrate that although we apply the term “novel” loosely to a number of works, it is only Rusvā's *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* that can be called a novel in every sense. It is a pity that Rusvā's *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* remained a singular achievement with no worthy successor until the emergence of Premchand, who moved on a different terrain. The promise of future perfection held out by this first novel has remained largely unfulfilled. There are ruptures and discontinuities in the tradition that need to be investigated. Nirmal Verma, one of the most self-conscious contemporary practitioners of the genre in Hindi, highlights the challenges that Indian novelists face in modern times in his essay, “Culture, Time and the Indian Novel,” which may also throw some light on the failure of Urdu novels to make a decisive impact on contemporary literature. He writes:

The modern Indian writer faces a greater risk. For while pursuing a genre like the novel, he will have to be self-conscious and logical like a western writer but he will also have to highlight the limits of this genre—an impersonal, ahistorical, “myth-laden abyss” of memories—and

immerse himself in this “abyss” in order to light it up.³⁹

It seems that Urdu novelists, with one or two exceptions, have not been able to immerse themselves in the “abyss,” and that is why the Urdu novels published in the twentieth century have been rather lackluster. In comparison with some other Indian literatures, viz., Bangla, Malayalam or Marathi, Urdu has not produced enough writers of promise who could have contributed to the development of a novel tradition. This fact seems puzzling when we consider the remarkable achievement of the Urdu short story during the same period. □

³⁹Nirmal Verma, *India and Europe: Selected Essays*, ed. Alok Bhalla (Shimla: Centre for the Study of Indian Civilization and Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000), p. 143.

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