

## Navigating the Urdu Short Story: Evolution and Trajectories

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### Abstract

The short story as a means of literary and creative expression has fascinated both writers and readers. Although it has traditionally existed as an oral genre, it acquired its written formalized version in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the novel became firmly established as a genre of literature and the periodical press gained currency. Urdu, like its counterpart Hindi, has occupied centre stage in the linguistic imagination of much of North, Central, and Western India. Though existing in related dialects such as Hindi and Hindustani, it developed as a formal language in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Post-independence, Urdu has become inextricable from a certain nationalistic identity. Yet, the Urdu short story (on both sides of the border) has gone on to evolve from the tradition of *daastaangoi* (story telling) to the contemporary written story that presents a vibrant kaleidoscope of human emotions, society, politics, and culture, while experimenting with structure, plot, and character. This paper attempts a brief history of the short story in Urdu, with special emphasis on the socio cultural and political factors that served as catalysts for its evolution and subsequent trajectories.

**Keywords:** Short story, Urdu, History of the Short Story, Short Story Writers

There has hardly ever been a time in Indian literature when short stories did not occupy a prominent place. Episodes and stories from the ancient epics and Puranas etc have been constantly narrated, along with others from popular works such as the Jataka tales, Panchtantra, Hitopadesh and Betal-Pachisi. The corpus was augmented when it came into contact with Perso-Arabic narratives such as the Arabian Nights, Alif Laila etc. Two factors can account for the appearance of the short story as a literary genre: firstly, that with the social and political upheavals of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, mythological and adventurous narratives could no longer serve as the voice of the times, and secondly, the novel came into its own as a literary genre. The distinctiveness of the genre can be gauged through the various nomenclatures for the short story: 'katha', 'akhyan', 'upakhyan', 'dastan', 'afsana' etc.<sup>1</sup> Sisir Kumar Das, in his *History of Indian Literature*, observes that the three stages of the growth of the short story as a modern genre are interrelated. The first two, those of anecdotes and of fables, were followed by the arrival of journals and periodicals and their concomitant emphasis on character sketches and

journalistic reportage. The short story, Das notes, is the most contemporary stage of the evolution of these narratives. It is characterized by ‘the presence of a conscious narrative, foregrounding a particular incident, situation or a moment of emotional intensity’.<sup>ii</sup>

One of the relatively younger languages of the subcontinent, Urdu has flourished since the late 16<sup>th</sup> century; beginning as the *lingua franca* of the Indian soldiers employed in the British army. It derives its roots from Persian, Arabic and local Indian dialects such as Hindvi, Khariboli, and Hindustani. It gained ascendancy when the rulers of Delhi, Lucknow, and the Deccan began to use it for official communication as well as literary pursuits, substituting it in place of Persian which had been the court language of the Muslim rulers in India. Along with being used as a court language, Urdu has historically enjoyed a long and illustrious tradition of verse, as can be seen in the continuing popularity of its great poets such as Mirza Ghalib, Rashid, Faiz, Miraji, to name but a few.

Like the Hindi short story, its counterpart in Urdu too gained ascendancy at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has been the forte of both Hindu and Muslim writers who presented vignettes of life in the subcontinent irrespective of religious divides. For long, the earliest short stories in Urdu groped for style. The journey from the ancient traditions of *dastangoi* (storytelling) and fable based techniques to the incorporation of western trends and movements from England, France and Russia has been arduous.

Earliest Urdu story writers like Rashidul Khairi and Khwaja Hasan Nizami followed the abridged *Daastan* or expanded fable style with weak attempts at characterization or plot construction that had no plan. It was however due to the pioneering attempts of Sajjad Haidar Yildirim, Sultan Haidar Josh and Premchand that the scene changed rapidly and the short story grew into the most popular form of fiction. Sajjad Yildirim’s *Nashe ki Pehli Tarang* (1900) is generally regarded as the first short story in Urdu, with Premchand’s *Duniya ka Sabse Anmol Ratan* (1907) following a close second. The earliest phase of the Urdu short story, lasting up to the 30’s was pre dominantly romantic. Yildirim, Ahmed Shuja, Majnoon, Josh and Hijaab Imtiaz were the prominent writers of this period. Although reformism coexisted in this phase, the veil of reform that the characters wore was thin. Stories by these writers were published in journals such as ‘Zamana’, ‘Awadh Akhbaar’ and ‘Makhzan’.

Premchand, decidedly the most outstanding short story writer that Urdu has produced, started writing around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was he who brought short stories closest to real life and is legitimately regarded as the progenitor of the new short story. His first collection of Urdu short stories ‘Soz-e-watan’ published under the pseudonym Nawab Rai fell a victim to official wrath before it could go into circulation. Thereafter, he switched to Hindi but did not give up Urdu. Most of his works have been translated or transliterated in both the languages. His stories disclose a progressive evolution of heart and thought. He moved from reformism to revolution, from Gandhian idealism to Marxian realism. His plots are woven with artistic accuracy, honesty and clarity and his round characters have a psychological genuineness and develop to maturity in a natural way. His collections in Urdu, other than ‘Soz-e-Watan’ include ‘Prem-Pachisi’, ‘Prem-Battisi’, ‘Vardaat’, ‘Khwab-o-Khayal’, ‘Aakhri Tohfa’ etc.

The tradition of writing on rural life caught on like wild fire, with writers like Sudarshan, Aazam Kurevi, Ali Abbas Hussaini and Upendranath Ashk all upholding the humanist tradition in their writings, juxtaposing the lives of the rich and the poor and using simple yet powerful dialogue. The building up of the freedom struggle in the 1930's combined with the growth of the periodical press and social consciousness relegated the purely reformist trend juxtaposed with the Western wave to the background. Short fiction assumed an actively patriotic role with pronounced sympathy for the freedom struggle and eventually for social development.

Progressivism found a strong ally in the short story. Actually, it was the short story that heralded the birth of Progressivism. While the Progressive Writers Association was born in 1936, 'Angaare', a collection of short stories exploded on the otherwise placid scene in 1932. It contained ten stories by Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Rashid Jahaan and Mahmood-uz-zafar. 'Angaare' was significant because it broke thematic constraints and ridiculed established notions about sex, social norms and customs. It awakened the average writer's intellect and observation to the surrounding chaos, social inertia and economic stagnation. While earlier writers despite their attempts at social reform had stayed within the formal, stylized etiquette of traditional Urdu writing, the new group approached these subjects fearlessly and put them in their proper ideological perspective. Though path breaking, this book sparked off a bitter controversy. Many critics felt that it crossed the limits of moderation more with a view to scandalize than to chastise. However, as Gopichand Narang points out, 'The stories collectively introduced Urdu fiction to the latest trend in contemporary western literature. It opened the flood gates for Marxism, Freudian ideas and imitations of James Joyce. After 1936, the Urdu short story branches off into two major streams: the sociological story represented by Rajinder Bedi, Krishan Chander and Ahmed Nadeem Qasami and the psychological story dominated by themes of sex as seen in the writings of Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai and Mumtaz Mufti'.<sup>iii</sup>

Writers of the sociological story were intimately connected with the Progressive Writers Movement. They gave voice to human aspirations, dreams and sufferings. A sense of commitment to the ideal of human freedom, peace and hope for a happy and contented future rings through their stories. Class conflict, economic tribulations of the common man, exploitation by capitalists and irresponsible bureaucracy are their themes. Their stories are deeply entrenched in middle class life, expressing the conflicts that men and women face in their day to day social and economic affairs. Krishan Chander fuses realism and romanticism in his stories like the warp and weft of a single pattern. Rajinder Bedi on the other hand uses dexterous psycho analysis to dissect the misery and gloom afflicting his characters. He creates a well knit, lifelike story from trivial occurrences and places that triviality in a wider context. His story *Lajwanti* is an example. It is the story of a woman restored to her husband after abduction and deals with the psychological problems this raises. Ahmed Nadeem Qasaami paints some extremely charming and realistic images of village life in Punjab; the downtrodden and the disinherited figure are his principal characters. Other writers of the sociological story include Balwant Singh with his vignettes of rural Punjab and Hansraj Babbar, writing on the plight of workers.

The next phase of the Urdu short story began after 1947. It was afflicted by the obvious disadvantage of the dispersal of writers into two distinct national groups, each negotiating

identities through a new set of circumstances often disparate and inconsistent. The horrors of the Partition, the problem of rehabilitating masses of people uprooted in the ensuing carnage shook the conscience of the subcontinent. Stung by estrangement and loss of faith, the intelligentsia pined for expression. The younger generation of writers experienced emotional upheavals and occasionally lapsed into morbidity and nihilism. Throughout the subcontinent the pre independence motivation of struggle against foreign subjugation was taken over by the fight for social justice, economic development and democratic government. Urdu short fiction is replete with themes based on the Partition and its catastrophic effects not just on the country but on collective and individual psyche as well. Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* sums up the tragedy and pathos of Partition with rare precision. Since the horrors of Partition are beyond words, they can be expressed only obliquely. Manto sets the tone with the very first line of the story. 'A couple of years after the Partition, it struck the governments of Pakistan and Hindustan that even as they had exchanged ordinary prisoners, so they should have an exchange of madmen as well.'<sup>iv</sup> The inmates of the asylum interpret the political situation in their own ways, instinctively grasping the implications of such an event. Manto's use of a madhouse as metaphor provides a ruthless critique of the politics of hatred that has divided a country and left a legacy of violence and hatred. On another occasion, Manto wrote, 'Literature is the pulse of a nation, a community; literature gives news about the nation, the community to which it belongs, its health, its illness.'<sup>v</sup> For Manto, the blood bath of the Partition signified the failure of the social imagination. That he could translate this collective irrationality into art is a testimony to his vision. Other writers like Qurratulain Haider and Ramlal write poignantly about post Partition events particularly the uprooting of vast populations on either side of the border. Intezar Hussain emerges in the post Independence era as the spokesman of this uprooted humanity, of refugee youth with shattered dreams and a rising generation with snapped moorings, isolated and angry.

As disillusionment became rife in the post Independence era, behavior and reaction became complicated and the writer found a cover in psycho analytic interpretation of individual action and emotion. Writers like Ismat Chughtai, Mumtaz Mufti, Manto, Qurratulain Haider, Akhtar Orinavi, Hayat Ullah Ansari etc. employed the ideas of Freud, Adler and Jung to explore the terrain of the human mind. Qurratulain Haider effectively used the stream of consciousness technique in her short stories. Ismat Chughtai characterized the decaying feudal society and the plight of its womenfolk with piercing intellect and the investigative instinct of a fiction writer. Her story *Lihaf* deals with the issue of female sexuality in a highly patriarchal society. Narrated from a child's point of view, the story reveals as well as conceals the world of suppressed erotic desire. Chughtai seems to say that when a patriarchal society regulates the sexuality of its women, it is bound to find expression in 'deviant' ways. As Tharu and Lalita point out, 'Ismat's themes are drawn from life in the middle class household. She explores the oppressions of family life and the workings of sexuality in the middle class home, its inhibitions and its unsuspected little freedoms with a subtlety unrivalled in Urdu fiction.'<sup>vi</sup> It is however Saadat Hasan Manto who stands at the apex of the writers of psycho analytical fiction. According to Zaidi, 'No other Urdu short story writer has given us more intimate and living pictures of the socially fallen and of pleasure seeking sex hounds and their allies like pimps, brothel keepers etc.'<sup>vii</sup> This was Manto's way of defying the moral hypocrisy of the so called custodians of society. Other writers like Mumtaz Mufti and Mohd. Hasan Askari are preoccupied with the subconscious in their stories.

There are other themes as well in Urdu short fiction. Writers such as Aziz Ahmed and Joginder Paul are more committed to historical realism. Aziz Ahmed is a keen observer of feudal decadence and takes his readers into the dying world of erstwhile princely states like Hyderabad. Jilani Bano's short stories draw their material from the last phases of the feudal order in the Nizam's dominions and its collapse after Independence. These writers 'capture a part of the past and its dissolution into a present struggling to emerge.'<sup>viii</sup>

Urdu fiction has had its share of women writers too, though not all have achieved the fame and status accorded to Ismat Chughtai or Qurratulain Haider. Women writers of the Urdu short story have expressed themselves on a variety of themes, not pertaining only to women's issues. Salehah Abid Hussain is a Gandhian in her treatment of political themes. She builds characters closely associated with the freedom movement. The sisters Khadijah Mastoor and Hajirah Masroor write mostly about women but unlike Ismat Chughtai are wary of directly and openly attacking social traditions. Mumtaz Shirin, Razia Sajjad Zahir and Jilani Bano, Rakshanda Roohi, Tarannum Riyaz are other acclaimed women writers in the field of the Urdu short story.

In its current avatar, the Urdu short story has not stayed untouched from the exigencies of a rapidly changing world. Its practitioners however, have not buckled under these challenges. On the contrary, they are using with greater skill the powerful weapon of this genre. One of the reasons why the short story continues to be a much loved and practiced genre is that it evades straitjacketing into movements and prescriptive methods. It affords freedom to the writer to present society and human emotions both realistically and metaphorically, as also to annotate all aspects of contemporary existence be they political, social, religious, psychological, material or metaphysical. To the readers, it affords simplicity and brevity, enthralling them with both realism and flights of imagination.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> S. K. Das. A History of Indian Literature. Vol. VIII. (1800-1910) Western Impact: Indian Response. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1991. P.303

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. p 302

<sup>iii</sup> Quoted in Das. History of Indian Literature. (Vol. IX) p274

<sup>iv</sup> Manto. *Toba Tek Singh*. Quoted in E.V.Ramakrishnan ed. Indian Short Stories (1900-2000). New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2000 p xxv

<sup>v</sup> Quoted in Ramakrishnan. p xxv

<sup>vi</sup> Quoted in Ramakrishnan p xxvi

<sup>vii</sup> Ali Jawad Zaidi. A History of Urdu Literature. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2006. p 401

<sup>viii</sup> Zaidi. p 410

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