

## CHAPTER X

## THE MODERN NOVEL

During the last two decades short-stories have gained such popularity that they have almost ousted the full-length novel from its former position. All the writers of literary eminence of this period are short-story writers, and even when they attempt full-length novels, their novels are of an inferior quality to their short-stories.

This is true not only of Prem Chand, whose full-length novels are not at all of the same class as his short-stories, but of others as well. Nyāz Fatehpūrī, M. Aslam, 'Azīm Beg Cugtāī, are all first and foremost writers of the short-story and only tried their hand at novel writing long after achieving fame and position in the literary world as writers of the short-story. The only exceptions are Hādī Ḥasan Rusvā and Mirzā Muḥammad Sa'id. About Sajjād Ḥahīr, it is too early yet to decide whether he will become pre-eminently a novelist or a short-story writer, as his first novel was published only two years ago, and before that his literary output was merely in collaboration with others.

The modern novels are of a distinctly different character from those of Nazīr Aḥmad, Sharar and Rāshid ul Khairī, and vastly superior to the works written in imitation of these.

The hero or heroine is no longer a conventionally perfect being, who overcomes all trials and tribulations through strength and integrity of character. But the modern Urdu novelist, like the modern English novelist, attempts to understand and portray those who are condemned at the bar of social morality, to lay bare their struggles and to reveal the causes that go to make them what they are. This attitude is fundamentally different from that of Nazīr Aḥmad, Sharar,

Rāshid ul Khairī, and others of lesser merit who followed them, and is common to all the modern novelists.

Hādī Ḥasan Rusvā's '*Umrāo Jān Adā*' and '*Zāt i Sharīf*', Mirzā Muḥammad Sa'id's '*Yāsmīn*' and '*Khāb i Hastī*', M. Aslam's '*Nāzima kī Āp Bītī*', Nyāz Fatehpūrī's '*Shahāb kī Sarguzasht*', all these have for the hero or heroine a conventionally erring personage.

Hādī Ḥasan Rusvā's '*Umrāo Jān Adā*' is perhaps the best of the modern novels. Though psychologically less profound, it is the most perfect. Or rather in it alone has execution matched inspiration. Others may have a more ambitious conception but they have not been as successful in translating their vision as Rusvā.

'*Umrāo Jān Adā*' alone of the modern novels has that charm of style which one associates with Nazīr Aḥmad, and it is this which makes it such delightful reading. In spirit it is modern, that is, it is a sympathetic and understanding study of a character condemned by the laws of society. Much ingenuity and originality are shown in the manner the story is told. The bulk of it is in the first person, but in the form of a dialogue and not a diary, which makes it far more vivacious and real and allows for such information to be incorporated into the story as could not have been introduced had it been confined to the first person. Rusvā asks just such questions as a reader feels inclined to ask when reading a novel in the form of a diary. And his questions not only elucidate but make the story very much more real and interesting. The opening chapter is written by the author himself in the first person and deals with a visit he made to Lucknow after the lapse of many years. On that occasion he accidentally met *Umrāo Jān Adā*, a very well-known "*tavāif*" of the "*Navābī*" era of Lucknow.

To recall something of the memory of bygone days, it is decided to hold a "*Mushā'ira*" to which *Umrāo Jān* is also asked. "*Gazals*" and "*ash'ārs*" are recited in the old way,

and *bons mots* and witticisms exchanged. *Umrāo Jān's* "gazals" are much appreciated and much reminiscing takes place, and it strikes Rusvā how interesting it would be if *Umrāo Jāo* could be persuaded to pen her memoirs. *Umrāo Jān* reluctantly agrees, but decides to relate them, leaving the task of editing them to Rusvā. As a matter of fact, Rusvā at first does not tell her that he intends publishing her memoirs but only that he wants her to recount them for his benefit alone.

This method of narration has given the story a lot of elasticity. Though *Umrāo Jān* keeps more or less to a chronological order, on several occasions she retraces her steps, or at times the mention of a person or an incident by Rusvā starts a different train of thought in her mind and she comes back to the chronological order of her story only after several chapters. Similarly, an incident is mentioned long before it appears in its proper sequence; for example, we are told very early in the story that *Umrāo Jān* did meet her family once again, but the actual meeting is not related in detail till much later.

But these irregularities do not detract from the interest of the story, rather they add to it, giving it an air of veracity which could not have been obtained in any other way.

The "character" of *Umrāo Jān* is evolved in a masterly way. The most difficult task in making a hero and heroine tell their own story is to make them convey their character truthfully. Rusvā has got over this difficulty with ease. He never makes *Umrāo Jān* pause and give a lengthy description of herself, as do most authors even when they are relating the story in the first person. *Umrāo Jān* never objectively and dispassionately analyses herself, for Rusvā was psychologist enough to realise that this sort of deliberate objectiveness was most misleading, and that human beings are far too egotistical ever to give themselves away deliberately. So he never makes *Umrāo Jān* give studied and detached descrip-

tions of herself. Rather he lets her see herself in action and gather her own conclusions therefrom. Her warm-heartedness and humanity, her basic goodness of nature and her love of her home and her parents, her humility in connection with her own nefarious profession and her admiration of those women who have what she has unfortunately had to forfeit, all these the reader readily realises as he reads on. The personality of *Umrāo Jān* at each page becomes more and more vivid and alive, and by the time the book is finished *Umrāo Jān* has entered the gallery of those "characters" of fiction who remain our lifelong acquaintances. *Umrāo Jān* is never presented by Rusvā as a paragon of virtue or an exceptional person. She is not endowed with such qualities of mind and heart as are not to be met with in women of her profession. Nor is she capable of such philosophical or metaphysical thinking by which she can justify her position as does *Lailā*, a heroine taken from the same stratum of society in a novel by Qāzī 'Abdul Gaffār. *Umrāo Jān's* character and attitude to life are not at all complex. They are very simple and straightforward. She realises that by all standards of decency hers is a contemptible position. She regrets, and very deeply and sincerely so, the fact that through sheer bad luck she was forced to enter into this profession. But having done so at an age when she knew no better, and at a time when she had no other choice, she accepts and tries to make the best of it.

She can never bring herself to be so utterly mercenary and heartless as *Bismillāh*, and let no warmth or human consideration enter into her transactions. But she is shrewd enough to realise that idealism will take her nowhere, that placed as she is she cannot afford to be idealistic, that it is not expected of her and will not be appreciated. So she does not like *Khurshīd* throw away her chances of success as a "tavāif", but practises coquetry and shows that deference and politeness which were necessary for her to secure a clientele.

The warmth of her heart, her humanity and her innate

goodness prevent her from being callous and utterly indifferent towards her admirers. She is human enough to feel pleased and be happy when a person as charming as *Navāb Sulṭān Mirzā* comes her way, when she has to deal with those who are cultured and polished rather than with the "nouveau riches", who only by virtue of their gold claim her time and attention.

Once she has passed her youth and has made sufficient provision for her old age, *Umrāo Jān* straightway gives up her profession; but here again the balance between her goodness and her common sense is retained. She realises that it will be absurd for her to go into "purdah" and try at this stage to lead the life of middle class respectability; so she is frank enough to admit that:

اللہ بخشے چاہے مارے، مجھ سے پردے میں گھٹ کر تو نہ رہا  
جائیکا۔

It is by his realisation of such psychological points that Rusvā has managed to make the "character" of *Umrāo Jān* so human. The conventional morality of the novelist with a purpose would demand that she be made to revert to an entirely pious life. But any one who has observed human conduct knows that such an ending would have been false.

Not only in the sketching of *Umrāo Jān's* "character" has Rusvā shown his knowledge of human nature and his ability to make a "character" come to life, but his sketches of minor "characters" are also well done. The background is painted with similar deft strokes. The Lucknow society of the period just before the Mutiny comes to life under Rusvā's pen. It is a very small section of society, not its whole surface as in '*Fāṣāna e Āzād*', that is seen in '*Umrāo Jān*', but this small section is brought very vividly before the mind's eye; we are allowed only a glimpse now and then, but whole vistas are revealed in those glimpses.

Silhouetted against this larger background of Lucknow

society is the underworld of a courtesan's life. Here the etchings are deeper, the tones more vivid and more details are filled in. In this world the towering figure is that of the *Khānam*, the mistress of all these courtesans. Though only a "tavāif" *Khānam* has a dignity which many a lady of gentle birth may envy. In her world she is the queen, her girls live in mortal fear of her, the tutors dare not trifle with her, the admirers of her "girls" all defer to her wishes, and even the "Begams" appeal to her to restore to them their erring sons and husbands. Notwithstanding all this, she has no illusions as to what her real status is. With what deference and politeness she talks to the *Begam's* maid and in what scathing words she describes herself and her fellow-workers to the *Navāb*!

The degradation and humility as well as the attractions of this sort of life are truthfully portrayed by Rusvā. How these girls who were brought up by an older courtesan were more or less her slaves. They had to obey her implicitly and had no voice or choice in selecting or rejecting admirers. They remained for ever financially dependent on their mistress. Petty jealousies and intrigues were rampant amongst the girls.

All these become apparent as one reads '*Umrāo Jān*', but not once does Rusvā point out the moral with a heavy hand, go out of his way to draw the attention of the reader to any of the lurid details. Rusvā is an artist and not a moralist. He draws his picture faithfully, showing the lights and shades. No prejudice blinds him to the fact that there is much that is attractive, especially for youth, in it, music and colour and every luxury that money can buy. Not only this, but amongst the so-called bad people, there is a great deal of goodness, charity and mercy. They have their own code of morality and honour which they faithfully keep, as is shown in the case of *Buā Husainī* and the *Maulvī Shāhib* and the old admirers of *Khānam* or in *Umrāo Jān's* own devotion to *Gauhar Mirzā*.

There was more of the milk of human kindness amongst these than amongst the so-called good people. The girls, though virtually slaves, were not ill-treated, but brought up with greater gentleness than the slave-girls in "respectable households".

The masterly portrayal of "character" and background, the vividness and charm of narrative, the psychological knowledge shown in 'Umrāo Jān', rank it as one of the best novels in the Urdu language. It passes the test as to whether or not the book is a classic, namely, whether it can be read and re-read. 'Umrāo Jān' can, like all works that rank as classic, be read each time with greater enjoyment. Its "characters" have that larger humanity which makes them interesting to every succeeding generation.

The other significant point in connection with 'Umrāo Jān' is that it has had a host of imitators. If in life imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, in the case of fiction it is the unmistakable sign that a book has attained to classical rank. Courtesans and actresses have been chosen as the heroines of their novels by a number of authors in imitation of Rusvā, the best known among them being Qāzī 'Abd ul Gaffār and M. Aslam.

'Umrāo Jān' can be regarded as a novel of transition; it is modern inasmuch as it is not didactic in its aim and has endeavoured to show that persons commonly described as immoral can have a good deal of humanity in them, if not goodness also. But it has the straightforwardness and directness of the older school. It is not analytical, and its "characters" are not complex and are not given over to introspection. It also has a nicety of style not to be met with in the works of the later modern novelists.

Mirzā Rusvā has written several other novels besides 'Umrāo Jān'. But none of these are as charming or as delightful as 'Umrāo Jān'. 'Zāt i Sharīf' has something of the same piquancy of style as makes 'Umrāo Jān' such

pleasant reading. The situations have the same air of veracity and are described with a similar eye for telling details. The same knowledge of human nature is also shown, as for instance, when *Khudā Bakhsh* is trying to find an opening for conversation with *Mehrī*. The description of *Mehrī* is also extremely good:

امامن کا سن وحال ایسا نہ تھا کہ ان پر کوئی عاشق ہوتا، جوانی کو رخصت ہوئے ایک مدت ہو چکی تھی، گرچہ یہ ابھی تک ہریات میں جوانی کی کسم (قسم) کہایا کرتی تھیں۔

This sarcastic comment also reveals more of *Mehrī*'s character than would a stereotyped statement about a middle-aged person. It suggests what was to her a source of pain. There are several such extremely well-written descriptive passages in 'Zāt i Sharīf'. They show Rusvā's capacity for descriptive writing; but nevertheless it is a much inferior work to 'Umrāo Jān'. It has not the same qualities of uniformity and excellence. Its main "character", *Chote Navāb*, is not so convincingly drawn as *Umrāo Jān*, and though doubtless at that time in Lucknow such incidents and swindling did take place as are described in 'Zāt i Sharīf' and people did believe in necromancy, yet it seems incredible now and in consequence this takes from the merits of the story.

Its sequel, 'Sharīfzāda', is the story of a poor young man who by reason of steadiness and integrity of character achieved success in life, as opposed to *Chote Navāb* in 'Zāt i Sharīf' who, through his stupidity, reached the stage of becoming dependent on a "favārif".

'*Akhtarī Begam*', another novel of Rusvā, lacks the humour and vivacity of 'Umrāo Jān', even of 'Sharīfzāda' and 'Zāt i Sharīf'. It is the story of intrigues against *Akhtarī Begam*, an orphan girl with a great deal of property. The enemies of *Akhtarī Begam* are foiled in the end.

'*Khūnī Bhed*', '*Khūnī Āshiq*', '*Rūs kā Shāhzāda*' are

novels lacking in any merit. Their plots are drawn from cheap English and French novels, and they are written in the style of the imitators of Sharar and Sarshār.

With Mirzā Muḥammad Sa'id's '*Khāb i Hastī*' and '*Yāsmīn*' the analytical novel made its appearance in Urdu. The subject, if looked at superficially, seems a very hackneyed one; viz., the evil effect of Westernisation on Indian youths, and the consequences of straying from the path of marital fidelity. But there is a world of difference between the way Mirzā Sa'id has treated his subjects and the manner in which it has been treated by Rāshid ul *Khairī*, or any of those myriads of lesser novelists and short-story writers. Until now the treatment was from without, that is to say, the novelists were content to catalogue the evils of Westernisation or of illicit liaisons, not accounting for them or at best putting them down as the result of the hero's or the heroine's association with undesirable characters.

Mirzā Sa'id's approach is totally different. He has attempted to analyse and understand the minds of this unfortunate generation which finds itself in the twilight of one civilization with the dawn of another yet afar, which is lost between two worlds, one dead and one yet unborn.

He has understood and tried to convey the tragedy of youth. Youth, which is regarded by superficial observers as a period of thoughtlessness and animal pleasures—and so it is in the case of the average person—in the case of a sensitive soul and an imaginative and thinking mind is the period of doubts and disillusionment, of self-reproach and longing for better things. It is the period when the house is divided within itself, and when the attempt to follow one's ideal lands one in greater depths of degradation. That it sometimes happens that youths who are seen to make a mess of their lives, do so only because they are seeking for a peace in beauty that is lacking in their lives, is a psychological fact.

'*Khāb i Hastī*' and '*Yāsmīn*' are both studies of this

inner conflict of youth. The hero of '*Khāb i Hastī*', '*Uṣmān*', is a young man of ideals, and has a sensitiveness of soul and is gifted with a quality of poetic imaginativeness which make him dissatisfied with the existing order of things. Though he has all the material comforts of life, he feels a lack of something. He feels that there is something wanting not only in his own life but in the existing order of society. He finds religion as practised and preached by the "*Maulvīs*" wholly unsatisfying and inadequate. His soul is in search of something he himself cannot define, but which would give him peace and assuage his thirst.

He wants colour and poetry in life, which the "purdah" system does not allow for, except in circumstances that cannot be considered above reproach. But his desire for romance is so strong that it forces him to disregard the conventional morality, though not without much inner conflict.

The character of '*Uṣmān*'s father, '*Ishāq*', contributes towards the state in which '*Uṣmān*' finds himself, as does the character of '*Akhtar*'s father in '*Yāsmīn*' towards '*Akhtar*'s ruin. The cold, impersonal and self-satisfied attitude of '*Ishāq*' in '*Khāb i Hastī*' and of '*Gazanfar*' in '*Yāsmīn*' is a challenge and a provocation to the romantic, artistic and poetic temperament of their sons. '*Uṣmān*'s restless mind refuses to accept life as readily as his father does and as most people do. The nobility of character and singleness of purpose of Adrian, his best friend, evoke his admiration, but Adrian does not exercise sufficient influence on '*Uṣmān*' to give him that stability and balance which he lacks. He has to go through the "ordeal by fire" himself before his soul is redeemed.

The company of such people as '*Bazl ul Hasan*' and '*Yūsuf*', adds fuel to the already smouldering fire of '*Uṣmān*'s discontent, their easy morality helps him to shed his already weakened resistance. He is introduced to '*Shamīm*', an actress, by '*Bazl ul Hasan*'; her vivacity captures him completely, and she flatters his vanity, and in his infatuation it seems to '*Uṣmān*'