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. Nyaz Fatehpuri, M. Aslam, 'Aqim Beg Qutbi, 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 Hadi Hasan Rusvai and Mirza Muhammed Sa'id. About Sajjad Zahir, 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 Naqir Ahmad, Sharar and Rashid ul Khairi, 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 Naqir Ahmad, Sharar,
and bone mots and witticisms exchanged. Umrāo Ḥān’s 
“gazals” are much appreciated and much reminiscing takes
place, and it strikes Rūsvā how interesting it would be if
Umṛāo Ḥān could be persuaded to pen her memoirs. Umṛāo Ḥān
reluctantly agrees, but decides to relate them, leaving
the task of editing them to Rūsvā. As a matter of fact, Rūsvā
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 Umṛāo Ḥān keeps more or less to a chrono-
logical order, on several occasions she retracts her steps,
or at times the mention of a person or an incident by Rūsvā
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 Umṛāo Ḥān 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 Umṛāo Ḥān 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. Rūsvā has got over this difficulty with ease. He
never makes Umṛāo Ḥān pause and give a lengthy description
of herself, as do most authors even when they are relating the
story in the first person. Umṛāo Ḥān never objectively and
dispassionately analyses herself, for Rūsvā 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 Umṛāo Ḥān 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
Umṛāo Ḥān at each page becomes more and more vivid and
alive, and by the time the book is finished Umṛāo Ḥān has
entered the gallery of those “characters” of fiction who
remain our lifelong acquaintances. Umṛāo Ḥān is never
presented by Rūsvā 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 Lādā, a
heroine taken from the same stratum of society in a novel by
Qāfī ’Ābdūl Ḥafīr. Umṛāo Ḥān’s character and attitude to
life are not at all complex. They are very simple and straight-
forward. 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 Bismili, and let no warmeh or human consider-
ation 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 Khur-
skīd throw away her chances of success as a “tāvāf”,
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 Navab Sultan Mirza comes her way, when she has to deal with those who are cultured and polished rather than with the "nouveaux 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, Umrano Jann 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:

اَللَّهُ لاَ رَبَّيْنَى چَاهِي مِنَاءَ یَمِینَ مِنَ سَیْبَائِی کُرُبَ تَوَرَهَا مَیَا بِکَر

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

Not only in the sketching of Umrano Jann's "character" has Rusva 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 Rusva's pen. It is a very small section of society, not its whole surface as in 'Fasana e Aasul', that is seen in 'Umrano Jann', 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 Khannam, the mistress of all these courtesans. Though only a "fardif", Khannam 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 tutions 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 Navab!

The degradation and humility as well as the attractions of this sort of life are truthfully portrayed by Rusva. 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 mistresses. Petty jealousies and intrigues were rampant amongst the girls.

All these become apparent as one reads 'Umrano Jann', but not once does Rusva 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. Rusva 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 Bu A Husein and the Maulvi Sahib and the old admirers of Khannam or in Umrano Jann's own devotion to Gauhar Mirza.
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 Qāṣī ‘Abd ul Ǧaffār and M. Aśīla.

‘Umrāo Jān’ can be regarded as a novel of transition; it is modern inasmuch as it is not didactic in its aims 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:

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”, Choṭe Naṣīb, 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 Choṭe Naṣīb in ‘Zāt i Sharīf’ who, through his stupidity, reached the stage of becoming dependent on a “tawāfī”.

‘Akhṭārī 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 Akhurstī Begam, an orphan girl with a great deal of property. The enemies of Akhurstī Begam are foiled in the end.

‘ Kháni Bhes’, ‘ Kháni ‘Ashiq’, ‘Rūs ka Shāhīsāda’ 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 Shairar and Sarehar.

With Mirzá Muḥammad Sa‘īd’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 Mirzá Sa‘īd has treated his subjects and the manner in which it has been treated by Rāshīd 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.

Mirzá Sa‘īd’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 “Maulūs” 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 Qaṣṣaṣ, ‘Ali 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 Baṣīl ul Ḥasan 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 Shamān, an actress, by Baṣīl ul Ḥasan; her vivacity captures him completely, and she flatters his vanity, and in his infatuation it seems to ‘Uṣmān