His name is still sometimes to be seen in the pages of “Sāqī”, “Adabī Dunyā” and other literary organs of the present day. His collection of short-stories was published in 1926 entitled “Fasāna e Josh”. There are nine stories in it and four or five articles. Several of the earlier collections of short-stories in Urdu incorporated essays as well, perhaps because the distinction between literary essays and short-stories was not established in the minds of the writers and they were thought of as interchangeable terms.

Some of the stories are written with a didactic aim, e.g. ‘Musāvāt’ and ‘Umr i Qaid’. The author addresses the reader direct in these, and advocates his point of view supporting it with the incidents from the story. They can almost be regarded as articles incorporating real or imaginary stories to give the argument greater force. ‘Musāvāt’ attempts to show how unpleasant will be the consequence of granting women equality. ‘Umr i Qaid’ is a most unsavoury story about the immodesty and selfishness of modern girls. ‘Talāsh i Ajib’ and ‘Taqiq i Adam’ are the two best stories in the collection. They are in a humorous vein and about common occurrences in family life and amongst friends. They are told in a manner which awakes interest, and there is a definite plot in them.

‘Itṣiqqāt i Zamāna’, ‘Nargis i Khudparast’, ‘Paḥlā Gunāḥ’, and ‘Ijās i Muḥabbat’ are stories without any special merit. ‘Nargis i Khudparast’ is based on a very well-known legend, and ‘Paḥlā Gunāḥ’ is the type of story which was very popular during this period. Examples of it are found in Sālik and in Rāshid ul Khairi, and even writers of recent years sometimes write in that vein. ‘Inqilāb i Zamāna’ and other stories that came out in “Makhzan” were in Rāshid ul Khairi’s style.

The intrinsic merit of Sulṭān Haider Josh’s work is very little. It has historic interest as it serves the purpose of showing the stages by which Urdu short stories have achieved their present position.

Chapter XIV

WOMEN SHORT-STORY WRITERS

As during the intermediate period in the development of the novel the best works were by the women writers, so in the intermediate period in the development of the short-story also some excellent work was done by women.

‘Abbāsi Begam and Nazr i Sajjad Haider were the best known journalists and novelists amongst the women between the years 1900 and 1925. No collection has been published of their works, but they are to be found in the pages of the old numbers of “Tahzib”, “Ismat” and “Tamaaddun”, and other magazines as well.

‘Abbāsi Begam has written some very good short-stories. ‘Garifūr i Qafas’ in 1915, which relates the story of “purdah” life in the terms of a caged bird, is a clever bit of inventive writing. ‘Zulm i Bekasān’ is a simple but touching story, showing the injustice and cupidity of men. ‘Do Shāhzādī’ is a delightful tale based on history. It is the story of the two daughters of Prince Shuja’ who, because of their father’s opposition to Aurangzeb, had lost all their wealth and were living in a small hut on the edge of a forest. Their only friend was a half-witted but extremely jolly boy who did all their work and kept them amused by his silly pranks. The younger of the two princesses was particularly fond of ‘Alīa’ and he specially endeavoured to keep her happy. After a few weeks, however, the local “Nawāb” came to know of the princesses’ stay in his territory and sent for them. They said good-bye to ‘Alīa with regret; the little princess gave him a ring to remember her by.

They were received with great ceremony at the “Nawāb’s” palace and presented to the “Nawāb” himself. The “Nawāb”
ordered every one to leave, and got up from his throne and came to the princesses and asked them if they remembered their silly servant ‘Alia or not. The “Na‘ūb” was none but ‘Alia himself. The story is extremely well-written and the dénouement is very clever.

Naqīr i Sajjād Ḥaider also frequently composed short-stories. ‘Khān i Armān’, ‘Hūr i Sahrā’, ‘Na‘īrān i Zamānā’, and ‘Haq ba Ḥaqādār’ are all extremely well-written stories; they are written very simply but are very appealing. The subject of her short-stories, as of her novels, is the inconstancy of man in matters of love and affection as opposed to the constancy of woman. Naqīr i Sajjād Ḥaider’s works are very topical; whatever might be the burning question of the day finds an echo in her writing. During the Non-Co-operation movement her stories were woven round this topic; when the question whether girls should be allowed greater freedom in the matter of marriage was being widely discussed in the pages of “Ismat” and “Tāḥīb”, short-stories came from her pen in connection with it. ‘Na‘īrān i Zamānā’ and ‘Haq ba Ḥaqādār’, the two best of the short-stories written in this period, were on this theme. There was a remarkable discovery in 1926 when two children were found in the cave of a panther. This furnished the plot of ‘Hūr i Sahrā’, one of Naqīr i Sajjād Ḥaider’s best short-stories.

Not only topical events but her personal feelings find an echo in Naqīr i Sajjād Ḥaider’s writings. ‘Akhātar un Nisā’ and ‘Hīrmiṇ Nasīb’, her two full-length novels, echo her own feelings after the loss of her mother and brother. ‘Khān i Armān’ was written after her sister’s death and the account of her life is presented in the guise of fiction. The poignant and pathetic of the story are greatly enhanced by its being a record of actual happenings.

In the old numbers of “Tāḥīb” one finds many short-stories written by women who did not write enough to gain individual recognition as short-story writers; but these solitary or rare efforts by unknown writers are extremely good. ‘Rā‘ūl kā safar’ (1915) by Anjuman ʿArā, ‘Shash o Panj’ (1915), ‘Ṭīrār ʿūrīk kā Ālīn’ (1918) by Ṣāfī Jāhān, ‘Kawkab’ (1919) by Saʿīda, ‘Mashq i Sītām’ and ‘Ṣālīgārah’ (1920) by Ṣāfī Jāhān, ‘Nādāmat’ (1921), ‘Mārta kī āna kārtā’ (1925) and ‘Ujla i Bejā’ (1925), are extremely good stories.

Rāshid ul Khairī’s style was imitated and several short-stories in “Tāḥīb” round about 1918 and 1919 were in his style. Bagdādī Begām, a writer of distinction of this period wrote several stories which were definitely under the influence of Rāshid ul Khairī; and Tāj un Nisā, a prominent writer in “Tāḥīb” and the author of ‘Ranj o Rāḥat’, wrote some excellent short-stories as well, most of which were published in “Tāḥīb”. They showed the influence of various authors. ‘Rūsā’ was in Rāshid ul Khairī’s style; ‘Afṣānā o Gadar’, in imitation of Ḥasan ʿAlī’s “fasānas”; ‘Īfā o Vāda’, a delightful story, can, for its simplicity and its appeal, be placed beside the best of Prem Chand.

Though some very good short-stories were written by ‘Abbāsī Begām, Naqīr i Sajjād Ḥaider and Tāj, and some excellent stories are to be found in the pages of “Tāḥīb” by writers who did not achieve any literary eminence, no woman writer of short-stories had written a sufficient number to warrant the publication of a collection of them. This distinction was first achieved by Khāṭān i Akrām; a collection of her “fasānas” has been published and entitled ‘Gūlistān i Khāṭān’. Two of her longer short-stories, ‘Paikar i Vafā’ and ‘Bichārī Bejī’, have also been published separately.

Khāṭān i Akrām died at the early age of twenty-four. Had she lived longer, it is certain that she would have achieved a very high place amongst the modern writers of short-stories. Most of the “fasānas” in ‘Gūlistān i Khāṭān’ were written between 1918 and 1920 when the authoress was merely
eighteen. They show extraordinary maturity of mind and seriousness of outlook, and the style is also as polished and perfect as that of a writer of long standing. Khätün Ḣakram’s “fusānas” show the influence of Prem Cand and Rāshid ul Khairī. The same ideas as Rāshid ul Khairī’s are to be found in several of her stories; the style of writing is also very reminiscent of his. In several instances erring characters are brought to repentance by significant dreams in Rāshid ul Khairī’s works; this motive was imitated by several writers, and Khätün Ḣakram also incorporated this in one of her stories called ‘Balā e Āmdānī’.

Like Prem Cand’s, Khätün Ḣakram’s stories are about simple people and everyday occurrences of life. She writes with the same directness and simplicity and, like him, has got the gift of making her stories appealing though devoid of all rhetorical artifice. ‘Ārzu par Qurbaṁ’ is the story of a mother’s cupidity. Ṣurning makes her three-year-old daughter, Ṣuryâ, observe “roza” so that she can have the excuse for a party which was the passion of her life. She is warned against it by her sister, and her own common sense ought to have told her that it was madness to get a three-year-old child to fast in the month of June. But she was bent on having an excuse for a party, and she makes little Suryâ fast, and gives a party in celebration. The guests arrived from early in the morning and in the rush and bustle of entertaining them Ṣurning loses sight of Suryâ and does not miss her till the time of “ifār”. Immediately a search is started but Suryâ is not to be found. After a long search she was found in a little room lying with her face on the “surāh”. She came there dying for a drink but fear of her mother’s anger did not allow her to quench her thirst. As in the case of Prem Cand, the outline of her story cannot convey the pathos and the charm of it. The excellence of this type of story does not lie in the ingenuity of its plot or the unusualness of its character, but that indescribable something called the style, and the charm of style cannot be conveyed through giving an outline of the plot.

Khätün Ḣakram used little telling phrases that gave her stories an air of veracity. In ‘Shahīd i Sūam’ she neither shows the relations as absolutely callous and indifferent nor does she show them very concerned about the fate of Sa’īda, but just as much affected by her fate as relations whose own lives are full and happy are moved by the ill-luck of an unfortunate member of the family.

Khätün Ḣakram shows this truthful reading of human nature in all her stories and does not paint her “characters” black or white. In ‘Inqilāb i Zamānā’ she has allowed a passing feeling of contempt and triumph to Husna when she sees her step-mother, Qaisar, standing humble and broken before her, and only on remembering that such a feeling is wicked does she get up and take Qaisar by the hand and make her sit next to her. This is a gesture of reparation not her first reaction.

In ‘Bichārī Beśi’, regarded as Khätün Ḣakram’s best short-story, the same balance is observed and the “characters” are human with human weaknesses. In the ordinary relations of life seldom does anyone come up to the ideal. Most have at one time or another done something which cannot be defended. Thus Rāfq and his mother because of their desire for another child agree to a second marriage for him. But they are not shown proud of what they have done. The relationship between ‘Aqīla and her husband and her mother-in-law was so good that it would have been incredible if suddenly they had been turned into evil incarnates. Yet this is what is done so often by so many writers of stories. In ‘Nairangi i Zamānā’, one of the “fusānas” in the collection called ‘Daulat par qurbanāid’ published by “Īsmat”, a similar situation is described, but there is a change in the husband’s and the mother-in-law’s attitude which is utterly incredible. Though human nature can deteriorate terribly, such a change of
attitude without any reason or cause to make it feasible is unnatural.

Khätün i Akram does not only make bad characters human, but her good characters are also not impossible. ‘Agila in ‘Bichrī Bešī’ is not shown like the heroines of Rāshid ul Khairi or Žia Bānu as absolutely passive and not even making protest against the injustice meted out to her. ‘Agila’s lost child is restored to her parents after twelve years by getting married to her adopted son and nephew. Similar devices had been used before by other short-story writers. Khätün i Akram is not original in her dénouement, but none the less the story is her own as the “characters” and the plot except in the end are quite different from those of the other stories in which similar means of finding the lost one are employed. ‘Paikar i Vafā’ is the other story of Khätün i Akram which has been published separately. It is a story of the constancy and devotion of an Indian wife in spite of her husband’s repeated acts of faithlessness.

‘Paikar i Vafā’ is better written than many other stories on the same subject. The parts describing Sa’īḍa’s reactions and struggle in her mind in complying with Zafar’s demands are well done, and the plot has sufficient element of doubt and uncertainty so as to turn the story will take to hold the reader’s interest. Still ‘Paikar i Vafā’ and ‘Bichrī Bešī’, the two longer short-stories, are weaker than ‘Shahīd i Sitām’, ‘Arzū par gurbānī’, ‘Sac kī faṭṭah’ and other short-stories of Khätün i Akram. It indicates that Khätün i Akram’s genius was primarily for writing short-stories, and had she attempted full-length novels, they would have been poorer than her short-stories, as are the novels of Prem Chand or any other writer who is preeminently a short-story writer.

‘Shahīd i Vafā’ is the second collection to be published of “fasānas” written by women. Amtul Vahī, the writer of these “fasānas”, is amongst the first rank of contributors to “Takžīb” and “Iṣmat”. ‘Shahīd i Vafā’ came out in

“Takžīb” in 1927. It is an extremely well-written tale, it conforms to all the requisitions of a short-story, and this can be said about it with certainty that it will find its place in any collection that is brought out of the best short-stories of the last ten years.

It is not often that the “characters” of short-stories remain fixed in the mind; most often it is just the impression that was created, but in ‘Shahīd i Vafā’ the “character” of Salma is drawn so well that it cannot be forgotten.

Salma and Sa’ād are very happy together; a little boy is born to them to complete their happiness, and for him they employed a nurse. This nurse, whose name is Mehr un Nisā, completely wins over Salma by her devotion and efficiency. On hearing that Mehr un Nisā came of a good family and had been forced to take up service through bad luck, Salma was especially kind to her, and on her telling the story to Sa’ād he also becomes very considerate towards Mehr un Nisā. Salma soon after notices a change in Mehr un Nisā; she seems to be fretting about something and keeps very quiet. Soon it becomes quite apparent that Mehr un Nisā is in love with Sa’ād. Sa’ād advises Salma to get rid of her. Salma tries, but Mehr un Nisā adopts such an attitude that she is forced to persuade Sa’ād to marry her. Sa’ād refuses for a long time, but is gradually won over. Mehr un Nisā becomes his wife. For a long time Sa’ād’s attitude towards Salma and his love for her do not change, but gradually Mehr un Nisā begins to influence him more and more, and after a four months’ tour in which Salma was not able to accompany him, but Mehr un Nisā went, Sa’ād is completely changed. Salma is sent away to his mother’s, where after a period a still-born child is born to her and she is very ill. Sa’ād, however, has no further dealings with her, and for Salma’s maintenance some property is left to her by her mother-in-law, who dies soon after her arrival at Lucknow.

The story is really quite complete at this stage, but another
chapter tells of Salma’s subsequent sacrifice for Sa’īd. After some years he comes and takes away Jamīl from her as Mehr un Nisā had no children. Poor Salma is distressed by this further blow and follows Jamīl to Lahore where Sa’īd is now stationed. There she lives in a house near his and sees him and Jamīl going past her door. That is her only consolation. When Mehr un Nisā falls ill, Salma gains access to the house as nurse. As she disguises herself she is not recognised, and on Mehr un Nisā’s recovery she continues to be a visitor. Sa’īd falls ill and the doctor declares a transfusion of blood to be the only means of saving his life. Salma willingly agrees to give her blood. But she was not able to stand this drain and begins to sink as he recovers. On her death-bed she is recognised by Sa’īd, who is deeply shocked and remorseful, but it was too late for any reparation. Salma dies with Jamīl and Sa’īd by her bedside.

‘Shahīd i Vafā’ is definitely amongst the best short-stories written in the last two decades. The way Amtul Vahī has conveyed Salma’s character is excellent. The scene between Mehr un Nisā and her when Salma has come to dismiss Mehr un Nisā is extremely good. Young, inexperienced, God-fearing Salma is completely outwitted by the cunning, mischievous Mehr un Nisā. By threatening suicide and by putting on an air of despair akin to madness, Mehr un Nisā thoroughly frightens her. She does not ask her to go because she feels her blood will be on her head. Mehr un Nisā plays her role well and the moment when Salma could have got rid of her passes away.

Sa’īd still thinks that Mehr un Nisā should be sent away, but gradually begins to get affected by this manifestation of love for him. Here again Amtul Vahī has understood and portrayed a very delicate situation extremely well. Sa’īd was not in love with Mehr un Nisā, he did not want to marry her, but his vanity was flattered as any man’s would be. The faithlessness of men had been the most popular subject of novels and short-stories written by women; but the way Amtul Vahī has shown the gradual change that comes over Sa’īd is a different thing altogether. It is the best piece of psychological study to be found in any short-story in Urdu.

To successfully convey any one mood is the aim of any short-story. In this also Amtul Vahī has been eminently successful in ‘Shahīd i Vafā’. The prevailing impression left in the mind is of Salma’s youth, simplicity and sweetness.

The other seven stories in this collection are also very well written; each of them has an extremely good plot. Amtul Vahī has shown originality in her tales and her themes are different. She has not made them didactic, rather she has written stories that have a greater element of interests and complexity in them. The end is always unexpected and surprising.

In recent years women are writing short-stories in increasing numbers but there are not many who have written sufficient to warrant publication of a collection of them; but still recent years have seen the appearance of several collections. Zubaida Zarī, a writer in “Humāyūn” and “Adabī Danyā” has brought out a collection of ‘afsānas’ entitled ‘Adab i Zarī’. Rāhbat Arā Begam, a prominent writer in “Nairang i Khayāl” has, in recent years, published several collections of her works entitled ‘Prem’, ‘Bānīrā kī Āvāz’, ‘Guncāpānā’, etc. ‘Ismat Cuggārī, Sāleha ‘Abīd Ilūsain, Mehr un Nisā Begam, are writers of very good short-stories. In the pages of “Ismat” and “Tahzīb” one still sees extremely well written short-stories by women writers who have not yet achieved any distinction in the literary world. Ḥijāb Ismā‘īl and Rashida Zafar are two very good women writers. Their work, though that of one is entirely different from the other’s, is so very good that it merits separate treatment.