

A Study of Trends in Urdu Short Fiction

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Abstract:

Storytelling and a love for narratives are part of human nature. They have a deep connection with human psychology and natural instincts. This is why the Holy Qur'an has been described as *Ahsan-ul-Qasas* (the best of stories). Storytelling has long been used as a means to escape the bitterness of life and its hardships and to find emotional comfort. With this purpose in mind, the tradition of *dastan* (epic storytelling) emerged, and for a long time, humans adopted storytelling as a cultural practice.

As time passed and human engagements became more complex, the novel emerged from the womb of the *dastan* in the form of realism. Gradually, people became inclined toward practical action and expressed dissatisfaction with supernatural elements. Rapid scientific progress further increased human preoccupations, and as a result, storytelling evolved into the modern short story. In today's era, it has taken the form of micro-fiction.

In Urdu literature, novel writing began after the War of Independence in 1857, as a result of social and cultural changes. Similarly, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the short story emerged to briefly portray the crisis-ridden life of Indian society. As far as fiction is concerned, both the novel and short story entered Urdu literature through English literary influence. Due to their narrative nature, they also drew inspiration from traditional *dastans*. Despite its relatively young age, the short story quickly reached the heights of popularity. It taught us to stay connected with literature despite our busy lives. In this way, the modern short story fulfilled the psychological needs of storytelling while continuing to evolve.

In the historical background of the short story, Sajjad Haider Yildirim is regarded as the pioneer of romantic short fiction, while Premchand is considered the leader of progressive fiction. These two great writers opened two major chapters of romantic and progressive short story writing. As a result, many talented writers emerged and enriched Urdu literature with remarkable stories. These storytellers played a significant role in the evolution of the short story. During this period, rare and

valuable stories were written that achieved the status of classic literature. Such stories are a precious intellectual and technical asset of Urdu literature, from which new writers continue to draw inspiration.

Keywords: *Ahsan-ul-Qasas*, Urdu, Storytelling, Fiction, trends, Sajjad Haider Yildrim

Sajjad Haider Yildrim was deeply influenced by Turkish literature. Through his translations of Turkish works, he provided a strong foundation for themes and storytelling in Urdu fiction. Yildrim's original short stories also reflect intellectual depth and artistic maturity, especially in their romantic orientation. In his writings, the colorful beauty of nature and the freshness of spring are often linked with emotions of love and romance. He skillfully creates harmony between human feelings and natural beauty. In this way, Yildrim's art can be seen as an extension of the traditional *dastan* tradition, filled with the fragrance of flowers, vibrant colors, and the radiance of moonlight. Premchand enriched Indian society with intellectual satisfaction, emotional comfort, and inner joy through his writings. By addressing human psychological and emotional needs, he fulfilled the demands of life through deep observation. He showed new paths to progressive short story writers. His stories reflect patriotism, individual identity, and the social problems of Indians. Through his fiction, he took upon himself the mission of social reform. "Kafan" is one of Premchand's greatest masterpieces and holds a distinguished place among the finest works of Urdu literature. This story stands as a powerful example of bitter realism and is regarded as part of classical literature.

Among the early short story writers, Niaz Fatehpuri promoted a tendency toward emotional excitement in his portrayal of beauty and love. Writers who came later fulfilled the task of storytelling by relying on the realities of life and artistic elegance. In the short stories of the third decade of the twentieth century, along with an honest and realistic depiction of society, deep impressions of life and bitter truths emerge. The strict austerity and political unrest of that era awakened in every conscious person a strong desire to serve humanity, which is clearly reflected in these stories. These writers not only listened to the heartbeat of the people of their time but also presented it in an artistic form.

Listening to and telling stories has been one of humanity's favorite pastimes since ancient times and has played an important role in human development. To escape and forget the bitter experiences of life, humans turned to storytelling. In the beginning, people practiced *dastan-goi* (epic storytelling), but as the shortage of time was felt, they moved from the novel to the short story. In Urdu literature, storytelling began in the eighteenth century. After the War of Independence in 1857, social and cultural changes became the reason for the emergence of the novel, while the crisis-ridden life of twentieth-century India established the proper tradition of the short story. Literary critics believe that the Urdu short story was derived from English literature and has no direct connection with our traditional narrative heritage. According to Dr. Ibadat Bareilvi:

"In the tradition of Urdu fiction, there is nothing that naturally led to the emergence of the short story. Its seed did not sprout in our literary soil; rather, the plant was brought from the West and planted here." (1)

Although the Urdu short story began in the twentieth century, it quickly gained fame and popularity and established itself as an independent literary genre. Before the introduction

of the short story, the tradition of storytelling and *dastan-goi* already existed in our culture and society. Humanity's connection with stories dates back to ancient times. This is why people have always used art to convey their feelings, emotions, and thoughts to others, including painting, sculpture, and other fine arts. In this regard, Abdul Qadir Sarwari writes:

"From the Greek point of view, the fine arts are even older than poetry and music. Their universality is such that there is no corner of the world, no nation, whose ears are unfamiliar with stories." (2)

As far as the historical background of the short story's evolution is concerned, many critics have presented different theories. Some researchers and critics consider Sajjad Haider Yildrim to be the first short story writer, while others regard Premchand as the first short story writer. In this regard, Dr. Farman Fatehpuri writes:

"The first short story writer of Urdu is not Premchand, but Sajjad Haider Yildrim. The first Urdu short story is not Premchand's 'Anmol Ratan' but Yildrim's 'Nasha Ki Pehli Tarang.'" (3)

Since our short story is a gift of the West, the principles of short story writing formulated by Western critics such as beginning, climax, and a surprising ending—were adopted. In this context, the fixed and established rules of Western tradition continued to be followed. In the field of storytelling, we do not find any artist who adopted a completely new path by breaking away from tradition. Therefore, the same tradition has remained in practice until today. The techniques of the short story that are connected with its traditional framework are still widely in use:

"Our short story, since it owes its origins to Western literary tradition, developed as a continuation of that very tradition. Therefore, the principles that were laid down for this genre were determined in the light of the short stories created during that same period. (4)

The beginning of short story writing in Urdu coincided with the twentieth century. However, it is quite difficult to determine whether Premchand or Sajjad Haider Yildram should be regarded as the first Urdu short story writer. In this regard, Dr. Parveen Azhar writes:

"Premchand needs no introduction. In literature, even in his capacity as an early short story writer, he holds great significance and importance." (5)

"Regardless of this, Rafi-ud-Din Hashmi, while declaring Sajjad Haider Yildram as the first regular short story writer of Urdu, writes:

"In Urdu, Premchand is regarded as the first short story writer. However, even before his early stories, Sajjad Haider Yildram had written some narratives that fully met the standards of a short story. Premchand wrote his first story in 1906 or 1907, whereas Yildram's first story was published in 1903." (6)

Therefore, agreeing with Rafi-ud-Din Hashmi's opinion, Sajjad Haider Yildram has to be acknowledged as the first short story writer in Urdu. Since Sajjad Haider Yildram was deeply influenced by Turkish literature, he initially translated Turkish short stories into Urdu. Later, he began creating original short stories in Urdu. In his stories, along with a high standard of quality and technical maturity, a romantic element is also prominently visible. His collection of short stories is titled *Khayalistan*.

"In Yildram's short stories, along with the common approach of respecting the temperament and nature of art and keeping it within the logical boundaries of thought and action, there is a noticeable tendency to use the colorful scenes and springlike beauty of nature as a backdrop for emotions of

love and romance. This effort to create harmony and mutual connection between human feelings and natural beauty is a result of his attachment to the tradition of the art of storytelling." (7)

In Sajjad Haider Yildram's short stories, we find themes such as music, poetry, flowers, light, and women. Considering all these as the essence and subject of life, he writes:

"A short story is a brief tale that carries the fragrance and colors of a flower. It has the moonlight that conveys the message of the beauty of life. The subject of the short story is woman and all her grace and charm." (8)

"In his early short stories, Premchand also provided human beings with mental comfort, satisfaction, joy, and delight of his age—things that people have always needed and which were gradually disappearing due to the pressures of a busy life. By giving the genre of the short story, he created a means to fulfill human psychological and emotional needs, and through his deep observation played an important role in meeting the demands of life. His very first short story is *Soz-e-Watan*, which is a passionate expression of love for the homeland. In this context, Syed Waqar Azeem writes:"

"The purpose of Premchand's early short stories was to create in the nation a spirit of love, and within that love, a passion to sacrifice one's body, mind, and wealth for the country." (9)

Premchand also wrote historical short stories. In united India, there was political turmoil and intense social activity. He wrote while being completely filled with the spirit of patriotism. The short story collection *Soz-e-Watan* is the best example of this. In this regard, Dr. Parveen Akhtar writes:

"The political atmosphere of that time appeared to dominate Indian life. Compared to other cultural movements, it was so overpowering that even they had begun to take on a political color." (10)

Premchand was the first progressive short story writer whose main objective was social reform. He chose the people of his country and society as his subjects. He portrayed the backwardness of rural society and highlighted how landlords and capitalists oppressed the poor and the farmers. In his stories, he brought out this bitter reality so powerfully that the reader cannot remain unaffected by the pain. In this regard, his stories *Kafan* and *Sawa Ser Gehun* are masterpieces. He carried out an artistic struggle for the lower classes. He was the first writer to present the true atmosphere and environment of Indian society in literature and, for the first time, depicted rural life in his short stories. Dr. Parveen Azhar writes:

"Generally, the task of drawing the attention of the educated urban middle class toward the lives of millions of impoverished villagers and farmers, and connecting them with these realities, is attributed to political leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru. However, long before this political awakening, during the period from 1910 to 1936, Premchand had already written powerful stories such as *Awaaz* and *Khoon*, whose heroes were farmers and laborers. In these stories, Premchand narrated the tragic tales of the destruction of peasants at the hands of the police, officials, moneylenders, and landlords." (11)

"In early short story writing, the name of Niaz Fatehpuri is also significant. His short story collection *Nigaristan*, especially stories like *Kyubado Psyche* and *Hamra Ka Gulab*, are notable symbols and lasting examples of this colorful tradition. In his style of writing, he kept the reader's interest in mind. The tendency toward emotional excitement in his descriptions of beauty and love in his stories is a result of this very perspective. In this regard, Syed Waqar Azeem writes:"

"Niaz, freeing himself from the restrictions and confinements of present-day life, has created a world of passionate love and deep affection." (12)

Among the early Urdu short story writers, the names of Sajjad Haider Yildram, Premchand, and Niaz Fatehpuri are particularly noteworthy. These writers employed the short story in different ways according to their observation and temperament. When the short story entered Urdu literature as a recognized and established genre, it remained at once very close to life and yet distant from it. It became a spokesman for bitter realities as well as a singer of sweet tales. Love and hatred, politics, economy, and morality became its major themes.

In the light shown by history, observation, tradition, imagination, and creative vision, it built a new world. It performed many roles simultaneously. The depiction of love, affection, and deprivation in the short story represents an early pattern of blending reality, morality, truth, the concept of life, and art. This very pattern later became more prominent, brighter, and more appealing.

On the foundations laid by Premchand, Sajjad Haider Yildram, and Niaz Fatehpuri, many short story writers emerged, including Ali Abbas Husaini, Majnoon Gorakhpuri, Azam Karevi, Fazl Haq Qureshi, and Kausar Chandpuri. They constructed such a structure of the art of fiction in which the reality of life and the charm of art stand face to face, holding hands and supporting each other. In this regard, Waqar Azeem writes:"

"Our early short story writers created an initial pattern of blending reality and poetic expression, truth and imagination, life and art in fiction. Later short story writers further enhanced, refined, and enriched this pattern with greater brilliance and color." (13)

After 1930, the impressions of life in short stories appear to have grown deeper, because bitter realities were expressed in them that truly reflected society. The strict atmosphere of austerity and political unrest of that time awakened in every sensible person a spirit of service to humanity. Our short story writers, for the first time, began to consider this as their literary mission.

During this period, Fayyaz Mahmood, Hayatullah Ansari, Azeem Beg Chughtai, Khwaja Hasan Nizami, Rashid-ul-Khairi, and Akhtar Ansari were writing very fine and high-quality short stories. According to Rafi-ud-Din Hashmi:

"Khwaja Hasan Nizami's short stories deal with the War of Independence of 1857 and are distinctive in their own unique style and tone." (14)

In short, storytelling and fondness for tales are part of human nature. They have a deep connection with human psychology and temperament. To escape the bitterness of life and its hardships, and to find comfort, storytelling has always been used. With this very purpose, the *dastan* (romance) came into existence, and from its womb, realism emerged in the form of the novel. As rapid scientific progress increased human engagements, a new form of storytelling appeared in the shape of the short story. In today's modern age, the short story has further evolved into the *afsanha* (very short story).

In Urdu, the beginning of novel writing occurred alongside changes in social and communal life. Similarly, at the very start of the twentieth century, the short story emerged to present, in a concise form, the crisis-ridden social life of India. Despite its young age, the short story quickly reached the heights of popularity. It taught us how to stay connected with literature despite busy routines. In a way, modern short stories played a key role in fulfilling the psychological need for storytelling, and along with this, the genre continued to evolve. Likewise, through the narrative impulse, art

was born, and in the twentieth century, painting, sculpture, and fine arts adopted new forms to express human emotions and feelings.

Sajjad Haider Yildram and Premchand opened two major doors of romantic and progressive short story writing. Through them, many writers emerged and enriched Urdu literature with outstanding stories. These storytellers played an important role in the evolution of the short story. In this period, rare and exceptional stories were written that attained the status of high literature. Such stories are a valuable intellectual and technical asset of Urdu literature, from which new writers drew inspiration.

Sajjad Haider Yildram was influenced by Turkish literature, so in the beginning he strengthened his storytelling foundation through translations from Turkish literature. His original stories also reflect intellectual depth, technical maturity, and a romantic inclination. Yildram shows a strong tendency to use colorful natural scenery and spring-like beauty as a backdrop for love and romance, creating harmony between human emotions and the beauty of nature.

Premchand provided Indian society with mental comfort, satisfaction, joy, and delight in his time. He fulfilled human psychological and emotional needs through deep observation and truly met the demands of life. His first short story, *Soz-e-Watan*, is a beautiful and passionate expression of love for the homeland. He showed new paths to progressive short story writers. His stories serve as a foundation for patriotism, individual identity, and Indian social issues. Through these stories, he undertook the mission of social reform.

Among early short story writers, Niaz Fatehpuri also holds an important place. In his stories, he shows a tendency toward emotional intensity while describing beauty and love. After him, writers such as Ali Abbas Husaini, Majnoon Gorakhpuri, Azam Karevi, Fazl Haq Qureshi, and Kausar Chandpuri carried forward this tradition. They fulfilled the duty of storytelling with the support of life's realities and artistic charm.

In the short stories of the third decade of the twentieth century, true social representation, deep impressions of life, and bitter realities clearly emerge. The strict austerity and political unrest of that era awakened a spirit of service to humanity in every sensible person, and this spirit is reflected in those stories.

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