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THE NOVEL IN INDIA

(H)

ITS BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT

edited and with an Introduction by

T. W. CLARK

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*Dedicated by his fellow contributors
to the memory of*

T. W. CLARK

*who died while this book was
in the press*

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODERN NOVEL IN URDU

by RALPH RUSSELL

ANTECEDENTS

The history of Urdu literature falls into two almost unconnected parts. It begins in the Deccan—the central plateau of the Indian sub-continent—and from about 1600 grows and flourishes for more than a century. Its achievement was considerable, and though most of the literature of this period is in verse, it includes one outstanding work of prose fiction, the allegory *Sab Ras*, by Mullā Vajhī, written as early as 1635–36.¹ Any comprehensive study of the history of Urdu prose fiction would have to start with this work. However, for reasons which need not be discussed here, the Deccan period comes to an end early in the eighteenth century, and the centre shifts to northern India, where it has ever since remained. And so completely did the new centre displace the old that the greatness of the Deccan's contribution was rapidly forgotten, and had to be largely rediscovered by twentieth-century scholars. The Urdu literature of the Deccan period therefore constitutes (in my view at least) the subject of a separate study, and falls outside the scope of this essay.

In the north, the prevailing language of literary expression had long been Persian, but in poetry Urdu now rapidly gained the ascendancy, first in Delhi, the Mughal capital, and a generation later, to an increasing extent, in Lucknow also. Indeed in some forms, notably the lyric, it had already by the middle of the eighteenth century achieved a standard which many would feel has still not been surpassed. Not least among the reasons why it could do so was that the new Urdu poets were thoroughly familiar with Persian and with Persian poetry, any many of them wrote it with facility. The use of the mother tongue helped them to convey an intensity in their poetry which they could not have expressed in Persian, but they also had ready to hand all the rich tradition of Persian poetry, and of this too they made full use. Narrative fiction is almost

¹ AH 1045, which corresponds to AD 1635–36. See 'Abdul Haq's preface to his 2nd edn. of *Sab Ras*, Anjuman i Taraqqī i Urdū, Karachi, 1953, p. 5.

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from the first represented in their work. By convention, its predominant themes are stories of love, and it is written, like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in rhyming couplets. Broadly speaking, the *masnavī*, as this particular verse form is called, is of two kinds, though love is the theme of both. The first kind, which developed earlier than the second, comprises relatively short poems (one may describe them as being of short-story length) which describe in directly realistic terms the tragic stories of lovers—tragic, because in the society of the day love necessarily *was* a tragedy. Some of these poems are quite clearly accounts of the poets' own experiences. Those of Mīr (?1722/3–1810), the great master of the lyric, are among the earliest and best in this class, while those of Shauq (d. 1871), written probably between 1846 and 1862,¹ are the last of real merit. In a society where that most drastic form of segregation of the sexes, the *purdah* (*parda*) system, is still widely prevalent, and where love is therefore by definition scandalous, orthodox opinion still frowns upon poems of this kind, and they are consequently less widely known and appreciated than they deserve to be. For all that, the best of them are fine and moving poems, and European taste would appreciate them as such. The other kind of *masnavī* is a much longer poem and tells the story of how young lovers, separated from each other by the magic powers of jinns and peris, are ultimately reunited to live happily ever after. By general consent the best of these is Mīr Hasan's *Sihr ul Bayān* (The Enchanting Story), completed in 1785.² Its great popularity, which still continues, is well deserved, for within the conventional form Mīr Hasan has written an essentially realistic poem in which the experiences of love are beautifully portrayed. It is worth noting in passing that his planning and construction of the story are outstandingly good; this stands in striking contrast to much of Urdu narrative prose fiction, where even to the present day faults of construction are particularly noticeable.

In prose, Urdu had to struggle much longer to supersede Persian. Up to the end of the eighteenth century no prose

¹ 'Aṭāullāh Pālavi, *Tazkira i Shauq*, Maktaba Jadid, Lahore, 1956, pp. 55, 105.

² For a full account see Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, *Three Mughal Poets*, Harvard University Press, 1968, and George Allen and Unwin, 1969, Chapter 3.

work written in Urdu would have been classed as a work of literature, and not until the late 1860s could an Urdu prose which really is quite distinctively Urdu establish itself as the norm. It is a striking indication of the long supremacy of Persian that it long continued even under the British to be the language of administration; thus it was only in 1837 that Urdu took its place in the law courts of those areas of present-day Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh that were then under British rule.¹ Nevertheless one can say that Urdu began, in effect, to contest its monopoly from about 1800, when works of narrative prose fiction made their appearance, consciously and deliberately written in the spoken idiom of educated native speakers of Urdu. The qualification 'in effect' is necessary because those who made the innovation did not do so with the conscious aim of ousting Persian as the normal medium of literary expression in prose, but for more temporary and mundane motives. By an accident of history the British authorities were closely involved in this. Shāista Akhtar Bānu Suhrawardy, in her book *The Development of the Urdu Novel and Short Story* (London, 1945) has described how.²

'In order to enable the employees of the East India Company to learn the vernaculars, the Fort William College, Calcutta, was founded in 1800, and Dr John Gilchrist placed at the head of it. . . . He travelled in the regions where the choicest Urdu was spoken, and from Delhi, Lucknow, Cawnpore and Agra he collected a band of men who were masters of Urdu idiom. He set them to translate³ into Urdu prose stories from Persian and Sanskrit. As the object was to get as quickly as possible books which could be used as textbooks for teaching young Englishmen Urdu, he had them written in easy flowing prose. . . .'

The best of these productions is generally held to be Mir Amman's *Bāgh o Bahār*, which was written in 1801.⁴ It is a

¹ Ram Gopal, *Linguistic Affairs of India*, Asia Publishing House, London, 1966, pp. 163-4.

² Shāista Akhtar Bānu Suhrawardy, *The Development of the Urdu Novel and Short Story*, Longmans Green and Co., London, 1945, pp. 14-15.

³ 'Translate' is perhaps too precise a word for what they did.

⁴ The title means 'The Garden and Spring'. As very frequently with Urdu works, it gives no indication of what the book is about. It is chosen because, read as a chronogram, it gives the date of composition of the book.

story—or rather, five stories set within a single frame-story—very much in the style made familiar to the English reader by the *Arabian Nights*. Those who wish to acquaint themselves with it can do so through the rather literal, but quite readable translation of Duncan Forbes, published in London in 1862.¹ Nearly all the Fort William productions are stories of this kind.

It is significant that though these books were primarily intended as texts for English students, they did in the course of time reach a wider public. The process by which this happened has not been investigated as it deserves to be. The fact that Fort William College had a press which printed and published these works was doubtless an important factor. Nevertheless, judging by the India Office Library Catalogue of Hindustani [i.e. Urdu] Books, *Bāgh o Bahār* seems to have taken nearly thirty years to acquire sufficient popularity in the real homeland of Urdu—the Delhi-U.P. area—to warrant publication there.² The reception accorded to these Fort William works was by no means one of unmixed enthusiasm, and in Lucknow in particular they were the target of much ridicule—not on account of their subject-matter, but because of the language in which they were written. Every gentleman of taste, asserted the Lucknow critics, knew that this was not the way to write literary prose; and to show how it should be done they pointed to Rajab 'Alī Beg Sarūr's *Fasāna i 'Ajāib* (A Tale of Wonders).³ It is not known when Sarūr wrote this book, but according to his own statement it attracted little attention when it first appeared, and it was not until many years later that its popularity suddenly began to grow rapidly, and to such an extent that it was decided to print it. (This, it can be established, was between 1838 and 1842.) Sarūr himself tells us that his literary ambitions first led him to attempt writing in Arabic and Persian, and only when he was regretfully forced to conclude that he would never excel in either of these languages did he turn to Urdu. It is clear that he consoled himself by making his Urdu prose as close as he possibly could to the ornate Persian prose style then in fashion. *The Tale of*

¹ W. H. Allen, London, 1862.

² See p. 106, fn. 1. below.

³ The information about *Fasāna i 'Ajāib* is taken from Sayyid Maṣ'ūd Hasan Rizvī Adīb's edition of Sarūr's *Fasāna i 'Ibrat*, Kitāb Nagar, Lucknow, 1st edn., December 1957.

Wonders is written in rhythmical, often rhyming, prose. The closest parallel to his prose style in English literature is perhaps Lyly's *Euphues*, but a closer parallel still is provided by those passages of rhyming prose in the *Arabian Nights* which Burton was at such pains to imitate in his translation, and which he has done as well as perhaps it can be done in English.

This then was the style which for decades together contested with that of Mir Amman for acceptance as the norm, and the volume of support which it could command is amply attested by the number of editions of the book which continued to appear.¹

Obviously this contest is of great importance in the history of the prose narrative in Urdu, but the accounts of it occupy what is, in my view, a disproportionate place in the histories of Urdu literature. For the main form of Urdu prose narrative before the modern period is neither that of Mir Amman nor that of Sarūr, but that of what in Urdu is called the *dāstān*. (Indeed, Sarūr's book itself is only a special kind of *dāstān*.) The word, which comes into Urdu from Persian, means simply 'story' or 'tale', but it is used primarily of enormous cycles of medieval romance, closely comparable to those of medieval Europe which Cervantes parodied in *Don Quixote*. The most

¹ The catalogue of Hindustani books in the India Office Library, published in 1900, lists an edition of *Fasāna i 'Ajāib* published in Lucknow in 1845. There is then a gap until 1866, but between that date and 1889 sixteen different editions are listed, of which, however, only the last was published outside the Delhi-U.P. area (from Bombay).

But, significantly, the editions of Mir Amman's *Bāgh o Bahār* are even more numerous; and its popularity clearly starts earlier and spreads further afield. Most of the early editions were published outside the Delhi-U.P. area. Then, from 1850, it clearly becomes very popular in the Delhi-U.P. area also. Finally, in the 1870s, its popularity spreads to Bombay and the South. Precise figures are as follows:

From 1804 to 1847—eight editions, of which only two (Cawnpore, 1832 and Delhi, 1845?) are from the Delhi-U.P. area.

From 1850 to 1871—twelve editions, all from the Delhi-U.P. area.

From 1872 to 1879—sixteen editions, of which eleven are from the Delhi-U.P. area, the other five being from Bangalore (1872), Bombay (1874, and two in 1877), and Madras (1876).

An edition in Devanagari (Hindi) characters appeared as early as 1847, and there are other Devanagari editions in 1852, 1869, 1870 and 1879.

There is also one in Gujarati characters published from Bombay in 1877.

I have left out of account editions and translations by English scholars—mostly published in London—clearly intended for the use of English students; also a translation into French published in Paris.

famous is that which relates the exploits of the legendary champion of Islam, Amīr Ḥamza,¹ the uncle of the Prophet, who, like the Christian knight of medieval European romance, rides through the pages of the tale fighting for the true faith against unbelievers, witches and sorcerers, and emerging triumphant over seemingly insuperable difficulties. Most popular in India was one part of this enormous cycle entitled *Tilism i Hoshrubā* ('the enchantment which steals away one's senses') which itself comprises seven tall, bulky volumes, totalling more than 7,500 pages. (The totals for the complete *Tale of Amīr Ḥamza* are 18 volumes and nearly 16,500 pages.) The stories on which the *dāstān* is based seem almost certainly traditional in origin and go back several centuries. One Indian tradition was that the *Tale of Amīr Ḥamza* was written in Persian by Faizī,² the great courtier of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556-1605), while some add that its purpose was to divert the Emperor's attention from the great Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārata*.³ But there is no evidence that this tradition is correct. As to content, the stories are almost certainly much older, while as to form, the most reliable writer on the subject⁴ argues convincingly that the *dāstān* assumed its present shape in the second half of the eighteenth century. The *dāstāns* were originally recited at the courts of the nobles, but also before more plebeian audiences, in very much the same way as their Arabic counterparts were once recited in Egypt. In fact the chapters headed 'Public Recitations of Romances' in E. W. Lane's classic *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, first published in 1836, will serve also as a generally accurate description of the way the Urdu *dāstāns* were recited in India.⁵

¹ The account of the *dāstān* of Amīr Ḥamza derives mainly from Rāz Yazdānī's article *Urdu dāstānōnī par kām kā tajziya aur tabṣira*, published in the Indian government periodical *Ajkal*, Delhi, issue dated July 1960.

² See also 'Abdul Ḥalīm Sharar's account in Chapter 12 of his *Guzashta Lakhnau*. (Many editions. The best is perhaps that which comprises a volume of *Maḡāmīn i Sharar*, in the collected edition published from Lahore, Sayyid Mubārak 'Alī Shāh Gilānī, n.d.)

³ The Newal Kishore Press (see below) itself made this claim. See, for example, the announcement on p. 2 of the cover of the second volume in the series, *Nausherwān Nāma*, Daftar i Awwal, Jild i Duwam, Lucknow, 3rd edn., 1915.

⁴ Cf. Firoz Ḥusain, *Life and Works of Ratan Nāth Sarshār*, 1964 (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London), p. 99.

⁵ Rāz Yazdānī. See Note 1 above.

⁶ Cf. also Sharar's account referred to in Note 1 above.

(The rhythmical prose, with its rhyming phrases surely owes much of its origin to this tradition of recitation.) The *dāstāns* had been widely popular as oral literature long before the present version—or more accurately, the most substantial of the present versions—were written down, at the instance of Newal Kishore, the founder of a press which still exists in Lucknow and has performed inestimable services to Urdu literature. The present versions are in part the work of two of the most famous *dāstān*-reciters of old Lucknow, Mīr Muḥammad Ḥusain Jāh and Aḥmad Ḥusain Qamar. In publishing them Newal Kishore stated that they were translated from Persian originals, but this is somewhat too large a claim. Persian versions of some parts of the story do indeed exist, but there is no known Persian original for the greater part of the work, and in at least one instance the 'translator' himself notes that he has departed from the Persian version he has before him because it does not accord with the story in the tradition with which he is familiar. An inquiry recently made on this point to the successor of the Newal Kishore Press brought the reply that 'No trace of Persian originals (of the *dāstāns* in their present form) can be found. The truth is that there certainly were one or two books on which they were based, but the *dāstān*-reciters employed by the Press used to come every day and recite the stories, and the scribes would write them down. . . . And this is how they came into existence.' There is no reason to doubt that the facts are substantially as here stated.¹

The *dāstāns* are therefore, in the main, original Urdu works,

¹ Rāz Yazdānī's statement, and that of the letter which he elicited from the successor of the Newal Kishore Press, is not accurate in every detail. Ghālib, in a letter to Nawwāb Kalb i 'Alī Khān of Rampur dated August 21, 1865 (see *Mahātīb i Ghālib*, ed. Imtiyāz 'Alī 'Arshī, Rampur, 1937) speaks of a Persian work *Rumūz i Ḥamza*, and says that it was written in the days of Shāh 'Abbas II (1642-66).

In 1965 Qāzī 'Abdul Vadūd of Patna showed me detailed notes which he had made on this work. It is a relatively short single volume. He told me that *Ṭilism i Hoshrubā*, which is in his view indeed the best part of the Indian *Dāstān i Amīr Ḥamza*, owes little or nothing to *Rumūz i Ḥamza*. The remark of the 'translator' who departed from his Persian original was drawn to my attention by Miss Fīroz Ḥusain (see fn. 3, p. 107 above); but, regrettably, I failed to note the reference. Cf. also Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Askari's introduction (p. 20) to his selection from *Ṭilism i Hoshrubā*, Maktaba Jadīd, Lahore, 1953, on new material avowedly introduced by the *dāstān-go*.

and even so brief an account of them makes it clear that the importance of Sarūr's *Fasāna i 'Ajāīb* should not be exaggerated. In both language and content it is entirely within the *dāstān* tradition, and the most that can be claimed for it, considered as a step towards the development of the modern novel, is that its material is presented within the compass of a single short volume.

The *dāstāns* can quite justly be called propagandist literature of a highly tendentious kind. Everything is in black and white—the virtuous are all virtue and the vicious all vice. It follows that there are no three-dimensional characters, and very little realism of any kind. Neither is there anything that can really be called a plot, nothing but a succession of episodes following one upon another in endless profusion. It is noteworthy that the *dāstāns* flowered in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the Mughal Empire was in headlong decline and where every principle of conduct in the medieval code was everywhere and every day being violated. Men who knew no other code, including those who were daily offending against it, could escape from the sordid reality around them into the world of the *dāstāns* where everything was splendidly simple and where the true Muslim warrior not only behaved unflinchingly as a true Muslim should, but by doing so achieved the most eminently satisfactory results. Moreover, the authors of the *dāstāns* had made provision for pleasing changes of diet. In the *Tale of Amīr Ḥamza* the hero is accompanied and supported in his exploits by his trusty friend 'Amar 'Ayyār—'Amar the Artful, who possesses magic powers and uses them to reinforce Amīr Ḥamza's valour. He does this mainly through the use of his magic bag *Zanbīl* into which he can cause almost anything to disappear and out of which he can cause almost anything to emerge. Very often he uses his magic to make his enemies look ridiculous, and his function in the tale is thus, to a large extent, to give comic relief from the prevailing atmosphere of high seriousness. Relief of another kind is provided by episodes with a love interest, in which the Islamic warriors' amorous adventures are related, often in circumstantial and titillating detail. (Their conduct in these scenes is not quite perhaps that which strict adherence to Islam would permit; but everyone seems to have been too absorbed to notice this.)

Thus the *dāstāns* provided a rich banquet of good and varied fare.

THE TRANSITION TO THE NOVEL

(a) *Ratan Nāth Sarshār (1846-1902)*

The elements of the modern novel come into Urdu literature piecemeal, and the development is most clearly seen if one follows a logical, rather than a strictly chronological, order, beginning with the work which is closest to the *dāstān*, namely, Ratan Nāth Sarshār's *Fasāna i Āzād* (The Tale of Āzād). Sarshār himself was at pains to emphasize that *Fasāna i Āzād* was something quite new in Urdu fiction, and, as we shall see, there are good grounds for his claim. But for all that, its points of resemblance to the *dāstān* are striking. The most obvious resemblance is in sheer length; its four larger-than-quarto volumes contain about 3,000 pages in all, with two columns of print to the page. (A rough word-count gives a total of two and a quarter million as against about 700,000 words for the Maudes' English translation of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.) But this is only the first resemblance of many. Āzād, its hero, is a typical, two-dimensional *dāstān* hero—handsome, brave, intelligent, talented, a great lover (though at the same time, of course, purity itself), and a great champion of the right. There is the same absence of plot, the same endless succession of loosely connected episodes, the same pattern of innumerable difficulties triumphantly surmounted, and the same black and white tendentiousness. Just as Amīr Ḥamza has his faithful companion 'Amar the Artful, so does Āzād have his faithful companion Khojī, and Khojī's main function is, like 'Amar's, to provide comic relief. Finally there is a marked resemblance even in style and language, for Sarshār is almost as fond of rhyming prose as the *dāstān* writers were. Thus it would not be hard to defend the statement that *The Tale of Āzād* is in the direct line of descent from the *dāstān*.

Nevertheless, in *The Tale of Āzād* the *dāstān* form is adapted to what is in one major respect a new content. Āzād is the champion of the New Light against the Old, the champion of modernism (which, in this context, means the values and

¹ For a full account of Sarshār see Firoz Ḥusain, *op. cit.*

outlook of Victorian England) against every form of mediocrity. Very conveniently, historical circumstances enabled him to be at the same time the champion of Islam, in true *dāstān* tradition; for the framework story tells how Āzād falls in love with a beautiful, pure, and above all 'educated' lady named Ḥusn Ārā ('Beauty-adorning') and is commanded by her to go off to the Crimean War and fight alongside the British and his fellow-Muslims, the Turks, in their struggle with the Russians. He does so, and returning victorious after countless adventures, wins Ḥusn Ārā's hand. (Had Sarshār been writing a few decades later, when the expansion of the European powers brought them into conflict with the Muslim states in the Near and Middle East, he would have been denied this happy chance of combining his hero's new role with the old. But in fairness to him it must be added that when at the end of the last volume the British authorities in India ask Āzād's help in their war against Muslim Afghanistan, he gives it without hesitation. It is the fight for modernity which is his real mission.) Another major difference from the *dāstāns* is that *The Tale of Āzād* is virtually free of supernatural incident, and its setting is in the contemporary world. In the earlier part the scene is laid in nineteenth-century Lucknow, which is vividly and realistically described.

Thus there is a certain parallel between *The Tale of Āzād* and *Don Quixote*, and we know that *Don Quixote* did in fact directly influence Sarshār.¹ His later book *Khudāi Faujdār* (The Godly Warrior) is *Don Quixote*, though considerably abridged and freely adapted. In *The Tale of Āzād* itself, the character of Khojī, Āzād's ignorant, uncultured, cowardly, blustering, but faithful friend, owes at least as much to Sancho Panza as it does to 'Amar the Artful. But in other respects Sarshār's characters are, of course, the reverse of Cervantes'. Whereas *Don Quixote* is the deluded champion of the old, Āzād is the clear-thinking, self-confident champion of the new. Whereas Sancho Panza is, in one of his aspects, the expression of down-to-earth common sense, Khojī is, especially in the earlier part of the book, little more than a buffoon, the personification of everything ridiculous and outmoded in the

¹ Cakbast, *Mazāmin i Cakbast*, Shaikh Mubārak 'Alī, Lahore, n.d., Essay on Pandit Ratan Nāth Sarshār, p. 24.

traditional Indian way of life. True, as the story progresses he becomes a more complex figure, embodying also, especially in his complete loyalty to Āzād, much that was admirable in the old order; and here there is a certain parallel between him and Don Quixote. Other differences between the two writers go deeper. Sarshār has nothing of Cervantes' mature wisdom, or of his intellectual and artistic power. His modernism is of the most crude and uncritical kind. The values and the way of life of Victorian England are to him the last word in human wisdom, and all that is 'old-fashioned' in Indian life (with the one significant exception of the *parda* system) is condemned in an equally wholesale way. Once again one is reminded of the *dāstāns*, where good is unalloyed good and evil unalloyed evil, and the struggle between them free of all possible ambiguity. But to say no more on this point would be to do Sarshār an injustice. In his crude extremism Sarshār is the child of his age. In the 1870s the cultural conflict in Muslim India as a whole was all around him being fought out in just these extreme terms. These were the years in which Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān was bringing about those radical changes in the outlook of the Muslim upper classes which for better or worse (for better *and* worse would perhaps be more accurate) were to determine their course of action for a century to come. Sir Sayyid was perfectly clear about what he was attempting. It was his aim, he said, 'to produce a class of persons, Muslim in religion, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions and in intellect'.¹ (The words, except for 'Muslim in religion', are taken bodily from that most extreme manifesto of British cultural policy in India, Macaulay's Minute on Education of 1835.)² And he made equally clear to his compatriots how far he thought they would have to travel to reach this desirable goal. In a letter from London dated October 15, 1869, he wrote: 'The natives of India, high and low, . . . educated and illiterate, when contrasted with the English in education, manners, and uprightness, are as like them as a dirty animal is to an able and handsome

¹ *Addresses and Speeches relating to the Mahomedan Anglo-Oriental College, in Aligarh . . . 1875-1898*, ed. Nawab Mohsin-ul-Mulk, Institute Press, Aligarh, 1898, *Tamhīd*, p. 2.

² Cf. *Selected Speeches*, ed. G. M. Young, Oxford University Press, World's Classics series, 1935, p. 359.

man.' (It should be stressed that this is not an opinion confidentially expressed in a private letter; the letter was intended for publication in India and was duly published there.)¹ Not surprisingly, the opponents of the New Light were driven by this kind of thing to a similar extremism and championed the cause of everything traditional simply because it *was* traditional. In any true appreciation of *The Tale of Āzād* all this has to be borne in mind. Not only is Sarshār's own attitude fully typical; his characters too, with their wholesale acceptance or wholesale rejection of the New Light, are portrayed with a greater realism than the present-day reader might at first sight think.

Two extracts will serve to illustrate both the weakness and the strength of Sarshār's work. At one point in the story² Āzād runs into an old friend who asks him, quite out of the blue, whether he thinks the Europeans and the Bengalis more advanced than the people of Lucknow. Āzād says that undoubtedly they are, but his friend demands proof, which Āzād promises to give him. Next day as soon as it is light they set off together, and walk until they have left the city proper behind them and reached the cantonment. There they see from the road a fine bungalow standing in well-kept grounds, and inside it, an English gentleman and his wife taking their breakfast. Sarshār's description is interesting. The English gentleman is barely mentioned, but the lady is accorded the full *dāstān* treatment, rhyming prose and all (which, however, I have not attempted to reproduce in my translation). 'There in a fine room was a Sahib seated on a chair, and near him an idol [the standard metaphor for a beautiful woman] with a face like a houri of Paradise—her body as delicate, and her cheeks as red, as a rose—gracing a more delicate chair. Her face was radiant, her black dress was of costly silk, and her perfume so fragrant that gusts of it were wafted to the road outside and permeated all one's senses. Both were conversing sweetly together and making short work of [the expression in the original is equally colloquial] some mutton chops. Āzād's

¹ Urdu text in *Musāfirān i Laddan*, ed. Shaikh Muḥammad Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, Majlis i Taraqqi i Adab, Lahore, 1961, pp. 183-4. English translation quoted from G. F. I. Graham, *The Life and Work of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, K.C.S.I.*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1909 edn., pp. 125-6.

² *Fasāna i Āzād*, Vol. I, 9th edn., Newal Kishore Press, Lucknow, 1949, pp. 69-70.

friend was lost in admiration and delight.' In other words, the sight of a nondescript Englishman and a highly perfumed Englishwoman eating mutton chops at about seven in the morning¹ is enough to prove the superiority of the English way of life! The narrative continues: 'They pressed on. Five young Bengalis were coming towards them in a carriage—one a barrister, one a civil servant, two M.A.s and one B.A. [Āzād seems to have detected these details at sight.] Āzād knew one of them, and greeted him. He got down and offered Āzād a cigar. Inquiry revealed that all the other four came of a poor family, 'but friends of their learned father had raised the money to send them to England to be educated; and now they held important positions. . . .' And so on and so forth.

This kind of thing is so crude as to be laughable. Yet side by side with it one finds pieces of excellent descriptive and realistic writing. In the first volume,² where Āzād has not yet gone off to the war, he and Khoji go on a railway journey from Lucknow. They reach the station in good time, and Āzād finds the refreshment room and goes in. Sarshār continues: 'He was delighted with what he saw: everything was spotlessly clean and in its proper place. From one end of the room to the other were tables with chairs arranged round them, and glasses set out upon them. Lamps were burning brightly on all sides. Āzād sat down. "Bring me something to eat", he said. "But, mind you, no wine, and nothing with pork in it." . . .' The waiter, spick and span in his clean uniform, and with a turban on his head, brought him all manner of English dishes [*sic*] which he served from costly plates of the most expensive kind. Āzād plied his knife and fork with a will, and finished off with lemonade and soda-water. When he came out, there was Khoji, his bedding unrolled on the platform, eating parāthas and kabābs.

'You look as though you're doing all right,' said Āzād, 'the way you're scoffing those kabābs.'

¹ Once again, the picture is perhaps closer to reality than the modern reader might think. Thus Edward Lear comments on 'the enormous meat meals, especially the immense quantities of roast mutton, that English people were accustomed to eat in India at that time. . . .' See Angus Davidson, *Edward Lear*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1950, p. 212.

² Pp. 418-20.

'That's right,' said Khoji, 'some of us like kabābs and some of us like wine.'

'What do you mean, "Some of us like wine"? Do you think I've been drinking wine? I never touch the stuff. I'll swear on the Qurān I haven't touched a drop. You might as well accuse me of eating pork.'

Khoji smiled. 'Right!' he said. 'You wouldn't let *that* chance slip. "You might as well say I've been eating pork!" he says. Well said! You have to think these things forbidden or repulsive to keep off them. But both are allowed to you. You think it's a great thing to have them. Well done, my friend! Today you've really shown your paces!'

'Have you finished? Or do you want to go on abusing me? I tell you, you can put me on oath. I've not so much as put my hand to wine; I've not even looked at pork.'

'You put that well. All right, you haven't put your hand to wine. But it went down your throat, I'll be bound. And anyway, who takes any notice of *your* oaths? An oath means nothing to you. I can't make out to this day what your religion is. . . . Oh well, we shall all get the reward of our deeds. Why should I worry about it?'

'You're not going to admit you're wrong, are you?'

'Why should I? Didn't I see you with my own eyes using a knife and fork?'

'Well? Do you think you drink wine with a knife and fork?'

'How do I know how you drink wine? Better ask one of your drunken friends about that. But I'm sorry you're so far gone. What a pity! What a shame!'

'Do just one thing for me: just go into the refreshment room and see for yourself.'

'What, *me*? Me, a true Muslim, go into a refreshment room? God forbid! God save us! I leave that to you, and welcome. *Me*? Go into a refreshment room? May God protect me!'

Āzād left Khoji to his kabābs and strolled along the platform. A gentleman with a beard a yard long accosted him, 'Well, sir, may I know your name?'

'Āzād.'

'Āzād.' He smiled. 'Yes, indeed. The name suits you. Freedom and free-thinking [Āzād means free, but its senses range from

liberty to licence and 'free-thinking'] are written all over you. And your religion?'

Āzād quoted a Persian verse and then replied, 'Respected sir, your humble servant is a Muslim. Islam is my faith, and I observe the Shari'at [Muslim religious law]. And *your* name, Maulvi Sahib?'

'Never mind *my* name. Allow me to express my sorrow.'

'Please do. Burst into tears if you like. But remember that Muḥarram [the month when the martyrdom of Ḥusain, the grandson of the Prophet, is mourned] isn't far off. You'll be able to weep then to your heart's content. Why so impatient?'

'You say you are a Muslim and observe the Shari'at, and yet you go into a restaurant and drink wine. God have mercy on us! My good man, do you never think of Judgement Day?'

'Respected sir, what can I say? I have no more to say to you. God save us!'

'Pardon me if I am rude; but think of yourself when you say "God save us!" Well, you have done Satan's work, but Praise God that your better self reproaches you.'

'Maulana, I swear by God I took only food in the restaurant, and that too only what Islam permits. Be fair! What is wrong with that? After all, in Istambul everybody—including the most eminent doctors of Islam—dine with Christians. Why on earth is it that in India Muslims think it a sin?'

'Listen; I'll explain it all to you. To eat in a restaurant is not creditable to a Muslim. If you'd spread your mat and had the same food brought out to you, that would have been all right. That too would have been open to objection, but not to the same extent. Then again, you may swear as many oaths as you like, with the Qurān raised in your hand, but no one will *believe* that you didn't have pork and wine. If you trade in coals your hands will get black. And don't talk to me about Istambul. The Shah of Persia drinks wine and orders the most expensive brandy. But does that make wine-drinking permissible? Let the Turks eat with Christians as much as they like. That doesn't mean that *we* should. It's against our traditions to do so. Have you got to live in Istambul? Or have you got to live here in India? When you're *in* Istambul, do as they do. But are we talking about Istambul or are we talking about India? After all, there's no lack of food outside the

restaurant—kabābs, parāthas, biscuits, everything. So what was to be gained by going there? Why make yourself conspicuous and get yourself laughed at for nothing?'

'My dear sir. First, the food in there is fine and tasty. Secondly, the place is spotlessly clean. Then you can sit and *enjoy* the food. There's a man to pull the fan. The fan is clean. The plates are clean. The tables are clean. There are four waiters standing ready to serve you. Can I get all that outside? God save us!'

'The food may be fine according to *your* taste. As for the fan, out here you can pay a pice [about a farthing] and get yourself fanned for an hour at a time. And what do you want with cleanliness when you are travelling? Besides, it's not as though things out here are filthy dirty. If *you're* over-particular, that's quite another matter. Anyway, it's your business and you can get on with it. But youngsters should listen to what their elders tell them. I've told you. But you must do as you like.'

Āzād thought to himself, 'I shan't do such a stupid thing again. It's up to me whether I eat in a restaurant or not, but I don't have to advertise the fact. From now on I'll be more discreet.'

'Well,' said Khojī, '*now* what about it? You thought you could make a fool of *me*; but now the Maulvi Sahib has told you off. I bet you won't go again in a hurry!'

There is no need to comment in detail on writing of this kind. It is clear that we are here dealing with modern realistic writing of considerable talent, which owes little or nothing to the *dāstān* tradition; and because such writing is not rare in *The Tale of Āzād*, it is, despite its obvious links with the *dāstān*, at the same time a work which brought permanently into Urdu literature some of the major elements of the modern novel.

(b) *Nazir Ahmad* (1836-1912)

Sarshār continued to write prose fiction for nearly twenty years after *The Tale of Āzād* appeared, but none of his subsequent works shows any very great advance upon the best

in what he had already achieved, and a rapid and very marked decline soon sets in. To see the advance towards the modern novel carried further, one has to turn to his older contemporary, Nazir Ahmad.

Nazir Ahmad was ten years older than Sarshar, and the first of the series of tales which he wrote between 1869 and 1891¹ pre-dates *The Tale of Azad* by some years. (Nazir Ahmad's first tale, *Mirāt ul 'Arūs*, [The Bride's Mirror], was written in 1869. The first instalment of *The Tale of Azad*—it appeared initially as a serial—came out in 1878, and the last in 1879. It was issued in book form in the following year.) But whereas Sarshar's power as a writer soon wanes, Nazir Ahmad's continues strong throughout at any rate the greater part of his literary life. He was a man of much more vigorous intellect than Sarshar, with a stronger character and a keener sense of realism, and these qualities are reflected in his writings. They have led most modern Urdu critics to regard him as a novelist, and to judge him accordingly. From this standpoint they have either praised him extravagantly or else belittled his achievement—with the majority taking the latter course. But to judge him as a novelist is in itself to do him a serious injustice, and one which is all the less excusable because he himself to the end of his days never made any claim to be one. He wrote to instruct, and he chose a fictional form because in that way he could make his instruction more palatable. That he makes no larger claim than this is clear from a preface written in the year of his death to a little text-book on writing the Urdu script. There he tells us: 'I began writing books at the time when my own children were of an age to start their schooling. I had my own experience both of learning and teaching, and as an employee in the Education Department had also had the occasion to supervise teaching. I knew in every detail all the defects of the educational methods and of the books in use. "Once you have seen the fly in your drink, you cannot swallow it"—and so I began to write books on my own account and to teach from them. This was the motive which first impelled me to write.'² This is entirely in keeping with what he had

¹ See p. 121, fn. 2 below.

² *Rasm ul Khaṭ*, 5th edn., Delhi, 1919, p. 1. Nazir Ahmad's Preface is dated 1912.

written more than forty years earlier, explaining how his first book, *The Bride's Mirror*, came to be written.¹ And independently of Nazir Ahmad's own statements, we know that it was originally written without even any thought of publication—let alone any pretentious claims to be called a novel—and that only its chance discovery by Kempson, the British Director of Public Instruction in whose department Nazir Ahmad was then employed, led to its being published.² Its quite unexpectedly large measure of success³ encouraged him to write other tales, planned now for a larger audience, but with similar aims in view. An outline account of *The Bride's Mirror*, which is available in an English translation by G. E. Ward (London, Henry Frowde, 1903) illustrates well enough the method of all of them. The aim of the book is to show the young Muslim girl what qualities she must cultivate if she is to meet successfully the problems she will face when she is married. In this case the lesson is taught by a story in two parts—the first a cautionary tale of a girl named Akbari, and the second (which Nazir Ahmad in fact wrote some eighteen months after his daughter had finished with Akbari and was clamouring for more)⁴ the story of her model sister Asghari. Akbari has always been spoilt, and the result is that when she is married and goes to her new home (which meant, as in most cases it still means, the home of her husband's parents) she cannot stand the trials to which every new wife is subjected and has a very miserable time of it. The passage in which Nazir Ahmad concludes his account of Akbari's misadventures and turns to Asghari, sets the tone of the book:⁵ 'Now listen to the story of Asghari. This girl was to her family what a rose in full bloom is to a garden, or the eye to a human body. Every kind of acquired excellence, every kind of natural intelligence was hers. Good sense, self-restraint, modesty, consideration for others—all these qualities God had bestowed

¹ Dībāca to *Mirāt ul 'Arūs*.

² Iftikhār 'Ālam, *Hayāt un Nazir*, Delhi, Shamsi Press, 1912, pp. 154-5.

³ Footnotes in the preface to its sequel *Banāt un Na'sh* tell us that by 1888 it had been published in editions totalling more than 100,000 copies, and had been translated into Bengali, Braj, Kashmiri, Panjabi and Gujarati. (*Banāt un Na'sh*, Delhi, 1888 edn., p. 1, footnotes 11 and 12.)

⁴ Cf. Dībāca to *Mirāt ul 'Arūs*, and the fuller account in *Hayāt un Nazir*, p. 154.

⁵ P. 51.

upon her. From her childhood she had a distaste for romping and jesting and ill-natured jokes.¹ She loved reading, or doing the work of the house. No one had ever seen her chattering rubbish, or quarrelling with anybody. All the women of the mohulla loved her as they did their own daughters. Blessed indeed was the fate of those parents who owned Asgharī for a daughter! And happy was the lot of that family into which Asgharī was now to be admitted as a bride!

Asgharī is married at the age of thirteen, and the first period of her life in her new home is well described.² 'In the earlier days of her wedded life Asgharī did feel very ill at ease, as was only natural after suddenly quitting her mother's house to live among entire strangers. She had become inured to a life of constant activity and supervision; she could not bear to be without employment for a quarter of an hour. And now she was condemned to sit demurely, confined to one room, with nothing going on, for months together. The liberty which she enjoyed in her parents' home was no longer hers. As soon as she arrived in her mother-in-law's house, everyone was intent on watching her, and scrutinizing her every action. One scans her features; another appraises the length of her hair; another guesses her height; another examines her jewels; and another takes stock of her clothes. If she eats anything, each morsel is observed. What sized bit did she take? How wide did she open her mouth? How did she masticate it? And how did she gulp it down? If she rises from her seat, they look to see how she robes herself in her mantle, how she holds up her skirts. And if she sleeps, they count the hours; what time did she go to sleep? When did she get up? In short, every phase of her deportment was under observation.

'All this was terribly distressing to poor Asgharī; but since she was endowed with common sense and a good education, she emerged with credit even from this ordeal, and her manners in general were approved of by her husband's relations.'

From this good beginning Asgharī proceeds by unflinching tact, a proper humility before her elders, constant hard work, and sheer cold-blooded calculation and intrigue, not only in

¹ 'Ill-natured jokes' is a stronger phrase than the original Urdu warrants: 'teasing' would be a nearer equivalent. (Here and in the passage quoted below, the translation is Ward's.)

² Pp. 62-3.

triumphing over all her difficulties, but also in establishing herself as the real ruler of the household.

The Bride's Mirror was followed by *Banāt un N'ash* (literally 'Daughters of the Bier'—one of the names given in Urdu to the constellation of the Plough) which is a sequel to it.¹ It consists mainly of an account of a school set up by Asgharī for the girls of the *muhalla*, and details at length the lessons on history, geography and elementary science which she taught in it. Other books were written to counter indifference to religion, to show the evils of polygamy, to ridicule the practice advocated in some advanced modernist circles of adopting English dress and furniture and manners, to expound the application of Islam to modern problems, and to argue (rather cautiously) for widow re-marriage.² The didactic aim is well to the fore in all of them, and was intended to be.

But if Nazir Ahmad was not, and never claimed to be, a novelist, it is not difficult to see why he came to be regarded as one. His stories without doubt embody some of the major elements of the modern novel, and these are not only more prominent in his works than in Sarshār's, but show, in general, more talented writing. For reasons of space they must be dealt with rather summarily. As might be expected, Nazir Ahmad's writing owes nothing to the *dāstān* and its world of fantasy, and his prose style reflects that fact. In Sarshār the fondness for rhyming prose and for standard descriptions in vague superlatives is still very much in evidence, and where it intrudes, as it often does, even in the depiction of the everyday contemporary scene, it seems irritatingly out of place. In Nazir Ahmad the *dāstān* style has been banished completely, to be replaced by the vigorous near-colloquial which the Fort William writers had pioneered seventy years earlier, but which acquires in his hands an ease and flexibility which they in their day had not yet been able to impart to it. At the same

¹ It was published in 1872. Cf. *Hayāt un Nazir*, p. 172.

² These are, respectively *Taubat un Naṣūh* (1877), *Mohṣināt* (also known as *Fasāna i Muḥtalā*) (1885), *Ibn ul Vaqt* (1888), *Ruyā i Ṣādīqa* (1892), *Ayyāma* (1891). For a brief account of most of them see Suhrawardy (*op. cit.*, p. 104, fn. 2 above), pp. 53-65. For some reason she does not mention *Ruyā i Ṣādīqa*. Nor does she give dates of publication. These are supplied from *Hayāt un Nazir* where this gives them; otherwise from Bashir Maḥmūd Akhtar, *Nazir Ahmad ki nāval-nigāri kā fan*, Maktaba i 'Ilm, Lyallpur, 1966, pp. 9-10.

time it is a style which can rise to great heights. Nazir Ahmad has a range of descriptive power and an ability to evoke atmosphere which Sarshar cannot match. His description of the cholera epidemic in Delhi,¹ or of a scene in the 'Mutiny' of 1857 where Ibn ul Vaqt (the main character of the story in question) returning to his home at sunset, comes upon the corpses of some of the English shot by the rebels,² or of his character Naṣūh's dream of the Day of Judgement,³ a dream so vivid that it marks the turning point in his life—all these are magnificent pieces of writing and make a most powerful impact. His mastery of dialogue is equally outstanding. Every character *speaks* in character as well as acting in character. And finally the characters themselves are portrayed with great realism. This last point is in some ways the most striking of all. In more than one of his tales one sees the realist taking over the reins from the moralist, so that characters created to typify this or that idea then begin to develop according to their own logic, and in a way which damages rather than helps the author's didactic purpose. Asghari, in *The Bride's Mirror*, is a case in point. Nazir Ahmad creates her to show how even a girl of thirteen can develop the qualities to cope successfully with every difficulty. But a girl of thirteen who can do that can also become hard and calculating, acquiring both a keen awareness of her powers and a keen pleasure in exercising them. In *The Bride's Mirror* Asghari does develop in this way, and Nazir Ahmad is instinctively too good a realist not to portray these aspects of her character along with the others, though in so doing he lessens her effectiveness as an exemplar of all wifely virtues. The same sort of thing happens in *Taubat un Naṣūh* and in other novels. One is tempted to the no doubt futile, but nonetheless attractive speculation of what Nazir Ahmad might have done if he could have been persuaded to write novels rather than improving tales.

(c) 'Abdul Halim Sharar (1860-1926)

Both Sarshar and Nazir Ahmad had already produced their best work when a new writer appeared on the scene, bringing

¹ *Taubat un-Naṣūh*, Chapter 1.

² *Ibn ul Vaqt*, Chapter 2.

³ *Taubat un Naṣūh*, Chapter 1.

with him fresh themes to diversify the growing stream of prose narrative fiction. This was 'Abdul Halim Sharar, the pioneer of the historical romance in Urdu. It is in this role that we shall consider him here; but it should be remarked in passing that the historical romance was not his only significant contribution to Urdu literature. He was a strong supporter of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ideas, and his prolific writings, which include essays, popular history, and novels on contemporary social themes as well as historical romances, were all intended in one way or another to serve the cause of the New Light. In one striking respect his ideas were more advanced than Sir Sayyid's, for he was a staunch and outspoken opponent of *parda*, and one of his novels is designed to show the disastrous effects which the *parda* system could produce.¹ The day will perhaps come when he will be most valued for his essays, and particularly for the whole series of essays which, taken together, paint a vivid portrait of old Lucknow before the British annexation of 1856. (An English translation of these is likely to be published shortly.) But from his own time to the present day it has been his historical romances which have made the strongest appeal to Urdu speakers. His best known works in this genre appeared between 1887 and 1907,² and won immediate acclaim. Stated in the broadest terms, they all have a single theme—the portrayal of the glorious past of Islam and of the great superiority of Islamic civilization in its heyday over that of contemporary non-Muslim (especially Christian) powers. His method may be illustrated by a study of *Florā Florindā* which is generally agreed to be one of the best of his books. It was first published serially, from 1893, and appeared in book form in 1899. The story of *Florā Florindā* is set in Spain in the third century of the Muslim era (ninth century AD) when Muslim power in Spain was at its zenith. At the time when the story opens, Flora, the heroine, is about eighteen years old. She is the daughter of a Muslim father and a Christian mother and has an elder brother Ziyād. The father had done his best to convert his wife to Islam, but without success. She had

¹ *Badr un Nisā ki mustabat*. Suhrawardy describes this book on pp. 82-4. Neither she nor Sadiq (see fn. 2 below) gives the date of publication. The earliest edition in the British Museum is dated 1897.

² Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature*, London, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 339.

never used the Muslim name Zahra which he had given their daughter, but always called her Flora, and in the end the whole family called her by this name. Moreover she had secretly brought Flora up as a Christian, assisted in this, especially after her husband's death, by the organized, secret activities of the Christian Church. The mother too is now dead, but the Christians' secret contacts with Flora have not ceased, and her brother Ziyād, who has all the time been unaware of what was going on, now gets wind of the true situation and like a good Muslim takes steps to correct it. Flora is cut off from all Christian contacts by his command that only visitors who are personally known to him may come to the house. This presents the Christians with a difficult problem, and the Patriarch of the Christian community in Spain personally draws up plans for dealing with it. A nun, Florinda, is sent in the guise of a young Muslim widow to occupy a house in the locality where Flora and her brother live. She is to cultivate their acquaintance, win their confidence, and when opportunity offers, get Flora away to the great cathedral at Cordova, where further arrangements will be made. This she succeeds in doing. Just as the whole Christian Church had been involved in the attempt to get Flora away, so is the whole Muslim machinery of state brought into action to recover her. But no trace of her can be found, and in the end Ziyād disguises himself as a Christian monk and goes out in search of her.

Meanwhile the Patriarch, Florinda and Flora are in hiding in a village in the Pyrenees, and Princess (*sic*) Helen, daughter of Alfonso, Duke (*sic*) of San Sebastian, is soon after sent for to keep her company. She becomes deeply attached to Flora, whose beauty now attracts the unwelcome attentions of the Patriarch. Flora determines to take refuge in a convent, thinking that there she will be safe. Helen and Florinda both try to dissuade her—Helen because she does not want to lose Flora's companionship, and Florinda because she too has grown fond of Flora and as a nun she knows that once in a convent, far from being safe from the Patriarch's attentions, Flora will be compelled as a religious duty to submit to them. Her vows of secrecy forbid her to reveal this to anyone, but after Flora's departure for the convent, in her emotional distress she tells Helen. Helen reacts with anger and contempt both

for Florinda and the Patriarch and for nuns and priests in general, and stays on alone in the village when they have gone—Florinda to stay for a while in the same convent as Flora. Some days later a young monk (Ziyād) appears, having traced the fugitives to the village. He and Helen fall in love; he reveals his true identity to her, and she persuades him to take her along with him in his search for Flora.

Flora, now a nun, is raped by the Patriarch and becomes pregnant. Helen marries Ziyād, and though he makes not the slightest attempt to convert her, she of her own accord grows steadily more sympathetic to Islam. Ultimately, after several months they succeed in tracing Flora, Florinda and the Patriarch to the convent where, for the moment, all three of them are. The place is surrounded by Muslim forces and thoroughly searched, but without success; for only an hour or so earlier, dramatic events had taken place there.

Flora, now seven to eight months pregnant, had been summoned at night by the Patriarch to the comfortable outlying room at the nunnery set aside for the satisfaction of the carnal lusts of the monks, priests and dignitaries of the Church; she had submitted to him with apparent complaisance and then, when he was sunk in sleep, attacked him with a knife she had concealed in her robes, and taking advantage of the uproar resulting from his discovery, had escaped leaving him for dead. The Patriarch had been removed to the home of a poor Christian layman, where he could be tended without fear of discovery until he should recover.

Flora flees blindly from the city and ultimately finds herself in a cave. By a remarkable coincidence this turns out to be the very cave in which Ziyād, on assuming Christian dress, had left his clothes and his sword. Flora recognizes them, and assuming for some reason that he has been killed by the Christians, determines there and then to disguise herself in his clothes, to discover his murderers and to revenge his death with his own sword. Without informing us how a girl in such an advanced state of pregnancy achieves this remarkable feat, Sharar assures us that in Ziyād's clothes she is taken for a strikingly handsome young Muslim man, and in this guise she is taken into the service of a Muslim traveller named Abū Muslim, and eventually reaches the outskirts of Cordova in

his company. Here she takes leave of him, and again assuming Christian dress, takes a house in an obscure quarter and settles down to wait until an opportunity for revenge should offer itself.

We are now in the 30th and final chapter, and Sharar having written 340 pages¹ seems all of a sudden to feel that all this has gone on long enough and it is time to end. In no more than 13 pages, therefore, he resolves all his outstanding problems, and the story comes to an end in a welter of blood, tears, improbabilities and striking coincidences which take the reader's breath away. Flora realizes that the birth of her child cannot now be far off, and that her condition is so obvious that only by the utmost care can she continue to make her male disguise plausible. For the next few days, therefore, she goes out as little as possible, and that too only after nightfall. One evening as she returns from the bazaar she is approached by a Christian priest who even at close quarters notices nothing to suggest that she is anything but the young man she wishes to be taken for, and asks if he can be of service, for he has observed that 'he' is a newcomer and is alone. Flora (to the reader's astonishment) says she would be obliged if he would occasionally visit her, and gratefully accepts his suggestion that he should call in every morning as he returns home from church. He pays his first call the next morning and sits talking to Flora at length without any untoward suspicion arising. (The problem of concealing her pregnancy seems to have disappeared.) From the conversation she learns that the Patriarch, whom she had left for dead, has recovered, that he is in hiding in Cordova, that her visitor knows his whereabouts and has been to see him several times, and finally that he is willing to grant Flora's wish that he should take her to see him; and he goes to get the Patriarch's formal consent to this, saying that he will then be able to take her to him that very evening. Flora rejoices at this unexpected opportunity of taking her revenge on him and decides to do this first and pursue Ziyād's murderers afterwards if she survives to do so. Between her visitor's departure

¹ There have been numerous editions of *Florā Florindā*, as of most of Sharar's novels. That which I have used was published by 'Maktaba i Urdū', but bears no date or place of publication. I obtained it from Pakistan in about 1960. Occasional page references are to this edition.

and his return the same evening Sharar conveniently arranges for Flora to be delivered of her baby and make herself presentable for her interview with the Patriarch. She realizes that to conceal the child as she takes it along with her will be 'a little difficult'—which the reader may feel to be a considerable understatement—but this too is managed. She puts the child in a sort of bag improvised from a sheet and carries this on her arm, puts on a flowing robe which conceals the bag, and accompanies her guide to the Patriarch's hiding place. All this while the child makes no sound. At length she is conducted to a small room where the Patriarch awaits her. She bows before him, and at the same time lays the child on the ground and draws the sword (which she has also concealed under her flowing robe); with this she half-severs his neck, and then plunges it into his breast, calling upon him as he dies (and, as we shall see, he is allowed more than enough time for this) to see the fruit of his evil-doing lying on the ground at his feet. The Patriarch now recognizes her, and calls on someone to revenge him on her while he still lives to see it. At this a door opens and a man springs upon her and stabs her in the side. She falls dying to the ground, and she and her assailant then recognize each other. He is Abū Muslim, the man in whose employment she had come to Cordova. She is asking how he, a Muslim, comes to be where he is when three others burst into the room. These are none other than Ziyād, Helen and Florinda. (Ziyād had by a lucky chance caught Florinda and a monk red-handed in a plot to murder Helen: he had killed the monk on the spot, and Florinda had later been compelled on pain of death to guide Ziyād and Helen to the Patriarch's hiding-place.) Ziyād asks the dying girl who she is, and she tells him she is Flora. At this Helen runs to her and embraces her. Flora calls her by name and Abū Muslim no sooner hears it than he turns his wrathful gaze upon her and leaps upon her with dagger drawn; but Ziyād intervenes in time, and strikes his head off with his sword at the same moment as Helen recognizes him as her father. The Patriarch now calls out in a feeble voice telling Ziyād to kill Florinda, but he refuses to sully his sword with her blood. But the priest who had guided Flora here, and has been standing in astonishment all this time, now picks up 'Abū Muslim's' dagger and buries it in

Florinda's breast. The Patriarch urges him to kill Flora and Helen too, but dies as he speaks the words, and Ziyād seizes the man, wrests the dagger from him, and binds him fast. Flora now has time to give Helen a concise account of all that had befallen her since they parted in the Pyrenees, and having done so, turns to her brother, declares herself a convinced Muslim and asks his forgiveness. Ziyād is now weeping uncontrollably, and Helen, in the double grief of Flora's and her father's loss, is in even greater distress. But she takes Flora's baby in her arms and weeping copiously, promises, despite Ziyād's initial objection, to bring it up as her own son. At this Flora bursts into tears and in the same moment dies. Ziyād and Helen continue weeping for a long time; then Ziyād asks her forgiveness for killing her father. She recognizes that he could hardly have done otherwise, and forgives him readily. We are now on the last page of the book. Helen goes on to say that now her father is dead there is no longer any reason why she should not openly embrace Islam, and she thereupon does so. And so all ends satisfactorily.

It hardly needs saying that a tale of this kind takes us right back to the world of the *dāstān*, although Sharar himself boldly calls his book a '*nāval*' (novel). The opening sentence of *Florā Florindā* reads, 'Our interesting novel begins about the year AH 230' (i.e. about AD 845). There are indeed significant differences. It does not exceed the length which the use of the word 'novel' would lead one to expect, and the narrative is well-constructed (albeit full of improbabilities), moves at a rapid pace and is, in general, written in simple but vigorous Urdu. Its dialogue too, where the themes are those of everyday occurrences, is natural and convincing. Yet the overall atmosphere is unmistakably that of the *dāstān*. There is the same evocation of the heroic age of Islam, the same battle of unalloyed virtue against unalloyed vice, the same dependence on exciting episodes following one upon another to maintain the reader's interest, and the same spicing of the story with erotic detail. Faiz Ahmad Faiz, in an excellent article on Sharar, writes of him,¹ 'It is rather a harsh thing to say, but all the same it must be said that when in his moral and religious zeal he depicts the evils of the churches and the monasteries . . .

¹ Faiz Ahmad Faiz, *Mizān*, Nāshirīn, Lahore, 1962, p. 229.

his writing borders on the pornographic'. This judgement is fully justified. Sexual lust, allied with religious fanaticism, is portrayed as the dominant motive of the Christian characters. Sharar sets the tone on page 10, where Christians first make their appearance. A small number of monks and nuns are depicted as they assemble at a desolate spot in the mountains outside Toledo. Sharar writes, 'But it is impossible to tell why they have come here in this way, and with what object they have assembled in this desolate and awe-inspiring place.' He goes on, quite gratuitously, 'Incidents arising from the carnal desires and illicit lusts of nuns and priests are so well-known throughout the country that everyone will at first surmise that they have come here to this wild and lonely place to give full vent to their uncontrolled desires and allow full freedom to their lusts. But no, that is not the case.' Similarly, Ziyād, in his first serious talk to Flora warning her of the dangers of too tolerant an attitude towards Christians tells her,¹ 'Their monks, who pretend to have abandoned the world, are the worldliest of men—in fact, they worship worldly things and more than anyone else in the world they are the slaves of their own desires. In the same measure nuns, who are dedicated to the Church to live out their lives as virgins, are almost without exception addicted in the highest degree to fornication. And the association of these lustful monks and abandoned nuns has resulted in a situation where the church has generally become a place of fornication. Thousands of abortions are carried out, and thousands of babies are secretly buried alive in the precincts of the church.' And such immorality is not confined to the monks and nuns; the institution of confession spreads it amongst the laity as well. We are told in a footnote (in Chapter 18): 'In the Roman Catholic religion it is obligatory for every man and woman once a week to go before the priest and confess all his or her sins of the week, and to ask forgiveness. On these occasions the priests receive the right to ask respectable women all manner of shameless questions, and to express freely to them their lustful desires. This is what is called confession. In former days, under the cloak of this confession, priests have depraved thousands of chaste women—not to speak of the fact that, since the priests become fully acquainted

¹ Chapter 4, p. 38.

with all the women's secrets, they can bring such pressure to bear on respectable women that, from fear that their secrets may be revealed, they are in no position to refuse any of the priests' desires.'

Examples could be multiplied. More characteristic still of the *dāstān*-like atmosphere is the whole chapter in which Florinda step by step arouses Ziyād's passion until he escapes the sin of fornication by a hair's breadth, saved by his strong devotion to Islam, but constrained by the violence of his feelings to press Florinda to marry him without delay.

The only Christian character portrayed from the start with any sympathy is that of Princess Helen, and here the fervour with which Sharar describes her beauty as good as tells us at once that she is destined to become a Muslim—which, as we have seen, she ultimately does on the very last page of the book.

Sharar makes full use of her as his most effective propagandist for Islam. At one point she interrupts Florinda to tell her forcefully:¹ 'It was you people who had impressed the idea upon me that the Muslims are cruel and bigoted. But since I came here it has become crystal clear to me that it is you nuns and monks that go around slandering them and fanning the flames of prejudice against them. In fact they are people who prize justice, and there is no trace of deceit or hypocrisy in them. They respect and honour any man who lives a sincere and honest life, no matter what his religion may be. My own example is there to prove it.' It is indeed; but readers will recall another example which leads perhaps to a less flattering conclusion. In Chapter 2, Ziyād is explaining his family history in a gathering adorned by numbers of the most distinguished and admirable figures of Muslim Spain. He tells how his mother had from the outset secretly brought Flora up as a Christian, and how in spite of all his efforts to cut her off from all contact with Christians he is only too bitterly aware that he has not been able to bring about a change of heart. He turns to his host—the most holy and most distinguished Muslim in Cordova—and asks him what he should do. His host replies:² 'You should make it clear to Flora that if she adopts the Christian religion she will be put to death; for in Islam the penalty for apostasy is death. Probably this threat will be effective.' The

¹ Pp. 326-7 (towards the end of Chapter 28).

² P. 24.

non-Muslim reader and, indeed, one hopes many Muslim readers too, will be bound to conclude that a man who can give such advice may have many virtues, but that tolerance is not among them; for leaving aside the question of whether tolerance and the death penalty for apostasy can go together, to regard as an apostate a girl who from earliest childhood has been taught Christian doctrines by her mother is, to say the least of it, going rather far. But Sharar was writing for an audience which took such things in its stride.

As in the *dāstāns*, the love-interest is as strongly in evidence in the Muslim camp as in that of its adversaries—though here, of course, nothing in the least reprehensible occurs. The portrayal is again in *dāstān* terms—terms which, incidentally, are common to the *dāstān* and the *ghazal*, the traditional Urdu lyric. Love at first sight, or nearly at first sight, expresses itself in an immediate, complete, and absolute devotion to the beloved; and in a declaration of willingness to sacrifice even life itself in her cause. And here both the depiction of the lover's feelings and the dialogue between lover and beloved are completely stylized in marked contrast to the dialogue elsewhere. Sharar is clearly aware of the appeal which such scenes made to his audience, for they recur throughout the book, and often in contexts where they are of little or no relevance to the development of the story.¹ It is commonly said that another feature which Sharar's tales share with the *dāstān* is his interruption of the narrative to display his skill in depicting the scenes in which the action is set. But in *Florā Florinḍā* at any rate this is not much in evidence.

Sharar's tales have played an ambiguous role from the time they made their first appearance right up to the present day. The popularity which he won is, I think, largely explained by the same sort of combination of historical circumstances that favoured Sarshār. The apostles of the New Light had found that one effective way of appealing to their fellow-Muslims was to remind them of their glorious past—the argument being that the civilization of Islam had once been far in advance of the Christian world, and that the Muslims therefore had it in them to emulate, and even overtake, the advanced nations of the West. Sharar himself belonged to this school of thought.

¹ Cf. Chapter 20, p. 202, and Chapter 24, pp. 264-5.

But by the end of the nineteenth century the argument had tended to boomerang. The recollection of the glorious past of Islam was used to justify the argument that Muslims had nothing of importance to learn from the British and that the awe and respect with which the New Light regarded them was entirely misplaced. Sharar's books must, I think, have appealed to both audiences. Faiz, in the article already quoted, writes,¹ 'Sharar's age is . . . an age when the Muslims had just awoken to a consciousness of their decline. These romantic tales in the first place helped them to forget the bitterness of everyday life. Secondly, the recital of past conquest partly inspired them with self-respect and partly with emotional solace, with the thought that even if *they* were not heroes at least their forefathers had been. And thirdly the description of the vices of other peoples provided them with a way of taking mental revenge for their present subjection. . . . This is why Sharar's novels are so popular. . . . Sharar is not a novelist, but a teller of tales, and one of considerable skill. . . . In general, all children and a good many among the young and not so young expect nothing more of a story-writer, and Sharar is still the novelist most popular with these young and not-so-young children.'

THE FIRST TRUE NOVEL: RUSVĀ'S 'UMRĀO
JĀN ADĀ'

If Sharar's work, as compared with Nazīr Aḥmad's and even with Sarshār's, represents in some measure a reversion to the *dāstān*, his contemporary Mirzā Muḥammad Hādī Rusvā (1858-1931) took the next major step forward, and that too a step of such significance that one can truly say of his greatest work *Umrāo Jān Adā* (1899) that with it a real novel, in the internationally accepted modern sense of the term, at last makes its appearance in Urdu literature. In the preface to another book² he sets out his views on the writing of fiction, criticizing in passing both Nazīr Aḥmad and Sharar, although without actually naming either. On Nazīr Aḥmad he expresses himself quite mildly: 'It is the practice of some contemporary

¹ P. 229.

² *Zāt i Sharif*, Ashrafi Book Depot, Lucknow, n.d. (?1963), pp. 3-4.

writers to frame a plot in order to prove a particular point and then fill in the details accordingly. I make no objection against them, but I shall not be at fault if I simply say that my method is the opposite of theirs. I aim simply at a faithful portrayal of actual happenings and am not concerned with recording the conclusions to be drawn from them.' On Sharar his tone is more sarcastic; after saying that he (Rusvā) writes of what he knows, he goes on: 'I have not the inventive power to portray events that happened thousands of years ago, and moreover I consider it a fault to produce a picture which tallies neither with present-day conditions nor with those of the past—which, if you study the matter carefully, is what usually happens. Great ability and much labour is required to write a historical novel, and I have neither the ability nor the leisure to do it.' He gives his own view of fiction at some length, saying that the fiction-writer is a kind of historian, and in a way his fiction is of greater value than histories are, because historians write the history of individuals (*sic*) and cannot give an overall picture of reality. The novelist generally gives a picture of what he has seen in his own time—that is, the novelist who makes Nature his teacher; for this is what a novelist should do. Aristotle well said that poetry is the imitation of Nature. 'Understanding these things,' Rusvā continues, 'I have made it a principle in my own writing to record in my novels those things which I have myself seen, and which have made an impression upon me, believing that these things will make an impression on others also.' He goes on to apologize, perhaps with his tongue in his cheek, for the fact that 'the scene of most of my novels is my birthplace, Lucknow', but excuses himself on the ground that this is the only place that he knows well—after which follows the hit at Sharar already quoted. Elsewhere¹ he reinforces his earlier point: 'My novels should be regarded as a history of our times, and I hope it will be found a useful one.'

In *Umrāo Jān Adā* he showed that he could not only enunciate these principles but also apply them in practice (though at the same time it must be said that his other novels fall short of the standards he set himself). The book is the life-story of a Lucknow courtesan, whose name forms the title

¹ The concluding sentence of *Zāt i Sharif*.

of the novel, and the story covers, roughly, the years 1840-70—that is the decades spanning the great watershed of the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857. In those years courtesans of Umrāo Jān's class—beautiful women, who besides being expert singers and dancers were also highly educated in the traditional culture of their day and were quite often poets, as Umrāo Jān herself was—played a role in Lucknow society closely comparable to that of the *hetaerae* in ancient Athens, and through her experiences one really does see something of the social and cultural history of the times. The story is beautifully told and extraordinarily well constructed. Not only are the characterization and the dialogue excellent; the story has a proper plot, and real development, with 'a beginning, a middle, and an end'. Rusvā begins with an account of how it came to be written. He had a friend from Delhi, who was very fond of Lucknow and frequently came to stay there for long periods. On these occasions he would rent a small house, and would often invite his friends there to spend the evening with him. The room where they used to sit together, talking and reciting their verses to one another, was separated by only a thin partition wall from the house next door. In it was a sort of hatch, the shutters of which were, however, always kept closed. They had been given to understand that the occupant of the house on the other side of the wall was an elderly courtesan, but had often noticed how quiet and unobtrusive a neighbour she was. One evening the host arranged a small informal *mushā'ira*, that is a gathering at which the guests, turn by turn, recite their verses. (This is still a popular institution with educated Urdu-speakers, amongst whom almost every other person seems to be a poet.) On these occasions the expression of appreciation is loud and uninhibited, and on this particular evening Rusvā has just recited a verse when the company is surprised to hear an exclamation of approval coming from the other side of the partition wall. The host smiles and calls out, 'Come in and join us. It's not proper to call out from there.' But there is no reply. A few minutes later a maidservant appears and asks 'Which of you is Mirzā Rusvā?' Rusvā identifies himself, and the maid says that her mistress is asking to see him. The other guests are quick to note that the lady next door knows Rusvā well enough to recognize him

from the sound of his voice,¹ and there is some chaffing at his expense. He excuses himself, goes out with the maidservant, and is taken in to see her mistress, whom he at once recognizes as Umrāo Jān. Knowing her accomplishments as a poet, he urges her to return with him and take part in the *mushā'ira*, and after some demur, she does so. Her verses are much appreciated, and after that evening she frequently visits the house to take part in gatherings of this kind. One evening she and Rusvā are talking with their host after the other guests have gone, and they tell her how interesting it would be if she would relate to them the story of her life. Rusvā is particularly persistent; and in the end she agrees to do as they ask. The rest of the book is an account of the successive meetings with Rusvā in which she tells him her story. After each occasion, unbeknown to her, Rusvā writes it all down, including the occasional exchanges between them with which her narrative is interrupted—a device which very effectively enhances the illusion of reality. Space does not allow even a summary account of her adventures, beginning with her childhood recollections, until at the age of seven she is kidnapped by a sworn enemy of her father and taken to Lucknow to be sold into a brothel, and recounting all her changing fortunes during thirty years until she retires quietly to spend her old age alone in the house she now occupies. When her story is complete Rusvā hands her his manuscript and asks her to read it through and correct any mistakes he may have made. She later describes to him her reaction.² 'Mirzā Rusvā Sahib, when you first handed me the manuscript of my life-story and asked me to revise it, I was so angry that I felt like tearing it into little pieces. I kept thinking to myself, "Have I not suffered enough shame in my own lifetime that now my story should be written down, so that people will read it and curse me even after I am dead?" But my own dilatory nature, and a regard for the labour you had spent on it, restrained me.

'Last night at about twelve o'clock I was dropping off to sleep when suddenly I felt wide awake. As usual, I was alone in the room. The servants were all asleep downstairs. The lamp

¹ Or, perhaps, she recognizes the verse.

² Mirza Rusvā, *Umrāo Jān Adā*, ed. Zahir Fatehpuri, Majlis i Taraqqi I Adab, Lahore, 1963, pp. 321-3.

was burning at the head of the bed. For a long time I kept tossing and turning, trying to get to sleep; but sleep would not come, and in the end I got up and made myself a *pān* and called the maidservant to come and get the hookah ready. I lay down again on the bed and began to smoke. I thought I might read a story. There were plenty of books on the shelves at the head of the bed, and one by one I picked them up and turned the pages. But I had read them all before several times, and could not arouse any interest in any of them. Then my hand fell upon your manuscript. I again felt deeply agitated, and, I tell you truly, I had quite made up my mind to tear it up when it seemed as though some unseen voice said to me, "Very well, Umrāo. Suppose you tear it up, throw it away, burn it. What difference will it make? The recording angels of God—a just and mighty God—have by His command written down in every detail a clear account of all the deeds of your life. And who can destroy *that* record?" I felt myself trembling in every limb, so that the manuscript nearly fell from my hand, but I managed to rally myself. Now all idea of destroying it had left me, and I wanted to put it down again and leave it as it was. But as though without my own volition, I began to read. I read the first page and turned over, and before I had finished the next half-dozen lines I was seized with so consuming an interest in my story that the more I read the more I wanted to. No other tale had ever engrossed me so completely. When you read other stories the thought is always with you that all this is invented, and did not really happen; and this thought lessens the pleasure you feel. But your whole narrative was made up of things which I myself had experienced, and it was as though they were all returning to pass before my eyes. Every experience seemed as real to me as it had been at the time, and I felt more vividly than words can describe all the emotions which it had aroused in me. If anyone could have seen me then, he would have thought me mad. Sometimes I would burst out laughing; at other times the tears would overflow and drop on to the page. You had asked me to make corrections as I read, but I was too absorbed even to think of it. I read on and on until daybreak. Then I performed my ablutions, said the morning prayer, and slept for a while. I woke again at about eight o'clock, washed my hands and face,

and again began to read. By sunset I had finished the whole manuscript.'

The book concludes with the account of a final session together in which Umrāo tells Rusvā her own reflections on the experience of her life.

We are not left in any doubt that Rusvā's deepest sympathies are with Umrāo Jān, whom he sees as the victim of others' sins against her; and a striking passage in the novel shows how passionately he feels about such things. He tells her,¹ 'Wise men have divided sins into two kinds. The first are those which affect only the sinner, and the second those whose effect extends to others. In my humble opinion the first are minor sins and the second are major sins (although others may think otherwise); and sins that affect others can be forgiven only by those whom they have harmed. You know what Hāfiz² says: Drink wine; burn the Qurān; set fire to the Kaba, and dwell in the house of idols: but do not harm your fellow men! Remember this, Umrāo Jān: to harm one's fellow men is the worst of sins. This is a sin for which there is no forgiveness, and if there is, then God preserve me, His godhead is in vain.' Characteristically, the words are spoken in a context where they do not apply directly to Umrāo Jān. (Whenever Rusvā talks to her about herself it is always in a half-serious, half-bantering tone.) But their application to her own case is clear. Yet Rusvā's approach to her is entirely un sentimental, and he can speak to her with a bluntness which is almost cruel. At one point in the story Umrāo is living in hiding at the house of a lawyer, who is defending her in a long-drawn-out lawsuit. One day when he is away, his wife, feeling the need of someone to talk to, comes across to the outhouse where she has her quarters and invites her into the house. While they are talking quite amicably together, an old woman comes in. She completely ignores Umrāo, but speaks contemptuously about her to the wife, and when she remonstrates with her a heated quarrel develops, which ends in the wife beating the old woman with her slipper. By this time the wife's mother-in-law and her old maidservant have appeared on the scene, and these two, who also treat Umrāo as though she were not there, proceed

¹ P. 263.

² The great Persian poet.

to discuss the rights and wrongs of the wife's conduct. As a result the old woman is ordered out, but they agree that in the first place it was the wife who was at fault. Umrāo, seeing that she is not wanted, returns to her own room. As she relates the incident to Rusvā she expresses the anger which after the lapse of all these years she still feels at the contempt with which she had been treated. Rusvā cuts her short and tells her bluntly that in his opinion the old women had been quite right to behave as they did, that the wife was indeed to blame, and that if *his* wife should ever do such a thing he would send her packing back to her parents and not allow her to set foot in his home again for six months. Umrāo demands to know why, and Rusvā replies: 'I will tell you why. There are three kinds of women—good women, depraved women and prostitutes. And depraved women are of two kinds—those who keep their depravity secret, and those who openly lead a wicked and immoral life. Haven't you the sense to see that only women whose character is unstained can associate with good women? Think of their position. Poor women, they spend their whole lives imprisoned within their own four walls, and have troubles without end to endure. When times are good anyone will stand by a man, but these stand by him in good times and bad alike. While their husbands are young and have plenty of money, it is usually other women who get the benefit of it. But when they grow old and have nothing, no one else so much as asks after them; and it is the wives who go through all manner of distress, and trust in fate to revenge them on the others. Don't you think they are right to pride themselves on all this? And it is this pride which makes them look upon immoral women with utter loathing and abhorrence. God will forgive a sinner who repents, but these women will never forgive her. And there is another thing. You often find that no matter how beautiful his wife may be, or how admirable her character, or how adequate in all her duties, her fool of a husband will get an infatuation for prostitutes who cannot so much as compare with her on any score, and will desert his wife, sometimes temporarily, and sometimes for life. That is why they get the idea—or rather the conviction—that prostitutes practise witchcraft which dulls their husbands' senses. And that too, in a

Pp. 280-1.

way, testifies to their goodness; because even in these circumstances it is not their husbands that they blame, but the immoral women who lead them astray. And what greater proof of their loyalty could there be than that?

Umrāo's own attitude towards herself is equally unsentimental. She tells Rusvā at the end of her story that a woman like herself who has been a courtesan is deluding herself if she thinks that marriage or love or security, or indeed any relationship which demands of others that they love and trust her, is possible for her. She must live her own life and rely on no one but herself to see her through. She obviously regrets that this should be so, and says she now shares the deep admiration and respect for purdah women which Rusvā had expressed earlier, and wishes that their lot could have been hers (though she adds, with characteristic realism, that the suffocating atmosphere of purdah would now be unbearable to her). But all this is said in a dry, matter-of-fact way, and with a complete absence of any maudlin self-pity.

Much more could be written about this novel, which in my view has nothing to fear from comparison with its English and European contemporaries. It is unfortunate that the only English translation is that of Khushwant Singh and M. A. Husaini, published in India in 1961.¹ The translators have failed to do justice to the original, and so have given a very inadequate impression of its true worth.

CONCLUSION

Umrāo Jān Adā has remained in many respects an isolated achievement. Even Rusvā himself never wrote anything to compare with it. His other two major novels are more closely comparable with Naẓīr Aḥmad's tales than with his own masterpiece. They deal with two contrasted themes. In one² the central character is a member of the old decadent Lucknow aristocracy whose complacent persistence in an outmoded way of life brings him to inevitable ruin. In the other³ the hero is also a man of aristocratic family, but one who is thrown entirely upon his own resources early in his life and makes his

¹ By Orient Longmans Ltd.² *Zāt i Sharif*.³ *Sharifzāda*.

way in the world through sheer hard work and determination to adapt himself to the new conditions around him. The moral is in both cases made as crystal clear as in anything that Nazir Ahmad ever wrote.

The strong moral didactic trend continues in Urdu prose narrative to the present day. The propaganda for western ways began to be met early in the twentieth century by counter-propaganda for the traditional Islamic way of life which stressed the danger to religion and morals which the western outlook brought in its train. (Very little writing of this kind—and there is a good deal of it—reaches any worthwhile standard.) In the twenties themes of nationalism and Gandhism appear, especially in the work of Prem Chand (1880-1936); and from the thirties socialist and communist trends emerge strongly, to continue up to the present day. The development of prose narrative in the twentieth century has been not so much towards a greater realism as towards an extension of the range of themes. The one really important novelist of the period is Prem Chand, who wrote both Hindi and Urdu versions of all his works and is thus a major figure in both literatures. His Gandhian message is expressed mainly in tales of peasant life. He knew the life of the peasantry intimately, and his best work portrays it extremely well. His numerous short stories are generally agreed to contain his best work, and the situation has not changed in this respect since his death, for while a few novels of some merit have been written, the short story has been developed to an appreciably higher standard, and Urdu can now show work in this field which, even judged by international standards, is in the highest class. Some of the factors that hold back the development of the novel are undoubtedly economic. Urdu writers work in a community where the standard of living is low and the percentage of illiteracy is still very high. A collection of short stories by a popular writer who has already established his reputation will rarely be published in an edition of more than 1,000 copies, and, at a price of somewhere about three rupees (that is, roughly four shillings) is beyond the reach of very many of his would-be readers. No Urdu writer can depend solely on writing for a livelihood, and few can devote even a substantial part of their time to it. (This is one of the reasons

why the short story has flourished more than the novel.) Another factor is that of cultural tradition. Poetry still enjoys a higher prestige than prose literature, and men who feel that they have creative talent tend to apply it accordingly. Nevertheless, the achievement in the field of prose narrative is substantial enough, and forms a firm basis on which present and future writers will continue to build.