

Verisimilitude in the 'First Urdu Novel': Reading *Umrao Jan Ada* as Metafiction

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The first Urdu novel is a category that is difficult to trace and has been a topic of much literary debate. The novel in many of its characteristics matches closely with older forms in Urdu, such as the dastan and the qissa.

*This paper focuses this complexity of defining the moment of the arrival of the Novel in Urdu language through Mirza Hadi Ruswa's novel *Umrao Jan Ada*. Often called the first Urdu novel, this novel emerges as metafiction- the story of a novel within a novel. As much as it shares the story of the protagonist, it also relates in several important passages the struggles of writing a biographical novel in late nineteenth century Lucknow. This paper will engage in a close study of instances that relate the act of writing a novel, also giving a close assessment of what a foreign form translated into, when it was absorbed into indigenous languages. It will trace certain ideas that indicate the position of the biographer in relation to his subject, raising questions relevant to the act of novel-writing in contemporary times as much as in the past.*

The novel as a form rose from nineteenth century Europe to conquer the world. It was literally so, since it went on to influence literatures across the world. The novel is closely linked to print capitalism and as circulated in large numbers due to its easy availability in print. It is the first form in the history of written literature to attain such wide circulation because it arrived at an opportune moment when print literature was thriving. Same is the case for India and its literatures which absorbed this popular form.

Literary historians trace the rise of the novel in Urdu as imported from Europe to the Indian subcontinent by tracing its predecessors in the traditions of Qissa and Dastan². Sarshar's *Fasana-e-Azad* and Munshi Naval Kishore's publication of *Dastan-i-Amir Hamza* represent a pre-existing tradition of storytelling, which was later crafted in the mould of realism and individualised narrative that mark the novel form. The element of linear

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² Asaduddin, 'First Urdu Novel: Contesting Claims and Disclaimers', pp-78.

storytelling and realism brought in by the European form broke with the cyclical, fantastical storytelling. So when Mirza Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada*, published in 1899, is proclaimed to be the first Urdu novel, it is a perfection of a form and manner of storytelling alien to Urdu prose but one that is emulated by Urdu writers so as to attain the status of 'modern' prose.

In order to explore this novel's claims to being the first Urdu novel and perfecting the form, the structure and framework is significant. The frame narrative that absorbs the author into the text as a full-fledged character is also a frame that becomes a significant part of the story. It supplements it, buttresses its claims of veracity, and contributes to the building up of the action by constant interventions by the author- both the unseen narrator outside and the amusingly inquisitive Mirza Ruswa in the text.

In his preface to the novel, Ruswa relates how he began writing the novel. A group of his friends stayed in Lucknow and would meet for *musha'iras* in the evenings. As a loud party, with zealous applause and '*wah wahs*' their party was apparently loud enough to be heard next door, where the ageing courtesan Umrao Jan resided. On one such evening the poets heard applause from the connecting window between the two apartments. Soon after, a maidservant arrived at the party and asked for Mirza Ruswa (whom Umrao knew prior to that evening) and upon her mistress' request, Ruswa went to the apartment next door and met Umrao Jan. Since they were familiar with each other, Ruswa invited her to their party and she obliged, and the same evening she recited some verses in the company of the poets. Their curiosity then led to the telling of the story of her life 'in a series of sittings'³ which were recorded by Ruswa and later published with her approval. The series of meetings thus took place in the evenings and Ruswa returned to his chambers to record them in writing, and eventually offered the manuscript to Umrao Jan for her to read through and approve, before it

³ Singh, and M.A. Husaini. Introduction to *Umrao Jan Ada*, pp-6.

was published. The historical veracity of this incident lies in doubt, and this doubt has a direct bearing on the text since veracity is one of Ruswa's key concerns and is stressed repeatedly. The frame Ruswa constructs persists throughout the novel, lending it a supposed authenticity by grounding it in the said incident and also proving to be his window for entering and exiting the text at will. This process is apparent when the novel is read as metafiction- a commentary on its own writing and its self-reflexivity.

Metafiction as a term is primarily linked to modernist and postmodernist literature because it interrogates the poet's consciousness and the process of artistic creation. Certain devices are employed, such as the violation of narrative levels by the narrator, which brings attention onto them, and also the author relating the story of the process of writing the novel itself. *Umrao Jan Ada* employs many of such devices, for instance Ruswa's detailed description of how he came across Umrao Jan and the narration of the story began, his flitting between narrative levels of Umrao's story and the story of the writing of the novel. His debates and discussions over what should be included or excluded from the narrative raise significant questions such as- what guides the process of the selection of events while recording a life story? What is the relationship between the subject/protagonist and the author? Is authenticity really the primary concern for a 'biographer' like Ruswa? These questions are explored in the course of the novel.

For some readers, *Umrao Jan Ada* might be a text that dodders between a biography and a novel true to its name. Indeed, as a biography, told and recorded in first person, and claiming fidelity to 'truth', *Umrao Jan Ada* seems to capture the life of the protagonist in a realistic portrait. The protagonist is sufficiently detached when commenting upon the events of her own life and also gives her stamp of approval towards the end, thus sanctifying the text with the holy waters of realism and authenticity. It holds the protagonist's biography from her

childhood to the current moment. Except that the 'protagonist' here, is a position that has contenders. It is contested by Ruswa himself- the ever present, omniscient narrator and character. It is his presence in the text that makes possible a reading of *Umrao Jan Ada* as metafiction. The story of Umrao Jan is as much the story of the courtesan as it is the story of recording it in a novel- it comments self consciously on not just its own writing but also on how it is recorded and what is not written.

Analyzing *Umrao Jan Ada* as a novel reveals certain important stylistic conventions. As a bildungsroman, this novel fits the category perfectly since it traces the story of Umrao faithfully (or claims to) and narrates it in her own voice. Insofar as Ruswa is brought into the picture, as a character who becomes a part of her story and also directs (and thereby 'writes') the story, his role enacts the author's role. He goads a story out of a character, he censures parts that unsettle his mind, he comments and induces discussion on the parts that he finds amusing or debatable. As the 'author', he does not only 'write' the text but also selects, omits and imposes his version of the text on a self proclaimed, untampered, faithful record of a life. For instance, in chapter 10 of the novel, when Umrao relates the incident that took place in the lawyer's house where the senior mistress of the house insults her, Ruswa intervenes to criticize Umrao in the following passage:

"I don't think there was any occasion for you to be so angry," insisted Mirza Ruswa. "I believe the two old women were not wrong in saying what they said and the thrashing the old hag got was wholly undeserved. That is the truth, whether you like it or not."⁴

Considering these claims, the novel betrays itself at more levels than one. Frances W. Pritchett points out some telling inconsistencies in the historical facts embedded in the story,

⁴ Ruswa, *Umrao Jan Ada*, Pp-118.

which reveal it to be an episodic novel and not an autobiography.⁵ For instance J.K.Bautze points out in the essay '*Umrao Jan Ada: Her Carte de Visite*'⁶ that Bahu Begum's tomb, at which Ameeran's father was the caretaker, was actually completed after the Revolt of 1857. According to the trajectory of the novel, however, Umrao is a mature lady when the revolt takes place and her childhood must have been located somewhere in the 1820s or 30s. The tomb could not possibly have been completed and received visitors in her childhood. Other inconsistencies point out the role of the selection of events which is a characteristic narrative effect of bildungsroman novels. For instance Umrao relates events at which she was not present and does not mention a source, such as the dialogue exchanged by Husaini and Banno. Dialogues are a language of performance and have circumstantial significance, but Ruswa quotes them in detail although he listens to them daily and returns home to record what he hears during the day. Such instances abound in the novel, along with evidence of Ruswa's influence. He bluntly tells her when her story slides into monotony, he censures her commentary on events according to his whims and what he deems morally correct.

In order to locate Ruswa in the larger historical context, one must recall that he was among the prominent names that formulated precepts of fiction writing in Urdu. R.Russell points out in an essay⁷ that though the Urdu lyric had established itself by the early eighteenth century, prose only arrived much later in the 1860s. Before that, in 1837, Urdu replaced Persian in the law courts. At such a nascent stage, the likes of Ruswa and Nazir Ahmad played a key role in establishing styles of fiction writing and modes of realism that would later be considered the foundation of Urdu prose fiction. Ruswa criticised Nazir Ahmad's style of fiction writing as directed by one point around which he framed a plot and then filled

⁵ Pritchett, 'Umrao Jan "Ada"'.
⁶ Bautze, '*Umrao Jan Ada: Her Carte de Visite*', pp- 138.
⁷ Russell, 'The Development of the Modern Novel in Urdu', pp-132.

in the details (though he did not name Nazir Ahmad)⁸. Ruswa on the other hand claims fidelity to actual events and does not bother with drawing conclusions about them.

This stress on realism is buttressed by his intrusion in the narrative at intervals, which maintains the illusion of reality and contributes to breaking the flow of the narrative, thereby reminding the reader of his presence. This presence therefore prevents the readers from slipping into the flow of the *dastaan*, reminding them that this is a novel- with a beginning, middle, and an end, and that it subscribes to the valorised virtue of realism and 'truth'.

Ruswa's character is finely etched and brought into relief through the commentary on his pseudonym- one of Umrao's couplets puns on the name Ruswa, in chapter 5: "Rue the day you professed love for Ruswa of evil fame/ He will not let you go, till you get as bad a name."⁹ Ruswa and Umrao- the author and his subject, share a relationship of two artists, two poets who are experienced and provide philosophical commentary on life. Such moments allow the text to slip into a didactic mode, reminiscent of Ruswa's predecessors like Nazir Ahmad.

Realism as a recording of events also becomes a mode of surveillance- the constant anxiety of Umrao regarding the recounting of her life and making her story public is an anxiety reflected in her anxiety of being taken to task on the day of Judgement. So the shame of recounting her life is as persistent as the inevitability of truth being laid bare before God, as depicted in these lines:

Then my hand fell on your manuscript. I was extremely upset by it. Then I felt the presence of someone beside me who whispered in my ear: "All right, Umrao Jan, let us assume that you have torn up the manuscript and thrown it away or

⁸ Ruswa, Introduction to *Zat-i-Sharif*, pp-3-4.

⁹ Ruswa, *Umrao Jan Ada*, pp-26.

burnt it, what difference will it have made? By the order of the Just and Powerful God, the Recording Angels have already written down a detailed account of all the incidents of your life; who can erase one line of that?"¹⁰

The authenticity of her experience makes her own story most compelling for her, most apparent in this passage:

I had never enjoyed reading other stories as much because I could never forget that they were fabrications of the mind without any truth or substance. All the incidents that you have penned in my biography did, in fact, come to pass. And they passed before my eyes exactly as they had taken place.¹¹

I would like to draw attention here also to Ruswa and Umrao's tone of bantering, bluntness, and the lack of sentimentality in expressing their opinions. The tone in fact turns austere and matter-of-fact, almost beseeching the reader to not doubt the veracity of the account. One may recall at this point that Ruswa's text is clearly embedded in a historical context- the Revolt of 1857 appears in the novel as a social upheaval that ravages Lucknow. There also references to Bahu Begum, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and other historically verifiable figures located in the then Awadh region. Ruswa's location and setting of the story is also verifiable because Chowk in Lucknow and other neighbouring areas indeed had *kothas*, and of course, Umrao Jan was a historical figure. However, as a reader of fiction, one must perceive this text critically as emerging from a context of social change. Umrao Jan's retelling of the milieu is also the narrative of change. Post the Revolt of 1857, the culture of *tawa'ifs* and their refined arts saw a decline. With the phasing out of feudalism and with it the connoisseurs and patrons of these arts, the culture of *kothas* in Lucknow and elsewhere slid to

¹⁰ Ruswa, *Umrao Jan Ada*, Pp-141.

¹¹ Ruswa, *Umrao Jan Ada*, Pp-141-42

a different position. The *tawa'ifs* receded and the meanings of their practices changed with the new legislations categorising 'prostitutes' as marginal, suspect figures.

The conclusion of the novel is marked by the features of the European novel- all loose ends are tied, all characters are rewarded or punished, as they deserve. Poetic justice also provides closure to Umrao- she justifies her life in long concluding passages, where Umrao indirectly addresses the reader too. In the conclusion, Umrao takes over completely as the narrator, her didactic passages sound similar to sermons, though not explicitly employing religious discourse. Just as Ruswa competes for the position of the protagonist or the subject, Umrao here contests the position of the omniscient narrator who also takes the liberty of addressing the audience and having the last word in the text.

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