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Evolution of Progressive Short Stories in Urdu Literature

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Abstract : In the literary world, every movement arises as a response to the one that came before it. Most literary movements emerge in reaction to the dominant ideas and purposes of earlier trends. Sir Syed's movement, which emphasized practicality and reform, was followed by a different literary impulse. Writers such as Mir Nisar Ali Dihlvi, Maulvi Abdul Haq, and Maulana Muhammad Hussain Azad raised the banner of literature for life and knowledge. In contrast to purely utilitarian thinking, they highlighted individual existence and social awareness. At times, individualism was stressed even at the expense of collective concerns. This gave rise to the slogan of "art for art's sake," which encouraged romanticism in literature. Lyricism and romantic expression gained popularity and shaped the literary taste of the era.

Yet changing times and harsh social realities once again redirected literature toward society and the individual. Writers began to look beyond a single artistic path and sought higher knowledge through broader engagement. Literature became a means of awakening both the elite and the common people. As a result, the Progressive Movement emerged worldwide as a reaction against capitalist and feudal systems. Its influence spread across Europe, Asia, and the Indian subcontinent.

SajjadZaheer and his associates published the manifesto of the Progressive Writers' Movement in London, which laid the foundation for this literary shift. The movement gained strength through the publication of several journals and magazines in Lucknow, and soon spread rapidly throughout the subcontinent. Fiction writers, in particular, embraced realism and used their work to highlight social issues. This platform played an important role in the struggle for human rights and social justice.

However, the movement also raised revolutionary slogans, which led to resistance from authorities. As a result, writers faced restrictions, and the movement was

eventually banned by the government in 1953. Despite this, it continued to function for a considerable period in the subcontinent. Even today, its influence, relevance, and importance cannot be denied. Just as romantic literature evolved into progressive forms, progressive literature itself is now undergoing transformation in Pakistan and India, adapting to new social and cultural realities.

Keywords: Realism, promise of the future, solution to life's problems, individual issues, literature for life, social problems and literature, opposition to the feudal system, rebellion against capitalism, voice of the laborer, struggle for rights, revolutionary thinking.

To understand progressive short story writing, we must shed light on the Progressive Movement and its background. The Progressive Movement attempted to connect literature with life and its realities. In the early twentieth century, voices were raised in Europe against the capitalist system. The Russian Revolution of 1917 plunged Europe into countless crises, after which different political and literary movements emerged in various countries. These people wanted to replace the old, worn-out system with a new one in which the state would hold more power than the individual. Dr. FauziaAslam writes about the Progressive Movement:

“The Progressive Movement is the name given to the refined, creative, and liberating force that connected literature with the core realities of life and the spirit of the age. It demolished the rigid and broken walls of slavish thinking and introduced literature to enlightened consciousness.” (1)

In progressive fiction, economic aspects are linked from many angles, so it is appropriate to also examine Marx's theory in order to assess the ideological dimension. According to Karl Marx, the external world is real, and the distribution of material resources in society is unjust and unequal, which has divided society into classes. In Marx's view, society will become ideal only when wealth is distributed fairly. In this regard, FauziaAslam writes:

“In the light of Marxist theory, an ideal society will come into existence when the class division between employer and worker comes to an end. After this, a classless society will be formed. Marx calls this ideal society a utopian society and names it the communist social system.”(2)

Progressivism in Urdu literature, especially in Urdu short stories, began in the 1930s, and the first short story collection, *Angarey*, was published in 1936. Khalil-ur-RehmanAzmi writes:

“In London, an association of Indian writers was established, which included SajjadZaheer, Mulk Raj Anand, the Bengali writer Dr. Jyoti Ghosh, Dr. Muhammad Din Taseer, and PramodSen Gupta. This association was named the Indian Progressive Writers' Association.” (3)

In 1932, a collection of ten short stories by four writersSajjadZaheer, Rashid Jahan, Ahmed, and Mahmood Zafarwas published. The publication of this collection created a social upheaval. Conspiracies began to form against it. In this regard, Dr. Khalid Alvi writes:

“The first article opposing *Angaray* was published on 25 January 1933 in *Sarfaraz* under the title ‘A Sedition in the Religious World.’ On 1 February 1933, another article titled ‘The Moral Status of *Angaray*’ appeared, which declared *Angaray* to be a morally corrupt book. Later, on 21 February 1933, *Sarfaraz* published an article by Abdul Hamid Khan Hanfi titled ‘The Spirit of Rajpal,’ in which SajjadZaheer, without being named directly, was compared to Rajpal and described as possessing the spirit of the author of *RangilaRasul*.”

(4)

Angarey included five short stories by SajjadZaheer: “NeendNahiAati”, “Jannat Ki Basharat”, “Garmiyon Ki EkRaat”, “Dulari,” and “Ghar Par Hungama”.

Ahmed Ali contributed two stories: “BadalNahiAate” and “Mahawaton Ki Raat”.

Rashid Jahan wrote two pieces, one a play and one a short story: “Dilli Di Sair”(A Trip to Delhi) and the play “PardayKePeechay” (Behind the Curtain).Mahmood-uz-Zafar contributed one story titled “Jawan Mardi” (Manliness).

These stories focus on outdated social customs, sexual violence, and the oppression of women in contemporary society, and they openly rebel against prevailing social values. In this context, QamarRais writes:

“Political subjugation, increasing poverty, and cruel social laws were creating a suffocating sense of anguish among these young people. Against these oppressive conditions, a fire of resentment and hatred was burning within their very being.” (5)

In the history of the short story, the year 1935 proved to be an important milestone. If we look at the stages of artistic development the short story passed through, we see that it moved away from an atmosphere of simplicity and colorfulness and traveled along paths where closeness to life and a deeper artistic awareness introduced it to new dimensions. At this stage, some writers produced stories that, on one hand, present a delicate blend of Eastern life traditions and artistic subtleties, and on the other, show the influence of Western thought and style as well.

The short story “*Kafan*” was written before the beginning of the Progressive Movement. It was published in 1935. Strong elements of realism are clearly visible in it. Its characters, “Ghisu” and “Madho,” represent an exploited society. They fail to understand human emotions and are constantly tormented by hunger.

“Premchand wrote many short stories about class struggle and exploitation, but ‘*Kafan*’ stands out as an immortal masterpiece of fictional art. Even when viewed against the background of modern and postmodern artistic demands, this story remains intact and relevant. In it, Ghisu and Madhav pass through such extreme stages of exploitation that they become strangers to themselves. As a result of prolonged social and class inequalities, they undergo a process of dehumanization that sends chills down the spine.” (6)

The short story collection “*Kafan*” is remembered because its publication infused a new spirit into Urdu literature. It stirred the exploited sections of society and served as a pioneering force in reflecting progressive thought.

Although the Progressive Movement influenced all genres of knowledge and literature, its impact was especially strong on short fiction. The short story began to advance rapidly, and the Progressive Movement gave it a new direction. Among progressive short story writers, Premchand, KrishanChander, SaadatHasanManto, IsmatChughtai, Akhtar HussainRaipuri, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Hayatullah Ansari, Ibrahim Jalees, Ahmed Ali, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Ali Abbas Hussaini, BadrNathAshk, Muhammad HasanAskari, and Rashid Jahan wrote outstanding and high-quality short stories.

Premchand took the Urdu short story out of its traditional, tale-like atmosphere and firmly connected it with real life. Through his deep observation, he revealed social realities and, at the same time, elevated human dignity. He created stories based on truth, and because of these qualities, he is regarded as the first progressive short story writer. His famous stories include *SawaSerGehun*, *Kafan*, and *ZewarKaDabba*, among others.

KrishanChander initially gained fame and popularity because of his romantic style of writing. He was a romantic artist, but he did not remain in that mood for long and soon turned toward realism. After *Tilsam-e-Khayal*, his second short story collection, *Nazarey*, was published, which showed a rapid change in his outlook. In *Ann Data*, KrishanChander appears not as a dreamer but as a bitter realist and a revolutionary thinker.

“The romantic KrishanChander transformed into a realist and bitterly critical revolutionary. This mental, emotional, and intellectual revolution elevated his short stories to new heights. ‘SafaidPhool,’ ‘TootayHuayTaaray,’ and ‘Ann Data’ stand as clear milestones of this creative evolution.”(7)

Rajinder Singh Bedi is one of the important short story writers of this period in Urdu literature. Like KrishanChander, Bedi also traveled from romanticism toward realism. He possessed a deeply compassionate heart. His stories deal with human suffering, deprivation, and anxiety, and because of this emotional depth, his fiction creates an atmosphere that draws the reader in and makes them feel connected.

Rajinder Singh Bedi mainly presents a vivid reflection of his surroundings and examines social problems from his own broad perspective. In this context, WaqarAzeem writes:

“Bedi was the most emotionally driven short story writer of his time. Emotional intensity shaped the beginning of his storytelling, marked by rich language and vivid imagery. In the early stages of his craft, the writer constantly sought to engage the reader’s imagination. His art viewed aesthetic pleasure as its primary goal.” (8)

The foundation of realism laid by Premchand was further developed by many writers, among whom Ali Abbas Hussaini holds a distinct position. When the Progressive Movement began in 1936, Ali Abbas Hussaini welcomed it wholeheartedly. By blending realism with progressive thought, he played an important role in giving Urdu fiction a new direction. He beautifully portrayed the lives of the working and middle classes. In this regard, Dr. AslamJamshedpuri writes:

“Ali Abbas Hussaini portrayed the lives of laborers, peasants, and ordinary people. He skillfully depicted the economic struggle between

the ruling class and the working class. His finest representation of rural life can be seen in his short stories ‘Muqabla,’ ‘Pagal,’ ‘Kunji,’ and ‘HaarJeet,’ where this portrayal reaches its peak.” (9)

Ali Abbas Hussaini’s first short story collection was ‘YasrMurdaKaliyan.’ He wrote extensively before independence and produced nearly nine short story collections, including ‘RafiqTanhai,’ ‘BaasiPhool,’ ‘MelaGhoomni,’ ‘ICS,’ ‘EkHammam Mein,’ ‘KuchHansiNahinHai,’ ‘Sailaab Ki Raatein,’ ‘Husn Rah Guzar,’ and ‘NadiyanKinare.’

SaadatHasanManto can, somewhat reluctantly, be counted among progressive short story writers. However, he was both the creator and the final authority of his own artistic style. He wrote powerful stories drawn from his observation and imagination. Although Manto was accused of obscenity, it remains an undeniable truth that he is one of the greatest short story writers in Urdu literature. Khalil-ur-Rahman Azmi points out elements of sexual deviation and other aspects in Manto’s works. He also states that if the weaknesses of Manto’s stories are set aside, Manto can still be extremely valuable for progressive literature even today.

“If the weaker elements and negative aspects of Manto’s short stories are set aside, progressive literature can still draw substantial inspiration and benefit from his art even today.” (10)

“The most important quality of SaadatHasanManto’s short stories is the diversity of themes found in his work, which prevents monotony in his fiction. On one hand, Manto incorporates subjects such as the sexual conflicts of young boys and girls and the lives of prostitutes into his art. On the other hand, his stories also deal with India’s freedom struggle, Partition, and social resistance. In this regard, Dr. AslamJamshedpuri writes:”

“Most critics present the short story ‘NayaQanoon’ as evidence of Manto’s progressive outlook. There is no doubt that ‘NayaQanoon’ is a masterpiece produced by Manto’s pen. However, when it comes to realism, whatever Manto created in this regard falls under the category of bold and uncompromising realism. Whether the subject is the impact of the Partition of India, sexual issues, or psychological conflicts, Manto portrays them with fearless honesty.” (11)

Manto wrote countless short stories, including ‘NayaQanoon,’ ‘ThandaGosht,’ ‘Khol Do,’ ‘Toba Tek Singh,’ ‘Jail,’ ‘Kali Shalwar,’ ‘SarKandonKePeechhe,’ ‘Pehchan,’ and ‘Sharda.’ Another prominent name among progressive short story writers is Ahmed Ali. In his stories, he boldly addresses the decline of civilization. His work reflects an awareness of both reality and the supernatural. His style and tone are philosophical in nature. Among his finest stories are ‘HamariGali,’ ‘PremKahani,’ ‘Mahawaton Ki EkRaat,’ ‘BadalNahinAate,’ and ‘MeraKamra.’ In this context, WaqarAzeem writes:

“In Ahmed Ali’s short fiction, the various stages of artistic evolution are clearly visible and distinct. ‘BadalNahinAate’ and ‘Mahawaton Ki EkRaat’ mark the beginning of this creative journey. At this stage, the writer considered the deep and intimate

relationship between life and art to be the foremost and most essential requirement. Stories such as 'Shola,' 'Jism,' 'TafseerKe Do Rukh,' and 'Istifad-e-Shumokhan' play a particularly significant role in strengthening this bond between life and art. This represents the second stage of development. The third stage includes stories like 'HamariGali' and 'MeraKamra.' Upon reaching this phase, the writer offered psychological interpretations of life's realities and inclined his art toward greater freedom. The prison stories indicate a new stage in this journey. Here, life, psychological imagination, philosophical thought, and artistic innovation become the central aims of the writer's creative vision."

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Hayatullah Ansari is also an important name in progressive short fiction. Inspired by Premchand and the authors of 'Angaray,' he joined the Progressive Movement. Hayatullah Ansari created hundreds of short stories, marked by strong realism.

His thought is elevated, and he has a firm command over his craft, through which even an ordinary incident takes the shape of a powerful story. His observation is extremely deep, and he appears capable of uncovering meaning even in the smallest details, enriching them with color, depth, and significance.(13)

Among Hayatullah Ansari's notable short stories are 'AakhriKoshish,' 'AnokhiMuseebat,' 'Dai SerAata,' 'Parwaaz,' 'KamzorPauda,' 'AdayaQaza,' 'ShikastaGungorKhuloos,' 'Bharay Bazaar Mein,' 'MozonKaKarkhana,' and 'Bohat Hi Ba-IzzatAhmed NadeemQasmi' is also counted among progressive short story writers and poets. He was simultaneously a poet, a fiction writer, and a journalist. He portrayed both urban and rural life with realism. In his short stories, the villages of Punjab can be clearly seen. He deserves credit for giving narrative form to the problems of rural Punjab. Ahmed NadeemQasmi largely follows the tradition of Premchand. By focusing on the issues and hardships of village life, he created powerful and memorable characters. Professor WahabAshrafi is of the view that:

"Ahmed NadeemQasmi emerged as a true representative of Punjabi life. 'Chopal' and 'Bhagwatay' are short story collections in which the features of Punjabi life clearly come to the forefront." (14)

Some of his representative short stories include 'Jopal,' 'Baba Noor,' 'Bain,' 'Sannata,' 'Bazaar-e-Hayat,' 'NeelaPatthar,' 'TaskeenParmeshar Singh,' and 'Main InsaanHoon.'

Ahmed Abbas is a short story writer who interprets life solely through the lens of progressive ideology. In his work, there is a strong presence of class struggle, social and economic equality, and a spirit of brotherhood. The well-known storyteller Ratan Singh is of the opinion that:

As a writer and storyteller, Wajid Ahmed Abbas is like a farmer who stands as a friend and helper of the poor. I have written about him as someone who dreams of brushing the dust off the bodies of the poor and clothing their pure forms in the new garments of prosperity. He

wishes to cleanse their minds of backwardness so that new values of life may shine within them like the flame of a lamp. (15)

Social issues and political complexities hold great importance in his short stories. Although his characters are realistic, they sometimes appear unconventional. Among his notable and high-quality stories are '12 Ghantay,' 'LaalAurPeela,' 'Tiddi,' 'Ababeel,' 'SardarJi,' 'Shukar Allah Ka,' 'Soney Ki ChaarChooriyan,' 'Bholi,' 'Pahiya,' 'RupayAanayPaai,' 'Diya JalaySaariRaat,' "In the history of Urdu short fiction, IsmatChughtai holds a very significant place. She was the first bold female short story writer in Urdu who presented sexuality in an outspoken and fearless manner in her stories. Her fiction serves as a powerful representation of events and experiences within the upper strata of society. She not only gave a voice to the suppressed, helpless, and frightened woman of society but also encouraged her to think and reflect on sexual issues. With great courage, she portrayed the psychological and sexual conflicts of women and children. In this context, Fazil Jafri confirms this view:

"The environment Ismat portrays in her short stories is the same as the one she herself experienced and became known for depicting truthfully. It reflects a middle or lower-middle class joint family where, instead of abundance of wealth, education, or exceptional talents, there is an excess of domestic affection and hostility, economic hardship, harmless quarrels, and the presence of both legitimate and illegitimate children."(16)

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In brief, it can be said about the Progressive Movement that after independence its voice gradually began to fade. About eight years after independence, around 1955, the movement started losing its momentum. The reason for this decline was the increasing rigidity of its ideology, the diminishing influence of external factors, and the beginning of a turn toward inner consciousness.

After the establishment of Pakistan, several prominent short story writers emerged. Among them, Ghulam Abbas stands out. His famous stories include "Anandi," "Overcoat," "Katba," "YehPariChehra Log," "Bahroopia," "Juaari," "Us Ki Biwi," "Hammam Mein," "Fancy Hair Cutting Salon," "Kundani," "Samjhauta," "Saaya," "SiyahaurSafaid," "Humsaye," "BajayWalaSurkhGulab," "PatliBai," "Bhanwar," "NamaziMard," "Mujassama," "Buhran," "Chakkar Bandar Wala," "NaakKatrakWala," "TinkayKa Sahara Andheray Mein," "Do Tamashay," "AikDardmandDil," "Faraar," and "SurkhJuloos."

QurratulainHyder, one of the most distinguished female fiction writers of Urdu literature, recipient of the Padma Shri and Jnanpith Awards, is the author of "AagKa Darya" along with numerous novels, short stories, and autobiographical works. Her notable stories include "AwaraGardi," "Patjhar Ki Awaaz," "Yeh Ghazi TerePurAsrarBanday," "Pali Hill Ki AikRaat," "NazaraDarmiyanHai," "Sitaaron Se Aagay," "Roshni Ki Raftaar," "AikMukalma," "ParwazKeBaad," "SunaHaiAlam-e-Bala Mein Koi KeemiagarTha," "Mona Lisa," "Awadh Ki Shaam," "Qalandar," "Raqs-e-Sharar," "Carmen," "Hum Log," "JahanKarwanThehraTha,"

“JalaWatan,” “AasmanBhiHaiSitam,” “Photographer,” “TootayTaaray,” “Main Ne LakhonBolSahai,” “YehBatein,” “Barf Bari Se Pehle,” “Haji Gul Baba,” and “DalanWali.” Mumtaz Mufti, a popular Pakistani novelist and short story writer, is especially known for his travelogue “Labbaik.” His famous stories include “Aaya,” “WohMohni,” “PuraniSharabNaiBotal,” “Roghni,” “WaqarMahalKaSaaya,” “JhukiJhukiAankhain,” “Ehsan Ali,” “Nafrat,” “Admi,” “AadheyChehray,” “KhulBandhna,” and “Begangi.”

Another outstanding fiction writer known for his unique narrative style and creative depiction of Partition experiences is IntizarHussain, the first Urdu writer to be shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. His notable stories include “AakhriAdmi,” “ZardKutta,” “Hum Safar,” “Badal,” “HoorNama,” “AjnabiParinday,” “Pasmandgan,” “Roop Nagar Ki Sawariyan,” “ApniAag Ki Taraf,” “DoosraGunah,” “HaddiyonKaDhancha,” “Kashti,” “MahalWalay,” “MurdaRaakh,” “WohAur Main,” “KhwabaurTaqdeer,” “Intizar,” “Seedhiyan,” “Parchaiyan,” “Mashkook Log,” “Patay,” “Doosra Rasta,” and “LambaQissa.”

HajraMasroor was a prominent feminist short story writer in Pakistan. Throughout her life, she wrote stories challenging male-dominated society. Her important stories include “Chand Ki DoosriTaraf,” “Sanduqcha,” “Aurat, MohabbatAur...,” “Haye Allah,” “Faslay,” “MasoomMohabbat,” “Bechari,” “TeesriManzil,” “AikBachi,” “Bandar KaGhao,” “Kaneez,” “SindbadJahaziKaNaya Safar,” and “Neelam.”

Another well-known fiction writer authored stories such as “Gudariya,” “Safar Dar Safar,” “Punjab KaDupatta,” “Baba Ki Tareef,” “Pani Ki Ladai,” and “Sandelay Ki Tawaifain.”

A. Hameed is a popular dramatist and short story writer, known for his romantic style of writing. His famous stories include “MittiKo Mona Lisa,” “AikRaat,” “Manzil,” “Pul Toot Gaya,” and “Shahdara Ki AikShaam.”

WajidaTabassum was a prominent Urdu fiction writer and poet with strong feminist ideas. She was well known for portraying women’s sexual and social issues in society, and some of her stories were also adapted into films. Among her notable short stories are “Manzil,” “Sholay,” “JannatiJora,” “Koila Bhatti Na Rakh,” “Zakat,” and “DhanakKe Rang NahinHotay.”

Some of these writers had begun writing fiction before the Partition of India, while others emerged afterward. As a result, the Urdu short story gained rapid popularity, and its themes expanded greatly in range and diversity. Today, the short story has reached great artistic heights. In addition, modern short stories display a strong symbolic tone. In recent times, writers such as Shams Agha, RafiqHussain, QasimMahmood, Inayatullah, Joginder Pal, Ram Lal, Ghulam-us-Saqlain, YounisJaved, Altaf, Saleem Akhtar, BalrajKomal, Masood Mufti, Salahuddin Akbar, Kumar Hashmi, BanoQudsia, FarakhandaLodhi, MirzaRiaz, HazraBukhari, NaveedAnjum, Rakaad-ur-Rehman, QayyumRahi, Hamida Rizvi, NighatMirza, Masood Ashar, Riffat, Dr. Ahsan Farooqi, MrasratGhaffari, Um Amara, Khan FazlurRehman, and Mirza Hamid Baig wrote high-quality and meaningful short stories, keeping the genre alive.

These writers not only preserved the tradition of short fiction but also enriched it with their unique personal styles, adding new dimensions to the genre. The value of life and the richness of art remain the greatest qualities of this tradition—qualities that have never been separated from the spirit of the short story.

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