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Some Thoughts on Urdu Prose[1]

TALL CLAIMS are often made about the changes that have occurred in Urdu literature since 1936 [the year in which the "Progressive Writers' Association" was established in India; Urdu writers were at the forefront of the Progressive movement in literature]. However, the changes were mostly in the nature of experience, and not of technique or form of expression. Indeed, there are some changes in the manner of expression too, but those are merely because of unavoidability, rather than the writer's choice. Political and economic forces operating at that time had created complex emotions and questions in the minds of young people. These emotional upheavals needed expression. But the young writers, on the one hand, did not have adequate awareness of the variety of Urdu literary prose styles and had, on the other, lost touch with the living idiom of the common speech. The fact is that this class had no language of its own, neither English nor Urdu. At best, the language that they were capable of using was that of a high school level English reader translated into Urdu. This language did not have the power or range to enable distinctions to be made between the peculiar characteristics or inner moods and states of external or internal objects.

Essentially this was the language with which these young men tried to give form and expression to their new experiences. They learned a couple of ideas from Western literature: one, unemotionally recounting inventories of external things, for example giving a list of objects in a room, or

[1]Written in 1954, "Kuchھ Urdū Naṣr kē Bārē Mēṅ," was included in the anthology of 'Askarī's critical essays *Sitāra yā Bādbān* (Karachi: Maktaba-e Sāt Raṅg, 1963), 154–65. This translation is based on 'Askarī's collected works, *Majmū'a Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Askarī* (Lahore: Sang-e Meel, 2000), 290–300. The footnotes have been added by the translator.

details of the clothes worn by the characters in a story, and so on; second, the principle of association of ideas. The manner in which the second principle was put into practice did not demand a change in the Urdu prose style. There was no problem in stringing together thoughts or images. Practice of the first principle did, however, pose some problems. One does come across descriptive narration in our traditional prose, but such prose did not consider it necessary to give a list of adjectives in order to describe the individuality or distinctiveness of something. Usually there would just be an adjective or an adjectival phrase preceding the noun. In English, the norm is that when one mentions a table one also mentions the kind of wood used for the table, its shape, color, whether it's chipped or broken—all this makes up the description of the table. Now the young writers in Urdu felt the need to develop the ability to enumerate the qualitative adjectives and phrases of an object within one sentence. Prose writers in Urdu in the post-1936 era were engrossed in this particular problem. The problem initially surfaced when Maupassant was being translated. In those days the translation of a descriptive sentence of the kind mentioned above seemed very awkward in Urdu. Gradually readers became used to it. As far as I can see, this problem has not been solved satisfactorily as yet. There have been two ways of approaching it. The first is to put the adjectival phrases in one or more sub-sentences, that is, separate them from the noun that they qualify. Thus each part of the picture is separate and one cannot see the entire picture with its attributes as a whole. Each part of the picture is first seen separately and not as a part of the whole. Later the reader puts the pieces together. In other words, the attributes are fractured and by putting them together one sees the full picture. The second approach was to write a sentence imitating the structure of the English sentence. Since we have slowly become used to doing that over the last fifteen or sixteen years it doesn't seem awkward anymore. But this doesn't mean that the problem has been solved. It is a makeshift solution.

Thus we acknowledged only one problem relating to prose in our literary writings and even that problem we didn't consciously try to solve. But other possible problems did not even attract our attention. Our writers just keep writing intuitively. This is because our writers have been working with only two paradigms: the sorrows of the age and the sorrows of love. And both things mean no more than emotional pain. They did not care about matters of art. Our writers have done their best to prove themselves as sensitive, good or kind-hearted human beings, but they never felt the need to prove themselves as skillful writers. Our writers

write with their emotions, not with words. Words for them are like drains in which the emotions flow. The only exception is Ismat Chughtai who sometimes explores her experiences through words and can identify and define her experience through the tone of her voice. In the last four or five years, Maṅtō has occasionally tried to use words to explore experiences, and then Aziz Ahmad,[2] in just one story, "Taṣavvur-e Shaikh," creatively used Sufi vocabulary to depict the particular nature of the experience and also, on a secondary level, used the Sufi terms in an ironical fashion. Anyway, by and large new writers have neither explored the rhetoric of expression nor studied the problems of prose texts.

Our first failing is that we seek emotional content in the work of our writers and never look at them as pieces of prose. When we do examine the prose style we are content to appraise it as fluent or effortless. It is wrong to confine the beauty of prose to mere "fluency." After all, there are experiences that are distorted when described in a facile fluent style. Or, at the very least, the organic unity of the experience is lost and it is shattered into many discrete pieces. In praising fluency as a quality of good prose we should bear in mind that fluency is not something that is identical in every situation. For instance, water flows in a drain and also in the river Indus but there is a world of difference between them. Thus describing a style as fluent is not enough. One has to observe what is fluent and where. Uncomplicated primary feelings will unfold at a different pace than complex experiences. The merging of thought and emotion demands another kind of fluency. To expect the same kind of fluency for all of these is tantamount to stifling the creative urge. One also has to keep in mind the readership of a text. Possibly the readership is not ready for complicated emotions and thoughts and may not permit the prose to become fluent and free flowing. The idea of the flow of a river cannot be measured without knowing the terrain in which it flows. Irresponsible use and overuse of critical phraseology harms the creative effort. The truth is that in our critical lexicon fluency has come to signify a prose style that does not challenge the comprehension of readers. It means that even a passive mind can grasp something from that kind of text. Or let us say the mind remains suspended and the feelings are stirred. Our writers' creative impulses are already wilting and the critics have worsened the situation by using vague phraseology and uncertain methodology in their critiques.

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[2]Fiction writer and historian; he later turned his attention to the history of Indo-Muslim culture.

This has created a generation of writers and their readers who enjoy uncomplicated textual prose that can be read without exerting the mind and has led to the assumption that literature can be produced and read without taking the mind into account.

The same is the case with short sentences. Valorizing this quality [of writing short sentences] so excessively is actually a function of loose and lazy thinking. One wonders how the short sentence by itself can become a positive literary value. Strangely enough, examples from modern English writers are cited to support this principle that short sentences in themselves are good. Even if this is considered proper, we should not forget that for English writers constructing short sentences is a choice that they have consciously made. For them there is a three-hundred-year-old tradition of writing longer and yet longer sentences. Thus if they write in short sentences it means they are making a specific experiment in style. As for us, an indigent person cannot be extravagant. Never mind Urdu, even our Persian does not have long sentences. Admittedly some Persian writers have produced sentences that are as much as three pages long. But stringing together a list of similar things or demands is not exactly a long sentence. Shortening or lengthening the list does not affect the syntax or the organic form of the sentence. It basically remains what it was, a short sentence. In Urdu at least, the significance of the long sentence was never understood, nor did anyone feel the need to understand it. Therefore, for us, writing in short sentences is not a merit, but a necessity.

Thus the first challenge for our prose is how to construct long complex sentences. I used the adjective "long" because I couldn't think of an appropriate term for what I wanted to say. I am not so much concerned with the mere length of a sentence. Clauses can be strung together with "and," "but," or "if," but this results in a collection of short sentences, not a complex sentence. A complex sentence has a deliberate structure. The clauses that make up a sentence should have a specific internal relationship and an order. A sentence qualifies to be called a "long sentence" when it has an internal structure; that is, when it is not a random piecing together of clauses. It has a purpose which is to present the different facets of an idea simultaneously. Now, our writers don't often engage in abstraction, but let us suppose they borrow an idea or are translating. The usual practice is to use conjunctions and divide the sentence into two parts. In doing that, the thought or idea is also dissected into two. In fact, one idea becomes two. And so what happens is that one thought becomes the principle thought and the second its corollary or a modification or an afterthought. This intellectual activity is completely different from one

where many facets of thought are seen at the same time or the thought with all its complexities emerges at once. The truth is that we haven't really begun to think conceptually. Our intellectual activity is similar to those of children who can absorb a thought only by breaking it into pieces. It's obvious that we could never have felt the need for complex sentences.

Let's put aside concepts for a while and examine descriptive techniques. One of the uses of a long sentence is that it can present a comprehensive rather than a piecemeal picture of an object so that its parts and its whole can be seen at the same time. Our prose has still not acquired this capability. We have learned by translating how to put together in prose an inventory of the minor details of an object, but we have still to learn the art of giving these the form of an indivisible unity. We still lack the skill to structure a prose sentence that represents the object as a whole and includes its properties at the same time. Our narrative prose jumps from one idea to another. We leap from one object to a second one and from the second to a third. Or, in fact, we haven't learned to pause and examine something thoroughly. Our prose is not capable of giving an impressionistic account of things. Using more than two adjectives jars our sensibility. One aspect of our mind-set is obvious from the very fact that in our grammar adjectives are treated as an abstract concept but exist as concrete things. But this also means that we cannot separate the object from the adjective used to signify it. For example, a primitive language may have a word for "red bird" but none for "red." Until one develops the ability to separate the signifier from the signified, one's creative imagination cannot work with full force; that is, it cannot find similarities within differences. And the ghazal is to blame for this. If poetry can subsist on symbolism alone then a more direct and sensuous experience becomes redundant. Ghazal poetry has dominated our minds so much that we're unable to see *things*. When things become abstractions they are no longer things and do not stimulate our senses. Urdu prose has still not acquired the ability to perceive things through the senses. Our prose can without a doubt enumerate things, but it cannot invest them with an individual existence or identity. So, when Urdu prose falters in portraying minor impressions based on the senses, then for it to produce a complex picture and create a complex sentence is a fairly remote possibility.

If prose is treated as a creative activity and not merely a means of communication, then it cannot subsist without metaphor. In our canon however, from the very beginning, so much emphasis has been accorded to fluency, limpidity and clarity of expression that writers shy away from

difficult, complicated creative activity. We often employ similes for the sake of elaboration, but examples of creative metaphors are hard to find. Our imagination has been circumscribed by the symbol and metaphor laden ghazal poetry. We rely mostly on one-word metaphors. The structure of the ghazal makes it impossible to construct a large metaphorical image or picture because the idea has to be encapsulated in the space of two lines. Therefore our prose has followed the same pattern, that is, we do not depict a thing as a complex picture of itself and, at the same time, also as a metaphor. In short, the temperament of our prose is generally elaborately descriptive. It is not a creative temperament, and it is because of this shortcoming that our writers cannot sustain any one good prose style. Examine the work of any of our celebrated writers. You won't find a page that doesn't have at least five flaws, and, if nothing else, there will be slackness in narration: disjointed sentences, extraneous words and phrases, and so on. It seems that even our best writers run out of steam and need to catch their breath before going on. And even fluency, limpidity and clarity of expression cannot be sustained beyond fifteen lines or so and connections are broken somewhere along the way; they are not sustained evenly throughout the text.

The biggest shortcoming of our writers, regardless of their intellectual ability, has been the lack of continuity of thought. There are flashes of brilliance here and there. The fact is that our prose was born in a time when there was no grand intellectual movement storming our literary scene ... nor has one happened so far. There have been several political, social and even religious movements, but none of them come close to my conception of an intellectual movement, which should apply its force to the intellect itself. Man cannot learn to think without focusing on the mind, and prose cannot develop without the capability of continued and coherent thought. Certainly there can be poetry, and one can also see that our prose has never reached the level of our poetry. One reason for this could be that our culture is given rather excessively to seeing the whole in the part or the part in the whole. In writing prose, equal attention has to be given to the whole and the part, and when the parts are spread over two hundred odd pages it needs great mental prowess to preserve the relationship between the whole and the parts. The easy way is to make the parts beautiful in themselves with the hope that the entire picture will be subsumed in the parts.

Possibly, the slackness of our prose is the result of the crucial design mentioned above. However, there could be yet another reason. In our culture attention is focused on what exists in the absolute sense, while in

the West the act or process of becoming existent is also examined. It is because of this that even minute details are important for Western prose writers. If the part is flawed the whole cannot be complete. From our literary perspective, the whole is existent anyway and will always be so. If the fraction or part is blemished, let it be blemished. The beauty of the whole is unharmed and intact in the Absolute Mind. This theory is ingrained in our minds despite the tremendous influence of Western literary norms.

Our prose suffers from another weakness that has persisted unchanged from the beginning, and that is the inability to interfuse emotion and thought or convert thought into emotion and vice versa. In fact we haven't yet produced a prose of "thought." The prose of even Abul Kalam Azad and Niaz Fatehpuri is not the prose of pure thought. It is rather an effort to produce some thought or another about his own emotions. Our prose has mostly been of the narrative or the emotional kind and the emotion has always been one that readers know and can recognize. It is never the prose used for expressing basic instincts. In fact even in regard to the primary emotions, our prose never went beyond simple narration. We haven't even learned how to analyze these simple emotions because analysis requires the play of intellect and thought. Some fiction writers did try to create such analytical prose, but our literary critics, or the readers under the influence of the critics, didn't let them go far down that road. The moment a creative writer shifts from a passionate narration to questioning, the readers object: is this an essay or a story? Our critics have constructed two separate compartments: one for creative writing and the other for scholarly writing, and they don't allow for a fusion of the two styles. In other words they insist that emotion/passion be separate from thought/reasoning. There shouldn't even be the shadow of thought on the depiction of emotions. Had the post-1936 era produced critics along with creative writers who were directly concerned with the creative process and could make a study of it, there would then have been the possibility of a readership emerging in the ensuing decade and a half that could accept new experiments in style and narration. In fact readers would have demanded more of such experimentation. But when critics don't lead the way, it's natural for readers to become complacent and intellectually weak. And when readers are undemanding, writers are less motivated to experiment with their creativity. In short, readers are indulging the writers and writers, the readers. Far from acquiring new capabilities, Urdu prose is permitting its existing capabilities to become mildewed. To be honest, the prose we are writing today is that of Urdu

primers: "the dog came, the cat went away." At present this is all the complexity or sophistication that our prose is capable of. I'm afraid that this situation will not change until all the modes of expression and usage available to us in Urdu prose are reexamined, not from the standpoint of grammarians and linguists, but from the stance of creative writers. ❐

—Translated by Mehr Afshan Farooqi