

The Role of Female Writers in the Promotion of Popular Literature in Urdu

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Abstract

By the end of Nineteenth Century there was no well renowned female writer in the world of Urdu Literature, only few female writers were in the picture, but not active enough to be counted as an asset for the literature. However, at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, female writers became active, they started their literary life by writing novels in Urdu. Generally the nature of women writing was social and domestic. From the beginning of progressive movement, signs of change also appeared in the Urdu Literature and women Authors were also affected by this change. The difference between pure literature and popular literature became very clear by the mid of Twentieth century. Popular literature is growing fast in Urdu since 1950 and women have played an effective/ vital role in the promotion of this popular literature. The objectives of my study are to highlight the role of female writers in the promotion/ development of popular literature, to analyse the trends developed by popular literature and to make a critical analysis of changes being faced by popular literature between the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Furthermore, I also try to locate the basic factors involved in the development of popular literature in Urdu.

Introduction

Urdu is considered to be one of the major languages, in those regions where it is spoken and comprehended. Despite being four hundred years old, it consists of fine collection of prose poetry. Male writers had been active and played their role in promoting Urdu language and literature. During that period not a single female writer was heard or read in the literary scenario of Urdu language.

According to research the first writer of Urdu literature is considered to be Mah Laqa Chanda Bai that too in poetry. Few females followed her foot steps and tried their skills in writing Urdu poetry. As far as female prose writers are concerned, their entry into this realm was quite delayed owing to various reasons. In the Indian subcontinent the girl child or females were not allowed to get any formal education. In almost all the cases their education was restricted to religious studies only. Under those prevalent circumstances Urdu literature was inaccessible to females since reading and writing was considered to be a useless activity for them (Siddiqui, 2008).

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Once the woman started writing, they became quite popular in a short period of time they played an important role in promoting popular literature in Urdu. In order to proceed further on the topic, there is a dire need to understand, “What is popular literature?”

According to encyclopaedia Britannica (2014)

“Popular literature includes those writings intended for the masses and those that find favour with large audiences. It can be distinguished from artistic literature in that it is designed primarily to entertain popular literature unlike high literature generally does not seek a high degree of formal beauty or subtlety and is not intended to endure”

After the War of Independence in 1857, Indians of subcontinent were demoralized and demotivated. Under those gloomy conditions, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his companions tried to infuse some spirit so that they may not turn into a decaying society.

Out of those few companions who raised their voice in favour of female education were Molvi Nazir Ahmad Nd Mulana Altaf Husian Hali. Molvi Nazir Ahmad wrote his first novel “Mirat- ul – Aroos” in Urdu. According to Mathews (1995)

“This books teacher the need for the education of women by describing unhappy experience of uneducated bride.”

Many female writers emerged on the scene by the end of 19th century as a result of being inspired by Molvi Nazir Ahmad. The main theme of this novel that is family life became immensely popular amongst females of that era. The first female writer who took the initiative of writing novel was Rasheeda Tun Nisa, who wrote her first social novel “Islah ul Nisa” in 1894.

Many females who chose the same field are Mohammadi Begum, Akbari Begum, Umat ul Wali , Khatoon Akram , Khatoon Sadeed etc. The theme of most of the novels written by these female writers revolved around social and domestic life, there by identifying social issues like women`s education, failures related to mismatched childhood, marriages and influence of western civilization. As the definition suggests, there woman wrote popular novels and as stated by Suharwardy (2006):

“The most popular novels of the last two decade have been written by aiming at reform which was forte of Molvi Nazir Ahmad.”

Woman female writers became involved in literary pursuits by writing in those digests which were published monthly or fortnightly. The earliest known digests for woman were Tehzeeb e Niswaan, Khatoon-e-Mashriq, Mahnama Bano, Ghulabi, Shama, Kiran, Hareem, Adab e etc.

These digests were published in large number catering to a wide readership. These digests to some extent, were instrumental in re-shaping the mindset which paved way for an appreciation of literature. The stories published in these digests revolved around women and their issues. In all fairness, it can be claimed that these digests and magazines promoted the genre of popular literature.

Many female writers became household names by their contribution to these digests. According to Salahudin (2005),

“In 1986, weekly magazine ‘Tehzeeb e Niswaan was published, the important thing is that from the very first issue a large number of women started writing for this magazine nearly all of them wrote reformatory articles against dowry superstitions or extravagance etc.” (P. 58).

Another major role which promoted popular literature was progressive movement in Urdu literature. The debates whether popular literature is literature or not started in 1936, when progressive movement in Urdu literature came into existence; otherwise what was written before it became part of Urdu literature. This debate was intensified in the modern era (Usmani, 2007).

The genre of bold writing in Urdu was pioneered by Rashida Jahan who wrote a story and a drama in “Angaray” (1932). She had to endure a severe reaction from the society which made her earn more fame by being known as “Rashida Angaray Wali” (Kamran, 2005). Her writings were banned for obvious reasons. However, her bold step paved way for other writers of that era such as Ismat Chughtai, who started writing during such times when the voice of the women was stifled. Despite this oppressed and suffocated environment female writers of the west were successful in making themselves heard. The early works of these female writers were romantic, instructional and reformatory in nature, nonetheless their work gained considerable popularity over a certain period of time (Naqvi, 2004).

“Many women writers took an active part in the Progressive Writers’ Movement and met with outstanding success dealing with all sorts of topics even those traditionally considered being taboo such as sex and communal violence” (Pietrangelo, n.d.).

After the first half the 20th century somewhere during 1950s popular literature flourished quite rapidly in English language, which inspired the Urdu writers. During that time female writers actively promoted popular literature in Urdu. The general objective of the writers of popular literature was to entertain masses by making them travel into the world of fantasy and romance. The idea was to provide them solace from mundane issues of daily life. The general perception about woman is that they are emotional and like to dwell in the realm of romance and fantasy. The female writers took advantage of inherent nature of women and promoted popular literature through female readers.

The most famous and active female writers who contributed a lot in promoting popular literature in Urdu 1950 are: A R Khatoon, Razia Butt, Bushra Rehman, Salma Kanwal, Khadeeja Mastoor, Haijara masroor, Jelani Bano etc. Some of these writers of popular literature equally promoted serious and pure literature. These writer authored many novels and some of them became quite well known by writing in digests in several episodes. The women anxiously waited for the next episode. At times these episodes were spread over thousand pages, and the same story which was read once in a month used to be compiled in the form of novel and became popular with audience again. This reflects that novel writing has been a catalyst in promoting popular literature in Urdu. The famous digests of this era are Anchal, Haya, Hina, Pakeeza, Batool, Dosheeza, Shua'a, Kiran, Khawateen digest etc.

The novels were combination of romance, fantasy, horror, happy life etc. which appealed the females' fantasy world. The novels were and still are a refuge for women who think as the heroines of these novels. These novels distracted them from sorrow and grief of their unhappy life.

The genre chosen by most of the female writers of that era is romance, which attracted immense readership. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica (2013)

“The most important genre in popular literature is and has been the romance. The most common type of romance describes the obstacle encountered by two people (usually young) engaged in a forbidden love. Another common genre is that of fantasy or science fiction.”

Broadly speaking, women like romantic literature because of their emotional nature. Instead of dwelling in sorrow, stress, depression of miserable life, they discovered escapism by reading romantic novels, thus acting as a remedy for their woes.

Radway (1991) disused in detail the reasons which enhanced reading of romantic novels:

“Romance fiction is compensatory in a second sense because it fill a woman's mental world with the varied details of simulated travel and permits her to converse imaginatively with adults from a broad spectrum of social space.”

The atrocities of partition in 1947 left deep impact on the lives of women. Men got busy in the world which existed outside the four walls and women inside had to seek new ways to deal with the unfortunate situation. The well - known writers of this time period were A R Khatoon, Razia Butt, Iffat Mohani etc. All of these famous female writers especially Razia Butt created a world of romance and fantasy for women. The major subject of her novels has been romance and love.

She was the popular writer of many generations. She ruled the hearts of millions female readers.

According to the Dawn (2012):

“Being a contemporary of many famous names in Urdu fiction writing, Razia Butt carved a niche and a market for herself by perfecting a particular brand of storytelling. Her style was close to cinema’s so-called ‘Muslim social drama’ trend. Not surprisingly, many of her novels, such as Saiqa and Naila, were adapted for the big screen. She was also a favourite of television producers looking to turn a novel into a TV drama serial”

These writers, in their writings doesn't just present the romance, but also discussed the other problems and aspects of lives in their writings. Because the popular literature was written by women so they presented the problems and other aspects and issues of life in better way. In Radway (1991) words:

“Thus the romance originates in the female push toward individuation and actualization of the self, but because it is written by women who have been engendered within a patriarchal family characterized by exclusively female mothering’, that drive is embodied within the language and forms created and prescribed by patriarchy ” (p.147).

Although the Science fiction is another genre of popular literature, But in Urdu there is no known and prominent female writer of science fiction.

“Sultana’s Dream a science-fiction was first published in 1905 making it probably the first Indian sci-fi work. It is a short story written by Roquia Sakhawat Hussain. Sultana’s Dream was first published in The Indian Ladies’ Magazine. It reads like a feminist vision of the future. But it is not just a feminist vision but also a wonderfully written sci-fi story” (Kashif, 2012).

Today just a few magazines in Urdu, called digests, do publish detective literature and science fiction. However, the stories that appear in such magazines are mostly translations or adaptations. Some of these are acknowledged as such, while others remain unacknowledged giving rise to a wrong impression that these might be original. (Dawn 2010) There are just few female writers can count on fingers who are promoting detective and horror literature like Maryam K Khan, Parveen Zubair and Seema Ghazal. In this situation, it can be said that romance was the major and a dominating genre of the 20th century in Popular Urdu Literature.

The 21st century is the century of science and technology. We can say that this era is internet era. A new generation is getting away from book reading because all kinds of Knowledge, information, fun and entertainment are now available on the internet. In the current situation, it is very difficult for writers and publishers to get the attention of readers. A clear change can be seen in the trends and topics of popular literature. Now women are very active in all fields of life. Women are educated now and doing work side by side men. Now they are confident and competing in all fields. They have a broad

vision of life. All of this changed their minds and thinking. Now just romance is not their requirement and the way of their satisfaction. Now a days digests publishing all kinds of stories Romantic, horror, suspense, science fiction, religious and moral. A questionnaire designed to review that in present era what kind of literature, young girls want to read. Here is no space for details, but a short summary of the answers of this questionnaire is that: New generation is going far away from book reading. A strong factor behind digest reading is that those young girls taking interest who's got this hobby from their mothers. Adult girls taking an interest in moral and religious stories. Umaira Ahmad, Maha Malik, Nimrah Ahmad, Riffat Siraj Rukhsana Nigar, Tanzeela Riaz are the favorite and popular female writers of this age.

Conclusion

Overall, we can say that female writers played active and vital role in the development and promotion of popular literature in Urdu. In the short time, they make their strong position in the world of Urdu literature. Especially after 1936, female writers became famous by their writings. Mostly female writers started their writing through digests. Romance was the major genre of popular literature after the second half of the 20th century. These female writers have a large number of fan following. We can see similarity in their thinking and way of writing. Popular literature based on romantic scenes, romantic dialogues, luxury lifestyle, fantasy, dream life, rare domestic issues, and happy life. Romance always be a weak point of females, so females want to read romance it is the best way of time pass. It also escaped them from the crucial realities of life. Now in present era females have broad vision now they changed their thinking. They have alternate ways which can escape them from crucial realities. Now females are going to less to take an interest in digests and novel reading. At present they want to read different topics. Popular literature in Urdu is still neglected by critics. They are not ready to give any status to popular literature in the world of pure literature. as Akhtar (2002)said that popular literature has no space in serious and pure literature although a researcher and student of Urdu literature could not ignore it. However, in the present era, it could be seen that popular literature is making its space and female writers are still active to promote popular literature in Urdu.

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