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The Earliest Extant Review of *Umra'ō Jan Adā**

Review

TAKEN as a whole this tale [*qisṣa*; i.e., *Umrā'ō Jān Adā*] is written on the same model that Mr. Reynolds used to write *Rosa Lambert*. The difference is this: Rosa Lambert has herself told everyone her life story and her shameless indiscretions [*sharmnāk bebākiyānī*], whereas in the case of this novel neither has Umrā'ō Jān “Adā” written it nor does it contain such shameless indiscretions as would make it unfit to be read before one's female family members [*bahū beṭiyōnī*]. [Umrā'ō Jān] told it all to her confidant (whose name is Mirzā Rusvā Ṣāhib), and he had it published. Further, the former [i.e., Rosa Lambert] is an imagined story, while the latter, according to Mirzā Rusvā Ṣāhib, is factual. Rosa Lambert disgraced herself out of spite; Umrā'ō Jān could not remain chaste due to matters beyond her control. Similarity in its [many] incidents distracts the reader's attention from *Rosa Lambert*, but [*Umrā'ō Jān Adā*], besides being not repetitious in its events, is in fact extremely interesting—in particular because of its frequent interludes of refined humor. Thought-provoking verses, delightful natural scenes, colorful private assemblies for dance and music, vividly described public entertainments and fairs, narratives of sufferings [at home] and travails in exile, tales of treachery and deception, accounts of true love, stories of the sagacity as well as foolishness of the rich and the noble—[they can all be found in this book].

*The following is presented with thanks to Professor Naiyer Masud of Lucknow, who discovered this review in the files of *Me'yār* and kindly shared his discovery with me.



ME'YAR (LUCKNOW): TITLE PAGE OF ONE OF THE ISSUES OF VOL. 5, 1911

Since Umrā'ō Jān was a courtesan [*ṭavā'if*] and a well-versed musician, we are also treated with frequent insightful remarks on finer points of music. Equally displayed is a knowledge of physiognomy [*qiyāfu-shināsi*]. Most importantly, [the author] has sought to prove that the goodness or badness of a man's nature is not enough to make him good or bad; it is necessary that there should also be appropriate and conducive circumstances [*vāqi'āt*]. It has also been shown that a prostitute [*randī*] does not get a chance to improve her lot in the hereafter unless she possesses some innate ability, or she is ugly looking, or she has grown old, or she has suffered some great misfortune. The reason for it is that there are always numerous people [around her] who would prize her lack of chastity and who would look with approval at her bold and shameless acts. It is these faults [of the prostitutes] that people count as their virtues. The delightfulness of the narrative and the excellence of the language can be gauged by the book's readers on their own. Price (illustrated): One rupee and twelve annas; (unillustrated): One rupee and eight annas.

Junūn-e Intizār ya'nī Fasāna-e Mirzā Rusvā

Bi Umrā'ō Jān, on seeing her own biography being published, has written all the intimate details of Mirzā Rusvā Ṣāhib's own life—in other words, she has vented her fury. But it too is not without its pleasure. It is also an example of Umrā'ō Jān's own talents. Price: Three and one/half annas.

[*Me'yār*, Lucknow; no. 8, 1899]

Notes

1. *Me'yār*: The first reaction in Lucknow to the prevalent “decadent” poetry of Vazīr, Rind, Amīr, Dāgh and Jalāl was in the pages of *Avad^b Panč*. This reaction was welcomed by most masters of poetry in that city. A prominent member of that group, Saiyyid 'Alī Naqī “Ṣafī,” organized a literary society by the name of Dā'ira-e Adabiya, among whose members were such luminaries as Munshī Sajjād Ḥusain (the first editor of *Avad^b Panč*), Mirzā Muḥammad Hādī “Rusvā,” Shaikh Mumtāz Ḥusain ‘Uṣmānī (the second editor of *Avad^b Panč*), and Piyārē Ṣāhib “Rashīd” (a famous elegy-writer). The gatherings of this society appear to have been

literary salons where members discussed literary and linguistic issues and collectively declared what was “acceptable” and “correct” in Urdu poetry. “Şafi” also established another literary society called Anjuman-e Me’yār-e Adab; it organized a monthly *mushā’ira*, hosted by different, more affluent members. These *mushā’iras* were *ṭarḥī*, and in the early years the *ṭarḥ* was always chosen from some ghazal of Ghālib. The new ghazals were then published in a monthly anthology entitled *Me’yār*, which eventually became a monthly magazine, with additional literary matter, including infrequent reviews. [The preceding is based on the comments of Mirzā Ja’far Ḥusain on the *mushā’iras* of Lucknow in his informative book, *Qadīm Lakḥnau kī Ākhrī Bahār* (New Delhi: Bureau for the Promotion of Urdu, 1981, pp. 262–7).]

I happen to possess a bound volume of *Me’yār* for the year 1911. The average issue runs to 32 pages. The cover is printed in black on green, with an elaborate design. Within the frame of a vine there is a map of India, with “Hindustān” visibly written in the Bay of Bengal, and “India” in the Himalayas. At the top there are dark rolling clouds through which two celestial shapes emerge: to the left, a crescent and star, with “Ghālib” inscribed in the crescent, and to the right, a big radiant sun, similarly inscribed “Mīr.” A large standard on the left side of the page carries a flared banner, with the name of the magazine in large calligraphy and another crescent and moon above the name. The title also carries three separate Urdu inscriptions. (1) In a medallion on the left: “What could be a greater honor and greater good fortune for this journal than to perform its duties under the patronage of Urdu’s foremost champion and the nation’s most popular and influential well-wisher, the Honorable Ḥāmid ‘Alī Khān Şāhib ‘Ḥāmid,’ Barrister at Law.” (2) Over and below the medallion is a verse: *bāzār-e ḥusn mēñ čal yūsuf kā sāmnā kar / kbōṭē kharē kā parda kbūl jā’ēgā č alan mēñ*. “Come with me to the Market of Beauty and stand before Joseph; the buyers will soon make clear whose beauty is true and whose is false.” (3) Down the left side runs another inscription: “Urdu literature’s most authoritative critic and the most powerful instructor of good taste. Edited by Ḥakīm Sayyid ‘Alī Muḥsin Khān ‘Abr.’ Printed at Me’yār Press, Čīnī Bāzār, Lucknow. Published at the Offices of Me’yār.” Inside, “Abr” describes himself as a “Follower of Mīr and Ghālib” and as the owner of the journal. Some of the issues also carry a photograph of some poet or patron of the journal, together with an account of his life and work.

Each issue is in the main devoted to the ghazals written for the monthly *mushā’ira* mentioned above. By this time the *ṭarḥ* is rarely a line

from Ghālib. The ghazals are organized in two groups. The first consists of ghazals specifically offered for inclusion in the monthly “competitive” or “comparative” [*taqābulī*] section. But the ghazals are not printed as separate entities. Instead, couplets from the various submitted ghazals are arranged together under the heading of the *qāfiya* that they share. Another condition observed is that the *maṭlaʿ* of each submitted ghazal contains the *qāfiya* of the *ṭarḥ* in the second line. Further, the selected verses are arranged by the alphabetical order of the poets’ names and not with regard to any distinction of seniority. The second group contains other *ṭarḥī* ghazals, presented in the conventional manner, with all due regard to the poet’s seniority. Additionally, there are often brief literary and philosophical essays as well as more poetry in other genres.

Apparently the journal was printed on two kinds of paper; the annual subscription for the better quality was Rs. 3; the lower quality cost a rupee less. Patrons paid Rs. 12; Supporters, Rs. 6; while the dues from *rājas* and *navābs* [*vāliyān-e mulk*] were left to their magnanimity [*ʿālī-himmatī*]. Of our further interest are the nine “Principles and Duties” [*uṣūl va farāʾiḏ*] that the journal listed on its inside back cover and which apparently guided its contents. These are as follows:

1. To seek to develop Urdu literature in interesting and serious ways.
2. To display in practice what “Good Taste” [*maẓāq-e salīm*] is, so that there may come about a general desire to perfect one’s abilities.
3. To nurture Urdu language and to follow “Good Taste.”
4. To remove errors of craftsmanship and understanding.
5. To exclude in a good manner all ignoble themes.
6. To publish frequently useful essays on poetry and prose.
7. To be bold and independent, but with due civility, in proclaiming what is right.
8. To judge what is false and what is true, without any partisanship or prejudice.
9. To withdraw and abstain from religious debates and political arguments.

2. George William MacArthur Reynolds (1814–1879) was one of the two Western writers most translated and popular in Urdu between the 1890s and 1920s, the other being Marie Corelli (1855–1924). At least three of the latter’s novels were translated into Urdu by Rusvā, but none of the former’s. (At least none has so far been identified.) For an incomplete listing of such translations, see Mirzā Ḥāmid Bēg, *Maghrib sē Naṣrī Tarājim* (Islamabad: Muqtadira Qaumī Zabān, 1988). (The book is still quite useful

despite its innumerable errors of editing and printing. Bēg lists five separate translations of Rosa Lambert, all published at Lucknow.) Rusvā's translations of cheap potboilers have long been out of print, but at least one was edited and published more recently: Mirzā Muḥammad Hadī Rusvā. *Khūnī 'Ishq*. Ed. Muḥammad Mazāhiru 'l-Ḥaq. Patna: Educational Society, 1987. It is a translation of Corelli's play, *Wormwood, a Drama of Paris*.

3. It is intriguing that the first edition had two versions and that one, more costly, was "illustrated" [*bā-taṣvīr*]. No copy seems to have survived. It may be mentioned that at the time an edition that had a photograph on its cover (printed on glossy paper) was often considered "illustrated." There is also a legend that there was in fact a courtesan commonly known as "Kālī Umrā'ō" [Black Umrā'ō] and it was her picture that adorned the cover of the first edition. □