

Characterization & Classical Urdu Poetry

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Abstract:

This article defines and discusses the terms "Character" and "Characterization" in order to explore its possibilities and varied dimensions in Classical Urdu Poetry. The writer has tried to correct this misconception about Classical Urdu Poetry that it is a merely an expression of the poet's feelings and thoughts in descriptive style and hence, a classical poet does not seek or apply artistic techniques in his poetry. It has been clarified in this article that in all prominent genres of Classical Urdu Poetry, characters are found and have certain peculiarities in their characterization which are noticeably praise worthy. Moreover, the strong trend of characterization in Modern Urdu Poetry is originated from Classical Urdu Poetry though it is broad in its horizon.

Character is a term, generally associated with Drama but besides literature, this word has also defined meaning as under:

"A character is a person especially when you are mentioning a particular quality that he or she has."(1)

Thus it can be presumed that every human being on this earth is a "character" in itself as he differs in particular qualities which specify his personality. God has created this difference of personalities to give recognition to every one. So the famous Shakespearian saying, "World is a Stage." is difinitely based on this fact.

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Literature, in the opinion of Coleridge, is the "Mirror of Life" that reflects characters from real life, sometimes as it is and sometimes with a blend of imagination. Obviously we come across many human beings in real life so the literature cannot avoid presenting them as characters. As a literary term, the word "Character" is defined as follows:

"The character in a film, book or play are the people that the film, book or play is about."⁽²⁾

It is apparent from this definition that characters are interlinked with story. Therefore in Drama and Narrative, characters are considered inseparable parts as is stated in *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*:

"Character, a personage in a narrative or dramatic work".⁽³⁾

It should be clear that "Narratives", include Novels and Short Stories etc. It is also worth mentioning that in these literary genres, characters being the essential part, are recognized to initiate discussions about the individuality of a certain personality. In Roger Fowler's opinion:

"Characters are by definition are determined contents (i.e., they are parts of a literary sequence involved in a plot), and can hence arouse liberal issues about the individualism of selves."⁽⁴⁾

As far as the "Characterization" is concerned it is representation of characters as a part of Narrative or Drama. *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, depicts the term "Characterization" as:

"...the representation of person in narrative or dramatic work."⁽⁵⁾

Similar is the definition, appeared in *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*:

"...The fictional representation of a person."⁽⁶⁾

The author employs direct or indirect method of characterization

by choice, hence, it becomes the criterion of his craft that how skillfully he chooses and applies a specific method of characterization, to express his views. In *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, these two methods are interpreted in the following words.

"This may include direct method like the attribution of qualities in description or commentary and indirect (or dramatic) method. Inviting readers to infer qualities from characters actions, speech or appearance."⁽⁷⁾

In a successful characterization, the author does not interfere with his personality into characterization. No doubt, he can set out his thoughts and ideas through the dialogues and actions of characters but certainly not in the manner of speech. Another merit of characterization is the contrast of characters with in themselves or with other characters. It strengthens not only their presentation but also the moral lesson or objective of the author rendered in a more clear way.

According to situation, sometimes the direct method of characterization is more suitable but in general, indirect method is much appreciated. Actually indirect method of characterization gives expression to impersonality in literature. In this way the author reveals his experiences through characters. That's what T.S. Eliot calls, "Objective Correlative". As stated by Eliot, the only way to articulate emotions in form of art is to put into words the "Objective Correlative", Eliot asserts:

"The only way of expressing emotions in form of art has been by finding an 'Objective Correlative', in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, such that when the external facts which must terminate in sensory experience, have been given, the emotion is immediately evoked."⁽⁸⁾

As it was observed that characterization is connected with Drama and Fiction, so with regard to Urdu Literature, it is appropriate that

Daastan, Novel and Afsana are termed as Fiction in prose and in poetry, Masnavi may be called as fictional genre, having characters in it.

So almost all the distinguished critics of Urdu Literature while discussing the above mentioned genres deem characterization as their indispensable part. Take the example of "Dastaan", Dr. Gyanchand expounds it as the story of one or two characters which is depicted without any break.⁽⁹⁾ Like wise Dr. Sohail Bokhari comments about Novel that in Novels, characters are more important than romances because they have a major role in plot construction, the Character Novel revolves around the character.⁽¹⁰⁾ Dr. Anwar Sadeed reckons characters as basic element of Afsana along with plot.⁽¹¹⁾ Further more Masnavi is also bound to display characters. Therefore, Shibli Naumani when depicts some rules of critical analysis of Masnavi in *Sher-ul-Ajum*, propounds that the criterean of Masnavi should be evaluated under the headings of characters, unity of characters, sequence and story.⁽¹²⁾

In short, in Urdu Literature, characters are believed to be indispensable part of Dastaan, Novel, Afsana and Masnavi. As about Drama it is quite clear that it cannot be imagined without characters.

In Urdu Poetry, the genres other then Masnavi are not based on story so usually critics ignore characterization in them or it is partially discussed. In most of the cases it remains unnoticed as a technical medium of expression. Hence, its varied dimensions are not reviewed as they deserve. The basic hindrance is the concept of poetry, imprinted in the minds of people. Poetry is always taken as the expression of feelings, experiences, thoughts and imagination of the poet. So characters are not equated with poetry in such a way as are attached with Fiction and Drama. However characters and characterization in all genres of poetry is quite possible. The simple logic behind this assumption is, that poet derives the subject matter of his poetry from this world full of human beings, consequently human

beings can also be a part of his poetry in form of characters. Undeniably, the term "Poem" has been perfectly elucidated in the *Princeton's Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* in these words:

"A poem is produced by a poet takes its subject matter from the universe of men, things, and events and is addressed to or made available to an audience of hearers or readers."⁽¹³⁾

We can infer from this extract that there is likelihood of presenting characters in poems and hence, poetry. In this respect, it will not be out of place to quote T.S. Eliot who pronounces three voices in the poetry. He delineates:

"The first is the voice of the poet talking to himself or no body. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character."⁽¹⁴⁾

Eliot perceives only imaginary characters in poetry. On the contrary, there are many other types of characters in poetry taken from History, Myths and even from daily life. In addition, these Historical and Mythical characters are presented with a touch of imagination. It mean that in such cases the poet deviates from the traits usually attributed to these characters or occasionally, changes the situation in contrast to the known facts. On that account these characters become Symbolic ones and metaphorical meanings culminate in their effect. In short, characters can be of many types depending upon the source.

But technically, the characters have two major categories:

- 1- Type (Flat or non dramatic) which are simple or unchanging.
- 2- Round (Dramatic) which change with the change of situation

and take an active part in the sequence of plot.

We notice two more terms while talking about the kinds of character i.e, stock or supportive character and Narrator's or Story teller's character. All these terms are not unfamiliar in case of Drama and Fiction. But the question is how these characters exist in Urdu Poetry and what are their discrete dimensions? Here we are not debating about Modern Urdu Poetry as it is replete with variant characters and accordingly requires extensive discussion. We just want to analyse and explore the roots of this trend of characterization in Urdu Poetry as it is usually thought to be devoid of characters except in the case of Masnavi. Especially in the well known and most practiced genre of Urdu Poetry i.e., Ghazal, all the feelings expressed are identified with poet's own feelings. An impersonal touch is believed to be almost impossible as most of the classical poets are categorized as inovert. Its true that they give expression to their personal thoughts and feelings in a direct way but yet some conventional characters can be easily highlighted from Ghazal. The character of Mehboob (the beloved) Ashiq (the lover), Raqeeb (the rival) Qasid (the messenger) and Naseh (the advisor) are must in ghazals of every Classical Urdu Poet.

In the same fashion, these characters have no distinctness in traits or behaviours while we go through the poetry of one or the other poet. Ashiq (the lover) is always humble, ready to bear all hardships in the way of love. Mehboob (the beloved) is all the time merciless to the lover. Raqeeb (the rival) invariably loves for the sake of lust but is dear to beloved as she can't recognize true love, Qasid (the messenger) is continually failing to convey the message of love from the lover to the beloved and is a bit dishonest, too. Naseh (the advisor) is an irritating personality throughout the tradition of Classical Urdu Ghazal. To sum up, inspite of lacking uniqueness in characterization, Classical Urdu Ghazal had characters in it though "Type" in technique and are handled in direct method. But this direct rendition of

characters becomes impressive when the poet delineates human emotions and feelings with psychoanalytical touch. That's what classical Urdu Ghazal is applauded for.

The second most important genre of Classical Urdu Poetry is Masnavi. Indisputably it has characters but dramatic ones are rare. For instance, the character of Najm-un-Nisa in Mansavi "Sehr-ul-Bayan" is the only dramatic character despite the fact that it is a supportive character. The two main characters "Shehzada Benazair" (lover) and "Shehzadi Bedr-e-Munir" (beloved) are basically "Type". Like in all traditional love stories, there is also the character of rival, "Mahrukh Pari", to complete the love triangle. The presence of Narrater's character can also be felt from this couplet of the Mansavi "Seher-ul-Bayan":

"Once there was a king of a city. He was kind to all his people."(15)

Obviously, the style is of a "Dastango" (story teller) depicting the story. But it should be clear that this Narrator does not take an active part in the progress of story. He just narrates the story and that's all. This analysis of Masnavi "Sehr-ul-Bayan" is true to all other outstanding Urdu Masnavis as the character of lover, beloved, rival, messenger advisor and narrator with same traits, are present in all of them.

Mersia is another major off-short of Classical Urdu Poetry. In it, historical characters with reference to the "Battle of Karbala" are presented to evoke mournful impact in readers or listeners on religious grounds of "Shia" sect of Islam. Mainly the characters listed below exist in the Mersia:

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|-------------------------|------------------------|
| (i) Hazrat Imam Hussain | (ii) Hazrat Abbas |
| (iii) Hazrat Zaineb | (iv) Hazrat Aun |
| (v) Hazrat Muhammad | (vi) Hazrat Ali Asghar |
| (vii) Hazrat Ali Akbar | (viii) Hazrat Sajjad |
| (ix) Hazrat Shehr Bano | (x) Shimmer |
| (xi) Hurr | (xii) Ibn-e-Saad |
| | (xiii) Yazeed etc. |

Most of these are known sacred historical personalities so the Mersia poets cannot ignore the religious restrictions in sketching their personalities. They show only one or two aspects of their personality which are helpful in creating emotional effect. The sharp contrast in Good and Bad characters is exploited also to intensify the regretfulness. Mersia poets have applied both direct and indirect method of characterization whichsoever is suitable. There is no question about their choice of method. But according to the critics like Kaleem-ud-Din Ahmad, the static presentation of characters in Mersia is objectionable.⁽¹⁶⁾ It is true to some extent but while analysing the characters in Mersia, two points should be kept in mind. First of all, characterization in itself as a depiction of impersonality of the poet is not the goal of the poets. Their basic purpose is to have woeful response, and for this they have adopted the technique of characterization. Secondly, religious bond hinders the poet to relate qualities like a common man of errors to these sacred personalities. In the same way, religious conflict compels the poets to sketch the Bad characters with extreme stress. So the poet paints only those colours which match the religious beliefs, and any other side of the personality is never discussed. We may also say that the Mersia poets thought it to be out of place to describe the whole personality of characters. They are justified in doing so in accordance with the demands of this genre of Mersia. But on the whole, the characters of Mersia should be categorized among "Type" ones as a particular character has almost the same qualities throughout the tradition of Mersia. For example, the patience of Hazrat Imam Hussain, the power of Hazrat Abbas, the priceless love of Hazrat Zaineb for her brother, etc. remains unvaried whether in the Mersia of Aness or of Dabeer, the two most eminent poets of this genre. This statement is also befitting to all Mersia poetry. However, the decorum in the dialogues of almost all the characters is appreciable.

Another kind of Mersia, is, a poem which is written on the death

of a dear one or any other favourite personality. Due to emotional affiliation, the poet describes all the good qualities of the departed soul and negative aspects are avoided. So again these characters of departed persons can be categorized as Type characters. Here once more the feeling of grief and sense of loss is prevalent which moves the reader's heart.

The Odes termed as Qasidas in Classical Urdu Poetry, have also characters. As a literary term, the Ode is defined as:

A poem that speaks to a person or thing or celebrate a specific event."⁽¹⁷⁾

More often, the person addressed to, in Odd or Qasida, is a personality important to the poet. Normally these include Emperors, Higher Officials or religiously holy personalities. In the first case, the poet eulogizes the Emperors or Higher Officials to gain worldly interests. Exaggeration in such characterization is dominant. In religious Qasidas again, the praise to the extent of exaggeration due to religious affiliations is must. Another form of Qasida is "Hajv" (or Satire). In it the poet describes the negativities of a person due to bias. Exaggeration is so frequent in such "Hujv" (satires) that often the poet crosses the limits of ethics to condemn the described personality. So in all the cases described above, characterization is not adopted as literary technique to enhance the effectiveness of the poem. Objects and goals of the poet are somewhat different.

While searching roots of charactererization in Urdu Poetry, another genre of Classical Urdu Poetry is worth mentioning i.e., Shehar Ashob (Lament of the City). The poet laments the ruined city, as he himself is the citizen of that city. He feels pangs of excruciating pain on the condition of his fellow citizens so expresses it through the presentation of peculiar characters. The poet sketches a true picture of ruination of the city, therefore the characterization is also true to life, though dealt with direct method of characterization.

Nazir Akbarabad, famous for his subject based poems, holds a

unique place in the tradition of Classical Urdu Poetry. He swerves from the popular genres of Classical Urdu Poetry and recounts day to day realities in his poems. Common man in his varied aspects is the main character of his poems. Direct method of characterization is favourite to him. Usually his style resembles with snapshots. He describes whatever is in front of sight at a specific moment and the reader feels as if he is observing a photograph where every feature is clear. Some of his characters are refined ones very close to the developed technique of characterization in Modern Urdu Poetry. That's why his poetry is considered an important milestone in the trend of characterization in Urdu Poetry.

In order to recapitulate, it should be stated that the trend of characterization which is commonly linked with Modern Urdu Poetry is also conspicuous in Classical Urdu Poetry. Both direct and indirect method of characterization are used by the poets but the direct one is prevalent. Though the direct method of characterization is not much admired but it has its own charms which lie in its suitability to situation.

In Ghazals and Mersias the characters are idiosyncratic but psychoanalytic touch in their portrayal is applaudable. Further more, characters are varied in Qasidas but the style of characterization is stubborn as the poet eulogizes and raves about each character in same fashion.

The variant and divergent characters from daily life in Nazir Akbarabad's poetry are highly praised and his style is admired while compared with other Classical Urdu Poets. So Nazir Akbarabadi is rightly said to be the progenitor of Modified characterization in Modern Urdu Poetry.



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