

Critical Analysis of the New Horizons of 21st Century Urdu Novels

1. **Dr. Tahir Nawaz**, Assistant Professor, Department of Urdu, Karakoram International University, Gilgit.
2. **Dr. Ghulam Farida**, Assistant Professor, Department of Urdu, International Islamic University, Islamabad.
3. **Dr. Aqlima Naz**, Assistant Professor, Department of Urdu Zuban-O-Adab, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi

Abstract

In the 21st century, the changing global scenario, the provision of the internet, and the common man's access to Western literature have ushered in a new era in Urdu novel writing, which includes modern themes, diverse narratives, and aesthetic experiences. In this century, Urdu novels are more prominent than other genres, as they not only reflect contemporary regional issues but also try to adapt to global influences while staying connected to their rich cultural heritage. The digital era has also played a key role in the new horizon of Urdu novels. The advent of e-books and online publishing platforms has made Urdu literature more accessible to a global audience. Writers can now break down geographical barriers and reach readers worldwide. Social media platforms have further facilitated this exchange, allowing writers to engage directly with their readers and get instant feedback. This interaction has not only helped writers improve their art but has also encouraged a more vibrant and interactive literary culture. Urdu novelists have given new dimensions to novel writing by combining traditional storytelling with modern literary techniques and the reach provided through digital platforms. This research article will critically examine the "New Horizons of Urdu Novels in the 21st Century".

Keywords: Novels, Urdu novels, New Horizons of Urdu novels, Urdu, 21st century Urdu novels

Objective:

The objective of this paper is to analyze the new directions and horizons of 21st century Urdu novels.

Research Question:

What are the new horizons of Urdu novels in the 21st century and what are the reasons why Urdu novels do not match the global novel?

Methodology:

To gain a thorough understanding of the current state of Urdu novels and the factors influencing their global standing, a structured research methodology is followed. The key approaches are literature review, thematic analysis, comparative literature, historical context, publications analysis, and recommendations.

Theoretical framework:

A comprehensive framework is developed to explore and analyze the multifaceted nature of Urdu literature and its place in the broader literary landscape. This approach will help to understand the research question of this paper: What are the new horizons of Urdu novels in the 21st century, and what are the reasons why Urdu novels do not match global novels? The following are the key components of the theoretical framework for this article:

1. Compare Urdu novels with global novels to identify differences.
2. The impact of translation on the reception of Urdu novels in the global literary market. Analyze how translation and dramatization affect the accessibility and interpretation of these works.
3. How historical events influence the themes and narratives of Urdu novels.

Introduction:

In the 21st century, the new horizons of Urdu novels present an interesting question. The question is, if new horizons emerge in Urdu novels in the 21st century, what were the old horizons? Knowing the new horizons without determining the old horizons is impossible. Intezar Hussain called Prem Chand the “crooked brick of Urdu fiction” (1). The same can be said of the Urdu novel, which was established by Deputy Nazir Ahmed and Abdul Halim Sharr in the form of reformative novels during the colonial era. Since the novels of Deputy Nazir Ahmed were patronized by the government, they became a means for The Deputy Sahib to receive prizes from the government. Sharr’s historical romantic novels continued to feed his literary journals and served as a catalyst for the wounded nation after the 1857 War of Independence. The same goes for Ratan Nath Sarshar’s social satire and comedy novels, which he wrote primarily to be the editor of the Awadh newspaper. Mirza Hadi Ruswa authored a complete novel thirty years later in the form of Umrao Jaan Ada, but this trend could not be sustained, and he could not write the rest of his novels in this style.

Prem Chand used realism to reform the novel. Through the works of Azeem Beg's “Khanum,” Ismat Chughtai's “Sudai,” and Krishna Chandra's “Defeat,” the Urdu novel reached to Qurat-ul-Ain Haider’s “Mary Bhi Sanam Khany.” The partition, migration, and riots of 1947 provided the biggest theme for the Urdu novel. All major novels of the late 20th century dealt with this theme. In this way, the Urdu novel evolved from reform, historical romanticism, and superficial realism to historiography. However, the Urdu novel still did not find a serious and full-time novelist. This

is the reason that, within the tradition of Urdu novels, we have significant works, but when compared with world literature, even the top Urdu novels are found to be lacking.

Discussion and Analysis:

Yusuf Sarmast has tried to answer this question in his book "Urdu Novels in the Twentieth Century":

"Urdu novelists did not do the hard work that the world's great novelists have done to write novels. Flaubert spent years writing his masterpiece and took the most intense mental labor... Anatole France was constantly changing his manuscript. And even when he gave it to the publisher, he kept changing it through eight proofs. Balzac used to change his writing even up to twenty-seven proofs. Tolstoy revised his 1,200-page novel War and Peace seven times... Similarly, Joyce spent 10 years writing Ulysses, but in contrast, there are very few Urdu novelists who rewrite their novels. In fact, few of our great and important novelists have not even revised their works."(2)

The question of why a great novel is not being written in Urdu remains, and another question must be posed to find the answer. Are our novelists either deprived, ignorant, or unwilling to accept the difficulties needed for higher novel writing? In this context, Ghaffar Shahzad writes:

"In order to write a great novel, it is necessary to have a deep awareness of history and civilization. What are the obstacles to the realization of people's fundamental rights? What effect have religion and philosophy had on human life over the centuries? How have modern critical theories such as existentialism, modernism, postmodernism, and structuralism helped to understand the interconnection of life, society, civilization, and culture? Our writers are not ready to fulfill their responsibilities. Anyone who wants to write does so and prints it in the form of a book, with no standard. We need to examine the novels written in Urdu impartially, keeping in mind the established standards. We will then understand why the possibilities of novel writing in Urdu literature are limited." (3)

This can be gauged from the statement of Abdullah Hussain, whose novel "Udaas Naslain" (1963) considered one of the major novels in Urdu. This novel became his identity in Urdu literature, and it is estimated that more than fifty editions have been published. This novel was also awarded the Adamjee Literary Award. He translated the same novel into English in 1999 under the name "Weary Generations," but it did not achieve the same fame in English as it did in Urdu. Regarding this novel, he says:

"Weary Generations" was not consciously written as a historical novel, nor is it a historical novel. Originally, the novel was written as a love story, and this idea remained in mind until the end." (4)

Not only novelists but also society and critics have been responsible for the artistic and intellectual decline of Urdu novel writing. Society was not ready to buy or read books, and critics, especially those of the 20th century, were not ready to focus on this genre. Poetry and short fiction have been more prominent in twentieth-century literature. One of the main reasons for this was literary journals, where short fiction and poetry were featured, but it was more difficult for novels to be published in these journals. Therefore, it can be said that most writers of the twentieth century were full-time short story writers and part-time novelists. Thus, the initial identity of writers from Prem Chand to Intezar Hussain is that of short story writers.

In literature, every era is connected to its predecessor in some way or another, so it is not possible to see it in complete isolation. As T.S. Eliot said, individuality is established within tradition. In terms of Urdu novel writing, the novels of the 21st century are the culmination of the 20th century. This is the reason that even in the 21st century, no major novels of global competition have been written in Urdu. However, compared with the Urdu novel writing of the last two centuries, globalization, the changing global scenario, the provision of the internet, and the access of the common person and the novelist to Western literature have introduced modern themes into the Urdu novel. In this century, Urdu novels have become more prominent than other genres. Dr. Naeem Anis has compiled a book titled "Urdu Novels in the 21st Century," in which he lists 113 novels published in the 21st century by 2016. It is estimated that by 2025, the number of Urdu novels will have exceeded two hundred. Despite being published so frequently, Urdu novels are still far from universal or comparable to world literature. Shahab Zafar Azmi writes in this regard:

“Despite the diversity of themes in the Urdu novels of the new century, the Urdu novel lacks the experiences and general diversity in style and thought needed to achieve universality or to be on par with world literature.”(5)

The question remains as to why Urdu novels are still unable to match world literature even after more than a century and a half. Urdu is one of the few major languages in the world, yet novelists of languages smaller than Urdu have won the Nobel Prize. So, will Urdu novels always be deprived of a globally recognized great novelist? Will the Urdu novel continue to be written in the same manner as it has been for the last century and a half? Is there any reason to continue with this style? One of the main reasons for this is the prevalence of university and journalistic novels, which also receive recognition in literary festivals, literary prizes, and praise from prominent Urdu critics. This is why this style of novel writing has become prevalent in Urdu. Faisal Iqbal Awan has illustrated this type of novel writing and criticism as follows:

"Whether critics and commentators have devalued and disregarded terms such as great, important, trendy, brilliant, and excellent novels with their untimely and indiscriminate frequent use. Such judges and critics are not only slaughtering the taste of the readers but are also unfairly praising weak and bad writers and encouraging them to consider their mediocre writings as benchmarks. By making such mediocre literature a benchmark due to these kind elders, it is obvious that these promoted writers will continue to write the same in the future.”(6)

If the critical tradition of the novel continues based on personal relationships, groupings, friendship, admiration, and expediency, then novels without creative power, weak and weak novels will continue to be written in future.

Now, let us try to see the other side of the picture. In the 21st century, one of the most important developments in the new horizon of Urdu novels is the emergence of new themes. The main themes of contemporary novel writing include globalization, identity crises, economic imperialism, consumer trends, social media, communal riots, increasing frustration among youth, prejudice, and post-colonialism, which reflect the changing regional socio-political landscape. Thanks to post-modernism and cultural influences, linguistic updates can also be seen in these novels. Contemporary Urdu novelists are also experimenting with various genres, including science fiction, fantasy, and different narrative styles. These experiments have expanded the horizons of Urdu novel writing to some extent, attracting new writers, and it can be hoped that in the coming years, better creative literature in the form of novels will emerge.

In the 21st century, the digital era has also played a key role in the new horizon of Urdu novels. The advent of e-books and online publishing platforms has made Urdu literature more accessible to global audiences. Writers can now break down geographical barriers and reach readers worldwide. Social media platforms have further facilitated this exchange, allowing writers to have direct contact and receive instant feedback from their readers. This interaction will not only help writers improve their art but will also encourage a more vibrant and interactive literary culture.

An important aspect of 21st-century novel writing is the presentation of contemporary environmental issues. This reflects the growing global awareness about climate change and environmental degradation. In this context, Muhammad Hameed Shahid's novel "Matti Adam Khati Hai" is important, as it attempts to explore the relationship between man and the environment. We need to address this topic further in novels. There is a need to significantly address gender issues and gender equality. Urdu fiction is still stuck on Manto's portrayal of sexism. Contemporary novelists must go beyond this and explain the complexities of contemporary gender issues, sexual issues, and societal expectations. Most psychological and social problems, as well as crime in contemporary society, are linked to these complexities.

Due to globalization, contemporary novelists and readers cannot remain isolated from the world. Therefore, the impact of globalization and imperialism on the global scene and regional issues must also be made part of the novel. Wars, epidemics, deaths, and the global refugee crisis are among the serious issues causing the displacement and death of thousands and millions of people. Mustansar Hussain Tarar has presented these problems very well in "Qila Jangi" and "Khas o Khashak Zamana". In the contemporary era, regional and global political and cultural tensions are increasing, leading to complexities such as identity and loyalty.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

There are few suggestions to take Urdu novel writing to new horizons in the 21st century. To elevate the contemporary Urdu novel to the level of world literature, it is necessary to adapt to

regional and global contemporary topics, modern narrative techniques, the knowledge and seriousness of the novelist, and serious literary criticism. This will ensure that the contemporary novelist not only preserves their literary heritage but also paves the way for new novelists. Urdu novels should not be limited to pages but should truly reflect society and Urdu literature so that they can impress readers all over the world.

Urdu novel writing of the 21st century faces problems in publishing, marketing, and distribution. Major publishers show reluctance in publishing new writers. Usually, the novelist must bear the cost of publishing the book themselves. The lack of promotion and translation of Urdu novels internationally is also a major obstacle. Social and political issues and restrictions also make it difficult for novelists to write freely. The impact of globalization on 21st-century Urdu novel writing is also significant. English literature dominates the world stage, which is why Urdu novels do not get the same appreciation as English novels. The same is true for Urdu translations of English novels compared to original Urdu novels.

The Urdu novel of the 21st century is far from being dramatized and adapted into films. Globally, novels are adapted into dramas and films, which increases their popularity and brings economic benefits to the novelist. Therefore, the Urdu novel must be brought towards dramatization and commercialization because the demands and dramatic needs of the present era cannot be ignored.

Gopichand Narang said:

“In every living society, the caravan of language and literature is always moving forward, and there are changes in literature every moment. These changes are both an extension of tradition and a deviation from it, but the interesting moments in literary history are those where, under an unusual trend or due to a giant literary figure, a deviation from tradition takes the form of rebellion, and a new scenario of separation and *ijtihad* emerges.”(7)

Therefore, it can be said that serious efforts are needed to take the Urdu novel of the 21st century to new horizons, so that we can truly call this century the century of Urdu novels. For this, a new scenario of innovation and *ijtihad* in Urdu novel writing needs to emerge soon, so that Urdu novels can become universal and be considered equal to world literature.

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