

Urdu Drama

M. MUJEEB

Indo-Muslim culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had been the battle-ground of two forces, tradition and Europeanization. In a sense, the movement of life is everywhere and at all times produced by the struggle between the desire of stability and security and the desire for change. But the new generally grows out of the old. It was very different with the conflict in Indo-Muslim culture. Here tradition represented a collectivist, community-centred, metaphysical view of life. Europeanization meant adoption of, or to be more precise, surrender to a culture that was essentially individualistic, man-centred, rationalistic. It may be possible to view both historically as the working out of the same basic ideas, but in the forms which they had taken by the nineteenth century, they were in fact irreconcilable. Europeanization had the support of political authority, of economic power, of scientific achievement. The result of its conflict with tradition was not a synthesis of ideas and beliefs, nor organic changes, but forced compromises, tacit acceptance of facts. No new and dynamic philosophy of life emerged from it; expression of ideas was often induced but it would be a mistake, perhaps, to regard it as genuine self-expression.

The development of Urdu drama is an illustration of how the conflict of cultures failed to produce distinctive, satisfying results. European drama has inherited its spirit from the Greek, which was a typical representation of man-centred culture. Its essence was conflict, inescapable, all pervading conflict, a destiny which nothing could change. In India, life has been conceived of as a whole with an end that must be consistent with the beginning. It was realized, no doubt, that desires and aspirations can remain unfilled, that happiness can be destroyed by circumstances and events, that man can be an enemy to man. But this was a problem in philosophy, in ethics, in the art of living; it had to be solved, not accepted as insoluble. There could be no belief in conflict as the unalterable law of life that would imply a denial of order in the universe and in human society, of wisdom and perfectibility. Indian drama, when serious, portrays persons and events of a serious character and reveals possibilities of adjustment or fulfilment through the invariably happy ending. Realism cannot be a criterion when reality is sought as much beyond as within the sphere of day-to-day life. Events are considered actual, no doubt, but it is their symbolic character that appeals more strongly to the Indian mind. The human being may have something individual about himself, but Indian drama would classify him as an individual belonging to a type. His experiences would also tend to be typical. Or, they would be raised far above the level of daily life into the fantastic or the supernatural.

These considerations are, however, irrelevant to the earliest form of Urdu drama. It is a moot question whether these forms could be called drama at all. The extravagance of the

Inder Sabha had to be modified when the income of the State of Oudh was no longer there to be squandered on spectacular performances. But for decades, the theatre was devoted to cheap display and a type of entertainment that verged on the disreputable. Even the best plays, or rather shows, had no social or psychological significance, the language was a grossly artificial, rhyming prose, the acting exaggerated, stylized, 'theatrical', and the plot an excuse for providing a sequence to songs and dance items which were the main attraction for the audience. These features have been taken over by the Indian film, the only improvement being that the dialogue is now not so far removed from every-day speech. The association of drama with the performances of theatrical companies was a deterrent to serious playwriting and production, even when the value of drama had been realized by the educator and the reformer.

Drama has now become a recognized form of literature, and almost every Urdu novelist and writer has written a few plays for production or as an exercise in a medium slightly different from his usual one. Opinions will differ as to whether the output is large or small, but it is certainly much smaller than the number of novels and short stories, and there is hardly any writer for whom drama is the exclusive or principal medium. Opinions will also differ, perhaps much more widely, as to the quality of dramatic writing. But there can be no doubt that its standard is far below that of the novel or the short story, whatever the criterion of judgment we may choose to adopt.

There are particular reasons for this. One is that the conflict between the traditional Indian and the Graeco-European conception of the drama has not yet been resolved. There is indecision as regards form and purpose. Sometimes the drama is just a story in the form of a dialogue, sometimes there are incidents that just throw light on a character, and by implication on life as a whole like a well-turned short story, sometimes the dramatic is just confused with the improbable. There are characters, but the characterization follows the lines of the novel and the short story. The individual still tends to become the representative of a type, or an embodiment of the dramatist's idea, a mouthpiece. The conception of man having his own nature, formed through the continuous exercise of free will, bringing joy or sorrow upon himself, coming up constantly against destiny, has still to find expression. Such expression would be easier to achieve if drama were to be identified with different forms of conflict. If the Greek conception of drama were to be consciously rejected, as it was by Chekhov and other Russian dramatists, perhaps another form of drama could be evolved. That, however, will happen either when a great dramatist is born, or when those who wish to use drama as a medium have made deliberate and careful experiments in form over a sufficiently long period.

The form of the drama is necessarily affected by the purpose for which it is written. In Urdu drama, the educator and the reformer have to a large extent determined the purpose. It is only after long experience, if even then, that it is realized that education is less effective when it is direct. Urdu playwrights have not had that experience. Their purpose is too obvious. This lowers the quality of dramatic writing. It leads to planning of situations

where the outcome is known beforehand, and there is no element of surprise. The insistence, during the last twentyfive years by progressive writers, that literature must reflect the real life and aspirations of the people, has not considerably improved playwriting. The education has given place to the propagandist, the didactic method has changed into the dialectical, the dramatic has been confused with the hysterical. But because the object was propaganda, much attention was devoted to producing the desired effects, and the significance of coordinating the play, the acting and the stagecraft was hardly realized.

Perhaps all the defects in Urdu drama can be traced to the fact that the dramatist wrote in a vacuum. He was not aware of the effects of didactic dialogue on the audience or on the actors, of the feeling of emptiness caused by lack of action, of those limitations of the stage which have to be kept in mind to enable a play to be properly produced. He did not draw his characters from life, but created them in his own mind to represent his ideas or sentiments. He did not have the opportunity to see good acting or to judge what kind of part could or could not be acted well. The Urdu drama has had few actors and no stage, and therefore competent playwriting has not been possible.

It would not be feasible here to attempt an appraisal of even random samples of Urdu plays. I shall only discuss three plays, each of which represent a type.

Perhaps the first serious Urdu drama was *Zud Pasheman*, published in the second decade of the twentieth century. Its subject is one that has appealed to sentimental writers and dramatists all over the world: the forced marriage of a virtuous and accomplished girl to a rascal young man, a tragic end to her life as well as to that of the really deserving suitor whom she would have married if she could. In *Zud Pasheman* we have, apart from the heroine and the hero, a father who is otherwise more enlightened than his relatives and neighbours, but thinks it a matter of parental honour and prestige to marry his daughter, whom he has educated with care, to whomsoever he will. He has a friend whose opinion he respects in all matters, but he angrily rejects his advice on the question of his daughter's marriage. The action proceeds precipitately from one situation to another. The father asserts his absolute right over his daughter and marries her to his nephew. The true lover is unable to interfere because he is called away by a fake telegram about the serious illness of his father. He returns to find that his beloved has committed suicide out of shame because her husband has been arrested by the police. So he shoots himself. And the fond father, when comes upon the scene, also shoots himself. It was perhaps bold of the author to write such a play at the time he did, and there are irrational elements that give the play some dramatic quality. But the work would have been different and much better if the author had not thought it necessary to proceed as rapidly and directly as possible from forced marriage to virtuous suicide.

Anarkali is perhaps the most outstanding literary play. It was written in the thirties by one who had considerable knowledge of stagecraft, and written at leisure. The story is pseudo-historical, about the maid-servant at the court of Emperor Akbar who fell in love with the crown-prince Salim, and was immured alive for this offence by the irate Emperor. As

literature, the play is excellent, but one feels resentful at so much talent and literary skill being wasted on a plot so insignificant, with an outcome so inconsistent with the manner and customs of those times. *Anarkali* could have been punished for infidelity or for obdurate virtue, but not for having added genuine passion to what was almost her function, and those of many others like her, at the court. If Salim had fallen in love with her and married her that would have given her some status among her rivals, but would not have created any political problems. Akbar's anger does not appear to have been justified because there was no danger of loss to the court or the kingdom. What has been brought into the limelight is sheer, purposeless barbarism, and the reader is left with the feeling that the dramatist is not sufficiently concerned with the understanding of life.

A play which may be considered representative of the propagandist type of drama is *Chaudah Golia*n. It was written with a laudable object, shortly after the tribal invasion of Kashmir. The hero, Maqbool Sherwani, performed feats of courage and self-sacrifice, and one cannot imagine anyone meeting a cruel fate more bravely. But the dramatist either did not have any conception of heroic grace and dignity or he chose deliberately to make his hero hysterical in order that he might say things that were effective as propaganda. This is in a way symptomatic of the age we live in, when the human personality has no value in itself and is regarded merely as a means to an end.

This appraisal of Urdu drama is obviously pessimistic. Perhaps it is a little too severe. Urdu with its literary quality, its adaptability for all types of expression, its rich idiom, its humanistic tradition should really have had dramatic literature of far superior quality than what it at the moment possesses. If we remain as complacent as we have been hitherto, it will be impossible to fix standards, and to indicate to play-writers what they should attempt and what they should avoid. Frank and honest criticism is now all the more necessary because the taste for play-acting is being cultivated, talent is being discovered, and a great field of art is being thrown open to adventure in self-expression.