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A Contemporary Writer from Afghanistan: Akram Osman and His Short Stories

FARIDULLAH BEZHAN*

ABSTRACT *Akram Osman is one of the most outstanding contemporary Afghanistani writers.¹ His short stories represent a current of modern Afghanistan literature in which an imported Western genre is mixed with indigenous literary traditions to become a mirror reflecting important issues and human needs in Afghanistan society. His works are divided into satirical short stories, stories of manners and diaspora stories which are not only pioneering in these types of Afghanistan literature, but also among the best to be created in modern Afghanistan. Among other particulars, his use of a form of a language based on folk traditions distinguishes his work from those of his contemporaries. Osman portrays a historical and artistic picture of Afghanistan social classes and their characteristics. Osman's stories display artistic merit and are of anthropological interest; and they have also become popular short stories in their own right appealing to the mass of Afghanistan society.*

One of the most outstanding authors of the genre of the short story in Afghanistan in the 1960–1970s is Dr Akram Osman, who combined indigenous and Western traditions in an artistic manner and produced some short stories of lasting value. He is Afghanistan's most popular author and has contributed to the development of the short story there. He has had a relatively long presence on the scene, having been writing since the late 1950s, and his collections of short stories have been best sellers.

Born in 1937 and holding a PhD in law and political science from Tehran University (Iran), Osman for a long time served in the literature and arts of Radio Afghanistan. He was also a presenter of poetry and stories on Afghanistani TV and radio, where he read some of his own stories. Following this he worked as director of the Institute of History and Law in the Afghanistan Academy of Sciences, then as president of the Afghanistan Writers' Association, and later served as Afghanistan's

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¹ Although the commonly-accepted international term is Afghan rather than Afghanistani, in Afghanistan the term Afghan is synonymous with the Pashtoon ethnic group as far as non-Pashtoons are concerned. The political strength of the Pashtoons led to them using the word Afghan to describe all ethnic groups; but this is resented by the many other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. In addition, the term Afghanistani is widely used inside Afghanistan. Therefore, I have chosen to use the word Afghanistani to describe the inhabitants of a multi-ethnic modern nation-state called Afghanistan.

high commissioner in Tajikistan and Iran. With the outbreak of civil war in 1992 and the so-called big wave of Afghanistan intellectual migration, he moved to Sweden. He still writes and is active in cultural activities for the Afghanistani diaspora. Osman heads the Afghan Pen Club which publishes a journal, *Farda* (Future), in Stockholm.

Osman has had diverse publications in the fields of history, politics, international law and literature. He has written over 80 short stories and a novel. More than 20 of these works have been created since his move to Europe. Some of his short stories were published in four collections: *Waqt-i ke Nay-ha Gol Mikonad* (When Rushes Blossom) (1983), *Darz-i Diwar* (The Crack in the Wall) (1985), *Mard-ha ra Qawl As* (Men Keep their Promises) (1988) and *Qaht Sali* (Year of Famine) (2003).²

But what makes Osman a significant author and his short stories so appealing? Osman was born to a father who belonged to Muhammadzai clan that ruled Afghanistan between 1826 and 1978, and a mother from the lower class. This combination (if not contrast) had a profound impact on Osman's outlook. It enabled him to have a deep understanding about the nature of the Afghan aristocracy, as well as the lower classes. At the same time, his education and his interest in history (as can be seen in his publications) gave his short stories a distinguished characteristic.

Osman's short stories are thematically and structurally varied and are not all of the same standard or artistic value. In order to depict the different aspects of his works, their artistic value, and their place in the context of Afghanistan culture and literature, they can be classified into four categories: the political, satirical, manners, and diaspora.³ Among these categories, his satirical works and stories of manners are of artistic significance. So, while below I discuss each group of his short stories briefly, the above two groups will be dealt with in detail.

The Political Short Stories

These works coincide with his early career and include stories from the late 1950s to mid-1960s. Predictably, being a young and inexperienced author, Osman did not write his best works in this period. These stories mostly mix sentimentality, politics and philosophy in superficial ways. They are full of optimism and project a bright future for Afghanistan free from cruelty, oppression and class conflicts, and are sympathetic to members of the lower social classes.

Osman was not the only author to deal with political and ideological issues in this period. Indeed, in the 1960s and early 1970s Afghanistan witnessed one of its greatest periods of politicisation in modern history. With the ratification of the new constitution (1965) and the emergence of political parties and an independent press, heated debates on social, economic and cultural issues were conducted by members of the various political parties and individuals in parliament, through public demonstrations and in the press. One of the areas in which debate occurred

² *Waqt-i ke Nay-ha Gol Mikonad* ((Kabul: Itihadya-i Newisendagan-i Afghanistan, 1983), *Darz-i Diwar* (Kabul: Intesharat-i Ta'b wa Nashr, 1985), *Mard-ha ra Qawl As* (Kabul: Anjoman-i Newisendagan-i Afghanistan, 1988) and *Qaht Sali* (Stockholm: Intesharat-i Baran, 2003). All references to the stories in this paper are to these collections or otherwise as cited.

³ One of the problems with categorising as well as investigating Osman's works is the fact that from his 80 short stories he has published only 40 in his four collections (published in the 1980s and 2003) and the rest are found only in the pages of magazines and newspapers.

was literature, including the short story. A relatively large number of writers turned to the genre not purely for its aesthetic values but as a forum in which they could express their political and ideological viewpoints. Among them could even be found some of the future so-called 'good authors', who later stood against the use of fiction in the service of politics and ideology.⁴

Osman's early works conveying political and ideological sentimentalism are: *An Su-yi Pol*, *An Su-yi Darya* (On the Other Side of the Bridge, On the Other Side of the River), *Darz-i Diwar* (The Crack in the Wall), *Hassan-i Ghamkash* (The Sympathetic Hassan), *Benay-i Bad* (The Basis of Wind) and '*Uqab-i Kur* (The Blind Eagle). Most of these are not successful works by any means, but they served as a training ground for his mature writings. They turned out not to be the type of works Osman wanted to create. Political and ideological fiction dominated the literary environment from the 1978 coup until the late 1980s. It was the official trend in art and literature, but for Osman this type was already dead.⁵

Osman's early stories, while conveying almost the same message, are diverse. Some of them are relatively well structured, such as *An Su-yi Pol*, *An Sy-yi Darya* and *Darz-i Diwar*. Others can hardly be called short stories in the proper sense; they swing between short stories and *parchah-i adabi* (literary essay), which had been common since the 1930s. Examples are *Benay-i Bad*, '*Uqab-i Kor* and *Hassan-i Ghamkash*. Generally, almost all of these works are characterised, in one way or another, by the beautiful and amazing world of childhood. Some of them, regardless of their strong or weak structures, present beautiful pieces of description as seen through the eyes of the children, as in the following extract from *Benay-i Bad*:

I was looking outside through the window. The snow never got tired of falling and the invisible wind was singing. I liked both snow and the wind, but liked the wind more, because the wind, like people, had a tongue and communicated. In the nights, when the dogs were barking in the dark, I assumed that the wind with its wide and dark wings was singing for the wild animals and called them to dance and wrestle.⁶

These works are also full of optimism and hope for the future. The main characters of the stories never give up, even if they have been defeated and fail to fulfil their desires, such as in *An Su-yi Pol*, *An Su-yi Darya*, *Darz-i Diwar* and '*Uqab-i Kor*. In *Darz-i Diwar*,⁷ for instance, an educated but poor man intends to hang himself from a large tree in his garden when he discovers that his sweetheart is marrying someone else. However, on the other side of the tree he sees a crack in the wall and comes to the realisation that this miserable condition will not last forever-and so decides not to kill himself.

⁴ Rahnoward Zaryab (b. 1945) was one of these writers who wrote some works in that context during this period.

⁵ However, one of his stories, *Dracula* (1979) was a 'political' short story. The publication of this story in 1980 almost cost him his life, and he narrowly escaped an assassination attempt. His recent novel, *Kuchah-i Ma* (Our Street), is a 'political' novel too. Between 1998 and 2004 it appeared in the columns of three papers: *Zarnegar* (*Adorned*), *Sarir* (Cry) and *Farda* published, respectively, in Toronto, Amsterdam and Stockholm. The novel was printed in two volumes in 2005 in Germany (Köln: Intesharat-i Kawa). For Osman as a political writer, see F. Bezhan, 'Akram Osman: A Socio-Political Critic' in D'Cruz, Hollier and Davies (eds) *Political Actors and Ideas in Contemporary Asia: Profiles in Courage* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, forthcoming).

⁶ Osman, *Mard-ha ra Qawl As*, p. 184.

⁷ This story was published recently under the title '*Arusi* (Marriage), with some changes, in the magazine *Farda* in Sweden as well as in *Qaht Sali*.

The Satirical Short Stories

Osman, from his early career as a writer, was attracted by satire, and his works in one way or another were blended with satire. During his relatively long career he has devoted some of his excellent and lasting works to satire.

Osman wrote his satirical works in a time when literary satire was just emerging in Afghanistan. Despite its rich tradition in classical Persian literature, both in verse and prose, in view of the political situation and the despotic regimes which ruled Afghanistan in the course of the twentieth century and harshly suppressed any kind of criticism, satire had long been absent from modern literature.⁸ In the 1960s, with the new developments (such as the ratification of the new constitution, and the emergence of political parties and an independent press), satirical fiction emerged. In addition, a relatively large number of satirical works from foreign languages were translated and published in Afghanistani newspapers and magazines and the same kinds of works were imported in large numbers from Iran. Special columns were established in newspapers and magazines in which satirical works, including satirical fiction, were published, and later independent satirical publications appeared.⁹ However, until the early 1970s almost all these so-called satirical works of fiction could best be classified as witty anecdotes, sketches and so on, but hardly short stories. Osman was among the first Afghanistani authors to write a considerable number of satirical short stories in the proper sense. Perhaps one of the reasons for his popularity lies in his writing of works of this kind.

One of the features of Osman's satirical fiction is its aesthetic combination of the two major satirical traditions, the local and the Western. His works have a close relationship with traditional satirical works through incorporating witty anecdotes and satirical folktales. However, they are modern short stories. The stories differ from the traditional folktales in scope, size, plot, point of view, and their spectacular and unexpected endings.

Osman's satirical works are smooth with little offensiveness, as if he were a Horatian satirist whose job is to soften jabs with what Dustin Griffin describes as gentle humour and extraordinary mobility of tone.¹⁰ The works depict life in precise and realistic ways. They are basically social satires, which display deep social issues in a historical perspective, such as the deeds of the aristocratic and middle classes. The following are regarded as his satirical works: *Az Bekh-i Butah* (From Nowhere), *Doshman-i Morghabi* (Duck's Enemy), *Raz-i Sar ba Mohr* (A Sealed Secret), *An Bala in Pain* (That on Top and This on the Bottom), *Yak Gur-i Moft* (A Free Tomb), *Maghz-i Motafaker-i Khanawadah-i Ma* (The Talented Person of Our Family), *Bonbast* (The Deadlock), *Nazi Jan Hamdam-i Man* (Nazi My Companion), *Nuqtah-i Nayrang-i* (*The Incongruous Sight*), *Sawal-i Hatmi* (The Compulsory Question), *Miyanaraw* (The Moderate) and *Digarguni* (Transformation).

Miyanaraw is the story of a juggler who goes into politics and becomes a member of parliament. In order to achieve promotion he marries (as second wife) a beautiful widow with many contacts, and with her help he is promoted to the

⁸ For a survey of satire in modern Afghanistan see: Faridullah Bezhani, 'Satire in Modern Afghanistan', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 25(2) (2005), pp. 465–479.

⁹ One of these publications was the weekly *Tarjoman* (The Interpreter), which made a significant contribution to the introduction of many literary satirical forms as well as nurturing a group of satirists. For a detailed survey of this newspaper, see F. Bezhani, *The Politics of Satire: Tarjoman, the First Afghanistani Satirical Newspaper* (Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, forthcoming).

¹⁰ Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), p. 8.

position of ambassador. While everything works according to his calculations, on the eve of his retirement she suddenly leaves him, grabbing all his wealth.¹¹

In *Az Bekh-i Butah*, Mary, a woman from an aristocratic family, employs the jobless, illiterate but handsome Nabi in order to gain the upper hand over her friends. Her friends comprise a few men and women, who 'like a group of hunters share everything but hunting. So there was an old hidden but heated rivalry among them'.¹² Mary introduces Nabi to her friends as Omar Sharif, the celebrated Egyptian movie star, causing them to stand and bow. But once she reveals the truth everybody teases Nabi, including Rash, Mary's husband. Nabi endures all this and patiently serves the guests, not only because of his position but also because of his feelings for Mary. However, the scene ends with a disaster, both for Nabi and Rash. Hitting the whisky bottle on Rash's head, Nabi escapes.¹³

In *Bonbast*, a man who accuses his uncle of being a blindly 'obedient husband to his wife', marries his cousin (the daughter of the uncle), only to become more obedient than his uncle, even to the point where he finds himself 'a servant to his wife'.

In *Digarguni*, one of Osman's recent works, Hassan tells the story of how, when he chose the word 'vagrant' as his surname, he was ridiculed by his colleagues. Later he indeed became a vagrant and moved to Germany, where he gradually lost his identity, including his mother tongue.

Osman's satirical works give a vivid picture of the aristocratic and middle classes. The aristocratic families found in these works provide a picture of a class sunk in perversion and decline. Their lives are marked by love for money, fame and the practice of dishonesty (as in *Az Bekh-i Butah*). They do not believe in real love, faithfulness and generosity. As a member of that class and a member of a family which ruled Afghanistan until 1978, Osman had an unsurpassed ability to depict the aristocratic class. Conversely, the members of the lower classes in these works stand for the opposite qualities. They are poor but honest, hardworking and faithful. Yet the author never places the members of these two classes opposite each other in the sense of class conflict. What then is the significance of dealing with social issues in these works? Osman is not a social advocate or a politician trying to supply a prescription for solving social disorder or injustice. He makes use of them to entertain his readers with subjects most appealing to them, as well as portraying historical features of a social class doomed to vanish.

There is no definition for satire on which all scholars agree; as Leonard Feinberg warns, satire 'is such a protean species of art that no two scholars use the same definition or the same outline of ingredients'.¹⁴ However, by examining large numbers of works, scholars have recognized 'four elements that those works and expression of satire generally agreed to be satire have in common':¹⁵ aggression (attack), play, laughter (humour and wit) and judgment.¹⁶ Osman's satirical fiction combines the above elements to different degrees. While his satires possess all the

¹¹ Osman, *Darz-i Diwar*, pp. 13–18.

¹² Osman, *Mard-ha ra Qawl As*, pp. 16–17.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 1–24.

¹⁴ Leonard Feinberg, *Introduction to Satire* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1967), p. 18.

¹⁵ George A. Test, *Satires: Spirit and Art* (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press, 1991), pp. 15–36.

¹⁶ Though some others emphasize only two elements, attack and laughter. Northrop Frye, for example writes, 'Two things ... [are] essential to satire; one is wit or humor ... the other is an object of attack'. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1957), pp. 224–225.

elements of satirical fiction found in Western works, thematically they remain indigenous.

The subjects of Osman's satire are man and his institutions. His approach to them is conducted by unveiling the relationships between them not in a static condition but against the background of social continuity. His method in writing satirical fiction is to describe vividly 'a painful or absurd situation, or a foolish or wicked person or group' and to use 'uncompromisingly clear language to describe unpleasant facts and people'.¹⁷ His works blend wit and humour, and build up absurd situations and scenes in which the characters behave accordingly. The essential features of wit include 'ingenious compression, a sudden revelation of hidden implications and the linking together of two incongruous ideas'.¹⁸ These situations lay the ground for the evil characters to display their deeds. Society and especially social classes determine wit in these works, such as in *An Bala in Pain* and *Az Bekh-i Butah*.

The element of attack is usually conveyed indirectly and subtly. Osman exhibits the dishonesty and self-interest of the members of the aristocratic class through their actions as well as in the eyes of other characters from their own class. At the same time, he confronts them with the opposite qualities in members of the lower classes. By doing so, he not only succeeds in portraying the evils more boldly, but also portrays the scene with wit. Osman's attack is liberal, not in the service of reviving the past, but to depict the relationships which are based on fraud, hatred and dissatisfaction.

In almost all his works the main characters are playing games. Indeed, Osman uses play in order to reveal the deeds and features of the main characters. Through the games they play we discover how cunning, dishonest and cowardly some of them are, as in *Doshman-i Morghabi*, *Raz-i Sar ba Mohr* and *Darundar* (The Introvert). In addition, Osman uses play as a structural tool. The end of the games is usually the end of the story.

Through his satirical works Osman displays his unique artistic skill by employing a special kind of language. The choice of language influences almost every aspect of his stories, and determines the quality of his works. Language dictates the mood and the characterisation, the tone and development, the pervasive atmosphere and attitude, and the continued qualification of time and event.

Despite a few attempts by writers such as Payez Hanifi (d. 1978), Osman was the first author to use colloquial language with superb skill. Colloquial language, with the rich folk culture that underlines it, is a resource that plays an important role in his satires. He makes extensive use of colloquial language in all its aspects, including proverbs and sayings in the narration, dialogue, and even the title. Osman's use of colloquialism in the narrative component of his stories is unique. From the point of view of language, Osman's satirical stories opened up this rich cultural treasure to modern Afghanistani fiction in general and satirical fiction in particular. However, he never uses offensive or taboo words, such as may be found in the works of some of his Western counterparts.

The author is very knowledgeable about the language of his characters. The language in his works is dynamic and moves step-by-step with the atmosphere and situation of the characters. In addition, Osman has the remarkable ability to

¹⁷ Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1962), pp. 18–20.

¹⁸ Mathew Hodgart, *Satire* (London: World University Library, 1969), p. 111.

present each character with a register of language based on his or her social and cultural situation. The particularities of this or that register become so significant that sometimes one might even assume that he is writing only to display such language. For Osman, creating and using language with these characteristics is as important as the story itself, and is probably one of the reasons for the popularity of his works.

He appears also as a verbose writer, in that he introduces an enormous number of synonyms, particularly terms for a single situation or person. This brings his works close to classical Persian storytelling. For example, he describes Shahkoko, an aristocratic old lady in this way: 'Shahkoko, a quarrelsome, shrewd, stubborn, mean, vengeful, vindictive and troublesome woman, who always yells at her husband, shouted'.¹⁹ While the use of so many synonyms may look like repetition, it is rather a progression, implying the increasing weightiness of the qualities listed.

Although generally Osman's satirical works deal with aristocratic and middle classes from urban circles and have striking and unexpected endings, there are some works which display serious approaches and predictable endings. The best example of this group is *Noqtah-i Nayrangi*, in which a young man from the countryside comes to the capital city in search of a better life and to pursue further education. Due to his outward appearance Daryab is subjected to teasing by his classmates to the extent that he falls ill. The story begins:

Among all the students in the faculty Daryab was an incongruous sight. He was tall and had a long neck, long hands, long feet and even long long teeth, and along with these he was thin and bony.²⁰

Then he falls in love with Nelofar, a beautiful and kind nurse. He does not succeed in love, as Nelofar is already married to another man, but love changes him completely. It gives him self-confidence.

Most of Osman's satirical works are connected with domestic affairs, as can be seen in the cases of *Bonbast*, *Az Bekh-i Butah* and so on. Other stories, including *Sawal-e Hatmi*, *Nazi Jan Hamdam Man* and *Noqtah-i Nayrangi*, revolve around love and focus on the psychology of the characters.

Some of Osman's satirical short stories may indeed be considered 'comedies of manners'. A story of this kind deals²¹

with the relations and intrigues of men and women living in a sophisticated upper-class society, and relies for comic effect in large part on the wit and sparkle of the dialogue ... [and] on the violations of social standards and decorum by would-be wits, jealous husbands, convincing rivals, and foppish dandies.²²

The best examples of the comedy of manners in Osman's works are *Az Bekh-i Bota* and *Bonbast*, to which all the features mentioned above are applicable.

The Stories of Manners

With his stories of manners, Osman introduced another type of fiction into the Afghanistani short story. In fact, fiction of manners was first introduced in 1922 by A.Q. Effendi's novel *Taswir-i 'Ebrat* (The Warning Portrait), which displayed all

¹⁹ Osman, *Mard-ha ra Qawl As*, p. 27.

²⁰ Ibid, 3.

²¹ M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (7th edn), (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College, 1999), p. 39.

²² While in Western literature it is generally a type of drama, Osman employed it in his short stories.

the elements of such novels in an artistic way. However, it did not attract many writers until the 1960s.

In this type of work, Osman deals with the behaviour and attitudes of social groups, as he does in his satirical and comedy of manners works. However, he deals with each type differently. While in the stories of manners there may be some signs of satire and humour, generally they are serious works of fiction. With respect to language, they have different approaches. In both types, Osman uses distinctively colloquial language. However, while the method is used throughout his satirical stories, in the stories of manners it mainly applies to the dialogue.

There are some similarities between his stories of manners and comedies of manners. Both deal with social classes in an historical context, and manners are the key concept in all. In both, the colloquial language and folk culture are prominently used, and both types are rooted in Western literary tradition. Comedy of manners, according to Chris Badlick, represents

the complex and sophisticated code of behaviour current in fashionable circles of society, where appearances count for more than true moral characters ... [and] revolves around intrigues and lust and greed, the self-interested cynicism of characters being masked by decorous pretence.²³

In addition, while stories of manners in Western literature mainly take the form of the novel, and the comedy of manners 'is a dramatic genre',²⁴ Osman employs them in the short story. For stories of manners, apart from *Taswir-i 'Ebrat* there is no other such work among Afghanistani novels, whereas there is a relatively rich tradition of comedy of manners in twentieth century Afghanistani drama.

However, Osman's stories of manners are different from comedy of manners. The differences are the social classes focused upon, as well as narrative style, depiction of characters, and treatment of language. Neither in manners nor in setting and class depicted do the stories of manners correspond to the comedy of manners.

The group of stories of manners display the peak of Osman's creativity, as his best and most lasting works belong to this group. Behind his works one can see an author well aware of the art of writing, and the nature of the socio-cultural world he is writing in, and capable of presenting his works in suitable language. In these works the author deals with the most fundamental issues of humanity, such as love, hate, devotion and, sacrifice, set in a particular cultural context. In every aspect, these works are entirely different from his other works, as if a different author had created them.

In these works, apart from the dialogue, there is no sign of the use of colloquial words and proverbs. Instead, the works are presented in straightforward and formal language. Dialogue, which makes up the main body of the stories, is different from the narration in tone and register. Indeed, in this type of fiction 'the language, style, or tone' is 'more indicative than its subject ... where language creates character, and dialogue often bears much of the weight of narrative'.²⁵

Osman supplies rules and conventions as well as extensive terminology for traditional professions, sports and games. For these alone Osman's works in this

²³ Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford, England; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 40.

²⁴ David L. Hirst, *Comedy of Manners* (London: Methuen, 1979), p. 3.

²⁵ Annette Weld, *Barbara Pym and the Novel of Manners* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 14.

group are a literary and anthropological treasure. They are stories of manners in the way James Tuttleton describes,

in which the manners, social customs, folkways, conventions, traditions, and mores of a given social group at a given time and place play a dominant role in the lives of fictional characters, exert control over their thought and behaviour, and constitute a determinant upon the actions in which they are engaged, and in which these manners and customs are detailed realistically—with, in fact, a premium upon the exactness of their representation.²⁶

Osman's stories of manners display these qualities in an artistic way. Among the elements which present the above traits the most is the protagonist of the stories. The author deals little with the outward side of the characters and concentrates mainly on their inner world. While the main characters represent their types, they have been skilfully individualised. In other words they are part of a social class and at the same time are individuals who are confronted with particular circumstances, displaying their typical and individual qualities. The biggest portion of the stories is assigned to the depiction of the emotive and inner world of the characters, whether through dialogue or exploration of the characters.

These works display the deepest and the most sophisticated needs of human beings against the background of socio-cultural values and codes. They are a kind of historical fiction, but do not comply with it fully. Examples of this category are *Mard-ha ra Qawl As* (Men Keep Their Promises), *Waqt-i ke Nay-ha Gol Mikonad* (When Rushes Blossom) and *Mard o Namard* (Man and Wretch). These stories mainly focus on guilds and the social class of knights.

At the root of Osman's stories of manners there is a conflict between individual self-fulfilment and social responsibility—the attempt of a person to achieve accomplishment at the cost of the disapproval of society. The independent action of the individual may lead to punishment or even expulsion from the circle to which he belongs.

In *Mard-ha ra Qawl As*, on one side there is the approved socio-cultural code, and on the other a passionate love between a young man and woman. Which side will prevail? The story is based on the tradition that once a man makes a friendship with another man he must maintain it to the end. The title, theme and message of the story convey that tradition. Shir, a kite flyer and wrestling champion, falls in love with Tahera, but once he forms a friendship with her brother and calls him a brother blessed by the Koran, he denies her love, despite being passionately in love with her. Tahera is engaged by force to an old man. She poisons herself but survives and marries. Shir takes refuge in his small kite-making shop, preserving her memory until the last moment of his life and continuing to burn with love for her.²⁷ He conveys his passion for Tahera and his lost love through making, flying and playing with kites.

Mard-ha ra Qawl As is reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet* with the same depth and tragedy but in a different culture and society. Here man and woman may be free to choose their love but are not free to reach it. Love is the deepest need for a human being, but as long as relationships are bound by socio-cultural codes they may be doomed to failure. Love has been sacrificed to Shir's faithfulness to what marks him as a social human being and the circle to which he belongs. Yet, may not a real and lasting love take shape within such restrictions?

²⁶ James Tuttleton, *The Novel of Manners in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), p. 10.

²⁷ Osman, *Mard-ha ra Qawl As*, pp. 45–72.

Waqt-i ke Nay-ha Gol Mikonad is the story of Akbar the knight, a champion among champions, a friend of the ruler who has assisted him on different occasions. He is sent to bring the head of the ruler's enemy and after years of suffering and hardships he does so, but is killed by the ruler at the very moment he arrives home successfully.²⁸ The story focuses on the knights, the remnants of an ancient class, and their social function. In the course of Afghanistan history, particularly in the Middle Ages, this class played an important role. Knights fought for justice, liberation and the honour of people. With the revolt of the people under the leadership of Ya'qub Safarid (r. 867–79 CE), a representative of this class, Arab rule ended in present-day Afghanistan and Iran. Indeed, knights historically were the symbol of liberation, faithfulness, bravery, honesty, pride against the powerful and modesty toward the powerless. In the story, the author not only portrays a glorified class on the eve of extinction, but also the domination of evil forces.

Akbar's attitudes and manners are rooted in the deeds of the class he belongs to. He does not fear any superior power, but submits once the superior power bows to him. Nevertheless, Akbar is aware of the evil nature of the ruler. He says to the ruler's aide who comes to convey the message of his master: 'It is his [the ruler's] habit. Since the old time he has been a wretch. Without an object of desire he never greets anybody'.²⁹ Despite all, Akbar is ready to perform the impossible for the ruler, because he is a friend of the ruler and more importantly he is a knight. A knight never rejects a request, especially if it comes from a friend and from a superior power. Rejecting a request portrays weakness. Akbar displays not only the features of the knightly class but also the ideal characteristics of ordinary people, including honesty, humility and sacrifice in friendship without any expectation of reward.³⁰

This type of fiction in which knights play an important role has a rich tradition in classical Persian literature, such as *Samak-i 'Ayyar* and *Darabnamah* (Book of Darab). In these works the knights live close to the princes and help them attain their goals through their bravery and cunning. In Osman's works, however, knights are free from tricks and dishonesty, and do not live in the shadow of kings and princes but above them. Knights live and associate with ordinary people and are bound up in everyday life. They are the protectors of the honour of ordinary people. However, if required, they carry out tasks for the rulers, not for money or official position but out of friendship. In *Waqt-i ke Nay-ha Gol Mikonad*, the way Akbar speaks to the king displays his superiority in the relationship. Akbar frequently resorts to swearing at the king, a fact that the king knows very well. The king describes Akbar to his aide thus: 'He [Akbar], before greeting anybody, swears at me ... He has no peer in the world, because he has no fear of death. His brawn is superior to mine'.³¹ Akbar has no expectations of the king, but it is the king who asks him now and then to do something for him. In addition,

²⁸ Osman, *Waqt-i ke Nay-ha Gol Mikonad*, pp. 1–16.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 7.

³⁰ Osman continued to write fiction revolving around knights. However, his recent work, *Qaht Sāli*, does not display the same quality as his previous works, such as *Waqt-i ke Nay-ha Gol Mikonad* and *Mard-ha ra Qawl As*. *Qaht Sāli* is a historical story in which Kaka Haidar (Haidar the Knight) defends people's honour and secures his country's liberation during the civil war and the invasion of his homeland by the British army. However, it is a propagandist story.

³¹ Osman, *Waqt-i ke Nay-ha Gol Mikonad*, p. 5.

swearing at an absolute amir, who had no tolerance for criticism of any kind (let alone swearing), symbolises the superiority of Akbar the knight to the Amir.

In the above two works, the author focuses on the manners of two social groups, represented by the two protagonists, Shir and Akbar. This approach displays the deep understanding of the manners of social groups as well as the craft of fiction. Osman's stories of manners are as much studies of character, in the sense of depicting an individualised self, as studies of the mores of a particular social group and social conventions. This combination, according to Scholes, 'the impulse to individualize and the impulse to typify',³² turns Shir and Akbar into memorable characters.

In both types of short stories, the manners and the satirical, Osman deals with social classes on the verge of disappearing. In the first group he predominately focuses on knights and traditional guilds, while in the latter he deals with the aristocratic class. However, he considers the vanishing of the knights and the guilds as a tragedy in an artistic and serious way. In contrast, he presents the fading of the aristocratic class with mockery and satire.

The element of setting is of special importance in studies of manners, as well as being an important element of the short story. According to Eudora Welty, it 'is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering-spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced',³³ and is an attempt by the writer to 'direct the reader's visual imagination'.³⁴ This element has been especially well managed in Osman's works. One of the places, which has a significant role in his stories is the street. In his stories of manners streets have a special significance. The works unfold in the streets. The characters are portrayed in the streets. The streets do not exist in the sense of modern ones, where they are a place for passers-by. Here the street is a stage where traditions and customs are on display. It is the streets which provide the characters with identity. The streets, as the setting of the stories, contribute in 'decisive ways to the total effect'.³⁵ In the works, setting is 'the first element to present itself to the reader's imagination and the last to leave his memory'.³⁶ In *Waqt-i ke Nay-ha Gol Mikonad* Osman describes Kuchah-i Ahangari (the Street of the Blacksmiths) thus:

Ahangari was the street of brave people. It was the street of the forge ... where both the bodies of ironsmiths and iron were heated up, and where the nature of everything was fashioned. The Ahangari men were as famous as their street.³⁷

This is something more than a normal street. It is a miniature of the author's country. It displays the history, culture and the identity of his countrymen. So the main characters remain in the street and respect its customs, and anyone who leaves it is the loser, as in *An Su-yi Pol*, *An Su-yi Darya*. This way of dealing with the street is rooted in the author's deep sense of patriotism.

³² Robert Scholes, *Elements of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 19.

³³ Quoted in Charles E. May, 'Short Fiction: Terms and Techniques', in F.N. Magill (ed.) *Critical Survey of Short Fiction* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Salem Press, 1981), p. 63.

³⁴ Elizabeth Bowen, quoted in Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London and NY: Longman, 1983), p. 152.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 150.

³⁶ Shaw, *The Short Story*, p. 150.

³⁷ Osman, *Waqt-i ke Nay-ha Gol Mikonad*, p. 1.

General Features

With his satirical and stories of manners, Osman's short stories are distinguished from other authors', and his contribution to the development of Afghanistani modern fiction is established. Among the features of these works, a few are discussed briefly here. Each group has its own characteristics and merits. While they are different in certain respects, they share some common features.

From a thematic point of view, Osman's satirical and stories of manners employ a historical approach. The works, which lack any political-ideological slogans, deal mainly with the status of two social classes through a historical viewpoint: the aristocrats and the knights. The former are part of the ruling establishment, while the latter are rooted among the masses. Both classes are on the brink of extinction.

The main characters in these works are totally indigenous. While most Afghanistani authors select their characters in order to display universal qualities, Osman's characters are deeply home-grown and only exhibit typically indigenous traits. They are indigenous in terms of appearance, manners, names and desires. Every single character, even the ones who appear Westernised, remains deeply native though he may represent a certain social class or group of people in search of a different style of life. For example, in *Az Bekh-i Butah*, 'the couple [Mary and Rashid] usually spoke [to each other] half-Persian and half-French'.³⁸ But this represents typical aristocratic couples. Although the main characters are generally typical of their class, they represent at the same time an individualised self. For example, Akbar the knight (in *Waqt-i ke Nay-ha Gol Mikonad*) achieves the impossible and risks his life simply to remain a knight.

One of the features with respect to characters is their naming, which is 'always an important part of creating theme, involving many considerations, and hesitations'.³⁹ Osman does not name the characters by chance or unconsciously. Names in his stories are rooted in the characters socio-cultural background and reflect certain characteristics. For example, the names Shir (from *Mard-ha ra Qawl As*) and Rashid (from *Az Bekh-i Butah*) share almost the same letters (in Persian) and meaning. Shir means lion and Rashid means brave. The lion is brave, and the best example of bravery is the lion. However, in the two stories, the characters are depicted as having completely opposite qualities to each other. The narrator describes Rashid's name thus:

Her [Mary's] husband's name was originally Rashid, but against the rule she made it shorter and while it sounded uncommon, non-rhythmic and unpleasant, for the members of the family and friends who were innovative in everything, it was a demure, cool and inventive name . . . In addition, the couple usually spoke [to each other] half-Persian and half-French. Rash was a diplomat and Mary was a half-diplomat and she had learned French from her foreign trips as well as from the older members of her family.⁴⁰

With this explanation, the narrator-author not only states the social and family status of the characters, but also furnishes the grounds for the use of such a name. The naming of Rashid (brave) is mutated in the above context. In order to depict the usage of names among aristocrats, as a manner of the class, the author chooses the name Rashid. At the same time, the name serves and matches the theme and presentation of the story. Rashid means brave, but when it is shortened the bravery

³⁸ Osman, *Mard-ha ra Qawl As*, p. 9.

³⁹ David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (Penguin Books, 1992), p. 37.

⁴⁰ Osman, *Mard-ha ra Qawl As*, p. 9.

disappears. Indeed Rashid, contrary to his name, is a cowardly person. He yields to his wife and never resists her decisions. When, at the end of the story for the first time he stands up and says no to his wife, he pays a heavy price. In addition, by shortening the name and depicting the opposite qualities, Osman gives the story a witty, humorous and satirical nature.

Shir, on the other hand, displays all the qualities of a lion (including the bravery and heroism common in Persian culture and literature). The narrator–author never shortens this name, as Shir (lion) remains lion-like. Shir is a hero, not only because of his power, but also his faith in certain rules and values, as one of his rivals, Mahmud, says to him: ‘Shir, really you are a lion, I made a mistake’.⁴¹ Shir sacrifices his life and love only to keep faith with the values that make him a lion.

Judicious selection of title is another feature of Osman’s stories. Indeed the title, which Cecil Hunt likens to an ‘advertising slogan’ and ‘window dressing’,⁴² is an important element of a short story. It is the first part of the story the reader encounters. Osman places great importance on this feature. Before Osman’s time and even among his contemporaries, the selection of titles bore little significance; for Osman, however, it is a very important element. The titles of his works match significantly their theme and content. While some of the titles resonate as literary quotations, others are metaphors which may evoke the whole story, such as *Waqt-i ke Nay-ha Gol Mikonad*, *Mard o Namard*, *Mard-ha ra Qawl As*, and *Az Bekh-i Butah*. For example, in the case of *Waqt-i ke Nay-ha Gol Mikonad*, the title symbolises impossibility, as rushes never blossom. It conveys the possibility that Akbar the knight may never be able to fulfil his task or return home, or that the ruler may never keep his promise, or that this friendship between the ruler and the knight may not blossom.

The titles interpret the central object of the stories due to the fact that a title ‘is in itself a key to interpretation’.⁴³ These titles can only be explained in the context of classical Persian literature and folklore. This not only displays Osman’s deep knowledge of Afghanistани culture, but also provides his works with a significant indigenous artistic character.

Indeed, it is not only the titles of his works, but also the whole of the prefatory sections which are structured skilfully. This part is of a more comprehensive textual strategy involving the naming of the story, the main character and the setting, and according to W.S. Penn ‘indicates the structure of the story as well as the mode and the kind of language it will use’.⁴⁴ This part in Osman’s works, which generally takes up only a paragraph, is usually built up in a well-considered way. Here the author is economical and sharp. He begins his stories directly, avoiding lengthy descriptions and synonyms, in contrast to the other parts of his stories. Most of Osman’s works start directly with the introduction of the main character and his/her status. For example, one can see this approach in the first lines of the following stories:

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 62.

⁴² Cecil Hunt, *Short Stories: How to Write Them* (London: George G. Harrap, 1934), p. 100.

⁴³ Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, translated from the Italian by William Weaver (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), p. 2.

⁴⁴ W.S. Penn, ‘The Tale as Genre in Short Fiction’, in Charles E. May (ed.) *Short Story Theories* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1994), p. 45.

Az Bekh-i Butah: 'Nabi was from the bottom of a plant. He knew none of his relatives and even knew nothing about his past'.⁴⁵

Noqtah-i Nayrangi: 'Among all the students in the faculty Daryab was an incongruous sight'.⁴⁶

An Bala in Pain: 'Old Muhammad Alam the cook wanted to organise the wedding of his 20-year-old son, Shir Alam, who could not bear to stay single any longer. But he did not have a place to hold the wedding'.⁴⁷

Yak Gur-i Muft: 'Asghar, the famous shopkeeper in Madar Qumri Market, was the best of his kind in stinginess, meanness, hoarding, overcharging and usury'.⁴⁸

Miyanaraw: 'Mr Abdul Manan Khan Hazeq was one of the prodigies of his time. Lying, posturing and cheating were his professions'.⁴⁹

Tanha'i (Loneliness): 'When Ady [the old woman] was young she was the companion, intimate and confidante of the lady of the house'.⁵⁰

Darundar: 'On that day, Mr Waheed Saberzada, tired and exhausted, came to the office and saw once again that the man with a pair of round glasses was sitting alone behind his desk'.⁵¹

These commencing sentences not only serve as the introduction to the main characters of the stories, but also the preface to the subject matters of the works.

Stories of the Diaspora

These are the works Osman had created since the 1990s, after his move to Europe. Thematically, they emphasise the crisis of migration and its social and cultural impact. The immigrants, who enter a new and strange world where they are cut off from their past, encounter a different culture and style of life and undergo tremendous changes. They are not accepted in this 'new world', and still dream of their homeland, which, according to Michael Seidel, 'is the most intimate place of origin, to which physical and psychological re-access is forever barred except in the domain of the imagination'.⁵²

When one considers that, by 'its nature exile [and migration] posits the awareness of loss',⁵³ Osman's works of diaspora portray the crisis of losing identity. His main characters have not only lost their original identities, but also must endure the crisis of not having one at all while looking ahead to an empty future. They feel that they are exiled on the fringes,⁵⁴ as the main character

⁴⁵ Osman, *Mard-ha ra Qawl As*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 27.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 102.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 188.

⁴⁹ Osman, *Darz-i Diwar*, p. 13.

⁵⁰ Osman, *Mard-ha ra Qawl As*, p. 282.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 292.

⁵² Michael Seidel, *Exile and the Narrative Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 6.

⁵³ Martin Tucker (ed.) *Literary Exile in the Twentieth Century: an Analysis and Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), p. xiii.

⁵⁴ It is an equivalent of the 'third wheel' and refers to the person who is the outsider when there is a group of three, or to be the extra, unnecessary person in a group of three people.

in *Kuchaktarin* (The Least) says: 'In fact we are their sixth finger, cutting which is painful and not cutting is shameful'. He has learned this from real life.

He gets on the bus and habitually says hello to the driver, but the driver ignores him. He takes a vacant seat and hopes someone will sit beside him and release him from loneliness for a few stops. However, the passengers prefer to stand rather than sit next to him.⁵⁵

In *Gorbeh-i Chaharom* (The Fourth Cat), the man who was a political prisoner in Afghanistan, in the West finds himself a nonentity. His only hope of life is to become the fourth cat of Christina, his Swedish teacher, the only person he knows in Sweden.

Osman's diaspora works, some of which may suffer from weaknesses of structure, are nevertheless important. Indeed, with the success of the Leftist coup of 1978 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR, large numbers of people migrated to neighbouring countries and some to the West. However, exile literature, particularly diaspora fiction, did not emerge. A few of the writers who left the country after the coup either kept silent, such as Rosta Bakhtary and Zalmai Babakohi, or wrote stories praising the Mojahedin and their fight against the Leftist regime, such as Maryam Mahboob. It was not until the late 1990s that diaspora fiction emerged, and Osman's *Qaht Sali* (Year of Famine) is one of the first collections of such short stories. It includes *Digarguni* (Transformation), *Chahar Rah-i Ruzgar* (The Crossroad of Life), *Ma ra Mosafer Nasazi* (Do not Make Me a Commuter), *Gahwarah-i Khali* (An Empty Cradle), *Bazgasht* (Return), *Kuchaktarin* (The Least), *Ta'bid* (The Exiled) and *Gorbeh-i Chaharom* (The Fourth Cat).⁵⁶

Osman's diaspora stories can be divided into several groups. Firstly, there are works which deal with the exiles in their own country. Afghanistan was ruled by despotic regimes between 1929 and 1965. During this period anyone who opposed the regime was harshly punished, imprisoned, exiled or even executed. Some of Osman's stories relate to this type of exile, such as *Ta'bid*. The other groups deal with the migration of Afghanistan people to the West, the causes of exile, the changes they undergo, their problems in new societies and within their own communities. In this second group there are works which portray the causes of exile, for instance *Gahwarah-i Khali*. A third group of stories depicts the migration of Afghanistans to a Western society where they feel estranged and completely lost, such as *Gorbeh-i Chaharom* and *Kuchaktarin*. In the fourth category are works displaying how young immigrants lose common ground with their parents and lose their identities, such as *Bazgasht*. There is a fifth group of works which deals with Afghanistani communities in the West and relationships between Afghanistani migrants there, where they create many problems for each other, such as *To ke Khub Nabudi ham Kharab Shodi* (Even You Who Were not a Good Person Became Bad).

Conclusion

As seen, Osman's short stories represent a current of modern Afghanistani literature in which an imported genre, such as the short story, is mixed with indigenous literary traditions to become a mirror that reflects deep issues and

⁵⁵ This story appeared in *Farda* and is not included in the *Qaht Sali*.

⁵⁶ Most of these works have appeared in *Qaht Sali*.

human needs, while still remaining rooted in the history of the country and in the context of this particular society. His short stories are among the works with which Afghanistani fiction entered a new era of development, to the point that the short story became an organic part of modern Afghanistan literature. Osman introduced types of fiction into the realm of the Afghanistani short story which had mainly been evident in the novel and drama in Western literature, such as the satirical short story and the story of manners. Osman's short stories display some of the deepest characteristic of Afghanistani nation, their sensibilities through craftsmanship. Osman's contribution to the development of Afghanistani short story is not only due to the depiction of such characteristics, but also in implying two traditions, the local and Western story-writing. His short stories are divided into different groups, such as political, satirical, manners and diaspora with few similarities in theme, structure or style. Among them, satirical stories and stories of manners are of special significance. With these two groups, which were created outside political currents, Osman developed his creativity to its highest by portraying a historical and artistic picture of social classes and their characteristics. One of the main elements in his short stories, regardless of their category, which distinguish his works from those of his contemporaries, is the use of language based on folk traditions. This transfers his short stories, despite their deep application, into popular short stories. So it is not a surprise that Akram Osman is the most popular author in his country.