

CHAPTER NINE: QISSA AS A GENRE

In a typology of world literature, the traditional Persian qissa and the long, ornate Urdu dastan would certainly be located within the larger generic category “romance.”¹ The term “romance” itself, however, has been used so casually, and in so many senses, that it cannot stand without clarification. Beer explains its original meaning:

The term “romance” in the early Middle Ages meant the new vernacular languages derived from Latin....Then the meaning of the word extended to include the qualities of the literature in those tongues, in contrast to Latin literature or works composed in Latin. Thus, in old French, *romant*, *roman*, means literally “popular book.” The characteristics associated with the vernacular literature of the time were a preoccupation with love and adventure and a peculiar vagrancy of the imagination.

Those characteristics of medieval popular literature, the “preoccupation with love and adventure” and the “peculiar vagrancy of the imagination,” have remained hallmarks of romance. The latter in particular is close to the heart of the genre. Henry James rightly recognized that the “only general attribute” of romance is “the kind of experience with which it deals--experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it.” Romance is thus a kind of narrative freed from realistic constraints, and structured by the uninhibited, liberating imagination. It is an “extreme form of esthetically controlled fiction, which minimizes both specific relationship to reality and intellectual content”; it is the only narrative form which is “ineluctably artistic, since it is the product of the story-telling impulse at its purest.”²

Critics have noticed a number of characteristic traits and tendencies of romance. Most of these are prerequisites for, or results of, the free play of the imagination which is the essence of romance. For what does the imagination ever do in its free play, but embroider our daydreams and fantasies? Thus Beer’s observation that romance “is always concerned with the fulfillment of desires--and for the reason it takes many forms: the heroic, the pastoral, the exotic, the mysterious, the dream, childhood, and total passionate love.” Because such wish-fulfillment cannot take place in the well-known world close to home, “romance depends considerably upon a certain set distance in the relationship between its audience and its subject-matter.” Its events tend to take place either long ago or far away--geographically or culturally--from their audience. This remoteness permits expression of what Frye calls the “extraordinarily persistent nostalgia” of romance, “its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space.” The same longing for perfection is expressed by John Stevens as the “claim of the ideal,” and is one of the most pervasive qualities of romance.³

Because romance is concerned with the fulfillment of desires, it is inclined toward fantasy: it delights in elaborate, luxurious description, and in sumptuous, sensuous detail. And

¹Russell describes Urdu dastans as “enormous cycles of medieval romances, closely comparable to those of medieval Europe.” Russell, “The Development of the Modern Novel in Urdu,” p. 106.

²Beer, **The Romance**, p. 4; Henry James, **The American** (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1907), p. xvii; Scholes and Kellogg, **The Nature of Narrative**, pp. 105-106, 232.

³Beer, **The Romance**, pp. 5, 12; Northrop Frye, **Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 186; Stevens, **Medieval Romance**, p. 169.

it always reaches a “happy ending” which in some way pleases and satisfies its audience. But the other side of fantasy is nightmare, and romance moves, with the abrupt discontinuity of a dream, between extremes of human desire and fear. Romance often creates an effect described by Strindberg: it seems to assume “the disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream”:

Anything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Space and time do not exist. Based on a slight foundation of reality, imagination wanders afield and weaves new patterns....But one single consciousness governs them all--that of the dreamer.

Strindberg’s controlling “consciousness of the dreamer” takes the form, in romance, of a narrator whose domination of the audience is so “authoritarian” that the audience’s experience “has an affinity with a child’s experience.” The narrator hovers over the action; though a non-participant, he is clearly a strong partisan of certain values over others. This narrator, casting his “spell,” enmeshes the audience in a world controlled by his own imagination. But that world is not necessarily erratic, original, or bizarre. Frye puts it well: “Random fantasy is exceedingly rare in the arts, and most of what we do have is a clever simulation of it.” For, as we have already seen, “the uninhibited imagination, in the structural sense, produces highly conventionalized art.”⁴

Romance, then, is narrative liberated both from the imitative constraints of realistic fiction, and from the intellectual constraint of allegory: narrative controlled by the uninhibited artistic imagination. Its content includes visions shaped by dream and nightmare, and fantasies of achieved perfection--often of perfect love and perfectly accomplished adventure. Except for an authoritative, detached, but partisan narrator, highly stylized characterization, and a “happy ending” (for the audience, if not for the characters), the term “romance” implies few structural conventions.

If long Persian qissas and Urdu dastans are romances, what can we say of modern printed qissas? Are they merely shorter and simpler romances? We have seen in the previous chapter that they are structurally indistinguishable from oral tales. Should they then be considered “folktales” or “fairy tales” of some kind? It would be convenient to find some broad generic term by which they could be described in a preliminary way.

In the previous chapter we saw that folklorists themselves have trouble defining and delimiting the categories of folk narrative. Stith Thompson summarizes the basic terms and their meanings as follows: “folktale” is used loosely for “the whole range of traditional oral narrative.” The terms “wonder tale” and “fairy tale” are “applied to stories filled with incredible marvels.” Terms in other languages are all “vaguely and carelessly used,” except for the German “Märchen.”

A Märchen is a tale of some length involving a succession of motifs or episodes. It moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite characters and is filled with the marvelous. In this never-never land humble heroes kill adversaries, succeed to kingdoms, and marry princesses. Since Märchen deal with such a chimerical world, the name “chimerat” has been suggested for international usage, though it has not yet received wide adoption.

⁴August Strindberg, “Introduction to A Dream Play,” in his **A Dream Play and The Ghost Sonata**, trans. by C. R. Mueller (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1966), p. 3; Beer, **The Romance**, p. 9; Frye, **Fables of Identity**, p. 27.

Sometimes distinguished from the Märchen is the “novella,” the action of which “occurs in a real world with definite time and place, and though marvels appear, they are such as apparently call for the hearer’s belief in a way that the Märchen does not.” But in any case there is “much overlapping.” When they try to generalize cross-culturally, students of folk narrative thus finds that all their “sharp differentiations become blurred and in many cases disappear entirely.” And if they seek greater exactness, they find themselves creating what are “essentially private definitions.”⁵

It is no accident, I think, that the most illuminating and influential studies of folk narrative have examined some clearly defined body of material from a single indigenous genre in a single language. Lord’s study of Yugoslav oral verse epics is a case in point. Propp’s “functional” structural analysis is based on one hundred tales from one standard Russian collection. By contrast, Max Lüthi takes as subject “the Märchen” as a whole genre—but is content to make perceptive suggestions and impressionistic comparisons, rather than rigorous, systematic claims.⁶ The best folklorists are well aware of the practical and methodological difficulties of trying to impose any one set of analytical categories on the enormous variety of indigenous folk genres.⁷

We have seen that the term “romance” is a broadly defined one which implies few structural conventions. Similarly, “novella,” “Märchen,” and “fairy tale” are terms with only a broad and general meaning. More detailed definitions would, however, deprive these terms of their valuable function as “umbrella” categories, by means of which similarities among many narrower genres may be perceived and expressed. We must be careful to understand this function, and to recognize its limitations, as John M. Ellis reminds us: we cannot take a term designed “to make a convenient gathering together of loosely related texts,” and treat it as “a precise instrument,” or use it as “the basis of research into the actual things it deals with.” By such a mistaken approach “the real importance of the term is ignored and an importance is sought for it which it can never have.”⁸ It is not surprising, then, if we find it possible to consider printed qissas both as short, simple romances and as long, complex fairy tales, or Märchen, or novelle. The chief function of such broad terms is to group together, rather than to separate.

But neither is it a terminological accident that qissa literature can so easily appear as romance and fairy tale both. For the single most important source of our notion of “romance” is medieval European romance. And Erich Auerbach finds in medieval European romance “the enchanted landscape of fairy tale”; he perceives “the numerous castles and palaces, the battles and adventures, of the courtly romances” as “things of fairyland.” More concretely, Stevens points to a group of significant images that “are the common stuff of fairy-tale, folk-tale, and romance.” This shared “vocabulary of images” includes “the tower, the ship, the bird, the castle, the rock, the well, the rose, the garden, the ring, the sword, and so on.” The kinship with the realm of fairy tale is so marked that some medieval romances virtually *are* fairy tales, modified

⁵Thompson, **The Folktale**, pp. 8, 21-22.

⁶Max Lüthi, “Aspects of the Marchen and the Legend,” trans. by Barbara Flynn, in **Folklore Genres**, ed. by Dan Ben-Amos, pp. 17-33. See also his other works listed in the Bibliography.

⁷For a lucid discussion of the problem see Dan Ben-Amos, “Analytic Categories and Ethnic Genres,” in his **Folklore Genres**, pp. 215-242.

⁸John M. Ellis, **Narration in the German Novelle**, p. 20.

by a veneer of chivalrous sentiment. Margaret Schlauch writes of “Valentine and Orson” that its “fundamental themes are well known in folk tales: false accusation of an innocent queen followed by her vindication, combats between two brothers and between father and son who do not recognize each other, reunion of a scattered family”; throughout the romance the “element of magic is grossly exaggerated.” Similarly, in “Helyas, Knight of the Swanne” (1512) the “early life of the hero is closely modeled on the märchen about some brothers who are bewitched into birds and later unspelled by their sister’s devotion.”⁹

Frye perhaps captures the relationship most clearly when he refers to “naive romance” as including the “fairy tales that are so clearly related to dreams of wonderful wishes coming true, and to nightmares of ogres and witches.”¹⁰ I am thus arguing that the difference between romance proper, “literary” romance, and “naive” romance, or fairy tale, is not qualitative one, but merely one of degree. There is *no* criterion by which a short, simple romance may be distinguished from a long, elaborate fairy tale. Rather, there is an obvious continuum, with printed qissa literature located generally near the middle. “Romance” is a term used by literary critics, who prefer to study works of a relatively high degree of length, complexity, sophistication, and self-consciousness. “Fairy tale” is the domain of folklorists, who have traditionally sought out the simplest, most archetypal, most naively “authentic” tales. The middle range of the spectrum, ignored by both groups of scholars, is the one actually flourishing in mass literature today. The whole situation perfectly illustrates John M. Ellis’s point about our linguistic concepts: that they are much more shaped by human purposes and needs than by the nature of things in the world. Ellis himself illustrates the same point with botanical examples: “weeds” can only be defined as “plants that we do not wish to cultivate,” and the distinction between “tree” and “bush” has in it “a large element of man’s need to use certain plants for timber, and others for hedging.”¹¹ The distinction between “romance” and “fairy tale” is of a similar order: it reflects the different intentions and preoccupations of literary critics on the one hand, and folklorists on the other.

It is easy to show that, historically, the continuum between (literary) romance and naive romance (fairy tale) has been not only a two-way street, but even a heavily traveled one. Fairy tales have been turned into romances: medieval romance is “a true folklore melting pot,” as Gerald Bordman puts it, because romance writers “filled their stories--indeed, later created them entirely--out of the vast folklore material that the great social comminglings of the Middle Ages had brought to light.”¹² And many of those same romances have been turned back into fairy tales through the effects of mass printing. In England, “chapbooks” (cheap-books) lived up to their name: “the printing, in many cases, was execrable, the paper even worse, and the woodcut illustrations, some of which did duty for various tales regardless of their fitness, were sometimes worse than type, paper, and presswork combined.” Chapbooks were generally undated and anonymous; their publishers “took all kinds of liberties” with the text, and “stole the

⁹Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis; the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by William R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 131; Stevens, *Medieval Romance*, pp. 161, 165; Margaret Schlauch, *Antecedents of the English Novel 1400-1600* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 56, 58.

¹⁰Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 107.

¹¹Ellis, *Narration in the German Novelle*, pp. 14-16.

¹²Gerald Bordman, “Folklore and the Medieval Romance,” in Horace P. Beck, ed., *Folklore in Action: Essays for Discussion in Honor of MacEdward Leach* (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1962), pp. 37-38.

productions of rival presses” without hesitation. Romances, fairy tales, and folktales of all kinds were common chapbook fare: stories of Aladdin, Ali Baba, Cinderella, Blue Beard, Hector Prince of Troy, Guy Earl of Warwick, Robin Hood, the Sleeping Beauty, Reynard the Fox, Jack and the Beanstalk, Sir Bevis, Valentine and Orson, Helyas Knight of the Swan, and many others.¹³ Just as typical folk narrative themes, and even particular fairy tales, were elaborated and given literary form as romances in medieval Europe, so many of those romances, in abbreviated form, were reabsorbed into the world of folk narrative after the spread of printing. In a fascinating article, R. S. Crane has studied the vicissitudes over time of one of the most popular of such romances-turned-chapbooks, the story of Guy of Warwick.¹⁴

The analogies are of course conspicuous: medieval romances are to many chapbook tales as Persianized Urdu dastans are to many modern printed qissas. In both cases an elaborate, sophisticated, essentially oral art form, proud of its length and ornateness, capable of providing elite as well as mass entertainment, is reworked into a cheaply printed body of short tales simply told, which continue to please a mass audience long after the elite has turned its attention elsewhere. To compare the Urdu dastan to the medieval European romance would be a revelatory and rewarding task--but one which is outside the scope of the present study. To compare North Indian mass printed narrative literature to chapbooks (and thus to compare qissa to certain chapbook tales) is equally tempting. The comparison seemed quite natural to Grierson.¹⁵ The present study is, however, the first surveyor’s report of a wide and variegated literary terrain. It must concentrate on important topographical features, at the expense of all such side trips and excursions. For many such comparisons suggest themselves. The traditional Persian qissa has given rise not only to the Urdu dastan, but to Uzbek and Tajik “chap-books (kissa)” in Central Asia. It has also influenced the printed “puthi” literature popular until recently in Bangladesh. And it has been the source of a “qissa” genre in Panjabi literature.¹⁶ Perhaps most interesting of all its descendants are mass printed qissas in Persian itself, which are clearly close cousins to Hindi and Urdu ones:

In the nineteenth century (with some earlier exceptions) there appeared greatly abbreviated versions of some older romances, as well as new romances, written almost to a formula. These new stories are all quite short when compared with the older romances, but they clearly derive from the romance tradition....These are often available today in cheap printed editions and are sold in the bazaars and more traditional parts of cities and towns.¹⁷

Future studies will perhaps deal comparatively with these and other related genres.

¹³Harry B. Weiss, **A Book About Chapbooks; the People’s Literature of Bygone Times** (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1942), pp. 1, 57; Schlauch, **Antecedents of the English Novel**, p. 82.

¹⁴Ronald S. Crane, “The Vogue of Guy of Warwick from the Close of the Middle Ages to the Romantic Revival,” **PMLA** 30 (1915):125-194.

¹⁵“In Rajputana, too, ballad poetry is very popular, and specimens can be bought in chapbooks in every bazaar, though rarely seen by Europeans.” George A. Grierson, “The Popular Literature of Northern India,” **Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies** 1 (1920):89.

¹⁶N. K. Chadwick and V. Zhirmunsky, **Oral Epics of Central Asia** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 330-331, quoted in Finnegan, **Oral Poetry**, pp. 194-195; A. M. K. Maswani, “Puthi Literature of East Pakistan,” **Perspective** (Karachi) 4 (March 1971):18-20; Bhāradvāj, **Madhyakālīn romāñs**.

¹⁷Hanaway, **Love and War**, p. 9.

In the course of the present study, we have looked at qissa literature historically--at both its roots in Persian and Urdu oral narrative tradition, and its association with the development of mass printing in North India. We have looked at it textually, examining the surprisingly clear-cut division of the genre into single-source and varying qissas, and assessing some of the factors that might explain such differentiated transmission of texts over time. We have studied some of the most important qissas individually, as works of literature which use particular devices to create particular kinds of effects. We have analyzed qissas stylistically, as works structurally indistinguishable from oral narratives. And we have looked at them in broad generic terms, as romances, as fairy tales. We have noticed their resemblance to many chapbook stories, and to other printed folk genres in different languages.

It remains now to look at qissas in relation to other modern mass printed genres of Hindi and Urdu. For qissa literature exists not in isolation, but as part of its own generic spectrum: other genres surround it and, in a sense, define its borders. Since these printed genres have received little or no critical attention, the best available generic taxonomies are those provided by publishers' catalogues. I looked in detail at a half-dozen of the largest qissa publishers' 1977 catalogues. The catalogues are printed in Hindi, but contain listings for Urdu works as well. Passing over the numerous publications dealing with practical skills, medicine, magic, and astrology, I concentrated on works of literature. And among works of literature, I looked particularly at narrative genres. I found that there are four numerically significant ones: **upanyās**, **qissā**, **nāṭak**, and **sāṅgīt**. Other narrative genres, such as **vrat-kathā**, are associated only with worship or other religious purposes. There remains a residual category of songs, poems, and narrative verse (**Ālha-khañḍ** chapters, etc.). The results of a rough title-count are shown in the following table.¹⁸

¹⁸The chart is based on the following catalogues: Dehātī Pustak Bhañḍār, **Pustak sūchī** (Delhi: Dehātī Pustak Bhañḍār, 1977, 20 p., Hindi); N. S. Sharmā Gauṛ Book Depot, **Grahakānā sūchīpatra** (Hathras: N. S. Sharmā Gauṛ Book Depot, 1977, 32 p., Hindi); Ratan and Co., **Nayā sūchī patra** (Delhi: Ratan and Co., [1977], 48 p., Hindi); Shri Loknāth Pustakālay, **Navīn sūchī-patra** (Calcutta: Shri Loknāth Pustakālay, 1977, 40 p., Hindi); Shyāmkāshī Press, **Pustakoñ kā navīn parichay** (Mathura: Shyāmkāshī Press, 1977, 30 p., Hindi); ʿhākurprasād and Sons, **Sūchīpatra** (Banaras: ʿhākurprasād and Sons, 1977, 46 p., Hindi).

MASS PRINTED NARRATIVE GENRES, 1977

GENRE	Ṭhākur- prasād & Sons, Banaras	N. S. Sharmā Gauṛ, Hathras	Ratan & Co. Delhi	Dehātī Pustak Bhañḍār, Delhi	Shyām- kāshī Press, Mathura	Shrī Loknāth Pustak- ālay, Calcutta	Total
upanyās/ novel	5	---	220	---	34	---	259
kissā/ kahānī	103	46	25	15	23	42	254
nāṭak/ ḍrāmā	165	35	35	98	8	73	414
sāñgīt	---	360	2	5	---	---	367
misc. religious works	397	137	287	278	100	17	1,216
other misc. (verse) works	270	32	35	---	11	3	351

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Now, I do not claim too much for this table. The exact numbers are skewed by the different enumerative practices of different publishers, and by the way some will publish a large work in separate chapters, others as a single volume, etc. And the numerical predominance of religious literature, conspicuous as it is, is actually under-represented, since many **nāṭaks** and **sāṅgīts** have religious themes. But the chart will help to show the nature of the “niche” occupied by qissa literature.

That niche has several defining criteria. First of all, qissa literature is not religious in intent and does not fulfill any didactic or ritual purpose. Religious literature forms such a large part of the generic spectrum that to be set apart from it is in itself more of a distinguishing feature than we might at first think. Second, modern qissa literature is essentially prose fiction, despite many inserted verses and occasional metrical passages. Thus it is set off from the many verse genres, including those of narrative verse (**gīt**, **ālhā**, etc.). and it is set off as well from both **sāṅgīt**, the traditional all-verse folk opera, and **nāṭak** or **ḍrāmā**, the modern “play,” which is in either prose, or mixed prose and verse.

Thus in this generic universe, the broad niche which might be described as “non-religious prose narrative” contains only qissa (together with **kahānī**) and **upanyās**, or novel. “**Kahānī**” has never really become a genre. Sometimes the term is haphazardly used for religious stories (**Rānī Draupadī kī kahānī**) or short humorous anecdotes (**Shaikh Chillī kī kahāniyān**). Sometimes a modern qissa will call itself a **kahānī** as well. Publishers frequently use the catchall heading **kissā-kahānī** for non-religious traditional prose narrative: the works listed in such sections are always mostly qissas. There is no standard body of works that are consistently called **kahānī**; from the erratic use of the term it is possible to assign it no more definite meaning than “story.” Once in a while the word “**kathā**” is used in conjunction with **kahānī**, or even with qissa, but it remains rare and--except for a religious flavor derived from its association with **vrāt-kathā**--quite amorphous.

Local use of such terms, especially for oral narratives, may differ widely. Wadley found that the villagers of Karimpur assigned their own meanings to qissa and **kahānī**.

Kahānī approximates our usage of “story.” **Kahānī** are generally rather brief, are often funny, and deal with real life (this world) characters. **Kissā** are usually long, are mythological, but are not rigorously connected to religious activity. Most often they are village versions of excerpts of the **Mahābhārata** or other all-India “great-tradition” works or are based on mythological themes not readily connected to the known “great” tradition. Both **kahānī** and **kissā** are exclusively oral traditions in Karimpur.¹⁹

Qissā (or **kissā**), **kahānī**, and **kathā** are all standard modern Hindi words for “story.” While they are differentiated in certain specialized contexts, over a large range of everyday usage they are roughly synonymous. Thus local variation in their usage is not surprising: they may designate whatever sorts of stories are locally popular. The present study thus looks at the terms only as used in modern mass printed narrative literature.

The novel--**upanyās** in Hindi, **nāvil** in Urdu--was of course an imported genre. Novels began to be published in North India during the later nineteenth century; many of the

¹⁹Susan Snow Wadley, **Shakti: Power in the Conceptual Structure of Karimpur Religion** (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1975), p. 46.

early ones were adapted from Bengali or English originals.²⁰ Now much cultivated, the novel enjoys the same kind of literary prestige and wide popularity among the educated as it does in the West. In the world of mass publishing, however, the novel is peripheral; as can be seen from the table, only one of the important qissa publishers deals much in novels. Those novels are described by the publisher as **jāsūsī** (secret agent or detective), **romāntik** (romantic), and **sāmājik** (“social,” i.e., novels of manners). They might more accurately be described as lurid fantasies of sex and violence.²¹ By attaching themselves to what passes for contemporary society, and exploiting its every possibility with relish, these novels decisively remove themselves from the qissa world. Of course in a sense the archetypes remain: **Ḥātim Ṭāḥ** becomes James Bond, **Parīs** become sexy women, **Devs** become criminals, **ṭilisms** become terrorist plots, and all the powers of magic are expressed as those of technology. But the setting in itself is sufficient to distinguish the mass printed novel, which offers the latest in modern scenes, from the qissa, which offers an escape from time. Old novels of this type are constantly giving way to newer ones, while new qissas usually lose out to older ones.

Qissas thus occupy a unique generic niche, which might be defined as that of non-religious traditional (i.e., non-novel) prose narrative. And within this niche, the perennials go on and on. All of them are featured in at least two of the six 1977 catalogues I examined--as are **Shīt Basant** and **Gaṅgārām paṭel Bulākhī Dās nāī**, the twentieth-century candidates for the perennials’ group. **Chhabīlī bhaṭiyārī** is featured in three catalogues; **Lailā Majnūn**, **Sāraṅgā Sadāvrij**, and **Triyā charitra**, in four; **Baitāl pachchīsī**, **Gul-e bakāvalī**, and **Siṅhāsan battīsī**, in five--and **Qīṣṣah-e Ḥātim Ṭāḥ** and **Qissā totā mainā**, in all six. And most of the minor qissas in the current crop label themselves “**ṭilismī qissā**,” and are of a thoroughly derivative kind, imitating the “core” group of perennials.

Of course the genre has evolved over time. But it has so far maintained a considerable degree of continuity as well. In Persian and Urdu tradition, a qissa was a (sophisticated or naive) romance centering on a noble but limited human hero who encountered marvelous adventures of all kinds and after much struggle came triumphantly through them. The earliest printed qissas were in the main line of this tradition: **Raja Vikram** was quite at home with **Ḥātim Ṭāḥ**. The “outer layer” of qissas, most of which became part of the genre in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, were stories of sexual love and sexual trickery. They explored marvelous heights of passion, or entertained the reader with marvelous displays of ingenuity. They had Persian antecedents of a sort: **Shirīn Farhād**, **Ṭūṭī nāmāh**. And some of them, as we saw in the case of **Qissā totā mainā**, were careful to invoke and develop qissa conventions. Yet they formed a new layer, more similar among themselves than to the classical “core” group of qissas. As such, however, they were thoroughly assimilated into the genre: it needed only a limited amount of expansion to accommodate them.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the genre had widened only to this limited extent, but it had changed in another way. It had come to consist almost entirely of prose works. Most of the verse qissas, which had been much more common than in Urdu in Hindi, had gone or

²⁰See McGregor, “The Rise of Standard Hindi,” and Russell, “The Development of the Modern Novel in Urdu.”

²¹For example, titles include: **Naked Women**, **The Hell of Sin**, **Call Girl**, **In the Bathroom (sic)**, **Blood Blood Blood**, **Seven Corpses**, **The Search for the Transmitter**, **The Prostitute’s Murderer**, **The Bomb Theft**, **The Dangerous Blackmailer**, **The Dealer in Women**. Ratan and Co., **Nayā sūchī patra**, pp. 15, 38-41. See also Majṭhiyā, **Jāsūsī upanyās**, pp. 139-155, on the authors of such novels.

were rapidly going out of print. Apart from strictly religious works and the occasional novel, qissa had become the only significant genre of mass printed prose narrative. The way thus lay open for any miscellaneous prose narrative to be called a qissa, if only for want of anything else to call it. For as we have seen, **kahānī** and **kathā** never really became established as generic terms in their own right, and there were no other well known, readily available names for story literature, in either Hindi or Urdu.

But when we look at the genre today, we find that this diffusive tendency, this incipient dilution of the genre, has been remarkably well held in check. The overwhelming majority of new qissas imitate not merely old qissas, but old ones of the classical “core” group. This degree of stability, maintained for so long and against such odds, is a tribute to the success of the perennials in pleasing generation after generation of readers better than any other kind of entertaining prose narrative. The genre maintains its stability, in my view, because its “fitness” to its readers’ tastes is so great that the “survival of the fittest” law of mass publishing works to its advantage. Mutations keep arising--and being killed off. Over time, the perennials usually kill off even their own slavish imitators. Rare indeed is the **Shīt Basañt** that “makes it” to perennial status, even with its head start as a **sāñgīt** and folktale. Rarer still is the **Gañgārām paṭel Bulākhī Dās nāī**, that “makes it” from nothing, starting as an original mid-twentieth-century work. Today the perennials dominate their niche in the mass printing jungle, as any collector of catalogues and habitu  of small bookstalls can easily confirm.

But the jungle is still the jungle, and qissa as a genre may yet suffer for its success. The possibility is always there. Four of the six 1977 catalogues I studied included stories of Shaikh Chillī, a traditional “wise fool” and hero of many jests, with the qissas. And all six included various collections of Akbar-Bīrbal anecdotes, witty encounters between the (Muslim) Mughal emperor Akbar and his favorite (Hindu) courtier Bīrbal, among the qissas. These works are varying-text perennials of their kind--but they are not qissas. They are books of assorted jests and humorous anecdotes, comic in intention, totally unstructured.²² They have no coherent beginnings and endings, no frame stories, no unifying narrative thread between one anecdote and the text. They can hardly be called “stories” at all. Of course they may be considered the exceptions that prove the rule. The inclusion of a few extraneous works among dozens of qissas may be quite insignificant.

But they serve to remind us that generic terms are always subject to change, to serve the changing needs of their users. Ellis writes of one such instance, “A pre-existing word was taken up and it filled the vacuum that events had created; but it was the character of *the vacuum* that dictated what meaning the concept would have, not the original meaning of the word in the former context from which it was borrowed.” Qissa as a genre might in the future be expanded into relative amorphousness, into merely a description of its niche: then any traditional non-religious prose narrative would be as much a qissa as any other. Qissa would then become an “umbrella” term, one which served “to make a convenient gathering together of texts with a loose relation to each other”--which is, as Ellis reminds us, a common and legitimate way in which generic terms serve their users.²³

Other fates for qissa as a genre can also be imagined. Cawelti suggests that “increasing specialization” will split many traditional popular genres into narrower and more

²²Such collections are often described as **laṭīfe**, **vinod**, **hañsī-dillagī**, etc., but none of these seems to act as a coherent, consistent generic category.

²³Ellis, **Narration in the German Novelle**, pp. 14-16, 19-20.

clearly defined ones. If qissa should become an amorphous “umbrella” term, such splitting might well occur. Or we might look at a historical instance. Chapbooks flourished in England from the time when presses became sufficiently numerous to permit mass publishing--until the rise of magazines and newspapers displaced them. Might some such fate overtake qissas? Of course there are newspapers and magazines in plenty in India today, but perhaps qissa buyers do not read them? Are qissas perhaps the preferred reading matter of the newly literate? Do qissa readers “graduate” to novels, newspapers, magazines, while fresh additions to the ranks of the literate keep the number of qissa readers high? Qissa publishers claim that “everybody” reads qissas, “all sorts of people”--young and old, men and women, urban and rural. No one today is in a position to dispute their claim. More knowledge about qissa readers would make it possible to say much more about the probable future of the genre.²⁴

But it appears that none of these fates--neither a widening, nor a splitting, nor a technological obsolescence--is imminent. Mr. B. N. Trivedī, the most important qissa publisher in Calcutta, told me that he is astonished to find that qissas today remain at least as popular as ever. He keeps printing them because people of all ages keep coming in and asking for particular ones by name. For a time there was a fashion for printing qissa stories as children’s books, and he thought then that qissas might die out (**band ho jānā**). But instead the children’s book fad is dying out, while the traditional qissas maintain their popularity; he expects this situation to continue.²⁵ And perhaps it will. For the perennials seem to have an appeal that goes deeper than any vicissitudes of literary fashion. “Of all fictions, the marvellous journey is the one formula that is never exhausted.”²⁶

²⁴The large publishers do much of their business wholesale, so they themselves often do not have detailed knowledge about individual purchasers. I had hoped to investigate such questions, but found it impossible within the time available.

²⁵Interview with Mr. B. N. Trivedī, Shri Loknāth Pustakālay, Calcutta, 5 January 1978.

²⁶Frye, **Anatomy of Criticism**, p. 57.