

Review Article

**Muhammad Hasan Askari:
The Postcolonial Mind^{*}**

Muhammad Reza Kazimi^{**}

The first sentence is disconcerting: ‘Muhammad Hasan Askari was Urdu’s first literary critic, in the Western, practical sense of the term; that is he chose to set up as a critic, an interpreter and a judge of literature’ (p.1). All these attributes, although they do not originate with even him, go back to Kalimuddin Ahmad. It was Kalimuddin Ahmad who was a critic in the western and practical sense of the term; and who startled the literary world with his opening sentence of *A Look at Urdu Criticism*: ‘The existence of literary criticism in Urdu is imaginary’, (1942) thus Kalimuddin Ahmad had chosen to set up as a critic, an interpreter and a judge of literature while Askari was yet a student. Mehr Afshan Farooqi next asserts:

Askari’s immediate contemporaries can be described as not much more than big fish in a small pond of Urdu letters of the second quarter of the twentieth century. All of them had extensive knowledge of English literature, but none came close to Askari’s prodigious intellect, originality of thought, and depth and range of erudition. (p.3)

A very sweeping statement by which Mehr Afshan Farooqi brushes aside Mumtaz Husain, a critic more substantial than Askari and Mujtuba Husain who was far more inspiring. All three of them were affiliates of Allahabad University. Not even one hypothesis of Farooqi’s can be proved. Askari did not have a prodigious intellect, a comparison with his own disciple Salim Ahmad is sufficient to establish that. Askari’s depth of erudition is apparent only in his essays on Mir (see his *Mir Sahib*, edited by Javed Akhtar Bhatti, Islamabad, 2010). Askari did not even believe in originality, and whatever sparks of originality he had, were

^{*} The article reviews Mehr Afshan Farooqi’s book *The Postcolonial Mind, Urdu Culture, Islam and Modernity* by Muhammad Hasan Askari published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003.

^{**} Dr. Muhammad Reza Kazimi, historian and literary critic.

snuffed out by his adulation of Firaq Gorakhpuri, Ashraf Ali Thanvi, and Rene' Guenon.

After reading some pages, and we come across another assertion: Askari's greatest contribution to Urdu critical thought was his insistence that every literary culture has the right to be judged by its own cultural moralities. (pp.10 & 249)

If this is to be regarded as Muhammad Hasan Askari's contribution to Urdu critical thought, then, where does this leave Masud Hasan Rizvi and his *Hamari Shairi*? Rizvi's book too was a reassertion of the traditional and insular plea that eastern literature should not be judged by western standards. In the colonial age, this assertion of cultural freedom, qualifies as a response, not as a 'thought.'

Further down, Mehr Afshan Farooqi writes that there were two Askaris (p.197). She says that in another meaning, but, it seems true. There was one Muhammad Hasan Askari she never knew, and one we read and met. Fortunately, it is not necessary to rate Askari as the first or greatest Urdu critic to make him the subject of an extensive study.

Muhammad Hasan Askari laid the ideological foundation, albeit unwittingly, for the Taliban in Pakistan. This he did by his preference to custom over legislation. He was the first Urdu literary critic to become a cult figure; the first to dissent from Marxism, and the first to attempt an ideological or national definition of literature. This last endeavor brought him into conflict with his mentor Firaq Gorakhpuri, who from across the border, had jumped into the fray.

This point of dissension with Firaq became a precursor of Askari's own isolation by his disciples led by Salim Ahmad. All the devotees of Askari, however, continued to rate Firaq as high as Mir and Ghalib. Salim Ahmad having died by then, his brother Shamim Ahmad led the assault on Shamsur Rahman Farooqi, for giving a realistic assessment of the poetic merits of Firaq Gorakhpuri. Likewise, Askari's devotees shunned the man and spread his message with the utmost fervor. It is only Muhammad Hasan Askari's adulation of Firaq that gives Mehr Afshan Farooqi pause: 'Why did an erudite and incisive critic like Askari have such an adulatory view of a secondary poet's work?' (p.9)

This is a trait which Farooqi admits, but localizes. Askari's obsession with tradition cannot be explained, except as an attempt to circumvent a scriptural taboo. The question Mehr Afshan Farooqi raises above is an opening to the central strand of her inquiry.

The letter also reflects his own arrogance, a flaw in his character that seems to have passed unremarked by his admiring friends... perhaps as a result of the culture of

admiration and adulation in some ways characteristic of all Urdu literary culture. It does obscure the real person especially for scholars who approach him later with the idea of trying to understand the intellectual and emotional motivations of Askari the man and Askari the writer. (p.21)

This is the heart of the matter. This lacuna is not a reflection of the Urdu culture of admiration. Other personalities have been elusive, or obscure, due to the exigencies of literary fashion, or even by personal inclination, but Muhammad Hasan Askari, till now, is the only Urdu writer whose 'real person' was deliberately obscured by his admirers. This dissonance between Askari and his disciples presents a unique strand of inquiry. Even had this dissonance been initiated by Askari, the reclusion of a critic is a topic well-worth pursuing. As earlier submitted, while Askari's mission was zealously promoted, Askari's person was jealously guarded.

It needs emphasis that this phenomenon was not unique. It follows a pattern in which the mission is divested of the man. Maulana Abul Ala Mawdudi was replaced as Amir, Jama'at-i-Islami, during his life time. The real Askari was an ardent follower of the leftist Pakistan People's Party, while his disciples, led by Salim Ahmad were committed members of its adversary, the Jama'at-i-Islami.

Muhammad Hasan Askari was retiring by nature, but polite. I met Askari and Salim Ahmad separately. Perhaps the last writer of note, who saw them together, is Ahmad Javed, but since he has now become a religious scholar, he may no longer be willing to share vignettes of their meetings now. Mehr Afshan Farooqi has mentioned Askari's cold response to the death of his father as well as his failed love affair with a girl he knew belonged to another sect. This means that unlike most college teachers Askari sought his brides from among his students. For an author, such details may be necessary to analyze a writer having pronounced psychological impulses, but a reviewer may be excused from belaboring them.

We have got ahead of ourselves by discussing Askari before coming to the main title *The Postcolonial Mind*. The passage below comes closest to justifying the title:

Postcolonial literary theory has provided us with many conceptual tools to unlock colonial/post-colonial texts. We may not take Askari's ideas as entirely undisputable, but he was undoubtedly the first critic to articulate the cultural dilemma in postcolonial society that *compelled* writers to produce texts that lacked a strong traditional anchor. (p.97)

The ascription is weak – to call the Second World, stretching a point. If writers were inspired by the Russian revolution, they would not care for

a traditional anchor. Mehr Afshan Farooqi is not very forthcoming about the nature of the compulsion. The traditional strand had not snapped even in colonial times as Askari's column on Akbar Ilaahabadi seems to indicate. Askari acquired such notions by refusing to take poets like Josh Malihabadi seriously. Askari wrote a moving obituary of Majaz which had cultural insights, but it seems not to have been covered in this treatise. Mehr Afshan Farooqi is on a better guided course when she recounts how Marxist ideology impacted art forms:

Considering that the P.W.M. [Progressive Writer's Movement] dominated the literary scene from 1936 onwards, especially during the turbulent 1940's, they should be held responsible for the failure of Urdu to produce novels. Askari's main point was that the Urdu Progressive Writer's ambivalent attitude towards a community's political goals and alienation from mainline Muslim culture prevented them from excavating or discovering the material for writing novels....I have yet to come across a theoretical explanation of why the Urdu novel failed to take off after its initial success. (p.97)

Brilliant in itself, this explanation takes refuge behind the word Urdu, because Ahmad Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* was written in English, and was certainly not oblivious to mainline Muslim culture. She does not mention the parallel development outside the P.W.M. which would have an inhibiting effect. Abdul Halim Sharar's novels were best-sellers, being historical fantasies, which became a veritable industry run by Nasim Hijazi and Wahshi Mahmudabadi. It was mainline Muslim culture to which such authors were appealing to, and their forte was the novel, not the short story. Quratul Ayn Haider was a trans-colonial novelist, while Shaukat Siddiqui was post-colonial, in that, that his realism cut his theme from a past that was socially losing its moorings.

Askari was himself colonial in his orientation. He wrote of Anglo-Indian girls, explaining that he could not presume to depict native characters. Simultaneously with having called Islam a 'mediocre' religion, he signified his willingness to derive his Islam from Rene Guenon [*Takhliqi Adab*, 4 July 1985, p.438]

However since Muhammad Hasan Askari drew upon the forms of fiction to illustrate a point regarding cultural affiliation, it is opportune to turn to Farooqi's assessment of Askari as a fiction writer. Mehr Afshan Farooqi deserves the highest commendation for saying that Askari was representing reality in its complicated slipperiness, not in a raw immediate fashion as Ismat Chughtai, 'his method of writing fiction was subtle and erudite, his prose more polished, and his story structured

in ways that were allusive especially when compared with most of his contemporaries' (p.89). There is another theme that Askari shares with the Progressives, the communal riots. What was the ideological consideration in promoting short stories is spelt out by Askari in this context;

The reduction of scale and number of properties in a short story create an illusion of perceiving the whole before perceiving the parts. (p.91)

This is with reference to riot literature. The Progressive Writers Movement was an attempt to introduce secular ideals in India; and it were the communal riots that upset that ideal. Yet Urdu writers of all three religions, Sa'adat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chandar and Rajinder Singh Bedi, rose to the occasion. If Krishan Chandar's *Hum Wahshi Hein* (We are Beasts) is considered journalistic then his *Ghaddar* (Traitor) is masterfully written. Rajinder Singh's *Lajvanti* is riot literature without depicting violence. Askari dubbed this outpouring 'insincere, lifeless and hollow.' He also went on to declare that riots cannot be a subject of literature (p.99). Why ever not? Mehr Afshan Farooqi says that initially Muhammad Hasan Askari had rebuffed Sa'adat Hasan Manto, but later we see him write the introduction to Manto's *Chughad* (Idiot) and *Siyah Hashiyay* (Black Margins) which contain cynical anecdotes about the riots.

Human being and mankind (*Insan* and *Admi*) are the binaries that run through Askari's literary criticism and only his book *Jhalkiyan* stands apart, because his columns were written before Askari had acquired his vision or experience to formulate any theory. Mehr Afshan Farooqi's chapter on *Jhalkiyan* is the best in the book, not because it covers new ground so to say because the columns had not been published in volume form, but because she succeeds in tracing the evolution of Askari's views through it:

The *Jhalkiyan* man oeuvre constitutes more than a thousand pages of sparkling, deceptively informal prose studded with original ideas on a stunning varieties of subjects. (p.7)

Askari was one of the few critics who upheld the supremacy of Mir Taqi Mir over Ghalib. (In a 1947 letter to Aftab Ahmad, Askari had confided that he had arrived at a hasty decision, because he had not had the chance to consult *Dewan-i-Ghalib*). In Mir emotion dominates, in Ghalib intellect. Askari nevertheless has an interesting basis of comparison:

For Ghalib, the lover's path and the common man's path are separate. But for Mir the common man's path itself can lead to the spiritual path. Askari's conclusion is that Mir's path by virtue of this quality of convergence and insights into the

status of love in human existence has more elements of the modern than Ghalib, and is therefore more relevant to the modern times. (p.129)

Askari's formulation is carefully phrased but it is not very convincing. Ghalib's modernity was by conscious choice as seen in his verse introduction to Sir Syed's edition of *Ain-i-Akbari*. Ghalib's preference for the invading East India Company over the rump of the Mughal Empire is deplorable, but amidst so many types of prejudices it emerges as modern. The main point of course is that Mir is identified with emotion and Ghalib with intellect-or that Ghalib is more hetero-sexual. Realism in love as depicted by Ghalib became the dominant strain in the twentieth century, Nasir Kazmi notwithstanding. The lute of Mir became anachronistic. The calamities of 1947 were akin more to the 1857 upheaval than to the Abdali invasions of a century earlier. Firaq's affinity with Mir is the main reason why Mehr Afshan Farooqi can call him a secondary poet. She is quite alive to the basis of comparison being thought and emotion

Yet the fact is that Mir's poetry is a fusion of thought and emotion. It is his ability to search and find the unique among the mundane and to give everyday reality the shape of a sublime experience that marks Mir as a great poet. (p.133)

Even the two terms by which Askari expounded his ideology is taken from Ghalib *Admi ko bhi muyassar naheen insan hona*. It is not the lot of even mankind to become a human being. Admi means one descended from Adam; Insan means a civilized person. Askari construes these terms to mean respectively natural and artificial. In his ideological formulation 'Insan aur Admi' (1948) and its retraction 'Admi aur Insan' (1956). These terms are transposed. As Mehr Afshan Farooqi puts it

While *Insan aur Admi* was widely read as an attack on Marxist ideology, and by extension on the Urdu Progressive writers, the sequel ('Admi aur Insan') was a scathing critic of American humanism, which Askari pointed out was mostly individualism. (p.157)

At first sight to call a reversal a sequel may seem odd, also because in his second essay Askari call communism a great experiment in human history; however, we have to raise our head only slightly, and recall that Afghanistan was invaded first by the Soviet Union, then by the U.S. This explains the vicissitudes that Third World countries have been exposed to. Rather than deserving to be impeached for a somersault, Askari deserves credit for not putting his ideological stance above considerations for salvation.

Askari expounding upon the limitations of expression mentions a language which had no separate word for either bird or blue. To say blue it had to say blue bird; to describe a bird it had to say blue bird. Since the Cold War put real political pressure on both ideologies, Askari's engagement with the real and his disciple's engagement with the ideal, brought about a rupture between them.

Salim Ahmad wrote a memoir about his mentor, called *Muhammad Hasan Askari: Insan ya Admi*. Commenting on this book, Mehr Afshan Farooqi writes:

I don't think Askari wanted to put people into boxes...

which is what Salim Ahmad does. (p.158)

It does not really matter what Askari thought, but what Askari wrote. Initially he saw mankind a victim of communist regimentation, thereafter, he saw human beings a victim of western materialism. How Salim Ahmad could avoid using the terms that Askari had symbolized, is not clear. During the times he was on visiting terms with Askari, Salim Ahmad had published his first work of literary criticism; *Nai Nazm aur Poora Admi* (The New Poem and the Whole Man) in which poets were judged on the basis of their sexual adequacy. This title did not earn disapproval from Askari, thus Farooqi's characterization of Salim Ahmad's quest as 'futile' seems unfair.

Salim Ahmad, possibly under the influence of Askari wrote ghazals in short meters. Askari has a full essay on the poetic effects of short meters:

It is a measure of Askari's inquiring, unorthodox and agile mind that he, even though not a prosodist by training, conceived of the subject as worth exploring. (p.136)

Askari observes that the short meter brings out the essence of whatever thought or emotion was sought to be expressed. Because of his reverence for tradition, Askari puts the ghazal in a light other than fiction; where according to him scale seems to matter. Though Mehr Afshan Farooqi did not juxtapose the two observations, she does mention the dissonance:

Askari concluded that Urdu did not have a 'prose of ideas' capable of creating a prose genre for expressing critical thoughts. He blamed the structure of the Urdu ghazal in which metaphorical images have to be encapsulated within two lines. (p.152)

All this is clear, but unfortunately Mehr Afshan Farooqi herself seems partial to the ghazal. In fact Askari's preference of Mir over Ghalib comes under strain here, because it was Ghalib who created the thought phraseology which through the agency of Sajjad Ansari and Rashid

Ahmad Siddiqui gave precision to Urdu prose, the fact of Ghalib being an innovator deflects her defense of the ghazal.

I am not persuaded that all the blame should be on the ghazal, or on constraints resulting from literary sensibilities, as they are also colored by cultural sensibilities. (p.153)

It was cultural sensibilities that Ghalib had challenged. His diction was not incomprehensible. Jameel Mazhari argued that it was Momin's diction that was involved and difficult. In an age when people learnt Persian from childhood, and could appreciate the odes of Khaqani, it could not have been because of his Persianized diction that Ghalib could be told to his face that his verse was obscure. It were Ghalib's cultural values that were found alien. Ghalib had said that one's profession does not determine one's social status. That expertise in whatever field is good. Ghalib asserted against the whole tide of tradition that desire is worshipped only by fools. Not just these but even his eclecticism and skepticism were hurting cultural sensibilities. Skepticism existed in the Urdu ghazal as a matter of form, his contemporaries seem to have suspected that he was voicing them as a statement.

A critic who is in need of such extensive analysis can hardly be called a good analyst himself. There exist contradictions in the makeup of most creative writers; that is why literary critics can exist. Muhammad Hasan Askari was a fiction writer and a literary critic. A controversialist whether like Ghalib or Askari is expected to draw comment even hostile comment, but a scholar surveying the scene is not expected to take sides. See for example her comment below:

The significance of Guenon's critique of the West for Askari lies in the dichotomy that he adumbrates: the dichotomy of discursive knowledge versus traditional knowledge. (pp.167-68)

This significance is not lost on Askari's critics, but the irony of Askari deriving his fundamentalism from a European convert to Islam is not removed. Farooqi's apology is prefaced by her admission that 'Askari's description of medieval sensibility as accommodating, even encouraging of individual talent, temperament and style is not supported by concrete examples' (p.167). As such, it is not understandable why Mehr Afshan Farooqi is so vehement in her denunciation of Askari's critics.

If Ajmal Kamal has pointed out that our sympathies should not be confined to Muslim victims of the communal riots and that they should extend to Hindu and Sikh victims as well; that presents no ground for calling his article on Manto's riot literature as 'churlish' (p.101). I had not expected prescriptive criticism to resurrect itself after such a long

liberal interlude. A critical essay can be refuted point by point, not by calling the essay ‘peevisish’.

Muhammad Irshad comes in for a far more severe indictment. She could have noted that it was not the person of Askari – retiring, courteous and mild – that invited criticism; but for the reason of his being made a cult figure by his disciples for the purpose of challenging rational discourse. Mehr Afshan Farooqi had weakened her stance by doubting whether Askari would have permitted the publication of *Modernity and its Misguidance* in its present state

Irshad’s strangest disagreement with Askari is the latter’s insistence that tradition is transmitted orally. Irshad claims that what Askari means by ‘transmitted orally from breast to breast are those secret mysteries and subtle points and symbols whose knowledge was imparted by the leaders of ancient mystery religions to their closest disciples’. It should be clear that Askari meant no such thing by tradition. *Askari was no obscurantist*. His definition may have been flawed, but tradition for him constituted in oral and personal transmission of the knowledge contained in the Quran, the hadith and their *right-minded interpreters*. I have ignored quite a lot of Irshad’s irrelevant prolixity and the contemptible barbs that he directed at Askari. Still, I give Irshad so much space because Askari’s defenders by not being logical and precise, give the impression that Irshad had the better of the argument (p.215) [emphasis added].

She should have given Irshad more respect than space. While refuting Irshad, Mehr Afshan Farooqi mentions those qualities that are subjective. The Quran says that God taught Man by the Pen. Askari still insists on oral transmission. Hadith as a genre is a legal source, but the authenticity of a particular Hadith depends on a vigorous critical apparatus. Exegesis by ‘Right-minded interpreters, is a tautological exercise.

Muhammad Irshad would not have launched his assault, had the votaries of Askari, with Askari himself out of the way, not given ideological support to the Zia-ul-Haq regime. Askari did not agree with Salim Ahmad, how then can Irshad be deserving of invective? Had Askari not been raised on a pedestal, he would not have been attacked. Mehr Afshan Farooq has only to read Askari’s letters to Shamsur Rahman Faruqi to arrive at a realistic estimate:

A. I have before me the example of a friend. He read *The Bezels of Wisdom* and did not take any precaution, rather, he considered a book like any other. God saved him from the corruption of his belief,

but his mind was so affected, that for two or three years he was unfit for any work. He suffered illness and financial troubles as well. Don't mention this event to any one.

- B. For people like me, only such knowledge of the revered Shaikh is sufficient as is given by authentic ulama (*Shabkhoon*, Allahabad, July 1980, pp.14 and 5).

Don't these letters show how completely Askari was governed by superstition and unquestioning belief? Can a follower of unquestioning belief, be called a critic at all? Is it not then a travesty to call him the greatest or the first critic of the Urdu language? There is more to come. In his posthumous *Modernity and its Misguidance*, Askari gives us his definition of Islam: He mentions the 'misconceptions' of modernism:

1. To think that the purpose of religion is to build character, and by character to mean those deeds and acts that are beneficial to social life.
2. To accuse the ulama of robbing us of the freedom of thought, and, on the other side, of intellectual stagnation.

Both these texts were available to Mehr Afshan Farooqi. If these printed words of Askari do not make him out to be an obscurantist, what do they make him out to be? What do they make Askari's admirers out to be? It is quite acceptable to present a major study of a minor critic, but a holistic approach is needed. The above dicta of Askari are objectionable, not only on the basis of logic, but also on the basis of scripture. Thus Muhammad Hasan Askari – whatever his intentions – has put question marks against our nationhood and our survival.