

*MUHAMMAD HASAN 'ASKARI*

*(1919-1978)*



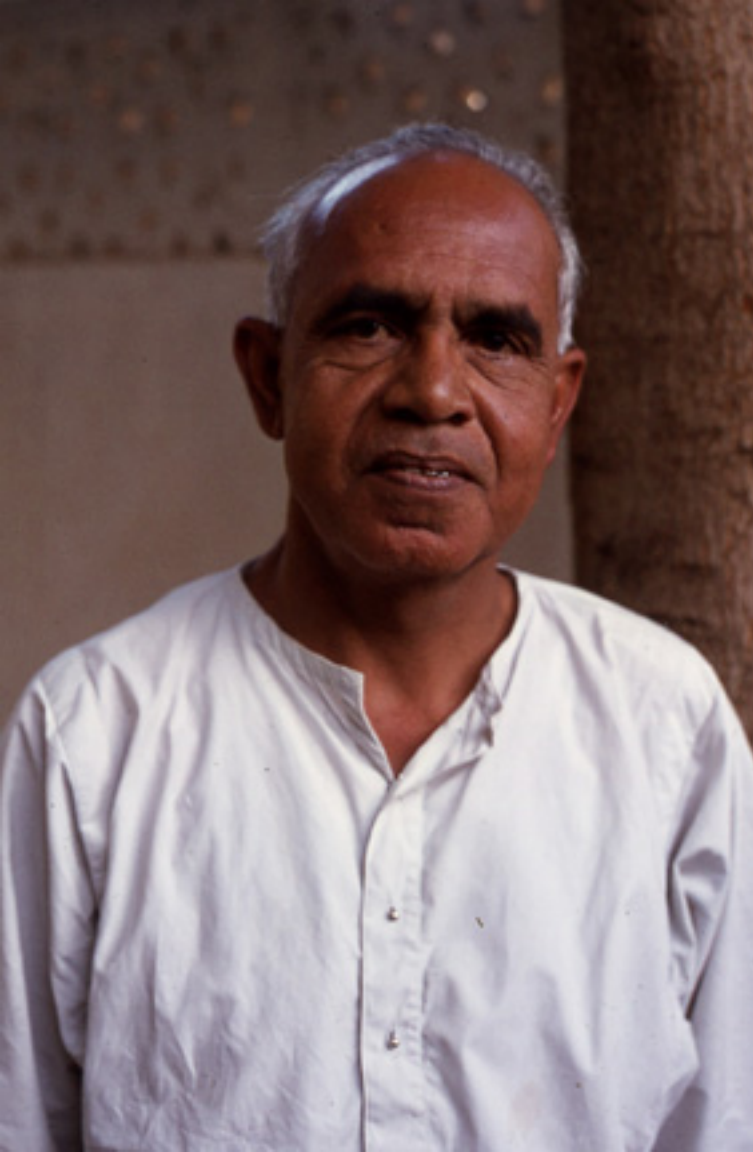
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*Essays and Short Story*

*(1940-1955)*



Translated by  
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## Towards a Prose of Ideas: An Introduction to the Critical Thought of Muhammad Hasan ‘Askari

We haven't yet in fact produced a prose  
of ideas to create a prose genre for  
expressing critical thought.

—MUHAMMAD HASAN ‘ASKARI

### I

URDU SCHOLARS are united in the opinion that modern Urdu literature began in the latter part of the nineteenth century when such intellectual giants as Alḡāf Ḥusain Ḥālī, Shibli Nu‘mānī, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād elected to write literary and cultural criticism, and that it further evolved at the hands of others, notably Iqbāl and several writers identified with the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM). Their contributions notwithstanding, I intend to discuss here the critical and creative writings of Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Askarī (1919–1978) who presents a strident, often sarcastic, dissenting opinion on the consequences of adopting elements of Western literary culture in the production of Urdu literature and on attempting to “reform” Urdu literature through the application of political ideology. His remarks are based on a thorough knowledge of Western literature and a sophisticated understanding of cultural relativity. One factor responsible for his omission from the wider scholarly discussion of modern Urdu literature might be that his work has not been consistently in print and, excluding a few stray pieces, has remained largely untranslated in English. Several other reasons might be: after an initial flirtation with the PWM, he rejected it, risking a

certain degree of marginalization by his peers; secondly, his creative output, though brilliant, is small and for certain idiosyncratic reasons sometimes quite “difficult” to comprehend; thirdly, during the latter part of his life he had lost interest in those controversial issues on which he had focused his energies during the 1950s and had become a traditionalist in matters of religion and culture which pushed him further towards the margins of the Urdu canon. Nevertheless, ‘Askarī deserves a hearing. I contend that his viewpoints on the position of the Urdu writer within the colonial context in fact prefigure some of the arguments that have become part of the postcolonial discourse. With this issue of the *AUS*, which contains translations of a number of important articles by ‘Askarī and one of his short stories, I hope the debate will be carried forward.

My current research on ‘Askarī focuses on his literary and critical writing between 1940 and 1955. As a young man, he found himself facing all manner of personal, intellectual and cultural crises: the economic depression in the country, the independence struggle problematized by the “Pakistan debate,” the anxiety and horror brought about by World War II, the partition of the Indian subcontinent, and his decision to move to Pakistan. In a characteristically robust and uncompromising fashion, ‘Askarī engaged directly with the literary and cultural choices that were uppermost in the thinking and work of Urdu writers. Of primary concern to him were the condition of the Urdu canon and the stylistics of the literary language. He was particularly interested in what the twentieth-century Urdu writer had inherited from the previous century, as well as the psychology of cultural and literary borrowing, the use of experience in literary imagination, and the relative importance of social and economic reform and political ideology in literary innovation. For a short period, between 1940 and 1945, he tried his hand at creative writing, primarily the short story, of which he composed just eleven. I have translated “Ḥarāmjādi” for this issue of the *AUS* and use it in my comments. ‘Askarī also called it his favorite. However, he was generally unhappy with his creative writing. As a member of the middle class, he felt that he had not lived through the kinds of experiences that would provide him adequate material on which to build a plot. His sense of alienation and loneliness ran deep, preventing him from situating himself squarely within a “natural” context. A careful reading of English, French, German and Russian authors, enhanced by translating French symbolists such as Flaubert into Urdu had stimulated in him a particularized yet sophisticated understanding of the function of literature and its relationship to culture. He came to realize how difficult the representation of another culture

through the act of translation is, and how problematic it could be to adopt ontological concepts and literary styles from Western sources when writing in Urdu. A university education had provided him with comparative methodology, but it failed to enable him to be reflexive. As an Indian Muslim, during the run-up to the departure of the British and the widespread confusion and unease produced by the political environment brought about by Nehru and Jinnah, he was unable to define or represent the “Indian ethos,” or “Indian sensibilities” in his own writing. For example, regarding his short story “Ḥarāmjādī,” included in his collection *Jazīrē* (Islands), ‘Askarī, having acknowledged Chekhov as his inspiration, confesses in the Epilogue to the collection that he was constrained to use a Christian character as the problematic figure since the story was derivative of “a seventy-five percent Western consciousness,” and it would be too much of a blow to Indian sensibility to give this main character a Hindu or Muslim name. He implies that to “reach the depths of the Indian spirit” the writer must scale the “walls of appearances” with the tools of “love and humility.” Unabashedly, he admits, “Love perhaps I could muster, but humility—by which I don’t mean placing myself below everyone else, but treating everyone as equal to myself—is something I cannot manage.”<sup>1</sup>

While he could not achieve, or was unwilling to attempt, a representation of the “Indian ethos” in his creative writing, ‘Askarī did succeed, I think effectively, in demonstrating how to improve the form and style of literary Urdu. On one or more levels each of his stories can serve as a demonstration of his intense interest and concern with equalizing if not privileging form over content (what he calls experience). He believed that his contemporaries, particularly the Progressives, were excessively concerned with depicting experience and realism, especially from a Western, Marxist point of view, but they had largely ignored developing the syntax and word usage of Urdu. In the above-mentioned Epilogue ‘Askarī confesses to several shortcomings, not the least of which is his failure to transcend his isolation from the core of an Indian ethos. I believe this is one of the main reasons he ceased writing fiction by 1945.

‘Askarī never married. He was an intensely private person and very little is known about his personal life. Photographs of him are rare. I was surprised that none of the recently published anthologies contains a pic-

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<sup>1</sup>For an expansion of the above points in ‘Askarī’s own words, see “Excerpts from ‘Askarī’s Epilogue” in my “Translator’s Note” elsewhere in this issue.

ture of him. He had a round face and wore thick glasses, and he wasn't very tall. He liked to wear shervanis. His friends have described him as shy, soft-spoken and very punctual. When I finally came across a picture of him, I saw that he had curly hair. There is some speculation that 'Askarī was not his given name since his father's name is Muḥammad Mu'īnu'l-Ḥaḡ.

'Askarī's early education was at the Muslim High School in Bulandshahr, a town in western Uttar Pradesh, not far from the village named Saravah where he was born in 1919. He joined Allahabad University as an undergraduate in 1938 and went on to earn a Master's degree in English literature in 1942. His first job was as a scriptwriter for All India Radio, Delhi. Soon thereafter, he began writing a literary column, "Jhalkiyān," for the Urdu journal *Sāqī*, (Delhi; after 1947, Karachi). By then he had published his first collection of short stories, *Jazīrē*. For a brief period around 1944 he also taught English literature at Delhi College (now, Zakir Husain College). After migrating to Pakistan in 1947, and remaining in Lahore for some time, he finally settled in Karachi in 1950. There he worked as editor for the literary magazine *Māh-e Nau* for several months, and then found a position in the English Department of Islamia College, teaching there until his death in 1978.

With 1950 another phase in 'Askarī's writing career began. During this period he wrote many of his most provocative and speculative articles on the state of Urdu literature. It is from this corpus that I have translated three pieces ("The Consequences of Imitating the West," "If the Benefit of Translation is Concealment," and "Some Thoughts on Urdu Prose"), and Baran Rehman two ("Fear of Metaphor" and "A Famine of Verbs") for this issue of the *AUS*. One can readily see the energy and vigor in 'Askarī's intellectual agenda by a mere look at the titles of these pieces. It is clear that here 'Askarī is attempting to discuss the literary critical issues and questions which he had grappled with earlier, albeit problematically, in his fiction. I feel that he succeeded in enhancing the stature of critical prose in Urdu and addressing significantly the desideratum articulated in the epigraph to this article.

By 1955 'Askarī became increasingly engaged in the transition to and formulation of Pakistani national culture (*Pākistānī tehzīb*), practically abandoning his previous work that had focused on discussions of style in Urdu language and literature. Apparently his life of alienation followed him. As a result, he ultimately came to reject much of what he had written earlier. Cold War politics muted the appreciation of Western cultures he had acquired earlier during his apprentice years at Allahabad

University. His disenchantment with the West was so profound that he denied any and all of its claims to leadership. During the last fifteen years of his life he became a serious student of Sufism, turning ever more to an interpretation of experience through the lens of traditional Islamic epistemology.

Despite his disengagement from serious literary criticism in the later years of his life, ‘Askari’s earlier statements on literature deserve to become part of our understanding of the literary and intellectual milieu of the 1930s through the 1950s—a time when Urdu writers were struggling to redefine idioms for prose and poetry. For complicated reasons, which generally had to do with politics rather than logic, the notoriety and agenda of the Progressive Writers enjoyed a kind of cachet, which itself tended to marginalize anyone deemed to be outside the fold. Even at the age of 19, though admittedly confused by competing ideologies and the apparent emptiness of his lonely middle-class existence, ‘Askari was perceptive enough to recognize the larger picture: that literary tradition never dies, but only slowly changes. He made the point that writers ideologically bonded to the Progressive Movement (PM) needed to consider that their contemporaries who were not so dedicated to the cause were nevertheless “moving in the same direction and may also be able to help them.” He argued, in “A Famine of Verbs,” that language and literature required new words and rhythms; that such innovations depended upon the contributions of an entire generation of writers, regardless of ideological conviction.

‘Askari is an important voice within the *jadīdiyyat* or modernist movement. It is more correct to use *jadīdiyyat* in the sense of a trend or preference for the modern or modernity, and not in the sense of a movement, such as that of the Progressive Writers. From its inception, the Progressive Writers’ Association (PWA) was dominated by writers who chose to analyze and describe society from a Marxist point of view. The PM in Urdu held center stage virtually unchallenged from approximately 1936 until 1947. However, it was not the Partition that singularly displaced the Progressives from their hegemonic position, although the anti-communist stance of the newly-founded states must have dampened their zeal. “Progressive” literature was challenged, rather, by the emerging trend which came to be known simply as *jadīdiyyat* or “modernity.” The drift towards *jadīdiyyat* was slow and rather imperceptible at first. It was devoid of a political ideology, but was fundamentally part of a “new aesthetic evolution.” In the poet Mīrājī (1912–49) the stirrings of modernity are nascent, and ultimately transcend his Marxism. His contemporary, Nūn

Mīm Rāshid (1910–75), is a romantic modernist. Both experimented with form, through which experience was channeled. Slightly younger than Mīrājī and Rāshid, ‘Askarī was an impressionable college student when the PWA was formed in 1936. He even called himself a “Progressive,” but he was unsure what it meant to him, and the world.

When ‘Askarī began writing (first short story published in 1940), the PM was at its height. Whether he was convinced by the Progressives’ agenda as a young student-writer is not clear. Certainly Allahabad University, ‘Askarī’s alma mater, had some eminent Progressive scholars on its faculty, Eḥtshām Ḥusain being the most renowned among them. In a letter dated July 1941 to the editor of *Adabī Duniyā*, a monthly journal published from Lahore, ‘Askarī describes his ambivalent feelings towards Progressivism:

I have freed myself from each and every restraint of religion, ethics, and social responsibility and the result is that I have made myself into a question mark. I cannot accept the old order. I cannot make a new order for myself. I wish I could be a plain and simple Socialist or Progressive. People generally take me to be a Progressive, and I call myself one too. But I am truly a decadent. The bitterness, despair, reclusiveness and extreme individuation in my story “Ḥarāmjādī” is an example of that. I want to infuse my stories with a spirit that will create hope for a new world and a new life for humanity. But my stories are severing even the threads of hope that remain. I cannot grasp the spirit of unity. I am bonded with the spirit of disunity. So aren’t my stories harmful and poisonous for the new life? Aren’t sick temperaments my examples? Is it justifiable that I write such stories at a time when there is a battle going on for the fate of humanity? That I should write stories about the illusions and imagined narcissistic fancies of an utterly personal nature? [...] I too have no “character.” My opinions and thoughts change with the wind. Only despair is my constant feeling [...]<sup>2</sup>

While ‘Askarī’s mortification at his so-called decadence is rhetorical and imbued with youthfulness (he was twenty-two years old after all when he wrote these lines), it nevertheless shows his ambivalence towards the Progressives and the restlessness of his *jadīd* mind. He gave up writing fiction within four years of publishing this letter, ostensibly due to his

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<sup>2</sup>See his “Ēk Nafsiyātī Muḡālī’a,” in *Maqālāt-e Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Askarī*, vol. 1, ed. Shīmā Majid (Lahore: ‘Ilm-o ‘Irfān Publishers, 2001), 45–50.



alienation from “the Indian ethos,” a feeling of decadence, and an incapacity to write stories which provide his reader with “hope for a new world and a new life for humanity.”

## 2

By the time ‘Askarī settled in Karachi and began to write his articles critiquing the trends and characteristics of modern literary Urdu, the hegemonic position of the Progressive writers had weakened and their influence diminished. In Pakistan, where Marxist voices were all but silenced, there was room for someone with a thoroughly *jadid* outlook to put forward his views. However, the situation is not all that simple. The tension inherent in the equation *taraqqī—jadīdiyat* (progress—modernity) is not readily apparent. It is not a hostility born of opposing views on nationalism, secularism or other socio-political themes. The confrontation had to do with the two groups’ differing point of view on *jiddat* or “novelty” in literature. Progressive writers, who privileged pragmatic concerns over creativity, had a hard time understanding this novelty and tended to dismiss it as something undesirable. Their version of “modernity” required a break from the past, and, if convenient, adoption of foreign (read Western) elements. For ‘Askarī, “modernity” implied a *continuity* and not a *break* with tradition. This continuity was to be sought by understanding one’s own literature, or the classical past and then attempting to read and relate it to world literature.<sup>3</sup> It further implied an interpretation (with regional variations) of the liberal sensibility and ethos that held sway in Indian culture from the late nineteenth century onwards. In literature, its manifestation was not simply the “experience” but also the expression of the experience. It expected stylistic innovation and exploration of different realities, based on learned preparation.

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<sup>3</sup>The need for continuity and intimate knowledge of one’s own culture was brought home forcefully for ‘Askarī when he joined the Allahabad University. “We had gone to the University to study English literature,” he writes, “but our teachers asked us, ‘Do you know anything about your own literature or not?’ ... And what was not taught in any other university [but was taught at Allahabad] was that one should not be overawed by the people of the West and, as far as possible, try to assess Western literature from our own perspective too.”—“Bē-Takalluf Guftagū,” in Majīd, *Maqālāt*, vol. 1, 39–40.

Around the mid-1940s, when ‘Askarī was concluding his experiments with the short story, a debate emerged in Urdu literary circles surrounding a *she’r* of Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837–1914) written more than fifty years earlier.<sup>4</sup> The *she’r* ostensibly encouraged Indian authors to “follow the West” in matters of literary principles and purposes. In fact, Ḥālī, Urdu’s first formal literary theorist was well-known for holding such an opinion. However, it was 1946, and due probably to rising anti-imperialist attitudes and the imminent arrival of independence, some critics argued that since Ḥālī used the phrase “*pairavī-e maghribī karēn*,” he was not referring to the West, but to the poet Maghribī, consequently giving an opposite thrust to the meaning of the *she’r*, i.e., “let us follow [the style of] Maghribī.” Some seven or eight years after this debate, when ‘Askarī was writing serious literary criticism, he published an article, “The Consequences of Imitating the West,” not so much to join the debate to argue for or against the idea of following the West, or to give an opinion on whether Hālī really alluded to Maghribī the Persian poet, but to raise a couple of fundamental questions: Were the Urdu writers and poets in the past one hundred years able to follow in the footsteps of the West, or not? and What did following the West actually mean?

‘Askarī answers them in a manner typically his, one which is often sarcastic, ruthless in its questioning and objectivity, sometimes naïve and unhistorical, but always thoughtful, with the goal of improving the output of Urdu literature. ‘Askarī wished Urdu writers to learn from the West but not at the cost of their own traditions. He also didn’t want

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<sup>4</sup>The *she’r* in question was:

*Ḥālī, ab ā’ō pairavī-e maghribī karēn*  
*bas iqtidā-e Muṣḥafī aur Mīr hō čukī*

Ḥālī, come now, let us follow the West  
 Enough of the leadership of Muṣḥafī and Mīr.

The *she’r* is slightly misquoted by ‘Askarī. In the *Divān-e Ḥālī*, facsimile edition of the 1893 edition (Kānpūr: Nāmī Press) published by the Urdu Academy, Delhi, IV reprint 1992, the ghazal of which this *she’r* is the *maqta’* appears on page 129 as follows: *Ḥālī, ab ā’ō pairavī-e Maghribī karēn / bas iqtidā-e Muṣḥafī-o Mīr kar čukē*. In the 1893 edition, proper names are calligraphed in bold. Thus names that occur in this *she’r*, Mīr, Muṣḥafī, Ḥālī, and also Maghribī are in bold. This means that the 1893 edition acknowledges Maghribī as the Persian poet and not the *maghrib* or West.

them to accept the West at its face value or accept the self-image of the West as its true and authentic representation. In the Maghribī debate ‘Askarī took the position of an intellectual doubter. For him the important question was whether it was at all possible for one culture to adopt the color and mores of another. He believed that literary traditions are distinguished from one another by their differences in sensibility, and that, practically speaking, it was impossible for Indian writers to imitate Wordsworth or use literature for a utilitarian purpose. He put his finger on the main issue framed by Macaulay nearly a century before, namely, that the British government, by providing English education to the Indian, expected it to ultimately produce generations of Indians who would be English in their thoughts but Indian in their color, dress and food habits. ‘Askarī clearly recognizes this to be a misconceived agenda not just because of the colonial and racist ambitions embedded in it, but because he believes that literary traditions are fundamentally distinguished from one another at the cultural level. In his article “Fear of Metaphor,” ‘Askarī criticizes Ḥālī and Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan for blinding the Urdu poet with their acceptance and vigorous promotion of both British utilitarianism and rationalism. His point is that following Ḥālī’s proposal to “follow the West” had, in the final analysis, an inescapable outcome: failure. Manifest in all literary traditions are their antecedents. When those antecedents are ignored and thrown overboard, the connection to one’s inherent sensibility, to the sublime irrational elements of one’s nature is lost.

In “The Consequences of Imitating the West” ‘Askarī is also targeting the PM and its writers. But he does not attack them on what could be described as ideological grounds. Contemptuous and disdainful as he was of the so-called Marxist and Progressive literary thought in Urdu, here he chooses not to invoke any ideological issues but instead goes to a deeper level of literary and cultural perception. Merely talking about class-consciousness as a “means of production” and as “social oppression” could not make Urdu literature Western in tone and temper. For, according to ‘Askarī, literature arises from deeper and more universal ontological concerns, and two different cultures could not share such concerns or borrow them from each other and graft them onto their own interests. Thus the Progressives’ agenda for literature to be fashioned as a weapon in the battle for social and political change agreed, on the one hand, with Ḥālī’s agenda for literature as a moral force and also with Ḥālī’s call to imitate the West. After all, the literary theory of the Progressives was clearly borrowed from the left-wing thinkers of the West. An unusual, ironic literary

scenario was created by the awe with which Western literature as approved by Marxist ideology was viewed and by resentment against colonial rule. Urdu writers no longer felt the need to study their own classical texts. Indeed, they were embarrassed by them. On the other hand, their knowledge of Western literature was shallow and mostly derivative. (‘Askarī in contrast was fully familiar with English and French and was also quite literate in Persian.)

Returning to the Maghribī debate, three important insights can be drawn from ‘Askarī’s contribution to it: the first insight relates to ontology, the second to sensibility, and the third to lack of adequate knowledge. All three observations make Ḥālī’s “come now, let us follow in the footsteps of the West” appear glib, overly simplistic and utterly non-serious, or, to quote ‘Askarī, “as easy as putting a scarf around your neck, picking up a walking stick and setting off for a stroll.” (Here, ‘Askarī is parodying Ḥālī, whose most popular photographs show him wearing a scarf, the buttons of his shervani closed to the top, a cap on his head and a walking stick by his side.) Nevertheless, he does point out that Ḥālī couldn’t have been all that gullible or facetious. But ‘Askarī doesn’t leave the Maghribī debate at just that. He drives his point home further with a series of arguments that make what seemed far-fetched earlier, that is, Ḥālī in his *she’r* was actually asking his fellow writers and poets to emulate Maghribī, the Persian poet, seem plausible and even more, the correct thing to do.

‘Askarī affirms that poets like Maghribī represent a link to the Indo-Persian tradition and culture; a link that needs to be strengthened and reclaimed. Maghribī represents all that is concrete in the Indo-Persian consciousness. Urdu writers need to look at their own as well as at the Western approach to objects and experiences. For example, in the Indo-Persian literary tradition (and here he is referring to *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* and *Fasāna-e Āzād*) objects appear, for the most part, without attributes, or, at most, with one attribute, denoting only an external quality or depicting a human reaction of the most primary kind. The need for appending an adjective to a noun does not arise because, in the Indo-Persian literary tradition human reaction to objects is mostly predetermined and constant. The writer knows that the mere name of a thing would set off a very specific reaction in the reader’s mind; hence it is not necessary to propel his emotion onward with a list of adjectives. Such prose is unlikely to appeal to readers who are fascinated with Western literature because such prose shuns depiction of the personal impressions of the individual. A consciousness such as this can produce only its own kind of prose. Even after decades of imitation Urdu writers had failed to produce Western-

style prose. And the very enterprise had, moreover, resulted in paralyzing their creativity.<sup>5</sup> By re-linking with the classical path (of which Maghribi could be a random example) and the tradition flowing therefrom, Urdu literature could grow and develop hand in hand with its own literary tradition in the glow of its own intellectual ideas. ‘Askarī pointed out that tradition is seamless and synchronic. It both influences and is influenced by ideas. It is an organic whole and not something rotten or archaic. Urdu literary culture, which had developed over the last two hundred years, was still alive and could be reclaimed.

‘Askarī was more brilliantly outrageous in his views on Urdu prose styles and even Urdu syntax. While he is generally dismissive of the literary prose of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries, he neglects to provide examples of model prose, unless, we regard his own prose the model he desired to be followed. While his critical prose is one of the most delightful as well as incisive and trenchant written in the six centuries of Urdu literary production, that of his fiction is slow, subtle and measured, and occasionally inclined to drag because of his preoccupation with detail. But are we asking too much from ‘Askarī? While he produced first-rate criticism, should he also have laid out an elaborate theory for the betterment of Urdu? Or is ‘Askarī essentially ahead of his time, writing literary criticism in a theoretical vacuum?

In his essays on Urdu prose, he closely examines the shortcomings as they surface in the process of translating from English and other European languages. One of the major issues is that of descriptive narration. Perfectly natural to English, such narration sounded quite awkward in Urdu because there was no tradition of using a series of adjectives to describe the individuality or distinctiveness of an object. Urdu needed to find a way to order qualitative adjectives and phrases sequentially to describe an object within one sentence. ‘Askarī felt that the solution of putting adjectival phrases in one or more sub-sentences worked out by Urdu writers distanced the attributes from the object, which fragmented the picture and forced the reader to reconstitute the shards into a coherent picture. Moreover, this was the only problem that was identified by Urdu prose writers and resolved with a makeshift solution. Other important problems relating to prose texts—such as the rhetoric of expression—were left entirely unexplored by the new writers. This was because

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<sup>5</sup>I have paraphrased ‘Askarī’s major points here.

they wrote “with their emotions, not with words. Words for them [were] like drains in which the emotions flow.”<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, long sentences are rare in Urdu while in English there is a three-hundred-year-old tradition of writing long sentences. Moreover, in English, short sentences are a choice that a writer makes, while in Urdu short sentences are a practical necessity. In ‘Askari’s estimation short sentences persist out of an inordinate concern for fluency. And fluency had come to signify a prose style that did not challenge the comprehension of readers. Instead of valorizing short sentences, the challenge for Urdu writers should be to construct long and complex sentences. He succinctly explains what is meant by a “long sentence.”

A complex sentence has a deliberate structure. The clauses that make up a sentence should have a specific internal relationship and an order. A sentence qualifies to be called a “long sentence” when it has an internal structure; that is, when it is not a random piecing together of clauses. It has a purpose which is to present the different facets of an idea simultaneously.<sup>7</sup>

‘Askari maintains that breakage in descriptive narration ruptures the idea or concept, prevents diverse facets of an idea from surfacing, and, ultimately, reduces the complexities of thought into fragments. He further points out that Urdu prose is not capable of giving an impressionistic account of a thing or of its affective perception. What is needed is the ability to separate the signifier from the signified, that is, to separate the similarity within difference. ‘Askari feels that Urdu’s lack of a syntactical paradigm to produce such distinctions is responsible in large part for the absence of conceptual or abstract prose.

Further, Urdu, being elaborately descriptive in temperament and yielding only passionate narration, lacks analytical prose. He identifies three reasons for it: (1) lack of creative metaphors; (2) inability to fuse emotion with thought; and (3) priority of subject over form. Conclusion: Urdu doesn’t have a prose of ideas to create a suitable genre for expressing critical thought. The structure of the Urdu ghazal in which metaphorical images have to be encapsulated within two lines had adversely influenced Urdu prose style because writers relied on the one-word metaphors employed in the ghazal, which severely affected their ability to sustain

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<sup>6</sup>“Some Thoughts on Urdu Prose.”

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

continuity of thought. Part of the problem had to do with the particular cultural orientation in which attention was directed toward that which existed in the absolute sense. It was this deeply ingrained cultural sensibility which prevented writers, the tremendous influence of Western literary norms notwithstanding, from giving equal attention to the whole and its parts.

‘Askari also believed that sophistication in writing is not acquired in isolation; a writer achieves greatness when there are scores of minor authors writing alongside him, carrying out experiments and innovations in form and content. Writers belonging to the same age do share a common creative spirit or idiom which unconsciously works behind their production. The search for words and rhythms is not just one person’s enterprise. Even the greatest poet/writer cannot breathe new vitality into his language all alone.

Finally, ‘Askari argued that besides the community of writers working in tandem, readers also contribute to the vibrancy of the literary scene. Reading, as much as writing, is a creative act too. Writers’ and readers’ synergies create literature. Urdu readers’ complacency and demand for “fluency” in texts encouraged creative writers to produce works of “passionate narration.” Whenever writers moved from narration to questioning, or combined emotion with thought, readers objected. If the post-1936 era had produced Urdu critics who were willing to look beyond “fluency, limpidity and clarity,” who studied the creative process, and motivated writers to experiment with style and narration, a readership accepting and demanding such experimental work could have also emerged.

So the critics had to lead the way, and this is precisely what ‘Askari himself does. However, he is so selective in his targets and often so audacious, both in his praise as well as his blame, that the keenness of his critique is blunted. I will try to assess to what extent ‘Askari’s critique influenced the direction of prose development, especially “creating a prose of ideas” and a genre for expressing critical thought.

It is of some concern that ‘Askari’s critique of Urdu prose lacks an historical perspective. Although ‘Askari is explicit about the time (post-1936) on which his critical eye is trained, he does not provide enough (almost none) of the historical background needed to create a proper perspective for assessment, focusing, rather, on late nineteenth-century educative, didactic, discursive prose; for example, the *inshā-pardāzī* (narrative prose) of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, a prose clearly imitative of English writing and out of which grew the PM. ‘Askari also ridicules early twenti-

eth-century *naṣr-e laṭīf* (poetic prose) of the likes of Lām Akbarābādī, Niyāz Fatehpūrī and Majnūn Gōrakhpūrī. But he ignores the genre of *qiṣṣa* altogether and doesn't raise any questions about the work of Mīr Amman, Ḥaidar Bakhsh Ḥaidarī, and Nihāl Čand Lāhaurī, who were associated with the Fort William College. Though he mentions Maulānā Āzād, he overlooks Shibli, and disregards Premchand altogether.

There is no discussion of early Urdu prose in 'Askarī's work. It is important to note that three distinct prose styles are found in the prose of the eighteenth century and onward. They are: (1) the prose of Qur'ānic translation and commentary (1770 onwards) that was simple and unadorned yet efficient; (2) high narrative prose or *nau ṭarz-e muraṣṣa'*—an ornate and decorative style found in such works as *Qiṣṣa-e Mebr-Afrōz-o-Dilbar* (1755) by Yūsuf Khān Bahādur; and (3) the mid-style prose of, for example, Fazlī's *Karbal Katḥā* (1732 onwards), a style ignored by the canon. The *dāstān* genre is incorporated into 'Askarī's critique as a paradigm of sorts. However, the printed versions of the *dāstān* did not appear before 1863. Thus, 'Askarī has left out prose models that preceded the *dāstāns*. A literary historiography has to take cognizance of the important cultural and historical breakpoint, the war of 1857. The sensibilities of writers who had grown up before that momentous event were doubtless different from those who grew up after 1857. 'Askarī's omission is the more glaring in view of his emphasis on the need for the Urdu writer to recover or reconnect with his literary predecessors rather than uncritically borrow from Western models. As such, it is a deficiency in his own critical thought that he didn't historicize the Urdu literary past more thoroughly.

I have briefly touched on 'Askarī's failure to provide theory, unless we identify the "theory" embedded in his writing and recognize his own work as the "model" for style in fiction and literary prose. After reading his fictive and critical prose and translating it as well, and supplementing this with his reflections on his own work, I am convinced that his own writing is indeed the exemplification of his theory. For instance, according to 'Askarī: "We [Urdu writers] still lack the skill to structure a prose sentence that represents the object as a whole and includes its properties at the same time." And elsewhere, "The clauses that make up a sentence should have a specific internal relationship and an order."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



Now let us apply his views on the complex sentence and take his opening paragraph of the story “Ḥarāmjādī” as an illustration:

*Darvāzē kī d̥h̥ar̥ d̥h̥ar̥ aur “kivār̥ kb̥ōlō” kī musalsal aur ziddī č̥kh̥ēn us kē dimāgh̥ mēn is tarah̥ gūnjīn̥ jaisē gahrē tārīk kuivēn̥ mēn d̥ōl kē girnē kī tavīl karāhtī hū’ī āvāz.*

The loud thumping on the door and the continuous, insistent shouts of “Open up!” resounded in her brain like the long drawn-out groan of a bucket hitting the water in a deep, dark well.

With the very first sentence ‘Askarī demonstrates his intention to create thoughts structured on the principle of representing the “whole.” In order to do this, he creates an expression full of adjectival phrases, hung, quite surprisingly, on the verb (*gūnjīn*). However, the effect is pleasing, and the sentence reads comfortably enough, without being tentative. His use of adjectives further enhances the “wholeness” of the sentence. In the first half of the sentence adjectival phrases are at once interdependent and flow to a crescendo, while in the second half of the sentence, after *jaisē*, the same technique pervades the clauses as they unfold, with the reader being made to wait for the main noun, *āvāz*, which ‘Askarī leaves for last. The use of *kivār* instead of *darvāza* (both mean door) for reporting the rustic speech of the person knocking on the door, and its simultaneous juxtaposition with *darvāzē kī d̥h̥ar̥ d̥h̥ar̥* in the same phrase illustrates ‘Askarī’s sensitivity to explore the use of socially diverse speech registers, once again, in keeping with his own appeal to recover the idiom of colloquial speech in creative writing.

One can draw numerous such extracts from his work to show how his own writing exemplifies his critical thought or vice versa. He is not shy about admitting that his fiction is inspired by some of the best Western writers, among them Chekhov, and his critical essays are reminiscent of G. K Chesterton or Aldous Huxley in their potency of thought and pithiness of style. All the same, while he affirms that there are commonalities between the East and the West, he is also quick to add that every culture has its own “pure element” and that this is what makes it unique.

‘Askarī was convinced that the Urdu literary tradition was alive but stagnating; and this stagnation was the result of an exaggerated adulation and imitation of Western literary practices without experiencing Western history. As he read more and more Western literature he admired it for its excitement, restlessness, uncertainty and tumult, which he felt were lacking in its “Eastern edition.” The West had had its own history of ideas, to

which new ideas and concerns were continually added. If Urdu writers wished to borrow from the West, then they should fully imbibe those intellectual, literary and cultural concerns that gave vibrancy to Western literary production. In his opinion, if the East was to infuse its literature with life and vibrancy, it was incumbent that it generate its own world of ideas. These ideas and concerns would have to be, necessarily, very different from those of the West. He understood that they would not, indeed could not grapple with change and discontinuity in the historical manner of the West. The long *durée* of the colonial experience in the form of an addendum to a very different, antecedent history had produced a different set of problems for the Urdu writer. Though he poses the hypothetical proposition—if Urdu writers wished to borrow from the West then they should fully imbibe those intellectual, literary and cultural concerns that gave vibrancy to Western literary production—in the final analysis he believes that incorporating the Western worldview would involve breaking away from cultural history and tradition, creating further problems, whereas rejuvenation of the Urdu literary tradition from within, albeit profoundly fractured and problematized, was the only choice that made any sense at all.

‘Askari’s thought is imbued with postcolonial insight. His greatest contribution to Urdu critical thought was his insistence that every literary culture had the responsibility to create its own cultural forms and had the right to judge them. Therefore, why should a ghazal be judged as if it were an English poem, a Western lyric, or a sonnet, and pronounced weak or lacking (or, at best, “oriental pearls at random strung”). And if it should be, then a sonnet or an ode should be equally judged by the critical canon employed for a *qaṣīda* and so on.

‘Askari’s work opened the doors of Western literature in an intelligible way for the Urdu writer. He knew that with the expansion of technology the world was shrinking rapidly and the force of Western influences was unavoidable. His effort was to temper plain “imitation” or borrowing with selection, investigation of the good and the bad, and the distilling of ideas through one’s own experience. He especially singled out French Symbolist poets for emulation because he felt that in spite of their disagreements with the old traditions these poets were nonetheless able to forge new links with them too. He privileged “difficult ideas” over simple thought. His own prose was the “prose of ideas”—the vehicle for the development of a critical genre and a critical idiom in Urdu. □