

Band 39 | 2022

Zeitschrift für Indologie und Südasiestudien

वरुण खामृतस्य

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BUSKE



ZIS
39/2022

Zeitschrift
für
Indologie und Südasiastudien

bis einschließlich Band 27/2010

Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik

Zeitschrift
für
Indologie und Südasienstudien

herausgegeben von
Hans Harder und Ute Hüsken

Band 39/2022



BUSKE

Zeitschrift für Indologie und Südasiastudien

von O. von Hinüber, G. Klingenschmitt, A. Wezler und M. Witzel
gegründet als »Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik«,
ab Band 28 mit dem neuen Titel

Redaktion:

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Erscheinungsweise: jährlich

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der
Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im
Internet über <https://portal.dnb.de> abrufbar.

ISSN 2193-9144

ISBN (Print) 978-3-96769-316-4

ISBN (eBook-PDF) 978-3-96769-317-1

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Vervielfältigungen, Übertragungen, Mikroverfilmungen und die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung
in elektronischen Systemen, soweit es nicht §§ 53 und 54 UrhG ausdrücklich gestatten.

Umschlaggestaltung: Detemple Design, Igel b. Trier. Umschlagillustrationen: Fotos von
Matthias Walliser, Göttingen. Vorderseite: Sarasvatī und Text von RV 2.28.5, 10.79.2 und
5.45.8; Rückseite: Harax'aitī und Text von Y 10.5, 28.1 und Y 51.5. Druck und Bindung:

CPI books, Ulm. Printed in Germany.

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Muhammad Hasan Askari: Mulla-Turned Modernist or Saviour of Tradition?

Arian Hopf

Abstract

Muhammad Hasan Askari is regarded as Urdu's first and most influential literary critic. After an early phase of avant-gardist writing and critical essays, much influenced by Western writers and critics, Askari went through an intellectual turnaround from a modern mind to an Islamic/Sufistic-oriented philosophy – an intellectual development that has largely been viewed as a radical break. In this paper, I will question this notion of a radical break. I will put his early writings in relation to the later ones and highlight persisting aspects in his thought.

Keywords: Urdu literature – Muhammad Hasan Askari – Literary criticism.

Introduction

Literary criticism according to modern standards is said to be introduced in Urdu by Muhammad Hasan Askari (1919-1978). One could definitely argue whether Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914) had not already introduced literary criticism in Urdu in the 19th century. Yet, both differ tremendously in their definition of what literature is and hence what the task of literary criticism is. Hali proposed a conception of literature that had to follow a particular moral agenda, and literature was a means to promote particular values. On the other hand, Askari appears – in his early critical essays – as a proponent of art for art's sake (*fan barā'e fan*), criticising any agenda in literature. So in the sense that literature had to be judged on its own terms and not as an instrument to achieve goals external to it, Askari's approach did indeed open a new horizon to Urdu literary criticism. So far only a few texts by Askari are available in translation, published by Muhammad Umar in the *Annual of Urdu Studies* 25 (2010) and 27 (2012) and also accessible online.

Askari made his first appearance in the literary sphere of Urdu not as a critic, but as a translator of English, French and Russian classics and as a writer of short stories. His stories are not less remarkable than his later critical essays, as they stand out in the literary environment of his

time. His first collection of short stories, *Jazīre*, was published in 1943 – at a time when Urdu literature was dominated by the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) or *Anjuman-i taraqqī pasand muṣannifīn*. The PWA, established in 1936 by Sajjad Zahir, aimed at promoting a socio-critical literature that had an anti-colonial and increasingly socialist outlook that attracted numerous writers of Urdu and other South Asian languages in the late 1930s and 1940s. The Partition of 1947, however, made the movement rapidly sink into oblivion, with its central aim of Independence being achieved. But in 1943, when Askari's *Jazīre* was published, the PWA was on the zenith of its influence and popularity. Almost all prominent litterateurs were in some way associated with the PWA or at least influenced by their agenda of a socio-critical literature and the struggle for Independence. However, Askari's stories could not meet the criteria of Progressive literature – even though Askari would have agreed to their central aims. His dissent was based on his unwillingness to sacrifice literature for any ideology or agenda.

While Askari in his early essays as well as his short stories – he only published two volumes of short stories, *Jazīre* ('Islands', 1943) and *Qiyāmat ham rikāb ā'e na ā'e* (*May the Last Day Come Along or Not*, 1947) – took a rather modernist stance, Partition proved to be a decisive turning point in his intellectual perspective. This turning point has been viewed predominantly as a radical break in his thought that cut off his early pre-Partition writing from his post-Partition essays. While Askari in his pre-Partition writings appeared to be hugely influenced by European and American, in particular English and French, writers and critics, his post-Partition essays gradually leave the sphere of literature and focus on questions of cultural identity with Islam becoming his point of reference:

Askari's intellectual journey commenced with cosmopolitanism, developed into a form of early postcolonialism, and was increasingly transformed by the last decade of his life when he began to map an exclusive Islamic-Sufistic philosophy onto Urdu's secular literary tradition. (Farooqi 2012a: 1)

In this article, I will try to put his post-Partition essays in relation to his early writings. In Urdu studies these have received some amount of attention, but in English-medium studies they have either been overlooked entirely or been given only marginal attention. Mehr Afshan Farooqi, for example, who has otherwise presented an impressive study of Askari's literary development, argues:

I have chosen to discount some of his later writing, which was published after his death; I feel that he wouldn't have permitted its

publication in the present state. But, I have examined his compelling, complicated, imaginative essays from *Waqt ki Ragini* that weave Sufistic mysticism into literary criticism, virtually using it as lens for classical Urdu poetry across the board. (Farooqi 2012a: 13)

Without further discussing the validity of Farooqi's exclusion of those texts from the corpus of his writings, one cannot help noticing that her fascination for the texts from *Waqt kī rāginī* does not yield more than a few pages in her study. Farooqi seems to read these essays as completely detached from Askari's pre-Partition writings, and inherently conforms to the hypothesis of a radical break in his thought that disconnects these two phases.

In this article, I will question this radical break in Askari's thought after Partition and highlight persisting aspects in his thought. Therefore, I will try to subdivide the chronology of his intellectual development more precisely and introduce a transition period shortly before and after Partition. In this period, one can see the steps that connect these apparently contradictory stances in Askari's thought.

Askari and His Time

When the PWA was founded in 1936, this meant a radical rupture in the literary environment of Urdu and other South Asian languages. But in order to understand its impact correctly and subsequently situate Askari in relation to it, we need to wind back a little and look at the foundational impulses to modernize Urdu writing towards the end of the 19th century. For while the writing conventions in the late 19th century were dominated by traditional genres like the *ġazal* in poetry and the *dāstān* in prose, we can already in those days discern a call for a renewal. Hali along with other proponents and associates of the Aligarh Movement urged for a new literature, leaving behind the traditional genres that came to be perceived as morally reprehensible, obscene and decadent. This critique had in the first instance been put forward by the British colonisers, missionaries and European historians against Muslims and their culture. Soon, Muslim reformers adopted this critique and urged to fight this as contrasting the essential principles of Islam. Several reform movements viewed the current decline of Muslim rule in South Asia (eventually defeated by the British after 1857) as a result of the Muslims' decadent and immoral way of life. This deficiency had to be removed by orienting to the original Islam, as exemplified in the life of Muhammad. However, in how this essential form of Islam was

described, the various reformers varied tremendously (Hopf 2021: 20-24).

With respect to literature, the Aligarh Movement around Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Hali accepted this critique and began to look at the tradition of Urdu literature from this very perspective. In his *Muqaddama-i šī'r-o-šā'irī* (1890), Hali called for a *natural* poetry in contrast to the conventionalised diction of the classical *gāzal* that was viewed as circling around the same old topic of unfulfilled love without any reference to real life and its social conditions. The new literary style of *necarī* poetry (Urdu-ised form of English *nature*) that he urged for emphasised realistic and moral themes. For example, in a few literary assemblies (*mušā'ira*) which aimed to establish this new literary style, the topic of patriotism was proposed to the poets along with more conventional ones like the rain season (Rahman 2009: 32).

Yet, these efforts proved successful only to some extent. The traditional genres remained popular and even reached new heights in public appreciation due to the aspiring printing technology and the correspondingly broader dissemination. Hence, the early 20th century literary world of Urdu was still characterised by the traditional genres along with the novel and the aspiring short story. The project of a *natural* poetry was outdated by this time and was replaced by romanticism among younger authors. In this time, literature came also to be used to criticise social grievances. This trend was significantly shaped by Premchand's (1880-1936) socio-critical stories. His realist style of writing was unknown at that time and influenced generations after him. Among them were the young writers of the *Angāre* cycle, a collection of short stories that appeared in 1932 and evoked huge protest for its critical view of the conservative Muslim class as well as for its anti-colonial stance. Several stories were regarded as obscene for dealing with sexual desire. In the outcome, the collection was banned by the government. *Angāre* laid the foundation for a larger project, the PWA that was eventually established in 1936. Premchand as a forerunner and pioneer was asked to hold the inaugural address wherein he presented the basic agenda of the movement:

Literature has been defined in many ways, but in my opinion its best definition is "the criticism of life". Whether in the form of an essay, or a story, or a poem literature's chief function is to present an honest critical view of life. (Rahbar 1957: 166-167).

Not only does Premchand discern the need for a new style in literature, but he also denigrates the entire literary tradition in Urdu and Hindi as defective:

The recent period through which we have just passed; was not at all concerned with life. Our writers created a world of imagination and worked in it any magics they liked. Somewhere it was the fairy tales full of wonders, and somewhere the story about imaginary gardens, or books like Chander Kanta series. The sole purpose of these writings was to entertain and to satisfy our lust for the amazing. That literature had any link with life, was a mere delusion. A story is a story, and life is life; both were regarded as contradictory to each other. (Rahbar 1957: 167).

In his critique of a delusive literature fully disconnected with real life, he stands in an intellectual row with Hali who equally viewed the classical tradition as immoral and unrealistic. Instead of mere pleasure, real literature was supposed to serve a moral purpose. For, "language is a means to an end, not an end in itself" (Rahbar 1957: 165).

A look at an excerpt of the 1936 manifesto of the PWA reveals a similar understanding of literature and its function:

[4] It is the duty of Indian writers that they should give the dress of words and form to the existent changes in Indian life and should assist in putting the country on the path of construction and progress.

[5] Indian literature, since the breakdown of classical literature, has had the fatal tendency to escape from the actualities of life. It has tried to find a refuge from reality in spiritualism and idealism.

[6] The result has been that it has produced a rigid formalism and a banal and perverse ideology.

[7] Witness the mystical devotional obsession of our literature, its furtive and sentimental attitude towards sex, its emotional exhibitionism and its almost total lack of rationality. (Coppola 2017: 80-81)

These excerpts of the PWA's manifesto are in unison with Hali and Premchand in as far as its derogatory stance towards the recent literary tradition in Urdu is concerned – a tradition that is regarded as mere delusion and escapism, and lacks any relevance for or relation to real life. Strikingly, the manifesto also adopts the critique of obscenity and rejects the attitude towards sexuality in classical literature. This is interesting insofar as the founders, Sajjad Zahir and Ahmed Ali, fell themselves victim to this very critique for their stories in the *Angāre* collection. In the manifesto, they seem to dissociate from this attitude and rather aimed to attract as many writers as possible. While the *Angāre* collection laid the foundation for the PWA, its initiators – in particular Sajjad Zahir – soon disavowed the rather provocative approach of *Angāre* and aimed at attracting as many members as possible. The

obscene aura of *Angāre* was felt to be detrimental to this aim and, thus, should not remain connected with the PWA. The latter's approach instead increasingly emphasised social critique instead without offensive statements such as those featuring in *Angāre*. (Coppola 2017: 83).

In its definition of the purpose of literature, the manifesto again stands in a row with its predecessors:

[11] We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjugation, so that it may help us to understand these problems and through such understanding help us act. (Coppola 2017: 82)

Apart from the well-known urge to use literature as a medium of social critique, it was also to be deployed – and this is new here – for broaching the issue of colonial “subjugation.” While Hali's and the Aligarh Movement's stance had in general still been pro-British, Premchand had in his collection of short stories *Soz-i vatan (Lament on the Fatherland, 1910)* openly criticised the British. The PWA now went further and adopted the fight for freedom as an integral part of its manifesto and a chief topic of literature.

So while the PWA dominated the literary world in Urdu since late 1930s, the *Ḥalqa-i Arbāb-i Zauq* (Circle of the Men of Good Taste, est. 1939) is commonly described as a counter-movement to the PWA that was founded in response to the Progressives. While we have seen a strong emphasis of an agenda-based literature serving as a medium for social and political purposes in the PWA's manifesto, the *Ḥalqa* is widely regarded as a strong proponent of the slogan *adab barā'e adab* (literature for literature's sake), which came as a direct challenge to the Progressive slogan of *adab barā'e zindagī* (literature for life's sake). Indeed, the PWA went through a slow process of dogmatisation towards a pronounced socialist approach, whereas the *Ḥalqa* remained critical towards any political agenda sneaking into literature.

But the neat split between these two movements that such programmatic enunciations suggests is misleading. Sean Pue argues in his paper, “Rethinking Modernism and Progressivism in Urdu Poetry,” in favour of outpacing the idea of a strong dichotomy between the movements and refers to personal as well as thematic overlaps. In his opinion, the binary opposition between these two is a construct, “first developed in the 1930s and 40s by the generally secular nationalist and frequently Marxist critics associated with the Progressive Writers Association. Dividing writers into two camps, progressive criticism generated a

layered system of binary oppositions that all mirrored this basic categorical distinction” (Pue 2013: 1). In a similar vein, Geeta Patel states:

The Halqa grew rapidly through word of mouth, becoming a popular, multivalent literary organization. Contrary to subsequent representations of it as a forum that shut out socialist writers, its records show that members of the Progressive Writers’ Association [...] read alongside writers with very different political and poetic beliefs [...]. (Patel 2002: 59)

The *Halqa*’s denial of a political agenda must not be misunderstood as a social or political disinterest, unconcern and limitation to *jamāliyyāt-parastī*, i.e. pleasure through aesthetics, as has been stated frequently. In contrasting Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-1984) and N.M. Rashid (1910-1975), regarded as prototypes of Progressive and Modernist poetry respectively, Pue can convincingly present crucial analogies with regard to the topics of their poetry. While their style remains distinctive, both share a call for social and political change in several examples, without however being specific about any political agenda (Pue 2013: 15).

What remains distinctive about the *Halqa*, though, is the fact that it promoted a particularly style of literature that was orientated toward Western modernist literature. Many writers of this group were quite avant-garde and incorporated free verse and symbolism in Urdu literature:

The Halqa encouraged collaboration between social realist writers of prose and fiction, the more modernist experimental poets who wrote prose poetry, and those poets who were reorienting older forms like the ghazal to political concerns. (Patel 2002: 59)

According to Salim Ahmad, himself a prominent literary critic of Urdu in Pakistan, his mentor, who was no one else than Askari, used to say that he “cannot see himself separated from the movement of 1936 [i.e. the PWA],” while also the *Halqa* could not fully meet his ideals (Anjum 2019: 10-11). In the following paragraph, I will locate Askari in this literary field of tension and scrutinise his early writings so as to excavate his position between these poles.

Askari and the Progressives

Ghar se kālij tak (*From College to Home*), the first story of Askari’s 1943 collection of short stories, *Jazīre*, is written in the stream of consciousness style – a technique not yet popular in Urdu fiction at that time. Although Askari was not the first to champion this device and was

preceded, for instance, by the *Angāre* circle of writers, this style became popular on a wider scale only one or two decades later. Likewise, other stories apply rather experimental styles like symbolism that came to be popular only with the next generation of writers in Urdu. Hence with respect to stylistics and aesthetics – without however going into any detail – Askari seems to be close to the *Halqa*, that generally encouraged avant-gardist ventures.

The protagonist of the story is a college student daydreaming on his way back home. He seems to be a loner and individualist who is not quite popular among his fellow students and, thus, seeks escape in daydreaming of receiving some acclaim in his former school where he wants to hold a speech. On his way back home, he thinks of the potential topics of his speech:

I scratch my face for a moment and then let my thoughts roam about titles of the speech and phrases related to it ... “The Contemporary International Situation ... hmmm ... Russia’s Social Condition ... hmmm hmmm ... Lenin ... Trotsky ... Stalin ... someone else ... The Poetry of Wordsworth ... no, no ... Every Single Peasant in Russia ...” [...] Oh, then ... Literature and Life [*adab aur zindagī*] ... this is fine. After all, these poor students should also know something. What are they taught after all, just this Ghalib [...] ... well, is this any poetry ... so then this topic is fine. (‘Askarī 2016: 3)

Not only does the protagonist denigrate Ghalib and with him the entire classical tradition of Urdu poetry, but he also chooses *Adab aur zindagī* (Literature and Life) as title of his speech. The observant reader will discern these as signs of the progressive mindset of the protagonist. The Progressives’ stance towards the classical tradition of Urdu literature, deemed to be obscene and bare of any relevance to real life shimmers through the protagonist’s attitude towards Ghalib and his poetry. Secondly, the title the protagonist chooses for his speech matches exactly that of a famous and influential essay by Akhtar Hussain Raipuri (1912-1992),

the firebrand leftist intellectual whose essay “Adab aur Zindagi” became the cornerstone of the Progressive Writers’ Movement. [...] His trenchant essays examined searing questions about the objectives of art and literature, and offered new ways of thinking on the purpose and aesthetics of literature: In the controversial essay, “Adab aur Zindagi”, he wrote, “The primary duty of literature is to initiate the removal of discrimination based on nation, country, colour, ethnicity, class or religion and to represent the group that takes practical

steps with this aim in mind ... The only thing our literature has accomplished so far is to lament the impermanence of life and helplessness of man ... The paths of humanity and literature are not different and their salvation also lies along the same path." (Farooqi 2012b)

In its further progress, the story steadily turns into a satire on the PWA, as the protagonist clashes with a real labourer, while mentally lecturing on the approaching revolution:

"Hey, will you finally get out of the way," was shouting a worker, soaked with sweat, black from head to feet who was pulling a cart loaded with coal sacks, mumbling in unseemly jargon ... Such people's talk shocks me ... we are giving speeches in favour of these people, we bare our teeth against capitalism for their sake, express our sympathy on their living conditions and they treat us this way? (Askari 2016: 6)

Askari here ridicules the armchair revolutionaries of the PWA, whose actions are regarded to be confined merely to words, whereas they do not have any real contact to the people they are allegedly fighting for.

While these are rather speculative evidences for Askari's stance towards the PWA, he is more explicit in a letter, quoted by Farooqi:

In a letter dated July 1941, to the editor of *Adabi Duniya*, a monthly journal published from Lahore, Askari described his ambivalent feelings toward Progressivism: "I have freed myself from each and every restraint of religion, ethics, 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 'Haramjadi' is an example of that. I want to infuse my stories with a spirit that would 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 opinion and thoughts change with the wind. Only despair is my constant feeling." (Farooqi 2012a: 93-94)