

## Hasan Askari: Bringing Urdu Criticism to the Metropolitan Readers

By Ambrina Qayyum

Farooqi, Mehr Afshan. *Urdu Literary Culture: Vernacular Modernity in the Writing of Muhammad Hasan Askari*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 304 Pages. ISBN: 978-1137009029. \$74.97.

Unlike most scholarly works about the so-called global periphery that take up, as an object of study, works of poetry, drama or prose, Farooqi's *Urdu Literary Culture* is focused primarily on the miscellaneous prose works of Mohammad Hassan Askari, one of the greatest Urdu critics. This book thus fills a huge gap in postcolonial and South Asian studies as it introduces, to the metropolitan, scholars, the range and depth of critical scholarship in Urdu.

The seven chapters along with an introduction and detailed notes at the end of the book prove Farooqi's diligent effort of analyzing and introducing Askari's contribution to Urdu criticism. She not only interprets his works but also studies them with reference to the events of his life. The book therefore has an underlying chronological scheme where the first chapter traces the life of young Askari who joined the Allahabad University in 1943. The later chapters discuss his short stories and his critical essays published in the literary journal *Saqi*. She explains his ideas about the role of literature in society and particularly in the newly established state of Pakistan. The final chapter explores the last few years of Askari's life and his religious turn. Farooqi reconstructs Askari's life from the accounts of his different friends and acquaintances but the most reliable of her sources is the collection of letters Askari to his friend Dr. Aftab Ahmed from 1945 to 1977.

The first chapter gives an overview of the fifty nine years of Askari's life. Farooqi explores the environment of Allahabad University during 1930 and 1940s in order to explain how it contributed in shaping Askari's authorial subjectivity. In the same chapter she mentions his various jobs ranging from translating works of Gorky and Lenin to working as script writer at all India Radio in Delhi to teaching in different colleges till the Partition of India which she believes split his life into two. The second phase of his life began with his arrival in Lahore where he stayed and taught till February 1950 when he moved to Karachi. There he first

pursued a short career in journalism and then taught at Islamia College until his death in 1978. In the same chapter Farooqi introduces her readers to an interesting aspect of Askari's life and that is his relationship with his teacher at Allahabad University and a well-known Urdu poet Firaq Gorakhpuri. She discusses their personal and literary relations in detail in her second chapter.

In the second chapter, Farooqi discusses different articles written by Askari about Firaq's critical essays and poetry including *Firaq Sahib ki Tanqid*, *Firaq Sahib ki do Nazmein* and *Kuch firaq Sahib ke Barey Mein*. However a major part of the second chapter consists of information about Firaq's reputation at Allahabad University as a homosexual. Farooqi's own interpretation of Firaq's poetry and his concept of love, lover and beloved. She refers to different critics including Shams-ur-Rehman Farooqi, Muzaffar Ali Sayyed and Abul Kalam Qasimi who did not consider Firaq a poet worth the praise showered by Askari on him. Despite these digressions, Farooqi proves that Firaq was a major formative influence on Askari's literary career. She points out that Firaq led Askari to identify and appreciate the Urdu literary tradition that existed prior to the influence of the British colonialism and therefore contributed to his development as a literary critic. Askari's critical views are discussed in the third chapter along with his fictional works.

Askari's eleven short stories were published in two collections of his works namely *Jazera* (1943) and *Zikar-e-Anvar* (1947). Farooqi claims that Askari's short stories, often written in the stream of consciousness style, "tread the slippery terrain of sexuality in ways that complicate reading." His contemporaries like Ismat Chughati were writing on similar topics. However, unlike Chughati, Askari failed to maintain his popularity as a fiction writer. Farooqi attributes his failure as a fiction writer to his elevated prose and allusive style of writing. She compares Chughati's famous short story *Lihaf* about lesbian love with Askari's short story *Phislan*, which is also about the topic of homosexuality. The former, she believes, contains the "social realism" whereas the latter confirms Askari's "anti-realist" approach, which he developed under the influence of French symbolists.

While discussing Askari's critical views, Farooqi asserts that he was impressed by the symbolist movement because of the mystical element in it. He thus developed a literary theory which required literature to be "a mirror of human condition, unfolded through its particular cultural sensibility using language in its most heightened, creative way, imbuing words with new affects and abstractions." He applied this theory to the works of the nineteenth century literary artists including Saiyyed Ahmed Khan, Altaf Hussain Hali and Mohammad Hussain Azad and concluded that they failed to produce significant

literary works since they severed their connection with the Urdu literary tradition of the past and produced “weak replicas of English-literary genres in Urdu.”

Farooqi particularly mentions two essays of Askari the “Fear of Metaphor” and one about an almost forgotten Urdu poet Mohsin Kakorvi. In the former essay Askari criticized Hali for developing a distaste for metaphor and thus lowering the standard of Urdu literary works. In the latter Askari compared the poetry of Hali and Kakorvi. He commended Kakorvi’s work for his sincerity and above all his indigenous style of expression. Farooqi refers to these essays in different chapters and employs them to prove that Askari strongly disapproved the ideas of Hali and his contemporary scholars and considered them responsible for rupturing the tradition of Urdu literature. She admires Askari’s views for his identification and questioning of the issues produced by the “cultural dilemma of a postcolonial society.” She sees him as one of the fore-runners of the postcolonial theory. His awareness about the cultural problems created due to the colonial rule later led him to demand a pure Pakistani literature. He repeatedly made this demand in his column “Jhalkiyan”. Farooqi presents a thorough analysis of Askari’s most popular essays published in *Saqi*.

The longest chapter of the book is entitled “Jhalkiyan” and Farooqi divides it into two parts. The first part contains a discussion of the essays published from 1944 to 1947 while the second deals with essays written from 1948 to 1957. The essays he wrote during the pre-Partition phase exhibit his knowledge of western as well as Urdu literature. His essay “*Hindustani Adab ki Parakh*” published in 1946 is about the need to set parameters for assessing Indian literature especially after it has been affected by Western literature. It proves his postcolonial sensibility in spite of the fact that he was then a twenty-seven year old young man. In addition to literary topics he wrote about contemporary politics as well. His essay “Pakistan” is particularly mentioned and analyzed by Farooqi and she declares it the “romantic” view of “a precocious, idealistic youth.”

Askari’s post-Partition essays mostly deal with the role of literature and literary artists in the newly formed state. His initial excitement about the new nation began to diminish soon and was reflected in his essays. Farooqi refers to essays like “*Pakistani Hakumat aur Adib*” which reflected his disappointment with the government’s approach to writers and their role in society. She, however severely criticizes the essay “*Taqsim-e-Hind ke Ba’d*” where he asserted that only Urdu can serve the purpose of representing the Indian Muslims. Farooqi rightfully challenges this narrow approach and criticizes Askari’s negligence of the large communities of Bengali and Tamil-speaking Muslims and their contribution to the Muslim culture in South Asia. But his writings in 1950s indicate his realization about the need to create and strengthen Urdu literature’s relation with the

indigenous languages and their literatures. The fourth chapter of the book expounds on this phase of Askari's life and his works.

The essays he wrote during 1948 to 1955 were published under the title "*Sitara ya Badaban*." According to Farooqi this series of essays reflects the influence of various western critics and philosophers including T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Mallarme and Martin Heidegger. Moreover, these essays were written with the fervor "to create Pakistani literature in Urdu as a model for the nation's cultural identity." He criticized Urdu literature's different deficiencies such as a lack of "analytic prose" and the excessive use of short sentences. Farooqi admires these ideas presented by Askari but at the same time points out that his "critique of Urdu prose lacks a historical perspective." Another objection against Askari's view of Muslim culture is his failure to incorporate local cultures of various regions of Pakistan into it. She discusses this drawback in her sixth chapter "Indo-Muslim Cultural Consciousness."

Farooqi mentions Askari's problems in adjusting in Lahore after the Partition and his realization that the culture of the immigrants in Pakistan differed from the local cultures. However, a major portion of this chapter consists of discussion about Askari's views about the significance of tradition. She refers to his essay "What is Tradition?" in which he criticized the western scholars for making tradition subordinate to culture. He believed that every society had one basic tradition, which manifested itself in cultural, religious or literary forms. He identified this basic tradition in Islam as "*Deen*." These interpretations of Askari's philosophical thoughts are really very valuable for the students of Urdu criticism because reading Askari's philosophical essays, without such explanations, usually confuse the readers as they fail to comprehend the crux of his ideas. Even Farooqi admits that Askari's "explanations and clarifications" appear "almost in a throw away fashion."

The rest of the chapter discusses Askari's views about two contemporary Indian Muslim scholars Dr. Mohammad Iqbal and Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanavi. The writer provides elaborate explanations about the views of both these stalwarts. Since Askari's wrote very little about Dr. Iqbal, Farooqi, therefore, uses Salim Ahmed's work "*Iqbal kay Sh'er*" for referring to Askari's ideas. She believes that since Askari was Salim Ahmed's mentor, therefore, his ideas about Iqbal were a representation of the mentor's views. The reader, however, finds it hard to attribute Ahmed's views to Askari.

Askari's views about the need to maintain tradition were rooted in Rene Guenon's philosophy based on his rejection of the influences of the Enlightenment. Farooqi discusses this aspect of Askari's views in the final chapter "Resuming the Past". She refers to his severe criticism of Western thought in the last years of his life. She ends the last chapter with her discussion of Askari's

growing inclination towards religion and particularly his interest in the *Deobandi* school of thought. She mentions that he even began “working with and writing for the *ulama* and students of *Deobandi* School.” He thus moved from a literary circle to a religious one.

On the whole this book is a must read for the students of Urdu literature as it informs them about Askari the critic as well as Askari the creative prose writer. In fact, Farooqi’s interpretations and elaborate explanations of Askari’s ideas does a great service to Urdu scholarship by making comprehensible the complex works of one the greatest Urdu critics. The book, therefore, is a great resource both for lay audiences and scholars.