

## **“Historical Consciousness”<sup>1</sup>**

*by Muhammad Hasan Askari*

*Translated by*  
**Ghazal Farooqi\***

### **Introduction**

One of the aims of this translation is to make Muhammad Hasan Askari’s phenomenal essay ‘Tareekhi Shaur’, which he had written in the Urdu language, available to those who prefer to read in English, or can only read in English. Moreover, this essay deserves a wider audience because it is arguably one of the finest essays written by Muhammad Hasan Askari. The manner in which Hasan Askari has provided an in-depth analysis of the condition of Pakistani literature helps us understand how much, and how long we have disregarded the relevance of our history. Our knowledge of our history, as Hasan Askari explains in his essay, will make or break the future of our literature, and this translation of Hasan Askari’s essay will help its message reach a wider audience.

This essay was translated with the intention that since there is no English translation of this essay available, thus there needs to be. I have searched for English translations of this essay, however, have found none. I am aware of the fact that a few of Hasan Askari’s other essays have been translated into the English language. Nonetheless, no other English translation of this essay has so far been found by me.

My textual strategy involved ensuring that the message of the author, along with the distinct style and tone of his writing is reflected in my translation.

I have not provided references of the complete texts of Iqbal’s, Aatish’s, and Nasir Kazmi’s verses because within the essay it is the verses that matter, not the complete texts. The particular verses out of the complete

---

\* Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Karachi

texts have been mentioned by Hasan Askari for a particular reason. The other verses of the texts have no relevance to Hasan Askari's essay.

### **“Historical Consciousness”**

It is not just literature, but the entire intellectual life of Pakistan that is pervaded by a dreary languor. Neither are short stories being written with the old zest and zeal, nor poems being composed. Furthermore, even literary and ideological debates and discussions have lost their vitality. At least in the days when the events of the riots were vividly present in our minds people had discerned that there was a need to address those events in our writings. But the situation is not even like that anymore - why even the communists have stopped arguing. This is the height of intellectual laziness. Such lack of heart in a young nation is a cause of some serious concern.

The contributing factors behind this lingering languor may be political and social. However, along with all these factors, one very important reason behind it is that for our intellectuals the demands of our times are proving to be quite unexpected! This is why they are in a state of undecidedness. Everyone is insisting upon the creation of a new constitution, a new social system, that a new type of literature be produced. Nevertheless, no one defines this 'new' in clear and definite terms. Perhaps such a definition isn't even possible. But the jeopardizing aspect of this problem, in a large context, is that if nothing else then not even a functional definition is being constructed. This slogan of 'new new' has made the case more obscure. Our existing political situation is new but we keep forgetting that a lot more than being 'new' we are in fact 'old'. Merely due to an absence of a strong and comprehensive realization of this, or due to negligence towards this realization, our conceptual perplexities have unwantingly increased.

But those people who keep reminding us of our 'datedness' are more troublesome. They say we should bring to life the 'real Islam' anew. According to them, history ever since the end of the Rashidun Caliphate<sup>2</sup> is an account of misguidedness. Their claim is that after The Rightly Guided Khalifas<sup>3</sup>, we have now truly understood Islam; therefore every action in Pakistan must be carried out in accordance with our vindication. The implication of this is that the three hundred years long history of the Muslims is unjustifiable, and during this time all the distinguished additions that Muslims made to the culture of humanity is worth

destroying too. This trend draws strength from one more direction. There is this group that argues that since Islam is primarily a democratic religion, therefore the establishment of monarchy implies transgressing from Islam. This is why everything done under the influence of Muslim kings is outside the ambit of Islamic history, and not a part of the cultural flavor of democratic Pakistan. Substantiation of this sort engulfs the likes of Al Hamra<sup>4</sup> and Taj Mahal<sup>5</sup>, and goes as far as to include Alf Laila<sup>6</sup> and Mir's and Ghalib's poetry too. Whatever the Arab kings did is still worthy of notice for they were kings of Arabia, but the creative endeavours made during the era of Hindustani Muslim kings are to be outed from any consideration, because the kings were Hindustani. The creative pursuits of scholars and Sufis like Amir Khusro<sup>7</sup> also fall into the same category because neither Amir Khusro nor Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya<sup>8</sup> understood Islam. The real Islam has been understood only recently by a few people!

This is not a view held by 'Islamic' groups only. Some important departments of our government also are busy achieving the same ends. For example, Radio Pakistan wants to produce Pakistani music, hence is of the opinion that some people need to be sent to Iraq to 'bring' music. All of the contributions of Muslims in Hindustani music, in the last six hundred years, may as well as go to waste. Due to the absence of a historical perspective our Radio is determined upon bringing to naught everything we have produced so far, and start from scratch. If we will continue to have such a bleak approach towards the history of the Muslims, who knows what kind of mischief we will do to ourselves.

Contemplation upon this one point will help you understand many things. At present we have two historical moments before us. One is the time of Amir Khusro, and the other one is our own. During the times of Amir Khusro the intellectual group of our community was thriving. Its creative capabilities were flourishing. It was fully aware of its values and had complete faith in them. For them, the foremost thing was creation. Religion was not perceived to be a vulnerably delicate reality by those people, something easily disabled by the slightest of damage. Amir Khusro was a Turk but he had no fear regarding Hindu music. He influenced Hindu music so exceedingly that he took it off their hands. And eventually, a time came when Muslims were the authority over that music, and Hindus the mentees. And Muslims began to jeer at the Hindus saying, this is our art. What do you know about it? So this was the state of affairs

in those times when the creative potential of our community was in full swing.

In contrast to that is our own time, in which despondency pervades our intellectuals. They lack faith in their values. They don't identify with their community. They have no love for their community. But since they cannot exist by dissociating from this community, therefore dread speaking about it, lest something would displease the community. They have heard that our nation believes in Islam so they try to please the community by mentioning Islam. When the condition of creative writers is so beat up then we can understand that music needs to be 'brought' from Iraq. In fact

The ablutioners would come from Kabul, our shroud from Japan<sup>9</sup>  
(*Aaen gay ghussaal Kabul se, kafan Japan se*)

Why should a nation that has created monuments like Al Hamra and Taj Mahal, dastans like Alf Laila and Tilism e Hosharba<sup>10</sup>, poetry like that of Hafiz and Mir, and musicians like Amir Khusrow, be afraid of the art of creation? Nations have no need to fear right? But those people certainly are afraid within whom life shrinks to the size of a nut. (*Albatta aisey log zaroor darte hain jin ke andar zindagi ghut kar "ju e kam aab" reh gai hai*) If our nation really is afraid then it too needs to know Muslim history. People who claim that the real Islam was lost after the Rashidun Caliphate make Islam look like a small thing. If Islam had merely been a literary movement then this claim may have seemed correct. A time span of twenty or thirty years is as long as Noah's life span for such movements. However, a vision that comes forth as a world-encompassing system, nevertheless is practiced for only thirty-six years, then what sort of a vision would that be? If Muslims had become wayward after the Rashidun Caliphate then that is not shocking at all. What is shocking is that in spite of their numerous flaws, Muslims continue to exist to this day, and still hold the strength in their hearts to live with dignity. What is strange is that despite their waywardness, Muslims enabled millions of people to create. What is more astonishing is that in spite of an uncompromising monarchy, Islam's democracy shined whenever it had the space to do so. People who attempt to separate Muslims from their history are the foes of Islam. Islam had brought belief and action together. These people try to turn a vital reality like Islam into a system of beliefs only. America and its comrade Russia are mocked because they recently became wealthy and it is said to

them that you two don't even have a history. This is why you two cannot even determine your future. We on the other hand have a history of thirteen hundred years. And these people advise us to forget all about it (*Aur yeh log hamain salah dete hain keh isey taaq-e-nisyan pe rakh do*). If we won't bring into use the collective experience of our community then we would continue to move about in the dark. In fact, we would go about entreating for a vision. (*Balke ghairon se aankhain mangain gay*) In these thirteen hundred years our community has gone through a lot. We have been victorious and we have also lost. We have laughed and we have cried. We have been pious and also extravagant. Thus what is there that we have not experienced. All this has influenced us bone-deep (*In sab cheezon ka asar humari rag-o-pe main utar chuka hai*) We would not escape this influence even if we wanted to. We are not only representatives of Umar bin Abdul Aziz<sup>11</sup>, but representatives of Wajid Ali Shah<sup>12</sup> and Muhammad Shah Rangeelay<sup>13</sup> also. If Muslim history is our history then we will have to accept it in its entirety. We can say that a particular time period was admirable or deplorable. But we cannot say that it has nothing to do with us. If Pakistan has to be made into a great country then every Pakistani will have to own our history. Each one of us will have to realize that Umar bin Abdul Aziz's qualities are my qualities and Wajid Ali Shah's flaws are my flaws, and the accountability of these strengths and weaknesses is on me. There are many shameful acts that we have committed but admitting that they were shameful can only benefit us when we admit that we are responsible for them. And by the way, if we have faith in a future then we need not feel too ashamed. A community that has arrived with a lifetime of thousands of centuries will have to put up with some fifty years or so of regression and humiliation too.

Hence, the principal intellectual concern before the Pakistanis right now is that they have to fully integrate the thirteen hundred years long history of the Muslims into their consciousness. The answer to several of our questions will be achieved through this particular achievement. We will have to understand our history once again and make it our guide even in the minutest aspects of our national life. When I see the intellectual issues of our nation complicating then I am relieved by the realization that my nation did not come to be in the year 1857<sup>14</sup> or in October 1917<sup>15</sup>. We have accomplished a lot in thirteen hundred years. And now we have to accomplish the same things keeping the contemporary context in mind. We do not in the slightest have a dearth of representative cases. We only

need to ask our history one question. That is, did Islam arrive in this world as a system of inactive beliefs, or as a glorious creative movement? Everywhere you look you will see that Muslims always gave their fundamental values the foremost importance, but in the pursuit of creativity, they never ceased to create due to the matter of similarity or dissimilarity they felt with things. They unhesitatingly took raw material from everywhere they could, and created things according to their own standards. They learnt from the Greeks, from the Persians, learnt from the Hindus, learnt from everyone, but in the end their individuality surfaced everywhere. In the same manner, they were not enticed by human psychology either. The discussion of sex did not break their ablution. Saadi<sup>16</sup> did not even hesitate from discussing lechery, and still continued to be the one bestowed with God's mercy. Muslims began to dither only when their creative potential became weak.

Quaid-e-Azam had said that the creation of Pakistan has emancipated human spirit, so that now it can show absolute diligency in its creative efforts. But what is this captivity that is holding back many of us from our own history? If there is vitality and strength in us, then our days of regression can teach us a good deal as well. You know how the saying goes: the terminal value of a dead elephant is more than a live one, because of the ivory (*Woh kehte hain na keh mara hua haathi bhi sava lakh ka hota hai*). When a Musalman errs, it is unique in its own way. It has its own splendour. The artificial colour that Lucknow's life had acquired can be given all kinds of abashing names<sup>17</sup>. However in the exercise of linguistic niceties, certain parts of the human spirit had actually flourished and we find certain striking examples which prove that Lucknow's cleanliness was not restricted to the garbs of its people alone. Take the verses of Aatish<sup>18</sup> for example:

Send word to my Yousuf O morning breeze,  
The scent of your robes has spread quite far  
(*Meri taraf se kahiyo mere Yousuf se  
Nikal chali hai bohat perahan se bu teri*)

Although Lucknow's poetry is fairly ill-famed, this couplet was beyond Delhi's artists. If the complaint against the 'disloyalty' of the beloved is expressed with such sublimity and finesse, with such reserve and integrity, then I would call that a splendid contribution to culture. This couplet belongs to the era of restraint, but isn't democratic Pakistan in need of

spiritual grace? And if the sprees of the royal courts evolve themselves into this:

My mind too is perfumed O gentle one,  
The morning breeze alone does not possess your scent  
(*Dimagh apna bhi ae gul badan muatar hai*  
*Saba he ke nahin hisse main aai bu teri!*)

then would the robust and youthful Pakistan refuse to train its soul through this couplet?

A historical perspective is impertinent for us for one more reason. Until and unless we become aware of the contexts of events, they fail to be meaningful to us. If an event takes place in our national lives and we are able to find its parallel in our history, then we become capable of understanding it. Then that event begins to acquire the status of a symbol for us. Meaningfulness enters our lives owing to our history. I shall prove this as well with the help of poetry. The riots are a major chapter of our national history. But as a matter of fact, those riots have not achieved a central place in our literature. Saadat Hasan Manto<sup>19</sup> has certainly written some good short-stories based on them, but the riots have not merged so completely with our literature that the merging would enable them to cease to continue to remain merely events for us; their details forgotten as well, and like a part of our collective experience, they would become a constant part of our national consciousness. Our short fiction cannot achieve this end at this point because we had long ago broken our contact with the prosaic tradition. This is possible only when experiences of the past and the present can come together. Indeed, we talk about these matters using words. But our linguistic structure is different, and that of the actual prose writers is distinct from ours. The same is the case with the form of the poem. Nevertheless, ghazal can effectively immerse the riots into our consciousness. And ghazal has initiated this process already. Ghazal possesses such a multitude of metaphorical words that it seems as if ghazal came into existence for the description of the riots, or that the riots happened so that ghazal could be brought back to life once again. I realized this after having first read one of Hafeez Hoshiarpuri's<sup>20</sup> ghazals, and then after hearing the couplets of the young poet Nasir Kazmi. It appears that the complaint against ghazal's exclusivity is either due to poetic humility (*shairana ijz*) or due to not being fully immersed in the

tradition of ghazal – because ghazal is known for holding the vastness of time and space. Just take a look at these two couplets by Nasir Kazmi.

They hint at the season of spring  
 These homes burnt upon the branches.  
 Evening time has set in the jungle and we  
 Had set out from our town at the break of day.  
*(Dete hain suragh fasl e gul ka  
 Shakhon par dale huay baseray  
 Jangal main hui hai sham hum ko  
 Basti se chalay thay mun andheray)*

The way these couplets merge the boundaries of the past, present and future, is farther from the capacity of a short fiction writer. These verses are the outcome of the riots, but not based on them. Look at what the tradition of the preservation of our collective experience has enabled this poet to do! Now we can argue that our minds have begun to comprehend the occurrence of the riots. But it has come to pass only when the intuition of the poet was able to merge the experiences of our past and our present (*Magar yeh usi waqt mumkin hua hai jab shayar ke wajdan ne maazi aur haal ke tajarbaat ko aik dusre main ghula diya*).

If our artists would begin to represent our present and past in this manner, then our nation will soon develop a historical consciousness. But it is impertinent to direct the focus of the artists themselves in this direction. This requires an effort on a conscious level. It is true that this kind of effort requires high knowledge, and much more than that, a great leader, that is not available to us right now. Small people like us writers are there, but it is possible that with our collective efforts, and the will power of a living nation, we can achieve what only a great man can achieve. Thus, the success of Muslims cannot be attained without the involvement of their history, because the Quran is the first revealed book that has given phenomenal importance to history<sup>21</sup>!

### **Endnotes**

- 1 This essay by Muhammad Hasan Askari is published in his book *Takhleeqi Amal aur Asloob*. It was compiled by Muhammad Sohail Umar, and this book was published in the year 1989.
- 2 The ‘Rashidun Caliphate’ refers to the four major caliphates established after prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) left this world. The Rashidun Caliphate is remembered, idealized and greatly admired by Muslims around the world for best living up to the merit of Islam, which

- the caliphates, monarchies and democracies that were established after them could not do justice to in the same way as they did.
- 3 The Rightly Guided Khalifas were the four caliphs that ruled the Muslim world after prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H)'s passing from this world. Hazrat Abu Bakr, Hazrat Umar ibn al-Khattab, Hazrat Uthman bin Affan and Hazrat Ali ibn Abi Talib are considered to be The Rightly Guided Khalifas, reason being that they were the four most competent men in the Muslim world according to the standards of Islam. So competent that no one can live up to their potential again.
  - 4 Also called Al Hambra now, it was built in Granada, Spain, and it is one of the finest examples of Muslim architecture. Commonly considered to be an architectural masterpiece, the Al Hamra is primarily praised for the metaphysical connotations of its architectural style. Its courts, gardens, halls and fountains signify Paradise, and its everlastingness, as a reward for those devoted followers of God who seek to follow His guidance.
  - 5 Taj Mahal, considered to be one of the 7 Wonders of the World, is a mausoleum in Agra, India, that was built on the orders of the Mughal king Shah Jahan after the death of his wife Mumtaz Mahal, and was dedicated to her. The Taj Mahal is also a prime example of Muslim art in general, and architecture in particular.
  - 6 *Alf Laila* is a collection of stories that emanated from the Arabian Peninsula, translated as *One Thousand and One Nights* or *Arabian Nights* in English. *Alf Laila* has been praised throughout the world for its narrative style, its visualization and its themes and their treatment, inspiring many other literary projects around the world.
  - 7 Amir Khusro was a Sufi, musician, poet and scholar of the Indian subcontinent. He is remembered primarily for his contribution to the world of music. He created the 'qawwali' by fusing the musical traditions of Persia, Arabian Peninsula, Turkey and India.
  - 8 Hazrat Muhammad Nizamuddin Auliya is one of those Sufis who is praised to this day for his devotion towards God, and continues to inspire people towards Tasawwuf, although he is with us no more. He belonged to the Chishti Order of Tasawwuf, which is distinct from other Orders in that it is more open towards people of lower spiritual stations.
  - 9 This is a line from one of Allama Muhammad Iqbal's poems in his poetry collection entitled *Bang-e-Dara*
  - 10 *Tilism e Hoshrubia* is a famous dastan which contains a narration of the events leading up to the martyrdom of Hazrat Hussain bin Ali (R.A) in Karbala.
  - 11 Also referred to as Umar II, Umar bin Abdul Aziz is an exceptional figure of Muslim history who is respected and admired for several reasons. He is largely remembered for being an exceptional ruler and revivalist of Islam, for he resurrected people's faith in the transcendental values of Islam. This was opposed to the general trend that was catching fire in those times, as people had begun to abandon the spirit of Islam for the luxuries of this world in the process of imitating their ruling elite.
  - 12 Wajid Ali Shah was a Nawab of Indian descent who ascended the throne of Awadh a few years before the colonization of India. He is identified in Muslim history primarily for his exaggeratedly lavish lifestyle.
  - 13 Shah Rangeelay was one of the last Mughal kings who is remembered in history for being one of the factors that lead the Muslims of India towards their decadence and degeneration. Rangeelay's life was marked by a consistent hovering around physical pleasures of all sorts. The effects of his lifestyle did not remain restricted to the royal court, but the morality of the entire society had begun to deteriorate.
  - 14 In British history, the year 1857 is recalled as The Indian Rebellion of 1857, but the year 1857 is a significant part of Muslim history because Muslims had fought what we refer to as The Battle of Independence against the British during that year. Although Muslims had lost the battle militarily and politically, yet it holds great significance for us because we had displayed our ability to believe in, insist upon, and fight for our concepts of reality.

- 15 This is most probably a reference to the Muslim opposition of the Communist movement in Russia that demanded that their religious beliefs and their national and cultural autonomy must not be harmed by the Marxist revolution. Since that was not possible during a Communist reign, Muslims were greatly disheartened, and some of them even emigrated from Russia to other parts of the world.
- 16 This is a reference to Sheikh Saadi, a great Muslim poet of Persian descent, who continues to be considered Ustaad-e-Sukhan or "Master of Speech" among Muslim scholars around the world. Western scholars, poets and philosophers too like Goethe, Hegel and Emerson have praised his writings for their wisdom and beauty.
- 17 This is a reference to Lucknow's ritualistic niceties. Lucknow is known for having mastered the art of sophisticated mannerism, however, it is widely believed and argued that those mannerisms were spiritless. That is, they were not genuine but ritualistic.
- 18 This is a reference to the eminent poet of Urdu literature named Khwaja Haider Ali Aatish, who was a part of the Lucknow school of poets. His era is considered to be the golden era of Urdu poetry. He is known to have hundreds of disciples and he is famous primarily because of his *ghazals*. Aatish's poetry is unique in the sense that its tone of a challenging nature, as opposed to being melancholic, which has mostly been the tone of Urdu *ghazals*.
- 19 Saadat Hasan Manto was a writer, who is most popular for his short stories on the riots that took place during the independence of Pakistan and India. He was also a novelist and playwright, and his lesser known works consist of two collections of personal sketches, three collections of essays, a novel and five series of radio plays.
- 20 Hafeez Hoshiarpuri is a noteworthy poet of Urdu poetry. He was Faiz Ahmed Faiz's contemporary and the teacher and guide of the famous poet of Urdu, Nasir Kazmi who continues to be praised for his style of poetry and his use of 'ista'aray' and 'chhotee beher'.
- 21 This point is based on the fact that The Holy Quran abounds in the stories of the prophets which serve the purpose of explaining the events that have occurred in the past. Without knowing that, Muslims cannot comprehend life, humanity and their own way forward in life. The Holy Quran even talks about the history of the cosmos, elucidating how and why it was created, and which events lead to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise and onto Earth. Hence, Hasan Askari's argument, that it has given a lot of importance to history.

### Abstract

This English translation is intended to render artfully Urdu text *Tareekhi Shaur* by renowned critic Muhammad Hasan Askari from a source language into English. It deserves a wider audience as it is arguable one of the finest piece of his Urdu writings, providing an in-depth analysis of the conditions of Pakistan literature helps us understand how much and how long we have disregarded the relevant of our history. It enriches two major components of translation studies i.e. translation theory and practice of translation as literary art. Growing academic presence of translation studies, students and teachers will find it relevant to cite as an example whether the translator renders source text precisely the same things in another language.

**Keywords:** Historical consciousness, translation studies, Pakistan literature