CHAPTER 7

Resuming the Past: Bright Morning and Foggy Night

Being disappointed with Pakistan, he turned towards the “world of Islam.” Now he expected from the Arabs to bring glory to the “world of Islam.”

—Intizar Husain, “Introduction,” Aftab Ahmad, Muhammad Hasan Askari: Ek Mutal’ia

One of my lines of inquiry throughout this study of Askari’s critical thought has been to try and understand the reasons behind Askari’s transformation from a relatively liberal, intellectual admirer of the West into an uncompromising Islamic scholar and passionate critic of the “modern” Western worldview. I think that Partition played a pivotal role in his transformation. The experience of Partition, the suffering, and sacrifice were life-changing events, even though Askari declared them to be a part of the birth of a new nation-state. Very early in Pakistan’s history, its foundational myth was broken. A shared religion could not be the spiritual balm that would assuage the suffering and problems of the diverse ethnic and linguistic minorities that were to live together in the so-called natural home of Indian Muslims. Urdu-speaking Muslims from north India found to their dismay that their acceptance in the land of their desire was not a given. Pakistan created its own ghettos where resentments seemed to grow or at best stagnate. In the forging of a Pakistani Muslim identity, the Indian part had to be divested. For Askari, it ultimately meant mapping or merging Urdu’s literary tradition with the Islamic tradition. This must have been a painful transition—finding refuge in an intellectual elitist Islam may have helped. His blaming of jadidiyat, or “enlightened modernity,” and associated ills that the West impinged
on the colonized societies was his final effort in making sense of the tangled nature of Pakistan’s society and politics.

Let us backtrack to 1938 when Askari’s epistemic roots were beginning to form—the young Askari had just arrived at the University of Allahabad—a shy, awkward student bristling with ideas. He was interested in philosophy and English literature but was drawn to writing in Urdu by friends. He began to espouse new and original ideas in his fiction. His stories were remarkable both for their content and style. Their style was revolutionary; it did not follow the model established by Urdu’s well-known writers, notably, Premchand, or that of the Progressive Writers, such as Krishan Chander. Even though those were heady days for Progressivism, and Askari was excited by the promise that it held in charting out a map for a new literature that would mark a departure from the “hidebound” literary values, and production of the past, he was not attracted by what he thought were oversimplifying poetics of the left-wing-dominated Progressives. In the space of two years, that is, between 1940 and 1942, Askari had not only published fiction, but had also initiated projects that were both critical and imaginative—anthologies of poetry and fiction—which would serve to disseminate the new trend in Urdu literature and also introduce new writers to their readers in a more direct and personal way. It is worth noting that from the start, Askari wanted a space, a niche for the writer in society. The fruits of these years would be a marker of Askari’s individuality and the freedom of the creative writer, not a position mired in ideology.

At the university, Askari had two important mentors: the enigmatic Urdu poet Firaq Gorakhpuri and the brilliant professor of English Satish Chandra Deb. Both left a deep impact on his personality and thought. Both were Hindu: Deb was a Bengali Brahmin, fluent in many languages including Urdu; Firaq was from the highly literate Kayasth community, many members of which were recognized scholars of Urdu and Persian. Deb was particularly interested in eighteenth-century English literature and thought and the French Symbolists, while Firaq had new ideas about classical Urdu poetics, colonial logic, and English Romanticism. Both Deb and Firaq taught Askari to locate Western knowledge in the context of Western thought and culture, and not to be overawed by the seemingly enormous disparity between the Eastern and Western episteme. Although neither of them wrote much on these subjects, Askari absorbed their ideas and used them with systematic rigor and clarity in the construction of his own thought. He has repeatedly acknowledged his intellectual debt to them. In 1942, when he left