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## Askari's "Haramjadi" (Translator's Note)

IN TRANSLATING "Ḥarāmjadī"<sup>1</sup> ("The Bitch"), I have tried to follow 'Askari's ideas on the theory of translation, as expressed in his essay "Gar Tarjumē sē Fā'ida Ikhfā'-e Ḥāl Hai" ("If the Benefit of Translation Be Concealment"). In this essay he talks about the problems in translating, that is, the choice the translator has to make between easy readability and faithfulness to the text. In 'Askari's opinion, the "foreignness" of the source text is also to some extent its spirit or mystique, and the language in which the text is being received should respect this "spirit." These thoughts were expressed for the first time in Urdu by 'Askari.

In the earliest Western debates about translation methods, especially concerning the Bible, it was observed that certain languages or texts presented easy translatability into English, whereas the syntax of some languages was so challenging that the languages were practically untranslatable. Therefore, the problem was addressed by conveying the sense rather than the literal meaning of the original. Conveying only the sense of the text sacrificed the character of the language, which in turn represented the sensibility of the culture of its origin. In his seminal essay "On the Different Methods of Translation," published in 1813, Friedrich Schliermacher (1774–1834) argued definitively that a literary text is not just its sense, it is also the language in which it is written, and naturalizing a text loses the spirit of the language and the sensibility from which the text emerges.

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<sup>1</sup>Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Askari, *Jazīrē* (Lahore: Ā'ina-e Adab, 1961), 49–78. "Ḥarāmjadī" was written in October 1940 and appeared the following year in the Urdu literary periodical *Adabī Duniyā*.

Besides being an important literary critic and creative writer, ‘Askari was a translator as well, and his views on translation are a valuable contribution to its philosophy. I have found them particularly relevant for my own translation work, and especially in my role as his translator. I see ‘Askari’s creative oeuvre to be a conscious implementation of his thoughts on prose, usage, syntax and language. He felt that literary Urdu was lacking in the full development of the long, complex sentence, and therefore, in his own creative writing he attempted, often zealously, to experiment with the run-on sentence. As a translator, I have tried to preserve that spirit in English, faithfully trying to follow the syntax, punctuation and paragraph design of the original Urdu. The opening paragraphs of the story were the most challenging. The insertion of action in the sentences, together with many descriptive phrases combined to produce convoluted sentences that were difficult to present lucidly in English. I know of no other writer in Urdu using this technique as early as the 1940s. There are paragraphs of dense prose, stretching to two and three pages without a break. I panicked at the thought of translating one complex sentence after another, each running into three or four lines! After the first few pages I had worked out a method of approaching the long sentences, matching them with equally long sentences in English. Here is an example:

*Aur usē inḥī zard mēñḍakōñ kī bārish kē har qaṣṣrē kō barastē hūḥ dēkḥnē kē  
liyē qaṣṣbē kī ṭūṭī-phūṭī rōṣhōñ kī sarḥōñ, tañg tārik silī hūḥ galīyōñ, gard-o-  
ghubār, kūṛē karkaṭ kē ḍḥērōñ, bḥōñktē hūḥ lāl pīlē kuttōñ aur kisānōñ kī  
gāṛīyōñ aur ghāñs-vāliyōñ sē ḥāñsē hūḥ bāzārōñ mēñ sārā dīn ghūmnā partā ṭhā.*

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And it was just for the purpose of watching each and every drop of this yellow frog-rain dropping away that she had to wander all the livelong day through the broken cobblestone roads of this small town, through dark, dank, narrow lanes, through dust and dirt, past heaps of garbage and red and yellow dogs that kept barking away, and shopping places chockfull with farmers’ carts and [women] grass cutters.

I have put together and translated relevant portions from ‘Askari’s “Ikhtitāmīya” (Epilogue) to *Jazīrē* (242–64) that give reasons for his choice of plot and subject in fiction. To readers who find nothing special about the form and content of the story, reading ‘Askari’s own astute remarks may help provide a proper perspective on what he was trying to accomplish, especially as early as 1941 when such literary questions scarcely

occupied the minds of Urdu critics. Seen from that vantage, the story, in my opinion, is a classic for its demonstration of alienation with and within a culture. ‘Askarī wrote only eleven stories. We find each of them bearing the weight of his concern to demonstrate the possibilities of the significance of form over experience. He remains focused on his language and the power of expression: “In literature it is the words themselves that are the experience.”

‘Askarī claims “Ḥarāmjādī” to be his favorite story. According to him, the story is inspired by Chekhov’s “School Mistress.” Writing about it in the epilogue to his first collection of short fiction, *Jazīrē* (Islands), he says that he thought the first half of the story was excellent and the second half would have been equally good if he hadn’t allowed himself to drift with the flow of the thoughts of his principal character, or, in other words, if he hadn’t gotten under the skin of the character but rather had made the character do his bidding (249). □

#### Excerpts from Askarī’s Epilogue in *Jazīrē*

... My stories seldom have a plot. I can’t say whether this is something to be proud of or not. But it was unavoidable because of two reasons. Most of my stories were written during my student days when an individual’s actual life and relationships are not within one’s grasp, except for some special emotions. I represent the middle class, a class that is seldom confronted with soul-searching events; there is just the usual colorless, homogeneity and monotony of life and spirit. My stories seldom have plots because plots, or at least their emotional importance are missing from our lives altogether.

My characters will be subjected to psychoanalysis and I along with them. The psychology of my characters is fairly straightforward, the same old tendency towards introversion, homoerotic impulses, weariness from their surroundings, escape from reality and so forth.... My stories are usually studies of schoolgirls. So you may take my spiritual measure and worth to be just about the same and if you are fond of psychoanalysis, you will probably add “arrested development” and “regression” to that. My themes have generally been defeat, frustration and the dissatisfaction with the environment that accompanies coming-of-age and the consequent resistance to it or escape from it...

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The one distinctive mental state that defines my characters is their experience of loneliness, and that is the reason for selecting the title of my collection.... Loneliness and alienation, these are the two most important themes of my time.... Contemporary [Urdu] poets, almost all of them, are struggling with the webs of loneliness and estrangement.... Comparatively speaking these emotions have found much less expression in the Urdu short story, though they do show up now and then in disguised forms. Sa'adat Hasan Manṭō has examined and analyzed feelings of loneliness, and most of my stories revolve around this theme.... Unknown fears, ambivalent desires, unattainable wishes and nervous breakdown—these are the pathways through which Western literature has passed after rebelling against romanticism. The literary movement that began with claims of ultra-realism ended in a state of extreme schizophrenia (*divāngī*). More or less the same tendency is found in the new [read modernist] literary movement in Urdu. We are moving away from pure realistic writing to a state where feelings are not recounted but rather the effect of those feelings on the nerves of the person, where the engagement is not with emotions but with a heightened emotional environment, an “emotional field.” Once again I am forced to use my own name, but only as an example. You can observe in this very collection of my stories the beginning and end of this progression. The first story is self-consciously realistic in the extreme, the last simply the narration of nervous disorder. I had tried my best to be as nebulous as possible, not to have any concrete ground for the story, but I failed miserably; nevertheless this story can be an example of the trend I have alluded to above. For generations our writers have eyed Werther suspiciously, but the fact is that we have been busy trying to produce the latest version of Werther.

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... The spiritual states (*kaifyāt*) I have presented [in my stories] are commonplace in Western literature. If Urdu writers keep following this path then perhaps we can never present anything new. Of course we can present the Eastern edition of Western literature, though this copy won't be false in any way but sincere and heartfelt because in the present times there are many commonalities between the East and the West.

I might as well explain the “new things.” Literature is universal because of its beneficence [*faiz*], but its roots/origins are national/cultural and inherent. For instance, mangoes can be eaten with enjoyment anywhere in the world, but they grow only in India. The literature of any culture is worthwhile because it presents that element, the sensibility and

ambiance special to it and which cannot be presented by any other culture in the world. And this distinctive sensibility is attained by soaking up in one's spirit the life of its ordinary people. If we want to create a niche for ourselves in world literature, it will be expected of us to provide something that only an Indian ethos can....

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... I myself don't know what this pure Indian element is, but I accept its existence and I respect it. In my stories this respect is expressed in my choice of Christian names for my characters. I could have given them Hindu or Muslim names. But to give a seventy-five percent Western consciousness a hundred percent Indian name would be an insult to traditional Indian consciousness. I have chosen Christian characters simply because I am not ready to claim the responsibility of representing Indian sensibilities. That is a heavy rock that I am content to have touched and left. As for the question of my acquaintance with Indian Christians, I know them only as much as you do. It is possible that at some point I could shatter the layers of appearances and reach the depths of the Indian spirit, but I know myself a little and I don't have much hope, because the walls of appearances can only be scaled with the help of two tools: love and humility. 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.

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