

MUHAMMAD HASAN ASKARI

The Use of Adjectives in Literature¹

IN THIS ESSAY Sufi terms and sayings will be observed in a few places, which may possibly lead you to think that some incantation and conjuring is afoot. Well, if all I wanted were a defense of Taṣavvuf, nothing but a Sufi anecdote itself would prevent me from doing that. It is said that a man came to Ḥaẓrat Junaid Baġhdādī² with the intention to learn the *Ism-e A‘am*.³ At first, Ḥaẓrat Junaid tried to hold him off somehow for a few years, but when the man persisted he gave him a bowl wrapped inside a cloth and said, Go—you will find a fakir sitting across the river, give it to him. As the man set off with the cup he felt something stirring inside. For a while he managed to clamp down on his curiosity, but it eventually got the better of him. He unwrapped the cloth and peered into it. As soon as the cloth was opened, a little mouse jumped out and disappeared into the grass. The poor man was smitten by terrible remorse, nevertheless he wrapped the bowl back up again and crossed

¹Written in 1960, “Adab Mēn Şifāt kā Iste‘māl,” is included in the anthology of Askari’s critical essays *Vaqf ki Rāgnī* (Lahore: Qausain, 1979), 21–42. Footnotes have been added by the translator.

²Abu’l-Qāsim al-Junaid (d. 908, 909, or 910) was the preceptor of the famous Maṣūūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 922) and the founder of the “Sober” (also “Orthodox”) school of Taṣavvuf. The best account of his life and writings is still Ali Hassan Abdel-Kader’s *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd* (London: Luzac & Co., 1976). See also, Andras Hamori, “A Sentence of Junayd’s,” in *Intellectual Studies on Islam: Essays Written in Honor of Martin B. Dickson*, ed. by Michel M. Mazzaoui and Vera B. Moreen (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), 147–52.

³Literally means “The Great Name” and refers to one of the ninety-nine names or attributes of God which is invoked as a talisman against the designs and effects of evil spirits.

over to the other side of the river. There he did find the fakir, who, the second he saw the man, snapped, So, the mouse took off? You set out to learn the *Ism-e A' am*, right? But you couldn't even keep watch over a little mouse!

Our mouse is literature. Even from the point of view of Taṣāvvuf it is our greatest duty to watch over it. Studying Urdu and Persian literature, and then, in comparison, Western literature, and later writing about literature, I've faced a number of problems. The only satisfactory answer I've ever found for these problems has come from the books of Taṣāvvuf. That's all, otherwise, here, Taṣāvvuf means neither a séance for communicating with spirits nor a talisman for bringing some jinn or other under control. In this essay Taṣāvvuf stands for the inner dimension of Islam, or the foundational beliefs of Islamic civilization. These beliefs were present in all the major civilizations of the East, and even in Western civilization they were active partially, if not wholly, up to the sixteenth century. I use the terminology of Taṣāvvuf only because my concern here is with Urdu literature, and in regard to Eastern literature my familiarity doesn't go beyond Urdu and Persian literature. However, you may, if you wish, replace a statement of Ibn-e 'Arabī⁴ that I cite with a statement of Shankara- charya. Hindu gentlemen need not feel discomfited at the mention of Ibn-e 'Arabī, any more than Muslim gentlemen should find Shankara- charya's mention a provocation. *At-Tauḥīd* [Oneness (of Being/Reality > God)], at any rate, is a single, indivisible entity. If understood as it should be, there cannot be two views about Oneness.⁵ It's not Einstein's physics after all.

Indulging in rhetoric? Perhaps. But only up to this point. Well then, this essay deals only with literature, or rather, inasmuch as I'm a writer, purely with my own problems. Although I am in fact a reader of literature, I do nonetheless have some experience with writing. I've translated three novels that are regarded very highly in Western literature. There was a time, long ago, when I dashed off a few

⁴On him, see Muhammad Umar Memon, "Askari's 'Noun' and Taṣāvvuf (Translator's Note)," elsewhere in this issue.

⁵Cf. Toshihiko Izutsu, *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things: Essays in Islamic Mystical Philosophy* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1994), where he shows the amazing similarity in the metaphysical notion of undifferentiated and absolute Oneness between Taṣāvvuf and the Vedanta on the one hand (28) and Taoism on the other (88–9).

sophomoric short stories mimicking the West, and I've also had the audacity to presume that I have practiced criticism. During all this a slew of problems cropped up—not just theoretical, but also practical. They arose during the effort to select a few words, string them together, and then place them properly. I could not solve these problems even by recourse to Western disciplines of philosophy, psychology, sociology, and literary criticism. It is quite possible that the failure was due to my own flawed understanding. Still, no Western thinker could provide me with a satisfactory explanation. The crux of the matter was that whatever the Westerners had to say on the subject just didn't apply to Eastern literature, indeed, at times not even to Western literature of the Middle Ages. One could of course say that these problems didn't amount to anything more than a cerebral chess game, but for him whose very business is raveling and unraveling words—isn't it a calamity? Among such problems one is the use of adjectives in Urdu prose and poetry.

If you write prose or poetry you must have traversed this exceedingly harsh terrain and may have even failed to make it through. If, on the other hand, you're just a reader, you can get some idea of the nature of the problem by trying to construct a sentence about a table, first in the old and then—following the West—in the new style. Try the old style first, appending, with or without reason, a few adjectives to the word “table.” For instance: “*bē-miṣāl, nādir-e rōzgār, pari-ṭal'at, ṣuraiyā-raf'at mēz*” (“a matchless, unique, fairy-faced, Venus-high table”).

If this were a sentence in a short story, you would be rebuked roundly for it with the complaint that this gives absolutely no idea what kind of “table” it was. In other words, the style fails to bring up a concrete image before the reader. Now write a sentence that satisfies the eye. Well then, in the manner of the West, your sentence would look something like this:

*Čār ṭūṭē-p'ḥūṭē pāyōn par ṭikī hū'ī čaukōr, zard raṅg kī, k'burdurī saṭeḥ wālī,
čīr kī lakṛī kī mēz, jis kē čārōn kōnē j'har čukē ṭḥē aur jis kī bāhar niklī hū'ī kilēn har
guzarnē wālē kā dāman is burī ṭarah k'ḥēnčī ṭḥīn keh in mēn tāgē ulajḥ kē rah ga'ē
ṭḥē.⁶*

⁶For obvious reasons, it is best to leave the sentence in Urdu; however, a rough translation would be: “A square, yellow-colored, uneven-surfaced, pinewood table resting on four broken legs, all four corners of which had crumbled away and whose

This time again you would be lambasted mercilessly; the objection would be: The sentence is altogether odd and unwieldy; looks like it's been translated from English word for word. And what will the Urdu critics say? "You will not find fluency and simplicity in this fellow!" So now you must write a third type of sentence, abandoning "realism" for the next stage of imitating the West: So you write "*kaf-dar-dahan, čikhtī čingāḥṭī mēz*" ("foaming at the mouth, screaming, bellowing table").

This sentence does, no doubt, offer a very clear image, but people will say: "The fellow's off his rocker! Where did you ever see a table foaming at the mouth?"

In short, none of the three types has found general acceptance in Urdu nowadays, an unconscious consequence of which has been that in their effort to avoid the whole mess our writers have settled on writing: good table, bad table.

Whatever the sociological and psychological reasons may be for what is described as today's "literary stagnation," it is worthwhile to consider how the difficulty of using adjectives may have something to do with this stagnation.

At any rate, the above examples present us with three aspects of the problem: What is the difference in the way in which adjectives have been employed in these sentences? Could it be identified as the difference between Eastern and Western styles? And, why have both become difficult for us?

Let's first reflect on the issue from the mind of a Westerner, who would say that the first sentence represents the Eastern style and the second and third, the Western. The difference between the two lies in the manner of perception; it's been there all along and will endure in the future as well, with the result that Easterners will never fully succeed in adopting the Western style; hence Eastern style will always fall short of producing good literature. In other words, according to the general mentality of the West, the East never had nor will it ever have great literature. Then again, this mentality doesn't even accept the Western poetry of the Middle Ages, and Professor Danby⁷ has very truthfully even admitted as much. He feels that just as one uses the term "pre-historic times," one

protruding nails tugged so badly at the clothes of every passerby that a mesh of threads had become caught in them."

⁷Translator was unable to identify this name and the spelling is approximate.

ought really to call the period of Chaucer the “pre-poetic/poetry age” because the history of poetry properly begins with Shakespeare. The upshot: the Western literature of the Middle Ages is thrown entirely overboard, thus becoming a single community with Eastern literature. But this also does away with the eternal difference between the East and the West. *Pakā’ī t̄hī k̄hīr, hō gayā dalyā.*⁸

Even those Westerners who do not expel Eastern literature from the community of literature still mistakenly assume that the East uses adjectives with a noun rather generously while the West with the greatest economy and thrift. Actually the responsibility for this misunderstanding rests squarely with translators. In Eastern literature words or compounds that are treated as a “noun” (“*ism*”) are converted into adjectives by these folks, otherwise the simple fact is that in classical Eastern literature adjectives are used most sparingly—no more than a pinch of salt in dough—a few exceptions notwithstanding. Contrast this with the situation in Europe since the end of the sixteenth century where a poet can’t even compose two lines without adjectives. To such an extent that poets’ individual styles are determined by the number and type of adjectives they employ.

Apart from such misunderstandings, Western thinkers locate the difference between the two literatures in their respective modes of perception. Here is just one example of how this difference is explained in theoretical terms. William Haas bases it on three things: one, the East conflates the viewer and the thing viewed, the West maintains their separation; two, the East is drowned in instinct, the West in life; and, three, the East is particularly keen in the tactile sense, the West in the visual/optic.⁹

First of all, the three principles Haas has foisted upon the East can be seen, individually or collectively, quite prominently in Western literature itself, at least from the last hundred years, which leads to the

⁸Roughly: “I thought I was making a sweet pie, it turned out to be mashed potatoes,” or something similar.

⁹William S. Haas, *The Destiny of the Mind: East and West* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), 199–201, 205. ‘Askari has used “life” in his paraphrase of Haas, which is problematic because “life” is not the opposite of “instinct,” but “reason” is. The relevant line in Haas reads, “In the West the external world is primarily relative to sense-perception and more particularly to the higher senses . . .” (199).

inescapable conclusion that either no necessary relationship exists between these principles and the East or that Western literature is attempting to recast itself in the mold of the East. Then one also needs to explain the degree to which the “tactile sense” and “instinct” have played any role at all in Islamic literature and arts. Haas gives the example of Hindu sculptures, but Hindu statues are symbols, backed by metaphysics, without which this art simply couldn’t have come into existence. To see in Hindu art only an expression of instinct and ignore the underlying metaphysics is sheer inequity. If the construction of a theory were the true aim, it would be more accurate to frame it thus: In the East, culture is founded upon metaphysics, in the West on physics.

By presenting Haas’s ideas all I want to show is that making a case on the basis of “mode of perception” alone wouldn’t do the job. A mode of perception results from a particular conception of Reality. When this conception changes, so does its corresponding mode of perception, indeed so quietly that one continues believing for quite a long time that one hasn’t changed at all. Precisely at this point the problem of the use of adjectives in literature rears up its head. With the spread of English influence we naturally began to feel the need to make changes in our literature, but even more serious, we also began to lose our ability to fathom the properties of our language. Abandoning Arabic *ṣarf* (morphology), many perfectly well-intentioned, honest individuals who were, moreover, steeped in “*mashriqīyat*” (Easternness), formulated the rules of Urdu grammar after the English. Whereas in the old method a word could be one of three kinds: *ism* (noun), *fiʿl* (verb) or *ḥarf* (particle), it now came to be split up into altogether eight categories according to English rules. It was claimed that Arabic morphology was exceedingly arcane and complicated, while English grammar rules, on the other hand, were comfortably easy and straightforward. It seems a bit strange that a division into eight kinds, instead of three, yields greater ease. But the fact is that due to English influence the traditional concept of Reality was becoming increasingly difficult for us to grasp and quite unconsciously we were gradually accepting the English conception. This is the reason why their grammar appeared easier to us. People who were changing the grammar of the Urdu language were also, in fact, changing the concept of Reality, for the rules of a language evolve from this very fundamental concept; hence the change of grammar was no ordinary or accidental matter.

The grammatical rules of both Arabic and Sanskrit have derived from metaphysical principles. I will attend to the details shortly, but first

observe the most obvious similarities. Arabic morphology divides “word” into three kinds: *ism*, *fiʿl*, *ḥarf*. Panini’s classification too yields only a tripartite division: noun, verb, and “that which cannot be inflected.” Before him, Syamanamacharya¹⁰ had maintained only two kinds: noun and verb. Likewise Ibn-e ‘Arabī too had the same duo: noun and verb. In fact, Ibn-e ‘Arabī goes a step further and maintains that there’s just one entity in reality: noun and only noun. Conversely, “word” is divided into eight kinds in the current grammar of Western languages, giving six elements the same status which noun and verb enjoy in the East. In Arabic morphology *ṣifat* (adjective) is not seen as an independent type, but rather as a form of *ism* (noun), so that, technically, it is defined as *ism-e ṣifat* (adjectival noun). What this means is that according to Arabic morphology noun and adjective cannot be viewed independently of each other. However, adjective has acquired a separate and independent status in Western languages these days, so it and the noun can be treated as separate entities; or rather, since the beginning of the seventeenth century the word “adjective” has acquired a secondary meaning—the extra that is simply added on.

Now have a look at the metaphysical backdrop of Arabic and Sanskrit grammars. According to both Hindu and Muslim Unitary belief the Absolute Reality (which, here, we will call God for convenience) is free from all determinations, is above and beyond even the realm of manifestation, and is eternally hidden (*abadīuʾl-khifā*).¹¹ Therefore words cannot describe it. But man expresses himself through words; indeed he is compelled to do so, which is why we are forced to give God some name or other. However, “word” is a limitation and a determination and God is free from it. Therefore God cannot have a name in reality; whatever name is ascribed to God will be merely a sign. Seen from this vantage a name, even though it is without a reality or foundation of its own, does nonetheless point to the Absolute Reality. Hence the most important thing in human language has to be that noun (*ism*), or those nouns (*asmāʾ*), that point to the Essence of God. Now on the other hand, God is also eternally manifest (*azalīuʾl-ubūr*). Even though all things other than God are devoid of essential being (*vujūd-e žātī*) and, hence, of reality, their existence is derived from God. So they do possess reality; they do have independent existence in the domain of

¹⁰Translator was unable to identify this name and the spelling is approximate.

¹¹See footnote 5, above.

manifestation; and within this domain their names (*asmā'*) do possess fundamental importance. And that's why Ibn-e 'Arabī holds that "word" has really only one kind—noun (*ism*).

Turning now to the "verb" (*fī'īl*), "activity" (*fā'ilīyat*) too is a determination and God is beyond it. He does cause other things to move, but the word (i.e., causing of movement) cannot be applied to Him. The world was created with the utterance of the command "*Kun!*" (Be!),¹² but this word was uttered by His creative Attribute. In any event, action is inherent in Divine Attributes. All actions are manifested in the phenomenal world by dint of these Attributes. As Ibn-e 'Arabī says: "The self is not an agent, but merely a patient, a recipient. The act belongs to the *rabb* (Lord) alone and only manifests through it/the self." (*Rabb*, in Ibn-e 'Arabī, stands for God's Self-Manifestation (*tajallī*)¹³ upon a self.) So, in a manner of speaking, we can now say that whatever happens in the world is produced by God. This leads to the conclusion that in addition to God's essence the second most important thing is His actions. Nothing falls outside of these two. This is why Arabic and Sanskrit grammars affirm only two fundamental verities of word: noun and verb. As for the *ḥarf* (particle), its sole purpose lies in connecting the two and is therefore secondary in importance.

Eastern grammars treat the adjective as a kind of noun precisely because God's Attributes cannot be isolated from God's Essence. Of course God has personal names, but they are no more than mere signifiers. Most, at any rate, are nouns of attribute. According to Ibn-e 'Arabī, every noun stands for two things: essence and attribute. Hence, a Name of God is simultaneously both a noun and an attribute. This attribute tells us the precise nature of Creation's relationship to God, and the manner in which these attributes act in the world. For example, al-Raḥmān (The Merciful), al-Muṣavvir (The Fashioner), al-Bārī (The Producer), al-Khāliq (The Creator). The same holds more or less true for the names of the Creation. Ibn-e 'Arabī says that Creation results when Divine Attributes manifest themselves on Eternal Archetypes¹⁴ (*a'yān-e ṣābita*)

¹²Refers to the Qur'ānic phrase "*Kun fa-yakūn*" ("Be, and it is"). In other words, when God wills a thing He only has to say these two words (see Qur'ān, 16:40, 19:35, 36:82, 40:68).

¹³See Memon, "Askari's 'Noun'."

¹⁴"The eternal Archetypes are to be regarded as ontological models which are eternally established in divine Consciousness and upon which the phenomenal

and “innate possibilities” (*ṭabā’i‘-e mumkināt*). Then again, the Eternal Archetypes receive precisely the type of Divine Self-Manifestation that is in keeping with their natures, as the Qur’ān itself has it: “*va huwa’-laẓī khalaqa’s-samāvātī va’l-arḡa bi’l-ḥaqqī...*”¹⁵ This verse has come to be translated from Sir Sayyid’s times onward as “God has created the sky and the earth for a specific purpose.” You’d have easily guessed that it is not God but Jeremy Bentham¹⁶ who is speaking through this sentence. Shāh ‘Abdu’l-Qādir¹⁷ has explicated it thus: God has endowed everything with a special nature according to which it acts. This “special nature” or characteristic is called “*ḥaqq*” by Muslims, “*sat*” by Hindus, and “*virtū*” by the European Christians of the Middle Ages.

In sum, everything is endowed with a special characteristic that distinguishes it from all other things. This characteristic cannot be isolated from that thing. Therefore, the name of everything must necessarily include its characteristic. It is for this reason that Arabic grammar treats “adjective” as a subordinate of “noun.” The upshot of this very concept has been that most Arabic and Sanskrit nouns show the entire action of the thing they signify, with the concomitant result that the word displays the same characteristic which is found in the Chinese script. For example, Kalidasa employs the word “*viharta*”¹⁸ for “wife,” which literally means “that which is opened.” The effect of this concept on literature has been that adjectives are rarely used with nouns in our literature as opposed to Western literature. If you don’t trust me on this, just open *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā*¹⁹ and read the account of just any garden, feast, or fair.

things are produced in the empirical dimension of time and space.”—Izutsu, *Creation*, 92. See Memon, “‘Askari’s ‘Noun.’”

¹⁵Qur’ān 6:73.

¹⁶(1748–1832), British philosopher and champion of utilitarianism. He was also a theoretical jurist and economist, famous for the principle “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.” He advocated universal suffrage and the decriminalization of homosexuality and produced a utilitarian justification for democracy. Obviously ‘Askari’s ire is directed against Bentham’s overemphasis on “utilitarianism.”

¹⁷Shāh ‘Abdu’l-Qādir (1753–1813) was the son of the famous Shāh Valīu’l-Lāh and is known for his translation of the Qur’ān, *Muḡīḥ al-Qur’ān* (1790) in Urdu.

¹⁸It is difficult to establish the correct spelling of the word from ‘Askari’s Urdu transcription. However, if the intended word is “*viharta*,” it is a passive past-participle and means “what is opened.”

¹⁹Itself in seven volumes, this is only a part of a larger cycle of stories collectively called *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza* (on which see the special section in *The Annual of*

These are the very occasions where Westerners unload a veritable cartload of adjectives. Conversely, here, you'll see only a beeline of just names of objects. Why adjectives are not appended to nouns is because every object has a quality all its own, the name simultaneously points to that quality as well; or that with the name we think without any deliberate effort also of its quality. Western writers since the seventeenth century have been forced to stick an adjective onto a noun because they do not admit the presence of a particular and distinguishing quality in an object, rather the quality changes with each fresh viewer so that whenever the writer names a thing he feels constrained to indicate the quality he observed in it at a given time and in given circumstances.

Of course literature is not the most direct means to reach reality and operates, admittedly, within the orbit of qualities. Still the manifestation of the concept of reality prevalent in a culture can be observed in all kinds of activities. We tend to place the names of objects above the names of their qualities, to such a degree that the observation of unseen forms and the examination of colors and lights is considered downright frivolous. A similar attitude is found among us as regards creatures. The emphasis is placed on the essence of a thing and only less so on its quality.

When an Eastern writer wishes to depict the good or bad quality of a thing, he customarily resorts to the use of simile and metaphor. For example, Anīs²⁰ praises the sword in the following words:

Yān mauj to vān sail, jō yān abr to vān barq
Mun^b zahr, burriṣh qabr, badan āg, zabān
barq²¹

Urdu Studies 15, pt. 1 (2000): 117–261). For a comprehensive discussion of the poetics of *dāstān* and of *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*, see Shamsu'r-Rahmān Fārūqī, *Sāḥirī, Shāhī, Ṣāḥib-Qirānī: Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza kā Muṭāli'a, Jild Avval: Na arī Mabāḥiṣ* (New Delhi: Qaumī Kōnsil Barā-e Farōgh-e Urdū Zabān, 1999). 'Askarī also published a one-volume selection of the *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* with a very perceptive foreword about the tenor, style, and importance of the art of *dāstān* (Lahore: Maktaba-e Jadīd, 1953).

²⁰Mīr Babbar 'Alī Anīs (1802–74) was famous for his elegies (*marāṣī*) commemorating the martyrdom of the Prophet Muḥammad's grandson Ḥusain b. Abī Ṭālib. For a verse translation of his famous *marṣiya*, *Jab Qat' kī Masāfat-e Shab Āftāb Nē*, see David Matthews, *The Battle of Karbala: A Marsiya of Anis* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1994).

Compare these lines to the descriptive verse of Spencer or Milton and you will know the difference between the East and West. As for the objection that one finds a plethora of similes and metaphors in Eastern poetry—well, such complaints have been regularly voiced from the time of Āzād²² and Ḥālī.²³ There's little we can do about it. These tropes too are related to our basic assumptions [about Reality]. Our grammar treats adjective as a form of noun and our literature expresses itself through metaphors. According to Lévy-Bruhl's²⁴ theory, we Easterners would be considered primitive people whose minds have no capacity to distinguish qualities apart from objects, but the fact is such intellectuals as Ibn-e 'Arabī and Shankaracharya have for centuries been occupied with explaining the assumptions that lie at the back of our stylistic media.

Here is the background of why simile and metaphor abound in our literature. To begin with, the status of all the Divine Names is *tashbīhī* [i.e., they can be understood only in relation to Creation; to know them as they are *qua* themselves is not possible for humans]. The Essence of God simply cannot be described in words. A Divine Name has two determinations: Essence and Attribute. Inasmuch as the Essence remains the same in each Name, each Name is necessarily reflected in its counterpart. Now if one is aiming for the Essence, any Name could easily replace another. Whether you call "Raḥmān," "Raḥīm," or "Bārī," you call on a single entity.²⁵

Then again, whatever action takes place in the phenomenal world, it does so from God; therefore, God's *tashbīhī* Names can scarcely be counted.²⁶ This conception of Supreme Reality already yields maximum

²¹Translation: "Here wave, there deluge, if cloud here, then lightning there / Mouth—venom, sharpness—wrath, body—fire, tongue—lightning."

²²Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād (1830–1910), author of the *Āb-e Ḥayāt*.

²³Khvāja Alḡāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837–1914).

²⁴Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) taught philosophy at the Sorbonne, Paris, and is famous for his studies of the psychology of primitive peoples.

²⁵I.e., all Divine Names and Attributes are only outward manifestations of the Absolute Essence; in the state of undifferentiation, they are the Essence itself. Their essential Unity cannot be obliterated by their future individuation at the plane of matter.

²⁶[T]he Absolute, in accordance with the ontological requirement of all its Names and attributes—the divine names are ordinarily understood to be ninety-nine but in reality they are, in Ibn 'Arabī's view, infinite in number—goes on

freedom for the use of similes and metaphors. Now as regards Creation (*makhlūqāt*), every object borrows its reality from God; in other words, a single Reality permeates all created objects and mutual similarity exists among them. This allows for them to be placed one next to the other. From this point forward one could find ample room for exuberance of imagination (*khayāl-ārāʿī*). As we have already seen, every object is endowed with a particular and distinguishing quality in which no other object can compare with it. Now if in another object a similar quality is found but in an inferior degree and we would like to describe or elucidate it, the easiest thing would then be to refer merely to the first object, which will automatically manifest that quality. So then, we describe one thing by referring to another. This is made possible by the simultaneous existence of both uniqueness and similarity among all objects.

Now read Anīs's above quoted lines again.

If in Eastern poetry we describe one object by means of another object, not merely by means of qualities, this poetry would inevitably acquire greater concreteness (*ṭhōspan*)—something that enjoys much importance in modern Western poetry. Concreteness means sensible experience (*ḥissiyātī tajriba*). Since instead of parading adjectives we call objects by their names, concreteness is naturally present in our poetry. But with a difference. In Eastern languages a word is connected synchronically with all the different stages of Reality.²⁷ This connection, rising above sensibility (*ḥissiyāt*) and passing through diverse stages [of Being] ultimately reaches the spiritual world (*ʿālam-e rūḥānī*), so that

manifesting itself in an infinite number of concrete forms.”—Izutsu, *Creation*, 163–4.

²⁷In the mystical philosophy of *Vahdatu'l-Vujūd* (Transcendent Unity of Being), the ontological descent from the Absolute Being to the empirical world of the phenomena occurs through cycles of emanation—each of which is called a *daraja* (stage/grade)—according to the following schema: *ghaib al-ghuyūb* or *zāt al-vujūd* (Mystery of Mysteries; existence as absolutely non-conditioned) > *aḥadī-ya* (Oneness; existence as negatively conditioned; the stage of the first self-determination of the Absolute; the “most sacred emanation” (*faiz aqdas*); the source of all phenomenal things) > *vāḥidīya* (Unity; existence-as-conditioned-by-being-something; stage in which inner articulations appear in the absolute Oneness; the stage of Names and Attributes and of the “sacred emanation” (*faiz muqaddas*) > appearance of individual phenomenal things. For a more comprehensive elaboration, see Izutsu, *Creation*, 85–ff.

every word possesses a non-sensible and non-emotional aspect as well. We cannot therefore claim that the concreteness of modern Western poetry and that of the Eastern are one and the same thing, though from Stéphane Mallarmé down to Ezra Pound and the Surrealist poets all good writers in the West have endeavored to extricate themselves from the bog of sensibility. But this is another matter.

Likewise, the use of names instead of adjectives should not impel one to assume that, like modern Western poetry, Eastern poetry also makes use of “image” or “symbol.” To a limited degree these terms can be useful even in regard to Eastern literature, but only when we have first understood the difference between the West and the East. Modern symbolist poetry begins with Charles Baudelaire, who had borrowed the theory of “symbol” from Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Even though Swedenborg was admittedly a kind of mystic, he had become lost in ecstatic contemplation of God (*mukāshafāt*) which is viewed in our culture as mere “sport” and “pastime.” Whatever Western poets have thought about “symbol,” they have generally done so within the confines of the material world. In the East, on the other hand, every object and every word is a symbol with the potential to connect simultaneously with all the stages of Reality. It can therefore have multiple meanings, without ever threatening to become a riddle. This is so because its meanings are circumscribed by an impersonal tradition and a consistent system. By contrast, in modern Western poetry symbols tend to be individual and self-referential or reflexive, which sometimes makes them hard for others to understand. A second difference lies in the fact that symbols in the East bear the most profound and intimate relation to the spiritual world. Conversely, in modern Western poetry symbols relate not to the “*rūb*” (spirit) but to the “*nafs*” (psyche; also self, ego).

I seem to have wandered a bit off the subject. I was talking about the use of simile and metaphor in place of adjective in the East, and about how our fundamental concepts allow us maximum freedom to go with our imagination as far as it will take us (*khayāl-ārāʿī*). As I presented it, every Divine Name has two determinations: Essence and Attribute. We can therefore view Reality in two ways: either in its dimension of transcendence/otherness (*tanzīh*) or that of similarity/sameness/immanence (*tashbīh*). All this necessarily means that in the East literature has—indeed, can only have—two basic stylistic modes. If a writer’s disposition inclines toward “transcendence,” his style will become so dry and drab that Westerners will expel it from the domain of literature; if, on the

other hand, it inclines toward “similarity,” his writing will become so oppressively colorful that Westerners will cry uncle.

Just as all opposites converge and unite in the Essence of God, in the same way Eastern literature is the meeting ground of opposite stylistic modes. All of Eastern literature keeps moving between these two modes. If you’re one for terminological labels, well then, call the two modes “inimitable simplicity” (“*sehl-e mumtani*”) and “exuberance of imagination” (“*khayāl-ārā’i*”).

In light of this principle it is possible both to do away with adjectives entirely or append numberless adjectives to a noun. If proof is needed, grab just one book, *Tilism-e Hōshrubā* and have a look. I’ll cite only one example in which a veritable procession of adjectives has been commissioned:

*Ēk javān-e khurshīd jamāl kō dēkhā jō nihānī rāz kā bhēdī, shabē viṣāl kā nau-
umīdī, hañs kē ḥērnē vālā, sitam uḥānē sē muñḥ phērnē vālā, rātōñ kō jagānē vālā,
vaṣl kē ankār par rūṭḥ jānē vālā, muḥabbat kā putlā, ‘ishq kā naqshā, zīnat čār
bālīsh ulfat, sarāpā čāhat kī ṣūrat, lab-e shīrīñ kā žā’iqā-mand, khāna’-e ḥusn kē
lūṭnē mēñ čāq-o-čauband, matā’-e ḥusn par dāñt lagā’ē, hōñṭ čūsñē kī ārzū mēñ
muñḥ phulā’ē, istighnā kā faqīr, bōsōñ kā sā’il, ḥasīnōñ kā amīr, dil-lagī par mā’il,
dashtē ‘ishq kā jōgī, muḥabbat kā rōgī, ‘aqīq kō nilam banānē vālā, hōñṭōñ par
dāñt lagānē vālā, jis kē pahlū mēñ na hōñē sē dil kō shōr-o-shīñ, intihā’ kā bēčāin,
shōkh, ṭarrār, čulbulā, žarā sī bāt par qasmēñ dēñē vālā, namak-e muḥabbat sē
mazē lūṭē hū’ē, shōrīdasarī par āmāda, hazārōñ dil lūṭ liyē, karōrōñ g’har ḥusn kē
barbād kiyē, qaid-e ulfat mēñ phūñsā, insāniyat sē ḥūṭē hū’ē ma’shūq kī āñkḥ kā
tārā, dil-o-jāñ sē ziyāda pyārā, parizādōñ kā banā’ō, mehjabīnōñ kā kḥēl,
nāznīnōñ kē dil kā rakḥ-rakḥā’ō, har dil kō usī sē shakēb, ‘āshiq pur-farēb, ma’shūq
bā-zēb ...*²⁸

As I said, the sentence is bursting with a profusion of adjectives. But try to analyze it according to English rules, first morphologically and then syntactically. It abounds in many adjectival phrases, but some of these are in their status adjectives, others nouns. Further, the manner of fusing nominal and adjectival phrases makes for a very strange structure indeed; however, the sentence manages to clarify, at the very least, that nothing like the Wall of China has been put up between the noun and the adjective. A noun, without much fanfare, quietly transmutes itself into an adjective and vice versa. It is a commonplace of our poetry that an

²⁸For the original in Urdu script, see Appendix.

adjective is used as a noun with the least bit of effort, for instance, “*shōkh*,” “*māh-rū*,” “*dil-rubā*,” etc. The use of an adjective as a noun without antecedent is not permissible according to Ḥasrat Mōhānī.²⁹ But the examples Ḥasrat has himself pulled out make it perfectly clear that from Valī Dakanī (1667–1720/5) down to Jigar Murādābādī (1890–1961) every poet has violated this principle—a violation sanctioned by the concepts which I have mentioned above.

It remains to be seen what adjectives or adjectival phrases employed in Eastern literature do express. Here, let me mention in passing that since the seventeenth century adjectives in Western literature express either the material properties of an object, or its affect on the viewer’s emotions or sensibility, or the viewer’s judgment about the value of the object. One observes a strange duality in this period of Western civilization. Since Descartes’ time Western science has insisted on viewing things apart from the viewer, while Western literature has generally held that an object does not possess a distinct quality of its own and that quality is merely relative—relative to its affect on the viewer. Here I’m merely talking of a general tendency, not a particular writer or group. In short, Western literature confines objects to the material world; conversely, Eastern literature gives them a status of their own quite independently of the viewer, and connects them to different stages of Reality. Adjectives employed in Eastern literature also describe the material and sensible characteristics of objects (comparatively more prominently in Sanskrit and Chinese poetry than in Arabic and Persian), but here the greater emphasis falls on the object itself and its motive power, not on the reaction of the viewer. A compelling and comprehensive analysis is not intended here, nor do I believe I’m capable of it. At any rate, here are just a few obvious and plain facts about objects that adjectives in our literature reveal to us:

1. To which of the manifold stages of Reality a given object belongs and its relation to the other stages.
2. What the status of an object is in the stage to which it directly belongs.
3. Inasmuch as objects are classified in subcategories from different perspectives within each stage, what the perspective is on the basis of which a given object will be placed in a subcategory.
4. What the particular and distinguishing quality of the object is.

²⁹Poet, journalist and political activist (1875–1951).

5. What its relationship to the other objects within its own stage is.
6. How it acts within its own stage.
7. What effect its action produces on other objects.
8. What its value is according to which perspective in a given stage.
9. Since all stages are structurally similar, a given object can be described in terms of all other stages so that qualities particular to a given stage can be applied figuratively to objects of another stage.

Now judge for yourself how far-reaching and wide-ranging the operational sphere of adjectives in our literature is and, by comparison, how confined and narrow their field of operation is in Western literature, which, it must be admitted, far outweighs ours in sensible intensity and passion.

Adjectives, in Urdu, followed along in consonance with the Eastern tradition. The change was inaugurated under the impact of the English. In order to fully appreciate this change it is imperative that we first look briefly at English literature itself.

Until the end of the Middle Ages adjectives were used in English poetry more or less as they are used in our tradition because Westerners, even though they may not have grasped Unity/Oneness (*Tauhīd*) as comprehensively as Hindus and Muslims had, nonetheless subscribed to a concept of Reality roughly analogous to that of Hindus and Muslims. Therefore their literature and stylistic modes too were nearer to Eastern and farther away from modern Western literature. Today most critics talk appreciatively about the manner in which Chaucer employed adjectives, yet none tells us what is good in this employment and where this quality comes from. One of them says that Chaucer's adjectives are very straightforward, another says it is their concreteness, still another that they have been used very precisely and aptly. Even Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874–1936), whom we could have rightly expected to tell us, fails to spell out the matter. And although Danby is right when he says that Chaucer's words do not distance us from but rather bring us straight inside of objects (this quality has been explained above), all he can say in elaboration of such phrases as "smale fowles" and "tender croppes"³⁰ is that these words are not "particular" but "common" and that

³⁰Askari's Urdu translation has, respectively, "small birds" and "delicate plants." He has reversed the order of their appearance. The original:

Whan Zephyrus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth

their beauty lies in giving expression to the experience of an ordinary man. To the extent that Chaucer is not stating his personal reaction but rather portraying an object that will be perceived as it is by others, Danby is right, but he's misleading in his reliance on the experience of the common man, which is a typical twentieth-century mentality. In the traditional view objects are sorted out in different categories and from different perspectives. These categories are not the sense perceptions (*maḥsūsāt*) of the common man; they are rather the immutable constructs of the traditional society. Chaucer, therefore, is not merely expressing sense perceptions through these adjectives; he is, as a matter of fact, also placing them in immutable stages and categories. This is not generalization but particularization. This is precisely Chaucer's "concreteness," above and beyond personal sense experiences (*shakhṣī maḥsūsāt*).

Then again, the Professor Sahib [Danby] states that Chaucer's disposition is characterized by tenderness and compassion and that he does not merely laugh at a thing he considers bad, he also accepts it. This too is not a product of disposition. Objects can be placed in categories, but each category occupies its ineluctably fixed place in the cosmos and, hence, it cannot be rejected or dismissed. For example, while one can of course find a phrase such as "wicked women"³¹ in Chaucer, what one will not find is Chaucer either stoning, à la Tennyson, or sanctifying, à la Swinburne, such women. Chaucer views life both from a moral and apart from a moral perspective. His ethics are

The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
 And smale fowles maken melodye

(The General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, lines 5–9)

³¹Askarī uses the phrase "*bad-ma'āsh 'aurtēn*." Whether Chaucer has used it is not clear. I asked S.R. Fārūqī about it and this is what he said: "The reference is to The Wif/Wyf (Woman) of Bath, a famous character in *The Canterbury Tales*. '*Bad-ma'āsh 'aurtēn*' is obviously 'wicked women' and seems 'Askarī's phrase. I couldn't find it in the Prologue to the *Tales*, or in the story of the 'Wyf of Bath.' She married five times and had many lovers besides. So she qualifies for '*bad-ma'āsh*.' Chaucer uses 'shrew' for this purpose, but applies it to both men and women. (In modern English, it only means 'a quarrelsome woman.') The relevant references in *The Canterbury Tales* are General Prologue, lines 460–4; 'The Wif of Bath's Prologue and Tale,' lines 5–9, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 1 (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000)."

not purely moral, because unlike the nineteenth century, metaphysics lies at the back of these ethics.

The decline of metaphysics was ushered in quite conspicuously during the sixteenth century, bringing in its wake a change in the manner in which adjectives were now used in poetry. For one thing, the number of adjectives multiplied ten times over what had previously existed. One can witness a veritable deluge of them in Spencer's poetry. He presents not the special quality, but the external uniqueness of an object, which results in an overemphasis on the portrayal of qualities and on the representation of experiences derived from the senses or on the emotional reaction. In other words, Spencer produces the type of "particularness" (*takhsīṣ*) mentioned by Danby. On the other hand, his adjectives are unalloyed moral judgments. If a thing is bad, it's bad; if good, it's good. Further, adjectives that have to do with the spiritual world are packed to overflowing—as if Spencer was in the throes of a death struggle to preserve what was quickly vanishing; assuring others and himself over and over that it was something important. In short, words that enjoyed metaphysical status in Chaucer had now acquired an emotional character.

Milton too follows closely in the tracks of Spencer. To top it all off, adjectives Spencer had daubed with emotional color, Milton employs to create a wholesome effect or atmosphere instead. Objects that had appeared clear and sharply defined until Chaucer's time lose themselves in a "soft numinous light" (*halkī halkī maḥhabī raushnī*).

Between these two poets are John Donne and his companions. Now "matter" has been accepted as a reality parallel to "spirit," adversaries of one another. As a result, adjectives move in two directions simultaneously among these poets, which produces a tension, a cramping. Contrast, confrontation, difference, fusion of incongruities, casting far afield for meaning—all these poetic acrobatics too were possible within the old tradition. The verse of our own Moḥsin Kākōrvī (1825–1905) may be cited for example. Things merge effortlessly according to the old tradition because there we start from metaphysics and move downward toward matter, so that internal resemblance is easily found in objects that otherwise are externally dissimilar. By contrast, a wild intensity is found among these poets. This is because even though they do affirm metaphysics, they start from the nether world of matter and attempt to also conflate objects at the material level.

Spirit and matter were decisively wrenched apart under Cartesian influence in the neoclassical period, which did away even with their mutual tension. When spirit became a nebulous thing there was no question of

its rising above matter. In the world of matter the most “immaterial” thing could only be analytical reason and, hence, the most trustworthy. This promoted the use of adjectives which described only the external and material state and quantity of an object, or else they were used to issue moral or social judgments. Another novel thing was also accomplished: this was to isolate the external quality of an object by recourse to purely analytical and rational methods and graft that quality onto another object. In such an adjective not just the sensible effect is snuffed out but also the metaphysical meaningfulness, leaving room, if at all, for only mental pleasure. For instance, Pope has described fish as “*sufnē-dār qabilē*” (“scaly tribes/schools”).³² On the other hand, as a reaction against this rationalism, other adjectives were employed which described only the most pedestrian, clichéd, emotional or sensible experience, indeed so slight an experience that one hardly deigns even to register it. Second-rate poets who managed to transform adjectives into a totally meaningless decoration adopted this style in the eighteenth century.

Adjectives acquired an entirely new significance among the Romantic poets who turned them into a vehicle for expressing the poet’s personal taste and manner of perception. In other words, the Romantics lopped off the objects and concentrated instead on showing their personal reaction to them. The upshot was that the adjective became more essential and unavoidable than the noun. Since these adjectives represent the poet’s personal reaction, they keep knocking around within the sphere of emotions and sensible experience. Beyond it, if they do hold any meaning at all, it is not metaphysical but philosophical—a philosophy exclusive to the poet. For example, Wordsworth portrays evening as “calm and free”³³ (*pur-sukūn aur āzād*). If you do not know the specific meaning “free” has in the poet’s own very personal philosophy, you cannot understand the true import of this phrase.

Victorian poets more or less rehashed the words of the Romantics with the difference that, whereas on the one hand adjectives became so sensible and concrete that their significance didn’t go farther than just those qualities, on the other, they became so insubstantial that, apart from an imperceptibly slight effect, no room could be found for even a

³²Alexander Pope’s (1688–1744) phrase is “the scaly breed” and occurs in the poem “Windsor Forest,” line 139.

³³The phrase occurs in the opening line of his sonnet “It’s a Beauteous Evening Calm and Free.”

personal philosophy. At any rate, these poets so popularized the use of adjectives that the very meaning of poetry came to lie in rounding up a slew of them and herding them into a single space.

The towering idol³⁴ of adjectives was finally brought down by Eliot, Pound, and other modern poets. But the inspiration behind their iconoclasm had come from their study of French poetry of the second half of the nineteenth century. Inevitably we must now take a trip to France.

Two styles of writing emerged in France from the middle of the nineteenth century and they persist with different modifications throughout Western literature to this day. Emile Zola spearheaded one of these, *Bau-* delaire the other.

Zola's method was to present only the external and material aspects of objects because beyond these aspects objects possessed nothing. This method put constraints on even the mention of individual reaction so that greater emphasis came to be placed on the visual sense in the hierarchy of perceptions derived from the senses. This style was reflected in poetry too, but generally novelists adopted it.

Even though adjectives also present the material aspect of objects in Flaubert, he endeavors mainly to show the inner state of the character as it is impacted by the description of external events. In other words, he makes man and objects an experiential unity. Claude Mauriac provides one definition of this quality when he says that Flaubert's characters are devoid of spirit.

Two separate worlds—the traditional and the one fashioned by Descartes and Western science—collide in the way Baudelaire uses adjectives. The resulting seismic upheaval best describes the character of Baudelaire's poetry. On the one hand he accepts that matter is the ultimate reality and that man knows matter through his sense perceptions, so he invests sense perceptions with such sharpness and intensity that they literally become uncomfortably harsh; and on the other hand he also does not reject the old metaphysical system, at least not its moral aspect, although he flaunts those things that are objectionable according to the old system. This is how an awesome blend of agony and ecstasy is produced in his poems. By using adjectives that are both sensible and religious in their nature in one and the same place,

³⁴Askari uses the word for the great Hindu temple Somnath on the coast of Kathiawar which Mahmud of Ghazni destroyed during his invasion of India in 1024–25.

he exposes the Hell of Western civilization. In this he was followed by Jules Laforgue (1860–87) and Tristan Corbière (1845–75).

Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91) was to a degree familiar with the religious texts of the East. He wanted to escape, likely as a consequence of this familiarity, the world trapped inside matter. His proposed method was to break free of determinations by disrupting sense perceptions. So, in a manner of speaking, adjectives work like dynamite in his poetry.

Mallarmé (1842–98), and his devotee Paul Valéry (1871–1945) as well, found another way out of determinations: they packed each noun and adjective with an abundance of semantic layers, each of which crumbled in turn, making room for the next layer. The process is touched off with concrete matter and sensibility, followed, in turn, by emotions, intellectual perceptions, and philosophy. Both writers were no doubt headed in the direction of metaphysics but never did make it there because they had started without the help of traditional metaphysics. Instead, they had depended on the power of personal cogitation. That is why their poetry turns into a riddle for the reader, who has to exercise an equal amount of cogitation of his own to keep abreast of them.

Surrealist poets turned literature and art into an instrument for expressing the unconscious. So, just as it happens in dreams, every noun (read “image”) and adjective became a concrete object. In this way they pulled down the wall Descartes had erected between noun and adjective, nonetheless they also crowded objects with a multitude of meanings and even demonstrated how one object could be substituted for another. Such poetry does appear to be inching toward traditional poetry. There is, however, a big difference. Although André Breton (1896–1966), who led this group, had gotten a whiff of the old tradition, thanks largely to René Guénon³⁵ who was the greatest Western expounder of Eastern thought, his own thought and art was founded upon Freud’s psychology and Marx’s materialism. In Eastern poetry these qualities result from certain metaphysical principles which keep all semantic complexities rigorously subordinated to a system. Among the Surrealists, though, the wellspring of every object is the unconscious. As such, this poetry becomes a raveled thread. For example, Reverdy³⁶ claims that “image”

³⁵On him, see ‘Askari’s “Ibn-e ‘Arabī and Kierkegaard,” footnote 6, elsewhere in this issue.

³⁶Pierre Reverdy (1889–1960) was a French poet and an early mentor of the Surrealist school.

does not compare one object with another; rather it unites two realities in a single place. In traditional conceptualization, on the other hand, plurality absolutely cannot be applied to Reality, which is necessarily ONE. While it is all right to say “two stages” of Reality, it is not all right to say “two realities.” Surrealist poets had invented a new kind of adjective, or simile, or metaphor. They would place two nouns or objects side by side, leaving the reader to decide which of the two was noun and which adjective. For example, “*čāqū čānd*” (“knife moon”). Here, two objects do indeed fuse into each other, but it simply cannot be said which of the two is intended by the poet: the knife? the moon? Objects, in this method, lose their individual identity; just the opposite of what happens in the East where they also come together, but without the loss of individual identity.

It is worth considering next how adjectives are used in Sartre’s novels. Technical terms apart, his philosophy can be described straightforwardly thus: Existence is of two kinds, purely material, which even stones have, and those moments of consciousness and cognition that one experiences but rarely. When Sartre describes objects that fall in the first category, the adjectives employed portray only the external and material aspect of the object. Here, he begins to approach the Naturalists. By contrast, in the description of objects in the second category, adjectives assume a philosophical aspect. Often the very same word signifies two opposite meanings. The most difficult word in Sartre, and the fuzziest as well, is “free.” Acquisition of consciousness is freedom, and so is the desire to become stone. This is the crass result of assigning priority to matter over essence.

Another popular feature of contemporary Western literature is to append a whole string of adjectives to a noun—adjectives indicative of intense sensible effect. Although found also in Faulkner, the most telling examples of this style are observed in the prose of Lawrence Durrell.³⁷ This style is characterized by such passionate intensity that not only does the object itself disappear but sensible perceptions too begin to melt away from their own intensity.

The latest trend in Western culture is to walk backwards: adjectives earlier connected with the spiritual world are now being affixed to the lowliest manifestations of the material world. Have a look at the most representative artistic expression of contemporary Western culture,

³⁷1912–90; best known for *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957–60).

namely commercials, and you will see all the attributes of the Holiest Realm (*'ālam-e rūḥānī*) applied to feminine undergarments and hair-removal soaps. By contrast, the Americans have got the fashion going that an object with even the slightest spiritual content should be described in professional jargon. For instance, they call a “place of learning” (*ta'limgāh*) a “workshop,” a term which has now become current in the countries of the East too.

To sum up this babble: The East has assumed that all objects derive their existence from metaphysical Reality and hence both share in its immutable essence and yet possess their distinguishing qualities. Quality, therefore, necessarily inheres in a noun. After the Middle Ages the West confined Reality to matter and sense perceptions. As a result, every other attribute except for purely material particularities broke away from objects. When only matter remained in objects, they shattered and scattered, and every human, commensurate with his private sense perceptions, received a piece thereof. The West has been attempting to comprehend and hold onto objects through adjectives for the last three hundred years. But even as the moon tumbles closer, the very objects of the world are moving farther and farther away.

This is the West Maulānā Ḥālī had enjoined us to emulate. Our problem in the second half of the nineteenth century was that we were both terrified and impressed by the material superiority of Europe, bending over backwards to somehow catch up with it. Our concept of progress had acquired a purely material character and we slunk away from metaphysics and spirituality. This is the end result of studying Muslim history, rather than Islam. Three demands were made of literature under these circumstances: one, it must be realistic, that is, the material aspects of objects must be described through analytical reason; two, it must have sincerity, that is, it must only arise from and affect emotions; and three, it must motivate action, that is, induce in one the desire to achieve material progress.

In the opinion of our literary pioneers Western literature possessed all these qualities, so they counseled us to follow the West. See how Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād portrays false literature: “Spears were stuck in the bodies of men, and in place of eyes women had fiery glasses. If men’s hearts were blazing ambers, women’s breasts were icy cold.”

How would poor Āzād know that in France, these days, some people in fact are beginning to call this sort of thing “true” literature, and so will the Surrealists a little later. Leave Western literature aside, in their reforming zeal these pioneers had started to go after Eastern literature itself

with a vengeance. To give just one example, Maulvī Azīz Mirzā’s gripe about Urdu poetry is that it is full of affectation, full of hyperboles, and, worse, imitates Persian poetry. “Conceits,” he says, “that had become established as beauty’s essential and contingent qualities among Persian poets after centuries of search and effort, barged intact into Urdu poetry as well.” Where the “essential and contingent qualities” had come from I’ve already demonstrated above, but the amusing thing is that the Maulvī Ṣāhib [i.e. ‘Azīz Mirzā] produces the following quote from Kalidasa to establish the superiority of Sanskrit poetry: “Her body is the jewel of all jewels and the adornment of all adornments. It would be proper to say that things which are generally regarded as the wherewithal of beauty should have their beauty and suitability judged with reference to her.”³⁸

Anyway, let’s now look at the fate of adjectives in the aftermath of our uncritical perusal of the West. Our Naturalist poets abandoned metaphysics and bonded with matter. Quite unjustifiably they began to round up all such adjectives that had to do with the spiritual world and plunk them into the sphere of materialism. This resulted in the reduction of their former status. Their new status was, at its very best, moral. On the other hand, these poets were also loath to accept sense perceptions, because such perceptions led to the dissoluteness and moral degeneration of the nation. So, with regard to sense perceptions, these people limited themselves to depicting merely their external appearance and effect, and even what was expressed, it’s expression or suppression made absolutely no difference at all, for example, “green parrot.” They were left with only one choice now: emotions. If you conflate the two, the result would be: Adjectives, in this kind of poetry, express moral sentiments. The following verse pretty much sums up this entire group:

*Nebr par čal rahī hai pañčakki
Dhūn kī pūrī hai bāt ki pakki*³⁹

³⁸That is, her body gives beauty to the jewelry, etc., and not the other way round. Unfortunately, information on Maulvī Azīz Mirzā is presently not available.

³⁹From the poem “Pañčakki” (Hydraulic Flourmill) by Ismā’īl Mēraṭhī. For “bāt” in the second line, read “kām.” Although [Muḥammad] Ismā’īl Mēraṭhī (1844–1917) wrote ghazals in both Persian and Urdu, he is better known as a children’s poet.

The flourmill is grinding away on the
 riverbank
 Unwavering in diligence, and conscientious
 too.

People under the influence of the movement launched by Sir Sayyid kept the number of adjectives to a minimum; they tried rather to stay away from them altogether in prose. Not so with the Aesthetic Movement (*jamāl-parastī kī tehrīk*). It literally unleashed a whole train of them, packing three, even four adjectives in a single sentence. Whether Sajjād Ḥaidar Yildarim or Niyāz Fatehpūrī, neither could stir an inch without the adjective. As for aesthetic beauty, it is conspicuously absent from their work. At the end of the day, you can only have two kinds of beauty: metaphysical or sensible. They had already severed the connection with metaphysics, all that remained was only a presumption of philosophy; and any adventure into the realm of the senses was likely to result in being roughed up. So they kept their devotion, their worship of beauty fairly innocuous—a prostration before the beloved. That's all. Just drool over the sight of a Parsi maiden on the beach and then scurry back home. Metaphysics or sense perceptions gone, emotions fairly innocent, on top of it all the desire to sound like philosophers—all this made this group's adjectives ring distinctly hollow, long on quantity, short on quality. A lot of verbal effusiveness, but nothing of substance to communicate. All that can be felt is that there is a riot in the emotions of the poor dears, and even that self-induced by a liberal use of Arabic words and Persian compounds. By way of example, try to compile a list of adjectives used in Sajjād Ḥaidar Yildarim: *sunehrā rēt* (golden sand), *halkē bādāl* (light clouds), *nīlgūn āsmān* (bluish sky), *nīm-garm pānī* (lukewarm water), *iztīrāb-āmēz 'ishq* (restless love), *'amīq aur ma'nī-dār muqaddas bhajan* (deep, meaningful, sacred hymn), *sāda magar pur-armān ḥarkat-e ḥayāt* (simple but filled-with-desire stirrings of life), *pur-faiḻ-e ḥayāt-o-farāvānī-bakhsh sīna* (full of munificent life and abundance-bestowing breast), *ṭḥandī aur bē-jān barkat* (cold and lifeless blessing), *shīrīn āghōsh* (sweet embrace), *mu'attar khushbū* (fragrant perfume), *lazīz ārzū* (delectable longing), *ḥasīn jism* (beautiful body), *'ālī falsafa* (lofty philosophy), *naḥīs afkār* (fine thoughts), *pāk-o-'ulvī khvāb* (pure and sublime dream), *laṭīf vaqār* (elegant pride), *rūḥānī aur bē-dāgh jism* (spiritual and pure body). Likewise, make another list from Niyāz Fatehpūrī: *ishāra'-e mubham* (barely perceptible gesture), *inḥizāb-e muzṭar* (involuntary attraction), *ḥayāt-sōz na rēn* (life-scorching eyes), *muṣaffā*

tarkīb-e ‘anāṣir (refined composition of elements), *khandā’-e saiyyāl* (liquid laugh). Did you observe how sense perceptions are altogether missing among the “lovers of beauty” (*jamāl-parastōn*), and how the reader is being oppressed by a show of presumed intellectuality?

Actually an overabundant use of adjectives started with Jōsh Malihābādī (1898–1982) in poetry, where intellect, emotions, sense perceptions are all thrown in together, though none of these really jells. Next Akhtar Shērānī (1905–48) and his associates picked up the commerce of adjectives. They express some vague, rather fanciful emotion, but, instead of Arabic, in Hindī words this time. Their adjectives point only to two things: the poet is melancholy, everything looks sad to him; he is happy, everything appears to him full of joy and ecstasy. While adjectives do appear to abound in their poetry, their total number doesn’t exceed a couple of dozen. They just keep recurring over and over, adjectives like *ḥasīn* (beautiful), *javān* (young), *afsurda* (melancholy), *raṅgīn* (colorful), etc.

Urdu literature had just about died at the hands of these people when, after 1936, the movement for a new kind of literature got underway. The most significant change from the literary point of view was the principle that some emotional, sensible, or reflective experience must necessarily lie behind every word. In aesthetic and romantic literature, poetry or fiction was made on the strength of adjectives, but meaning never did enter them, while the words were constrained to express nothing. After 1936, words were required to express something; adjectives especially must necessarily have meaning. In prose Maṅṭō found a way to present material attributes of objects with both detail and accuracy, and added further that the details should simultaneously reveal the human character. Faiz, Rāshid and Mīrājī⁴⁰ invested adjectives with sensible and emotional meanings, even with reflective meanings in places. Now the evening was not merely beautiful but became a “sad and burning evening” (“*afsurda, sulagṭī hū’ī shām*”), and the centuries-old enchanted mysteries, “dark and brutal” (“*tārik aur bahīmāna*”).

The new writers consciously abandoned the old metaphysics and adopted the Western concept of reality, and they tried, equally consciously, to relate to Western literature. Up until recently, what one saw was an effort to somehow fit the old tradition into the framework of

⁴⁰Pioneers of Modernist poetry in Urdu. Mīrājī died in 1949, Nūn Mīm Rāshid in 1975, and Faiz Aḥmad Faiz in 1984.

Western conceptions, even if that meant drastic surgery. Conversely, the new writers directly imported Western concepts and foisted them upon their writing styles. Whether this effort was good or bad is not the issue here. However, what this walking shoulder-to-shoulder with the West implied was the desire to move our literature forward on three fronts: those of sense perceptions, emotions, and intellect. Maṭṭō, Faiz, Rāshid, and Mīrājī accepted the challenge to accomplish that task. However far they may have traveled, the plain fact is that their followers didn't go forward, but rather backwards. Here I'm not concerned with naming names; all I want is to give an idea of the general literary condition. Other poets literally regurgitated the distinctive vocabulary of Faiz, Rāshid, and Mīrājī, indeed they started to reintroduce the adjectives used in the time of Akhtar Shērānī. The fiction writers couldn't even hold onto the style of Maṭṭō. Here, Akhtar Shērānism got the better of them even more. Aside from individual poets and fiction writers, this is how our literature generally looks today.

In this essay I have analyzed Urdu literature of the past one hundred years in the most cursory fashion. I lack the endurance to undertake a comprehensive study. All I want to do is produce an outline of the most salient tendencies. The problem that has bedeviled our literature for the past hundred years is this: having abandoned the old concept of Reality it is no longer possible for us to produce the old style literature. The only way left open is to follow the West, whether we like it or not, and several times and with much fanfare we have in fact tried to do just that. I've presented before you the sum of all our capital. I've especially analyzed adjectives because, as long as our traditional concepts persisted with us, the most basic words were "noun" and "verb." Conversely, under Western influence, "verb" and "adjective" have become the most basic words. This is because the West searches for the reality of things in the way they operate and in the way they affect the viewer. Anyway, there can be no doubt that we are no longer capable of perceiving the world with our traditional sensibility, but we have also shut ourselves off from the method of the West. Today our literature sees neither how objects act nor how man reacts to them.

This essay is not an inventory of crimes, but rather the necessary consequence of my personal problem. A writer doesn't work alone, but along with others. It may be uninteresting for you, but my problem is indeed grave. For the past twelve or thirteen years I've been laboring—if

only I could write a single sentence like Flaubert's on page 25, line 18 of his novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Garnier Edition) before I die.⁴¹ □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*

Published in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 19 (2004)
<mumemon@charter.net>

⁴¹Since there are numerous Garnier editions and reprints of this book, the sentence referred to cannot be determined conclusively without knowing the year of the Garnier edition used by 'Askari. If he had the 1954 edition (Paris: Garnier Frères) before him, the sentence would be: "Il ya avait au-delà du mur un verger, après la charmille, un bosquet; derrière la claire-voie, un petit chemin" (lines 16–8). "Beyond the wall there was an orchard, after the clipped hedge, a clump of trees; behind the fence, a little lane."—Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, trans. with an introduction by A.J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 38.