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Askari's "Ibn-e 'Arabi and Kierkegaard" (Translator's Note)

V_{QAQT} KI RAGNI (*Vaqt ki Rāgnī*), from which this and the preceding and following essays are taken, appeared posthumously a year after its author's death in 1978. The bulk of the essays in this volume were written in the 1960s, a few in the 1970s, and the last four in the 1940s. In the 1960s, 'Askari was writing principally for the literary journal *Sāt Rañg*, ably edited by its owner Aḥṡar Ṣiddīqī—indeed Mr. Ṣiddīqī, a poet in his own right, had started the journal at the behest and encouragement of none other than 'Askari himself. *Sāt Rañg*, like most Urdu literary journals—because they rarely turn a profit and are kept alive during their brief flowering merely by the youthful dedication of a few literary enthusiasts—ceased publication after a few years. Later, in the 1970s, when Suhēl Aḥmad, a poet and critic and professor of Urdu at Lahore, started his *Mehrāb*, a sporadic miscellany of creative and critical writing, largely to fill the gap left by the second demise of the celebrated literary journal *Savērā*, he especially invited 'Askari to write for *Mehrāb*. *Shabkhūn* (Allahabad) was still another venue where a few stray pieces by the author appeared during this period, mostly due to the high regard 'Askari had for its editor Shamsu'r-Raḥmān Fārūqī.

Of the sixteen essays brought together in *Vaqt ki Rāgnī*, the last four, dating from an earlier time, although penetrating and insightful as 'Askari's writings always are, really do not belong in this collection. They are thematically at odds with the other twelve. Their inclusion must be attributed to Suhēl Aḥmad's "*ijād-e bandā*"—his "inventive exuberance," if you will. The rest of the essays are all of a piece, indicative of the single, consuming engagement of their author with the problem and place of REALITY within Eastern civilizations. Questions such as what literary taste is, how it is born, what its foundational assumptions are, what it

means to accept Western literary concepts and influences, and whether such influences can be accepted without injury to one's essential cultural ethos as it unfolds in empirical time are revisited from varying perspectives of creative art and creative writing (such as literature, music, metaphysics, and writing-scripts) with a murderous intensity of focus in these essays. 'Askarī eventually concluded that in order to deal with these questions it was necessary to first trace them back to a core concept—and that concept was REALITY. But which Reality? The Reality grasped by the rational faculty? By emotion? Senses? By all and none. Individually, none of these apparati of cognition, as the instrument of a finite and contingent being, was truly self-existent. Hence it could only speak for itself and not for the cosmos as a whole. And collectively, they were all merely part of something still higher, self-existent and beyond temporality, indeed part of Existence itself. 'Askarī felt that this Reality had to be metaphysical, well beyond the material world, but one that nonetheless contained the material world within itself as a possibility of its phenomenal becoming. He arrived at this concept of Reality through Taṣavvuf, as expounded in the metaphysics of *Vahdat al-Vujūd* (Unity of Being) by its greatest theoretician Ibn al-'Arabī, a native of Murcia in al-Andalus (present-day Spain).

The question of whether everyone in society was always conscious of this necessary relationship between one's meanest act and Reality was perhaps less important for 'Askarī. However, no informed cultural discourse—and especially not literary discourse in South Asia with such formidable Western values looming large overhead since the arrival of the English—could afford to bypass it. A lack of clarity regarding this question had clouded the thinking of most Urdu intelligentsia since the time of Sir Sayyid, Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād and Ḥālī—men who ardently undertook to effect a transformation of their society in order to bring it abreast of that of their English overlords.

'Askarī's chief purpose in the present essay is a comparative study of the treatment of Abraham's narrative by Soren Kierkegaard in his *Fear and Trembling* and by Ibn-e 'Arabī in three chapters of his classic work on the metaphysical theory of Taṣavvuf the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. Actually only one of Ibn-e 'Arabī's chapters, fifth in order and scarcely three-and-a-half pages in length, deals strictly with Abraham. The other two, devoted as they are to Isaac and Ishmael, complement and conclude the narrative, enabling 'Askarī to fully work out and validate his thesis.

The third book discussed in the early part of the essay, André Gide's *Les Nourritures Terrestres*, is ancillary to 'Askarī's discussion, but

nonetheless important as the much needed springboard for the later comparison of the interpretive methods of Kierkegaard and Ibn-e 'Arabī, 'Askarī's main objective. Gide provides him with the needed point of departure, and in a curious but not wholly unexpected way, its introduction into the essay has much to do with 'Askarī's particular writing style, characterized as it is by a devastatingly sharp and blistering irony, if astonishingly understated.

Needless to say, a perusal of *Fear and Trembling* and the relevant chapters of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* would be quite rewarding (the former is a delightfully slim book, the latter only a few pages long), if only to verify whether or not 'Askarī has misrepresented either author. My own reading has not revealed distortions or misrepresentations; hence I have also not felt it necessary to trace each idea of the two authors back to its source. Had I even tried, it would no doubt have proved impossible to resurrect them intact since 'Askarī rarely quotes verbatim but rather paraphrases the original in his own Urdu, and that, moreover, is interspersed with his own text. However, a complete reading of the original texts does bear out 'Askarī's accurate reading and comprehension of them. Whether his conclusions are compellingly drawn is quite another matter which I'll address below.

Fear and Trembling was originally published under the pseudonym "Johannes de silentio" and is available in several English translations. I have used the one by Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 2003 [1985]). 'Askarī probably read it in a French translation or in an earlier English translation by Walter Lowrie.

As for the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, it was partially translated into French by Titus Burckhardt with the title *La Sagesse des Prophètes* (Paris: Lyons, 1955), and this was later translated into English by Angela Culme-Seymour as *The Wisdom of The Prophets* (Aldsworth, Gloucestershire: Beshara, 1975); a complete English translation by R. W. J. Austin appeared in 1980 under the title *The Bezels of Wisdom* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press).

'Askarī refers to three sources for Gide. He himself had most definitely read *Les Nourritures Terrestres* in the original French because his Urdu title for it, "*Zamīnī Ghizā*" (Earthly Nourishment), is a word-for-word translation of the French title. Gide's book was first published in 1897. Later he published *Les Nouvelles Nourritures*. Both works are available together in the single-volume translation by Dorothy Bussy titled *The Fruits of the Earth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949).

The passage from Gide's journals paraphrased by 'Askarī is available on page 26 of Volume IV (1939–1949) of *The Journals of André Gide*, translated with an introduction and notes by Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951).

The third source, where a devotee of Gide is shown to refer to Michel de Montaigne, has proved to be quite elusive. The incident certainly does not occur in this fourth volume of his journals which covers the years 1939–49. And if Gide, by his own admission, had read René Guénon only in 1943, it is unlikely that this incident could be found in the earlier volumes of the journals. On this it seems we just have to take 'Askarī's word for now.

I have, at any rate, given the text of the relevant portion from *Les Nourritures Terrestres* in a footnote in my translation and have reproduced the relevant portion of the entry for October 1943 in the appendix at the end of the translation.

A few words about the translation. 'Askarī simply borrows into Urdu the balance of Arabic technical terms—terms developed in the heyday of Muslim intellectual vigor, when the “overwhelming” West was still half a millennium or more in the future. These terms and their meanings had evolved from within the logic of a culture focused unwaveringly on the appreciation of the inner meanings of the Qur'an, which was, after all, unlike Christianity, Divinity incarnate in Word. Both Ibn-e 'Arabī's and 'Askarī's use of the employed terms is consistent throughout. This creates two very specific problems for the translator. One is the expectations of the target language itself, in this case English. Repeating, for instance, “self-manifestation” (*uhūr*) ten times over in a paragraph would create a very jarring effect, to say nothing of the resulting inelegance and clutter in what purports, above all, to be a literary text, though one may swallow such a practice a bit more easily in a treatise of a technical nature. Any inventive exuberance in this regard risks distorting the meaning. Many sensitive Western scholars, among them, first, Titus Burckhardt, later, William C. Chittick¹ and R. W. J. Austin,² have been aware of this problem and have pointed it out in their translations of Ibn-e 'Arabī. For

¹See his *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabī's Cosmology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), especially xxxv–xl.

²See his introduction in *The Bezels of Wisdom* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 16–7.

my own part I have tried, to the degree it has been possible for me, to be both literal and elegant, and in one instance even admit my failure.

The second problem is infinitely more daunting and not quite as self-apparent. Chittick has elucidated it brilliantly, very much after ‘Askarī’s own heart, though ‘Askarī probably never expressed it himself in quite the same way—viz., that both “transcendence” and “immanence” inhere simultaneously in such terms. For instance, the Western mind inclines towards abstraction. However, in the Islamic outlook, the abstract is equally concrete. It is not possible to think of one without the other. And words do convey this dual reference in the vocabulary of Taṣāwuf. For instance, “*a’yān-e ṣābita*” has been customarily translated as “Eternal Archetypes” and “Immutable Essences.” None of the four words here has an analog in objective and concrete reality; hence they are purely abstract. By contrast, the original Arabic does carry a suggestion of the “concrete,” even if it is indicative only of a possibility of existentiation (the word *a’yn*, sing. of *a’yān*, is “essence/self” all right, but it is also the word for “eye” and “spring/stream”). Curiously, we can only appreciate an “*ayn-e ṣābit*” in its existentiated form, as a concrete object, because no matter how mean it may be as a phenomenal object, it is part of transcendence. To capture in an English word this dual aspect and be elegant at the same time becomes very difficult indeed. In my own translation, however, I have generally used “Fixed Entities,” a term preferred by Chittick. (Readers will readily see that it is the same old problem of “*tanzih-tashbih*” to which ‘Askarī has alluded in these three essays time and time again.)

‘Askarī’s style is a refreshing, if at times somewhat irritating blend of high seriousness and controlled, if brutal, irony, bordering, at times, on sarcasm, very lightly, perhaps even comically, expressed. But at the end of the day, an intelligent reader comes away with one dominant impression: ‘Askarī’s clarity of vision, backed by years of extensive reading and reflection and passion for getting to the root of the matter. This blend of high seriousness and ironic lightness of expression is also evident in his very deliberate choice of titles for his essays. Who could guess from “*Bārē Āmōñ kā Kučh Bayāñ Hō Jā’ē*” (which might be translated jovially as “Let’s Talk About Mangos”), even though emanating from the sublime Ghālib, has little to do with “mangos” and everything to do with a very serious subject: the metaphysical foundations of adopting a particular script for writing—nothing resembling the debate raging over the Urdu script issue in India these days, but curiously related to it by its absence from that debate. Or the

title “Jadīd ‘Aurat kī Par-Nānī” (“The Great-Grandmother of Modern Woman”), which, you guessed it, examines the status of women from the earliest times to the present. Here, the dominant effect is in the nature of a humorous vignette and hence at odds with the contents of the essay itself. Some titles are so bland that they reveal nothing of the author’s purpose. “Ibn-e ‘Arabī and Kierkegaard” is a case in point. ‘Askarī would never have forgiven me for appending the subtitle “A Study in Method and Reasoning.”

The apparent stylistics were part of a deliberate plan: to jog Urdu intelligentsia out of its complacency, slumber, and facile interpretations, to do what they eventually must do with full consciousness of what was involved, and more importantly, to understand where they were coming from. The purpose was not to offend them.

I’ll close this note with a few personal observations on the man and my tentative discomfort at his treatment of Kierkegaard. ‘Askarī was a law unto himself. The phrase is not meant to suggest he had an autocratic streak, but certainly he possessed an endearing autonomy rarely seen and also astonishingly self-sustaining. He could do pretty much what he liked, but only by reducing his needs to a bare minimum and expecting little from others. He gave generously to those in whom he saw intelligence and talent. A bachelor, he lived all his life with his married sister who tended to his needs: cigarettes, tea, paans, food and clothing. His entire universe consisted of a single room which doubled as his library and sitting room, where he received only those of his students and friends he cared for, the rest were politely turned away from the door by one of his nephews on a cue from him. It was here that he did all his reading, thinking and writing on a square wooden settee. A few chairs but no table. At least this is how I found him whenever I visited him before 1964 at his home in Pir Ilahi Bakhsh Colony, and later a few times when visiting Karachi and he was living at Kashmir Road. If the reader would like to learn more about ‘Askarī’s life, I suggest a perusal of Inti ār Ḥusain’s non-fictional works, especially his partial memoirs *Āirāghōn kā D̄hu’ān* (Lahore: Sang-e Meel, 1999).

There is little doubt that in this as well as in his other essays ‘Askarī’s intended audience is the insider—the Urdu reader and writer. As for his analysis of Ibn al-‘Arabī it is quite simply brilliant, indeed inspired; both the insider as well as the outsider will find much of value in it. That said, ‘Askarī’s treatment of Kierkegaard does raise some questions, at least for this reader, and some of the essay’s premises may give pause to a Western reader as well. It is not so much a question of misrepresenting

Kierkegaard's ideas, 'Askarī is fairly accurate there, as it is of insufficient regard to the historical context of those ideas. Even for the insider it would be quite pertinent to be made aware of what some of these pauses might be, but a note such as this is hardly the place to focus at length upon the subject; a few points may nonetheless be briefly mentioned.

'Askarī assumes, here as elsewhere, that without a prior understanding of their own distinctive cultural traditions and histories South Asians cannot properly attempt to understand or imitate the West, much less accomplish the task successfully. However, in that case neither would they properly comprehend the West without reference to Western history and culture. While his exposition of Ibn al-'Arabī's ideas is brilliant beyond a doubt, it remains grounded in Islamic culture and its particular spiritual and intellectual environment, which is how it should be. When 'Askarī turns to Kierkegaard, however, he overlooks the fact that *Fear and Trembling* might also have something to do with a different history and culture, even if we disregard—conceding to 'Askarī that one's own life is of little moment before prophets—the individual biography of its author. 'Askarī seems to imply that Kierkegaard somehow deviated, and hence subverted or cheapened, the notion of prophecy, as though "prophecy" were a construct with uniform meaning across all monotheistic traditions. The only valid critique of Kierkegaard's failure would have to be, necessarily, located against the Christian backdrop of the meaning of prophecy and Abraham's role as a prophet, not against how Abraham himself as well as the notion of prophecy are viewed by Judaism or by Islam. Put more dramatically, how valid would it be for a Muslim to fault a Christian for his view of the Christ as God or as the Son of God? In spite of certain similarities between Christianity and Islam regarding Jesus, their one basic disjuncture regarding his divinity is so extreme that one cannot assume that an identical narrative will ever emerge about this "status" from these two traditions.

Moreover, the word "prophecy" subsumes a wider range of meanings than the Islamic "*nubuwa*," and the two words converge in meaning only in a very limited sense. Hence, neither word is a satisfactory substitute for the other. The conceptual substitution of "prophecy" for "*nubuwa*" can be attempted only at the cost of disregarding those historical imperatives which shaped the evolution of the notion of "prophecy" in the West over time. While the meaning of *nubuwa*—and hence the treatment of Abraham—has remained relatively consistent and uniform through the ages in the Islamic tradition, the

Jewish Patriarch Avram (Abram) has, on the other hand, gone through an entire series of transformations over time. One can easily discern contemporary anxieties and concerns—whether apologetic, polemical or theological—in the transformation of Abraham’s figure and in its treatment in pre-Christian and postbiblical Judaism. Likewise I’m not sure that the image or the role of Abraham is, on the whole, identical in the Islamic and Christian traditions.

Finally, to underscore the inherent complexities of the issue, I’d like to quote the following:

Moreover the message of each prophet, if examined in detail, depends more on the particular traditions to which it was heir and the historical-cultural setting of the prophet’s activity than upon a transcendent ideal that applies to every member of the group.³

Being unaware of the Islamic view of Abraham, for which he can hardly be faulted, Kierkegaard had other concerns—bequeathed to him by his own history and religious tradition—to deal with, other demons to vanquish. On the one hand, he was fighting the Hegelian overemphasis on rational thought, which could *even* comprehend faith, and on the other, the fairly substantial baggage of guilt inherited from his penitent father, to say nothing of his own “dread” that was more or less a spiritual state inspired by no fixed object.

‘Askarī also faults Kierkegaard for having used three separate styles, one of which, the novelistic, raises his particular ire because he feels its sphere is the psyche (ego) and is, therefore, not at all suitable for a solemn and sublime subject such as “prophecy.” To begin with, a comparison of *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and *Fear and Trembling*, two works which couldn’t be more stylistically distinct, is itself a question which is not even raised by ‘Askarī, much less compellingly answered. The *Fuṣūṣ* deals squarely with the metaphysics of Taṣāvvuf using a highly symbolic and complex language not easily grasped by the reader. *Fear and Trembling*, on the other hand, as described by its author, is a “dialectical lyric.” This is further complicated by the fact that it was released by Kierkegaard

³Gerald T. Sheppard and William E. Herbrechtsmeier, “Prophets,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12. Ed. Mircea Eliade, et al. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 9.

under the pseudonym of “Johannes de silento” (John of Silence),⁴ which Alastair Hannay, the translator of *Fear and Trembling*, indicates was allegedly borrowed by Kierkegaard “from one of the Grimms’ fairytales.”⁵ All of this gives the work a narrative density which is anything but random. Far from being random or, as ‘Askari implies, the result of Kierkegaard’s confusion, these styles—voices, really—as well as the pseudonym, are part of a deliberate narrative scheme. They are strategically deployed through the work to create its compelling dialectical back-and-forth and its subtle meaning, which reaches its fruition in the idea that faith—contrary to Hegel’s contention that the transparency of the Absolute Mind can grasp it—“simply has no place in a system of thought, that ‘faith begins where thinking leaves off.’”⁶ On another level, since Kierkegaard believed (or at least his author-persona Johannes did), unlike Hegel, that nothing at all could ever be said about faith “except that it is something which, if you have it, you will not be able to explain to anyone else,”⁷ perhaps the choice of diverse voices and the combination of styles ranging from lyrical to dialectical to philosophic discourse was necessary in order to capture some of this ineffability of faith. Finally, while the *Fuṣūṣ* is a statement, par excellence, of certainty about faith, *Fear and Trembling* is a statement, par excellence, of the *quest for* certainty about faith, with its attendant hazards and perplexities.

These considerations aside, the value of Askari’s analysis and presentation is beyond contest. As a study in method and reasoning this essay remains without precedent or parallel in Urdu literary criticism. □

Published in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 19 (2004)
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⁴*Fear and Trembling* is by no means the only work of Kierkegaard’s to appear under a pseudonym; indeed he routinely published his books under different pseudonyms.

⁵(Reprint; London: Penguin Books, 2003), 10–11.

⁶See *ibid.*, 11.

⁷*Ibid.*