

Introduction

*ai 'ishq-e azal-gīr-o-abad-tāb, mere bhī haiñ kuchh k̄hvāb
mere bhī haiñ kuchh k̄hvāb!
is daur se, is daur ke sūkbē hu'e daryā' oñ se,
phaile hu'e ṣaḥrā' oñ se, aur shahroñ ke vīrānoñ se
vīrānah-garoñ se maiñ ḥaziñ aur udās!
ai 'ishq-e azal-gīr-o-abad-tāb
mere bhī haiñ kuchh k̄hvāb!*

O love, embracing the Beginning and illuminating the End,
I too have some dreams
I too have some dreams!
This age, the dried-out rivers of this age,
the outspread deserts, the ruins of cities,
their destroyers leave me sad and forlorn!
O love, embracing the Beginning and illuminating the End,
I too have some dreams!

THE LINES ABOVE, from the free-verse poem “I Too Have Some Dreams” (Mere bhī haiñ kuchh k̄hvāb) by N. M. Rashed (Naẓr-e Muḥammad Rāshid, 1910–1975), introduce the central concerns of a crucial figure in the history of poetic modernism in Urdu. The passage describes the forces of ruination in an age in which the rivers have run dry and cities have returned to desert or been ravaged by human destruction. Against these forces of desolation, the narrator calls out to “love,” asserting that he still has his own dreams. In the remainder of the poem, the narrator notes the mutability of the present and the future, and the possibility, if not the certainty, of newness and change in the world. The dreams he describes relate to beauty, to place, to

language, to tradition, to the new, to community, and to being “human.” This poem articulates the ambitions of the author for his poetry.

The poem further illustrates the manner in which Urdu poetry is enmeshed in a politics of language. Its opening line is divided into two phrases, the first of which (*ai 'ishq-e azal-gīr-o-abad-tāb*) is entirely comprehensible in Persian, while the second (*mere bhī haiñ kuchh khvāb*) is in a *bolchāl* (spoken language) idiom. Sometimes referred to as Hindustani, this spoken language is shared by both Urdu and what is now Modern Standard, or *khayī bolī*, Hindi. The poem demonstrates how Hindi and Urdu are, for all intents and purposes, spectrums of one language written in two scripts.¹ Subject to language reform movements for much of their modern history, the two languages became attached to religious communities across the nineteenth century. Urdu, shot through by Persian vocabulary and poetics, transformed into the language of a Muslim minority, and Hindi, studded with Sanskrit words, became a national language of a Hindu majority. Urdu would become the national language of Pakistan following the violent Partition of British India in 1947, while Hindi was adopted by the postcolonial Indian state.

In this poem and throughout his larger oeuvre, N. M. Rashed emphasized the composite nature of Urdu and asserted the indigeneity, not the foreignness, of “Persian” aesthetics, as this poem makes clear both in terms of meter and lexicon. Though not confined by rhyme or a fixed number of metrical feet, the poem maintains the basic outlines of Urdu and Persian meter, derived from the prosody of Arabic and distinct from the Sanskrit and Braj Bhāshā metrics adopted and transformed in modern Hindi poetry from the early twentieth century on.² Rashed’s poem maintains these links despite being an example of what is called *āzād nazm*, or “free verse” in Urdu, which Rashed pioneered and popularized at the end of the 1930s. While breaking with classical forms, such as the ghazal,³ Rashed’s poetry mines the histories of language.

The composite nature of the language of Urdu makes it impossible to read this literature in isolation from other languages. Rashed’s poetry demands a comparative and multilingual methodology. The genealogy of thought this poetry participates in is similarly rich.⁴ Take, for instance, the opening line of this poem, “O love, embracing the Beginning and illuminating the End, I too have some dreams.” The words *azal* and *abad*, translated as “Beginning” and “End,” refer to the eternities on either side of time. Both terms most probably derive from the Middle Persian language of Pahlavi, signaling an encounter with the temporal understandings of Zoroastrianism. Also, the

term used for “love” (*ishq*) in this poem brings to mind a worldview often associated with *taṣawwuf* (Sufism) according to which the universe is created out of and sustained by divine love. While Sufism is certainly a polyvocal phenomenon, frequently more worldly and collective than transcendent and individual, its “mystical” conventions feature quite prominently in classical Persian and Urdu poetry, especially the ghazal.⁵ For readers familiar with modern texts, *ishq* also invokes the poetry of Muḥammad Iqbal (1877–1938), an Islamic modernist and Persian and Urdu poet credited as the spiritual father of Pakistan. Iqbal, a critic of many of the worldly and mystical practices of Sufism, repurposed love as an active force of creation, writing in dialogue with the vitalism of Henri Bergson. Finally, the line invokes a wide set of possible ideas about dreams, including, for readers familiar with Rashed’s poetry, Freudian ideas of the unconscious. The poetry is dense with intertextual and linguistic references.

Rashed’s poetry therefore demands a very sophisticated form of close reading that is grounded in text and in context. It also demands attention to his formal experimentation. Rashed’s modernism was guided by a vision of the purpose of literature that was unique in the history of Urdu writing in the twentieth century, but that also challenges a number of contemporary modes of understanding the significance of non-Western literature. Rashed’s writing decisively opposes the reading of literature as representative of communities or contributing to identitarian politics. This aspect of Rashed’s poetry also sits uneasily within Urdu- and Hindi-language criticism and histories of literature.

Rashed’s poems use both markedly Persian elements and the common speech associated with Hindustani, resisting the naturalized association of languages to peoples. His poetry recasts the formal conventions and traditional worldview of Urdu poetry from within, infusing them with other modes of analysis, often taken from Western modes of thought. Aspects of Muslim thought and Islamicate references are found throughout Rashed’s poetry, but they are typically reworked in creative ways. In his own modernist self-presentation, whether in critical writings or in the manifesto-esque introductions to his own works, Rashed rejected the conservative forms of traditionalism that were prevalent in Pakistani Urdu letters and instead projected himself as an avant-garde modernist rupturing with tradition.

Rashed’s modernism was defined by his profound distrust of collective forms of identity. He instead celebrated poetry as a site for articulating individual dreams. In critical writings and in his poems he argues for individual

experience over collective belonging, whether in the form of the nation-state, religious identity, or restrictive ideological commitments, including traditionalism and socialism. In their place, as in “I Too Have Some Dreams,” he emphasized the value of individual perception and critical insight. A focus on individual experience over ideological determination is a defining feature of modernism in South Asia, as elsewhere. Yet it should be noted that there is no lack of collectivity in his poetry. In the quotation with which I began, as in his later work especially, he visualizes collective life in the form of a city or cities, or a shared secular space, rather than as a national, ideological, or religious community.

Rashed’s focus on individualism and criticism of identitarianism is best understood as emerging from the trenchant criticism of empire and domination that pervades his poetry in various forms throughout his oeuvre. While his criticism of British colonialism in his earlier work is obvious to all but the most contrary of readers, his inhabitation of an anti-identitarian position is most thoroughly developed in his poems about World War II and the devastation of the Partition of British India, which highlight the terror and violence of modern forms of identity. After the formation of Pakistan, *vatan* (homeland) largely disappears from his published work. Instead, he turns, as in this poem, to “the outspread deserts, the ruins of cities / their destroyers.” He offers the possibility of new dreams, the mutability of the present and future, and of the “new celebration of Man’s birth.”

In post-Partition works, Rashed’s earlier focus on embodiment transforms into a criticism of forms of belonging grounded in ideas of religious transcendence. This is particularly the case in poems opposing national teleology, especially the promise of Pakistan as in line with a divine mission. As in the poem excerpt above, Rashed’s poetry maintains a proximity to religious discourse, even as it refutes the Islamic modernism of thinkers like Iqbal from a secular position. The final chapters of this book examine Rashed’s turn to a modernist form of allegory as a means to imagine an ideal form of collectivity, addressing a transnational Urdu literary community. They chart the adjustments in the address of Rashed’s poetry to take into account the changing status of religious and national identity in the Pakistan of the 1960s.

Although this study is divided both chronologically and thematically, Rashed’s poetry holds together as a body of work, and it is rewarding to see how his aesthetic project was shaped by a changing historical and cultural context. One of the challenges of writing about a single author, especially a

poet like Rashed who kept reforming his work in style and content, is to chart how modernism changes dynamically over several decades. This book is about the history of the possibility of modernism in Urdu poetry, and in South Asia more broadly, across the twentieth century, as particular avenues closed and opened.

WHAT IS MODERNISM IN URDU POETRY?

The assertion that Urdu modernism developed in ways both meaningful and innovative, rather than artificial and derivative of European models, should no longer be surprising to contemporary Anglophone readers. Over the last two decades, works in the field of (New) Modernist Studies have expanded the study and definition of the ever-elusive term “modernism” in temporal, spatial, social, lingual, textual, and disciplinary directions.⁶ These works have challenged the standard time frame of modernism, expanded its canon, emphasized the significance of multilingualism and translation, and moved modernism’s study out of an exclusive domain of the aesthetic and into a “sociocultural matrix.”⁷ Yet academic studies of South Asian modernist literature have continued to lag behind studies of postmodern—and often diasporic—Anglophone literature. Modernist literature had distinctly different aesthetics, however. This study traces the emergence of a modernist aesthetic across the late colonial and early postcolonial eras.⁸

This book considers the definition of modernism in South Asia through an analysis of Rashed’s richly intertextual poetic work. Modernism for Rashed involved establishing a new relationship with an Urdu poetic tradition that had come to be viewed both as a site of moral corruption in need of reform and as a source of authenticity and of difference. Through literary experimentation, Rashed sought to develop an aesthetic that would be open to contemporary experience and modern thought while also remaining intelligible and recognizable as Urdu poetry. His literary experimentation involved a notion of individualism, the promotion of new reading practices, and the universalism of modern experience in ways that anticipate theorizations of the “global” or “planetary” in what has been called “geomodernism” in modernist studies.

Rashed became a standard-bearer of modernism in Urdu, and his work was judged, sometimes in large part, as a representation of a modernist approach to literature. In the chapters that follow, I detail the critical reception

of Rashed's work at particular historical moments. But Rashed's critical presentations of his own volumes of poetry provide a good sense of what was at stake overall for the author in promoting a modernist aesthetic. The introductions to his volumes read as defensive and arrogant; in one text, he condemns those who dislike the "melody" of modern poetry as simply stuck in the past.⁹ But the introductions also accurately anticipate the major criticisms of his work: characterizations of his poetry as insufficiently social, as unsuitable for performance, as unconnected with political or religious projects, and as distant from his literary or national community.

In the introduction to his first volume, Rashed justifies his literary experimentation by emphasizing its place in the life of the community, preempting the critique that his poetry is insufficiently social. He argues there that the advancement of a "community/nation" (*qaum*) cannot happen "when literature is deprived of new experiences/experiments (*tajribāt*)."¹⁰ Experimentation and individualism are united here, and he stresses the need in literature, as in the community, for action and for individualism over languor and religious otherworldliness or identification. The goal of modern poetry for Rashed is to find a style that can reveal an author's individuality with the heroic aim of revitalizing the community and its literature, not of destroying the old just for the sake of destruction. Describing and justifying his own style at length, he argues that poetry should continue to be affective while also breaking with literary convention.

Rashed also anticipated the criticism of his work, both as free verse and as written abroad, for its distance from the *mushā'irah*, or poetic gathering, at which Urdu poetry is often debuted. In the introduction to his second work, published while he was living in New York, he declared that the modern poet was no longer a part of society, as he was in the premodern period. The individuality of the modern writer is linked to what Rashed describes as the breakdown of the *mushā'irah*, which leaves the contemporary writer to reflect more on the depths of the human psyche than did the writers of the past.¹¹ Establishing writing as a solitary enterprise also permitted Rashed, who spent most of the latter half of his life abroad, to continue to participate in a reading public rather than in a public constructed around performance.

Rashed associated modernism with a critique of ideology, and he wrote sharply against both religious and Marxist critics of his work. Beginning with his second volume, his most important claim for literature was that it should be free from any external ideological program, whether of a religious group or a political party.¹² Instead, he argued that the poet should give an-

swer to “life” in all its manifestations, based on his own “internal and external experiences.” What is significant here is that Rashed is not only challenging what he would call “ideological” poetry, written under an “external precept,” but is also emphasizing a model of artistic subjectivity that takes into account the murkiness of internal life, as opposed to just a rationally ordered subjectivity, as is frequently the case in realism and secular nationalism. In place of an experience of the soul, as in religious writing, he stresses the topic of literature to be the “self” of humankind, “error-prone” and “lost” as it may be.¹³

Finally, Rashed also challenged the assumption that his diasporic writing should reflect exclusively on the experiences of his national and literary community by arguing against the confinement of thought or of art to a particular locality. He first articulated a position against the constraints of thought to a particular territory in his first volume, as he argued that modern poetry must embrace nontraditional, global modes of understanding.¹⁴ In his third volume, he wrote against the assumption that the poet must “write about some country or some thing,” outlining a process of abstraction. His focus was more properly “circumstances” themselves, which are not necessarily unique to a particular geographical or historical context. He argues in this sense that the poet of one country is not different from that of another, as all bear a responsibility before a “vaster humanity.” At the same time, Rashed defended his work against the charge of “distance” from his community by stressing that the “vision” of a poet always has certain local roots in some “present and immediate reality.” Yet that vision is not confined to those circumstances, or to a particular nation, as the poet’s vision extends not only to what is absent in the world but to what “should be present” in it.¹⁵

With its emphasis on critical individuality, experience, and a dispersed reading public, Rashed’s conception of modernism largely aligns with what contemporary theorists have identified as “geomodernism.”¹⁶ His modernism is rooted in place yet also disruptive of local poetics and open to the world beyond the nation, especially to what Laura Doyle has described as a “geopolitical history” of “multiple empires and multiple resistance movements.” In other words, it attends to the ongoing imperial settings of modernist style, as noted by Edward Said among others.¹⁷ Rather than just addressing Pakistan or South Asia, Rashed’s modernism aligns with an understanding of geomodernist writers whose “horizon is global and [whose] voicing is refracted through the local-global dialectic of inside and outside, belonging and exile, in ways that disrupt conventional poetics.”¹⁸

At the same time, in its creative use of Urdu's linguistic range, Rashed's poetry asserts a regional modernism, with clear links to South Asia and the Middle East. It is in this way that Rashed's poetry differs from this self-presentation: his work does not discard Urdu literary tradition so much as disrupt it. Particularly in his last two volumes, this disruption is facilitated by the poetry's engagement with global forms of thought. The major transformation one sees in later works is a shift from capturing experience to capturing thought, in a way that challenges tradition and articulates new dreams of liberation for the present and future.

N. M. RASHED: BIOGRAPHY

N. M. Rashed was born in the Punjab on August 1, 1910, in the town of Akalgarh, in the district of Gujranwala, now in Pakistan. His mother tongue was Punjabi, and he received his education in Urdu, English, and Persian. His father, Rājah Faḡl-e Ilāhī Chishtī, was an inspector of schools and a follower of Sufism. His mother is remembered as a pious woman, and also an interpreter of dreams. In biographies of the poet, this is often presented as a melding of modernity and tradition. Rashed's grandfather, Dr. Ġhulām Rasūl Ġhulāmī, a poet in both Urdu and Persian, played an important role in his early education.¹⁹ Rashed excelled at his studies, and he began composing Urdu poetry at an early age.

Rashed attended Government College in the city of Lahore, where he received a BA with honors in Persian in 1930 and an MA in economics in 1932. He quickly established himself within the literary circles of Government College, editing the college magazine *Rāvī* and pioneering free verse.²⁰ He studied English literature with Ahmed Shah "Patras" Bokhari (1898–1958), a popular writer and Cambridge graduate, who would later become Rashed's superior both at All India Radio and at the United Nations.

Following his graduation, Rashed attempted to make a living out of literature and tutoring, but eventually had to take a job at the commissioner's office in Multan. In December 1935, he married his maternal cousin, Ṣafiyah.²¹ While working in Multan, Rashed became an active member of the primarily Muslim *Ḳhāksār* movement, which emphasized military-style discipline and social service and aspired to free India from the British.²² Rashed's involvement in this organization was enthusiastic, but brief.²³ As I will discuss later, though his family members and friends remembered the poet's opposi-

tion to the movement's regimentation, later writers have seen his involvement as proof of his ever-present Muslim consciousness.

Like many South Asian literati of his generation, Rashed began a career in radio and then joined the army. From 1939 to 1941, he worked at All India Radio, first at Lahore and then in Delhi. There he published his first collection of poetry, entitled *Māvarā* (The Beyond) in 1941. From 1943 until 1947, he took up a temporary army commission with the rank of captain in the Inter-Services Public Relations Directorate of the British Indian Army.²⁴ He began in Delhi, and then spent time in Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Jerusalem, and Ceylon. Rashed's experiences in Iran became the subject of his second collection of poetry, *Īrān meñ ajnabī* (A Stranger in Iran), which he published in 1957.²⁵ After leaving the army in 1947, he returned to All India Radio, working as a director in Lucknow. With the Partition of British India, All India Radio also split in two.²⁶ Rashed elected to serve in Pakistan, where his family lived. He moved up the ranks in Radio Pakistan in various locations—Peshawar, Lahore, Karachi.²⁷

In 1952, Rashed joined the United Nations as an information officer, a post that would take him to a number of countries in his later life. He lived in New York until 1956, then Jakarta until 1958, and Karachi from 1958 to 1961. Just before returning to New York in 1961, his wife passed away. Two years later, he married Sheila Angelini, an Italian-British teacher. He returned to Tehran in 1967 and remained until 1973, where he gave numerous lectures in Persian, which he spoke fluently, as well as a number of interviews about his own writing.²⁸ He also wrote extensively in Urdu about modern Persian poetry.²⁹ In Iran, Rashed completed his third collection, *Lā = Insān* (X = Human) in 1969.³⁰

Though he had earlier hoped to return to Pakistan, Rashed retired to Cheltenham, England.³¹ One of the main considerations Rashed mentioned was the comfort of his wife.³² There he spent time writing and researching.³³ Shortly before his death, he completed his fourth volume of poetry, *Gumāñ kā mumkin* (The Possibility of Supposition).³⁴ Rashed passed away from a heart attack on October 9, 1975.³⁵ Contrary to the burial practices preferred in Islam, his body was cremated.

There are a number of competing narratives about Rashed's cremation, which still remains controversial. According to Saqi Farooqi, a younger poet and friend of Rashed's living in London, as well as Rashed's son Shahryar, the poet had voiced a desire to be cremated.³⁶ Rashed's daughter Yasmin Hassan, however, has blamed Rashed's second wife for his cremation and

charged that Rashed never communicated a desire to be cremated to anyone.³⁷ As I will discuss below in regard to Rashed's critical reception, absolving Rashed of the posthumous sin of cremation has opened up readings of the poet as a committed Muslim and a Sufi that had previously been foreclosed by what one contemporary Urdu weekly described as a rebellion "against Islam and God," and an indication of the poet's arrival at a "place of apostasy and heresy."³⁸

RECEPTION OF RASHED'S WORK BY URDU CRITICS

Much of the critical writing in Urdu on N. M. Rashed speculates on the effect of his time spent abroad on his poetry. This sort of reading coincides with Rashed's own initial concern with capturing experience, but opposes the terms in which he later wrote. In his first two volumes, the settings of Rashed's poetry followed the contours of his life, though his poems employed a variety of narrative techniques designed to signal the distance between the poetic voice and his own. Later, his poetry left aside concrete geographical reference points, although the poems rested on the imaginative geography of Urdu literary tradition. The poet consistently subverted the organic relationship between poetic setting and national geography that some critics desired, eventually fashioning poetry that addressed universal themes of human life. But as the universality of his poetry's address increased, so did the intricacy of its ties to the history of Urdu literature. In his prose writing, Rashed articulated his desire to separate culture from geography. Yet Rashed chose to write his "universal" poetry from the position of Urdu, a language that had been rendered "particular" and attached to the national project of Pakistan over the course of his life.

Rashed's opposition to common uses of place as a marker of identity was present in his poetry even before Pakistan was created. It began with the poems in his earliest volume, which were set in the urban spaces particular to late colonial British India. Critics like the poet Mīrājī found these settings distasteful, as they appeared more "Western" than Indian.³⁹ Rashed's second volume, *Īrān meñ Ajnabī*, which was published ten years after Partition, invoked the more general geographical category of "Asia," which included both Iran and India. The poetry also used modern Persian references to signal the common contemporary experience of the region. Not only was

the charge of “Westernness” continued here but, as I will explain in chapter two, the poetry became caught up in the larger critique of the Persian legacy in Urdu. Rashed’s later, more “difficult” works treated landscape in more loosely metaphorical terms, building upon the genealogy of Urdu poetry most often associated with the establishment of Pakistan. In this poetry, he addressed the general problems of “man.”

Many critics attributed Rashed’s critique of place and identity to his biography, questioning his commitment to the situation of his own national and religious community as opposed to universal human problems. Rashed’s literal distance from his homeland became a proxy for a larger set of discussions about the relevance of his poetry to society. Charges levied against modernism itself—its supposed excessive internality and distance from the common people—continued to be associated strongly with Rashed’s poetry. More sympathetic critics followed Rashed’s own suggestions to interpret his poetry as increasingly cosmopolitan, concerned with the human world as a whole.

These readings are primarily interesting insofar as they signal the difficulty that modernism faced in the Urdu literary sphere. Rashed’s poetry attempted to posit literature as a form of critique rather than a space of common purpose or communion. That was literature’s purpose, as far as he was concerned.

Shortly after N. M. Rashed’s death in 1975, the poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz artfully described Rashed’s position in the field of Urdu poetry. Noting the length of time Rashed had spent outside of Pakistan since joining the United Nations in 1952, Faiz spoke of the “distance” between the poet and his public as a loss, not only to his public but also to Rashed himself. “When a man is overseas,” Faiz wrote, “then his own self (*ẓāt*) cannot stand in for society, and, in a way, his own self becomes a separate country.” Instead of focusing on his own society, such a poet becomes at once too preoccupied with “looking inside his self” (*darūn-bīnī*) and too prone to transcendent pronouncements. Rashed’s cosmopolitanism had left him disconnected from the specific concerns of his people, Faiz argued. He became focused on his own estranged self and on the “international problems” of man devoid of any regional or national specificity.⁴⁰

Faiz’s argument pivots on the distinction between “inner-looking” (*darūn-bīnī*) and “outer-looking” (*jahān-bīnī*) poetry—a distinction that had emerged among Urdu progressive (*taraqqī pasand*) critics by the early

1940s. These critics were associated with the extraordinarily influential All-India Progressive Writers Association, an anticolonial literary organization that formed in London in 1935 and quickly spread through India. Modeled on the Writers' International and Popular Front, it worked through manifestos, local branches, and national conferences, and quickly established a national presence.⁴¹ By the early 1940s, some "progressives" were perceived to be ousting from their fold some of Urdu's most beloved writers, who were deemed too sexual or obscene, as well as those who were not politically aligned with the Soviet Union and Communist Party.⁴² Many progressive critics, embracing aspects of socialist realism, condemned the "classical" tradition of Urdu poetry as well as modernist writings for focusing on the inner world at the expense of the outer one, in the manner done by Faiz in his review of Rashed's later work. They demanded that literature instead be mimetic and realistically depict the problems of India's peasants and workers. At that time, the critic Āftāb Aḥmad defended Rashed's poetry using language grounded in these terms, calling Rashed a poet of the "external through the internal."⁴³ But even Āftāb Aḥmad complains that in Rashed's later volumes, "it seems as if he has stepped off of the earth and entered a strange and personal/internal (*ẓātī*) world." Like Faiz, Āftāb Aḥmad blames Rashed's time away from Pakistan. "Far from the nation, in foreign lands," Āftāb Aḥmad explains, "the very circumstances of his personal life pushed him far away from the world of external realities."⁴⁴

Critics wishing to recuperate Rashed's later poetry from this criticism often invoke his appeal to universality. They cite the example of the Urdu and Persian poet Muhammad Iqbal, who similarly moved beyond national concerns to address the global Islamic community. This interpretation emerged after the publication of N. M. Rashed's 1969 collection, aptly titled *Lā = Insān* (X = Human), which Rashed described in its preface as addressing "the suffering soul of mankind as a whole."⁴⁵ The volume was published soon after the 1965 India-Pakistan war, which had exacerbated national tensions in the Urdu community.⁴⁶ For those Urdu literati concerned with developing ways of thinking beyond the nation, Rashed's poetry was particularly attractive. In an Indian journal and edited volume published shortly afterward, Indian critic and philosopher 'Ālam Ḳhūndmīrī described Rashed as "from his first period to the last, concerned with the collective human station."⁴⁷ Pakistani poet and critic Vazīr Āghā agrees that Rashed's "revolutionary voice" is in fact "more concerned with the future of the race of man than the future of his own country."⁴⁸

Critics who follow this mode of reading also frequently comment on Rashed's freedom from ideology. Muḡhannī Tabassum, an Indian critic and poet, describes one of Rashed's later poems as bearing a "sensitivity and consciousness of his age [that] is not bound by any principles or point of view." The poem in question shows that Rashed "holds such a cosmic consciousness" that his poetry, too, "is not bound to time or place," but instead is deeply fixed on the "human predicament."⁴⁹ Reading today, we can recognize these discussions as both cosmopolitan—the practice of writing a universal account of human life from within a position of difference—and secular—writing under a universal understanding of humanity as sovereign.

More recently, critics from Pakistan have reversed both of these readings to incorporate Rashed as a national poet, seeing him primarily as a Pakistani and a Muslim. In a series of revisionist readings published during Rashed's birth centenary celebrations in 2010, critics tied Rashed's poetry much more closely to Pakistani politics and history. To these writers, Rashed's focus on the "human predicament" was a cover for a Muslim worldview made necessary by his work at the United Nations. Much of the recently published work focuses, therefore, on Rashed's "religious consciousness," and many critics read his late poetry in particular as involving Rashed's experiences of the soul.⁵⁰ Research into his earlier involvement with the Khaksar movement, as well as the denial of his desire to be cremated, enabled his canonization as a properly Pakistani Muslim poet. Many of these volumes simply ignore much of the writer's criticism of Sufism and of nationalism.

The most significant of these volumes is perhaps that of Fateh Muhammad Malik. Malik follows the cosmopolitan narrative to argue that Rashed was not bound to any particular "political or literary movement," such as the Progressive Writers Association or the symbolist followers of Mīrājī. Malik finds in Rashed's poetry a political consciousness arising from the "bounty of his spiritual experience," that is, from the poet's inner recesses rather than from outside. He sees Rashed as a poet focused strongly on message, whose purpose was to free "the world of the East from political and civilizational slavery to the West." Malik provocatively writes that Rashed was more "connected in an unbreakable and instinctive way with the destiny of the Indian Muslims" than any of his contemporaries, even Faiz.⁵¹ As in his treatments of other writers, Malik interprets whatever universality may be present in Rashed's text as a result of the poet's deep and spiritual experiences of his contemporary world, and particularly his feeling of "Pākistāniyāt," or care for Pakistan.⁵²

These revisionist readings of Rashed's poetry collapse into a Pakistani Muslim identitarianism the far more subtle and critical kinds of readings that his poetry actually attempts to make possible. The main project of Rashed's poetry is exactly the escape from such representative and ideological reading practice through consistently iconoclastic and formally complex writing. While Rashed addressed the Urdu literary community, the manner in which he made that address emphasized shared knowledge and experience over the more foundational identities fundamental to nationalist discourse. The conventions of Urdu poetry, as a whole, require an ability to read about Muslim experience. But to collapse Rashed's poetry into "Muslim" experience requires a misreading of much of his poetry, which invokes but critiques religious tradition, particular the Sufi experience so crucial to many ways of thinking about being Pakistani. In place of identity, this present study finds that the overarching concern of Rashed's poetry is freedom, both from political formations and from ideology. Rashed nominated literature as the appropriate discursive space for free critique. So while this study largely agrees with the cosmopolitan reading of Rashed's poetry—chapter 3, for example, sees Rashed as imagining new ways of visualizing the human collective—it also reads Rashed's verse as involving literary and religious traditions primarily in order to critique them.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The first chapter of this book places N. M. Rashed's controversial volume *Māvarā* (The Beyond, 1941), the first volume of free verse in Urdu, within its properly multilingual literary milieu. The poems are written in opposition both to classical forms of poetry, like the ghazal, and to previous attempts at literary reform. Reform movements in South Asian languages depend on the association of language with a regional or religious community. Attempts to naturalize the Urdu, Hindi, and Bengali languages and attach poetry to the moral life of the community were countered by romantic movements in those literatures. In his poetry, Rashed tried to move beyond both of these approaches by responding to his contemporary circumstances. To respond to the domination of colonialism required a break with poetic form, particularly so that poetry could properly represent sexual desire. *Māvarā* opposes embodiment to transcendence, arguing that the forms of romantic vision or

a metaphysical beyond advocated for by previous poetry were insufficient to the contemporary moment. The poetic subjectivity that emerges in Rashed's poetry opposes the rational subjectivity of literary reform as well as the lyrical subjectivity of romanticism, which is associated with figures like Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali and Akhtar Shairānī in Urdu.

By focusing on the significance of literary reform and romanticism, chapter 1 challenges a frequent mode of reading modernism, and *Māvarā* in particular, as a reaction to "progressivism," or *taraqqi pasand adab*. Modernism and progressivism began to solidify as opposed positions only after the publication of the volume. Rashed's poems clearly explore the intersection of power, psychology, and sexuality, employing what I call a form of psychological realism in critique of British imperialism. To some progressive and nationalist critics, who insisted on a less psychological realism, the poems' descriptions of escapism through the romantic couple appeared as apolitical, asocial, and dangerously perverse. Like Rashed's poetry, which employs loosely Freudian concepts, these critics also turn to psychoanalytical models, even as they decry the poetry as too Western and insufficiently indigenous.

Chapter 2 examines Rashed's formally innovative poem "Īrān meñ ajnabi" (A Stranger in Iran), which was the centerpiece of a volume of the same name. Published in 1957, ten years after the formation of Pakistan, this long poem articulates the resistance to both ideology and the politics of representation that came to exemplify his work overall. In the movement to establish Pakistan as a separate nation for the Muslim community, Urdu literature became a symbol of an Indo-Muslim culture built, in part, on a historical relationship with Persian language and literature. Rashed's poem is set in Iran and engages with Urdu literary debates about the role of Persian language and culture. Its series of poetic fragments describe the experiences of an Indian Muslim soldier in the British Indian Army occupying Iran during World War II. Rashed's narrator searches in Iran for his cultural past, but instead finds an extension of his colonial present in a Tehran divided between European and Soviet powers and filled with war refugees. Rashed exemplifies the contemporaneity of Iran by including modern Persian vocabulary in his Urdu poem.

This gesture is meaningful in the context of a movement, articulated by many progressive critics, to deemphasize Persian and promote a Hindustani language that bridges the gap between (Muslim/Pakistani) Urdu and (Hindu/Indian) Hindi. Modernism (*jadīdiyat*), the literary movement with which

Rashed was most closely associated, tended to emphasize the Persian roots of Urdu, in a gesture that we can recognize as strongly identitarian—one that was dismissed by progressives as socially regressive. By setting the poem in Iran and by using modern Persian, Rashed confronted a readership for whom those gestures could only be signs of Indo-Persian nostalgia. Instead, the poet articulated a common contemporary experience of an oppressed “Asia.”

For Rashed, Asia was not a marker of cultural heritage, but was closer to what Gayatri Spivak has recently called a “position without identity”—a geographical category grounded not in a timeless culture but in an experience of power. The ephemeral and contingent experiences of Iran presented in the poem provide the poet evidence for his critique of the two modes of belonging then prevalent in the Urdu literary community, progressivism and Indo-Muslim identitarianism. In occasionally parodic poetic fragments, Rashed reveals both to be ideologies mired in imperial projects. Soviet internationalism is revealed as Russocentric imperialism, while Western imperialism provides stronger connections between India and Iran than does the Indo-Persian tradition. In addition, the poem employs rich citations of modern Persian poetry in order to critique an Iranian nationalism based on continuity with a lost imperial past. Rashed proposes a category of Asia too vast and heterogeneous to collapse into ideology, and imagines, in vague detail, the emergence of a “new human” not bound by any current identitarian or political structure.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore Rashed’s late poetry, which was collected in two volumes. That poetry deepens and extends the poet’s critique of representation and ideology, casting doubt on the relationship between word and meaning, both in the context of postcolonial states like Pakistan and in relation to metaphysical meaning in general. A particular target of these poems is the reliance of Urdu literature on Sufi ideas of the self, which the poet dismisses as insufficiently attendant to the body and psychology. Rashed’s third volume, *Lā = Insān* (X = Human, 1969), questions the meaning of the word “human” and opens up the possibility of new, unconventional forms of subjectivity. The poet celebrates the malleability of language as a sign of the possibility of the transformation of social life in order to allow individuals greater freedom. In chapter 3, I explore how Rashed’s poetry uses a modernist form of allegory to envision a fully embodied collectivity that does not follow the false certainties of symbolic politics. As allegory, this poetry incorporates elements of literary tradition, ensuring the effectiveness of its address to the transnational Urdu literary community. By reinterpreting and

compounding elements drawn from the ghazal, Iqbal, Sufism, and Rumi, it critiques tradition in order to emphasize the instability of meaning and to celebrate bodily life.

In his late poetry Rashed engages most closely with the writing of Muhammad Iqbal, who, despite his opposition to the form of the nation-state, had become accepted posthumously as the poet-philosopher of Pakistan. In the Pakistani nationalism derived from Iqbal's work, Islam, as an "ethical ideal plus a certain kind of polity,"⁵³ provides the cohesion of a nation for Indian Muslims despite—or perhaps because of—its fundamental difference from Western nationalism. Rashed's critique of the symbol as vulnerable to ideological reification, discussed in chapter 3, is directed toward Iqbal's poetry. Iqbal's writing on time is a focus of chapter 4. Though Iqbal was critical of the conception of time in Sufism, the mystical practices of Islam that are frequently valorized as a marker of Pakistani cultural particularity, Rashed's late poetry asserts that Iqbal did not go far enough to disrupt the temporality that has been conventional to cultural nationalism.

In both chapters 3 and 4 however, I observe, how Rashed finds in Iqbal's writing the raw materials for the new form of collectivity that he proposes. Working again in an allegorical mode, Rashed's poems on time continue to critique the idea that national identity—that marker of modernity—is an organic attribute of human beings. It does so using an allegorical technique that incorporates aspects of literary and religious tradition and inverts their significance. In other verse, Rashed also deprecates Sufi withdrawal from the world, much as does Iqbal, yet he does so in order to celebrate the uncertainty of language and the instability of social forms.

In these chapters I detail a move in Rashed's poetry to carve out a position for literature from which it can challenge ideology. In the late colonial period, reform movements and identitarian political projects used the medium of Urdu poetry, which also became a site for the articulation of Islamic modernism. Rashed's poetry maintains a close proximity to religious discourse, but through literature it presents a different sort of critique. It sees in literature possibilities for deeper understanding of the relationship between the body, the self, and the social world. For Rashed, modernism is a means to sustain doubt and to challenge the certainty and the veneer of naturalness taken on by conventional ideas. His poetry emphasizes change over continuity, and limits itself to the exploration of worldly life.

In the conclusion I consider one of Rashed's most popular poems, "Ḥasan kūzagar" (Hasan the Potter). Heralded as one of the greatest statements

about love and creativity in Urdu, this poem in four parts, crossing both of Rashed's two final volumes, provides an opportunity to reconsider the themes discussed in the previous chapter—embodiment, position without identity, allegory and collectivity, and temporality—through a reading of each of the four parts of the poem.