

## CHAPTER 2

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# Askari and Firaq: Personal Relations in Life and Letters

My love-utterances are sweet but false endearments:  
Would I be so honest if I wasn't really sincere?

—Firaq Gorakhpuri

There is a unique place for the poet Firaq Gorakhpuri (1895–1982) in Askari's writing. His unbounded, almost-ardent admiration for this poet-professor of the English Department, who played an important mentoring role in his life, has been dubbed "too difficult to swallow," by Urdu literary critics, but never scrutinized or studied with a view to determine why Askari was so strongly biased in his assessment of Firaq. In this chapter, I have tried to make sense of their relationship by trying to touch upon that special something in Firaq's poetry that appealed so much to Askari. Askari's writings about Firaq's poetry illuminate not only that poetry but a bit of Askari himself, as well as the Urdu literary critical tradition, and the impact of political circumstances on Urdu literary culture. I have explored the possibility that there may have been an undercurrent homoerotic attraction or sensibility that drew Askari to Firaq—I offer alternative readings to some of Firaq's well-known she'rs and also provide an in-depth analysis of Askari's writings on Firaq. I will show how Askari's heightened response to Firaq's poetry enabled him—and us, looking through another lens—to see Firaq's poetry and Urdu literary tradition in a new light, illustrating some of the cultural constrictions within which Urdu literary criticism functioned. I make the argument that it could be possible that personal life, particularly sexual orientation, can affect the opinion and style of the critic.

Firaq's inquiring mind was greatly influenced by the English Romantics and late nineteenth-century Victorian poets. In his time, he was a brilliant student of English literature, but he was more prominent as an Urdu poet in the classical mode. His interest in Hindu themes and thought as exemplified in medieval Hindi, or more specifically Braj and Awadhi poetry, led him to exploring ways and means of expressing nontraditional themes in the ghazal. Above all, he was a dazzling conversationalist and a charismatic personality. Askari's closeness to Firaq led him to see original aspects of Firaq's poetry that other critics had not observed—and also led Askari to some innovative ideas about literature—a debt that he profusely acknowledged and repaid many times over.

At Allahabad University, Firaq Gorakhpuri's homosexuality was an open secret.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that people talked about his sexual preference in the same breath as his poetry. It added more color to the scintillating, egotistic persona of the celebrity poet. Some contemporary writer friends such as Josh Malihabadi (who had similar sexual leanings) alluded to it in their memoirs, but no one seriously considered examining his poetry, particularly his love poetry, or his book-length essay on Urdu love poetry (*Urdu ki 'Ishqiya Sha'iri*) from the homoerotic perspective.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Firaq's "scandalous" lifestyle was treated simply as a subject of gossip and, perhaps, ridicule in Allahabad. Many of the tragic events in Firaq's life assumed comicality because of his individualistic way of life.<sup>3</sup> Firaq himself was uncharacteristically shy in nixing rumors and/or openly admitting his sexual inclination. He never discussed the subject, pretended to ignore what was obvious to both his friends and foes. Not until after his death in 1982 was his homoeroticism discussed in a dispassionate manner.

Mushtaq Naqvi's short but empathetic biography of Firaq (published in 1984) is the first and to my knowledge the only full-length study of Firaq that unabashedly discusses the various aspects of Firaq's personality including his entanglements with males of all ages and backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> Naqvi's compelling narration paints a rich portrait of his colorful subject in a manner that approaches the ostensibly delicate topic of same-sex relationships with disarming forthrightness. According to Naqvi, "Stories of Firaq's homosexual preferences were the talk of the town. Every day new anecdotes were added to the corpus of stories about Firaq. Incoming freshmen were both entertained and made alert with accounts of Firaq's scandalous activities. Jokes about his sexual preferences were passed around even among faculty members. His fame in this regard was not just limited to Allahabad but reached

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