

Ismat Chughtai



Nonfictional Writings



A selection by
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A Note on Ismat Chughtai's Nonfictional Writings

FOLLOWING the publication of *The Quilt and Other Stories* and the novel *The Crooked Line* in the last few years, there has been renewed interest in the work of Ismat Chughtai (1915–1991). However, this interest has been focused largely on her fictional writing. Her nonfictional writing, which is comprised of essays, commentaries, and biographical sketches, has received scant critical attention. Nevertheless this corpus is also important for a number of reasons. It gives the reader a good idea of the artistic, political, and social milieu of the author, which both serves as a background to her own fiction and complex literary design and furnishes insights into the art, lives, and times of her contemporaries. The importance of this nonfictional work for understanding the author's literary intent and her specific expectations from novelistic art cannot be overstated, any more than the importance of this work for the reconstruction of the social and intellectual history of her group, especially the Progressive Writers, can be exaggerated. Beyond this, Ismat Chughtai also developed connections with the Bombay film world through her husband Shahid Latif, who was a filmmaker, and these connections continued after his death because of her own involvement in cinematic art. Hence, her nonfictional writing also becomes significant as a valuable resource for the study and understanding of that world.

Ismat Chughtai's involvement with the Progressive Writers' Association, her close friendships and contacts with authors like Sa'adat Hasan Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander, Josh Malihabadi, Ali Sardar Jafri, Khawaja Ahmed Abbas, and her association with both famous and not so famous actors and actresses, all provided experiences which motivated her to venture beyond fiction and write ceaselessly, as one would a diary of events and impressions. We have, as a result, a trea-

sure trove of essays, commentaries and biographical sketches left behind by her as a vivid testimony to her life and times. These pieces range from commentaries, such as “Fasādāt aur Adab” (communal violence and literature) and “Āirāgh Jal-rahē Haiñ” (the lamps are burning), to a long personal narrative about Krishan Chander, to an emotional essay “Dōzkhī” (one condemned to hell/hell-bound) about her dear brother Azim Baig Chughtai, also a writer, who died at an early age of tuberculosis. “Mērā Dōst Mērā Dushman,” (my friend, my enemy), a piece about Manto in which she reconciles contradictory elements with her characteristic skill—portraying not only the life of one of Urdu’s major fiction writers, but also drawing an affectionate portrait of a man she loved to hate—is of course well known.

In these nonfiction works, Ismat Chughtai writes passionately but also with brutal honesty about some of the most famous writers of the Indian subcontinent. She gives valuable insights into the political and social forces which influenced them and inspired them at times to produce immensely powerful creative work and at others, what can only be called reactionary literature. Independence and Partition are the principal backdrops against which much of her nonfictional writing unfolds. These, along with the slow disintegration of the Progressive Writers’ Association and its gradual loss of élan, as well as the dispersal of writers (some having left for the newly-created Pakistan) and the consequent sense of loss, find their most vivid expression in nearly everything Ismat Chughtai has written. Gradually Bombay becomes the new haunt of writers; it isn’t long before dreams of “interpretive and creative works” are swallowed up by the gargantuan and shoddy world of films. In effect, as we read Ismat Chughtai’s essays we glimpse the slow dissolution of what was once a world of great passion and literary wealth. The three pieces that follow are merely a small sample of that wealth. Eventually, I plan to publish a more comprehensive selection of Chughtai’s nonfictional writings that will, hopefully, bring some awareness of her world to readers unfamiliar or less familiar with it.

“From Bombay to Bhopal,” the opening piece, represents in many ways a symbolic journey of the Progressives. Aboard the train from Bombay to attend a Progressive Writers’ meeting in Bhopal is a rich company of characters, among them Krishan Chander, Mahindar Nath, Majrooh Sultanpuri, and Chughtai herself. Missing from the cast is Ali Sardar Jafri, the standard-bearer of the Progressive Writers, who has recently been arrested and jailed. Later, in Bhopal, Jan Nisar Akhtar, Safia Akhtar, Josh Malihabadi, and various young men and women

representing the “future” of Urdu literature join the group. The chaotic and often comical—indeed even bordering on the absurd—goings-on at the meeting itself and later, could very well be regarded as a reflection of the precarious relationship that had developed between Urdu literature and the Progressive Writers’ Movement at this time. Inasmuch as it was written after Partition, Manto’s absence rankles not only those in the narrative, but also the reader. The sense of loss is further heightened by some other notable absences, such as those of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Hajira Masroor, and Khadija Mastur.

A memorable piece, the excerpt from an early autobiography *Kaghazī Hai Pairaban*, deals entirely with Ismat Chughtai’s trial at Lahore on a charge of obscenity in connection with her short story “Liḥāf” (the quilt). This piece not only lays bare the political underpinnings of literature, it also offers an intimate look at her close friendship with Manto and the role each of them played in the life of the other. Chughtai’s resolute character, her strong and unshakable belief in her own individuality, her insistence on courageously upholding the right to be herself—all come through with remarkable clarity in this selection. Perhaps because it was written before Partition, it is also less pessimistic in tone than her later work, and this despite the fact that the two years of the trial were the most distressing for her. Jarred by the tensions and pressure of public censure, her marriage to Shahid Latif very nearly fell apart. Although Shahid Latif had strong reservations about her point of view and found her unyielding nature, her obstinacy, a constant irritant, he didn’t leave her, nor she him. A similar tenacity characterizes all of Ismat Chughtai’s work.

“Communal Violence and Literature,” written a few years after Partition, sums up the tragedy of Partition in its opening sentence: “The flood of communal violence came with all its evils and left, but it left a pile of living, dead and gasping corpses in its wake.” Here, Chughtai surveys Partition literature produced on both sides of the border. In her observations about the motives behind much of this writing, she spares no one, not even Manto, about whose *Siyāh Ḥāshiyē* (black margins) she admits—in what sounds more like rhetoric than reality—that she finds herself at a loss. “[S]hould I catalog it as a work of literature or should I find an entirely new classification for it?” she wonders with childlike innocence, yet fully aware of her reservations, her dissatisfaction, her skepticism. Unable to come to terms with Partition literature’s relentless emphasis on “accountability,” she is openly critical of the Pakistani writer M. Aslam’s novel *Raqs-e Iblīs* (Satan’s dance) and the Indian writer

Ramanand Sagar's novel *Aur Insān Mar-gayā* (and humanity died). She finds both works irredeemably reactionary in nature. That a betrayal has occurred, in both a political and literary sense, runs as a common thread throughout her essay.

These three pieces also clearly show Ismat Chughtai's position on the status of women, their roles in society, and their somewhat indeterminate futures. They reveal her unwavering belief in the potential power of literature for promoting reform. She touches directly upon the taboos that writers must contend with, and the hypocrisy that lies at the heart of the debate about what is "filthy" and what is not, claiming that "it is foolish to waste time trying to trim the foliage instead of concentrating on digging out the roots," and finally offering hope: "When the roots change, new leaves will sprout and new flowers will bloom on newly-grown branches."

Ismat Chughtai wrote constantly, it seems, and although she is often repetitive, both in her observations and her narratives, a characteristic that often irritates present-day readers, her work offers a rich and incisive probe into an era of Urdu literature when something very new and exciting was happening. Independence was no longer a dream, western literature and philosophy had been introduced, Marxism had permeated the consciousness of writers and poets, and modernity was slowly taking root. Then Partition came along, a severance and a birth that had tragic consequences for both India and the newly-created Pakistan. Minds were divided, as were bodies; something was lost just as something was gained. The following essays by Urdu's seminal woman writer seek to take the reader on a journey to this era in the hope of rediscovering and regaining a very special moment in the history of modern Urdu literature. □