

An Uncivil Woman: Ismat Chughtai (A Review and an Essay)

The poetic “I” is not an “I”; it is not identical to itself.

—Giorgio Agamben¹

“KAGHAZI HAI PAIRAHAN.” Ismat Chughtai takes the opening phrase of the second line (*mişra*) of the couplet (*she‘r*) that begins Ghālib’s collection of poetry, and turns it into the title she gives her autobiographical pieces. This phrase then becomes an evocation that Katha uses in its valuable new collection on Ismat Chughtai. In the Katha collection, *Ismat Her Life, Her Times*, edited by Sukrita Paul Kumar and Sadique, the words “*kāghazī hai pairahan*” faces a photograph of the young Ismat. Above the photo is the section title, “Ismat on Ismat.” This section, which contains selections from Ismat Chughtai’s autobiographical pieces, becomes the dress of paper that gives us the author’s portrayal of herself. At least this is what the Katha collection seems to promise by juxtaposing the title *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan* against Ismat Chughtai’s picture and the section title.

Katha’s collection, which is organized as selections from work and life (*taḥrīr-o-ḥikmat*), weaves together nonfictional writing and letters composed by her over the course of her career; analytical essays on her penned by friends, compatriots and critics; as well as biographical pieces and reminiscences about her. The various genres of prose are interspersed with pictures that vividly evoke the writer and her life.

“*Kāghazī hai pairahan.*” Ghālib’s *she‘r* places Ismat Chughtai, it situates her in her various manifestations. Carrying the weight of a *faryādī*, a

¹*Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 112.

supplicant, who has a legal and social claim that they wish to bring to the attention of a court of readers, the *she'ṛ* also makes a listener or a reader, the possible arbiter of the claim, pay attention to the playfulness of the form in which the claim appears. Ghālib never tells us what words the supplicant lays before the person who adjudicates. The claim might be anything. The judge might be us, readers whose attention is short-lived, or a kind of divinity before whom a supplicant might stand for all time. The petitioner stands arrayed in paper, words, mere shadows, appearing almost as an afterimage, the trace, the print, and the *naqsh*, of memory. With her claim on Ghālib's first *she'ṛ* Ismat Chughtai spells out both her consistent audaciousness and the playful transitoriness of the words (*shōkhī-e taḥrīr*), with which she speaks. Her life in words takes the form of a portrait (*paikar-e taṣvīr*).

Ismat Chughtai was nothing if not bold. Writer after writer, friends, relatives, companions, attested to her remarkable obstinate demand to disturb the civil, to disrupt the ideas that constituted civility, to upend the notions that gave force to how women ought to be. As a supplicant asking for our attention, she was ironic, playful, moving, funny, cutting, witty, she spoke to desire and grief, but rarely succumbed to propriety. As a supplicant who grounds stories of her life with a call to Ghālib, one of the most complex, subtly lyrical writers in the world, Ismat Chughtai audaciously insists on a place for herself in the annals of Urdu writing, in the canon of Urdu literature. And it is a place where writerliness comes together with realness, where biographical details, characters that lived around her, and the familiarity of the kind of language Chughtai heard and knew, are crafted into prose and fiction.

All writers lie, all writers must lie, and in how well the lies are told rests the craft (*fann*) of fiction. I began this piece with an epigram from the Italian writer-philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who is concerned with the ways in which poetry and prose flow into each other. Prose writers are poets, and Chughtai, despite some of her more prosaic pieces, was a writer who played with writing. In doing so, she raises the important question—so essential when considering the work of women but often relegated to some place in their biography—of where might one place nonfiction in relation to fiction. One, nonfiction, is often treated as the place where the truth of the world lies. The other, fiction, is usually considered the place where a writer explores the delicate line between truths and true (*aṣlī*). Both fiction and nonfiction are essential parts of Ismat's writing, as Tahira Naqvi has so ably pointed out in her introduction to selections from Chughtai's nonfictional prose. The translations that she

and Muhammad Umar Memon have lovingly crafted for *The Annual of Urdu Studies*² can be productively considered alongside those published in the Katha anthology. Unlike those in the Katha anthology, these translations are more complete. When they have been trimmed, the cuts fit the logic of the originals in Urdu. Though the Katha anthology offers a lovely introduction to an extraordinarily powerful writer, the edits, probably necessitated by the needs of the publishing process, render some of the pieces awkward.

Tahira Naqvi, herself a short story writer, known for her collection *Attar of Roses & Other Stories of Pakistan*, has also given us selections from Ismat's copious fictional oeuvre. *The Quilt and Other Stories*, as well as the *Crooked Line*, are marvelous introductions to the work of this woman writer. In her introductions to these two translations, the concerns Tahira Naqvi addresses in order to make Ismat Chughtai available in her historical context flow into those voiced by many of the writers who have spoken about Chughtai and attempted to grapple with how to understand the paradoxical images that accrued around her work.

Ismat Chughtai was the kind of writer whose fiction opens within the temporality of the first person, or is introduced with the immediacy of sound, so that one feels that she almost unceremoniously dumps you into a present which you as a reader suddenly begin to inhabit. But as a writer, Chughtai also tells stories. These stories, though they are given in the narrative present, take a reader back through a narrative past. And this is the agreement Chughtai seems to make with readers about how she will deal with time, that past and present will come together in familiar story-telling ways as well as in ways that push at the boundaries of familiarity.

The phrases that initiate the first story, "B^hul-B^hulaiyān" of her collection *Āṭṭh* throw a reader into the sounds made by a tongue, "laifī rā'īṭ, laifī rā'īṭ, ku'ik mārc."³ English in Urdu, returned to the play of its sounds on a tongue instead of its non-phonetic visual form. For those of us who have had to feel our bodies trained in a certain kind of pedagogy, either through the Girl Guides or the Boy Scouts, the familiar demands made by those words might return us to body memory, bodies marching, the memory of those sounds on our tongues. "Ēk Shauhar kī Khāṭir," another story towards the end of the same collection, takes us directly to the ruminations of a wry, bemused protagonist who begins the tale of a series

²No. 15, pt. 2 (2000), pp. 403–56.

³Ismat Āṭṭhā'ī, *Āṭṭh* (Aligarh: Educational Publishing House, 1982), p. 17.

of both ordinary and strange encounters on a train with, “*aur ye sab kuḥḥ bas żarā sī bāt par hu ā. Muṣibat ātī hai tō kah kar nahīn ātī . . .*”⁴ The protagonist’s voice could be ours, as we tell a story to ourselves, sifting it for its oddities. It also produces a sense of temporality as a kind of promise—*ye sab kuḥḥ*—that we will hear as the story takes us into a future which will come out from a past, come from the *żarā sī bāt* that has already happened.

The sharp staccato of a call to march, left, right, left, right, the soft flow of syllables sifting through the voice in one’s imagination—both of these give the textures of sound, movement, tactility, and temporality, pointed out as characteristic of Ismat Chughtai’s writing by critics like Manto, Varis Alvi, and Tahira Naqvi, all of whom also go to Krishan Chander’s introduction in *Ātīn* to support their claims.⁵ These textures embody Chughtai’s poetics. I call the qualities that mark Chughtai’s prose her poetics because these qualities, when taken together, produce something more than the formal thinness carried by the word style in English. The word style in English refers to the formal features of prose, it is like the dress prose wears, which identifies dress and prose as belonging to the oeuvre of a particular writer. Poetics is a stronger word, a word that feels denser, thicker than style. Used on a writer it offers a sense of the entire ambience of the writer’s prose, including the kinds of beliefs embodied in the prose. To feel the density offered by Chughtai’s prose, Manto turns to the other physical senses (*dūsrī jismānī ḥisēn*), smell and listening, (*sūngḥnā aur sunanā*).⁶ From Krishan Chander Manto gets the description of Ismat Chughtai’s *raftār, gḥur-daur, ya’nī raftār, ḥarkat, subuk*.⁷ Varis Alvi takes the evocations of Chughtai’s writing by Krishan Chander and Manto and names them “tactile word pictures.”⁸ A tactile word picture is an apt description of Chughtai’s prose, because it is about

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁵ Sa’adat Ḥasan Maṅṭō, “‘Iṣmat Ātīn’,” in *Ganjē Farishtē* (Lahore: Mataba-e She’r-o-Adab, 1978?), pp. 143–74. Varis Alvi, “Some Aspects of Ismat’s Art,” *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times* (New Delhi: Katha, 2000), pp. 209–16. Tahira Naqvi, “Introduction,” *The Quilt and Other Stories* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990), pp. vii–xix. Krishan Āandar, “Pēsh-Lafz,” in ‘Iṣmat Ātīn’, *Ātīn*, pp. 5–16. Maṅṭō’s piece as well as Krishan Āandar’s have been translated for the Katha anthology.

⁶ Maṅṭō, p. 168.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁸ Alvi, p. 214.

tactility, sensory ambience, intensity, and sharpness. Her prose almost solidifies through the physical presence of sound, sound that produces the presence of a something that takes shape as present in the present of the reader. In “*Dōzakhī*,” Chughtai’s powerful piece on her deceased brother, she conjures up his diseased body—“*āṅkḥēn sharārat sē nāč rahī hōngī, nilē murda hōnṭ talkhī sē hil rahē hōngē. Magar kō’ī usē rulā nabīn saktā. Vo shakḥḥ jis kē pḥēpḥarōn mēn nāsūr, ṭāngēn ‘arṣē sē akṛī hu’ī, bāḥēn injekshanōn sē gudi hū’ī, kūlḥē mēn amrūd brābar pḥōṛā ...*”⁹—his flesh both monstrous and falling away. The fleshiness given this narrative allows it to thicken and produce the illusion that you are, all senses horrifyingly in place, thrown into a scene from life. The fleshiness and the tactility of this narration, however much we might recoil from them, become both through the flow of sound in the sentences, and also through something else that Chughtai deploys so well—temporality—the flow of time.

Krishan Chander points to Ismat Chughtai’s *raftār*, the quickness with which her words seem to move across a page, and the swiftness with which she composes, leaning across a page, lying on her bed. This image of Chughtai appears in photograph after photograph in the *Katha* collection and it is also evoked in the written pieces included there as well as in Tahira Naqvi’s introduction to the *Quilt and Other Stories*. The photographs of Chughtai lying across her bed looking up, which one sees scattered over the course of the *Katha* collection,¹⁰ gives a reader a sense of the movement of remembering this quality (*raftār*) of hers over time. Taken from contact sheets, or glimpsed as a portrait, or sometimes pasted into a collage, photographs of the author’s body caught in the act of writing seem suspended in time, but they also appear to promise a sense of taut momentariness, as though time had stopped for an instant and would rush on as Ismat Chughtai continued to write.

Speed has to do with the simultaneous evocation of space and time. Space married to time creates the impression of speed, so if one begins to set Varis Alvi’s tactile word pictures into motion one gets *raftār* in the kind of movement of time that Chughtai’s prose produces. One glimpses moving time—like the lifting of the curtain of time at the end of the first paragraph of “*Lihāf*”—“*mērā dimāgh bītī hū’ī duniyā kē pardē mēn daurnē*

⁹“*Dōzakhī*,” in *Čōṭēñ*, p. 165. This piece has also been translated for the *Katha* anthology as “Destined for Hell,” the translation of these sentences appears on p. 148.

¹⁰*Ismat: Her Life, Her Times*, pp. 98, 172, 220, 241.

bhāgnē lagtā hai.” “Dōzakhī” is crafted across time, the many portraits that bring the piece to life flower through the past held in abeyance, a sense of time moving forward and backward and of time suspended—precisely the temporalities associated with sharp grief, slowed mourning and stilled melancholia.

Ismat Chughtai’s dexterity with sensuousness and with temporality are qualities that characterize films and the best kind of biographical prose. These qualities trigger the illusion of a body. When writers use them, they seem to bring a body into being, replete with all its qualities, present at the moment, almost as though the body were standing before a reader. Bodies are given shape in the present tense. When Ismat Chughtai composes, she produces bodies through the sometimes subtle, sometimes brutal sense of the sensual. One feels as one reads that one has immediate access to the bodies that people her stories and nonfiction. Taken into her fiction, these qualities make it appear merely biographical.

Chughtai’s fiction is biographical in the strongest sense of the word. Tahira Naqvi’s introduction to Chughtai’s biographical prose makes this amply clear. Chughtai’s nonfictional pieces, translated by Naqvi and Memon, and by a range of writers for the *Katha* collection, complement the material given in the fiction. One sees details repeated, many from Chughtai’s own life, entire sequences captured in fictional form, characters coming to life in the two types of writing that translate content back and forth between them.

As we read the reportorial style of Chughtai’s nonfictional pieces and carry that style over into her fiction, we are seduced into feeling that we can, in some simple, direct, unmediated way, really see the truth of the times she evokes so powerfully. Chughtai’s language, often *bēgamāti zabān*, makes one feel that one is looking into the world of the *zanān* through a peephole without any filters. The image of this kind of reader, which we seem to become, is wonderfully captured in the opening sequences of Naqvi’s short story, “A Peep-hole Romance.” “The peep-hole was smaller than a keyhole but large enough for an eye to fit snugly against it.”¹¹ Because so many of Chughtai’s stories are disturbing, and seem to offer a naked, painful, prurient glimpse into the world of women, one is often lured into forgetting Agamben’s ethical caveat about poets: the poetic I is not an I, it is not identical to itself. In forgetting this, we

¹¹Tahira Naqvi, *Attar of Roses & Other Stories of Pakistan* (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), p. 29.

become the kind of reader whose practices are as eroticized as Ismat Chughtai's stories and fiction are often accused of being. Our eyes pushed snugly up against a peephole, which is our window into a world, we feel like we are looking in and grasping on to text with our desire. But in fact, as Alvi reminds us, Chughtai's fiction and her other prose followed the subtle nuances of a range of languages, not the least of which were the nuances of her own wry, intellectually astute commentary on states of affairs and states of being.¹² Chughtai seduces us into believing the truth of her writing, the truth *in* her writing, precisely because it is so crafted, precisely because she has told true lies, and precisely because her poetic I was not an I.

Chughtai, as Naqvi says so aptly, walks the line between ethnography and fiction. This line in Chughtai is not the one familiar to us from certain ethnographic canonic works like *Nisa*,¹³ which many young students of anthropology read in introductory courses. Rather, it is the one produced in current writing by ethnographers like Kamala Visweswaran in *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*,¹⁴ and specifically through her piece "Betrayal in Three Acts." Loss, transgression, violation, disappointment, partial identities and identities that do not fold seamlessly into themselves, are some of the themes Visweswaran treats, and these are also the ways in which one might read the embodiments of the feminine I in Chughtai's work.

Many of Chughtai's short stories, some of her best nonfiction, and her novels are invested with the kind of power given to words that shred, tear, and rip. Not in the ways in which Manto's fiction tears at the fabric of what seems to be comfortable, salvific and safe, but in a kind of tearing that embodies constant losses.¹⁵ Chughtai's writing might productively be considered alongside the work of French feminists, as Naqvi suggests in the introduction to *The Crooked Line*. Naqvi lays that novel against Simone de Beauvoir's seminal book, *The Second Sex*. Like *The Second Sex*,

¹²Alvi, p. 215.

¹³It is a book basic to anthropology. It teaches one about the kinds of ethnography that seems to give you the truth of a person or people. Marjorie Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

¹⁴Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

¹⁵Sadique, "Ismat Chughtai's Art of Fiction," *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times*, p. 227.

The Crooked Line, written about five years before, reveals the fault lines in psychoanalysis, and shares contiguities with the kinds of rewritings of psychoanalysis done by feminist analysts.

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”¹⁶ The sentence with which de Beauvoir initiates a discussion of childhood could be said of all the women characters in Chughtai’s work, including Chughtai herself. The protagonist of *The Crooked Line*, Shamman, is a protagonist whose being flowers through grief and ruptures. In Shamman’s childhood the first rupture that makes her who she is, is her tearing away from her wet-nurse Unna. This is a tearing that the child brings upon herself when her dreams negotiate both her bond with Unna and the separation enacted by Unna’s relationship with a lover. Separation and fusing permeate the novel, beginning with that almost primordial break which throws Shamman back into the sociality of the household.

Women’s psyches are made not through some primordial return to the body, but in the crucible of the social, political and economic.¹⁷ A woman is not born but made, made from the constant losses she bears through living in the worlds she must inhabit. Chughtai’s fiction is the fiction of the repeated traumatic, and in the ways in which she reiterates loss her work participates in the kinds of questions raised by Sigmund Freud—not in his incursions into the psychology of femininity, but in his work on dreams, mourning, melancholia and his profoundly historical, mythic and social, multiply-rendered narrative *Moses and Monotheism*.

Grief burns away civilities. But the “uncivil” in Chughtai’s work is so lovely because it is sometimes also rendered in the other counterpart of grief—wry humor. Chughtai plays upon the humorous, punning with the possibilities of how women are made in some of her fictional nonfiction and her nonfictional fiction. I would like to close with a reading of a short story, perhaps taken, as many things in Chughtai’s life were, from her biography, or perhaps not.

This story, “Ēk Shauhar kī Khāṭir,” set on a train, does what Chughtai’s fiction does at its best. It plays with movement—the necessary temporality of speech gives it its quick, sharp power. Its scenes are palpably shaped through language. It performs critique in an almost quotidian fashion. Into its dramatic conversations are ensconced critiques—of gen-

¹⁶Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 301.

¹⁷Sadique, p. 227.

der identifications made through marriage and childbirth; of colonial surveillance; of late nineteenth-century depictions of the rural as utopian by Orientalists like Max Muller which were taken up so avidly in nationalist discourse; of regimes of representation; of the gender that demanded domesticity as its given; of socialization as a series of repetitions; of nationalist expectations about the proper place of women. Its performance of critique relies precisely on the ellipsis, the space, the strangeness produced when the I of the protagonist is never quite an I.

In “Ēk Shauhar kī Khāṅīr,” a young, unnamed woman is traveling on a train from Jodhpur to Bombay to interview for a job. She gets into a woman’s compartment, the *zanāna* car and finds it empty. The epitome of a secular, modern woman, she calls out to Allah to alleviate her bored loneliness. Her wish is unwittingly fulfilled. The train suddenly becomes crowded with women from nearby villages and chaotic with children, falling baggage and noise. Each set of women that gets in asks the young woman to identify herself, and in each case the terms of identification are couched in marriage and childbirth.

Chughtai plays with repetitions, the questions repeating themselves and changing slightly each time. Over the course of repetitions, the story that the young woman tells about her life solidifies. But it solidifies in contradictory ways. Faced by curious interlocutors, who carry their assumptions into their curiosity, the young woman answers their questions by bringing into her responses whatever catches her eye as she looks out the window.

The story is a farce—a circus of inadvertent clownishness. The young woman starts with saying that she is not married, moves into saying that she has married a coolie (which contradicts her questioner’s ideas of status). She goes on to state that she has been married for four years, and finally gives herself eight children (there are eight semi-wild dogs visible from the window), one after another. When one of the women, puzzled by the awkward juxtaposition of four years of marriage with eight children, asks her to explain the children, the young protagonist replies sharply that it is perfectly possible to have more than one child at a time—one can have three or more together. At that point in the narrative the first woman (the one who was told that the protagonist was not married) begins to listen in and interjects. All the women suddenly notice the ticket collector who walks by, smiles at the protagonist, and asks if she is traveling with someone. The protagonist turns a character into her daughter’s son, reducing her interlocutors to helpless confusion. The ticket collector names her—Mrs. Chokhe—at which the protagonist hits

him over his head with her handbag.

In this story Chughtai shows up narratives of marriage for what they can be, scripts that are fitted on to hapless women trapped by their absurdity. But she also creates scenes in which performance and repetition are necessary conditions for establishing marriage and domesticity as viable, solidified ways of being in the world.

Tradition in this story is not something that stands still, stands at odds with modernization. All the women are travelers on a train, the symbol of British modernizing imperatives. However “traditional” the women who get on the train might be, they still participate in, if not need, the organizing metaphors of modernity. There is no absolute separation between the inside and outside in the story. Everyone gets on, and the narratives produced in the train by the protagonist are narratives whose content is shaped by whatever catches her eye through a window. All the women are miscegenated—hybrids of modernity and tradition, though each displays a different blend.

The women who get on the train are clearly identified as village women, and the protagonist as urban, but unlike nationalist evocations of the rural as utopian spaces set against troubled urban spaces, the two are not separated here by time or space—they feed off each other and are necessary to each other. Neither is utopian and neither is abysmal. Travel as a mode for colonial surveying/surveillance and codification are confounded by this story set on a train. Looking out, surveying the territory, codifying the people, animals, and objects out the window gives the story its ironic, parodic humor. Everything seen outside and placed through its name, is also given a place in the confines of the moving car. But even as these objects viewed from the window are put into narratives they turn absurd. The linear movement of the train from one place to another carries the kind of promise of certainty that seems true to most historical scripts. But here this teleological narration turns constantly on its head in the face of repetition and in the face of confusion about apparently ordinary expectations.

Over the course of the story the domestic space of the car is crisscrossed by every kind of narrative convention that appeared in colonial writing—from law to history, from fiction to travel diaries. The domestic looks nothing like itself nor do any of the other modes of articulation.

What Chughtai’s work makes clear is that she had to tease out a relationship to representation, so as to portray women dressed in “*kāghazī pairahan*,” who stand before us as plaintiffs carrying their complaints, their charges on their bodies. When Chughtai works out subtle nuances

embedded in representation, she begins to claim a place for a story like “Ēk Shauhar kī Khāṭir.” Like other women writers, Chughtai too, had to return to the spaces and conditions associated with the domestic, where women were identified through and understood themselves through their lives as wives and mothers. These kinds of identifications produced gendered figures who were domesticated into wifehood and motherhood. In order to undo these kinds of identifications, writers like Chughtai had to reconfigure the sites of their domestication. A great deal of women’s writing from the 30s and 40s during the height of nationalist movements, including that of Chughtai’s mentor Rashid Jahan, does this. In the face of the churning violent narratives that nationalism might have produced, women’s literature sounds like the clinking of china teacups. My reading of this sometimes seemingly gentle rearticulation, which seems almost tamely tied to small spaces, as radical, is at odds with much of the prevailing criticism on women’s literature. I am proposing a different take on the rewriting of domestic space. I propose that a return to the domestic is not a resolution into domesticity, but a rupture where grief and humor play in order to modulate the characterizations available to women writers under narratives of national reform that required them to stay static, pure and stable. Ismat Chughtai’s uncivil subjectivity, the subjectivity of the poetic I, never quite itself in this seemingly small story, travels this terrain with admirable grace. □