

TAHIRA NAQVI

Ajeeb Aadmi—An Introduction

ISMAT CHUGHTAI, Sa'adat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chandar, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Kaifi Azmi, Jan Nisar Akhtar, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Ali Sardar Jafri, Majaz, Meeraji, and Khawaja Ahmed Abbas. These are some of the names that come to mind when we think of the Progressive Writers' Movement and modern Urdu literature. But how many people know that every one of these writers was also involved with the Bombay film industry and was closely associated with film directors, actors, singers and producers? Ismat Chughtai's husband Shahid Latif was a director and he and Ismat Chughtai worked together in his lifetime. After Shahid's death Ismat Chughtai continued the work alone. In all, she wrote scripts for twelve films, the most notable among them *Ziddi*, *Buzdil*, *Sōnē kī Čīryā*, and *Garm Havā*. She also acted in Shyam Benegal's *Junūn*. Khawaja Ahmed Abbas made a name for himself as director and producer for his own films and also by writing scripts for some of Raj Kapoor's best-known films. Manto, Krishan Chandar and Bedi also wrote scripts for the Bombay films, while all of the above-mentioned poets provided lyrics for some of the most alluring and enduring film songs ever to come out of India. In remembering Kaifi Azmi, Ranjit Hoskote says that the

felicities of Urdu poetry and prose entered the consciousness of a vast, national audience through the medium of the popular Hindi cinema; for which masters of Urdu prose, such as Sadat [*sic*] Hasan Manto, wrote scripts, while many of the Progressives, Azmi included, provided lyrics.

While necessity may have led Azmi to compose lyrics for the movies, this did not result in a dilution of his adherence to literary standards. His lyrics, especially those written for films directed by the legendary Guru Dutt, endure in the mind and on the tongue: among these memorable

songs are “*Waqt ne kiya kya haseen sitam*” (from “Kagaz ke Phool”) and “*Kar chale hum fida jaan-o-tan saathiyon*” (from “Haqeeqat”).¹

Clearly films dominated their lives as much as Urdu literature. It's true these writers worked for films in order to make a living, but regardless of their obligations to the producers and directors, they managed to inject something of their philosophy and convictions into their work. But they were writers first, so invariably many of them made the stars and their filmy milieu the subject matter for their writing as well. Manto's personality sketches of Ismat Chughtai (who was as much a member of the film industry as anyone else), Ashok Kumar, Nargis, Shyam, and “Paričehra” (“Fairy-faced”) Naseem in the collection *Ganjē Farishtē*, are legend, but he wrote about other members of the industry as well. In *Ganjē Farishtē* one also comes across portraits of Desai, Babu Rao Patel, and the great playwright Agha Hashr. Ismat Chughtai's portrayals of the actress Suraiya and Khawaja Ahmed Abbas,² and of course Manto, who had himself said that when he first arrived in Bombay he longed only to be “a shining star on the heavens of the film world,”³ are also notable. Perhaps not so well known is Ismat Chughtai's novel *‘Ajīb Ādmī*, which I am currently translating for Kali (see accompanying excerpt), and in which she takes on the story of Guru Dutt's tragic life and death, writing not only a fictionalized narrative, but also, in a style uniquely her own, borrowing heavily from her own personal experiences and delving deeply into the times in which she lived, producing, in the end, a scathing account of the topsy-turvy world of the Bombay film industry. Ismat Chughtai believed in writing about what was most familiar to her, and the film world, a second home to her because of her husband and her friends, was no exception. In a 1972 interview for *Mahfil*, she says that when she first wrote a story about Bombay films “they all got angry with me. I was the first person to write about this black money in films.”⁴ The story was *Shama* (Candle). Based

¹Ranjit Hoskote, “Kaifi Azmi: Symbol of Resistance,” *The Hindu* (Internet ed., Magazine Section), 19 May 2002 <<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/mag/2002/05/19/stories/2002051900280300.htm>>.

²*My Friend, My Enemy: Essays, Reminiscences, Portraits* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001), pp. 241, 249.

³Sa'adat Hasan Manṭō, “Merā Ṣāhib,” in his *Manṭōrāma* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mīl, 1991), p. 13.

⁴“Mahfil Interviews Ismat Chughtai” in *Mahfil: A Quarterly of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 8, Nos. 2–3 (1972), p. 186.

loosely on the life of the actress Nargis, a fact that is well known now, *Sōnē kī Čīryā* caused a furor at the time it was made. Ismat Chughtai explains the circumstances surrounding the film:

So I told how these people take black money; then we made a film of it. It was *Sone ki chiriya* [The Golden Bird], which tells how film heroines are treated. My husband suffered in a way because of this film ... film producers and music directors were all angry at us for this film.⁵

She then goes on to mention a new novel about films, hinting at the truth behind the novel which was a work in progress:

Right now I'm writing a novel about ... Oh! Don't mention his name! Once I wrote a story using the actual name of the person ... and I was fined Rs. 200/ and then he sued me for Rs. 2 lakhs for damages ... I am working on another novel about films and in it I show how cunning these film people are.⁶

In the novel itself there are certain deletions of names that confirm what she says. Of course Ismat Chughtai did not actually ever admit to making a film about Nargis or writing about Guru Dutt, but these observations can be made with confidence because a great deal is known about the lives of the film stars in question. In the interview Ismat Chughtai does offer some details, which, however vague, point to Guru Dutt as the ill-fated protagonist of her narrative.

Anyway, this novel is about this film producer who dies; he commits suicide. I go into why he commits suicide, why girls run after him and big producers like him and the hell they make for these men and for their wives. After this starlet he's helped becomes a big star, she leaves him and goes off. She leaves him and the poor man is in a lurch.⁷

It's interesting that she blames the starlet and not the "producer." The "starlet" she refers to is believed to be Waheeda Rahman. The reader immediately places *'Ajīb Ādmī* in context; it takes all of fifteen minutes of reading to come to that conclusion. The hero, Dharam Dev starts out as a

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

film director and then also becomes an actor, his wife Mangala, is Bengali and a singer in great demand, the “starlet” is a thin, dark-complexioned Muslim girl from Madras. Her name is Zarina Jamal and her dancing “takes the film industry by storm.”⁸

Several years ago, at a function honoring Kaifi Azmi in which Shabana Azmi, Javed Akhtar and Shabana’s mother, Shaukat Azmi, were also present, I had occasion to chat with Shaukat Azmi about Ismat Chughtai. I asked her why she and Shabana had never done a film based on Ismat Chughtai’s work and she admitted that they had been interested for a long time in filming *‘Ajīb Ādmī* but could not. There wasn’t time to continue the conversation, but later, when I read the novel, I realized that perhaps the fact that many of the people Ismat Chughtai writes about were still living—Ashok Kumar among them—had something to do with the difficulty in bringing *‘Ajīb Ādmī* to the screen. One cannot help think of the potential the novel has of metamorphosing into a very interesting screenplay now that no one can sue anyone.

Manto’s portraits, the sketches by Ismat Chughtai herself, and *‘Ajīb Ādmī* constitute a look into a world that has long ceased to exist. There is no one left who will put together a firsthand history of the Bombay film industry, no one who can. This glimpse is important because the Progressive Writers’ Movement is linked to what was going on in films. Mehboob, Chetan Anand, Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Shantaram, and Ismat Chughtai and Shahid Latif—their films reflect that link clearly and heroically. They also rendered another service; they brought to the common man who would never read the literature an awareness of the philosophy that inspired and impelled them.

In one sense *‘Ajīb Ādmī* is more than the story of an ill-fated genius. The novel is eventually one great writer’s attempt to cross-examine and analyze the system of which she and others like her were such an integral part, something Ismat Chughtai does with relentless candor, but without ever compromising her humanity and compassion. □

⁸‘Ismat Čughtā’i, *‘Ajīb Ādmī* (Lahore: Rohtas Buks Ahmed, 1992), p. 39.