

TAHIRA NAQVI

## Ismat Chughtai—A Tribute

“The wretch turned out to be a total woman!”  
—SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO, *Ganjē Farištē*

SHE DIED AS SHE HAD LIVED, in the midst of controversy, doing her own thing. The news that she had left instructions she was to be cremated became cause for heated debate in both India and Pakistan and even those who knew her, who expected her to be unpredictable, were taken by surprise. But the furor over funeral rites could not divert attention from Ismat Chughtai the artist. Her greatness as the grand dame of Urdu fiction, as one of the four pillars of modern Urdu short story (the other three being Manto, Krishan Chander, and Rajinder Singh Bedi), as the indomitable spirit of the Urdu *afāna*, the last chronicler of the Uttar Pradesh Muslim culture and its associated semantics, was affirmed again and again in tributes by old friends and contemporaries, new and young writers, journalists, and critics.

The importance of Ismat Apa’s craft and the skillful manner in which she approached it cannot be minimized, nor can her role as an innovator and revolutionary in the area of fiction. She was a writer (and a good one at that) when women were discouraged from involving themselves in intellectual pursuits; she developed the markings of a feminist in the early forties when the concept of feminism was in its nascent stage, even in the West; she spoke her mind unreservedly; she was afraid of no one, nothing; she was a rebel. But one tends to forget that she was more than all this. I hope she will be remembered best, especially by people like myself who see Urdu faltering and enervated, as a woman writer whose work is a living document of traditional linguistic patterns, in all their colloquial, idiomatic and dialectal richness.

Many of Ismat’s critics, past and present, lament her single-minded

preoccupation with women's lives, with a middle class society and its concerns, what they deem to be her myopic view of the world. I agree that there was much more out there in the villages and towns of India and Pakistan that Ismat Apa could have utilized to enhance her subject matter and the narrative texture of her stories, but if she had branched out and experimented with other themes and approaches, she would probably have lost that very special touch that sets her apart from all other writers of Urdu fiction. The reason for this might lie in the fact that Ismat was inseparable from her milieu and thoroughly steeped in her culture and its particular linguistic expressions. And thank God for that! How else could we have had stories like "Čaut<sup>h</sup>ī kā Jōṛā," "Badan kī Xušbū" and "Dō Hāt<sup>h</sup>" (to name just a few), and longer works like *Ziddī*, *Dil kī Dunyā*, and *Tē<sup>h</sup>ī Lakīr*?

Ismat Chughtai was born on August 15, 1915 into a middle-class family in Badayun (India). She was ninth of ten children (six brothers, four sisters), and since her older sisters got married while Ismat was very young, the better part of her childhood was spent in the company of her brothers, a factor which she admits contributed greatly to the frankness in her nature and writing.

Her brother, Mirza Azim Beg Chughtai, already an established writer when Ismat was still in her teens, was her first teacher and mentor. She read Thomas Hardy and then the romantic works of Hijab Imtiaz Ali, Majnun Gorakhpuri, and Niaz Fatehpuri. Before long she was writing melodramatic stories in secret, for she was afraid they would be considered unseemly and, if discovered, even bring her reprimand. The works of Dostoyevsky and Somerset Maugham had a great impact on her, and she also developed a special fondness for Chekhov. From O'Henry, as she said in an interview, she learned the conventions of storytelling. Among Urdu writers, Munshi Premchand was her favorite, and understandably so; having been influenced by Dickens, Tolstoy and, later, Gandhi, Premchand was the first Indian writer to pay special attention to the technical aspects of the short story and novel as developed in the West.

In college, beginning with Greek drama, continuing with Shakespeare, and down to Ibsen and Bernard Shaw, she read voraciously. Finally, at twenty-three, Ismat decided that she was ready for some serious writing of her own. Her first short story "Fasādi" (The Troublemaker) was published in *Sāqī*, a prestigious literary magazine. Its readers were perplexed; they wondered why Azim Beg Chughtai (Ismat's writer-brother) had "changed" his name!

In 1936, still working on her bachelor's degree, she attended the first meeting of the Progressive Writers' Association in Lucknow. Here she met Rashid Jahan for the first time. A doctor by profession and a writer, "a woman of a particularly strong-willed, liberated sort," Rashid Jahan was the only woman to leave a lasting impression on Ismat, who would later recall: "She spoilt me a lot because she was very bold and never shied away from speaking her mind, and I just wanted to copy her."

After her B.A. Ismat worked for a B.T. (a bachelor's in Education), thus becoming the first Indian Muslim woman to have earned both degrees. Subsequently, she was appointed principal of a girls' college and, later, in Bombay, Inspectress of schools. She also worked in Aligarh for a time. Here she met Shahid Latif, who was at the time working on his master's degree. The two developed a close friendship. They were married in 1942.

Two months before her marriage, Ismat wrote the short story "Liḥāf," which created quite a stir then and continues to be considered one of the most controversial works ever produced by a woman writer in the Subcontinent. A frustrated housewife, whose *navāb* (lord) husband has no time for her, finds sexual gratification and emotional solace in the companionship of a female servant. Ismat cleverly tells the story from the viewpoint of a nine-year-old girl who can relate everything she sees without being burdened with the caution or restraint an adult female narrator might experience in recounting such a tale.

When "Liḥāf" was published, a storm of controversy broke out. Readers and critics alike condemned the author and her story. She was charged with obscenity and, subsequently, was dragged to the court. The trial, which took place in Lahore, lasted two years, at the end of which the court dismissed the case as it couldn't find any "four-letter words" in the offending work.

*Kalyān* (Buds) and *Āḥṭān* (Wounds/Injuries), Ismat Chughtai's first two collections of short stories, were published in Azim Beg Chughtai's lifetime. Other collections came later, among them: *Ēk Bāt* (A Word), *Āḥṭān-e-mū'ī* (The Sensitive One), *Dhānī Bānkēn* (Green Bracelets), *Dō Hāt* (Two Hands), *Xarīd Lō* (Buy!), *Ēk Qaṭra-e Xūn* (A Drop of Blood), and *Tḥōrī sī Pāgal* (Just a Little Crazy). She also wrote novels *Tḥēḥī Lakīr* (The Crooked Line) and *Saudā'ī* (The Mad Man) and novellas *Ziddī* (The Stubborn One), *Dil kī Duniyā* (Realm of the Heart), and *Māṣūma* (The Innocent). Her other books include *Ham Lōg* (We People), a collection of short stories and essays; *Yahān sē Vahān tak* (From Here to There), a collection of essays; *Šaiṭān* (The Devil), a collection of plays; and *Afsānē*

*Drāmē* (Stories and Plays). Additionally, in collaboration with her husband, Ismat wrote twelve film scripts. She also made five films independently. Some years ago she played a small but important role in Shashi Kapoor's film *Junūn* (Madness/Craze).

Ismat had two daughters by Shahid Latif. After his death she continued living in Bombay, a city she loved dearly. Once she was asked if she had any unfulfilled desires and she replied that she wished "to be reborn in India." Sadly, she was never awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award, one of the most prestigious given to Indian literati. However, rather belatedly, she did receive the Samman Award for Urdu literature in 1990, the year she turned seventy-five. Ismat Chughtai died on October 24, 1991.

Ismat Chughtai began writing at a time when South Asian women were still sequestered and their voice suppressed. Tradition and ethical mores held a tight grip on society and any attempt on the part of women to write poetry or fiction was viewed with profound skepticism. However, despite the taboo, certain women (notably Nazar Sajjad Hyder and Hijab Imtiaz Ali) did manage to make themselves heard. Ismat herself was affected initially by Hijab Imtiaz Ali's overly-romanticized themes and flamboyant, over-stated characters. But, although quite popular, the work of these early women writers and others like them was largely romantic or instructional and reformist in nature, with character development and subject matter remaining stilted and quite flawed. Soon, however, Ismat broke free from this influence, as is evident already in her first story "Fasādi" and later in "Liḥāf."

Like her male contemporaries such as Sa'adat Hasan Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, and Krishan Chander, Ismat was influenced a great deal by Western fiction writers of the late nineteenth century. This influence was most noticeable in her conscious selection of social and sexual themes. She treated these themes with frankness and sensitivity, without being judgmental. The subject matter was delivered in a style which was bold, innovative, rebellious, and unabashedly realistic in both its portrayal of character and its analysis of the human condition.

It was out of this tradition that "Liḥāf" came. It set the tone of Ismat's later work and also confirmed her place among the foremost writers of her time, such as Manto and Bedi. Although "Liḥāf" became the focal point of recognition for Ismat's work, her creative world was neither confined to nor exhausted by the theme of lesbianism. She had

much, much more to offer.

Some critics have found Ismat rather limited in her choice of subject matter. Perhaps that is true. She was indeed at her best when she wrote about the world she was most familiar with, a world crowded with mothers-in-law, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandmothers, servants and a whole network of neighbors. She knew these characters well and she portrayed them in their milieu with vivid and masterful realism.

On the other hand, there are stories such as “Muqaddas Farz” (Sacred Duty), “Kuñvāri” (The Virgin), “Sorry Mummy,” “Kaččē Dhāgē” (Breakable Threads), and “Lady Killer” which provide instances of Ismat’s writing at its worst. When she delved into the high society and film studios of metropolitan Bombay, with the intent to expose their sham and hypocrisy, her pen faltered. She tended to editorialize and pontificate, thus considerably weakening the power of her narrative.

This inability to be thoroughly at home in both worlds, inasmuch as she chose to write about both, can be viewed as Ismat Chughtai’s one great flaw. But perhaps we judge her too harshly. It is the perfection we observe within the limits of her world that we should be concerned with.

Ismat was at her best when she wrote about ordinary people, especially women. The better part of her writing shows a deep and abiding preoccupation with women’s issues, particularly their cultural status and their myriad roles in Indian society. By underscoring women’s struggles against the oppressive institutions of her time, she brings to her fiction an understanding of the female psyche that is unique; no other Urdu fiction writer has approached women’s issues with the same degree of sensitivity and concern.

Theme and plot, however, are nothing without language. It is Ismat’s diction, her unique and rich idiom that thrills any reader who views Urdu not only as a language but also as a veritable institution. Her diction is closely related to the social and cultural aspects of life in middle-class Muslim families of Uttar Pradesh. And along with the linguistic patterns characteristic of this group, there is also the colorful, robust, and completely unrestrained vernacular employed by the servant class and women who made their living at menial jobs and were not “bēgams.” Dialects come alive and idioms explode on every page of her work, so that each paragraph becomes more than just a collection of sentences conveying an idea; it represents a way of life, traditions, a whole philosophy. Class consciousness, clothing styles, cooking habits, foods, elements of social exchange, customs regarding such important events as birth, marriage and death are presented for our scrutiny. For example, we

can see the practice of matchmaking at work in the story “Biččhū Phuphī” (Aunty Scorpion). It would be incorrect to assume that the tradition of matchmaking has died out; in India and Pakistan there are still households where the practice follows a somewhat similar, if not identical, route. One may also learn in the same story how a Muslim shroud is prepared, how the cloth is squared and measured and ripped by hand, without the use of scissors. And in the story “Ghūng̃har” (The Veil) we meet a woman whose loyalty to the institution of marriage has tragically consumed her whole life, a phenomenon deeply ingrained in the very fiber of South Asian culture.

Even though Ismat didn't do much writing after the sixties, her life and presence in the years that followed became emblematic of an era, a special gilded age of Urdu fiction. In her final years, she was not so much a person as a legend, not so much a woman as a myth. Sometimes I think of Ismat Chughtai as an icon, as a powerful idea with a gentle face. When in the course of translating one of her works, I came across that all-too-familiar line drawing of her, that oval face surrounded by short curly hair, those smiling eyes behind small, round, wire-rimmed spectacles and that mouth which is just barely engaged in a shy smile, I told myself that it is the face of a woman who had nurtured and lived, every minute of her life, an unflinchingly passionate and courageous commitment to truth. But there is something else: it is also the face of a woman who never forgot who she was, who was glad to be a woman, who, if offered the choice, would be a woman again and again.