

REVIEW ARTICLE

Out of the Zenana: New Translations of Ismat Chughtai's Work

I

I FIRST MET Ismat Chughtai in her Bombay apartment in 1972. At the time I was doing doctoral research on her friend and contemporary, Saadat Hasan Manto. As part of my research I had read both Manto's sketch of her, written for the series "Na'ē Adab kē Mi'mār" (Builders of the New Literature) and her eulogy of him, "Mērā Dōst, Mērā Dushman" (My Friend, My Enemy), written shortly after his death in 1955.¹ During what turned out to be a very extended conversation, I learned as much about Ismat's own life and writing, some of which I had also read, as I did about Manto and Urdu literary life in Bombay in the '40s. I came away impressed with her liveliness and vitality, her genuineness as a person, and the forthrightness of her views on literature, although by that time Urdu fiction writers had embraced very different approaches than the ones she and Manto had inherited. Remembering that gracious interview, and a subsequent one in the same apartment ten years later, I was delighted to take a closer look at Tahira Naqvi's fresh translations of her work.

Ismat Chughtai was surely the leading lady of the Progressive Writers group, the generation of Urdu writers who came of literary age and produced their most influential work between 1935 and 1955. Including Ismat, Manto, Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Ahmed Ali, Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan, and others, this group inherited the approach to fiction of the nineteenth-century French and Russian realists. Espousing a

¹Sa'adat Hasan Manṭō, *ʿIsmat Čuġhtā'ī* (Bombay: Kutub Publishers, 1948). This sketch was later included in Manṭō's collection *Ganjē Firishtē* (Lahore: Al-Bayān, 1953). ʿIsmat Čuġhtā'ī, "Mērā Dōst, Mērā Dushman," in *Nuqūsh Manṭō Nūmbar*, 49–50 (1955), pp. 296–310.

largely didactic view of literature, they emphasized social commentary that criticized the middle and upper classes and portrayed sympathetically the working class and rural communities. Before the '50s, with some exceptions, they tended to de-emphasize formal experimentation and concentrated on simple narrative structures, often using faceless first- or third-person narrators. Taking up Rashid Jahan's mantle, within this literary context Ismat Chughtai practiced a particular kind of social commentary in her fiction, by fearlessly depicting the positions and roles of women in middle-class U.P. families, while avoiding the sentimental view of working class characters often presented by her contemporaries. Most often she approached her narrative through an undistinguished first-person narrator. In contrast to her contemporaries, she used a distinctive language, often infusing the narrative with the wit, liveliness, and vocabulary characteristic of the Begmati Urdu of the arena she depicts. Though depicting a largely secluded society of women, Ismat's fiction is anything but narrow. Rather, it provides a unique view of such human universals as the price of social acceptance, the fate of lovers attempting to cross social boundaries, the consequences of selfishness and greed, the tensions between religious credulity and skepticism, and the capacity of human beings for both self-delusion and self-sacrifice.

Although well known, read, and loved among Urdu readers, Ismat Chughtai's work is scarcely known by non-Urdu readers. Occasional translations into English of her short stories have appeared in collections of twentieth-century Urdu fiction, and in this journal and the *Journal of South Asian Literature*. Now a substantial body of her work is available in English in three recent publications by the talented translator Tahira Naqvi. We are fortunate to have *The Crooked Line* (*Ṭēr̥hī Lakīr*; Oxford: Heinemann, 1995), *The Quilt and Other Stories* (Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: Sheep Meadow Press, 1994), and *The Heart Breaks Free and The Wild One* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993).

II

First published in Urdu in 1944, Ismat Chughtai's sprawling and ambitious semi-autobiographical novel *Ṭēr̥hī Lakīr* focuses on the growth and development of a young woman whose experiences strongly resemble her own. In her introduction to the translation, Tahira Naqvi characterizes the novel as "a vehicle whereby Ismat Chughtai exposes the social-cultural conflicts and the psycho-sexual determinants that govern the develop-

ment of female consciousness” (p. vii). Suggesting that the novel contrasts sharply with earlier portrayals of women’s lives in Urdu, she argues that it depicts the emotional barrenness of the traditional household, against which the protagonist rebels, in which sexuality is experienced but never explained and women are oppressed chiefly by other women. Explaining its appeal beyond its own narrow circle, she also suggests that in her detailed descriptions of custom and ritual, Ismat provides close to an ethnography of middle-class Muslim women’s lives of the time. Although Naqvi concentrates on the psycho-social intent of the novel, she also gives some attention to its narrative approach, showing that the seeds of much of Ismat’s later fiction are sown in the novel, and that it provides a sterling example of the unique blend of autobiography and fiction that characterizes much of Ismat’s work.

To the non-Urdu reader of 1995, *The Crooked Line* must surely seem a curious novel. Its forty-four chapters are largely episodic and gallop from one event to another with little sense of the passage of time. Despite its third-person narration, its point of view is limited to what its protagonist Shamshad can observe and guess. Thus, although it provides an in-depth depiction of her own psycho-social development, largely by describing her relationships with others and her feelings about people and events, it almost never gets into the heads of the other characters. Physical description is virtually absent from the novel, giving almost no sense of what others look like nor any sense of place, and, until the beginning of the Second World War, providing little mention of events outside Shamshad’s own tight circle.

Even so, the novel is more than a historical artifact and holds more interest for the contemporary reader than simply the autobiographical. What is equally interesting is the structuring of the novel into three phases, which together depict the gradually broadening social milieus of women of Ismat’s class in the early twentieth century. In the first phase, the action of the novel occurs primarily at home, in a largely female society. For Shamshad, the most important relationships are with females: her wet-nurse, her sister Manjhu, Bari Apa, and her female friends at school. Within this realm, which is almost entirely middle-class and Muslim, emotional relationships are paramount, and Shamshad’s rebellion against these women and the expectations they hold for her behavior through her attachment to them is the most vigorous of the novel. The second phase focuses on Shamshad’s experiences in college. Here she encounters a mixed-gender society and learns to relate to men, albeit in the restricted ways allowed at the time. She also discovers other ethnic groups, develop-

ing a friendship with a Hindu family, including a romantic infatuation with the father, and beginning her lifelong friendship with her Christian friend Alma. Although the novel provides little sense of Shamshad's intellectual development, this phase does depict her growth of political awareness and her budding participation in the independence movement. In the third phase, Shamshad enters the colonial milieu, becoming the headmistress of a national school and interacting with government officials. More important, despite her deeper involvement in the nationalist movement, she meets and marries an Irish man and thus encounters at a personal level the communal antagonisms and strains of the colonial experience. Throughout, Shamshad's rebelliousness, discomfort, and unwillingness to accept the behavioral expectations of any group suggest how difficult these transitions and changes were for her and for her contemporaries. The ambiguous ending of the novel, in which Shamshad's husband has gone off on a dangerous mission just when she discovers she is pregnant, reflect Ismat's uncertainty as to the direction these changes are leading her and, by extension, her society. Not merely the depiction of a single woman's experience, the novel thus provides a template for much of twentieth-century India's social changes, with this woman's life providing our angle of vision.

Tahira Naqvi's translation of the novel is quite readable, although it does not attempt to reproduce the quality of Ismat's language. The English text is peppered with Urdu words, fortunately without distracting notes. For the uninitiated reader, a brief glossary is provided at the back of the book, with a helpful list of the most commonly used Urdu kinship terms.

III

In contrast to the sprawling novel, *The Quilt and Other Stories* is a collection of fifteen of Ismat Chughtai's best known short stories, nine translated by Tahira Naqvi and six by Syeda S. Hameed. The volume begins with an appreciative preface by Anita Desai, who characterizes Ismat as a truly liberated soul, as someone who is both inside and outside traditional culture and consequently able to depict it both sympathetically and critically. Desai also provides insightful comments on some of the stories and on Ismat's narrative stance. Tahira Naqvi's introduction begins with a biographical sketch of Ismat. She then places her work within the context of the development of the Urdu short story during the '30s, '40s, and '50s,

providing an assessment of Ismat's unique contribution to that legacy and stressing her attention to ethnographic detail. Regrettably, although Naqvi states that Ismat wrote her best stories in the '40s and '50s, she gives us no indication of when the individual stories included here were written or whether she has arranged the volume in chronological order. Such information would be helpful for the reader interested in tracking Ismat's use of certain techniques or her interest in particular subject matter. Nor does Naqvi discuss Ismat's characteristic narrative approaches, in particular the fact that Ismat tended to use primarily the faceless first-person narrator. While such a narrator gives Ismat's stories considerable immediacy and authenticity, it gives very little sense of authorial voice or encouragement to ponder the larger dimensions of the story in front of us.

Still, the stories in this volume are surely among Ismat's best and are, even now, genuinely compelling. Of them, the title story is probably still the most famous, largely because of the controversy that it generated at the time of its publication in 1941, in its depiction of a lesbian relationship between a childless woman and her servant. Told in the first person from the point of view of a child, but filtered through the recollections of an adult, the story thus depends for its effect on the contrast between those points of view, between the confusion of the child and the understanding of the adult. The story also challenges restraints on subject matter, while making female experience the emblem of the universal confusion engendered by the child's discovery of adult sexual behavior.

Very different from "The Quilt," "Sacred Duty" is also an engaging story in its depiction of another universal, parental reaction to a mixed marriage, here between a Muslim man and a Hindu woman. Although Ismat's approach, which comes through beautifully even in English, is decidedly humorous, the story deals with a real and difficult situation, not only in India, but in much of the rest of the world, including the U.S. Another example of Ismat's humorous approach to social issues, "The Eternal Vine," portrays the variety of family responses to a middle-aged widower's remarriage. Belying the humor, however, the irony and pain in the ending of the story, in which the widower dies and the young second wife is stranded, are also unmistakable. Almost as an aside, the story also provides a telling example of the incorporation of Hindu mythology into Muslim culture, and a deft inversion of traditional gender relationships, in its characterization of the widower's five sisters as Pandus, while an old aunt's voice has the power of a hundred Kurus (p. 25).

Surely one of Ismat's very best stories, "The Wedding Shroud," in its depiction of the attempt to find a husband for the ill-fated Kaneez, exemplifies well Ismat's ability to provide ethnographic detail, here concerning trousseaux and other nuptial customs. The story also provides a telling example of Ismat's gift for social commentary, in this story more subtle but also more pointed than in the more humorous stories, in its depiction of the great effort expended on the attempt to extract a proposal for Kaneez from a freeloading relative. In its shift from a third-person narrator, to first-person narration by the younger sister, and back to third-person, the story is also more technically interesting than many of Ismat's other stories.

"The Morsel" provides an example of Ismat's move out of her traditional milieu into that of working class Bombay, with its more varied communal mix. Here the women friends of the unmarried Sarla "assist" her in attempting to attract a man whom she met on a bus, by persuading her to dress in an ultra-feminine and totally unnatural fashion. In the ironic ending of the story, the man fails to recognize Sarla in her new outfit. The story is heavily critical of both the pressure exerted on a single woman to attract a man and the wiles thought necessary to do so. Nevertheless, the ending is also hopeful in its suggestion that the real Sarla is attractive as she is and could therefore, if she chose, form a relationship with the man without the artificiality of special clothing and makeup.

This volume also includes "The Veil," "Kallu," "Choti Apa," "The Rock," "The Mole," "By the Grace of God," "Poison," "A Pair of Hands," "Bichu Phupi," and "Scent of the Body." With the exception of "The Mole," which is a primarily a psychological study, these stories also show the mix of social commentary and engaging story focusing on some aspect of Muslim family life that characterizes Ismat's other stories.

The translations included here generally read well, especially considering that neither translator is a native speaker of English. That fact, however, may explain why, for the most part, the English here fails to convey the pungency of Ismat's Urdu, although possibly not even a native English speaker could find a comparable diction in English. The language of "Sacred Duty" comes closest to me, where the translation is brisk and clever, especially in its use of italics to convey the interior asides of the characters. Occasionally, the English is jarring or stilted, as, for example, when the narrator of "The Quilt" cites her tendency to fight with other children: "all I could think of was fisticuffs with every known and unknown girl or boy I ran into" (p. 5), or when she describes herself as

“dead scared” (p. 11) of Begum Jan and Rabbo’s quarrels. But these are quibbles. This is a valuable collection, for the pleasure it enables the reader of these stories to experience and for the examples it provides of Ismat Chughtai’s accomplishments as a short story writer.

IV

The Heart Breaks Free and The Wild One brings together translations of two of Ismat Chughtai’s novellas, *Dil ki Duniya*, first published in 1966, and *Ziddi*, first published in 1941. Although written twenty-five years apart, these are an interesting pair, in that both treat similar themes of interest to contemporary feminists. In both cases, too, the translations are sprightly and readable, carrying the reader along without any jarring notes.

“The Wild One” deals with the impossible and ultimately tragic love affair between Puran, a young man of a princely family, and Asha, a servant maid. Initially Puran is rebellious, lively, charming, and wild. When he announces his intention to marry Asha, his family spirits her away and persuades him to marry a woman of his own class. As a result, Puran literally becomes lifeless, and ultimately, the marriage fails. When Asha returns to him at the end, he dies tragically in a fire, upon which Asha sets herself on fire. The novella thus suggests that, although class differences are real, it is families who maintain and care about those differences, and it is the pull of family ties that prevent one from breaking free. More importantly, as if almost to justify the rebellious path Shamshad takes in *The Crooked Line*, the novella, in its depiction of Puran’s end, tells us that acquiescing to family ties and to social convention results in virtual, if not actual, death-in-life.

Picking up that same theme, “The Heart Breaks Free” tells the contrasting stories of two women. The first is Bua. Initially footloose, fancy-free, and wildly alive, Bua maintains her extraordinary freedom through her devotion to a saint of several centuries past. However, she is tricked by her family into taking a purgative, which renders her “normal” and consequently totally lifeless. The second woman, Aunt Qudsia, having been abandoned by her husband at a young age, passively, almost lifelessly, waits in her parents’ home to be taken back by him. After Bua becomes “normal,” Aunt Qudsia becomes freer and more unconventional. Aided by a relative, who is himself in love with her, she finally elopes with her lover, Uncle Shabir. This novella thus suggests that, in contrast to the lifelessness and ultimate death experienced by those like Bua who allow themselves or are deceived by their families into allowing themselves to follow social convention, those able to break free of rigid

social convention and escape the familial tether find a unique and life-giving freedom. Unlike “The Wild One,” in which the only solution in 1941 for the protagonists’ dilemma is death, in 1966 Aunt Qudsia and Uncle Shabir are allowed to flourish and produce a liberated daughter of their own, for whom the narrator provides a fitting benediction:

Go, Rafiah Hasan, you can go without fear where you want to go. You have your own tape measure, your own weights, your own scales to plot and gauge life’s values. No one will be able to cut you down, your dreams will never be crushed. (p. 71)

V

Why would someone want to read these works, some more than fifty years old, and what do they say to an English-speaking reader, particularly a North American reader, in 1995? Certainly, these works have a historical value. They show the kinds of issues that engaged an Urdu writer who had largely adopted the Progressive point of view and the approach to fiction consistent with that view. They also provide an engaging portrait of a society in transition within a particular period, with some sense of the human consequences, both positive and negative, of social change. For the contemporary reader, they illuminate issues that much of the world is still addressing: changing women’s roles, multiculturalism, relationships between Asian and European societies. They also provide insights into universal human experiences: in the novel, the passage from child to adult, and in the novel and the shorter fiction, such familiar emotions and experiences as love, longing, greed, confusion, fear, despair, triumph, and death. What is most important, these translations enable us to encounter an authentic voice, who wrote out of her own lived experience, who provided a strong and compelling portrayal of that experience, who spoke for a segment of society not previously represented in Urdu letters, and who paved the way for a succeeding generation of women writers in Urdu in both India and Pakistan. For enabling us to hear that voice in an alien tongue, Tahira Naqvi deserves our thanks and praise.

—LESLIE A. FLEMMING
University of Maine