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Urdu literature in 1940's – A focus on Ismat Chughtai's work

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by

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Urdu literature from 18th century – 20th century :

Some main features

- Urdu literature entered in a new phase since 18th century
 - It is the classical form of Urdu
 - Poets like Mir, Sauda, Dard and Ghalib
 - Golden Period of the Urdu literature
- Contribution of Vali (1667-1741)
- End of Deccan Period and the beginning of the Delhi Period (from 1735 onwards)
 - Religious odes
 - Elegies
 - Romantic themes
 - Ustad (Master) and Shagird (Pupil) institution
- New phase of Urdu literature from the second half of the 19th century.
 - Expansion of the British Empire
 - Consequences of failed India's first war of Independence against British in 1857 (Qureshi)
 - Revolutionary and progressive thoughts begin to crop up
 - Iqbal (1873-1938) > philosopher, writer, progressionist.
- Period of reform, social justice and progressist movement from 20th century
 - Revival of Urdu journalism during the Khilafat Movement
 - Urdu literature portrays new appreciation of historical and cultural heritage of Indian Muslims (Qureshi)

Literary genre in Urdu

- Dastangoi
 - Art of storytelling
 - Dastan and goi
- Tazkiras
 - Biographies and anthologies
- Ghazals
 - Short in size
 - Each phrase is called misra & second misra ends always with the same word, this refrain is called the *radif*.
 - The word preceded by *radeef* is a rhyme which is called *qaafiya*.
 - Any verse can be read individually and they do not depend on each other. Several themes.
- Nazm
 - No size limit.
 - No importance of *radeef* and *qafiya*.
 - Verses cannot be read individually. They are interlinked. Only one theme.
 - Often, nazam is an eulogy on the prophet or a king, or other personalities.



Some very famous Urdu writers and poets

- Mirza Asadullah Beg Khan “Ghalib” – 1797-1869
- Muhammad Iqbal – 1877-1938
- Prem Chand – 1880-1936
- Faiz Ahmad Faiz 1911-1984
- Saadat Hasan Manto – 1912-1955
- Ismat Chughtai – 1915-1991
- Intezaar Hussain – 1923-2016
- Rahman Abbas – 1972-

Other known non-Muslim Urdu writers

18th and 19th century

- Sarb Shukh Divana (1727-1788)
- Jasvant Singh Parvanah (1756-1813)
- Daya Shankar Nasim (1811-1884)

20th century

- Upendranath Ashk > 1910-1996
- Krishna Chander > 1914-1977
- Rajinder Singh Bedi > 1915-1984
- Jagan Nath Azad > 1918-2004
- Bhupendra Nath Kaushik > 1924-2007
- Harcharan Chawla > 1926-2001
- Satyapal Anand > 1931
- Gopi Chand Narang > 1931
- Monhinder Pratap Chand > 1935

Progressive Writer's Movement

- Launched in 1936
- Speech extract by Premchand on the first meeting:
 - *“Our literary taste is undergoing a rapid transformation. It is coming more to grip with the realities of life; it interests itself with society or man as a social unit. It is not satisfied now with the singing of frustrated love, or with writing to satisfy only our sense of wonder; it concerns itself with the problems of our life and such themes as have a social value. The literature which does not arouse in us a critical spirit or satisfy our spiritual needs, which is not 'force-giving' and dynamic, which does not awaken our sense of beauty, which does not make us face the grim realities of life in a spirit of determination, has no use for us today. It cannot even be termed as literature.”*

Manifesto of the Progressive Writer's Association, 1936

- Radical changes are taking place in Indian Society. The spirit of reaction, however, though moribund and doomed to ultimate decay, is still operative and is making desperate efforts to prolong it. Indian literature, since the breakdown of classical culture, has had the fatal tendency to escape from the actualities of life. It has tried to find a refuge from reality in baseless spiritualism and ideality. The result is that it has become anaemic in body and mind and has adopted a rigid formalism and a banal and perverse ideology.
- It is the duty of Indian writers to give expression to the changes taking place in Indian life and to assist spirit of progress in the country by introducing scientific rationalism in literature. They should undertake to develop an attitude of literary criticism that will discourage the general reactionary and revivalist tendencies on questions like family, religion, sex, war and society. They should combat literary trends reflecting communalism, racial antagonism and exploitation of man by man.
- It is the object of our Association to rescue literature and other arts from the conservative classes in whose hands they have been degenerating so long to bring arts in the closest touch with the people and to make them the vital organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future we envisage.
- While claiming to be the inheritors of the best traditions of India civilization, we shall criticize in all its aspects, the spirit of reaction in our country and we shall foster through interpretative and creative work (with both Indian and foreign resources) everything that will lead our country to the new life for which it is striving. We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and un-reason, we reject as reactionary.
- All that arouses in us the critical spirit that examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive.

Progressive Writer's Movement and Urdu literature in 1940's

- Under the context of class oppression prevailing in Urdu-speaking societies, the Progressive Writer Movement gained popularity among Urdu writers.
- The literary experience shifted from abstract to real issues.
- Poetry >
 - Faiz Ahmad Faiz > He mixed the adolescent romanticism with the fight against the oppression of the poor and took a revolutionary posture against the imperialism.
 - Majaz > torn between revolutionary and romantic impulses (Qureshi)
- Prose > Progressive Movement made immense contributions to Urdu literature.
 - Premchand > progressive and reformist message, poverty, injustice in the city and villages. He switched to writing in Hindi in 1914.
 - Publication of Angare (1932).
 - Krishan Candar (d. 1977) > mixture of realism and romanticism, and modernism and a nostalgia for the past.
 - Rajinder Singh Bedi (d. 1984) > social realism, partition of India.
 - Saadat Hassant Manto (d. 1955) > search and portrayal of goodness in prostitutes, criminals etc. Partition violence, red-light areas and slums of Bombay inspired his stories.
 - Ismat Chughtai (d. 1991) > world of Muslim middle-class families, religious hypocrisies, and women's sexuality.
- Urdu in 1940's
 - Hali inaugurated modern style theoretical and practical criticism in Urdu.
 - More interest in Western philosophies reflected with inspiration from Nietzsche, Bergson, Darwin, Marx, and Freud, etc. and into Western literary criticism and social theory.
 - Partition of India in 1947 and its consequences inspired Urdu writers to evoke the theme with blends of philosophical thoughts such as existentialism.

Ismat Chughtai – Biography



Ismat Chughtai

Born	15 August 1915 Budayun, British India, UP
Died	24 October, 1991
Occupation	Writer
Literary Movement	Progressive Writers Movement
Notable awards	Ghalib Award (1984)

Condition of Women & Ismat Chughtai's work - I

- Male domain society
 - If woman can just read the Quran or other religious texts, that's enough.
 - Example cited by CM Naim >> Bibi Ashraf (19th century).
 - Booklet on women's education undermines women's education in Bengal (1877)
- The field and space of women was restricted to the family
 - If it extended further, there was a subject called « Home Science » (domestic science)
 - Girls students will take these subjects > cooking, stitching, laundry, clothing etc.
 - Women may make a career with profession like these: Chef, Nutritionist, Nursing etc.
 - Publication of Bihisti Zevar (The Ornament of Paradise) in 1906 by Thanvi.
 - But hunger for knowledge by women was always there. Unconventional women
- Purdah system prevalent
 - Men would not meet women > separate space « Mardana vs Zenana »
 - Access to knowledge limited

Condition of Women & Ismat Chughtai's work - II

- Education of Ismat Chughtai was interrupted
- She stayed in a hostel
 - She met different women from different cultures
 - She was exposed to intimate details
- Her writings reflected her personal experiences :
 - Tough choice for her > how much to reveal and how much to conceal ?
 - Courageous and bold writing > revealed in autobiography
 - She gave a segment of her whole life.
 - Her fictions can also be considered as an ethnographical work.
 - Every ritual and every custom is decoded. (Naqvi)
 - Topics and themes were matrimonial alliances, familial disputes, women behind the four walls.
 - In her novel, « *Lihaaf* » (The Quilt) she attacked the hypocrisy of practicing Muslim women. Novel on lesbian and sexual adventures within the closed realm of family.
 - In her short story, « Dozakhi », (Hell bound), she mocks her brother, she explains his disturbing Islamic life, shows his character and finally renders a tribute.

Condition of Women & Ismat Chughtai's work - III

- Usage of colloquial language
 - Rarely literary language
 - She said once, « I write as I speak to everyone »
 - Style termed as « Begumati Zuban » (women's tongue)
 - Wit and satire as tool to depict the harsh social realities. (Jalil, 2015)
 - Urdu acquired a new zest, an added spice that made it more readable. (Jalil, 2015)
- Inspired by Dr Rashid Jahan, communist-writer-doctor
 - Short stories of Muslim middle class families with female protagonists
 - Écriture féminine came into Urdu as early as 1940
 - Parallels with Simone de Beauvoire
- Rebellious nature
 - Among the forefront writers of the progressist mouvement
 - Influenced by his brother 'Azam Beg Chughtai'
 - Dared to challenge the world, went counter current.

Begumaati Zubaan

- Language practice of women, zenanas of Delhi in the 19th century.
 - Later, it stretched to other Urdu-speaking cities like Hyderabad, Lucknow etc.
 - Mostly spoken in the purdah society
- Earthy, graphic, colorful, picturesque, vibrant imagery
- Fast-paced narrative, sharp piercing wit, unself-consciousness cynicism, uncommon courage to speak one's mind (Naqvi 1995)
- Straightforward and highly colloquial
- Women speakers are not very educated
 - Persianized Urdu not used
- Women are not worried what men will think of them since men are not party to the conversation.

Sacred Duty

- Short story on arranged marriage in a Muslim family
- Samina, the Muslim girl elopes with a Hindu boy just the day before her marriage
- The family of the girl plans to murder her daughter and the Hindu boy.
- The family's friend, a Muslim, gives the idea to re-convert Samina to Islam and to ask her boyfriend to convert to Islam.
- Both the girl and the boy are converted to Islam, marriage ceremony is reorganized.
- Both the girl and the boy elope once again, refusing to comply with the conditions laid out by the girl's family.

Extract – Sacred Duty

- Papa, Mummy – I’m terribly sorry, but I can’t go through with this marriage. I’m leaving with Tashar Trivedi to go to his parents’ home in Allahabad. We’ve been married in a civil ceremony. I will consider myself privileged if you decide to forgive me.
- When his wife heard the news, she almost fainted. There’s only one thing to do: let’s go to Allahabad and shoot them both.
- But there wasn’t even a well-sharpened knife in the house with which they could kill their daughter and son-in-law.
- If fate had been on our side, our daughter would not have run off, would not have blackened our faces thus.
- Tashar became agitated when he was told to convert.
- Papa, what’s this nonsense ? First it was Papaji who forced me to become Hindu, telling me to recite all kinds of holy hymns that sounded like gibberish, and now you’ve started this farce. We refuse to be part of your games. As soon as we return to Allahabad we’ll be forced to dip again, have more photographs taken, and ...”
- The maulvi saheb has been waiting a long time to make the conversion. He hasn’t accepted a cup of tea, says he’ll have a complete breakfast after he has performed his sacred duty.

Some concluding remarks ...

- Urdu got a prominent position and boost from Progressive Writer's Movement
 - Many Urdu writers were not a part of Progressive Writer's Movement.
- Urdu literature in 1940s raised more fundamental human concern rather than playing itself into Muslim identity politics.
- Ismat Chughtai played an important role in the development of modern Urdu
 - She brought a literary revolution through her strong feminist posture.
 - She moulded the India of the 40s with her bold writing and gave confidence to other women writers.
 - Ismat's fiction reveal valuable information about the social and cultural aspects of life in Muslim families.
 - Social taboos, class consciousness, customs regarding birth, marriage and death etc.

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