

## Ismat Chughtai

ABOUT one and a half years ago when I was in Bombay I received a postcard from a gentleman in Hyderabad. The content of the message ran somewhat like this: "How is it that Ismat Chughtai and you didn't marry? It would have been wonderful if the two personalities—Manto and Ismat—had come together. What a shame! Ismat married Shahid Latif and Manto ..."

It was about this time that a conference of Progressive writers was held in Hyderabad. Though I did not attend the conference I read the accounts of its proceedings in a journal published from Hyderabad. It mentioned that many girls had approached Ismat Chughtai there and asked her why she did not marry Manto.

I do not know whether the report was true or false. But when Ismat returned to Bombay she told my wife that when a lady in Hyderabad had asked her whether Manto was a bachelor she had replied sharply, "Indeed, no." Hearing this the lady was sorely disappointed and became quiet. Whatever the truth, it is curious that in all of India only the men and women of Hyderabad have been so concerned about Ismat's marriage and mine.

I did not reflect on it at the time, but now I wonder. If Ismat and I had really become man and wife, then ...? It is a big speculative "if" of history that is a little like asking—*if* Cleopatra's nose had been longer by one eighteenth of an inch what consequences would it have had on the history of the Nile valley? However, in the present case, Ismat is not Cleopatra, nor Manto Mark Antony. It is certain, though, that if Manto and Ismat had got married, it would have had the effect of an atomic bomb on the history of contemporary fiction. Short stories would have become a thing of the past and tales would have been reduced to riddles. The milk of diction would have dried into some rare powder or burnt to ashes. Maybe, their signatures on the marriage contract would have been

their last compositions. Well, who could say with certainty that there would have been a marriage contract at all! It seems more probable that both would have written stories on the marriage contract and put their signatures on the officiating Qazi's forehead as a proof of the marriage. During the marriage ceremony, a dialogue like the following might have ensued:

"Ismat, Qazi Sahib's forehead looks like a writing board, doesn't it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What's wrong with your ears?"

"Nothing. It's your feeble voice that refuses to come out of your throat."

"Don't be silly.... Well, I said—Qazi Sahib's forehead looks exactly like a writing board."

"A writing board is absolutely flat."

"Don't you think his forehead is flat?"

"Do you even know what 'flat' is?"

"No!"

"Your head is flat. Qazi Sahib's is ..."

"Very beautiful!"

"That it is."

"You're teasing me."

"It's you who's teasing me."

"On the contrary, *you're* teasing me."

"And I say, *you're* teasing me!"

"You must admit that you're teasing me."

"Come on, you're behaving like a husband already."

"Qazi Sahib, I shan't marry this woman.... If your daughter's forehead is as flat as yours, then please marry me to her."

"Qazi Sahib, I won't marry this fellow.... Please make me your wife, if you don't have four already. I like your forehead very much."

In the Preface of *Chotein*, Krishan Chander writes:

Ismat and Manto could not be more similar in their fictional art. Few Urdu writers can match them in their ability to leave a reader entirely clueless, to arouse his wonderment and suspense and then, in the end, suddenly change this wonderment and suspense into joy.

Had we thought of getting married, then instead of drowning others in wonder and agitation we ourselves would have been drowned in it.

And when we would have come to our senses after the initial shock, then our wonderment and agitation would have changed not into joy but sorrow. Ismat and Manto, *nikah* and marriage—what a ludicrous idea!

Ismat writes:

How many Shaukats, Mahmoods, Abbases, Askaris, and Yunuses are dispersed in the small world of love; like cards they're shuffled and dealt out of the deck. Someone tell me who is Jack among them. Shaukat's roving, hungry eyes, Mahmood's limbs that crawl like a serpent, Askari's ruthless hands, Yunus' black mole under his lower lip, Abbas' vacuous smile; then so many others endowed with broad chests, broad foreheads, luxuriant hair, shapely calves, strong hands. All these are jumbled together like a skein of tangled twine. Puzzled, I stare at the skein not knowing which end I should pull so that one strand comes out untangled, and with its help I could fly beyond the horizon, reaching out like a kite. ["Chhoti Aapa"]

Manto writes:

I know this much, that to love a woman and to buy land are the same to you. So, instead of falling in love, you had better buy one or two *bighas* of land and occupy them for your whole life.... Only one woman in a lifetime? And the world is so full of them! Why does it (the world) hold so many attractions? Why didn't Allah stop Himself right after creating *gandum* i.e., wheat? Listen to me, enjoy the life that you have been blessed with.... You are the kind of shopper who would amass wealth his whole life to find a suitable woman but would always consider the wealth inadequate. I am the kind of customer who will conclude deals with many women in his life. You want to fall in love so that some second-rate writer has the opportunity to recount it as pulp fiction. This will be published by Narain Dutt Sahgal on yellow paper and sold as junk in the flea market. I want to eat up like termites all the pages of my life so that no vestige of it remains. You want life in love. I want love in life. ["Takleef"]

If Ismat had found the end of a string in that skein of tangled twine which had made it possible for her to soar beyond the horizon like a kite, and if Manto had been able to turn himself into a termite swallowing up even half the pages of the book of his life, they would not have left such a deep mark on literature. Ismat would have remained in the high heavens beating her wings and Manto's admirers would have stuffed the rest of the book of his life into his belly and enclosed him in a glass case.

Krishan Chander also has this to say in his Preface to *Chotein*:

As soon as Ismat's name is mentioned the male fiction writers begin to have fits. They are embarrassed. They cringe and are overwhelmed by a sense of shame. This preface is also the result of a desire to blot out this sense of shame.

Whatever I am writing about Ismat is not out of shame. In fact, I owe a debt to her, a debt I intend to pay back with a small amount of interest.

I do not remember which of her stories I read first. As I was about to write these lines I delved deep into my memory but that didn't help. It seems I had read them all even before they were written down. That is why I didn't have any fits. However, when I saw her I was sorely disappointed.

The office of the weekly *Musavvir* was situated at Adelfi Chambers, flat no. 17, Clair Road, Bombay. Shahid entered the office with his wife. It was August, 1942. All the Congress leaders including Mahatma Gandhi had been arrested. The atmosphere in the city was chaotic. The air was thick with politics. For some time we kept talking about the Independence Movement. Then we changed the topic and began talking about short stories.

About a month earlier Ismat's short story "Lihaf" had been published in *Adab-e Lateef*. I was working at All India Radio in Delhi then. After reading it I had told Krishan Chander, "The story is very good, but the last line betrays a lack of craft." Had I been the editor instead of Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, I would have certainly deleted it. So, when our talk veered towards short stories, I told Ismat,

I liked your story "Lihaf." Your special merit lies in using your words with utmost economy. But I'm surprised that you've added the rather pointless line, "Even if someone gives me a lakh of rupees I won't tell anyone what I saw when the quilt was lifted by an inch."

"What's wrong with that sentence?" Ismat had retorted.

I was going to say something but then I looked at her face. There I saw the kind of embarrassment that overwhelms common, homely girls when they hear something unspeakable. I felt greatly disappointed because I wanted to have a detailed discussion with her about every aspect of "Lihaf." As she left I told myself, "The wretch turned out to be a mere woman after all!"

I still remember, I had written a letter to my wife at Delhi the following day—"I met Ismat. You'll be surprised to know that as a woman she is exactly like you. I was bitterly disappointed. But you'll certainly like her. When I alluded to the last line of her story she was embarrassed."

After a long time, when I reflected seriously on my extreme reaction, I felt strongly that to create something enduring in art it is imperative that one stay within one's natural limits. Where now is the art practiced by Dr. Rasheed Jahan? Some of it got lost along with her long tresses, and some of it must have taken shelter in the pockets of her pantaloons. In France, George Sand<sup>1</sup> had taken off the cloak of femininity and embraced a life of affectation. She may have been instrumental in making Chopin, the Polish composer, create some gems of music despite his blood-spitting, but her own creations died a stifling death in her own country.

I reflected: let the women fight head and shoulders with men on the battlefields, let them excavate mountains, let them become story-writers like Ismat Chughtai, but their palms should be adorned with henna. Bangles should tinkle on their wrists. I regret having made that remark about Ismat Chughtai at the time.

If she had not been "a mere woman, after all!" then we would not have found such fine and sensitive stories like "Bhulbhulaiyan," "Til," "Lihaf" and "Gaiinda" in her collections. They portray different facets of a woman—neat and transparent, purged of all artifice. These are not flirtations or coquetry designed to conquer men. They have nothing to do with the coarse gestures of the body. The objective of these spiritual gestures is man's conscience which encompasses the unknown and unintelligible but tender nature of a woman.

His complexion changed. "Poor child.... Perhaps he has lost his father."

"God forbid!" I clasped the child to my breast.

"*Tain!*" The child fired the gun.

"Hey, firing at your Abba!" I snatched his gun. ["Bhulbhulaiyan"]

People say, Ismat is a bad woman, a witch. Asses! She has distilled the essence of a woman's soul in these four lines. And these people judge her on the basis of their abominable morality. They should be made to stand

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<sup>1</sup>Pen name of Amandine Aurore Lucie Duderant (née Dupin) (1804–76), French novelist and author of such works as *La Mare au Diable* (1846). She was a champion of women's rights.

up before a cannon and be shot through the head.

When “Dozakhi” was published in *Saqi*, my sister read it and told me, “Sa’adat, how shameless this Ismat can be? She didn’t spare even her dead brother! How can she write such things about him?”

I said, “Iqbal, if you promise to write a sketch like this after my death, by God, I’m ready to die this very day.”

Emperor Shah Jahan had the Taj Mahal built to commemorate his love for his beloved. Ismat wrote “Dozakhi” in memory of her beloved brother. Shah Jahan made others carry the stones, carve them and then build the grand mausoleum for the mortal remains of his beloved. Ismat gathered a multitude of sisterly emotions, erected a high scaffolding with them and then gently put her brother’s body on top of it. The Taj looks like a brazen marble exhibit of Shah Jahan’s love, “Dozakhi,” on the other hand, is an exceedingly subtle and exquisite gesture of Ismat’s love. The title is not a screaming advertisement for the paradise that has been created in it through its content.

After reading the sketch my wife had asked Ismat, “What is this nonsense you’ve written?”

“Don’t chatter. Just get me some ice.”

Ismat had this habit of chewing ice. She would hold a piece in her hand and crunch on it noisily. She wrote several of her short stories in this fashion. She would be lying face down on the charpoy supported by her elbow, with a notebook open before her on the pillow. She would hold a fountain pen in one hand and a chunk of ice in the other. The radio would go on blaring, but Ismat’s pen would race along on the paper with a gentle rustle as her teeth smashed the ice into pieces.

Ismat writes by fits and starts. She may have a lean period when for months she writes nothing, but when she is taken over by the fits, hundreds of pages come out of her pen in a steady flow. And then she becomes supremely indifferent to eating, drinking or having a bath. She just lies there, face down, on the charpoy, resting on her elbow and committing her ideas in ink, not caring about her spelling or the use of diacritical marks.

A long novel like *Terhi Lakeer* was finished by her, as far as I know, in seven or eight sittings.

Krishan Chander writes about the pace of her narration:

The stories remind one of a horse race. That is, speed, movement, briskness (I think Krishan Chander meant, lightning speed) and acceleration. It is not only that the stories seem to be on the run but the sen-

tences, images, metaphors, the sounds and the sensibilities of the characters and their feelings—all seem to be moving along in a cluster with the force of a storm.

Ismat's pen and tongue both run fast. When she starts writing, her ideas race ahead and the words can't catch up with them. When she speaks, her words seem to tumble over one another. If she would enter the kitchen to demonstrate her culinary skill everything would be in a mess. Being hasty by nature, she would conjure up the baked *roti* in her mind even before she had finished kneading the dough; the potatoes wouldn't be peeled yet even though she had already finished making the curry in her imagination. I feel sometimes she may just go into the kitchen and come out again after getting satiated in her imagination. However, contrary to this haste, I have seen her perfectly relaxed when stitching clothing for her baby daughter. She may commit spelling mistakes while writing but her needle does not shake even a bit while stitching. Each stitch in its own place without any loose ends anywhere!

Ismat writes in "Uff, Ye Bachchey" (Oh! These Children!):

To call it a house is a misnomer. It is a veritable mohalla. There may be epidemics or plagues, children elsewhere may die, but none here will kick the bucket! Every year, by the grace of God, the house turns into a hospital. People say children also die. Well, they just may. How do I know?

And just a few days ago, in Bombay, when her daughter Seema was down with whooping cough, Ismat stayed awake through the whole night. She was deeply upset and looked lost all the time. One knows the real nature of love only when one becomes a mother.

Ismat is very stubborn. Obstinacy is her second nature. In this she is almost child-like. She will never accept any view or even a natural law without a show of resistance. First, she refused to get married; when she somehow agreed to that, she refused to become a mother. She will suffer and face troubles but will not give up her stubbornness. I think this is her strategy—to test life's truths through her conflicts with them. She has her own ways which are always different.

One finds the same traits of obstinacy and refusal in her male and female protagonists. A couple may be deeply in love, but they will go on denying it; longing to kiss, one will prick the other's cheek with a needle; wanting to stroke the other gently, one will instead strike the other so violently as to make him/her wince. This kind of violent or negative love

that begins much like a sport, ends in tragedy in her stories.

If I live to see Ismat meeting the same fate I will not be surprised.

I have known Ismat five or six years. Given our fiery and volatile temperaments it is only natural that we should have many fights. Yet, it is surprising that we do not fight, except for once when we had just a minor tiff.

Shahid and Ismat had invited us to their house at Malad. When we were through with the dinner Shahid said, “Manto, you still commit mistakes in your usage.” I rejected the contention out of hand. The argument started and raged on through the night. When the clock struck half past one Shahid declared that he was exhausted. But Ismat kept on arguing in support of her husband. The clock struck two. I was not ready to give in. It was then that Ismat used the phrase *dast darazi*. I cut her off immediately, pointing out that the right expression is *daraz dasti*. The clock struck three. Ismat did not admit to her mistake. My wife had already gone to sleep. To put an end to the hair-splitting Shahid fetched the dictionary from the adjacent room. *Dast darazi* could not be found in the list of items under “D,” even though *daraz dasti* and its meanings were listed there. Shahid said, “Ismat, you have to accept defeat.” Now husband and wife started quibbling. The roosters began to crow. Ismat flung the dictionary to one side and said, “When I compile a dictionary, the right expression there will be *dast darazi*. What’s this nonsense... *daraz dasti*.”

Eventually the argument came to an end. We didn’t fight after that, or rather we don’t allow things to come to such a pass. Whenever our conversation reaches a flash point, either Ismat changes track or I turn onto safer turf.

I like Ismat and she likes me. But if someone were to suddenly ask, “What exactly is it that you like in each other?” then I’m sure both of our minds would go blank for a few moments.

Ismat’s appearance may not be irresistible, but she is certainly attractive. I still remember our first meeting. She wore a simple dress—a white sari with a small border, a tight-fitting blouse with black stripes on a white background. She held a small purse in her hand and wore flat brown sandals without heels. Her small but sharp and inquisitive eyes gleamed behind thick eyeglasses. Her short curly hair had a crooked part. The merest trace of a smile brought dimples to her cheeks.

I did not fall in love with her; instead, my wife fell for her. However, if Safiya ever dares to express her love for her, Ismat is sure to say: “The cheek you have! Men of your father’s age have fallen for me!”

I know a fellow writer, an old man, who had a crush on her. He had



expressed his love for her through his letters. Ismat encouraged him in the beginning, but eventually gave him such a drubbing that the poor man began to see stars. He may never write this “true” story.

To avoid the risk of a fight Ismat and I talk very little. Whenever a story of mine is published, she praises it. After “Nilam” was published she was very enthusiastic in her appreciation. “Really, what’s this nonsense about addressing a woman as ‘behen’? ... You’re right. For a woman, to be addressed as a sister by a man is an insult.”

It made me wonder—she calls me “Manto Bha’i” and I call her “Ismat Behen.” God help us!

In the course of our five or six year friendship I cannot recall any extraordinary event. Once both of us were arrested for obscenity. This charge had been brought against me twice before. But for Ismat it was something new. So she was very upset. Luckily it turned out to be illegal because the Punjab Police had arrested us without a warrant. Ismat was happy. But how long can one destined for trouble remain secure? Eventually she had to present herself before the Lahore court.

It’s a long journey from Bombay to Lahore. But Shahid and my wife accompanied us. We had great fun. Safiya and Shahid teamed up and began to tease us about the obscenity charge. They kept harping on the hard life to come after arrest and described scenes of prison life with frightening details. Finally Ismat flared up and said, “Let them send us to the gallows; we’ll stand by the truth.”

We had to go to Lahore twice in connection with this lawsuit. On both occasions students from nearby colleges came in large numbers to see us in the court. Noticing this Ismat said to me, “Manto Bha’i, tell Choudhry Nazeer to collect a fee from those who want to see us. At least we can pay our fares with it.”

As I said, we went to Lahore twice, and on both occasions we bought ten or twelve pairs of sandals and shoes from the Karnal Boot Shop. Someone had asked Ismat in Bombay:

“Did you go to Lahore in connection with the lawsuit?”

“No. We went to buy shoes.”

This was about three and a half years ago. It was Holi. Shahid and I were sitting on the balcony of their flat at Malad drinking. Ismat began to incite my wife: “Look Safiya, these fellows are squandering so much money, why don’t we join in?” They tried to summon up the courage for a whole hour. Suddenly there was a commotion. In walked Mukherjee, the Filmistan producer, with his portly wife and a few others in tow, and literally assaulted us. In just a few seconds their [i.e., Safia and Ismat’s]

faces had become unrecognizable.

Ismat's gaze shifted from the whisky to the colored powders and dyes: "Come on Safiya," she said, "let's spray them with colors."

All of us went out to the bazaar and then Holi started in earnest on G.B. Road. Blue, yellow, green, black—colors were being sprayed all around. Ismat was in the vanguard. She smeared a large Bengali woman with coal tar. At that moment I was reminded of her brother Azim Baig Chughtai. Ismat's voice boomed like that of a military commander—"Let's invade the house of the Fairy-faced."

Everyone liked her idea. In those days Naseem Bano was working for our film *Chal Chal Re Naujawan*. Her bungalow was also on G.B. Road. Within minutes we were all inside her house. Naseem, as usual, was in her makeup. She wore a fine georgette sari. Hearing our noise she and her husband came out. Ismat, drenched in colors, looked like a goblin. My wife had so much color on her face that another coating wouldn't have made any difference. Ismat told her, "Safiya, Naseem is really beautiful."

I looked at Naseem and said, "Beautiful but cold."

Ismat's small eyes rolled behind her eyeglasses stained with colors. "Cold things," she said, "sit well with hot-tempered people."

Saying this she marched past and in a second the fairy-faced Naseem was looking like a circus-clown.

Ismat and I often pondered strange things. "Manto Bha'i, I feel like writing about the romance between roosters and hens" or she would say, "I'll join the defense services and learn to fly planes."

A few months ago, Ismat and I were returning from the Bombay Talkies by electric train. During the conversation I said, "In Krishan Chander's writings I find two frequently occurring motifs—rape and the rainbow."

Ismat looked interested. "That's right," she agreed.

"I'm thinking of writing an essay on him with the title "Krishan Chander, the Rainbow, and Violent Rape." I wonder what the underlying relationship between rape and the rainbow could be?"

Ismat pondered over this for a while. "From an aesthetic point of view, the different colors of the rainbow are very attractive and beautiful. But you're looking at it from another angle."

I said, "Oh yes, red is the color of fire and blood. In mythological iconography this color is associated with the planet Mars, i.e., the executioner in the sky. Maybe this color is the common link between rape and the rainbow."

"Maybe. But do write your essay."

“In Christian paintings the red color is the symbol of divine love. No, no.” An idea flashed through my mind. “This color is associated with the intense desire for crucifixion. The Virgin Mary is also portrayed wearing red clothes which is a sign of chastity.” As I said this my eyes fell on Ismat’s white dress.

She broke into a smile. “Manto Bha’i, you must write this essay. It’ll be very interesting ... but get rid of the word ‘violent’ in the title.”

“Krishan will object. He deplores the act because of its violence.”

“His complaint is useless. How would he know—his heroines might have thoroughly enjoyed this violence!”

“God knows better.”

Many articles have been written about Ismat’s fictional art—less for, more against. If some of them are far-fetched, others defy all comprehension.

Even Patras Sahib, who had been held in check until then by Lahore’s middlemen, took off his gloves and wrote an article on her. He is brilliant and witty, so the article is coherent and interesting. Talking about the label “woman” he writes:

It seems that a powerful and seasoned editor (this reference is to Salahuddin Sahib) also wants to keep men and women separate in the realm of literature. He says that as far as women writers are concerned Ismat Chughtai has the same stature among them that George Eliot had in English literature at one time. As though literature is like a tennis tournament where men and women play matches separately.

George Eliot’s stature is assured, but merely dropping her name is hardly relevant in the context. What should be investigated is whether there is any essential distinction—not in the external circumstances but in something that is inherent, fundamental, natural—that makes literature produced by women different from that produced by men. If there is some such distinction, then what is it? Whatever the answers to these questions are they will not justify the division of writers on the basis of their sex.

It is entirely probable that the answers to the above questions will not justify putting writers in separate compartments. But, before giving their reply, people will certainly want to know the sex of the person who asked the question—male or female? Once that’s clear, the questioner’s natural expectations will be evident to a great extent.

Patras Sahib’s sentence “As though literature is like a tennis tourna-

ment” is typical of his penchant for wisecracking (*figre-bazi*, i.e., witticism). Literature is not a tennis tournament. It's not indecent for men and women to play matches separately. When Patras Sahib delivers a lecture in the classroom, the content of the lecture does not differ on the basis of the sex of the students. But when he has to think about their mental development he will not ignore their gender.

Let a woman become George Eliot or Ismat Chughtai, that does not mean that one should ignore the impact of gender on the literature produced by her. Will Patras Sahib offer the same insight in the case of literature produced by transvestites? Is there any distinction—natural, internal, fundamental—that differentiates the literature produced by ordinary men and women from that produced by the transvestites?

I consider it vulgar to label people as “man” or “woman.” It is ridiculous to put up signboards on mosques and temples declaring that they are houses of worship. But from an architectural point of view, when we compare them with residential dwellings we do not ignore their sacred character.

Ismat's identity as a woman has left its deep imprint on all branches of her writing, which guides us at every step in our appreciation of her art. Her merits and inadequacies as a writer, of which Patras Sahib has made an objective assessment in his article, cannot be seen in isolation from her gender. And there is no way—critical, literary or chemical—to do that.

There is one Aziz Ahmad who, in a critique of Ismat Chughtai's *Terhi Lakeer* in *Naya Daur*, writes:

Ismat has just one way of experiencing the body and that is through fondling. All the men who figure in her novel—from Rasheed to Taylor—have been judged by their physical or mental sexual activity. Most of the time it is passive. This is her only means to know men, life and the universe: “Abbas's hands flashed like lightning under heaps of quilts and small vibrations spread among the group of girls.” Rasool Fatima's tiny hands are an indication of a dark sexuality. And a somewhat less obscure version of it is the revulsion and love felt by the matron. She was surprised that the girls did not feel the probing eyes of the rakes crawling along their thighs. In this regard, Shamman's feminine sensibility (attention Patras Sahib) feels the touch of fingers on her thighs....

Aziz Ahmad Sahib is wrong in asserting that for Ismat the only way of perceiving is through fondling. First of all, it's wrong to call it

fondling, because that's an act which goes on for some time. Ismat is extremely sensitive. A gentle caress is enough for her. In her, the other senses seem to be equally active. For instance, the auditory sense and the sense of smell. As far as I can see, the sense of hearing has a greater role in her writings:

*Gharrrr ... phat ... shoon ... phash....*The car was groaning outside in the carport.

He kept on turning the tuning knob on the radio—*kharr...khaan ...shauh... shash ... gharum.....*Tears welled up in my eyes.

*Tanan... Tanan.....*The cycle bell rang. I realized Edna had come. ["Puncture"]

Then, as she tried to doze off, loud bangs and peals of laughter came from the roof.

The *bahu* came down the stairs banging her feet while her anklets tinkled.

*Ghan...ghan... ghan*—the *bahu* mumbled. ["Saas"]

The baby will croon—*koon, koon*—and then begin to slurp—*chapar... chapar....* ["Safar Mein"]

It was like a cat licking a plate—*sapar ... sapar....* ["Lihaf"]

*Tick tock, tick tock*—his heart began to beat like a clock.

Mosquitoes breaking out into loud guffaws. ["Til"]

A mysterious, graveyard-like sob vibrated in the wind. ["Jhurri Mein Se"]

The tinkling of *ghungroo* and the sound of clapping crept into my body and began to dance in my veins. ["Pesha"]

The sense of smell is also active in places:

Just smell the stench of that rotten hookah. Oh God, *thu ... u.*

The odor of syrup was so strong that it was difficult to sleep. ["Da'in"]

The mustard oil would begin to give off a stench on the eighth day. ["Neera"]

Her body exuded a strange, sickening odor.

The warm scent of attar had made her all the more attractive.

Flaring my nostrils I sniffed the air. There was only the warm scent of attar, sandalwood and henna, nothing else. ["Lihaf"]

He had drawn even the deep sighs and soft fragrance in color. ["Til"]

A man's shirt, pervaded by the odor of cigarettes.... ["Hero"]

She picked up tiny leaves of coriander and began to sniff them. ["Mera Bachcha"]

All her senses work at appropriate places and they work properly. Aziz Sahib's view that sex is omnipresent in her writing like a disease may be correct in the way he looks at it. But let him not suggest prescriptions to remedy it. In any case, even writing itself is a disease. A perfectly healthy man whose temperature never fluctuates from 98.6 will forever remain barren, his life's slate absolutely cool and clean.

Aziz Ahmad Sahib further writes:

The greatest tragedy of her heroines is that no man has ever loved them deeply, nor they any man. Love bears the same relationship to the body as electricity bears to a wire. Just press the switch and love lights up the world like a thousand candles. It makes the fan move in the scorching heat of the noon. With the strength of a thousand demons it turns the wheels of the great machines of life. And sometimes it does up the hair or irons the clothes. As a writer Ismat Chughtai has no conception of such love.

It's clear that Aziz Ahmad Sahib regrets this. But this love, of which he seems to have some knowledge, appears to have been created by him according to a five-year plan and now he wants to impose it on everyone ... To go along with him, let me imagine that Ismat's heroines were unaware of both the AC and DC currents of love.... Even then how does it follow that they neither loved anyone deeply, nor anyone them?

Ismat, of course, knows nothing of the kind of love which Aziz Ahmad Sahib has manufactured. It is precisely this ignorance which makes her writing possible. Today if the wires of her life were connected to this love and if the switch were pressed, it is quite possible that another Aziz Ahmad would be born, but Ismat, who has produced "Til," "Gaiinda," "Bhulbhulaiyan" and "Jaal," would certainly die.

There are as many opinions as there are critics: Ismat's plays are weak. There are loose ends here and there. Her plots are not well-knit. The scenes do not dovetail into one another but remain a jumble of patches. She feels like a stranger at parties. She is obsessed with sex, so much so that it seems to be a disease. Ismat's childhood was not conducive to her mental development. She excels in describing what goes on behind the curtain. Ismat is not interested in society but in people. Not in people but in individuals. Ismat has just one way of perceiving the body and it is through fondling. Her stories have no direction. Ismat's acute power of observation is extraordinary. Ismat is an obscene writer. She is a genial humorist and a satirist and her style is characterized by these salient

features. Ismat walks on the edge of a sword. And so on....

A lot has been said about Ismat and continues to be said. Some will like her, some won't. But her creativity stands much above people's liking or disliking. Good, bad, naked, covered—whatever, it must endure. Literature has no geographical limits. It should be saved, as far as possible, from the stranglehold of cliché and repetitiveness.

A long time ago, a gentleman from Delhi by the name Desh did a strange thing. He published a book with a title which ran something like *Others' Stories, Told by Me* or *Many Will be Benefited by Reading This*. The volume included one story each by Ismat, Mufti, Premchand, Khwaja Mohammad Shafi, Azim Baig Chughtai and me. The "Introduction" consisted of a desultory critical write-up on Progressive literature. The book was dedicated to the editor's two young children. He sent Ismat and me each a copy of the book. Ismat did not take kindly to this crude and improper act on his part. In a rage she wrote to me, "Manto Bha'i, did you see the book published by Desh? Give the fellow a good rattling; serve him a legal notice asking him to pay two hundred rupees for each composition or we'll file a lawsuit. Something must be done, don't you agree? Anyone and everyone drags us down into the muck and we don't say anything. Give this fellow a good rubbing in, it'll be fun. Just look at his cheek—he puts himself up as a great champion of forbidden literature, publishing our stories just to ensure the sale of the book. It's maddening the way every Tom, Dick and Harry tries to preach to us. Please write an article that includes everything I've written here. You may say why don't *I* write it? My reply is—after you."

When I saw Ismat I told her, "First of all, there's Chaudhury Muhammad Husain of Lahore. If we ask him he'll certainly file a lawsuit against Mr. Desh."

Ismat smiled—"The idea's all right. But the truth is—we'll be rounded up along with him."

I said, "So what? ... The court might not be an interesting place but the Karnal Boot Shop certainly is. We'll take him there and...."

The dimples on Ismat's cheeks became deeper. □

—Translated by M. Asaduddin