

SAFIYA AKHTAR

## Letters to Jan Nisar Akhtar\*

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: When Şafiya Akhtar's husband, Jāñ Nişār Akhtar, moved from Bhopal to Bombay in 1949 to pursue a career as a film lyricist, she opted to stay back in order to keep her teaching job at Hamidiya College and thus support him and their two young children, Jāvēd and Salmān. Şafiya wrote to him regularly, often several times a week, letters full of love and encouragement, interspersed with snippets of her life alone, at home and at work. Barely a year after Akhtar's move to Bombay, Şafiya began to suffer from an unusual, difficult to diagnose illness (probably skin cancer), as well as rheumatoid arthritis. She struggled with her illness with remarkable fortitude and determination, suffering long periods of hospitalization alone in Bhopal. She describes her day-to-day battle with the disease with such felicity of prose that even a casual reader of her letters would not fail to notice their literary quality. With a compelling narrative heightened by a foreboding of impending tragedy, the letters unfold events of her remaining life, recording her joys and anguish to the very end. Her feminine sensibilities come through in each one of her letters.

It is ironic that the seepage of personal tragedy into the letters overshadows their literary merit. One has to go beyond the personal tragedy and appreciate the felicity of her prose and her unabashed expression of feelings as she struggles with the dilemma of pursuing a career, living as a single parent, and missing her husband whom she loved deeply and wanted to be with. Şafiya Sirāju'l-Ḥaḡ (d. 1953) was an educated, secular Muslim woman of the 1940s. She held a Master's Degree in Education from Aligarh University and was imbued with the Progressive ideology. She chose her life partner and made her own decisions. She has, nevertheless, been invariably presented as the sister of the talented Progressive Urdu poet Majāz (1909–55), or as the wife of Jāñ Nişār Akhtar, or, more recently, as the mother of Jāvēd

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\* Şafiya Akhtar. 1974. *Zēr-e Lab*. Delhi: Şafiya Academy.

Akhtar.

Although her letters were published in book form in two volumes titled *Ḥarf-e Āshnā* and *Zēr-e Lab* by Maktaba Jāmi‘a in 1955, some two years after her death, they have never been examined from a literary perspective and have gone unnoticed in feminist retrieval histories and anthologies of women’s writings. Aṣḡar Vajāhat’s Hindi translation of her letters, titled *Tumbārē Nām*, published by Rajkamal Prakashan (2004) will undoubtedly give them wider circulation, a fresh currency and perhaps recognition for their own merit.

Letter writing is an important part of literary language and its canon. In Urdu, the first name that springs to mind in this regard is that of Ġālib whose letters are emblematic of the range and creative potential of the genre. Ġālib wrote brilliant prose, sparkling with witticisms. I’m not, of course, comparing Ṣafiya with Ġālib, I’m simply drawing attention to the polarity and scope of the genre in Urdu. Ṣafiya’s letters are earthy, embodying a woman’s inner feelings and thoughts: how she looks forward to wearing a new red blouse, how she feels when racked by fever, her joy in buying a new quilt for her husband, motherly pride in her children’s accomplishments at school, and so on. On another level, the letters sound like poems or ghazals. She speaks of the distances and silences of separation (*firāq*) and of the longing for union (*vaṣl*), of moral strength in the face of difficulties, and of dignity and pride in the midst of anguish.

As translator, I have tried to sustain the warmth of the original language by using endearments that sound “right” in English and maintaining consistency of choice. For example, I have translated *‘azīz* as dearest, *sāthī* as partner, and so on. I could find no English equivalent to convey the depth of meaning subsumed in the seemingly simple letter-closing endearment *tumbārī*, for which “yours” sounded banal and dull. But I think that by juxtaposing the name of the letter writer with “your,” as in “Your Ṣafiya,” I have been able to convey the nuance of *tumbārī*.

### Last Letters

Maḥbūb Manzil  
Bhopal  
22 December 1949

Dearest Akhtar,

I got your letter after an excruciating wait. I couldn’t deliver your

resignation letter to the principal today because he had left. I will take it to him tomorrow morning. It's good that you sent your resignation. That was the only way to end the prolonged mental anguish, although the comforts of life in Bhopal and the college job were so alluring. You could perceive it as a weakness in my nature or some such thing, but it would have been very difficult for me to do this. Anyway, you have given proof of your determination, and believe me, I am ready to bow my head and acquiesce to your being stronger.

I'll definitely send you money tomorrow. I am sure that you must be terribly short of cash. Don't be shy about telling me your smallest trouble and every need.

If you can manage to stay with 'Işmat for a month or two that will be great. You've known Shāhid for years and 'Işmat Āpā sympathizes with your cause. I'm sure you'll never be a burden for them. You're being unfair to them if you think this way.

And ... don't allow yourself to feel beholden. Good and bad times all pass away. Facing a crisis with determination and constancy is proof of moral superiority. Don't let joblessness loom over your head and destroy your peace of mind. Obviously, if you want, your splendid job still awaits you, but it is a matter of your own choice, so why torment yourself? Don't start running around looking for work and neglect your health. God forbid if you were to fall sick, my beloved.

I will be able to spend these days of separation from you with all my courage and faithfulness even though my worlds at home and college both have been devastated. But Akhtar, there are many people who are suffering more than us; we have to think about them. I will not dwell on my sorrows.

I invited Akhtar Sa'īd over today and spoke with him. The poor guy was awe struck. Shahāb came by this evening and talked about you all the time.

The situation in Bhopal is too awful to mention. Everyone's house is getting searched and different people are being harassed in every which way. Do look around for the possibilities of employment for me. I am willing to accept whatever offer comes along. No job is too big or small. Sorrows will feel like joy if I am with you. Talk to Sulţāna about this, perhaps she can think of something. If there is the slightest possibility I will join you at once and be with you. You must be short on clothing. I had packed two unstitched pyjamas—ask 'Işmat Āpā's nieces to stitch them for you. I will send for your sherwani tomorrow and dispatch it to you. All right ... lots and lots of love.

Your very own,  
Şafiya

Bhopal  
1 January 1950

Akhtar dearest,

Your resignation is still in Nausha Şāḥib's pocket. I will try to push it along with Nausha Şāḥib's help when the college reopens day after tomorrow. The poor principal in his innocence is bent upon sympathizing with me and has been trying to convince me in so many ways to ask you to come back. He says that if you return just once you will get over this passion. On the other hand, this news has spread all over the city. I heard that the *Nadīm* has published the story twice, giving different versions. Some people think that we have separated. In short, there has been a lot of gossip. What could have been a better opportunity than this to satisfy your desire for tumult, Akhtar? The blaze of your love is bent on leaving me burnished gold. Let me continue receiving lessons on strength of character.

Oh yes, I'll send your sherwani and clothes with Tāj. If you don't need the quilt, do send it back ... it will be hard to lug around. Secondly, don't be too humble or desperate in your job quest; keeping one's poise is both appropriate and necessary. Otherwise, one's indigence becomes obvious to others and this weakens the case. Don't feel helpless about money. Even if you can't earn something in three or four months we'll manage, maybe not very well but badly. In any case, we'll keep going.

There is a phase of gloomy and miserable days here. I attempted to decorate your memories with the arrival of the New Year. Why am I grieving? I thought to myself:

*vōb ā'ēñ na ā'ēñ par sajñī, ghar ham-kō āj sajānā hai*

Whether he comes or not, but my sweet, I have to deck  
out the house today

But believe me, this heart is so rebellious it is beyond my control. Anyway, I want to pass this day by keeping myself busy, working away.

I have let Baḡī Bī off; Uṣmān can cook by himself. There's not much to cook anyway ... it's not a problem.

I'll send more money as soon as I get my salary. How can you live on so little in Bombay, especially when you are planning to move out of Shahīd's place? Give my greetings to 'Iṣmat Āpā. I'll send her razai with Tāj as well. Will write again soon, at least this is an opportunity to talk to you or else it's just me and myself.

That's all for now.

Lots of love,  
Your Ṣaffō

Bhopal,  
5 January 1950

Dearest Akhtar,

It's been three or four days since I wrote to you. This distance and silence suffocates me. There's always something new happening at the college. There was the inauguration of a new playground for girls and Mrs. Banerji was invited. I was awfully busy for two days without a moment to spare, but there was no way out. Anyway, it passed off well. Today I had time off, but Salmā was leaving so I had to go to Shimla<sup>1</sup> to meet with her and say goodbye.

Here's your update: day before yesterday, the 3rd day of this month, the principal reluctantly accepted your resignation. He feels very bad about having to do this and was saying to me yesterday that had he known about this earlier he would have talked to you and persuaded you to stay. Safiu'l-Lāh and some others have applied for your position. I asked him if it was acceptable for me to apply as well. He said that I could on the condition that I had intentions of staying. Anyway, I will do as you advise.

How are you getting along? How are things? Sleep eludes me when these thoughts come to my mind. Don't lose heart. Things will definitely improve. These are just passing problems. There is nothing more soul sapping than our separation. The college seems bleaker than the house. I had gotten used to your support there even more than at home. I took

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<sup>1</sup>Name of Ṣāhibzāda Rashīdu'z-Zafar Khān Ṣāhib's kothi.

care of running the house, but at work I had become dependent on you. I feel terribly alone without you. The newest challenge is that we have been asked to enroll boys in the fourth year class; today there were boys there along with girls.

Akhtar, please write to me often; your letters keep me going. Nafis misses you a lot and sends you love. May God will that I get to see your handwriting again tomorrow.

My cloistered lifestyle will bring a smile to your lips. Akhtar! Come, let me love you.

Your Şafiya

Bhopal,  
20 July 1950

Dearest Akhtar,

Lots of love and countless greetings.

There were two letters from you in the afternoon post. The first one was written on the morning of Eid and the second was about the application.

Akhtar! It isn't often that I ignore your advice. Logically, I should have begun working on what you said this time as well. However, I felt I needed to talk to you before beginning to act on your suggestion.

Firstly, the deadline for the applications was 15 July. Applications are here already, although the date for reviewing them will be in the fourth week of July. Rashīdu'z-Zafar Şāhib has gone to Bombay so it won't be possible to see him and talk with him about this. Secondly, our principal, Mr. Melhotra, who is also a member of the review committee, will probably voice strong opposition to my candidacy, and I'm afraid there is a likelihood of me losing his goodwill, which until now I have enjoyed. What if I don't get the scholarship and the situation at work becomes unpleasant as well? Thirdly, this problem of membership is also important; it could be an issue for debate. In any case, if one is determined, these hindrances aren't all that significant. The most crucial issue that we have to resolve before embarking on a venture like this is about our children. Akhtar! You know that Jādū is going to be six soon and Ovais has just turned four. I have clasped them to my bosom so far and gone through all sorts of ordeals for their sake. I have not been a bad mother

and have done a father's duties when needed. How can I drop them in your lap now when you're struggling in Bombay, living in stressful, anxiety-filled circumstances, and go off to America in pursuit of a career? Will it be at all possible? Can it be the right thing to do? How will it ever be possible for me to go in pursuit of my own advancement and recognition leaving you and depriving my children in the process? I see that your enthusiasm is well intended but look at it from my perspective, beloved. You can try to take care of both children but it will be difficult and cause more problems.

My love, I cannot bear to be separated from you in this way and travel in foreign lands for almost two years! You are a poet. And if you can say, "I won't love you if you don't want me to," then you can love in the manner of Shelley, that is, love me not in flesh and blood but only in your imagination. But I am not made this way. I am in love with you and for that reason I need you in my life. How can I put myself to such a test for my career? Akhtar, if you were to go away from me for fourteen years I would live by the strength of my faith in you, but I cannot wrench myself away from you, beloved!

My love, what is this you have asked me? For that I do not have the will to comply. Akhtar! It is enough for me to pass through this life at your feet. This means everything to me. There cannot be greatness waiting for me now without you. If I have a job it is not for the sake of honor or to add to my dignity, but rather to make our lives easier. The day your financial situation becomes stable I will leave this job and devote myself wholly to serving you. My M.Ed. degree will be of no consequence then. Think about it once again from my perspective, feeling the way I do, and if your decision is irrevocable, after that I will have no misgivings about striving for the fellowship.

*Savērā* arrived at the college address yesterday. I will write to Tābāñ and to Bḥā'ī Z̄afar too, though he must be angry with me for not going to Khairabad.

The weather here has turned exquisitely sensual. Nights are crispy cold and days so pleasant! Being in Bombay you can't imagine how it feels here. The hills are lush and green and the fields are verdant whichever way one looks. "If you were here why would the eye wander."

Come Akhtar! Let me flow in your veins. I have prayed long and hard to make you mine. Seven years have gone by and for the most part we have been separated. My yearning grows with every passing day. I cannot live away from you much longer.

Akhtar, I desire your companionship and you want to send me a mil-

lion miles away! I am truly scared of your lyrical style of love. My very own Akhtar! Come, take me to you, hide me within you in such a way that I may not exist outside of you. Let there just be you and me within you.

Your Şaffō

Bhopal  
21 January 1951

Partner!

I have your letter. I see you are writing longer letters now, but don't mix bitterness with romance. You know very well that it was my choice, my desire, my wish to be associated with you. A single "no" from me would have been enough to end our relationship. I also helped you overcome your hesitancy and uncertainty. If I hadn't succumbed to my "superfluous desire and blithe audacity" in daring to write to you, who knows where our lives would be drifting now. It's been over seven years since I became yours. The delightful accord we have shared in these seven years would be hard to find in married lives. To me the path was obvious, I wanted to be with you at all costs. But you, despite your dilemmas and anxieties, never thought of me as separate from you at any moment. Time and again you stifled your desires and ambitions but never allowed anything to come between us. You sought my companionship and I gave you my support. In this relationship, my beloved, you gave me so much more than you got from me. The innocent shining faces of my exceptionally intelligent and affectionate children thrill my motherhood with every breath and welcome this gift from you with new and unique fervor. The rush of pride I experience on glimpsing your reflection in the eyes of Jādū and Ovais is enough to make me surrender at your feet.

Akhtar! You have endured more sorrows and have had few joys in life. The contentment, the confidence that comes from peaceful nurture has seldom been your lot. If I can give you the mental peace that saves you from anguish, torment and distress, I will consider my life successful. During these years I must have given you worries, but not once did I not regret those instances. Please don't think even for a moment that my life is of any worth without you. Keep me always with you on the most difficult paths, through troubled times, and you will find a smile on my lips. My



partner! My life would become meaningless if you were not to need me anymore. I would rather die than live to see such a day.

Have confidence in yourself, have confidence in me, and you will find that confidence in life comes naturally to you. Victory will be yours. Akhtar, don't allow yourself to become depressed. We get to live just once. Come, let us draw what we can from life for ourselves and our children.

It's the 21st of January today, plan on being here on the 20th of February. I will somehow pass this month waiting for you. Every morning I will wake up with the happy thought that the day of your arrival comes nearer. My poor Ovais, he doesn't tire of asking morning and evening when his *abbī* is going to come. I happened to say that you are coming in February so he asked, "Will he come flying to us, *farr-farr*? Is that why he's coming in *Farvar*?" Tell me, where did he get this poetic disposition from?

Yesterday was our college's convocation. There was the Vice-Chancellor's lunch which I was invited to. Agra University's Registrar was present and was asking about you. He seems to know you quite well, going back all the way to your Gwalior days. This morning was a group photo session scheduled with the Vice-Chancellor. I had to go. All of this is because of your standing. "What blackness have they taken from my heart's core."

I get a low-grade fever in the evening these days. I feel as if my body is burning up even though the fever is not that high. Burning in the passion of separation ... maybe that's what it is. I'll wait and watch for a few days then consult a hakim. Doctors are no good. I don't have the courage to seek a doctor after that awful experience when Jādū was ill.

Convey my greetings to all your friends. I am thinking of writing to Sulṭāna. Is the Valkeshwar Road address still current?

Shahāb's wife has gone back along with her mother-in-law. Shahāb organized innumerable, endless musical evenings to impress his wife. I heard that all the tabla players and accompanists from the city gathered together in the front room until well past midnight while the poor wife sat suffocated in the adjoining chamber. Mian Shahāb had thought that all this would impress her a lot. Now that she has gone away with his mother, he is very lonely and also worried about the fate of the leftover provisions like ghee, etc., that he had collected for the visit.

What more to write? I have talked to you at length. I have bought a very pretty fabric to have a new razai made for you. Your old one must be worn out now, bring it back with you and I'll have this new one ready.

I'm also expecting to get two new kurtas for you. Let's see ...  
All right, lots and lots of love,

Your Şaffō

Bhopal  
5 February 1952

Precious Love,

I got your letter. Akhtar, don't allow yourself to languish this way, worrying about me. You know that I have determination and courage. I haven't given up even now. Sometimes I trouble you with descriptions of my afflictions, but what can I do my beloved. My agonies are such that I can't possibly share them with anyone but you. I was perceptibly better in December but now the pain is coming back again. As long as I can manage, I'll carry on. We have to make plans for regular treatment during the coming break. There's no other way.

You say that if you were to leave Bombay and come here, unemployment would make things difficult. I know your nature and temper. You are overly sensitive about unemployment. So then, what do you say?

All I know is that in this situation you have to live for me and I for you, and together we have to be there for our children. They look up to us and we cannot betray them.

Come home by the 12th of February and plan on staying not for a week but at least two weeks so that we can talk a little about the future.

Miṣḍāq came by. Jādū wouldn't let her go without making her write a story for him in his notebook. Then he began to talk about story writing and made such insightful remarks that Miṣḍāq was dumbfounded.

Now Ovais has started school too; Jādū takes care of him. Yesterday Jādū reported that Ovais got mixed up and at least three of his mistakes had to be corrected. One of them is that he recognizes the school bell, but as a signal that it is time to go home.

The children are so excited with the news of your visit that they can barely sleep. Write to them as often as you can. I was extremely troubled all January with my illness and also the elections. As for the election results, they are out, but not a single nominee of Na'ī Rāh was elected. I was very disappointed, Akhtar. I wonder if these people do any work at all? The situation in Bhopal is very conducive, what we lack are good

workers. As far as my ailment is concerned, we have to see what happens in the end.

I heard glowing descriptions of the Industrial Exhibition at Bombay from Mişdāq. I longed to come to Bombay, even for a few days, but have neither the money nor the health.

I am writing at the college. The constant coming and going of students is disrupting my thoughts. But if I were to go home and write, there would be no one to drop it off at the mailbox. Jādū and Ovais would be in school.

So long then, a thousand embraces. Send me the date of your arrival.

Your Şafiya

Lucknow  
8 November 1952

My good Akhtar,

I have your letter. Your worrying makes me more despondent than ever. Don't fret, maybe the days of trial will pass somehow. How can I agree with your advice to live in Bhopal and take treatment from Ḥakīm Ziyāu'l-Ḥasan when 'Abdu'l-Majīd's treatment has more or less paralyzed me? There is the bed and there's me. After many days my fever has come down to 99 degrees. I am afraid to start any new treatment.

Did you read out the announcement about Majāz in the Anjuman? Parkāsh is not happy with it.

I learned that you have been invited to Amravati. Now listen to me and have a single-minded approach to this. Take whatever you can get in November and come straight to Lucknow in early December. Spend a month at home in Lucknow, you'll feel relaxed. Maybe I'll be better by then, or else I can enjoy your loving care. You have a habit of making plans and then canceling. So regard the program I have suggested as final.

The children liked the plastic bags, though they don't seem durable. They'll be writing to you soon.

I don't have the strength to write more. Take my love, my beloved, with laughter and smiles.

Your very own,  
Şaffō

Lucknow  
27 November 1952

My good Akhtar,

I have been trying so hard for the last four or five days to write a couple of lines by way of a letter to you, but couldn't muster enough energy to do even that. You promised to visit in December ... Jādū and Salmān are counting the days and seeking omens for the date of your arrival.

Any news from Amravati?

You must be getting the details of my condition from Ḥamīda's letters. I'm on homeopathic medicine these days. You say that I should consult Dr. 'Abdu'l-Ḥamīd so I will do that.

What else to write, Akhtar? Come and see me ... once. Lots and lots of love.

Your Ṣaffō

Lucknow  
23 December 1952

Akhtar dearest,

The month of December has passed in waiting. My sweet beloved!

Are you now planning on visiting in January? I know that you must be struggling there for the sake of my needs. But please, come show your face to me, just this once. Make sure to come in January my beloved, I don't have the strength to wait any longer.

Our ninth anniversary is two days away. Akhtar, I await the gift of your love. You won't disappoint me, will you? I send my love and the children's too.

I thirst for your sight.

Ṣaffō

Lucknow  
29 December 1952<sup>2</sup>

Dearest Akhtar, my life,

I got the poem! Your sweetest gift! Believe me, I couldn't hold back my tears. I feel so honored and full of pride today. I have always had your love, care, friendship, affection, confidence and warmth; now I feel that I am your poetry too. What more could I desire?

Akhtar, come to me, don't let me die. I don't want to die. But I am so tired my beloved! Come now, let me put my head in your lap and get a long sleep, then I will certainly be up and be ready to walk with you.

I shower you with immeasurable love.

Your very own,  
Şaffō □

—Translated by Mebr Afshan Farooqi

### Glossary of Names

Akhtar: Jāñ Nişār Akhtar, Progressive poet; film scriptwriter, Şafiya's husband.

Akhtar Sa'īd: Akhtar Sa'īd Khān, advocate, Secretary Progressive Writer's Forum, Bhopal.

ʿIşmat Āpā: Well-known writer ʿIşmat Čuġtāʿī.

Jādū: Jāvēd Akhtar, noted lyricist, film scriptwriter, Şafiya and Akhtar's first born.

Majāz: Asrāru'l-Ĥaq 'Majāz,' talented Progressive poet, best known for his lyrical poem "Āvāra," Şafiya's brother; died young.

Mişdāq: Bēgum Şāliĥa 'Ābid Ĥusain; well-known short story writer.

Na'ī Rāh: A leftist political party in Bhopal.

Naushā Şāĥib: Naushā 'Alī, Professor, Hamidiya College, Bhopal.

Ovais: Salmān Akhtar, poet, psychiatrist, author of several books on the psychology of immigrant populations; two years younger than Jāvēd; his name was changed to Salmān when he started school.

Shahāb: Shahāb Ashraf, lecturer, Hamidiya College, Bhopal.

Shāhid Laṭīf: filmmaker, ʿIşmat Čuġtāʿī's husband.

Sulṭāna: Sulṭāna Ja'fri, wife of the eminent Progressive poet Sardār Ja'fri.

Tāj: Muĥammad 'Alī Tāj, budding poet of Bhopal.

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<sup>2</sup>Şafiya Akhtar died 18 days after she wrote this letter.