

Pash's poetry is not limited to the experiences or images of rural Punjab. He casts his net far and wide and moves from one part of the country to other places; he traverses the records of history and calls upon the dead to witness the present; he searches the skies in this need for a saviour and moves across religions. There is a deep sense of history – both political and cultural, as well as the history of ideas. Contemporary personalities walk in and out of his poems, indicating a sharp awareness of the world of conflict and of the territories of power. He flits from the village barber to Jimmy Carter, to the various wars of civilisation, the power struggles, the Mahabharata and the lives of the Gurus. The goat grazer inhabits his poetry alongside Gandhi. There is a very fine poem "Against the Defiled Language." Others which deserve special mention are "A Grass-like Person's Tale," "Application for Disinheritance," "In Our Times" and "Tragedy of a censored letter." The

freshness of images, the complexity of emotion, the warring ideas locked up in the human mind, the divisiveness, the harsh self-critiquing almost like tearing the psyche into bits – every poem has something new to convey, every poem establishes a connection with the reader in some conscious or unconscious response, disrupting complacency and acceptance.

But it would be a mistake to think that ideas overpower the poet to such an extent that the poetic art is neglected. No, that is not the case. The brevity and starkness of poems like "Jail" and "When Revolt Rages Wild" is replaced by startling images in a longer poem, like "Talking to a comrade." This poem is in six parts and each part addresses itself to an assessment of different realities – the political stances, the state of things, the failures and failed revolutions of history, a questioning of the communist credo, the futility of class hatred, the unreliability of being and the price of survival. Image after image

goes on building up an atmosphere of anger and defeat, of pain and rootedness juxtaposing the generality of ideas with the particularity of the individual human condition, the controlling power structures with human waywardness, and the ideological positions with emotional responses. An example of a striking image which is built on reversal and contrast is:

Salute to you O cold kettle
And to times boiling in you!
Salute to you O crawling bird
And the sky petrified in you!

From a poem of this kind when one shifts to another poem like "A Letter" it is almost as if the village letter writer has taken charge: "Our mood is fine, of your own do write," which calls to one's mind "Yahan sab kushal hai, apna hal likhen." And with such a beginning, every succeeding stanza opens out a world of annihilation, destruction, cruelty, death – the ships that have sunk, God who is dead, war

which kills, marauders who loot, and thus all things perish.

For Gill, apparently, it has been a labour of love and he has displayed a fine instinct for transferring the poetic impulse, carefully choosing the words. If the poems can hold the reader's interest and evoke a response then the task is well performed. But the critical response to such a work of translation is forked; it tends to focus excessively on ideological issues and less on poetic experimentation; approximate fidelity to the original becomes a point of consideration and one ends up by evaluating the translation rather than the work, imposing upon the translator a whole lot of responsibility which Gill has fulfilled admirably. Gill's selection of poems is also judicious as Pash's early poems gradually move into the later phase. *Reckoning with Dark Times* is a valuable addition to the field of comparative studies.

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This book is the first *Katha* publication devoted to one single writer that approaches a litterateur – Ismat, a legend in Urdu literature. *Katha* is a 'nonprofit society' aiming at 'enhancing the pleasures of reading,' which in fact are declining very fast. Earlier this society was known to writers and readers of literature through *Katha Prize Story* volumes edited by Ms Geeta Dharamrajan, a real force behind the society's literary activities.

At the outset, *Katha* must be congratulated for the profusely illustrated and richly contributed book on the life and times of Ismat Chughtai, who has now become an inseparable constituent of the Indian literary heritage. The editors of this book have been careful, cautious and meticulous in selecting articles, photographs and other related material, classifying the same under the sub-headings – 'Ismat on Ismat,' 'Chronology,' 'By Ismat,' 'Critics and Writers on Ismat,' 'Ismat and Her Films,' 'Reminiscences and An Interview,' 'Supplementary Reading,' and 'Genealogy and Tidbits.' The articles from various critics and contemporary writers like Manto, Krishan Chander, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Qurratulain Hyder and others give a deep insight into her life, times and writings. It is not enough to know that a writer is a progressive or a reactionary; what matters is to know the writer's concerns and how he or she communicated the same to readers through his or her writings! Under the subheading 'Ismat on Ismat,' in her article 'Caravan Dust,' Ismat writes, "As a child, I saw minions in such a pitiable state that I began hating both the master and the institution of servants (not servants themselves).

Book review

The Legend of Ismat Chughtai

ISMAT: HER LIFE, HER TIMES

Edited by Sukrita Paul Kumar & Sadique

Katha Publications, New Delhi, pp. ?

Rs. 395, US\$ 18.99, £ 11.99.

Many of my stories have characters that are servants, some weak and helpless, some liars, cheats and connivers ... when I came into contact with the world at large, I learnt that discrimination on the basis of class and caste was merely a farce." She further observes, "There was no room for love and affection in our upbringing. And it was only what we learnt from our servants that came to our rescue" (p 21). This observation of Ismat is full of pathos which underlines the love and devotions of minions towards the children of the family in contrast to her own family members. This experience is not limited to Ismat and other children in the family alone, but it is and has been the experience of all of them who are or were brought up in the feudal background. According to Ismat, whatever such children learnt, good or bad, they learnt from the class which had been subservient to their masters. She revolted against this tradition in life as well as through her writings.

'In conversation,' Gopichand Narang, one of the leading critics in Urdu Literature, while talking to Sukrita, one of the editors of the book, admits "Ismat had a very aggressive personality and I think our literary criticism has been fighting shy of

Ismat. Ismat's writings certainly need to be reread closely. I'd say she's a forerunner of feminist writing" (p 243). If I may be permitted to say, she was not merely the forerunner of feminist writing, but was also a great visionary of women's emancipation.

I again quote from 'Carvan Dust': "to me this femininity seemed just a hoax. To my mind, this display of contentedness, cowardice and hypocrisy was deceitful. To me even makeup, dressing up and wearing gaudy clothes seemed to be the means of covering up faults and engaging in deception" (p 26). Her total attitude towards conventionality in regard to women as a whole was of defiance, which helped her to crystallise her understanding as a person and a writer about emancipation of women. She hated sickening traditions like Purdah, early marriage, education, segregation of sex etc. An interesting episode from her autobiography is worth referring to here:

"Amma had smacked me..."

"You wicked, accursed creature!" blows started raining on me from all sides – You stuffed the burqa in the bag deliberately, didn't you? I accepted the blows as if they were sweets. I knew very well that it was just not

possible to open the well-trussed bedding in half an hour. I was made to wrap a chadar around me and I stepped on the platform like a bold victor" (p 70).

Is this not a testimony of her militant attitudes, towards such sickening traditions prevalent in the family, and the society as a whole, preventing women to live as a normal human being?

Sukrita in 'Introducing Ismat' is quite elaborate, critical and objective in her observations. I feel inclined to agree with her that "the recognition of the ethnic geography emerging from Ismat's large body of writings is disturbing, not because of its rather explicit realism but because it brings with itself a poignant awareness of the grip of oppressive patriarchy over the Muslim middle class" (p 15).

In her article 'Progressive Literature and I,' Ismat professes in unambiguous terms and with a great foresight that "perhaps, after this modernist literature, an ultra modernist literature will come into being and perhaps at that time, the ultra modern writer would leap out of his own bounds and discover himself in majority. And then it will pierce through this suffocation and darkness to point towards that cleft which opens into light, friendship and self confidence" (p 133).

She further claims "that all literature is propaganda, the Quran, the Bible, the Tauriyat, The Vedas. The poetry of Meera, Ghalib, Zauk, and Shibli and Hesrat Mohani is propaganda. The message of Mahatma and the Buddha is propaganda. The verses of Tulsidas, Kabir and Khusro are propaganda. Every conceivable literature is the propaganda of some ideology or the other" (p 133).