

collections of Pash's writing, explaining, contextualising, annotating, as the requirement may be. Considering the fact that Pash wrote in many modes—and moods—this is a challenging task. *Loh Katha* was the first collection of Pash's poems, published when he was merely twenty years old, settling down in his village after his discharge from the Border Security Force. The opening gambit is a poem titled "Bharat" which at once alerts the reader to the son-of-the-soil argument about patriotism. Debunking the pretences of elite cultural practice, the young idealist claims that only the weather worn labourer or the careworn tiller understands the essential concept of nationhood. The theme of exploitation of the working class by a privileged capitalist segment places the poems within a sort of Marxist mode – the qualifying "sort of" is meant to point to Pash's rather naive understanding of class struggle. What can one really endorse is the limited artistry and limited viewpoint in words such as these:

But with full regard to you  
To the existentialism you flaunt  
We shall hurl you to the moon...  
(p. 30)

Pash's youthful vigour is better expressed in the love poetry contained in *Udhe Baajan Magar* where he successfully "subverts," in Gill's opinion, "motifs popular with love poets in Punjabi" (p. 49). Surely, the lively images of "laughter as of linseed

flower" (p. 48), or "errors from the page of life" speak well for poetic sensibility. The anger of youthful, raw political thinking serves well to demolish the prevailing sentimentality about rural life or for that matter, soft romanticism. The project of unearthing brutality beneath the veneer of cultivated "love" remains evident as in *Chithian*. Far from glorifying village life in its supposed simplicity and nostalgia, Pash evidently warns against the vulgarising of folklore in the "pseudo-songs" created for "the money they amass through their circulation" (p. 24).

Pash, the rebel, and that is what remains most attractive about the Punjabi poet, is a firm opponent of all oppressive forms, be they in literature, politics or in social constructions. Boldly, he exposes the falsity of mass religion (p. 25) and turns a critical eye upon growing communalism (p. 26). Gill astutely points towards Pash's tentative, groping vocabulary for secularism, which to Pash, and to several others of his post-independence generation, was linked to a "respect for all religions with the implicit belief that they conveyed the same ethical and spiritual message" (p. 25).

Gill's own study of Marxist thinkers actively plays upon his analysis of Pash's nascent political ideology for a groundswell of "polity, belief and joy," words from Pash's last collection published in his lifetime, *Saade Samia Vich*. Personally, this is the collection I

find most appealing. The ardour for change seems tinged with a wisdom that takes note of the indeterminable edges of human experience. Pash also gathers within his ambit of exhortations those social constituencies which are often ignored by mainstream politics. A poem such as the following gives evidence of the scope of Pash's maturity in terms of content as well as linguistic range:

Comrade, how counter to  
revolution and class  
Has our sister grown  
She hides her pebbles  
Underneath my erudite books,  
For all the wisdom drilled into her  
head  
She is worried more about play  
Than society's future. (p. 74)

While I remark upon Pash's linguistic capabilities, I am acutely conscious that I am dealing with a translated text and that the language quoted is that of the translator, T.S. Gill. This is an occasion to ask a pertinent question about the target audience for such renderings as also to wonder about claims of "authenticity." The translated text is usually written for a reader who does not know the original language. A relationship of trust is created between the translator and the reader as also between the translator and the author. In this case of reading Pash, I am inclined to depend upon the "authentic" rendition from Punjabi to English offered by a scholar of repute. While it is possible that another rendering may be couched differently,

one must grant that the original will not be ignored or falsified by any aware translator in today's literary scenario. To return then to my "sense" of the original poems, I would say that Gill has preserved the flavour of Pash's revolutionary phrases, as also the verse form, in the few poems appended to the end of this literary biography.

In conclusion, Tejwant Singh Gill's book on Pash is a thoughtful, well structured, extended essay. It offers academic critique as it points to the influence of Pablo Neruda on the choice of tone and subject in Pash's political writing (p. 56) while it also traces the growth of a callow young man from naivety to an intelligent comprehension of power relations in the modern nation state. Gill is objective enough to see the discontinuous identifications which often caused conflict in the emergent artist. Occasionally Gill adopts the tone of an indulgent mentor to the rebel poet but an immediate corrective is offered by Gill the honed critic. There's a fine balance to be maintained in a work such as this. Eulogy sounds false, irony is redundant. T.S. Gill shows the way by weaving a fine commentary on the life and works of Pash. He displays his own engagement with the problematics of Marxism even while he allows primacy of voice to the young poet who is his subject.

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Tejwant Singh Gill's translation of some selected poems by Pash, one of the leading revolutionary poets of Punjab, is a welcome addition to the still small world of translated works in Punjabi literature. Pash, who along with Surjit Pattar inherited the poet's mantle from Shiv Butalvi, has left his mark on Punjabi Poetry, despite an early death.

The literary artefact carries within it an amazing contradiction. On the one hand, literature can easily be transferred to other cultures for it deals with human situations, aspirations, frustrations, losses, experiences and emotions. One does not have to acquire a taste for it, as one has to do for the music or dance of another culture. Yet, on the other hand, codified as it is within one linguistic code, it is difficult to cross the linguistic boundaries unless it is translated. Hence, when the linguistic boundaries are crossed, it is a matter of joy for it allows accessibility to the otherwise inaccessible, and opens up a whole new world.

Pash, whose real name was Avtar Singh Sandhu, was born in 1950 and grew up in rural Punjab experiencing the great divide between the rich and the poor, and being on the wrong side

## Book review

### A Challenge to the Translator's Imagination

RECKONING WITH DARK TIMES:  
SEVENTY FIVE POEMS BY PASH

translated from the original Punjabi

by Tejwant Singh Gill

New Delhi : Sahitya Akademi, 1999. pp. 126. Rs 80.

of power, which by its very nature is ruthless and pushes the oppressed towards agitation and violence. He was sympathetic to the naxalites and his poetry is deeply influenced by the revolutionary ideology. There is anger, rage, rebelliousness, and a determined will to resist, oppose and question the status of power. There is an interlacing of violence, the violence which was to overtake him when he was gunned to death in 1988 at the age of thirty-eight. Pash died without having acquired the patience of age or the mellowness of defeat; but he did acquire a genuine poetic voice (as he shifted from one job

to another, from the border Security Force to a journalistic career), and a literary expression. He started writing in 1970 and his poetic career spans the period of the naxalite hold over Punjab. He witnessed the militancy and the turmoil which shattered Punjab during the 70s and 80s.

The poems in the present volume have been selected from four collections of his poems: *Loh Katha* (1970), *Ud de Baajan Magar* (1974), *Saade Samaan Vich* (1978) and the posthumous *Khilre Hoi Virke* (1980) (the last symbolically referring to his uncollected poems as *The Scattered*

*Leaves*). They are representative of his poetic voice as well as the experimentation he was engaged in.

Translation is always a challenge to the translator's imagination, as he empathises with two linguistic codes and attempts to simulate the original experience in a different language. Poetry offers even a greater challenge than prose as it seeks to reproduce the nuances, rhythms, images and tightly woven metaphors as closely as possible and Gill seems to have captured them and reproduced the stylistic devices with a surprising degree of fidelity: the interrogative sentences, the colloquialisms of a spoken idiom, the romanticism which has turned sour. There is a beautiful short poem, almost prophetic in the manner it announces death:

In the dark, pitch dark nights  
when moments shudder from each  
other to recoil,  
and the light in the room upstairs  
jumps down to death from the  
windows above;  
in the womb of such serene nights;  
when revolt rages wild,  
My murder can occur in light or  
twilight.



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).