

Ismat and India

By Rafia Zakaria

This upcoming Saturday it will have been twenty-four years since the author Ismat Chughtai died. A fiery woman, she was known for her ascerbic and trenchant prose, piles of acutely observed short stories that laid bare the hypocrisies of middle class Muslim society in pre and post-partition India. It was the fiery burial she chose decades later that made the Pakistani side of Urdu speakers uncomfortable. A Muslim writer must choose a Muslim burial, and the insecure borders of post Partition South Asia dictated that such post-mortem predilections, even by the eccentric and eclectic, be considered complete repudiations.

So it was with Ismat Chughtai, whose receding position in the canon of Urdu literature has been chronicled in at least bi-annual laments near her birth and death dates. In an additional burden, Ismat Chughtai's birthday falls on August 15; the detail that this happenstance took place in 1915, long before the divisive vagaries of Partition would mandate patriotic hatreds, is often lost in the fervid milieu of nationalist passions. The calculations left to the subcontinent by the British also mandate that a hesitant embrace of Pakistan equals an amorous passion for India. Ismat Chughtai, the brilliant author, the talented wordsmith, the creative genius, chose to live in India even after Pakistan was carved out as the better location for the subcontinent's Muslims. For this she was loved by India and Indians, their ardor for this living female testament to the superior soil offered by their staunchly secular environment, reflected in the pile of awards and titles with which they festooned her. The possibility that Ismat Chughtai may have chosen to stay even in some small part from some mix of habit and familiarity, a banal repugnance toward the usually inconvenient project of migration, was not a proposition that anyone wished to consider. India the secular was assumed to be India the freer, more given to bending and bowing the constrictions of culture to suit the whims and fancies of reliably unpredictable writers and artists.

That may well have been then, but like so much else in a subcontinent increasingly empty of writers who lived through its bloody border carving, it is not so anymore. In the past several weeks, Indian writers, some of Muslim origin but largely any who have had

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the temerity to question the Government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, have become subject to harassment and hate crimes. Three notable public intellectuals, M.M Kalburgi, Govind Pansare and Narendra Dhabolkar, have all been recently murdered. Other writers and poets are also facing censorship and harassment; they include Perumal Murugan, scholar M.M Basheer and poet K Satchidanadan. Dismayed by the Modi Government's refusal to investigate the murders and cases of harassment, over thirty Indian writers have returned the "Sahitya Akademi Awards," one of the highest literary honours awarded in India. According to PEN International, the organization that monitors literary freedom around the world and which is trying to organize a campaign to protect literary freedom in India, two Ministers from the Modi Government have even questioned the intentions of these writers in returning the awards. In the words of PEN International, "it takes courage in the current climate in India to express dissent in a public manner. PEN international salutes the courage of and expresses solidarity with those who have returned the awards in protest or have resigned membership of the Akademi."

On the Pakistani side of the border, of course, there is even less room for glib satisfaction at threatened state of Indian secularism. With recent months and years littered with the unabashed killing of writers, scholars, students and really anyone uninterested in the constricted agenda of a blood thirsty few, the streets of the country are stained with blood of slain intellectuals. If Indian writers are protesting, Pakistani intellectuals have had to flee or die or hide. Those too poor to hire coterie of guards to protect themselves must beg at the embassies of former or recent colonial masters; those even poorer must keep quiet in life or be sentenced to a more permanent silence. The choices are all bleak ones and their paltry offerings have been lamented often on vast acres of newsprint filled with incessant and helpless eulogies. Writers after all have only words to commemorate the words that were taken from the mouths of murdered others.

It is well that Ismat Chughtai is dead, however, for neither India nor Pakistan would have offered her much relief from the ever constricting shackles of religiously motivated obscurantism. The dead who saw the hopeful, if momentarily so, birth of two separate nations seem luckier in their demise than they would evaluating the miserable present. As the two countries get older, they do not get wiser; new generations are born reared on resolute and hatreds they are told are sacred. For the writer, it is a delicate balance of precision mourning: criticizing Muslim persecution in India can launch mobs that kill the Hindus left behind in Pakistan; criticizing Hindu persecution in Pakistan can launch mobs

that kill Muslims left behind in India. There are a lot more of the latter but even such factual acknowledgements morph into macabre competitions of greater bigotries. The construction of a sentence, here or there, is burdened with this baggage; it is evidence of the success of a gruesome osmosis, the equalization of hatreds on either side.

Ismat Chughtai is actually dead; others in Pakistan and in India and in all the other scattered corners of the world where they live and read and write in shrines to their lost lands, are the breathing dead, the living ones. Their words stained with the pain of exile or the burden of censorship, the fire of zealotry that burns and burns unsated and on either side.