

BOOK REVIEW

JOGINDER PAUL

The Writerly Writer

KRISHNA SOBTI

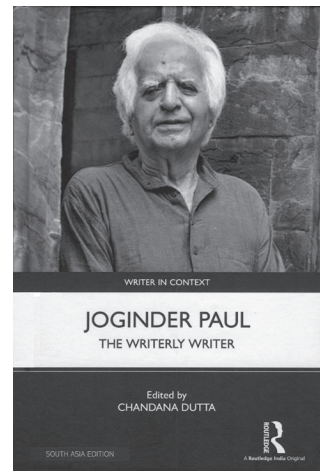
A Counter Archive

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The word 'series' is often visualised as neat leather-bound volumes in an ornamental box, sitting atop a teakwood library shelf. However, Routledge's offering of the 'Writer in Context' series is far more dynamic and user-friendly than the visualised assumption. Meticulously planned by the series editors Sukrita Paul Kumar and Chandana Dutta, 'the volumes as a whole offer a vision of the strands and divergence as well as confluence in Indian literature' (Preface: xvi). Noting the magnificent range of 'modern' writing in the regional languages of the country, and recognising that a map of interlinkages through translations and resource materials would enrich systematic study of trends and comparisons, the editors have commissioned volumes on individual authors, keeping a firm eye on the socio-cultural ethos of their creations. Highly innovative, purposeful and comprehensive, the first two books in the series reviewed here clearly demonstrate the arrival of mature scholarship aimed at benefitting South Asian studies globally. The books are attractive for the common

JOGINDER PAUL: THE WRITERLY WRITER

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reader as well because curiosity about a favourite regional writer is graciously satisfied.



‘I don’t know whether it was fiction on which man first built his faith, or faith on which his fiction,’ says the Urdu writer Joginder Paul, integrating the multiple levels at which his narratives operate (p. 69). Aptly titled *Joginder Paul: The Writerly Writer*, Chandana Dutta has compiled an extraordinary range of information that delves into a master-craftsman’s forge of the imagination and finely examines each tool along with samples of Paul’s aesthetic articulation. In the eight sections that unfold the intricacies of Paul’s writing, Dutta holds on to the clear objective of showcasing ‘how Paul strove consistently to effect a change in how fiction should be perceived, particularly by his readers who he considered the most important ally-participant in his effort to create stories’ (p. 1). Systematically organised and impeccably comprehensive, the book is a first presentation in English of Paul’s rich oeuvre in the context that shaped him and his writing.

Understandably, the opening section comprises translations of a few short stories—powerful, robust, incisive. Take, for example, ‘Parayi’, translated by Keerti Ramachandra, about a young woman’s spirited questioning of her ‘clod of earth’ violent, impotent husband and her abusive in-laws, as to ‘where is my house?’ For not producing a male heir, or any child, she is being thrown out, but is it her ‘fault?’ ‘Can saffron sprout on trampled earth?’ she asks. Ramachandra’s exquisite translation of the woman’s angst, her earthy colloquialisms, her raw anger show the barren wife’s plight and social ostracism. The title ‘Parayi’ has been wisely left in the original as there is no English equivalent to this vernacular concept for a woman’s ‘otherness’. Paul, in this story and others, has a keen eye for the marginalised, the dispossessed, whether it be the coloured people in Nairobi, the disabled person, the so-called lunatic—all of whom function outside the normative.

We are witness to Paul’s consistent and fascinating explorations into the art of fiction. Through several sections of the book, Paul speaks directly about his life experience of many transitions—Africa, England, Pakistan, India—a writer’s

portmanteau of memories and social comment. While dwelling amongst imagined people in a creative space, a writer may be acutely lonely or ‘suffering’, he says in an essay in ‘The Cartography of Creativity’—‘The misery of man is attributable to the state of loneliness to which he feels tempted for what he fashionably regards as his right to privacy,’ says Paul with irony (p. 67). At the same time, he is a sensitive public figure, a critic of other writers, carrying opinions on the evolution of Urdu and Hindi literatures. From one master to another, Paul’s essay on Premchand is a classic which focuses on the influence of the *dastan* in shaping structure and language.

An indigenous form of short-short story called *afsanche* in Urdu was pioneered by Paul many decades before flash fiction became fashionable in English. In a mere 500 words, a vignette sparks into life, such as in the unfinished tale of a hero and heroine who escape the author’s pen, walk out of his doleful pages, and decide to joyfully embrace marriage (‘The Settled People’). Christopher Merrill places such aphoristic writing within a tradition of ‘wisdom literature’ (p. 156). Paul, however, invents his own evocative term: *kahanipan*/storyness—‘the spontaneous flow in the experience of the story’ (p. 61)—and gives full acknowledgment to the intended play between the writer and his characters, his readers and critics.

In the sections that are critical commentaries on Paul’s writing, I was delighted to find several references to *Nadeed* (Blind), my favourite text for comprehending Paul. Set in a residency for blind people, the metaphor of sight and sightlessness critiques the idea of normalcy. Sukrita Paul Kumar writes, ‘At one level the novel engages with the spiritual malaise or problems related to the Indian situation, but on another level, it seems to be the story of our times anywhere in the world’ (p. 233). In conjunction with Wazir Agha’s essay on *Nadeed* and Hina Nandrajog’s recall of co-translating the text with Kumar, the endorsement of Paul’s complex, authentic and philosophical portrayal of reality through surreal landscapes holds steady. *Khwabrau* (Sleepwalkers), another novel cast in liminal space, encourages speculations about its metaphors for Partition and the larger sector of human choice. The segment on ‘Conversations and Dialogues’ opens up the writer’s creative process to frank scrutiny. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, famous for his own work, reads Paul

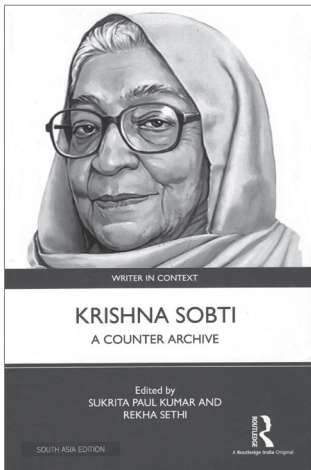
against the background of the Progressive Movement, catching the moments of assent and dissent. From such literary history to personalised essays by Paul's wife Krishna, niece Usha Nagpal and close friends such as Zahir Anwar, affection and admiration for a remarkable intellectual flow through the pages.

The theory and practice of literary translation stands illustrated brilliantly in the collection. Vibha Chauhan, Meenakshi Bharat, Sunil Trivedi, among others, speak about the challenges of intra-lingual transfers and discuss the affinity of language to a cultural matrix. The fraught issues of retaining original words, creating glossaries, adopting differential tones in conversations and such other topics surface and are explored with examples of their own practice in rendering Joginder Paul into English. In one of his musings, the great writer had composed a 'Self Obituary': 'The fact is that I have no idea as to when I had died, for I am breathing in spite of it' (p. 111). Joginder Paul is indeed a living presence through this wonderful book, its gifted translators, and the academic services of Sukrita Paul Kumar and Chandana Dutta.



KRISHNA SOBTI: A COUNTER ARCHIVE

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Transiting to the second book in the series, *Krishna Sobti: A Counter Archive*, edited by Sukrita Paul Kumar and Rekha Sethi, one notices the shift to the outer world of politics, gender violence, sociological imperatives, and so on. As the editors emphasise, 'Counter archives are disruptive of conventional narratives, and while they tend to engage with the past and historicise differently, there is also a futuristic intent built into them' (p. 1). A rich oeuvre of material unfolds, whether autobiographical or located in historical events such as Partition. Sobti, when I met her at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, came through as a mercurial personage. When I showed interest in her links with Rajasthan, my home state, she

reminisced in a fragmented way about her time as a governess to the young prince of Sirohi. Much later, this shaped into the maverick novel *A Gujarat Here, A Gujarat There*, in which Daisy Rockwell, the translator, deciphers multiple schisms surfacing immediately after Partition.

The schisms of gender identity, linguistic fluidity and locational disruption show up in much of Sobti's work, of which this book offers plentiful examples. Part 1 with a focus on the writer's 'many Hindi(s)' starts with *Sikka Badal Gaya* presenting the admixture of Punjabi words with Hindi (to which Agveya, as editor, showed no objection) and moves through citations from several works. My favourite is *Ai Ladki* (Hey Girl), in Shivanath's translation. Based on a fictionalised conversation between an elderly, sick woman (Ammu) and her daughter (Ladki), the language is remarkably supple in unravelling the mind of a woman afflicted with thoughts of death, yet fighting to taste the joys of life. She is feisty and unconventional; the daughter is a quiet, unvoiced character, dutifully attending to the ailing woman. In translation, the vivacity and pungency is not lost: 'Ladki, this is not maya or an illusion. No, no, life and living are not imagined. It is the leaving of it that is. Is there anyone of flesh and blood who can savour juicy mangoes, ripened on the tree, after death? *Nahin ri*' (p. 37). In 'Literary Reception', a later section of the volume, critics Savita Singh and Florence Pasche Guignard present their views on intergenerational struggle, and debates around sexuality and motherhood. Superbly done, Sobti's leadership in casting the parameters of an Indian feminism in Hindi literature is substantiated by Singh (p. 147), even as Guignard explores the story through the lens of 'maternal theory' (p. 162). Opposed as Sobti was to stereotypes of a dependent female, she was nevertheless empathetic towards the social realism of family structures in north India where her novels are situated. It is noted in the Introduction that Krishna Sobti never wished to be slotted as a 'woman writer', but always said she was proud to be a woman (p. 11). I may add that such a conundrum is not particular to Sobti and is equally observed in writers as different as Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande.

A substantial section on *Zindaginama* is justified by the sheer volume and significance of Sobti's epic text (pp. 83–112). Nirmala Jain's astute essay describes the novel's unique positionality thus:

'It gives a panoramic view of a common culture, a long-standing tradition; it is steeped in the fragrance of the soil of Punjab and the folktales that arise out of it, whose one end touches the pristine Puranic lore and the other the rural life before Partition' (p. 93). Counted amongst the significant '*anchalik*' (regional) novels, *Zindaginama* inscribes an arch of discovery greater than several others in bridging over dialects and voices, prose and poetry, mainstream as well as marginal languages. To Sobti, what she called the '*zinda rukh*' (a massive living tree) was to be kept alive (p. 7). Hence, translating such a cultural narrative with linguistic differentials poses a particular challenge, as many translators have attested. Neer Kanwal Mani wishes to retain *Sphota* (burst of sound) (p. 88), Jain wonders about authentication of cultural roots, and Sobti herself, penning notes on *Zindaginama*, recognises her 'wrangle between words' (p. 98). A taste of the translation in Rajul Bhargava's rendering from the novel:

Who will know
 Who will understand
 The pain of leaving one's motherland
 Of turning one's face away from it?
 The anguish (p. 91)!

I return to the high accomplishment of this volume on Krishna Sobti where the challenges of multiple regional languages, cross translation and re-translation have been faced head-on. It therefore becomes a source book for not just entering into the intricacies of Sobti's themes, intellect and languages, but a research guide on the manner and method of approaching such authors and texts.

The enquiry would be incomplete unless I were to speak about the personalised conversations and reminiscences that comprise later sections of the book. Meenakshi Faith Paul presents a dialogue between Krishna Baldev Vaid and Krishna Sobti who were friends and contemporaries, but held vastly different views on how gender is presented. In her poetic chat with Anamika, Sobti reveals the struggle within a writer saying, 'The relationship between the writer and her work is as fiercely bitter as those of rivals' (p. 198), elaborating on the variety of styles in her creativity as expressed in *Zindaginama*, *Mitro Marjani*, *Surajmukhi Andhre ke*, *Dil o Danish* and

Samay Sargam (p. 200). Further, there are vivid recollections by luminaries such as Ashok Vajpeyi, who writes of Sobti's hallmark of 'Resistance', and publisher Ashok Maheshwari who recalls her anxiety over each novel as it progressed towards print. The unfortunate law suit between Krishna Sobti and Amrita Pritam finds mention in muted tones in some of the personalised essays, but is best ascribed to Sobti's principled stand on what she considered 'right'. That she was deeply engaged in every word written by, or about, her is evident in many tales of delayed publication of her works, some of her earliest ventures being the last to see print, such as *Channa* and *Gujarat*. But that's how Krishna Sobti lived—with a fullness of flavour to the last sip.

This panoramic view of two books merely whets the appetite for more and the upcoming volumes are happily anticipated. A fortunate development in the study of Indian literature, such material lends texture as well as density to understanding figurations in modern writing across languages. These books are rooted in India's cultural ecology and function as seedbeds for a new efflorescence.

