



# Indian Literature

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September–October 2022 # 331



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# THE BOOK REVIEW

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SANTHALI, MAITHILI AND DOGRI

# THE BOOK REVIEW

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# Joginder Paul and the Art of Fiction

Mukul Chaturvedi

JOGINDER PAUL: THE WRITERLY WRITER

Edited by Chandana Dutta

Routledge, Writer in Context Series, 2022, pp. 288, ₹1495.00

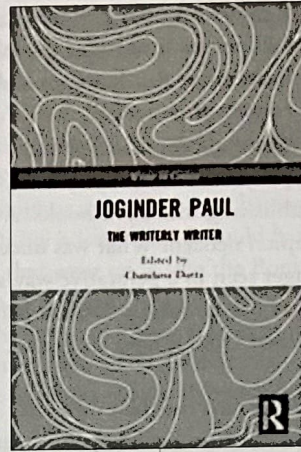
Over the last two decades, Indian Writing in English translation has emerged as a flourishing field that has seen a steady rise in the translation of fiction and other forms of creative writing in almost all Indian languages. While there is much to cheer about, what is missing is the study of critical discourses and literary traditions in regional languages in translation. Additionally, with translated works from different Indian languages included in universities' curricula and a favoured area of research in literary studies, the scarcity of critical material in translation is urgently felt. Chandana Dutta's book *Joginder Paul: The Writerly Writer* is a valuable step in that direction as it offers a wealth of scholarly and critical material on the well-known Urdu writer Joginder Paul and introduces to the reader his vast and varied engagements with fiction both at the level of form and language. Locating the writer within the literary tradition is much needed for Indian writing in English translation as the texts are likely to be read and taught in a vacuum, with little or no knowledge of other texts in the source language and the intra-linguistic literary tradition of the bhashas. A rich resource for readers and academics, this book is part of the *Writer in Context* series by Routledge, which is conceptualized with the objective of building an archival source on different Indian writers writing in regional languages. Chandana Dutta provides a fascinating template on how to collate and organize the material that portrays Joginder Paul to invoke TS Eliot as part of a vibrant literary tradition and yet showcase his individual talent. The availability of such archival material opens up a vast horizon for the readers, thus enriching the process and purpose of the translation.

'Landscape of Fiction: The Layout of *Joginder Paul: The Writerly Writer*' adds much to its appeal and accessibility to the reader. Divided into eight neat sections, each focusing specifically on one aspect of Paul's oeuvre, the book includes selections from his novels, short stories, flash fiction

and essays. Also, to enrich the reader, it offers critical articles, interviews, and literary commentaries on Paul by a host of well-known scholars. While each section stands independently, it is also in conversation with others. This cross-sectional engagement and analysis presents Paul as a writer with a refined literary sensibility and an acute sense of ethical responsibility.

The first section initiates the reader to the fictional universe of Paul by offering select short stories and extracts from his novels and novellas. This section highlights how Paul's creative energy draws sustenance from the trials and tribulations of human existence and, despite their rootedness in a specific context, has a universal resonance. For instance, the beautifully translated story by Nirupama Dutt, 'The Flight of Doves', creates memorable characters, Lobh Singh and Fazaldeen, friends who were separated during Partition. Etched in Lobhya's memory is Chawinda in Pakistani Punjab and while he continues to write letters and has imaginary conversations with his friend, his son tells him that it's 'been ages since the Chacha in Chawinda died'.

Section three offers critical perspectives on Paul by noted scholars like Fikr Taunsvi, Anwar Pasha, Qamar Rais, Mohd. Asim Siddiqi and Wazir Agha, who reflect on various aspects of Paul's fiction; language, art, aesthetics and to use Taunsvi's term, 'insightfulness', and 'acumen', that showcases the 'civilizational culture of our subcontinent'. Commenting on flash fiction, *afsanche*, a genre that Paul brought to critical acclaim in Urdu, Anwar Pasha notes that it was Paul, 'who imparted strength and reliability' to the art of *afsanche* and to his credit are four impressive collections, *Silvatein*, *Katha Nagar*, *Parindey*, and *Nahin Rahman Babu*. An important aspect of Joginder Paul that scholars discuss is his place and position in Urdu literature, especially his relationship with progressives and modernists, because he was writing at a time that saw the combined influence of both. Several scholars claim that it is difficult to cast him in either mould as he delicately traverses both terrains but does not fall into one frame. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi provides valuable insights regarding placing Paul in the vast canon of Urdu literature. Comparing him to Intizar Husain, Faruqi observes that Paul's writing was not



'formula based', and both writers evolved a style that was distinctly their own. He notes that Paul's writing style is devoid of any embellishments and is persuasive and effortless because he does not strive after linguistic affects like many other writers in Urdu. According to him, Paul's training in English literature taught him the *tour de force* of the narrative form, and he remained true to that. Faruqi's observations on Manto, Rajinder Singh

Bedi, Qurratulain Hyder and Premchand while discussing Paul are significant as they give the reader an insight into different writing styles in Urdu and enrich our lives in understanding Paul's oeuvre as well as other writers of Urdu fiction. Essays by literary critics and translators included in the volume discuss Paul's creative and figurative use of language, his use of diverse registers of Urdu, inflections from Hindi and Punjabi, idiomatic expressions, allusions, conversational tone, and tenor, all of which add to the richness of his work. While the multicultural and multilingual world of Paul's fiction poses a challenge to the translator, it remains a rewarding endeavour as it offers to the reader an inimitable style of writing in Urdu fiction that is unique and stands its ground.

'On Fiction and Fellowship': An essential dimension of Paul's oeuvre included in Chandana's book is his essays in English that bring out the voice of a literary critic who perceives a distinct role for fiction. The title of his essay in English, 'Fiction: Fellowship in Suffering', provides an entry point into his world of fiction. His term 'kinship with fiction' brings to mind a remarkable book by Wayne C Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* that explores the metaphor of books being the best friends that enable the reader to build a community, allow the exchange of ideas, and revision of values through the world of fiction. For Booth, fiction can promote an ethical stance as we engage with others and enter into a dialogic relationship with them as readers. In a similar vein, Paul argues that to claim kinship with fiction endows both the writer and the reader with a responsibility of living in 'fellowship with his fellow man'. One of the remarkable statements in the book is Paul's observation, 'I don't know whether it was fiction on which man first built his faith, or faith, on which his fiction.' For Paul, fiction offers



# Indian Literature

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Yamuna—the riverine metaphor with all its semantic possibilities—of flow, embarkments, and obstructions—shapes the narrative of *Yamuna's Journey*. Each chapter is a stage in this flow, where the focus is not so much on action but its formulaic denouement. However, Mulay's didactic-emancipatory zeal tends to overflow the 'literary balance' that literature demands. At these junctures, *Yamuna's Journey* becomes a kind of conversion primer, where Christianity becomes the progressive panacea for all social ills. Though certainly programmatic, this 'literary' lapse does not diminish its 'novelistic' and historical importance.

The significance of the novel lies in its historicity. It documents a period of multiple transitions—ideological, religious, and cultural. 1857 has generally been documented as a time when the native ways of governance were up against the yet-to-be-consolidated colonial power and statecraft. The existential churning that this encounter had ushered in at cultural and social levels has not been adequately documented. Mulay's *Yamuna's Journey* was, and remains, a significant fictional intervention in that direction.

The original and the translated are separated by 165 years. The readers have to traverse this distance with commensurate critical and historical empathy. This, of necessity, requires a dual temporal sensitivity. The narrative has to be read by anchoring it in the pastness of its past and appreciating how this pastness has evolved into the present vis-à-vis woman's issues in a country that is forever in transition. This dual lens is a must, for either of the two lenses, if employed exclusively, would reduce the significance of the translation. If read as a routine fictional take or an archival translation retake on the past—a dominant narrative credo of the contemporary—its literary possibilities and interventionist trajectories would certainly be lost to the readers.

As a translator, Deepra Dandekar is keenly aware of this historical responsibility. She accordingly foregrounds her translation with a 'Note for Readers', 'Translator's Introduction', and a 'Glossary' to ground contemporary readers in the historicity of *Yamuna's Journey*. While 'trans-editing' the text for this purpose—by paraphrasing the Sanskrit extracts or simplifying it in places—she has been careful to retain the narrative authenticity of the original. Though the translation seems to be a bit stiff or overtly academic at places, it nevertheless enables an insightful peep into the history, historicity, and historiographical potentials of fiction. It also tells us how historiographic fictionality weds intervention and entertainment to fictionalize history and shape public opinion programmatically.

**Anup Singh Beniwal** teaches English Literature at USHSS, GGS IP University, New Delhi. A writer, translator, and critic, he has seven books to his credit, the latest being *Literature, Theory, Pedagogy: Cultural Ruminations* (2023).

## Women Making History

Mukul Chaturvedi

### A MOST NOBLE LIFE: THE BIOGRAPHY OF ASHRAFUNNISA BEGUM (1840-1903)

By Muhammadi Begum (1877-1908). Translated from the original Urdu and edited with additional material by C.M. Naim  
Orient BlackSwan, 2022, pp. 188, ₹630.00

Women's role and contribution to Urdu literature and journalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century remains a relatively under-examined area. CM Naim's *A Most Noble Life: The Biography of Ashrafunnisa Begum (1840-1903)*, makes an important intervention as it tells the tale of an extraordinary woman who was deeply devoted to the cause of women's education, and enriches the reader with a wealth of material that highlights the social, cultural, and literary context that shaped the contours of ordinary Muslim women's lives in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, there are several 'firsts' that mark the publication of this biography. Not only is it the first one written in Urdu by a woman; the biographer, Muhammadi Begum (1877-1908) is the first woman to edit a journal in Urdu, and Ashrafunnisa Begum taught at the first school for girls, the Victoria Girls' School, in Lahore. Translated by a well-known scholar of Urdu literature, this richly annotated and timely translation is a treasure-trove for scholars and readers and adds to the current scholarship on Muslim women in South Asia.

A fortunate stroke of serendipity brought Ashrafunnisa

We seldom come across a biography where the biographer's life is equally fascinating and illustrious as that of her subject. Professor Naim does justice to that by providing an account of Muhammadi Begum's life and her contribution to Urdu letters and journalism.

## BOOK REVIEW

*Veil or Shroud:*

*The Predicament of Women in Jyotirmoyee Devi Sen's Short Stories*

Book: *Behind Latticed Marble: Inner Worlds of Women*

Author: Jyotirmoyee Devi Sen

Translator: Apala G. Egan

Publishing House: Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2023



Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengali writer Jyotirmoyee Devi Sen (1894-1988) wrote short stories about women in the Indian royal households of Rajasthan. Although she spent most of her life in Bengal, she was born and brought up in Jaipur, Rajasthan. However, after the demise of her husband, she was widowed at a young age of twenty-five and moved to Bengal with her children. Her autobiographical work, *Smriti Bismritir Torongo* (1986), touches upon the anxieties that she faced and how she involved herself and found empowerment in the writing of fiction, non-fiction, and social work. Sen's remarkable literary contribution has been her novel, *The River Churning (Epar Ganga Opar Ganga)*, first published in 1968, based on the Partition of Bengal, focusing on the violence inflicted upon women's bodies during this time. Sen was also the winner of the prestigious Rabindra Puraskar for her compilation of short stories, *Sona Rupa Noy*, in 1973, and enjoyed a prolific literary career.

Ten of her short stories were published as a collection, *Behind Latticed Marble: Inner Worlds of Women*, by Niyogi Books in 2023 and translated from Bangla to English by Apala G. Egan. These stories have been previously published in various journals and magazines. The book contains a detailed introduction by Egan, which provides historical and social context to the stories. Sen's stories in this collection are drawn from familiar everyday milieu since her birth in Jaipur, Rajasthan. As an observer of the intricate life of the veiled zenana and other spaces occupied by women, Sen was a keen eyewitness to the position and hierarchy that operated within and outside the walls of a household – be it a humble abode, a landowner's haveli, or the royal palace.

The tales are interspersed with depictions of the royal harem, practice of polygamy, mothers and daughters, mistresses and enchantresses, child brides, courtesans, and widows; and detail various difficulties that women experienced at a time when not many avenues were available to them. The story, "The Princess Baby" ("Beti ka Baap"), illustrates female infanticide. Despite the father being happy about the birth of a daughter, the grandmother thinks of her as a burden and a stain on the family, eventually poisoning the newborn girl with opium. In a scenario where women faced disinheritance, loss of honour, sexual violence, and tyranny, these stories depict a nuanced understanding of human emotions tied with societal anxieties. In one of the most popular stories from this book, "The Child Bride" ("Baijilal"), Kesar must hide her identity of being a rich woman with inheritance and work in another household as a maid till she gets married as she does not have the protection of any male relatives. Unfortunately, she is widowed, and her in-laws take her wealth away, abandoning her, after which she finds refuge in Vrindavan. Such descriptions are poignant and often the stories end with death or disappearance of the woman protagonist – completely erasing her being and reflecting upon how little this individual mattered in a rigid patriarchal social setup.

Another story about a father, "Beneath the Aravalli Hills" ("Dhapi"), portrays a father who sells his daughter, Dhapi, for two hundred rupees. She becomes a part of the royal harem and after about a decade