KAGHZI HAI PAIRAHAN
THEATRICAL TAKES ON
ISMAT CHUGHTAI’S
NON-FICTION

MAYA PALIT
Projects/Processes
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Kaghzi Hai Pairahan: Theatrical takes on
Ismat Chughtai’s Non-Fiction

Maya Palit
A still from Motley’s *Aurat! Aurat! Aurat!* at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.
Motley’s
Aurat! Aurat! Aurat!

Venue SAG Ground

Curated by Arundhati Nag
A still from Motley’s *Aurat! Aurat! Aurat!* at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.
Curatorial Note

Curator Arundhati Nag
Director Naseeruddin Shah
Associate Director Ratna Pathak Shah
Lighting Designer Arghya Lahiri and Rahul Rai
Lights Execution Rahul Rai
Set Design Jairaj Patil and Ratna Pathak Shah
Sound Design Sahil Vaid
Costumes and Art Direction Ratna Pathak Shah
Stage Manager Anirudha Rawal
Backstage Dwarika Prasad, Ramesh Konar, Prakash Amberkar, Dhruv Kalra, Vijay Telani, Vivaan Shah
Set Execution Rangmanch Setting Service
Backdrops Ajay Pujare
Media Consultant Kajal Gadhia Budhbbhatti
Publicity Design Punit Gandhi
Photographs Mayur Shroff
Producer Jairaj Patil
Artists Seema Pahwa, Jaya Virlley, Shruti Vyas, Prerna Chawla, Bhavna Pani, Vijay Telani, Chitransh Pawar, Sonu Anand

“I do not write about the farmer and the mill worker because I do not know their lives well enough. I empathise more with the travails of the middle and lower middle classes.”
– Ismat Chughtai

Selections from Ismat Chughtai’s autobiography form the opening segment of Motley’s continuing tribute to one of the greatest short story writers of all time. The three pieces (written between 1930 and 1950) are chatty “essays” containing Chughtai’s views of womanhood in her time, played on stage.
“A 100 years after her birth, everyone wants a piece of her. She obliges”, the Pakistani author and translator Tahira Naqvi wrote, of Ismat Chughtai. “I have written extensively about her, translated nearly all of her major works, thought about her, dreamt about her, spoken about her and answered, tentatively always, questions about her work, or my translations of her work, and have come away with a sense of having just about scratched the surface.”

There is a kernel of exasperation in the writing of some scholars who have grappled with the work of the legendary twentieth-century Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai. Part of this appears to stem from the fact that her wide-ranging and formidable legacy has too often been eclipsed by the discussion of certain works considered her most notable or “notorious”, such as her 1942 short story Lihaaf, which was subjected to obscenity charges and immense scrutiny. Recent literary scholarship, though, has engaged with her oeuvre at length—including her celebrated short-story collections, as well as her autobiography, novels and novellas, radio plays, dialogues for films, travelogues, and non-fiction. Uncivil Woman: Writings on Ismat Chughtai (2017), edited by the literary historian Rakshanda Jalil, for instance, compiles a host of perspectives on Chughtai’s work by authors including Tahira Naqvi and Geeta Patel, as well literary stalwarts such as Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Qurratulain Hyder. There have also been several attempts to locate her in the context of her time, examining her work alongside that of her mentors, such as Rasheed Jahan, and contemporaries like Saadat Hasan Manto, as well as looking closely at Chughtai’s association with the Progressive Writers’ Movement of the 1940s.
Besides the expansive literature on Chughtai, there has also been a burgeoning revival of her work within Indian theatre. The efforts of the veteran actor and director Naseeruddin Shah are prominent among attempts to bring Chughtai’s works to the stage, which he has done in various plays with the Mumbai-based theatre troupe Motley: *Manto Ismat Hazir Hain*, *Ismat Apa Ke Naam*, and *Kambakht Bilkul Aurat*. The scholar Sadaf Jaffer, in her doctoral thesis on Ismat Chughtai, speaks of some of the idiosyncratic elements of these productions. Of *Ismat Apa Ke Naam*, in particular, she says: “the stories themselves are told and enacted by a single narrator, who recites the text of the short story verbatim. In choosing to perform Chughtai’s stories as dramatic recitations, rather than staged enactments, Shah draws on the tradition of dāstān-go’ī (traditional storytelling), relying on gestures, intonation, and facial expression rather than on props, staging, and visual elements.”

Many of these elements were visible in *Aurat! Aurat! Aurat!* —a play performed by Motley Theatre Group and directed by Shah, which has been running since 2018 and was presented at the Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa in December 2019. Yet, *Aurat!* contained some departures from the previous productions. It is the first of these plays to feature an all-female ensemble, with the actors Seema Pahwa, Bhavna Pani, Trishla Patel, Shruti Vyas, Prerna Chawla, and Jaya Virrley playing Chughtai at different stages of her life. Since it adapts excerpts from her autobiography as well as three other pieces of writing—*Ek Shauhar ki Khaatir*, *Aadhi Aurat Aadha Khwaab*, and *Soney ka Anda*—it also appears more concerned with Chughtai’s thought and perspectives on the world, rather than narrative or action. Consequently, the sets were minimalistic, which Shah told me over an e-mail interview, was intentional and central to his process: “I never design sets beforehand (which in some cases is a limitation). I let the set appear in my mind gradually. I believe a set must not be an architectural marvel, it should serve the text and the audience must not notice it till it is made to come alive by the actors appearing on it.”

The play begins on a dark stage. Four women, who play the younger avatars of Chughtai, sit humming on the far left, to the
A still from Motley’s Aurat! Aurat! Aurat! at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.
accompaniment of a harmonium. They are lit in a dim blue. They launch into a rendition of “Aaj bazaar mei pa-ba-jolan chalo”—let us walk with our shackled feet to the market, written by Faiz in 1959 while he was imprisoned in Lahore. A spotlight falls on the older actor playing Chughtai, standing on the right hand of the stage, as she says, “Door kahin koi Faiz ka nazm ga raha hai”—in the distance someone [Chughtai’s text refers specifically to the singer Nayyara Noor] is singing a Faiz nazm. The older Chughtai begins a monologue—a selection from Kaghzi Hai Pairahan. She wonders aloud where the mythic “great Indian women”—Sita, Mirabai, Sati-Savitri, Razia Sultana—are today; are they suffocating under the quilt, or are they playing Holi with their own blood? By scoring a symbolic point with this beginning, the play may have missed a beat, in that these words are the sardonic concluding lines to the tail end of a section in Chughtai’s autobiography in which she describes in furious, exhaustive detail the lead-up to and the circumstances of her trial for Lihaaf and how it brought her an exasperating amount of attention. But the play moves swiftly into an introduction to Chughtai’s stature, “the boldness of her writing” and the themes she covered. This is followed by a description of the infamous first meeting between Chughtai and Manto, in which he apparently railed against what he saw as an evasive and cowardly ending for Lihaaf, and exclaimed, “kambakht, bilkul aurat nikli” (a declaration he also seemingly retracted later).

The play is organised into sections. The first speaks to Chughtai’s childhood memories. Pahwa sits on a bed on the right end of the stage and narrates disparate images from her childhood, how she remembers, for instance seeing the flashes of people standing near her while whirling around and dancing at her uncle’s wedding. “Even today”, the actor says, “it seems like they’re all still moving, while I stand still”. Another actor plays an animated version of a young Chughtai, in which she comes across as the rebellious tenth, and by far the youngest, child (whose mother, she suspects, was very tired of motherhood by then). She was irrepressible, enjoyed school and, unlike her sisters, was interested in horse-riding, shooting, football,
and *gilli danda*. Later, a third actor playing Chughtai in the ninth grade recalls that she was keen on education and strongly resistant to the idea of marriage. A fourth actor recounts her college life and exploits, her friendship with the director Shahid Lateef and how she continued to warn him not to marry her. This segment of the play intersperses Pahwa’s anecdotes with younger actors’ reenactments, and during the former, the stage is quiet, with barely any light barring a sparse spotlight. In an interview with *The Hindu* last year, Pahwa reflected on this, recalling that her instructions were to “be absolutely still, not to move my hands or neck...” and added that “from the stillness in that play I realised, there is no great need of gesturing or posturing... when what you are saying is so strong, it will reach the audience, never mind how far they may be seated.”

A sharp contrast to the stillness of the beginning is what follows: a vivid account of a train journey, from *Ek Shauhar ki Khatir*. The set becomes a single train compartment, where a young woman is travelling alone. Finding the women’s compartment as silent as a graveyard, and bored of newspapers, she prays for some company. Soon the place is teeming with women and children, and, in what unfurls as a farce, everyone asks her the same questions, which she begins to find nagging and intrusive—”where are you going”, “where are you coming from”, and “are you married?” She answers the passengers erratically and contradicts herself often, telling them that she isn’t married, then saying she is and has had eight children in four years, and puzzling everyone in the process. The protagonist was compelling in this scene, her exasperation getting many laughs from the audience. But this part of the play relied largely on the comedy stemming from repetition (passengers often ask her the same questions several times before she snaps back), playful dialogue, a chorus of voices, and quick retorts, and here the moments of over-exaggeration by actors playing the passengers became a visible shortcoming.

The last scenes move back to a domestic setting, with a dimly lit stage and a spotlight on the bed. They contain Chughtai’s reflections on the condition of women (or rather, the false notions of the condition
A still from Motley's *Aurat! Aurat! Aurat!* at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.
of women according to men) and a monologue by Pahwa, which addresses the societal preoccupation with women giving birth to boys. It is clear that this structure of these segments is not so much intended to be a chronological ordering, but more to induce an immersion into Chughtai’s worldview and the period in which she lived.

“The staging of the train episode, and the next one, Aadhi Aurat Aadha Khwab, are closer to conventional theatre than our other presentations of her stories”, Shah said, when speaking about the form that Aurat! eventually took. Ismat Apa ke Naam started out as an experiment, he recalled, in which, through readings of her stories, “…we finally arrived at a form where we the demolished the ‘fourth wall’, used an informal approach with the audience, and made no pretence of ‘this is actually happening.’ In fact, we went to some lengths to emphasise that this is not actually happening—it is just a play.” He clarified that he had decided on a few aspects from the beginning, many of which also find their way into Aurat!:

“The storytelling should not take the form of a play, the descriptive passages which are often the soul of a story, would remain as they are, the ‘he said’ and ‘she said’ format would all be retained as in the text and the actors would become various characters but remain the storyteller. In other words the actor would always be at a remove from the character and the story. This approach not only clarified [the German playwright Bertolt] Brecht’s approach in my head but also has given me a whole new perspective on how I stage my plays now.”

It would in any case have been counterintuitive to attempt to impose chronological or linear clarity onto Chughtai’s autobiography, since it lacks these too, as the scholar and translator M Asaduddin indicates: “Kaghazi Hai Pairahan... is not a straightforward autobiography inasmuch as it does not record the author’s life story—from her birth to the point of writing the book—in a chronological order. It is fragmented, jagged, written in fits and starts when spurts of memory propelled her to record her reminiscences, without consideration for chronology, repetition or narrative coherence.”4 He adds that part of this style is because the text was published in fragments in
the Urdu journal *Aaj Kal* between 1979 and 1980, and Chughtai never had the chance to take another look at these (they were eventually published together three years after she died). It amasses Chughtai’s thoughts on various concerns, including debates over questions of obscenity, the position of Muslim women and the role of literature in society. Given all its “fits and starts”—the rapid pace of the writing, the digressions and fluctuations in thought—its presentation in theatrical form in *Aurat!* feels seamless.

*Aadhi Aurat Aadha Khwab* comes at a juncture in the performance when viewers have been given some bearings, including the insights into Chughtai’s childhood and adolescence. It is a heavily sarcastic and unapologetic piece of writing. Among other things, she wonders why male thinkers have pontificated so much about women (“In every country and era, great thinkers have always established some opinion about woman. Someone is emphasising her beauty; another insists on her purity and decency”); why men’s egos are threatened by the success of women (“Why sir, if a woman achieves fame, she is not wresting it away from your own share in it. It is Allah’s gift. Why do you feel pained by it? What cheapness!”); and why widows are treated differently (“When Dr. Naidu was referred to as ‘Mrs. Sarojini Naidu’s husband’, he used to act all embarrassed”).

In *Aurat!* the essay does not take the form of a monologue but a conversation between a woman and people who work for her in the house. This creates moments of irony, when her lofty theorising about women’s work is interrupted by practical questions about pending household chores. It also introduces some levity and chattiness into the piece, and there are moments when the actors appear to anticipate a laugh from the audience, such as when the actors poke fun at certain deluded male opinions:

> Another person commands, “When a child is breast-fed for the first time, the mother goes red with happiness, and starts trembling”.
A still from Motley’s *Aurat! Aurat! Aurat!* at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.
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A still from Motley’s *Aurat! Aurat! Aurat!* at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.
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Women must have anticipated that the commanding person is a man, and whatever he has written is based on hearsay. He has undoubtedly never fed a child himself and does not know how painful it is when a child is breast-fed for the first time. The mother who goes red and trembles definitely does not do so in love and mirth; her colour must have changed owing to anguish.6

When I asked Shah about the decision to introduce the variation between voices and avoid presenting the piece as a monologue, he said, “The essay Aadhi Aurat Aadha Khwab is the most ‘dated’ piece in the play and was teetering close to a lecture when memories of my ancestral home rescued it and I introduced the sweeper woman, the old maid, and the dhobi’s wife; some things are said to them and they say some of the lines. I think doing it that way saved it from becoming tedious and also somewhat reflected the social mores of the time”. The success of the production, as well as Motley’s previous ones centring Chughtai’s work, speaks to the enduring relevance of Chughtai’s writing.
NOTES


Maya Palit is a Delhi-based editor and occasional writer. She is currently Books Editor at The Caravan magazine, where her work involves editing longform essays on politics, history and culture. She has worked in publishing and digital newsrooms and her interests include fiction and music.
Projects / Processes 2019

*Kaghzi Hai Pairahan*: Theatrical takes on Ismat Chughtai’s Non-Fiction by Maya Palit

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/Maya Palit