

DE GRUYTER

*Rosine-Alice Vuille*

# KRISHNA SOBTI'S VIEWS ON LITERATURE AND THE POETICS OF WRITING

THEORETICAL POSITIONS AND  
LITERARY PRACTICE  
IN MODERN HINDI LITERATURE



WELTEN SÜD- UND ZENTRALASIENS  
WORLDS OF SOUTH AND INNER ASIA  
MONDES DE L'ASIE DU SUD ET DE L'ASIE CENTRALE

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# **Welten Süd- und Zentralasiens / Worlds of South and Inner Asia / Mondes de l'Asie du Sud et de l'Asie Centrale**



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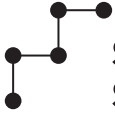
# **Krishna Sobti's Views on Literature and the Poetics of Writing**



Theoretical Positions and Literary Practice in Modern  
Hindi Literature

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## Note on transcription and transliteration

The names of authors, characters, mythological figures and places are given phonetically, with the exception of *ardhanārīśvara*, which I introduce as a concept and not as a mythological figure, thus using the Sanskrit transliteration. Hindi and Sanskrit terms, on the other hand, are always given in their transliteration, following the transliteration of Ronald S. McGregor's *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* for Hindi and the IAST for Sanskrit.

For the title of works, I use the standard transliteration, with the exception of the Sanskrit epics, which are now very commonly used in their Anglicised versions. The titles of existing English translations of Hindi novels are also given (in italic), alongside a literal translation, when the English title is not close to the original title.

The names of Hindi writers are given in their Anglicised versions in the main text as well as the bibliography. However, they are also given in their standard transliteration at first appearance, alongside the dates of the authors. This should serve the purpose of establishing a timeline of Hindi literature for the convenience of the reader.

The streams of Hindi literature are given in their transliterated form following the *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*.



# Table of abbreviations

## Sobti's non-fictional works

MSRS	<i>Maiṁ merā samay aur merā racnā saṁsār</i> (Me, My Time and My Literary World)
SeS	<i>Sobti ek sohbat</i> (Sobti: A Companion)
SAKeS	<i>Sūrajmukhī aṁdhere ke</i> (Sunflowers of the Dark: A Memory)
CNZNP	<i>Caṁd noṣ zindagīnāmā par</i> (Few Notes on Zindaginama)
TTKMNT	<i>Tab tak kuch mālūm nahīm thā</i> (Until then I didn't know)
SVS	<i>Sobti-vaid saṁvād: lekhan aur lekhak</i> (Sobti-Vaid, A Dialogue: The Writing and The Writer)
SAM	<i>Śabdoṁ ke ālok meṁ</i> (In the Glow of Words)
HaH	<i>Ham haśmat</i> (I, Hashmat)

## Sobti's novels

DSB	<i>Ḍār se bichuṛī</i> (Separated from the Flock)
YY	<i>Yārom ke yār</i> (Friends of Friends)
TP	<i>Tīn pahār</i> (Three Mountains)
SAK	<i>Sūrajmukhī aṁdhere ke</i> (Sunflowers of the Dark)
MM	<i>Mitro marjānī</i> (Mitro the Troublesome)
ZN	<i>Zindagīnāmā</i> (Zindaginama, A Chronicle of Life)
AL	<i>Ai laṛkī</i> (Hey, Girl!)
DoD	<i>Dil-o-dāniś</i> (Heart and Reason)
SaS	<i>Samay sargam</i> (The Melody of Time)
GPGH	<i>Gujarāt pākistān se gujarāt hindustān</i> (From Gujarat Pakistan to Gujarat India)



# 1 Introduction

Krishna Sobti's non-fictional works highlight her substantial activity as a thinker and reveal the philosophy and view of life and literature which lie behind her oeuvre. Through an analysis of these texts and their relationship to her fictional works, Krishna Sobti (Kṛṣṇā Sobtī, 1925–2019), one of the most prominent contemporary Hindi writers, emerges as an original thinker who meticulously verbalises her thoughts regarding the figure of the writer and the writing process. She constructs her views on life and literature – or what I call her poetics – through tensions and paradoxes, for example between the writer's inner world and her interactions with society or her place as a public voice. Those tensions produce a dynamic of dialogue and exchange which underlies Sobti's creative process and constitutes the core of her self-representation as a writer.

In contrast to the analysis of Sobti and her work, which has focused until now on the perspective of gender issues and a feminist agenda – there are indeed many studies on Sobti's depiction of female characters in her novels and short stories – I propose to examine how this exceptional Hindi writer represents herself and her writing process, given the expectations and restrictions regarding her work, as well as the label of a woman writer (*mahilā lekhak*) imposed on it – a label which she herself rejects. To this end, I analyse the forms her poetics adopt and the relationship Sobti's views on literature have with her quite diverse fictional work.

By poetics, I mean here the poetic theory and practice of a specific writer, as well as her own reflections about those practices.<sup>1</sup> In this understanding of the

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<sup>1</sup> Poetics designates firstly the theory or structure of literature, more specifically of poetry and, secondly, any treatise on the matter. The first association of these notions for a reader in the West would be with Aristotle's *Poetics* or Horace's *Ars poetica*. These two works attempt to set rules for literary genres, be it for drama (Aristotle) or poetry (Horace, with the very subtlety that his work itself is written in verse and thus already constitutes an illustration of the rules it sets out). The tradition of writing such guides for correct writing continued into the European Renaissance and Classical era with treatises on poetry, drama and other genres, and later, in the form of literary manifestos. One could give as examples manifestos of diverse new literary currents such as the French Pléiade in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (*Défense et Illustration de la langue Française*, 1549) or, more recently, the manifesto of the Russian Futurist movement (*Poshchchina obshchestvennomu vkusu*, 1912, A Slap in the Face of Public Taste). In the context of Hindi literature, the magazines published by the diverse groups or movements of writers have also taken up this role of asserting the purpose of literature and of defining certain



term, poetics designates concepts and thoughts behind the work of a writer as stated, implicitly or explicitly, by the author herself. This also takes into account the conventions followed, consciously or not, by writers.<sup>2</sup> In the case of a modern author like Sobti, her poetics includes her conceptualisation of writing and literature, her views on the role and place of literature in society and her use of language – or, indeed, various kinds of language.

In examining Sobti's work, it is particularly productive to take note of a very deliberate construction of the figure of the writer. Sobti purposefully 'stages' herself, while speaking in a rather abstract manner of 'the writer' (*le-khak*) in general.<sup>3</sup> She uses a highly metaphorical style in her essays, partly shrouding the writing process in mystery through her representation of the writer as a hybrid figure, simultaneously active, as a creator of a literary work, and passive, as a transmitter of the heard and processed voices from the outside. The essays, combined with Sobti's other modes of representing her writerly persona, help conjure up an image of literature as an interaction and a dialogical process, where the fictional text is a free thinking space beyond conventions, moral judgements and notions of good and evil.

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conventions of writing. One can name the writer Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi (Mahāvīr Prasād Dvivedī, 1864–1938), one of the 'fathers' of modern Hindi literature, who edited the monthly magazine *Sarasvatī* and had a considerable influence on the accepted genres of prose published in Hindi, more specifically on the development of very realistic short stories and novellas. Premchand's speech on the intent of literature ("Sāhitya kā uddeś", The Aim of Literature) given at the opening of the first Progressive Writers' Conference in 1936 is another good illustration of this phenomenon. Premchand (Premcand, 1880–1936), the 'emperor of the novel' (*upanyās kā samrāt*) is perhaps the most influential Hindi writer connected to this movement. His vision of a literature at the service of society sets a model even now for many Indian writers. Furthermore, various movements of Hindi literature published their manifestos, for example the *Nai Kahānī* (New Short Story), see Kamleshwar (1966), *Nai kahānī kī bhūmikā* (Introduction to the New Short Story).

**2** Conventions for different genres still exist and are followed by most authors – for example, crime fiction or suspense novels, with their generic characters and conventional acceleration of action towards the end through successive, unexpected revelations.

**3** While speaking about the writer, Sobti uses the masculine form of the noun in Hindi, *le-khak*, which also corresponds to a gender-neutral form, rather than the feminine form *lekhikā*. For Sobti, a writer is not defined mainly by gender and she herself considers her core identity to be that of a writer. Her attitude towards the notion of 'women's writing' is however ambiguous, see chapters three and five.

In the context of Hindi literature, studies on the poetics of writers remain rather scarce, with the notable exception of Annie Montaut's work on Krishna Baldev Vaid (Kṛṣṇa Baldev Vaid, 1927–2020) and Nirmal Verma (Nirmal Varmā, 1929–2005).<sup>4</sup> The present book aims to contribute to this understudied field and demonstrate how one major Hindi writer reflects on herself and participates in the existing intellectual debates within the field of Hindi literature.

Examining Sobti's works from an angle other than a feminist perspective, which has until now been the focus of the scholars, will highlight other aspects of her work, particularly her use of metaphorical language to both expose and conceal meanings; her attitude towards literary characters and writers' creative freedom; and her position within the language debate around Hindi in general and the use of dialects in written literature in particular. Another key point of Sobti's poetics revolves around her creation of a 'double', Hashmat, and her notion of the coexistence, within one single individual, of a multiplicity of perspectives and identities that can be expressed in literature – and which allows the writer to uncover the truth about the nature of life and the human being beyond her own personal limits. Through a discussion of the double (a male writer persona), Sobti's position on 'women's writing' (*mahilā lekhan*) acquires yet another frame of reference, showing Sobti's very subtle reflections on gender issues in literature. Furthermore, Sobti is very vocal about the relationship between literature and time, and the role of literature as a means to 'hold onto time', but also to think about human transience and the constant changes that life brings.

However, before delving into the topics which lie at the core of Sobti's views on literature and writing, I shall briefly examine the context of the discussion of poetics in India and especially in Hindi literature, while placing the same within a larger framework of Western debates which seem to influence contemporary Hindi writers.

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<sup>4</sup> See Montaut 2004; Montaut 2012.

## 1.1 Poetics in Hindi Literature

In India, poetics is associated with ancient texts on drama and poetry, the two most famous being the *Nāṭyaśāstra*,<sup>5</sup> and Dandin's *Kāvyaḍarśa*.<sup>6</sup> However, for contemporary Hindi writers, Aristotle's poetics and other Western theories of literature seem to be very influential as well.<sup>7</sup> How to place oneself – namely, within classical Indian traditions or modern, Western-influenced orientations – appears to be one of the great questions confronting all Hindi writers. In this particular context, the discussion of poetics is mainly centred on the role of literature in society and on the debate as to how an author might be best defined: is the author an authority, an inspired poet, or is he merely a transmitter or a recounter of a tradition? Many writers express their views on the subject, mostly in articles published in literary magazines.<sup>8</sup> In these discussions, the

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5 The *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Treatise on Theatre), a treatise on the performing arts attributed to Bharata thought to have been first compiled between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, is not the only existing theory on poetics and aesthetics in ancient India. However, because of its wide reception and its many commentaries, it is often considered as the classical Indian conception of aesthetics or the theory of *rasa* (lit. essence, taste). It was commented upon, amongst others, by the philosopher Abhinavagupta, an 11<sup>th</sup>-century Kashmiri philosopher associated with Kashmir Shaivism, who is mostly known for propagating the theory of *rasa* and the spiritual power of the aesthetic experience, a notion that has sometimes been paralleled to the notion of catharsis in Western classical drama. Later, these theories and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* were received in the West under the influence of the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), a Sri Lankan Tamil thinker and philosopher who was particularly influential in making Indian art known in the West in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The *rasas* are the diverse emotions (eight of them are listed, complemented by the *bhāvas*, states of being or feelings) that a human being can experience and that will bring up a higher level of consciousness; later, in the theories of Abhinavagupta, a ninth *rasa* was added, which was to produce a state of bliss through a merging of subject and object. This higher state of mind must bring the spectator closer to the ultimate goal of *mokṣa*, the liberation of the self. On the subject of the comparison of *rasa* with the notion of catharsis, see for example Mohit Ray 2008. On Coomaraswamy and his influence, see for example Lipsey 1977, especially chapters VI–XI, and Guha-Thakurta 1992, particularly chapter 5.

6 The *Kāvyaḍarśa* is a treatise on poetry focussing especially on the use of rhetorical devices, written by the late 7<sup>th</sup>-century grammarian and poet Dandin.

7 See for example Lutze's introduction to his study of Hindi writing in postcolonial India, where he discusses the influence of Western views on authorship and aesthetics in contemporary Hindi literature, Lutze 1985.

8 Consolaro presents briefly and clearly the question of authorship in Hindi literature before the Indian independence in chapter 9 of the first part of her study on contemporary Hindi prose, linking it with the nationalist debate. See Consolaro 2011: 93–95. It appears that although the authors believe that they have a role towards society, not anyone can be a writer,

concept of literature as having a duty towards society remains particularly persistent. On that account it seems pertinent to examine in more detail Premchand's (1880–1936) seminal speech on the 'aim of literature' ("Sāhitya kā uddeśya"). Delivered in 1936 at the opening of the Progressive Writers' Conference over which he presided, it finds resonance amongst Hindi writers even today and is representative of the evolution taken by modern Hindi literature (and its discourse on poetics) since its beginnings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup>

The discourse on poetics in contemporary Hindi literature is strongly linked to the literary magazines and newspapers, and the manifestos of diverse literary movements which appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is indeed with the emergence of modern Hindi literature that a discussion on how to write in Hindi begins. Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hindi as a language was not really defined, and its immediate linguistic precursor, *khaṛī bolī* (lit. 'rough speech'), was not deemed fit for literature.<sup>10</sup> As a literary language, what is considered today standard Hindi was born in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and used mainly because of its potentially wide audience, since this form of the language was largely understood throughout North India. On that account, the primary objective of the first writers using standard Hindi in their writings was to defend Hindi as a language of literature and promote it as a prospective national language. This would imply that the main

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but a certain predisposition, a form of 'genius' even, at least according to most authors, must be present as well.

**9** The Progressive Writers' Movement was an association of groups of writers defending an anti-imperialistic and progressive agenda. It was mainly active in pre-independence British India but some groups survived in the first decades after the partition of the Subcontinent. The movement focused on social concerns.

**10** It would be beyond the present purpose to introduce the debate on the beginnings of modern Hindi literature and its separation from other traditions, more specifically from the Urdu tradition. For a good introduction to modern Hindi literature, see Consolaro 2011. The language known as modern Hindi is itself not clearly codified and has been the object of a long debate between the supporters of a 'pure' (*śuddh*) Hindi, free of Perso-Arabic influence and highly Sanskritised, and those of a 'democratic' Hindi encompassing the whole range of dialects (see King 1994 as well as Rai 2001). Before the arrival of the British in India and the creation of the Fort William College for the purpose of educating the British officials in local languages, no literature was written in the 'standard' *khaṛī bolī* Hindi, a language that had a status more as *lingua franca*, a language of communication, rather than a language of literature. Literature was written in the Urdu script and in Avadhi or Braj (specifically the mystical *bhakti* poetry). Literature in modern 'standard' Hindi developed only from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

concern of early Hindi literature did not lie solely with the literary or aesthetic character of the language but also with its potential for communication and mobilisation, since it was more widely understood than the classical literary languages still in use (Sanskrit, Persian) or English.<sup>11</sup>

Communicating specific content as well as assembling and mobilising the public were the main objectives of this new literature. Hence, the early writings of Hindi authors on matters of literary discourse advocated an engagement with society, a commitment to its betterment and fight against colonial hegemony. Hindi was perceived as a practical tool of communication and the primary focus was not the literary use of language but its communicatory potential. In this context, the first theoretical writings of Hindi authors on Hindi literature, for example those of Harishchandra,<sup>12</sup> Dwivedi or Premchand, defended the use of Hindi against the use of any other language, precisely because of its potentially wide audience, thus directly implying the duty of education which a writer has towards the public as a member of an elite and as a public intellectual.<sup>13</sup> In the context of colonial India, literature was also used to mobilise the public in the independence movement. These purposes given to literature constituted a new poetics of the language.

Premchand's speech on the aims of literature is the strongest illustration of this new view on literature and writing. The author was certainly the most prominent among the advocates of a literature that would promote social concerns. His thoughts exercised – and still exercise, – considerable influence on the development of Hindi literature. “Sāhitya kā uddeśya” (“The Aim of Literature”) shows this particularly well.<sup>14</sup>

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**11** Its status as a language of communication, a language which was widely understood, was the reason why Hindi was put forward as a potential national language for India after the independence, being seen also as the language of the people, in opposition to English, which was and still is perceived as the language of the privileged. However, Hindi was never to achieve the status of national language. On the Hindi-English debate, see Rai 2001.

**12** Bharatendu Harishchandra of Benares (Bhāratendū Hariścandra, 1859–1885) is one of the fathers of modern Hindi literature, active not only as a writer, poet and playwright, but also as a magazine editor and book editor.

**13** See Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi's essays concerned with poetics, for example those first published in his magazine *Sarasvatī* and later collected in *Ālocanāñjali* (1928, A Handful of Criticism), or his reflections on Hindi and its young literature (see Dwivedi's collected works, *Racnāvalī*, 1995). One could also mention Premchand's essays first published in his literary magazine *Hāms*. The magazines were and still are an important medium for the discussion of ideas on poetics in the Hindi context.

**14** Premchand 1982: 5–25. I am quoting Francesca Orsini's translation published as an appendix to the edition of a selection of texts of Premchand in Premchand 2004.

*Sāhitya kā uddeśya* sets itself the task of calling on the younger generation to distance themselves from the older generations of writers, mostly poets, and their literary production, predominantly in poetic measure. Directed not only at Hindi literature but at all Indian literatures (although most of its internal references are to the condition of Hindi literature at the time), Premchand's oratory *pièce de résistance* suggests abandoning the traditional representations of beauty, and the fare of adventures and magic which were at the core of court poetry and entertainment literature for a long time. Instead, literature ought to turn to the social reality of the country: "The age that we have just crossed had no concern for life. Our literary people would use their imagination to conjure magical worlds, whether it was *Fasana-e-'Ajaib*, *Bostan-e Khyal* or *Chandrakanta Santati*.<sup>15</sup> The aim of those tales was simply to entertain and satisfy our taste for the wondrous. That literature should have anything to do with life was beyond imagination. A story is a story, life is life – the two were considered opposites."<sup>16</sup> While this type of literature might have fulfilled its role at the time, there was now another need and another function for literature and writers. Indeed, according to Premchand, literature 'expresses some truth'; it possesses the 'ability to leave an impression on the heart and the mind' by manifesting the truths and experiences of life.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, a writer must know human nature and take interest in the society which surrounds her:<sup>18</sup> "Nowadays, literature is not just meant for relaxation, it has a further aim apart from entertainment. It no longer only tells stories of happy and unhappy lovers, but it ponders on the problems of life and solves them too."<sup>19</sup>

The argumentation of the speech is constructed around an opposition to traditional storytelling, the assertion of the need for change (namely a change of social mentality), and the juxtaposition of ethics and aesthetics (or literature). Having first posited, as the few quotes given above illustrate, that language is not the aim of literature but its means (*bhāṣā sādhan hai, sādhyā nahīm*), Premchand goes on to state that tastes in matters of literature are

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15 *Fasana-e 'Ajaib* (1824), by Mirza Rajab 'Ali Beg Surur (1787–1867), *Bostan-e khyal* (1882–91) and *Chandrakanta Santati*, the multi-volume sequel by Devkinandan Khatri and his son Durgaprasa Khatri of *Chandrakanta* (1892), were all popular examples of narratives of wonder and adventure. See note of the translator, Francesca Orsini, in Premchand 2004: Appendix: ii.

16 Premchand 2004: Appendix: ii.

17 Premchand 2004: Appendix: ii.

18 Premchand uses the masculine form (*lekhak*) to speak of the writer; Hindi distinguishes between *lekhak* (writer, masculine) and *lekhikā* (woman writer, feminine) but not between the personal pronouns. However, Premchand's ideas apply equally to women and men writers. I therefore chose to use the feminine pronoun throughout. While discussing other authors (Prasad, Agyea, Verma), I shall also use the feminine pronoun to refer to 'the writer'.

19 Premchand 2004: iv.

changing and that literature is now concerned with issues affecting society: “The aims of ethics and of literature are the same – the difference is only in their manner of teaching”.<sup>20</sup> Ethics (the rules of moral code) use arguments and preaching, while literature relies on stirring up emotions and inducing experience in the reader. Literature is preoccupied with beauty; however, a writer’s perception of beauty must not be limited to the description of lovers, but include depictions of ordinary life. In her fight against the ugly (to be understood here as the morally ugly as well), a writer pleads for more justice, for humanness, and attempts to give rise to such feelings in the reader.<sup>21</sup> Because of this, the writer must not fall into the trap of exaggeration but remain close to the reality she observes, so as to remain credible: “A writer writes stories, but keeping in mind reality. A writer shapes images, but so that they may be alive and expressive. A writer surveys human nature with sharp eyes, studies psychology and tries to have characters who behave in every situation as if they were made of flesh and blood.”<sup>22</sup> The writer’s role, according to Premchand, is to depict a credible reality, based on observation, experience and knowledge. These three aspects of a writer’s creativity must be wide, so that the vision she transmits to the reader through her text might broaden the latter’s perception of the world. In doing so, the writer awakens in the recipient of literature an experience of beauty. Premchand defines beauty as an inner harmony: a bridge is thus built between the aesthetical experience and the spiritual or moral experience. Literature aims to refine the readers’ perceptions and strengthen “within us feelings of loyalty, truthfulness, sympathy, love for justice and equality”.<sup>23</sup>

These notions are encompassed in the concept of ‘progressive writing’ (*pr agatīśil lekhan*). Coming through this definition to the name of the movement, Premchand declares that it represents for him a truism: it lies in the essence of a writer to be progressive because she is necessarily unsatisfied both with herself and the society and wants, through her perception of the world, to point out what could and ought to be changed. Premchand defines

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20 Premchand 2004: iv.

21 It is worth noting that although it is only later that Premchand explicitly makes a reference to Aristotle, the poetics of Aristotle are present as an intertext at this point of the speech already. Indeed, in the parallel established between ethics and literature, one finds an echo of Aristotle’s notion of literature as depicting truth and a general or universal experience, thus stirring up an emotion in the reader/spectator, which will bring her to a better understanding and to a higher morality. Compare Aristotle’s *Poetics* 1987: 40–42.

22 Premchand 2004: Appendix: vii.

23 Premchand 2004: Appendix: viii.

progress as a force which gives the “resolve and energy to act”:<sup>24</sup> “Nowadays we need an art which carries a message of action.”<sup>25</sup>

In order to achieve this, the notion of beauty, which lies at the core of literature, must be modified to encompass also depictions of the poor, the hard-working, the broken and the ordinary: the notion of beauty must not remain superficial, but ought to coincide with ‘moral beauty’ as well. In Premchand’s words: “Beauty [must become] for us so wide as to encompass the whole creation within its bounds.”<sup>26</sup>

The image of the writer that emerges from Premchand’s views on the aim of literature is one of a public servant (*sevā*, service, an important term at the time of the struggle for independence, is a keyword in this text as well), who nevertheless possesses, in addition to knowledge and the ease of writing, a certain gift (“There is no doubt that one is born, not made, a writer”<sup>27</sup>). However, constant curiosity and refinement of the mind as well as moral compass are necessary for a writer to fulfil her task in society. The writer, as an individual, is part of society and must not cut herself off from it. According to Premchand, a writer is always an engaged intellectual whose language must be close to that of the ordinary people (*jansadharan*): “Once our ideal becomes wider, language will naturally become simpler. Inner beauty can afford to be indifferent to artificial adornments. The writer who looks up to wealthy patrons adopts a sumptuous creative style, a writer who belongs to ordinary people will write in the language of ordinary people.”<sup>28</sup> Literature is thus at the service of society, highlighting its problems and the possibilities of improvement, but also bridging the gap between the elite and the masses. The speech ends with a list of tasks Premchand envisions for the association (organising the writers, conducting debates, fostering critical exchanges) and a call for action in society so as to create a literature which would represent the ‘truths of life’.<sup>29</sup>

Premchand’s picture of the writer as socially engaged – and advocating the rights of those excluded from society – combined with the image of the writer as a cultured, well-informed intellectual possessing the talent to write, had a great

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24 Premchand 2004: Appendix: ix.

25 Premchand 2004: Appendix: ix.

26 Premchand 2004: Appendix: x.

27 Premchand 2004: Appendix: x. It seems evident to Premchand that education and knowledge come as an addition to a natural predisposition and talent; one cannot be made into a writer without them.

28 Premchand 2004: Appendix: xiii.

29 The notion of the writer and literature as revealing truth about life and human nature is deeply rooted in Indian traditions. It is present in the image of the first poets-seers, the ṛṣis, and many contemporary writers see this as their task, including Sobti.



influence on the further developments of literature in India, particularly in Hindi. Such an understanding of the role of literature is brought up time and again by the writers themselves as well as the critics. Although writers were sometimes opposed to this conception of literature, a study of the self-representation and self-understanding of writers in India must view such an approach as an implicit reference to the said notion.<sup>30</sup>

Two more aspects of Premchand's speech need to be highlighted here: firstly, the fact that Premchand makes only one direct reference to a work on poetics and the role of literature, and that this reference is to Aristotle, i.e., to the Western theories of literature. Secondly, that the poetics of Premchand are centred not on language as a goal – that is, language as representing the world and giving a new understanding of it through a new usage of words – but on the communication of a message. Here, the writer is a messenger conveying, by the means of language, something she knows to be true. The reflection on the 'literary character' of a text, as it is defined, for example, by Jakobson or by Todorov, is relegated to the background.<sup>31</sup>

Premchand's vision of literature, although very influential, did not silence divergent views or nonconformist debates on literature and the question of the literary character of texts. Alongside literature 'at the service of society', light entertaining literature continued to flourish. Literary movements, some focused on poetry, others on prose writings, carried on and developed their respective theoretical frames. In fact, Hindi literary movements which emerged in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had their numerous theoreticians who voiced their positions mostly in articles published in magazines. Preoccupation with notions of aesthetics and the reproach that the newly developing Hindi literature would be only a 'pale shadow' of a Western – or Bengali – model are apparent in the non-fictional writings of the Hindi authors of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>32</sup> Unlike

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**30** To realise the extent of the influence of Premchand's vision of the role of literature, one can cite Alessandra Marino's recent article on activist writers, where she examines, through the examples of the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi (Mahāśvetā Devī, 1926–2016) and the English Indian writer Arundhati Roy (b. 1961), the evolution of the progressive writers of Premchand's time towards the writer as an environmental and social activist, who builds a bridge between socio-economical oppression and man's relationship to nature, see Marino 2017.

**31** See Jakobson 1973 and Todorov 1973.

**32** Modern Bengali literature developed earlier than Hindi literature and was also, due to the early presence of English outposts in Bengal, exposed earlier to Western, specifically English, literary writings. It was both a model and a rival for Hindi. In the debate on the influence of the West, it is important to bear in mind that the Hindi authors knew the ancient Indian concepts of poetics and aesthetics quite well. It is on them that Dwivedi draws in *Ālocanāñjali*, for example, see Dwivedi 1928.

Premchand, who referred directly to a Western model, most authors of the time looked to concepts presented in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the theory of *rasa*, in order to embed themselves within an Indian literary tradition. As an example of such writings, it is instructive to closely read an essay by Jayshankar Prasad (Jayśaṅkar Prasād, 1889–1937), one of the leading poets of the *Chāyāvād* movement.<sup>33</sup> Prasad was a very prolific writer, author of poems, plays, novels and essays. Perhaps the best known of his essays, “Kavya aur kālā” (“Poetry and Art”),<sup>34</sup> first published in book form in 1939, discusses the position of the poet and her function in society, with many references to classical Indian concepts. This embedding of his work in the classical Indian tradition emerges partly from Prasad’s desire to respond to the critics of the *Chāyāvād* movement who saw in it a pale copy of Western romanticism.<sup>35</sup> Yet, the article also reflects Prasad’s consciousness of a continuity between his own work and the works that preceded it, allowing him to introduce his original views on poetics. As such it is a perfect illustration of the ongoing discussion about tradition and modernity in Hindi literature.

The essay is constructed as a comparison between Western and Indian concepts and classifications of poetry. There are obvious simplifications in the presentation of the notions of poetics and aesthetics, but it is important to remember that Prasad sees himself invested with the task of defending the *Chāyāvād* movement against its detractors and framing it as an indigenous movement set in the long-lived Indian tradition. In his discussion of aesthetics, Prasad highlights the differences between the West and India in the classification of poetry. In India, poetry is considered a part of knowledge and not an art; it is linked to the notion of a higher – one could say, spiritual – truth. As depicted in the *Upaniṣads*, the poet is a sage, a seer. In the Indian context, the experience of literature, specifically of poetry, is therefore a spiritual experience, whereas in the West it remains something material inasmuch as it is connected to the perception of the senses

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**33** The *Chāyāvād*, literally ‘Shadow-ism’, is a literary movement of the early 1920s stressing individual emotions and feelings. It is the first movement which tried to write lyrical poetry in standard Hindi, encountering at first much resistance from the literary establishment which criticised its lack of social engagement and accused the *Chāyāvād* poets of being obscure and borrowing an empty romanticism from the West or from Tagore’s mystical poetry. After the first years of struggle to be recognized and published (Prasad had to launch his own magazine in order to have his texts circulated in print), the movement acquired an audience and eventually became the mainstream. On *Chāyāvād*, see the introductions to the anthologies by Rubin, 1998 and 2005.

**34** Prasad 1988 (for the original Hindi text) and Prasad 2005 (for the English translation by Satya Pachori and Chandra Agarwal).

**35** On the subject see Rubin 1998; Rubin 2005; Schomer 1998.

(art and aesthetics are classified as experiences of the five senses, not involving the ‘abstract’ dimension of the soul).<sup>36</sup>

Prasad’s argumentation becomes more puzzling in his treatment of the question of poetic genius, which he describes as ‘an experience of the self’ (*atmā kī anubhūti*).<sup>37</sup> Poetic inspiration springs up from the perception of the self, something that is deeply connected to the personal experience of the poet. Thus, even if Prasad sees in poetry a means for attaining self-fulfilment and truth – implying the universalisation of the aesthetic experience – he stresses the specifically individual core of the poetic genius and poetic expression: a poet may be great only if conveying feelings and emotions that emerge from her own personal experience, as Prasad illustrates through the examples of two *bhakti* (mystical) poets, Surdas and Tulsidas.<sup>38</sup> Despite the mystical and universal core of poetry and poetic experience, the individuality (of which the personal life experience, *anubhūti*, is one form) of a poet is essential to her work because it confers on it its uniqueness, its ‘genius’. Prasad constructs here a specific image of the poet as a seer and transmitter of a higher reality, embedding himself in a vision of literature and art conceived as tools towards achieving a ‘higher’ (spiritual) goal. This point of view may be paralleled with Coomaraswamy’s interpretation of Indian art as a spiritual art, i.e. an art in which the aesthetic experience of beauty is the carrier of a truth of which the audience may partake even if the work of art in itself is not flawless.<sup>39</sup> The audience or the readership is expecting an individual experience of

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**36** According to Prasad, the West has a tendency, following the Ancient Greeks (in reference to Plato’s theory of forms), to categorise into ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’, putting the ‘abstract’ category higher than the concrete, tangible one. Now, the aesthetic experience, having a material object, belongs to the second and lower category. In India, such categories do not apply because there is no such rejection of the world in its material form (matter is viewed as a manifestation of the Supreme Being). See Prasad 2005: 229.

**37** See Prasad 1988: 25; Prasad 2005: 230.

**38** Prasad 2005: 234. Surdas and Tulsidas are 16<sup>th</sup>-century devotional poets, the former known for his poems about Krishna, for example the *Sūr sāgar* (Sur’s Ocean), the latter for his rewriting of the Ramayana, the *Rāmcaritmānas* (Lake of the Deeds of Rama).

**39** See Coomaraswamy 1918: 33–34, “The spectator’s appreciation of beauty depends on the effort of his own imagination [ . . . ] Thus, technical elaboration (realism) in art is not by itself the cause of *rasa*: as remarked by Rabindranath Tagore ‘in our country, those of the audience who are appreciative, are content to perfect the song in their own mind by the force of their own feeling.’ This is not very different from what is said by Shukracharya with reference to images: ‘the defects of images are constantly destroyed by the power of the virtue of the worshipper who has his heart always set on God.’ If this attitude seems to us dangerously uncritical, that is to say dangerous to art, or rather to accomplishment, let us remember that it prevailed everywhere in all periods of great creative activity: and that the decline of art has always followed the decline of love and faith.”

beauty or a higher truth. Adopting devotional attitude enables the spectator or the reader (in the case of literature) to complete or perfect the work of art through her own imagination and faith. Such vision of art implies that the artistic experience is spiritual as well. However, whereas Coomaraswamy focuses more on art than literature and sees artists as anonymous (or as vehicles of the higher truth, whose individuality is irrelevant), for Prasad, himself a writer and a poet, the individuality and the personality of the poet are an essential criteria in the creative process and successful shaping of a work of art. Therefore, in Prasad's depiction of the aesthetic experience, the personal dimension of the author plays a central role. The poet can only communicate and transmit her message through what she knows and has experienced, i.e., through her own self, through her own being. In this respect, Prasad positions himself in the discourse that places the individual writer as the active shaper of her work and literary world. The question of the role and place of the writer in the writing process is a central topic for Sobti as well, and I will analyse it in greater detail in chapter two.

An analysis of Premchand's speech and Prasad's essay demonstrates to what extent the Hindi writers are preoccupied by issues such as the role and place of literature in society, the essence of creativity, and the writing process. In their debates, it is also clear that most authors are acquainted with Western literary theory, though they develop their own views, sometimes attempting to draw parallels between their concepts and those of classical or early modern India. More importantly, Premchand and Prasad represent the intensive self-reflection of writers in the context of Hindi literature and the activity of writers as thinkers. Writers of later generations, Sobti's generation for instance, continue to think about the same matters and present their views on literature through various means, be it non-fictional or fictional writings, or lectures and interviews. In order to understand better the context in which to place Sobti's reflection on writing and literature, it is essential to pause and consider this important part of the writers' activity.

## 1.2 The Writer as Critic

The activity of writers as critics is not a new phenomenon, but so far it has not received extensive scholarly attention. One can mention here one volume of the *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, edited by Marie-Paule Berranger, on the writer as critic (the result of seminars and of the work of a study group meeting at the university of Caen between 2007 and 2010).<sup>40</sup> In this collection of articles, the

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<sup>40</sup> See Berranger 2012.

scholars examine the critical work of several French authors and discuss distinctions between their work as writers-poets and as critics. The articles highlight the evolution of the activity of criticism in literature and stress the different genres chosen by the writers to act as literary critics – manifestos, letters, open letters, newspaper articles, diaries, travelogues, prefaces to their works or the works of fellow writers. It is interesting to note that these genres are indeed also those chosen by Hindi writers, by Sobti herself, for example, but also by her contemporaries, like Agyeya (Ajñeya, 1911–1987), Krishna Baldev Vaid (1927–2020) or Nirmal Verma (1929–2005). In the introduction to the selected articles, Berranger insists on the importance, for the writers, of their activity as critics, with writers seeing it as a tool for expressing their own views on literature.<sup>41</sup> While stating the intent of the articles selected for the volume of the *Revue*, she also emphasises the constant interaction and even dialogue between the genre of criticism and the writers' fictional works:

From this point of view, the purpose has been given to enlighten the connection between the multiplication of channels and the genre diversification of critical writing: a new economics of writing results from this, leading the writer to express her critical reflections through diverse registers and 'wave lengths': open letter, testimony, foreword, short item, echo, memoirs, review, travelogue – the boundaries are porous and the genres flexible, all open to speculating. The avant-garde movements of the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century entrusted this task to the typographic poem, the aphorism, the novel. Becoming more diffuse, critical writing sneaks into the literary works: the borders are blurred which separate criticism from metapoetic discourse and self-reflection – not to mention the roman à clef which is, too, a means of staging one's fellow writers and to discuss their works.<sup>42</sup>

With many Hindi writers, Sobti in particular, such a blurring of distinctions between the genres can indeed be observed, as my analysis will show. In the Hindi context, however, the non-fictional works of writers and their relationship to literary criticism remains yet to be examined closely. One exception is Jasbir Jain, who devoted a book to a collection of critical works by Indian – mostly Hindi –

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<sup>41</sup> See Berranger 2012: 10–11.

<sup>42</sup> Berranger 2012: 11–12, "A partir de ce belvédère, on s'est proposé d'éclairer le lien entre la multiplication des supports et la diversification générique de l'écriture critique : une nouvelle économie de l'écrit en résulte, induisant l'écrivain à décliner sur divers registres et 'longueurs d'ondes' ses réflexions critiques : lettre ouverte, témoignage, préface, fait divers, écho, mémoires, feuilleton critique, récit de voyage – les frontières sont poreuses et les genres élastiques qui tous s'ouvrent à la spécularité. Les avant-gardes du début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle la confieront au poème typographique, à l'aphorisme, au roman. Plus diffuse, la critique s'introduit dans les œuvres : les frontières sont floues qui séparent de la critique le discours métapoétique, l'autoréflexion – sans parler du roman à clés qui est aussi un moyen de mettre en scène ses confrères et de discuter de leurs œuvres."

In the absence of an existing English translation, I translate this passage myself.

authors, titled *The Writer as Critic*.<sup>43</sup> The essays found in it are miscellaneous and cover not only a long period of time, from the beginnings of modern literature (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) up to the 1980s, but also a wide range of topics. For Jain, it is particularly interesting to look at the activity of writers as critics in order to place them in their historical and cultural milieus and grasp the extent of the debates on questions of literature, language but also on social and political issues which pre-occupied the writers. This illustrates the dialogue which establishes itself between the authors. Examining the non-fictional works of writers helps understand the relationships between them and see how they are influenced by thinkers from other periods and other geographical places – the dialogue between Indian and European traditions is quite important – and to define major themes emerging again and again in their essays and speeches. The last point is particularly striking: regardless of the linguistic origin of the writers approached by Jain (Bengali, Urdu, Hindi or English), the main topics include: the appropriate language to write in, the identity as ‘Indian’ authors, the creative process and the place and role of literature in society (with the question of the *littérature engagée* or politically committed literature as a central issue).

It appears clearly that from the very beginnings of modern Hindi literature, thinking about one’s own writing, creative processes, literature and its role is part of being a writer. Many writers reflect on those topics and express their thoughts implicitly or explicitly, in various forms (dialogues, interviews, prefaces, reviews of others’ work, speeches, etc.).

It is particularly interesting to observe that amongst Sobti’s contemporaries, two writers, Agyeya (who belongs to the generation before Sobti’s and who, as the editor of the literary magazine *Pratik*, supported her at the start of her career) and Nirmal Verma (who was one of her personal friends), published essays dealing precisely with two of the main topics of Sobti’s poetics: the figure of the writer and literature’s relationship to time and memory. I thus consider Agyeya and Verma to be important points of reference to understand debates raging within the Hindi literary sphere at the time Sobti wrote. Examining their views on those subjects offers a good contextualisation of their activity as critics and thinkers. However, before turning to Agyeya and Verma, let me briefly present three studies on Hindi poetics, one by Lothar Lutze and two by Annie Montaut, which provide a broader context to discussions of poetics by writers in India and more specifically those writing in Hindi.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Jain 2011.

<sup>44</sup> See Lothar Lutze 1985; Montaut 2004; Montaut 2012; Montaut 2016.

Lutze, in his study on Hindi writing in postcolonial India (1985), took a particular interest in the creative process of several contemporary Hindi authors – most of them poets. The writers he interviewed discuss some aspects related to their poetics in their statements, mainly their own writing process and the question of inspiration, but also the role of literature in society. Most of them avoid giving direct answers to the question of the effect and power of poetry on society, although it is clear that they consider it their duty to speak in their writings about social issues in one way or another – this holds true even for writers whose main concerns are human emotions. The opposition to the West is present in some of the discussions, for example in Shrikant Verma's (Śrikānta Varmā, 1931–1986) statement where he links the author's freedom as a creative individual to her achieving 'liberation' in the spiritual sense.<sup>45</sup> The questions posed by Lutze relating to writing processes and conceptions of art were met at times with incomprehension, at times with scepticism, and yet all the authors obviously mused on their own process of creation and did so even before being prompted to do so by Lutze.

While doing so, the interviewed authors construct the image of the writer (mostly a poet) as both aloof from her society and time, and deeply connected to it.<sup>46</sup> They see themselves basically as communicators. Reflections on the writing process itself are rarely fully developed or well rounded, but it is obvious that for several of the writers, there is a part of mystery in it – or something which they are not ready to articulate.<sup>47</sup> The writer showing the greatest readiness to speak about his work and the creative process is Agyeya, who is also well-known as a thinker and philosopher under his

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<sup>45</sup> See Lutze 1985: 62–66; Shrikant Verma refers to the question of the artist's independence, an ongoing topic in the West, and states that in India, independence has always had another meaning and is related to the idea that art is also a way to free the individual in the spiritual sense of the term: "According to the Indian point of view, independence is not merely an ethical and political question; it is an effort to reach beyond time while remaining within the limits of time. [. . .] In order to reach the state of 'mukti' (liberation, freedom), the individual has to search for himself. For Indian poets, poetry, too, has been a search. I see it in this way. The poet liberates himself through the poem. He releases himself from all those bonds by which he has been bound." (Lutze 1985: 64). Thus, Verma links, like other poets, for example Jayshankar Prasad, poetry and spirituality. It is also interesting to see how Verma links this to time as well to a quest to 'reach beyond time', an aspect that is important for Sobti as well. I will discuss this point in chapter five.

<sup>46</sup> It is interesting to observe here that the image, inherited from Sanskrit literature, of the poet as a seer, a medium transmitting a message, remains very popular.

<sup>47</sup> See for example the discussion of this aspect by the poet Vishnu Khare (Viṣṇu Khare, 1940–2018), Lutze 1985: 72–75.

birth name of Sacchidanand Hiranand Vatsyayan (Sacchidānand Hirānand Vātsyāyan). I will come back to him later in this section.

Lutze's findings revolve around what he defines as the 'Author Situation', i.e. the socio-political environment of the writers and the state of mind that arises from it and permeates the motivation and intention to write. In the context of post-independence, most writers acknowledge a desire to communicate a meaning to their readers, often with a message of social progress, and a wish to reach the 'common reader'. Most of them thus consider Hindi and literature as a means of communication. It seems obvious that they have interiorised Premchand's view of literature as playing a role in society by impacting mentalities.

Lutze's interviews intended to lay bare the poetics of several modern poets and writers and discover not only their creative process but also their views on their own role or influence in society and their views on literature. The analysis is particularly interesting in its exposition of two major preoccupations common to almost all writers: their relationship to their own society and time – while mostly avoiding the question of the relationship of art and political power – and the influence of literature on society and the readers. Most writers believe that the written word has the ability to convey a meaning and to convince – or even educate – the reader. In the meantime, there is a strong predominance of the belief that the process of creation has an inexplicable origin, that inspiration comes without any control of the writer and has a mysterious and perhaps even mystical character, a possibility to reveal something that could not be expressed or manifested in a form other than an aesthetical one. Those two aspects are precisely those one may find in Premchand's and Prasad's statements on poetics. Lutze's study proves to be very important in highlighting this view of literature, common to most writers of the first generation after the independence.

If Lutze's study consisted of a collection of interviews (written and spoken) with several authors, introduced and commented upon, Annie Montaut devoted herself mainly to two writers and their poetics. Those two writers are interesting points of comparison for Krishna Sobti as both of them are her personal friends. The first is Krishna Baldev Vaid, with whom Sobti conducted a dialogue on literature and writing – a dialogue published as *Sobti-vaid saṁvād: lekhan aur lekhak* (2007, Sobti-Vaid, A Dialogue: The Writing and The Writer, later SVS) and constituting an important source for the study of Sobti's and Vaid's poetics. The second is Nirmal Verma, a Hindi writer and well-known thinker and critic.

In her study on Vaid, Annie Montaut concentrates on the question of the void in two novels by Vaid, a writer who has often been accused of plagiarising Beckett and other Western existentialist and absurdist authors. The first novel,



*Dūsrā na koī* (1978, translated into English as *None Other*),<sup>48</sup> a rather abstract text, allows Montaut to analyse Vaid's metaphors and comparisons as well as his use of *bhakti* (mystical love expressed in devotional poetry) and classical aesthetics to rewrite philosophical renouncement. With the second novel, *Guzarā huā zamānā* (1981, lit. Times Gone By, translated into English by the author himself as *The Broken Mirror*),<sup>49</sup> a novel about the partition, the same style is reconstructed by Montaut as a way of representing communal violence and dismantling the notion of the absolute truth. Through her analysis of Vaid's style, Montaut uncovers a poetics of the void particular to this author and emphasises how humour and irony can serve to deconstruct notions such as absolute truth and fixed identity. This very convincing analysis of Vaid's poetics highlights topics which are specific to Vaid, but also one preoccupation he shares with Sobti: the question of literature's ability to explore truth – and to reveal the complexity and the plurality of reality.

Montaut's work on Verma starts with an attempt at solving the contradictions in the views held by critics on Verma's novels (considered as very Western) and Verma's essays (often seen as presenting a Hindu worldview). Through her analysis of some extracts of Verma's novel *Ek cithṛā sukh* (1979, lit. A tattered Happiness, published in English as *A Rag Called Happiness*),<sup>50</sup> Montaut shows Verma's aesthetic conception of the gaze and, through it, she is able to link the author's most important concepts of time, myth and the self both to Verma's novels and his philosophical background, voiced in the essays and often considered as 'oriental' (read 'exotic').

It is particularly interesting to witness the separation that has so long been made between Verma as a thinker – not only on literature but also on society and culture – and a novelist. There is a distinction in the style adopted by Verma for his fictional and non-fictional writings, and on this point Sobti is very different from him, as will become apparent in the following chapters. Montaut's interest in modern Hindi authors' poetics brings to the fore the originality of each of them and facilitates a better understanding of the philosophy underlying their work. In this respect, the present study sets itself on a similar course of analysing an author's work, with particular attention given to the writers' own statements regarding their poetics.

Apart from the works mentioned, there are almost no studies on the non-fictional writings or the poetics of Hindi authors. However, as the already

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48 Vaid 1996; Vaid 2017.

49 Vaid 1981; Vaid 1994.

50 Verma 1979; Verma 1993.

mentioned works highlight, many Hindi writers are active as thinkers and reflect on their own works, their writing processes and the role of literature and the writer in society and human life. It would, however, be beyond the scope of the present work to look at all the writers of Sobti's generation who were active as literary critics or essayists, since almost all of them were. I will therefore examine only the work of Agyeya and Verma, two writers and thinkers who discuss several themes which are central in Sobti's non-fictional works as well and can thus be seen as part of the same intellectual sphere, even if their approaches and views on those subjects are in many ways different from Sobti's.

For Agyeya (1911–1987),<sup>51</sup> reflecting on oneself is an integrated part of being a writer. Questions on authorship and the process of writing as well as the issue of time and its relationship to literature are very important to him. Agyeya was a particularly prolific thinker, being the author of many essays and having given speeches and lectures on countless occasions. His theoretical positions and his views on literature could be the subject of a stand-alone work; here, I will only look at some of his writings which prove very interesting in comparison with Sobti's positions.<sup>52</sup>

Sacchidanand Hiranand Vatsyayan 'Agyeya' (lit. the 'Unknowable') is one of the most prominent figures of Hindi literary scene. His life-story reveals a multifaceted persona: young revolutionary and freedom fighter, acclaimed writer and poet, traveller and journalist (in Europe and in Japan), philosopher and academic teacher. Under the name 'Agyeya' he published his poetry and his novels, while he used his official birth name for the theoretical works as well as lectures and speeches he was asked to give both in India and Europe.<sup>53</sup> He thus makes a clear distinction between the two activities of critic and creative writer.

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51 Sacchidanand Hiranand Vatsyayan 'Ajñeya' (in the Sanskrit transliteration; 'Agyeya', in its Hindi phonetical transliteration) was active as a writer, editor of literary magazines and thinker. He is closely associated in Hindi literature with an experimental literary movement (*Prayogvād*) which aimed to create new forms and experiment with literature, more specifically with poetry. His social awareness and engagement are also very important; he published many essays as well as articles in the magazines he edited, such as *Pratik*.

52 Sobti and Agyeya also knew each other personally. It is indeed in *Pratik*, the literary magazine edited by Agyeya, that Sobti's first short stories were published. Sobti mentions this fact in some interviews and in her last book, *Gujarāt Pākistān se Gujarāt Hindustān* (2017, lit. From Gujarat Pakistan to Gujarat India, translated into English as *A Gujarat Here, a Gujarat There*).

53 The name 'Agyeya' (unknowable) was adopted under particular circumstances. The author was in jail because of his revolutionary activities and wished to publish without being named. The friend through whom the texts reached the publisher therefore called him 'Agyeya', which means 'unknown'. Later, Vatsyayan adopted this as his pen name. See Malinar 2019 and the interview of Agyeya with Geeti Sen and Sharat Kumar, Agyeya 1983: 529.

Agyeya's thoughts on the role of the author in society and the difference between a writer and a citizen are particularly interesting because of their relationship to some of Sobti's ideas and the two authors' discussions on poetics in contemporary Hindi literature. Among Agyeya's preoccupations, the concepts of identity and authorship, the role of the writer in society as a citizen, the relationship of author and citizen (a topic that lies at the core of his 'autobiographical' novel, *Śekhhar ek jivanī*, lit. Shekhar: An Autobiography, Part I 1941, Part II 1944, published in English as *Shekhar: A Life*),<sup>54</sup> the question of time, as well as the contrasts between Western and Indian aesthetics are central. As a thinker, under the name of Vatsyayan, Agyeya has published essays and given many lectures and interviews. However, of particular interest with regard to Sobti's own non-fictional writings are the two 'diaries' published under his pseudonym Agyeya in 1972 (*Bhavantī*, lit. The Present) and 1975 (*Antarā*, lit. The Inner Space). These two texts have been translated by the author himself as *Truculent Clay* and *Preparing the Ground*.<sup>55</sup> Not diaries in a narrow sense, they discuss the doubts of the writer and describe his creative process, giving the reader a sense of what he considers to be the role of literature. The entries in these diaries are neither dated nor do they follow a chronological template. They constitute reflections of the writer on a wide range of topics, amongst others the question of identity – for the individual in general and the author in particular.

If Agyeya distinguishes between his identity as a writer and his identity as a critic with the use of different names, the two diaries are interesting because, although they offer many thoughts on literature and the process of writing, they are published under the name of the novelist and poet (Agyeya) – not under the name of the critic (Vatsyayan). In their blurring of the genres, they constitute a good illustration of Berranger's exposition of the new ways writers exercise their activity as critics and thinkers.

The images of the author which emerge from those texts are manifold. Writing is implicitly described as a quest for the right word – i.e., a quest centred on language – and new ways of expressing experiences and emotions; besides an affinity with the word, the writer is primarily defined by her own particular sensitivity. A writer is thus essentially an individual who expresses her views and emotions through words. However, this idiosyncratic experience and sensitivity

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<sup>54</sup> This novel-autobiography is not an autobiography *stricto sensu* but a biography of the character of Shekhar that includes reflections on the identities of the self. See Malinar 1997; Malinar 1998; Malinar 2019). One of the key themes in this text is the involvement of the main character in politics and society, contrasted with his identity and needs as an artist (an individual). See also the recent English translation, Agyeya 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Agyeya 2011; both texts were first published in English in 1982.

has a more universal relevance; it is set in a specific context and in interaction with a given environment.

Agyeya sees certain difference between poetry and prose, putting poetry closer to a spiritual quest, with prose reflecting the social surroundings of a writer. However, both genres create a space-time continuum which is distinct from what we call ‘reality’ and into which the audience is transported. In contemporary literature, in Agyeya’s eyes, the attempts at realism mean that society influences the writer and that she, in return, creates an image of it: “Society leaves its imprint on the writer. The writer then creates ‘society’ – through the medium of language. By juxtaposing society and ‘society’, we bring the writer’s awareness of reality to the touchstone, we evaluate his mind.”<sup>56</sup> It is obvious here that, for Agyeya, literature is always located in the subjectivity, in an idiosyncratic perception of the surrounding world, and in interaction with it. It is not a collection of scientific data on the world. However, a writer (a good writer, that is) must be able to transcend her own personal life-experience to express a bigger or deeper experience:

Then the second question arises: to what degree is the experience he communicates bigger or deeper than the writer’s own life-experience? How does it compare with the experience of mankind? In other words, how far the writer has been able to transcend the limits of his own life and enter that of the community or society, how far he has succeeded in communicating experience significant for the entire society.<sup>57</sup>

This quote implies the potential of universalisation of literature and the interaction of the writer with her society and time. It is indeed a complex image of the writer that emerges from the entries in Agyeya’s diaries: on the one hand, she is not writing ‘for’ society or in order to change it; on the other hand, she is influenced by it – through her own life experience – and lets this experience flow in her writing, transforming through her sensitivity that which she has lived and seen into a common or universal experience which in turn reflects the time, the society and something that surpasses this context. The notion that literature possesses such a potential of universalisation and therefore moves beyond its direct socio-geographical and temporal context, is very important for Sobti as well.

However, Agyeya doesn’t define the writer as the owner of her creation. After the work is completed, it becomes distinct from the writer and does not belong anymore to her but to the reader. Literature is always addressed to an audience – be it the writer herself (the internal audience) or the reader. Communication and

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<sup>56</sup> Agyeya 2011: 50.

<sup>57</sup> Agyeya 2011: 60.

dialogue are therefore at the core of writing.<sup>58</sup> In a passage in *Preparing the Ground*, Agyeya compares different views, taken from various periods of the history of literature, on the mutual relationships of the writer, the communicated object (the text) and its recipient.<sup>59</sup> He shows how the understanding or the claims made on this relationship evolve in time. However, it is implicit that, for him, writing exists only in the interaction with an other – although this other can be a part of the self.<sup>60</sup>

Agyeya's two diaries are interesting because they blur the genres: they are presented as diaries and yet never bear a date; they report some events, but mainly thoughts and dreams; they contain poems, both in Hindi and English (in the Hindi original, that is; the author translates all the verse in the English version); they discuss a huge range of topics, from dreams and memories to questions of politics (particularly the relationship of an author to power and the author's identity as a writer or a citizen), including questions of literary criticism and philosophy. More importantly, however, they introduce the thoughts of the author on his main topics of reflection: time, the balance between social responsibilities and individuality, reflections on language and the different roles of the words. The reflections are not presented here in the same structured frame one finds in Agyeya's essays or lectures on specific topics. As such, they seem more detached from a context, as if they were just gushing out of the mind of the narrator of the text. Implicitly, the writer is staged in those texts as an intellectual who constantly reflects on a wide range of topics, is involved in the issues of her time but is, in the meantime, living her own world within herself. All this constitutes an interesting parallel to Sobti's non-fictional works. Indeed, for Sobti as well, the interaction with society and the individual world of the writer are of central importance. Moreover, in her non-fictional texts, too, the distinction between the theoretical and the literary is never clear.

In Agyeya's presentation of the author, it is obvious that in his view literature plays an active part in society, but that the creative process is first of all an individual process. Thus, his vision of the author and the poet does not correspond completely to Prasad's views, examined above, but bears similarities to them nonetheless in the importance given to the personal and individual experience in the process of creation. It also shows significant differences with

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<sup>58</sup> See in particular Agyeya 2011: 53. With Agyeya, this idea is nevertheless not as central as it is for Sobti, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

<sup>59</sup> Agyeya 2011: 176.

<sup>60</sup> All these points are very similar to Sobti's perception of literature as a dialogical process, as I will discuss in the following chapters. However, for Sobti, the dialogue with the self takes on a very elaborated form with the creation of a double, Hashmat.

Sobti's views. Indeed, for Sobti, the writer is much more a 'transmitter' of voices heard and processed, whereas it seems that Agyeya's view of the writer is very much centred on the author's individual experience and perception of the world. This disparity between Sobti and Agyeya manifests itself also in their fictional works. If Agyeya is indeed very attentive to the choice of words and the melody they produce, he does not develop, like Sobti, an ear for local and regional dialects nor for the 'voices' of the protagonists he stages.<sup>61</sup>

Agyeya's conception of the role of the author and his analysis of the difficult position of the artist in society are subjects that would require a separate study. With regard to general preoccupations with those questions in Hindi literature, he is an important and influential thinker and must therefore be included in the discussion about the writers' activities as critics in the Hindi literary sphere. One may observe many similarities in his choice of topics in his non-fictional works and those of Sobti, but there are manifest differences in their views of literature as well.

One great difference lies in their relationship to theory and theoretical writings: whereas Agyeya has been self-admittedly active as a critic and thinker, Sobti insisted on being mainly a writer – or even a writer alone. It is interesting to note that both Agyeya and Sobti have created different identities for different levels of engaging in writing: Agyeya the poet and the novelist, and Vatsyayan the philosopher and critic; Sobti the writer and Hashmat the 'failed writer' and chronicler of Delhi's life.<sup>62</sup> The construction of the self and the staging of the self in both cases is characterised by a feeling of double-identity of the self or plurality within the self. However, for Agyeya, the 'double' is the theorist, opposed to the poet and novelist, whereas for Sobti, Hashmat is an extension of the self, a development of her personality as a writer.<sup>63</sup>

Agyeya is an important thinker in the field of literature, society and aesthetics. However, he is not the only modern Hindi author to have written a great number of essays or to have translated them into English – thereby pointing towards the importance he personally gave to this aspect of his work.

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**61** See chapter 3. In fact, Agyeya allegedly criticised Sobti's use of Punjabi diction in her magnum opus *Zindagināmā*, see Deepak 2021: 72. However, as Kumar and Sethi write in the Introduction to their book on Sobti, "She [Sobti] was very appreciative of Agyeya, who had published her story "Sikka Badal Gaya" without any language editing despite Sobti's admixture of Punjabi words with Hindi in that story." Kumar and Sethi 2021: 6–7.

**62** One ought to bear in mind here that the pseudonym 'Agyeya' was adopted under particular circumstances. See footnote 53.

**63** See chapter five for my examination of the creation of a double.

Another such writer and thinker is Nirmal Verma, a friend and contemporary of Sobti, who also shares quite a few similarities with her in his views on literature. Best known as a novelist (*Ek citharā sukh*, 1979, *A Tattered Happiness*, translated into English as *A Rag Called Happiness*; *Lāl ṭin kī chat*, 1974, *The Red Tin Roof*) and author of short stories (*Parim̄de*, 1959, *Birds*; *Kavve aur kālā pānī*, 1983, lit. *Crows and Exile*, published in English as *The Last Exit*), Nirmal Verma is also the author of several essays, art criticism and travelogues. He travelled in Europe, studied in Prague and worked as a translator as well. His essays reflect deep knowledge of Western and Indian literature; the comparison between the diverse cultural settings he experienced underlies his thinking. If in his early years he was quite close to the communist ideology, he returned from Prague quite disillusioned and turned in later years to a re-examination of Indian traditions. These preoccupations and the comparison between India and the West are manifest in his essays, for example in *Bhārat aur Yūrop (India and Europe*, 1991).<sup>64</sup> He worked on the translation of several of his essays himself and seems to have considered this part of his work very important.

As a literary critic and thinker, Verma is concerned with the role of the writer in society and with the choice of literary genres, as well as the independence of art – particularly of writing – from power.<sup>65</sup> His vision of the role of the writer in society appears clearly in his activism and the political positions he took, for example during the Emergency (1975–1977), when he opposed Indira Gandhi’s politics and all forms of censorship.<sup>66</sup>

In his collection of essays, *Śabd aur smṛti* (1976), published in English as *Word and Memory* (1989),<sup>67</sup> Verma discusses various topics ranging from the relationship of fiction and reality, to the place of memory and history or to the role of a writer in society. Asking himself why one writes, Verma discusses the ideas of ‘art for art’s sake’ and ‘art as a result of a moral decision’. Verma rejects both positions: “[. . .] instead of facing the dilemma squarely, they [the engaged writers and the writers-aesthetes] seek an escape-route, one by reducing the

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**64** These two ‘periods’ of his life are probably at the origin of the very different perception of his novels and his essays by the Indian critics as highlighted in Montaut 2012.

**65** This topic is quite important in the Hindi literary context. See also chapter seven. Although Verma stresses the importance of the complete independence of literature (for example in the essays collected in “*Śabd aur smṛti*” or “*Word and Memory*”, 1976), he was a Communist Party member at one time, unlike Sobti who always remained distant from any political affiliation.

**66** The Emergency (1975–1977) refers to the 21-months long state of emergency declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1917–1984) in reaction to waves of protests and unrest throughout the country, engendered by opposition to her government. During this period, censorship prevailed and many of Indira Gandhi’s opponents were arrested.

**67** The English translation was published in 1989 in collaboration with Nirmal Verma himself.

creative act to mere means of serving a given end, the other by identifying the end with the creative act itself. Neither of them seeks to resolve the tension [between art and values] in its own terms.”<sup>68</sup> For Verma, the role of literature is precisely to build a thinking space where a doubt in a value, or a questioning emerging from experience, can be voiced.<sup>69</sup> Literature must be free and independent – i.e., independent from power structures – in order to “act as a conscience” which might “enrich and enhance the cultural awareness of people”.<sup>70</sup>

According to Verma, the modern author – as opposed to the anonymous or collective author of tales or fables – delves into her experience to produce a work of art which is rooted in her individual consciousness and yet acquires something universal through the very form – the aesthetic form – which it receives. This form emerges by itself so to speak, out of the topic or plot of the story.<sup>71</sup> The author is thus at the same time a free creator of her works and restricted in her choices by the topic itself: “a certain experience could realize itself only in the form of a story – and in no other form.”<sup>72</sup> The story then might gain independence from its author and become universal. Fiction, according to Verma, is based on experience – the experience of reality – but it builds another universe, another world, which is distinct from what we call ‘reality’ and should be perceived as such as well. In this new universe, time and memory acquire a new meaning, they are contained and held: “a work of art freezes time within itself”.<sup>73</sup> In this process, fiction is able to ‘arrest’ time.<sup>74</sup> This is also one of the main tasks of literature according to Sobti.

The essays are for Verma a place to reflect on the role of literature and art – for the society and the human being – in interaction with the ‘reality’ and the time in which a writer lives. Literature cannot be cut off from life, but it is neither life’s mirror nor life itself. The power of the writer to create remains consequently a particular ability. This particular ability is strongly connected to notions of time and memory.

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**68** Verma 1989: 24–25.

**69** Understanding the meaning of one’s experiences lies at the root of writing according to Verma, who places experience at the core of writing. However, for him, experience alone is not sufficient; it must bring with itself a reflection involving another level of signification and leave room for the imagination. See Verma 1989: 26–30.

**70** Verma 1989: 30.

**71** Verma 1989: 44–45.

**72** Verma 1989: 44. Although Verma does not go as far as Sobti in his views on the independence of a story, they share the similar concept of the contingencies brought about by the choices of topic, character and form. See chapter three.

**73** Verma 1989: 54.

**74** Verma 1989: 70.



In *Word and Memory (Śabd aur smṛti)*, Verma highlights precisely the relationship of literature with time and memory, drawing a parallel between the place of myth and the place of literature in the construction of identities (that of an individual as well as a group). For him, art has the potential of being ‘mythical’, of connecting the human being with a part of an anonymous and collective consciousness where the notions of time are not linear, but recurring.<sup>75</sup> When analysing the development of literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Verma asks himself whether it is possible for literature to occupy the place of myth and thus to give human beings another understanding of their place in the world order: “Thus, if a conscious regression to the primitive is not the way to restore man to his primary, universal vision of reality, so also the attempt to create that vision in the self-contained realm of art would be of limited value unless it is linked with a wider social process – to overcome and transcend man’s historical estrangement from himself.”<sup>76</sup> As Verma reiterates, transcendence is however only possible if there is a continuity of the human race – even this ‘eternal time’ is therefore embedded in a human time-frame.

According to Verma, literature – and art in general – has the function of ‘holding time’, defying the transitoriness of life, and, through an aesthetic epiphany, realising a vision which surpasses the limitations of an individual. In the essay on images of beauty, Verma explains that an aesthetic epiphany is possible when the memory of the past holds time in place and the past is consequently brought back by means of art. The artistic creation allows human transcendence, while at the same time it remains rooted in human temporality. Memory – and its capacity of making the past alive again – lies at the core of artistic creation. However, Verma knows that the moment ‘held back’ in art is never a perfect correspondence to the ‘reality’ – indeed, art is not a copy of life. Nevertheless, he sees in literature the possibility of arresting time:

In actual life, everything passes. But there is a look which remains arrested, eternally [. . .] Every writer rejects this limitation<sup>77</sup> before writing because he likes to think that there is something in the evening in September which will not pass, that this deserted road will not

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75 See Verma 1989, more specifically the article “Mythic Consciousness”, Verma 1989: 17–23. It is interesting to note that Verma’s views on literature refer back to Aristotle’s idea of literature as telling something universal about human nature, and as being, therefore, essential to education. The notion of an anonymous and collective consciousness may be paralleled to Sobti’s *lokmānas* (lit. ‘people’s consciousness’) and her notion of a flow of consciousness which endures in the people, often through the transmission of legends and folklore, and through tradition. See chapter six.

76 Verma 1989: 23.

77 The limitation of the real, where the impressions can (and eventually will) fade away.

be lost at the next crossing, and that the man walking on it will be able to say something which will be capable of illumining his fate for at least that evening, we wish that he should 'commit' himself to something so that we can catch the threads of his past and a glimpse of his destiny. Simply a word, a sign is capable of lifting it from the real and pulling it towards 'truth'.<sup>78</sup>

One of the roles of literature is then to hold onto time, and, through the retelling of past events, reveal truth about human being. With these two notions Verma is close to Sobti's views on literature and the written text's relation to time, as the following chapters show.

Verma's image of the writer resembles Sobti's as well, as for him the writer has the ability to observe and re-create in words the surrounding reality. However, for Verma, as Montaut argued in her article, the sense which enables a writer to perceive the reality is vision, whereas for Sobti, a writer has a particular sensitivity to voices and idiolects. This difference manifests itself in the writing style of both authors (see chapters three and four).

From this description of some of the essays of two major modern Hindi writers, one can glean some topics which lie at the core of writers' reflections on literature and writing: the place of the writer in society, the role of literature, the interaction of literature with time, the perception of reality, and therefore, the relationship of reality and fiction.<sup>79</sup> Agyeya and Verma are known and recognised as thinkers both by literary critics and the academic world.<sup>80</sup> They appear to be very conscious of their ability to discuss philosophical, political and literary topics and demonstrate great awareness of their own activity as writers as well as their writing process. By comparison, it is interesting to look at Sobti's non-fictional writings and her discussion of the writer and the writing process, because her activity as a thinker has not yet been acknowledged by critics and academics. In the course of this book, I intend to show that she is no less an original thinker than her two contemporaries and that her metapoetical discourse is directly related to her own works and writing process. Unlike Agyeya's and Verma's, Sobti's non-fictional works adopt a very metaphorical tone, particularly close to the style of her fictional works. More than her two fellow writers, Sobti plays with the limits of the genre. This makes her non-fictional works all the more special.

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**78** Verma 1989: 70.

**79** All these topics, which are central for Sobti as well, seem indeed to be common to most of the Hindi writers of this generation, and even of earlier generations, as the comparison with Premchand illustrates. These are also topics emerging from the essays by Indian writers collected by Jasbir Jain, see Jain: 2011.

**80** However, only few studies exist on this aspect of their work.

### 1.3 Methods

Before reading and analysing Sobti's non-fictional texts, it is essential to establish more clearly what is understood by the term 'poetics' and in which discourse on literature the discussion of Sobti's work will be situated.

Establishing a definition of poetics is an arduous task as the term can incorporate many meanings. Even in Todorov's work of the same name, the definition varies.<sup>81</sup> Initially, Todorov describes it as being its own object and not as a judgement about aesthetic value (or any other value) but the literary character of a work, i.e., the formal criteria that allow a reader to differentiate between a discourse having a literary intent (and literary diction) and another type of language. In his conclusion, Todorov highlights the difficulty of formulating such a definition and the fact that it can be turned into a method of analysing the discourse surrounding any type of text.<sup>82</sup>

Poetics and the discourse on poetics are also categories of thinking and a method of discussing and assessing literature in the critical discourse and the academic world, where many definitions of the term are proposed, constructed and deconstructed.

A definition of poetics may be attempted through the reading of texts dealing with the notion of literature and the literary character of a text, for example the works of critics like Roman Jakobson, Tzvetan Todorov, Mikhail Bakhtin or Roland Barthes, or through the non-fictional works of the writers themselves, in which these writers express their views on literature and attempt to answer the question of 'what is writing'. This is the definition of the term that enables a study of the stylistics and philosophy of each writer as something original, and to observe the traces of the writers' views on literature in their fictional works. By attempting to understand the thought underlying a writer's work, one can interpret better her fictional works and their intent. In the case of Sobti, this definition of poetics and this approach to her non-fictional texts has allowed me to unravel her image of the writer as a transmitter of voices heard, a writer

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**81** See Todorov 1973, *Poétique*, in particular subchapters 2 and 3, "Poétique et esthétique" and "Que la poétique est son propre objet".

**82** See Todorov 1973, specifically the last part of chapter 3, "Perspectives". For Todorov, poetics is to be understood as a tool to analyse why a text was perceived in a given context as literary and what aspects made it such. With time, he sees the possibility of this search developing into the analysis of the forms taken by language in all types of texts. It is worth mentioning here that in the second edition of this essay published in 1973, Todorov had changed his previous conclusion to highlight the study of poetics as a field open to all disciplines which would therefore facilitate the understanding of any type of text.

in constant interaction with herself and her surroundings. This analysis has enabled me to discover her very un-hierarchical conception of language as well as her love for the metaphor. Poetics, in the context of this book, thus encompasses all the reflections of an author on the role of literature and the essence of a language that can be deemed as literary.

In literary criticism, the preoccupation with poetics, understood as the study of the literary character of a text, starts with a new wave of literary criticism focussing on the structure of texts themselves as independent entities rather than on the biography of the author and the ‘background information’ on the text (i.e. the social and historical context, the milieu of the writer, her family history, etc.). This form of textual literary criticism emerged in the Russian formalist school and the studies that followed, of which Jakobson and Bakhtin might serve as examples for the purpose of this brief introduction.<sup>83</sup>

For Bakhtin, who uses the term ‘poetics’ (*poetika*) in the title of the second edition of his famous work on Dostoyevsky and the question of polyphony (*polifonija*) in the novel,<sup>84</sup> poetics are clearly defined as the thought behind the construction of the literary discourse. It does not merely consist of the elements that render a discourse literary – such as the use of metaphors and other images or the construction of the language – but also includes the structure of a work and the intent of the creator to build a work according to her own concept – in the case of Dostoyevsky, with the disappearance of his presence as an omniscient narrative voice in favour of several voices.<sup>85</sup>

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**83** Although I shall not go into an in-depth discussion of Bakhtin, I would like to stress here his distance from the Formalist school, for example, when it comes to seeing literature as a more or less closed system. For him, there is always an interaction between literature and its environment, an interaction which is not limited to intertextuality alone. Sobti is very close to this understanding of literature.

**84** Bakhtin 1972 [1929]. In chapter three, while introducing the concept of writer/author, this study will be examined more closely, the present introduction will therefore remain quite brief.

**85** See Bakhtin 1972: 6–7, and Rotsel’s English translation, Bakhtin 1973: 4: “The plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses and the genuine polyphony of full-valued voices are in fact characteristics of Dostoevsky’s novels. It is not a multitude of characters and fates within a unified objective world, illuminated by the author’s unified consciousness that unfolds in his works, but precisely the plurality of equal consciousnesses and their worlds, which are combined here into the unity of a given event, while at the same time retaining their unmergedness.”

This conception of literature and the author is close to the idea of the suspension of judgement or ‘neutrality’ which will be discussed in chapter three in the context of Sobti’s view of the author.

The scope of Jakobson's studies is very wide and his thought and conception of literature evolved during the course of his work. However, for him, the term 'poetics' clearly means the idea of the literary character (*littérarité*, as Todorov coins it) of a text.<sup>86</sup> When he examines a poem, a novel, or the style of an author, his focus always lies on the specific use of language and its function. He analyses the discourse itself, seeing in it the characteristics of literature. In his article on the essence of poetry,<sup>87</sup> Jakobson asks what constitutes poetry: does it lie in the topic itself, in the choices of words, in the quest for something new? If the notions of poetry are liable to change with time, the poetic function (*poéticité*, which can be paralleled to Todorov's *littérarité*) is an independent element, although it is part of a complex whole, and changes the structure of the text through the relationship it establishes with the words. In the text, the word is felt as a word and not just as the substitute of the object it designates: "But how does poeticity manifest itself? Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality."<sup>88</sup> It is this emphasis put on the words, their values and associations in themselves – i.e., independently from what they designate, but through their history and always new contexts – which characterises the poetic use of language and its poetic function.

Like Todorov, Jakobson considers poetics to be the study of the discourse, the study of language, with a specific use of metonymies, metaphors and other tropes as markers of the literary character of a work.<sup>89</sup> While discussing the work of a specific author in particular, for example in his article on Pasternak, Jakobson examines the specific use of words and rhetoric figures, and compares it to their use by other artists in an attempt to highlight the specificity of the writer. Through this method, it becomes possible to define the particular relationship of each author with the words. For example, the metonymy, defined as the creation of images by a contiguous association of ideas ("*association by contiguity*"),<sup>90</sup> is revealed as the main rhetorical figure in Pasternak's

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**86** See Jakobson 1973.

**87** "What is poetry?" in Jakobson 1987: 368–378.

**88** Jakobson 1987: 378. In this passage, Jakobson stresses the fact that in a text perceived as 'poetic' or 'literary', the words possess a power and a value of their own, manifested through their sounds and the associations they generate in the reader's mind; they are connected to a reality and its complexity.

**89** See for example *On the Prose of the Poet Pasternak*, Jakobson 1987: 301–317.

**90** Jakobson 1987: 310.

work. As a result, a definition of poetics emerges which settles it as the specific relationship between the world of objects and the world of language established by each author.<sup>91</sup>

This understanding of poetics puts the singularity of each writer at the centre, and yet it stresses the essential role of language in the perception of the world offered by literature as well as by all language-based human activity. Such a definition of poetics is indeed open to all forms of the use of language, not restricted to literature alone. For Sobti as well, her own relationship to language (in its multiplicity) is central to her writing and creation or recreation of a world (or indeed of worlds) in her texts.

If the notion of poetics evolved from being a term designating treaties on how to compose verses or write dramas to the theory and practice of a specific writer, it is only as a reflection of the development of literature as an occupation from being the affair of individuals enjoying the patronage of rich protectors to becoming the profession of the modern ‘writer-businessman’, to use the term coined by Roland Barthes.<sup>92</sup> This latter model of the writer is that of an individual standing on her own, dependent ‘only’ on the market and the publication and reception of her works. As a result, the writer is more compelled to become a public figure, particularly in recent times, and to make her positions and thoughts on literature, society and politics known. It becomes part of a staging of the self, of the creation of a public persona. In the meantime, main currents of literature with distinctive discourses on ‘how to write’ – i.e., currents with specific poetics – tend to lose their importance, replaced by single individuals developing their own literary discourse. This new phenomenon does not imply that there is no connection between the poetics of different writers. Yet, it is striking to notice how much space the individuality and the individual take in this new development. At the same time, the concept of the ‘death of the author’ which many writers endorse, remains widely popular fifty years after the publication of Barthes’ seminal essay.<sup>93</sup> A second question

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**91** See chapter four for a discussion of how Sobti develops a particular relationship to words and how she reflects on the subject. Parallels with Jakobson’s views on poetics become apparent there.

**92** See Barthes 1964: 147.

**93** Nevertheless, one ought to acknowledge here that for Barthes, the ‘death of the author’ in the process of reading and understanding a text is not tantamount to the disappearance of the idiosyncrasies of the author which render her style unique and peculiar, quite the contrary. See for example Barthes’ discussions of specific authors or his reflections on style in “Le style et son image” in *Le bruissement de la langue* (1984). The author is also not absent from the text, although her presence differs from the notion of the author as the parent of the text. On this point, one can observe the following passage of the essay “De l’oeuvre au texte”, in *Le*

which accompanied my reading of Sobti's work was therefore the manner in which she constructs herself as a writer.

The first step in my analysis was to assemble, read, and partly translate the corpus of non-fictional texts, speeches and interviews of Krishna Sobti. Establishing the whole corpus was not easy, since it is often difficult to know the exact date of publication of a text.<sup>94</sup> Given the extent of interviews and literary reviews published in magazines such as *Hamis* and others, it is possible that some interviews or speeches have escaped my notice. The main sources I used were, however, the written essays and lectures, as well as the long dialogue between Sobti and her friend and fellow Hindi writer, Krishna Baldev Vaid, published in book form as *Sobti-Vaid Samvād* (2007, Sobti-Vaid: A Dialogue). A chronological approach to the texts was very quickly discarded as it is almost impossible to date all the essays.

The main non-fictional texts are collected in two volumes of miscellaneous writings, namely *Sobti ek sohbat* (Sobti: A Companion, first published in 1989, thereafter SeS) and *Śabdom ke ālok meṁ* (In the Glow of Words, first published in 2005, thereafter SAM).<sup>95</sup> In the first, within the section devoted to essays, one finds four very interesting texts where Sobti discusses her work. The most important among them, "Mairṁ, merā samay aur merā racnā saṁsar" (Me, my time and my literary world, thereafter MSRS) presents all the main ideas developed by Sobti in her poetics and therefore constitutes the cornerstone of my analysis. The second volume<sup>96</sup>

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*bruissement de la langue*, see Barthes 1984: 74–75. I quote here Stephen Heath's English translation, Barthes 1988: 161, and keep the translator's choice of using capital letters, which are absent in the French original: "It is not that the Author may not 'come back' in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a 'guest'. If he is a novelist, he is inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet; no longer privileged, paternal, aletheological, his inscription is ludic. He becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work; there is a reversion of the work on to the life (and no longer the contrary); it is the work of Proust, of Genet which allows their lives to be read as a text. The word 'bio-graphy' re-acquires a strong, etymological sense, at the same time as the sincerity of the enunciation – veritable 'cross' borne by literary morality – becomes a false problem: the *I* which writes the text, it too, is never more than a paper-*I*."

<sup>94</sup> Even in collected essays or collected works of writers, the date of the first publication of a short story or of an essay is rarely mentioned. Konrad Meisig, for example, stresses this point in his study of the *Nai kahāni*, the Hindi new short story movement, see Meisig 1996.

<sup>95</sup> Chapter two provides an introduction to Sobti and her work. There, I examine the corpus of her non-fictional works in greater detail.

<sup>96</sup> In this book, so far untranslated into English except for a few passages found in Kumar/Sethi 2021, Sobti addresses one of her nieces, Sarvar, and recounts some childhood memories or memories of important moments of her life and travels, but always in relation to her writing.

is a collection of essays and non-fictional works where semi-autobiographical passages alternate with essays, speeches and interviews, some of which have appeared earlier in literary magazines, like Anamika's interview for *Vāgarth*. Several other articles and essays were published by Sobti in magazines such as *Hamṣ*, *Samkālin bhāratīya sāhitya*, and others. The four interviews found in *Śabdōṃ ke ālok meṃ* have been included in a collection of Sobti's interviews published in 2018 as *Lekhak kā jantāmitr. Sobtī se sāksātkār* (The Writer's Democracy. Interviews with Sobti). Some of Sobti's interviews and essays have appeared in English translation, in volumes dealing with one specific topic, such as, for example, writers' assessments of their working process, the partition, writing in India as a woman, and recently, in *Krishna Sobti. A Counter Archive* (2021), a book edited by Kumar and Sethi, in the new Routledge series 'Writer in Context'.<sup>97</sup>

Once the corpus of texts was established, my analysis centred first on the search for textual evidence of Sobti's self-representation as a writer, as well as her notions of authorship and *littérarité*, in the frame of Roland Barthes' discussion of the author<sup>98</sup> and Todorov's definition of *littérarité* and poetics.<sup>99</sup>

Already in her novels, Sobti's style is famous for being elliptic and difficult.<sup>100</sup> The essays present a few other difficulties. Their vocabulary is very wide and challenges the reader – and even more so the translator – by the use of terms which can be seen as synonymous or nearly synonymous, such as *vakt* and *samay* for 'time', *anubhav* and *anubhūti* for 'experience', *atmā* and *rūh* for 'soul'.<sup>101</sup> The language used by Sobti in her non-fictional work is very abstract. It is often based on the Sanskrit register, a register frequently used by Hindi writers for their essays. Yet, she does not use only this particular register. She also employs many words of Persian origin, particularly when she wants to illustrate her point of the necessity for Hindi to remain an open and inclusive language. However, Sobti's essays present an abstract image of 'the writer' (*lekhak*), instead of directly personal statements, with an 'I' as the subject. This 'I' appears more often in interviews but is not dominant even there. It is only in her dialogue with Vaid, who, as a friend and fellow writer, is also a sympathetic

<sup>97</sup> On writing processes see Meenakshi Sharma 1996; on the partition, see Jain 2007b or Bhalla 2007; on writing as a woman, see Jain 2007a and Mohanraj 2009.

<sup>98</sup> Particularly drawing on the notion of the 'Death of the author' and the life of the text in Barthes' eponymous article, see Barthes 1964, Barthes 1984.

<sup>99</sup> See Todorov 1973.

<sup>100</sup> See not only the Translator's note in the English translation of *Zindagīnāmā* (2016), but also Mariola Offredi's articles on Sobti, Offredi 2007; Offredi 2008; Offredi 2009.

<sup>101</sup> While the terms often play with the Persian and Sanskrit etymologies and attest to Sobti's openness to this specific linguistic plurality, this is not always the case. For example, *anubhūti* and *anubhav* are both words of Sanskrit origin.



critic and equal partner of discussion, that Sobti's representation of the writer becomes more personal in its wording itself. Throughout the non-fictional writings, the abstract term 'the writer' (*lekhak*) sometimes designates any writer (good or bad) and sometimes Sobti's own views of writing, i.e. her self-perception.

Another important feature of the language of the essays, which constituted a difficulty in my reading and translating of those texts, was the constant use of metaphors, sometimes referring implicitly to cultural *topoi*, throughout the whole corpus. Having noticed that Sobti's language, even in the essays – and partly in the interviews as well! – was filled with images led me to make the analysis of metaphors the next step for the analysis of the essays. The metaphors serve as an illustration of Sobti's views, but sometimes they are also a way of shrouding the writing process in mystery in order to make it seem magical and unexplainable. This phenomenon is accentuated by another characteristic of Sobti's essays, namely the recourse to free verse in order to depict the moment of creation. The prose suddenly flows into free verse for passages that I call 'theory in verse', before merging again very smoothly into prose. Those passages do not only constitute a blurring of genres, between theoretical writing and literary writing, they also illustrate a point through a stylistic form, and challenge the translator through their use of metaphors and poetical images.

Metaphors are by far the most common literary trope. They are also very present in everyday language, something which led some analysts, like Lakoff, to develop the notion of conceptual metaphors.<sup>102</sup> In my analysis of Sobti's metaphorical language, this notion has proved useful, as has a much more classic understanding of metaphors and similes.

The theoretical frame for the interpretation of metaphors in Sobti's work is provided on the one hand by general metaphor theories, as presented for example by Semino or Tendhal, and on the other hand by Lakoff's notion of conceptual metaphors.<sup>103</sup> The combination of these two approaches helped unravel the most recurring metaphors in Sobti's essays and analyse to what extent they serve either to reveal and explain the writing process or to shroud it in mystery.

Semino and Tendhal present what I call here for the purpose of simplification 'general metaphor theory'. By this, I mean the use of metaphors as a rhetorical device to explain a meaning through implicit comparison, through similes or through sustained metaphors. In rhetorics, metaphors are comparison where the word introducing the comparison is absent and where the reader or listener must herself reconstruct the elements of comparison between two given objects.

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**102** See Lakoff 1993, for example.

**103** See Semino 2008; Tendhal 2009; Lakoff 1993.

This device is often used to explain a thought or to produce a clearer image in the mind of the recipient of the discourse through an analogy. However, this figure of speech can serve other purposes as well. In literature, especially in poetry, it is often used to encourage to look at something from a new perspective induced by an analogy, which may seem at first completely alien or even obscure to the recipient of the discourse. As such, metaphors are also a means to hide meaning or to avoid directness. This use of metaphors seems, quite unexpectedly, much present in several of Sobti's essays, particularly in her depiction of the writing process. Analysing metaphors and their role(s) is therefore particularly important to understand Sobti's views on writing.

The 'classic' definition of a metaphor is essential to any analysis of Sobti's work. Moreover, because Sobti uses the same image, the same analogy, in several essays and within the same text by extending it through a whole semantic field, I found that the notion of the 'métaphore filée' (sustained metaphor) suited perfectly Sobti's metaphorical description of the writing process. A *métaphore filée* is a metaphor that is not limited to one object or one thought but includes a whole semantic field and thus extends the analogy over more than one sentence. In other words, it is a metaphor spanning over more than an image through a development of its central idea.<sup>104</sup> In the case of Sobti, I adopt this term to speak of her description of the literary work as a plant emerging from a soil nourished by the author and by her surrounding environment (the manure or raw material). I will analyse this specific metaphor in chapter three.

The very notion of a metaphor that extends itself to cover more ideas bears similarity to another theory of metaphors, a theory developed among others by Lakoff. In my analysis of Sobti's metaphors, Lakoff's notion of conceptual metaphors was extremely useful as well.<sup>105</sup> As Lakoff convincingly argues, metaphors are not limited to the realm of literary discourse and poetry; on the contrary, they are a very important part of everyday life and everyday language. A classic example would be the metaphor of the journey for life, but one could also mention the image of the 'stream of thoughts' or that of the 'flow of time'. In colloquial language, the word combinations we use very often imply analogies, although the speakers rarely consciously reflect upon that. Within the concept of such metaphors, two domains are joined by a set of correspondances. In the case of life as a journey, for example, one considers the road as the life-span, the individual as a traveller and death as the destination. Those sets function without any problem in communication because they are rooted in a common human experience. For

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104 See for example Reboul 1991.

105 See Lakoff/Mark 1980 and Lakoff 1993.

my analysis of Sobti's use of metaphors, this notion was particularly helpful in understanding better her extension of the basic metaphor of weaving to the act of story-telling (the text-textile metaphor) as well as for some of the images she uses while talking about time and temporality.

Sobti's metaphorical language constitutes thus one of the major difficulties in reading her texts, especially with view to translating them. Without venturing too far on this topic, I will discuss some problems of translation I have encountered, as in the following chapters I will use mainly my own translations of Sobti's essays. Aside from the obvious problems posed by the scope of Sobti's vocabulary and her elliptic style, where the reader-cum-translator must fill in gaps and make choices of interpretation, Sobti's essays present some difficulty in the way they allude or refer, implicitly and explicitly, to specific cultural concepts. Some concepts are named, but more often than not they remain vague and open to conjectures.

This difficulty has been at the core of my reflections on my own translations and understanding of Sobti's essays. The method I adopted in my approach to the texts was philological. Through textual analysis and careful contextualisations, I attempted to understand the more elliptic passages and thereby reconstruct a frame for Sobti's non-fictional writings. By frame, I mean here not only a historical and geographical frame but also a cultural frame, informed both by Sobti's textual references and my own reconstruction of her readings and sources of influence and inspiration. To this end, it proved essential to examine not only the socio-political context in which Sobti wrote, but also her own cultural background and her personal likings in matter of literature and philosophical ideas.

This close reading of Sobti's writings enabled me to unravel the core points of her views on literature and the writer. In this, MSRS clearly stood out as the central text in which all the main issues and the major metaphors used by Sobti in her self-representation and her presentation of the writing process are present. I therefore focused on this essay,<sup>106</sup> drawing from its structure four main issues discussed by Sobti: the representation of the writing process through the use of the metaphor of the field or the plot of land; the choice of language, where Sobti's use of the linguistic plurality of Hindi is both a rejection of the uniformity of standard Hindi (*mānak hindī*) and the result of her writing process and her assimilation of her characters' idiolects; the interaction of literature

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**106** MSRS is a lecture turned into an essay. The context in which the speech was given is not clear, but it is probably linked to Sobti's publication of her longest novel, *Zindagināmā* (1978, lit. Chronicle of life, translated into English as *Zindaginama*), for which she received the literary prize of the Sahitya Akademi, the academy for literature in India.

and time, specifically centred on the tension between literature as ‘holding time’ and the consciousness, voiced in literature, of the constantly changing time; and finally the question of the multifariousness of her own identity which merges in her case with gender issues, since her alter ego, Hashmat, is a male writer.

In my discussion of language as the tool which allows Sobti to recreate the universe(s) of her characters, Bakhtin’s notion of *heteroglossia* (*raznorečie*, plurality of idiolects in one language) proved very useful.<sup>107</sup> It appeared very clearly that Sobti’s perception of Hindi is that of a language which is highly heteroglossic and must be presented as such in literature in order to reproduce and even recreate the lived reality of Hindi speakers. For Sobti, language is not only a political issue, where the inclusion of all layers of Hindi reflect her views of India as a plural and inclusive democracy;<sup>108</sup> it is part of her creative process as well, through the absorption of the ‘voices’ of the characters and their recreation in the literary text. She is therefore very attentive to the authenticity and diversity of languages spoken in each specific context, epoch, setting and even by each character. Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia helped me to explain Sobti’s differentiation between the layers of Hindi and her views on the need for literature to reproduce precisely this linguistic diversity so as to recreate a world through words.

Plurality (of languages and of voices) is however not only a reality of Hindi as a language, it is, for Sobti, a reality within the self as well. The next step of my research was to look at Sobti’s creation of Hashmat, her alter ego. My analysis of Sobti’s construction of the plurality of voices in her own self through the creation of a ‘double’, Hashmat, was mainly based on a reading of Hashmat’s texts and a comparison of ‘his’ writing style to that of Sobti. However, it is also informed by notions of ‘gendered writing’ (Cixous’ *écriture féminine*, Virginia Woolf’s notion of the androgynous mind, for example). The question of ‘gendered writing’ is indeed central to the discussion of the self-perception of the writer in the case of Sobti, for she was confronted time and again with the definition of her work as ‘women’s writing’ (*mahilā lekhan*), despite her own strong opposition to this label. A study of the existing literature on gender issues in India and theories on the construction of the self allowed me to find a starting ground to discuss both Sobti’s self-perception (and self-construction) and the creation of a double. The double remains however an enigmatic figure and

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<sup>107</sup> See Bakhtin 1975 and my discussion of this point in chapter three.

<sup>108</sup> The Nehruvian ideal, so to speak, which is strongly supported by Sobti. See chapters four and seven.

must be read not only as a ‘male alter ego’ but also as a site of exploration, as an opening to new perspectives and meanings in Sobti’s literary world.

Several of Sobti’s novels can be called historical due to their setting. Therefore, it is meaningful to examine how literature interacts with history, history writing (historiography) and issues of temporality. In my analysis of Sobti’s recreation of history, I drew on existing theories of history and the relationship of history and literature. I based my reflections mainly on Ricoeur’s *Temps et récit* and Hayden White’s work on metaphors and history.<sup>109</sup> It appeared that although Sobti wrote before those theories were developed, her vision of history in literature as representing not only events but also their perception by the people who witnessed them is close to a modern vision of history writing. In the meantime, her writing of history makes it impossible for her works to be reduced to historical writings alone. Indeed, from her novels and her discussion of history, there emerges a conception of literature as the record of time lived and experienced by individuals and communities. In her views on time, temporality and history, Ricoeur’s idea that all history is a narrative proved an interesting parallel. However, it was more interesting to compare Sobti’s treatment of history and temporality with that of other writers, like Virginia Wolf.

To examine temporality within Sobti’s novels and her ways of conveying the human (individual as well as social) perception of time and history, I relied on the theory of narratology. The narratological approach of Genette proved particularly helpful.<sup>110</sup> Genette’s categories of narrative instance, narrative time and narrative levels enabled me to describe the way Sobti plays with the order of the events narrated, the narrative voices and the focaliser. Sobti plays constantly with the focus of the narration and often switches the points of view through which the story (*histoire*, plot, in Genette’s terminologie) is told. Genette differentiates between narrators present in the story (intradiegetical) and external to the story (extradiegetical). He then goes on to defining the perspective of narration, the focalisation. A ‘focalisation zero’ corresponds to an absence of specific focus, while the focalisation following one or several characters alternatively can be internal (with the voice and thoughts of the focaliser) or external (the ‘eye of the camera’ following the focaliser, but without being privy to her or his thoughts). Genette’s differentiation between intra- and extradiegetical narrator and between the types of focalisation facilitates the identification of the voices of the characters and the lines of the plot – or the train of thoughts of the characters – in

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109 See Ricoeur 1983; White 1973; White 1985.

110 See Genette 1972.

Sobti's novels. It also enabled me to highlight Sobti's use of a language peculiar to each setting or even each character in her fictional works.

With regard to time and the 'leaps', 'flash-backs' or even ellipses in the narration, relying on the structures given by a narratological analysis of novels was also very useful. Genette distinguishes between the order of events (time of the story, of the plot), and the time of the narration (*temps du récit*), where chronology is not necessarily (and indeed rarely) respected. The narration can project in the future (*prolepse*) or narrate after the events (*analepse*). Both can also be mixed. In some scenes or sequences, for example in dialogue, the narration time and the narrated time are the same. All those notions, while they seem very straightforward, are essential to the analysis of complex narratives such as Sobti's novels, where the author experiments with forms.

To sum up my approach to Sobti's works, both fictional and non-fictional, one can say that I relied on philological methods for the reading of the source texts as well as on narratology and metaphor theory for the analysis of the texts. I found it particularly relevant to work with Barthes' notion of authorship and Genette and Todorov's views on narrative structures. My discussion of time in literature and of language are mainly based on Genette, Todorov and Bakhtin (for the notion of heteroglossia). However, it is Barthes' discussion of the author and of the opposition between *écrivain* (writer) and *écrivain* (scribe) which proved the most useful in understanding and analysing Sobti's self-representation as a writer, and therefore to come to what seems to be the central point of her poetics.<sup>111</sup> She conceives the writer as being free to think – thus establishing literature as a free space of thinking and exploration, away from any form of conventions and judgement – and yet as being bound to her own time and committed to society. The writer is thus both an *écrivain* (writer) and an *écrivain* (scribe/scriptor).

From Sobti's non-fictional works emerges a complicated image of the writer and of the writing process, constructed around tensions and apparent paradoxes which show Sobti's awareness that her own reality and that of the world(s) she writes about is multi-layered and multi-faceted. Those tensions must not be resolved but instead acknowledged as part of a writing process which is dynamic and changing like life itself. In this process, the writer is both a catalyst or a transmitter of voices from the outside – voices which she received and absorbed (thus, she appears to be rather passive in the writing process) – and a creator or recreator of a world (thence more pro-active), through a long process of assimilation and assembling in her inner world (i.e. in the inner

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111 See Barthes' essay "Écrivains et écrivains" in *Essais critiques* (1964).

‘plot of land’, in what Sobti calls ‘the memory banks’, *smṛti bairṅks*)<sup>112</sup> of voices which the text will bring back. The main tensions underlying Sobti’s views are an opposition between the writer’s commitment to a complete freedom from any value judgement in literary writing (she is an *écrivain*) and the position of the writer within society and the public sphere, where writers must defend individual freedoms and rights (they act as well as *écrivants*). However, throughout Sobti’s depiction of her writing process, tensions also exist between the mystique and the magic of writing and her insistence on the ordinariness of the writer, as well as between her strong belief in individuality and individual rights and her idea that the writer overcomes the limitations of individual experiences to draw from a shared pool of memories, histories and experiences and produce narratives which reflect a multiplicity of subjective perspectives.

In her essays, Sobti deliberately stages the figure of the writer and the writing process. She constructs them around the notions of dialogue and interaction. As a writer, in literary works, the writer interacts with the world without imposing on it, or her works, any moral judgement. In this conception of the writer, Sobti is close to what a writer like Milan Kundera sees as the ‘free thinking space’ offered by the novel.<sup>113</sup> This is the writer’s function as *écrivain*. However, as a part of an intellectual class in the public sphere, the writer must not and cannot remain silent when individual rights are at stake. Therefore, Sobti sees it as a writer’s duty to have a commitment to society and to voice her opinions. This is the writer’s function as *écrivant*, a role that Sobti acknowledges in speeches and interviews. Sobti thus embodies the merging of the two functions of the *écrivain* and the *écrivant* which was predicted by Barthes in his article. By doing this, she is not only representative of a trend which one witnesses in contemporary literature,<sup>114</sup> where writers become more and more involved in the public sphere; she also creates an image of literature as a place of thinking and constant interaction with time, settings and characters, where the writer, while putting worlds to paper, withdraws from the place of creator or judge to let a dialogue establish itself between the reader and the text, as well as

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**112** The concept of memory banks, storage rooms of memories and images in a writer’s mind, is one of Sobti’s recurrent images in her depiction of the writing process. See chapters three, four and six.

**113** See Kundera 2000: 164, “[. . .] the fascinating imaginative realm where no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood.” For Kundera and, as I argue, for Sobti, literature is a free thinking space away from systems and plain answers, a room of tolerance where every individual can be understood.

**114** See for example the column of the Swiss writer Martin R. Dean on ‘involved writing’ which appeared in the NZZ on the 4.09.2016: <http://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/zeitgeschehen/martin-r-dean-ueber-autor-und-oeffentlichkeit-der-schriftsteller-bastard-ld.114502>.

between literature and the reality it is based on. Here, literature becomes a dialogical process, with a clear distinction between the writer (as a public persona) and the literary text.

## 1.4 Existing Studies on Sobti's Work

Krishna Sobti's work has been the object of several studies, mainly written in Hindi. The aspects highlighted by most of the analyses of Sobti's novels and short stories revolve mainly on the depiction of female characters, gender issues and power relationships. While several monographs give an overview of all of Sobti's novels, most of the authors have chosen to look at one or a selection of texts, like Christof-Füchsle in his article on *Mitro marjānī* (1966, *Mitro the Troublesome*, thereafter MM, translated into English as *Tohellwithyou Mitro*),<sup>115</sup> or Vasudha Dalmia's analysis of *Dilo-dānīs* (1995, *Heart and Reason*, thereafter DoD, translated into English as *The Heart Has Its Reason*) as a re-writing of the classical *bārahmāsā* (poems describing each month of the year through their symbolisation of the emotions of separated lovers).<sup>116</sup>

From those studies emerges the image of a writer who stages rather extraordinary characters and destinies, focussing often on very strong female characters, and who is attuned to social and gender differences. Sobti is also perceived as a historical writer, able to depict accurately different epochs – or rather key moments – of South Asian history. Her very particular use of language has not yet been studied much, although her intensive use of dialectal loanwords and non-standard constructions is highlighted as a great difficulty by several critics.

The monographs devoted to Sobti's work have until now emphasised Sobti's exposition of gender issues and asked the question whether Sobti must be considered a feminist writer – a label to which she herself would have strongly opposed, as I will discuss in the following chapters. For Sobti's generation, writing as a woman automatically raises the issue of what a woman writes about, the range of her experiences, and the appropriate language and topics for a woman. Through her choices, Sobti indubitably rejects the stereotypes projected on women who write as well as the very idea that there might be topics or wordings inappropriate for women writers.<sup>117</sup> The main characters of most of her novels are women, with

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**115** Christof-Füchsle 1998.

**116** See Dalmia 2006.

**117** Sobti's rejection of the label as 'woman writer' is however not discussed by the scholars who examined her work so far, the only exception being Jasbir Jain's collection of essays on



the exception of *Yārom ke yār* (1968, *The Friends of the Friends*, thereafter YY). As shown for example by Geeta Solanki in her monograph *Nārī cetnā aur Kṛṣṇā Sobti ke upanyās* (*Women Consciousness and Krishna Sobti's Novels*, 2004), Sobti can be placed within the context of the feminists movements in India, because her work gives a voice to the perspectives of many female characters and, as in the case of the novel *Ḍār se bichuṛī* (1958, *Separated from the Flock*, thereafter DSB, translated into English as *Memory's Daughter*), often adopts the perspective of one or several female protagonists to tell the story as women experience and perceive it. Solanki contextualises Sobti's work within the struggle for women's rights in India and analyses the elements which she deems to be feminist in Sobti's novels. She centres her argumentation on the most important female protagonists and on women's issues (*nārī-samasyāem*) through a feminist reading of the novels. Seeing Sobti's work through this lens, Solanki emphasises what she calls Sobti's progressive views. She highlights Sobti's choice of female protagonists who assert themselves and take decisions, her depiction of economically independent women like Ratti in *Sūrajmukhī amdhare ke* (1972, *Sunflowers of the Dark*, thereafter SAK) or of heroines who express their needs and choose their way in life, like Channa and Mehak in DoD. Sobti's female protagonists are thereby clearly defying the conventions and the traditional image of what a woman's place and role in society are.

A similar line of argumentation leads Kumari Meena to place Sobti outside of the category of 'women writers' because of her depiction of women characters but also because of the wide range of topics explored in her fictional texts. In her monograph on Sobti, *Kṛṣṇā Sobti kā racnā-saṁsār* (*Krishna Sobti's Literary World*, 2004), Meena stresses the uniqueness of Sobti's oeuvre in its diversity and its originality, specifically in the experimentation with forms. If the plot of the novels or short stories is often rather simple, argues Meena, the wording, distinct for each work, and the exploration of many possible narrative structures (often non-linear, non-chronological), make Sobti stand out among the Hindi writers of her generation. Meena's monograph lists many central points of Sobti's oeuvre, which are also essential to a better understanding of her poetics. Particularly relevant and interesting is the attention given by Sobti to language. The diction of each novel is different – and differs from the general tone of the short stories – and enables Sobti to recreate a specific atmosphere. Meena's analysis of Sobti's wide range of topics uncovers Sobti's ability to capture accurately various setting; however, by praising Sobti's originality and the richness of her language as elements that put

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the topic of writing as a woman in India, see Jain, 2007a, where an essay of Sobti's on her double, Hashmat, is published and briefly introduced.

her on an equal footing with men writers, she implicitly accepts the idea that women's writing is a category in itself and that most women writers are, by definition, not the equal of men but must strive to achieve this equal status. Even in the first part of her monograph, where she attempts to describe Sobti's personality and outline her life, Meena does not mention Sobti's reluctance to see her work assessed only as the work of a woman. On the contrary, by explicitly stating that Sobti must be seen as the equal of men, Meena stresses the existence of a category which Sobti, as will emerge in the following chapters, doesn't consider as a valid criterion for the analysis and assessment of literature. But Meena's point lies somewhere else: she wishes to demonstrate not only the quality of Sobti's work at a literary level, but also the impact it has at a social level by its depiction of female protagonists who cannot be reduced to stereotypes and do not fit a traditional view of gender roles.

Rohini, in her study *Ek nazar Kṛṣṇā Sobtī par* (A Glance at Krishna Sobti, 2000), goes even further by positioning Sobti within the category of 'women's writing'. She defines this category as the literature written by women and treating of women's issues (dealing for example with self-assertion, access to education and financial independence or with the struggle for emancipation). Sobti is described in this context as a precursor for writers of the following generations, particularly because of the freedom of her female characters, both in terms of opinions and discourse, and in terms of actions. The discussion of Sobti's literary work is then divided into two parts, the first focused on the early period (upto the publication of *YY* in 1968) and the second on what Rohini calls her 'mature years'. According to Rohini, an evolution in the style but also in the choice of topics can indeed be observed in Sobti's works, with a research on the construction of idiosyncratic languages for each work and the specific forms befitting the theme of each novel. This approach could be analysed in greater depth, and it is something which I attempt to do in chapter four through the examination of Sobti's views on Hindi as a 'plural' or 'heteroglossic' language. Meena and Rohini both take all of Sobti's novels into account in their studies. They lay stress on gender issues and show how Sobti's depiction of singular destinies supports the questioning of traditional gender roles and gender divisions. This aspect of Sobti's work is particularly important. As I will demonstrate through the analysis of Sobti's poetics, it is by her descriptions of individual and extraordinary destinies – of men and women – that Sobti recreates the lost worlds and gives voices to 'nameless people' (*anām log*), thus bringing them back to life.

Sobti's female characters possess each a different personality and an idiosyncratic voice. This point has been specifically highlighted by Rupa Sinha in *Strī-asmitā aur kṛṣṇā sobtī* (2008, Women's selfhood and Krishna Sobti). This monograph on Sobti's female protagonists is interesting because it shows the

writer's ability to portray women from all social classes and perceive each of them as a complex individual interacting with complex socio-cultural frames.

Sobti's depiction of female characters and social structures has been at the centre of the studies and articles on her work so far. In Rekha's "Renegotiating Gendered Space: A Reading of Krishna Sobti's Fiction" (2009), the adoption of the definition of space as gendered in a traditional society allows the author to emphasise Sobti's awareness of the constrictions applying to women within families. Breaking out of the space allotted to one corresponds to a breach of rules and results in separation from one's society. In Sobti's novels, this does not always lead to an empowerment, something which Sobti has been reproached with by some feminist critics, like Chandra Nisha Singh.<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, Rekha's article attests to Sobti's awareness of a connection between gender and space. This analysis is particularly convincing for the novels DSB and DoD, where space is not only a part of a division of roles within families but also an important marker of social status, showing who belongs where – and at what time, or on what occasion.

Sobti's novels are indeed subtle expositions of very complicated and intricate social structures and hierarchies, not only in relation to women, but also to the male protagonists of the stories. In his discussion of relationships in a marriage in *Intimate Relationships*, Sudhir Kakar refers to several modern South Asian novels to illustrate his points on the constrictions generated by society and its codes incumbent on both husband and wife in a traditional joint family.<sup>119</sup> In this context, he refers to Krishna Sobti's novel *Mitro Marjānī* as an example of life in such a family. It is striking that for him, literature proves to be a way of pointing out the problems induced by the existing social structures.

Sobti's awareness of such structures and the conflicts they can provoke are also used by other scholars to support their analysis of power relations. In the case of Kumool Abbi, for example, the analysis of Sobti's longest novel, *Zindagīnāmā* (1978, Chronicle of Life, thereafter ZN, translated into English as *Zindaginama*), allows for a reconstruction of social interactions in rural Punjab before the partition.<sup>120</sup> Comparing the novel with historical records, Abbi shows how literature can be useful to understand complicated relationships between communities but also to attest to a shared, lived culture. Abbi's discussion centres on the myth told by one character at the very beginning of the novel and, through an interpretation of this story, it reconstructs the intertwined

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**118** Singh 2007.

**119** Kakar 1989.

**120** See Abbi 2002 as well as her two articles, Abbi 2008a and Abbi 2008b.

cultures of all the communities of the village while simultaneously pointing out the already existing tensions that foreshadow the partition. In her analysis, Abbi emphasises the reconstitution of the past and the accuracy of its depiction. In two articles published in *Reconstructing identities: society through literature* (2008), she develops further her study of the two aspects of the novel which she had already mentioned in her monograph: the depiction of identity through religion and caste, and the discussion of women's sexuality and identity through their position as widow, wife or potential lover.<sup>121</sup> Abbi's work demonstrates Sobti's shrewd political awareness and her sensitivity to the treasure of shared legends in rural Punjab before the partition. Through her analyses, Abbi argues that the partition and its violence are rooted to a great extent in economic inequalities and social structures which render the common life of various religious communities complicated (the rules of politeness but also the rules of 'purity', for upper caste Hindus, which forbid them to eat together with their Muslim neighbours). Those points are important in Sobti's own depiction of the partition in her interviews.<sup>122</sup>

I believe that caution is necessary in the use of literature as a source or document to understand a specific geo-social and historical context. However, it is certain that Sobti's novels lay bare the existing structures and power dynamics, while always focussing on the perspectives of the protagonists and their own perceptions of reality. In his thesis on English translations of Sobti's work, Ashok Verma examines the structures of power in several of Sobti's novels and discusses the question of language and language-related choices in power games in contemporary Indian society.<sup>123</sup> Verma argues that Sobti's particular use of a variety of language registers and dialects reflects the hierarchical structures of society and brings out its oppressive structures and attitudes. Verma's analysis is particularly convincing in his discussion of *Mitro Marjānī*, where he demonstrates the difference between the language of the main protagonist, Mitro, and that of her in-laws. His study highlights some of the difficulties of translating the specific registers of language used according to one's status in a language where the same social structures do not exist or even if they do, can not be easily rendered in translation. In his analysis of power games, Verma also shows that Sobti's works can and, in fact, must be read in the context of the generation that came of age at the independence and was to support the Nehruvian ideal of a secular and plural democracy. The vision of society carried

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<sup>121</sup> Abbi 2008a; Abbi 2008b.

<sup>122</sup> See chapter six. See also Sobti's interview with Bhalla in Bhalla 2007.

<sup>123</sup> Verma 2013.

by the novels, he argues, agrees with this ideal. While Verma's remarks on language and translation are pertinent, his thesis does not take a philological or linguistic approach of the issue and remains therefore at times rather superficial. However, he hints at some important aspects of Sobti's poetics and stylistics by pointing out her mastery of several lexical registers.

The question of language and stylistics resurfaces in R. S. Gupta's analyses of Sobti's multilingualism and the problems encountered by translators, who themselves function in multiple languages. The author discusses problems in the translation of Sobti's novel *Ai lar̥kī* (1991, *Hey girl!*, thereafter AL, translated into English as *Listen Girl!*)<sup>124</sup> and his in-depth study includes his own translatorial suggestions for passages of the novel. While doing so, he highlights how culturally embedded the text is and how much is implicitly referred to. This is a core aspect of Sobti's poetics, manifest to a greater extent in other novels as well, for example in the three historical novels, DSB, DoD and ZN, where the reader must provide a good knowledge of the context. It is part of what one may call Sobti's 'elliptical language', and Gupta shows what challenges it presents to both reader and translator.

Language and multilingualism is indeed a core aspect of Sobti's oeuvre. It has however until now not been analysed in great detail, with the exception of two articles by Stefania Cavaliere.<sup>125</sup> Cavaliere highlights the multilingual character of Sobti's texts, which she places in the context of Indian literature as a 'polyphonic canon'. This term designates the plurilingualism of the Indian subcontinent, which is present in literature by way of loanwords, idioms and various other cross-lingual references. Cavaliere's articles are a very good illustration of Sobti's poetics of language. Through an investigation of the construction of new images of the socio-cultural system, they also emphasise Sobti's vision of Indian society after the independence as being torn between the Nehruvian vision of a secular ideal and a much more complicated reality, where a multiplicity of layers of identity interact. Cavaliere also shows, in her discussion of Sobti's depiction of pre-partition Punjab, how original Sobti is in her presentation of history through a multiplicity of perspectives (and of language registers). Her argument about Sobti's portrayal of marginal life experiences in order to depict everything which constitutes the collective memory of people is an interesting interpretation of the wide range of characters and idiolects staged by Sobti and corroborates the arguments of chapters four and six.

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124 Gupta 2007.

125 Cavaliere 2017; Cavaliere 2021.

Language, variety of registers and the indications they give about an epoch and a society are very important topics in Sobti's work. Those aspects are also brought forward by Mariola Offredi in the three articles she has devoted to ZN and Sobti's work. Offredi's approach is quite original and offers fresh perspective on Sobti's oeuvre. Two of the articles are centred on ZN and its concepts of myths and legends, while placing the novel in the context of Sobti's other works. In "Zindagīnāmā: The Undivided Panjab of Krishna Sobti",<sup>126</sup> Offredi shows the structure of the novel through a distinction between the men's world and the women's world, which she considers a reflection of the myth of the Sun and the Moon told at the beginning of the novel. In her analysis of the text, Offredi points to Sobti's use of various language registers and linguistic dialects according to the various characters staged. She also draws parallels between ZN and DoD, showing how the second novel may be read as a form of evolution of the first.

With "Myth and Religion in Kṛṣṇā Sobti's Zindagīnāmā",<sup>127</sup> Offredi continues her analysis of ZN by discussing how Sobti uses myths, legends and religious references (mostly to Sufi saints and bhakti poets) to show that the partition divided a land but not its shared cultural heritage. Offredi lists myths and religious currents referenced in the novel, thus illustrating the variety of allusions (implicit and explicit) made by Sobti to myth, religion and spirituality. In the following chapters, I will develop several of those topics which are indeed central to Sobti's views on literature and her own writing. While I find Offredi's points useful, my approach is different from hers, as I base my analysis mainly on Sobti's statements on her poetics.

"A journey from Bacpan to *Samay sargam*"<sup>128</sup> examines the place of memory and remembrance in Sobti's works upto the publication of *Samay sargam* (2000, *The Melody of Time*, thereafter SaS, translated into English as *The Music of Solitude*), stressing their role in the construction and reconstruction of the world of the characters and their selves. Offredi argues that Sobti's extremely varied work presents as a constant the presence of two dialoging voices and the relationship between past and present, through the phenomenon of remembering. Those two points in time are expressed by the use of memory as a literary device in the construction of the plot, but also in literature's potential to act as a memento. In addition, Offredi points out to the role of memory in the process of creation, a topic elaborated on in chapters four and six. Thereby, she demonstrates

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126 Offredi 2007.

127 Offredi 2009.

128 Offredi 2008.

the importance, for Krishna Sobti, of an interaction with the surrounding world – possible through her own memories of it – during her writing process.

Offredi's approach is very original and differs from that of the great majority of critics. The present study, however, will follow yet another approach to Sobti's work, through a search for her poetics. Nonetheless, Offredi's articles offer some important insights into Sobti's literary universe by highlighting the importance of dialogism (plurality of voices) and memory. Those two elements are at the core of Sobti's poetics.

Another original study of a novel by Sobti is Vasudha Dalmia's analysis of DoD as a modern re-writing of the classical *bārahmāsā*.<sup>129</sup> The *bārahmāsā* traditionally follows months of the year and associates each with the feelings generated in the hearts of the lovers passing through different stages of love. DoD has a very complicated temporal setting and each of the periods of the story narrated is set in a specific season. Using the *bārahmāsā* frame enabled Dalmia to lay bare the complicated structure of the novel and show the evolution of the main protagonists' feelings, an evolution which is not, as Dalmia points out, the classical evolution of feelings in a traditional *bārahmāsā* poem, but rather follows the social change witnessed by the protagonists in the story. The comparison to a traditional form places Sobti within Indian narrative traditions while emphasising the originality of her works. It also showcases her ability to play with classical literary *topoi* and change them according to her own poetical intent.

*Mitro marjānī* (1966), is certainly one of Sobti's most studied and discussed novels. Adopting Mieke Bal's theory of narratology, Martin Christof-Füchsle unravels the evolution of the main protagonist in the course of the novel.<sup>130</sup> In his article, he shows the inner logic of the character, in spite of the reproach of a 'return to conventions' often made against Sobti for Mitro's choice to go back to her husband at the end of the story.<sup>131</sup> His analysis of the novel demonstrates the efficiency of a narratological analysis for contemporary Hindi novels. By laying bare the narrative structure, Christof-Füchsle brings to light Sobti's sensitivity to the inner voice of her characters, a point she insists on in her non-fictional works.

With a few exceptions, the studies on Sobti's work examine the gender roles and the gender constructions within the novels and attempt to place Sobti

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129 Dalmia 2006.

130 Christof-Füchsle 1998.

131 For example, by Chandra Nisha Singh and other feminist critics, see Singh 2007.

within the feminist discourses in India. If most of the critics perceive her as a feminist writer, defending the freedoms of women in all the aspects of their life, some of the radical feminists, like Chandra Nisha Singh, argue that Sobti's novels present a return to conventions at their conclusion.<sup>132</sup> However, it appears clearly from the novels that Sobti does not portray stereotypical characters – neither female nor male – and that her choices of protagonists and plot allow her to lay bare some important social issues, especially with regard to the condition of women. This was highlighted already in the first reviews and articles on her work, for example by Usha Saksena Nilsson.<sup>133</sup> The second main point made by the existing studies on Sobti is the wide range of vocabulary she uses and her mastery of many linguistic registers. This point is highlighted by Mahesh Alok, for example, when he discusses Sobti's style and her ability to create an atmosphere for each setting.<sup>134</sup>

Two recent publications deserve to be mentioned here. Girdhar Rathi's *Dūsrā jīvan* (2001, Second life), a biography of Sobti combined with reflections on her works, and *Krishna Sobti: A Counter Archive*, a volume collecting essays on Krishna Sobti and excerpts from her fictional and non-fictional works, edited by Sukrita Paul Kumar and Rekha Sethi.<sup>135</sup> Rathi's book offers a very personal portrait of Krishna Sobti, nurtured by his meetings with the writer herself and by accounts of many of Sobti's friends. Beside a biographical sketch, the publication also reflects on important milestones in Sobti's writing career, such as her first short stories; the creation of her double, Hashmat; or her self-description as a 'middle-class woman' viewed through the lens of Sobti's interviews and memoirs. Complementing this biography of Krishna Sobti, Kumar and Sethi's volume explores Sobti's creative world along the notion of a 'counter archive'. This approach proves very successful in bringing to the fore the core aspects of Sobti's views on history writing, memory, and language.

To sum up, the existing studies on Sobti have demonstrated her originality and the special space she occupies within Hindi literature as a writer who does not portray stereotypical female protagonists and is not afraid of breaking conventions, be it in the matter of content, or of language and form. However,

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**132** See Singh 2007. Singh discusses MM and SAK, where she deplores the fact that Sobti is not more radical in the choices her heroines make in the end. The discussion of Sobti's poetics in the following chapters will show that for Sobti the 'truth of the characters', i.e., their voice, is more important than writer's own wishes or agendas. Sobti says she is not an activist but a writer.

**133** Saksena Nilsson 1977.

**134** Alok 2010.

**135** Rathi 2021; Kumar/Sethi 2021.



Sobti's oeuvre has so far not been extensively examined from the perspective of Sobti's own poetological statements. Building on the existing studies on Sobti's female characters and Sobti's language, the present book addresses Sobti's poetics by way of an analysis of her non-fictional texts informed by a close reading of her fiction.

## 1.5 Outline of the Book

Through an analysis of her non-fictional works, the present book explores Sobti's construction of the figure of the writer and the writing process. It delves into Sobti's relationship with language and her use of metaphors, as well as her concepts of time and time narration. In my analyses of those, I proceed from Genette's narratology (using also his terminology) to Barthes' discussion of the figure of the writer, while placing Sobti in the context of reflections on those topics within the Hindi literary sphere.

Chapter two constitutes an introduction to Sobti's life and work. I start by presenting the known biographical facts about Sobti, drawing attention to her own construction of herself as a 'middle-class woman',<sup>136</sup> belonging to the generation that came of age at the independence of India in 1947 and was part of the Nehruvian vision of the building of the new nation as secular, plural and democratic. I argue that Sobti's background as a member of the educated middle-class but also a part of the class of the Punjabi landowners, who lost their lands and homeland during the partition, tuned her ear to a multiplicity of dialects which are present in her works. Furthermore, it is this background that informs Sobti's views of India as a plural and secular democracy and lies at the root of her political positions. I then move on to an overview of Sobti's work and finally, after a brief contextualisation of women's issues and women's movements in India, introduce the question around the label of 'women's writing' (*mahilā lekhan*). This issue is important to understand Sobti's position with regard to the category of 'woman writer' in which her work was included.

Chapter three is devoted to the image of the writer in Sobti's self-perception and her depiction of the writing process. After discussing Sobti's ambiguous position towards 'women's writing' (*mahilā lekhan*), I turn to her construction of herself as a writer for whom being a woman is but one aspect (albeit important) of her personality. Through an analysis of the recurrent metaphor of the field used by Sobti to represent the process of creation, I determine Sobti's views on

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136 See Sharma 1996: 106.

the independence of the work from the author, drawing on Roland Barthes' and on Tzvetan Todorov's conceptions of the author. The writer is constructed by Sobti as a catalyst or transmitter, living constantly in an 'in-between position', from which she can bring forth the voices of the nameless people (*anām log*). The writer is not seen as the almighty creator of a text but as a listener and 'gardener/cultivator'. This introduces the notion of dialogue between the writer and her surrounding world, the text and the writer and the text and the reader. Dialogue seems very important for Sobti, who considers literature as a place of interaction and its reception as a dynamic process. On this particular point, her thoughts suggest an interesting parallel with some of Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas on dialogue.

Chapter four is dedicated to the question of language. Language lies at the core of Sobti's research preceding the act of writing and must precisely express the world of the protagonists. This means that in the context of the debate on Hindi, and more specifically the debate on the inclusion of dialectal forms and loanwords, Sobti holds a very straightforward position and favours what she calls a 'democratic' (*loktantrik*) Hindi. 'Democratic' Hindi is an inclusive Hindi which reflects the language spoken by the people in North India and not the language of an elite. This position echoes Sobti's political views voiced in the context of conventions like *Pratirodh* (lit. 'opposition', a cycle of conferences held by activists at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi in 2015 and, in a second edition, in 2016). Indeed, Sobti speaks up for values such as freedom of speech, integration of the lower classes in politics and society, and individual rights. She opposes all forms of populism in her vision of every Indian as being first the citizen of her country before belonging to a religious community or a caste. In this, she voices the Nehruvian vision of India, a position which also attests to her background as a member of the educated middle-class.

However, language is also the tool of literature and, in the case of Sobti, it is an instrument for experimenting, often through the use of metaphors and other tropes. As a consequence, the second part of chapter four delves into Sobti's use of specific metaphors such as the text-textile metaphor, or the painting and music metaphors, to verbalise the process of literary creation. These recurrent metaphors give rise to a more pro-active image of the writer than the one presented in chapter three and intimated by the field metaphor. This more pro-active image is embedded in the idea that the writer absorbs and assimilates voices from the outside and, after a process of germination and maturation of the proto-work in her 'memory bank', is able to recreate the world through words.

Chapter five investigates the activity of Sobti's literary double, Hashmat, and what the creation of such a double implies. It places the construction of an 'other

self' in the context of the whole question of gendered writing, since Hashmat is a man. The double appears as more than a 'male double'; he is really an expansion of the self which offers an opportunity to explore new perspectives and dimensions. As such, he reflects Sobti's awareness of the coexistence of a multiplicity of selves within her – and within any individual. Hashmat can also be read as an illustration of Sobti's views on the writer's ability to encompass the world in all its aspects by the adoption of a multitude of perspectives, a notion that she links with her description of the writer as *ardhanārīśvara* (image of a half-man, half-woman god, one of the manifestations of Shiva), a concept close to Virginia Woolf's 'androgynous mind'.

Chapter six builds on the notions developed in the previous chapters, particularly the idea of the work as epitomizing a truth about life which surpasses the individual experience of the writer, and elaborates on those notions through an examination of Sobti's conceptions of time and history in literature. The first part of the chapter defines literature as the instrument through which the writer, with the help of memory, reconstructs or 'fixes in words' a specific time-space dimension in the face of the transitoriness of all things human. Sobti's thoughts on time and memory parallel other modern novelists' concerns with time and impermanence, a question voiced by Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf or James Joyce, for example, but also by some of Sobti's contemporaries in India like Nirmal Verma or Agyeya. However, for Sobti, time and memory possess a 'material quality' as well; as such, they are not only constitutive of the individuality, but also of narration and process of creation, particularly through Sobti's concept of 'memory banks'. These 'memory banks' consist of places in a writer's mind where impressions, ideas, images and experiences are stored and mature, to suddenly re-emerge when the time is right to be re-shaped into a literary form. The role of time and memory in Sobti's novels is crucial not only during the process of creation but within the texts themselves, as I show through a reading of AL and SaS and a discussion of the notion of 'memory banks' itself. In the second part of the chapter, I analyse more precisely the place and role of history in a literary work and the difference between the writer and the historian through Sobti's construction of the writer as a humanist (perceived here as a person preoccupied with human nature and the individual rather than with larger historical contexts). Sobti's vision of history and its plurality are presented through the analysis of the issue of time and history in the novels DSB, ZN and DoD, all three of which are set in specific historical contexts. As opposed to history as an academic field, literature is, for Sobti, a place where the personal and subjective experience of time and historical events can come forth, a place also where a world lost (like the pre-partition Punjab) can come back to life through language.

While literature has the task of ‘bringing back to life’ and of recreating a time-setting, it does so without a political agenda, leaving characters the freedom to find their own voices. However, in Sobti’s vision of literature, a writer is not aloof from her time and society and must therefore also be a voice in the public space. Chapter seven therefore examines the constitution of a writer’s persona in the public sphere through Sobti’s treatment of socio-political themes in her essays and her fictional work. Here, I address the paradox between the complete freedom from judgement about characters and plots, and the writer’s position in the public sphere. In this context, Sobti’s identity as a middle-class Punjabi woman and her experience of the partition receive particular attention as the background of her political awareness. This construction of a ‘public persona’ in spite of Sobti’s otherwise reserved attitude and her views on the freedom of the writer from any judgement on good and evil leads me to draw a parallel between Sobti’s opinions and Barthes’ idea of the conflation of the functions of the writer (*écrivain*) and the scribe (*écrivain*).

Finally, in the conclusion, I summarize the results of my reading of Sobti’s non-fictional works and integrate them in Sobti’s construction of the writer as a catalyst, an in-between, who facilitates a constant dialogue of literature with society and time. I highlight her staging of the writer as an intellectual with a duty towards the society she lives in, a phenomenon illustrated by her public appearances and her decision to give back all the official awards she had received from government institutions, as a sign of protest against the climate of growing intolerance for divergent opinions in India.<sup>137</sup> I show how this political position must be read as part of Sobti’s personal background, and how Sobti herself distinguishes between her position as a public persona and her activity as a writer who sees literature as a free thinking space, a place where, through language, a writer can experiment and search for a truth about life and the human being, away from any moral or value judgement.

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**137** In 2015, after the murder of the South Indian scholar and writer, M. M. Kalburgi, several Indian authors, including Sobti, gave back all their government awards in protest against the government’s lack of reaction in the face of growing intolerance and against the pressure and threats received by intellectuals and scholars who expressed views conflicting with the now dominant nationalist opinion.

## 2 Krishna Sobti and Her Work

Krishna Sobti counts among the most prominent Hindi writers of her generation, a generation who had just come of age at the independence of India in 1947. Her work is characterised by its variety of topics and wide range of vocabulary and dialectal idioms. Her novels are very different from each other, not only in their subject matter, but also in their diction. Common to all of them is however the absence of judgement regarding the narrative enfolded of events and characters, very often manifested through a strategy of switching focalisation or even blurring the focalisation (so that it is sometimes unclear for the reader whether the narration is focalised or whether it is a third-person unfocalised and heterodiegetic narration). Through this strategy and through the variety of her writings, Sobti has created a particular niche for herself in Hindi literature. The analysis of her non-fictional works throws a new light on the philosophy underlying her fictional oeuvre.

In the present chapter, I start by briefly introducing Sobti's life and work, first through Sobti's own assessment of her background as a middle-class woman and member of a community of writers, then through an overview of her works, both fictional and non-fictional. The next step will bring me to the issue of writing as a woman in South Asia after 1947 and the context of the women's movements in India – Sobti's work has, indeed, always been placed in this particular context. This will, in turn, lead me to her self-perception as a writer, the question of being perceived as a feminist or as a 'woman writer' playing here a key role.

### 2.1 A Short Biography

Sobti was born in 1925 in a small Punjabi town called Gujarat, now in Pakistan, the granddaughter of a Hindu landowner who had however left Punjab to work in the colonial administration. Her father was a civil servant in the colonial administration as well, and Sobti grew up between Delhi and Shimla (the then summer capital of British India). She therefore experienced several worlds during her childhood and fondly remembers going back to her 'homeland' (*vatan*) Punjab for a few months every year.<sup>138</sup> The district of Gujarat, lying between the two rivers Chenab and Jhelum, is of great importance to her. Images of water, with its ebb and flow,

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138 See MSRS, Sobti 2014: 406–407.

omnipresent in her fictional and non-fictional works, are always associated with those two rivers, symbols of prosperity and fertility.<sup>139</sup> Sobti was schooled mostly in English. The choice to write in Hindi, which is representative of many writers of her generation, must be seen in the context of the attempt to make Hindi the national language of independent India.<sup>140</sup> After the partition, her family settled in India, and she did not complete her degree course started at Fatehchand College in Lahore. She lived in Delhi for a while and worked for some time in the refugee camps as a teacher before taking on the position of private tutor to the Maharaja of Sirohi near Mount Abu. This experience is narrated in her last novel, *Gujarāt Pākīstān se Gujarāt Hindustān* (2017, lit. From Gujarat Pakistan to Gujarat India, translated into English as *A Gujarat Here, A Gujarat There*). She later left this job and joined the Army Officer's Children's School in Delhi, where she served as Principal until 1951. She then worked as an Editor for the Adult Literacy Programme of the city of Delhi. She resigned from this position in 1980, after the success of her novel *Zindagīnāmā*, and started to live as a writer, spending her time between Delhi and Shimla. She was a writer-in-residence at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Shimla between 1996 and 1999. Sobti lived her later years in New Delhi, where she passed away on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2019. She was a private person and talked mostly of childhood memories in her interviews, remaining vague when it came to her personal life. In her seventies, she married the Dogri writer and translator Shivanath, breaking once again the conventions of Indian society by entering into this late union.

Sobti insists of there being two aspects which constituted her background: her belonging to the middle-class and her ties to the rural Punjabi society (however, one must keep in mind that this is in fact the class of the wealthy land-owners). She voices this for example in one of her most important essays, MSRS:<sup>141</sup>

On one hand, I belong to the class of the cultivators, which, because of its open-minded nature, gives you the audacity to do anything; but on the other hand, I am the product of the white-collar class whose administrative posting has become a synonym of prosperity.

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**139** See autobiographical passages in MSRS, Sobti 2014, but also HaH, Sobti 2012: vol.1: 252–271. The next chapter of this book will develop the notion of a fertile land as a metaphor for writing.

**140** See also chapter four. One ought to note here that the appeal of Hindi was its potentially huge readership and the emphasis put on Hindi by the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) and other movements, among them the Arya Samaj, one of the most important Hindu reform movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**141** See my discussion of Sobti's essays below, in section 2.3.

I openly confess that I have lived within this framework and have assimilated the so-called habits, manners and deeply rooted, strong validations of this class with all the frustrations nurturing it.<sup>142</sup>

Being confronted with two worlds – the rural Punjab and her grandparents' *haveli*<sup>143</sup> during her summer holidays, and the cities during the rest of the year – contributed to Sobti's awareness of the diversity of life and the huge linguistic variety of her environment. However, the passage quoted above also demonstrates Sobti's self-representation as a member of the 'class of cultivators' (actually the class of wealthy landowners, who were both exploiting and sustaining village life in rural Punjab before the independence and the partition)<sup>144</sup> and the educated middle-class employed by the government. If there is some irony here in Sobti's tone and wording ('posing', 'manners', 'so-called habits'), she clearly remains very proud of this background and defends the values of this intellectual middle-class with which she identifies.<sup>145</sup> She is indeed indubitably close to the ideals of a plural and secular democracy, where each individual is granted equal rights regardless of social background, religion, caste or gender. Those ideals were defended by the intellectual middle-class at the time of the independence and were to be the cornerstone of the building of the new nation in what one could call a Nehruvian vision of India.<sup>146</sup>

Sobti started writing quite early on and published her first short stories in the 1940s in literary magazines (mostly in *Vicār* and *Pratik*). After the first attempt at publishing a novel in 1952 (*Cannā*, a story focussed on the life of the wife of a Punjabi Hindu landowner at the time of the partition),<sup>147</sup> she published the short novel DSB in 1957 with Rajkamal Prakashan, her Hindi publisher to this day. This first novel was well received and contributed to establishing Sobti among the writers living in Delhi in the 1950s and 1960s and frequenting the

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142 MSRS, Sobti 2014: 406: *Ek or khetihar varg se juṛī hūm jo apne mizāj ke khulepan se āpko kuch bhī kar sakne kī jurat detā hai, dūsrī or us safedpoś varg kī upaj bhī hūm jiskī safedpośī uskī bharṅimā kī paryāya ban cukī hai. Khule dil svīkār karnā cāhūmṅī kī is varg kā tathākathit vyavahār, sāj-saṁvār aur unke nice paltī kunṭhāom se kahīm gahrī aur pukhtā mānyatāom ko mairne isi dhānce meṁ jiyā hai aur ātmasāt kiyā hai.*

143 A large mansion or a townhouse, usually owned by nobles, landowners or merchants.

144 Like the family of the Shahs in Sobti's long novel on pre-partition Punjab, *Zindagināmā* (1978).

145 See also chapter seven.

146 See for example Pandey 2001 or Chatterjee 2010. See also chapters four and seven.

147 Sobti withdrew the manuscript before its publication when she saw the extensive editorial changes introduced by her publisher – most of them alterations of Punjabi words into standard Hindi. The novel was finally published, as it was first written, in 2019, see Sobti 2019.

coffee houses and tea houses of the Indian capital, constituting what one could call a Hindi bohemia.

The circles of the literary intelligentsia of the 50s and 60s have not yet been the object of much scholarly attention.<sup>148</sup> This Hindi bohemia seems however particularly relevant in the experience of the writers who were active at this period. The coffee and tea house culture created a place of interaction and dialogue which was instrumental in the constitution of a consciousness of the role of the writers towards society. This world is depicted in several novels and short stories of the time; Mohan Rakesh's *Amdhere bandh kamre* (1961, lit. Dark closed rooms, published in English as *Lingering Shadows*) is one such example.<sup>149</sup> It is also at the core of most of the short pieces written by Sobti's double, Hashmat. Recently, Baldev Vanshi collected several articles and short literary pieces by actors of this literary scene under the title *Dillī tī haūs* (Delhi's tea house).<sup>150</sup>

The writers met and discussed literature and society, exchanged opinions and read each other's works. They constituted a social group of their own, which has been portrayed with an ironical tone by Hashmat, Sobti's double, in several short pieces of *Ham Haśmat* (I, Hashmat, 1977, 1999, 2012 and 2019).<sup>151</sup>

It is in this context as well that the group of the *Naī Kahanī* – the new short story –<sup>152</sup> was born. Arguably, these interactions between the writers contributed to forging their awareness of their responsibility towards society and rendering the writing of essays or non-fictional texts important in their eyes. Several trends can be identified among the writings of this period. Most writers were close to the communist ideology (or even Communist Party members) and expressed their political leanings in their works. However, the writers also constituted an intelligentsia, a class of their own, living in a world which was very different from that of the masses – and especially from that of the people living on the land, in the countryside. They belonged mostly to an urban, educated, slightly westernised middle-class (a novel like Rakesh' shows this well). In spite of the political beliefs of most of the writers, particularly the Progressives

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148 With some exceptions, such as Bhattacharya 2017.

149 Rakesh 1993a; Rakesh 1993b.

150 Vanshi 2009. See also an article by Ravikant Sharma, Sharma 2016.

151 On Sobti's double, see below, chapter five, where I examine Sobti's relationship to the alter ego she created. For the moment, let us only bear in mind that Hashmat is a second writer-personality invented by Sobti, some sort of 'failed writer' who writes a chronicle of the life of the literary circles of Delhi. It is not a pseudonym, since Sobti was not concealing her identity behind this name.

152 A movement in Hindi literature of the 1950s and 1960s, which developed a new type of short story writing centred on the individual's experiences of her surroundings.



(*pragativādi*), it is in this context as well that movements promoting art for art's sake and experimentations with forms (for example Agyeya's Experimentalists, *prayogvādi*) emerged.<sup>153</sup> In fact, as Sharma shows in his article, it was a space where writers of all generations and affiliations met and interacted. Some of them, like Sobti, always insisted on remaining free from any agenda or political ties.<sup>154</sup>

Sobti always seems to look back at this period of her life as very happy, despite a slightly ironic attitude towards the intelligentsia, which remained a very closed society, as becomes manifest in Hashmat's portrayal of the writers and their get-togethers. It is certain that Sobti was part of this 'coffee house culture' and that knowing the other writers contributed to her awareness of her own abilities and to establishing her as a writer – she became the first woman to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award in the category of Hindi in 1979 for her longest novel, *Zindagīnāmā* (1978).<sup>155</sup> It is also worth noting that several of the prominent writers meeting in the coffee houses were, like her, originally from Punjab (her close friend Krishna Baldev Vaid or Mohan Rakesh, for example) and that the partition between India and Pakistan constituted one of the main topics of literature. For those writers, the trauma of the partition and the search for a new place in society were also among the reasons behind the creation of the coffee house culture. The relationship between the partition, the coffee houses and a literary movement like the *Naī Kahānī* has been examined by some scholars, for example Anne Castaing.<sup>156</sup>

Sobti is the author of a collection of short stories, *Badloṃ ke ghere* (1964, Encircled by clouds) and of several, mostly short, novels – with the exception of the 400-pages long *ZN*. Her short stories were written during the early stage of her writing career and published first in literary magazines before being assembled in the form of a book. A few of them have been translated into English and into various other Indian languages. Due to the form and the content of many of those stories – the conflict of the individual with society, the feeling of

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153 The *Pragativād* (progressivism) was a literary movement close to the Communist Party, which strongly believed in the ability and duty of literature to contribute to progress through education and propagation of ideas. This movement was quite different from the *Prayogvād* (experimentalism), a movement, especially strong in Hindi poetry, which devoted itself to the search for new forms of expression. The two opposed each other and there were even some personal attacks, but the dialogue between them was not impossible.

154 See also chapter seven.

155 The Sahitya Akademi Award, conferred by the Indian Academy of Literature, is given each year in categories corresponding to each of the national languages. It is one of the most prestigious literary awards in India.

156 See Castaing 2015.

alienation of the self, the focus on described details to symbolise a state of mind – Sobti's writing style of this period is sometimes associated with the aforementioned *Nāi Kahānī* movement.<sup>157</sup>

The *Nāi Kahānī* was a movement in Hindi literature which started shortly after the independence and reflected a crisis in the beliefs and values of the writers of the urban middle-class. The movement is deemed to have been at its height between 1955 and 1965, parallel to the time of the coffee house circles in Delhi. The main authors of this literary stream are Mohan Rakesh (Mohan Rākeś, 1925–1972), Kamleshwar (Kamleśvar, 1932–2007) and Rajendra Yadav (Rājendra Yādav, 1929–2013), but some other prominent Hindi writers, like Nirmal Verma, Krishna Baldev Vaid, Mannu Bhandari (Mannū Bhaṇḍārī, 1931–2021) and Krishna Sobti were close to the movement, which is reflected in some of their texts as well. The *Nāi Kahānī* focuses on the individuals and their inner world, the feeling of alienation in the modern urban environment, the search for an identity, and expression of emotions.<sup>158</sup> The form adopted is the short story – in a varying length sometimes bordering on the length of a novella – and the style is particular as well, insisting on details and symbolic images to present the feelings or situations of the protagonists.<sup>159</sup>

While several of Sobti's short stories can be embedded in the *Nāi Kahānī*, her short novels are difficult to classify into one single category. Therefore, her work escapes every attempt at being bracketed with a specific literary current. Sobti's originality is widely acknowledged by the critics; in 2017, when she received the Jnanpith Award, a literary award given each year to an Indian author for her outstanding contribution to literature, the Selection Board, in its announcement,

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**157** Konrad Meisig considers Sobti to be a member of this literary stream, see Meisig 1996: 17.

**158** See the short introduction by Nicola Pozza to the collection of Hindi short stories which he translated into French together with Galina Rousseva-Sokolova and Philippe Lang, Pozza 2001: 7–15, and the introduction to the analysis of the narrative techniques of the movement given by Konrad Meisig in his monograph, Meisig 1996.

**159** References are also made to mythological figures, the figure of Trishanku, for example: an ancestor of Rama and a former king on earth, Trishanku wished to enter heaven with his physical body, which is not possible. After asking a sage for help, he found himself in an in-between situation, suspended in mid-air between the earth he belonged to and the heaven he wanted to reach, in a heaven of his own. For the authors of the *Nāi Kahānī* movement, he represents perfectly the identity crisis of the urban middle-class, torn between modernity and tradition. Trishanku is also the title of a short story by Mannu Bhandari (1931–2021), a famous Hindi-writer of this period. Besides the conflict between the tradition of the home and household and the rapid modernisation of the cities, the ambiguity of independence, which came at the price of the partition and its violence, looms over the atmosphere of the texts of the *Nāi Kahānī*.

stated that she had “immensely enriched Hindi literature by experimenting with new styles”.<sup>160</sup>

In her novels, Sobti touches upon various topics ranging from the destiny of a young woman at the time of the Anglo-Sikh wars (DSB, 1957) to the passing of time and growing old in Delhi (SaS, 2000); the relationships between various communities (ZN, 1979; DoD, 1995); women’s sexuality and freedom (MM, 1966); or the pressure of daily life in an office (YY, 1968). This variety of topics and style has given Sobti a particular place in the Hindi literary world. Let me now present a brief overview of her most important fictional and non-fictional work.

## 2.2 Overview of Sobti’s Fiction

As already mentioned, Sobti’s novels cover a wide range of topics and adopt different forms and literary styles. With each new work, the diction changes in an attempt to reflect the world of the protagonists of the text.

Sobti started her writing career as a short story writer, publishing her very first short stories, *Lāmā* and *Nafīsā*, in the magazine *Vicār* in 1944.<sup>161</sup> All her short stories were later collected and published in a book titled after one long short story, *Badlom ke ghere* (1980, Encircled by Clouds). Both in terms of topics and in terms of writing style, these short stories are extremely wide-ranging and prefigure Sobti’s later work.

Sobti’s first published novel, *Dār se bichurī* (DSB, 1957) is a first-person narrative focused on the perception of the narrator and main protagonist, Pasho, a young Punjabi girl who finds herself tossed from one place to another in the context of the last Anglo-Sikh wars.

After this debut novella, Sobti published *Mitro marjānī* (1966), a work which gave rise to a certain controversy due to its open treatment of women’s sexuality. MM narrates the life of a large joint family in a small provincial town in a third person narrative, but with a constant shift of focalisation on the main protagonists. The joint family is composed of the parents, their three sons and their respective wives. A daughter married in another city comes visiting around the middle of the story. Mitro is the wife of the second son and it transpires after a while that her mother was a courtesan. She is

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<sup>160</sup> “Hindi writer Krishna Sobti chosen for Jnanpith Award,” *The Hindu*, 3.11.2017.

<sup>161</sup> See the interview with Tarun Bhartiya and Jayeeta Sharma in Sharma 1996. However, in a later interview for the magazine *The Caravan*, Sobti indicates *Sikkā Badal Gayā* as her first published short story. This latter story was published in Agyeya’s magazine *Pratik*.

uninhibited and refuses to submit to the rules of subservience – and to lower her head before the men of the family. Moreover, she openly speaks of her sexual longings, which her husband does not satisfy. The plot follows how the family deals with this while juggling with the financial difficulties brought about by the youngest son's bad management of business. MM, though judged controversial at first, has known an ongoing success for the past decades and was adapted into a stage play by the National School of Drama.<sup>162</sup> It is certainly Sobti's most widely received and discussed work.<sup>163</sup> In 2007, Sobti published *Jainī Meharbān Siṃh*, a modern adaptation of MM, designed originally as a script for a movie which was never filmed.

Mitro's bold language was considered scandalous, and so was the choice of the topic – women's sexuality, still a real taboo at the time. However, it is the language of the short novella *Yārom ke yār* (YY, 1968, The Friends of the Friends), which was the most criticised by the literary establishment as being 'obscene' (*aślīl*). The notion of *aślīlā* (obscenity) is an important one in Hindi literary criticism and many authors had to face similar reproaches, often coupled with the accusation of un-Indianness.<sup>164</sup> YY relates the life of a group of clerks in an office in New Delhi. The plot is not centred on one character or one particular event but follows the train of thoughts of the employees and their destinies. They use ordinary, everyday language, peppered with peculiar idioms and abuse. This was not only unusual for literary texts, but also unexpected from a woman writer.<sup>165</sup> The use of abuse and clear allusions to sexuality did not – and partly still do not – match the codes set by the Hindi establishment for women writers. For Sobti, however, these codes had in fact to be broken by the writers exercising their literary freedom and in search of authenticity.<sup>166</sup>

*Tīn pahār* (TP, 1968, Three Mountains), a short novel published in the same year as *Yārom ke yār* and indeed often appearing in the same volume, is

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**162** See Sobti's interview with Rama Jha, Jha 1981, and SAM, Sobti 2014: 154–155.

**163** Sudhir Kakar discusses it in his book *Intimate Relationships*, for example, see Kakar 1989. Alongside *Ai Laṛkī* (1991), it is also the most translated work of Sobti's with several translations in Indian languages (among others Bengali, Urdu and English) and in Russian. I will come back to it in my discussion of language in chapter four.

**164** A good example of such criticism of contemporary Hindi writers is found in Jaidev's *The Culture of Pastiche*, Jaidev 1993. It is worth noting, however, that in his monograph Jaidev mentions Sobti on several occasions as a counter-example to the pastiche-writers he criticises. I will come back to the question of language and obscenity in chapters four and five.

**165** On the subject, see amongst others Sobti's interview with Niranjana in SAM, Sobti 2014: 313–314.

**166** See Sobti's short article published in Jasbir Jain's collection of essays on women's writing in India, Jain 2007a: 18–26, and my discussion of this matter in the following chapters.

written in a completely different genre and in a completely different style. It presents a love triangle set in the Indian upper middle-class in Darjeeling. The plot in itself consists of a depiction of the inner conflicts of three individuals involved in intricate love relationships. In its language, particularly through the use of metaphors, it can be said to prefigure *Sūrajmukhī āmdhere ke* (SAK, 1972).

Told in a particularly metaphorical style, this latter novel follows the difficult evolution of Ratti, a young woman who was raped as a child and cannot connect or open up to other human beings. The text describes in particular her relationships with men, using metaphors of fire and ice and other natural elements to imply sexuality and the sexual act.

Sobti's early works had already met with a certain success, but it is with her longest novel, *Zindagīnāmā* (1978, ZN), that she acquired fame – and earned, in 1979, the most prestigious literary award of India, the Sahitya Akademi Award. ZN is a 400-pages long fresco of the life in rural Punjab before the partition. It tells the life of people from all social classes and age groups over a time of several years. Describing numerous characters, their preoccupations and their evolution, Sobti presents a picture of the life of a small, imaginary (and nameless) village, throwing light on the growing dissonances between the distinct religious communities. The novel does not focus on main characters – although many recur – but places the region, the village and the land at the centre of the narration. This type of storytelling, coupled with the wide use of local idioms and words, induced several critics to consider ZN as a regionalist novel in the same vein as Phanishwarnath Renu's *Mailā āmcāl* (1954, *The Soiled Border*).<sup>167</sup>

After the great success of ZN, Sobti did not publish anything for quite some time, apart from articles or pen-portraits written through the eyes of her double, Hashmat and published often in magazines.<sup>168</sup> As with most Hindi writers, it is extremely difficult to trace back the first publications of Sobti's short stories or

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**167** Regionalist or regional novel (*āmcālik upanyās*) is a Hindi literary genre encompassing novels with a focus on a specific local setting and employing a regional variant of Hindi. The term was coined by the Hindi writer Phanishwarnath Renu (Phaniśvarnāth Reṇū, 1921–1977) in the foreword to his novel *Mailā āmcāl* (1954). See also chapters three and four.

**168** The pieces are allegedly written by Sobti's double, Hashmat. However, Sobti does not hide her own identity behind him, like writers using a pseudonym do. Instead, it was very clear from the beginning that Hashmat is Sobti's alter ego, a male writer present in her. See chapter five.

other short pieces appearing in literary journals.<sup>169</sup> It is therefore impossible for me to state with a degree of certainty when the first pieces written by Sobti's double Hashmat actually appeared. They were later assembled in four volumes, over a span of more than forty years.

The first volume of *Ham Haśmat* (HaH, I, Hashmat) was published in 1977.<sup>170</sup> Seen through Hashmat's eyes, it depicts, in a slightly ironical tone and without any taboos or inhibitions, the Hindi literary scene and the society of Delhi between the 1950s and the 1970s. Three volumes were published between 1977 and 2012, with the fourth appearing weeks before Sobti's death in 2019. The later volumes include portraits of contemporary writers and are slightly different in tone than the first volume, although irony and self-irony are never absent. If the writers portrayed did not all appreciate their description, HaH has remained a public success since its first publication. The short texts constituting the four volumes alternate between literary criticism and humorous descriptions of the upper middle-class intelligentsia of New Delhi, but also other scenes of Delhi life.

After the long interval which followed the publication of ZN, Sobti wrote *Ai larķī* (1991, AL), a short novel presented in the form of a dialogue between a dying old woman and her daughter, where the mother is really the speaking voice and story-teller. Besides the mother-daughter duo, it includes a handful of minor characters. The text resembles a theatre play in structure with an almost absent third person narrator who is acting more like a stage director. The real narrator of the story during most of the text is, instead, Ammu (lit. 'Mum'), the mother. The novel is very popular and has been translated into several Indian languages, including English, and into Swedish.

A few years later, in 1995, Sobti published *Dilo-dānīś* (DoD), a story set in Delhi in the 1920s and depicting the life of a wealthy Hindu family established as lawyers, with its two sets of children born to Kripanarayan, the main male protagonist: the sons are from his actual marriage, while another son and a daughter were born to Kripanarayan's mistress, Mehak, daughter of a Muslim courtesan. Through the story of this family, Sobti portrays the end of an era – the time of the courtesans and the society of Delhi influenced strongly by the Mughal and Persian etiquette (*adab*) – and the emerging conflicts between the religious communities stirred by economic differences in a modernizing society.

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**169** Konrad Meisig complains about this as well in the introduction to his study on the narrative techniques in the Hindi short story, see Meisig 1996: 7. Precise bibliographical data in the context of Hindi literature is at the moment still very difficult to obtain.

**170** Chapter five is devoted to the question of the literary double and the portrayals of writers, artists and members of the Hindi literary scene written under the pen name of Hashmat. This introduction will therefore remain succinct.

*Samay sargam* (2000, SaS) follows the growing friendship of Aranya and Ishan, two ageing members of the Delhi upper middle-class and the destinies of their friends and relations. Discussions on life, health and the social and topographical changes of the city constitute the core of this short novel.

In early 2017, Sobti published a book on which she had been working for a while, *Gujarāt Pākistān se Gujarāt Hindustān* (GPGH), a self-proclaimed autobiographical novel narrating Sobti's experience as a private tutor to the Maharaja Tejsingh of Sirohi, near Mount Abu, in the period shortly following the partition. The text provides the writer with an opportunity to tell the stories of several of her relatives who had to leave their homes, now in Pakistan, and start a new life in India, their new 'homeland'. It is mainly autobiographical but written in the third person and does not hold the claims of truth usually associated with the strictly autobiographical genre.

Finally, Sobti's very first novel, *Cannā*, was published in 2019 by Rajkamal Prakashan just as the writer had intended it to be published several decades earlier. The novel, written in the first person and inspired by Sobti's own experience, can be said to prefigure ZN, but is set in the Punjab at the time of the partition.

In the following chapters, I will keep on referencing Sobti's most important novels to illustrate the relationship between her poetics and her fictional work.

### 2.3 Sobti's Non-fictional Works

Krishna Sobti is best known as a novelist. However, like most writers of her generation, she has written a certain number of non-fictional texts in which she presents her views on literature, its role in society and the process of writing, among others. The texts create an image of the writer and contribute to the construction of the figure of the author in society and the public sphere. Below, I give an overview of the most important of those texts, which lie at the core of my analysis of Sobti's poetics.<sup>171</sup>

As already mentioned, in the context of Hindi, it is extremely difficult to date with precision when the particular article or short text was first published.

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<sup>171</sup> Sobti has also given interviews, some of which are available online (I give a list of her major interviews in the Appendix). However, I base my analyses of Sobti's poetics mostly on the written essays and speeches. Although the interviews present very interesting ideas and give a glimpse of Sobti's creation of her public persona, they also constitute a genre which is quite different from the written texts through its susceptibility to being modified and guided by the interviewer.

In the case of Sobti, whose essays have never been translated into English (but for some small recent exceptions),<sup>172</sup> it is even more difficult than with authors like Nirmal Verma or Agyeya, who are acknowledged not only as writers but also as thinkers. Many of Sobti's non-fictional texts and some of her interviews have been put together in *Sobti ek sohbat* (Sobti. A Companion, first published in 1989, thereafter SeS) and a collection of essays and non-fictional works, *Śabdām ke ālok meṁ* (In the Glow of Words, first published in 2005, thereafter SAM);<sup>173</sup> however, even in those volumes, no date of the original, possibly earlier, magazine publication is provided. It is therefore impossible to establish a perfect chronology for Sobti's non-fictional writings. One can only make conjectures on the basis of the evidence present in the texts themselves.

SAM presents itself like a compendium of disparate pieces. It assembles miscellaneous texts such as dateless diary entries (describing Sobti's everyday life, some memories or associations of ideas, discussions of her readings and thoughts on ongoing or past events, all addressed as letters to Sarvar, one of her nieces, or appended to letters being sent by Sobti); speeches and lectures given on particular occasions; shorter essays and interviews. Several of the enclosed interviews have been published elsewhere – and partly or fully translated into English, for example the interview with Alok Bhalla on the partition or the interview with the Hindi writer, critic and translator, Anamika.<sup>174</sup> The whole text of SAM is therefore not homogenous but constitutes a patchwork of genres presenting ideas around life, politics and writing. Out of these texts emerge an image of the writer as a figure of dialogue, a transmitter of meaning but also a recreator of a world, and a portrait of Sobti and her diverse interests.

One of the issues with SAM, besides the question of the chronology of the texts, resides in organising the pieces into categories: the table of contents, which is a bit sketchy, does not mention all pieces of writing found in the volume and the book reads as a flow, with very few titled pieces. However, it is possible to pinpoint several main topics. These topics echo the points which seem to preoccupy Sobti throughout her other non-fictional works, namely the points which are discussed or reflected upon in the texts collected in the last

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**172** See Kumar and Sethi 2021.

**173** I am using the 2014 edition of SeS and the 2015 edition of SAM here.

**174** The interview with Alok Bhalla was published in English in the magazine *Hindi* (2000: vol. 1: Nr. 3–4: 87–119) as well as in Bhalla's collection of interviews with writers on the topic of the partition, *Partition Dialogues*, Bhalla 2007; parts of the interview with Anamika in English translation appeared in *Indian Literature* (2013: vol. 57: Nr. 3: 21–35). See Puri 2017 for a complete list of publication of Bhalla's English iteration of his interview.



part of SeS, more particularly in the last and longest text, MSRS, a speech given probably shortly after receiving the Sahitya Akademi Award for ZN in 1979.

MSRS is a very dense text which offers a very good introduction to Sobti's thoughts on literature.<sup>175</sup> It touches upon all of Sobti's main areas of interest, although it focuses on ZN, the process of writing and the question of the role of the writer and her interactions with society. MSRS has a very clear structure. It opens with the idea that in spite of all the differences between human beings there remains a binding element between them, and presents literature as the record of this connection between all individuals.<sup>176</sup> Literature is indeed a place where individual and personal experiences are transformed into a larger, all-encompassing human experience of life which transgresses individual limits. The text then flows from one point to the next through an investigation of the identity of the writer and her connection to the world and society around her. A brief biographical interlude serves as an illustration of this interaction. This interlude leads back to the question of language and its importance for writing and the writer. To stress her point, Sobti introduces a short passage in free verse which showcases her own process of writing, more specifically in the context of ZN. The speech ends with the uniqueness of the 'fire' (the fire of inspiration) that burns in each writer. Thus, the auditor or the reader travels from the individual to a larger dimension and then back to the singular. With MSRS, Sobti attempts a definition of literature and the writer. All the three topics indicated in the title are explicated in her text: herself, through the biographical points; her time, through the socially critical part of the essay and through the depiction of the role of the writer; and, finally, her vision of writing, a theme that permeates all the others. All the major topics of Sobti's poetics are addressed here as well, even if not all of them are fully developed. The writing process and what I call the 'field metaphor' constitute the central elements,<sup>177</sup> but Sobti also discusses the question of literature's relationship to time and the issue of language. In the last part, she touches upon the topic of gendered writing and makes it clear that she does not consider gender an appropriate category for analysing literature. She rather favours an image of the writer as

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**175** As stated in the introduction, I used this particular text as the point of departure for my analysis of Sobti's poetics because it reiterates all her most important concepts.

**176** This view is what I call Sobti's humanism. It is rooted in her deep belief that there exists a core which is common to all human beings in spite of the differences, and that literature can reach it through its potential for universalisation. This view also influences Sobti's image of the human being as an individual made out of several elements of identity.

**177** See the discussion of this metaphor in chapter three.

someone who possesses the widest possible treasure of experience and the ability to grasp the world around her in its entirety.

Sobti wrote several shorter texts discussing one or several aspects of her literary creation in the context of a particular work. Mostly, those shorter pieces were designed as a preface to a new edition of the novel or text in question, or as reflections on the process of creation in their respective contexts. This is the case of the three shorter texts contained in the non-fictional part of SeS: “Caṁd noṭṣ Zindagīnāmā par” (A few notes on *Zindagīnāmā*, thereafter CNZNP), a text on ZN and the treatment of history by a literary writer; “Tab tak kuch mālūm nahīm thā” (Until then, I knew nothing), a brief explanation of the genesis of the idea of MM; and “Sūrajmukhī aṁdhere ke, ek saṁsmaraṅ” (*Sūrajmukhī aṁdhere ke*, a remembrance), on SAK and the difficulty in finding the right words to deal with the trauma of rape. However, the later editions of some works also contain similar short pieces, for example, the re-edition of DSB (2001) or the English translation of AL (2002), where the context in which the novels were first imagined as well as the process of creation are described. As my exploration of Marie-Paul Berranger’s volume in the introduction has shown,<sup>178</sup> it is typical of writers to discuss their own work and literature by adopting many different literary forms and blurring the limits of the genres between criticism, self-reflection, metapoetic discourse and literary writing. Sobti is a perfect example in this respect.

Short pieces, speeches – in contexts ranging from receiving a prize to political meetings and participation in seminars and conferences – interviews and essays constitute the main genres of Sobti’s non-fictional writings.<sup>179</sup> Another work, however, needs to be included here. Next to MSRS and SAM, it has proved to be the most interesting source for reconstructing Sobti’s self-perception as a writer and her opinions on literature and its role in contemporary Indian society. The work in question consists of a long dialogue between Sobti and her friend and fellow Hindi-writer, Krishna Baldev Vaid, and is titled *Sobti-Vaid saṁvād. Lekhan aur lekhak* (2007, Sobti-Vaid, A Dialogue. Writing and the Writer, thereafter SVS). The conversation has been first recorded in Shimla in 2001, and then put to paper. In this long dialogue, the two friends discuss and compare their methods of writing, their ideas on the role of literature and writer in society, and their opinions on women’s writing and the state of literary criticism in Hindi (the dialogue itself illustrates the fact that several Hindi writers deplore the lack of active

<sup>178</sup> See Berranger 2012 and my remarks on this work in the introduction.

<sup>179</sup> I would like to point out here that although Sobti never showed discontent with her published interviews, it is a genre which must be treated with care, since the interviewer has the possibility to alter the words of the writer.

literary criticism). Sobti and Vaid discuss also several of their novels<sup>180</sup> and Sobti's tone is more personal than in her other non-fictional works. She speaks less of an abstract 'writer' and uses the personal pronoun 'I' much more often. This is in agreement with the form of a dialogue, but can also be interpreted as a sign that in her friend and fellow writer Vaid, Sobti had found an equal and sympathetic partner of dialogue.

Sobti also wrote a form of diary recording her travels in Laddhak under the title *Buddha kā kamaṇḍal Laddhak* (2012, Laddhak, the Vessel of the Buddha).<sup>181</sup> This book is beautifully illustrated and differs from the other non-fictional works of the author, although it highlights her fascination for mountains – a fascination that is evident in all her writings.

It is difficult to ascertain whether the corpus of Sobti's non-fictional texts presented here is exhaustive. It is possible that Sobti published interviews or articles in magazines which are no longer available or have eluded my search. Sobti has also given several interviews on the radio or television, some of which are freely available on the Internet. Indeed, in her later years, she has been very active in the public sphere and has given speeches on many occasions, for example during Pratirodh (lit. 'opposition'), a convention of Indian writers and intellectuals held in New Delhi on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 2015.<sup>182</sup> Topics such as tolerance, improvement of education and freedom of speech lie at the core of Sobti's public appearances. This mirrors her idea of the place a writer has to occupy in society as a public intellectual.

The corpus of Sobti's non-fictional texts, to which one could add interviews and public appearances, is quite large. Some of the texts or speeches cover almost exactly the same issues or present striking similarities with each other. The texts are often very difficult to date with precision, apart from the later public appearances which are recorded and available in the public domain. The approach I have chosen is therefore, as stated in the introduction, thematic rather than chronological. Indeed, the three major texts, MSRS, SAM and SVS, which are at the centre of my analysis of Sobti's views on literature, contain the most

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**180** It is interesting to note that several Hindi writers decided to take on the role of critics and interviewers; Vaid is a good example, since he published his interviews with other Hindi writers (Madan Soni, Ashok Vajpeyee and Jyotsna Milan) and even his interview of himself in *Javāb nahīm* (2002, No answer).

**181** The word *kamaṇḍal* designates an earthen vessel or pot carried by wandering ascetics.

**182** Part of the recording is available on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJUuleArlfg> (consulted on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2017). In April 2016, Sobti participated in Pratirodh II as well. The list of all the interviews, speeches and non-fictional works is included in the bibliography; with the constant uploading of new resources, the list is however not exhaustive.

important aspects of Sobti's thoughts and perception and allow us to identify four major topics: the staging of the figure of the writer through the depiction of the writing process; the issue of time in literature (and the relationship of literature to time); the question of language (where the debate on Hindi as a literary language proves as important as poetological considerations on language); and finally, the construction of a double literary identity, merging with the question of gender (since Sobti's literary alter ego, Hashmat, is a male writer). These themes are, in fact, intertwined: they are part of the creation of a persona, of a figure of the writer as inhabiting a space 'in-between' two worlds – for example, between her own inner world and the world outside, between reality and fiction, between public and private life.<sup>183</sup> From the analysis of these themes, it appears that, for Sobti, writing is really an interaction, a dialogue – with the text, with the reader, with society, and even with the self.

The style of Sobti's non-fictional texts deserves to be examined more closely. It is more abstract and draws on a more sanskritised vocabulary than Sobti's novels and short stories. Like the fictional texts, however, it is at times elliptic, and can therefore become particularly obscure, especially when one attempts to translate it into English – an issue I have highlighted in the introduction. The essays prove challenging because their very abstract subject matter is often presented through metaphorical language (whereas the metaphors do not necessarily reveal the meaning but conceal it!) and through passages of free verse. Those passages are mostly used in Sobti's depiction of her own writing process and constitute, therefore, what I call a 'poetics in verse' or a 'theory in verse'. This style allows Sobti to represent or even stage the writer as a complex figure, between a pro-active creator and a more passive listener or transmitter of voices.

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**183** As it seems to me that Sobti is consciously constructing and representing an image of the writer, I often speak of 'the staging of the writer'. It is my belief that Sobti is aware of the expectations laid on writers to explain themselves and that she sometimes intentionally plays with those very expectations. See also Puri's remark on Sobti "performing for an audience": "Taking umbrage at the 'theatrical indulgences' of some co-presenters at the just concluded seminar, Nirmal Verma apparently observed, with a sneer, '*kuch log m̄ac par 'parfārm' karte hāi*/some people like to 'perform' when on stage,' to which Krishna Sobti replied: '*ham sabhī m̄ac par 'parfārm' karte hāi* / all of us 'perform' on a stage' (Sobti 2005: 79), opening the floor for a heated discussion. The outcome of the discussion might not be as important as Sobti's conviction that at least she herself consciously 'performs' for an 'audience' every time she writes, speaks or interacts with others. Her carefully cultivated public persona, with its distinct sartorial imprint and her famous Haśmat impersonation, are probably the most visible aspect of the self-in-performance, colouring, but also nurturing, her writerly enterprise." Puri 2021: 277. I am keeping the transliteration given in Puri's article.

The topics dealt with by Sobti within her non-fictional works correspond not only to her own preoccupations but also reflect issues which are discussed by other writers of her generation as well, although often in a quite different manner. Before turning to Krishna Sobti's thoughts on poetics, I would like to outline first the development of the women's movements in India and of the debates around the category of 'women's writing' (*mahilā lekhan*), as an important background to understanding Sobti's positions in the debate surrounding gendered writing and her self-representation as a writer.

## 2.4 Women's Movements and 'Women's Writing' (*mahilā lekhan*): A Brief Contextualisation

As the overview of existing studies on Sobti's work has shown, the analysis of her oeuvre has until now put the emphasis on the depiction of female characters and the question of the condition of women. The studies place Sobti in the context of women's movements in South Asia and literature written by women. Indeed, Sobti has come to be strongly associated with 'women's literature' (*mahilā lekhan* or *strī lekhan*). However, Sobti herself was always reluctant to be seen as a 'woman writer' or a feminist.<sup>184</sup>

The category of 'women's writing', which has developed into a category of its own in literary criticism – and this not only in India – usually designates literature authored by women, regardless of their self-definition as feminists or as women writers. In the case of the writers of Sobti's generation, the first generation after the independence, the label of 'woman writer' (*mahilā lekhan*) was not welcomed nor embraced, quite the contrary. It was largely associated by critics and readers with a genre of literature that was easy, somewhat romantic and less serious or of lesser literary quality than the writings of men of the same generation. Several women who wrote (including Sobti) therefore opposed such a categorisation and insisted on their equality with men, as well as on the fact that they were first to be seen as writers before being viewed as women.<sup>185</sup> Nevertheless, there seems to be no escaping this categorisation, and most of the studies devoted to Sobti and her work are centred on her depiction of women and her representation of the condition of women in society. Those

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<sup>184</sup> See the discussion of this point in chapters three and five.

<sup>185</sup> See for example Sobti's interview with Tarun Bharatiya and Jayeeta Sharma, Sharma 1996, or Mridula Garg's articles, Garg1991; Garg 2013.

issues are important and Sobti indubitably raises them through her portrayal of non-stereotypical female characters and her choices of topics. It is therefore essential to understand better the context in which she wrote and the debate around the label 'women's writing'.

As stated in the introduction, Hindi literature is very young; from its beginnings, it aimed to describe and influence society, following Premchand's views on literature.<sup>186</sup> The condition of women and their status was undoubtedly an important topic already before the independence and, although most of the first Hindi writers were men, one finds several women among the writers of the very prolific literary period which preceded the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947.

The most prominent among those women writers is probably the poetess Mahadevi Varma (Mahādevī Varmā, 1907–1987).<sup>187</sup> Mahadevi Varma wrote almost exclusively poetry, but she is also the author of a series of pen-portraits of common people which record instants of ordinary life. She wrote as an editor in the women's magazine *Chand* as well. Through her editorials, she tried to influence the perception of women's role and her place in the public sphere. She was active in the movement for the independence and, as the principal of a girls' college in Allahabad, was very influential as an educationist, too. There is a stark difference between her very mystic and romantic poetry and her action as a teacher and publisher. If in her literary work she seems distant from the social preoccupation that Premchand saw as the core of a writer's work, in her other activities she was very close to his ideas. However, like most women writers involved in the independence movement and with a prominent place in the public sphere, she withdrew slowly from public light after the independence.<sup>188</sup> Nevertheless, she was a very prominent and influential figure for the Hindi women writers of the next generations.

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**186** See the introduction and my discussion of Premchand's speech "Sāhitya kā uddeśya" (The Aim of Literature).

**187** Mahadevi Varma is one of the principal poets of the *Chāyāvād* (lit. 'Shadowism'), a literary movement to which Jayshankar Prasad also belonged, often compared to Romantism. On Varma and her work, see Schomer 1998.

**188** This observation has often been made, for example by Sinha, see Sinha 2006 and Sinha 2011, or by Malashri Lal, Lal 1988. Although women were involved in the struggle for independence, they had to return to a more conventional role once it was achieved. Preetha Mani, in her article on the two writers Mannu Bhandari and Raghavan Chudamani (1931–2010), argues convincingly that although there was a period of 'lull' in the women's movements after the independence, the works of some important writers was influential in keeping the debates alive. See Mani 2016.

The generation that followed, namely Sobti's generation, had to struggle to find recognition for their writings in the eyes of the critics and be considered professional writers. A quick look at the criticism and scholarly work on 'women writers' or 'women's literature' in India shows that this label has been adopted without much questioning as a category in itself and that any woman who happens to write was and still is automatically associated with this category. Feminist literary criticism, depicting women characters and the condition of women, highlights the evolution between the generation of Mahadevi Varma and Sarojini Naidu (Sarojinī Naydū, 1879–1949)<sup>189</sup> and the generation of writer-activists like the Hindi writers Geetanjali Shree (Gītāñjali Śrī, b. 1957) and Anamika (Anāmikā, b. 1961). This evolution has been summed up in the depiction of the 'three generations of feminisms' by Mrinalini Sinha and other scholars.<sup>190</sup>

For a long time, women were not amongst the most well-known writers, neither in India nor in the West. Recent studies tend however to show that there have always been women writers. For the Indian context, one could mention here the anthologies of women's writings edited by Tharu and Lalita or by Zaidi.<sup>191</sup> This quasi-absence is the result of the social structures, which, for a long time, limited women's areas of activity to the home and to the private sphere. In India, during the struggle for independence, the support of women was sought and more women were allowed to take a place in the public sphere, mostly through magazines, activities as teachers and social workers, or involvement in the campaigns of the Swadeshi movement.<sup>192</sup> After the independence, however, most women returned to the private sphere and the more conventional lifestyle which was expected of them.

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**189** A poet, freedom fighter and activist, well known for her poetry in English.

**190** For example: Sinha 2006; Sinha 2011; Forbes 1996. The notion of the writer-activist is also developed by Alessandra Marino, see Marino 2017.

**191** Tharu/ Lalita 1995; Zaidi 2015. Interestingly, Tharu and Lalita do not include Sobti's writing in their anthology, saying, "For volume 2, we wanted to include the work of Krishna Sobti, one of the leading contemporary Hindi writers, but she writes in a dialect [the] translators felt would be difficult to render into standard English and uses an earthy, lewd diction. Standard forms of English, sanitized as they have been over the last two hundred years, just did not stretch into anything that resembled the scope of Sobti's idiom." Tharu/Lalita 1995: vol 2: xx–xxi. In Zaidi's anthology Sobti is represented by a translated fragment from SAK.

**192** The Swadeshi movement was part of the Indian independence movement; it was based on an economic strategy aimed at improving economic conditions in India through revival of local production and boycott of British products.

By becoming a writer and entering the public sphere, a woman was already crossing the limit of the threshold (to play with this important symbol of Indian literature),<sup>193</sup> hence any study of the work of a woman writer is strongly connected to the history of women's movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the Indian context, this history follows the generations of women active in the public sphere and the evolution of their perception of women's condition, as well as the history of their revendication.

Literature on women's movements in India and on the condition of women in modern India abounds. For the purpose of this introduction, I shall base my comments mainly on Geraldine Forbes' study, *Women in Modern India*, and on works of Mrinalini Sinha, with additional inputs suggested by readings of Partha Chatterjee and Gayatri Spivak, and related to the possibility for women, as a subaltern group, to speak and act.<sup>194</sup>

Efforts to modernise women's roles started with the birth of reform movements in India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The movements emerged in reaction to the confrontation with the West and set themselves the task of modernising society, often referring back to an imagined 'Golden Age' associated with the Vedas. Changing the role and place of women in society was one of the great preoccupations of these movements, be it the Brahmo Samaj or the Arya Samaj.<sup>195</sup> This can be seen as an indigenous response to the colonial view on the question. Indeed, the 'women's question' was central to the arguments of the colonial rulers to highlight their 'civilising mission'. The reformers therefore took up the condition of women as the main point of their agenda. However, as Chatterjee emphasises, there remained a clear demarcation line between the home and

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**193** The threshold (*caukhat*) symbolises the limit of the household (the private sphere), within which the women are protected. Malashri Lal's analysis of gendered spaces in several Indian English novels focuses on this notion, see Lal 1995.

**194** Forbes 1996; Sinha 2006; Sinha 2011; Chatterjee 1989a; Chatterjee 1989b; Spivak 1988b.

**195** The Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj are two main Hindu reform movements of 19<sup>th</sup>-century India. The Brahmo Samaj is the older of the two and was mostly active in Bengal. Founded by Raja Rammohan Roy in 1828, it reflected the ideologies of the Bengal Renaissance, advocating the abolition of practices such as *sati* (immolation of the widows on the husband's funeral pyre), caste divisions and dowry system, and promoting better education for women. The Arya Samaj, founded by Dayananda Sarasvati in 1875, was partly influenced by the Brahmo Samaj and active mostly in Northwest India, especially in Punjab (the family of Krishna Sobti, for example, had connections to the movement). Referring back to a Vedic Golden Age, the Arya Samaj advocated several reforms of the existing social order, including the emancipation of women within the family (women were to have more responsibilities inside the family structure, but without a complete overthrowing of those structures). Similarly, important reform movements were also present in the other main religious groups of India, for example the Ahmadiyahs in Islam. On the reform movements in India, see Jones 1990.



the world: the realm of the home needed to be protected, not necessarily transformed.<sup>196</sup> As a consequence, the reforms touching women were held within limits. They included the abolition of child marriage and *sati* (immolation of the widows on the husband's funeral pyre), better education for women and the possibility for widows to remarry.<sup>197</sup> All these points were advocated by progressive writers like Premchand as well.<sup>198</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century also saw the emergence of girls' schools and girls' colleges. Women themselves began to publish, mostly memoirs and poetry. However, through the agenda of the reform movement, a new image of women emerged too, namely that of the *gṛhalakṣmī* (goddess of the home, the ideal housewife), a companionate wife who was educated and supportive of her husband and family. This image was not only supported through literature by men writers, but by women writers as well.

In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, organizations dedicated to women's welfare emerged, first as initiatives by men, and later, established by women themselves. Their goals were propagating education, defining women's interests in the frame of an association (often at a local level),<sup>199</sup> and, from the 1930s onward, contributing to the shaping of India's future after the independence.

Movements for women's rights (among them, women's vote) gained traction with the intensification of the struggle for independence. Ultimately, however, they were subordinate to the cause of the nationalist struggle. In her study, Forbes shows the inconsistencies of the National Congress in this matter and the ambivalence of the movements themselves in the context of colonial India (for example, through the support of British suffragettes who, however, believed in the colonial civilising mission). At the independence, in 1947, women were granted equal rights with men in the constitution. However, within the society itself, it had not yet been achieved and the women who had been an active part of the nationalist independence movement generally withdrew into the background.

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**196** For an analysis of the role the 'woman question' took in the nationalist struggle, see Chatterjee 1989b.

**197** The Sati Regulation Act was passed in 1829, the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act in 1856, and the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929.

**198** While several acts had been passed before Premchand started to write, they were not necessarily widely implemented in practice. As in British society at the time, there was also the idea of the 'new woman' who would become the educated wife of her educated husband and an adept mother to her children.

**199** See Forbes 1996: 68.

Most of the women's associations continued to be active in independent India but, being close to the government agencies, their approach was what Forbes calls 'welfarist':<sup>200</sup> providing education centres, hostels and dispensaries, but not preparing women for new responsibilities within the newly founded nation. Neither were they actively advocating social and economic change in order to improve the general condition of women. It is only in the 1970s (the decade 1975–1985 was declared the Women's Decade by the UN), that the government's policy in matters of equality was challenged, among others through the publication, in 1974, of "Toward Equality", a report on the status of women which concluded: "The review of the disabilities and the constraints on women, which stem from socio-cultural institutions, indicates that the majority of women are still very far from enjoying the rights and opportunities guaranteed to them by the Constitution".<sup>201</sup> The result of this study came as a shock in India (one of the few countries at the time to be ruled by a woman, Indira Gandhi), and led to the emergence of new movements which Sinha and others have associated with second generation feminism or second-wave feminism.

This second-wave movement was not organised around one single association but was rather a loose amalgamation of different organizations brought together into the public domain by the feminist press which emerged at the time; the coverage of women's issues in the media; and meetings and conventions uniting the many autonomous and local groups.<sup>202</sup> For women active in the movement, the improvement of the condition and status of women in practical life was at the core of their struggle and action. Many of these movements are still active today.

Third-wave feminism involves mainly the youngest generation, a generation which had access to a better education and strives to obtain full equality within the public sphere. The ideologies of this third wave – the groups are not united – are influenced by various models of feminist thinking and criticism of society, most importantly the post-colonial thinking and subaltern studies.

This evolution of the feminist thinking and social struggle in India reflects itself in the literature. The 'first generation' after the independence focused

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**200** Forbes 1996: 225.

**201** "Toward Equality", quoted in Forbes 1996: 227. The report is available online. <https://pldindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Towards-Equality-1974-Part-1.pdf>.

**202** One may note here the publication, in Delhi, from 1979 onwards, of the magazine *Manushi*. A *Journal about Women and Society*, in Hindi and in English. It proved influential in highlighting the condition of women of all classes of society, exposing the violence to which women were subjected.

more on the private sphere, seen through the eyes of women writers who belong mostly to the urban middle- and upper-classes. Their writing has been labelled by the literary critic and scholar Indu Prakash Pandey, in his study on women's writing in Hindi up to the 1980s, as 'romantic feminism'.<sup>203</sup> Through this condescending denomination, Pandey highlighted the focus laid on the emotions and issues faced by women within the frame of their families. He did exclude several writers of the first generation, including Sobti, from this judgement. However, the focus of the (women) writers shifts with the next generation. Studying women's literature in Hindi a few years later, Pandey sees a great change in the work of women authors, namely in their depiction of the condition of women from other social classes and treatment of issues such as communal violence, work life and politics.<sup>204</sup>

Other critics and scholars also point out the tendency of confining one's writing to the family sphere in the first generation of women's writing – and deplore it. Chandra Nisha Singh's monograph, *Only So Far and No Further. Radical Feminism and Women's Writing*, offers one such example.<sup>205</sup> She starts by examining the evolution of feminism in India and then moves on to look at several novels (Hindi and English) and their treatment of the themes of marriage, work, motherhood and sexuality. As the title of her book suggests, her point of view is that of a radical feminist, advocating full emancipation of women in terms of political rights but also within the private sphere. She traces the evolution of the perspectives of the writers in the course of time through three generations of feminism, demonstrating how the earlier writers remain closely affiliated to the codes and conventions of the established society.<sup>206</sup> In her introduction, Singh also offers a good overview of the works published on women's writing in India and the reception of feminist literary criticism in India.

The influence of Western feminisms is apparent for some Indian writers of Sobti's generation. For many, however, as Jasbir Jain notes in her collection of essays on women writers, the debates remain centred on issues strongly rooted in the Indian cultural frame and social structure.<sup>207</sup> The dialogue with other feminist movements and debates around the world is therefore difficult to trace back. Most writers are aware of the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia

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**203** See Pandey 1989.

**204** Pandey 2006.

**205** Singh 2007.

**206** Indeed, while discussing *Mitro marjānī*, she even reproaches Sobti for not subverting conventions in the final part of the novel.

**207** See Jain 2007a: xxii.

Woolf, but how far they are acquainted with subsequent feminist theories remains difficult to assess, unless they make a direct reference to them.<sup>208</sup>

This last aspect proves particularly interesting in the case of a writer like Sobti. Indeed, Sobti mentions or quotes many poets from all parts of the world in SAM. There is no doubt that she is familiar with the work of several women writers and with feminist criticism, for example with Virginia Woolf.<sup>209</sup> It may therefore be assumed that she is conversant with the work of thinkers such as Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir.<sup>210</sup> There are striking parallels between Woolf's views and Sobti's on gendered writing, as well as on their respective perception of time in literature.

Beyond that, Woolf is one of the writers who thematised woman authorship and expressed the need for women to find their own voice in writing. Her speech, later published as an essay, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), remains a reference in any discussion of literature written by women. Asked to express herself on women and fiction, Woolf starts by musing upon what such a title might mean (women and what they like reading; fiction about women; fictional women; fiction written by women), before reaching the conclusion that it is probably a mix of all the interpretations suggested. She ponders on the quasi-absence of women as authors until the 18<sup>th</sup> century – with only few exceptions – and the condescendence that was shown towards women authors up to the time when she herself writes. She builds a bridge between the position of women in society, their lack of proper education and economic independence, and their 'silence' in literature. Without a space of their own and without economic means, the possibilities of developing artistic skills, imagination and, therefore, literature, is limited. The correlation between the socio-economic circumstances and the ability to produce literature and art has been pointed out not only by Woolf but other critics as

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**208** Through the existing translations (such as Prabha Khetan's 1990-Hindi translation of the *Second Sex*, *Strī upekṣitā*) and the curricula in literary criticism at university level teaching feminist theory, there is a possibility of Sobti and other writers of this generation being very familiar with this literature, see de Beauvoir 1990.

**209** In her interview with Rama Jha in 1981, Sobti mentions Woolf among the Western writers she reads and likes. It is the only explicit reference to Woolf I could find in her work. She does mention, however, in her interview with Bharatiya and Sharma that Tolstoy is one of her favourite writers; she likes also Lawrence Durrell's style in *Alexandria Quartet*, even after being told that he represented a 'colonial' outlook, Sharma 1996: 114.

**210** Indeed, in Sobti's piece written for Jain's collection of essays, the tone makes it obvious that the author is well aware of ongoing feminist debates. See Jain 2007a: 19–26. Sobti read in English. Besides, Woolf's work has been translated into Hindi, probably even before the recent translations I know of (Woolf 2008; Woolf 2011).

well, like Silvia Bovenschen, for example. It is present, too, in Sobti's writings.<sup>211</sup> This has, however, rarely been as clearly expressed as in Woolf's essay.

But Woolf's reflections on the question of women and literature do not stop there. She also investigates the images of women presented in Western literature and shows the very stereotyped views of women they convey, with women usually shown as 'the angel of the house' or 'the fallen woman'. The same dichotomy is highlighted by Bovenschen, and it applies to Hindi literature as well.<sup>212</sup> On this particular point, Woolf argues, women writers have the possibility to present another vision of women; to represent women in their complicated relationships with other women but also with men, seen from a woman's point of view, rather than through the classic, stereotypical description of women's characters. Woolf ends her essay by reflecting upon the idea of a 'feminine writing' and a 'masculine writing' and wonders if good literature would not in fact spring up from a mind which would combine both qualities.<sup>213</sup>

The ideas expressed in this essay proved very influential; indeed, they nourish the perception of women's literature till today. With time, feminist literary critics and writers developed the notion of women's writing in other directions as well, for example through the perspective of a 'feminine writing' (*écriture féminine*) which ought to be claimed as such because of its very difference, as proposed by Hélène Cixous; or the perspective of each individual as unique, as presented by Julia Kristeva in her work on the feminine genius.<sup>214</sup>

In India, the category of 'women's literature' or 'women's writing' (*mahilā lekhan, strī lekhan, at times nārī lekhan*) has taken on a very strong activist accent, with many writers of the second or third generations after the independence defining themselves first as feminists before being writers or consciously insisting on the activist character of their works.<sup>215</sup> This evolution must be seen in parallel with the development of the feminist movements on the one hand and, on the other, with a change in the mentalities of the literary establishment, where literature written by women is no longer immediately considered as inferior to that written by men.

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**211** See Bovenschen 1980, or Sobti's dialogue with her friend and fellow writer Krishna Baldev Vaid, SVS 2007.

**212** Indeed, one observes, not only in classical literature but even among the Progressive writers a separation between the *patitā*, the fallen woman, and the good woman, *satī*. The Progressive writers tend to show compassion for the *patitā* who is seen as the innocent victim of social circumstances.

**213** See also the discussion of Sobti's double, Hashmat, in chapter five.

**214** See Cixous 2010 ; Kristeva 1999–2002.

**215** This is the case of many writers published by the feminist publishing house Kali for Women. See also Jain 2007a.

For Sobti, as for several writers of her generation, like Mannu Bhandari, it is particularly important to escape the label 'woman writer' because of its being associated, even by the writers themselves, to writings of lesser literary value. However, because all women authors writing in Hindi are conscious of the importance of gender issues and the struggle for equal rights, their position within the debate on 'women's writing' (*mahilā lekhan*) is not unambiguous.

Sobti was constantly confronted with a definition of her person and her work limited to the aspect of gender. While writing as a woman might have been difficult in the context of post-independence India, she did not consider herself to be a feminist and always refused to be associated too closely with any group or political movement. Being a woman was, according to her, but one aspect of her personality. Her identity, in her own eyes, should not be limited to this aspect alone. However, Sobti was deeply aware of the difficulties faced by women as individuals in her own social and geopolitical context and her depiction of strong women characters in her texts must be read in the context of women's movement and women's issues.<sup>216</sup>

Like several other women writers of her generation and many earlier women writers, Sobti does not claim a feminine quality for her writing as a token of her singularity and a tool in feminist debates but strives instead for the recognition of her equality with men in her identity as an individual and a writer. In this she is close to writers such as George Sand and George Eliot, but also to Indian women writers of her generation, like Mahashweta Devi (*Mahāśvetā Devī*, 1926–2016), Mannu Bhandari or Mridula Garg (*Mṛdulā Gārg*, b. 1938), who all claim that their identity as writers prevails over their identity as women.<sup>217</sup> This aspect is discussed at length in Jasbir Jain's collection of articles, autobiographical pieces and short stories on the question of 'women's writing', *Growing up as a Woman Writer*.<sup>218</sup> In this collection of essays, the result of several conferences on the issue, various opinions on the subject are brought to view. Interestingly, one can see that while Sobti's generation strives to be perceived as writers and not as 'women writers', the younger generation proudly adopts the latter label. As the Bengali writer Nabaneeta Dev Sen (*Nabanītā Dev Sen*, 1938–2019) reveals in her article in this volume, until the 1980s, most women writers held the same position as Sobti, Devi or Garg,

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**216** In all of her interviews, Sobti raises the issues connected to writing as a woman. See also all the studies on her work discussed in the introduction.

**217** See Mani 2016 for the development of feminism in literature in India. Mridula Garg voices her thoughts on women's writing as a category in one of her essays, see Garg 2013. She not only defends the individuality of the writers, but also that of the characters defined solely from the point of view of gender.

**218** Jain 2007a.

in their wish to belong to the mainstream and not to “be ghettoed”.<sup>219</sup> She herself changed her position in the course of her career because she witnessed an evolution in the perception of the category ‘women’s writing’ from a condescending branding to the positive denomination given to women authored works by literary studies and feminist criticism.

Jain’s collection of articles shows not only the variety of points of view on the term ‘women’s writing’ itself, but also the fact that the debate takes forms which are specific to the Indian context and do not necessarily reflect the evolution of feminist criticism in the West. For example, a part of the literature written by women addresses the issues of female infanticide, bride burnings and dowry deaths and consequently takes up an activist-feminist perspective. However, the literature written by women in the subcontinent cannot be said to be mainly concerned with these issues. In view of the variety of topics and styles of the authors, in the introduction to the volume, Jain asks in what way and under which criteria can the category of ‘women’s writing’ be constructed.<sup>220</sup> The answer that emerges is that the writing must be marked, among others, by the notion of a woman’s perspective in the way word are used while simultaneously giving voice to the women’s perception of their environment in the space that a particular cultural context has assigned to them.

Each of the writers represented in Jain’s volume relates in her own way to the idea of a ‘women’s writing’ label used by critics to speak of their work. While some revendicate this categorisation, others, like Sobti, adopt a more sceptical point of view. In her piece included in Jain’s collection as well as in her other writings, it is very striking that Sobti constantly refuses to be reduced

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**219** Dev Sen in Jain 2007a: 8.

**220** In Jain 2007a: xviii-xix: Jain highlights, for example, the problems of ‘gender neutrality’ in writing and the complexity of the question of experience. Gender neutrality would imply, according to Jain, a lack of feminine awareness, a focalisation on commitment instead of personal experience, or it could become a higher aesthetic value than the expression of feminine realities. However, one can argue that gender is but one aspect of the individual experience of the world and therefore it needs not be the central element of writing (neither for men nor for women). How ‘neutral’ a writing can be is also a vast question. As Jain adds, “Women live in the same world in which men live. But their locations, experiences and perceptions are different. The debate needs to focus on the nature and quality of this difference. Does this difference infiltrate their writing and how valuable is this in itself? As gender locations in culture happen to be different, perspectives are bound to differ.” (Jain 2007a: xviii). The argument is valid; nevertheless, since each individual experience of the world is different, it remains open as to whether a ‘feminine’ perspective of the world can indeed be defined. Sobti sees in gender merely one aspect of a person and not a main defining criterion. ‘Gender neutrality’ is however replaced in her thought by the concept of *ardhanariśvāra* (the god who is half female, half male). On this point, see chapter five.

to the gender aspect of her personality and insists on being seen first as a writer: "I am a writer who happens to be a liberal, middle-class woman."<sup>221</sup> Such a position must be considered in relation to the context in which Sobti started her career, in the 1950s, when the Hindi literary scene was still strongly male-dominated. In this world, it was particularly difficult for a woman to assert herself and have her work judged by the same standards that applied to the work of a man. For Sobti, the will to be recognized as a writer on the same footing with men goes hand in hand with a consciousness of her own value and her strong personality. What gives her a claim to equality is the fact that her personality as a writer is no less defined than that of any man:

Ground to stand on, natural self-confidence, social skills and my present friends made it possible for me to feel like a writer, not only like a woman. The aspect of personality I am referring to here is well-known to you. Still I need to say that in our society, there is so little parity between a woman writer and a man [writer] that neither do we treat each other as equals nor do we publicize literary acumen.<sup>222</sup>

For Sobti, it is evident that the important dimension in judging a work of art is not gender but individuality, as defined not only by the personal background of the author or the 'biology', but by experience and what a person does with this experience, her acquired knowledge and abilities. On this ground, when speaking about the writer, Sobti doesn't use the word for woman writer (*lekhikā*), but the 'genderless' (grammatically masculine) word *lekhak*. Because of her vision of each writer as an individual, she sees herself as the equal of male writers and therefore as possessing the right to speak as a writer about writing and 'the writer'. The use of the word *lekhak* illustrates Sobti's idea that being a writer is her main identity. Being a woman is only one of the many aspects of her personality and identity – personality and identity which will be reflected in her own writing, it is true, but which are much more complex than the aspect of gender. Sobti sees each individual as possessing a complex and plural identity within a given socio-cultural context. Reducing an individual to a single aspect of her identity, be it gender, caste or religion, would not reflect the reality Sobti is

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<sup>221</sup> Krishna Sobti in her interview with Tarun Bharatiya and Jayeeta Sharma transcribed in Sharma 1996: 106. It is similar to the position of the Indian English writer Shashi Deshpande (b. 1938), as quoted in Jain 2007a: xviii.

<sup>222</sup> SVS, p. 139: *Grahaṇ karne kī zamīn, svabhāv pradatta ātmaviśvās, sāmājīk śiṣṭācār aur samkālīn mitroṃ ne hī ise sambhav banāyā kī maiṃ sirf strī kī hī tarah nahīṃ – lekhak kī tarah mahsūs kartī hūṃ. Vyaktitva ke jis pahalū kī or merā saṅket hai āp use acche se jānte-pahcānte haiṃ. Phīr bhī mujhe kahnā hogā kī hamāre samāj meṃ strī lekhak aur puruṣ ke bīc samāntā kī itnī kami hai kī na ham ek-dūsre se barābarī kā vyavahār karte haiṃ aur na hī sāhityik vivek kā prasār-samcār.*



looking for. Sobti's position in the discussion of the label 'women's writing' is ambivalent. On the one hand, she is conscious of the challenges generally faced by women who strive to find a place as individuals in their own rights. Her novels depict strong female characters, far from typical stereotypes. In her interviews and in her discussion with her friend and fellow writer Krishna Baldev Vaid, she insists on women's rights and the need to give women the same chances and the same access to education as men.<sup>223</sup> In her article in Jain's volume,<sup>224</sup> for example, she insists that no topic and no language ought to be forbidden to women. The notion that some topics and some linguistic registers (insults, abuse, for example) would be 'inappropriate' for women is a notion Sobti fights against. Women must be free to speak about and reflect on the world as they perceive and hear it. Within the debate on 'women's writing', Sobti can therefore be viewed as a writer who defends the women's rights to express themselves freely, to claim their true voice.<sup>225</sup> In the context in which she wrote, these issues are central to her work and her reflection on society. On the other hand, Sobti is very reluctant to be associated with the category of 'women's writing', because she perceives this category as designating a work that is either that of a political activist (as opposed to an artist), or one of a lesser literary value than that authored by a male writer. In her eyes, her main identity is the identity as a writer, a writer being a free individual who uses her experience of the world, her personality, but also her special ability to listen to the surrounding world in order to find out a truth about the human being and life.

Sobti's use of the word *lekhak* is an indicator of her position within the discussion on 'women's writing'. Although the issue of gender is very important to Sobti, her self-representation revolves much more around her writing activity, an activity where it appears to her meaningless to discriminate between men and women, because a good writer has the ability to go beyond this aspect in her depiction of the world. There is no notion of 'gendered writing' in Sobti's poetics, but rather the idea that a writer possesses a large experience of the world which includes both sexes. With the presence in Sobti's oeuvre of the voice of her double, Hashmat, this issue becomes much more complex.

Since Sobti uses the word *lekhak* to speak of the writer in her non-fictional writings, she also conjugates the verbs in the masculine form, in agreement with Hindi grammar. While using this form, Sobti refers sometimes to her own

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223 See the discussion of women's issues in SVS, Sobti 2007: 145–170.

224 Jain 2007a.

225 See Sobti's self-perception as a writer, her opposition to the term 'woman writer' and her construction of a double, Hashmat, a failed male writer, as well as her use of language in chapter three, section 3.1 and chapter five.

positions and opinions – it is then self-descriptive – and sometimes to an abstract writer, thus expressing more general considerations about literature. In my discussion of Sobti's poetics, I use exclusively the feminine pronouns in English, while remaining aware of the distinction present in the essays between 'the writer' and Sobti's own writing practice.

In the following chapter, I will return to this point in greater detail and analyse the metaphors and discourse used by Sobti to convey her views on the writing process. While for her, her identity is linked to writing, the debate on 'gendered writing' and the issues connected to the condition of women constitute an important background of her work, as the secondary literature on her work and the existing debates on writing as a woman illustrate. Through her position and her depiction of 'the writer', she is reacting to a discourse directed at her while confronting expectations laid upon a woman writer of her generation.

### 3 The Figure of the Writer

As discussed in the introduction, poetics implies several ways of thinking about literature: at the level of the author of a text, in the context of literary criticism and at the level of the texts themselves. For the present purpose, it constitutes a method of thinking about an author's self-perception regarding the processes of writing and her own views on literature.

Central to this analytical perspective is the notion of authorship, a controversial topic in literary studies. Indeed, its relevance for understanding literature is either asserted or denied in the debate on the place of the authors in their texts and the relevance of their interpretations and comments on their oeuvre. The fact remains that almost all authors discuss their own works as well as their process of creation, their motivations and their methods, be it through essays or through interviews. This tendency is supported by the new media, the world of publishing, and the ever greater need to promote a sort of 'industry of writing' since the old structures of patronage have disappeared and authors often struggle to make a living by their pen. In these new contexts, writers reflect on their own work and their poetics, building, consciously or not, an image of the writer and her role in society.

In Sobti's essays and other non-fictional texts, the figure of the writer and the reflection on what writing is – what does it consist of, what does it imply for all the parties involved – are omnipresent. They lie at the core of her reflection on literature and shall therefore be the very first point of the analysis of her poetics. A close reading of the relevant passages of the essays will show that her conception of the writer, both implicit and explicit, is related to all the other notions she develops: the diction and the use of images and metaphors, the question of identity (especially with regard to gender), time and history, and, last but not least, the involvement of the writer in the public sphere. As a consequence, it makes sense to start the discussion of her poetics and her views on literature with the image of the writer that emerges from her non-fictional work and her description of the creative process.

In the present chapter, I will first look at some general considerations regarding the figure of the writer and the presence of authors in their texts, with a particular focus on Barthes' 'death of the author'. I will then explore Sobti's definition of herself as a writer through her strongly articulated opposition to the label of 'woman writer'. The next step will lead me to examine her position in the discussion on the place of the author before turning to the implications of her views on her construction of the figure of the writer and her use of a recurring metaphor to illustrate the process of writing. This will allow me to

analyse how she perceives herself as a writer and uses metaphors and verse to describe her own writing process. In this depiction of the creative process, a tension emerges between the ‘inside’ (the internal world of the author) and the ‘outside’ (her environment, society and time). This tension is not resolved but engenders a strong distinction between the work and the author and implies a constant dialogue between them and between the two poles of influence at work in the creation of the text, namely the author’s inner and outer worlds. Finally, I will show how those points, taken together, lead to the construction of the identity of the writer in Sobti’s poetics.

### 3.1 Some General Considerations on the Figure of the Writer

In the introduction, I examined several examples of critical writing and discussions of literature by Hindi writers. It is clear that the notions of the authorship and the role of the writer lie at the core of most reflections on writing and literature even if the conception of authorship has varied over the course of history. In order to situate Sobti’s personal position, it is necessary to go back to some of the main existing conceptions of authorship and the influence of authors on their works.

As pointed out by Roland Barthes in his short essay *La mort de l’auteur*,<sup>226</sup> for a long time the author was not considered the real owner of a text and there was no notion of copyright or even authorship per se. The transmitters of a text were really that: transmitters. Bards, storytellers or other performers had acquired a certain set of stories and were performing them, often travelling and arranging their tales according to their audience or the tastes of a patron. The most famous performers were those who could stage best a tradition that was usually already known to their audience. Even for works set in writing – like the medieval French novels (*romans*), for example Bérout’s *Tristan and Isolde* – the question of the authorship is contested and does not seem to have been of primary importance at the time of putting the texts down in writing. Very often, several versions of such texts coexist, with differences that do not always amount merely to copying mistakes made by scribes. If the authors mention their own names – sometimes with a certain pride – the names of their patrons appear as often as theirs and seem equally important. In India, although a similar phenomenon is observed with a great amount of ‘anonymous literature’ and an old tradition of bards reciting the Epics or the Puranas, one needs to stress the fact that the notion of an author as creator of the text was still important. The author was in this case not the historical author of the text but its mythical creator, like Valmiki,

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226 Barthes 1984.

the *ādikavi* (first poet) and alleged author of the Ramayana; the seers (*ṛṣis*); or historical figures often transformed into a ‘rhetorical persona’ as suggested, among others, in the case of the medieval poet Kabir.<sup>227</sup> Such an authorship conferred on the texts a great authority and a claim to truth which was particularly important for the storytellers as well as their audience.<sup>228</sup>

In Western literary criticism, the tendency to see in the biographical aspects of the life of an author – the historical author and not an authoritative mythical author – the key to the understanding of her work stems from a discourse on the work and literature which emerged later, after the Renaissance, and more noticeably in the period of the Enlightenment, with the focus laid on the individual and her achievements. In India as well, such an understanding of authorship is rather recent.

Well unto the 20<sup>th</sup> century, literary critics followed the tendency of focussing any interpretation of the literary achievements of a writer on a discussion of her biographical self, drawing parallels between the private person of the author and her work. This tendency was already denounced by Proust in his famous *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, but he was not the only critic of this approach to texts.<sup>229</sup> The

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227 See de Bruijn 2014: 142: “It [the use of the name of the poet as alleged author] transforms the poet to whom the poems are attributed into a rhetorical persona that can be used to convey a decontextualized and generalized message. This can be transported to other environments that are sensitive to the religious experience evoked in the text.”

228 The importance of the author and the concept of authorship in Ancient India has been denied by some researchers. However, even if the historical authors do not seem very important, the notion of authorship itself is part of the claim of truth and authority of a text. Valmiki, the mythical author of the Ramayana, who is said to have invented the most widely prevalent verse form of Sanskrit, the *śloka*, is considered to be the first poet. His authority as a source derives from his being a sage and a character in the Epic itself, a witness, so to speak. The seers are sages who are divided into several clans and are considered to be the poet-authors of the Vedic hymns. See the article on Ramayana, Goldmann/Sutherland-Goldmann 2009 in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, as well as the article on the *ṛṣis*, Witzel 2009.

229 In *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Proust stresses the problems emerging from Sainte-Beuve’s method when one attempts to understand the work of an author. For Sainte-Beuve, the work of a writer or indeed of any artist can be explained by her biography and the study of her social and familial background. Proust, while recognising the influence of the social milieu, the education and the family on an individual, supports an interpretation of the work which goes beyond the biographical and back to the text itself because the text and the literary production emerge from ‘another self’ than the one which interacts in everyday life: “[. . .] un livre est le produit d’un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vices. Ce moi-là, si nous voulons essayer de le comprendre, c’est au fond de nous-mêmes, en essayant de le recréer en nous, que nous pouvons y parvenir.” Proust 1971: 87. This idea of ‘another self’ is very interesting and modern. It brings out the clear distinction between the biographical person of the author and her work, an idea which is present in Sobti’s

Russian Formalists<sup>230</sup> and the schools of literary criticism that followed – and were partly received in the West through the translations of Todorov and Kristeva – also started shaping another notion of the figure of the writer, separating clearly the speaking voice (or rather voices) of a text from the biographical person. ‘Who is writing?’ and ‘Who is speaking?’ became very important questions, which remain even now at the core of any textual analysis, in particular in narratological approaches. The biographical elements of the ‘person behind the work’ – Krishna Sobti, born in 1925 in the small town of Gujarat, for example – lost its significance in favour of an observation of the text in itself, as a distinct entity.<sup>231</sup>

For Barthes, the person of the author must disappear so that the work and the reader can finally receive their own space in literature, namely the time-space created by the text building its life, a life rendered possible only by the death (the disappearance) of the author. The biographical author is indeed, according to him and the Russian Formalists, not the ‘speaking voice’ of the text. There can be more – and there mostly are more – than one narrative voice in a text. This polyphony, to take up the notion introduced by Bakhtin in his work on Dostoyevsky, is induced by the different types of speech – direct, indirect, semi-indirect – and by the blurring which appears in more modern fiction between these types of discourse and behind which every notion of auctorial speech vanishes.<sup>232</sup> With the idea of the presence of multiple voices inside the texts, every notion of ‘one true single voice’, the voice of the biographical author, must indeed be discarded in favour of an analysis of the text in itself and the diverse voices and perspectives present in it.<sup>233</sup>

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writings as well. One ought to note that the essay was only published posthumously in 1954, and was therefore unrelated to the work of the Formalists.

**230** See particularly Jakobson 1973; Bakhtin 1984 [1972].

**231** However, Bakhtin does not separate the text from its socio-historical surrounding and keeps stressing the importance of intertextuality. While arguments in this book will be based on a narratological approach to texts, the notion of intertextuality and interaction between a context and literature remain essential to my analysis of Sobti’s works, since it is an important point for her as well.

**232** For Bakhtin, Dostoyevsky is the perfect example of the polyphonic novel, since the perspectives constantly shift and each of the characters receives a voice. His definition of ‘polyphony’ can be paralleled to the differentiation between focalisations in Genette’s narratology, but it goes beyond it with the idea of the suspension of the auctorial judgement or of a judgement by the (hierarchally higher) narrating voice which organises the text/story. See Bakhtin (1972).<sup>1929</sup>

**233** This conception of the text bears similarities to Umberto Eco’s notion of open text, *opera aperta*, see Eco 1976.

This type of analysis does not mean however that the biographical author is completely absent from her text or non-existent. In his essay, Barthes stresses the fact that, in a text, it is the language that speaks – not a person. It is not a person who is the subject, but an ‘I’ which is only carrying a meaning inside the language and its understanding. The writer withdraws from the text – thus distancing herself – and the relationship between the text, the reader and the author changes:

The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after. The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now.<sup>234</sup>

In this passage, Barthes opposes the traditional conception of the author as ‘the father’ (or mother!) of her work and affirms the disappearance of the writer in favour of language itself: a reading of a text only ‘happens’ during the act of reading. It is at that precise moment that a text comes to life and language acquires a reality. Here, the author, as a biographical person, is non-existent. The use of the term ‘le scripteur (SCRIPTOR/SCRIBE) moderne’ instead of the word ‘écrivain’ (writer) is interesting. By using this term, Barthes puts even more distance between the traditional notion of authorship and the writing person composing the modern text: the scribe, or writing person, is not considered an author with the authority this title confers on her, but a writing instance through which the text is created; she is independent from the text and the text is independent from her. A text must be considered as being open to many layers of language and meaning, and not as something that is closed by the presence of one single author and therefore subject to one single auctorial interpretation. The existence of the text lies in the reading, not in the writing: the author must ‘die’ in order for the reader to take her place, namely the place where the text lives. According to Barthes, a writer is not ‘the father’ or some kind of god-like creator of a work. The creator of the message is, instead, language itself. The biography of the author, the external contingencies that affected her as a real person in real life must not influence the act of reading and interpreting the text. The distinction between the author as a person and the text could not be greater than here. The text itself is a space

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<sup>234</sup> I am quoting here the English translation by Stephen Heath in Barthes 1988: 145, keeping translator’s decision to use capital letters. For the French original, see Barthes 1984: 66.

where the words, through layers of meaning and intertextuality, bring a multiplicity of possible understandings which will emerge during the precise moment of reading – the act of reading being the performance and the ‘life’ of the work, a recreation or rewriting of the text.<sup>235</sup>

This perception of a text leaves ample room for all sorts of interpretations during the act of reading. This is the point made by Gayatri Spivak in her essay on Mahasweta Devi’s *Stanadayini* (1980, “The Breast-giver”),<sup>236</sup> where she highlights the distinction between the author and the text and stresses the multiple possible readings offered by the text. Indeed, as she illustrates through successive ‘readings’ (interpretations) of the short story – i.e., the author’s own allegorical reading, the Marxist feminist reading, the Liberal feminist reading, the reading of the theory of women’s body – each single interpretation of the text would be reductive. A text always contains more than what the author consciously intended:

[. . .] I hope these pages have made clear that, in the *mise-en-scène* where the text persistently rehearses itself, writer and reader are both upstaged. If the teacher clandestinely carves out a piece of action by using the text as tool, it is only in celebration of the text’s apartness (*être à l’écart*). Paradoxically, this apartness makes the text susceptible to a history larger than that of the writer, reader, teacher. In that scene of writing, the authority of the author, however seductively down-to-earth, must be content to stand in the wings.<sup>237</sup>

I personally favour this last vision of super-positioning possible interpretations of a text as the most open conception of literature. I would argue that such a vision of the text is particularly relevant for Sobti’s works and that it is in agreement with her own distinction between the text and the author.

However, this vision of literature and text interpretation is very far from the idea of the writer as some kind of a prophet transmitting truth through her words or a messenger of greater truth and reality. Relegating the biographical author to the background, it is much closer to the vision of the performers of medieval times who were staging and re-staging the text instead of initiating it. Yet, the notion of the author or poet as a particular figure possessing higher

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**235** This idea of reading as a rewriting of the text is present in Todorov’s *Poétique* as well, see Todorov 1973: 16. See also the English translation by Richard Howard, Todorov 1977. It is also continued in a way by Umberto Eco’s notion of *opera aperta* (open work) and the idea that any communication is in fact open to any interpretation depending on the recipient of a text, see Eco 1976.

**236** Spivak 1988a: 241–268.

**237** Spivak 1988a: 268.



knowledge remains a common *topos* of literature and poetry, particularly in the Romantic era.<sup>238</sup>

This image of the writer, or more specifically the poet, as a carrier of a divine message or a message emanating from a higher reality which is not directly accessible to all is very deeply rooted in many traditions, including Ancient India where the *ṛṣi*s, the divine seers, are the first poets and initiators of poetic utterances.<sup>239</sup> Because of the status of the word as possessing the power of truth, poetry and the poets were associated with transmitters of a greater truth, and were believed to receive visions from above. Even today, the poet is not exactly in the same position as the writer-novelist. The form of poetry, with its specific language and use of images, has a special status. Yet one can still draw a parallel between the position the poets occupied during the periods when poetry was the main genre and the space and role occupied by the novelists in modern society. Indeed, in the eyes of the public, the novelists are endowed with the power of bringing new – and better – visions and perspectives to society.

The conception of the author as an intermediary between a higher and invisible reality and the world of ordinary people is so deeply rooted that one finds traces of it in the writings on literature even of authors belonging to modern movements, be it in the West or in India. Leaving aside poets like Jayshankar Prasad who very clearly defended such a vision of the poet,<sup>240</sup> in many depictions of the role of writers as members of an elite and possessing, therefore, a duty towards society, it is but another expression of the same idea that is manifested, namely another variation on the figure of the writer or artist as occupying a special position in comparison to other human beings because of a capacity to see further and to understand a reality that is not directly accessible to others. For Sobti herself, the notion of the peculiar sense of perception of the writer and the ‘magic’ (*jādū*) behind the process of creation plays an important role and constitutes a paradox when read together with her statements about the ordinariness of the writer or the distinction between the writer and the text. I will come back to this point in a later part of this chapter. Let me only remark

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**238** This can be observed, for example, in Victor Hugo’s verses or Baudelaire’s depiction of the cursed poet (*poète maudit*), as well as in the poetry of Wordsworth or Shelley. All these are in fact later development of the ancient notion of *poeta-vates*, the poet as a divine seer and messenger, an image that is present in the Indian tradition as well, with the poet as *ṛṣi*.

**239** On this subject, see Witzel 2009 on the Poets’ families, as well as Gonda 1963: 14–20 and Malinar 2012:137–148, for the debate on the authority of texts and their authors.

**240** See for instance Prasad 2005.

here that there is a tension between these two quite different images of the writer, and that this tension is central to Sobti's self-representation as a writer.

The image of the writer as a 'visionary' is also invoked in the modern idea of the *écrivain engagé*, which is the product of a change in the distribution and patronage of literature. With the industrial revolution and the rise of the bourgeoisie, new sites and new media for the dissemination of thought and literature emerged, such as the salons and cafés, as well as newspapers allowing the publication of novels and short stories in *feuilletons*. Writers who had long depended on the patronage of the aristocracy or the rich bourgeoisie – and therefore were under obligation towards them, as is often expressed in dedications or prefaces to a work – had now other ways of making a living through writing. They thus acquired a new independence. In this context, the need to sell – the rules of the market – replaced the need to please a particular patron, a need that had inevitable repercussions on literature. This new freedom of the writers enabled them to take positions on matters of public life and society more directly and distinctively than before, though censorship remained in place and at times resulted in the ban of certain literary works. While it is only in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the idea of the writer as an intellectual involved in society really settled, its roots lie far beyond, probably even at the very beginnings of literature, in the notion of the message conveyed by literature and other arts as a door to new conceptions and a different understanding of the world.

With the proliferation of cheap print, newspaper culture and the newly found freedom of the writer as an individual, the notion of the writer as a thinker, acute observer and shrewd critic of society established itself and entered the most common representation of the writer. Today's writers are expected to take positions and comment on ongoing events, a trend accentuated by interviews and the media coverage of the persona of the author.<sup>241</sup> The notion of a socially engaged intellectual (be it a writer or another type of artist) is, according to Barthes, a quite modern idea that originates, as far as France is concerned, in the

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**241** This trend developed to such an extent that some writers actually rebelled against it and asked for their right 'not to have an opinion'. An example of a contemporary discussion of this role and place of writers in society might be found in the column by the Swiss writer, Martin R. Dean, on 'involved writing' published in the NZZ on the 4.09.2016: <http://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/zeitgeschehen/martin-r-dean-ueber-autor-und-oeffentlichkeit-der-schriftsteller-bastard-ld.114502>. Interestingly, this column refers to the opposition *écrivain/écrivain* developed by Barthes (1964) and highlights the fact that the expectations laid upon the writers by society have led to a merger of both, as was already predicted by Barthes in his essay.

Dreyfus affair and Zola's famous "J'accuse" published in the newspaper *L'Aurore*.<sup>242</sup> In his analysis of the social involvement of authors, Barthes prefers the usage of the word 'écrivain' (writing person, meaning the person who performs the act of writing; the word, being the substantivisation of the present participle, is generally translated as 'scriptor' in the English translations) to the word 'intellectuel' ('intellectual'). He opposes it to the notion of 'écrivain' (writer), thus giving us a definition of the writer that will provide an interesting perspective to Sobti's thoughts on the subject. For Barthes, the writer does indeed accomplish a function when she writes. Language is for her a structure which replaces her own and the world's structure; it is neither a tool nor a vehicle. A writer has no right over truth; for her, writing is an intransitive act: it is a practice in itself. The writer undertakes a task which is a part of a 'sacred duty'; she is invested in it like a priest of the language by the society that produces her. The writing person (*écrivain*), in opposition, sets herself the duty to write to transmit a specific content – it is an active act of communication where language is but a tool. The prominent distinction made here by Barthes resides in the ambiguity that lies at the core of the literary discourse produced by the writer (*écrivain*): here, the language is open, it leaves room for interpretations because its purpose is essentially to be a discourse, and not to convey a specific thought. Meanwhile, the discourse of the scribe (*écrivain*) is directed at one specific aim and does not want to admit in itself to anything else than its message. According to Barthes, both activities have a tendency to merge into a single one, bringing forth a new figure of the writer because a discourse that is only transitive (that of the scribe/scriptor) often fails to reach the audience, whereas the intransitive discourse of the writer, with its sacred function of the preserver of the language, does. In the modern context of the distribution of literature as a marketable commodity, both roles dissolve into a hybrid figure merging the writer, committed to the language, and the thinking intellectual, thus placing the writer in a role inside society, role that Barthes parallels to that of the sorcerer, namely a function of complementarity, healing the illness of society through her liminal positioning between inclusion and exclusion.<sup>243</sup>

It is striking that Barthes describes here precisely the same social expectations laid on the writers by their reading public and the literary establishment, as the ones denounced by Martin R. Dean in his column.<sup>244</sup> A writer must be a

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<sup>242</sup> See Barthes 1964.

<sup>243</sup> Barthes refers here to the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and to his analysis of the role of the sorcerer from an anthropological point of view. The particular position of the writer in a space 'in-between', a liminal space, is an important theme in Sobti's essays.

<sup>244</sup> Dean 2016.

public figure and take position on matters of society and politics, she cannot remain outside or live only in her literary or imaginary world. It is expected of her to be active or at least comment on the ongoing events. But on which grounds? Because of her dubious position of authority as a member of the thinking elite? In this question, one can see either an assimilation of the idea of the writer as an involved intellectual (a model defended amongst others by Sartre) or a remnant of the image of the poet-sage who is the messenger of another reality. Or, as I suggested earlier, the writer-intellectual might be but a modern expression of this ancient *topos*.

In the context of Hindi literature, many writers believe that a writer is a public intellectual and, as such, has a message to convey.<sup>245</sup> As pointed out in the introduction, the beginnings of modern Hindi literature are very strongly connected to the vision of Hindi as the perfect vehicle for new ideas because of its status as a widely used language, with a large number of speakers spread over vast geographical area. This remains true to this day. Even if Hindi is mostly spoken in the form of regional dialects, it is still a language widely spoken, read or at least understood throughout North India. The fact that this language was viewed early on as a medium of communication on an almost pan-Indian level has greatly influenced the evolution of its literature. Most of the writers who reflect on the role of the writers in society highlight the need, for an author, to communicate a message, an idea – and very often a political one.<sup>246</sup>

In the representation and self-representation of writers in the Hindi context, the writers are therefore often depicted as *écrivains engagés*. However, for most authors, there is a particular tension between the role of the writers in society and the role of literature and art as a dimension of life, which surpasses its specific historical frame and temporal context. For a writer like Agyeya, this conflict takes on the form of an opposition between the individual, and her self and life on the one hand, and the social duty and vision of progress on the other. The conflict cannot be completely resolved but remains a tension within the self, as exemplified by the figure of Shekhar in Agyeya's novel, *Śekhar ek jīvanī*.<sup>247</sup> The same

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**245** On the role of public intellectuals in the Indian public sphere, see Thapar 2015.

**246** See the discussion of Agyeya and Verma's positions in the introduction. But Sobti, too, considered it her duty to take position on several socio-political issues, remaining a public figure even in her later years – and participating in conferences and conventions like Pratirodh I and II at JNU in 2015 and 2016.

**247** See Agyeya 2014, as well as my discussion of the same in the introduction.

question is taken up by Nirmal Verma in his discussion of art for art's sake and activist writing.<sup>248</sup> For Sobti, the opposition between a writer's position in society with her function as an intellectual, and a writer's commitment to literature and life, is never voiced as directly as by her two just mentioned contemporaries. Sobti neither depicts the inner conflict of the writer, as Agyeya does, nor discusses the two possible roles of a writer openly in her essays, like Verma does. For her, the tension between those two functions of the writer is but one facet of the tension between the inside world of an individual and the outside world, i.e., an individual's surrounding, her society and time. This tension is however not seen as an unsolvable problem but as the underlying condition of the process of creation. It is from the opposition and ultimate convergence of those opposite directions and because of the dynamism and dialogue they induce, that a work takes its shape.

The depiction of the tension between those two functions as well as the apparent paradox existing between them is frequently expressed by Sobti through the use of metaphors and free verse, which I term 'theory in verse'. The choice of representing her views in a literary form and not a more academic or scholarly way illustrates Sobti's constant play with genres to both explain and conceal meanings, thus shrouding the writing process in mystery.

The writer, in Sobti's vision of life and literature, is situated in the position of an intermediary or catalyst, becoming a figure of dialogue and generating an interaction both for herself and the readers. In Sobti's essays, the first facet of the construction of the writers' persona and their relationship with their readers and their work constitutes therefore a questioning of the identity of the writers in their time and place, and of the interaction between their inner and outer worlds.

### 3.2 Krishna Sobti's Self-Perception as a Writer

Be it implicitly or explicitly, the figure of the writer is central to Sobti's writings on literature. She reflects often on her own activity and describes her methods of working which she also expands upon in comprehensive statements regarding the process of writing and the role of writers in general. She moves quite imperceptibly between 'I' and 'the writer' (*lekhak* or *racnākār*), usually preferring the more abstract word, 'the writer' (*lekhak*). The crossing from one term to the other is made so smoothly that the merging of both takes place in plain sight. However, while describing 'the writer', Sobti does not always refer to

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<sup>248</sup> For example, in the essays collected in Verma 1989.

herself but rather presents her vision of a good – or bad – writer in general, discussing diverse views on the writer's role and, ultimately, the role of literature. As I stressed in the first chapter of this book, Sobti's manner of speaking about 'the writer' can be interpreted as her way of allowing herself to discuss the writer in general (and in this way, not being reduced to the identity of a 'woman writer'). In the meantime, it is also a means of avoiding to speak too directly about herself, while in fact her statements are often highly personal.<sup>249</sup>

Sobti presents her vision of the author and her role in society as something that could be regarded as universal, valid not only for her but for other writers as well, and this in spite of her highlighting the individual character of her work and ideas. She shapes a certain image of the writer that emphasises in particular her relationship to her work in the process of creation, and her position as an intermediary, i.e., a medium through which the concretisation of the literary text and its protagonists comes about. Her role is thus that of a mediator, located in a liminal 'middle place' between her own inner world and the world that surrounds her. As such, the writer is established as a figure of dialogue. Within the writing process, identity (and thus the writer's persona) is defined in the dimension of space, in an interaction between the inside and the outside.

In the introduction, I have briefly presented Sobti's non-fictional texts and noted the difficulties faced in establishing their chronological order. The analysis of her views on the writer which emerge from these works will therefore not follow a strictly chronological order but rather the topics she takes up and the metaphors she uses to address this issue. Sobti's image of the writer shall thus be reconstructed through her intensive use of metaphors.

I start by discussing an essential point in Sobti's self-representation through a careful examination of her rejection of the category of 'women's writing' and her definition of herself as being first and foremost a writer. I will then analyse the central metaphor used by Sobti to describe her own writing process. This will lead me to examine a few passages of 'theory in verse' and the implications of the choice of this type of writing for the construction of the image of the writer. The next step will be to look at the tension that Sobti constructs in her theory (in verse and prose) between the inner and the outer worlds of a writer and the strong distinction – and yet connection – between the writer and the text which

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**249** In her discussion with Krishna Baldev Vaid, Sobti speaks generally about writers of her generation, provoking a reaction from her interlocutor who believes that he can speak only for himself and from his own point of view. See SVS, Sobti 2007: 31. However, Sobti is quite personal when she develops her views on writing.

this implies. Finally, I will turn to the image of the writer as a dialogical figure which emerges from a close reading of the texts examined here.

### 3.2.1 Opposing ‘Women’s Writing’: Defining the Self as a Writer

According to Sobti, the gender of a person ought not to be the sole criterion to judge literature, because there is always more to any individual than this aspect alone. A writer cannot be reduced to one aspect of her experience of the world – neither to her gender, nor to her religion, nor to her social or economical background. There is more to the elements constituting a writer’s identity – and therefore her self-representation as well – than gender or social background. But Sobti is also aware that, in the context she lives in, individual freedom is nothing ‘natural’ for women, particularly for women of her generation, as the external circumstances do not support the practice of individual freedom in the case of women and do not see women as independent subjects or individuals. The notion of individuality being, indeed, central to Sobti’s self-representation, it is therefore essential to understand how she conceives or stages her own ‘individuality’.

As thinkers like Judith Butler have argued, the dimension of gender is part of the creation of the subject or her identity. The category of ‘woman’ is particularly difficult to establish, because it is a political and socio-historical construction.<sup>250</sup> In the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, where she discusses the existing theories of gender, Butler elaborates Luce Irigaray’s claim that there is only one sex, the masculine, which produces its ‘other’, the feminine. In this sense, the constitution of a subject or a person (as an agent, i.e., an agent of its own

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<sup>250</sup> See Butler 1988, 1990, 2015. A passage of *Gender Trouble* seems particularly relevant here: “Apart from the foundationalist fictions that support the notion of the subject, however, there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity. Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, *women*, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety. As Denise Riley’s title suggests, *Am I That Name?* is a question produced by the very possibility of the name’s multiple significations. If one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered ‘person’ transcends the paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.” Butler 1990: 3.

freedom) is reserved for the men who are 'subjects'.<sup>251</sup> In the framework of the Western 'humanism',<sup>252</sup> the modern notion of the freedom of the individual is only applicable to such subjects. As it is highlighted by Partha Chatterjee at the end of his article on the nationalist resolution of the women's question in colonial India, the categories have to be rethought in order to include women.<sup>253</sup>

If Sobti nevertheless feels deeply equal to men as an individual, it is because of her own strong personality and the friendships she has formed during her career. She is aware that equality between men and women in itself has not yet been acquired in matters of education or opening up of other opportunities, and that therefore it is not possible for the writings of women to live up to the standards set by men in the literary canon. This canon, indeed, like the literary scene itself, is dominated by men – who have also had, for a long time, monopoly on higher education and experience of the world outside of the home.<sup>254</sup>

Yet, I shall argue that for Sobti, asserting herself in front of men and thus acquiring equality with them is not the only issue at stake. Rather, she strives to promote another vision of the writer and of the human being. This vision is that of an individual who is not reduced to gender, caste or any single aspect of her personality. Quite often, Sobti equates the situation of women writers to that of Dalit writers, highlighting thus the attitude of the critics – who all belong to the Hindi upper caste elite, as she points out – towards groups which are perceived as the subaltern other, less educated, less visible or articulate and thus marginalised.<sup>255</sup> Categorising and labelling a work, she says, is problematic because it suppresses the genuine quality of a writer as an individual, that is, ultimately, the very quality that makes her work unique, and must not be subsumed under general categories following types and conventions.

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**251** Butler 1990: 9–25.

**252** Meaning here the valorisation of the construction of an individual identity and its preservation.

**253** See Chatterjee 1989a: 252: "A critical historical understanding will show that this path will only bring us to the dead end which the nationalist resolution of the women's question has already reached. The historical possibilities here have already been exhausted. A renewal of the struggle for the equality and freedom of women must, as with all democratic issues in countries like India, imply a struggle against the humanistic construct of 'rights' set up in Europe in the post-enlightenment era and include within it a struggle against the false essentialisms of home / world, spiritual / material, feminine / masculine propagated by nationalist ideology."

**254** On the division between home and the world as a gender division, see also Partha Chatterjee's article on the nationalist resolution of the women's question, Chatterjee 1989a.

**255** See for example SVS, Sobti 2007: 92 and 141.



In the literary establishment and literary criticism, works written by women are usually classified as ‘women’s writing’ – meaning ‘texts written by and for women’. Allegedly, such texts cover only a woman’s perspective and cannot be considered on par with ‘high literature’. Some of the arguments for such a disqualification of ‘women’s writing’ are the inequalities in the area of education and the limited range of women’s experiences. Although the veracity of these two factors cannot be denied, it is striking that emphasising them does not lead the establishment to the questioning of the existing structures which cause such inequality.<sup>256</sup> Perhaps yet more remarkable is the fact that even a discourse such as Sobti’s – or my own discussion of it – implies that this branding is justified to a certain point, namely when we claim that such and such writer is not a part of the mainstream trend of women’s writing – the mainstream being here a certain ‘feminist romanticism’, to use the term coined by Indu Prakash Pandey in his study, first of its kind, on Hindi women writers.<sup>257</sup> Indeed, Sobti herself acknowledges this categorisation to a certain degree when she shares the fact that she is no longer branded as a woman writer but considered an equal by her fellow men writers and critics. According to her, this is due to her strong personality and her independent way of life:

Now I know they [the community of Hindi writers] just can’t treat you [women writers] as an equal – either they are patronizing or they put you on a pedestal. Though I must confess they did not treat me quite like that. Probably because I was too much of an individual. I didn’t have the inhibitions that most women feel in a predominantly male setup.<sup>258</sup>

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**256** It is important to note that the separation exists not only very officially in criticism and the discourse in the academic world (let us think of the number of seminars and symposia on women’s writing) but in the minds of writers and readers as well.

**257** See Pandey 1989 and my brief discussion of his views in chapter two. Pandey argues that most of the women writing in Hindi until the 1990s were focussing on man-woman relationships and the familial sphere, rarely including political or social themes in their texts and mostly describing the lives of urban middle-class women, educated and sometimes working. He excludes some writers from his branding as ‘feminist romantics’, amongst others Sobti, Bhandari and Garg. While his point of view is certainly worth considering, it is also necessary to take into account the context in which such writings emerged and the self-reflection that is present in them: due to the power structures, it is to be expected that the first women who got the opportunity to take up their pen (and access a publishing house) must have belonged to the upper middle- and middle-classes and possessed a certain level of education; see however, for an exception to this rule, the circumstances under which one of the first female autobiographies – and the very first autobiography in Bengali – was written by Rassundari Devi (1810-?), in the nineteenth century. Rassundari Devi was an ordinary housewife who taught herself how to read in order to read devotional texts. For an introduction to her and her autobiography, see Tharu/Lalita 1995: 190–202.

**258** Interview with Tarun Bhartiya and Jayeeta Sharma in Sharma 1996: 118.

Asked what those inhibitions are, Sobti interestingly shifts to her style of life and the perspective it has provided her with, a perspective that the women living in a family, even a nuclear one, do not possess, and states that this freedom is indeed a must for writing:

Men do not allow women to share the world they inhabit, and the region outside the house becomes almost exclusively male. Which is why I have chosen to live alone and to inhabit both worlds – the one within the walls of my house and the other one beyond it.

Personally, I feel that having a family of one's own can be a handicap for a writer. Women writers are so often asked, 'Doesn't your husband object to your writing?' This question always makes me cringe, but I can't deny that there is the possibility of a husband objecting. And there is so much 'noise' in a family situation. Just the presence of some people can be a deterrent to your work. A married existence in a family is anti-writing.<sup>259</sup>

This last argument brings to mind Virginia Woolf's point made in *A Room of one's own*: for women to become writers, independence is necessary, and not just independence in a material sense, but also in a spatial sense.<sup>260</sup> The room is part of the freedom that is required in order to create. According to Woolf, the impossibility of possessing such a space within a family home also explains the fact that many early women writers in the West never married – especially when their social background allowed them the choice of an unmarried life. It is very interesting that Sobti should automatically move from the question of the inhibitions of women writers to the issue of the space inhabited and occupied by them in society. She perceives the difference in her position with regard to other women writers of her generation as related to her own situation as an independent woman – or an independent individual – who has access to both spheres, the home and the world. This could indeed be viewed as a sign of her embodying within herself the male and the female perspectives.<sup>261</sup>

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**259** Sharma 1996: 118.

**260** See Woolf 1991. A room or space of one's own is a place that can be organised independently and where one can shut oneself away from the outside world and its noise. This is the reason why it is so important for a writer or thinker to possess an option to retire into her study. *Study* (the English word), is also the word Sobti uses for her own working place. Woolf is an interesting point of comparison with Sobti as another woman writer who reflects on many similar topics. Vaid, in his dialogue with Sobti, also refers to Woolf and suggests the comparison.

**261** This 'global view' of the world (in the sense of a view encompassing the perspective of all genders and, in general, a multiple perspective on life), is, according to Sobti, necessary for a writer and constitutes primary expression of the notion of the writer as *ardhanārīśvara* (half-man half-woman) which Sobti voices or alludes to in some of her interviews and essays. This must also be paralleled with Sobti's endeavour of presenting a complete view of life.

The question of her personal life and her choice to remain single and, thus, independent, is brought up by Sobti in her article on her double, Hashmat, written for Jasbir Jain's edited volume on writing as a woman. There, she expresses very clearly her opposition to a definition of writing formulated through the aspect of gender, in a way which is reminiscent of Woolf's argumentation as well.<sup>262</sup> In Sobti's understanding of writing, there is no place for the cares of a family life:

As a writer or as a writer who happens to be a woman, I had to create for myself quite wide inner and outer spaces. I stayed and lived like a bachelor girl. I did not manage a home and I also did not create a family. I was not meant for that mould. I do believe that for a woman raising a family is anti-writing. It will take a long time for a woman to manage both a household and the discipline demanded by creative writing. In a patriarchal society, a household and family claims and drains a woman's attention, energy and skill leaving little room for anything else, more so a vocation like creative writing, that is equally demanding.<sup>263</sup>

Sobti considers the patriarchal order of society as an impediment for women's writing and developing their individuality as long as they remain within the template envisaged for them by society (the family). Individuality implies for her 'becoming one with one's self'<sup>264</sup> and it is out of this individuality that writing can emerge. The notion of individuality is thus central to Sobti's self-representation and interestingly goes beyond gender roles or identification with her biological sex. Individuality, for Sobti, does not mean that a writer is a solitary individual detached from her environment. However, the autonomy needed in order to be active as a creative individual requires an independence which the patriarchal society does not grant women within a family.

This statement has to be put in its specific context. Indeed, it seems that even in the world of writers, in the Hindi sphere of writers and artists meeting at Delhi coffee houses in the 1950s and 1960s – and Sobti was very much part of the coffee house culture – women were not welcomed on an equal footing with men and even though at times accepted, this acceptance did not always come about without problems.<sup>265</sup> The attitude described by Sobti in the interview quoted above may also be inferred from essays and vignettes collected in

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**262** See chapter five of this book for a discussion of the figure of *ardhanārīśvara*, one of the representations of Shiva.

**263** Sobti in Jain 2007a: 22–23.

**264** Jain 2007a: 23.

**265** There are, to my knowledge, not many specific studies of this Hindi bohemia, but the writers who used to meet in coffee houses often refer to these circles, as shown in Vanshi's collection of articles, Vanshi 2009; or, for that matter, in the short Hashmat pieces.

*Dillī tī hāus* by Baldev Vanshi<sup>266</sup> and from the fictional literature of the time. One could cite Mohan Rakesh's novel *Aṃdhere baṃd kamre* (1961) as an example: despite a modern education and a modern vision of life, both Harbans, the main protagonist, and Madhusudan, the narrator, have obvious trouble in dealing with women who no longer conform to traditional roles and stereotypes.<sup>267</sup> From such depictions of the literary scene of the 50s and the 60s, it is not difficult to surmise that the position of a woman trying to establish herself through an artistic activity was far from easy. Yet, for Sobti herself, in her experience, the struggle is not seen as overly difficult – at least not in the majority of her writings. There are some contradictions in her portrayal of her experiences, but the fact remains that thanks to her strong personality she did indeed create for herself a niche in Hindi literature.<sup>268</sup>

In Sobti's analysis of this difference between herself and the majority of Hindi women writers of her generation, the emphasis put on individuality and the notion of space are particularly striking.<sup>269</sup> The idea of space and mobility is very interesting because it brings to mind the image of the writer as residing in an in-between space. Her ability to move within two spheres – the inner and the outer, i.e., the inner space of the self, and the outer space of her environment, but also more concretely, in this case, the inner space of home and the

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**266** Vanshi 2009. The volume includes a piece by Sobti on Delhi of the 50s and 60s, and on the meetings of writers and artists at the coffee house. Sobti's position as a strong personality is manifest there as well.

**267** See Rakesh 1993. The novel gives a picture of a group of artists, or would-be artists, and writers in Delhi over a period of some ten years. It is viewed and narrated by Madhusudan, a journalist and writer. Harbans, one of the main protagonists, encourages his wife Nileema to be an artist and is torn between his wish to form with her a modern couple of artists and his inhibitions at the idea of her being a dancer. Madhusudan, although attracted in the course of the novel by two 'modern' women of this circle, ends up choosing a traditional wife in the person of the daughter of his former landlady.

**268** While discussing the fact of being a woman and a writer with Anamika, for example, Sobti explains how, despite the fact that her novels cover other topics than those relating to women and man-woman relationships, her work was sometimes put aside deliberately by the critics or the selecting committees probably merely on account of her being a woman. See the interview with Anamika in SAM, particularly Sobti 2015: 191.

**269** It is worth noting that Sobti separates herself clearly from other women writers here and on other occasions as well. It is a part of the creation of her persona as a very independent and strong-willed individual going her own way – a position that her contemporaries acknowledge – but also denotes her will not to be considered a 'woman writer'. In the last piece of the first volume of HaH, Sobti 2012: vol I, when Hashmat meets Sobti, the same emphasis is put on independence, through her refusal to join a party or a literary group, but the text also highlights the very solitary path Sobti has chosen for herself.

outer space beyond it – confers on the writer a more global view of the world. This global view is not gendered or, to phrase it better, it encompasses all genders and is a must for a writer in order to grasp the reality and truth of the lives of her characters. Thus, the writer is also a bridge, a binding element (or a catalyst). She possesses the ability to cross boundaries and set limits in order to investigate both spheres – without completely belonging to any of them.

The bridge is one of the images that Sobti uses to speak of the position of the writer,<sup>270</sup> but it is not the only ‘crossing’ or ‘border’ image occurring in her writings – fictional or non-fictional. The threshold (*caukhat*) is another in-between image which plays a very important role not only in Sobti’s imagery but in the Indian gender-space discourse as a whole. Malashri Lal dedicated a whole book to the question of the threshold and the crossing of this notional line that separates the world of the home, the area usually seen as women’s sphere, from the outside world. Men are able to cross the threshold at any time; however, it is clear that the inside of the house, although they have authority over it, is not ‘their’ sphere.<sup>271</sup>

The idea of crossing this limit – a taboo, since the border is also traditionally seen as a protection, a *lakṣmaṇa rekhā* –<sup>272</sup> is present in several of Sobti’s novels. The discussion of such a limit and the reflection on the possibilities of crossing it or of belonging to both spheres – or, as one could argue, to none – is not restricted only to her theoretical writings.<sup>273</sup> Perhaps the most obvious illustration of this would be Sobti’s very first novel, DSB, which interestingly starts with a warning from the grandmother of the heroine and first-person narrator, Pasho, in the epigraph preceding the narration: “Be careful, girl! One slip

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**270** See MSRS, Sobti 2014: 398.

**271** See Lal 1995. Beside the great symbolism of the threshold in itself (a crossing place, i.e., a place that does not belong really to any of the spaces it separates), this study of works by Indian women authors writing in English stresses the difficulties of crossing this border and the implications such a crossing can have for a woman. The image is central in the work of many Indian writers.

**272** The expression *lakṣmaṇa rekhā* designates in its primary understanding the line drawn by Lakshmana, Rama’s brother, around Sita’s house before setting out, in order to protect her during his absence, as it is told in the later versions of the Ramayana. This magic line protects her from any danger outside the home and must not be crossed. As long as she does not cross it, she is safe – and Ravana’s attempts to kidnap her fail. In order to kidnap her, the demon disguises himself as a wandering sadhu and begs for food to be brought to him outside the house, where his vows do not allow him to set foot. The expression then evolved to designate any protective line, but specifically the idea that a woman is safe only inside the limits of her home.

**273** Rekha, in her article published in *Indian Literature*, analyses several of Sobti’s novels through the perspective of space and limits in association with gender. See Rekha 2009.

and your life will turn to dust!"<sup>274</sup> In this story, however, the crossing of the threshold by the heroine does not result, as might be expected, in an empowerment, but in a succession of episodes of domination and constant threat by men, with only few moments of solace inside a home, in what might seem to justify the grandmother's warning. But a closer look reveals the protagonist as true to herself and aware of her own needs in every situation, thus altering the first impression that the story might produce on the reader. While Pasho cannot be described as a typical victim of the patriarchal society because of her tenacious will to live (and thus fight against the oppressing situations), there is no trace here of the idea of the ability to move in both worlds, between the inside and the outside, on equal terms with men. Pasho remains subjected to the demands of patriarchal society until the very end of the story.

In the novel, the threshold marks the limit a woman must not cross if she is to remain protected and 'safe'. For Sobti, however, threshold and family ties are boundaries and limits hampering the development and the horizon of an individual (man or woman) and even more so, a writer:

In my simple and prosaic life, things took such a turn that I never came to be caught in the cycle of time nor the happiness and demands of the inner side of the threshold. The joy and blessing which show up in this seemingly tiny, immense world are absent in my house. The building in which I am destined to live out my time looks less like a house and more like an open courtyard. There are no heaps of material objects there, no precious things kept under lock and key, no sentimental bamboo screens hanging in front of one's eyes,<sup>275</sup> and no image to adorn the walls and the heart.<sup>276</sup>

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274 DSB, Sobti 2001:1: *Sam̐bhalkar rī ek bār kā thirkā pāṃv zindagānī dhūl meṃ milā degā.*

One ought to note here that this saying is presented as an epigraph and it is not very obvious whether it is really Pasho's grandmother who says it. It appears again later in the text (Sobti 2001: 91, 123) as words Pasho repeats to herself as a motto.

275 Bamboo screens used to separate the women's quarters from the men's. The sentence poetically describes a married woman's home.

276 MSRS, Sobti 2014: 400, *Apnī sīdhī sapāt zindagī meṃ kuch aisā ghaṭā ki ham na kisī vakt ke dāyre meṃ bandhe na kisī caukhaṭ ke andarvālī khuṣgavāriyoṃ aur mazbūriyoṃ se. Jo rounak barkat ek choṭī dikhnevālī baṛī duniyā meṃ ākar, ikatṭhā hotī calī jāti hai vah apne yahām gairāzir rahī. Apne vakt ko rahne ki imārat hī aisi milī ki jaise ghar na ho – dālān ho. Vahām na kisī māl asabāb ke ḍher lage na kimtī jimsōṃ par tale paṛe na āmkhoṃ ke āge rūmānī cilman ṭaṅgī na hī dilodivār par koī ek tasvīr lagī.*

In this passage, Sobti discusses her personal life with her characteristic discretion when it comes to very private aspects. It is worth noting that she is merely making allusions and using metaphors to let the reader (or listener) understand that she did not marry and never started a family. Nothing is said directly. It can be compared to a similar passage in HaH, Sobti: 2012: vol. 1: 252–253.

Relating her own experience, Sobti highlights the fact that she lives free of the boundaries imposed by the symbolic threshold (*caukhaṭ*, used here as synonym for the household) and in an open space (which is not really a home, but rather a hall accessible to all). The choice of the word ‘courtyard’ or ‘open space’ (*dālān*: verandah, hallway, yard) with the idea of a free space in which one moves, and which outsiders might enter freely, is particularly striking, even more so since very often it is a space on both sides of which lie the women’s and men’s domains. This puts the writer in a space in-between, which joins several spheres and spaces but does not belong completely to any of them.

In this middle space, the writer can develop an individuality that is as open as the place itself, and equip herself to understand the world more fully. It is this mobility, this space, that allowed Sobti to present herself in the Hindi public sphere as an individual and find an equal footing with men. Indeed, it is implied here that the fact that she could move between the outside (i.e., the world marked as male or predominantly male) and the inside (the world of the home, assigned traditionally to women) made it difficult to categorise her into any of the stereotypes related to the figure of a woman writer – writing about home and family relationships – or into a socially constructed image of femininity. By being free to move in both spheres, Sobti comes into possession of the aspects of both, a conceptualisation she presents in her writings when she describes the ideal writer as a figure of *ardhanārīśvara*, a union (or fusion) of a male and a female.<sup>277</sup> With a reference to such an androgynous figure, she does not however allude to the sexual identity of the writer but rather her ability to see and experience the world from two different points of view: “Every writer herself is the birth father and the birth mother of her works. To be a good writer, an individual needs to possess, to start with, a seed with elements of both. The measure in which those are present in a writer’s nature, in even or uneven proportions, accounts for the blend which determines the quality of the creative work and its character.”<sup>278</sup> These elements or ingredients (*tattva*) are

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**277** See the discussion of Sobti’s male double, Hashmat, in chapter five below. *Ardhanārīśvara* is a form of Shiva, particularly beloved in art, symbolising the ultimate unity of the nature (*prakṛti*, associated with female energy) and the awareness (*puruṣa*, associated with the masculine). For Sobti, the writer possesses elements of a man and a woman. She is not only situated in an in-between space but is also herself a sort of hybrid creature. This notion recalls the liminal space in which Barthes puts the writer in his comparison of the writer and the sorcerer.

**278** MSRS, Sobi 2014: 412. *Koī bhī lekhak apnī racnāoṃ kā āp janak hai āp hī janani bhī. Acchā lekhak hone ke lie kiśī bhī ek vyakti meṃ bīj rūp se in donoṃ tattvoṃ kā honā zarūrī hai. Lekhak ki prakṛti meṃ ye kis anupāt meṃ maujūd haiṃ, barābar yā kamobeś, iskā sammiśraṅ sṛjan ki guṇavattā aur uske svabhāv ko tay kartā calā jātā hai.*

essential to the creation of a work that would reflect at least partly the reality and diversity of the world with all its constituent, complementary components.

The notion of space – here, gendered space – is central to Sobti's vision of the writer, and she repeatedly places the writer in a middle position, an in-between place which might be far from comfortable, yet is presented as the necessary setting for creation. This is apparent from the quote above referencing family relationships, as well as from Sobti's continual refusal to be involved in the power struggles of writers' groups or in politics.<sup>279</sup> Such an involvement would indeed imply losing part of the freedom she considers essential to good writing. Furthermore, Sobti stresses the complementarity of the genders and a vision of the world which encompasses all aspects of life as something that is needed in writing and literature; this vision includes not only both gender aspects – and recognises the possibility of their completing rather than opposing each other – but also a larger conception of the world as an all-encompassing space.<sup>280</sup> As the quoted passages show, the notions of space and gender are intertwined. However, in Sobti's very individual-centred vision of literature, a writer must never be defined only by one aspect of her self but rather accommodate in herself as many aspects of reality as possible:

For a writer, be it a man or a woman, when considered in artistic context, both the innate strengths as well as the shortcomings, abilities and limitations, are not at odds with each other – rather, they complement each other. Both grow from their very association. Traits related to inherited temperament, physical disposition and [social] circumstances come to the fore through a writer's skill and flourish in her writing only when practical experience, sensitivity and imagination are balanced by intelligence. [Then only] do they give birth to harmony. Rather than separating male writing and female writing into two distinct categories in the name of physical constitution and *sex*<sup>281</sup>[*gender*], it would be more

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**279** See Sobti's answer to Rama Jha's question about her belonging to a group of writers, Jha 1981: 69: "I belong to no group. I do not try to intellectualise the commitments. I am with those who stand up against oppression, exploitation and strive to keep human dignity at any cost. A writer needs fresh air all the time. Freedom from inhibitions, traditions and degenerated morality. He must create a large territory within himself which he has to nourish constantly."

**280** Although in Sobti's writings, and in particular in her use of the figure of *ardhanārīśvara*, there is an allusion to sexual hybridity, the third sex, which plays a role in the Indian tradition (the Hijras, the 'third gender', are accepted in society and have a role in rituals), does not seem to be an important notion for Sobti. In her perception of literature, it is more essential to possess a vast vision of life which includes all genders, namely what one could call, in this regard, a global or all-encompassing vision of the world.

**281** Sobti uses here the English word. I set all English words used within the Hindi text in italic in my translations.



meaningful to evaluate the individual's 'life savings', which she put together, on the strength of her quest and experience.<sup>282</sup>

The writer must be in a state of harmony to create – with the idea of harmony and balance echoing again the concept of a middle. It is this very position of the 'in-between' that makes a writer at the same time strong and able to stand and face the world and yet vulnerable because she does not belong wholly to any one sphere.

Particularly striking in this quote is the idea that what constitutes the identity of an individual – and more specifically of a writer – is the entirety of her experience, including her learning, her background, her family history and everything she has acquired in the course of her life. To reduce a person to one aspect does not render justice to the complexity of the life experience which, according to Sobti, is at the core of literature. This situation is also what will enable the artist, in this case the writer, to take a position in the world. The writer is thus presented here as living in a space which is somehow outside the worlds she recreates or shows in her works. The writer acts as a transmitter, a bridge, but is not completely involved in this or that world. This is indeed what gives writers the ability to observe and communicate. The gender of a writer or her caste identity is but one aspect of what constitutes her creative personality.

This insistence on experience allows Sobti to foreground the equality between men and women and indeed between all human beings. Just as no man writer belonging to the Hindi elite would be confronted with having his work and thinking reduced solely to a single particular aspect of his personality, Sobti asks that no woman and no Dalit who writes should have to face such a reduction either. Personality must be at the core of any identity as an individual, and this is what enables her, for example, to hold a dialogue with Krishna Baldev Vaid as his equal.

In SVS, Sobti discusses with Vaid the position of women in literature and the difficulties women face within the Hindi literary establishment. It is interesting to note that for Vaid it is perfectly straightforward and easy to declare that he supports women's writing and feminism, whereas for Sobti supporting

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282 MSRS, Sobti 2014: 412, *Lekhak aurat ho yā mard, kalātmak saṃdarbh meṃ donoṃ kī ādim khūbiyāṃ aur khāmīyāṃ, sāmāthyā aur simāeṃ ek-dusre kī vīrodhī nahīṃ – pūrak hai. Sājhe-pan meṃ hī ve ubhartī haiṃ. Vaṃśānugat svabhāva, prakṛti aur pariveś saṃbādhī viśeṣṭāeṃ lekhak ke kauśal se ubharkar tab panapatī haiṃ jab uske lekhan meṃ anubhav dakṣatā, saṃvedan aur kalpnā vīvek se tālmel biṭhāte haiṃ. Sāmaṃjaysya paida karte haiṃ. Śārīrik gaḍhan aur seks ke nām par nārī lekhan aur puruṣ lekhan ko alag-alag khāṃcoṃ meṃ biṭhāne se kahīṃ zyādā mahatvapūṃ hai vyaktitva kī kul jamā pūṃjī kī paḍtāl jo lekhak apnī khoj aur anubhav ke bal par arjit kartā hai.*

women's rights and their equality with men is not tantamount to supporting women's writing as a category.<sup>283</sup> While acknowledging the fact that more and more women write and that what they express is something new, Sobti strives to preserve her status of equality with men in terms of the quality of her writings. Indeed, for her, two conflicting ideas are at stake here, something that brings about the sometimes paradoxical statements that emerge in her texts and in her interviews. Although she strongly defends the rights of women to go beyond the sphere of the home traditionally assigned to them and to be recognized for the value of their work and their abilities (not being merely reduced to their biological self), she refuses to be called a feminist and participate in seminars and conferences on women's writing.

Vaid: [. . .] The ideal situation would be that the assessment of literature would not be connected to gender,<sup>284</sup> but as long as this situation does not come about, I don't see any problem in speaking of 'women's writing'. Until five or ten years ago you were opposed to the use of this term, but of late you have started to take part in events which focus on this topic and where you present your elaborated point of view to others.

Sobti: I beg your pardon. Taking part in such programmes is not at all a sign that there has been any change or turnabout in my beliefs. The ongoing debate on women issues, at the *academic* and literary levels, corroborates the fact that there seems to be a particular kind of anxiety among men [living] in Indian society. Since the earliest times, literature has been full of detailed accounts about relationships between women and men. It was mostly men who provided those physical descriptions and narrations. The beauty of women, the attraction, the intoxication of love, all this is there, in the writings by men. Now, women are presenting unabashedly their inner going-ons, about which they

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**283** See Vaid's statement in SVS, Sobti 2007: 146, "I admire your thinking and praise your courage. Krishna, as an individual, I am a supporter of feminism in politics and in life too, not only in literature. I consider myself a feminist man."

*Maiṃ āpke vicārom kī kadr kartā hūṃ aur āpke sāhas kī dād detā hūṃ. Kṛṣṇā, maiṃ vyakti-gat rūp se sāhitya meṃ hī nahīṃ, rājñiti aur jīvan meṃ bhī nārīvād kā himāyati hūṃ. Maiṃ apne āpko nārīvādī puruṣ māntā hūṃ.*

For the whole discussion of feminism and women's writing in the dialogue, see SVS Sobti 2007: 145–170.

**284** Vaid uses the word *liṅg* in Hindi. I translate it as 'gender' here in this context, but it usually means 'gender' in a linguistic sense. It is difficult to know how far the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' applies in the Hindi discourse, where the gender roles are very clearly defined by the biological sex of a person and where, therefore, Judith Butler's observations on the categorisation of 'woman' as a socio-cultural construction are particularly valid. Nonetheless, here as well, the roles are not really perceived as constructed. On the distinction between 'gender' and 'sex' see, for example, Butler 1988, 2015. One may observe here that some Indian literary critics, like Rekha, emphasise this distinction, as well as the difficulty of defining both terms; see Rekha 2009.

previously never said a word. There is nothing astonishing in this. Two human entities, complementary to each other, feel the pressure of sex in their heart and mind, spirit and body, and they weave it into writing with the help of language. Men have written no less about women. They have painted them with innumerable colours. They have lived them in their own being.

Now, women have started to express their *sexual* longings and their feelings about love in their own words<sup>285</sup> – earlier, nobody but men had the right to write about those. Now this miracle-making is within the grasp of women. The woman reveals herself all by herself and in her resplendence holds in her gaze man’s virility and its limits. Now in her ‘unique singleness’, she can discover herself as well. And she is fashioning an image (*svarūp*) of man with her fresh gaze, moulds him through a new language, searching for new words.<sup>286</sup> She raises herself from being subjugated to man and his physical strength. She learns the benefits of economic independence.

It is true that the entry of the so-called women’s writing into the creative field of literature is recent but this fact ought not to be an excuse for slotting it in a separate category or giving it a rank.

We need to get used to seeing similarities between men and women. In view of how the social, economic and progressive lifestyle presents itself [nowadays] in human society, we need to prepare ourselves to live and understand such a language.

K.B.,<sup>287</sup> be it as it may: the difference between your writing and mine is not due only to gender. Forgive me, but if you are a man, it doesn’t mean that you are better than me in matter of literary expression; and because I am a woman, it doesn’t follow that I am [worth] less than you on the creative level. As writers, the difference between you and me is not merely that I am a woman and you are a man. Our different personalities are moulded by other elements as well. The hereditary and familial situations, the circumstances, the atmosphere, the education, the work-life, all this has a long-term share in the literary make-up of a writer.<sup>288</sup>

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**285** Here it is interesting to think of Hélène Cixous’ *Le rire de la Méduse* and her idea of the necessity for women to express what was until then contained and even repressed, see Cixous 2010: 38–39.

**286** Mitro in MM is the illustration of what Sobti states here.

**287** Krishna Baldev Vaid; Sobti addresses him as K.B. in their dialogue.

**288** SVS, Sobti 2007: 147–150. Vaid: [ . . . ] *Ādarś sthiti to yahī hogī ki sāhitya kī pahcān liṅg se joṛkar na kī jāe lekin, jab tak vah sthiti nahīṃ ātī tab tak ‘nārī lekhan’ kī bāt karne meṃ bhī mujhe koī haraj nahīṃ dīkhtī. Āj se pānc-das sāl pahle tak āp ‘mahilā lekhan’ ke istemāl par āpatti kiyā kartī thīṃ lekin idhar āpne aise āyojanom meṃ śarik honā śurū kar diyā hai jahām is viṣay par gaur hotā hai aur jahām āp apnā suljhā huā dṛṣṭikon dūsrom ke sāmne rakhtī haiṃ.*

Sobti: *Māf kījiegā – aise āyojanom meṃ śarik honā is bāt kā saṅket to kataī nahīṃ ki mere viśvās meṃ koī pher-badal huā hai. Āj akādamik aur sāhityik star par strī vimarś par jaise vivād ho rahe haiṃ, vah is bāt kī tāid karte haiṃ ki bhāratīya samāj ke puruṣ varg meṃ ek khās tarah*

This long passage from the conversation between the two writers shows clearly the evolution of Sobti's point of view about women's writing as a category as well as the issues at stake for her in this context. She does not deny the lesser level of education in the case of women nor the fact that women's writing is quite a new phenomenon. Indeed, although in the past decades the early writings by women have received more and more scholarly attention, they remain an exception and it is a fact that until the 19<sup>th</sup> century very few women wrote (or were published). In view of this, Sobti supports women's writing and, after decades of hesitation, even accepts to participate in symposia and seminars on the topic. Nonetheless, it is obvious that she does not link literary quality to gender issues nor biological identity.

Her change of mind about symposia and seminars on women's writing can probably be paralleled to the evolution of the literary scene and the emergence of new generations of women writers. Many women-writers of the younger generations are highly educated, have university degrees, hold PhDs, are often

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*kī haḍbaḍī lakṣit hai. Ādikāl se strī-puruṣ ke sambandhoṃ ke byauroṃ se sāhitya bharā paṛa hai. Zyādātar puruṣ ne hī yah daihik varṇan aur vṛttānt prastut kie haiṃ. Strī ke saundaya, ākaraṇ uske prem pyār kā unṃād puruṣ ki likhit meṃ hai. Ab strī niḥsaṃkoc apne āntarik prakaraṇoṃ ko prastut kar rahī hai jis par vah kabhī muṃh na kholṭī thī. Ismeṃ vismaykāri kuch nahīṃ. Ek-dūsre kī pūrak do mānavīya ikāiyāṃ śārīr, man, dil-dīmāg par seks ke dabāv ko mah-sūs kartī haiṃ aur bhāṣā kī madad se use likhit meṃ gūṃth letī haiṃ. Puruṣ ne strī par kam nahīṃ likhā. Use behisāb raṅgoṃ meṃ āṃkā hai. Apne astitve meṃ use jīya hai.*

*Ab strī apnī abhivyakti meṃ saikṣual manovṛttiyōṃ, aur pyār ko lekar apne bhāvoṃ ko bhī vyakt karne lagī hai – is par likhne kā pahle puruṣ kā hī adhikār rahā. Ab yah camatkār strī ke pāle meṃ hai. Vah svayaṃ ko udghāṭit kar rahī hai aur apne vaibhav meṃ ek sāth puruṣ ke puruṣatva aur uskī sīmāoṃ ko bhī dekh rahī hai. Ab vah apne ekatva meṃ apne ko bhī ḍhūrṭī hai. Aur puruṣ ke svarūp ko bhī apnī naī nazar se, naī bhāṣā meṃ gaṛh rahī hai, nae śabd ḍhūrṭ rahī hai. Puruṣ ke nice paṛe rahne kī purānī daihik pratāṃ se ubar rahī hai. Ārthik svatantratā kī upādeytā samajh rahī hai.*

*Yah sahī hai kī sāhitya ke racnātmak kṣetr meṃ tathā kathit mahilā lekhan kā praveś nayā hai lekin yahī ekmātr kāraṇ unheṃ alag śreṇī yā kramāṃk dene kā vikalp nahīṃ honā cāhie.*

*Hameṃ strī aur puruṣ meṃ samāntāeṃ dekhne kā ādī honā cāhie. Jis tarah kī sāmājīk, ārthīk aur vikāśīl jīvan śailī mānav samāj ke sāmne ughaṛ rahī hai – us bhāṣā ko jīne, samajhne ke lie hameṃ apne ko taiyār karṇā cāhie.*

*K.B.: anyathā na leṃ – mere aur āpke lekhan kī vibhīntā kā kāraṇ sirf liṅg-bhed hī nahīṃ. Māf kijiegā, āp puruṣ haiṃ to apnī racnātmak abhivyakti meṃ mujhse behtar nahīṃ haiṃ aur kyoṃki maiṃ strī hūṃ to sarjanātmak star par āpse kamtar nahīṃ hūṃ. Lekhak ke rūp meṃ mujhmeṃ aur āpke darmiyān vibhīntā mahaz itnī mātr hī nahīṃ kī maiṃ strī hūṃ aur āp puruṣ haiṃ. Ham donoṃ ke alag-alag vyaktitva ko ḍhālnevalē kai aur bhī tattva haiṃ. Ānuvāṃśīk pārivārik shthitīyāṃ, parīsthitīyāṃ, vātāvaraṇ, śikṣā, ājīvikā yah sabhī lekhak ke racnātmak paryāvaraṇ meṃ dūrgāṃ hissedārī karte haiṃ.*

Sobti's argumentation brings to mind Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

lecturers or holders of managerial positions. Since their range of experience is broader than the family life, their writing expands as well in many new directions – they are ‘real subjects’. It seems logical that Sobti would be more willing to be associated with this type of writing (with someone like Geetanjali Shree, for example)<sup>289</sup> than with the mainstream of women’s writing of the 1950s and 1960s. In the meantime, however, it remains essential for her to be defined as a writer and not identified with any women’s movement, because her primary objective is literary, not political.<sup>290</sup>

For Vaid, who, as a man, has no such issues to bear in mind, it is therefore much easier to state clearly that he is a feminist. His books will not be branded nor their literary quality relegated to the background because of such a statement. The apparent paradox in Sobti’s attitude is indeed the result of the two issues at stake for her in this particular context. On the one hand, it is essential for her to assert herself as an individual in a male-dominated field and to defend the literary quality of her writing by insisting on her primary identity as a writer. On the other hand, she is conscious of the necessity to strive for a better representation of women in the literary world. Resolving this problem proves difficult. However, more than a question of gender in a feminist understanding of the term, the issue for Sobti is her self-perception and her identity as a writer.<sup>291</sup> I shall now demonstrate how, as a writer, she perceives her role and describes her own writing process.

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**289** Although Sobti never names specific writers when she speaks of the young Hindi writers, she reads and is aware of the younger generations of women writers; she knew many of them personally, for example, Geetanjali Shree and Anamika. Sobti and Shree also share some common themes, like the study of the mother-daughter relationship.

**290** In her piece, *Discovering Hashmat*, Sobti makes this point very clear, see Jain 2007a: 22. “A clear sight is all that is needed to recognise your inner world. It is so much easier to exaggerate the differences between Male and Female writing. I must confess I do not classify ‘women’s writing’ as a separate genre unless it is done as protest writing.” By introducing the notion of ‘protest writing’, Sobti detaches herself from the feminist-activist trend of writing and implicitly highlights her own poetics, namely the literary purpose (enclosing male and female elements) of her works. In the quote, I have kept the capital letters of Jain’s edition of the translation from the Hindi original. Hindi has no capital letters.

**291** However, things become more complicated due to the presence in Sobti’s work of another voice, the voice of her alter ego, Hashmat, a male writer. See chapter five.

### 3.2.2 The Writing Process

Sobti does not consider herself a prolific writer. She gives herself time before writing and often states quite proudly that she sets the pen to paper only when she feels the urge to tell something and when the 'time is right'.<sup>292</sup> This idea is very closely connected to the notions of ripening and cultivation, the work in its final form being the result of a whole process of germination inside the inner 'soil' (*bhūmi* or *zamīn*) of the writer.<sup>293</sup> The metaphor of the soil and the growing plant or crop (the work) lies at the heart of Sobti's depiction of the writing process and can be introduced here as the core metaphor in her perception of her role as a writer and of the relationship between a writer and her surrounding world.

Two roles of the writer emerge from the depiction given by Sobti and illustrated by the recurring metaphor of the 'field'. On the one hand, the writer is portrayed as a creator, drawing material from her surroundings, but also relying on her capacity of imagination and her personality. On the other hand, the writer is presented as a mere transmitter of the voices of the characters she stages in her works, a vessel or a catalyst through whom the reader receives directly the speech of the protagonists of a text (in its original wording). The tension between these two poles is paralleled to a tension between the inner world of the writer (*antarman*) and her surroundings (*pariveś*) as two opposite directions which however have to come together for the creation of a text. The image used by Sobti to illustrate this process is summed up in the metaphor of the field (or plot of land) and the writer-cultivator, both images based on the semantic field of agriculture and gardening.

This field metaphor (as I shall call it from now on) appears in many variations throughout Sobti's essays and is often developed by the use of a semantic field connected to the idea of vegetation and growth – in the sense of cultivation, not of wilderness. Writing needs careful thinking and planning; a writer acts as a

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**292** The notion of the right time for creation is an important part of Sobti's construction of the image of the writer and appears in almost all depictions she gives of the first springing up of the idea underlying her works, as for example in the case of ZN, her longest novel, in which she recreated the life of a village in Punjab before the partition. Her first plan was to write it in several parts and it is in fact a creative reworking of her very first (and until recently, unpublished) novel, *Cannā*, written almost thirty years prior to the publication of ZN.

**293** Sobti uses in this context the words *bhūmi* and *zamīn* in turns. Both mean 'earth, soil, land'. Each writer is depicted as having her own plot of earth, with the actual soil in its materiality as the nourishing element from which the work will grow. The same idea is present in the English titles of Agyeya's diaries discussed above in the introduction. However, for Sobti, this metaphor is really central to her conception of writing, much more than for Agyeya, for whom the writer is some kind of visionary, not a patient cultivator of a plant.

farmer or a gardener who needs to look after her plants and tend to them. For Sobti, writing is not the result of a sudden inspiration or surge of emotions (as other writers describe it, for instance Agyeya in his introduction to *Śekhar: ek jīvanī*).<sup>294</sup> One could almost speak of a *métaphore filée* (sustained metaphor),<sup>295</sup> with the resonance of this image running often over several sentences and paragraphs in the essays, or even over all of Sobti's non-fictional works. The literary work is thus 'growing' inside the inner world of the writer like a seed; the emerging text is the crop (*fasal*) of the long process of germination of the raw material (*kaccā māl*)<sup>296</sup> assembled by the writer. This metaphor is found in almost all of Sobti's essays and seems to reflect her representation of the process of creation. It is, however, particularly striking in her discussion of the genesis of ZN:

To write *Zindagināmā* by hand was not enough. It had to be lived like life itself. Nurtured like the crop in the field. It so happened that a piece of fragrant land caught my eye. The claim was already there. There was some desire. Some ancient birth right. Well, I took the field. Marked it. Prepared the earth. Checked the soil. Worked out the irrigation. Got the seeds. When it was time, I began to sow. What happened in between was the blessing and bounty of nature and the fate and toil of the farmer. As to the rest, the crop is here. If there is goodness in it, it is from the soil and the seeds; if something is lacking, it is because of my meagre talent.<sup>297</sup>

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**294** See the introduction and Agyeya 2014: 17–22. The whole novel represents Agyeya's attempt to relive the feelings of one night when he thought he was going to be sentenced to death. The first draft was written in the space of a few days. It was something like a vision (*vision*, in English in the original text): "*Śekhar: ek jīvanī*, which is the fruit of ten years of my labour – close to ten years, and yet the 'autobiography' is not finished! It is an attempt to set in words the *vision* of just one night of intense suffering. '*Śekhar: ek jīvanī*' *jo mere das varṣ ke pariśram kā phal hai – das varṣom meri abhī kuch der hai, lekin 'jīvanī' bhī to abhī purī nahīn huī! Ghanībhūt vednā kī keval ek rāt meri dekhe hue vision ko śabdabaddh karne kā prayatna hai.*" Agyeya 2014: 17.

When not stated otherwise, I am using my own translations.

The use of the word 'vision' is particularly interesting in this context: Agyeya expresses in his text the feelings of that one night, but it is also the moment when he knew what he intended to write, when he 'visualised' it. For the analysis of Agyeya's intent in writing and his choice of this literary form, see Malinar 2019.

**295** See the definition of sustained metaphors in the introduction, as well as in Reboul 1991.

**296** The expression *kaccā māl* is used by Sobti in MSRS to designate precisely the material (documentation, experiences, observations) that allows a writer to create, see for example Sobti 2014: 395 and 399.

**297** CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 374, *Zindagināmā ko hāth se likhnā – bhar nahīn thā. Use to zindagi kī tarah hī jīnā thā. Khet meri fasal kī tarah hī ugānā thā. Huā yah kī zamīn ke ek sondhe ṭukṛe par āmkh ṭik gā. Hak to thā hī. Kuch cāhat thī. Kuch virāsat. Bad khet le liyā. Hadbandī kī. Zamīn hamvār kī. Miṭṭī kī kism dekhī. Simcāi kī thāh māpī. Bij bharā. Mausam dekh boāī śurū*

Sobti always describes the experience of writing the novel ZN, her longest and most dense piece of fiction, as particular. ZN addresses the subject of Punjab before the independence and the partition, a topic which carries many deeply personal implications for Sobti. Her own connection to the land is much stronger here than it is in the context of her other novels. However, the metaphor is not only an implicit reflection of what she attempted to do by writing ZN – reclaim a piece of land that was taken away from her by the partition of Punjab.<sup>298</sup> By creating an affiliation between her work as a novelist and the work of a farmer or peasant, it also shows the length of the process of literary creation and its concrete and laborious character. The work has to grow inside the writer in a process of slow germination, during which elements constituting the text are patiently sourced and assimilated by the writer. This process was particularly long for ZN because the processing of the past was probably more difficult for Sobti personally than the issues she deals with in other works. ZN also has a special place among her novels: in it, a whole little universe becomes alive in all its complexities and intricacies. In this text, she attempts to bring the past back to life, make it alive again.<sup>299</sup>

The passage quoted above is one of the most explicit uses of the field metaphor in Sobti's essays, doubtlessly because it refers to ZN's context of rural Punjab.<sup>300</sup> In this paragraph, Sobti describes how ZN came into being: first there was the wish to use this topic – an ardent desire and almost a psychological need, as

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*kar dī. Bic meñ jo ho guzarā, vah khetihar ka mehnat mukddar aur kudrat kī barkat bakhśīś. Bāki fasal sāmne hai. Agar khūbī hai to dharti aur bij kī – kamī hai to vah apnī choṭī taufik kī.*

This passage has also recently been translated in Kumar/Sethi 2021: 98.

**298** It was her explicit objective in writing ZN to bring back to life this time and this land, as she states on several occasions, for example in SVS, Sobti 2007: 98–99 or in the interview with Niranjana published in SAM, Sobti 2015: 321. This topic will be examined in the following chapters, particularly in chapter six.

**299** In chapter six, I will discuss Sobti's vision of the role of literature as a space outside of human temporal boundaries, where a specific time can be recreated. In this context, ZN will also receive particular attention. One can already note how closely the main concepts of Sobti's essays are interwoven.

**300** Although Sobti recognizes that she is “not a plant of village society” (*main grāmin samāj kī paud nahim thī*, SVS, Sobti 2007: 65), she is very proud of her heritage (she is the granddaughter of a landowner of West Punjab) and her holidays as a child in the old family haveli in Gujarat seem to remain a very vivid memory that greatly influenced her and her ability to perceive situations and settings other than her own urban middle-class environment. See, for example, the autobiographical passage of MSRS, Sobti 2014: 406–408.

Sobti tends to adapt even her choice of metaphors for the creative process to the setting of the text she discusses. This is obvious in the case of SAK, see chapter four.



can be inferred from the interviews and from the quote itself.<sup>301</sup> This wish is metaphorically expressed through the act of sudden finding of a suitable plot of land. Then comes the research, the assembling of the raw material (symbolised by the irrigation, the measuring of the land, the preparation of the soil, the planting of the seeds). Once this has been accomplished, the idea is sown and given time to grow within the writer, just as a plant does under the vigilant eye of the farmer. The result is not hers; it belongs to the work's shadowy inspiration which Sobti never really defines – and which probably cannot be completely defined but is explained by Sobti as some kind of magic (*jādū*).<sup>302</sup>

In the preface to *Śekhar: ek jivani*, Agyeya posits the independence of the work and the characters from the author in the matter of lived experience.<sup>303</sup> However, for him, unlike for Sobti, there exists the notion of a 'vision' carried by the author into the text and this very 'vision' constitutes the inspiration of the work. In Agyeya's eyes, the hold of the writer on her work is very tight. For Sobti, on the contrary, the work that emerges at the end of the process of creation may be the crop of the writer, but it does not belong to her. In her words, after the completion of the work, the text and the writer part ways: "After writing down, my [emotional] relationship with my writing cools down. Having lived our life for each other, we abandon our common course. We each go our own way."<sup>304</sup>

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**301** See Sobti's interview with Alok Bhalla, Bhalla 2000, for example. Sobti's very first attempt at a novel, *Cannā*, already dealt with the topic of the partition. It was set at the time of the independence, contrary to ZN that is set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, Sobti was unhappy with the changes the publishers wanted to bring to the language of her novel (suppressing all traces of Punjabi) and later also found flaws in the text itself. The printed copies were pulped. Sobti later decided to entirely rewrite the novel in the form of ZN as we know it. The process of creation was thus indeed very long (between the early 50s and 1978, when ZN went to press). *Cannā* was ultimately published in 2019.

**302** Sobti describes in essays or in prefaces of new editions of her novels how a work first comes to her mind. It is very often just a sentence, an image, or a small event which re-emerge from what Sobti calls her 'memory banks' (*smṛti-bāinks*). For example, a chance encounter on the road with a very bold and uninhibited working woman was the seed of the idea that eventually became *Mitro Marjāni*, see *Tab tak kuch mālūm nahīm thā* in Sobti 2014: 386–388.

The notion of magic (*jādū*) is developed in chapter four. The word itself comes up, for example, in Sobti's first essay in SAM, Sobti 2014: 8. One can also note the notion of 'miracle-making' (*camatkār*) for literary writing in Sobti's dialogue with Vaid quoted above in footnote 288.

**303** See Agyeya 2014: 19–21.

**304** MSRS, Sobti 2014: 399. *Likh dālne ke bād merā rištā mere lekhan se bilkul thāmḍā ho jātā hai. Ek dūsre ko jī cukne ke bād ham sājhī diśāem choṛ dete haiṁ. Ek dūsre ke rāste se haṭ jātē haiṁ.*

These two passages from Sobti's essays, put side to side, allow for some remarks on the image of the writer that Sobti constructs here. For her, there is a clear distinction between the writer and her work. She does not view herself as the 'father' or 'mother' of the text (or its independent creator), but as a cultivator or catalyst. Like a farmer, the writer nurtures an idea that comes from the outside. The seed of the work is external to the writer. The writer looks after it and ensures that it grows thanks to the raw material invested in it and her own substratum, the soil (i.e., her background, history, experience and personality), but she does not own it and is only carrying it as a message to the reader. The message itself is not identical with the writer. The relationship between a writer and her work is therefore very complicated: the work is a product of her imagination, her personality and all other elements (both external and internal) that constitute her make-up, and yet, at the same time, it is not merely a product of her labour, it has an external point of reference, in the writer's surroundings. This enables Sobti to distinguish between the 'goodness', the merit, of the story in itself (*khubi*), and the flaws (*kamī*) of the writer.<sup>305</sup>

In Sobti's fictional works, this translates into a multiplicity of points of view and perspectives, a form of polyphony,<sup>306</sup> where any value judgement of the characters is suspended. In contrast to Agyeya, for example, one could

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**305** Here, one can draw a parallel to Claude Simon's description of his writing process in his Nobel prize acceptance speech of 1985: "Well, in front of my blank sheet of paper, two things confront me: on the one hand, the troublesome muddle of emotions, memories, images inside myself. On the other, the language, the words I'm going to look for in order to express it, and the syntax which will determine their arrangement and in whose womb they in some sense are going to take form.

And immediately I find that, first: what one writes (or describes) is never something which has happened prior to the work of writing. On the contrary it produces itself (in every sense of the term) in the course of working, within its own present. It is the upshot, not of the conflict between the very vague initial project and the language, but, on the contrary, of their symbiosis, so that, at least in my case, the result is infinitely richer than the intention." Nobel speech as rendered on the website of the Nobel Academy:

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1985/simon/lecture/> (I quote here the official translation from the French). For Simon, writing happens at the time of writing through a process of union (symbiosis) between the project existing somewhere in the author, her 'raw material' gathered during a life of experiences (emotions, memories, images are the components named by the writer in this passage) and the words which are the means of expression for the writer, the tools which enable her to act. It is worth noting that for Simon, a writer does not deliver a message but simply writes, writing being an act in itself. Like Sobti, Simon distinguishes between what the writer brings with her and the text resulting from the writing process itself.

**306** In the sense given to the word by Bakhtin 1972.

argue that Sobti tends to withdraw as much as possible from her work, letting the characters and the plot speak for themselves with their own voice. She leaves them free to develop and sees herself more as a caretaker than a director. This view of writing is constructed with the apparent opposition between the inside (the self of the writer) and the outside (the environment, the contingencies induced by the setting, the characters and the plot). The tension generated between the two is what will ultimately bring the text to life.

The field metaphor is so common in Sobti's essays that it seems an impossible task to examine in detail each occurrence of this image.<sup>307</sup> I will now look at the recurrence of this semantic field throughout the long essay MSRS and more specifically the lyrical passage describing the process of writing at the end of the text, taking this lyrical composition as the perfect illustration of the concept. Through this metaphor, Sobti points out the opposition between the inside and the outside and the interaction that their encounter generates. It is the field metaphor which illustrates Sobti's understanding of the process of creation as a dialogical process where the opposition must not be resolved but, on the contrary, perceived as the essence of creation through its dynamical power.

In MSRS, the field metaphor is an expanded, sustained metaphor, where the analogy is taken further over several paragraphs and carried throughout the text. In this context, it is particularly relevant to speak of 'semantic field', because one is indeed faced with a vast field of expressions, of words and of

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**307** It is found for example in MSRS, in several of the texts collected in SAM, see for example, Sobti 2015: 13–14, and in CNZNP. A beautiful example of the metaphor is found in SAM, Sobti 2015: 145: "In order to make a 'thought' flourish, any good writer needs a big plot of land! She has to be her own person. The land needs the manure of a great experience.

Experience is not spying – it is not reduplicating. It is not second-hand stuff. You do not pick up literary authenticity from here and there, just like that. You awaken it from your own consciousness, in your own sensitivity!

Then you jot down, without excess and without bias, the substance of the work! You give it words in order to make it authoritative and contingent. From there, you also come to know clearly how deep the layer of soil is, how well irrigated it is. How much manure has been spread. I used an exceptionally large part of this long time just preparing manure, but I have no regrets."

*Kisī bhī acche lekhak ko 'vicār' ke panpane ke lie ek baṛī zamīn cāhie hotī hai! Use apnā vyakti khud honā hotā hai. Zamīn ko baṛe anubhav kī khād cāhie hotī hai.*

*Anubhav jāśūsī nahīm – nakal nahīm. Dūsre hāth kā māl nahīm. Lekhan kā kharāpan āp idhar-udhar se nahīm juṭāte. Āp use apne caitanya se, apne sarīvedan meṃ jagāte haiṃ!*

*Tab āp racnā kī saghantā ko binā atīrek aur pūrvagrah ke am̄kit karte haiṃ! Use śabd dete haiṃ prāmāṅik aur prāsaṅgik banāne ko. Yahīm se ubhartī hai vah pratīti bhī kī zamīn ke nice kitnī gahrāī hai, kitnī namī hai. Kitnī khād ḍālī gāī hai. Mere lambe vakt kā khāsā baṛā hissā sirf khād bankar rah gayā hai, par koī malāl nahīm.*

associations of ideas related to the image of the crop/work. Each work has a season (*mausam*). Season (*mausam*) is in itself a recurring term in Sobti's non-fictional works. Seasons play a role in her novels as well, as an element of the plot or as an image: the passing of seasons in ZN as signs of the cyclical life of the village; the winter at the beginning of SAK paralleling the 'frozen' personality of the main character Ratti; the successions of seasons echoing the various episodes in DoD, for example. In her theoretical writings, however, seasons are associated with the time of maturation of a work – or indeed of germination – inside the inner mind (*antarman*) of the writer until the time of writing finally comes. The recurrence of the notion of season and the place of this notion in Sobti's work highlights how Sobti unifies her process of creation through this image. This is particularly interesting in view of the diversity of Sobti's oeuvre. Indeed, although the topics and even the styles vary with each novel, the process of writing and, consequently, the constructed image of the writer, is presented as being always the same.

In MSRS, the word *mausam* is used on three occasions and always plays on the double connotation of the term as 'season' in its meteorological sense and 'time', more specifically the appropriate time for something. It is as such that the idea of season is connected to the semantics of the field metaphor.

The term first appears in a passage on the power of death (time) over all things and the connection – and opposition – of literature to this power. Here the passing of seasons refer only to the passing of time in a cyclical understanding of time in the universe as rhythmically recurring.<sup>308</sup> The second instance of the word connects the seasons to the idea of the 'colours' of a writer. Just as a writer possesses her own 'colours' (the aspects of her personality and sensitivity), she goes through many seasons in her life.<sup>309</sup> The last of the three instances is the most interesting with regard to the field metaphor because it occurs in the

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**308** See MSRS, Sobti 2014: 395. "Seasons change. The new becomes old, some bits remain, and then bulge green and new again." *Mausam palaṭte rahte haiṁ. Nae purāne ho jāte haiṁ, šeṣ ho jāte haiṁ aur phir dubārā sabze ubharkar nae ho jāte haiṁ.*

One ought to note here that time (*kāl*), has a double connotation in Hindi and Sanskrit as time-destiny, and also, ultimately, death.

**309** Like all the other human beings; this is a common metaphor for the stages of life, and aging. However, it can also be understood here as being closer in meaning to *raṅg* (colour, nuance): "The truth is that a writer must have at the same time a thousand colours and a thousand eyes – and keep protecting that which is her inner colour, her mood, her season, and is ingrained deep in her nature." *Sac to yah hai ki lekhak ko ek sāth hazār raṅg aur hazār āṁkh honā hotā hai – sūrakṣit rakhte hue use jo uskā āntarik raṅg hai, mizāj hai, mausam hai, to dūr gahre meṁ uske svabhāv meṁ racā basā hai.* MSRS, p. 398. The two terms, 'colour' (*raṅg*) and 'shape' (*rūp*), are used by Sobti to speak about the diversity of the words themselves and their many layers of meaning.

lyrical passage or ‘poem in free verse’ of the essay and elaborates on the very notion of the creation of a work. It is a good illustration of Sobti’s recourse to a literary form in order to express theoretical meanings. Indeed, as a whole, the poem illustrates Sobti’s vision of the process of writing:

If I were to say that the seasons of an author do not lie in the control of nature either, it would not be wrong. One neither knows when they come nor when they go. If you keep waiting for them, they elude you. To have them return, you repeat yourself. Take briefly a peep at the writer’s room today!

What will you call this season?  
Soul, the door is closed.  
The writer waits outside.  
Not a footstep, not a sound.  
Not even a low hum.  
Silence – silence and silence only.  
The room is but a room. The walls, plain walls.  
Ink, pen, paper – all mute.  
If silence has a face  
it hangs in this room.  
Thresholds of heart and mind – a wilderness.  
And something, someone, has turned her waste land into a rock  
bringing things to a standstill.  
Something will gush out, will it not?  
Water – a cascade – a lake – a river – something!  
Just a few drops – forget about the ocean!  
Whatever one may find,  
is accepted humbly!!  
But no:  
in the brazier, piles of long-dry wood  
lie idle.  
The fire blazes up.  
Glams.

Stocking the fire of yesterdays’ nameless darkness, the journeys – one’s own, those of others – countless faces vanish from the writer’s sight.

Right in front [of her], darting, glittering – heaps of fire! For all that, no attachment, no distance, no rift, nothing. A parting of ways – indifference, coolness. In front [of the writer], in the heat of the golden flames, the wood burns – dissolving – into embers.

What is left over is only a word – and a thought.  
Word and thought only.  
Which the writer is not yet allowed to seize.  
Just waiting, waiting,  
outside the door.

Quiet, silent.

Not yet . . .

They return into the past.<sup>310</sup>

**310** MSRS, Sobti 2014: 409–410. *Agar kahūn ki lekhak ke mausam bhī kudrat kī pābandī meṁ nahīn rahte to galat na hogā. Na unkī āmad kā hī patā lagtā hai na unke cale jāne kā hī. Āp intazār karte cale jāte haiṁ, ve āpke jhūṭhlāte cale jāte haiṁ. Unheṁ lauṭāne ko hī āp bhī apne ko dohrāte cale jāte haiṁ.*

*Āj kī tārikh meṁ zarā lekhak ke kamre meṁ jhāmkie –*

*Is mausam ko kyā nām dijjegā?*

*Rūh par kā kapāṭ band hai.*

*Lekhak intazār meṁ bāhar khaṛā hai.*

*kahūn koī āhaṭ nahīn, khaṭkhaṭāhaṭ nahīn.*

*Halkī-sī gungunāhaṭ bhī nahīn.*

*Khāmośī – khāmośī aur khāmośī hī.*

*Kamrā sirf kamrā hai. Divāreṁ korī divāreṁ.*

*Syāhī kalam kāgaz sab meṁ abolā hai.*

*Maun kā bhī ek mukhṛā hotā hai to*

*Vahī ṭaṅgā hai is kamre meṁ.*

*Dil dimāg kī dahlīzeṁ virān haiṁ.*

*Aur koī apne bhūrepan meṁ caṭṭān bankar*

*Aṛā hai.*

*Kuch umṛegā kyā?*

*Pānī-jharnā-jhīl-nadī-kuch to.*

*Kuch būndem hoṁ – kyā sāgar!*

*Jo kuch bhī mil jāe –*

*Sir jhukākar manjūr hai!!*

*Magar nahīn -*

*Aṅgīṭhī meṁ cīṛ kī sūkhī lakṛiyom ke dher*

*Paṛe haiṁ.*

*Āg lahakati hai.*

*Jhammajhamāti hai.*

*Ānc ko tāpte āj tak ke gumnām andhere apne parāe sab safar, beśumār cehre lekhak kī*

*āmkhom se aujhal ho gae haiṁ.*

*Sāmne rah-rah lapakte raheṁ – kaundhate raheṁ āg ke āmbār! Phir bhī koī lagāv, koī*

*durāv, koī darār kahīn kuch nahīn. Ek virāg – taṭasthatā, ṭhandāpan. Sāmne sunhalī*

*ānc kī tapiś meṁ lakṛiyām jal jāti haiṁ – aṅgiyārom meṁ -*

*šeṣ sirf śabd rahtā hai – vicār rahtā hai.*

*Śabd aur vicār hī.*

*Jis pakayne kī ijāzat abhī lekhak ko nahīn.*

*Intazār hī intazār –*

*Darvāze ke bāhar!*

*Gumsum sum –*

*Abhī nahīn . . .*

*Pīche hī lauṭte haiṁ.*

This lyrical passage is an integral part of the essay. It is remarkable because it is written in the form of free verse but is perfectly set within the argumentation of the text itself. Several critics have observed that theory is often expressed by writers in poetical form as a kind of meta-poetics. This appears to be the case here with what Armin Paul Frank would call a ‘didactical poem’, i.e., a poem that explains the workings of the creation of a work.<sup>311</sup> For Frank, poems can indeed contain in their very form an illustration of what poetry or literary creation ought to be. They are, as such, instructions on how to write, a form of ‘user’s guide’ to poetry, or at least a description of the creative process. Here, Sobti is explaining the long process preceding the moment of writing, when the first idea of a text and its first form emerge. The poem opens with the question “What will you call this season (*mausam*)?”. What name can one give to this period of time that is in fact a long wait for the right time? This is what Sobti calls, a few lines before the poem, the ‘season of ZN,<sup>312</sup> the appropriate time for it to be written. More than any other of her works, this one had to take time to mature inside her. But the process is the same for each work. Sobti can therefore use the example of ZN to articulate a kind of general description of her creative process.

First, there is complete silence. The access to the soul is barred – the process of writing cannot start. Signs of obstruction, indeed, recur at the beginning of the poem: *rūh par kā kapāṭ baṁd hai* (*Soul, the door is closed*), *aḍā hai* (*persists, in the sense of ‘is stuck’, or ‘stands still’*). There is but emptiness in the mind, which is compared first to a room, then to a landscape, both empty and barren. The analogy of the mind to a house – the space-thought idea – is continued with the word *threshold* (*dahlīz*) implying spaces divided by a liminal line. In the next verse, however, it is the idea of earth and soil that returns in a version which differs slightly from the one found in the short essay on ZN.<sup>313</sup> Here, the writer’s ‘soil’ is the place in her inner mind where the works are created; it is now, prior to the emergence of the first inspiration, colourless and

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The subject of the last sentence is not very clear. I suggest interpreting it as the words or the faces and memories spoken of above. In my translation, I attempt to maintain the rhythm of the Hindi original, especially in the alternance between nominal sentences and verbal sentences.

**311** Frank 1977: 132 and following pages.

**312** MSRS, Sobti 2014: 409. “For me, the season of writing *Zindagīnāmā* was much longer than seasons of any other writing.” *Mere nikaṭ Zindagīnāmā kā mausam lekhan ke dūse sab mausamōṅ se lambā thā.*

**313** See the passages quoted above.

desolate (*bhūrā*). The unploughed, unirrigated land turns to rock and things come to a standstill.

However, something might spring out of the cracks of this rock and flow. This 'something' is the inspiration for the plot, the idea that will allow the characters to emerge. The association of inspiration with water is very striking because it appears in other essays as well.<sup>314</sup> Inspiration as a nourishing flow is a common *topos* in literature. It is often represented as a stream, with fixed idioms of the everyday language taking up this metaphor further ('to let one's inspiration flow', for example; this is what Lakoff would call a metaphorical concept).<sup>315</sup> In this context, it includes, for Sobti, the idea of control on the writer's part that counterbalances the freedom or un-restrictedness of the imagination stream. While waiting for inspiration, however, even if it were but a few drops, whatever would come would be accepted with gratitude by the writer as breaking the emptiness and barrenness she finds herself in. Thus, inspiration is seen here as something which is nourished from the outside and from the inside, but over which the writer has no control whatsoever. It is a part of the mystery and magic (*jādū*) of the creative process. This also illustrates the interaction between the two opposite poles implicated in creation, and the fact that this is a 'flow', that is, a dynamic process.

The last metaphor used in this poem is that of the brazier. At the beginning, there is no flame – only a pile of dry wood. Then the flame of inspiration appears, producing shadows that dance around the fire and stoke it up.<sup>316</sup> They receive an identity. According to Sobti, name or designation must indeed come first to allow the plot to develop when the figures have come to life.<sup>317</sup> Although the fire (the inspiration) burns, the writer remains cold; she waits until all dissolves leaving only the word and the thought: the beginning of a work. However, she must still wait in front of the door (just as in the first lines of the poem) in silence, until all the words – or all the characters – come back and the story can finally unfold.

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**314** Or even in MSRS, earlier in the essay, with the idea of the two streams coming together in the figure of the writer, one of them being the imagination, see Sobti 2014: 398.

**315** See for example Lakoff 1993.

**316** Sobti uses another common literary *topos* (or indeed conceptual metaphor) here, namely the fire-inspiration metaphor. However, she develops it to suit her representation of the role of the writer, playing with the water-fire opposition and the hot-cold contrast. It is a good example of her use of contrasting ideas and of opposites.

**317** See also SVS, Sobti 2007: 24. "The right name for the character first reassures me, then makes the character come to life, and [finally] gets the story going." *Pātr kā sahī nām pahle mujhe āsvast kartā hai, phir pātr ko saḥiv rūp detā hai aur kahānī cal partī hai.*



Two interpretations of the last sentence appear possible and meaningful. The subject could be the words coming back and enabling the writer to create. This seems very plausible when one looks at the whole poem. Indeed, the writer has already found the shadows of the characters and given them a name – an identity – but she must search for appropriate words, language being the key to the creation of a work. Nevertheless, a second reading can present the characters of the work as the subject of the last sentence. This interpretation is supported by the next paragraph of the essay, which starts with the enumeration of characters from ZN. The seed of the idea is already present, but the writer must wait for the characters to return in their own shape – not as mere shadows – before being able to stage them. Since the characters and the language are strongly intertwined in Sobti's perception of writing – the idiosyncratic language of each character is central to their personality – the two interpretations seem plausible and can in fact be combined.

It is striking that in this short didactical poem Sobti uses several of her most common metaphors to describe the process of creation as well as many ideas that find a parallel in all her essays, in other descriptions of the phenomenon of writing. The notion of season (*mausam*) is essential here since, although the word appears only once, the whole poem is ultimately about the grasping of this appropriate moment for creation.

Silence and the 'sounds of footsteps' or 'noise' (*ahaṭ*) is also an image that Sobti often uses to speak of the period of expectation before the arrival of inspiration. For example, in several of the shorter texts describing the genesis of a specific novel (*Ai laḍkī*,<sup>318</sup> ZN<sup>319</sup> or *Mitro Marjāni*),<sup>320</sup> the characters or the language of the work are described as suddenly emerging in the silence of the writer's study, where only a light 'sound' or 'noise' (*ahaṭ*) is heard. The environment of the writer – and especially her inner state of mind – is at that point one of seclusion and deep solitude. Very often, Sobti introduces a dramatic touch through a depiction of natural elements – heavy rain in the mountains, a storm, the depths of a winter night or the sounds of a mountain stream. In these descriptions, she paints the image of a lone writer waiting for inspiration 'in front of a closed door'. The atmosphere engendered by this image seems close to another literary *topos*, namely the romantic picture of the solitary writer searching and listening

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**318** See SAM, 145–147 or the preface to the new edition of the translation of the text, Sobti 2002, in the English translation by Shivnath.

**319** In CNZNP, Sobti 2015: 382–383. In this text, Sobti chooses once again a form close to a poem to express the origin of inspiration. Another remarkable point is the importance of the natural elements in the process of creation. In CNZNP, for example, it is the rain.

**320** See SAM, Sobti 2015: 152, or *Tab tak kuch mālum nahīm thā*, Sobti 2015: 387.

for a spark of inspiration. Solitude and emptiness – the idea of a waste land with its barrenness – dominate this representation.<sup>321</sup> This constitutes one of the poles of the life of the writer, who stands in a relationship with the external world, but must also withdraw from it to have the distance needed to create.

The didactical poem of MSRS is exceptional not only because of the density of the themes and images it combines – all of them being recurring images for Sobti – but also because of the form itself. Written in free verse, it mostly plays with the repetition of sounds, syllables and words. The elision of the verb 'to be' (*honā*) on several occasions allows the writer to avoid repetitions but also to create the specific rhythm of the sentences, shortening them and even transforming some of them into nominal sentences.

The construction of the phase of waiting, for example, is very simple: short sentences and ellipses to avoid repetitions. This helps emphasise the desert-like absence of any inspiration. However, when the fire starts blazing, the form of the poem suddenly changes into two paragraphs of longer sentences describing the first emergence of inspiration, when the shadows of the characters of the work reappear in front of the writer's eyes before dissolving into ashes, leaving only word and thought. Yet here as well, after a paragraph consisting of a verbal sentence, the nominal style is chosen again to present the process of emergence-dissolution. The sentences, becoming shorter and shorter, mirror the return to quiet and silence as well as the state of expectation.

The poem merges again into the prose text on the observation "they return into the past". It is striking to see how smoothly the transition is made, first from the prose text into the free verse and then from the lyrical passage into the prose text. The demonstration having been made, Sobti can introduce her view about the appearance of the very vivid characters of ZN: they are 'living' characters, not mere constructions of an imagined past. The didactical poem constitutes also an illustration of the patient work and the wait underlying the creation of a literary work, and therefore expresses the theme of the 'right season' or the 'appropriate time' (*mausam*) for writing. This season of the work is the period during which the raw material is slowly transformed into the work through its structure and wording. *Mausam*, with its double connotation of 'season' and 'right time' emphasises again the idea of the work being like a plant or a crop, thereby unfolding another aspect of the field metaphor.

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<sup>321</sup> One can see here a parallel to the romantic poet always seeking inspiration in solitude, in dramatic or at least picturesque settings. It is unclear whether or not Sobti is deliberately playing with those conventional images.

The alternation between prose and lyrical passages given above is not the only case of a recurring switch between diverse styles in Sobti's non-fictional texts. For example, in the short essay CNZNP and in the discussion of *Ai larḳī* in SAM, lyrical passages are also present.<sup>322</sup> In general, no non-fictional text is totally free from the more metaphorical or descriptive passages, blurring the demarcation between the genres.<sup>323</sup>

Whenever she is asked to speak of her writing process and her conception of literature, Sobti uses the semantic field of the season, the earth, the raw material and the growing process; all these are images that belong to and constitute the field metaphor.

This is particularly striking in the context of ZN, a work connected to land and soil. The poem in free verse on which this 'fresco'<sup>324</sup> of life in rural Punjab begins takes up this connection of soil and work as well. It develops the idea of the work being a living tree, *zindā rūkh*, the subtitle of the novel. Free verse seems therefore to be one of the specific forms in which Sobti chooses to describe her process of creation.

The whole poem,<sup>325</sup> which forms a sort of preface to ZN, holds a particular position with regard to the text itself. Sobti explains that she wrote it after having completed the novel.<sup>326</sup> She had the feeling that there was a need for

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**322** See CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 373–385, and SAM, Sobti 2015: 145–147.

**323** Whenever Sobti describes the first emergence of an idea for a work, she adopts the style of free verse, as seen in the context of ZN, or a scene-description that is similar to her writing style in her novels. A good example of such prose would be the preface to the last edition of DSB, Sobti 2001.

**324** I use the term 'novel-fresco' or 'fresco' to designate novels that, like a fresco, present a large picture of life with several lines of plot told in parallel. This is however not an official, academic term, and I would like to point out the fact that it is a very vivid portrayal of life, not anything static.

**325** See ZN, Sobti 2013: 9–17.

**326** Like many modern novels, ZN does not follow a classical chronological plot centred on main characters. Because of the multitude of characters depicted and the action being focussed mainly on a specific geographical area (around Gujarat in West Punjab), ZN has been often categorised as a regional novel (*āñcālik upanyās*). It could be a good definition, and Sobti's admiration for Renu, who coined the term with *Mailā āñcāl* (1954), is well known. The fact that ZN is not a classical novel induces me to call the text a fresco of life in rural Punjab, because of the focus on the depiction of life and characters, which brings to mind this type of painting in the wide range of characters and milieux depicted.

Regional novels have become a category in Hindi literary criticism following the coinage of the term by Phanishwarnath Renu in the preface to the first edition of his novel, *Mailā āñcal*, see Renu 1989: 5. "This is *Mailā āñcal* (*The Soiled Border*), a regional novel. *Yah hai mailā āñcal, ek āñcalik upanyās*." The preface then goes on to describe the region in which the action takes place and states that nothing in it has been made more beautiful or sophisticated than

something more, like an introduction, but ultimately left the decision whether to include it or not with the publisher. The poem is therefore not related to the plot itself, but more to the poetics (i.e., here, the intent) behind it. Once again, it is worth noting that this notion is expressed in free verse, especially since Sobti often explains that poetry is not a genre in which she feels comfortable.<sup>327</sup> The poems or free verse passages in which Sobti exposes the genesis of a work or the creative process are therefore very special: they are another form of poetry. Unlike the mainstream poetry by Hindi writers – today, poetry still is a highly popular and well regarded genre in Hindi – these poems do not tell a story nor describe a feeling. Moving beyond Frank's label of 'didactical poems', I would prefer to call them 'meta-poetical poems'. I use the term 'meta-poetical' here to refer to the explanatory dimension of the writing process present in these poems. The example of the poem-introduction to ZN is particularly interesting because it sets out the auctorial intention, namely the bringing back of a land and time that are gone. It also constitutes a leave-taking of this way of living which shall never be there again.<sup>328</sup> This use of verse, and in fact the hybrid form in this and other theoretical writings, is worth exploring in greater detail because it illustrates Sobti's way of blurring the limits of the genres. I attribute this choice of a more literary style for such descriptions of the writing process to Sobti's intention of showing the 'magical' and inexplicable character of writing on the one hand, and to her wish to combine the intent with the form by making use of literary devices, on the other.

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what the reality observed offered. This is as close a definition as Renu gives of what he means by a 'regional novel'. Later critics have described the genre by characteristics such as the use of local idioms and words, geographical limits of the setting and the absence of specific main protagonists whose story might be followed in favour of the region or the village as central character. ZN corresponds to all these criteria. In the following chapters, I shall come back to the specific aspect of language in this novel. One ought to note here also that although the regional novel has become a genre in Hindi literature and Indian literatures in general, examples of this type of novel-frescos are found in other literatures as well (George Eliot's *Middlemarch* could be an example of this type of novels in English).

**327** See, for example, her interview with Tarun Bharatiya and Jayeeta Sharma in Sharma 1996: 115. "My temperament is too prosaic for good poetry."

**328** There is now an English translation of the novel, including the poem; in this chapter, I am using my own translation of the extracts but refer the reader to the complete text in the translation by Mani and Mazumdar, see Sobti 2016: 3–10.

### 3.2.3 Theory in Verses

In Sobti's essays as well as in the texts of SAM, which combine autobiographical elements with literary commentaries, one observes the occurrence of several hybrid passages mixing prose and verse. These passages are interesting illustrations of the interaction between literature and theory under the pen of writers. It is quite common for writers to be concerned with theory and self-reflection. Analysing what they do is a part of consciously deconstructing and reconstructing their works and identities as writers. In contrast to literary critics and academics, however, they allow themselves freedom from the conventions of theoretical or scientific writing which the former would not tolerate. In doing this, they blur the borders of the genres.<sup>329</sup> Sobti is a typical example of this phenomenon. In her theoretical writings, she intensively uses metaphors and switches to passages of free verse. While the use of rhetorical figures is nothing unusual in essays or other texts with a set purpose of demonstration in general, in Sobti's case the metaphors, even when they are quite common, are always displayed in an innovative way marked by a strong literary character.<sup>330</sup>

If one believes that literature differs from argumentative texts, the difference in the use of the rhetorical tools must be examined. Sobti herself insists on her identity as a writer as opposed to the historian or the philosopher, unlike, for example, her friend and fellow writer, Krishna Baldev Vaid, who is a scholar as well.<sup>331</sup> She sees her primary identity as that of a writer, and it is as a writer – i.e., with the authority or the lack of authority that this confers on her – that she reflects on her own writing practice and the role of literature. For her, metaphors are a common literary device, not only in her fictional works, but also in her other texts and even in her interviews. There, metaphors have an argumentative character, but, as the field metaphor shows, they can be constructed over a whole text into a very poetical and literary element. Why does Sobti deem it important to use these rhetorical tools and to alternate between prose and verse or free verse within texts which have an argumentative or explicative intent?

As one reads closely the texts of her essays, it becomes apparent that the metaphors are a prominent element of the discourse. The analysis of Sobti's non-fictional texts aims to recognise the metaphors and decode a language which is sometimes so full of images that it becomes obscure and difficult to grasp. In this case, one wonders if the use of metaphors also plays the role of

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**329** See the introduction of Berranger to the articles on the writers as critics, Berranger 2012, and my discussion of this point in the introduction.

**330** In the sense of *littérarité* proposed by Todorov, see the introduction.

**331** See SVS, Sobti 2007: 108–111, and MSRS, Sobti 2014: 395.

concealing the meaning, of puzzling the reader by creating an intricate image of the self or of the thoughts of the writer. Indeed, if metaphors often serve as illustrations of a phenomenon (to explain it better), they can also adopt the opposite role: express indirectly a meaning or even hide it by playing on the ambiguity of certain words or phrases.<sup>332</sup> In literary texts, this device serves the purpose of creating several layers of meaning, by generating double entendre. In essays, it is rarer, because in that case the expected purpose of the figure of speech ought to be to highlight an argumentation and make it clearer.

One might argue that writers often use their literary style even while discussing theoretical or meta-poetical aspects of their works. Indeed, Armin Paul Frank examines this in his article on the relationship between theory and poetry.<sup>333</sup> This is apparent not only in the choice of an image-filled discourse, but also in the choice of a form (passages of verse, narration of anecdotes, depictions, all of which are unusual in more theoretical or academical ways of writing). The use of metaphors and other images has always been part of any argumentative discourse, since metaphors support and illustrate points the authors want to make. However, in 'theory in verse' or in the theory written as literature, the use of metaphors becomes different from those argumentative metaphors. In that case, authors sometimes switch the genre of their writing within the work itself.<sup>334</sup> This is particularly striking in Sobti's case. The language of her essays itself is often poetical and, through its elliptic character, more obscure than one would expect a strictly theoretical text to be. This style of writing illustrates Sobti's statement about her being a writer and not a scholar. Although she sees the writer as an intellectual who reflects upon her own creation and upon the process of writing – as much as on the subject of society – she insists on being neither a scholar nor a philosopher but a writer, whose purpose is different.<sup>335</sup> The writer, for sure,

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**332** For the theory of metaphor and the use of metaphors in communicating, see, for example, Tendhal 2009 or Semino 2008. In those works, the authors exemplify the use of metaphors to convey indirect meanings by analysing passages of literary works. See also chapter three for Sobti's use of metaphors in the creation of a literary language and as a tool to reveal and conceal meanings.

**333** See Frank 1977.

**334** I refer back to Berranger's article, quoted in the introduction, see Berranger 2012.

**335** See SVS, Sobti 2007: 108, "There is a difference between punditry and creativity. Just as there is [a difference] between connoisseurs of literature such as a professor like you [Sobti addresses Vaid] and a mere writer like me." *Pāṁḍītya aur racnātmaktā meṁ fark hai. Usī tarah jis tarah sāhitya ke jñātā āp jaise śikṣak meṁ aur mujh jaise mātr lekhak meṁ.* Nevertheless, Sobti considers that one of the roles of the writers is to be sensitive to society outside of themselves and to take position – it is their role as intellectuals. She thus implicitly includes herself among the intellectual elite, although she is no scholar. See for example MSRS, Sobti 2014: 398, "As a writer, her concerns, her interests, are linked to both [inside and outside] – and so

performs, to a certain extent, the same function in society, being an intellectual who must also remain vigilant, but her role differs in several other respects. The quest of a writer leads her into the midst of life itself, and therefore she does not have the distance of a philosopher or a thinker. The writer is not an objective and distant observer who remarks on and ponders over life; she is much closer to life experiences and the people and the world around her, who all influence her works:

[The philosopher], removed from the confines of the world, using only self-contemplation and knowledge, reflects with detachment on life and its dilemmas. Draws conclusions on the basis of her analyses. Always positions herself at a neutral distance from the context of her research. And maintains this [distance]. It is quite the opposite for a writer for whom the very condition of being one forces her to move beyond neutrality and detachment and be *involved* in the tensions and pressures [of life]. A writer's journey cannot be accomplished on the peaks and heights of mere ideals; her journey takes her into the middle of life itself.<sup>336</sup>

I see here one of the apparent paradoxes of Sobti's representations of the writer: on the one hand, she establishes the writer as a part of the intellectual community, as an intellectual,<sup>337</sup> and on the other hand, she defines a writer's activity as an interaction with life and a concrete reality away from abstract thinking. The writer has to live constantly in a state of in-between distance and closeness to life (life being the subject of her works and literature in general). This relationship to life defines writers and constitutes their identity. Meanwhile, in this tension and because of it, literature emerges. Literature is thus a

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they should be. Can any engaged intellectual repudiate this approach? Can she, ensconced at the pilgrimage sites of her own solitude, go on fanning the sacred flames of her ego?" *Lekhak hone ke nāte uskī cihntāem, sarokār donom starom par juṛī hairī – juṛī rahni cāhie. Koī bhī jāgarūk buddhijīvi kyā is prakriyā ko nakār degā? Apne ekānt ke tīrth-sthalom par hī aham kī dhūni racāe rahegā?* The image of the sacrificial fire (*dhūni*) and its sacred flames is an illustration of the independent and detached (*sadhu*-like) behaviour of the writer-intellectual in her ivory tower, which Sobti rejects. For her, the interaction with the outside world lies at the core of literature. In this, she echoes Premchand's speech on the aim of literature, for example, in this passage: "If he [a writer] continues to live happily or sadly in a world of his own making, then it is no injustice if there is no place for him in this world." Premchand 2004: Appendix: xi.

**336** See in MSRS, Sobti 2014: 395, *Vah [dārśanik] simāom kī duniyā se alag-thalag apne jñān aur ātmacīntan ke bal par, niḥsamgatā se jīvan aur use juṛe muddom par gaur kartā hai. Viśle-ṣaṇ kar kinhīn natijom par pahunctā hai. Lagātār apnī khoj ke samdarbh se ek taṣasth dūrī banāe rakhtā hai. Use barkarār rakhtā hai. Isse thik viparīt lekhak ke nikaṣ uske hone kī śart niḥsamgatā aur taṣasthattā ko abūrkar bākāyā tanāvom aur dabāvom mem involve ho jāne ko majbūr kartī hai. Lekhak ko apnī yātrā kore ādarsoṁ kī ḍhalānom aur ūmcāiyom mem hī sam-pūrṇ nahīn kartī hotī, uskā safar ain zindagī ke bicombic hokar guzartā hai.*

**337** This topic will be discussed at some length in chapter seven.

point where a reflection of life, in both meanings of the phrase, becomes possible. Literature is a space of thinking about life as well as a mirror of life – hence the constant tension between distance and closeness, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ that make up a writer’s identity.<sup>338</sup>

By using free verse to describe the process of creation, Sobti highlights the strong link between language as the writer’s tool and her method of thinking. The form language takes is in accordance with the content and the intent of the text. Whenever prose merges into free verse and verse dissolves again into prose, it is at a point where Sobti depicts a particular moment in the process of creation, mostly the first appearance of the idea or the sentence that will be the origin of the story.

Through this alternation between prose and verse, Sobti surrounds the process of creation with mystery, making it a special moment which has something inexplicable, puzzling and magical about it. Prose cannot illustrate this mystery as well as the form of free verse. The metaphors used in this context stand for something which could, in theory, be expressed explicitly. However, in order to construct the image of the writer working in her workshop and binding words, it is necessary to adopt an image-filled language and another form of discourse. The discourse becomes therefore more ‘literary’, i.e., closer to Sobti’s style in her fiction than to the style of a standard, theoretical textbook. The back and forth between prose and free verse illustrates also the two poles constituted by thought (reflection on life, exposition of life) and imagination (the expansion of the reflection on life).

In her discussion of ZN and its genesis, Sobti often uses the form of the poem to express how creation was made possible. I shall examine here lyrical composition addressing this and mentioned in SVS,<sup>339</sup> because it has at its core the image of the work as a tree growing from the soil where the influences from the inner world of the writer and the world around her are combined:

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**338** Although I use the notion of reflection of society here, I will show through further analysis of the field metaphor that the process of creation goes much deeper for Sobti; writing becomes a recreation of voices heard and other elements from the outside which are incorporated and assimilated by the writer during the time of germination of the work.

**339** Sobti declares in her discussion with Vaid that this poem is at the beginning of ZN. However, although the novel starts with an epigraph and a poem, neither contains these lines. They are included in the English translation of the novel, but in none of the versions of the original text I had in hand. Nonetheless, they reflect precisely Sobti’s vision of the creation of ZN, and throw a new light on the subtitle, *Zindā rūkh*, the living tree. Here, life is clearly put at the very core of a writer’s preoccupations; this is beautifully illustrated as well in a passage of MSRS through the comparison with Rabia al-Basri, see section 3.2.4.



Neither the prowess of the pen,  
 nor the writer  
 nor the writing;  
 it is life, which spread itself  
 on the sheets of paper  
 somewhat  
 like a growth in the soil  
 a large rooted  
 living tree.<sup>340</sup>

This poem highlights two recurring motifs in Sobti's essays: the separation of the writer from her work (both are distinct entities), and the explicit comparison of the work to a growing tree. Rarely is this image more explicitly expressed than here. The work is a living tree that has grown from the land of the writer and the material collected by her. It represents and expresses life in its fullness, another central point in Sobti's vision of the role of the writer.

The title of the long novel-fresco, *Zindagīnāmā*, could be translated as 'Chronicle of Life', a name which would have been appropriate for any 'regional novel' (*āñcālik upanyās*) and many other novels as well. However, through this title and the subtitle 'The Living Tree' (*zindā rūkh*), Sobti highlights the deep connection between literature and life. The work has not only the same claim to realism (in the primary meaning of the closeness to facts and reality) as Renu's novel,<sup>341</sup> it claims to be the life itself put down on paper and brought back to life. This last aspect is very important for Sobti in this particular context because, as the poem-introduction to ZN states, this land and its universe are no longer accessible except through the power of words and literature. The written novel is neither the result of the will of the writer nor exclusively the product of an arduous labour of writing; it is life itself flowing freely on paper. The relation between word and life is very strong. The implication in this poem is that literature is not merely holding up a mirror of life to society, as a famous definition of realism has it, but that it is, in fact, a recreation of life, with deep roots in the earth. The materiality of literature, which is dear to Sobti, is implied in this image. Here, the writer is not absolutely active, she is more in the position of a

<sup>340</sup> SVS, Sobti 2007: 30: *Aukāt na kalam kī/na lekhak kī/na lekhan kī/zindagī phailtī calī gāī/kāgaz ke pannom par/kuch is tarah/jyom dharti meṁ ug āyā ho/viśāl jaḍom vālā/ek zindā rūkh.*

<sup>341</sup> See Renu 1989: 5, "There are flowers and thorns there, dust and roses, mud and sandalwood, beauty and ugliness – I couldn't bear to let any of this go. *Ismēṁ phūl bhī haiṁ sūl bhī, dhūl bhī hai, gulāb bhī, kicaḍ bhī hai, candan bhī, sundartā bhī hai kurūptā bhī – maiṁ kisī se dāman bacākar nikal nahīṁ pāyā.*" The English translation does not do justice to the emotionally charged, idiomatic lyricism of the Hindi original.

Renu's claim is that his novel depicts life 'as it is', in a realistic (*yathārth*) way.

catalyst or, to use the field metaphor, of a cultivator. The work is also clearly distinct from the author whose purpose is to achieve a real closeness to life, and who therefore adapts to the setting and contingencies of the written text. However, the relationship between the writer, the surrounding world and the text is much more complicated.

### 3.2.4 The Writer, the Text and the Surrounding Reality

Metaphors and free verse are tools to depict the process of writing. Through their literary character, they contribute not only to the illustration and elucidation of meaning, but also to the construction of a magic of creation.<sup>342</sup> Creation cannot be fully explained, neither can the emergence of the work nor the appropriate time for writing. The field metaphor serves precisely the purpose of highlighting this. Through this image, Sobti shows that the writer stands in interaction with her surrounding world, that she is not the sole creator of her work but rather a cultivator, bringing a work into existence by using the outside raw material, which has germinated in her inner world. This leads Sobti to separate clearly the result of this process (the text) from the writer, but also from the reality it depicts. In an interview with Anamika, she addresses those points, emphasising the relationship between the text, the reality it is based on, and the writer:<sup>343</sup>

Authorial expression is not merely the function of style and linguistic skills. Whatever form the text might take on in a work, it shapes it, enlivens it – in it, multiple possibilities come about! Therefore, for a writer, to consider herself the creator of the text seems absurd to me.

Any sensible writer takes measure of her own limits and possibilities and marks the boundaries of her literary ground. She puts together raw material collected through experience and, on the basis of the linguistic passion of her mental make-up, transcends her inner capabilities.

Now let us look at the other side of this. At one level, the relationship between a work and its author is, as a rule, bitter, [like] the frowns of two opponents. And, like [all] passionate relationships, they run deep. Their confrontation and their closeness dare each other from [two] opposing sides. If well aligned, they can be contained – and are contained. A work is not solely an external envelope knitted into lines by structure and style.

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<sup>342</sup> Sobti refers to the term 'magic' (*jādū*) to qualify the creative process in SAM, Sobti 2015: 8.

<sup>343</sup> This interview is available in an abridged version in English, see Anamika 2013. However, since this particular passage is not fully translated, I am using my own translation here.

Nor is it merely a skilful expression. Woven with words and thoughts, it is an artistic thought display, an authority in itself. The ultimate authority. That, too, in spite of being written by the writer. The actuality of the work and the writer's intuition flow side by side and, from the soil they both share in, the lines of the text spring up and flourish. But, interestingly, both leave part of their soil for each other's idiosyncrasies; so that the rhythm of the work's 'inside' and 'outside' does not falter and a distance between the two remains. If any of the two overpowers the other, the consequences can be fatal.

[. . .] One must say that for any writer, her literary method is always very personal. The waves animating the world of emotions are, on one hand, obscure and complicated; on the other, they are astonishingly simple. In moments of doubt, I, in my writerly alertness, adopt a totally fresh and friendly point of view and call out to the work in a low voice – as low as if the door were closed and the work's unknown face was behind it. The writer's voice must be so low that if the work does not want to hear the hint, it doesn't have to! This is the first condition for protecting the work. The writer does not order it around, she pleads with it.<sup>344</sup>

This very long quote builds a bridge between Sobti's recurrent field metaphor and her idea of the strict separation, but also close relationship, between the writer and the work. This idea introduces the notion of what I would call an ideal form of the work or the work in all its potentialities, i.e., the work as it

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**344** SAM, Sobti 2015: 180–181, *Lekhakiya abhivyakti mātr śaili aur bhāṣā-kausal nahim. Racnā meṁ pāṭh kā vajud jo kuch bhī grahaṇ kartā hai, use rūpāyati kartā hai, jāgrat kartā hai – usmeṁ anek sambhāvnāmeṁ ekatr hotī haiṁ! Aise meṁ lekhak kā apne ko pāṭh kā racayitā mānnā, mujhe aṭpaṭā lagtā hai.*

*Koī bhī samajhdār lekhak apnī simāom aur sambhāvnāom kā jāyā lekar hī apnī racnātmak zamīn par hadbandī kartā hai. Anubhav dvārā arjit kaccā māl sameṭtā hai aur apne mānsik par-yāvaraṇ ke bhāṣāyī tāpmān ke bal par apnī āntarik kṣamtaom kā atikramaṇ kartā hai.*

*Ab isī kā dūsrā pakṣ dekheṁ. Ek star par racnā aur racnākār ke sambandh bākāyā prātid-vandvī ke tevarom kī tarah tīte hote haiṁ. Aur rāgātmak sambandhom kī tarah had tak gahre bhī. In donom kī ṭakrāhaṭ aur nikāṭtā hī viparīt dikśāom se ek-dūse ko cunaautī dete haiṁ. Agar sab ṭhik-ṭhik juḍ jāe to paribhāṣit hote haiṁ, aur paribhāṣit kar lie jāte haiṁ. Racnā mātr ūpar kā khol nahim hotī jise śilp aur śaili se paṅktyom meṁ bun liyā jātā hai. Yah mātr kausālpūrṇ abhivyakti bhī nahim. Śabd aur vicar se guṁthī vah vaicārik kalātmak prastuti hai jo apne hone meṁ svayaṁ apnī sattā hai. Param sattā. Lekhak dvārā likhe jāne ke bāvjūd. Racnā kā astitva aur racnākār kī antartdṣṭiyām samānāntar bahtī haiṁ aur donom kī sājhī zamīn se hī ubhartī-hariyātī haiṁ pāṭh kī paṅktyām. Dilcasp itnā bhī ki donom apne-apne hisse kī zamīn ek-dūse kī viśeṣṭāom ke lie choḍ detī haiṁ. Isilie ki racnā ke 'andar' aur 'bāhar' kī lay na ṭiṭe aur ek-dūse se dūri banī rahe. Inmeṁ se koī bhī ek-dūse par hāvī ho to pariṇām ghātak hī homge.*

[. . .] *Kahnā hogā ki har lekhak ke nikaṭ uskī racnātmak prakriyā nitānt uskī nij kī hotī hai. Bhāv-jagat kī ye taraṅgeṁ ek or gūṛh aur uljhī huīm, dūsrī or bhaucak sapāṭ. Mairṁ aise dohre samay meṁ apnī lekhakiya sajagṭā meṁ nitānt nāī tāzī mairī ke koṇ se racnā ko halkī-sī āvāz detī huīm – itne dhime, jaise koī band darvāzā hai aur racnā kā anjān mukhṛā uske andar hai. Lekhak kī or se dhvani itnī halkī ki agar vah is saṅket ko sunnā na cāhe to na sune! Racnā kī surakṣā kī yah pahli śart hai. Lekhak use ājñā nahim detā, vah uskī prārthī hai.*

could hypothetically be, written from the raw material drawn from the context of the work. Such an ideal form or hypothetical form is never written down; as such, it can be paralleled to the notion of a 'silent text' behind the text, to which Sobti alludes in one interview.<sup>345</sup>

The above passage expands the field metaphor, constructing the soil or literary ground of the writer not only as her inner ground, receptive to seeds from the outside, but also as the place from which the completed work emerges.<sup>346</sup> The idea of a hypothetical form of the work existing in parallel to the work written by the author implies that the writer takes up the role of a cultivator, not that of a creator, because the plant germinates inside her from an external element, or rather from an interaction with the outside followed by the assimilation of external elements. However, it is particularly complicated in Sobti's case, because the position of the author is, for her, something in-between: not only is the writer connecting the reader and the work, but she is also a hybrid being between a creator and a catalyst. The seed of the work grows in her literary ground; it is therefore nurtured by her personality and background, which influence the rendition of the work and make it highly original. And yet, the work has a will and a presence of its own, and so do the characters staged in a text. A writer needs to distance herself from the subject and the creation; this enables her to render justice to the contingencies of the story and the autonomy of characters, the setting and even the plot of a given work.

It is striking that Sobti always constructs her representation of the creative process through constant oppositions. In the passage quoted above, it becomes particularly manifest in her insistence on the individual character of writing, particular to a writer, which becomes one with the contingencies induced by the work. In Sobti's choice of words, opposition is always present as well; for example, the aspects of inner life are 'obscure and complicated' (*gūṛh aur uljhī*) and at the same time 'astonishingly simple' (*bhaucak sapāt*). This opposition is mirrored in literature and in the process of creation itself. In Sobti's eyes, opposites are constantly present but do not exclude each other. On the contrary, it is in their coming together, in their interaction, that lies not only the possibility of

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345 See Sobti's interview with Tarun Bharatiya and Jayeeta Sharma in Sharma 1996: 109.

346 The image of the soil is recurrent and must of course be seen in the light of the field metaphor described above. The Hindi term used by Sobti most frequently is *bhūmi* (earth, soil, agrarian land; it is as a third meaning that the word is used as the Earth, the world). *Zamīn* (soil, land, earth) also occurs often. The two seem to be synonymous in Sobti's eyes. *Bhūmi* is a word of Sanskrit origin and *zamīn* a word of Persian origin. Sobti plays here with different language registers. Both terms designate for her the background of the writer in the sense of all that she brings with herself in the form of personal history, experience and personality.

the existence of literature (of creation) but also of life itself, which she considers as dynamic, not static or stable.

In this passage, the field metaphor appears again in Sobti's description of the process of creation. Unlike in MSRS, Sobti does not mix prose and verse because this passage is part of an interview and therefore the context does not allow for such a change of genre. Nevertheless, the vocabulary chosen remains within the specific semantic field of the writer as a farmer-gardener. Here, Sobti alludes to the territory possessed by a writer in her literary world in terms of 'literary plot of land/soil' (*racnātmak zamīn*). This soil is nurtured by the flow of inspiration or imagination, like in MSRS, but also by all that forms the background of a writer. The writer draws a line of demarcation in order to delineate her territory. This plot of land consists of her abilities, experiences, personality and capacity to use the material gathered from the outside. All of this constitute the raw material (*kaccā māī*) of a writer. When using her own resources as well as what is coming as an inspiration from her surrounding world, the writer will be able to go beyond the limits of her abilities and her enclosed territory in the form of the new work. The place from which the work emerges is a territory, a plot of land, which is not entirely that of the writer nor that of the work but the converging point of the influence of both; it is from this that the text in its known form emerges. The work as it is presented to the reader is thus described here as the product (the plant, the crop) of the double influence of material from the outside – which Sobti calls the work (*racnā*) and must therefore be understood as the work in its potentiality, a form of an ideal or hypothetical work existing in parallel to the work which is being written<sup>347</sup> and the writer with her personal background and skills.

The slight difference this presents in comparison to the idea of the work as growing from a seed, first found outside, and now germinating within the writer – the version presented in the discussion of ZN – allows for a better understanding of the concept of the literary work as something separate from the writer. This notion of separation is expressed in the rest of the long quote given above as well as in other instances in Sobti's essays. Indeed, if both the work and the writer have their own spaces and converge at a third point to give birth to the work, it is implicit that the term *racnā*, work, refers in the first part of the sentence to a form of it which exists in parallel to the text that the writer is

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<sup>347</sup> This form of the work is probably the 'silent text' behind the text to which Sobti refers in Sharma 1996: 109. This form of the work is a version of the text where 'all is said', if such a thing is possible, where the meanings are directly stated. The fact that they are not explicitly voiced in the final version of a written text leaves room for interpretations. It is this free space which marks the literary character of the text.

composing, a form which is ideal in as much as it is complete, leaves nothing unsaid, but cannot be written down, precisely for this reason.<sup>348</sup> This vision parallels another passage of MSRS, wherein Sobti uses the metaphor of the bridge to discuss converging streams coming from opposite directions: "Independently of the goings-on involving the inside and the outside, every writer's innermost being entertains a free, foolish part which loves living it up. Its uncommon, happy-go-lucky attitude counterbalances the writer's tensions. It acts like a bridge for currents surging from opposing directions."<sup>349</sup> The currents alluded to in this passage are the background of the writer and her external inspiration and knowledge. United, they can give rise to the work. The bridge is here not so much the writer herself as a specific ability and disposition of hers, the ability to be carefree, which allows her to bring together these materials and to create from them. Interestingly, the term I translated as 'happy-go-lucky attitude' here is *mastī*, which designate a feeling of being unbound by restraint, a sort of reckless amusement, associated not only with material forms of enjoyment but also with a feeling of 'drunkenness' in a metaphorical sense, as in devotional poetry. This prefigures the parallel of the writer and the Sufi saint which Sobti makes in a latter passage of MSRS.

The work in its 'ideal' form is an entity in itself, over which the writer has no authority; she must respect it and not seek to dominate it. Here, Sobti speaks against the notion of an agenda in literature, although in a very indirect manner: the writer is in reality a seeker, she does not know beforehand where the story and the characters will lead her. For this reason, it is impossible for her to force any decision or twist of the plot upon the characters so that they correspond to a personal vision or belief. The writer is looking at life and accepting its reality as it is; she is not imposing a reality she envisions. The characters, as well as the plot, must therefore remain free to evolve. The final text which emerges from the convergence of the inside and the outside is independent of the writer as well as of the 'outside reality' which lies at its root. It acquires an existence of its own.

The word 'work' or 'composition' (*racnā*) clearly refers to two forms, according to Sobti. There is, on the one hand, the text as it is presented to the reader and, on the other hand, the ideal form of the work (the 'silent text'), which is not clearly described and defined but must be taken into account as

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**348** One must note here that Sobti's texts always play with what is unsaid, with ellipses, and are, therefore, wide open to interpretations.

**349** MSRS, Sobti 2014: 398, *Andar aur bāhar ke is vyavahār-vyāpār se dūr har lekhar ke vajūd meṁ ek āzād bekhāuf ũkṛā mastī meṁ paṅpatā rahtā hai. Yāhī apnī anokhī lāparvāhī meṁ lekhak ko tanāvom meṁ santulan detā hai. Viparīt diśāom se umaṛṭī ghumarṭī dhārāom ke lie setu kā-sā jugār kartā hai.*

having an existence of its own and an influence on the end result which will be presented to the audience of the text. Both notions are covered by the Hindi word *racnā*. If Sobti is not clearly defining the second form of the work (this 'hypothetical form of the work', as I have called it), she describes more precisely the independence of the characters and that of the work from the author.

This independence plays a central role in Sobti's essays. On one side there is the work and, on the other, the personality and skills of the writer; it is from their combination that the text will emerge as the final form of the work. The writer does not dominate the work as a god-like creator who has the final say on the matter of plot and characters. On the contrary, although her skills, her fantasy and her background have an influence on the form the story will take, she must respect the verisimilitude imposed by the work and its context. Thus, neither is she the sole creator nor is the text 'writing itself'. It is an interaction, a dialogue, a process of cultivating the land.

The writer's position oscillates constantly between passivity – being a medium or catalyst – and activity – shaping the plot and leading the development or leaving some points unsaid. By allowing thinking space in the text through the 'silent text' existing behind the text, the writer leaves the reader free to experience the story in her inner world, interpret it in diverse ways and search for what was not explicitly stated.<sup>350</sup> The work as it is presented to the readers is indeed an open text, quite similar to the *opera aperta* conceived by Umberto Eco, or to the conception of the independent text developed by Roland Barthes.<sup>351</sup> The work's independence from the writer appears therefore not only at the time of the completion of the work, when the author sends it out into the world – to the first reader or the publisher – but it is there from the very beginning and must be treated with respect. The writer cannot allow herself any freedom, or at least Sobti does not. She maintains a distance between herself and her work.

In Sobti's eyes, the writer stands in interaction with her surrounding world, with the reality on which her work is based and with her own inner world and the text. Considered from the outside, the writer fulfils the role of a communicator, an

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**350** In her interview with Tarun Bharatiya and Jayeeta Sharma, Sharma 1996: 109, asked why she writes three drafts of each of her works, Sobti answers: "For the silent text, the text behind the text! The third draft tells you whether you have been good or not. If the silent text is still verbal, it really bothers me. There has to be a silent text for my readers so that they can feel the story in their gut." This quote implies the existence, behind the words, of other layers of meaning, which the reader can and must decode. The different drafts are stages in revealing these meanings and Sobti, as the author, chooses which form gives more room for the text and for the potential reader to live in.

**351** See Eco 1976, 1979; Barthes 1964, 1984.

intermediary who renders something visible to others. For the writer herself, this implies that she is always in a middle position<sup>352</sup> between introspection and observation of her surroundings – or even involvement with them. Towards her characters, towards her work, the writer must keep a certain distance and objectivity.

This conception of the writer implies that the characters have a freedom of their own, an idea that is very dear to Sobti. Indeed, she insists on her distant relationship with the characters she stages and the outside origin of their idiosyncratic language and stories (she only has the ability to listen to them, grasp their utterances and record them). Nevertheless, in contrast to this external factor, the inner self of a writer and her individual sensitivity also play important roles. Sobti considers experience as central, yet it is not enough. The interaction between the environment and the inner self (*antarman*) is really essential. Although such a vision might seem at first rather commonplace, it must be understood as a much deeper process of dialogue between the external reality (the world, the life-based characters) and the writer's individuality and inner world than the statement initially suggests. During the time of germination, the external elements are assimilated by the writer who then creates the new work from them.<sup>353</sup> The characters and the settings depicted in Sobti's novels are therefore really recreations of life, not just reflections of it: their language, their idiolect and their psychology are brought to life in the text. A writer must allow for the characters of her works to thrive. They have a life and a logic of their own which Sobti refuses to overlay with her own thoughts or 'veto', as she says in her discussion with Vaid:

[. . .] while writing, my attitude as a writer is to bring together, under any condition and to the best of my ability, the inside and the outside, and write it down. As a writer, I do not consider myself as having exclusive rights over my work. A writer may play any game she wants – toy with her characters and turn them at will – [but] I never use this 'veto'. If a novelist wants to present the text of life, it is also her responsibility to protect the personal, social and collective standing of characters who came into existence through [the power of] her pen.<sup>354</sup>

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352 As such, the writer finds herself in a liminal position which resembles that of a sorcerer or a shaman, just as was hinted at by Barthes at the end of his article on *Ecrivains et écrivants*, see Barthes 1964.

353 This becomes clearer in another beloved metaphor of Sobti's, the colour-music metaphor, where the writer is compared to a painter or a musician.

354 SVS, Sobti 2007: 69–70, [. . .] *likhte hue mere lekhak kī manaṣṥthiti kisi bhī hālat meṁ andar aur bāhar donoṁ ko bharsak sameṥkar likhne kī hotī hai. Lekhak ke rūp meṁ mainṁ racnā par apnā ekchatr adhikār nahīṁ māntī. Lekhak jaise cāhe use khele – pātroṁ ke khel ko apnī mancāhī diṣā meṁ more – yah "vīṥo" mainṁne kabhī istemāl nahīṁ kī. Upayāṣkār agar zindagī*



This passage illustrates perfectly the idea of the autonomy of the work and the characters, an idea that several other novelists have expressed.<sup>355</sup> Sobti gives the characters room to develop and does not force her ideas and wishes upon them. This reflects a need for ‘realism’ or rather ‘vraisemblance’ or ‘credibility’. A character will also have a language of her own<sup>356</sup> and the role of the writer is not to project too much of what is inside herself on the characters. It is the vigilance of the writer towards the outer world, her surroundings, that allows the characters to blossom as they do and remain close to the reality of the world and time in which they exist. The writer has the literary ability to recreate this and, through her narrative voice and perspective, she marks the characters and the work with the stamp of her individuality. The writer is therefore present in her writings. She cannot be absent. Nevertheless, she leaves room for the characters and the plot to develop on their own. When she writes, something of her self is lost and something is gained that comes from the work, from the logical development of the characters, from the ‘outside’ so to speak.<sup>357</sup> The presence of the writer must therefore not be dominant so as to leave the space free for

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*kā pāṭh prastut karne kā nimitt hai to jo pātr lekhak kī qalam dvārā astitva pā rahe haiṁ unki vyaktigat, sāmājīk aur sāmūhik sattā kī surakṣā karnā bhī lekhak ke jimme hai.*

In this passage, Sobti distinguishes between the work (*racnā*) and the text (*pāṭh*). I understand this distinction in this particular context as between the template provided by life (*zindagi kā pāṭh*, the text of life) and the work produced by the writer after germination of the seed (the inner and outer material collected by the writer). The Hindi word *racnā*, often translated as ‘composition’ or ‘literary work’ is etymologically linked to the root *rac* ‘to produce, fashion, compose, write’; the adjective *racnātmak* is usually rendered as ‘creative’, but also, at times, as ‘literary’, ‘compositional’.

In the encounter between Sobti’s double, Hashmat, and Sobti herself, where Sobti seems to give away a great deal of her person, she makes a comparable statement on the independence of the characters, even going so far as to say that it is they who write (who are written through the writer, using her as a medium), see HaH, Sobti 2012: vol I: 258. “You are writing, yet you feel it is not you writing, but someone else. You try to make a claim that it is you writing, but then the characters of the story warn you, no, it is not you, madam, it is us who are writing ourselves through you.” *Āp likhte haiṁ lekin mahsūs karte haiṁ, āp nahīṁ likh rahe koī aur likh rahā. Āp yah dāvā karnā cāhte haiṁ ki āp hī likh rahe haiṁ to kahānī ke pātr āpko khabardār kar dete haiṁ ki āp nahīṁ sahib, ham haiṁ jo āpse likhvā rahe haiṁ.*

**355** See, for example, the case of Schmucl Asch, the hero of *Judas*, by Amos Oz, according to the author in his interview in the NZZ (18.03.2015): <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/buecher/ich-liebe-jesus-fuer-seine-anarchie-1.18504168>.

**356** One can mention, for example, the very specific language used by Mitro in MM, a language free of inhibitions which mirrors the psychology of the character.

**357** See SVS, Sobti 2007: 46–47, “When a writer settles into a literary work, she brings her own way of thinking into it. She gears up [the world of] her inner thoughts. [. . .] It is true that in the contexts of a literary work many things change – they they acquire an edge. Their

the development of the interaction between the writer's inner world and the text-to-be. Writers might have a desire to control or play with their characters, but according to Sobti, this would defy the purpose of literature, which is to "present the text of life" (*zindagī kā pāṭh prastut karnā*), to become more than a reflection of life. The purpose is to become a genuine recreation of life.

This notion of the characters existing independently from the writer once the first idea has germinated brings to mind Pirandello's play *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*) with its treatment of the meta-poetical question of the independence of the characters.<sup>358</sup> In this play, the game is pushed to the extreme with the characters coming to life and playing their scenes – with the ironic tragedy that some of the scenes will never take place because they have not yet been thought through by the author. For Sobti, the characters do have a life of their own in the same way. When she describes how her characters emerge and appear to her, it is almost always through their words, through a particular sentence or a scene: the voice heard on a road in Rajasthan for Mitro in MM, or a sentence said by Sobti's dying mother about light for the persona of the mother in AL.<sup>359</sup> The characters appear to her already formed and alive. Sobti needs to be certain of the liveliness of her characters in order to put them on paper. The words of Pirandello in the preface to his play shed some light on Sobti's views as well: "But there are others who, beyond such pleasure, feel a more profound spiritual need on whose account they admit only figures, affairs, landscapes which have been soaked, so to speak, in a particular sense of life and acquire from it a universal value. These are, more precisely, philosophical writers."<sup>360</sup> Those writers, according to Pirandello, feel the need to get in touch with

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outward appearance is given a makeover. They are thoroughly *transformed*. It is my experience that [both] feelings and thoughts lose something and gain something [new]."

*Lekhak jab racnā meṃ apne ko sthīt karnā hai to racnā meṃ apnī vaicārik upasthiti darj kartā hai. Apnī āntarik soc ko pukhtā kartā hai. [ . . . ] Yah sahī hai ki racnā ke sandarbhon meṃ bahut kuch parivartan hotā hai – nukilā banā liyā jātā hai. Raṅg rūp meṃ badal diyā jātā hai. Sahī māyanom meṃ trānsform kar liyā jātā hai. Merā anubhav hai ki bhāv aur vicār meṃ kuch nafī ho jātā hai aur kuch jamā ho jātā hai."*

In this passage, it becomes clear that for Sobti there is an interaction or even a partnership between the writer and the work or the characters as entities possessing their distinctive existence.

**358** See Pirandello 1986, and more precisely the preface written by the author, stating that the characters were "born alive" in his imagination. Agyeya, in the preface to *Śekhar: ek jīvanī*, makes the same point (and refers to Pirandello as well), see Agyeya 2014: 17–22.

**359** See Sobti 2014: 386–388, and Sobti 2002: 7–11.

**360** I am quoting here Eric Bentley's translation, Pirandello 1952: 364–365. Pirandello emphasises two aspects which are central to Sobti's understanding of literature as well: the search for truth (credibility) and the ability of literature to universalise the singular.

their characters and give their stories a particular significance, a specific meaning. If this is not the case, creation cannot happen. Writing only in order to convey moral or other beliefs is not sufficient and not ‘right’. This last idea is indeed very present in Sobti’s essays, although it is rarely asserted explicitly. It is rather implied in her strict distinction between the writer with her beliefs and the work and its claim to reality or *vraisemblance*. A writer must never allow her wishes and beliefs to interfere with her role of respecting the existence of the work as an entity independent from herself:

With the writing of the first line on the page, the rights of authorial proprietorship and its power of being in continued possession of one’s old creative abilities get diminished by half. Going by the rules, a writer’s proper engagement with the product of her inner world starts with that first line, which is the sign of the existence of the work in and for itself.<sup>361</sup>

Because of the existence of the work as an independent entity and because of its truth, the characters develop a life of their own, on which the writer must not impose her ideas and judgement. The purpose of the writer, according to Sobti (and to Pirandello in the passage quoted above) is not to promote a specific agenda but to search for life and truth in life.<sup>362</sup>

As a result, it is of particular importance for Sobti not to pass a judgement on life, on the world, or on a character. She does not allow herself to pronounce a sentence on them: she is a recounter (or even a humble ‘petitioner’ seeking the help of a higher power).<sup>363</sup> Her role is to depict and show her moral commitment to human being and life, which are the subject of her work.<sup>364</sup> This

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**361** SVS, Sobti 2007: 83, *Apnī hī pichlī kṛtvālī kṣamtā ko lagātār hāsīl karne kī pahīlī pañktī likhte hī lekhaḳīya svāmītvā ke adhīkāṛ aur uskī śaktī ādhī rah jātī hai. Jo lekhaḳ ke antarjagat kī upaj hai uskā adhīkāṛpūrvak sāmna us pahīlī pañktī se ārambh hotā hai jo apne āp meñ racnā ke astītvā kā sañket hai.*

**362** In his essays, Nirmal Verma also puts truth at the core of writer’s work: “And then, in that truth [the truth revealed about a fictional character], a writer’s neutrality crumbles, and his commitment begins. Commitment, neither to himself as a writer, nor to the word written, but to the truth, unborn, hovering somewhere between the two.” Verma 1989: 70. The preoccupation with truth – the truth of the characters, their authenticity – is thus not a point unique to Sobti but rather part of a poetics of writing common to many Hindi writers.

**363** The notion of a ‘petitioner’ (*prārthī*, in its extended meaning also a worshipper turning to god) comes up in Sobti’s interview with Anamika (in its original full Hindi version in Sobti 2015) and describes the attitude of the writer towards the work (as well as towards her raw material). The episode of Rabia al-Basri, presented in MSRS, Sobti 2014: 398, also illustrates that the writer is something of a devotee of the human being.

**364** See the interesting parallel, drawn by Sobti in MSRS, between writer and Sufi saint. The human being is the ‘object of devotion’ of the writer, the focus of her study and work, just like god is for the Sufi saint. See MSRS, Sobti 2014: 395, “For a writer, her journey does not end in

attitude towards the human being, this freedom from any judgement, is what I call Sobti's humanism. It consists not only in not imposing her ideal vision of the world and humanity but also in seeing and accepting the complexity of life and human beings.

In MSRS, Sobti illustrates her point with the story of an Arabian Sufi saint, Rabia al-Basri (ca. 714–801).<sup>365</sup> Rabia is reported to have walked out of her house one day with a bowl of burning embers and a bucket of water, the one to burn down heaven and the other to quench the fire of hell so that people would worship god for himself alone and not because of their fear of hell or their desire for heaven. It is in this way that the writer must worship her 'god', the human being, without being blinkered to aspects that do not please her. There must be no judgement here over good and evil but neutrality, objectivity and acceptance. Sobti concludes her narration of the Rabia-episode with these words:

Friends, a writer cannot choose to see or hear what she wants to see or hear only –

Neither can she choose not to see or hear what she doesn't want to see or hear.

This would be a sin on the part of the writer. A writer should not mark something with the stamp of heaven or the fear of hell; she ought to read life and the living with a candid gaze and then proceed, picking up the truth by engraving it with her pen.<sup>366</sup>

A writer must refrain from judging the characters she stages, allowing them instead to be themselves. It remains possible, as a narrating voice and the giver of the perspective on a story, to guide the opinion of the reader and pass a judgement

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[visiting] the highs and lows of abstract ideals; her journey takes her into the middle of life itself. Her destination is the human being's audacity and the lifeblood of fearlessness shed in endless struggles. The human being is her god; he is indeed her deity." *Lekhak ko apnī yātrā kore ādarśom kī dhalānoṃ aur ūncāiyom meṃ hī saṃpūrṇ nahīm karnī hotī, uskā safar ain zīndagī ke bicombic hokar guzartā hai. Uskī maṃzil īnsān kī jurrat aur jīvaṭ kā lahū hai jo niraṃtar saṃgharṣom meṃ bahtā hai. Uskā khudā īnsān hai. Vahī sacmuc meṃ uskā bhagvān hai.* There is something 'sacred' about writing according to Sobti, who also uses the word *mastī*, 'carefree attitude', 'passion' (in a Sufi context, the word may be used in the sense of 'religious fervour'), to speak of the peculiar perspective of the writer on life and her attitude to it. It is also interesting to note that this comparison implies the notion of discipline as well, something that is very important in Sobti's eyes. A writer is thus, once again, put in an in-between space, namely between a carefree attitude and discipline.

**365** See MSRS, Sobti 2014: 398.

**366** MSRS, Sobti 2014: 398, *Dosto, aisā nahīm kī lekhak jo cāhe vahī dekhe – vahī sune – Aisā bhī nahīm kī jo cāhe – use na dekhe – na sune –*

*Lekhak ke nām par to yah gunāh hogā. Lekhak ko to na svarg ke nām par kuch aṃkīt karnā hai na narak ke ḍar se, use khari nazar se zīndagī ko jīnevāloṃ ko paḍnā hai aur kalam se ukerkar satya ko cunte cale jānā hai.*

or lead implicitly towards a specific opinion about the characters or the plot. However, according to Sobti, this is to be avoided. It would even be a sin (*gunāh*)! The writer is to act as an intermediary, carrying the voice of the protagonists to the reader; it is not her place to decide on good and evil. The writer is a humanist who looks at humankind as it is, without diabolising it or embellishing it.

The notion of ‘humanism’ (*manāvīya mūlya*, human values) seems important for Sobti, as well as for several other Hindi writers (Mridula Garg or Agyeya, for instance).<sup>367</sup> Although the word itself does not appear very often in Sobti’s essays and interviews, I use it here to designate the particular orientation of her thinking and writing towards the human being and her life and thoughts. For Sobti, the words human, human being (she mostly uses the words *manāvīya*, as adjective, and *insān*, as substantive) do seem to correspond to a set of values of tolerance, empathy and respect for the other’s freedom (and for the other’s very being) which she expects the writers, as an intellectual community, to defend. This is her definition of humanism,<sup>368</sup> a definition which goes hand in hand with her unprejudiced attitude towards the human beings as the subjects of literature.

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**367** See Garg 1991: 419–420, “The concern of women and men writers of the second world is humanist.” According to Garg, the writers – most of them belonging to the middle-class or upper middle-class – feel it their duty towards the lower classes to depict their struggles in order to bring awareness about them. However, this does not remain a mere social duty but becomes a way of reflecting on life. Indeed, the writers let all their concerns and those of all the classes flow into their works, in a depiction which can touch any human being.

The theme of humanism and its connection to a certain vision of society and to a writer’s role within it is a recurring theme in the Hindi context. It is, for example, voiced by Agyeya in *Preparing the Ground*, Agyeya 2011: 123, “To be secular does not mean to be without, against, or even neutral to religion. It means to be committed to the religion of man. That man is the measure of all things, that he is the source of all values means that man is the creator of values.” If Agyeya shows great awareness and sensitivity towards the fact that society is a construct, this passage also illustrates his belief in a vision of literature which posits the human being at its core. This is the attitude which I call ‘humanist’ in the context of this study, an attitude implied in Sobti’s essays and speeches. Sobti’s humanism consists of accepting and defending the plurality and the complexity of individuals, and acknowledging the existence of a universal core in human nature which makes it possible for good literature to reach beyond its socio-historical and geographical frame.

**368** See for example some passages of SAM, Sobti 2015: 7, “With its help [the help of the language], the writer renews through her writings the traditions, the principles and the human values.” *Isī ke sahāre lekhak paramparā, siddhānt aur mānāvīya mūlyom ko apnī kalam se nayā kartā calā jātā hai.*

Or SAM, Sobti 2015: 338, in the interview with Kamal Ahmad: “Any dictatorship that spreads communal hatred and fear in the peace-loving people of India challenges the principles of humanity of our constitution – to protect democracy – destroying the civil society in the name of religious cruelty will indeed prove dangerous for any political party or ideology.”

According to Sobti, the writer establishes, through her attitude, a dialogue with life and with the human being in a sense quite close to the dialogue as defined by Martin Buber.<sup>369</sup> This type of dialogue is an attentive and non-judgemental listening which leaves room for a questioning of the self as well. It is a search.<sup>370</sup>

In literature, the dialogue with the other is a dialogue through the written word, through an examination of life which is free of ready-made judgements

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*Koī bhī tānāśāhī jo bhārat ke śāntipriya janmānas meṃ jātiya gṛhṇā aur ātāmk kā pracār-prasār kartī hai, vah hamāre saṁvidhān ke jantāntrik siddhāntoṃ ko cunautī detī hai – loktantra kī surakṣā ke lie nāgarik samāj ko dhārmik krūrtā ke nām par bhāmjñā kisī rājñitīk dal aur vicārbhārā ke lie khatarmāk hī sābit hoga.”*

In the last passage, it becomes clear that democracy – in its particular manifestation of an inclusive democracy, without caste discrimination and without segregation of any kind – is part of Sobti's definition of humanism or of the 'human values' (*manāvīya mūlyā*) a writer ought to defend. See also chapter seven.

**369** See Buber 1979. For Buber, each individual lives and perceives the world only through dialogue, through a relationship and interaction with her environment and her own self. The notion of constant interaction and dialogue is close to Sobti's vision of the writer's relationship with the world. It is through this 'partnership' (*sājhedārī*), as Sobti sometimes calls it, that a writer can find a truth about life and the human being.

**370** A passage of Paul Mendes-Flohr's introduction to his collection of essays on Buber summarises this point best, see Mendes-Flohr 2015: 3, "As an interpretative method, dialogue has two distinct but ultimately converging vectors. The first is directed to the subject of one's 'investigation': one is to listen to the voice of the other and to suspend all pre-determined categories and concepts that one may have of the other; dialogue is, first and foremost, the art of unmediated listening. In a sense, Buber's principle of dialogue extends Isaac Newtown's maxim: *Hypotheses non fingo: I feign no hypotheses*. Dialogue is, of course, more than a method ensuring maximum objectivity; dialogue has manifest cognitive and thus existential significance. By listening to the Other attentively, by allowing the voice of the Other to penetrate, so to speak, one's very being, to allow the words of the Other – articulated, acoustically and viscerally – to question one's pre-established positions fortified by professional, emotional, intellectual and ideological commitments, one must perforce be open to the possibility of being challenged by that voice. As Eugen Rosenstock-Heussy [(1888–1973), German-American historian and social philosopher] put it: *Respondo etsi mutabor*, I respond, although I will be changed; 'I respond, even though I may change in the process!' Genuine dialogue thus entails a risk, the 'danger' that by truly listening to the other – be the other an individual, a text, a work of art – that one might, indeed, be changed, transformed cognitively and existentially."

Although I am not sure that the aspect of being changed by the constant dialogue is important for Sobti, I see a strong parallel between her vision of dialogue and Buber's in that it is a genuine opening towards both the other and the self, free from prejudices and judgements. Dialogue and freedom from judgement find a particular expression in the creation of the alter ego, Hashmat. See chapter five.

and opinions so as to enable one to reach the reality of life, a reality that can be accepted as constantly changing and as having an influence on the writer herself – it is a challenge. Such a vision of dialogue and interaction seems to underlie Sobti's conception of writing. For her, there is no judgement on the 'other' (be it a fictional character, the surrounding environment of the writer which she observes and with which she interacts, or even the self).

In the search for the reality and the truth of life and the human being, all the commitments to a specific cause must vanish. A writer must therefore keep herself apart from all parties and groups in order to remain true to her commitment to literature and life – to the human being – and to the dialogue with the world. Literature becomes the space where such an interaction is possible.

In Sobti's preoccupation with the human being, individual concerns merge with universal concerns. In this conflation, literature turns into an exemplum, something that can reach out to a large audience because, through the depiction of something particular, it reflects something to which any human being can relate. This is indeed one of the central roles of literature according to Sobti. Literature is a binding element for the human being, it is a chain that is as endless as life – and time – and connects the individual and her time to a larger dimension.

For Sobti, although the writer cannot be absent (the writer is indeed the channel through which the work is transmitted), she must possess the ability to refrain from any direct interference. This apparent contradiction between the writer's presence (and direct confrontation with life, as discussed above in opposition to the thinker) and the writer's 'absence' is expressed by Sobti in the image of the field metaphor through the notion of the two opposite directions (the 'inside' and the 'outside'). When these two poles merge (in the soil of the writer), they generate a literary text, where the strictly personal elements of the writer have been surpassed through what she has gained from the outside – thus reaching out to an aspect of life which is universal and lies beyond the writer's own limits. The dialogue of the writer with her surroundings is therefore not only unavoidable (life implies a constant interaction), it also constitutes the condition of literary creation.

### 3.2.5 Literature as Dialogue and Interaction

Sobti constructs literature as a dialogical process between the inner and outer worlds of the writer and, within the writer, between the multiple aspects of her

own self.<sup>371</sup> What starts out as an opposition of two poles or directions (the inner world, *antarman*, and the outside environment, *parivesh*), is finally constructed as a constant and dynamic interaction which makes creation possible and corresponds to a reality of life, where nothing is ever fixed or standing still. This 'dialogue' of opposites constitutes a central aspect of Sobti's poetics. In her conception of literature, the place of the autobiographical elements and the writer's ability to combine her personal experience with external elements in order to obtain a work with a universal reach are central. I will examine those points now in greater detail, starting with the paradox of Sobti's construction of the writer as an 'ordinary human being' (*sādhāraṇ jan*) despite her insistence on the particular outlook and vision needed for writing, as well as with her conception of autobiography.

Sobti considers literature as universal; good literature is not centred on the single individuality of a writer but addresses questions which matter to everyone. Through literature, the elements binding human beings together become manifest and something can be told, which goes beyond the individual preoccupations of the writer or of any individual, or, rather, highlights precisely what, in an individual experience, is common to all human beings:

There is a side to the brotherhood of man, where somehow, in spite of being divided into innumerable strata, it comes together at one point.

Despite differences in looks and characters, at the level of thoughts and concerns, there is always something at work, something that separates us but keeps us together, too. Notwithstanding smaller or larger limitations, literature itself is this vast fraternity where any experience, liberated from the personal concerns of an individual, links itself to a larger context.<sup>372</sup>

In MSRS, Sobti stresses on several occasions the need for a writer to surpass the range of her own personal experience, not to be limited to one's own inner world or one's own individual concerns. This does not mean, however, that her personality and experiences are neglected, quite the contrary. In Sobti's conception of experience (*anubhav*), observation of the surrounding world and documentation have an important place, alongside what happened directly to an individual. This is part of a writer's vision of the world, a vision which must

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**371** The multiplicity of the self is a central topic for Sobti, particularly obvious in her creation of a double, Hashmat, see chapter five.

**372** MSRS, Sobti 2014: 394, *Insān kī birādarī kā yahī vah pahalū hai jo tah dar tah beśumār hisson meñ banṭī hone par bhī use kahīm na kahīm ek bindu se joṛe rakhtā hai.*

*Insān kī sūrat aur sūrat ke alag raṅg aur alag-alag paimānom bāvjud lagātār kuch aisā bhī zindā hotā calā jātā hai jo soc aur cintāom ke star par ek-dūsre se kuch bāmṭtā hai aur kuch sājhā kartā hai. Choṛī baṛī hadbandiyom ke bāvjud sāhitya hī vah vyāpak sājhedārī hai jismeñ koī bhī anubhav vyakti kī nij kī cintāom se ubarkar apne ko ek vyāpak sandarbh se joṛtā hai.*



not be limited, but dynamic and free. A larger vision of the world is provided by the possibility to move within it, by a freedom from bonds – be it the family ties or other ties – and by the ability to draw out the essence of people (characters) from completely different milieus. Freedom is the essential value for a writer according to Sobti's views on literary creation. It is through freedom (of thinking, moving about, experimenting, creating) that literature can fulfil its role as a vehicle for all the facets of human life, expressing not only the conventional, rational and factual sides of humanity, but also its darker and more mysterious parts. Freedom is essential to the process of creation; it therefore becomes central to Sobti's views on society and politics as well.

A brief look at the wide range of topics of Sobti's fiction – the novels and the short stories – shows that when autobiographical elements are present, it is generally implicitly. There is certainly always a part of lived experience in a fictional work, and Sobti is very much aware of it; however, she has herself a greater interest in topics that bring her to her own limits: "It becomes essential to know whether the author's game is being played on the turf of her own self or if its limits lie above and beyond her personal concerns. The pervading truth of life is not centred in any one individual. When one individual joins another and this one joins yet another, then the individual rises above herself and acquires the ability to look beyond the self and into the future."<sup>373</sup>

A writer must not be closed to the world surrounding her nor remain centred only on herself and her own imagination. For Sobti, a writer possesses this inner world, but the role of literature and the writer is to interact with it and the world outside. The notions of space, of an inside and an outside, are essential here. The writer must find a middle space between them and keep moving from one to the other, questioning both of them. Enclosed in herself, she would not be able to write more than something which would be 'monological' and quite removed from the larger world – and, therefore, from the 'truth of life' which a writer must seek to uncover.<sup>374</sup>

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**373** MSRS, Sobti 2014: 396: *Mahattvapūrn̄ ho uṭhtā hai kī lekhak kī dauṛ kyā uske nij ke ghare ke andar hai yā uskī sīmāeṁ vyaktigat cintāoṁ se āge aur pare bhī haiṁ? Jīvan kā vyāpak satya kīsī bhī ek vyakti meṁ kendrit nahīṁ. Ek se dūsrā aur dūstre se jab tīsrā jurṭā hai tabhī vyakti apne se ubarkar pare aur āge dekhne kī sāmārthya arjit kartā hai.*

**374** Sobti speaks of the 'monologue of art' in the following passage of MSRS, Sobti 2014: 397: "Friends, when we reject reality – stride over it on the strength of [our] imagination, negate it, we turn around [in another direction], and in the untouched inner solitude, we start creating an imaginary world, charming, gentle and full of colours. This is called, in poetic language, the fascinating monologue of art." *Dosto, jab ham yathārth ko nakārte haiṁ – kalpanā ke bal par phalāṅgte haiṁ, use asvikār karte haiṁ to palaṭkar aṁtar ke achūte akelepan meṁ ham ek*

Sobti's vision of literature as a dialogue bears some resemblance to Bakhtin's notion of dialogism. Bakhtin's dialogism includes the idea that a work is always set in a specific context and possesses relations and implicit (conscious and unconscious) references and associations of ideas with the literature that preceded it and with the worlds of the readers (present and future).<sup>375</sup> For Sobti, any work is connected to its context, its society and time. Even though a good writer is able to go beyond this limited dimension, it is important to remain connected to one's society and epoch, not to write only 'for one's self'.<sup>376</sup>

In her dialogue with Vaid, Sobti elaborates on her thoughts concerning the relationship of a writer to herself and her surrounding society and time through her discussion of the autobiographical aspects of a work. Both writers have a somewhat different view of the place of autobiography in fiction. For Vaid, it is simply impossible to write if the topic is not related to his life experience, despite his distinction between the fictional 'I' and his own self.<sup>377</sup> For him, it is essential to have the personal aspect and the personal experience inside a work because these are precisely the elements which will distinguish the writers from each other, make a work and a style individual and mark them out as such. Vaid considers the individuality of the writer as the most important element in writing. If he differentiates between 'autobiography' and 'autobiographical fiction', he admits nonetheless that he is not moving away from what he knows best.<sup>378</sup> He illustrates his point with the examples of Henry Miller and Marcel Proust, where it would be wrong to confuse the narrator with the real-life person of the writer. However, he sees

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*kālpānik manmānā komal satraṅgi saṁsār banāne lagte haiṁ. Ise kāvyamayī bhāṣā meṁ kālā kā sammohak ekālāp kahte haiṁ.*

This monologue is opposed to the conception of literature implicit in Sobti's essays and, I would argue, in her fictional works as well, namely literature as an interaction, as a constant dialogue between the work and the writer, the work and the reader, and the writer and the reader.

**375** See Bakhtin 1972. Bakhtin thinks of the peculiar associations of ideas and connotations of words and notions in their specific cultural contexts. Sobti does not go quite that far (although she expresses her views on word associations), but it is clear that for her a work and a writer are in dialogue with their context, their time and the time that preceded them. This is actually also what enables literature to reach beyond the time lived by a single writer and her direct surroundings.

**376** See for example the passage of MSRS, Sobti 2014: 398, quoted above in footnote 335. The image is one of solitude and selfish creation for one's self, without any exchange with the outside. Sobti rejects this type of creation. Her position regarding "l'art pour l'art" and activist writing is thus very similar to Nirmal Verma's position voiced in *Word and Memory* (1989).

**377** See Vaid in SVS, Sobti 2007: 55–56.

**378** See SVS, Sobti 2007: 43–58 for the whole discussion of the autobiographical elements in fiction.

personal experience as the main tool of the writer. One must note here that he does not have a narrow definition of experience and includes in it everything that contributes to the background of a writer.

For Sobti as well, experience (*anubhav*) plays a key role in the composition of a good text and is always present in writing:

For me, it is clear that the personal, autobiographical experience of the self, the inner language of the writer and the raw material from which the tale is woven, all of them flow together into their own time, epoch, individual and collective, social partnership as a form of expression. A writer chooses a story, a style and a structure which conforms to her own psychological make-up.<sup>379</sup>

Literature has a potential of universality, as discussed, but this does not mean that the writer's specificities completely disappear. Here again, there is a certain tension between the image of the writer as a catalyst, bringing the voices of the characters to life, and the conception of the constant presence of the writer's vision in her own texts. The two cannot be completely separated, because although a writer's work surpasses the strictly autobiographical dimension, she cannot be absent from her texts. Separating what is biographical or personal and what is not is almost impossible, but according to Sobti it is not very important. What is important is a writer's perspective and her ability to associate personal experience with a larger vision of life, because writing is more than the projection of an image of the world:

K.B., we all know that writing is not mere photography; taking up an incident seen earlier, the writer gives and can give it a new meaning through her inner language, craft and style. What matters is how vigilant the writer's eye is and how far it can see into the darkness, how vast her experience is, and what her eye can find, after it has dug deeply. [. . .] How much autobiography there is or is not [in a text]? Without going further into this matter, I consider 'experience' to be a distinctive element of writing. Much can be grasped using only imagination or through philosophical conceptualisation in order to cover up for the lack of experience or fill in the void; but the flights of imagination cannot fill up a work from which natural beauty of experience has been excluded. I will say clearly one thing: my understanding of experience is not equivalent to what 'happened', or occurred to one's self, nor one's own experience [alone]. The range of experience must be very wide. Then only do we arrive at the word endowed with meaning.<sup>380</sup>

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**379** Sobti 2007: 56, *Mere nikaṭ yah bāt sāf hai ki ātmakathā ātma-anubhav, lekhak kī āntarik bhāṣā aur vṛttānt bunne kā kaccā māl sabhī milkar apne samay, kāl, vyakti aur samāj ke sāmjhapan meṅ abhivyakti ke rūp meṅ pravāhit hote haiṅ. Lekhak apne manovijñān ke anurūp kathya, śailī aur śilp cuntā hai.*

**380** Sobti 2007: 57, *K.B. ham sabhī jānte haiṅ ki lekhan mātr phoṭogrāphī nahīṅ, dekhe hue ghaṭnā ko uṭhākar lekhak apnī antaraṅg bhāṣā se, apne śilp aur śailī se kathya ko nae arth detā hai, de saktā hai. Mahattvapūrṇ yah hai ki lekhak kī āmkh kitnī caukas hai aur amḍhere-ujāle*

As I have shown, the process of writing itself is assimilated by Sobti, through the field metaphor, to a long process of germination, where the crop (the text) will ultimately grow from the combination of external and internal elements. Therefore, a literary work does not amount merely to autobiographical elements, nor does it present a faithful picture of the external world. In it, there is more, there is thought as well as the particular gaze of the writer, her idiosyncratic ability to look and see the world and to think about it. This is obvious from Sobti's statements about the writer, and yet, despite her construction of the mystery and magic of writing, she insists on presenting the writer as an ordinary person and the particularities as being merely the result of a writer's ability to see:

The truth is that the writer is neither an ascetic nor a mahatma. She is an ordinary human being who looks for the unusual in her sacred duty of creation [defined as] [textual] creativity, and demonstrates it through her creative, textual competency. Yes, on the question you are referring to, I will say this much: the situations and circumstances that emerge in each person's life are not the same. Hence, neither are the identity nor the gaze. All these elements come together in the creation of a good text.<sup>381</sup>

The central semantic field of this new description of the writer is vision. The writer is an observer of the world. In order to grasp it properly, she needs an acute sight. Writing is not photography – i.e., the accurate reproducing of an image in a mechanical way – but the revelation of a deeper meaning, concealed behind the first visible layer. In order to grasp and convey this, the writer must see beyond the surface of the world. She has this ability partly through her own experience and partly through her 'eye of a writer'.<sup>382</sup>

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*meñ ek sāth kitnī dūr dekh saktī hai, uskā anubhav kitnā baṛā hai, vah āñkh gahre paiṭhkar kyā khoj saktī hai. [. . .] Ātmakathya kitnā aur kitnā nahīñ – iskī uljhan meñ na paṅkar maiñ 'anubhav' ko lekhan kā viśeṣ tattva māñtī hūñ. Anubhav kī kami, riktā ko bharme ke lie mātr kalpnā yā vaicāriktā ke darśan se bahut kuch grahañ kiyā jā saktā hai, par kalpnā kī uṛāñ bhī us racnā ko nahīñ bhar saktī jahāñ anubhav kā sahañ subhītā racnā ke bāhar khaṛā rah gayā hai. Ek bāt sāf kar dūñ kī 'anubhav' se merī murād ghaṭit ke yathārth se nahīñ, na hī apne ūpar bīte hue se aur na hī svayam apne meñ anubhav kie hue se. Anubhav kā dāyṛā bahut baṛā honā cāhie. Ek pañkti meñ sameṭne ke lie bhī bahut baṛā. Tabhī use chankar vah śabd bantā hai jise ham arth dete haiñ.*

**381** Sobti 2007: 58, *Sac to yah bhī hai ki lekhak na sant hai, na mahatma. Vah ek sādharmañ jan hai jo apñī srjandharmā racnātmaktā meñ asādharmañ ko khojtā hai, apñī racnātmak sāmārthya dvārā use pramāñit bhī kartā hai. Hām, jis praśan kī or āpkā sañket hai uske sandarbh meñ itnā hī ka-hūñgi ki har vyakti ke jīvan se ubharī sthityāñ-paristhityāñ ek-sī nahīñ hotīñ. Pariñāmsvarūp uskī śakhsyat aur nigāh bhī. Yah sabhī tattva milkar ek acche pāṭh ko racne meñ sahyog dete haiñ.*

**382** In MSRS, the idea of a peculiar ability to see and listen is present as well. See MSRS, Sobti 2014: 396, "The substratum which gave rise to a writer's salient thoughts or the number of journeys she went on are not very important; much more important is [the question]: are

The idea that a writer has a more discerning capacity to see and perceive the world than the average human being is a way to take up again the *topos* of the writer or poet as a seer (a *ṛṣi*, so to speak). This *topos* is part of the Indian vision of the poet – in ancient traditions as well as for a 20<sup>th</sup> century poet like Jayshankar Prasad – and is a *topos* in Western literature, too. However, for Sobti, it is not the poet who is an exceptional character, gifted with extraordinary powers, it is the search of the writer which is a search for the peculiar, the uncommon; her personality only singularises her writing, it does not render her, as an individual, more special than another human being. Although this seems at first quite paradoxical (in the staging of the figure of the writer, Sobti is indeed close to the romantic *topos*),<sup>383</sup> she eases the tension by insisting on the specificity of the gaze of writers, of their attitude, though not of themselves as people. This appears to be the essential meaning of this passage and it agrees with Sobti's belief in the fundamental equality of all individuals.

As Annie Montaut pointed out in her articles on Nirmal Verma's poetics, the semantic field of vision is really central for this writer as well.<sup>384</sup> Verma develops

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the author's ears in her eyes and her eyes in her ears so that she may read life, and is the picture in her heart and mind a picture made by her? Is this image merely the image of her own likeness? Or are those the images of people linked to her consciousness by human relationships who are knocking at her door?" *Sāhityakār kī buniyādī cintāem kis dharātal se ubharī haiṁ, kitnā safar tay kar cukī haiṁ, isse bhī mahatvapūrṇ bāt yah hai ki zindagī ko paṛhne ke lie kyā lekhak kī nigāhom par kān lage the – kyā uske kānom par ankheṁ lagī thīṁ aur uske dil-dīmāg par taṅgī tasvīr lekhak kī khud apnī hī thī? Apnī hī āṛtī kī? Athvā unkī jo mānaviya rīṣṭe se uskī apnī cetnā se juṛe the aur use khaṭkhaṭāte rahe the?*

See also Sobti 2007: 397. "If there is no affection in a writer's heart and dispassion in her eyes, then prolonged association [with people] will give her nothing. What literary work requires is the analytical intimacy of a literary mind, fearlessness and chisel-work". *Agar lekhak kā sinā garm na ho, aur āṁkh ṭhaṁḍī na ho to lagātār sohbat se bhī racnākār ke hāth kuch na lagegā. Racnā ko jo cāhie vah hai lekhakiya man kī viśleṣaṅātmak ātmīyatā, bekhaufī aur tarāś.*

In those two passages, Sobti uses the sense of sight to show the capacity of a writer to perceive the truth behind mere appearances. Sight or vision is here tantamount to analytical faculty.

**383** See, for example, Sobti's depiction of the moment when she found inspiration for ZN, while running in the rain one evening in the mountains, CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 382–383.

**384** See Montaut 2016. "Tout y [in a discussed extract of Varma's novel *Ek chitra sukḥ*] tourne autour de la transformation qu'il faut opérer pour bien voir /voir les choses dans leur vérité. Il faut se détacher au point d'être coupé de toutes les contingences (les chaises, les tables, les autres écoliers), au point que l'objet regardé se dissout dans le vide, mais cette dissolution est présentée en hindi comme une dissolution, aussi, du sujet qui regarde [. . .] Quant au regard support de cette conversion de la vision, il est « droit », « acéré » et « vide » en même temps, ne pouvant que rappeler l'attention flottante, générant simultanément le flou [. . .] et le cisèlement de l'objet isolé." See also Montaut 2012 for an analysis of Verma's poetics. As

an aesthetics of the gaze, of the right way of looking at the world, which becomes the distinctive feature of the artist and her individuality. According to this 'right way of looking', the distinction between the inside and the outside, between the spectator and the object of her observation, vanishes, and it is in this very subjectivity that lies the essence of the artistic gaze.<sup>385</sup> For Sobti, this is somewhat different. The gaze of the writer is indeed individual and particular, but it is above all an aptitude to examine the world acutely and actively interact with one's environment. For her, the surroundings of the writer, from which the characters of a text emerge, are no less important than the writer. They are distinct from the writer, and a certain coldness, an objectivity, is required in order to be true to the world depicted. However, Sobti's vision does not resemble realist writers' longing to produce a true copy of the world. For her, writing is the result of a long process of assimilation of the scrutinised material which enables her to really bring it back to life. The distance is therefore necessary because the writer is not one with her text nor with her material, but separate, even though there is a strong connection between them.

With her aptitude to look clearly at life, to analyse it and combine it with her own emotions, with an imaginary world and with the contingencies brought by the topic and characters of a work-to-be, the writer functions as a binding member between worlds, as a sort of bridge.

Sobti introduces the notion of the bridge in two related, but different contexts. In the passage immediately preceding the story of Rabia al-Basri in MSRS, the bridge is the emotional capacity of the writer within herself, her ability to live out a carefree attitude, a fervour (*masti*), fearlessly and fully. The passion that the writer feels and that makes her an alter ego of the Sufi saint is depicted in this context as the element channelling the influences from the outside and those of the inside and bringing the balance that Sobti considers necessary in order to write without bias.

A writer must be involved with the surrounding world so as to understand it, and yet, while writing, she must keep a distance from her text – in order to respect the work itself and the characters depicted in it – as well as from her own emotions. Sobti never writes without a certain distance to herself and to the text.<sup>386</sup> Writing cannot happen when she finds herself in an emotional

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Montaut convincingly demonstrates, it is the gaze, the way of looking at reality, that defines the writer in Verma's conception of the writer.

**385** See Montaut's analyses in Montaut 2012, 2016.

**386** See Sobti's interview with Tarun Bharatiya and Jayeeta Sharma in Sharma 1996: 111, "Writing, for me, is the main activity of my life, not an alternative. In spite of this, I have not written anything in reaction. If I am sad, angry or happy, I do not go near my writing."

state – for a long period after the death of her mother she was incapable of writing, as she states in one of the texts of SAM.<sup>387</sup>

But the bridge is also the term Sobti employs to describe the activity of the writer in society and her function between the reader and the characters and story she tells:

I will say that a writer doesn't only fight her own battles. Nor does she present merely the jottings of her joys and sorrows, pains and sufferings. She links the inside and the outside through a literary bridge. It needs to be constantly sustained – in every season, at all times. Through relationships growing apart, through the records of rights and wrongs. Through historical decisions and break-ups.<sup>388</sup>

The writer is not self-centred, although her own inner world is an important component of what she brings into a work. She is connecting what is inside her to her surroundings and it is from this combination that the work emerges. The writer functions therefore as a bridge, as a binding element between what is personal and individual (and yet, paradoxically, universal)<sup>389</sup> and the world, but this connection is a constant process, something that the writer is always creating or letting grow anew. The writer is conscious of the environment and society she lives in; she is also conscious of the time she inhabits and acutely aware of the historical events or their contexts. Everything is adding to her knowledge of life and humanity. The bridge (*setu*) – which she functions as – is a 'creative', 'literary' bridge: it is through the word, through language and through her literary ability that the writer is able to communicate and bind together disparate elements making up her writerly world. The writer is thus an intermediary conveying meaning and language to the readers but also conveying through the medium of the words the voice of the characters. Her inner world, her biography and personal experience are all a part of the interaction that establishes itself during the process of creation. Thus, the two poles (the inside and the outside) are in constant dialogue.

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**387** See SAM, Sobti 2015: 146–151.

**388** SVS, Sobti 2007: 30, *Kahūṅgi ki lekhak sirf nij ki laṛāi nahim laṛtā. Na apne dukh-dard aur harṣ-viṣād kā hī lekhā-jokhā peś kartā hai. Apne andar-bāhar ko racnātmak setu se joṛtā hai. Use laḡātār ugnā hotā hai – har mausam, har daur meṁ. Dūr hote riṣtoṁ ke sāth, sambandhoṁ kī jamā aur nafi ke sāth. Itihās ke faisloṁ aur fāsloṁ ke sāth.*

**389** This notion of universality through the singular (literature showing a potentiality of human nature) is present in Aristotle's *Poetics*. In the South Asian context, it brings to mind *sādhāraṇikāraṇa*, the principle of universalisation, which enables the reader of a text or the spectator/auditor of a theatre performance to partake in the emotions depicted.

### 3.3 Conclusion

Sobti's construction of the figure of the writer revolves around the notion of interaction. The writer is placed in the position of an intermediary, constantly living in a sort of middle space between her inner world and the world outside, between the world of the home and the wide world, between the work with all its intrinsic potentialities and what she herself adds and takes away from it through her own personality, her style and her background. The writing process is a long process of assimilation and reworking of material coming from the outside world (observation, acquired knowledge, experience, the contingencies of a situation and of society) as well as from the inner world of a writer (her personal history and biology, her own experiences, her imagination, her sensitivity). This raw material (*kaccā māl*) is like a seed which can grow at the appropriate time and in the appropriate soil to give rise to a plant – the text.

The field metaphor is central to Sobti's perception and self-representation as a writer. The writer is not the almighty god-like creator of a work but rather a careful gardener or cultivator who nurtures the land thoughtfully and listens to the needs of the work-to-be. The writer needs to give her inner world manure to nurture it (external material, time, people's voices) in order to rear the literary work (the literary plant, *racnātmak paudhā*).<sup>390</sup> The process of creation is long and requires patience. A writer must also acknowledge what is not dependent on her and what is not 'hers' in the work, respecting thus the independence of the characters she stages, their voices, and all that she has assimilated during the germination of the work.

Literary writing is a collaborative enterprise, a partnership (*sājhedarī*).<sup>391</sup> It is because of her association and interaction with the outside world that a writer has the faculty of presenting accurately something which she has not

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<sup>390</sup> SVS, Sobti 2007: 28.

<sup>391</sup> See SAM, Sobti 2015: 156, "I deeply believe that the writer is predestined to describe experiences which she has not necessarily lived through herself – that by virtue of being in this big world, she gets, at times from others, at times just from being with others, from their company and friendship, something valuable."

*Mainḡ gahre tak viśvās kartī hūm ki lekhak nimitt hotā hai us jīe hue anubhav ko aṅkit karne ke lie jo zarūrī taur par vah svayaṅ nahīm jītā – ek baṛī duniyā ke pās se guzarkar kabhī dūse se kabhī aīn bīcobīc se hokar saīgat aur sohbat mem se kuch aīsā uṭhātā hai jo mūlyavān hai."*

Sobti uses the term *sājhedarī* frequently, for example in SAM, Sobti 2015: 178–179 and 331. It is quite a common word in Hindi; however, Sobti employs it on several occasions with a specific association of meaning with the relationship between the work and the writer or the words and the writer. This emphasises the importance of the notion of interaction and dialogue in her conception of writing.



necessarily experienced herself. In her relationship to her work, a writer is not completely involved and not completely free either. She is not her work: she is associated and intertwined with it. She is both a recipient and transmitter (passive), and an agent (active) of the transformation which will ultimately bring a setting and characters to life, after the process of assimilation and maturation inside what Sobti calls her memory banks (*smṛti-baiṅks*):

I turn towards my *study*.

A total junkyard. No order of any sort. From top to bottom, paper upon paper. Books. Some stuck for over a year. Some others, for six months, and yet others, invisible under the heaps.

Let it be. All of us have memory-banks-like treasure-troves. Stockpiles of things, voices, memories, thoughts.

Silence!

To whom was this said?

To yourself.

Who are you? Is there a part of you that is now starting to be estranged? What did you say? One persona made up of small pieces. Sometimes a character, sometimes a writer, and sometimes both!

Silence.

Something is making a rustling sound on the table.

It is the wind. It is papers flying.

No, no!

A faraway commotion. Who cares?

You! Your heart and mind or the paper!

Paper – pages.

Did something glitter? Did a light come on? Anywhere?

No, a sound of tiptoeing feet. A touch.

Who?

Me.

I am that, what you –

No, I am not what you are and you are not what I am.

This dialogue takes place eternally between the work and the writer.<sup>392</sup>

392 SAM, Sobti 2015: 11–12, *Apnī sṛaḍī kī or lie caltī hūm*.

*Bilkul kabāristān hai. Koī tartīb nahūn. Ūpar-nīce kāgaz par kāgaz. Kitābern. Koī sāl-bhar se aṭakī paṛī hai. Koī chaḥ mahīne se aur koī saṭkī paṛī hai ḍher ke nice.*

*Rahne dem ise. Ham sabke smṛti-baiṅk tośākhāne haiṅ. Ambār haiṅ cīzoṅ ke, āvāzoṅ ke, yādoṅ ke, vicāroṅ ke.*

*Khāmoś!*

This passage offers a perfect summary of the major points made in this chapter. It is clear that Sobti perceives literature as a dialogical process, staged here in its very form as an imaginary discussion between the writer and the text-to-be, in a mix of genres ranging between an essay and a more literary text – something which is typical of Sobti. Such form, where genres blur, allows her to illustrate the complicated and entangled relationship between the writer, the text and the world on which the writer (at least in Sobti's case) bases her creation. Creation happens: something comes from the writer herself and is produced by her – the text – and yet it seems that part of it is unexpected and remains a mystery even for the writer herself. In the meantime, there is no relationship of complete identity between the writer and her work. The generally accepted idea, long defended by the critics and still held by many of them and even by many authors, that an author is the father or the mother of her work, is challenged by Sobti's dialogue with her work-to-be. Indeed, for her, even if the writer produces the work, it is not a one-sided process but an interaction, a constant dialogue.

To begin with, Sobti stages the setting of her study.<sup>393</sup> This working space reflects the space in her mind: on the table lie papers, books and notes, in

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*Yah kise kahā jā rahā hai?*

*Apne ko.*

*Āp kaun? Koī ek hissā hai tumhārā jo tumheṁ is vakt apne se parāyā lag rahā hai. Kyā kahā? Ṭukṛom-tukṛom se banī ek adad śakhsyat. Kabhī pātr, kabhī lekhak aur kabhī donoṁ!*

*Khāmoṣī.*

*Mez par kuch sarasrātā hai.*

*Havā hai. Kāgaz uṛ rahe haiṁ.*

*Nahīṁ, nahīṁ.*

*Kolāhal hai dūr kā. Kise bhed rahā hai?*

*Tumheṁ! Dīlo-dīmāg ko ki kāgaz ko!*

*Kāgaz – pannā.*

*Kyā kuch kaurīdhā! kuch rośnī hui! kahīṁ koī ālok!*

*Nahīṁ, dabe pānv ek āhaṭ. Ek chuan.*

*Kaun?*

*Maiṁ.*

*Maiṁ vahī, jo āp –*

*Nahīṁ, maiṁ vah nahīṁ, jo āp haiṁ aur āp bhī vah nahīṁ, jo maiṁ hūṁ.*

*Yah saṁvād har racnā aur racnākār ke bīc nīrantar hotā rahtā hai.*

**393** While writing in Hindi, Sobti always uses the English word *study* to speak of the room she writes in. It is a place of solitude and intimacy where she can retire to work and where she works at her own pace, following her own routine and timings. It is, so to speak, her 'room of her own'.

short, everything which has been accumulating for a very long time and will function as a memory bank.<sup>394</sup> The disorder reigning there is part of the chaos preceding the creation (creation consisting partly in organising the thoughts). In this staging of the state of affairs before writing, Sobti stresses the parallels between the space in the mind and the space in her study. The study becomes an expansion of the mind. Through this description, writing is associated with a thought process. Indeed, Sobti considers writing as an act of thinking: she does not write after having already completed the whole story in every detail in her mind, but writes when there is merely an idea. She writes at her own pace, letting herself be influenced by the outside, by the work itself. Creation is therefore a process which keeps happening, it is an ongoing dialogue.<sup>395</sup>

This notion is central, not only prior to the start of the writing activity itself, when the material is gathered from within the writer and from the outside in a constant interaction, but afterwards as well, during the writing process, when an exchange has established itself between the writer and her work. A part of the writer separates itself from the writer – estranges itself from her – stemming out of fragments of the raw material assembled. This part will become an entity in itself (the work) and ultimately separate itself completely from its author, once it is written and published.<sup>396</sup>

The relationship of an author to her work is thus, according to Sobti, one of interdependence and yet of independence. It is a relation, a dialogue, where there is no identity between the writer and her work. The writer *is not* her text. Yet, they are strongly connected and influence each other. The image of the memory bank from which the work emerges illustrates precisely the working of

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**394** The notion of ‘memory bank’ (*smṛti-baiṅk*) occurs on several occasions in Sobti’s essays, for example, in SVS, Sobti 2007: 165, “A writer has in her possessin a pile of *images*. It is her memory bank where for years feelings and events are left to ripen.” *Lekhak ke pās imejes kā ambār hai. Apnā smṛti baiṅk hai. Jahāñ barsoñ-barsoñ tak ghaṭnāeñ-bhāv pakte rahte haiñ.*

It is interesting to note that the notion of the memory bank suggests the idea of memories producing interest and shoring up revenues while being stored in the mind for a period of time.

**395** This brings to mind the passage of Claude Simon’s Nobel lecture quoted in footnote 305, with the idea that writing always happens at the moment of the act of writing (of actually choosing the words to put on paper).

**396** As discussed above, after finishing a work, Sobti detaches herself from it and lets it live its life, now, in its relationship with the reader. See, for example, SAM, Sobti 2015: 9, “The encounter of the text and the reader generates an intimate relationship between the two. [ . . . ] The disappearance of the writer from between these two is a difficult but happy situation.” *Pāṭh aur pāṭhak kī mukhāmukhī pāṭh aur pāṭhak ke sambandhoñ ko ghañiṣṭh kartī hai. [ . . . ] In donoñ ke bic meñ se lekhak kā gairhāzīr ho jānā ek kaṭhīn maḡar sukhad sthīti hai.* This idea is very close to Barthes’ ‘death of the author’ and life of the text in the reading(s) of the reader.

the long process before the moment of writing, when the material from a writer's outside world and from her inner world intermingle. The opposition between the outside and the inside is not 'resolved' in this moment, but their intermingling and their interaction generate a dynamic movement which will eventually result in the re-emergence of the idea and the creation of the work. Thus, Sobti constructs the image of the writer through the joint metaphors of the field and the memory bank, as a hybrid creature, both passive (assimilating the outside elements, transmitting them) and active (bringing back the assimilated elements in a new, literary form, thus conferring on them a new existence). The writer is a constantly dialoguing figure. She establishes a dialogue with the self, with the world, with literature, with society, with a specific time and with the human being. In this relationship, she functions sometimes as an active agent of the discussion, and sometimes as the bridge or binding piece which enables the dialogue between the reader and the work of literature.

In Sobti's depiction of the writing process, the writer's identity is defined through an opposition of inside and outside, in spatial terms, so to speak. It is through the tension between these two poles that creation becomes possible. This dialogue is not resolved but, on the contrary, through its perduring existence, it constitutes the generating force of creation because of the tension between those two poles.

In this dialogue, language and the choice of diction are absolutely central as the medium of expression. In the following chapter, I will therefore turn to Sobti's use of language and, through two other recurring metaphors of her essays – the textile and the painting metaphors – build on her construction of the writer as both a transmitter (passive) of voices and a creator or re-creator (active) of worlds through words.

## 4 Language

Poetics and language are intrinsically connected. In the introduction, I have shown how the specific language chosen by a writer has been constructed by critics like Jakobson or Todorov to define the literary character of a text (*littérarité*). For writers, this point is essential as well. In Sobti's poetics, language is the central element since it is the means through which her texts can convey the authentic voices of the characters she stages, the tool through which a specific context and epoch can be brought back to life and the instrument of expression of the individuality of the writer. In her conception of language, the choice of diction is constitutive of the identity of the characters depicted, but also of their socio-political environment, their historical context and even their psychology. In this understanding of language, she proves to be very close to Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia.<sup>397</sup>

The multi-faceted language used by Sobti in her novels in accordance with the setting, the characters, their socio-cultural milieux, but also the mood or the emotion of a story, represents the heteroglossic reality of the Hindi world or rather of North India as a whole. This particular context is interesting because it shows Sobti's wish to protect and preserve the diversity of language against the standard form of Hindi (*mānak hindī*), the language usually chosen for literature. Before the independence in 1947, the language debates in India revolved around the dichotomisation between Hindi and Urdu (the 'sister languages', so to speak), the opposition between English (the elite language) and Hindi (the language of the people), and Hindi's claim to becoming the national language (*rāṣṭrabhāṣā*). The context of post-1947, after the independence and the partition, was one of fear of fragmentation. After the creation of Pakistan, with Urdu as its official national language, Urdu became strongly associated in India with the Pakistan-movement. Hindi in its standardised form (*mānak hindī*) became the key word of the new language politics, opposed both to Urdu (the language of 'the other') and to the *bolīs*, the regional dialects. It was therefore standard Hindi which became the predominant language of Hindi literature, raising the question of how to represent the variety of dialects, sociolects and idiolects of the Hindi world. This linguistic variety corresponds to Bakhtin's notion of

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**397** *Raznorečie*. See Bakhtin 1975, and the essay on the discourse in the novel, *Slovo v romane*. The term describes the coexistence, in a single language, of a variety of possible dictions and discourses (levels of language, idioms, jargons, etc.), specific to a social milieu, a context, a group and even a profession or a family. It is in this sense that I use the word 'heteroglossia' and the adjective 'heteroglossic'.

heteroglossia, which he considers to be a part of literary writing as well. In the Hindi context, this heteroglossia was initially used by writers such as Phanishwarnath Renu or Rahi Masoom Raza (Rāhī Māsūm Razā, 1927–1992). However, their works were branded as ‘regionalist’ or ‘regional’ (*āṁcalik*),<sup>398</sup> thus marginalising this approach to language, which was considered by the literary establishment as a mere attempt of mimesis of a regional and rural setting.<sup>399</sup>

Sobti’s statements about language and her vehement defence of linguistic diversity must be read in this context. It is indeed in this larger frame that she constructs her understanding of language as heteroglossic, insists on the need to protect and preserve the *bolīs* (regional dialects), and speaks for a ‘democratic’ and all-encompassing Hindi.<sup>400</sup> This view of language is mirrored in Sobti’s novels, where the language changes dramatically according to the characters, the setting but also the mood she wants to create. Language allows Sobti to recreate socio-cultural or historical subjectivities, and yet it is not merely a reflection of a reality, but the result of a process of internalisation of voices by the writer. Sobti stores those voices in her memory banks (*smṛti-bāinks*) and, through a mysterious and magical process, they come back in the form of the texts at a later point. In this image, the writer becomes a much more pro-active figure than the figure described in the field metaphor. This new role and image of the writer is also supported and stressed in the metaphor of colours employed by Sobti in her discussion of language.

This chapter starts with the examination of Sobti’s statements in favour of a democratic Hindi as opposed to the standard Hindi (*mānak hindī*) or pure Hindi (*śuddh hindī*) advocated by the literary establishment. This leads me to look more closely at heteroglossia in her novels and more particularly at her use of language in characterisation and plot, with a reference to the concept of memory bank. The next step will be an analysis of the new metaphors developed by Sobti in this context to explain the role of the writer and the image of the writer which emerges from them. Finally, I will discuss how language can become the expression of a mood and a state of mind in Sobti’s novels through the examples of the novels MM and SAK.

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**398** See the discussion of the term ‘regional novel’ and Renu in chapter three.

**399** Renu’s works and the regional novels are now accepted and even praised by the Hindi critics; however, this vision of language is considered as belonging to this particular context, not to novels set in small towns or big cities. Therefore, the reaction to some of Sobti’s lexical choices was very strong.

**400** See SAM, Sobti 2015: 57, where Sobti speaks about the ‘democratic nature’ (*loktantriya mizāj*) conferred on language by the regional languages.

## 4.1 The Hindi Debate: *mānak* and *śuddh* Hindi Versus Hindi as a Democratic Language

The language currently called standard Hindi (*mānak hindī*) is a rather recent language, in particular as a language of literature. Hindi (or Hindustani or even Hindavi, as it was also known)<sup>401</sup> was codified and used by the British officials who needed a language which would enable them to communicate with the local population. This tool of communication was then turned, especially by writers such as Bharatendu Harishchandra and Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi into a literary language, a tool of expression, which was also used as a means of spreading nationalist thoughts and promoting independence from British rule. Bharatendu and Dwivedi exercised a strong influence on the development of Hindi as a language of literature. They promoted this language as a way of reaching out to a large audience, thus bringing new ideas into society. Bharatendu and Dwivedi were very active as editors of literary magazines as well. The press was indeed blooming from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward and counted many readers among the circles of the upcoming middle-class (mostly constituted of employees of the colonial administration). It was primarily, albeit not only, this class that the new Hindi literature intended to reach and win over for the nationalist cause.<sup>402</sup> However, Hindi was also employed for propaganda of another kind than that of ideas of revolt against the colonial power, namely for the promotion of reforms in society, in the cities as well as in the villages. Premchand, a generation after Dwivedi, would be the best example of such literature.<sup>403</sup> In the beginning, Hindi literature was very much conceived

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**401** Hindustani, also called Hindavi, designates a language which took the form of Urdu among Muslims and Hindi among Hindus – the difference between both lying mostly in the script – a language understood by a large population in North India. It is this language that was advocated as the ideal national language by national leaders such as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), for example. I refer here mostly to Christopher R. King’s *One Language, Two Scripts*, see King 1994, and to Alok Rai’s *Hindi Nationalism*, Rai 2001. The three terms Hindi-Hindustani-Hindavi share a similar etymology derived from Persian and linked to the geographical denomination for the territory beyond the river Indus. The question of the multiple forms taken by this language and the relationship between Hindi and Urdu is very complex. On the topic, see King 1994, and the essays on Hindi and Urdu literary culture in Orsini 2010. This latter volume contains essays discussing the complexity of the debate around the definition of the language and the variety of scripts it was written in. This issue is however beyond the scope of the present study.

**402** On Bharatendu, Dwivedi and the public sphere in the nationalist struggle for independence, see Orsini 2002 and Dalmia 1997.

**403** See the discussion of Premchand’s speech, *Sāhitya kā uddeśya*, in the introduction.

as a powerful tool for the propagation of new ideas through fiction. In the meantime, this standard language was also used in the press and the periodicals. Although the idea of reaching a large audience and propagating political messages was crucial for most writers, this was not the only purpose of the choice of Hindi as a language of literary expression, as the publication of many texts written only for entertainment demonstrates.<sup>404</sup>

As King shows in his study of the Hindi Movement, the necessity to promote an indigenous language as the official language and *lingua franca* (common language) for India as a nation was recognized early on by the nationalist leaders in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>405</sup> It was needed in order to oppose English – the language of the colonial power – and Urdu, a language associated with the urban elite of Delhi and the Mughal court. After some decades of debates, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hindi, being intelligible for a great part of the population of India (the North being more populated than the South and the standard form of Hindi being comprehensible even to speakers of the dialectal forms of the language), was chosen by nationalist leaders as the official language which would, in time, replace English.<sup>406</sup> It was envisioned that, some years after the independence, Hindi would supplant English. This was however not to happen, partly because of the resistance of other linguistic groups, and partly for the pragmatic reason that English was still more widely used by the Indian elites throughout the country. After 1947, this established a certain competition between English and the standard form of Hindi, the former being considered as the ‘language of the elites’ and the latter as ‘the language of the people’. It is in this peculiar context of post-independence that Sobti positions herself on the question of language, first with her choice of writing in Hindi, and then with her idiosyncratic view of the use of this language as heteroglossic and what she sees as the democratic potential of Hindi.

From the linguistic perspective, Hindi, even in its standard form, is far from being unified, because it is shaped by the languages and dialectal forms with

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**404** On the subject, see for example Orsini 2004b, on the genre of the detective novel in 19<sup>th</sup> century North India; or Orsini 2009, on the various types of popular texts in colonial North India.

**405** See King 1994, especially the introduction, King 1994: 1–22, and chapter V, “The Hindi-Nagari Movement”, King 1994: 126–172.

**406** Bengali, as an already established language of literature, and Urdu were also possible candidates, but even someone like Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi supported Hindi, seeing in it a potential to reach out to a larger part of the population. The topic was very widely discussed, also among poets and writers, for example by the poet Nirala (1896–1961), who was very vehement in his opposition to Bengali (on the subject, see for example, Rubin 1998).



which it was in contact in the course of its history. King divides the language into three speech strata: the local dialects, unintelligible already a few miles away from their original villages; the regional forms (for example Maithili or Bhojpuri); and the standard language, in its two “major divisions as Hindi and Urdu”.<sup>407</sup> The relationship between those two is particularly complex. Without entering into the details of this part of the language debate, I will point out briefly that the distinction, which was initially unclear to the users of the language themselves, became more and more apparent through the development of various media in the two languages, for example with the spread of printed magazines. The Nagari script associated with Hindi became dominant; many writers therefore turned to Hindi as a language of literary expression. Since the majority of the readership and audience of this language was Hindu, Hindi written in the Nagari script became closely associated with this religious affiliation. Within the nationalist debate, however, the language supported by someone like Gandhi as a national language was not a ‘Hindu Hindi’ but a ‘Hindustani’, written in Nagari script indeed, but constituting an inclusive language – embracing Urdu and the regional forms of Hindi alike. It is this democratic Hindi which was favoured by Sobti as well.

With regard to literature, the same phenomenon is to be observed: Hindi, as a widely spoken language, is perceived as a tool of communication; a certain group of writers nevertheless chooses English as a medium of expression.<sup>408</sup> Within the Hindi literary sphere, a strict distinction is made between the correct or pure (*śuddh*) Hindi and the hybrid forms which mix it with Urdu, with regional dialects or even with very local forms (i.e., with any or all of the three linguistic strata described by King). Despite the fact that Hindi is a rather modern construction – and that standard Hindi is itself an artificial construction – the literary establishment, which consists of an elite of Hindi critics and writers

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**407** See King 1994: 7–9, and the following passage on Hindi and Urdu, King 1994: 8, “Usually this stratum [the third speech stratum, that of the standard language] designates its two major divisions as Hindi and Urdu, though some argue these should be considered two different languages on political and cultural – not linguistic – grounds. Aside from unimportant grammatical variations, vocabulary and script constitute the principal differences between the two. The most formal level of Hindi, sometimes referred to as ‘high Hindi’, uses a vocabulary saturated with Sanskrit, while the corresponding level of Urdu, sometimes called ‘high Urdu’, draws heavily on Persian and Arabic. On this level the two come close to mutual unintelligibility. Other less formal levels of Hindi and Urdu approach complete mutual intelligibility, the main difference being the script employed.”

**408** Most of them belong to the upper middle class or the upper classes who received their schooling exclusively in English. However, some authors, like Sobti, schooled in English as well, chose Hindi as their language of literature.

who all advocate a sanskritised Hindi,<sup>409</sup> shows a certain reluctance towards the use of dialectal forms and even more so towards local words and idioms. This elite objected to Sobti's use of a great variety of linguistic forms in her literary work.

Against this elite of purists, several authors and intellectuals, and Sobti among them, stand up and promote a democratic Hindi (the *khaṛī bolī*, which they call Hindi or Hindustani and oppose to 'Hindi' or *śuddh* Hindi). This language also stands in opposition to English as an elitist language and to high Hindi as the language of an upper caste group. The debate around Hindi is far from being simple and involves many layers. On the one hand, one witnesses the opposition to the language of 'the other' (be it English as the language of the former coloniser or Urdu as the language of the Muslims and of Pakistan), and on the other hand the opposition to more popular and non-standard forms of the language.<sup>410</sup>

For Sobti, this last point is of great importance. As was said earlier, she was schooled in English and belongs to a Punjabi family from the region of Gujarat, now in Pakistan, where the tradition to learn Urdu was very much alive. Because of her background, she is familiar with Urdu poetry and prose as well as with the local Punjabi dialects and with the regional forms of Hindi. When she writes, the richness of her linguistic heritage flows into her texts and attests to a genuine multilingualism. This multilingualism is characteristic not only of Sobti but of her whole generation of writers.<sup>411</sup>

For Sobti, the issue of Hindi and the place of the dialects in literary language reflects two preoccupations: the need for language, in a literary context, to represent the reality of the world of the characters and, on another level, the need for language to remain close to the reality by illustrating the diversity of Hindi in its local and regional forms.

The first point is a common idea amongst the so-called 'realist' writers:<sup>412</sup> a peasant from Punjab will not speak the same dialect as a young woman from

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**409** By elite, I mean the privileged groups from the upper classes and castes who benefitted from higher education and use mainly the sanskritised version of Hindi.

**410** In his pamphlet (as he calls it) in favour of Hindi, Rai stresses the fact that Hindi is always constructed in opposition, instead of being seen, as he would wish it, as an inclusive language embracing Urdu, English loanwords and dialectal or provincial forms. See Rai 2001: 5; "Historically speaking, Hindi has been understood, defined and projected through a series of antithesis: with Urdu; with its 'dialects', notably Braj; with the 'provincial' languages; with English."

**411** Indeed, the same observation could be made about Krishna Baldev Vaid, Bhisham Sahni or Mohan Rakesh, for example.

**412** If one uses the word 'realist' in its primary meaning of close to the reality it intends to depict.

the upper middle-class. Therefore, according to the setting of the narrative and depending on the character who speaks, the language will vary. In this respect, Sobti's views on language are very close to Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia. Although this realism of the language may seem common to many authors, in Sobti's novels, it takes a form and an intensity which must be noted.

The second point, which is related to the first by its insistence on the closeness to reality, stresses the fact that Hindi is not a unified language. On the contrary, it is an encompassing and welcoming language, hence representing perfectly the diversity of India itself. Hindi in its diversity is indeed constructed by Sobti as the democratic language of India, perceived here as an inclusive democracy, wherein plurality is respected and encouraged.<sup>413</sup> This vision of an inclusive and 'generous' Hindi is supported by Rai in his self-termed pamphlet as well.<sup>414</sup> It also represents the position of a part of the Hindi intelligentsia and many Hindi writers who see in this language a tool for the promotion of secularism (*dharmnirpekṣatā*).<sup>415</sup>

Sobti connects democratic Hindi to the notion of a national language (*rāṣṭraḥbhāṣā*), the language of the nation, of the people, as opposed to a nationalist language, a 'purified' Hindi, which would exclude not only the Urdu influences as a foreign element, but also the language of the ethnic minorities or of the many regions.

In the debate about Hindi as a national language, as both King and Rai show, a specific use of language is associated with religion and becomes a

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**413** This vision of Hindi was promoted by other Hindi writers, Vaid or Renu, for example. However, to my knowledge, the notion of a 'democratic' (*loktantriya*) language is specific to Sobti, see for example SAM, Sobti 2015: 57.

**414** See Rai 2001, especially the closing chapter, "Roads to the Present", Rai 2001: 106–122.

**415** The concept of secularism (*dharmnirpekṣatā*, literally 'detachment from religion') is a complicated one, particularly in the context of post-independence India. It does not designate laicity but rather the equal treatment of all religions by the state, which does not imply the strict separation of religion and state as it is practised, for example, in France. On the contrary, there coexist codes of personal laws according to different religions which function side by side with the state law in some instances.

The Indian secularism is very complicated and its evolution since the independence has highlighted the difficulties in putting it into practice as well as all the paradoxes attending it. The literature on the subject is itself very polemical. For a good introduction, see the edited monograph on secularism in South Asia, Jaffrelot/ Mohammad-Arif 2012, in particular the excellent introduction, and Rajeev Bhargava's article "How has secularism fared in India?", Jaffrelot/ Mohammad-Arif 2012: 47–68, or Partha Chatterjee's article on secularism and toleration in *Empire and Nation*, Chatterjee 2010: 203–235. Sobti has her own view of secularism (see below in the present chapter and chapter seven), which corresponds more or less to the Nehruvian ideal promoted at the time of the independence.

criterion for distinguishing between a ‘pure’ Hindi, highly sanskritised and Hindu, and a Muslim Urdu with a strong Persian influence. The advocates of Hindustani (the ‘mixed’ Hindi-Urdu language) as an inclusive language are in fact promoting a democratic and secular vision of society, in which the different communities can coexist peacefully. This is the case for Sobti for whom terms such as *dharmnirpekṣatā* and *loktāntrik* (democratic) are essential. Under Sobti’s pen, the word *dharmnirpekṣatā* acquires a meaning which differs a little from the secularism practiced by the Indian state with its multiple, coexisting codes of personal law.<sup>416</sup> For her, secularism represents the creation of an identity (within India as a nation) first and foremost as a citizen of India: “Thus, if a group or a collective [of people] wishes to cross the divides of religion, class and caste to live in a wide world and is ready to live in this fashion, we ought to welcome it; this is the substratum that will earn our secularism goodwill.”<sup>417</sup> One may remark here that this is precisely an identification (as a citizen before being a Jat, a Muslim, a Brahmin, . . . ) which is not encouraged by the existence of parallel codes of personal law (which establish specific rules and a specific legislation according to the communal identity of an individual). Indeed, through the existence of parallel codes of law, one witnesses a stronger attachment to communal identities. Sobti’s vision of democracy, on the contrary, places the individual at the centre, i.e., the individual’s relationship to the state. It is part of her humanism.<sup>418</sup> She therefore defends a vision of Hindi which encompasses not only Urdu but also the provincial languages and the regional and local dialects. Only this language can be truly democratic and allow all the citizens of India to view themselves as equals:

If we look at the huge family of our Indian languages, each Indian language presents its own particularity in multiple forms and styles. It is settled in the democratic common consciousness of our Indian diversity. Multiple linguistic aspects, in their diversity, present and stir this central unity that we are calling ‘Indianness’. In fact, precisely these

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**416** On the coexistence of codes of laws and the polemics around it, see, for example, Bhargava 2012 or Chatterjee 2010.

**417** MSRS, Sobti 2014: 405, *Aise meṁ koī bhī samūh yā bhīṛ dharm, varṇ aur jāti-pāṁṁti kī sīmāom ko lāṁgh ek baṛī duniyā meṁ jīnā cāhe, jīkar dikhāe to uskā hamem abhināndan karnā hai, isī zamīn se hamāri dharmnirpekṣatā kī sākh ubharegī.*

One must note here that this definition as an ‘Indian first’ is used within the Indian context, not as a definition in opposition to the rest of the world; Sobti advocates a vision of the human beings as being all equal, regardless of their background, and possessing a plural identity. Any form of narrow nationalism is therefore absent from her thinking.

**418** As discussed earlier, Sobti’s humanism assumed a non-judgemental approach to all human beings. For her, every human being possesses more than one criterion of identity. Each individual is a complex being who must be acknowledged and considered as such, not defined by only one aspect of her identity.

national refinement and sensitivity pulsate in the perception of the Indian soul. Our regional languages are of no less value in their literary expression than any other language that is considered rich and powerful. [ . . . ]

The condition is only that the windows letting in the thought of new times remain open. We ought not to consider ourselves less worthy, nor of greater value, in any comparison. [ . . . ] Therefore, in the linguistic context, it becomes decisive how we identify, know and recognise the linguistic expression, the weight of the words, the measure, the families of words and their meanings, in our own experience; [it is decisive as well to know] through which literary and linguistic understanding we present thoughts in their correct expression! The written language, the linguistic refinement, the style and ornamentations secure its [the language's] dignity and, in our speech-tradition, the resilience of the dialects, the sound of the language enrich the dialogue. The 'people's consciousness' doesn't let the lively torrents of the dialects run dry. It preserves this fish that is connected to its environment through ever new usages.<sup>419</sup>

The vocabulary used by Sobti to designate languages draws on the semantic field of the family (*parivār*). In this way, she already hints at the relationships and bonds of kinship which she wants to create between the Indian languages.<sup>420</sup>

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**419** SAM, Sobti 2015: 281; *Apni bhāratiya bhāṣāom ke viśāl parivār ko dekheñ to har bhāratiya bhāṣā apni nijatā ko anek rūpom aur śailiyom meñ prastut karti hai. Hamāri bhāratiya vividhatā kā loktantra janmānas meñ sthit hai. Anek bhāṣāyī mukhye apni vividhatā meñ use kendraīya ikāi ko prastut aur tarañgīt karte haiñ jise ham bhāratiyatā ke nām se pukāte haiñ. Yahī rāṣṭriya sañvedan-sañskār bhāratiya ātmā ke caitanya meñ dhaṛaktā hai. Hamāri deśi bhāṣāeñ apni sāhityik abhivyakti se kinhiñ bhī dūsrī sampann aur śaktiśāli kahī jānevālī bhāṣāom se kam nahūñ. [ . . . ]*

*Śart itni hī ki nae samay kī soc ko jazb karnevālī kھیkiyāñ khulī hoñ. Ham kisī bhī tulnā meñ na apne ko kam samjheñ aur na zyādā. [ . . . ] Isilie bhāṣāyī sandarbh meñ niñayak ho uṭhtā hai ki ham bhāṣāyī tevar ko śabdom ke vajan ko, māp ko, śabdom ke gharānom ko kaise cīnhate-jānte-pahcānte haiñ, unke arthom ko apne anubhav meñ aur kaise sāhityik aur bhāṣāyī samajh se vicār ko sahī mukhaṛe aur mudrā meñ prastut karte haiñ! Likhit bhāṣā, bhāṣāyī sañskār, śailī-alamkār uskī garimā ko sudṛṣh karte haiñ aur vācān-paramparā meñ boliyom kī lacak, bhāṣā ke kolāhal sañvād ko samṛddh karti hai. 'Lokmānas' boliyom kī prāñvān dhārāom ko sūkhne nahīñ detā. Us mīn ko nae-nae prayogom se barkrār rakhtā hai jo uske paryāvaraṇ se juṛī hai.*

This is an extract of a speech given in Calcutta on Republic Day for the Bhāratiya Bhāṣā Pariṣad (Indian Language Association). This context is interesting because it shows Sobti's attachment to the values of this institution, namely the promotion of all the Indian languages.

In this passage, the terms *janmānas* and *lokmānas* ('common consciousness' or 'people's consciousness'), which I will discuss in chapter six, refer to a common vision, in this case of language. I translated the term *caitanya* as perception here, although it is often rendered into English as 'consciousness' as well.

**420** One should note here that, linguistically speaking, they do not all belong to the same 'family'; Sobti thus reinterprets the linguistic concept of 'language families' by constructing it along the lines of a larger Indian identity which unites all languages and religions.

The way Sobti expresses herself can be paralleled to a unifying discourse and the will to create a feeling of unity in diversity – a type of discourse which is not uncommon in politics as well, particularly in the Nehruvian discourse. In a country like India, where the differences between regions and cultures are evident and can always give rise to separatism and segregational attitudes, the existence of unity within the diversity was already championed in the cultural discourse during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continues to constitute an important part of a national discourse.

Here, one also ought to stress that the idea of ‘family’ introduces the notion of a genealogy and of twigs and new sprouts. This is present in Sobti’s conception of languages as a large (joint) family. Latent in her depiction of the Indian languages as a family are also her perception of India as a united nation and her conception of language as inclusive due to its embracing loanwords and influences from all ‘branches’. The inclusiveness of language mirrors the inclusiveness of society which Sobti would welcome. For her, using a Hindi which does not hierarchise the various linguistic forms and accepts them all is tantamount to the upholding of equality between all Indian citizens within the Indian democracy. Language is highly political. Let me therefore turn briefly to the conception of Indianness (*bhāratīyatā*) which Sobti defends, a conception which is strongly connected to her views on Hindi’s heteroglossia.

The term *bhāratīyatā* appears on a few occasions in Sobti’s essays and in her dialogue with Vaid.<sup>421</sup> For Sobti, this concept is clearly one of inclusivity and tolerance: around it, she constructs her vision of the new Indian citizen who would combine in her individual identity the manifold aspects of the Indian diversity and consider herself first and foremost as an Indian citizen, before belonging to a region, a religion, a caste or a clan. This positive connotation of the term contrasts with the usual understanding of *bhāratīyatā* in the context of Hindi literary criticism, where the Hindi-Hindu elite has appropriated the word to designate the ‘truly Indian quality’ of a literary text (in contrast, for instance, to ‘Western’). At the linguistic level, the same elite also opposes the inclusion of dialects or of a Hindi which is not sanskritised. It is therefore really important to highlight Sobti’s new interpretation of terms such as *bhāratīyatā* and *dharmnirpekṣatā*, where she confers on them exactly the opposite meaning of the one commonly championed by the Hindi literary establishment. In doing so, Sobti employs the very

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**421** See for example in SAM, Sobti 2015: 61; 285. For Sobti, the word has a positive connotation and represents the inclusive and plural Indian society. In the dialogue between Sobti and Vaid, Vaid however uses the term to designate the conservative position of the Hindi-Hindu elite, see for example SVS, Sobti 2007: 113.

vocabulary of her opponents to define her own vision of India and of the Hindi language.

The concept of inclusiveness and tolerance is voiced in several passages of Sobti's essays as well as in her interviews. The following extract of a conversation with Kamal Ahmad is a good illustration of her standpoint on secular India and Indianness:

[. . .] for a citizen, the belief underlying the Indian mind lies not in narrowness [of mind], but only in the width similar to the hugeness of our country. This is illustrative of the tolerance emerging only through diversity, it is not merely an experimental convention. Born in the various parts of the country, out of various castes, religions and sects, it is the national thought and the energy that have given a deep span to our thinking and ability to reflect. We may give it the name of 'secular ideology' or not. We know the quality of Indianness. Our enlightened class doesn't forget this faculty of discernment; it lends depth to the national consciousness. It looks with suspicion at these political delusions made to create divisions between castes, classes and religions.<sup>422</sup>

In this passage, Sobti highlights the role of her own social class – i.e., of an intellectual elite – in raising consciousness for an ideal of citizenship beyond the divides of caste, religion and social background. This ideal of equality is what she designates by the word 'Indianness' (*bhāratīyatā*), conferring thus on this term the very meaning rejected by the advocates of 'Indianness' in the most widely spread contemporary understanding of the word, namely a conservative and traditional vision of India. In her vision of the large 'Indian family', Sobti includes everyone and welcomes the idea of the development of bonds of kinship between the many smaller families it is composed of, both in the linguistic context (loan-words from all the Indian languages) and in the social context (inter-caste and inter-religious marriages).<sup>423</sup> In her discussion with Ahmad, she stresses the fact that such a thinking is possible even for people who had to live through the worst of the events that followed the partition, like her own family. Her generation experienced the worst of communal divides and violence but also supported the Nehruvian ideal of a plural and secular India as a modern state giving each

422 SAM, Sobti 2015: 329; [. . .] *nāgarik ke rūp meṃ bhāratīya mānas kī āsthā saṅkīrṇatā meṃ nahīn, apne deś ke viśāl kī tarah hī vyāpaktā meṃ hai. Yah vibhīntā meṃ ubharī mātr sahaṅśīltā kī paricāyak parīpāṭī nahīn. Deś ke vibhīn bhāgoṃ meṃ vibhīn jāti-dharm-sampradāyoṃ se janmī vah rāṣṭrīya vicār-ūrjā hai jisne hamārī soc aur cintan ko ek gahan vistār diyā hai. Isko dharmnīrpekṣa vicārdhārā kā nām deṃ na deṃ. Ham bhāratīyatā kī guṇātmaktā ko jānte haiṃ. Hamārā prabuddh varg is vīvek ko nahīn bhūltā aur rāṣṭrīya caitanya ko gambhīrtā se letā hai. Vah ṭukṛī-ṭukṛī aur jāti sampradāya aur dharm ke nām par un rājnītik prapañcom ko sandeh se dekhtā hai.*

423 See MSRS, Sobti 2014: 405.

individual equal rights.<sup>424</sup> The existence of communities should not prevent the emergence of an Indian citizen who will see herself as the heir to a pluralistic culture and a multi-faceted historical background. In this respect, Sobti is close to the Nehruvian vision of a plural India.<sup>425</sup>

For Sobti, Indianness does not mean narrow-mindedness or clinging to some – selected – traditions, but quite the opposite. It is the spirit of embracing and assimilating the ‘others’ in order to construct a plural identity. In MSRS, Sobti describes her vision of this ‘new Indian’ (a new Indian citizen conscious of her rights) with the term of ‘composite Indianness’ (*mīlī-julī bhāratīyatā*).<sup>426</sup> This is precisely what Sobti would welcome in the making of a new Indian citizen whose individual identity would be first and foremost as a citizen (an individual with an individual relationship to the state) and then only as a member of other groups or communities. As was highlighted above, this interpretation of Indianness is at the antipode of the dominant understanding of the term. In the dialogue with Vaid, Vaid uses the word *bhāratīyatā* in the sense of the upholding of traditional and conservative values, among others caste and class identities, and strongly objects to this form of Indianness. Indeed, some of his texts were considered as ‘not Indian’ by those who champion the conservative idea of ‘Indianness’, as for example Jaidev in his *Culture of Pastiche*,<sup>427</sup> whereas Vaid himself perceives his work as beyond the notions of nationality.<sup>428</sup>

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424 See chapter seven and the discussion of Sobti’s political positions. It is important to note how political the question of language is in the context of Hindi.

425 The term ‘Nehruvian’ is widely used in contemporary discussions on India (be it in the media or elsewhere). I use the term here after Pandey 2001.

426 See MSRS, Sobti 2014: 405, “Where even now conflicts in the name of religion, caste or community do take place, a small but mature brotherhood is coming up, which, by crossing dividing lines of religion, caste and province, presents an image of a composite Indianness by overcoming the old traditions and narrowmindedness as a result of inter-religious marriages. In this cultural stream, an Indian is born who is not just a Hindu or a Muslim – or a Parsi, a Sikh or a Christian.”

*Jahām dharm, jāti, samūh ke nām par abhī bhī jhagaṛe-phīsād jāri haiṁ, vahām dharm, jāti aur pradeś ko phalāngkar ek choṭī magar pukhtābirādari panap rahī hai jo bhinn dharmoṁ ke vivāh sambandhoṁ ke pariṅāmsvarūp purānī rūḥiyōṁ aur samkīrṇatā ko abūrkar mīlī-julī bhāratīyatā kī tasvīr prastut kartī hai. Isī sāmśkṛtik dhārā meṁ us bhāratīya kā bhī janm ho cukā hai jo na sirf hindū hai na musalmān – na mātr pārsī, sikkh aur na kristān.*

427 See Jaidev 1993.

428 See not only his dialogue with Sobti but also his own non-fictional writings and essays, for example “The Indian Contexts and Subtexts of my Texts” in *Imagining Indianness*, Dimi-trova/de Bruijn 2017: 95–110.



The debate on the ‘Indian peculiarities’ or the ‘Indian character’ of a text is an old and broad topic.<sup>429</sup> In this particular context, ‘Indianness’ means the upholding of conventions of propriety and the depiction of the ‘Indian life’, against modernist tendencies in writers like Vaid.<sup>430</sup> Every trace of unconventional relationships between the people, more specifically between men and women, is therefore considered ‘not Indian’.<sup>431</sup> This description of the debate on Indianness shows how Sobti’s own redefinition of the term is original and subversive.

However, it is not only her use of the term which voices this unconventional definition of Indianness (i.e., as referring to a secular, inclusive and plural Indian society), but also her choice of trope. Sobti refers both to India and to the Indian languages as constituting a large joint family. Families of languages depicted by a genealogical tree are indeed common, but instead of drawing on this well-known conception of filiation and family, Sobti sees the languages as members of a family which originated in all sorts of inter-marriages. This imagery corresponds to the inter-caste and inter-religious marriages which she supports. This scenario is a way to overturn the traditions the Hindi establishment clings to, in the linguistic perspective as well as in the social context.

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**429** For example, the authors of the *Chāyāvād*, like Jayshankar Prasad, also had to face strong objections to their poetry due to its being regarded as not Indian. Their poetry was deemed to be too heavily influenced by the English romantic poets and not rooted deeply enough in Indian traditions. On the question of the Indianness of the *Chāyāvād*, see Schomer 1998 and Rubin 1998, 2005. In the Hindi literary scene of post-independence India, so-called ‘not Indian’ authors were accused of obscenity (*aślīlā*) and plagiarism of Western existentialist or absurdist literature. Vaid was confronted with such twin reproaches, as were other writers such as Mridula Garg and Nirmal Verma, see Jaidev 1993. His criticism is quite virulent, particularly with regard to Garg, whom he sees only as a bad imitator of Western novels, depicting emancipated women who are alienated from the Indian reality.

**430** It would go beyond the scope of this study to enter into a definition of the term ‘modernist’ in literature. I use it here to designate all the later developments, mainly of the novel, in literature from the end of the 19th century onwards, which overturned the conventions (such as the linearity of the plot or even its very existence). Vaid, who is the Hindi translator of Samuel Beckett, is particularly close to this writer in his own work. In Hindi literature in general, there was a strong positive response to such writers as Eliot or Joyce, for example. On the subject, see for example Harish Trivedi’s article on the reception of Eliot in Hindi literature, Trivedi 1989.

**431** It is worth noting, however, that Jaidev mentions Sobti twice in his book and always as a counter-example of the writers he criticises. For him, she illustrates the possibility of combining a modern approach of literature with tradition. This can be explained by the possibility of interpreting some of Sobti’s novels in a more traditional way, as was mentioned in the introduction through the example of the ending of *MM*.

Language plays an important role in Sobti's agenda for setting up the ideal Indian society she dreams of. Through an 'inclusive' language – a language which does not establish barriers between a 'pure' form of the language and 'lower' usages – democratic values can be transmitted and every individual can be integrated into society. Sobti sees therein one of the duties of the intellectual elite and of the writers. Faced with English, the other languages must not have any inferiority complex since they allow for the expression of new contents and reflect the changes in society. The use of dialects and expressions as well as of loanwords from the regional and provincial languages enrich a text and open it up to a wider audience and to new thoughts and meanings. For Sobti, it is essential that Hindi – and any other Indian language – should not cut itself off from the vocabulary of the villages, the regions and non-elite groups. Only then is it capable of expressing the thoughts and moods of the people. Interestingly, in the quote given at the beginning of this section, she also refers to orality – the regional dialects, the *bolis*, are spoken languages – and places it side by side with the written word. The spoken idioms possess, according to her, a vitality which the fixed and coded written language does not, and can therefore enrich literature. Moreover, one should note that the *bolis* are the carriers of the oral genres as well: the folktales, songs and proverbs that constitute a very rich heritage. Sobti is particularly aware of this heritage and integrates it in her writing. There is for her no hierarchisation between linguistic forms.

Interestingly enough, Sobti highlights English as an example to follow due to its openness towards local words and its inclusion of idioms borrowed from different linguistic and socio-geographical settings. Sobti shows once again in this choice of example – the language of the former coloniser, the language Hindi should replace and oppose – that she is not afraid of polemical statements. Her argument is nevertheless quite straightforward: the openness of English towards expressions and loanwords from the various cultures of the ancient dominions and colonies, where English has now become an adopted local language, has enriched the language and made it more universal.<sup>432</sup> This

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**432** The comparison with English and Anglophone writers is brought up by Sobti on other occasions as well. Salman Rushdie seems to be an example for her. This is once again quite a provocative position, not only because of the choice of an English model, but also because of the controversies around Rushdie's works in South Asia. However, Sobti's point, presented as if she were unaware of its controversial character, is that, just as Salman Rushdie's English is not rejected as 'un-English' by English-speaking readers, Hindi must be accepted with local dialects and regional forms: "If you ask the truth, writers like us cannot stop ourselves from new experiments. And rightly so; the language remains evergreen thanks to this. Each new crop requires fresh water. If the English reader can accept Salman Rushdie, then why hesitate so much to accept it in Hindi?" *Sac pūchie to ham jaise lekhak nae prayog karne se bāz nahīm*

openness is truly democratic inasmuch as it reflects the diversity of the reality of life and expresses the changes in society. The same argument is valid for Hindi and all other Indian languages as well. For Sobti, there is indeed an intimate connection between the language used and the reality lived:

The ideologies within the country have influenced Indian thought deeply. Postmodernism is one result of this process. In spite of this, Indian writing has developed its own different Indian identity. Indian writing in English is its standard.<sup>433</sup> The local sound-scape of the national languages is present in the works published in English! [. . .] A language like English that possesses an abundance of words has not banned our regional words. If our linguistic purists would think earnestly about this, an exchange, a taking and giving, with this abundance of words from the various regional languages (*kṣētrīya bhāṣāom*) and dialects will enrich our national language.<sup>434</sup>

In this passage, Sobti affirms the importance of the local languages in expressing the reality of life at different levels. It implies the ability of literature to reflect life and to play a role in communicating between the various layers of society and the various social groups. This is the democratic role of literature in local languages and in this lies the importance of accepting, within Hindi, a variety of local and regional idioms and words. The boundaries between the languages must be crossed in order to enable enhancements and mixtures (just as

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*āte. Kuch galat bhī nahīṃ, bhāṣā isī se hariyāti rahtī hai. Har nāī fasal nayā pānī cāhtī. Agar aṃgrezī pāthak ko Salmān Raśdī svikār ho sakte haiṃ to hindī meṃ isko lekar itnī jhijhak kyon?.*, SVS, Sobti 2007: 100.

Once again, Sobti uses the field metaphor to speak of writing.

**433** Sobti does not elaborate on the notion of postmodernism (*uttarādhunikā*), but it is worth noting that she sees its influence on Indian literature, and yet considers that there are specificities of an 'Indian writing'. It is unclear if the standard set by Indian English literature is only in the matter of loanwords and the inclusion of local manners of speaking and idioms, or if she also means the form of the novel, the presence of magic realism, for example (like in Salman Rushdie's work), or the absence of linearity of the plots. Sobti considers postmodernism to be the result of ideologies (she never elaborates on her meaning but probably refers to Marxist thought, which was and still is popular among the intellectual elite) but emphasises the fact that this influence did not render Indian writing similar to other writings. It kept its idiosyncratic character. What this character is remains however undiscussed.

**434** SVS, Sobti 2007: 93, *Antarrāṣṭriya vicārdhāraem bhāratīya maṇiṣā ko gahre tak prabhāvit kar rahī haiṃ. Uttarādhunikā isī prakriyā meṃ se upjati hai. Iske bāvjud bhāratīya lekhan ne apnī viśiṣṭ bhāratīya pahcān banāe rakhī hai. Aṃgrezī kā bhāratīya lekhan iskā pramāṇ hai. Deśī bhāṣāom kā deśī dhvani-saṃsār aṃgrezī meṃ prakāśit racnāom meṃ maujud hai! [. . .] Aṃgrezī jaisī bhāṣā ne jiske pās śabdōm kā vipul bhaṃḍār hai, hamāre deśaj śabdōm kā bahiṣkār nahīṃ kiyā. Hamāre bhāṣāyī sūddhatāvādī is par gambhīrtā se vicār kareṃ to vibhinn kṣētrīya bhāṣāom aur bolīyom se śabd sampadā kā ādān-pradān hamārī rāṣṭriya bhāṣā ko bharpūr sampann karegā.*

in inter-marriages). Interestingly enough, the passage quoted above is Sobti's answer to Vaid's question about the language used in Sobti's novel DoD, where many Urdu words are used – so much so that Vaid asks if it could also be considered as good Urdu.<sup>435</sup> Sobti answers by protesting that Hindi is for her an inclusive language where Urdu cannot be considered as 'the other'. For her, it is very clear that Hindi must be an inclusive language; it ought to be inspired by English, which, despite its already large vocabulary, does not show reluctance towards local loanwords in texts set in a specific geographical and historical context, nor towards more oral forms of language.

Sobti speaks of several layers of language, using various terms to designate them. Although the distinction is not always absolutely clear, she differentiates between *rāṣṭrīya* (national), which usually means Hindi in its position of official national language, and *deśī* or *desi* (regional, local), as well as between *bhāṣā* (language per se, or regional language of India) and *bolī* (dialect). The national language is associated with her vision of Hindi as inclusive and 'democratic': "[. . .] an exchange, a taking and giving, with this abundance of words from the various regional languages (*kṣeṭrīya bhāṣāom*) and dialects (*boliyom*) will enrich our national language (*rāṣṭrīya bhāṣā*)."<sup>436</sup>

The term *desi bhāṣā* probably refers to the provincial languages accepted as such (Bhojpuri, Avadhi), although it could also mean the Indian provincial languages which are put in a position of inferiority by the majority languages and English as the literary language of the new Indian elite. When answering Anamika on what troubles her most, Sobti touches upon the question of the position of writers who publish in provincial languages compared to Indian English writers. There, she uses the term *desi bhāṣāom kā lekhak* (writer of the provincial language) to refer to herself and her use of Hindi.<sup>437</sup>

*Bolī* is even more local and reflects the dialects (the oral stratum of the language) at the level of the villages, for example when Sobti speaks, in the quote from SVS given above, of "regional (*kṣeṭrīya*, in the sense of 'connected to a

<sup>435</sup> See SVS, Sobti 2007: 93, "If I were to say that in *Dil-o-dānīś*, apart from the colloquial speech, or along with it, Urdu literary idioms are beautifully used, what then?" *Agar main yah kahūm kī dīlo-dānīś meṁ bolcāl kī bhāṣā ke alāvā yā sāth-sāth sāhityik urdū muhāvare ko bhī baṛī khūbī se istemāl kiyā gayā hai to?"*

<sup>436</sup> SVS, Sobti 2007: 93: *vibhinn kṣeṭrīya bhāṣāom aur boliyom se śabd sampadā kā ādān-pradān hamāri rāṣṭrīya bhāṣā ko bharpūr sampann karegā.*

<sup>437</sup> See the interview with Anamika in SAM, Sobti 2015: 189.

small locality’) dialects” and “regional languages”. The distinctions between these terms mirror the linguistic complexity and diversity of Hindi and parallel the three strata expounded by King.<sup>438</sup>

For Sobti, it is essential to accept and include all of these layers while writing, because it is through the use of these local forms of expression that she can draw a faithful picture of the reality on which she bases her fiction. Once again, one recognizes here her conception of literature as close to life and focussing on life ‘as it is’, in the ‘closeness to reality’ which is so typical of her. For Sobti, one of the tasks of literature and of the writers (as intellectuals) is to establish a dialogue between the various social groups and classes; a dialogue which will namely enhance the good functioning of democracy:

Hindi literature has written down the local activities, the distance between the educated and rival groups of the country. In it, there is the energy of the fight of this class [the educated class], there are the aspirations to reach somewhere and, necessarily, there are the expressions of the tensions of the democratic system. [. . .]

I would like to say that Hindi, like all the regional languages, has stirred the consciousness of the people of the regions, through its democratic nature, on the national level. It has worked properly as a bridge between the average citizen and the ‘elite’.

Our actual social atmosphere and the intellectual milieu appear to actively endeavour to approach each other from opposite directions.<sup>439</sup>

This extract from SAM stems from a speech given on the occasion of the celebration of fifty years of the independence, in 1997. In this context, the themes and terms discussed before are dealt with more precisely. Hindi is established as the language of the people and the capacity of literature to play the role of a bridge (*pul*) between the elite and the average citizen (*ausat nāgarik*), i.e., the citizens who do not belong to the elite (one can even interpret this as a designation for the vast majority of the population which belongs to the lower classes and castes) is stressed. This role can be embraced by the writers because of

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**438** See King 1994.

**439** SAM, Sobti 2015: 57: *Rāṣṭra ke paṛhe-likhe pratispardhī samūhoṃ aur unke bīc kī dūri ko, sthāniya kriyāoṃ ko kalambaddh kiyā hai. Usmeṃ us varg ke saṃgharṣ kī sphūrti hai, kahīṃ pahūncne kī ākāmṣāeṃ haiṃ aur zarūri taur par jantāntrik vyavasthā se tanātani kī mudrāeṃ haiṃ. [. . .]*

*Maiṃ kahnā pasand karūṅgi ki tamām kṣetriya bhāṣāoṃ kī tarah hī hindī ne bhī rāṣṭra ke loktāntriya mizāj ke anurūp deś ke deśī, deśāj janmānas ko rāṣṭriya star par taramṅit kiyā hai. Deś ke ‘īlī’ aur ausat nāgarik ke bīc bākāyā ek pul kā kām kiyā hai.*

*Hamārā vartmān sāmājīk vātāvaraṇ aur bauddhik paryāvaraṇ virodhī diṣāoṃ se ek-dūsre ke karīb āne kī ceṣṭāoṃ meṃ kriyāśīl dikh rahā hai.*

their choices of topics, but also because of the language they use. All the regional and local languages of India can constitute a binding element (a link in a chain) between the higher classes and the illiterate or semi-literate groups. Literature has been the reflection of the attempts to change society from the inside and to reject social and communal barriers. Sobti articulates here again, like in MSRS, her hope for the creation of a new generation of citizens for whom the national identity will be stronger than class, religious or caste identity and will be diversity-acknowledging.

Hindi as a language is instrumental in achieving this goal as long as it is open to the local and regional dialects. In this way, Sobti replies to her critics who opposed her intensive use of regional and local idioms, in particular in ZN. Apart from this, she pleads generally for the acceptance of colloquial speech (i.e., also for orality within the novel) and for the use of the language of “the common people” (*jansādhāraṇ*):

Hindi is not only the language of the enlightened class; so how could it be polluted by the idiom of the common people? If the Hindi elite seems to see a danger in the intrusion of words from its sister-dialects, then it should brand it with Sanskrit pedantic phrases so that this class distinction remains.

The greatness of Hindi resides in its being the language of the people, not merely in the dignity of the aristocracy. If Hindi is not limited to being the language of a certain province or of a certain class, then it has to broaden its refinement and become more comprehensive. Are we pleased to remember that there is also a history of vain narrow-mindedness behind us? It is now necessary to unburden ourselves from the small-heartedness that has become its symbol. Do not look with contempt at the various local languages after having agreed to the regional ones, with the self-conscious frowning and coughing of [your pride of] belonging to the enlightened class. Expand these idioms and combine them with Hindi in an expressive form for the sake of national unity.<sup>440</sup>

This passage from MSRS makes Sobti’s point clear once more and alludes to an important step in the history of Hindi literature. In his novel *Mailā Āmcal*, published in 1954, Phanishwarnath Renu made intensive use of regional words. At

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**440** MSRS, Sobti 2014: 411–412: *Hindī mātr prabuddh varg kī bhāṣā nahīm hai kī jansādhāraṇ kī zabān se bhraṣṭ hotī ho. Agar hindī ilīṭ ko hindī kī boliyoṃ bahaneliyoṃ se ādān-pradān karne meṃ koī ghuspaiṭhī khatrā dikhā hai to vah use saṃskṛt kī paṃḍatāū pyomā lagāti cale tāki us varg-viśeṣ kī mudra kāyam rahe.*

*Hindī kī khūbī uske lok-bhāṣā hone meṃ hai keval abhijāt kī oṛhī hūi garimā meṃ nahīm. Agar hindī kisī pradeś viśeṣ yā dharm-varg kī bhāṣā nahīm to use apne saṃskār ko vistṛt kā dāmbhī itihās bhī hai. Hamārī mānasiktā jis taṃgdilī kī pratīk ban cukī hai use ab apne ko ubār lenā zarūrī hai. Hindī ka prabuddh varg hone ke abhīmānī tevar aur ṭhasse se kṣetriya bhāṣāoṃ ko āmcalik karār de unheṃ hikārat se na dekhie. Unheṃ bhāvātmaṅ rūp se hindī se juṛne dijie aur rāṣṭriya ektā ke lie uskā vistār kijie.*

the time, the Hindi establishment considered that the language of the novel did not qualify as Hindi and that it was impossible for a Hindi native speaker to read it. However, after a while, it was accepted and even welcomed as part of the new genre of the regionalist novel (*āṁcalik upanyās*). Here, Sobti pleads for the recognition of the local idioms, as she uses them in ZN, and for the inclusion in Hindi of loanwords from the regional languages and dialects. Only then will Hindi be more than just the *śuddh* (pure) Hindi which is the language of an intellectual elite alone and will assume its role as the language of the people, as a democratic language. As a result, it will justify why it was chosen as the official language of the country in the first place.

Sobti presents Hindi as a very heteroglossic language. The standard form of the language would be too reductive and would not allow literature to reflect the reality of a plural world (a world which is indeed plural not only in matters of language, but also in its social and cultural structures). Her view on the use of language in literature is one of openness towards dialectal forms, loanwords and orality. Indeed, for her, it is through this democratic language that the plurality of the world can be depicted. However, her closeness to reality goes deeper than the reflection of (and on) a socio-cultural context through the use of local languages and dialects. The idiolect of a society, and even of a character, must be absorbed and then incorporated by the writer in order for the text to really recreate a world, a setting and a personality. In the next section, I will examine how Sobti integrates this heteroglossic character of language into her own novels by looking at DoD, ZN and MM.

## 4.2 Language(s) as the World(s) of a Story

For Sobti, Hindi is an open language, which represents the diversity of the Hindi speakers, on ideological and political grounds, i.e., in her vision of a democratic and plural India. In its literature as well, from a poetic perspective, the language must mirror the variety of dialects and idioms of the Hindi speaking world in all its regions and social spheres. Each character – and each novel – must have its distinct idiolect, which reflects its setting and its social background but also the psychological characteristics of the protagonists. In that sense, Sobti proves to be very close to Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia.<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>441</sup> See Bakhtin 1975, "Slovo v romane", especially Bakhtin 1975: 75–77. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia (*raznorečie*) in literature is rooted in the idea that language in a novel consists of a system and its language. The narrator has a language, each character has her language, each type of discourse (dialogue, letter) has its specific wording. However, it is important to

In Sobti's view, language is indeed the means to express the diversity of the reality on which her texts are based. She proves to be very aware of the co-existence, within one language, of a huge variety of speeches, and she plays with them in her novels, which are therefore very different from each other not only in their subject matter but in their diction as well. Sobti's preoccupation with language goes even deeper than the desire to present a mirror of a reality. She needs to absorb the voices of the protagonists of her novels in order to recreate their universe. This point and the diversity of Sobti's use of language is obvious in all her works. I will now look at the Hindi-Urdu language in DoD, at ZN's use of regional words, and at the idiolect of a single character in MM.

#### 4.2.1 Language as Socio-Historical Context: *Dilo-Dānīś* and the Hindi-Urdu Debate

DoD, which Sobti and Vaid discuss at some length in their dialogue, constitutes a good example of Sobti's openness towards a plural linguistic field and her wish to recreate a universe through language. By its use of many Persian and Arabic loanwords, DoD also raises the question of the relationship between Hindi and Urdu. In this context, Sobti defends her use of some words as peculiar to the idiom of Delhi, specifically at the time when even the social milieu of the Hindu elite was very much infused with the Mughal court culture, the Persian and Urdu poetry and the Urdu language itself.<sup>442</sup> The language is not to be separated from the specific context in which the plot is set. If this requires a register of vocabulary which is not considered as standard, Sobti will not

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see that in a novel there coexists a diversity of social speech types or even of languages as well as of individual voices. These are artistically organised. To sum up, the novel is the place where the diversity of languages and dialects connected to certain groups, professional jargons, official language and linguistic particularities of a specific epoch are orchestrated. Bakhtin's view of language as the expression of a whole and plural reality is very close to Sobti's perception of language and of the world.

**442** As demonstrated very clearly in King 1994, several Hindu groups had integrated not only the fashion and lifestyle of the Mughal society but also its language. The Hindi-Urdu distinction did not correspond for them to a religious distinction. These groups were part of a certain elite of society and adopted the language and codes of the court. Among these groups, the most prominent were the Kayasths, the Kashmiri Brahmins and the Khatris. In DoD, the family of the haveli or the family of the main male protagonist Kripanarayan, are Khayasths.



refrain from using it merely on the grounds that it might not be accepted by the conservative Hindi literary establishment of the day.<sup>443</sup> Sobti illustrates her point in the discussion with Vaid through a few sentences from the novel:

Concerning ‘*Dilo-dānīs*’, I can repeat a few lines for you:  
 ‘One chavanni, Hail Ram!  
 One chavanni, my respect to you!’<sup>444</sup>

The language of Delhi is as mixed up as sugar dissolved in milk. Is there something new in this sentence? Something that would be outside of Hindi?

It is the idiom of the surroundings of Chandni Chowk and the Jama Masjid; if you look a little further, [the area] around the Red Fort. Once, the capital’s seat of power was the Mughal court. The language of Delhi also resonates with local expressions, under the influence of the common man. Naturally, Hindi and Urdu have been comingling for centuries. Any objection to this seems strange to me.

If we say: ‘Badru and Masooma reached the Haveli with Babban Miyan, where Rajjan Bhai’s birthday was being celebrated with great fanfare,’ does anything strange happen to the language? Ought one use the word ‘*janamdin*’ for birthday in order to make it more intelligible, whereas the polite language of Kayastha families hints at mixing Hindi and Urdu?<sup>445</sup> With ‘*Dil-o-dānīs*’, I was not laying down an artificial ground of communal harmony, I highlighted what was already present. The form of a language doesn’t merely change from city to city, it also changes from quarter to quarter.<sup>446</sup>

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**443** Here, I use the phrase ‘conservative Hindi literary establishment’ to define the group of the purist writers mentioned earlier.

**444** One chavanni is four annas. The idiom *ādāb* (generally meaning ‘manners’ but here, as a salutation, ‘respects’) is a typical greeting in polished Urdu, just as *jayrām jī* (hail Ram) is a greeting used in Hindu circles.

**445** Here, I am confronted, as all translators, with the problem that the heteroglossia of Hindi finds no exact equivalent in English. Sobti points out the existence, within Hindi, of synonyms which possess different etymologies (*janmdin*, birthday, of Sanskrit origin, and its synonym, *sālgirah*, of Persian origin, for example). This specificity of the language and the nuances induced by the choice of one term or another are extremely difficult to translate into English.

**446** SVS, Sobti 2007, 87–88: *Jahān tak ‘Dilo-dānīs’ kā sambandh hai, āpke lie kuch pamktiyām duharā sakti hūn.*

*Ek cavanni Jayrām jī kī*

*Ek cavanni ādābarz!*

*Dillī kī zabān aise milī-julī rahī jyom dūdh meṁ miśrī ghulī hū hai. Kyā is vākya meṁ kuch bhī nayā hai. Aise jo hindī ke bāhar ho.*

*Cāndnī cauk aur jānā masjid ke āspās kā muhāvarā hai, zarā piche dekheṁ to lālkile ke karīb. Kabhī rājdhānī kā saktisthal, mugal darbār thā. Dillī kī bhāṣā ām ādmī ke sāth-sāth kṣetriyā tevarom se bhī chantī-bantī rahī hai. Svābhāvik rūp se hindī aur urdū bhāṣā sadiyom tak ek-dūsre meṁ ghultī rahī haiṁ. Is par aise aitrāz mujhe ajīb lag rahā hai.*

According to Vaid, the language used by Sobti in DoD is not *ām bolcal hindī* (common colloquial Hindi),<sup>447</sup> a judgement which Sobti opposes vehemently. She explains her choice of vocabulary and her vision of Hindi as well as her vision of the role of language in the creation of a specific world or setting for a literary text. For her, there is no such thing as ‘common colloquial Hindi’ – or rather, it still needs to be defined, as she tells Vaid: “What is common Hindi, really, explain this, please! It certainly is not just the language of the Hindi-speaking states. I don’t think Hindi has found its final form yet. Hindi is evolving into the national language of India. It is becoming the country’s language of communication as well and all the potentialities of a great language are coming together in it – and yet one must say that its creative form will change with use and progress.”<sup>448</sup> Hindi is or ought to be an inclusive language, following the example set by English. This is Sobti’s definition. The readership will follow because such an inclusive language, by reflecting the diversity of the idioms of the Hindi speakers and the reality of a given context, will be entirely genuine and authentic.

The case of DoD is unusual for yet another reason. The diction of this novel is not based on regional dialects or provincial forms of Hindi but on Hindustani, the mix of Hindi and Urdu, which Sobti compares to a blend of sugar and milk. This image illustrates the symbiosis of the two languages and heritages in the context of Delhi. DoD does not require particular effort on the part of the

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*Agar ham yah kaheñ ki badrū aur māsūmā babban miyām ke sāth havelī pahūñce to rajjan bhāī kī sālgīrah par khāsī dhūm macī thī to kyā bhāṣā ke sāth kuch anokhā kiyā gayā hai. Use āmfaham banāne ke lie sālgīrah kī jagah ‘janmadin’ kā prayog kiyā jānā cāhie, jābki kāyasth parivārom kī yah sāistā zubān hindī-urdū ke miśrañ kī or samket kartī hai. ‘Dilo-dānis’ dvārā mairī sāmpradāyik sadbhāw kī kṛtrim zamīn nahīñ bichā rahī thī, jo pahle hī maujūd thī – use amkit bhar kar rahī thī. Bhāṣā kā mukhṛā sirf nagar-nagar hī nahīñ badaltā – vah vibhinn muhalloñ tak meñ bhī badaltā hai.*

The image of Hindi and Urdu which “dissolved [into each other]” (*ghulī huī*), like sugar in milk, is very illustrative of Sobti’s perception of language, and the composite society she welcomes. One can compare it to her vision of the inclusive Indian citizenship described in the previous section.

**447** See SVS, Sobti 2007: 82: “The spirit of *Dilo-dānis* resides in its language and this language is not, in my opinion, the common colloquial Hindi.” *Dilo-dānis kī jān uskī bhāṣā meñ hai aur vah bhāṣā mere vicar meñ ām bolcāl kī hindī nahīñ.*

**448** Sobti 2007: 85: *Ām hindī darasal kyā hai ise to sahī kijie! Vah yakīnan sirf hindī pradeśom kī bhāṣā nahīñ. Hindī apnā svarūp tay kar cukī hai, mairī aisā nahīñ samajhtī. Hindī bhārat kī rāṣṭrabhāṣā ke rūp meñ vikāsīt ho rahī hai. Vah deś kī sampark bhāṣā bhī ban rahī hai aur ek baṛī bhāṣā kī tamām sambhāvnāeñ apne meñ sameṭe hai – phir bhī kahnā hogā ki iskā racnāt-mak svarūp iske istemāl aur vikās ke sāth badaltā jāegā.*

Here, one can see a parallel between Sobti’s vision of identity and life as dynamic, constantly in movement, and her similar perception of language as alive and constantly evolving.

Hindi reader as its language is already present in Delhi due to it being the former capital of the Mughals. In fact, Delhi possesses a specific idiom, shaped by her history. The Mughal period has left its mark, but so did the creation of ‘New’ Delhi by the British, the settlement of refugees after the partition, the assimilation of surrounding villages into the city and the new status of Delhi as capital of the Indian federation.<sup>449</sup> DoD illustrates Sobti’s refusal of a Hindi-Urdu distinction and her support for Hindustani, as well as her deep sensitivity for the linguistic ‘soundscape’ of the capital and its change over time. Sobti even creates a linguistic topography of Delhi where diverse areas tell their history through their linguistic idiosyncrasies.<sup>450</sup>

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**449** This point is clearly stressed by Sobti in her dialogue with Vaid, see SVS, Sobti 2007: 87: “Let’s look at today’s Delhi. Old Delhi, New Delhi, the refugee colonies that sprang up after the partition – the large flock of wealthy owners and, defying them, the city *block* of the DDA [Delhi Development Authority, the authority in charge of urban planning in New Delhi since the 1950s]. You can also look at the four cardinal directions of Delhi through the linguistic idioms. The city of Delhi swallowed more than three hundred of its sub-urban villages. Sometimes, even now, you can still hear the old voices there. In the walled area of Old Delhi, called the City, the colloquial speech has a particular kind of *elegance*. The Urdu urbanity! Who will object to that?”

In *Dil-o-dānīś*, my millieu was not the Sitaram Bazaar [a locality in Old Delhi] – it was the surroundings of Begum Samru’s mansion [Begum Samru (1753–1836) was a famous *nautch* (dancing) girl who ended up ruling Sardhana, a principality near Meerut, some 100 kilometers north of Delhi; her Delhi mansion in Chandni Chowk stood on the spot where Bagirath Palace, today a wholesale market of electric goods, is located]. Delhi is the national capital. It possesses a singular linguistic charm rooted in different regions; it is not right to peer at it through a narrow window. It would be sheer linguistic parochialism”.

*Āj kī Dillī ko hī leñ. Purānī Dillī, Naī Dillī, vibhājan ke bād ubharī śarañārthī bastiyām – sampann dhaniyom ke visāl jhuñḍ aur in sabko cunautī dete ḍī. ḍī. e. ke nāgarik blāk. Bhāśāyī muhāvarom meñ se bhī āp Dillī kī cārom ḍisāem dekh sakte haiñ. Dillī ke dehāt ke tīn sau se zyādā gāmv Dillī śahar ne lī liye haiñ. Āp purānī āvāzeñ abhī bhī yadā-kadā vahām sun sakte haiñ. Fasīl ke andar purānī Dillī jise śahar kahā jātā rahā hai, vahām kī bolcāl meñ ek khās tarah kā bhāśāyī ailīgaimś haiñ. Urdū kā nāgarpan! Is par kise aitrāz hogā.*

‘Dilo-dānīś’ meñ merī dauḍ sītārām bāzār kī nahīm thī – begam Samarū kī koṭhī ke āspās kī thī. Dillī rāṣṭra kī rājdhanī hai. Vahām deś ke vibhinn kṣetrom kī bhāśāyī nidhi jazb hai, use kisi sañkrī-sī khīḍ se jāmcnā ṭhīk nahīm. Yah bhāśāyī sañkīṛnatā hī hogī.”

**450** See SVS, Sobti 2007: 88–89: “New Delhi taught me to listen to the noise of the city of Delhi. New Delhi was not what it is now. In a much smaller, cleaner and neater environment than today, the refinement of a particular time. In comparison, the Hindustani *texture* of Fazil, its density, couldn’t be put on the same scale. Here and there, history had been dispersed. It was a particular noise that originated from the back of the centuries. Trams, tongas, buggies, filmmakers, saline-sellers, street vendors, hawkers, masters, jewellers, sweet-sellers in stiff clothes, the whole export market glittering with lights, and the language, pure Hindustani. With flecks. In the earthen pot, a mix of Hindi and Urdu. A whole epoch of Indian history.

In creating the linguistic universe of DoD, Sobti relies on her own experience and observation. Implied in her depiction of the creation of the language of DoD is the idea that literature must choose a diction which mirrors a certain reality, which is indeed the idiolect of a society and even of single characters. For instance, the Kayasths had adopted not only the customs but also the language of the Mughal court. This is evident in their vocabulary. The narration of the story will therefore parallel this linguistic observation. Let me present a brief extract from the novel to illustrate this point. The passage, found at the beginning of chapter four, introduces the reader to the thoughts of Chunna, the widowed sister of the main male protagonist, who is here a homodiegetic first-person narrator. Although a Hindu (belonging to the Kayasth caste), she chooses a vocabulary filled with Persian words:

One could be under the mistaken belief that the uproar caused during the birthday party was done and over with. But no, no! My sister-in-law would not let this happen. Even her stiffly starched sari is seething with anger. Dadda's [Kripanarayan's, Chunna's brother's] wilfulness will be turned over and over like on a potter's wheel.<sup>451</sup>

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How to speak about the language of Ghalib's city? Pared words and fine postures. Urdu urbanity and local manners. Yes, I worked, and I enjoyed this language in the attitude and in the courtesy of my friends and fellow-workers from the office. I saw the effect of living through language. Language's unsaid discourse in the gestures. And its two bits of influence."

*Mujhe Dillī śāhar kā śor sunne kī tālīm Naī Dillī ne dī. Naī Dillī vah nahīm thī jo āj hai. Āj se bahut choṭī, sāf-śāffāf aur pariveś meṃ ek khās vakt kā pariśkār. Mukāble meṃ fasīl ke andar jo hindustānī ṭaikscar thā, ghanva thā, iski kahīm tulnā nahīm thī. Yahān-vahām itihās bikhṛā parā thā. Ek khās tarah kā śor thā jo sadiyom ke pichvāre meṃ ubhartā hai. Ṭrām, tānge, baghī, jhillivāle, rehīvāle, khomce, chabaṛī, seṭh, jauharī, kalaf lage kapṛom meṃ kulfivāle, rośaniyom se jhilmil kartā pūra disāvar aur bhāṣā ṭheth hindustānī. Dānedār. Kūmze meṃ hindī-urdū kā miśraṇ. Ek pūrā bhāratīya kālkhāṇḍ.*

*Gālīb ke śāhar kī zabān ke bhī kyā kahne. Tarāše hue śabd aur bārik bhāṅgimāerī. Urdū kā śāharātīpan aur desī laṭke-jhaṭke. Hān, māimne naukari kī to daftar ke sāthiyom aur sahkarmiyom ke vyavahār-śiṣṭācār meṃ is zabān kā lurf uṭhāyā. Zabān se jīne kā asar dekhā. Bhāṅgimāom meṃ zabān kā anbolāpan. Aur uskā do ṭūk prabhāv.*

The use of the English word 'texture' to qualify the language is interesting, because it suggests a certain 'materiality' of language: language becomes alive, almost 'palpable'. It is also worth noting that while speaking about the language of the city of Delhi (Ghalib's city), Sobti switches from using the Sanskrit-originated word *bhāṣā* for language to the Persian-originated word *zabān*, which besides 'language' denotes also 'tongue', in both meanings of the word. Thus, she emphasises in her own wording her point about the mix between Hindi and Urdu and illustrates it in her own discussion of the issue.

451 DoD, Sobti 1995: 53, *Kise galatfahmī hogī kī sālgirahvālī dāvat meṃ uṭhā jhagaḍā-fasād rafā-dafā ho cukā. Jī nahīm, bhābhī yah naubat na āne demgī. Unki kalaf lagī sarsarātī sādī tak baukhlāī rahti hai. Daddā kī khudmukhtārī bār-bār carakhī par caḍhtī hī rahegī.*

In those few sentences (the thoughts of one of the protagonists of DoD) the core vocabulary is a typically Delhi-Hindi vocabulary, where words of Persian origin abound: *galatfahmī*, *sālgirah*, *rafā-dafā*, *naubat ānnā*, *kalaf*, . . . These words are not difficult to understand for speakers of standard Hindi. However, they are clearly marked as belonging to an ‘Urdu register’ of the language and can therefore be considered by Sobti as being representative of the mixed culture of Delhi, a culture embraced by the Kayasth caste to whom the narrator of the passage belongs. In DoD, Sobti thus recreated the atmosphere and the idiolect of this specific caste through language, not only in the dialogues, but also in the reported speech, in the stream of thoughts of the protagonists and in the passages of third-person narration. Through this language, the whole atmosphere of the mixed culture comes back to life.

If all the characters belonging to the family at the haveli adopt, like Chunna, a vocabulary with a strong Urdu leaning, the language of the main male protagonist, Kripanarayan (or Vakil Sahab, as he is also called), is worth noting because it illustrates Sobti’s sensitivity to the specific diction of a social group or a profession, i.e., to sociolects.<sup>452</sup> Kripanarayan uses a very refined language, full of Urdu words, like his sister Chunna. But more than the vocabulary, it is the phrasing, a polite phrasing typical for the urban elites of Delhi, that is remarkable here. This politeness and this refinement are in accordance with Kripanarayan’s status – in society and as a successful lawyer – but also with his character and his will to be always master of the situation. As an illustration of this peculiar language and way of expression, one could look at the will of Kripanarayan, at the very end of the novel.<sup>453</sup> In his choice of images and words, Kripanarayan is quite representative of the diction of his class and society: “One’s life is like a lamp of existence. In the grand party of the world, it keeps burning until the appointed time and then, having settled itself in one’s children, it goes out.”<sup>454</sup> One could also mention the quote from a poem in the last page of Kripanarayan’s will.<sup>455</sup> Through this refined language, Sobti sets Kripanarayan clearly within the urban elite of Delhi and its

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I remain intentionally close to the original text in my translation, so that the imagery and the tone can be grasped better. However, it is not possible to reproduce the peculiarity of the diction chosen here by the author.

**452** This sensitivity is also very manifest in the novella YY through the sociolect of the office clerks. However, it would go beyond the scope of this book to look at this novel in detail here.

**453** DoD, Sobti 1995: 227–235. A will would use Persianised language, as the legal language was highly Persianised at that time.

**454** Sobti 1995: 227, *Zindagī śame-hayāt hai. Duniyā kī mahfil meṁ muqarrar vaqt tak jaltī hai aur apne ko baccon meṁ qāyam karke gul ho jāti hai.*

**455** Sobti 1995: 235.

culture, a culture of poetry (mostly in Urdu) and music, this ‘mixed’ culture that is already slowly disappearing at the time of DoD.

Drawing on Urdu is however not completely uncommon in Hindi literature, since it is the ‘sister language’, so to speak. This register in DoD was therefore much less discussed by the literary establishment than Sobti’s use of regional idioms and words in her major novel ZN.

#### 4.2.2 A Diction for Each Setting: *Zindagināmā* and the Use of Regional Idioms

Sobti is not only aware of the distinction between Hindi and Urdu or between regional dialects and idioms; she is also very conscious of the fact that the different idioms are connected to social groups, classes and local influences – that they are really idiolects. Being sensitive to this fact, she decides to make it part of her poetics of closeness to reality. Not only her characters but also the whole narration of her novels should mirror a specific linguistic setting. In DoD, it is the peculiar Hindustani of Delhi as described above; in ZN, it is the Punjabi flavour as well as the local culture, influenced by the wide spread of Persian and Urdu and by the very local usages of language.<sup>456</sup> To give an impression of ZN’s linguistic variety and the difficulty it may present to a reader, let me just point out the constant use of local terms of address – like *bebe* for an elder woman or *puttaro* for a child or a young man – and the use of more regional forms for numerous words, for example *masit* for *masjid* (mosque) or *ākkhān* for *ākhyān* (tale). While some of those forms are easily recognisable, others present a greater difference from the words they derive from. However, the greatest difficulty of the text resides in its alternation between registers (sanskritised when an Arya Samaj priest is speaking or staged, Persianised in the men’s gatherings, filled with local words in the women’s talk), and in the fact that many words are written in a form unfamiliar for standard Hindi readers, like *manukkh* for *manuṣ* (man, human being), reflecting Punjabi usage.<sup>457</sup>

This use of local words was much more heavily criticised than the use of words of Persian origins. By the time DoD was published, in 1995, Sobti was

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<sup>456</sup> Because of the difficulty in translating this diversity of linguistic registers into English, I will not attempt to give an extract of the novel in this section but refer the reader to the text and its new translation by Mani and Mazumdar, Sobti 2016. The choice of the translators to keep many words in their original form illustrates precisely the difficulty of the translation in this context. Some extracts of the novel are discussed in chapter six, in the context of the discussion of the depiction of history in literature.

<sup>457</sup> Mani and Mazumdar, the translators of ZN, have emphasised these issues in their “Translator’s note” and justified their choices. See the translation of ZN, Sobti 2016: vii–xi.

already an acclaimed Hindi author, and the novel, in spite of its extensive recourse to Urdu lexicon and diction, was on the whole easier to read as the knowledge of Urdu vocabulary is much more widely spread among Hindi speakers than that of local dialects. Sobti therefore discusses her choice of language in ZN in several of her interviews, as if to justify it. The notion of authenticity in the diction is a matter really close to her heart. The first novel she wrote, *Cannā*, was ultimately withdrawn from publication – at Sobti’s own cost – because she could not agree with the publisher’s changes with regard to the vocabulary. The publisher had chosen to replace all the dialectal idioms by standard Hindi words, which, in Sobti’s eyes, destroyed the flavour of the text – and all its authenticity:

After almost half the run was printed, I was forced to withdraw it. Some of the words bringing to life voices from the stretch of land and time left behind, had been changed.<sup>458</sup> ‘*Cannā*’ was my first novel and yet I didn’t think it fit to give up the writer’s unstated prerogative to set down in writing a language, a dialect and a regional, traditional manner of speaking; so, after paying for the paper and the already printed pages, I took it back.<sup>459</sup>

This passage demonstrates how important the idiolects, the peculiar speech of the region, is for Sobti in the recreation of a lost world. This was so much more important to her than the joy of publishing her first novel, that she refused to have it sent to press in a wording which, by being more ‘polished’ and ‘standard’, had lost the authenticity of the voices the text was to bring back.<sup>460</sup>

Sobti faced a lot of criticism for the language of ZN, a language which was, for a very long time, deemed impossible to translate into another language.<sup>461</sup> In

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**458** Sobti means here voices that were lost because of the partition. I will come back to this topic in chapter six, through the question of literature as bringing the past back to life through language.

**459** SAM, Sobti 2007: *Lagbhag ādhe fārm chap jāne ke bād mujhe ise vāpas lenā paḍā. Kuch aise śabd badal diē gae the, jo piche chūṭ gae bhūkhariṅ aur kāl kī āvāzom ko zindā karte the.*

‘*Cannā*’ merā pahlā upanyās thā phir bhī bhāṣā, bolī aur sthānīya vācan paramparā ko likhit merī samjone ke lekhak ke aparibhāṣit adhikār ke mainne choḍnā thīk nahīn samjhā aur chap chuke pṛṣṭhom kī chapāī aur kāgaz kā bhugtān kar use vāpas le liyā.

**460** The writer, as shown in chapter three, must not bend the plot and the characters to her wishes. This applies to language as well: Sobti wants to reproduce precisely the diction of the characters she represents, she has no right to ‘translate’ it into a more standard or official linguistic idiom.

**461** Indeed, even the English translation, published only recently, in 2016, struggles with the issue of culturally loaded words and their ‘untranslatability’. The translators thus chose to keep many original words in their translation, a strategy which makes the text, even in English, difficult for those who are not familiar at all with Punjab. See also my remarks on the impossibility of translation in chapter two and Tharu/Lalita 1995: vol 2: xx–xxi.

her discussion with Anamika, for example, Sobti recalls an exchange with one Hindi literary critic, shortly after the publication of ZN, who harshly criticised her choice of words in the novel, arguing that if dialectal idioms are acceptable in direct speech, they are out of place in the heterodiegetic third-person narration. Sobti's defence for the use of local words within the whole text and not only within the spoken dialogues of the protagonists takes Renu's *Mailā āṁcal* as a model. However, it primarily aims at illustrating her idea of the necessity to remain close to the subject of the story while writing in order to recreate a specific universe accurately.<sup>462</sup> By this, Sobti stresses once more her concern for harmony between the topic and the diction of a text.

Amritlal Nagar (Amṛtlāl Nāgar, 1916–1990) the prominent Hindi literary critic and author with whom she discussed the novel, objected to Sobti's use of Punjabi words in the whole text (instead of limiting it to the dialogues), because it made the language “impure” (*aśuddh*) and confusing for the reader. He insisted that he had no difficulty reading Agyeya's *Śekhar: ek jivanī*, for example, but that ZN was not pure Hindi.<sup>463</sup> Sobti had answered at the time by comparing ZN with Renu's *Mailā āṁcal* (1954) and its use of local words and prophesized that in a few years' time it would be the dialects that would infuse Hindi with a new life.

Nagar obviously belongs to a group of Hindi intellectuals who consider the literary language as separate from the language of expression used by the people in the villages. A dialogue between him and Sobti was impossible at that time, because both refused to move from their respective positions. However, Sobti's prophecy proved right to a certain extent: years later, at the time when she relates this anecdote to her interviewer, Anamika, the language of ZN has been

<sup>462</sup> See SAM, interview with Anamika, Sobti 2015: 182–183.

<sup>463</sup> See SAM, Sobti 2015: 182, “After the publication of *Zindagīnāmā*, I run into Nagarji [a Hindi literary critic]. With great dignity, he directed my attention to the language of the novel, by saying that if I had used Punjabi words only in the dialogues it would have been easier on the reader. The impurity of the language would also have been limited. The unfamiliar words of the dialect feel akward to read and articulate.

*‘Zindagīnāmā’ ke prakāśan ke bād Nāgarjī se bherṅ ho gai. Unhoṁne bare barappan se merā dhyān upanyās kī bhāṣā kī or dilāyā. Yah kahkar kī agar maiṅ sirf saṁvād meṅ pañjābī śabd istemāl kartī to pāṭhak ke lie suvidhā hotī. Bhāṣā meṅ aśuddhatā bhī simit rahtī. Boliyoṅ ke aparicīt śabd paṛhne aur cīnhane meṅ atpāṭe lagte haiṅ.’*

Further on, Nagar insists that Agyeya's novel, *Śekhar: ek jivanī*, did not present any difficulty, thus attempting to show his openness to a modern use of language. Nevertheless, one ought to note here that Agyeya does not use local idioms or dialectal forms.



accepted – the novel is widely acclaimed – even though it is still perceived as very difficult and was long deemed ‘untranslatable’.<sup>464</sup> Nagar’s position with regard to the use of Punjabi words only in the dialogues can be considered as ‘traditional’ in the sense that the dialogues may show the idiosyncratic expressions of the protagonists and therefore reflect their linguistic universe, but the rest of a text ought to be in the ‘high’ or standard language, that is, written in a vocabulary and style belonging to the linguistic register of the elite. This was the strategy long adopted by novelists of the realist current.<sup>465</sup> Sobti goes further by introducing local words in the main narration as well. This corresponds to her views on language as presented in the first part of this chapter and shows how close Sobti is to modern linguistics and its non-hierarchical conception of the varieties of idiolects of a language.<sup>466</sup>

It is particularly striking that in defence of her own novel, Sobti refers constantly to Renu’s *Mailā āmcal*. This novel is influential because it constitutes a turning point in the history of Hindi literature through its introduction of the region as a literary subject in contrast to the urban setting dominating Hindi literature in the 1950s and 1960s. In ZN, Sobti did something quite similar when she chose a rural environment and a large collection of characters instead of a handful of main protagonists. In the novel, it is the village and its peculiarities (including the language which itself plays an important role, as well as the mix of multiple influences shown in the stories, legends and beliefs of the people) which lie at the core of the text – not a main character, not even the family of Shahji, the main landowner of the village. Language is central in the context of this text because it functions as a mirror of the diversity of the characters and their social background. Thus, it becomes an essential component of the recreation of this lost world.

In the context of the rural Punjab of ZN, the metaphor Sobti uses to speak of the relationship of the writer to her documentation and sources is derived from the soil; it is a variation of the field metaphor examined in detail in chapter three. It is particularly essential for Sobti to show that it is only the very specific language of the text, with its diversity of influences, registers and forms, that enables the recreation of the lost world of pre-partition Punjab and thus

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**464** As I mentioned, the English translation is very recent. The translators chose to leave many local idioms in their original form in the text and furnish a glossary at the end. In their preliminary note, they explain the challenge the translation represented for them. See Mani and Mazumdar in Sobti 2016: ix, “*Zindaginama* has been an engaging text in terms of translation strategies. All our energies have been focussed on bringing the flavour and richness of life in the Gujarat Punjab of the first two decades of the twentieth century to the reader.”

**465** For example, the French realism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**466** See, for example, linguistics as presented in McGregor 2009.

calls back to life people who experienced the everyday reality of this common culture.<sup>467</sup> The author of ZN therefore insists on her use of local words, giving examples and pointing out the loss of originality and authenticity which would result from ‘translating’ them into standard Hindi:

To be able to gather together the soil of this life [the life of rural Punjab], the writer had to get close to the dialects. The vernaculars, the dialects, extract the power off the soil – they collect genuine popular traits dissolved in popular life; they shape its tune.

Some people were perplexed by the language of *Zindagināmā*. I will only say this much: why is there such a disregard for the words from Farsi, Arabic, Braj, Apabhramsha, Pali, Urdu and Sanskrit that are mixed in the speeches or contemporary dialects in any locality of a region? There was no need to translate them into Khari Boli.

It was necessary to master the *diction* of that period in order to be able to grasp and lay out in its totality the language of *Zindagināmā*, the atmosphere of *Zindagināmā*, to express its emotional quality in the dialogues between the characters, the fragrance of the earth and the people, imperceptible and intangible. This can only be established once the whole phonetic power of the people, their conversation, has been appropriated [by the writer]. When it had been dissolved in the popular style and then assimilated, there was no reason to uproot the word-structure. The writer had no right to ban countless words like *padakkhinā* (*pradakshinā*, circumambulation of an object in mark of respect), *sambhākhan* (*sambhāṣaṇ*, conversation), *jass* (*yash*, glory, fame), *vikkhobhan* (*vikṣobhan*, distress, anguish), *nimmal* (*nirmal*, clear, pure), *tikhan* (*tikṣan*, challenge, assault), *ceruli* (*dasī*, fringe of clothes), *khat-tadhamm* (*kṣatriya dharma*, duty of the Kshatriyas), *gahapati* (*gṛhapati*, householder), *gahapatānī* (*gṛhapatnī*, housewife), *rabb rākkhā* (*rab rakṣak*, god protector). The words’ own power alone is enough of a challenge for her.<sup>468</sup>

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**467** Language is the tool through which literature can challenge time and death by holding the instant and recreating a universe; a connection is established here to the notion of literature as ‘holding time’, see chapter six.

**468** MSRS, Sobti: 410: *Is zindagi kī zamīn ko sameṭne ke lie lekhak ko boliyom ke nazdik jānā thā. Lok bhāṣāeṅ, boliyom apnī tākat dharti se sokhtī haiṅ – ṭheṭh loktatvom ko apne meṅ sameṭtī haiṅ aur lokjīvan meṅ ghulmil uskī lay ko amkit kartī haiṅ.*

*Zindagināmā kī bhāṣā ko lekar kuch logom ko pareṣānī huī hai. Itnā hī kahnā cāhūngī ki deś ke kisī bhī kṣetra viśeṣ yā kālkhariṅd kī bolī meṅ ghulmil gae saṅskṛt, pālī, urdū, apabhramṣa, braj, arabī, fārsī ke śabdom ke lie itnī upeṣā kyom? Khaṛī bolī meṅ unkā anuvād kamā darkār na thā.*

*Zindagināmā kī bhāṣā uske saṁvād kī bhāvābhivyakti meṅ zindagināmā ke vātāvaran, dharti aur lok kī gandh ko, agocar aur amṛt ko uskī samagratā meṅ saṁjone aur pakar sakne ke lie us kālkhariṅd ke ḍikṣan ko sādhe rakhnā zarūrī thā. Lok aur uske saṁvād ke bhāṣāyī dhvani-saṅskār ko apnākar hī use barkarār rakhā jā saktā thā. Lokmudrā meṅ vilay ho gae – jazb ho cuke śabd-vinyās ko ukhārne kā koī kāraṅ na thā. Udāharaṅārth padakkhinā (pradakshinā), sambhākhan (sambhāṣaṅ), jass (yash), vikkhobhan (vikṣobhan), nimmal (nirmal), tikhan (tikṣan), ceruli (dasī), khattadhamm (kṣatriya dharma), gahapati (gṛhapati), gahapatānī (gṛhapatnī), rabb rākkhā (rab rakṣak) jaise asaṅkhyā śabdom kā bahīṣkār kamā lekhak ke adhikār meṅ nahīṅ thā. Śabdom kī apnī sattā hī use cunautī dene ko kāfī thī.*

This appeal to inclusivity in Hindi leads Sobti to examine the relationship of the writer to words. Words have their particular meanings, visible in the connections they establish between themselves as ‘communities’ (as semantic fields or through association of ideas and fixed idioms or collocations), and all this creates a specific diction. For Sobti, words have a certain ‘material’ quality beside their sound quality, and it is through this that they can contribute to the recreation of a setting. The analogy which Sobti uses in this context is a musical one. Though not uncommon in discussions of poetry, this analogy is constructed here not only through notions of rhythm or melody (*lay*), but also through a reference to the ‘families/communities’ of words, *gharānā*, a term which is used to refer to the families or schools following a certain musical or dance tradition. The notion of *gharānā*, implying also the semantic field of words, their collocations, the association of ideas they call to mind for a speaker of a specific idiolect, is very close to Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia. It illustrates perfectly Sobti’s views on the particularity of language in a given context and on the specific life of the language, which makes it the only way to bring back a voice, a setting or an environment.<sup>469</sup> Sobti also introduces the notion of the musicality (*rāgātmaktā*) of the words, produced through their combination and their position in a sentence. Because of those associations and its potential of creating new associations through sound and rhythm, language becomes the tool of the recreation of a world, of a society or of a character.

The music analogy is a recurring motif in Sobti’s essays and expresses her vision of literature as playing both with sounds and silences. This musicality of language is present in the sentences, at a phonetic level, so to speak, and at the level of meaning, through a play between what is said and what is left unsaid by the text.<sup>470</sup> Therefore, on the one hand, Sobti uses a vocabulary which is

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**469** In the context of the performative arts, the *gharānā* does not denote ‘family’ in the biological meaning of the term but rather schools or traditions cultivating a specific style of music which is taught by a master to the students and transmitted further to the next generation but not necessarily to the master’s own children. This is part of Sobti’s view of a larger and inclusive ‘family’ or community. The image therefore illustrates her conception of language as inclusive and made up of free associations which can be associations of meaning or sound.

**470** See another passage of SAM, Sobti 2015: 151: “You don’t place words in words’s mouth, so to say, you place meanings, because words in themselves convey feelings and experiences. Like music, the words too have [their] communities. In the heart and mind, and in the hand of a good writer, they bring out a melodious tone, a rhythm and a dialogue couched in an original musical mode. When you read a good text, it gets filtered through the faculties of sight and hearing, the heart and mind, and the written lines start throbbing [with life]. Silences, tightly woven into the lines, begin to speak up.”

*Āp śabdōṃ ke mukh meṃ śabd nahīṃ, arth ḍālte haiṃ kyoṃki śabd to apne bhāv-anubhāv ke sāth svayam bolte haiṃ. Saṅgīt kī tarah śabdōṃ ke bhī gharāne hote haiṃ. Ek acche lekhak*

specific to the region or the plot she depicts, and, on the other, she remains often very elliptic, letting the reader make her own mental associations with other words of the text – thus leaving the reader free to ‘dialogue’ with the text; once again, literature is constructed as an interaction.

For Sobti, both the words and the language are alive, they are truly ‘living’. Language is not static but evolves; a writer must be receptive and sensitive to this, as well as to the many linguistic registers, in order to depict life accurately. The writer is really a ‘listener’, who assimilates and recreates the world through the voices and words she has heard:

It is not only the shapes of the words that matter; it matters too that from them ‘word’ is produced as a vehicle. Every word has a body, a soul and a dress. Its form and cultivation are linked to its ‘sociality’ by its meaning. Words have their communities as well. Nothing points in the direction of their homes. Their lively elasticity resounds in their postures and gestures; it hints at the warmth of musicality. A writer lives in the company, in intercourse even, with the words. The relation of a good writer to the words is not only cursory. The knowledge of the words is bound and stitched to a writer’s whole view of life. A language she doesn’t live for, for which she has no affection, no connection and concern, cannot be braided in a meaningful way in the fabric of her work on the level of creation. It is also true that the individuality, the thought, the worries and the whole view of life of a writer are intimately joined together with language.<sup>471</sup>

This passage is very close to the idea, exposed in chapter three, of the writer as a listener who is not the master of the plot, language or characters of her work, but who lets them emerge from within herself and from what she has gathered in

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*ke dil-dimāg aur hāth se vah maulik rāg meṁ sur-tāl nād aur saṁvād arjit karte haiṁ. Jab āp ek acche pāṭh ko paṛhte haiṁ to vah dṛśya-śravya aur dil-dimāg se saṁcārit hokar likhī paṁktiyom meṁ dhaṛakne lagte haiṁ. In paṁktiyom ke pīche vah gahrī gūṁthī khāmośiyām bhī hotī haiṁ jo pāṭh ko mukharit kartī haiṁ.”*

Beside the clear reference to music and the notion of ‘communities’ or families of words (*gharānā*), this passage emphasises the presence of a resonance created through the words based on the meaning and the possible interpretations of a text, a resonance which leaves room for what is unsaid. It brings to mind the ‘silent text’.

**471** MSRS, Sobti 2014: 410, *Śabdom ke mukhare hī mahatvapūrṇ nahīm hote –mahatvapūrṇ hote haiṁ ve jinheṁ ‘śabd’ vahan karte haiṁ. Har śabd kā ek jism, ek rūh, ek pośāk hotī hai. Uskā ākar saṁskār uske arth ke sāth uskī sāmājiktā se bhī juṛā rahtā hai. Śabdom ke apne ghar-āne bhī hote haiṁ. Yah unkī caukhaṭ kī or isārā nahīm. Unkī zindā lackilī bhāṅgimāom mudrāom meṁ gūṁjti unkī rāgātmaktā kī garamāhaṭ kī or hī iṅgit hai. Lekhak śabdom kī saṁgat, sohabat meṁ rahtā hai. Acche lekhak ke saṁbandh, śabdom se keval sarsarī hī nahīm hote. Śabdom kī pahcān lekhak kī samūci jīvan-dṛṣṭi se juṛī-gūṁthī hai. Jis bhāṣā ko lekhak jītā nahīm, jisse use lagāv nahīm, saṁbandh-sarokār nahīm – unheṁ sṛjan ke star par vah racnā kī bunāvāṭ meṁ sārthak rūp meṁ gūṁth nahīm saktā. Sac to yah bhī hai ki bhāṣā ke sāth gahre meṁ juṛā hai lekhak kā vyaktiva, uskī soc, cimtāem aur uskī samūci jīvan-dṛṣṭi.*

matter of knowledge and understanding of a reality outside herself. The words have a life of their own, language has a life (and a diversity) of its own. The writer develops a personal relationship with it, but she does not remain limited to her own sociolect or familiar language. She develops the ability to listen to and absorb the diversity of dialects and idiolects present in her language. This conception of language shows similarities to Bakhtin's heteroglossia:

There is a distinction between language and language. The idioms, the intonation and the arrangement of a language change according to the class of each group of people. The language of a hard-working peasant differs from that of an oil-seller, of the intellectual white-collared class, and of the smoothly polished atmosphere and the neatness of the aristocracy. In the language that is connected to hard manual labour lies a bitterness that is born from being confronted with struggles. Hostility and animosity too. The language of the mind is embellished by its intellectual refinement from the rough to the subtle. In this process, there is little warmth in language, the expression of depth intensifies. The language that claims to express traditional values and beliefs is an impediment to the straight expression of the common people through its typical bookishness and its difficult word composition. Literary language, which beyond its extensiveness seems natural and resilient or gives an impression of openness, requires so much mastery from the writer. The emotions and the choices of a writer reflect her relations to the literary work in the context of words.

*Zindagināmā* is a tale about the life of cultivators. It would be a literary stupidity to cover it with a layer of city and town idiomatics, after having extracted [all] the traces of its rough dialogues.<sup>472</sup>

The relationship of a writer to the words is divided into two parts. There is on the one hand her sensitivity towards the language, her knowledge and ability to identify idiosyncratic languages; on the other hand, the writer's own personality, thoughts and worldview (as well as her education), will permeate her use of the words and the images she creates with them. The relationship between the words and the writer is therefore subjective. The writer searches not only

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472 MSRS, Sobti 2014: 410–411, *Bhāṣā aur bhāṣā meṃ fark hai. Bhāṣā kā muhāvarā, lahzā aur uskī saṃvaran har varḡ ke caukhaṭe ke sāth badalte haiṃ. Mazdūr kisān kī bhāṣā apne tevar se safedpoś śikṣit varḡ aur abhijāt ke mulāyam maṃje hue mizāj aur pariṣkār se alag jā paṛtī hai. Jo hāth ke mehnat se juṛī hai usmeṃ saṃgharṣ kī ṭakrāhaṭom se talkhī paidā hotī hai. Tarer aur turṣī bhī. Cintan kī bhāṣā apne bauddhik saṃskār se pariṣkṛt hotī calī jāti hai, sthūl se sukṣm bhī. Is prakriyā meṃ jahām bhāṣā kī garamāhaṭ kam hotī hai, vahām garāī kā tevar aur zyādā phailtā hai. Jo paramparāgat mūlyom aur āsthāom kī dāvedār hotī hai uskā viśiṣṭ paṃḍatāūpan aur kliṣṭ śabdāvalī jansāmānya kī sīdhī-sādī abhivyakti ke āṛe āte haiṃ. Srjan kī bhāṣā apnī vyāpaktā meṃ ūpar se jītnī sahaj aur lackilī lagtī hai yā khulepan kā ābhās detī hai – lekhak se vah utne hī kaṛe saṃyam kī māṅg kartī hai. Śabdom ke saṃdarbh meṃ lekhak ke lagāv cunāv racnā ke sāth lekhak ke saṃbandhom ko lakṣit karte haiṃ.*

*Zindagināmā khetihar janjivan kā prastutikaraṇ hai. Uske khurdare saṃvād kī salavaṭem nikāl us par śaharāti yā kasbāi muhāvare kī tah biṭhānā lekhakiya himākat hī hotī hai.*

for a certain ring and musicality of language but also for an authenticity which matches the subject and the context chosen for a specific work – only through this language will a work acquire the power of bringing to life, of telling a genuine story (the notion of truth is central to Sobti's poetics) and of conveying a voice which goes beyond the personal experience of the writer.

Once again, Sobti insists in this quote on the diversity of language, a diversity which is not only geographical but also corresponds to education and social background. Literary language must have the particularity of catching and reflecting this very linguistic plurality. It is not merely through the rendering of a meaning in a standard or high language that a good literary quality can be achieved. On the contrary, it is important to give an accurate image of other idioms that would mirror the life of the particular group which uses them. In the case of ZN, it was essential for Sobti to enter into the specific linguistic world of rural Punjab. It would have been artificial and false to change this language into an urban one only to satisfy some critics who belong to the Hindi elite. The quest for authenticity is central for Sobti who does not see herself as the 'mother' or 'father' of her texts, but as a careful gardener, a listener of the "nameless people" (*anām log*)<sup>473</sup> to whom she can give a voice. In the context of ZN, it carries an even greater importance, since it is verily through the language(s) of the region that the lost universe can be brought to life again.

However, an idiolect is not necessarily the language of a community or of a region or epoch; it can also be a very individual voice which is brought forth through a specific wording, which then reflects not only a social milieu but a psychological state or a mentality as well. This is the case in Sobti's novel MM, with the language of the main protagonist, Mitro.

#### 4.2.3 Language as the Expression of a Single Character: *Mitro marjānī*

What is implied in Sobti's presentation of the relationship of the writer to the words is that the aim of the writer is to reflect reality, beyond the common notion of mimesis: the reality must actually be absorbed and brought back by the writer. Thus, when she writes YY, Sobti really adopts the language of office clerks, and she moves to small town Hindi with an influence from rural dialects for MM.

In this novel, however, the language of the main protagonist is worth examining more closely, because it does not only correspond to her social and cultural milieu, but also to her mood and her psychological reality. It is a very bold

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<sup>473</sup> See SAM, Sobti 2015: 76, and also chapter six.

language, the language of a woman who has no inhibitions – and who lives with a great internal frustration. Mitro is loud, beautiful and aware of her beauty, and refuses to bow her head – or cover it – in front of her in-laws. She also makes allusions to her husband's impotency and is seen flirting openly with other men. In her speech, she is absolutely uninhibited; it is obvious that she revels in the appearance and the materiality of her own body. The two following extracts from the novel illustrate this point. In the first, Mitro addresses her younger brother-in-law, Gurjari Lal; in the other, her older sister-in-law, Suhagvanti:

- There you are, miserable wretch! I would have thought that now, after having been with a woman, you would [finally] become a man . . .<sup>474</sup>

Covering her breasts with her hands, she [Mitro] said, delighted: 'Tell me the truth, sister-in-law Suhagvanti, does anyone else have such breasts?'<sup>475</sup>

The plot of MM follows the life of Mitro, daughter of a former courtesan, who is married to the second brother in a joint family of three brothers. The in-laws are very traditional and cannot cope with Mitro's open language and her assertion of her sexual needs, which her husband is not able to satisfy. The parents of the joint family are quite old and rely on their three sons and daughters-in-law to provide for them, while they continue to rule the family from within. In the novel, the depiction of the joint-family life focusses on the contrast between three very different daughters-in-law: Suhagvanti, the embodiment of the ideal mother and housewife, subordinated to her husband and parents-in-law; Mitro (her full name is Sumitravanti), who is generous and ready to help (for example by selling her jewelry) but also expresses her desires without inhibition; and Phulvanti, who is meek in front of her in-laws but tries to get her hands on a larger share of the family property and money through the influence she has over her husband. The story centres on Mitro and on her coming to terms with her physical desires as well as her fear of becoming like her mother.

In the novel, language is of particular importance as the element which establishes the setting in a small town and allows the reader to distinguish between the in-laws and Mitro's mother and her world.<sup>476</sup> The story in itself, with its

<sup>474</sup> MM, Sobti 1996: 25 *Vāh re nindak! Guljāri lāl, main̄ to sam̄jhī thī, aurat ke sāth̄ dhuk tū ab mard ban gayā hogā . . .*

<sup>475</sup> MM, Sobti 1996: 19, *Hāthom̄ se chātiyām̄ dhāmk̄ magn̄ ho kahā: 'Sac̄ kahnā, jīṭhānī suhāgvantī, kyā aisī chātiyām̄ kisī aur kī bhī hañh̄?'*

I remain quite close to the original text in my translation in order to give an impression of Mitro's tone.

<sup>476</sup> In the quotes given above, it is obvious that Mitro speaks plainly about sexuality and her body. The rest of the family adopts a much more conventional speech and condemns her

depiction of women's sexuality, was already enough to give rise to controversy. The fact that Mitro is portrayed as the daughter of a courtesan, if it partly explained her 'otherness', did not prevent the polemic. The novel also had to face criticism from feminists because of Mitro's conventional choice of returning to her husband. The uninhibited language used by Mitro was specifically targeted by the more traditionalist critics. I have to add here that the voice of Mitro is now celebrated by many feminists as an example of a liberating speech.<sup>477</sup>

On several occasions Sobti explains that she first heard 'Mitro's voice' by chance on a road in Rajasthan and that, years later, it re-emerged and turned into the novel. She defends herself in this way from being accused of 'obscenity' (*aśliltā*, an important point of criticism in the Hindi establishment, a reproach Vaid had to face as well for his novel *Bimal urf jāem to jāemge kahām*, 1972, *Bimal* or if we have to go, then where should we go?).<sup>478</sup> Mitro's language reflects the reality of something which Sobti has heard – the idiosyncratic language of a character is not the language nor the idiom of the writer herself.<sup>479</sup> This language is particular, not necessarily in the diction (the words used by Mitro are part of a rather standard, although popular, Hindi), but in their lack of inhibition which is considered improper for a woman. Mitro does not respect social codes, which expect women not to speak (and probably not to think) of sexuality, to use a very polite language, and to lower their head, both physically and figuratively. In the novel, it is in fact not only through verbal language but also through attitude (body language) that Mitro challenges social order and conventions. This is the reason why her character and her language were deemed 'obscene'. For Sobti, this was however a question of authenticity,

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openness in their fear of society's censorious gaze. See the words of Mitro's mother-in-law in MM, Sobti 1996: 28, "Daughter-in-law, have you no shame? What will people say, when they see and hear you? *Bahū, kuch to lāj-lihāz rakh. Dekhte-sunte kya kahemge?*".

**477** It would be beyond the scope of the present discussion to enter into the analysis of the whole debate around the novel, and the play based on it, as well as their reception. Literary critics who analysed the novel – always through the perspective of a feminist discourse – are for example Martin Christof-Füchle (Christof-Füchle 1998) and Chanana Kuhu (Kuhu 2005). For some feminist critics however, like Nirmala Jain (Jain 1980) or Chandra Nisha Singh (Singh 2007), Sobti portrays liberated women, but they remain conventional in their behaviour. Thus the last two writers reproach Sobti for her depiction of Mitro returning to a traditional family life at the end of the novel.

**478** See SVS, Sobti 2007:112–114 for the discussion on *aśliltā* in Hindi criticism and Sobti 2007: 41–46 for the discussion of Vaid's novel *Bimal urf jāem to jāemge kahām* (translated by the author himself as *Bimal In Bog* in 1972). The question of obscenity is a much discussed issue in literature and society in India; on the topic, see for example Gupta 2002.

**479** This point has been discussed in chapter three and in the first part of the present chapter. In Mitro's case, it is worth noting that it is not only a sociolect which Sobti recreates, but the idiolect of a single character, her own voice, expressing her frustration.



of recreating genuinely a voice she had heard and which had then grown with time in her ‘memory banks’. This genuine voice of Mitro is the expression of a woman who suffers because of her frustrated needs and feels imprisoned in a situation without an escape route.

In MM, two linguistic layers interact: the linguistic context of the small town, which permeates the whole text, and the language adopted by each protagonist, with the striking difference between Mitro’s freedom of speech (her openness, the sexual content of some expressions and her complete lack of inhibition in this matter) and the measured and conventional means of expression of her in-laws. Mitro’s language is described by Sobti as combining elements of living dialects from Rajasthan, Haryana and Punjab:<sup>480</sup>

With regard to this [the peculiar language of a geographic locality], the world and the language of Mitro depict a small town. A country town is as different from a village as it is from a big city. Before the translation,<sup>481</sup> it is necessary to know the geography of a work and its temporal history in order to know the story.

In order to reach to the language and the culture of a *text* it is important to understand its society and class.

Mitro is the extraordinary daughter-in-law of an ordinary family. She is particular. This particularity originates in the former and present atmosphere of her in-laws’ house and her mother’s house. The bridge measuring the distance between both is Mitro herself. What is being measured can be heard in the language of Mitro. I want to reiterate that the idioms of Mitro are not those of the writer. Mitro has her own single right over them in which the situations [stemming] from opposing directions have merged in their different colours. Feelings and ethical values as well. The voice of Mitro has emerged from the knocking together of these two sides. Her sound. In words, a unique fleshy roughness.<sup>482</sup>

**480** See the discussion of MM in SAM, Sobti 2007: 151–157.

**481** Here, Sobti means the translation of a setting into a literary text.

**482** SAM, Sobti 2015: 151–152, *Iski tulnā meṁ mitro kā saṁskār aur bhāṣā ek choṭe kasbe ko pratibhāṁbit kartā hai. Mufassal-kasbā jitnā gāmv se mukhtalif hai, utnā hī mahānagar se bhī. Anuvād se pahle kṛti kā bhūgol aur uskā sāmāyik itihās jānnā uske kathya ko jānne ke lie zarūrī hai.*

*Ṭaikṣṭ kī bhāṣā aur saṁskār tak pahūncne ke lie uske samāj aur varg ko samājh lenā mahatvapūrṇ hai.*

*Mitro sādharmaṇ parivār kī asādhāraṇ bahū hai. Vah viśeṣ hai. Yah viśeṣṭā uske pithar aur sasurāl ke agle-pichle vātāvaraṇ se ubharī hai. Donoṁ kī dūriyom ko māptā huā pul svayam Mitro hai. Jo māpā jā rahā hai use Mitro kī bhāṣā meṁ sunā jā saktā hai. Mānnā cāhūṁgī kī Mitro ke saṁvād lekhak ke saṁvād nahīṁ haiṁ. Un par ekādhikār Mitro kā apnā hai jismeṁ viparīt diśom se sthitiyām apne alag-alag raṁgoṁ meṁ ekākār ho gāi haiṁ. Bhāvnāeṁ aur naitik mūlya bhī in donoṁ or kī takārahāṭ meṁ se ubharā hai. Mitro kā śor. Uski anugūṁj. Lafzom meṁ ādim māṁsal khurdarāpan.*

Mitro's language is set in a specific environment and reflects her idiosyncratic story. Besides providing her with a shelter from the accusation of obscenity, this conception of language allows Sobti to stress the fact that language itself tells something about those who use it. Language bears witness to a social and geographical background, but not only. It is also the expression of a state of mind, of a psychology.<sup>483</sup> Highlighting Mitro's background is part of Sobti's policy of defending herself against the criticism of Mitro's uninhibited language (Mitro speaks openly about her own beauty, her body and her sex appeal).<sup>484</sup> However, it also corresponds to Sobti's search for authenticity in the voices of her characters – whereas this is not only a matter of their social and cultural background, but also of their psychology and emotional moods. Not only is Mitro's language not the language of the author herself, but the story itself developed in a way which surprised Sobti:<sup>485</sup>

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**483** Sobti reasserts this argument later in the same text, see SAM, Sobti 2015:154: "Mitro's language is what gives her authenticity. In Mitro's dialogue, I felt the encounter of two extremities. The first is the 'colour', the 'mood' that flickers in the household of Gurudas and Dhanvanti – in the old monotony of relationships – and the second, the 'colour' that blows in from Mitro's past. The raw sunlight on the doorstep of her mother, Balo's, open door and the dampness, conjoined. Perhaps these two opposites gave rise to Mitro's language, adding feelings and energy to her speech."

*Mitro kī bhāṣā iskā pramāṇ hai. Mitro ke saṁvād meṁ mujhe do sīmāntoṁ kī muṭhabheṛ kā ahsās huā. Ek vah raṅg jo gurudās aur dhanvanti kī grhasthī meṁ jhilmilā rahā hai – sambandhoṁ kī prācīn ekarastā meṁ aur dūsrā raṅg lahrā rahā hai mitro ke pichvāre se. Uskī māṁ balo ke khule darvāze kī dehrī se kaṛī dhūp aur silān ek sath. Śāyad inḥūṁ do vīrodhī tattvoṁ se ubhārī hogī mitro kī bhāṣā, jisne uske saṁvād meṁ saṁvedan aur ūrjā se nikhār kiyā."*

One should note here the light-colour metaphor which establishes a parallel between writing and painting. This is an example of Sobti's recourse to images and tropes to illustrate the magical side of the process of writing. The colours represent nuances highlighted by the choice of words, nuances which in the context of MM are representative of the different world views and different characters of the protagonists.

**484** See the extracts of the novel given above.

**485** This point was already discussed earlier. Here, Sobti uses it in order to defend herself against accusations as well. As such it is no longer only a part of her views on literature. However, I really believe that the idea of the freedom of the characters and the plot from the author is a major aspect of Sobti's poetics and that it is not just a strategy to avoid criticism. See SAM, Sobti 2015: 154, "There was much debate about Mitro's language. From my side, [I will say] only this much: this expression came together after it had been filtered through the sensitivity of the 'world'. In its locality, a soundscape mixed from [dialects from] Haryana, Rajasthan and Punjab was shaped, and lived in the discourse. At the presentation of the National School of Drama the discourse of Mitro truly astonished me. I was surprised that the feeling was not the writer's and that in 'Mitro marjānī' there was not only Mitro's appearance, but that something bigger was happening. In it, the murmur of a new woman was hidden. Such a murmur in which there was not only her name, but also her self-assertion. The first line of the work in

As I was writing, I wasn't at all aware that, by writing about a joint family, the story of a fierce and direct conflict which almost wrote itself in the shape of a dialogue, would also carry with itself the emergence of Mitro's body language and the interiority of her feminine existence, which can also be called a new idea of woman, and which emerged from the property [*dharmā*] of the body, an idea which needs to be conveyed to a woman's mind. This is important as well: Mitro had almost no educated and literate universe of language. The impression of energy and heat in her words, in her being, in her choice of words remained astonishing. Almost up to the level of creation.<sup>486</sup>

In MM, the main protagonist, through her uninhibited words and her attitude, her body language (*deh bhāṣā*), becomes some sort of spokesperson for women, for a generation of women who assert their rights – and also their sexuality –

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itself is laying out a far-reaching effect. The first line on the paper, and it is like a new birth. The forthcoming work and the power and the autonomy of the author, divided in two, turned out to be united. On one single page, two streams flow in their own particularity towards this one point where the inner core of the work is settled. The work has its own sundial that is different from the time arranged by the writer.”

*Mitro kī bhāṣā ko lekar bahut carcā huī. Apnī or se itnā hī ki 'lok' ke saṃvedan se chankar yah muhāvarā guṃthā. Iskī sthānīyatā meṃ hariyāṇā, rājasthān aur pañjāb kā milājulā dhvani-samsār saṃvād meṃ sugaṭhit aur prānvān huā. Neśanal skūl of ḍrāmā kī prastuti par mitro ke saṃvād ne mujhe sac meṃ camatkṛt kiyā. Hairānī huī ki lekhak ko ahsās tak na huā aur mitro marjānī meṃ sirf mitro kā hī praveś nahīn huā – kuch baṛā ghaṭit huā. Usmeṃ kisī nāi aurat kī āhaṭ chipī thī. Ek aisī āhaṭ jismeṃ uskī saṃjñā hī nahīn thī, uskī asmitā bhī. Racnā kī pahli paṃkti apne meṃ dūrgamī pariṇām saṃjoe rahtī hai. Pahli paṃkti panne par aur jaise kuch janm-sā ghaṭit ho jātā hai. Udghāṭit racnā aur racnākār kī sattā aur svāyattatā do hissoṃ meṃ baṃṭkar ek meṃ ekākār hone ko cal nikaltī haiṃ. Ek hī panne par do ghārāem apne-apne nijatva meṃ us ek hī bindu kī or bahtī haiṃ jahām racnā kā antaramṅ sthit hai. Racnā kī apnī dhūpghaṛī hotī hai jo lekhak ke saṃyojit samay se alag hotī hai.*

This extract illustrates the inter-relatedness of three important notions in Sobti's poetics: the independence of the work from the writer, the arbitrariness of the time when a memory might emerge and enable the creation of a work (the 'memory bank' concept), and the necessity of using a language reflecting the topic and the mood of a specific text. But this quote refers to the play based on the novel, not to the novel per se. One witnesses here therefore also the reaction of the writer to an interpretation of her work, where it suddenly becomes obvious to her that her text has the potential of expressing perhaps even more than what she herself had thought of or intended.

**486** SAM, Sobti 2015: 155, *Likh rahī thī to kataī andāz nahīn thā ki ek saṃyuktā parivār ke bahāne, āmne-sāmne kī jo ṭakkar kahānī ke saṃvād ke rūp meṃ khud-bakhud taiyār ho gai, usmeṃ mitro kī deh-bhāṣā aur uske nārī-astitva kī āntarikā ubharne kī prakriyā meṃ hai jise dehdharm se nayā svarūp letā aurat kā vicār bhī kahā jā saktā hai, vah vicār jise strī ke vivek tak pahuñcanā hogā. Mahattvapūṛṇ hai yah bāt bhī ki mitro ke pās bhāṣā ka pariṣkṛt śikṣit saṃskār lagbhag nahīn hī thā. Vismaykāri rahā uskī bolī meṃ bhāv meṃ, śabdomeṃ ke cunāv meṃ ūrjā aur ūsmā kā prabhāv. Karīb-karīb srjanātmak star kā.*

after recognising the need and the right to do so in their rational mind (*vivek*). Although this is manifest in the text of the novel, it is only when she saw a stage adaptation of MM that Sobti became fully aware of this power of assertion of the character she had created.<sup>487</sup> The stage adaptation can be seen as merely one of the possible interpretations of the text, but it remains a fact that, for Sobti, it confirmed her perception of the independence of the character and its language from the author. MM illustrates this idea perfectly not only as a stage adaptation but as a novel as well. Indeed, the main character turned out to be expressing something which had to be voiced at this particular time in Indian society, namely the existence and the importance of the physicality of women's body. It is not so much the idea or the reality of this physicality which was new, but rather that it found an outlet within Hindi literature and its 'tame' or moralistic writing culture. The text, and later on the play, found a deep resonance within Indian society. However, this language and body language went beyond what had intentionally been written by the writer; they acquired a power of expression of their own. This power was perhaps even enhanced by the fact that Mitro is not a highly educated woman with an urban background and thus expresses more genuinely and naturally the physical reality of her being, of her body. However, this didn't prevent Sobti from being accused of 'obscenity'.

The accusation of obscenity or of improper language (improper especially for a woman writer) was voiced by critics in the case of MM and in the case of YY, where insults and swear words abound. For Sobti, this stigmatisation of a language as obscene or even pornographic is not only tantamount to limiting the self-expression of writers; it also denotes the setting of particular standards that the critics apply to women in this regard, a point which she vehemently condemns. A woman cannot keep accepting the role and image assigned to her by men; namely the role and image which are reflected in the language that is considered appropriate for a woman:

Coming to the issue of the objections raised against women's writing including a lot of 'vulgar' or 'obscene' expressions, one could ask, are we trying to invent a new moral code for the contemporary generation of women writers? We should strongly oppose such discriminatory moves to purify creative culture. [. . .] The woman has always been seen by man, presented from the male viewpoint. Now, she is looking at herself and also at men with a new perspective. Just as the male has admired, explored and exploited the woman's nakedness, why can a woman not be allowed to look at the male form and react to it, personally, and in her writings, if she wants to do so? Why set double standards? Let us

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**487** See the passage quoted in footnote 485 for Sobti's assessment of her experience as a spectator of the play.

not create two languages and two perceptions in human literature and walk into the trap the whole male world is trying to set – to suppress her creative life.<sup>488</sup>

This quote from a piece on Sobti's double, Hashmat, introduces aspects which will be dealt with in greater length in the next chapter, but it also pinpoints the issue of vulgarity or obscenity, particularly with regard to the expression of female sexuality, as it is voiced by the character of Mitro in *MM*. Sobti highlights the fact that men have presented their views of women for centuries in literature and that women, as their equals, should not be limited by another standard of language, where some words or expressions are banned. Indeed, creativity must be free and honest, remaining true to the feelings, the situations and the characters depicted. In Sobti's eyes, the language of Mitro is in complete conformity with her positioning and corresponds to her personality as well as her background. In the situation she finds herself in, it mirrors her distress too: it is the expression of a deeply unsatisfied woman. Therefore, the accusation of obscenity is hypocritical, and this all the more so since the aim is to suppress the expression of something genuinely human in the name of morality.

It is striking that Sobti, although still answering to the criticism of obscenity and adopting the strategy of drawing attention to the background of her main protagonist to achieve this, stresses the resonance found by the story in Indian society and considers it to be the logical result of her depiction of a reality present in every woman. One could say that, according to Sobti, it took an unconventional woman, with an unconventional background (the daughter of a courtesan), put in a conventional setting, to bring to light a topic which affects not only unconventional women and situations but the whole society. One also needs to note that at the time when Sobti wrote *SAM*, *MM* enjoyed already such popularity that there were no more reasons to offer explanations or justifications regarding the unconventional character of Mitro and her personal genealogy.

The discussion of *MM* in the context of *SAM* provides Sobti with the opportunity to express yet another interesting aspect of her conception of literature, one which is not really elaborated on in other essays: writing as a form of translation. In the extract of *SAM* dealing with the genesis of *MM*, Sobti compares the creation of a text with a translation. A good translation depends on the ability of the translator to perceive and transmit what is not directly voiced, that is, the 'silence' of a text (as was mentioned in chapter three), as well as the cultural, geographical and historical specificities which are implied in a particular text. For Sobti, writing is actually a kind of translation, into words, of a lived or observed experience of the

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<sup>488</sup> Sobti in Jain 2007a: 25. This line of argumentation echoes Woolf's plea for the voice of women or Cixous' call for the creation of a feminine writing. See also chapter five.

world and the self. While writing a novel, she needs to have incorporated the idiosyncrasies of the place and characters she depicts in order to ‘translate’ them into her literary language.<sup>489</sup> This act of ‘translating’ implies a knowledge of the setting and context of a story as well; it presupposes the ability to represent accurately the environment of the protagonists and the languages connected to them, as well as the capacity to grasp and render the psychology and moods of the characters.

The language is the end result of a whole situation, not only of the individual sensitivity of the writer. Therefore, when asked by Anamika in her interview how it was possible to write each novel employing a different language, and demonstrating thus not only incomparable linguistic skills but also a profound knowledge of the idioms of several social groups and a great familiarity with popular folk songs and proverbs, Sobti answers that it is precisely the context which calls for the choice of language:

The credit for the creativity of her linguistic ability doesn’t belong to the writer alone. Its warp and woof is assembled by those characters who embody their own inner situation in words. This experience is much deeper than cleverness and it stirs the artistic sensitivity of a fine writer. The linguistic vastness of our cultural universe filled with its colourful diversity is broad and bright. In it, [all] the emotional and cultural density of our regions is contained. Like the Indian multi-coloured and multi-shaped garments, the words, which have glittering colours from threads of rough textile (gold, silvery, copper) present our nature in countless appearances – like a voice or melody springing up from sounds! Dry, smooth, spiny, dense: the wave-like waters of the rainbow, thought-emotion-meaning, are arranged; all these bundles of words are giving a message of love, hatred, war and peace. Lines. All this emerges out of these mysterious waves whose appearance unites the writer with her own environment.<sup>490</sup>

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**489** See SAM, Sobti 2015: 154: “I would like to say that the perception of these very silences [the silences of the text] is the specific quality of a good translation. I have never translated anything; but original writing, achieved through language, is a kind of translation too. Through language, you translate the ‘experience’ connected to your surroundings, this experience that is your own and, by being bound to your particularity, you also translate all that is part of your being.

In the structure of a work, its inner essence is animated from behind the words. For a story or a novel, the local codes of behaviour, an individual’s cultural milieu tied to class, all have a bearing on the translating skills.”

*Kahnā pasand karūṅgī ki inhī khāmośiyon kī anubhūti acche anuvād kī guṇā hai. Mairīne kabhī anuvād nahīn kiyā – lekin bhāṣā kī madad se maulik lekhan bhī ek tarah kā anuvād hī hai. Ap bhāṣā kī madad se āpke āspās guṇthe us ‘anubhav’ kā anuvād karte haiṅ jo āpkā nij kā hai aur apnī nijatā se baṁdhā us sab kā bhī jo āpke hone kā hissā hai.*

*Kṛti ke kalevar meṁ uskā āntarik svabhāv śabdome ke piche se taraṅgit hotā hai. Kahānī yā upanyās ke lie sthānīya sabhyācār, varg viśeṣ se ubhare vyakti kā saṁskār anuvād ke kauśal par bhī hāvī ho jātā hai.*

**490** See SAM, Sobti 2015: 177–178, interview with Anamika: *Bhāṣik kṣamtā kī racnātmaktā kā śreya sirf lekhaḥ ko hī nahīn jātā. Uskā tānā-bānā un pātroṁ se guṁthā jātā hai jo apne āntarik sthāpatya ko śabdome meṁ rūpāntarit karte haiṅ. Yah prayog cāturya se kahīṅ zyādā gahre aur*

It is not merely the writer who shapes the language specific to a work, but the characters themselves do so as well. Here, Sobti refers once more to the independence of the characters, an issue which she had asserted on other occasions. However, for her, the issue of heteroglossia and its presence in novels is not a mere question of 'mimesis'. It goes deeper, in the reconstitution in words not only of a socio-cultural and historical universe, but also of the moods and the state of mind of the protagonists of the texts, as MM has illustrated. This is possible only if the writer has assimilated the idiolects of the characters she stages and can thus bring them back to life in their authenticity. In this sense, writing is a translation of an imagined world into words. In order to achieve an accurate translation, the writer must have a deep understanding of the linguistic diversity and the subtleties it can express.

The diversity of languages and dialects in India renders the possibilities of expression almost infinite. Sobti, moreover, insists on the relationships of the various linguistic layers which are intertwined in a text (the heteroglossia). Words from the pluralistic linguistic reality of North India are entangled and intertwined, constituting a patchwork of colours and textures, just like a fabric.<sup>491</sup> The textile or weaving metaphor for a text is common in Hindi, as in many other languages, also in the everyday language, but it is very interesting to observe how Sobti combines it here with the notions of colours and sounds (the painting and the music analogies, carrying the idea of nuances); the pluralistic linguistic reality is the material (the fabric), and the form and shape of the words are the melody or colour-quality of a text.

The textile metaphor is in fact often intertwined with the metaphors of painting and music in Sobti's description of the structure and materiality of a literary text, illustrating thus the depth of the process of assimilation of voices from the outside during the creative process. From this image emerges a picture of the writer as a more pro-active figure than the field metaphor elaborated on

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*bārik lekhak ke racnātmak saṃvedan ko hī taraṅgit kartā hai. Hamāre raṅg-biraṅg vividhatā bhare saṃskṛti-saṃskār kā bhāṣāyī vaibhav bahut viśṛt aur raṅgīn hai. Usmēṅ nihit hai hamāre pradeśoṅ kā bhāvanātmak aur sām̃skṛtik ghantva. Anek-aneṅ raṅg-rūpvāle bhāratīya paridhānoṅ kī tarah khurdare gaṛhe, mulāyam, sunharī, rupahālī, tille ke tāroṅ se camatkāri raṅgoṅ vāle śabd hamāre svabhāva ko jāne kin-kin jhalakoṅ meṅ prastut karte haiṅ – dhvaniyoṅ se ubharte svar-tāl kī tarah! Śuṣk-ciknā, pīṭhdār, ghanā indradhanuṣ ke laharie-sā jāl, vicār-bhāv-arth ko saṃjotā prem-pyār, ghṛṇā, yuddh-śānti kā sandeś dete śabdōṅ ke gucche. Pam̃ktiyaṅ. Yah sab un rahasyamāyī taraṅgoṅ par ubharte haiṅ jiskā ābhās lekhak ko apne paryāvaraṅ se miltā hai.*

491 The textile metaphor is for example present in the passage quoted above: "the Indian multi-coloured and multi-shaped garments" (*anek-aneṅ raṅg-rūpvāle bhāratīya paridhānoṅ*).

in chapter three led to believe. I will therefore now turn to Sobti's use of these combined metaphors in her construction of the figure of the writer.

### 4.3 Metaphors: Concealing or Revealing Meanings

Metaphors are omnipresent in Sobti's writings. While she often draws on familiar tropes and common metaphors ('conceptual metaphors' in the sense given by Lakoff to the term),<sup>492</sup> she develops them further and creates her own image around them. In her non-fictional writings, this mainly serves the purpose of revealing (or concealing) her writing process. In novels, especially in the very elliptically written SAK, the metaphors uncover what is not said directly. Metaphors, in this sense, are both concealing and revealing meanings.

#### 4.3.1 Weaving, Painting and Music

Metaphor is by far the most frequent rhetorical device used in Sobti's writings. In the previous chapter, I have shown that the essays abound with metaphors, in particular when Sobti describes her writing process. Those metaphors usually appear in the depictions of creativity and author's interaction with language. Some images or analogies are more frequently used than others.<sup>493</sup> Most prominent is the field metaphor and its semantic field. However, comparisons of writing to painting, music and weaving are very common in Sobti's essays as well. Those images bring with them a new vision of the writer and her role in and during the writing process.

Analogies between text and textile, between writing and music and between writing and painting are common, even in everyday language. These three metaphors can be considered to be 'conceptual metaphors' in the sense given to the term by Lakoff, namely as reflecting an experience common to the great majority of people. According to Lakoff, a conceptual metaphor is an analogy which draws on a shared experience of life and where not only two terms but the whole semantic field connected to them present parallels. An example would be the metaphor of the journey to represent life: the individual as

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<sup>492</sup> See Lakoff 1993 or Slingerland 2004 for an introduction to the notion of 'conceptual metaphor'.

<sup>493</sup> Here I use 'image' and 'analogy' as synonyms or generic words for 'metaphor', being perfectly aware that it is a stylistic choice of mine and that the relation between the three terms is in fact more complex.



the traveller, the lived time as the road, the possibility of encountering obstacles, turns, sideways, etc. In this case, the concept of life is metaphorical, because it is spoken of in terms of a comparison derived from life experience (the experience of travelling).

In the case of the text-textile metaphor and the metaphors of music or painting for the act of writing, the elements of comparison also seem self-evident. However, in Sobti's use of those combined metaphors, one witnesses an ambiguous phenomenon, namely the fact that the images which are used to reveal a meaning, to clarify it, become so complicated that they turn out to be a means of concealing the meaning – or surrounding it with mystery. In this process, writing becomes something 'magical' – Sobti indeed even uses the word magic (*jādū*).

In Sobti's depiction of the creative process, metaphors are often a way to confer depth to the discussion of the act of writing and, through images, to render it more complicated and less immediately recognisable and understandable. While discussing the author-text-reader relationships at the beginning of SAM, Sobti takes recourse to the text-textile metaphor, which she intermingles with the writer-painter topos.<sup>494</sup> Both metaphors are old literary topoi, familiar to most readers and easily comprehensible. The elements of comparison seem quite logical in both cases (namely the structure of a fabric for the textile metaphor and the creative activity for the painting analogy). Sobti adds another layer to her comparison between literature and art (or the writer and the painter) by bringing in the images of sounds, melodies and rhythms, that is to say, by adding an analogy between literature and music. Through this, she renders her image of the writer a bit more complicated as well, introducing more nuances in her portrayal of the creative process. Taken individually, these elements of comparison are easy to understand; it is their combination which generates a bewildering picture. The reader must carefully reconstruct the depiction of the process of writing in order to fully grasp Sobti's views.

The image of the textile-fabric refers to the structure and the construction of the text and its complexity. On the surface, it seems clear enough, like a piece of cloth, but the work underneath (the weaving) is intricate. At the level of form and meaning, it is the painting metaphor, conjoined with the music analogy (the sounds) which illustrates the specific quality and atmosphere that

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**494** Most texts of SAM have no titles nor any indication of a possible publication date. This very first essay of the volume, however, is one of the few to be titled, namely "Śabdoṃ ke ālok meṃ samay kā raṅg" (lit. The colour of time in the glow of words). The title is very promising, but the text remains elusive, providing a good illustration of the use of metaphors (the painting metaphor, in this case), to conceal rather than to reveal a meaning.

the choice of diction and wording will confer on a text. This analogy completes the field metaphor discussed earlier. While the first metaphor examined the time of emergence of a work, the textile-metaphor, combined with the painting-music metaphor, is used to explain the composition of the text itself. It is very close to Sobti's notion of the plurality of language (of heteroglossia, all the nuances of the words being paralleled here to the nuances of colours or sounds in painting or music), and to her idea of the material quality of language (language as possessing 'fabric' or 'texture') which enables the words to really recreate a universe. However, the use of those images becomes more complicated in Sobti's representation of the purpose of a text, namely to express not only the tangible and perceptible layer of meaning, but also, beneath it, what remains 'invisible' or 'silent'. First, the reader's attention will be captivated by the surface (the cloth), before seeing the structure of the text (its 'weaving', *bunat*). The two joint metaphors of textile and painting-music thus present Sobti's views of the existence, behind what is explicitly stated in a text, of another 'silent', 'invisible' text (as discussed in chapter three), a text which must be freely interpreted by the reader:

As straightforward and simple as the linguistic structure of any text seems to be on the level of creation, it is braided together in its structure and construction. The profound and particularly dynamic colours of the words present the existence of the text, its being and its appearance in the form of a dazzling writing. In order to obtain the expected or unexpected of a dialogue or a narrative through the combination of words, the light of the meaning emerges in the material of the outline as if applying the *brush* after the words and sounds have been moulded in a flash of colours and forms.

Simultaneously, the text knocks at the [door of] the self of the reader-to-be with liveliness and intelligibility, through its weaving, using the visible and the audible. Thus, reaching the innermost self of the reader from the pages, it spreads within her, in her sensitivity, in a friendly way.<sup>495</sup>

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495 SAM, Sobti 2015, 6, *Racnātmak star par kisī bhī pāṭh kī bhāṣik saṁracnā jitnī sīdhi-sādi aur saral hone kā ābhās detī hai, utnī hī saṁśliṣṭ gūṁth uskī bunāvaṭ aur banāvaṭ meṁ hotī hai. Śabdoṁ ke gambhīr aur viśiṣṭ gatiśil raṁg ek sāth pāṭh ke vajūd ko, uske astitva aur paharan ko ek dhaṛaktī likhat ke rūp meṁ prastut kar rahe hote haiṁ. Śabdoṁ ke saṁyojan se pāṭh vṛttānt athvā saṁvād ke pratyāśit aur apratyāśit tak pahuṁc pānā, śabdoṁ ke, dhvani ko sphūrt raṁg-rūp meṁ dhālkar unke arthoṁ kā āloḥ braś dvārā aṁkan ke samān hī ubhartā calā ātā hai.*

*Ek sāth panne se pāṭhak ke antar tak bhāṣāyī dṛśya-śrava ke saḥāre pāṭh kā mukhṛā sa-jagṭā aur sugamṭā se apnī bunat meṁ paṛhnevāle kī ātmā ko khaṭkhaṭāṭā hai aur antarmaṁ ke kapāṭ khulte hī maitrī bhāv se uske saṁvedan meṁ pasar jāṭā hai.*

Here, I have allowed myself some freedom in translation by interpreting the rather convoluted sentences. I translated the word *ātmā* (soul, self), as 'self', considering it to mean the inner self or psyche of the reader.

The textile metaphor is used to point out the intricate relationship between words, meaning and interpretation, but also between the reader, the text and the writer. The words are carriers of meanings; these meanings are not only dependent on the context, but also on the interpretation which each recipient of the discourse will associate with them, on the grounds of her personal experience and knowledge – this idea is by now familiar; it shows Sobti's proximity to modern linguistics and her fine feeling for idiolects. In specific situations, words indeed bear certain 'colours', i.e., particularities, induced by word associations, collocations and semantic fields. However, the textile metaphor is not sufficient to reflect Sobti's views of this plurality, because it carries with itself only the notion of interconnectedness and the 'material' quality of the language, i.e. its capacity to really 'create' an identity, a time, a setting. In order to develop her views on the multiplicity of nuances present in the words, Sobti therefore introduces the painting metaphor, which represents, together with the music analogy, the level of meaning, mental association and interpretation of a text.

Thus, the colours-words bring into the text all the nuances of life and language. However, this happens in a process that Sobti cannot really explain, which is some kind of magic:

Just at the moment when words touch upon an instant, an individual, a spectator or an event, they take on different shades and colours according to their own sensitivity.<sup>496</sup> How they [the colours] live again through the words, how they come into new existences, this astonishing magic is the particular sign of the memory and understanding of the human being. Time, place and the human impetus . . . the magical conjunction of a dynamic movement becomes sketched in such colour-combinations that a writer starts to look at the colours of the words in the harmony of the world outside, bringing to light the inner corners in his works.<sup>497</sup>

I would argue that, instead of clarifying the explanation of the creative process and the relationships of words and meanings (as well as of their transmission), the metaphors used here by Sobti result in a rather mysterious picture of the

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**496** Here again, I translate quite freely, keeping the meaning I understood. I refer the readers to the Hindi original.

**497** SAM, Sobti 2015: 7–8, *Kisi ek kṣaṇ ko, vyakti, dṛṣṭā aur ghaṭnā ko jaise hī śabd chūte haiṁ, unmeṁ ve raṅg prakāṣ hote haiṁ, jinheṁ vah saṁvedan viśeṣ se apne meṁ saṁjoe rahte haiṁ. Vah śabdoṁ ke mādhyam se kaise-kaise punarjīvit hote haiṁ, nae astitva meṁ āte haiṁ, yah vilikṣaṇ jādū mānaviṃya smṛti aur samajh kā viśliṣṭ ālekhan hai. Samay, sthan aur mānaviṃya ūrjā – gati kā aindrajaḷik samanvay kuch aiśi raṅg-saṅgati meṁ rekhāṅkit ho uṭṭā hai ki lekhaḥ bāhar ki duniyā ke tālmeḥ meṁ śabdoṁ ke raṅg dekhne lagtā hai aur apnī racnā-prakriyā meṁ antarkoṇoṁ ko ujāgar kar detā hai.*

writing process, thus conferring a magical power (*jādū*) to the creative process and to the words.

Drawing on Lakoff's notion of 'conceptual metaphor', it is possible to search for a broader understanding of the textile and painting metaphors. If writing is like weaving, the writer is a weaver, the pen is a loom, and the sentences (or their meaning) are the threads, intertwined to compose the fabric – i.e., the finished text. The colours of the fabric would then be the words with their nuances. However, it is precisely here that Sobti introduces the metaphor of painting. Painting implies the common comparison between words and images (present in ideas and expressions such as a 'depiction' of a situation or of 'getting the picture', in colloquial English, for example), and thus between the painter and the writer. The pen is here referred to as a brush,<sup>498</sup> and words become the colours and lines drawn which will compose the final picture. The element of light, essential to painting, is present as well. It reflects the particular meaning and the particular association of ideas brought about by the words, while the personal touch of the painter represents the nuances and the style of the writer. In the passage quoted above, Sobti elaborates on the metaphor of painting in order to reflect all elements of the process of writing. The structure of the work would be the outline of the painting (the first sketch, so to speak), which is then developed by filling in between the lines – the sounds of the words – as the component which will give the work (painting or text) its shape. The meaning expressed by the words is like the light of the painting, it is the dimension which will allow for the expression of all the aspects and emotions of human life. However, the words are also the colours, carrying cultural and even individual associations of ideas and creating a new life in a process that Sobti qualifies of 'astonishing magic' (*viliḱṣaṇ jādū*).<sup>499</sup>

The painting metaphor emphasises a later stage of the writing process than the field metaphor, namely the moment of writing itself, once the plot and the characters have already emerged from the memory banks. Still in the aforementioned essay published in SAM (*Śabdom ke ālok meṁ samay kā raṁg*), Sobti alludes to the position of the reader and her relation to the text. When a reader opens the text, she becomes interwoven with it because the structure of the text and the reader's mental associations with the words are being connected to her

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**498** Sobti uses the English word in the Hindi original. However, the word for pen, *qalam*, means both a pen and a painter's brush.

**499** There is a parallel between this representation of the process of writing and the idea of literature bringing a moment back to life, defying time. Indeed, in this passage, it is this idea that is expressed through the notion of time as being the 'colour' expressed by words, joined together in the text.

own self. The relationships between the reader, the text and the writer are entangled and complicated. They are represented through a double movement: initially towards simplicity – the ‘outline’ of the text, its fabric or structure – and then, from this simple form, towards the final form of the text, which is more complicated. The textile metaphor thus serves the purpose of laying bare the texture of a text, while the painting and music metaphor introduce the nuances – those peculiar to the writer with her singular background, as well as those of the words themselves, specific to an idiolect (to a character) or a context (to an epoch or a society). It is between those two layers that the text can ‘speak’ explicitly and implicitly, through what is clearly said as well as through the silences.

The form is influenced by the individuality of the artist, by her skill and sensitivity. Through it, the words are organised in a text and lend it their particular colours. This is what enables the language to express both the perceptible and the imperceptible of human experience and reality. It is important to note that for Sobti this opposition is always present: the text expresses explicitly and implicitly a meaning, at all times. It is the notion of the ‘silent text’ behind the text which was already alluded to earlier. Words have the ability to convey a meaning which is not necessarily intended or planned by the writer, through their own association and their own resonance in the reader. Thus, as Umberto Eco envisions it, a text remains open.<sup>500</sup> There is indeed an explicit meaning, a surface to the words. Beyond it, however, there are other layers of meaning which are not stressed on by the writer but left open to the interpretation of the reader. A good literary text always leaves room for this ‘silence’; it always expresses something more than a first shape or outline of the words (to take up Sobti’s painting metaphor). Through language and its capacity to reveal and conceal meaning, the writer is connected to a tradition, which she is constantly recreating. This is possible because the writer is related to her own time by her individual being and to literature through the language itself and its associations of ideas and echoes.<sup>501</sup>

Words are able to express a reality and an individuality. They catch the particularities and bring them forth again. In this way, they are like the nuances of colours in painting. However, they also interact with time and, in the act of reading, bring time to one unique point/moment – the text.

Just as in painting, the outline is made first and it is beneath it that the words combine and express the human feelings and experiences in all their

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**500** Eco 1976.

**501** See chapter five and the discussion of literature and time.

complexity. In the analogy to painting – the outline, the colours, the forms and the depth given by light – Sobti creates an image of the text which renders visible the notion of layers of understanding and the contrast between the outside (the general structure, the outline), and the inside (the human impressions, experiences, feelings and values), which a writer extracts from the words. Here Sobti perceives words as being set in their geographical, cultural, social and historical context.<sup>502</sup> However, Sobti also refers to a consciousness which pervades those layers and can be seen as trans-historic, an absolute consciousness, expressed by literature. This concurs with the notion of literature as connecting the human being to a larger context, which Sobti develops elsewhere in her depiction of literature as a link between a human (finite) temporality and a larger infinite temporality of life (in the order of nature). Here, it is the capacity of the insight of a writer to capture a reality (I would even say a truth) about life and the human being, which is emphasised. Such a truth goes beyond the notions of historical time and thus confer a huge power on the words (in a literary text), namely that of bringing forth a deeper knowledge of life. This knowledge possesses a universal quality and therefore transcends temporal and geographical boundaries.

The process of creation is never described in simple words by Sobti, and this reveals, on the one hand, something about her perception of it and, on the other hand, about the way she wishes it to be perceived. Although she has a democratic vision of writing and states in MSRS that her being a writer does not make her superior to or more special than another individual,<sup>503</sup> she systematically surrounds the process of creation with mystery, be it through passages of free verse depicting the expectation of inspiration<sup>504</sup> or, like in the extracts quoted above, through analogies with other arts and the activity of weaving, resulting in an “astounding magic” (*viliḱṣaṇ jādū*). Writing is presented as an intricate process which cannot be entirely explained and involves several layers of interaction and dialogue between the inside and the outside worlds of a creator as well as with the reader and with the time in which the writer lives. In the end, it cannot be fully

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**502** This idea corresponds with what was described of Sobti’s views on Hindi.

**503** See the very beginning of MSRS, Sobti 2015: 394: “There is nothing in me that would not be also in you.” *Mujhmeñ aisā kuch nahim jo āp meñ na ho*. And the following development on the unity of all human beings. The notion of ‘genius’ is absent from Sobti’s essays. However, her staging of the process of creation and her idea of a writer’s particular ability to see and listen hint at the special position of writers in life. The end of MSRS and its allusion to the ‘red lamp’ (*surkh cirāg*) of the poets can also be interpreted as a sign of the existence of such a special faculty within writers. See MSRS, Sobti 2015: 412.

**504** Like in MSRS, see chapter three.

explained, neither in simple words, nor with the help of metaphors. And yet, Sobti constantly uses metaphors in an attempt to describe the writing process – or maybe on the contrary, in order to create an aura of mystery around it.

Sobti does not only combine the textile metaphor with the painting metaphor. She also combines the image of weaving with a musical metaphor. The two metaphors of the text-textile and the text-music acquire a particular meaning in her texts. Weaving is not merely the act of joining together words – or elements of the plot – in order to create the texture of the text. It also becomes an image for the intermingling of personal experience, knowledge and imagination in order to create the specific character and atmosphere of a given text, to produce it in sounds (as music).

She [the Indian writer] examines and evaluates the situations around, she uncovers the repetitions spread under the layers of the upper open surface. She has joined together the account and the dialogue of the country in the bindings of the text; it is dense. [ . . . ] We writers, however small, big or common our talent may be, know this much: whatever the extent of our comportment and thinking, our social attitude and our individuality may be, our endeavours are carried forward, after transgressing our individual concerns and businesses, towards the point where the origin of a common nature is protected. The knot which binds society with time-space, and originates in the individual's inner core holds a special charm. In its linguistic and spiritual impulse, this powerful element is called the profession of literature. The 'thought' we [the writers] weave in the melody and rhythm of our own texts is a living immortality which changes evanescence into permanence. The aspects of thought, colour, shape, memory, shadow, emotions, situations, mutual relations, proximity are assembled in the known, unknown and familiar characters, in the heart and mind; emerging on the paper, sometimes they come and go, sometimes they run on even paths, sometimes they cut across each other. If the costumes are forgotten for a whole instant, then both the individuality of a writer and her style will constitute the subconscious of her former parts that unfolds on its own conditions and opens up in thousands and thousands of colours and forms, plays and is shaped.<sup>505</sup>

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**505** Speech given on Republic Day (26<sup>th</sup> of January) in 1997, at a meeting of the Bhāratīya Bhāṣā Paṛiṣad (The Association of the Indian Languages, which promotes Indian languages other than English), in SAM, Sobti 2015: 277: *Ār-pār kī sthitiyom ko jāmcā-ṣṛṭāltā hai, ūparī khol kī tahom tale pasre doharepan ko ughārā hai. Usne rāṣṭra ke vṛttānt aur saṁvād ko jis pāṭh kī baṁdīś meṁ bāṁdhā hai, vah ghanā hai. [ . . . ] Ham lekhak kitnī bhī choṭī-ḥarī yā sādḥāraṇ pratibhā ke dhani hom, itnā to jānte haiṁ ki hamārī ācār –vicār aur sāmājīk vyavahār vyaktitva kā vistār jo bhī ho, hamārī ceṣṭāem hamārī vyaktigat cintāom aur sarokārom kā atikramaṇ kar us or pravāhit hotī haiṁ, jahām sādḥāraṇtā kā ṭheṭh surakṣit hotā hai. Vyakti ke antaramṅ se ubharkar samāj aur deś-kāl kī guṁth meṁ jazb hotā rahtā hai. Apnī śabdīk aur ātmīk ūrjā meṁ yahī prāṇvān tattva sādḥitya kā sarokār kahlātā hai. Jis 'vicār' ko apne pāṭh ke lay-tāl meṁ bunte raṁṅ, rūp, smṛti, aks, bhāvnāe, sthitiyām, āpasarī sambandh, dūr-pās ke mukḥṛe jāne-anjāne-pahcāne pātr, dil aur dimāṅ meṁ guthe hue kāgāz par ubharte hue kabhī āmne-sāmne, kabhī samānāntar*

The ideas of ‘weaving’ and of ‘tying knots’ are present at two levels. In the very first part of the text, they refer to the situation which emerges from the intermingling of the society, the time and the country as a geographical location tied to a moment in time. The context thus created is a ‘knot’, it is composed, like fabric, of many little threads forming one reality. The author has to be aware of it. However, she is a weaver too: the writer weaves together (*bunnā*, in Hindi) all her experiences in the melody (*lay*) and the rhythm (*tāl*) of the text. At this second level, one finds another knot, namely the fabric of the work. Here, Sobti combines two perspectives on the text: on the one hand, the structure, the ‘guiding thread’ of the plot, which is expressed through the metaphor of weaving and represents, at the level of the text, the ideas which flow in it and all the influences received by the writer; and, on the other hand, the form of the text through the music metaphor. A text possesses a rhythm and a melody of its own, both of which are expressed through the words in their external quality, i.e., not as vehicles of content (level of structure, weaving metaphor), but as sounds (level of form, music metaphor).

More importantly, the writer has the ability to transform by means of a text an experience and an idea into something lasting, when she is able to reach the ‘common nature’ (*sādhāraṇtā*) of all human beings and its origin. The combined metaphor of plaid and music serves in this context as a support for the idea of a truth being revealed by literature, an idea which was also present in the quotes of the textile and painting metaphors.

What do the metaphors used by Sobti reveal about her vision of literature? Does the examination of such a passage with a focus on the metaphors uncover new perspectives?

Considering the world of experiences of the writer as the threads of a gigantic plaid (the structure of the text) emphasises more clearly the dialogue between society and the writers: it becomes more apparent that literature is a reflection of society and a reflection on society, including the possibility of discussing as well as presenting the changes at work at political and social levels. According to Sobti, this is indeed what the Indian writers – of all languages – have been doing since the independence. However, the writer is not only ‘reflecting’ or ‘mirroring’ society. By weaving together different elements, establishing connections (after the mysterious growing process in her inner soil), she is indeed ‘recreating’ a universe, and bringing new layers of thoughts to the

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*paṭriyom̄ par dauṛte, kabhī ek-dūsre ko ā-r-pār kāṭate hue. Lekhakiya vyaktitva aur uske śailī par-idhān ko kṣaṇ bhar ke lie bhūl jāem̄ to yah hai uske pichvāre kā avacetan jo apnī śartom̄ par ughaṛtā hai, aur sahasra-sahasra raṅg-rūpom̄ me khultā hai, khiltā hai aur rūpāyit hotā hai.*



reader through the combination of different elements of sound, voice, material reality, social setting or character. The writer creates new connections, new layers of meaning and understanding:

As natural as it seems to be a writer, it is not so simple. A writer assembles a large world within herself. In her own single limited unity, she makes a small inner world stand by the side of the big one. Despite being herself, she awakens from herself a teaching that gives her a great perspective. It connects her to the reality of the world spreading outside of her as well. It unifies her own inner solitude and the tumult of the outside. It connects her with her time and epoch. Not under anyone's pressure – from her own will.<sup>506</sup>

The writer emerges from this description and from the combined textile and painting-music-metaphors as a free creator, a free-willed individual, i.e., a somewhat different view to the one presented by the field metaphor. Nevertheless, the image of the fabric also shows how a writer's past and background are intermingled with the time in which she lives, the places she inhabits and the whole context of her life. Although writers construct their identity as authors and as individuals freely, they belong to an environment and a time, to a given culture and even to a particular educational background.<sup>507</sup>

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**506** Sobti 2015: 277–278, *Lekhak honā jitnā sahaj dīkhtā hai, vah utnā āsān hai nahīm. Lekhak ek baṛī duniyā ko apne meṁ sameṭe rahtā hai. Apnī ek sīmit ikāī meṁ ek choṭī antaramṅ duniyā ke baṛī ke pakṣa meṁ khaṛā kartā hai. Apne hone ke bāvjūd apne se ek aisī tālīm jagātā hai jo use ek baṛā paripekṣya detī hai. Use apne se bāhar phaile saṁsār ke yathārth se bhī joṛtī hai. Uske nij ke ātmik akānt aur bāhar ke śor ko ek kar detī hai. Use samay aur kāl se joṛ detā hai. Kisi ke dabāv meṁ nahīm – svecchā se.*

There is a similarity to Agyeya's notion of the world (i.e., the outside reality in which the writer lives) and the 'world' depicted in a fictional work. See my discussion of Agyeya in the introduction.

**507** See SAM, the aforementioned speech, Sobti 2015: 278: "Whatever the home is from which the writer emerges – both her creation and her life become assimilated in her writing. Light and strong winds, cold and warmth that she will have known, that she will have felt in her childhood, all will have been absorbed inside [herself] too. The child of every human being passes through these seasons. These mornings of a town, small town, village, city, metropole, wherever they have moved, in light and shadow, they will certainly have crept into [a writer's] being. Every day is soluble. The naughtiness of childhood, the playful tricks played before being a grown up, all of them would come alive from some indestructible corner and settle in the house of memory. This, piece by piece, drop by drop, gets mixed up in the text of a writer. It becomes one. The threads connected to this, the warp and woof, carry on after having drawn you very far. Then, who knows from where the elements are revealed, alongside the possibilities of the writer, all of her own abilities and limits. Standing on the eternal door of literature, how will the neophyte writer look at talent and creation; how does she accept her predecessors and elders, support or reject her contemporaries; how does she bring up new and old thought in her own inner views, put them there? All this restrains the relations of the

The metaphor of weaving and words such as *būnnā*, to weave; to plait, *gūmṭhnā*; to string; or *tānā* and *bānā*, warp and woof; appear regularly in Sobti's non-fictional writing. Their occurrences are not always relevant for the study of this metaphor, since they are sometimes used merely in the conventional and ordinary understanding of this image in everyday language.<sup>508</sup> Nevertheless, in Sobti's particular use of this metaphor, combined with the painting-music-metaphor, the image of the writer as a patient farmer or gardener which had emerged from the field metaphor is completed, in the second stage of the writing process, by the image of a much more pro-active writer, who establishes connections, weaves ideas and words together, and brings the nuances and subtleties of language and society together in her text. Although the writer is indeed a listener who has no control over the 'right time' for writing, she has an important creative role as the weaver of the elements present in her soil, in her 'memory banks' – those elements which reappear and are combined in a process that remains all the same mysterious, and indeed magical.

In Sobti's essays and even in her interviews, metaphors often serve both as illustrations of an idea and as mystifying elements to depict the creative process as a kind of magic. As the cases of MM, DoD and ZN have illustrated, language, in Sobti's novels, is the essential element which allows for the recreation of a

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writer to the writer and controls them. All this happens with every writer. Not occasionally, [but] again and again, each time the writer becomes 'old' in the form of a new work. She doesn't become old.

*Jis bhī cauḥaṭ se lekhak jāgrat hotā hai – uskā racāv-rasāv donom uske lekhan meṃ jazb hote cale jāte haiṃ. Havāem halkī-tikhī, sard-garm jo lekhak ne apne bacpan meṃ jānī hoṃgī, mahsūs kī hoṃgī, vah andar sokh bhī lī hoṃgī. Har insān kā baccā is mausamom ke bīc se guzartā hai. Vah subaheṃ jo śāhar-kasbe-gāmv-nagar-mahānagar, kahīm bhī dhūp-chārh meṃ laharāi hoṃgī, vah yakīnan uske vajūd meṃ ghulī hoṃgī. Har dīn ghulanśīl hai. Bacpan kā naṭa-khaṭpan, bālig hone ke pahle kī śārāteṃ amīṭ amkan se saḃiv ho smṛti ke talghar meṃ paṛī hoṃgī. Vahī katrā-katrā, būnd-būnd lekhak ke pāṭh meṃ ghul-mil jāti haiṃ. Ek ho jāti haiṃ. Inse juṛī vah ḍoreṃ, vah tānā-bānā bahut dūr tak apne ko khūnce lie caltā hai. Phir na jāne kahām se mukhṛā dikhāti haiṃ lekhak kī sambhāvnāem apnī pūrī kṣamtā aur sīmāom ke sāth! Sāhitya ke cirantan dvār par kharā nausikhiyā lekhak pratibhā aur sarjan ke kaise nihārtā hai, apne pichle prācīnom ko kaise apnī antardṣṭiyom meṃ tārtā hai ḍhāltā hai – yah sabhī kuch lekhak se lekhak ke sambandhom ko maryādīt kartā hai saṃyamīt kartā hai. Yah sab kuch har lekhak ke sāth ghaṭit hotā hai. Kabhī-kabhār nahīm, bār-bār, har bār, jab lekhak nāi kṛti ke rūp meṃ 'purānā' hotā hai. Vah purānā paṛtā nahīm."*

Beyond the writer's milieu and personal experience, she also must live in connection with the past and with her literary predecessors. She is thus embedded in a tradition.

**508** The text-textile metaphor is indeed, as already emphasised, a common 'conceptual metaphor' according to the definition of Lakoff 1993. It is frequent in everyday language and not only in Hindi.

psychological character, an ending era or a regional universe. However, through the intensive use of an elliptic and metaphoric language, the diction of a novel can also depict the mood and the distress of a single character, like in SAK.

#### 4.3.2 *Sūrajmukhī aṃdhere ke: Language and Mood*

Of Sobti's short novels, SAK is often considered the most 'Western'.<sup>509</sup> The story could indeed take place anywhere in the world. It is certainly one of Sobti's novels where the use of metaphorical language to render implicit meanings plays the most obvious role. Divided into three parts (*pūl*, Bridge; *surāṅge*, Tunnels; *ākāś*, Sky), it narrates in an unlinear order the story of Ratti, a young woman who was raped as a child and is since incapable of establishing a stable relationship with others – or developing a healthy relationship with herself. She attempts to connect with several men, without success, until she meets Divakar, a married man, with whom she will eventually be able to come to terms with the past and reconstruct her own self. The protagonists of the story belong to the upper middle-class. Ratti received a good education and is a working woman. Her close friend Reema and Reema's husband, Keshi, live comfortable lives in a villa in Shimla. All these elements exercise an influence on the vocabulary, where loanwords from English appear quite frequently. However, the most striking point in the wording of the text is the fact that the word 'rape' never occurs in the whole story: the rape is only hinted at. Indeed, during the whole first part of the story, the reader knows that something with Ratti is 'not quite right' but doesn't know what happened to cause her feeling of brokenness and outsiderdom. It is only in the second part, which delves into Ratti's childhood and early youth, that the rape is narrated – in veiled words. The titles of the three parts of the novel are already symbolical: *Pūl* (Bridge), *Surāṅge* (Tunnels), and *Ākāś* (Sky). They hint at the heroine's journey from darkness to the open sky. Metaphors are present within the whole text, which is very elliptic and leaves much for the readers to guess at or reconstitute themselves.

Throughout the short novel, the natural elements – snow, wind, fire, rain, water, sun – play a key role in hinting at Ratti's state (of mind and of body) and at her impossibility to reconcile with herself, both physically and mentally. The contrasts between heat and cold, darkness and light, flame and humidity are

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**509** See Usha Saksena Nilsson's article on a few Hindi novels and their treatment of women's experience, where the author points out the universality of SAK's story, see Saksena Nilsson 1977: 16: "There is nothing typically Indian in Ratika [Ratti, the main character of SAK]'s experience." Usha Saksena Nilsson is a well-known Hindi writer publishing under the name of Usha Priyamvada (Uṣā Priyamvadā, b. 1930).

omnipresent. This intensive use of metaphors corresponds to Sobti's poetics of the 'silent text' and demonstrates how the ellipses and images can contribute to recreating the mood of a protagonist who lives in the impossibility of speaking following a traumatic experience. The absence of the word 'rape' stems not from a social taboo, but rather from the psychological impossibility for the main protagonist to come to terms with the past and voice the trauma. This particular language is also the illustration of what Sobti calls a deep encounter with language.<sup>510</sup>

In her discussion of SAK, particularly in an essay devoted specifically to this text,<sup>511</sup> Sobti expounds on her relationship to language and the meanings of words. She dwells at some length on the specific language adopted for this novel, a language which was filled with double-entendre and metaphors, and yet presents a certain simplicity. It is interesting to note that the language used to describe the writing process of this novel differs a little from other descriptions of the same but matches the world of SAK itself. Here, one observes a great parallelism between the form of the discourse on writing and the text examined by this very discourse:

The echo of darkness is the complicated search of the human mind. Full of danger.

There ought not to be even a slight sound of steps while grasping the *transparency* of this desolated solitude.

*Sūrajmukhī* is a story springing from the ability to seize precisely such a moment.

Wounded memories. Sound of steps and obscurity.

[. . .]

I had to touch this instant, and I had to touch the face of this old Ratti who doesn't die, and her fear, her dilemma [. . .].

Outside, it was dry, very far. There was sand without any water. There was not a stream of water anywhere.

It had to be searched for and marked.

I want to admit that the writing was figurative. On the level of creation too.

Slowly, very slowly, after blind groping, brushing and cleaning, an image, hidden for years under layers of dust and darkness, came to light.

The writer had only one freedom. That of naming the story. For the rest, it only consisted of looking, only looking as with '*contact lenses*' on the eyes, for a long moment. With the same gaze two belligerents would have after fighting a long battle.<sup>512</sup>

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**510** See SAKeS, Sobti 2014: 393.

**511** SAKeS, Sobti 2014: 389–393.

**512** SAKeS, Sobti 2014: 390–391, *Āndhere kī pratiśruti mānavīya man kī jaṭilatam khoj hai. Jō-khim bhārī*.

Several of the main topics of interest that Sobti addresses in her non-fictional writings are manifest in this passage. Implicitly, the first sentence reflects Sobti's constant preoccupation with the human mind and the understanding of the human being which was already posited as the quest of the writer earlier.<sup>513</sup> Through SAK, Sobti attempts to grasp the depth of the trauma of rape and to show how an individual can build herself again in spite of all her fears. One of the main themes of the short novel is the loneliness of Ratti who, because of her trauma, is incapable of building a real relationship or establishing communication with others – until the visit to Reema's family, where the presence of the child and his acceptance of her prepare her to open up again to others. From the point of view of the writer, grasping precisely this feeling and showing it was a difficult task. The metaphorical (or figurative) language serves the purpose of expressing this, concealing direct meaning to convey the subtlety of the state of mind of the main protagonist. Because Ratti cannot speak, because she lives in silence, the writing of the novel itself becomes elliptic, figurative, and thus recreates precisely the mood of its main protagonist.

For the writer, during the process of creation, it was therefore important to remain aware of the very 'presence' of this silence behind the words and the power of the words to convey more, to express the 'unsaid'.

The metaphor of dryness (associated with barrenness) and water (streams) is a common way of speaking of fertility, but also of sexuality.<sup>514</sup> In the novel

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*Us virāne ekānt kī trāṁspereṁsi utār lene meṁ āhaṭ tak na honī cāhie.*

*Sūrajmukhī aise hī kṣaṇ ko uṭhā sakne kī kahānī hai.*

*Smṛtiyān ghāyal. Āhaṭ aur aṁdherā.*

[. . .]

*Us kṣaṇ ko chūnā thā aur chūnā thā us purānī na marnevālī Rattī kī us cāhat ko, Rattī ke ātan̄k ko, duvidhā ko [. . .].*

*Bāhar dūr-dūr tak sūkhā thā. Be-pānī ret thī. Pānī kā sotā kahūn thā nahīm.*

*Ise khojnā thā aur aṁkit karnā thā.*

*Svikārnā cāhūngī – likhnā gauṅ thā. Srjan ke star par bhī.*

*Haule se bahut haule se ṭaṭolkar jhāṛ-porichkar us ākṛti ko dhūp dikhātī thī jo barsom̄ dhūl-miṭṭī aur aṁdhere kī partom̄ ke nice lukī-ḍhakī thī.*

*Sirf ek chūṭ lekhaḱ ke pās thī. Kahānī ke nām̄karaṇ kī. Śoṣ to ek baṛe kṣaṇ ko āṁkhor̄ meṁ 'kāṁṭaiḱ-laiṁs' kī tarah lagākar dekhnā, bas, dekhnā-bhar thā. Aisi nazar se jo ek laṁbi laṛāī meṁ jūjhne ke bād laṛnevāle ko milti hai.*

As discussed earlier, it is not uncommon for Sobti to use figurative language and literary images while depicting the process of writing. Here, it is particularly the building of a scene, of the setting where the idea of the novel emerged from, which is close to Sobti's novel itself, as if the semantic field of the novel was rubbing off on the language of the essays as well.

513 See particularly the story of Rabia al-Basri and its discussion in chapter three.

514 One could consider it a conceptual metaphor in Lakoff's sense.

itself, the notions of heat and coldness are used to describe Ratti's frigidity (a reproach constantly made to her by the men she meets). In the final part, where Divakar makes his appearance, it is the image of water which is at the core of the depiction (in this case not merely implicit) of the sexual intercourse. Here, Sobti does not create a new image or a new metaphor but rather, by building on an existing concept, extends its idea to present the psychological state of her protagonist. She can then recreate precisely Ratti's mood in a very elliptic and economic language.

The water metaphor is very strong because water is the essential component of life. In SAK, Ratti's quest for herself and for the possibility of a relationship (meaning a relationship where sexual intercourse is possible as well), is a will to live, a search for the force of life. When she speaks of the 'old gaze' (*purānī dīṭh*) of Ratti and uses a vocabulary which implies that, though alive, the heroine is dead (coldness, *ṭhaṇḍh*; damp wood, *gīlī lakṛī*, are the terms which come again and again throughout the novel to describe her – in her own vision of herself – until the last part of the novel),<sup>515</sup> Sobti hints at the fact that the trauma of rape means death for her main protagonist.

Sobti uses the same images (coldness, dampness, dryness, barrenness, light, darkness) to explain the process of recovering the story from memory and experience: "Slowly, very slowly, after blind groping, brushing and cleaning, an image, hidden for years under layers of dust and darkness, came to light." This sentence reflects the process of the emergence of an idea and parallels the notion of the *smṛti bainks* (memory banks). However, instead of taking up the field metaphor again as she did in the context of ZN, Sobti adopts the metaphorical field specific to SAK to describe her writing process. The language, even in non-fictional writing, must correspond to the topic – and to a chosen range of metaphors. And yet, through the notion of the waiting for the sound of the character and the mood, through the use of the term 'contact lenses', which offer the writer her particular way of looking at the world, Sobti formulates once again, in the context of SAK, her image of the writer as a patient listener who, after a process of assimilation, can recreate a specific world, mood and setting. The particularity of SAK lies in the room left to silence and free interpretation, in the room given to the 'unspoken' in the text.

The last paragraph of the extract quoted above describes the neutrality of the writer, her place as an observer, and the distinction between the work and the writer. While writing SAK, there was no interference on Sobti's part, she claims, only observation – with the distance and even the conflict implied by

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515 See for example SAK, Sobti 1972: 17.

the metaphor of the two belligerents.<sup>516</sup> Through this, the story acquired its specific language, its idiosyncratic voice which echoes the protagonist's solitude and her inner world.

Words have a particular place in SAK. Sobti calls this her encounter with the soul (*ātmā*) of the words, their very 'self', a way of expressing the depth which the figurative use of language confers on each sentence in the very economic diction of the novel. It is precisely when less is explicitly stated, that the words gain more power and more depth. In SAK, it is not only a setting, an idiolect, nor even a specific psychological tension (like in MM), which is voiced through language, but the mood and the deep trauma of the main protagonist.<sup>517</sup>

This experience was extremely different and deeper than with '*Mitro marjānī*', '*Yārom ke yār*', '*Dār se bichuḍī*' . . .

This time, it was not the body of the words that I encountered, but their soul. And I am grateful to '*Sūrajmukhī*' for this encounter.

I have examined '*Sūrajmukhī*'s first and third draft. There is no modification. There was no room anywhere even for improving or embellishing a single sentence. On the level of language, there was no provision for polishing, no liberty of controlling. The melody of the whole story dissolved itself from itself into words and yours was only the power of telling as much as had to be told. There was this power because the soil of the story hadn't been prepared. It was there. It had deep roots. There was a surface, there were echoes, and they were right before the eyes.

In the writer's responsibility, there was this solitude of '*Sūrajmukhī*' – there was this isolation, so that a sound, a wrong word, would not only shake this solitude, but could also ruin it. If this didn't happen, then the irresistible aspiration to inscribe the old roughness would dissolve into the solitude of Ratti and, having wiped out all the signs and the old marks, would destroy them.

In the process of writing, it was my responsibility to be able to keep the frightful solitude of '*Sūrajmukhī*'. So that in the literary search, when one advances, no footstep should be heard. The eyes would look and not be amazed. What should be presented is what is, not what ought to be. Therefore, no 'passion', but objectivity was needed. And measure.

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**516** This and the notion of 'contact lenses' echoes Sobti's idea of the particular gaze of the writer, her analytical ability.

**517** As discussed earlier, Sobti speaks of the words in terms of families and represents them anthropomorphically. Here, the 'soul' or 'self' of the words signifies their deepest layer of meaning, their inner core, which resonates with the reader through the potential of figuration the words possess at a secondary level of understanding.

Through this alone, it was possible to establish this evidence of the dark places and the solitudes of the human mind – the sunflower.<sup>518</sup>

Sobti refers to her habit of writing three drafts of each of her works in order to make sure that she grasps the wording she is looking for, a wording which leaves room for the ‘silent text’ behind the text.<sup>519</sup> In the case of SAK, the first wording was already as she wished. The figurative language used and the ellipses do, indeed, offer a reflection on the state of mind and the mood of the protagonist, who lives within a silence and an impossibility to put explicit words on her trauma. Thus, in SAK, language becomes a tool to reconstruct exactly the feelings of the main character.

The idea of ‘telling as much as had to be told’ stresses the very economic use of language in SAK, but it also emphasises the notion of a ‘silent text’. Indeed, the unspoken is what leaves room for interpretation. In this ‘silence’ resides one of the peculiarities of literature, namely its ability to show reality (‘what is’) in a different light, to open it up to new perspectives through figurative representation. Metaphors can indeed be used to imply more than is directly said and generate new associations of ideas in the recipient of the discourse, even when they build on already existing and common concepts (water-fertility, for example, in the case of SAK). Although the central images of Sobti’s description of the process of writing in SAK reflect those of the novel, for the emergence of the work, she comes back to the field metaphor (the soil of the story, *kathā kī zamīn*). This

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**518** SAKeS, Sobti 2014: 393: *Yah anubhav ‘Mitro marjānī’, ‘Yāroṃ ke yār’, ‘Ḍār se bichuṛī’ se nitānt alag aur gahrā thā.*

*Is bār śabdōṃ kī māyaltā se nahīm – śabdōṃ kī ātmā se merā sāksātkār thā. Is sāksātkār ke lie maiṃ sūrajmukhī kī kṛtajña hūṃ.*

*‘Sūrajmukhī’ kī pahli aur tisri pratilipi ko jānckar dekhā hai. Koī parivartan nahīm. Vākyaṃś ko sudhārne saṃvārne tak kī kahīm koī guṃjāis nahīm thī. Bhāṣā ke star par koī juguṛ mānjāv yā kasāv kī chūṭ nahīm thī. Pūri kathā kī lay – apne āp hī śabdōṃ meṃ ghultī calī gāi aur jītnā jahām kahnā thā, usmeṃ āp hī apnī sāmarthya thī. Sāmarthya thī kyoṃki kathā kī zamīn banāi nahīm gāi thī. Vah thī. Jare gahrī thīṃ. Tah thī, guṃjal the aur āṃkhoṃ ke sāmne the.*

*Lekhak ke zimme to sūrajmukhī kā ek aisā ekānt thā –algāv thā jise koī svar, galat śabd na sirf us ekānt ko jhakjhor hī detā, use tahas-nahar bhī kar saktā thā. Yah bhī nahīm to purānī rūkhī rākh ko uker ḍālne kī adamyā ākāṃkṣā Rattī ke ekānt meṃ ghulākar purāne cinhoṃ aur sab niśānoṃ ko urā puṃchākar khatm kar detī.*

*Likhne ke daurān Sūrajmukhī ke bhayāvane ekānt ke akelepan ko surakṣit rakh saknā – bhar mere zimme thā. Kuch aise ki lekhakīya khoj meṃ pāṃv āge baṛhe to āhaṭ na ho. āṃkh dekhe to caurṃk nahīm. Jo hai, so prastut ho – vah nahīm jo honā cāhie. Iske lie ‘rāg’ nahīm, virāg cāhie thā. Aur cāhie thā saṃyam. Isī se āṃkit ho sakā mānavīya man ke āṃdheroṃ aur sannāṭoṃ kā yah dastāvej – sūrajmukhī.*

**519** On the subject, see interview with Tarun Bharatiya and Jayeeta Sharma, Sharma 1996, as well as the discussion of the notion of ‘silent text’ in chapter three.



metaphor, through the image of the emergence of the work from a plot of land nourished by the writer's own experience and the material from the outside, seems indeed to constitute the metaphor which best captures the process of creation in Sobti's eyes.

More importantly, in the context of SAK, the use of a metaphorical and elliptic language at the level of the text of the novel itself reflects another layer of Sobti's poetics of language, namely the capacity of language and words to recreate the mood and the psychological state of a character by drawing on all the possible associations and nuances implicitly present in the words.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

In the present chapter, the particular language, or rather languages, used by Sobti have been examined as part of a literary strategy of proximity to the plural linguistic reality – namely, Hindi's heteroglossic character. In this context, the notion of 'colours' offered by the painting metaphor enables us to point out all the nuances present within a language. Those nuances, which bear great similarity to Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia, represent for Sobti not only the specific languages of regions, social classes, milieux and epochs. They can also convey the feelings and the psychology of the protagonists, and even express the moods or the deep trauma of a character – sometimes, like in SAK, through silences and implicitness. The intensive use of rhetoric means, particularly of metaphors, allows the writer to further develop the language most suitable to the specific context of each work.

Looking at language in Sobti's texts enables us to highlight the most important aspects of her poetics. Language is for Sobti the place where the peculiar diction of a region, a social group or even an individual is expressed, a place where idiosyncrasies can flourish. Her vision of Hindi as a language including dialects, local forms, regionalisms, but also loanwords from other languages – Persian, Urdu, Arabic, Sanskrit, English, Braj, . . . – is part of a literary as well as political agenda. On the one hand, it mirrors her wish to present the reality as it is lived (the language as it is lived) by the prototypes of her protagonists, to genuinely recreate their universe through language – this constitutes the literary agenda. By doing this, she wants to remain, on the other hand, close to the people, opening up Hindi to all and making it a language which goes beyond social and regional borders to become the language of the modern Indian citizen, a democratic language, so to speak – this is the political agenda. Both agendas unite in the vision and depiction of a plural and tolerant society, without any hierarchisation or moral judgement.

Hindi, as a language with no fixed form and as the chosen official national language of India (*rāṣṭrabhāṣā*), offers precisely such a possibility of openness towards other linguistic forms, be it dialects, regionalisms, or borrowed words and structures. The Hindi writer Renu used local forms in the grammatical frame of standard Hindi in order to depict through sound and word the region he had set his novels in. Sobti wants to enlarge the scope of Hindi in the same manner in order to match the peculiar diction of her characters and the atmosphere of their universe. This quest for proximity to reality leads her to change her vocabulary and syntax with each new work, in perfect accordance with the social milieu, the universe and even the personality of her protagonists. In this way, the peasants of ZN have a deeply Punjabi-flavoured language, DoD is written in the peculiar Hindustani of old Delhi, and when the Indian upper middle-class is staged, like in AL or in SAK, English loanwords appear alongside what could be termed standard Hindi or the Hindi of the upper middle-class.

It would be however not enough for Sobti to ‘mimic’ the idiosyncratic language of a social group or a character in the dialogues alone: the diction has to flow into the whole text, to permeate even the level of the narration – either by an extradiegetic and omniscient (or ‘neutral’, i.e., not focalised) narrator or by a focalised narrator – in order to represent fully the universe of the protagonists of a novel. By doing this, Sobti also plays with the narrative levels. The focalisation is often blurred; it is sometimes difficult for the reader to know if she finds herself ‘in the head’ of one of the protagonists, so to speak, or if she is back in a more neutral narration.<sup>520</sup> Language participates in this game of focalisation because the peculiar choice of wording is not limited to direct and indirect speech but is omnipresent. This enables Sobti to really bring a setting, an atmosphere, a state of mind present and alive in the text. It is indeed through language that literature can fulfil its role of recreating a world, of bringing it back to life, a point which is essential for Sobti’s perception of literature, as chapter six will illustrate through the discussion of literature and time.

The metaphor constitutes Sobti’s main rhetorical means. It is not only omnipresent in her literary work; even in her non-fictional texts and in her interviews, she takes recourse to metaphors to describe the writing process. In this particular context, metaphors are both a way of illustrating an idea and a way of concealing meaning, of enveloping it into an image to confer on it a greater depth or an impression of depth. Language, indeed, is in possession of this function as well: it embellishes meaning and says more with less. Through this,

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<sup>520</sup> This is particularly apparent in DoD, but present in other texts as well.

Sobti stages the process of creation and the activity of the writer as something special, as something magical.

However, the metaphors used in the context of the non-fictional texts, particularly in the description of the writing process, also match the fictional text they refer to. If the most recurring metaphor is the field metaphor, while speaking of SAK, Sobti reuses the *topos* of water-fire and cold-heat in order to describe the creative process in this specific context as well as the emergence of the particularly figurative language of this novel. Thus, the boundaries between essay and literary writing become less clear, and, as in the case of the discussion of ZN, where prose was interwoven with free verse, the writing process is presented in a literary form, namely through the use of images.

The use of metaphors to describe the process of writing and the emergence of a work is often ambiguous. Metaphors are usually a means of either illustrating a meaning by making it more tangible and comprehensible or, on the contrary, a means of not speaking directly of the topic addressed. In the genre of the essay, it is commonly expected that rhetorical devices, such as the metaphor, explain a meaning, clarify it. With Sobti, however, it is not so clearly the case, as the combined metaphors of weaving, painting and music have shown. In this context, the intermingling of several layers of metaphors surrounds the process of creation with mystery, while showing that the writer is not merely a recipient or a transmitter of voices heard, but is much more active herself through her ability to assimilate what she has seen and heard and to establish connections, thus conveying, by her choice of words, all the nuances of the universe she has observed.

However, in the combined weaving and painting-music metaphors, the writing process is not fully explained, but rather described as the result of some kind of magic (*jādū*), which surpasses even the understanding of the writer. This depiction of the writing process as inexplicable and ultimately magical implies that the writer does not have full control over the text and the process of writing, as the field metaphor and the concept of memory banks have already established. Sometimes, something appears, comes out, which was absolutely unexpected. Something which surprises the writer herself; something which seems to have appeared of its own free will in order to expand an individual's vision and knowledge of the world. Interestingly, it is in the same manner that Sobti describes the apparition of her double, Hashmat, her mysterious alter ego.

## 5 Sobti – Hashmat, a Plural Identity

Sobti talks about herself as a ‘writer’ (*lekhak*), using a masculine noun, which in Hindi corresponds to a gender neutral form as well. As mentioned earlier, this can be read as a claim to speak for writers in general, but also as a strategy to avoid being labelled a ‘woman writer’ (*mahilā lekhak*) producing ‘women’s writing’ (*mahilā lekhan* or *strī lekhan*). This point seems particularly important with regard to Sobti, whose work has been so far analysed mostly from a gender perspective, focussing on gender roles and women’s emancipation. Sobti, however, was always opposed to such a narrow definition of herself, and one may wonder if her creation of a male alter ego, Hashmat, needs to be viewed in this perspective as well.

Hashmat, Sobti’s ‘double’, writes portraits and scenes of daily life in Delhi. He is a versatile and uninhibited chronicler who explores many sides of life without inhibitions. A closer look at the texts written under this penname – Sobti has never hidden herself behind him – show him as a much more complex figure than merely a ‘male version’ of Sobti. Indeed, Hashmat raises the question of the existence, within one’s self, of a multiplicity of voices, a question implicitly underlying previous discussions of Sobti’s process of writing (and her ability to hear and recreate many different voices). This question will be addressed further in chapter six through the issues of time and identity. Hashmat, as the double, is not only the ‘other self’ but in fact an extension of the self, allowing for a broader exploration of life.

In this chapter, I will first look at the question of the creation of a male double, Hashmat, and the male and female identities in writing, drawing on my discussion initiated in chapter three and related to Sobti’s self-representation as a writer, in opposition to the term ‘woman writer’. The next step will be to examine the double as the expansion of the self and, finally, as a partner of dialogue with the self, in an attempt to understand the very enigmatic figure of Hashmat.

### 5.1 Hashmat: A Double Identity?

It would be instructive to begin the enquiry into the nature of Hashmat’s identity with Sobti’s elucidation of her personal feeling of ‘doubleness’. In one interview, she explains it so:

My intellectual and creative responses have been deeply rooted to an eclectic and integrated human experience. I have always been conscious of two distinct elements merging

in me. I believe in the concept of Ardhanariswar – both male and female elements are combined creatively in content, language, style and imagination.<sup>521</sup>

Two distinct elements merging in one self: the male and the female, *ardhanārīśvara* (lit. ‘the lord who is half-woman’). This concept is very much present in Sobti’s thought and her perception of literature. *Ardhanārīśvara* is a figure of the god Shiva represented as half-man half-woman, the right side traditionally depicted with the attributes of the male god and the left side with those of the goddess (*devī*), usually Uma or Parvati. This merging of the male and the female elements into one figure, one image and one iconic representation, symbolises the unity of the male and female principles in the universe, of *puruṣa* (the consciousness, the awareness) and *prakṛti* (the nature, the matter). The female element is associated here with the original cosmic force (*śakti*) of the universe, whereas the male element is the organising principle and thought in the cosmos.

In Hinduism, the figure of *ardhanārīśvara* symbolises the merging of the opposites. According to Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, it is typical of the myths around Shiva to play with oppositions and contrasts<sup>522</sup> and it is precisely this alliance of opposites that renders the universe and the cosmos complete. The concept seems really appealing to Sobti as it parallels her notion of the writer as being able to comprehend the whole human life in every single one of its aspects.<sup>523</sup> Indeed, one can compare the writer’s search for the whole truth of human life and a cosmic vision of the unity of the world – of the unity of the male and female elements within it. In order to see and understand the world as a whole and the entire reality of life, a writer must also be able to adopt the point of view of both sexes.<sup>524</sup>

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521 Krishna Sobti in her interview with Tarun Bhartiya and Jayeeta Sharma in Sharma 1996: 111. Sobti is not the only woman writer who refers to the figure of *ardhanārīśvara*, the androgynous form of Shiva. Garg sees in *ardhanārīśvara* one of the mythical figures that gives a particular identity to women writers, see Garg 2013: 186–188.

522 See Doniger O’Flaherty 1980: 296 and 310–323.

523 See chapter three.

524 This also echoes Nabaneeta Dev Sen’s call to other women writers in her keynote address delivered at the 2001 conference on “Women writing in India at the Turn of the Century” and published in Jain 2007a. The figure she refers to is not *ardhanārīśvara*, however, but Hara-Gauri, another form of the Shiva-Parvati couple. See Jain 2007a: 18, “In order to make the fullest use of our talents, I genuinely feel, we women writers need to be androgynous in our hearts. Androgyny is the mantra favoured. In order to be good womanists, or even good humanists, we need to follow the Hara-Gauri image as our motto. Great art demands androgyny. [ . . . ] We shall always remain women writers, no amount of backlash can put us back into our shell again. It is broken. Once for all we know who we are. We want to know what the whole of life is all about. Not only ours, but theirs as well.” Two points are interesting in this call:

In view of this complementarity between man and woman highlighted by Sobti, one may ask oneself what role the character of Hashmat, Sobti's alter ego, plays for her. Who is Hashmat? Sobti's answer to this question is very direct and yet very intriguing: "My spiritual double – if at all I have any spirituality."<sup>525</sup> A double. An alter ego who is part of her spirituality – of what constitutes her mind and her personality.

Hashmat is a name attached to the persona of a supposedly male writer. The name has also been spoken of as Sobti's pseudonym or pen name, and yet it is difficult to really qualify it as such because Sobti is not hiding behind Hashmat as, say, Romain Gary (1914–1980) dissimulated his identity while writing under the name of Emile Ajar.<sup>526</sup> When the first volume of *Ham Hashmat* was published in 1977, Sobti's name appeared on the cover as well. Hashmat, therefore, is a double identity which is perfectly and consciously assumed by Sobti.<sup>527</sup> The word 'double' and the expression 'alter ego' shall be used here to designate the peculiar relationship between the two writerly identities. However, Hashmat constitutes more an expansion of the self of the writer into two distinct personalities designated by two different names than a division of the self. Unlike writers using pseudonyms to mask the link between their different literary personae, like Romain Gary/Emile Ajar, Sobti is not trying, with Hashmat, to write under another name in order to become another, with completely different worldviews and writing style (although Hashmat's style and the genre of his writings are manifestly different from Sobti's). Neither can her choice of a male alter ego be completely paralleled to the choice of writers like George Sand or George Eliot

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first, the implicit notion that a writer has to be a humanist, to represent human life and meditate on it; and second, the affirmation of a 'women's writing' as a new force in literature, a perception of the world which enables women writers to speak not only about their own lives, but also about those of men. The parallels to Sobti's views on literature (with the human being at its centre) are manifest. The main difference lies in Sobti's individualism which prevents her from identifying with women writers as a group.

**525** Interview with Tarun Bhartiya and Jayeeta Sharma in Sharma 1996: 116.

**526** Romain Gary was a French writer, film director and diplomat; he wrote novels under two pseudonyms: Romain Gary and Emile Ajar (his official name was Roman Kacew). He is the author of many acclaimed novels published under both names (*Les Cerfs-volants*, *Les Racines du ciel*, *La Vie devant soi*), but perhaps best known for being the only writer who won the Goncourt literary prize twice, once under the name Romain Gary and once as Emile Ajar. The writing style and range of vocabulary of the two are very distinct.

**527** The first pieces by Hashmat were published in literary magazines such as *Hamis*. I could not find the first publication date and thus do not know if Sobti had already revealed her identity in the very first texts. However, in later publications in magazines, Sobti's name is there next to Hashmat's, and the whole Delhi literary scene knew of this game of identities – and of the dress adopted by Sobti as Hashmat.

who created a new male identity for their persona as writers in order to be on equal terms with men.<sup>528</sup> The case of Hashmat rather brings to mind the case of Fernando Pessoa's many heteronyms inasmuch as Hashmat is a fictional character, staged by an author, who becomes another writer adopting a different style – and a different handwriting! – than his creator.<sup>529</sup> Since Sobti did not pretend to have no relationship whatsoever with Hashmat, one cannot really speak here of a pseudonym but ought rather to see the character of Hashmat as an imaginary author invented by Sobti to express something from herself that she felt was not part of her style (and persona) as Krishna Sobti.<sup>530</sup>

The portraits drawn by Hashmat acquired their final form and achieved fame in four volumes, published over more than five decades, between 1977 and 2019.<sup>531</sup> The title, *Ham Haśmat* ('I, Hashmat' or 'We, Hashmat'), already plays with the question of identity which lies at the core of the creation of this character. Indeed, the Hindi pronoun *ham* is ambiguous, since it can mean

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**528** However, there is a certain parallel between the three writers in the idea that the equality of status with men must be achieved and that the label of 'woman writer' is to be rejected. In that sense, when Sobti speaks, she clearly wants to dissociate herself from a certain mainstream of women's writing, just as Sand and Eliot did. In the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, be it in England or in France, women writers were commonly associated with minor genres of writing, more particularly with the sentimental novel and the moral novel, not with 'high literature'. The huge success of a novelist like Mme de Genlis in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century illustrates this tendency in women's writing, highlighting particularly the moralising tone of many of these texts (on the subject, see for example Reid 2011). Although several women writers were acclaimed and recognised (Germaine de Staël, Charlotte Brontë, for example), the general understanding of 'women's writing' was that of a minor genre. Genius and, as a due consequence, literary genius, was deemed to be masculine. For Sand as well as for Eliot, assuming a masculine identity through their pseudonyms was thus a way of expressing their status as equal to men's. On Sand and Eliot and their choice of a male pseudonym see for example Kolberstein 1996, Laporte 2001 or Karl 1995.

**529** The comparison with Pessoa remains limited to the fact that Hashmat is, according to Sobti, a man of flesh and blood who has his own personality – or rather, expresses a part of Sobti's personality – and writes with a freedom that Sobti as herself would not take. Pessoa's heteronyms – albeit more specifically the four Pessoa-Campos-Caeiro-Reis – all had their own biographies, opinions, styles and even physical appearance. This remains a unique case.

**530** In that respect, this is parallel to the phenomenon of writers assuming different names to write in different genres. While writing as Hashmat, Sobti assumes a different writer-identity, a different personality and another style of writing. The peculiarity of this case is that Hashmat's identity is constantly changing, that he becomes a form of writing game and an exploration field.

**531** It is difficult to find when and where the single texts were first published, but most of them appeared in magazines such as *Ham's* before the book was published, for example, the portrait of Upendranath Ashk (*Ham's*, March 1997, 14–20).

either 'I' or 'we'. Although it would be grammatically more accurate to translate *ham* in the plural form, in colloquial speech, and more specifically in the Hindustani Hindi used in those texts, it is the norm to use *ham* to denote a singular speaker – an 'I'. Due to the absence of the comma in Hindi (it is not compulsory), the ambiguity of the title is brought to yet another level, since it can be understood either as the separation of the two identities or as one single identity (I – Hashmat). It already becomes obvious here that the whole construction of the double is a game, confusing and complicating the question of identities.

The texts collected under this title are not, as one could expect from this brief introduction, told by a first-person narrator but mostly by a third-person narrator, as if Hashmat was being observed from the outside (by Sobti, perhaps, or by Sobti in complicity with the reader) and yet the focalisation hinges on him most of the time with the adoption of his voice and diction even outside of the direct or indirect speech. One particularity of this third person focalised narration is that it suddenly switches to a 'ham' which is not very clearly definable. Is it Hashmat alone? Is it Sobti and Hashmat? Is the reader included? The identity of the narrator is difficult to grasp here and this is obviously intentional.<sup>532</sup>

The first volume of HaH, published in 1977, contains fourteen portraits of many prominent Hindi writers (Nirmal Verma, Krishna Baldev Vaid, Bhisham Sahni, for example) and even the account of the first encounter between Hashmat and Hashmat/Sobti. The pieces are quite brief – rarely more than eight pages long – and usually narrate a meeting between Hashmat and the writer or the artist in question and an assessment of his writing (the writers and artists presented in this first volume are exclusively men) or, in the case of the publisher Shila Sandhu, of her work and personality. This first volume is the richest in the variety of the texts it contains. It includes seven brief pieces which are not portraits or literary comments on a writer's work, but depictions of social events or satirical tales of daily life. The second volume was released more than two decades later, in 1999, and is more voluminous.<sup>533</sup> It distinguishes itself by its use of the first-person singular pronoun *maim*, whereas the first volume used rather the first-person plural *ham*. It focuses on the portrayal of writers

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<sup>532</sup> The writing evolves a little between the four volumes and in the later volumes a *maim* (an 'I') emerges from time to time, without it being clear if it is Hashmat who speaks, or Sobti remarking on him. In the closing piece of the first volume, Hashmat meets Hashmat/Sobti and the pronoun is clearly a first person (sometimes 'I', sometimes 'we'), blurring even more the notions of identity. However, the content of this last piece clearly indicates that it is Sobti speaking about herself and not Hashmat.

<sup>533</sup> Several Hashmat pieces have been published in SeS as well, extracted from these two first volumes.



and artists, mixing satirical depictions with literary criticism. It is more ‘serious’ than the first volume, adopting partly the point of view of a literary critic. However, in the description of Hashmat’s actual meeting with the artist, something of the light and entertaining tone of the first volume comes back. The third volume came out in 2012, which was also the occasion to add a few portraits and scenes to the first two volumes in their reedition.<sup>534</sup> Finally, a last volume was published in 2019.<sup>535</sup> The later volumes include a few (rare) portraits of women writers. This emphasis put on the men belonging to the Hindi literary scene can be considered as Sobti’s way of asserting her equality with those writers or, indeed, as a reflection of Sobti’s own friendships. In the last piece of the first volume, she states that in the literary establishment she has more friends who are men than women.<sup>536</sup>

In these short satirical pieces, the reader learns that Hashmat is a writer who frequents the coffee houses of Delhi and is therefore familiar with all the Hindi writers and artists of the 1960s and 1970s. He presents himself as an easy-going chronicler of the life in Delhi, writing of his encounters with various figures of the Hindi public sphere in what the publishers have called ‘pen portraits’.<sup>537</sup> In these images of the literary circles of Delhi, Hashmat allows himself a great liberty of tone and analyses the writing style of his fellow writers quite ruthlessly. Hashmat’s irony and, on occasions, his sarcasm were not always well received by the other writers but were acclaimed by the public.<sup>538</sup>

Hashmat has an unmistakable style and a tone of his own. He speaks his mind freely, makes fun, cracks jokes at publishers and writers and adopts in every way a very irreverent tone. Of his life, the reader knows that he is poor,

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**534** This re-publication also saw some changes in the organisation of the first two volumes. Most importantly, the title of the last piece of the first volume, when Hashmat meets Hashmat/Sobti, was changed from “Haśmat se Haśmat mulākāt” (Meeting of Hashmat with Hashmat) to “Mulākāt Haśmat se Sobti ki” (Sobti’s meeting with Hashmat). It reflects more accurately the content of the piece, as shall be discussed in section 5.4; however, it also changes things in the identity game.

**535** As this volume was long not available to me for practical issues, it is not included in my discussion of Hashmat.

**536** See HaH, Sobti 2012: vol. 1: 267, “I have many men friends. I have few women friends. *Mere dost zyādā haiṁ. Merī dost kam haiṁ.*”

**537** The expression is not very clear but describes the fact that, while narrating meetings and discussions with several authors, Hashmat also comments on their literary style and on their writing.

**538** Even Krishna Baldev Vaid, a great friend of Sobti’s, had some objections to his own portrait in the first volume of HaH. See SVS, Sobti 2007: 50–51, and the discussion of this text in sections 5.2 and 5.3. However, as the many reprints of HaH attest, those texts are an ongoing success.

married and has children, tries – always unsuccessfully – to get published, and hates every sign of exploitation and luxury. He has no inhibitions whatsoever and always speaks his mind frankly, often in verse, and quotes Urdu and Persian poets. He seems very much embedded in the Hindustani culture, at ease with Hindi but at home as well with the Urdu-Persian tradition and employing a Hindustani typical of Delhi. A few lines from the text depicting the meeting with Vaid will illustrate this better:

[. . .] To himself, Hashmat had noticed that Vaid was all ears to the sentences he fabricated, so he said, laughing: “What meaningful rhymes are strung together! Friend, you are only writing theatre, why don’t you improve your hand through poetry as well? After reading ‘Bimal’<sup>539</sup> I have become convinced by your pen!”

Vaid placed a new order, forgetting to get food as well; Hashmat reminded him, taking [those rhymes] as an excuse:

“First alcohol  
Second youth  
Then shami-kebab”

Baldev ordered kebab but scolded me in a cruel manner –

“You too have started using such cheap tricks! I hadn’t expected that of you. I see that the way of thinking around here is turning very base.”

I too played my cards–

“What shall I say, brother, your influence on me is beginning to show.”

“What do you mean . . . .”

Vaid was startled.

“Look, Baldev, this manner is not mine but yours! Remember page 76 of your novel where you sing the immortal praise of Hindi literature . . . .”

Grumbling and mumbling, Baldev changed his attitude and said, relaxing:

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**539** *Bimal urf jāeṃ to jāeṅge kahāṃ* (1972, Bimal or if we are to go, then where?) is a novel by Vaid which was subjected to much criticism, amongst others the accusation of ‘obscenity’. Sobti was one of the few friends of his who supported him at the time of the debate. The novel follows a young man, Bimal, through his wanderings through Delhi and his description of his states of mind, of his struggles with inspiration, love and sexuality, and of his opinions. It is highly satirical and, one could argue, iconoclastic. Vaid in fact published it first in his own English translation (1972, *Bimal In Bog*) because of the accusation of ‘obscenity’.

“Friend, what nonsense is this, sitting in ‘Deviko’<sup>540</sup> by such a nice weather! Come, let’s switch the topic.”<sup>541</sup>

This passage and indeed the whole portrait shows Hashmat’s love for food, drink and the material aspects of life. It is an important dimension of Hashmat’s that he is, as a struggling and poor writer, constantly reminding the writers of the reality of life in its material aspects (the need for money, food, etc.) and not only of the need for their (sometimes idle and vain) intellectual discussions.<sup>542</sup>

The end of the portrayal of this meeting with Vaid is a good illustration of Hashmat’s tone as a literary critic as well:

One more thing.

Friends, leaving these light and entertaining dialogues aside, and apart from friendship or enmity, if you examine the revolutionary writing of Vaid, then, perplexed, you will want to take refuge in some art-gallery, escaping from writing and reading, in order to be able to look for some time at silent pictures.

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540 A bar in Shimla.

541 HaH, Sobti 2012: vol. 1, 44–45: [. . .] *Cupke-cupke Haśmat dekh cuke the ki apne gaḍhe hue har jumle par Vaid ke kān pharak rahe haiṃ so haṃskar kahā – ‘Kya arthvān tukeṃ milāi haiṃ! Yār, tum nātak to likhte hī ho, kavītā par bhī kyoṃ nahīṃ hāth māṃjate? ‘Vimal . . .’ ko paḍhkar to maiṃ tumhārī kāyal ho gayā hūṃ.’*

*Vaid ne orḍar nayā kiyā to khāne kī bhūl ko Haśmat ne bahāne se yād karvāyā –*

*‘Avval śarāb*

*Doyam śabāb*

*Soyam śāmi-kabāb.’*

*Baldev ne kabāb orḍar kar die maḡar zālīmānā aṃdāz meṃ hameṃ ghuṛkā –*

*‘Aise saste ṭoṭke tum bhī istemāl karne lage. Tumse aisī ummīd na thī. Dekhtā hūṃ yahām socne kā ḍhaṃḡ baṛā ṭuccā hotā jā rahā hai.’*

*Hamne bhī dahlā pheṃk diyā –*

*‘Kyā kahūṃ baṛe bhāi, mujh par to tumhārā hī asar ho gayā lagtā hai.’*

*‘Kyā matlab . . .’*

*Vaid bidak gae.*

*‘Dekh o Baldev, yah tarz merī nahūṃ, tumhārī hai! Yād karo apne upanyās kī pṛṣṭha saṃkhyā 76 jahām tumne hindī sāhitya par amar stotr kahe haiṃ . . .’*

*Ghūrte-ghūrte Baldev ne irādā badal liyā aur ḍhile paṛkar kahā –*

*‘Yār, aise pyāre mausam meṃ ‘Deviko’ meṃ baiṭhkar ham kyā bakvās kar rahe haiṃ! Āo, mazzmūn badal ḍāleṃ.’*

In my translation, I remain quite close to the original to give an impression of the tone and the constant shift between the narrating voices and focalisers.

542 This is obvious in Vaid’s portrait and in several other pieces of HaH, for example in “Davāt meṃ śirkat” (Attending a dinner party, HaH, Sobti 2012: vol. 1, 100–115) and in “Samāj-vādi kiṭī pāṛṭī” (A socialist kitty-party”, HaH, Sobti 2012: vol. 1, 160–169).

Vaid's writing is basically this expression of *high intensity* that maintains the ability to take the 'notation' of the heart from the brain and that of the brain from the heart. As a result, you have such a jingling and ringing noise that you would wish to shut it out – but you can't. You would wish to be far away – but you can't. This noise is much higher and more resounding than the noise of your being, of your living. Therefore, it doesn't only dominate Vaid badly but also his characters and his readers. Writers and readers of Hindi, if your vocabulary is weak or has begun to become 'anemic' at the moment, don't forget to read Vaid's literature; the magic of Hindi and Urdu will start to take possession of your mind.<sup>543</sup>

This extract can probably help understand the annoyance of some of Sobti's contemporaries with Hashmat. It also brings to light a certain liberty of tone which might be surprising. It is not so much the diction – indeed the choice of vocabulary is not strikingly familiar – as the freedom to speak one's mind that is remarkable here. With regard to Sobti's quote on the inhibitions of women writers in the Hindi sphere, one can understand that such a tone is not appropriate for women and probably not welcome in a woman. Indeed, a reading of novels such as *Am̄dhare baṁd kamre* (Rakesh, 1961) or a look at the collected texts of *Dillī ṭī hāus* (Vanshi, 2009) show that in spite of the openness and the modernity that the writers and artists endeavoured to demonstrate – in their opinions on women's rights and women's emancipation – their attitude remained ambivalent and in certain ways patronising. Sobti denounces this attitude on several occasions<sup>544</sup> and it is legitimate to wonder if what made Hashmat appear as a man and not as a woman was not precisely his liberty of tone and irreverence. Even in his literary commentaries of the works of Vaid, he does not depart from irony and a certain sense of humour. The phenomenon of the indefinite and switching

543 HaH, Sobti 2012: vol. 1, 56–57: *Ek bāt aur*.

*Dosto, in halke-phulke saṁvādoṃ se haṭkar dostī yā duṣmanī kī āṛ se āp Vaid ke krāntikārī lekhan kā jāyzā leṃ to ghabrākar likhne-paḍhne se dūr kisī āṛṭ-gailrī meṃ jākar punāh le lenā cāheṃge tāki āp kuch der tak to khāmoṣ tasvireṃ dekh sakeṃ.*

*Vaid kā lekhan buniyādi taur par us hāi inṭensiṭī kī abhivyakti hai jo dimāḡ se dil kā aur dil se dimāḡ kā 'noṭeśan' kar ḍālne kī sāmārthya rakhtā hai. Natījā – āpke pās sansanāhaṭ aur jhajhanāhaṭ kā ek aisā śor jise āp apne pās rakhnā cāheṃ aur na rakh sakeṃ. Dūr honā cāheṃ aur na ho sakeṃ. Vah śor āpke hone ke jīne ke śor se kahīṃ zyādā ūmcā aur guṅjāhaṭvālā hai. Isīlie vah sirf khud Vaid par hī nahīṃ, uske pātroṃ aur pāṭhakoṃ par bhī burī tarah se hāvī ho jātā hai. Hindī ke likhne-paḍhnevālo, agar āpki śabdāvalī kamzor hai yā hāl hī meṃ 'inimik' lagne laḡī hai to Vaid-sāhitya paḍhnā na bhūlie, hindī aur urdū donoṃ kā jādū āpke sir par caḍhkar bolne lageḡā.*

544 See for example the interview with Anamika, SAM, Sobti 2015: 190–191 or the discussion with Vaid, SVS, Sobti 2007: 139–158. In her piece on Hashmat published in the volume edited by Jain, Sobti makes the same point, stating that women must have the same freedom of expression as men. See Jain 2007a.

speaking voice in the text accentuates the light and free tone by producing the impression of a loose conversation or dialogue between Hashmat and his interlocutors but also between Hashmat, Sobti and the reader.

Hashmat is specifically defined by the freedom of his tone and his lack of inhibition. In one of her interviews, Sobti mentions briefly that, as Hashmat, she assumes a male identity and acquires thus more power: “Editors have the power to chop bits from your work. I too get that kind of a kick when I get rid of lines, a redundant passage. Or when I am writing as Hashmat. Then I assume some extra power and a masculine form – my stance changes, my language is different, I take on a new personality.”<sup>545</sup> It is not obvious from the phrasing if this power is the result of the male identity, but the fact that the two notions are linked in the same sentence suggests that they are intrinsically connected. The power to use words more directly, not to hesitate, is thus associated with masculinity. This echoes Virginia Woolf’s vision of male writing as described in the last chapter of *A Room of One’s Own*.<sup>546</sup> A woman who writes will still have some inhibitions and restraint because of the rules set by society and because of the standards imposed on women. Hashmat, on the other hand, doesn’t abide by conventions. Even for a man (especially considered that he is probably a Muslim man), he is breaking taboos: drinking and smoking, discussing all matters without any fear (from corruption and politics to the private life of the members of the Hindi literary sphere). Hashmat’s meeting with Vaid illustrates well the character of Sobti’s alter ego, his particular tone, and the specific equality this writer claims with Vaid. Unlike Sobti, who is an equal in the literary respect – with regard to the quality of her work and quest – Hashmat is Vaid’s equal as a man, a friend with whom it is possible to establish a relationship of comradeship – but also of competition.

I have so far looked at several extracts of the long dialogue between Vaid and Sobti from the perspective of the analysis of Sobti’s poetics. Referring the reader to them, I suggest a brief comparison of their general tone with Vaid’s portrait in HaH. Talking as Krishna Sobti, about literary themes and about life and writing with Vaid, her friend and contemporary, Sobti is serious and asserts her equality with him but also her professionalism. The dialogue is an affirmation of equality with Vaid, an affirmation of Sobti’s identity as a writer who deserves to have a place in the pantheon of Hindi literature (a place that she had already well established at the turn of the century when the two authors recorded their discussion in Shimla). As Hashmat, a few decades earlier,

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<sup>545</sup> Interview with Tarun Bharatiya and Jayeeta Sharma in Sharma 1996: 116.

<sup>546</sup> Woolf 1991.

the setting and the tone are different. Instead of a seminar room, the two authors meet in Deviko, a fancy bar, to have drinks and kebabs and to speak very freely as two old friends. There are no taboos and it is clear that the personality of Hashmat makes all barriers or inhibitions tumble down. Vaid does not speak with the same tone of respect towards his interlocutor either. In both cases, the relationship is one of equality, but in Vaid's portrait drawn by Hashmat, it is the equality between comrades having a drink and exchanging the latest gossip.

## 5.2 Male or Female Identity in Writing

Who is Hashmat, in that case? Apparently, a double who expresses a voice in Sobti which she would not express under her official name. Should then a form of inhibition on her part be read in the fact that she must chose a male voice to utter these opinions and to feel perfectly free? One observes that the liberty of tone and the jokes are not present in Sobti's dialogue with Vaid (SVS), whereas in Hashmat's interaction with the same writer, the reader has the impression that two old friends are meeting over a drink, sometimes teasing each other, sometimes comforting each other, but always good comrades. What makes Hashmat's writing 'male' and is there even such a thing as a 'male' writing? As I have discussed above, when Sobti touches upon the issue of women's writing, the idea of a writer's hybrid character (mixing male and female elements) is a recurring topic. It is illustrated in the figure of *ardhanārīśvara*, the incarnation of the writer's ability to see the world in all its aspects. As mentioned earlier, several women who were writers and thinkers have reflected on the question of a 'femine writing' and what it would imply. The notion that the mind is not exclusively female or male was already considered by Virginia Woolf in the last chapter of *A Room of One's Own*:

And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought.<sup>547</sup>

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547 Woolf 1991: 91–92.

Creation, literary writing, cannot be perfectly accomplished unless it combines the male and the female elements and brings them out in the literary work. Something immediately seems lacking in a writing that belongs to one gender only. Woolf elaborates on what she means by ‘gendered writing’, as I would call it for lack of a better term. It is, according to her, a writing that plays only on one side of the whole range of human experience in terms of emotions, rationality and intelligence. Her categorisation seems at first glance to be quite stereotyped by opposing a rational and self-assertive way of thinking (male writing) to a more emotional and psychological approach of the characters (female writing), where the author is not assertive but rather presenting the characters with their inner doubts and tensions. Nonetheless, in the examples she gives, Woolf makes it clear that these categorisations do not imply a strict separation between the sexes – a writer, even a man, can be feminine in his writing and, probably, a woman could be masculine as well, although Woolf doesn’t give any examples of this.

Sobti, however, doesn’t explain what she means by the complementarity of the masculine and the feminine elements of writing. It is therefore difficult to infer, solely from her description of Hashmat and of how he appeared in her study, what could be particularly masculine about him, apart the very fact of his being male or the complete lack of inhibition already highlighted.

Women’s writing has been defined in several ways: in terms of the range of experience it conveys – the women’s experiences, making it close to biographical writing, as in the case of other so-called ‘minorities’ literatures’ – or in literary terms with the idea of the ‘feminine voice’ being cyclical, non-linear, as Cixous describes it in her notion of *écriture féminine*.<sup>548</sup> For Cixous, indeed, the characteristics of *feminine writing* are the fluidity and the encompassing (maternal) element. In *Le Rire de la Méduse*, Cixous states that there are markedly ‘gendered’ writings – which do not necessarily correspond to the biological sex of the writer – and that *feminine writing* has yet to be fully expressed:

[. . .] for, with a few rare exceptions, there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity; exceptions so rare, in fact, that, after plowing through literature across languages, cultures, and ages, one can only be startled at this vain scouting mission. It is well known that the number of women writers (while having increased very slightly from the nineteenth century on) has always been ridiculously small. This is a useless and deceptive fact unless from their species of female writers we do not first deduct the immense majority whose workmanship is in no way different from male writing, and which either

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548 On Cixous’s notion of *écriture féminine* see, for example, her essay, *Le Rire de la Méduse*, in Cixous 2010 and several reflections on or reactions to this essay, Toril Moi 2002: chapter 6.

obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women (as sensitive-intuitive-dreamy, etc.).<sup>549</sup>

These distinctions lead Cixous to claim the right for women to write in an *écriture féminine* and thus assert themselves and reclaim their identity. Sobti does not share this point of view. As I have shown earlier, she has a vision of literature as encompassing a female and a male character. However, there seems to exist, for her as well, characteristics of women's writing and of men's writing. These are closer to Woolf's positions.<sup>550</sup>

Woolf, when she distinguishes between women's writing and men's writing, defines male writing by the directness and straightforwardness of the style: "Indeed, it was delightful to read a man's writing again. It was so direct, so straightforward after the writing of women. It indicated such freedom of mind, such liberty of person, such confidence in himself. One had a sense of physical well-being in the presence of this well-nourished, well-educated, free mind, which had never been thwarted or opposed, but had had full liberty from birth to stretch itself in whatever way it liked. All this was admirable."<sup>551</sup> Direct, straightforward and

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**549** Cixous 1976: 878; for the French original see Cixous 2010: 42–43.

**550** Although I do not believe that Sobti had read Cixous and I do not see much in common in their positions on female writing, there are points where the two authors share similar views. For both of them, there is the notion of a space in-between, between the genders, where the process of writing happens. See Cixous 1976: 883, "It will usually be said, thus disposing of sexual difference: either that all writing, to the extent that it materializes, is feminine; or, inversely – but it comes to the same thing – that the act of writing is equivalent to masculine masturbation (and so the woman who writes cuts herself out a paper penis); or that writing is bisexual, hence neuter, which again does away with differentiation. To admit that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death – to admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another. A process of different subjects knowing one another and beginning one another anew only from the living boundaries of the other: a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between, from which woman takes her forms (and man, in his turn); but that's his other history." For the French original see Cixous 2010: 51–52. This passage seems to me very close to Sobti's notion of the position of the writer as constantly inhabiting a space in-between, not merely with regard to gender but also between her inside world and the world outside, between the work and the reader, between society and the self. The idea that the process of writing is a perpetual exchange parallels the vision of writing as a dynamic dialogue which emerged in earlier chapters as Sobti's view of the creative process. It is also worth noting that, like Sobti, Cixous sees in this interaction – and in the writing that reflects it – a way of undoing death's work. I will come back to this specific capacity of literature in the following chapter.

**551** Woolf 1991: 93.



free are the most striking characteristics – derived, once again, from the difference in social status and education. However, on the other hand, feminine writing is, according to Woolf, letting the emotions and the connections be made between different faculties of the brain. Only when both the rational intellect and the emotional sides are combined can a text be suggestive and not ‘closed’ – not stating everything, but hinting or alluding to meanings, thus summoning up in the reader thousands of new ideas and images.<sup>552</sup> This power of suggestion is what is lacking in texts described as exclusively ‘male’:

What, then, it amounts to, if this theory of the two sides of the mind holds good, is that virility has now become self-conscious – men, that is to say, are now writing only with the male side of their brains. It is a mistake for a woman to read them, for she will inevitably look for something that she will not find. It is the power of suggestion that one most misses, I thought, taking Mr B the critic in my hand and reading, very carefully and very dutifully, his remarks upon the art of poetry. Very able they were, acute and full of learning; but the trouble was that his feelings no longer communicated; his mind seemed separated into different chambers; not a sound carried from one to the other.<sup>553</sup>

According to Woolf, writing must therefore be everything but gendered in order to encompass the reality and to be vested with the power of suggestion required to make literature a living space. This idea is indeed close to Sobti’s vision of *ardhanārīśvara* and to her rejection of the label of women’s writing. But how far can Hashmat be seen as an illustration of this idea? Or is Hashmat the expression of a plurality of identities in Sobti, a plurality which is acknowledged by several artists, especially writers?<sup>554</sup>

### 5.3 Becoming Hashmat: A Double, An Extension of the Self, or a Writing Game?

When Sobti discusses the creation of Hashmat, what is striking for the reader to begin with is her description of the natural way in which this ‘double’ appeared. Suddenly, he was there, at her working table, next to her, and took up

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<sup>552</sup> The notion of the suggested meaning is in fact a form of definition of literary writing in opposition to academic or scientific writing. It also reflects Sobti’s idea of a ‘silent text’.

<sup>553</sup> Woolf 1991: 94–95.

<sup>554</sup> I have already mentioned Romain Gary/Emile Ajar and Pessoa. One could also think of Stendhal’s many pseudonyms (Stendhal being only his most famous), all aiming at the creation and at the blurring of the identity of the author and the self. A name is always something that defines – and therefore limits. Changing or varying the names becomes, as a result, a way of overcoming such limitations and definitions.

the pen. It is not only the tone of Hashmat that is different; even his handwriting is not the same:

I will move from this [the discussion of the autobiographical elements in fiction writing] to another related theme: when in one and the same writer two personalities, two colours, two styles and two expressions are present. I was confronted with such a situation when ‘Hashmat’ appeared in my *study*. [. . .] While I was writing the first part of ‘Hashmat’, I didn’t feel at all that I was far from myself or that I was imposing someone else on myself. The linguistic idiom in which Hashmat’s face was revealed was neither new nor alien to me. For me, it was the environment of my social context in which I’ve always lived and [which] I was outlining, after instinctively assembling it in my consciousness. In his writing, nothing seemed new or unique. Neither had the thought been borrowed from somewhere, nor its connection of words. This was not a reinvention of Sobti.

[. . .] This is the reason why, in myself, in my solitude, on my table, the presence of ‘Hashmat’ didn’t seem incongruous to me at all. Between the two, there was no form of contradiction that I needed to solve. A miracle certainly occurred: in the very first line that Hashmat wrote, his writing became completely different from Sobti’s handwriting. Sobti’s handwriting always slants from right to left and Hashmat’s from left to right.<sup>555</sup>

In her discussion with Vaid, Sobti depicts the appearance of Hashmat in a way that is quite similar to that of the fictional characters of her novels.<sup>556</sup> Hashmat appeared at the outset of a sentence or a thought and was simply almost physically there. Interestingly, in the quote above, one notices the use of Hashmat and Sobti as if they were characters and not identical to the speaking subject – or rather, distinct parts of the speaking subject who, as the ‘self’, binds them together and is yet another, able to comment and analyse the two from a distance. Sobti speaks about herself and about Hashmat (herself as well) in the third person and discusses *Sobti’s handwriting* and *Hashmat’s handwriting*. This

555 SVS, Sobti 2007: 47–48, *Isī se juṛe dūsre mudde kī or baḍhūṅgī, jab ek hī lekhak meṃ do vyaktitva, do raṅg, do śailiyām aur do muhāvare prakāṭ hote haiṃ. Is sthiti se maiṃne sāḡsatkār kiyā jab apnī ṣṭaḍī meṃ mujhe ‘Haśmat’ kī upasthiti kā ābhās huā. [. . .] ‘Haśmat’ kā pahlā ḡkṛā likhte hue mujhe kataī nahīṃ lagā ki maiṃ apne se kahīṃ dūr hūṃ yā apne par kisī dūsre ko āropit kar rahī hūṃ. Jis bhāṣāyī muhāvare meṃ Haśmat kā mukhṛā ughaṛā vah mere lie na nayā thā aur na hī parāyā. Yah mere nikaṭ merī sāmājiktā kā paryāvaran thā jise maiṃ niranantar jī rahī thī aur apnī cetnā meṃ saḡ sameṭkar aṅkīt kar rahī thī. Mujhe uskī likhit meṃ kuch bhī na nayā lagā, na anokhā. Na soc kahīṃ se udhār par uṭhāī gāī thī aur na hī uskā sābdik vinyās. Yah Sobti kā punarānveṣaṃ bhī nahīṃ thā.*

[. . .] *Yahī kāraṅ hai ki apne meṃ, apne ekānt meṃ, apnī mez par ‘Haśmat’ kī upasthiti mujhe kataī aṭpaṭī nahīṃ lagī. donoṃ meṃ koī aisā antarvirodh nahīṃ thā jise mujhe suljhānā thā. Ek acraṅ zarūr ghaṭā ki ‘Haśmat’ kī pahlī pankti ke sāth hī Sobti kī likhāvaṭ se Haśmat kī likhāvaṭ bhīn ho gāī. Sobti ke akṣar dāeṃ se bāeṃ aur Haśmat ke bāeṃ se dāeṃ.*

556 See for instance the appearance of Mitro or of Pasho first through images or single sentences reverberating in the head of the writer.

must be looked at in the light of the discussion of the distinction between author, narrator and character in narratology. Sobti, the biographical author, is distinct from the two writer-identities she assumes, who, in turn, develop narrative voices of their own in their texts. Hashmat has a particular status because he is situated somewhere between a fictional character, a narrator – the texts of HaH are perceived through his perspective – and a writer-identity. Sobti presents him here as a writer, just like Sobti. In the texts, however, he can be perceived as a narrative voice – sometimes through direct first-person narration, at others through a focalisation on his point of view. Sometimes, he is an almost absent or neutral third person narrator.

His relationship with Sobti – as a figure which emerged from within her – is a complicated one. Indeed, both writers (Sobti and Hashmat) are part of Sobti's (or the biographical individual's) personality. Neither the experiences lived by Hashmat, nor his irony, vocabulary or tone are alien to her. It is merely a different form of expression from the one that Sobti adopts – hence the necessity of the double. Hashmat has a different function from that of Sobti the novelist. She writes fiction, he writes fictive or semi-fictive portraits and pen-sketches depicting the Hindi literary world, couched in a satirical and irreverent tone. This alone would not constitute a reason for the creation of a double. Indeed, many authors write in different genres and styles under one name only. However, the creation of an alter ego allows for much more freedom of imagination, choice of topics and perspectives on the world.

The vocabulary Hashmat uses is not only more casual than what is usually found in Sobti's writing – with the notable exception of *Yārom ke yār* (1968)<sup>557</sup> – it is also tinged with Urdu, something particularly typical for the Hindi of Delhi. This is certainly not mere chance. The abstract noun, *haśmat*, used here as a name, has Urdu roots (and is of Arabic origin); it denotes 'riches, wealth; pomp, state,' but also, 'retinue'. According to Sobti, however, the original meaning of the name is rather 'someone who is his own master', totally free and independent.<sup>558</sup> Such an interpretation certainly makes perfect sense with the personality of

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557 Indeed, one can wonder whether this short novel or long short story might not be seen as a prelude to the creation of Hashmat. There are similarities in the tone and choice of vocabulary (although the insults and lower-register words seem to be more accentuated in *Yārom ke yār*, in order to reflect the atmosphere of the clerks' office). However, the novel is a fiction and if satire and irony are present, there is also a sense of the tragedy of human life in it, namely in the character of Bhavani Babu who just lost his son and cannot find a way to express his sorrow. Interestingly enough, it is also the only one of Sobti's novels where no single female main protagonist features; like in HaH, the male environment predominates.

558 See the interview with Tarun Bhartiya and Jayeeta Sharma in Sharma 1996: 116–117.

*miyān* Hashmat, as Sobti sometimes calls him.<sup>559</sup> Beside the name, the handwriting also resembles slightly the Urdu script with its letters slanting towards the right (whereas Sobti the author has another type of handwriting). All this contributes to embedding Hashmat in a certain Hindustani culture of Delhi which mixes Hindu and Muslim heritage.<sup>560</sup>

Adopting a novel range of vocabulary is not particularly new for Sobti who adapts her diction for every work according to the setting and the characters. But Hashmat's irreverent and satirical tone is far removed from the more earnest tone of Sobti's novels. Hashmat is, according to Sobti, presenting the "social and literary *transparencies*" (*sāmājīk, sāhityīk trānsperensīz*)<sup>561</sup> of the Hindi writers who crowded the coffee and tea houses of Delhi at the time when Sobti herself was part of the literary scene. Sobti's use here of the now slightly dated English word, *transparencies*, referring to 'slides' or 'diapositives' that capture a moment in time and can be viewed and reviewed at leisure, is telling. Hashmat made his first appearance after a dinner party attended by writers and other members of the Hindi literary world, apparently at the very moment when Sobti was overcome by the feeling that they were all running in meaningless circles and getting nowhere. This produced a sense of *déjà vu* compounded by the realisation of her being at a distance from all the people present and looking at them from afar. When she sat down to write later that night, a new presence seemed to be there, presumably something male or masculine. It was Hashmat – and he stayed.<sup>562</sup> It can thus be inferred that there was a strong need for novelty and that this new personality expressed something which existed in Sobti, but without replacing the other writer-identity she possesses. The fact that he was a man is intriguing but is manifestly not the central aspect for Sobti herself. She perceived his voice

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559 *Miyān* is a form of address in Urdu used as a mark of kindness or respect. It can however have an ironical undertone as well. Sobti is always polite when she speaks about Hashmat, at times even using the plural as a mark of politeness. Nonetheless, irony is never very far away; Hashmat is not an alter ego to whom she looks up all the time, although it happens at some points. She has, for example, a great respect for his freedom of tone and freedom from inhibitions.

560 Not only in the texts of HaH, but also when Sobti speaks about Hashmat, Urdu words abound in her Hindi. This can be interpreted as a way to adopt Urdu or at least to draw on it, thus reaching out to a world of common cultural background and showing that this, too, is part of Sobti's personality and world. Indeed, in her native Punjab, Urdu was for a long time the language of the elite, the language taught in schools. Although she herself never learned the Urdu script, she considers this language a part of her cultural heritage. One of Hashmat's roles could thus also be to explore this facet of her reality.

561 See SVS, Sobti 2007: 49.

562 See the interview with Tarun Bhartiya and Jayeeta Sharma in Sharma 1996: 116.

as masculine and his type of writing as masculine and somehow feared at first that the ‘Sobti-voice’ could be threatened by this new voice before realising that they could in fact coexist. For her, Hashmat constituted, first and foremost, a way of expanding her range of experiences:

When Hashmat and I settled in my study after becoming ‘Ham Hashmat’, a feeling of intellectual expansion was awakened in me. Hashmat was not unknown to me. I kept hearing noiselessly his intonation and his expression in myself. He was close to my general attitude of friendliness and in his own speech he was capable of [both] an apparent self-indulgence and earnestness. I kept hearing his sharp aspersions inside myself. There were certainly two voices rising from one single individual.

[. . .] It was not only the grammatical difference of ‘ī’ and ‘ā’. Both voices were mine and both were distinct. I didn’t think ‘from these two, we will call one the masculine text and the other the non-masculine or feminine text’, because I was bothered by neither of them. On the literary level, there was no problem. The natural ease with which this became possible alone protected the existence of Hashmat. Both are posted in their own place, with their own respective expression and perspective. [. . .]

That there would be only one name in a single mind, in an individual, is natural; but that there would be two of them is not impossible either. All of us, in our hearts and minds, bring up pieces, sometimes of a united nature, sometimes of a two-fold nature as well, in such a way that the attitude would express the image of a delicate woman or the qualities proper to a man, and that it would be a mix of the respective influence of the one on the other.<sup>563</sup>

The coexistence of the two writer-personalities is indeed a sign of androgyny as both the masculine and the feminine aspects are present. However, the description Sobti gives here of this new ‘voice’ within herself is based more on the idea of the

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**563** Interview with Niranjan in SAM, Sobti 2015: 310–311; *Ham aur Haśmat jab ‘Ham Haśmat’ hokar merī s̥aḍī meṃ sthit ho gae to mujhe apne meṃ bauddhik vistār kā ahsās jagā. Haśmat mere nikaṭ anjān nahīn the. Unkā lahzā aur muhāvarā maiṃ beāhaṭ apne meṃ suntī rahī thī. Vah merī vaicārik mitratā ke karīb the aur apne vācan meṃ ek mancale dikhnevāle magar gambhīrtā ke kāyal the. Unki tikhi chīṃṭākaśī maiṃ khud apne meṃ suntī rahī thī. Yah zarūr ek hī vyakti meṃ se uṭhī do āvāzeṃ thīṃ.*

[. . .] *Vyākaraṇ ke anusār yah sirf ‘ī’ aur ‘ā’ kā antar nahīn thā. Donoṃ āvāzeṃ merī thīṃ aur donoṃ alag-alag thīṃ. Ismeṃ se ek ko puruṣ kā pāṭh kahemge aur dūse ko apuruṣ yā strī pāṭh – is par mujhe socnā nahīn thā, kyomki donoṃ ke sāth mujhe koī pareśānī nahīn thī. Racnātmak star par koī dikkat nahīn huī. Jis sahaj saḥūliyat se yah mumkin huā, usne hī Haśmat ke astitva ko surakṣit kiyā. Donoṃ apnī-apnī jagah par taināt haiṃ, apne-apne muhāvare aur nigabhānī ke sāth. [. . .]*

*Kisī ek sanjñā meṃ, vyakti meṃ sirf ek hī nāmdhārī maujūd ho, yah svabhāvik hai, magar do bhī hoṃ, yah asambhav nahīn. Ham sabhī ke dil-dimāg meṃ kabhī ikahare aur kabhī dohare svabhāvoṃvāle ṭukṛe bhī uge rahte haiṃ. Aise bhī ki vyavahār meṃ komal strī chavi yā puruṣocit guṇoṃ ki abhivyakti ho. Ek-dūse ke prabhāvoṃ kā mīśraṇ ho.*

multiplicity of points of views and identities in one single person – in one writer – than on the gender issue itself. Sobti insists that the difference was not merely one of gender, expressed through grammar (the long *ī* or *ā* being the usual ending of feminine nouns), but a dialogue within herself. She herself didn't consciously decide to build this mixed gender identity. It happened because it was there as a reality within herself. For Sobti, Hashmat is really a double, another part of her which needed to find a means of expression.

The connection to the image of *ardhanārīśvara* is implied here in the last paragraph with the idea of the 'mix' (*miśraṇ*) of the qualities of man and woman. According to Sobti, in every human being – and perhaps more specifically in an artist – more than one nature is present. Those natures are not necessarily gendered, or the gender can be used only to refer to a categorisation of some traits of personality. Indeed here, quite like Woolf, Sobti associates the 'earnestness' or 'gravity' with man and 'delicacy' with woman in a primarily stereotyped vision.<sup>564</sup>

The relationship between the construction of a male double and the notion of *ardhanārīśvara* is also hinted at in Vaid's considerations about Hashmat:

What you say about Hashmat is very interesting. Through a miracle of your imagination, he has given you a truly different self. But I had not thought that even his writing was different from yours. When I first saw Hashmat as you were creating him, it reminded me of the English writer George Eliot and of the French writer Georges Sand, and I was very pleased that you were perhaps showing, through Hashmat, that a writer is *androgynous* (he is as well man as woman). Virginia Woolf had said as much earlier. And nowadays many people, many thinkers and writers are saying this too. Writing Hashmat, you reduced the mutual distinction and the gap between man and woman, without omitting or losing anything.<sup>565</sup>

With his background as a professor of English literature, it is only natural that Vaid should make such parallels. However, it is striking that for him, this

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**564** The categorisation is very conventional and stereotyped (just like in Woolf), but it is also striking that Hashmat's tone is less earnest than Sobti's. This observation adds to the element of playfulness present in the creation of Hashmat. Nothing is ever as clearcut and defined as one could imagine it at first.

**565** SVS, Sobti 2007: 50, *Haśmat ke bare meṃ āp jo kah rahī haiṃ, bahut dilcasp hai. Use vākaī āpne ek alag asmitā de dī hai, apnī kalpnā ke kamāl se. Lekin maiṃne yah nahīṃ socā thā ki uskī likhāvāṭ bhī āpkī likhāvāṭ se alag hogī. Āpke race hue Haśmat ko jab maiṃne pahli bār dekhā to mujhe angrezi lekhikā Jorj Eliyaṭ aur frānsīsī lekhikā Jorj Saimḍ kā khayal āyā thā, aur maiṃ bahut khuś huā thā ki āp Haśmat ke mādhyam se śāyad yah sanket bhī de rahī haiṃ ki lekhak eṅdrojinas (nar bhī, mādā bhī) hotā hai. Virjaniyā Vulf ne bhī bahut pahle yah bāt kahī thī. Aur ājkal to bahut se log aur vicārak-lekhak yah bāt kah rahe haiṃ. Āpke Haśmat ko rackar nar aur mādā ke āpasī bhed aur vyavadhān ko kam kiyā hai – kuch gaṃvāe yā khoe bagair.*

double identity is clearly a way of expressing the double nature of the writer, not merely an assertion of women's equality with men. Like Woolf, Sobti seems indeed to see the key to good writing primarily in an understanding of the world that faces outward, in a complementarity that she sees symbolised in the figure of *ardhanārīśvara*:

No man or woman can become the creator of a good or less good work only on the grounds of a sexual division, after rising up from oppression and pressure. I will move towards the word *ardhanārīśvara* and the spiritual place connected to it that establishes our arts. If the qualities of men and women mix together and assemble in a unit, the energy of woman and the gravity of man – both grasp this creative heat that keenly expresses its best not in writing alone, but in the recreation of all the other arts as well.<sup>566</sup>

In philosophy or iconographic representations, *ardhanārīśvara* symbolises the ultimate non-duality of Shiva and *śaktī* (the power), of the male and female elements, but it also stands for the notion that all the opposing forces which constitute the world are in truth not distinct from each other in the non-duality of the world. If feminist interpretations of this figure always highlight the inequality hinted at in the name (the lord who is half woman, placing men indirectly higher than women in the hierarchy), the figure of *ardhanārīśvara* was traditionally understood as the evidence of this ultimate unity.

In the iconography as well as in the mythology, as both Doniger O'Flaherty and Goldberg emphasise in their respective works on the subject, it is clear that even if the fusion of the female and male elements is perceived as positive, this does not mean any propagation of an equality between the sexes that would or could be reflected in society.<sup>567</sup> It is difficult to know from the allusions and quotes given above to which vision of *ardhanārīśvara* Sobti refers. For her, the figure appears to be an expression of the ultimate union of seemingly opposite forces and concepts in the universe and of the possibility of combining them to obtain a whole picture. As such, it brings to mind once again Woolf's idea of the androgynous mind as it is also presented in the novel *Orlando*, where Orlando's double experience of the world is what ultimately makes her/him a full human being and a successful writer at the end of the novel.<sup>568</sup>

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566 Interview with Anamika in SAM, Sobti 2015: 196, *Utpiṛan, dabāvoṃ tale se uṭhā koi bhī strī yā puruṣ mātr ling-vibhājan se hī acchī aur kam acchī kṛti kā racayitā nahīn ho saktā. Ardhanārīśvara śabd aur use juṛe us ādhyātmik gahan kī or baṛhūṃgī jo hamārī kalāoṃ ko pratiṣṭhit kartā hai. Strī aur puruṣ donoṃ ke mile-jule guṇ ek ikāī meṃ ekatr hoṃ to strī kī ūrjā aur puruṣ kī gambhīrtā – donoṃ us racnātmak ūsmā ko grast karte haiṃ jo mātr lekhan meṃ hī nahīn, anya sabhī kalāoṃ kī punarracnā meṃ apne śreṣṭh ko prakhartā se abhivyakt karte haiṃ.*

567 See Doniger O'Flaherty 1980 and Goldberg 2002.

568 See Woolf 1990.

The parallel with Woolf's point of view is also manifest in Sobti's essay, "Discovering Hashmat", published in Jasbir Jain's collection of articles.<sup>569</sup> Sobti muses there on Hashmat's materialisation (first appearance) and about the difference there is or could be between the male and female writing, concluding that a writer – or any human being – possesses within herself both the female and the male elements:

I repeat, I do believe in the concept of *ardha-nareeshwar*. Bisexuality is not only a fantasy of a complex being, it is also a reality in creative arts. Any work of art is a product of a complicated cerebral activity. The creative spark is not exclusively in male intellectual energies and rhythms or in female ones. It is in both. And it is for the writer to mix the different elements, churn it to make different rhythms and transform it to its creative advantage. When I discovered Hashmat in me I was only looking for a different shade of my personality.<sup>570</sup>

Sobti brings here the image of *ardhanārīśvara* in order to express the artist's larger vision of life. Creativity is not only the apanage of men, nor would it be only that of women either. Like Woolf, Sobti perceives that the potential of a deep creativity lies in the ability to join both elements to form a whole being.

In her novels and essays, Sobti constantly refers to the key concepts of her own traditions. Here, I am consciously using the plural because it is manifest that Sobti moves about as naturally in the sanskritised context of Hindu mythology as in the stories and tales of the Punjab or in the world of Urdu or Persian poetry (this is most manifest in ZN). All this forms a background that is so deeply interiorised that she rarely feels the need to quote her sources or to be explicit in her references.<sup>571</sup>

Referencing and reinterpreting are typical traits of Sobti's works. The chapter about language and metaphors demonstrated how Sobti takes up, develops and eventually coins literary *topoi* in an innovative way. It might well be the same with the concept of *ardhanārīśvara* found in her discussion of women's literature and of Hashmat. Linking this notion with the creation of a literary double might just be only one of the possible interpretations of the figure of Hashmat.

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569 Jain 2007a.

570 Sobti in Jain 2007a: 22. I keep the spelling found in Jain's edition of the text.

571 It is indeed one of the great difficulties of translating her novels into a foreign language, since the richness of her heritage is liable to be lost or remains simply unclear to the translator. For the essays and other non-fictional texts, the same problem arises, with the difference that it is often more obvious that Sobti is alluding to existing concepts – as here with *ardhanārīśvara*.



## 5.4 The Double as the Space of a Dialogue With the Self

Beyond the question of gender, the persona of Hashmat confronts Sobti and the reader of the writings of both authors with the question of identity. The creation of the figure of the writer as Sobti builds it throughout her essays reaches here the high point with the construction of a double. The speaking voice in the pieces by Hashmat is not very clearly defined, although it could be argued that the pronoun *ham* (we) is to be interpreted as Hashmat's voice only (since in the highly colloquial speech he adopts, it is commonly used as a singular). However, Sobti speaks of 'becoming *ham hashmat*', and a very strong relationship persists between both writer-identities despite their differences in tone and genre.

The matter becomes yet more complicated when Hashmat meets Sobti and when he meets Hashmat-Sobti. To begin with, this takes place in the very first written piece by Hashmat, "Dāvat meṃ śirkāt" (Attending a dinner party), which is however not the opening text of the first volume of HaH.

As the title indicates, the piece describes an evening party which takes place at the house of the Hindi writer Bhisham Sahni. While making his way through the crowd of eminent guests, commenting on them and the fashion of the ladies, Hashmat stops to observe a woman in black helping herself to food. He asks who she is and learns that it is Madam Sobti. Through Hashmat's eyes, the reader is given here a self-portrait of Sobti from the point of view of another, a point that is very central in this context.<sup>572</sup> Indeed, Sobti highlights later in the meeting of Hashmat with himself/Sobti the difference between self-perception and perception of the self by others.<sup>573</sup> Hashmat offers the possibility to do both, because he is at the same time the 'self' and the 'other'. In his first assessment of his alter ego, Hashmat does not spare Sobti:<sup>574</sup>

A lady finely dressed in black clothes was ordering a *coke*. Upon asking, I learned that it was *Madam Sobti*.

Because it was the first time that he saw her in such an assembly, Hashmat stepped back to examine her. Let's find out on which reality this vivacious air is applied, in fact. A stiff body and polite speech. Hashmat understood quickly that under this personality there

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572 For a detailed analysis of Hashmat's meeting with Hashmat/Sobti, see Browarczyk 2017.

573 See HaH, Sobti 2012, vol. 1: 253.

574 In this game on identities; if Hashmat is Sobti's alter ego, she is his alter ego as well.

must be a pride of a dangerous kind covered up. An air as if all were her subjects. Involuntarily, he felt the need to go to her and whisper in her ear:

“The princely states are gone, your Highness! Change your humour and attitude a bit!”<sup>575</sup>

Here, one has an example of the possibilities of observation and distantiation from the self which are offered by the creation of the double. A literary alter ego constitutes not only at the literary level another who presents a widening of the personality and of its range of possible experiences; on the personal level as well, it is both a mirror and a judge, a lens through which a writer can examine herself and reflect upon the self. This reflection and distantiation is enhanced by the perspectives of narration. Although Hashmat is the focaliser during the whole extract (and the whole piece), the narration switches from the first person to the third very smoothly, thus putting yet a greater distance between the observer and the object of the observation. However, throughout the text, the narration passes from the ‘I’ to the ‘he’ constantly; this narrative strategy produces an effect which is almost cinematographic of alternating close-ups and wide shots. It is the space where an ironic (distant) description may develop. Indeed, through the irony towards the ‘lady all in black’ and her airs, the criticism of her own deportment shows Sobti’s awareness of how her personality is perceived from the outside and her ability to think about it with the same objectivity she uses for her characters. In this passage, ‘Madam Sobti’ becomes, indeed, a character in a narrative, through an external observation. This latter point is taken up again in the second encounter between Hashmat and Sobti/Hashmat, at the end of the first volume of HaH, in “Mulakāt haśmat se sobtī kī” (Sobti’s meeting with Hashmat).

This last portrait of the first volume is particularly interesting because it distinguishes itself from the general tone of the other texts included here and is much closer to the voice of Sobti in her essays and other non-fictional texts. In fact, some passages of this last piece which describe certain of Sobti’s works are found almost word for word in essays published later.<sup>576</sup> When Hashmat

575 HaH, Sobti 2012, vol. 1: 105: *Kāle libās meṃ saji-ḍhakī ek khātūn kok kī farmāis kar rahī thiṃ. Pūchne par mālūm huā mādām Sobtī haiṃ.*

*Aise mazme meṃ inheṃ kyoṃki pahlī bār dekhā thā, islie jānc-partāl ke liye Haśmat piche-piche ho liye. Jis asliyat par damkhamvālā yah khol hai, patā to lage ākhir ciz hai kis pāe kī. Kāṭhī kaṛiyal aur guftagū sāistā. Haśmat jaldī hī samajh gae ki is vyaktitva ke nice ḍhakā gumān bayā khatarnāk kism kā honā cāhie. Nigāh kuch aisī ki sabhī unki riyaṃ haiṃ. Beikhtiyār tabiyat huī ki unke kān meṃ jākar kaheṃ –*

*‘Riyāsatēṃ to khatm ho gaṃṃ huzūr! Thoṛā mizāj aur aṃdāz badlie.’*

576 It is particularly striking with the discussion of SAK as it is found in SAKeS, Sobti 2014: 389–393 and HaH, Sobti 2012: vol. 1, 252–271. In fact, it seems that this piece is a slightly re-

meets Hashmat, as the title promises, it is actually Sobti that he meets.<sup>577</sup> Earlier in my analysis, for example in the dialogue with Vaid, it was obvious that for the speaking Sobti, both writer-identities (Hashmat and Sobti) were distinct. Here, they appear to be very close indeed, so much so that one is compelled to ask who is the speaking voice? Who is Sobti and who is Hashmat?

If in most of the other portraits and scenes found in HaH, there can be no doubt that Hashmat is the focaliser and that he is a man, commenting often on women as well – and stating what he finds attractive or not in them – in this last piece of the volume, the tone and the situation change. The tone becomes milder, less ironical, less mordant. Sobti starts by describing, in her usual discreet way when it comes to her private life, the fact that she never settled, never married, and led therefore a quite independent life, away from the turmoil of the world.<sup>578</sup> In her independence, she developed a way of life of her own that is not perceived in the same way from the outside and the inside:

When I look at myself with the eyes of others, I see an arrogant and vain woman, dressed in a shining gown, with an air of being different from others.

When I scrutinize myself, I see a simple, self-contained person, on whom both time and god have not shown much mercy, and yet – drawing strength from her own self – still vivacious.<sup>579</sup>

Hashmat, in the first piece, saw Sobti through the eyes of another. This capacity to see one's self from the outside is a gift for a writer. It is a token of objectivity and self-awareness. But it is also a sign of the multiplicity of the self, since a certain distance from the observed object is needed for such a reflection. The double, the alter ego, is here an instrument used to change the perspective regarding the self, to look at it with fresh eyes. In one of Sobti's quotes on Hashmat given above, the writer used the idiom 'intellectual expansion' (*bauddhik*

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written version of an autobiographical text written for the collection of autobiographical notes of Hindi writers edited by Kamleshwar and first published in 1980, See Kamleshwar 1980: 85–104.

**577** As indicated earlier, the title was modified in later editions from “Haśmat se haśmat mulakāt” (Meeting of Hashmat with Hasmat) to “Mulakāt haśmat se sobti kī” (Sobti's meeting with Hashmat).

**578** Sobti is indeed very discreet when it comes to commenting on her private life, see for example the more autobiographical part in MSRS, Sobti 2014: 406–409 or the interviews recorded in SAM, Sobti 2015: 178–179 and 306–310.

**579** HaH, Sobti 2012: vol. 1, 253, *Dūsrom kī nigāh se apne ko dekhtī hūm to ek magrūr ghamāṅḍī aurat, camak-damakvālā libās aur apne ko dūsrom se alag samajhnevālā aṁdāz.*

*Apnī nazar se apne ko jānctī hūm to ek sidhī-sādī khuddār śakhsīyat. Vakt aur khudā donom hi jis par zyādā mehrabān nahīm – phir bhī apne jigre ke zor se zindādil.*

*vistār*) to describe the end result, the fallout of Hashmat's emergence. This is indeed what is witnessed here. The second identity is an expansion of the first, which provides the latter with a new range of experiences as well as with the distance towards the self that allows reflection upon it. Thus, Hashmat serves many purposes in the course of the small pieces written from his perspective and in his hand.

The aspect of dialogue, which is always important in Sobti's eyes, takes on another dimension through the constitution of a dialogue with the self – constructed as an 'other'. It seems possible to draw a parallel here to Martin Buber's vision of a constant relation, i.e., a constant interaction, not only between a subject and the outside world (a relationship which was stressed in the preceding chapters), but also between the self and the self, in its own multiplicity.<sup>580</sup>

The specificity of the style of the last piece of the first volume of HaH, is that it suddenly resembles more Sobti's own wording than Hashmat's irony and sarcasm. In meeting herself, Sobti/Hashmat pauses to reflect first on the perception of her personality from an outsider's point of view before comparing this with her self-perception, which is quite different. This enables her to explain her process of writing in a way that parallels other essays written in Sobti's hand. In this text, Sobti reveals discreetly how she perceives her own solitude and how this nurtures her writing and the processes of creation. She then goes on to discuss her works published at the time of writing this piece (in the 1970s, that is). Interestingly enough, the text closes with a description of a box – which can be seen as the chest holding the trousseau of a future bride – containing a manuscript and earth which is still untouched, until the right time for writing comes.<sup>581</sup> This time is, of course, the time to write ZN – a time that was to come just a few years later.

The metaphors used throughout “Mulakāt haśmat se sobtī kī” (Sobti's meeting with Hashmat) are worth analysing. Using the *topos* of water and rivers to symbolise the flow of inspiration and the journey of life, Sobti constructs them both as images for the passing of time and the awareness of death. Crossing a river during the monsoon illustrates the realisation of the presence of death at every moment of life, and this newly obtained awareness can in turn be formed into literary writing:<sup>582</sup>

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**580** See Buber 1979.

**581** It is Monika Browarczyk's interpretation (Browarczyk 2017), and I agree with her, that this manuscript / piece of earth is the future ZN. Indeed, the last sentences, which contain a promise to the readers that if the box is opened, they shall meet the author again, as well as an allusion to a novel, indicate that this is really what Sobti means. See HaH, Sobti 2012: vol. 1, 271.

**582** The metaphor of water flowing to represent time or the stream of time is a conceptual metaphor in Lakoff's sense (see Lakoff 1993). Drawing on this common metaphor, Sobti binds

[Once], while journeying from Sahibganj to Manihari Gali Ghat,<sup>583</sup> standing on the *boat* and leaning on the *railing* I looked, in the darkness of the night, at the story of my former lives, at their water-like travels, on the surface. In these very waves in the soft and wet darkness, I had been swimming but now, lingering on the Ganges, I have to reach this moon. There. There. In these few hours of travel it was as if I had recognised the threshold between this world and the other. I wasn't afraid. It seemed as if I didn't have a body and as if I was waking up the thirst of my own wants. I am bathing. I am going to bathe. Living fully, a little as if my freedom and my achievement was in this water. In this darkness.<sup>584</sup>

This passage is representative of Sobti's use of metaphors and particular situations and settings to describe the process of creation – and surround it with mystery. The water forms a leitmotiv in the essays and corresponds to the idea of a flow associated sometimes with inspiration and sometimes with the passing of time. In this passage, the metaphor is that of a crossing. It places Sobti – the writer – in a position 'in-between the worlds', a position in the middle, once again. This symbolises the role of the writer as a transmitter, as well as the journey of life between birth and death and their constant interactions in life.

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in the following quote the feeling of time and transitoriness with literature. This parallels her views on time and literature which will be discussed in the following chapter. As we will see, the Ganges is the river of death (and life), which enables the writer to understand the reality and the presence of death and, subsequently, to live the moment more intensely (the next scene of "Mulakāt haśmat se sobti kī" depicts how Sobti ate with more appetite after this instant of awareness on the deck of the ship).

**583** Sahibganj is a town on the Ganges in the state of Jharkhand; Manihari Ghat is another town on the Ganges, in the state of Bihar. A ferry connects both locations and was for a long time a very busy route used by travellers going to Darjeeling.

**584** HaH, Sobti 2012, vol.1, 255, *Sāhibganj meṃ maṇihārī galī ghāṭ pahūncne ke daurān boṭ par relīng ke sahāre khāṛe-khāṛe maiṃne rāt ke aṃdhere meṃ apne pūrvajanmoṃ ke itihās, unki yātrāmeṃ pānī kī tarah satah par dekh dāle. Inhūṃ laharoṃ meṃ pighle gīle aṃdhere meṃ maiṃ tairtī rahī hūṃ lekin ab mujhe gaṅgā par laṭke us cāṃd par pahūncnā hai. Vahāṃ. Vahāṃ. Un kuch ghaṇṭoṃ kī yātrā meṃ maiṃne is lok se dūse meṃ le jānevālī dehrī ko jaise pahcān liyā thā. Dar nahīṃ thā. Lagā kuch aisā kī mujh par merī deh nahīṃ hai aur maiṃ apne abhāvōṃ kī pyās ko jagātī hūṃ. Nahātī hūṃ. Nahātī calī jātī hūṃ. Jī bhar-bhar kuch is tarah kī merī mukti aur prāpti isī pānī meṃ hai. Isī aṃdhere meṃ hai.*

Darkness, bathing and freedom through movement are associated with death at the end of Sobti's novel AL as well. These are recurring images for her. The writer also demonstrates here that the freedom from the fear of death enables her to look more fully at life – and to write.

One could also note here the water metaphor and its connection to Sobti's vision of time as the Ganges-flow, a topic which will be elaborated on in chapter six. Yet more intriguing is the parallel between this intense life experience and the notion of 'moments of being' which Virginia Woolf developed through her posthumously published autobiographical writings (see Woolf 1976 and my analysis in chapter six). I must admit that I do not know if Sobti could have read them at the time of writing "Mulakāt haśmat se sobti kī", since this text is difficult to date precisely.

In “Mulakāt haśmat se sobtī kī”, the river is on the one hand a metaphor for the journey of life, for the passing of time – through the association with the Ganges.<sup>585</sup> On the other hand, it is an image of life itself, as in a later passage of the same text, where Sobti, hiking in the Himalayas in summer, exhausted, suddenly sees a river at a turn of a mountain path and is reminded of the Chenab in her native Punjab, a river that she associates with fertility . . . and storytelling.<sup>586</sup> Water (the river) is the flow of time, a symbol of death, but also a symbol of the eternal return, of life perpetuating itself. Even in a text which is much closer to an autobiographical one, Sobti thus uses this metaphor and reveals her own perception of time and transitoriness.<sup>587</sup>

It is worth noting that, in the whole piece, the tone of voice and the diction are not those of Hashmat but those of Sobti, thus blurring completely the identities of the two writer-identities. Hashmat’s encounter with Hashmat/Sobti is not written in the form of a dialogue as most other pieces are. Yet the dialogical partner is constantly present. The speaking voice, employing here a tone of intimacy and trust, is addressing someone who can be seen either as Hashmat or the reader. Throughout the text, the reader is indirectly confronted with the question of the identity of the narrative voice. Here, Hashmat adopts Sobti’s voice. Or maybe they are really just one?

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**585** This metaphor will be discussed in the next chapter.

**586** See HaH, Sobti 2012: vol. 1, p. 270, “A boiling hot afternoon. On foot from Khajjiar to Chamba. Blazing rocks burning the soles of my feet. My throat dry. I was getting all weak from the heat when, around a corner, the swift water of the Iravati came into view. I started to run. I will dive in the Iravati. I will splash around to my heart’s content.

When I reached the bank down below, my feet came to a standstill on the hot rocks.

The swiftness of the Irravati, the rushing sound of the twisting current – I was blinded by the danger.

Thinking about the charm of rivers, of their flowing water, brought on a happy feeling that I, too, was born on the banks of such a blessed, carefree river. Its cheerful, ever-young stories are famous throughout the world.

*Ek karakārātī dupaharī. Khajiyār se paidal cambā. Tapatī caṭṭānoṃ par pāṃv jalne lage. Halak sūkhne lagā. Garmī se niḍhāl ho-ho jāti thī ki moṛ par se irāvati kā tez pāni dikh gayā. Daurne lagī. Irāvati meṃ ḍubkī lagāūngī. Jī bhar-bhar nahāūngī.*

*Nice kināre par pahuṃci to pāṃv garm caṭṭānoṃ par hī jam gae.*

*Irāvati kā veg, muṛti dhārā kā harharātā śor – khatre ne merī āṃkhem lip dī thīm.*

*Dariyāoṃ ke suhāne bahte pāniyom kī bāt soc-sockar sukh hotā hai ki ham bhī paidā hue aise hī bhāgībhare albele dariyā ke kināre. Uskī śokh-javān kahāniyāṃ jahān meṃ maśhūr haiṃ.”*

This is also part of staging the re-emergence of a memory – and in this case, of something which will be part of the creation of ZN.

**587** See chapter six.

Hashmat serves several purposes and adopts different tones, although he is mostly presented as a sharp critic and mindful observer of the pettiness of everyday life, a conscious witness of the changes taking place in Delhi, or even of the Indian way of life (Hashmat witnesses, for example, a meeting of a village council).<sup>588</sup> The personality of Hashmat and his role are more complex than it might initially appear and stating that he is merely acting as the joyful and carefree friend of the other writers, holding a mirror up to them to reveal their contradictions and show the other side of the life of the intellectual elite, would not render justice to this figure.<sup>589</sup> Indeed, while looking more closely at Hashmat and at the texts collected in the four volumes, it appears clearly that what started as a game to point out the paradoxes of the lives of the intellectuals in Delhi in the 1960s and 1970s, gradually acquired a new meaning, or, rather, several new meanings.

Hashmat encounters not only writers and intellectuals but also visits a *panchayat* meeting (village council) in a village, overhears the conversation of odd-job men and joins them,<sup>590</sup> and finally even meets himself. There is a certain versatility in his portrayals of the life of the capital and its surroundings. Just as Sobti changes her style with each novel, Hashmat changes his purpose – and

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**588** See the first volume of HaH, in the piece titled “Inkalāb khvāb nahīm” (Revolution is not a dream), Sobti 2012, vol 1: 148–159.

**589** The reflection on the role and place of a community or elite of writers in society is in fact an important topic for several contemporary writers. On the one hand, there is the awareness of the literary and intellectual achievements they bring, and on the other hand the consciousness of the artificiality that resides in this very life as well. One may quote a passage of Imre Kertész’ *Kaddish for a Child Not Born* (1997: 10): “And so on, and so on we blew the false notes of the English horn as the thin, bluish dusk descended on the motionless, frozen tops of the trees of the glade in whose depth like a thick center hid the dense mass of the resort building where dinner awaited us, with tables set and the expectation of the sounds of silver and china, glasses clinking, and the chattering sound of conversation, and from this, too, the false notes of the English horn emanated [ . . .].” In this passage, the sheltered life of authors making a living by literature and the pride residing in their intellectual capacities – middle range capacities, however, as the narrator of Kertész’ text highlights time and again – is put in direct opposition to the reality of the quest and questions that would occupy them if they dared, creating a discrepancy between the life on the surface and the inner wishes of the writer-narrator, a discrepancy that the text alone tries to solve. One could argue that in presenting the superficiality of the life of the Hindi literary circles, Hashmat is exposing precisely this as well, namely that the writers do not dare to ask questions that really matter.

**590** See HaH, Sobti 2012, vol. 1: 160–169: “Samājvādī kiṭiparṭī” (A socialist kitty-party). A kitty-party is a kind of party held mostly by women of the higher society who meet on a monthly basis to socialise. The kitty refers to the sum of money collected by the members of the group and handed over to the woman who will organise the next gathering. In this text, Hashmat is hired to work with the caterers.

partly adopts a new tone – according to his function at the moment. He serves therefore not only as an expansion of the self, offering new ranges of experiences and perspectives, but also as a political voice (for example by defending all those who are oppressed by the established system), taking up positions that Sobti didn't necessarily take up at the beginning of her career.<sup>591</sup> The mask of irony is central here to this figure of the writer as a nonconformist.

To sum up, after looking at the many faces of Hashmat, it seems possible to bring forth several consistent traits of his personality. Irony and criticism, a sharp eye for the pettiness of everyday life, sympathy for those left out by society and for the underdogs are the most striking elements. All these are expressed through an open, fearless tone where nothing appears to be forbidden to voice and where no inhibition remains. Hashmat can therefore in some respect be seen as a trickster figure, just as Rameau's nephew in Diderot's text is sometimes considered to be as such a figure.<sup>592</sup> Being an observer of the world of writers of which he would love to be a successful part but cannot be, he points out all the contradictions, paradoxes and vanities of the 'Hindi bohemia' and the society of Delhi in the 60s and 70s. As such, he is an expansion of Sobti, another self who doesn't have to respect the same conventions as she does and is not bound by them. Hashmat is not merely the other as a man with an unusual name (a possibly Muslim-sounding name), but also as a free spirit and a jester. Just like a trickster, he is also versatile and can be a serious, tragic or comic figure according to the circumstances.<sup>593</sup>

## 5.5 Conclusion

As a woman who writes, Sobti was confronted from the beginning of her career with certain prejudices and somewhat biased perceptions of her work. At the very beginning of her career, she was strongly opposed to the classification of her texts under the labels 'women's writing' or even 'feminist writing'. When she did take position, however, it was clear that she was a great supporter of women's emancipation – even Hashmat, her alter ego, was rather progressive in his vision of working women, as it appears in the portrait of the publisher

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**591** Later on, Sobti became much louder and more visible on the public scene as well. She often participated in debates and meetings, taking up positions on political and social issues, for example in the conventions Pratirodh I and Pratirodh II organised at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2015 and 2016.

**592** Diderot 2010.

**593** On the figure of the trickster, see for example Radin 1976.



Shila Sandhu.<sup>594</sup> Her depiction of women in her fictional work leave no doubt on the subject either. Those characters are not stereotypes but human beings made of flesh and blood, with their own aspirations and flaws. The literary critics have until now paid a great deal of attention to this aspect of Sobti's work, ignoring sometimes its more literary features or the wish, stated by Sobti in her essays, to remain close to life and portray characters who would be true to themselves and 'alive'.

If, like the women writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the West, Sobti had to assert again and again that the quality of her work is indeed on a par with the work of men writers (like the other women writers of her own generation or slightly younger, such as Mannu Bhandari and Mridula Garg, had to do, too), the choice of adopting another identity as a writer, the identity of a man, doesn't seem to emerge from this situation, at least not entirely. When Sobti created her double, or, rather, when Hashmat appeared, after an evening party spent with the elite of the Hindi literary circles of Delhi, his main reason for coming into existence was to provide a new voice that could put spotlight on the inconsistencies of this bohemian world of Hindi writers, publishers, journalists and artists. Hashmat's first task was therefore to hold a mirror to this self-centred and somewhat self-satisfied society. Indeed, as a failed author constantly struggling to make ends meet, Hashmat confronts his interlocutors in the text and his readership with another image of this life. On the one hand, he confronts them with the reality of life's hardships and, on the other, with the vanity and even the emptiness of many of the conversations of this so-called intellectual elite which is often disconnected from its surroundings. Hashmat is also a trickster figure as an unsuccessful writer who wishes so much to belong to this life but is more tolerated than accepted. He is a jester who sees through everything in society and feels therefore free to speak his mind, a bit like Rameau's nephew in Diderot's novel.

Hashmat's position as some kind of an outsider who is let onto the secrets and the real goings-on of Delhi literary circles gives him an opportunity to observe and comment with the distance of irony – an irony which is not bitter but rather full of affection as seen in the pen-portraits.<sup>595</sup> The figure of the double is particularly complex here. Like the trickster figure, he constantly changes and adopts several roles. In most of the portraits of writers and the depictions of evening parties, he is clearly the counterpart of the successful writers, being thus not only Sobti's alter ego but that of the other writers as well. Through his

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<sup>594</sup> HaH, Sobti 2012, vol. 1: 64–79.

<sup>595</sup> However, Hashmat must not be considered as a complete outsider. Like many unsuccessful writers, he is very much part of the literary circle of the time, gravitating around more successful authors.

ironical and critical look at the world, he reminds those writers of the existence of a world outside their circles, of a reality where a writer cannot live only on her royalties, and he reveals to them the pretension of their intellectualism through his open enjoyment of food, drink, poetry, beauty and through his pre-occupation with more material concerns.

Hashmat is difficult to describe – indeed, he escapes every attempt to enclose him in one single identity. If some of the pieces seem very serious, for example Hashmat’s meeting with himself/Sobti or the assessments of writers’ style, others are light and entertaining, like Krishna Baldev Vaid’s portrait or the portrayal of the odd-jobs men at the kitty party (giving insights to such a party from a quite unexpected point of view). No aspect of life seems to elude Hashmat and perhaps it is precisely in this that lies all the interest of this writer-identity for Sobti, namely in taking up any topic and in speaking without any taboo. The only constant element in the pieces by Hashmat is precisely this absence of fear and inhibitions in dealing with themes that might be considered difficult or not acceptable, such as the question of the power of the *panchayat* (elders’ council in villages), corruption, the position of the lower castes and classes and, last but not least, the sway of the political class over the artists and, more specifically, the writers.

There is also an evolution between the first written pieces and their gossipy tone about the literary circles of Delhi and the more touching tone adopted in “Mulakāt haśmat se sobtī ki” or the later pieces. In those texts, Hashmat tends to become more earnest and more conscious of problems as well. However, the humour – and particularly the irony – are never far away. What started simply as a game might have become, in the course of time, the sign of a writer exercising her freedom of speech. Freedom is doubtlessly an essential point in the creation of Hashmat. Hashmat is the incarnation of freedom from taboos and inhibitions; through him, it becomes possible to do, imagine and say anything.

The portraits of writers in the second, third and fourth volumes of HaH are however more serious and offer an opportunity to try the genre of literary criticism. The part given to the discussion of texts and literary style is indeed larger there than in the pieces of the first volume.

To sum up, Hashmat has become a voice expanding Sobti’s own voices and daring to go to places where she herself, as Sobti, would not necessarily go. Is Hashmat more political than Sobti? The question certainly deserves to be asked, and yet, in the past years, Sobti has been more and more involved in the public sphere, taking position on many topics and participating in debates, although without stating her affiliation to any political party. Therefore it is difficult to see in Hashmat her ‘political voice’ or her ‘earlier political voice’, because the last

volumes were published at a time when Sobti was already quite active as a public figure.

Thus, the figure of Hashmat remains very intriguing, just as the fact that he appeared as a ‘he’ and not as another ‘she’. Many writers use other names, a double, to write in another genre or in another style. The phenomenon of women using masculine pen names – usually in order to assert the equality of their work with the work of men or to avoid censure – is well known too. Yet Sobti’s case differs because there was no need for her to acquire an equality that she had already obtained under her own – feminine – name, nor was she hiding her real identity behind a pseudonym in order to protect herself against potential reactions to her writings as Hashmat. She describes Hashmat as another personality within herself, a little like Pessoa had several heteronyms. As such, Hashmat complements her or rather, as she expresses in one of the passages quoted above, he expands her intellectual vision. The fact that he is a man also enhances this role of expansion of the personality. Indeed, it is possible to interpret Hashmat as a tool for Sobti to explore new genres and to be placed very freely in new situations. Through his perspective, there is a fresh vision of the world – and of the self.

This complementarity goes hand in hand with Sobti’s view of the need for a writer to possess a broad vision of the world and to encompass within herself the female and the male aspects of human life. She stages the writer as *ardha-nārīśvara*, ‘the lord who is half woman’, indicating thereby that a writer must have, in her mind, the woman’s side as well as the man’s side. Hashmat may be seen as the illustration of this presence of both elements in Sobti herself. He expresses, as her alter ego, as her other self, another perspective and chooses a diction different than hers. However, he is more complex than a mere ‘male counterpart’ of Sobti who, being a man, speaks more freely and more directly than she does – using strikingly less metaphors, except in the piece “Mulakāt haśmat se sobtī ki”, where Sobti is actually the narrating voice, as if, in her presence, Hashmat must disappear. Hashmat is another self with whom Sobti establishes a dialogue to gain distance from herself and her perspective, thus expanding her vision of the world. He is a partner in the process of thinking – often taking life more lightly and yet not having any inhibitions in tackling controversial issues and raising unwelcome questions.

Through Hashmat, Sobti does not only give another perspective on the life of the literary circles in Delhi; she also obtains a distance from her self and her world. She can thus pursue her reflection on the construction of the self and on the construction of the figure of the writer. Indeed, Hashmat’s portraits of the other writers show them with their everyday preoccupations and concerns, with the vanity of an elite centred on itself – and yet express a lot of sympathy

for those intellectuals who are constantly active and constantly thinking. Hashmat's pieces provide an occasion to think and raise questions, to observe one's self at a distance and to dialogue with one's self and with the other members of this elite community.

For the reader, Hashmat offers a view of the world of the Hindi bohemia of the 60s and 70s and a new vision of life and of the world. With his light and ironical tone, Hashmat introduces a distance in the perception of everyday reality. In the construction of the figure of the writer, he also highlights the presence, within each individual, of several temperaments or mentalities, not necessary in agreement with each other, even if they are not at loggerheads. Hashmat is therefore a perfect illustration of Sobti's vision of literature as a dialogical process.

This dialogue with the multiplicity of selves and with the world includes a discussion of the temporal dimension of life – and of literature – which is particularly important to Sobti. The question of the identity of the self is put in a temporal frame, through the issue of the constant change of everything living. It is now time to turn to this very central aspect of Sobti's views on literature, both through her discussion of change and through her discussion of history.

## 6 Literature and Time

In Sobti's fiction, characters grapple with changing times at different levels. Time can mean the epochal time, for example the time of the Anglo-Sikh wars in DSB or the partition and the time just preceding it in ZN and some of Sobti's short stories. However, the changes of this historical dimension of time are often subtler (echoes of WWI and the Ghadar movement in ZN)<sup>596</sup> or more gradual, like the social changes in DoD. Time, in Sobti's novels is also the time of generational changes, as is apparent in AL, and the questioning of identity in the witnessing of the ageing process, like in that novel and in SaS. Although all those texts are very different from each other and their reflection and interaction with time and history are not similar, they have one central point in common, namely that in all of them the perception of time, even of historical time, remains a very subjective perception, closely related to the characters' experiences. When examining the concept of time in Sobti's texts and her discussion of time in her non-fictional works, literature emerges as a space where time can be thought of on several levels.

The consciousness of the passing of time and the constant change – within and without a human being – implied in this consciousness is of great importance to Sobti's work. In the fictional texts, it becomes apparent in the shifting points of view and the depiction of the evolution of her characters. In her essays and interviews, it is expressed in her few statements about her personal life and the discussion of the capacity of literature to bring the past (back) to life.<sup>597</sup>

For Sobti, time is of essential importance as the dimension underlying every lived phenomenon and experience – one could even say, as the central

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**596** The Ghadar movement was a Punjab-based movement for the independence of India.

**597** While speaking about her personal life, Sobti is very discreet and distant but one must always infer from her words a consciousness that nothing remains eternally the same, be it relationships or states of mind. See for example MSRS, Sobti 2014: 401, "Friends, there is no such relationship, be it casual acquaintanceship, love, close friendship, that would not slowly get caught in its own mire and come to an end. That would not grow cold. Often, to accept one's own lapses and others' misgivings, one ought to subscribe to the idea that what is there today will not be there tomorrow, what will be there tomorrow will not be there the day after. So hold onto the given time as long as it stays in your grip. Before it is too late. *Dosto, jān-pahcān, pyār-muhabbat aur dostī ke koī bhī rīste saṃbandh aise nahīṃ jo raftā-raftā apnī hī daldal meṃ phaṃskar cuk na jāeṃ. Thāṃḍe na ho jāeṃ. Aksar apnī gafalat aur dūsrom kī badgumānī ko khel jāne ke lie apne nazdīk yahī ahsās aṛā rahā ki jo āj hai – vah kal nahīṃ; jo kal hogā – vah parsom nahīṃ. Islie ittafāk se jo vakt jurā hai use thāme raho jab tak vah khud hī apnī gīraft meṃ se nikal ne jāe. Dher ho jāe.*"

category of experience. Time as it is perceived, the time of an individual, the historical time, the time organised by society, the time of nature, all of these lie at the core of her novels, where they are interconnected and provide a reflection on life. However, notions and concepts of time and history are also discussed in her non-fictional works.

Contrary to the everyday experience of time flowing and not coming back,<sup>598</sup> time in literature, through the capacity of memory (despite its unreliability and untrustworthiness), offers the possibility to travel back into the past and forth into an imagined future. It also enables us to bring together simultaneously several layers of time. In Sobti's works, time thus becomes a dimension where movement is possible, where a lost epoch is revived, where the dead come to life again – whereas space often functions as a more 'stable' element, with the choice of a single location for the action in most of her novels. Time is thus not a uniform category and covers several meanings at different levels.

In the perception of time of an individual, the feeling of man's transitoriness unites with the feeling of the instability of life and identity (the fleeting notion of a self)<sup>599</sup> in the awareness of death. Time can be perceived only through the power of memory or projection – whereas projection, relying on the experience of the past, which permits conjectures about the future, can be said to be rooted in memory. The close relationship between time and memory is thus established. This implies in turn a strong relation, in the human experience and understanding of time, between time and narration: thinking about time generates almost immediately a narrative of 'what has happened', i.e. of the past. An individual's perception of time is therefore connected to her faculty of remembering, but also to her impression about the effects of the passing of time (changes in the consciousness and in the body). The perception of time can consequently be considered to be highly subjective and changing. It is this qualitative dimension of the time experienced that lies at the core of the understanding of time in Sobti's texts, at the level of individual time.

For Sobti, time is strongly associated with the notion of season (*mausam*) as well, that is to say, with the idea of a 'right' (appropriate) time for something – for writing, for example, but also for a memory to re-emerge.<sup>600</sup> This

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**598** Time as unidirectional, as opposed to a common perception of space, in which it is possible to travel back and forth.

**599** 'Fleeting' because it is constantly changing and cannot be fixed, in spite of an existing intuition that there is such a thing as a self, as an 'I'.

**600** *Mausam* was a central term in the poem found in MSRS, analysed in chapter three. It is one of the links between the field metaphor and the question of time and memory in literature in Sobti's poetics.

implies in turn the time of expectation, of waiting, before being able to write, and eventually the sudden apparition of a memory, of an idea, which brings about the appropriate moment for writing.<sup>601</sup> This moment is then a moment intensely lived: the quality of the experience constitutes the time of the individual, the time she deeply experiences – a time which is highly subjective. Through this intensity of the lived moment, there is a connection between the individual time and a larger time, a connection which is hinted at by the use of the word for season, *mausam*.

In literature, the subjectivity of the individual time – and the reflection which springs from it – is mirrored through the way a story is told and through the way the text records or holds on to an instant, a subjective impression or a series of events. However, time is also a social time, a dimension of the life of a group; in that context, it is present in literature through the constitution of a common consciousness of time passed, of myths and stories and legends which are constitutive of a collective identity. Indeed, time also forges the dimension of social activities, amongst others, of the rituals which rhythm the life of a community.<sup>602</sup>

Because time is present in every human activity, it is essential to literature at the level of the structure of a text too, in the very composition of a narrative. Sobti refers to time in several understanding of the notion which interact in literature to form a complete depiction of life. Time is individual time – experienced and sometimes deeply or intensely lived by the individual. As such, it is finite and limited, but it is also the time which can be reclaimed through memory. This subjective time is connected to social time (the time of the group to which an individual belongs) which is a time permeated by a cultural, social and geographical context, by the history (imagined and experienced) of a community. Sobti associates this second layer of time with the image of the Ganges (*gaṅgā*), the flow of time, recurrent and yet passing. However, those two layers are embedded in a larger time frame, a cosmic or natural time, recurrent through the cycles of seasons (*mausam*) and through the continuity of death and birth, at a level which encompasses and surpasses individuals and human societies. Thus, the human beings are set in a larger order of nature and life, by their being part of nature, which, according to Sobti, has an infinite temporality. In this last time layer, time exists as the point where the past, the present and the future coexist

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**601** Here, the notion of memory bank, introduced in the previous chapters, is quite central to Sobti's conception of writing. See section 6.2.2.

**602** This aspect is very significant in most of Sobti's novel. It is very manifest in ZN, but also in DoD or even in SaS, where the time shared and the time of an individual are a central aspect of the text through the opposition between the time-organisation of the two main protagonists.

and are present together. This aspect is central to literature because art and literature are what enables human beings to ‘hold on’ to a moment, to recreate it and to confer on it this very dimension of simultaneity and infinity. These three layers of time are present in Sobti’s reflection about time in her fictional works as well as in her essays.

In this chapter, I examine how Sobti conceptualises time, history and memory, basing my discussion of Sobti’s novels partly on the narratological discourse about time.<sup>603</sup> I will analyse Sobti’s vision of the role of writing (i.e. of literature), particularly within the tensions between the text that ‘fixes’ time and her own strong sense of time and life as dynamic and constantly changing. This will take me to look further at Sobti’s relationship to history as an academic discipline but also as a collective experience shared by a community.

I will start this chapter by looking more closely at Sobti’s use of metaphors in her discussion of time. As with the writing process, she constructs her vision of time around images and important terms, particularly the notion of season (*mausam*) – which I have already discussed in chapter three – the image of the Ganges, and the now familiar concept of memory banks. I will then turn to the main points of this chapter, beginning with the tension between literature and death. This will direct me to the question of memory and the writing of an individual history. A further step will bring me to the question of time and identity, particularly with regard to the passing of individual time and ageing. Finally, I will examine Sobti’s relationship to academic history as a discipline and conclude with her vision of history in literature as a subjective perception of time lived and history. In this part, I will look at Sobti’s three so-called historical novels, DSB, ZN and DoD, and their ways of recording history.

## 6.1 Speaking About Time: Concepts and Metaphors

In her non-fictional works as well as in her novels and short stories, Sobti sets herself in the context of a protracted discussion on the concept of time in Indian philosophy and intellectual history. She does so, however, not by explicitly referencing established notions and documentation, but by associations of

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**603** As proposed by Genette 1972, Todorov 1973 & 1980, and Barthes 1964 & 1984. I will draw on their concepts of time as a dimension of narration and story-telling at a diegetic level and on the difference between narrated time and narrative time (*temps narré*, *temps de la narration*, implied by Genette’s distinction between *histoire* and *récit*).



ideas, metaphors and other implicit allusions to a whole range of concepts originating mainly from Hindu mythology, but also partly from Indian philosophy, Sufi tradition, Persian poetry or Punjabi folklore.<sup>604</sup>

There are many very diverse concepts of time in India and delving into the detail of the schools of thought would go far beyond the intent of the present chapter. It remains however necessary to place Sobti's views on time in a larger frame. While examining Sobti's implicit and explicit statements about time, I will therefore attempt to trace back references and allusions to existing theories on time, be it general philosophical approaches to time or concepts of time with regard to literature.

The question of literature's relationship to time and the role of literature as a means to 'hold on time', to 'stop time' is an important topic not only for Sobti but also for most of her contemporaries. As discussed in the introduction, both Agyeya and Nirmal Verma have written on time. Some of their reflections show similarities with Sobti's views, but each writer is different in the approach to history and memory. While I will focus on Krishna Sobti, it is interesting to briefly reiterate Agyeya's and Verma's thoughts on the subject.

Agyeya is one of the prominent Hindi writers who worked on the issue of time and its significance in an essay composed of several parts published under the umbrella title, *A Sense of Time*.<sup>605</sup> In his reflections, Agyeya makes exactly the same distinction between the human experience of time and the cosmic time that one finds in Sobti's writings.

To begin with, Agyeya illustrates with anecdotes the varied experiences and perceptions of time that a person can acquire, so as to ask the question, 'What is time?' or, rather, 'Are there many times?', before turning to the scientific concepts of time and comparing them to the empirical sense of time of the human being as an individual. He discusses the existence of a convention of time which allows a society to synchronize the individual experiences of time: "In other words we achieve a time which is independent of how we personally experience the flow of time and which has inter-subjective validity. It also provides us the means and a method for arranging the facts of history in a meaningful way. Furthermore, it provides us with a convenient – and now apparently indispensable – measure of a vast variety of social, technological and economic actions and processes."<sup>606</sup> Agyeya then highlights the fact that these conceptions of time are

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**604** Those last three aspects appear mainly in the novels, more than in the non-fictional works. It is particularly manifest in ZN.

**605** Agyeya 1981.

**606** Agyeya 1981: 9.

new and are part of what he calls the modern (Western) society, as opposed to the pre-modern (Eastern) societies, where time is still perceived in a different manner, with the rhythm given by tradition.<sup>607</sup> Eternity, linked to a global vision of life as a recurring cycle of events – and to a religious conception of the world – is opposed to history as a linear vision of time, where the same never comes back. Here again, Agyeya stresses the similarities between Indian concepts of time (the Buddhist's denial of the continuous existence of the soul as a reality and the vision of time as a perpetual flow)<sup>608</sup> and the gradual change in Western thought which gave birth to what Agyeya calls 'historicisation' (i.e., the 'destruction' of the notion of eternity and its replacement with a linear vision of time and history as a sequence of transitory events, i.e., as a process, possibly leading towards a goal).<sup>609</sup>

The thought behind Agyeya's opposition to the modern vision of history (born in modern times, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) and the conception of time of what one could call, for the sake of simplification, 'traditional societies' is that the modern conception of history implies a linearity of time, a form of teleology, with the vision of a process, a progression towards a new state of being. The traditional societies, on the contrary, perceive time in a more circular way, as eternal and cyclically recurring, somewhat like the seasons in nature and the 'ages of life' which are at the root of the creation of a filiation or a genealogy (that is, of an unending cycle of death and birth within a group). The notion of cyclically recurring time is important in Sobti's conception of time as well, although she doesn't enunciate the concept as clearly as Agyeya.

Yet, continues Agyeya, the similarities between the modern perception of time and history in the West and concepts of transitoriness in Ancient India didn't give rise to the same feeling of loss of the self in India as they did in the West. Agyeya attempts to understand this difference through the use of time and the treatment of time in literature. This enables him to discover that the verses he quotes as an example create a new relation to time by highlighting another (eternal) space-time dimension, in spite of the existing awareness of

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**607** A rhythm which is, for example, present in Sobti's novels ZN and DoD, where this feeling of time is declining, in parallel to social changes.

**608** Here, it is of course Agyeya's vision of the Buddhist time concepts which I refer to for the discussion.

**609** Agyeya 1981: 10–15.

the human (ephemeral) time.<sup>610</sup> The creation of this new dimension becomes one of the tasks of literature.<sup>611</sup>

In the second part of the essay, Agyeya considers the human experience of time and the relation of time to the self, with the paradox of the sense of a flow of time – irreversible – and the feeling of the self as a stable unit, despite the changes. In doing so, he highlights the intimate connection of memory to time and the instrumentality of memory in the (re)construction of the identity of the self. He draws here on T.S. Eliot, Proust and his own novel, *Śekar: ek jīvanī* (1941),<sup>612</sup> showing that “the attempt to reconstruct the self becomes the pursuit and the recapture of time in experience”.<sup>613</sup> This last point is very close to Sobti’s idea of the reconstruction, through literature, of a world or a time that was and of the lives of nameless (*anām*) characters.<sup>614</sup> Art, according to Agyeya, plays a particular role here: through the self reconstructed by memory, it has an aspect of timelessness – of breaking the progress of linear time towards death by holding onto an instant.

The third part of the essay reflects on the connection of literature and time and on time as the medium of any narrative. Starting with the ‘time out of the real time’ of the folk tale, Agyeya arrives at the modern novel and its use of the time experience at the individual level, which becomes the core of narration in the stream of consciousness through the flow of free associations of thoughts. For Agyeya, time in narration encompasses the time experience conveyed by the text, but also the different layers of narrative time and narrated time and

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**610** Agyeya 1981: 16–17. Here, Agyeya quotes the beginning of a Sanskrit play (without referencing it, however; it seems to be part of a devotional play about Krishna), where the god Krishna comes home late and must convince his consort Satyabhama to let him in. The scene ends with a prayer for the success of the play. This preamble contains puns on the epithets of Krishna, but, as Agyeya argues, it also introduces the dual time of the literary work: the time of the gods is ‘always there’ and always present; the dialogue is therefore eternal. But the prayer at the end is set in the time-space of the actors of the play, in another dimension, which is ephemeral (hence the need for protection by the gods). The poem illustrates therefore the infinite (divine) dimension of time, which surrounds the human (ephemeral dimension), and, during the duration of the recitation of the poem, it joins them into one unity.

**611** Interestingly, Ricoeur refers to poetry/singing too as an example of what momentarily solves the paradox of the measure of time as he has explained it in the introduction of *Temps et récit*, see Ricoeur 1983: 46–47.

**612** Agyeya 1981: 24–29. Through the link between memory-time and the construction of the self, a bridge is built between the representation and the perception of the self of the writer and the consciousness of time or the experience of time.

**613** Agyeya 1981: 26.

**614** See the discussion of time and death, and of memory and narration in her non-fictional works in sections 6.2.3 and 6.2.4. See also, SAM, Sobti 2015: 76–77.

the time of the reading experience.<sup>615</sup> Here, he also introduces the notion of *fictional time*, the time in the story, and thinks about the implications of this temporality within the story.<sup>616</sup> Like Sobti, Agyeya sees in literature the necessity of creating reality, and creating it in its interactions with time: “The problem of the novel, indeed the problem of all literature, is not merely the presentation of reality, but the creation of reality – the creation of artistic reality and communication of the created reality.”<sup>617</sup> This reality is intrinsically linked to time and to the shift, documented by Agyeya at the beginning of his essay, in the perception of time in the modern era.

At the conclusion of his essay, Agyeya refers to his actual situation at the time of writing (a retreat in the park of a castle) and to the feeling of passing time this evokes in him, particularly through the parallels he is able to draw between the hunting pavilion where he is – as well as the very theme of hunting – and the search for time. He summarizes once again his points on the perception of the flowing of time and yet reaches the conclusion that the written text – his own written text – is the formulation of the experience of time and, as such, an account setting out to record the dimension of time itself.<sup>618</sup>

Agyeya’s essay on time is not written from the perspective of a novelist, but rather from that of a thinker and philosopher. He includes in his reflections some notions drawn from the scientific definition of time, refers to modern literature, history and philosophy. Unlike Sobti, who does not directly write about time, Agyeya adopts here an essayistic tone and addresses the issues methodically (although mostly without quoting his sources). His interest in theory is manifest in his choice of wording – less metaphorical and abstract than Sobti’s voicing of her views on literature – as well as in his discussion of topics such as communicability, discourse and differences between East and West. However, the main dissimilarity between the two authors lies in their conception of history. Contrary to Sobti, who searches for literary ways to express human temporality and human perception of history, Agyeya discusses history as a tool for understanding human life and human society. He considers history as linear, involving an evolution and, more importantly, possessed of the potentiality of progress. This is obvious not only in Agyeya’s views on time but in the novel *Śekhar: ek jīvanī* as well. For Agyeya, the temporality lived by the individual,

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**615** In this regard, there are comparison points with Genette’s and Todorov’s analyses of the diverse time layers in narration. See Genette 1972 and Todorov 1973.

**616** See Agyeya 1981: 46.

**617** Agyeya 1981: 56.

**618** Such an idea is close to what Sobti expresses through her vision of literature’s ability to ‘bring [something] back to life’ or to create a picture which is full of life.

which is constitutive of an identity of the self, doesn't exclude the notion of another linear temporality where there is a constant progress towards a goal. This points to his acceptance of the Marxist view of history, which was very influential in India before and shortly after the independence of India. The notion of progress and indeed a Marxist theory of history does not play any role in Sobti's discussion of time and history.<sup>619</sup> This essential difference in the way both writers engage with time and history is reflected in their works, where Agyeya's treatment of history includes historical events and political debates, whereas Sobti focuses on individual time perception in order to recreate not only a historical setting but also the way a period was really lived by an individual and a community. For Sobti, memory (collective and individual) becomes then central to writing.<sup>620</sup> For Agyeya, memory is not the core point of his discussion of time, although the individual experience of time and memory are major topic in his works, for example in *Apne apne ajnabī* and in *Śekhar: ek jīvanī*.<sup>621</sup>

In contrast, Nirmal Verma's views on time are again closer to Sobti's in the priority given to the empirical experience of time by individuals and through Verma's view on literature's ability to 'hold on' time, to render a moment in time eternal, be it only at the moment of reading. For Verma, this is one of the roles of literature which can, like myths, attempt to reconcile for an individual the many layers of temporality with which she interacts by being not only on her own but also part of a society and the universe.<sup>622</sup> While time, memory and the identity or feeling of belonging that they can produce are important topics for Verma, he doesn't engage with the topic of time as systematically as Agyeya. He is however closer to Sobti in his conception of literature as a space where time can be 'held' or 'stopped' and where it becomes possible to connect the reader with the past and the future.

From this exposition of Agyeya's views and the brief summary of Verma's views, a perception of the existence of a multiplicity of temporalities emerges as a common conception of time. Interestingly, Agyeya and Verma also refer to myths and folktales as spaces where the notion of time differs from the individual time

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**619** This is worth noting in view of the importance of Marxist theories for writers and thinkers of Sobti's generation.

**620** The notion of memory bank illustrates already how essential memory is for a writer working 'upstream', during the process of creation. I will show in this chapter how memory is constitutive of any individual's self-perception as well as of the collective perception in Sobti's views on time and memory.

**621** See Agyeya 2003 and 2014.

**622** See Verma 1989. See also my introduction to Verma's thoughts on time and literature in the introduction.

and where an individual can have an understanding of a temporality (a recurring temporality, that is) that surpasses her own finite time. This conception is also present, although not directly expressed, in Sobti's non-fictional writings. An individual has her own very particular feeling of time and of the time passing, but she also has a notion of time passing within the social collective to which she belongs, as well as a feeling of the recurrence of phenomena such as seasons. This view of time as 'multiple' is essential for Sobti. In her novels, the protagonists grapple with several layers of temporality, while always keeping their own perception of how time affects them.

Sobti is not always consistent in the terms she employs to speak about the different layers of temporality, but it is possible to distinguish between several terms. Sobti uses indeed a wide range of vocabulary to speak about time. Those words are connected to specific conceptions of time, though it must be noted here that a few terms seem to designate more or less the same idea and are used by her as synonyms. This is particularly significant since the two main terms used as synonyms, *vakt* and *samay* (time as a moment of time or the time in an individual dimension), are of Persian and Sanskrit origin, respectively, and reflect Sobti's undifferentiated use of these two main registers of vocabulary in Hindi.<sup>623</sup>

In Sobti's views on time, one observes two major dimensions or 'perspectives', which literature is able to combine: an eternal and cyclically recurring dimension, connected to a natural or cosmic order of the universe (the rhythm of the seasons), and another human and finite (or even linear) dimension, where time becomes synonymous with death and the notion of transitoriness. Functioning partly as a link between these two, a third one, the dimension of time at the level of a group, of a society, is represented in Sobti's texts by the image of a flow, of a linear (genealogical) transmission of traditions and culture. In those dimensions, I recognise precisely the three layers of time I defined above in the introduction to this chapter.

In the context of Sobti's works – essays and fictional writings alike – time is a complex notion. Several Hindi words are used. *Samay* is a moment in time or the 'human time'; *vakt* is almost a synonym to *samay*. Both represent time as linear, ephemeral and set in the perspective of the individual. There appears to be almost no difference in Sobti's use of *samay* and *vakt*, although *vakt* can have a more historical connotation as 'epoch' or 'a new chapter of history', for example when Sobti employs this word to refer to the new time coming after

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623 See chapter four.

the independence of India.<sup>624</sup> Etymologically, *vakt* has the connotation of time as a duration, whereas *samay* is more related to the idea of a moment, of an appointed time. For Sobti, both seem however to be designations for time from the perspective of the individual in her finite temporality.<sup>625</sup>

The two terms *mausam* and *kāl* represent time at a more abstract and cosmic level.<sup>626</sup> The word *mausam* means ‘season’ and reflects the aspect of time as cyclically recurring like the seasons themselves, seasons which rhythm rural life (as in ZN), but also offer an image of the continuation of life through filiation and the creation of a genealogy, or even of a lineage.<sup>627</sup> *Mausam* plays a central role in Sobti’s views of the process of creation as the right moment for writing; it sets this process in the order of the universe and connects the literary creation to a frame larger than the human individual one. Sobti considers literature as a binding element between individual time (limited by death, finite) and the enduring time pictured and held in literature by a ‘genealogy of writers’ (a chain of writers, *racnākārom kī kaṛī*),<sup>628</sup> which connects the individual and her time to a larger temporality. This larger temporality remains however a human temporality, one which presupposes the existence of people who will receive the written literature and keep transmitting it.<sup>629</sup>

Here, the conceptions of temporality are to be observed at a multiplicity of levels. The individual time is finite and limited, but it is embedded in a socio-

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**624** See SAM, Sobti 2015: 54, for example, where *vakt* is clearly used to designate the times to come: “When a new time comes [ . . . ]. *Nae vakt kī āmad par* [ . . . ].”

**625** *Samay* can indeed also represent the time lived by an individual, his epoch, just like *vakt*, for example in the title of the essay “Maim, merā samay aur merā racnā saṁsār” (Me, my time and my literary world).

**626** In chapter three, I have already emphasised the importance of the term *mausam* in its relationship to the time of writing. Being a term connected to the rhythm of life in a natural and cosmic cycle, it constitutes a link between the field metaphor and the issue of time in literature. All the aspects of Sobti’s poetics are thus interconnected.

**627** Filiation (the birth of children) constitutes a central point in several of Sobti’s novels, for men as well as for women, with the idea that through the birth of children and the perpetuation of a way of life and of the family line, a form of immortality is obtained. Agyeya is also referring to this first possibility of obtaining ‘immortality’ for the human being. See Agyeya 1981.

**628** SAM, Sobti 2015: 25. See also 6.2.1.

**629** Sobti does not stress this point, but Nirmal Verma, her contemporary, pinpoints it in his essays on time and literature. See Verma 1989. According to Verma, literature – and art in general – has the function of ‘holding time’, of defying the transitoriness of life, and, through an aesthetic epiphany, of realising a vision which surpasses the limitations of the individual. However, as Verma points out, transcendence is only possible if there is a continuity of the human race; even this ‘eternal time’ is therefore embedded in a human time frame. See the essay on aesthetics and beauty in Verma 1989: 68–70.

cultural frame which possesses a certain recurrence through the construction of genealogies inside a flow or stream of time, ensuring the perpetuation of a tradition (i.e., of a culture). It is also related to the cosmic time, the time of nature, which is to be seen as a cycle of the perpetual return of the similar (the seasons, the years, for example). In this latter dimension, there is also the notion of a point of time where all the moments of time (past, present and future) exist simultaneously, a notion illustrated by the image of the trident of time (*triśūl*), in opposition to the river of time (the Ganges, *gaṃgā*). Those two images are central in Sobti's understanding of time.

As mentioned briefly in chapter three, time as *kāl* is associated with death: in Sanskrit and in Hindi, one of the secondary meanings of the word *kāl* is 'the point of death'. In both languages, this term means time, season, age and destiny, fate and death. It is one of the epithets of the god Yama, the king of the dead. *Kāl* is frequently found in Sobti's writings to designate the endless time which includes the past, the present and the future. *Kāl* represents therefore a dimension of time which surpasses the level of the individual and its linearity (its finitude). In the meantime, it includes the dimension of time passing and constantly bringing changes in spite of the recurrence of the similar. *Kāl* is also connected to the notion of the 'trident of time' (*kāl kā triśūl*, i.e. past, present and future), which constitutes the frame in which life happens, the time-dimension of human life:<sup>630</sup>

Man, too, is just a fragment of time. He is its plant.<sup>631</sup> It grows and dies with the [passing of] seasons. The trident of endless time, putting them all in order and gathering them in its power, the past, the present and the future, adorns the forehead of the [individual] time. There are three, only three, days of time. Yesterday, that has gone by, today, the day that is in one's palm, and tomorrow, that lies in the future. The soul of the writer, bound to this trident, produces today's time through words, sounds, rhythm and meaning. Through the vibrant warmth of the body and the pure un-restrictedness of the soul, it recognises the human consciousness and existence.<sup>632</sup>

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**630** The word *kāl* possesses several meanings and its connotations have evolved over the course of time. For an introduction to this term, see Malinar 2009. It is worth noting that *kāl*, as a word for destiny, is very much linked to the time of the human being and its transitory character. It is however also seen as one of the essential components (*tattva*) of the cosmos, whose agency cannot be sidestepped by any human being, thus linking the individual to the world.

**631** The use of the word *paudhā* (plant) brings to mind the field metaphor. Here, I understand this image to be conveying the notion that time is the underlying dimension of life and that all evolution and growth, like that of a plant, happens in time. It resonates with Sobti's perception of life as constantly changing and moving, as opposed to the fixed written word; this is one of the main tensions in her essays.

**632** MSRS, Sobti 2014: 396: *Ādmī bhī vakt kā hī tukṛā hai. Usī kā paudhā hai. Ugtā hai aur mau-samom̄ ke sāth jhar jātā hai. Vigat-āgat aur anāgat in sabko apnī sattā meṃ samjoe sameṭe*



In this very abstract passage, Sobti refers directly to the philosophical notion of the three times (*trikāla*), the division of time between past, present and future; they are all conjoined, however, in the notion of a recurring time inside a flow of perpetuation or recurrence, where the three ‘days’ of time are held together by the power of memory. This time-dimension is inescapable for the human being, who is subjected to death. However, literature has the ability to bind the human being, through the words, to the larger cycle of time, to its recurrence. By writing, the author shapes the human time (*samay*), a time which is biographical, social and historical. Being bound by literature as an endless chain to the larger time (*kāl*), the writer brings forth the ‘time of today’ (*samay*) and joins both together. Sobti makes it clear that literature is the place where the various concepts of time are bound to each other and intermingle. This happens through the use of language, but also because literature refers to constant themes and preoccupations of human life, to a certain universality, which transcends a given time.

For the writer, the image of the trident (*triśūl*), in which all three ‘days’ of time are simultaneously present and conjoined, is important. Indeed, ultimately, this is also what literature does, namely binding together those three layers of time and giving them a stability in the midst of the endless flow of time. During the time of reading, the text is merging together those three temporal layers. Sobti constructs this idea around two very powerful images, both embedded in Hindu mythology: the trident, one of the attributes of Shiva or the Goddess, symbolising not only the simultaneity of past, present and future but also the role of the god as creator, protector and destroyer; and the river of the dead and of the ancestors, the Ganges, which, in Hindu mythology, is the goddess Ganga descending to earth from Shiva’s hair.

The trident, with its double signification, represents a larger, a cosmic dimension of time, i.e., a stability of time which literature can grasp, whereas the flow or river of time, although symbolising a certain continuity as the recurrence of the similar, corresponds to the dimension of time from the perspective of a social group, through the notion of the perpetuation of traditions.<sup>633</sup> In the

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*samay ke mastak par nīrantar kāl kā triśūl sajā rahtā hai. Kāl ke tīn, sirf tīn dīn. Vyatīt ho cuke atīt kā kal, āj kī hathelī par āj aur ānevāle bhaviṣyakā kal. Is tikhūmṭe par baṁdhi lekhak kī ātmā āj ke tatkā ko śabd, svar, lay aur arth se sirjatī hai. Deh kī guṅgunī garmāhaṭ aur ātmā kī nirmal unmukttā se mānavīy cetnā aur asmitā kī pahcān kartī hai.*

**633** A river is part of the cycle of water. Through the reference to the Ganges, which is the river of the dead and of the ancestors, Sobti establishes a connection between the notion of the perpetuation of memory and tradition and a larger dimension of time (a cosmic dimension), since the Ganges is believed to be the river coming down to earth from the world of the gods. Ganga is also associated with the Milky Way.

conception of time found in Sobti's essays, there is a constant interaction between the experience of time of the individual, the socio-historical time of a group and the cosmic time in the order of nature.

To reinforce her views, Sobti appeals to a traditional division of time into three 'days': the past, the present and the future. These are connected by the writer in her self, enabling her to produce the 'time of today'. In fact, the writer creates time (i.e., an image of the present) through the text. This idea of the creation of time by the author goes in two directions. Firstly, a very philosophical one which fits in with the role of literature as 'holding' time through the creation of a moment-space where a certain object in time seems to stop; and secondly, the notion that the writer makes a certain vision of the present real through her writing. This is part of her power as an author.<sup>634</sup>

The writer is bound to time (epoch, *kāl*) and thus, with the freedom of her soul, she is able to recognise the human consciousness and existence – i.e., what is universal and lasting in them. In the last phrase of the passage quoted above, the 'warmth of the body' (*deh kī garmahaṭ*) is opposed to the 'pure un-restrictedness of the soul' (*ātmā kī unmukttā*).<sup>635</sup> This opposition brings to mind the notion of the writer as being in the midst of life.<sup>636</sup> Life and the writer's experience of humanity are not for her merely abstract thoughts but possess materiality as well. However, the freedom of her soul allows her to cross the borders of her own experience to reach a wider human experience, while the distance of her 'cold gaze' (*thamḍī ānkh*) ensures the objectivity of her writing.<sup>637</sup>

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**634** The first point can be seen as parallel to several contemporary authors' preoccupation with time. It is very apparent in James Joyce's writings, as well as in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, where the subtlety of the plot lies in the subjectivity of the perception of time of the protagonists and of their feeling of change, of an evolution within themselves. The time which is 'held' in literature is indeed the subjective individual time. It is also the 'time of reading', discussed by Todorov and Barthes. During the moment of reading, the text acquires a life; the real time is as if suspended. In other words, the ephemeral character of the subject of literature is suspended as long as the act of reading lasts: during the act of reading, it surpasses its finitude. Reading, as an act or a process, consists verily in recreating an image and making it present in the mind of the reader. As such, it is an act of memory or of 'recalling to life'.

The second idea is part of Sobti's poetics of recreating a world through language, as discussed in the previous chapters.

**635** I translate *ātmā* as 'soul' in this context, rather than self – it probably means the deep inner layer of an individual – because of its opposition to the body (*deh*). *Ātmā* is one of the most difficult words to translate because of its many philosophical and cultural connotations.

**636** This notion, developed in chapter three, is voiced by Sobti in several places, for example in MSRS, Sobti 2014: 395.

**637** The 'cold gaze' is not mentioned in the passage quoted above, but it is the dimension of the writer's neutrality or distance to her subject which Sobti expands on elsewhere, see chapter three.

In the short passage of MSRS quoted above, Sobti refers to the ‘soul of the writer’ (*lekhak kī ātmā*). *Ātmā* can mean ‘self’ as well, which sometimes adds another layer of meaning to a sentence, as could indeed be the case here. The self, the real individual identity of the writer, is bound to the ‘trident of time’ as well as to the larger frame of the infinite and recurring time. Because of this connection, it is able to create the time of literature (a present) through words and meanings. The self of the author is ‘travelling’ through the eternal and unending time (opposed to her own individual finite lifetime); in this respect, it is not restrained. Meanwhile, through the materiality of existence (the body), her self is also bound to her present and tangible reality.<sup>638</sup> Literature, produced by the writer, therefore becomes the place where the individual human being and a community, bound to a specific time, can access the cosmic time through the power of the words.<sup>639</sup>

Sobti’s vision of a cosmic cyclical order is embedded in some of the Indian conceptions of time, just like the idea of constant change and passing.<sup>640</sup> In ancient India, the cosmological representation of time as eternal and constantly recurring in a cycle, not only of birth and death and rebirth, but also in the idea that eras (*yūga*) succeed one another before the destruction of the world and its new beginning (and a new succession of the eras in the same order) is very widespread. This dimension of time reflects the observation of the recurrence of certain phenomena in the world (alternation of day and night, recurrence of the seasons which give rhythm to life in a rural setting, for example). In parallel, there is the conception of time as a constant movement implying the impossibility of going back into the past or undoing the outcome of an event in a chain of cause and effect. The vision of time as a succession of causes and effects stresses the ephemeral character of everything, most of all, however, of human life and human experience and therefore raises a question about the identity of the self or subject who experiences the world. In Buddhism, the notion of a constantly changing ‘self’ leads to the conclusion that there is no ‘self’ at all. This question is present in several other Indian philosophies’ approach to time as well.<sup>641</sup>

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**638** As I will argue below through the discussion of SaS (section 6.2.3), materiality, the physical aspect of life and reality, is of essential importance for Sobti, who does not harbour an abstract vision of humanity or life.

**639** Words have the power to create reality, to produce it in the mind of the recipient of the discourse.

**640** As Malinar shows in the introduction to the volume *Time in India* (2007), there is a great range of concepts of time in India. Sobti does not make direct references to any specific one; I remain therefore very broad in my presentation of the concepts that may have influenced her.

**641** It is also present in Western tradition, be it in Heraclitus of Ephesus or modern philosophers like Hume or Schopenhauer. For writers, particularly for modern writers, this question of

While Sobti does not explicitly refer back to those notions of time, I argue that the three layers of time intermingled in her own perception of time and present in her writing of time in her novels are clearly related to this specific discourse. One recognises the notions of a cosmic time with the recurrence of the similar notion of a flow, which, for Sobti, seems to be associated with a 'collective consciousness' (*lokmanās*) of time passing, and the notion of the instability of the individual perception of time, a concept which is reflected in Sobti's preoccupation with subjectivity and subjective time experience. Although Sobti does not attempt to explicitly embed her views on time in a given philosophical context, her use of metaphors and terms such as *lokmanās*, *janmānās*, *trīśūl*, demonstrate that her thoughts are part of a tradition of thinking about time. For Sobti, the reflection about time layers and temporality is clearly one of the functions of literature.

Let me now turn to the metaphors which inform Sobti's views on time and the relationship between time, literature and history. When Sobti speaks about notions of time and history, one image emerges again and again in her discourse: the Ganges (which is, also, the goddess Ganga). This reflects the very common concept of time as a flow. For Sobti, the flow of life and the notion of the passing of time is not only associated with the Ganges but also with the Jhelum and the Chenab, the two rivers of the district of Gujarat from which she comes, and which lie at the core of ZN. These two rivers occupy an important place in Sobti's imagination and are alluded to in all her autobiographical statements.<sup>642</sup> Nevertheless, the Ganges is even more symbolical because of its significance in the Indian context. This is also particularly striking when in her essays Sobti distinguishes between what she calls the 'two histories'.

Sobti juxtaposes the tasks of the writer and the historian by taking recourse to the idea of 'two histories' (or indeed around the parallel existence of a multiplicity of histories).<sup>643</sup> The first history, the 'history one', occupies the historians and concerns itself mainly with the facts, the examination of records and the

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the self and its existence with regard to the reality of constant change is central to the depiction of life. One can cite here Marcel Proust or Virginia Woolf. In the Indian context, Sobti is not the only one who reflects upon this topic. It is present in Nirmal Verma's and in Agyeya's works as well. The same question, informed by an existential dimension bordering on absurdism, is found in the works of Beckett, Ionesco or Mrožek and, in Hindi literature, in Vaid's works.

**642** See for example the autobiographical part of MSRS or the last piece of the first volume of HaH, as discussed in chapter five. When speaking of her time in Lahore, Sobti also refers to the Ravi river, of course.

**643** The multiplicity of histories can be paralleled with the multiplicity of selves and identities discussed in previous chapters. Sobti's views on literature and life appear clearly to develop around the notion of omnipresent plurality, interaction and dialogue.

analysis of socio-political and economical situations and contexts.<sup>644</sup> Through this, it attempts to ascertain the value systems of the people in a given epoch and show how those systems evolved through time. The ‘history one’ thus presupposes a vision of time set in a succession of events linked by causes and effects; it presupposes a linear temporality.

The ‘other history’ is the time experienced and felt by the people and inscribed in their consciousness of time passing; it is connected to the notion of transmission and to what Sobti terms the ‘consciousness of the people’ (*lokmānās* or *janmānās*).<sup>645</sup> This plays with the three layers of time discussed above: the time of the individual corresponds to a subjective perception of the intensity of the moments lived within the larger frame of the time of life in a given social context. But this larger frame is also the life reiterating itself through filiation and the creation of genealogies, a flow which allows for the perpetuation of a culture and constitutes a factor of identity for a specific group. This social time is then embedded in a larger cosmic or natural time frame, namely the recurrence of the seasons in yearly cycles, and the cycles of birth and death. Literature binds these three aspects of time together through its ability to represent them all and to reflect on them. Literature provides the most versatile space for reflecting on the simultaneity of those three dimensions in an individual’s life and temporal experience.

The writer, in opposition to the historian, works with the two histories (and all the layers of time implied by the second history) in an attempt to reveal not only the contextual reality but the deeper levels of the human (individual and social) perception of time, which are constituted by the ‘time and place’ or ‘space-time’ (*deśkāla*).<sup>646</sup> This latter notion takes all its meaning in the context of the partition, the historical context most often discussed by Sobti, especially in interviews. Indeed, literature and the literary portrayals it offers – portrayals not restricted to the mere depiction of socio-economical power games between the communities but including the way the past is narrated through songs, myths, legends, and, therefore, incorporated into the creation of the identities

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**644** This vision and definition of history would probably not match the modern historian’s view of her work, but when Sobti worked on ZN in the 1970s, the academical discourse on history did not yet include the comparison with literature suggested for example by someone like Hayden White, where literary criticism is linked to historiography to offer a broader reflection on cultural understanding. See White 1973 & 1985.

**645** See for example CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 377 or SAM, Sobti 2015: 118. The two terms appear to be synonyms; *lok* refers primarily to the ‘folk’ or the ‘world, universe’; *jan* to the ‘people’ or the ‘living beings.’

**646** See CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 378. .

of those communities (with the potential of separating them sharply from other groups) – enable us to understand better some of the roots of the partition.<sup>647</sup>

In CNZNP, her short essay on ZN, Sobti explains her vision of the ‘two histories’ and their influence on her writing, illustrating her discourse with several examples:

There isn’t one, single history, but two.

(Sometimes, even more than two histories are composed)

One history is the one recorded and preserved in the annals of the government. The other flows with the Ganges of people’s consciousness and lives in the soul of the community.

The writer keeps a *calendar* of the ebb and flow of events of the first history in front of her eyes but acquires the understanding and the ability to envisage the specifics of time and place through that other history.<sup>648</sup>

The writer’s task, in contrast to the historian’s, is to delve into the feelings of the people and recognise their perception of an epoch as individuals and communities. In the essay, the two different visions of history are conveyed by several examples of narration of the same event through two types of narrative perception of what has happened. The first history consists of a series of facts and dates or records and documents per se.<sup>649</sup> The second history consists of the depiction of scenes of village life and interactions between different protagonists whereby several temporalities intertwine.

The ‘other history’, rooted in people’s experiences and sense of time, is closely associated with the Ganges, as in the image of the ‘Ganges of people’s consciousness’ (*lokmānās kī bhāgīrathī*). In this idiom, the Ganges is spoken of using the epithet *bhāgīrathī*, a reference to the myth of the Ganges’ descent from the world of the gods to the earth. The story goes like this: King Bhagiratha wanted the goddess Ganga, the Ganges, to come down to earth and purify

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**647** This point will be discussed in greater length in the following chapter, but it can already be mentioned here that in her interview on the partition with Alok Bhalla, Sobti declares that the partition had become inevitable because of the crystallisation of the factors of identity around the religious communities, see Bhalla 2007: 146. This crystallisation of identities is more apparent in literary depictions of pre-partition times than in the historical records and official histories.

**648** CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 377–378, *Itihās ek nahīm do hote haiṁ. (Kabhī do se zyādā bhī banā die jāte haiṁ). Ek Itihās vah jo hukūmat ke khāte meṁ darz kar surakṣit kar liyā jātā hai, dūsra vah jo lokmānas kī bhāgīrathī ke sāth-sāth bahtā hai. Jan sādharmaṇ kī ātmā meṁ zindā rahtā hai. Lekhak pahlevāle itihās ke ghaṭnā-cakra kā kailāṁḍar apnī āṁkḥoṁ ke āge ṭāṁge rakhtā hai aur dūsre itihās se deṣkāl ko pahcāne kī samajh-būjh aur sāmārthya grahaṇ kartā hai.*

**649** A letter of the last wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, for example. See CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 379.

the ashes of his ancestors.<sup>650</sup> After many devotions, Brahma fulfilled the king's wish and poured the Ganges onto the locks of Shiva from where it flew onto the earth. The river is consequently closely associated with the notions of death, but also purification. Apart from that, the myth illustrates also the connection with the cosmos through the 'history' of the river: by descending from the higher realm of the gods, the Ganges forms a binding element between the divine realm and the world of men. The river is associated with death rituals (and the ultimate rite of passage) and the genealogies of the ancestors; it is called the 'river of the dead' or the 'river of the ancestors'. As such, it is related to the human temporality and its embedding in the cosmic order or cosmic time frame. This is precisely one of the tasks accomplished by the 'other history' mentioned by Sobti, namely to express the dimension of the human experience of time which is closer to a cyclical and recurrent perception of time (connected as well to a consciousness of belonging to a genealogy, a tradition, through the transmission of legends), and thus to set it in a larger temporality. This embedding in a larger time frame is possible, on the one hand, because of a universalisation of a life experience<sup>651</sup> and, on the other hand, because, according to Sobti, what literature reveals and records is the consciousness of the people (*lokmanās* or *janmanās*), i.e., their temporality as they live and experience it through the emotions, the stories told and the shared traditions. This temporality lies far away from the centres of power and decision-making depicted in the first history, but closer to the flow of time, where events are not read or perceived in their temporal succession but lived with a simultaneous awareness of past, present and future. As a flow, this consciousness possesses the liberating power of the Ganges, and, more importantly, establishes a connection between the (ephemeral) temporality of an individual or even of a community, and the larger temporality of life, linked to the order of nature.

The metaphor of the Ganges implies an association with the flow of time, the passing, and yet the constant recurrence of similar phenomena which Sobti emphasises elsewhere in her discussion on time.<sup>652</sup> The river is not an uncommon image for time (Heraclitus of Ephesus uses the image to exemplify the impermanence of all things), but Sobti confers on it a particular meaning through

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**650** Many myths and stories are told in countless variations about the Ganges. I refer here to Kelly Alley's article on the Ganga, Alley 2009.

**651** The creation of myths, legends and stories presupposes indeed the potentiality for a narrative form to voice something which is not limited to a specific and singular experience of life or only to a specific period of time.

**652** In MSRS, for example, see Sobti 2014: 395–396 and my discussion of this passage in the following section.

the reference to the Ganges. She makes it thus clear that the consciousness of the Indian people (constituted by their feelings, emotions, thoughts, experiences and perceptions of events past and present as well as by the construction of their identities) establishes a link between all the levels of temporality, death, and the cyclical order of the cosmos.<sup>653</sup> This metaphor, with its reference to the consciousness of the people (*lokmānās*), thus fixes the image of the socio-historical time as a cultural time possessing a certain recurrence through the creation of genealogies (the Ganges is the river of the dead and of the ancestors, i.e., a place where a succession is set by a tradition).

In another passage on history and literature, Sobti expands further on her metaphor of the Ganges as follows: “History is also what flows with the Ganges of the people’s consciousness, creates, blooms and remains alive in the cultural maturity of the common consciousness.”<sup>654</sup> The people’s consciousness, this river, is what brings continuity in a linear temporality by creating a cultural frame, a tradition which is transmitted generation after generation and ensures a constancy even in the flow of passing time. This goes hand in hand with the notion of a chain, of a continuity, which is in turn set in the larger concept of an infinite (or eternally recurring) time, present in the image of the season (*mausam*) or represented by the *triśūl* as a stable point of simultaneity of past, present and future.

To sum up, several images from the Hindu mythology carry the meaning intended by Sobti in her multi-layered perception of time. The goddess Ganga is the river of time flowing, she is the continuity of the filiation and the tradition (as the river of the dead and of the ancestors), streaming down from Shiva’s hair in the popular iconography. Shiva himself holds the trident in his hand, symbol of the simultaneous existence of the three ‘days’ of time and of what is everlasting. Literature is what enables the producing of an account which encompasses all those aspects and reflects on or questions them.

One of the main differences between literature and historiography (the record of human time placed at the level which Sobti calls ‘history one’), is that literature delves into the consciousness of the people, whereas history one strives to remain quite objective – or at least claims to remain so. This distinction is

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**653** See the encounter between Sobti’s double, Hashmat, and Sobti herself, in the last text of the first volume of HaH, HaH, Sobti 2012, vol 1: 255, mentioned in chapter five. There, the image of the river as a symbol of death and the cycle of life is present as well in a passage where Sobti narrates a moment of profound consciousness of death while crossing the Ganges on a ship.

**654** SAM, Sobti 2015: 284: *Itihās vah bhī hai jo lokmānas kī bhāgīrathī ke sāth-sāth bahtā hai, bantā hai, paṅpatā hai aur janmānas ke sāmśkr̥tik pukṭāpan meṃ zindā rahtā hai.*



possible because literature interacts with all the layers of time discussed above, which are all constitutive of a consciousness of time likened by Sobti to the Ganges. This consciousness, although not recorded in history books, enables literature to bring to light a specific time in history but also a more universal truth about life and human time perception, and to establish a link between the finite temporality of individuals and societies and the larger temporality of nature.

I have highlighted in the introduction and in chapter three Sobti's tendency to develop a theoretical discourse infused with tensions and apparent paradoxes (the tension between outside and inside, for example). With regard to time in literature, such a tension is tangible precisely in literature's set goal of 'holding on' to a moment and thus defying death in the face of the transitory character of life. The written word confers a fixity and a stability onto what has none – individual time – and yet, in Sobti's works, time and life experiences, even in her more historical novels, are never defined as fixed, but on the contrary as constantly changing and dynamic. I will now turn to this tension and to Sobti's view of literature as challenging the finite nature of time and life.

## 6.2 Literature and Death

### 6.2.1 Transitoriness and Literature as 'Holding Time'

One of the central points of Sobti's discussion of the notions of time and history in her essays is the idea that literature 'holds on' to a moment, an epoch, a temporal form of the reality. It can stop the endless flow of time during the time of reading, but it can also defy 'Time the Destroyer' (*kāl*) by placing this moment in the larger frame of the eternal time through the power of the words. This role of literature is essential as it answers an intrinsic need of the human being to hold on to something in the face of the reality of the passing of time and the final, unalterable loss of that what has gone by. However, in Sobti's works, this quite common perception of literature and art as challenging finitude is placed in a framework marked by the strong consciousness of life's natural instability, voiced through Sobti's depiction of the characters with their personal evolutions and shifting identities.

In literature, time can be held and stopped; but literature also possesses the ability, through words and memory, to bring together simultaneously several moments in time, to render them present, and thus build a bridge between them, a phenomenon which is illustrated in the image of the trident of time, the *triśūl*, mentioned earlier.

In being subject to transitoriness, we are all under the immense power of Death.

Because of its frowns, the faces keep changing. The seasons change one into the other. The new becomes old, it becomes residue, and then it emerges once again, green and new. It is literature which presents an assessment of this endless chain, and it is to this literature that the author is dedicated. The author alone draws the line of time, even without being conscious of it, and keeps linking it to larger contexts.

What is gone, what passes, does not return. And yet, what returns is but a repetition of the old! When it comes to life again, it has either been made into a story or into history. The old face of today, which emerged from the past, waits already at the next turning point. Hanging in the middle, you sometimes return from the past to the future, and sometimes from the future to the past. You probe in search of the past through the eyes of the present, you search for what has gone by and, separating your own thoughts from the present time, you connect to the past. What emerges sometimes appears as distant as history at its beginnings, and sometimes so close that you stand still and begin to scrutinize the present itself, that you start cleaning it up.<sup>655</sup>

For Sobti, one of the tasks of literature consists in recording or holding a specific moment in time and binding it to a larger context, all in the consciousness of the endless recurrence of the larger (cyclical) time. All the human beings are faced with death and remain in death's power. Death (here personified) changes the time and the people. Sobti's conception of several layers of time is beautifully expressed here through the intricate interaction of the seasons (the cosmic level) and the individual timeline, to which the embedding of the individual in a socio-cultural frame must be added. Literature is the space which narrates or records this complicated temporal reality and allows a reflection about it and the perception(s) of time of each individual. The fact that literature is a tool for investigating human temporality – i.e., human life – is highlighted by Sobti's use of phrases such as 'search for' (*talāšte haiṁ*), which suggest a quest for a better understanding of this witnessed reality.

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655 MSRS, Sobti 2014: 395–396, *Naśvartā ke tahat ham sab mṛtyu kī virāt sattā kī prajā haiṁ. Isī ke tevar se badlāvorīn se mukhaṛe badalte rahte haiṁ. Mausam palaṭte rahte haiṁ. Nae purāne ho jāte haiṁ, šeṣ ho jāte haiṁ aur phir dubārā sabze ubharkar nae ho jāte haiṁ. Is anant kaṛī kā lekhā-jokhā prastut karnevālā sāhitya hī hai aur isī sāhitya ko amarpit racnākār hai. Racnākār hī samay kī lik ka ankit kartā hai aur anjāne hī use vyāpak saṁdarbhōm se joṛtā bhī calā jātā hai. Jo bit jātā hai – guzar jātā hai vah lauṭkar nahīn ātā. Phir bhī jo lauṭtā hai vah purāne kī hī punarāvṛtti hotī hai! Jab vah dubārā zindā hotā hai to yā ākhyān ban cukā hotā hai yā itihās. Atīt se ubhare kisī purāne āj kā mukhyā agle moṛ par pahūnc cukā hotā hai. Bic meṁ laṭke āp kabhī āge se pīche lauṭte haiṁ kabhī pīche se āge. Vartmān kī nigāh se atīt ko ṭaṭolte haiṁ, guzar cuke ko talāšte haiṁ aur apnī soc ko tatkāl se haṭā use bhūt se joṛte haiṁ. Jo ubhartā hai vah kabhī itnī dūr lage ki itihās ho uṭhe, kabhī itnā karīb ki āp ṭhīṭhakar āj kā hī jāyāz lene lage. Āj kī hī jhāṛpōmch karne lage.*

However, literature also plays the role of bearing witness, of making the account of life. In a way, this defies death and time at the human scale by ‘stopping’ time or a part of it, thus preserving a moment in time. Through the very act of writing, something that is actually ephemeral receives a certain stability. In a later passage of MSRS about ZN, this becomes even more clear: ZN is described as bringing back a time or a world that had been taken away.<sup>656</sup> Literature, through the use of language,<sup>657</sup> connects a specific work, which has emerged from a specific context, to the genealogy of authors, to the larger time frame of the history of humanity, a history which is not only linear but cyclical as well, because of the succession of birth and death (and birth, and death, again and again), and because of the recurrence of the similar and the continuity of the past.

The cycles of time (*kāl*, *mausam*, a larger time frame) are such that what is gone doesn’t come back, and yet it always brings a repetition of the old (of the similar). The interconnectedness of the diverse layers of time is very strong, so that history and legend mix like the past and the present. The image of time Sobti presents here is one of constant interactions between present, past and future, with the resurgence of past things in the present, albeit in a slightly different form. The writer is particularly aware of this intermingling which nourishes both legends and history. Moreover, all three temporal dimensions are intertwined in an individual’s time perception.

Cycles and recurrences characterise not only the natural or cosmic temporality, but are very much present in human life, too. The resurgence of some elements from the past in the present is possible because all the events are related by a chain of cause and effect. The recurrence of time-episodes happens at two levels: in a large time frame, as a cycle of similar phenomena, and at a lower level (through the connections between the past, the present and the future in a linear dimension of time, i.e., the dimension of time as a chain of causes and effects in a historical perspective). An example of this second level would be the echos of the tension between Hindus and Muslims in DoD (set at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) in similar tense relations almost a century later, when the novel was written and published in 1995. There, although Sobti

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656 Sobti 2014: 409, “Years later, this bit [of land] was to be taken away from us and turned into a novel, *Zindagīnāmā*. *Barsom bād usī tukṛe ko hamse alag ho jānā thā aur palaṭkar zindagīnāmā ban jānā thā.*”

657 Language, especially as Sobti uses it and adapts it to each character and setting, becomes here the means of recreating accurately a world and a reality. See my discussion of language in chapter four. Language must however also be seen here as the means of transmitting the stories further, as what unites the chain of writers to which Sobti refers.

was not writing about her own present-day reality, she and her readers could draw parallels between the situations and certainly identify many of the issues. Literature is therefore constantly intermingling contexts and establishing connections between them. When Sobti speaks of the interconnections between past, present and future, it is indeed also this particular historical dimension that she has in mind, and not only a universal vision of the endless time. She refers to the recurrence of certain specific patterns in human history. Sometimes, while looking at the past, it is the image of the present which comes to her mind and, like a piece of furniture, she can ‘dust it up’, ‘clean it up’ (*jhār-pomch karnā*), to see it better for what it is. DoD illustrates this well through the implicit comparison it makes between the Delhi of the 1920s and the Delhi of the 1990s.<sup>658</sup>

Sobti believes in the capacity of literature to bring back a vanished world to life, to reconstruct it. This reconstruction constitutes a way for literature to defy time and find a voice for those who have lost theirs in the course of history and simply by passing away.<sup>659</sup> Time, together with death, are the great enemies of the human being and literature but the (written) word allows the human being to get the better of them and ties her to time in such a way that she might, if not leave a mark, still exist in the work of art. Here, Sobti refers to the quite common idea that literature brings ‘immortality’.<sup>660</sup> However, for her, this immortality is not the immortality that accrues to the author – to herself – but the one

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**658** The tensions between the religious communities never ceased completely since the independence. However, in the 1990s, there was a resurgence of violence, particularly with the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992. The Hindu nationalists, who claimed that this 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque had been built exactly on the site of the birthplace of the god Rama, pulled down the structure. This was followed by a series of unending acts of retaliation. While writing DoD (1995), Sobti certainly had also this context in mind.

**659** This brings to mind the idea of ‘giving a voice to the voiceless’ and Spivak’s discussion of the works of Mahasweta Devi, for example, as well as the debate on the possibility for the subaltern to speak, of their voices being expressed through literature; see Spivak 1988a. Sobti, however, never politicises her writing. For her, as I have shown in chapter four, the words and the language are particularly important in bringing back to life not only a setting but each character, each individual. Her commitment is not to a political cause but to the human being.

**660** The idea is quite common; it is for example summarised by Werner Jung in his study of literature and time as follows: “[. . .] schreibend vergegenwärtigt sich der Schriftsteller in der Zeit, schreibt er die eigene Zeit auf und fixiert damit eine Erfahrung, die seither unverloren geblieben ist.” Jung 2008: 11. The act of writing consists in rendering present an experience (which is time-bound and thus limited and temporary). It is important to remember here, however, that the act of reading is different each time and, therefore, the experience put to paper will not be received by the reader exactly as it was intended, lived or thought by the writer – nor be read twice in the exact same manner, even by the same reader.

that accrues to those whose life has been immortalised in her works. Through the depiction of their lives, she intends to recreate an atmosphere and a milieu that have disappeared, like the composite culture of Delhi in the 1920s in DoD, a world already dying in the novel. It is indeed striking that although she attempts to bring back a time, Sobti does not create an idealised or nostalgic vision of the epoch depicted, where life would be ‘frozen’ – neither changing nor moving. On the contrary, her three so-called historical novels (DSB, ZN and DoD)<sup>661</sup> are built around a sense of time and history as dynamic and perpetually evolving.<sup>662</sup> Sobti asserts her desire to ‘bring back to life’ or recreate a picture that is alive and pulsating with life. Indeed, she makes this point in a passage about the genesis of ZN, which can be considered as a general statement on her poetics:

There was a desire in my heart that the people who lived and had been lost in the ruins of history after their homeland had been separated into two pieces, may appear before one’s eyes in their form and in their essence. That it would seem that they are alive. That they would not be lifeless pictures.<sup>663</sup>

This quote refers to the specific context of the partition; nevertheless, the wish to make ‘people appear in front of the eyes’ can be interpreted as what a work of literature does, namely presenting a scene, a picture, of a certain time-place setting. The idea of life represented in its fullness is central here: literature must neither present a frozen and ‘dead’ image of a time nor indulge in nostalgia, but rather provide the reader with the opportunity to acquire a sense of authenticity. Time passes and is bigger than the individual and yet through writing it becomes possible to challenge its crushing power, both individually but also as a community. By presenting a living picture, literature becomes a place for meditating on life and, more particularly, on time. The notion that literature is not an ‘image’ (a ‘photograph’, as Sobti says)<sup>664</sup> of life, but rather a recreation of it, informed by a

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**661** Those novels are set in the past and are thus often considered as historical. However, they cannot be viewed solely as historical novels.

**662** By constructing history in this way in the novels, Sobti also renders it impossible to reduce literature to a historical document, because it becomes difficult to put history back into the text and within the multiple layers of changing perspectives on the events. See sections 6.3.1 and 6.3.2.

**663** “Caṁd noṭṣ *Zindaġināmā* par”, Sobti 2014: 376, *Dil meṁ ek tamannā thī ki log jo the aur vatan ke do tukre ho jāne ke sāth hī itihās ke khaṁdaharomē meṁ kho gae ve apne raṁgrūp aur haḍḍī meṁ sāksāt kāyam hoṁ. Lage ki zindā haiṁ. Bejān tasvireṁ na hoṁ.*

This brings to mind the notion of creating ‘living’ characters, discussed in chapter three, through a parallel to Pirandello and the episode of Rabia al-Basri.

**664** See above in chapter three and SVS, Sobti 2014: 57.

reflection, is central for Sobti, as the field metaphor and its implied idea of germination (i.e., of growth and evolution) illustrates.

The reconstruction of a time is rendered possible by a writer's ability to capture more than her own experience. This capacity applies to past historical settings as well as to present ones, as a writer is connected to all the moments and layers of time. She lives in her specific environment and time and interacts with it but, more importantly, she interacts with other human beings and brings back to life a multitude of voices. This is obvious in Sobti's novels, where the plurality of points of views and focalisations is one of the most constant features, in spite of the large diversity of her works. Sobti proves to be particularly aware of her connection to the world and to others, as well as to literature's ability to absorb, 'digest' and then recreate (or indeed bring back to life) the voices of others, the 'nameless people' (*anām log*):<sup>665</sup>

In the written lines, in the individual existence, it is not us who are assembled – but our environment. The time gone by – is not only our own – it is also that of numerous nameless people that we have presented in front of you, calling them 'characters'. As an evidence that not only we lived, but they too have lived with us. Friends, the heart of such an account is always beating in literature – it is touched by small and big pens and comes alive again and again, through others; it defines the time which is bound not only to the past and the present – but to the future as well. These three keep flowing endlessly in their own supreme power, bound to each other. We go on living, sometimes within ourselves, sometimes in others. We go on dying, sometimes for ourselves, sometimes for others. In spite of living and dying, in the knowledge and glory of literature, the community of writers continues to be alive – and to be read by the readers.<sup>666</sup>

Writing consists in giving a voice and a name to 'nameless people' (*anām log*).<sup>667</sup> The narrated tale is tied up by time and to time: the human destiny and

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<sup>665</sup> Nameless and not voiceless: literature will give them both a name and a voice.

<sup>666</sup> SAM, Sobti 2015: 76–77, *Likhī pañktiyoñ meñ vyaktigat haisiyat meñ sirf ham nahīñ – hamārā pariveś guñā huā hai. Jānā huā vakt – jo sirf hamārā khud kā nahīñ – anām aur asañkhyā logoñ kā bhī hai jinheñ pātroñ kā nām dekar ham āpke sāmne prastut karte haiñ. Is sākṣī meñ ki sirf ham hī nahīñ, vah bhī hamāre sāth jie haiñ. Dosto, aise vṛttānt kā dīl hameśā dhayaktā rahtā hai sāhitya meñ – choṭī-baṛī aur baṛī lekhanī se sparṣ pātā hai aur bār-bār zindā ho jātā hai dūsroñ ke bahāne aur us vakt ko paribhāṣit kartā hai jo sirf atit aur vartmān se nahīñ – bhaviṣya se bhī juṛā hai. Ye tinoñ ek-dūsre se guñthe-baṁdhe nīrantar apñī param sattā meñ – bathe rahte haiñ. Ham jite rahte haiñ – kabhī apne meñ, kabhī dūsroñ meñ. Ham marte rahte haiñ – kabhī apne lie, kabhī dūsroñ ke lie. Jīne-marne ke bāvjud samay aur sāhitya ke vidhi-vaibhav meñ lekhakgañ zindā hote cale jāte haiñ – aur pāṭhakoñ dvārā paṛhe jāte haiñ.*

<sup>667</sup> Such a phrase, particularly in the context of contemporary Indian literature, brings to mind the post-colonial discourse and Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988b), with all the issues that the idea of giving a voice/name to the voiceless/nameless raises when it comes

its flow are a part of the endless flow of time, of which literature is the chronicler. For this reason, it is not merely the ability of the writer that creates the work of art; it is also the inspiration, drawn from life, of all the characters which emerge – their voices are truly present here. Literature preserves and carries the idiosyncrasies of individuals and as such is also a token of knowledge, culture and tradition. It bears witness to humanity's existence with regard to the passing of time.

The experience accumulated by the writers is the treasure (*nidhi*)<sup>668</sup> stockpiled by literature against time. Beyond the individuals and the societies and cultures to which they belong, lies a dimension of life and time which is infinite and eternal. Each particular (and individual) experience is embedded both into this larger frame and a specific society, time, place and culture. Literature is a record of all, a record which is transmitted further and can therefore overcome the individual finitude. It matters to Sobti that literature is not merely the world of an individual writer, but rather a mode of expression of the multitude of individual destinies and experiences (of those who can speak and those who cannot), a means of making these lives live on. As such, literature 'bears witness' to the living even when they are not there anymore.

'Bearing witness' – reflecting on life and recording it – becomes possible because the writer is not alone; she is part of a genealogy of writers, a community of authors that constitute a tradition and an endless chain. In the very same way life may be seen as eternal by way of the act of giving birth and continuing a family line.<sup>669</sup> This chain of authors (*racnākārom kī kaṛī*) is what binds the individual to a larger context by the power of the words to express something which goes beyond the individual life experience.<sup>670</sup> This process of

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from a well-educated woman from the upper class. However, for Sobti, there is no political agenda here: literature is a space where the individual and collective stories and experiences can receive a lasting shape, despite their own transience. For her, voicing those individual and collective destinies is one of the roles of literature. This is not connected to a political agenda, with the idea of asserting the rights of the subaltern or the minorities, but rather to a will to find and unravel a truth about human nature and human life. If a parallel to Spivak's work on Mahasweta Devi is possible, one must bear in mind that Sobti is not an activist and always kept her distances from political parties.

**668** See SAM, Sobti 2015: 76, "According to the rules and living traditions, we [the writers] are handing over the gathered treasure, in the face of the eternity of life. *Niyam aur jīne kī maryādā ke anusār apnī saṁcit nidhi ko jīvan kī nirantartā ke sammukh samarpit kar dete haiṁ.*"

**669** This notion of filiation is essential in several of Sobti's novels, especially in AL and DoD.

**670** For Sobti, it is important to see that writers form a particular group, a community, see chapter seven. Instead of a biological filiation, writers construct an intellectual filiation;

inscribing a specific (individual) time into the larger time frame is the task of literature, a task achieved through memory.

Memory, which is intrinsically linked to time and more particularly to the human perception of time, lies therefore at the core of literature as well. As a consequence, it is not surprising to find it at the centre of Sobti's reflection on temporality. It is indeed memory and the written culture that challenge the transitory character of the individual destiny:<sup>671</sup>

As many times as we are protecting the merits of the word in order to assemble life in a work, we are bowing in respect. We bow in respect. To our elders. To our Ancestors. To our New Ones. This is the continuous chain of authors. We can touch them because it is the written word. The memory of repetition. And memory is immortal. Each time, it is born in the arrangement of a work, to be expressed again.

We [the authors] touch the experience between beginning and end, between birth and death. Our living heart chooses itself its testimony and, after bringing the text to advance on the stream of communicability, displays it with the help of language. It manifests the density and the vivacity of life with inspiration. In its own particularity, after peeping from the corners of the outside to the inside and from those of the inside to the outside, it reveals the dark places – where it produces sounds on the silent pages of the soul and of the body. From this shore to that shore – repeatedly, this very circulation of man in the world, again and again. Constantly. This is the very encounter of life with death. Since it is so, neither is a beginning only a beginning, nor is an end only an end.<sup>672</sup>

This passage illustrates not only the importance of memory in holding time in the face of the reality of transitoriness, it also highlights Sobti's idea that the

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through intertextuality, through their use of language and images, they are also connecting their time and society to the past and establishing a bridge towards the future.

**671** And yet, memory is subjective, selective and liable to change, as Sobti illustrates well in her fictional works (I will examine this through the example of AL). I see here a tension between the role of literature as a recording of life, an act of memory, and that of literature as the space of thinking about human memory and the transitory character of life.

**672** SAM, Sobti 2015: 25–26, *Ham jitni bār jīvan ko racnā meṁ gūmth lene ke lie śabd ke puṅya ko surakṣit karte haiṁ – utnī bār naman hote haiṁ. Naman karte haiṁ. Apne purānoṁ ko. Pracīnoṁ ko. Apne nayoṁ ko. Racnākāroṁ kī yah aṭūṭ kaṛī hai. Chū pāte haiṁ, kyoṁkī śabd kī likhat hai. Dohrāne kī smṛti hai. Aur smṛti anaśvar hai. Har bār racnā kī samjñā meṁ janm letī hai, dubārā pravāhit hone ko.*

*Ādī aur ant janm aur maraṅg ke bic kī anubhūti kā sparṣ karte haiṁ. Hamārā prāṅvān antaḥ-karaṅ svayaṁ apnā sākṣya cuntā hai aur pāṭh ko prāmāṅiktā kī dhār par caṛhākar bhāṣā kī madad se prakāśit kartā hai. Jīvan ke saghan aur saṅg ko pratibhā se ujāgar kartā hai. Apnī-apnī nijatā meṁ andar se bāhar aur bahār se andar ke konoṁ se jhāṁk un aṁdheroṁ ko ujāgar kartā hai – jahāṁ deh aur ātmā kā maun pannonoṁ par suroṁ ko pravāhit kartā hai. Is pār se us pār – phir manuṣya kī yahī parikramā is lok meṁ bār-bār. Bārambār. Mṛtyu se yahī hai jīvan kī mukhāmukhi. Iske calte ne ārambh mātr ārambh hai, na ant mātr ant hai.*



writers constitute a group: literature binds them in a lineage in which, in spite of their independence and their particularities, they are all united. This unity lies in the use of language, of the written word, relying on memory. There is a continuity in literature because it relies on language, the vehicle of memory. The image of literature which emerges here is one of constant repetition of the similar, exactly like the third layer of time. It is an image made of repetitions – not an endless repetition of exactly the same, but a repetition of the similar within the chain or genealogy of authors, through the use of words, through a repetition of themes and quests, and through a record or a memory of human life. This memory is immortal because it is embedded in the flow of time and contains what always repeats itself in human nature – a form of ‘universal core’. Literature, as shown in the preceding chapters, is concerned with universally recurring human themes and issues, and is therefore not limited to a single epoch or setting.

Literature is thus not constructed by Sobti as a constant quest for novelty – a poetics which is often defended by literary movements or individual authors – but rather as the record of the incessant flow of life in the consciousness of what always remains true for human beings, of what recurs again and again. Literature raises above a specific context, although each work is indeed linked to its particular setting as well.<sup>673</sup> This notion of literature’s universality brings to mind the argument of chapter three. Here Sobti sets her views regarding the interaction of the inside and the outside and the need to lay bare the ‘darkness’ (*amdhare*) of human nature and set it in a temporal frame, or rather several temporal frames. Literature, by retelling or recreating life (the time between birth and death), brings resonance to the reality of the individual. Through its potentiality of universalisation, literature points at what is recurring and thus challenges the notion of finitude implied in the individual human life. It shows life as a constant cycle of birth and death, a beginning, an end, and a new beginning.

In this vision of a constant flow, of a cycle, and in the notion of the ‘shores’ of life (birth and death), one finds again the metaphor of the water, more precisely of the river. The shores of life recall the linearity of the destiny of an individual, as does the idea of the current, an image of transitoriness. However, the

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<sup>673</sup> In chapter two, I quoted Shrikant Verma’s notion of literature as ‘reaching beyond time’, in a spiritual dimension as well. While I do not think that Sobti hints at or believes in the possibility of bringing a spiritual liberation through literature (the notion of *mokṣa*, which can be compared in the context of the arts to the notion of *catharsis*), it is clear that, for her, there is a deeper dimension and meaning given to life through literature, that literature has the ability to reach a higher truth.

very idea that the individual temporality is set in a larger cyclical temporality is contained in the metaphor of the river (embedded in the water cycle), in which Sobti conjoins the three levels of time-consciousness (the eternally recurring temporality, the individual finite temporality and the socio-historical temporality).

Literature is a record of the individual finite time, of what comes between the beginning and the end of a single life. It writes the individual finite time into the broader time by making manifest or 'loud' what is not expressed, what is hidden and 'dark' – as well as what is universally human. This idea parallels that of giving a name to the nameless. However, here, the 'dark places' (*amdh-hera*) may also be seen in a more psychological light, as the unsaid, unadmitted, and also as the darker sides of human nature – the violence, the conflicts, the aggression – all that is present and emerges again and again. Literature attempts to understand and explain this. Such an interpretation of the role of literature concurs with Sobti's wish to be impartial in her portrayal of life and the human being (*insān*), as analysed earlier through the discussion of the story of Rabia-al-Basri in MSRS.<sup>674</sup> Just as in that discussion, where the interaction between the inside and the outside (the inner mind of the writer and her surroundings) was so central, here, too, Sobti refers to these two notions and emphasises their essential role in the writer's search for a fuller understanding of human nature and human experience, that is, for a comprehensive reflection on life in all its aspects, including the different layers of temporality. This recreation of life, which Sobti considers to be one of the roles of literature, relies on memory, both as the tool which entwines literature and time and constitutes literature (as a record of human life) and as the instrument through which a writer sets in motion the process of writing and creating.

### 6.2.2 Memory and the Process of Creation: Sobti's Memory Banks

The potentiality of creation is rooted in the act of memory, in grasping a specific event in time. Memory is central to literature: the collective memory, the recalling

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<sup>674</sup> See chapter three and MSRS, Sobti 2014: 398. In the conception of time presented by Sobti, the three layers of time interact. Literature has the ability of showing these interactions and interconnections. It brings together the levels of the finite individual and the cosmic times. This capacity originates in the potential of literature to make a singular life and event into an exemplum of the potentialities of human nature, as Aristotle argued in his *Poetics*. For Sobti, this aspect is not voiced explicitly, but illustrated through the parallel between the writer and the Sufi saint and the devotion of the writer to the 'truth' about life and the human being (without embellishing or demonising them).

or retelling of an experience which is universal, enables literature to communicate more deeply than everyday language and reach the text's reader or listener on a common ground. However, for Sobti, memory is essential to the process of creation as well, as a space within the mind: it is the place where the stories and the experiences are located, and the place from which they re-emerge to be transformed into the literary work. This particular place is illustrated by Sobti's concept of memory banks (*smṛti-bairṅks*). In those 'storage rooms', the writer keeps piles of images, instants, voices, experiences and scenes. There is no active awareness involved. Time passes and with it, through an unconscious process of reworking and assimilation (or combination), some of those images give birth to a new form, a new shape – the text. Here, Sobti completes the image of the text-crop with the notion of a 'bank', where over time an interest will accrue – or not. The writing process emerges clearly from this new image as more than the sum total of the reflection or reproduction of elements from the outside to be presented by the writer. After a long (and mysterious) process taking place within the writer, a memory re-emerges, enriched and informed by other elements. This process is an act of creation, a reshaping of memory through the power of words:

We all keep flying on the wings of seasons and times, and who knows what stories we weave – what stories we live! When we return again, we give them new shapes and colours in association with the words. Sometimes we remember them, sometimes we discard them from our memories and forget them. Sometimes we diminish their being to put them away from our eyes. Sometimes we start and expand them. Sometimes we raise them from our memories. Sometimes, after having made one's self superior to their diversity, we knock them down and go further. Sometimes we diminish them secretly in order to feel light. Sometimes, being awake, we expand them. Sometimes we raise them from our memories and establish them in our self and express them in our characters and in our lines. We express the unspeakable – sometimes we assemble [it], little by little, into one full word. With this, it seems to be the variable, whimsical time that reveals the melodies and rhythm, the numerous forms and colours of our lived experience in diverse sound-writings and in diverse forms of expressions. It stirs the 'world' of the world in the 'world'. This is the greatness of the meaning of the 'word' and of the essence of the human being.<sup>675</sup>

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675 Sobti 2015: 75: *Ham sab, ṛtuom̄, mausamom̄ ke paṁkhom̄ par uṛte-uṛte jāne kyā se kyā ākhyān bunate haiṁ – jīte haiṁ! Dubārā lauṭākar śabdom̄ kī soḥbat meṁ nayā raṅg-rūp dete haiṁ. Kabhī unheṁ yād karte haiṁ, kabhī yādom̄ se katrākar unheṁ bhulā dete haiṁ. Kabhī unheṁ āṁkhom̄ ke āge se sarkā dene ko, unke astitva ko choṭā-sā kar lete haiṁ. Kabhī caunṅkar unheṁ vistār dete haiṁ. Kabhī smṛtiyom̄ se unheṁ ubār lete haiṁ. Kabhī unkī anekrūptā se apne ko hāvī pākār unheṁ pachāṛ dete haiṁ aur āge baḥ jāte haiṁ. Kabhī halkā maḥsūs karne ko, man-hī-man unheṁ choṭā kar lete haiṁ. Kabhī saḥaj ho unheṁ vistār dete haiṁ. Kabhī smṛtiyom̄ se ubārkar unheṁ apne meṁ sthīt kar lete haiṁ – kabhī sūkṣm se sūkṣm ko ek śabd-bhar meṁ gūṁth lete haiṁ. Iske sāth-sāth hī lagā rahtā hai parivartan̄sil taram̄gom̄vālā samay jo hamāre*

For Sobti, the ability to create is constantly alive. It relies on what is lived, seen or heard, and takes support from the memory. In this passage, the dependence on memory for creation is manifest and the interaction with actual memories is beautifully described. It is an interaction where the writer is not always ready to welcome all the aspects of her remembrance or all the memories as they are. But memory can be enlarged and enriched by the ability to create, by the imagination. The words are the instruments which allow this process of creation to take shape, while time is the agent of the transformation of a memory, through the words, into a new form and expression, into a fictional world built on the basis of the so-called real world.<sup>676</sup> The peculiarity of literature is to render the 'core' of the human being apparent and to ultimately embed it in another time than the variable and transitory time of the individual life.

The language used in this passage to describe the process of remembering and the emergence of a new idea is metaphorical. The two main metaphors found here recur in Sobti's works: the weaving metaphor and the music-painting metaphor. Here, the image of weaving is developed in order to illustrate the construction, out of memories and experiences, of a 'patchwork' knit together into one unit, the text. This process assembles several colours and sounds (the manifold aspects of the text, the painting-music metaphor) in the form of the work. These various aspects reveal the diversity of human life and perception by inscribing the plot and the characters in their own time frame. In this context, the combined textile and music metaphor illustrates the diversity of the life projected or brought back by a literary text.

It would go beyond the scope of this section to discuss Sobti's numerous descriptions of the emergence of the first idea for all her novels. However, let me point out that it is always an echo of something heard or lived, an image, something emerging from the memory bank, that ultimately provides the impulse for the creation of the literary text. For example, in the context of the creation of DSB, Sobti describes seeing, in her mind's eye, a young girl, followed by the memory of her grandparents' old haveli. This gave, in turn, the impetus to start a new story. A similar phenomenon is at the root of MM. There was an

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*jine ke asaṁkhyā-asaṁkhyā raṅg-rūp, sur-tāl alag-alag svarlipiyom meṁ, alag-alag mukhyom meṁ prakāṣ hotā hai. Lok ke 'lok' ko 'lok' meṁ taraṅgit kartā hai. Yah 'śabd' ke arth aur manuṣya ke marm kī mahimā hai.*

Sobti plays with the anaphoric *kabhī* in this passage to create a poetic rhythm. It is yet another example of her blurring of styles in the essays.

**676** This is the distinction made by Sobti between the world (*lok*) and the 'world', the fictionally recreated reality, which acquires however through the words the power of revealing a truth which is not clearly recognisable otherwise.

encounter on a road with a fearless and cheeky working woman in Rajasthan. Years later, Sobti heard this voice again and connected it to an image which had flashed before her eyes: the vision of the upper room of a large joint-family home, with a man lying on a cot. From these small elements, the rest was developed by the imagination and by the existence of the characters for themselves and in themselves, partly at the moment of writing itself. The creation of MM, as it is depicted in SAM and in another essay on this novel, is a perfect illustration of the workings of memory in the creative process.<sup>677</sup> It demonstrates how, for Sobti, literary creation works through the interaction of memory, imagination and experience of the world. However, in the whole process of writing, there is still a part of mystery that remains outside the control of the writer.

On a personal level, Sobti views memory and time as something fleeting and passing. If memory lies at the core of her work and process of creation, it is never an intentional act. Rather, it is usually an unexplained circumstance that brings back to the mind's surface a memory from which a new text or a character might emerge. The writer is both pro-active, because of her assimilation and combination of elements in her memory bank, and passive, because she does not control the text or the characters. Once again, Sobti constructs her image of the writer through an unresolved tension. She points to the arbitrariness of this process in her interview with Anamika in the following manner:

It will be no exaggeration if I say that the account-books of my memories do not travel very far with me. Such is my nature: I keep my gaze on the present situation. What has come along before, has gone somewhere backstage. To voice it, one needs time. I don't have time to foster and nurture by-gones. My own little world has become big and, after the big world became small, it has shrunk in the inner mind. I understand and see the essential, but I avoid regrets. Once inscribed in the memory, any sound of steps or knocking, word, *image*, individuality, becomes indestructible. I have known its spark when the rough crowd of *Zindagināmā* assembled next to my table. There was no mistake in the countless names and faces of the characters. All simple people. For me, each face had a distinct identity.<sup>678</sup>

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**677** See the discussion of the creation of MM in Sobti 2014: 386–388, and in SAM, Sobti 2015: 152–157.

**678** SAM, Sobti 2015: 182: *Atišyokti na hogī agar kahūm ki merī smṛtiyom ke bahī-khāte mere sāth bahut dūr tak nahīm calte rahe. Kuch hai aisā mere mizaj meṁ ki tatkāl kī upasthiti par nigāh rakhī hūm. Jo piche sarak gayā, vah kisī nepathya meṁ gāyā. Use āvāz dene ke lie vakt cāhīe hotā hai. Mere pās pichvārom ke pālne-sālne ke lie koi vakt nahūn thā. Merī nij kī choṭī duniyā baṛī ho gāī aur ek baṛī duniyā choṭī hokar antarmān meṁ simaṭ gāī. Marm ko samajhī-būjhatī hūn par pachtāvom se dūr rahtī hūm. Koi ek āhaṭ-khaṭkhaṭāhaṭ, śabd, imej, vyaktitva ek bār smṛti meṁ amkit ho jāne pa miṭ ho jātā hai. Iskā camatkār maine tab jānā jab ‘Zindagināmā’ kī khurdurī bhī*

With her awareness of the time passing and things changing which she also speaks of elsewhere,<sup>679</sup> Sobti does not get attached to memories. She does not tie herself to a specific situation or context. She observes the very fascinating capacity of the mind to record images, events, impressions, and then bring them back at unexpected moments, allowing the writer to draw from them the thread of a plot or the outline of a character. This is what happened, amongst others, with the composition of ZN.

Memory's workings are outside the control of the writer – outside the control of any individual, really – and it is with this understanding of memory and its unsteadiness (or even unreliability) that Sobti writes. She makes this a topic in her writing as well (as in AL), but this view of memory is also part of her depiction of the figure of the writer, who is not an omnipotent creator but a hybrid figure between the pro-active author and the transmitter of worlds she has grown and assimilated within herself with the help of memory and language.

The memories are stored up in Sobti's memory banks (*smṛti-baṅks*), a place in the mind to which she alludes on several occasions in her essays and interviews. As explained earlier, the memory banks are the storage rooms of images, voices, parts of dialogues, events, characters, impressions and everything which a person remembers, consciously or not, during a lifetime. For Sobti, memory is a place where all the lived experiences are kept and from where they can spring at times to give birth to a literary creation. Just like the banks, they render interest in the course of time; they augment and grow. However, they can also go to waste, without ever producing anything. The writer cannot decide on that:

The writer possesses a pile of *images*. It is her memory *bank*. Where during years and years the feelings and the events are ripening. Sometimes, they rot and become junk, and sometimes, through the power of talent, they are exposed to shine. The vigilance that is present with every new feeling is being carved out as well.

You start writing and, who knows by which means, what amounts at the beginning almost to nothing – feelings, thoughts – spring up on the page.<sup>680</sup>

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*merī mez ke āspās ā juṭī thī. Saikṛōṅ pātroṅ ke nām-cehroṅ meṅ koi bhulekhā nahīn thā. Sab sādharmaṅ jan. Mere nikaṭ har chehre kī alag pahcān thī.*

679 In MSRS, Sobti 2014: 401, for example.

680 SVS, Sobti 2007: 165, *Lekhak ke pās imejes kā ambār hai. Apnā smṛti baimk hai. Jahām barsōṅ-barsōṅ tak ghaṭnāeṅ-bhāv pakte rahte haiṅ. Kabhī bosidā hokar kabār ban jāte haiṅ aur kabhī pratibhā ke bal par camakne ko ughaṭ āte haiṅ. Vah caukannāpan bhī jo har nae anubhav ke sāth vajūd meṅ ātā hai, tarās liyā jātā hai.*

*Āp likhnā śurū karte haiṅ aur jāne kis udyam se jo ārambh meṅ lagbhag na ke barābar hotā hai – bhāv, vicar panne par ughaṭte cale jāte haiṅ.*

The image of the field and crop, which is so central in Sobti's conception of writing, appears again in this passage through the idea of the re-emergence of an image or a memory. No wonder that some of the words recall this very semantic field: *paknā* (to ripen, to mature), *bosidā honā* (to rot, to decay, to waste away). Not all ideas give rise to a work, but some do and, like at the beginning of a new life, from almost nothing, something appears on the pages. The idea of a memory bank carries in itself an idea similar to that of a rate of interest: after some time, a lot might emerge from a single image; at other times, nothing; the writer cannot foresee any of it.

A text can surpass its own context and time because of its potential for universalisation, which is linked to the recreation of a world, of life, through words.<sup>681</sup> The combination of memory with knowledge, experience and imagination enables the writer to bring back to life a specific time and connect it to a larger context. The experience and observation of the world is therefore not an act of 'spying' (*jāsūsī*)<sup>682</sup> or monitoring, for it implies an active interaction between the inner world of the writer and her surroundings. It is indeed this dialogue – between inside and outside – at the core of which lies memory as the tool for recording the idiosyncratic perception of the world of the writer, which confers on a text its potential of expressing a truth about life.<sup>683</sup>

Memory as a space (a storage room) and memory as a process both lie at the heart of literary creation, according to Sobti. In her fictional works, she uses memories in the construction of the narrative as well, and she reflects on the process of remembering as constitutive of an identity and the understanding of life and the world. Thus, alongside knowledge, experience and imagination, memory is instrumental to the ability to create and universalise the singular. However, memory is also intrinsically linked to any narration: it is through memory that the transitoriness of life can be challenged; retelling an impression is an act of memory which has the potential of conferring a lasting character on a lived experience. Memory is also essential to the perception of the surrounding world and the self. For Sobti, this latter aspect possesses a certain importance, as becomes obvious in the novels SaS and AL. In those two works, Sobti's understanding of memory's propensity to mutate and her awareness of the transitory character of everything in life become essential topics on which she reflects through the subtle description of the characters and their perception of change and ageing.

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**681** It is this potential which embeds a written work into a larger temporal frame – a frame which, however, still presupposes the possibility for literature to be read and transmitted.

**682** Sobti 2007: 164.

**683** It is remarkable that in every topic developed by Sobti the dialogue between outside and inside is central.

### 6.2.3 Memory and the Constitution of Identities: *Samay sargam*

In her novels about ageing, SaS and AL, Sobti makes time the main narrative theme. Time – present time, time gone and time still remaining – is the central topic around which identity can be constructed – or reconstructed. The characters, confronted with old age and death, delve into their memories, examine their perceptions of the passing of time, and reflect on the self – or the selves. In SaS, the remembrance of the past and the ‘past selves’ is at the core of a reflection about identity. In the confrontation between time passed and time experienced – with the rhythm specific to each – within the lives of the two main protagonists, the text also offers a reflection on the pivotal idea that time is not only the time that elapses, the time leading ultimately to death (*kāl*), but the time presently lived as well: that it is, indeed, life itself.

SaS concentrates on two old friends, Aranya and Ishan, their meetings, their discussions about life and old age, and their perception of memory and changing times. Through their slowly developing romance, the life of elderly people in Delhi (with the side issue of children and relatives depriving older people of their rights) is also depicted. In this novel, the feeling of time – the change in the very perception and management of time, but the phenomenon of remembering as well – functions as the narrative device around which the plot is built.

The story is divided into twenty-two chapters told in the third person with a shifting focalisation on the protagonists, although the main focaliser remains Aranya during most of the story. This focalisation switches to Ishan for a few chapters of the novel. The characters of the two main protagonists are very distinct: Aranya was a women rights’ activist in her working days and is dynamic and impulsive, while Ishan leads a very orderly life and is interested in spirituality, keeping up a correspondence with a Danish disciple of Krishnamurti.<sup>684</sup> The opposition between the two characters allows for an elaborated dialogue on memory, time, living and the changes in the city of Delhi (which receives almost the place of a protagonist in the story).

As the title, *Samay sargam*, suggests, ‘time’ (*samay*, ‘the human time’) forms the core of this short novel. However, as the second word of the title clarifies, it is not ‘time’ per se but rather the confluence, the coming together of different strands or ‘melodies’ of time in a polyphonic display of the range of the musical

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<sup>684</sup> Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) was a philosopher viewed by the Theosophists as the new world teacher. Later he turned away from Theosophy and developed his own line of thinking. His thoughts remain influential in India and around the world.



scale (*sargam*) that really interest the author. The difficulty of translating this poetic title aptly into English is reflected in the translatorial choice evidenced by the English edition of the book, *The Music of Solitude*.<sup>685</sup> Overwhelmed by the overabundance of meanings, the translator decided to drop any direct reference to time while highlighting the musical aspect of a shared, old-age existence.

The perceptions of time of the protagonists are presented through their memories, their daily routine and their subjective feelings of change in the outside life but also within the self. The novel offers a reflection – through Aranya’s gaze and partly through Ishan’s – on the changes in the flow of time at diverse points in life and the consciousness of the self which springs up from this:

The pace of time.

We were insiders as long as we were in the run. As soon as we are out of it, we stand outside. Entirely outside. Just as if we were sitting in a hired *taxi*, although we roam the streets, we are cut off from them.

A new time and old we are.<sup>686</sup>

While ageing, the feeling of time and of belonging to the outside world, to the society, undergoes a change, bringing in a new image of the self and a confrontation with the past (including its memories) and the reality of the present, everyday life. What was familiar is gone and has been replaced by a new reality. It is as if there was no belonging to this world anymore, only to the past (and the memories). The metaphor of the hired taxi points precisely to this feeling of unbelonging.

But it is also the perception of time that changes and stretches, while the rhythm of life slows down. As a consequence, the vision of the self becomes divided into several images or identities, between what is remembered and what is lived today. While thinking about herself and her fragility now that she is an old woman – she has just been robbed of her belongings while coming

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**685** Sobti 2013, trsl. Vasudha Dalmia.

**686** SaS, Sobti 2008: 44, *Vakt kī raftār*.

*Daṛ meṁ them to andar them. Daṛ se bāhar haiṁ to bāhar. Niṇaṭ bāhar! Ṭaksī kī tarah bhāṛā dekar baiṭhe haiṁ uske andar aur saṛkoṁ ko tay karte hue bhī saṛkoṁ se alag.*

*Nae vakt aur purāne ham.*

Sobti uses the term *vakt* in this passage partly because the setting of Delhi calls for a type of Hindi tinged with words of Persian origin, but also because she refers here to the dimension of time in a more historical meaning than the period of time lived individually by a person.

home from the airport in a taxi – Aranya muses about her identity and sees the need to address it in the plural, not in the singular:

Whatever it may be, I feel an immense satisfaction with myself, quite apart from any relationships or friendships.

Then why are you calling out to those who live in yourself, having looked for an occasion to attack yourself?

There are several editions of me printed in myself. They can't be seen all the time. But when they show up, they take aim at me with invisible weapons!<sup>687</sup>

This feeling of diversity present within the self becomes more extreme in the confrontation between the memories of youth and strength and the present with its absence of future prospects. The self, however, remains constantly present and constitutes the 'composite' self, an identity made up of multiple aspects. This plurality is an important point for Sobti and must be seen not only as a plurality in time (induced by the constant change and evolution of the self), but also as a multiplicity of selves coexisting in the same body and mind. Sobti is very aware of this and arguably this might have been the reason for her creation of a double, Hashmat.

In the construction of the identity and the self – while it is apparent throughout the novel that no identity is definitively fixed and marked, but that all is perpetually in motion – the materiality of the body plays no less an essential role: it bears witness to all that has been lived, to the passing of time, and, because of the constant renewing of the cells, it constitutes the evidence of the incessant change of everything living as well. Indeed, for Sobti, each human being is not an abstract or spiritual being (at least not only) but a being made of flesh and blood, possessing a tangible body which is as much part of her experience and personal history as the mind. There is a material dimension to life:

The skin regenerates itself every month. And so does the lining of the stomach; every five days, the *liver*, and in six weeks, the entire frame of the body. Even so, we feel that nothing changes, while 95 percent of the body's cells are being transformed. They continually keep growing and go on regenerating the body.

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**687** Sobti 2008: 48–49, *Jo bhī hai main apne andar ek gahrī trpti mahsūs kartī hūm jo kinhūn bhī sambandhoṃ aur mitratāoṃ se alag hai.*

*Phir kyōṃ unheṃ āvāz de rahī ho jo khud tumhāre viruddh ghāt lagāe rahte haiṃ.*

*Mujhī me mere kāī samrakaraṇ chipe haiṃ. Aksar nahīn dīkhte. Dīkhte haiṃ to mujhī par gum hathiyār dāg dete haiṃ!*

In its subtle form, the stock of cells is connected to a powerful *cosmic computer*. A *cosmic computer* with ultrasound signals. And the wonderful thing about this is that nothing happens by chance.

Our body is evidence of all the experiences we have known and lived. I am not only me. I am also all that I have assembled in myself.<sup>688</sup>

Throughout the novel, reflections about the body and its ailments present an opposition to the mind and its ability to connect and think – faculties that are still there. Yet the opposition is resolved through the notion that change is an intrinsic part of life: it is its natural course. Yet, in the construction of the identity of the self, the materiality of the body is central, too: the self (the self perceived as enduring despite change) is constituted not only of the mind, but also of the body, and not only of its ‘essential core’ (inner core, *antarang*),<sup>689</sup> but of all the external elements that influence an individual in the course of time as well.<sup>690</sup>

All these elements together constitute the self and compose life, that is, the ‘melody of time’, present in the title, a melody that is not only flowing but also modulating itself in constant variations. The title of the novel reveals its full meaning in the last chapter, where Ishan and Aranya, now sharing a flat, listen to the last raga of the day, the midnight raga.<sup>691</sup> Time is not only death, it is also life – it is the time lived. And it plays a melody which, like all the ragas of the day,

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**688** Sobti 2008: 56–57: *Ek mās meṃ tvacā badal jāti hai. Udar kī tillī, har pānc din meṃ livar, cha saptāh meṃ pūra kaṅkāl is kāyā kā. Us par vilakṣaṇ yah ki lage kuch bhī badlā nahūn jab ki 95 pratiśat śarīr ke aṅṅ badal jāte haiṃ. Pratiśhāpit hote haiṃ aur śarīr ko navibhāt karte haiṃ.*

*Koṣṅṅu apne laghu rūp meṃ jūre haiṃ, śaktiśālī kosmik kamyūṭar se. Kosmik kamyūṭar – parādhvani samket! Us par khūbi yah ki akasmāt kuch bhī ghaṭit nahūn hotā.*

*Hamārī deh un sab anubhavoṃ kā puṣṭikaraṇ hai jinheṃ hamne jānā hai. Jiyā hai. Maiṃ mātr maiṃ nahūn: maiṃ vah sab bhī hūn jiskā anubhav maiṃ apne meṃ sanjoe hūn.*

**689** This ‘heart of heart’ of an individual is spiritual, but its physical dimension is of equal importance to Sobti, who sees the physical or even sensual aspect of the world very clearly and expresses it in her novels as well. One can think here not only of SaS, but also of Mitro in MM, or of the very epicurean tone of Hashmat in HaH, as well as of the character of the mother in AL, a woman who speaks constantly about the tangible world, food and material reality. Many of Sobti’s characters are very rooted in life.

**690** This can be paralleled to the activity of the writer who assembles experience lived and observed in her raw material (see chapter three). In this way, each human being is intrinsically connected to her surroundings and dependent on her perception of the world. The image of the ‘cosmic computer’ in the extract quoted also presents the idea of the connection of the individual to the universe in an even larger frame; this vision of the individual embedded in a multi-layered context is parallel to the three layers of temporality discussed earlier.

**691** There are different types of ragas corresponding to the times of the day. Here, the parallel is made between the last period of a day and the last period of life which has started for the two main protagonists of the novel.

strings all the aspects of human experience, a diversity of shapes, sounds and colours: “The melody of time. Time is a *raga*. No. A multitude of *ragas* are bound up in time. Many musical patterns. In each of them, its unique flow of notes.”<sup>692</sup> These songs are the individuals, bound together by the melody of time. The motive of music becomes, in SaS, a metaphor for time and its passing which also represents both the constantly changing self and the diversity of life. Music is the reflection of time, of the multitude of aspects and moments of life. It is however within the written text, within SaS itself, that this diversity can be revealed and explored – this is one of the purposes of literature.

The metaphor of music, with its modes, variations, evolution and rhythm, illustrates the flow (i.e., the dynamism) of life, which lies at the core of Sobti’s poetics as well. She is particularly aware of change and plurality within life and within the self, but also of the human need to ‘hold on’ to something and construct an identity in spite of this actuality of change and multiplicity of identities. Through the metaphor of music and melody, she hints at the thread that binds those multiple aspects together, a thread which remains present, even when not very visible, and makes it possible for literature to combine and bring out the existing pluralities of identities and temporalities.

SaS discusses the phenomenon of ageing and reflects on the identity of the self through memory and the passing of time. It also shows how literature attempts to enclose and hold the diversity of life through a journey into memory and individual experience of the moment. The place of memory as a narrative device and as the ‘holder’ or ‘maker’ of identity is even more central in the novel AL.

#### 6.2.4 Memory and Narration: *Ai laṅkī*

Time is the dimension in which the individual lives and evolves, but also, through memory, the dimension in which she perceives her own as well as others’ existence and can form the notion of identity. The notion of the self as constituted through one’s memories and time perception – as well as the question raised about the possibility of establishing a fixed identity in the face of the flow of time and constant change – is present in Sobti’s works, both fictional and non-fictional. However, it is interesting to note that it is never explicitly voiced and that the words translated here as identity or personality (*śakhsīyat*, *paḥcān*) do not occur

<sup>692</sup> SaS, Sobti 2008: 152, *Samay sargam. Samay ek rāg. Nahim. Samay meṁ nibaddh haiṁ anek rāg. Anek baṁdiṣeṁ. Har baṁdiṣ meṁ apnī svar-laharī.*

very often in the essays. The idea of a connection between the constitution of a self, of an identity (which can also be a group identity), and time and memory is manifest in Sobti's presentation of literature as the account of the individual perception of time and the transience of life.

As shown, memory is essential to the creation of a work. At the same time, it is part of what a text investigates in an attempt to understand the human being and her perception of life. It can therefore function as a narrative device, while delving deeply into the constitution of an identity. This is the case in what I call 'end-of-life-narratives', where the whole plot follows the reconstruction of the past of one main protagonist faced with illness and imminent death, through her reminiscences of her own life. Such is the case in Sobti's *AL*, a short novel narrating the last days of an old, sick woman from the upper middle-class in dialogue with her unmarried daughter. *AL* presents some of the typical characteristics of an end-of-life-narrative, where a central character thinks over her life and tries to come to terms with the life she lived in the perspective of the life she wished for.<sup>693</sup> Only a few characters appear in *AL*, which is very much centred on the dying mother, called Ammu (Mum) throughout the text. Except for the nurse, Susan, no protagonist is named, something which on the one hand concurs with the Indian kinship conventions, where one does not address one another by first names, and on the other hand contributes to conferring on the tale a potential of universality through the anonymity of its characters. From this narrative strategy of sobriety (a very focused text, with few characters and few elements), emerges a very dense analysis of the construction of the self through memory at the moment before death, when the individual looks back at the remains of her days.

The action plays out over a few days, at the end of which it is implied that Ammu dies. However, through the retelling of Ammu's memories and association of ideas, the reader is taken on a journey through her life as a girl, a young bride, a mother and a grandmother, and finally a woman who reconsiders the priorities which governed her whole life. This questioning of her priorities and of what constitutes her personality (*śakhsīyat*) is induced by the presence of the daughter – called simply *laṛkī* (girl) by her mother and *dīdī* (elder sister) by the few other featured characters – who confronts her mother with a different vision of life, being herself an unmarried and apparently independent woman. By her

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**693** The classical example of such a story is Tolstoy's *Smert' Ivana Ilicha* (1886, The Death of Ivan Ilich), but it is interesting to note that Sobti herself wrote a short story, "Badlom ke ghere" (1955, Encircled by clouds) along the same lines. The main themes of "Badlom ke ghere" and *AL* are similar and the treatment of memory as a tool to judge past events would make for an interesting comparison.

being a mother and a grandmother, Ammu is part of a tradition and of a genealogy. Her daughter, on the other hand, stands outside this cycle of life and birth (a perpetuation of tradition which is one of the ways of placing an individual in a larger context and conferring immortality on her). This is a cause of preoccupation for Ammu but also incites her to think about her own time and about how little freedom she had to live her time as her own and not to be subjected to a time-regime imposed on her by society, her in-laws, her husband . . .

The retelling of the story of the mother is not chronological. It works by association of ideas: one topic brings up a memory, a word stirs up another memory, until a whole picture is drawn. The novel is composed as a series of conversations that amount to one long dialogue.<sup>694</sup> It may be compared to a theatre play where the omniscient narrator is some kind of a director instead of a narrator; a director who merely gives stage directions indicating the tone in which the characters are to speak, their facial expressions, the time of the day, etc. This narrator-director is made present through the settings given to the scenes and through indications about the characters and their voices or reactions. However, due to the absence of longer passages narrated by an omniscient narrator, there are no signs of a potential judgement regarding the protagonists and their words. The primary narrator gives voice to the mother for the greatest part of the novel, thus conferring on her the most important narrative voice.

The discourse of the mother is always directed at an intradiegetic audience – in the plot, the daughter, with whom the reader, as the addressee of the whole text, can be partly identified. Despite the fact that the daughter does not speak much during the whole novel – enhancing her position as a recipient of the story and her mother's reflections – she is a very important protagonist because her mere presence and her embodiment of another vision of life and another way of life than her mother's functions almost as a chemical agent, a photographic developer revealing the life story and the thoughts of the dying mother.

It is indeed through the opposition of these two characters – the mother, who spent her life embodying the traditional ideals of Indian womanhood (daughter, wife, mother, grandmother, mistress of the household) and the daughter, independent, bent on studying and remaining on her own – that the mother finds the space and time to reflect on her life and her choices as well as on those of her daughter. This confrontation of both visions stirs up memories around which the story is constructed. The memories are seen through the

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**694** Dialogue is a form which seems dear to Sobti; in the case of *AL*, the whole text is like an exchange between the protagonists. But in other texts as well, through the narrative strategy of shifting points of view and focalisations, it is a dialogical conception of literature that Sobti puts forth. As I have shown in chapter two, Sobti considers life and writing as a dialogical process.

perspective of the mother who narrates them and presents the reader – and, in the story (*histoire* in Genette’s terminology), the daughter – her point of view. Through them, the mother, as the most important narrative voice in the novel, receives an opportunity to think back on her life. The trigger for this reflection is, on the one hand, the proximity of death and, on the other hand, the presence of the daughter (with her completely different vision of ‘the good life’) which compels the mother to muse over her own choices – or their absence.

In AL, memory functions internally as a narrative device: it is the channel through which the life of the main protagonist can unfold. As such, it is an example of the role of memory in narration through free association and a reorganisation of the thoughts and impressions in the course of a reflection on the past. It also concurs with the dying mother’s situation of isolation. She is left to herself and her thoughts; for the first time, she asks herself questions about the way she lived, about her own wishes and about what gave meaning to her life. Often read as a feminist text highlighting the condition of women in a traditional family – and the suppression of their own individuality in favour of the good functioning of the family – AL is also a meditation on the possible meanings of life and the embedding of the individual in the cycle of life through tradition<sup>695</sup> as opposed to her choice of an independent – and therefore solitary and ‘ephemeral’ – life.<sup>696</sup>

But time and memories are not merely narrative devices in this text; they are also the main topic of the novel. Faced with the imminence of death, Ammu, through a personal introspection, comes to terms with her own life devoted to others’ wishes and with her daughter’s choice not to follow the tradition. For Ammu, family, through the chain of births (particularly the birth of a baby girl for a woman), is a perpetuation of the self and a means to ensure immortality:

Listen! To let grow an image of one’s self is a great work for a mother. It is a great deed. Merely by giving birth to a daughter, a mother becomes immortal. She doesn’t die. She becomes eternal. She is today, she will remain tomorrow as well. From mother to daughter. From daughter to her daughter, from her daughter as well to the next daughter. And so on and so forth. This is the stream of creation.<sup>697</sup>

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**695** And through the filiation which springs up from the creation of a family, an important theme in AL.

**696** The feminist reading of AL is, in my opinion, one of the possible interpretations of the text. However, I am attached to the idea that any text leaves room for more than one potential reading.

**697** AL, Sobti 2010: 42–43, *Bāt sun. Apnī samrūpā utpanna karnā māṃ ke lie baḍā mahattva-kārī hai. Puṅya hai. Beṅī ke paidā hote hī māṃ sadājīvi ho jāti hai. Vah kabhī nahīṃ martī. Ho*

However, in AL as in SaS, time is also the time lived, and lived with intensity. Many of Ammu's memories are filled with a thirst for life which implies the intensity with which she had grasped time. Yet there are inevitable regrets connected with the ordered and limited life she had to lead inside a family: "I have run this family like clockwork, never having a thought for myself. And now, girl, this gives me pain."<sup>698</sup> The image of the clock recalls, of course, the notion of time; it mirrors the idea that in a traditional family, no individual (neither the women nor the men) is master of their time.

It is old age and the proximity of death that finally provide Ammu with this precious resource, and thus with an opportunity to stop and think about her life, about the traditions and the social order which she accepted all her life without much opposition or reflection.<sup>699</sup> Only in this dead-end situation is Ammu compelled to question an order which she pretty much accepted as 'the way things ought to be', even though she kept, as is manifest in her memories, her capacity for judgement and observation throughout her life.

The subjectivity of memory and the association of ideas are the pretext for the organisation of the storyline through a non-linear retelling of the life of the mother, centred on her family life and the relationships between the family members. However, memory is also one of the topics of the novel by means of this very narrative strategy: memory is not linear, it works by associations. It can pin itself to small details or images on which it confers a meaning. Thus memory, a singular and idiosyncratic perception of the world, constitutes the essence of the identity of the self.

Ammu's memories reconstitute not only her life and her world but her personality as well. This can be paralleled with Virginia Woolf's notion of 'moments of being', which are at the root of the conception of this author's autobiographical writings.<sup>700</sup> Indeed, according to this notion, it is the moments and impressions remembered which are constitutive of what is 'lived' and 'perceived' intensely by a subject. Those moments make up an individual's 'being'. For Woolf, through writing, those small instants – those moments lived and perceived and on which a meaning is conferred by the individual – are recorded

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*uḥatī hai vah niraṅtarā. Vah āj hai, kal bhī rahegī. māṃ se beḥi tak. Beḥi se uskī beḥi, uskī beḥi se bhī aglī beḥi. Aglī se bhī aglī. Vahī sṛṣṭi kā srot hai.*

It is interesting to observe that filiation is a flow, like time, like the Ganges.

**698** Sobti 2010: 58, *Is parivār ko maiṅne ghaṛī mutābik calāyā, par apnā nij kā koī kām na saṃvārā. Laṛkī, is samay is bāt kā baṛā kaṣṭ hai mujhe.*

**699** She is conscious of this fact, see AL, Sobti 2010: 71: "What naivety! Could one think or speak up back then? *Bholī bāteṃ. Socne-kahne kā maukā hī kahām thā?*"

**700** See Woolf 1976 as well as the short essay, "The Moment: Summer's night", Woolf 1947.



and re-shaped. One can also argue that it is sometimes through reminiscence that those moments acquire their real meaning. This is the argument underlying Woolf's *Moments of Being*. Although the notion of 'moment of being' is never clearly defined, it designates a moment of perfect and intensive awareness and consciousness of what is lived; it can also apply to a sensation (the way the blinds flutter, the sound of the waves on the shore) or to a reading, or even to an action. Thinking about Woolf's novels, this notion can easily be recognized as lying at the core of her depictions of the protagonists through their receptivity and perception of their environment and of their selves. It seems indeed to be precisely those moments which are constitutive of an identity of the self through the very subjectivity and singularity of the way the moment is lived (or not lived, being a 'moment of non-being', of lack of intensive awareness). Since *Moments of Being* are autobiographical, it is manifest that those peculiar moments of awareness are not only central to shaping the essence of a given person but also instrumental in her understanding of the time lived, i.e. the time at the scale of the individual. Recording those moments would therefore amount to reconstructing what is meaningful for a character (in a novel) or an individual. It is the core of what makes up her idiosyncratic experience of the world. I see here a very strong parallel between Woolf's conception of time and memory, as constitutive both of an individual's identity and of a narration, and Sobti's views on memory from the perspective of an individual in her novels about old age. In *AL*, it becomes very obvious, in the memories retold by the mother, through the intensity of life which emanates from them.

For Sobti, time is always the time lived. Thus, it is not only the time limited by the perspective of death. According to her, time also has other dimensions, besides this self-defining one. Those dimensions are of great importance in the life of an individual at a socio-historical level and in the larger context of a culture and of the order of nature. The novel in which all these three aspects – the very subjective and individual time, the historical time, and the cosmic time of the seasons – are the most obviously intertwined is *DoD*, with its very subtle and subjective approach to time, change and history. I will therefore turn now to this novel and to the question of literature and history.

## 6.3 Time and History

### 6.3.1 Writing the Passing of Time, Socio-Historical Change and Subjectivity: *Dilo-dānīs*

I have described memory as the result as well as the origin of the subjective and individual perception of time in the circular relation of the interdependence of time (understood as the dimension in which one lives) and the understanding and experience of the same through the faculty of remembering. Among Sobti's works, no text perhaps illustrates the subjectivity of the feeling of time's passing as well as DoD. Set in Delhi in the 1920s, it is one of Sobti's so-called historical novels<sup>701</sup> and raises the question of writing history.

Sobti's writing of history does not focus on major actors and events, but on the experience of time of the protagonists of her texts. In doing so, she not only conveys a 'second' or 'other' history (the non-official history lived and felt by the people, the subjective history, so to speak), but also renders it impossible for the readers to disregard the literary and fictional aspects of her novels and read them only as historical documents. This is part of Sobti's understanding of the difference between the roles of the writer and the historian. Indeed, for her, literature is not an academic field but the place where the subjective and individual perception of time intermingles with history, culture and the construction of group identities. As a result of this subjectivity, important periods of change, like the 1920s in Delhi, can be brought to life in literature by depicting how those temporal settings affect the individuals who live in them and how those individuals move within them. This is exactly what

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**701** I am using this term with regard to Sobti's novels DoD, ZN and DSB for the sake of simplification, but they are not what is commonly termed as such. However, if one follows Jerome de Groot's definition of historical fictional writing, they can be admitted into this category; see de Groot 2010: 2, "Historical writing can take place within numerous fictional locales: romance, detective, thriller, counterfactual, horror, literary, gothic, postmodern, epic, fantasy, mystery, western, children's books. Indeed, the intergeneric hybridity and flexibility of historical fiction have long been one of its defining characteristics." Historical fiction may cover a wide range of genres and adopt different perspectives on history (subjectivity, the creation of nations, the question of writing itself, the convention of history writing, etc.). From conservatism to dissidence, historical fiction englobes all the possible tendencies of approaching history and reflecting on it. It is also addresses to a multiplicity of audiences through the pen of very different writers. Sobti's novels can thus be termed 'historical', although she herself never calls them by the name *aithihāsik upanyās*, the Hindi term for the historical genre which exists and is even quite beloved in Hindi literature – and could be represented by a writer like Bhagawati Charan Verma (Bhagavati Charan Varmā, 1903–1981), to name but one well-known modern author.

lies at the core of DoD, where social changes are grasped and lived very differently by the four main protagonists – and the secondary characters.

In Sobti's distinction between the history one and the history two discussed above, literature is the place where the second kind of history, with its subjectivity and its construction of a collective memory of events, is recorded. Her three historical novels (DoD, ZN and DSB) show the perception of everyday life and historical events related to the lives of individuals and communities removed from the centres of power and decision-making. The novels concern themselves mainly with the depiction of everyday life – where history constitutes the context or framework in which the storyline is set. However, through such a setting, the novels become a reflection on the perception of time, historical events and legends surrounding the protagonists. In spite of not being what one could call 'major actors' in a historical process, the protagonists are not passive; they possess their own opinions on what is happening around them. Through their understanding of legends, folk songs, folk tales and so on, they are not only inhabited by a particular vision of the past (as well as by views on *sants* and *pirs*,<sup>702</sup> past rulers and kingdoms), they are also transmitting them further, and thus contributing to the creation, next to the official historiography, of another interpretative construction of history and the past. This other construction is deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the people and may be seen as constitutive of a (collective) identity. Thus, it is not history as an academic field, not the recreation of a chronology of events, that matter in Sobti's novels, but a more individual and social understanding of history and the passing of time.

In DoD, although the end of the epoch of the courtesan tradition and, ultimately, the end of a composite Hindu-Muslim culture (a culture that one could call 'Hindustani', very much associated with the life of the city of Delhi and the Mughal court) is narrated, it is told in such a way that no exact date can be assigned to the story.<sup>703</sup> References to historical events are made but they remain implicit so that it is up to the reader to fill in the gaps with her own knowledge of the period. The blurred vision of time is accentuated by variations in the speed of the time of narration at the level of the story (*histoire*, in Genette's terminology) and by the depiction of the time lived by the protagonists through a multi-focal narration.

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<sup>702</sup> Hindu and Muslim holy men respectively.

<sup>703</sup> Delhi, as the seat of the Mughal empire, had developed a hybrid culture which had adopted many aspects of the Persian culture (Persian culture dominated at the Mughal court) and had associated them with local cultures. Many Hindu families who held important positions in society during the Mughal time had also appropriated a mode of life inspired by the imperial court. From this mixed culture emerged the language designated as Hindustani. DoD reflects the end of the dominance of this mixed culture.

The multiple points of views (focalisations) represented in DoD offer perspectives on life which match exactly the changes at work in Delhi at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is not absolutely clear in what year the novel starts and in what year it ends – indeed, even how many years elapse between the first and the last chapters is open to discussion – but a reference to the Khilafat movement in the middle of the novel points towards the time just after WWI, as do the references to the new houses being built in Civil Lines – where Chunna, one of the main protagonists, will move at the end of the story – and to the Arya Samaj.<sup>704</sup>

Few historical events are, however, referred to directly in the text. It can be inferred from some of the conversations that the nationalist movement is already under way. Yet, the colonial power is depicted as a silent force behind the life of the main characters: the main male protagonist, Kripanarayan, is an attorney from an old Hindu family – the Kayasth scribe community which had adopted many of the habits of the Mughal court – but now he himself is appropriating habits from the British (the whiskey bottle in the cabinet, for example); Badruddin, his son by Mehak Bano, is sent to an English missionary school and plans on studying in England. The Hindu reform movements are at work as well: Chunna Bua, the young widow of the family, resists the pressures of her natal family and her in-laws to reduce her life to devotions, pilgrimages and prayers; she eventually remarries a partner of her choice in an Arya Samaj ceremony. Delhi is changing, the rules of conduct governing traditional families are changing, and the passing of time is also pointing here to the end of a world and a specific culture, associated with feudal life styles, patronage extended to courtesans (Mehak Bano, one of the main protagonists, is the daughter of a *tawaif*, a courtesan), music soirees and poetry gatherings.

This key period in the history of the city – in DoD history and time are closely linked to space, particularly to a certain area of Old Delhi – is brought to life through individual experiences in all their subjectivity. The language, habits, way of life, are all part of the reconstruction of a historical setting. However, it is the actual perception of time and the changes it brings about as it

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**704** The Khilafat movement was a pan-Islamic movement launched in British India after the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1919 with the purpose of opposing Western influence over Turkey and the Muslim world.

Civil Lines, a north zone of Delhi located beyond the walls of the Old City, consisted mainly of bungalows and single houses, built around 1911. This type of housing constituted a break away from the traditional haveli with its inner courtyard, usually home to a large joint family.

The Arya Samaj is one of the most influential Hindu reform movements, born in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

passes that constitute the core of the novel and reflect the important transformation which this society is going through. Here, history is mainly the individual story – and yet it is this story which presents a historical picture of Delhi in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

To refer back to the notions of ‘history one’ and ‘history two’ introduced in the first part of this chapter, one can see that Sobti, by placing the focus of the narration on the families and their perceptions of time and change, is telling ‘history two’, with only some allusions to the context of ‘history one’. Nevertheless, it is precisely this attention given to the perception and experience of time of individuals (as well as of the various social classes pictured in the novel) which enables the text to bring this particular era to life.

The plot of the novel can be summarised roughly as follows: the attorney Kripanarayan, head of an extended, wealthy Hindu family of Delhi, has two women in his life, hence also two families, which he rules according to a very strict, well-regulated system. There is, on the one hand, his legitimate family living in the ancestral haveli (symbolising status and wealth), with his wife Kutumb, to whom the money and good name he earns through his success as a lawyer go, and on the other hand, his other family, with Mehak Bano, the daughter of a Muslim courtesan, who has his heart but is kept in a small and rather decrepit house. Mehak gave Kripanarayan two children: a girl, Masooma, and a boy, Badruddin. With Kutumb, Kripanarayan has three sons. The attorney appears to be dealing with his wife’s fits of jealousy quite well – handling perfectly the volatile situation at his eldest son’s birthday, when the other, illegitimate children are invited to the haveli for the first time. But he is also using Mehak completely, even having in his keep all the jewellery of her mother, whom he defended in a court case. However, there are dissonances in this beautiful melody: not only does Kutumb find it difficult to accept the situation, but Mehak, too, starts striving for more independence. She first visits a sadhu to help her win back her husband’s affections and is eventually impregnated by him. The second goes on a pilgrimage to Ajmer Sharif with another man, a respectable Muslim attorney trained in England, without telling Kripanarayan. As a consequence of these events, Kripanarayan returns to his wife and his duty to the coming child, doing all in his power to preserve the family reputation, although he is heartbroken at leaving Mehak. He later arranges a wedding for Masooma within the family of the in-laws of his widowed sister, Chunna, under the condition that mother and daughter will never see each other again. Broken by this new blow, Mehak decides to take her life back in hand and goes to Khan Sahab, the Muslim attorney, after fighting to get her jewellery back. She appears at the wedding to give her daughter the jewellery, creating a scandal

since her attendance had expressly been forbidden by Kripanarayan. The novel ends some years later with Kripanarayan's death and his will.

This brief summary does not do justice to the complexity of the switching points of view within the story which make it sometimes arduous for the reader to grasp immediately who is the focaliser of the narration. In one and the same chapter, the focalisation can pass from Mehak to Kripanarayan or to one of the children. Through this strategy, the readers are made to understand the feelings and the thoughts of each of the main protagonists and suspend any judgement they might have harboured at first. The shifting narrative points of view enhance the subjectivity of the whole tale as well, particularly with regard to the experienced time.

Indeed, the way the narration plays with the uncertainty of time is particularly striking. The story does not follow a classic linear temporality but starts at a juncture when the children are still really young, with several chapters depicting this period, Kutumb's jealousy and the conflicts between the two sets of children. The story then jumps to a later point in time and it is at first unclear to the reader how much time might have elapsed. Is it only a few months, or is it a couple of years? Or maybe it is just a change of season? The narrative time passes from winter to spring, the story ending with the rainy season.<sup>705</sup> It is only through references to the children having grown up that the reader understands how much time has actually gone by. Even so, it is a mere approximation. When the story ends, a few years or at least a year after Masooma's wedding, the reader finds Kripanarayan on his death bed and is given no clue as to how much time might have elapsed since the preparations for Masooma's wedding described in the preceding chapter. It is through a discussion between Chunna and her brother that we learn how Mehak behaved at the wedding and that this sealed the end of her relationship with Kripanarayan – something that devastated him, probably also because the whole uproar at the wedding reflected badly on the family's reputation.

The seasons play a role in the novel, as is highlighted in Dalmia's essay on the subject.<sup>706</sup> They are embedded in the time perception of the protagonists and follow not only their own internal evolution but also the evolution of their relationships with each other. However, if the seasons (*mausam*) play a central role in Sobti's conception of writing (as the appropriate time), and represent the cosmic time in her views on time, in this novel, the passing of the seasons

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**705** Vasudha Dalmia gives a very interesting analysis of the novel as a rewriting of the classical *bārahmāsā* (seasonal cycle, where each season is associated with a specific feeling) in her article titled "The spaces of love and the passing of the seasons", see Dalmia 2006.

**706** Dalmia 2006.

does not bring out this larger dimension but, as was shown by Dalmia, follows rather the development of the feelings of the protagonists, their idiosyncratic perception of time and the changes at work in society in Delhi at this particular period. The seasons correspond, on the one hand, to the traditional Indian *topos* of the months of the year as stages of a love story (the *bārahmāsā* per se), stages which are deconstructed here since the love story is not a classical one; and on the other hand, they mirror the time perception of the protagonists (the winter of the beginning corresponds to the ‘frozen’ time and the ‘status quo’ of the first part of the novel, for example).

Time is a central component of the novel. Here, however, it is more a fluctuating notion of passing time for the individual characters than at a strictly historical level. The feeling of time is therefore very subjective and so is the approach to time at the level of narration. The first chapters ‘stretch’ time by describing the birthday party in detail, delving into the feelings of Mehak, Kripanarayan, Kutumb and Chunna at this early stage – the winter, the beginning of the story – when everything seems to be working out well and is under the perfect control of Kripanarayan. The tempo accelerates, however, later with the coming of spring and finally the rainy season. Many important moments such as Masooma’s wedding, Chunna’s start as a teacher or her remarrying in an Arya Samaj ceremony are not recounted directly but only through conversations or in Kripanarayan’s will.

The time of the narration and the narration time do not coincide – this is rarely the case in narratives, except in dialogues.<sup>707</sup> But in DoD, this discrepancy between the narrated time and the narration time reflects the time as experienced by the protagonists, especially the three women. Indeed, the first part of the novel stretches over several chapters introducing the situation, where everything seems more or less static. Things seem to be under Kripanarayan’s control and in conformance to his vision of the world, where he clearly separates two aspects of his life: his duties to his family in the haveli and his pleasure at Mehak Bano’s place. However, when with time Kripanarayan’s growing attachment to his son Badruddin and the changes in the women surrounding him turn the routine upside down and he loses his firm control, the narration accelerates; the chapters follow each other more rapidly and jump over months and years. The first, ‘slower’, part corresponds to the state of situational stagnation: even if Kutumb’s fits of jealousy and Chunna’s resistance to social pressures forcing her to adopt the role of a model widow who has renounced the world do bear fruit at times and bring slight changes to their everyday life, everything remains in Kripanarayan’s grip. He controls everything

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707 On the subject, see Genette’s discussion of time in narration, in Genette 1972.

according to the set of rules he has chosen to respect, putting the honour of the family higher than his own wishes, and yet, within this, he has found a balance that satisfies him.

When the three women, each of them unhappy with the status quo, come to a decision, everything changes and so does the narration. Time accelerates, the perception of time as well. From a state of stagnation, the three women gradually pass to a position of active subjects, with a claim to make decisions and exercise agency in their own lives. For Kutumb, it is her despair that pushes her to consult a sadhu with whom she finds herself and, by becoming pregnant, brings her husband back to her and the home. For Chunna, it is the realisation that she cannot rely on her brother if she wants to escape the common fate of widows. As for Mehak, she takes the first step towards self-assertion when she goes on a pilgrimage to Ajmer with Khan Sahab. But it is the ultimate blow of having her daughter's wedding arranged without her having a say in the matter that severs her ties with Kripanarayan.

In each of the cases, the text establishes a correlation between emancipation, space and time. It is always a decision and a movement towards an outside place that bring the women out of their constricted time frames: the sadhu's cave for Kutumb, the school where she is accepted as a teacher for Chunna, the trip to Ajmer and then setting off alone to go to Khan's house for Mehak. In the case of Mehak, the link between her emancipation from Kripanarayan – thus recovering her own individuality, associated here with the filiation to her mother, Naseem Bano<sup>708</sup> – and setting out is the clearest, particularly when, after realising that she will never be allowed to see her daughter after the wedding, she decides to ask for her family jewels back and goes to Khan Sahab's to obtain his support:

Getting up in a flurry, Mehak started to look for her shoes. The shoes are her own and she has left and kept them aside for years. How many times altogether has she worn them, after all?

Taking the dupatta and draping a warm shawl over it, Mehak bolted and locked the door and, climbing down the stairs, she thought: 'Why did it take me so long to leave this room?'<sup>709</sup>

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**708** Filiation is an important aspect of the human being's coping with her own transitoriness. In Sobti's works, it also occupies a particular place and comes as a question for several characters; see ZN, AL, DoD and MM, for the most striking examples.

**709** DoD, Sobti 1995: 174, *Mahak har̥baṛāhaṭ meṁ uṭhakar jūṭī ḍhūr̥hne lagī. Jūṭī apnī hai aur choḍ rakhī hai barsom̥ se. Kul milākar jāne kitnī bār pah̥nī hogī!*

*Mahak ne dupaṭṭā le ūpar garm caddar oṛhī. Kunḍī lagā tālā caṛhāyā aur paṛiyom̥ se utarte socā – bhalā hamne bhī is kamre se nikalne meṁ itnī der kyom̥ kar dī!*



But if space – and finally leaving the home – seems to be so obviously a part of leaving the role imposed on the women from the outside, time is also a key agent in the narration in DoD. When the power of making decision sets in, a movement sets in, too, and the succession of events rushes forward, a phenomenon that is reflected in the text by the sudden acceleration of the narration and the big ‘leaps’ in the narrated time. Here, emancipation is also, for the three women, the claiming of their own time and signifies freedom from the time-regimes imposed on them by others.<sup>710</sup>

A closer look at DoD shows that history, under Sobti’s pen, forgoes recording historical time in favour of a more personal, more individual narrative, and ultimately merges with the very subjective perceptions of the passing time. These perceptions are related, in contemporary novels, to the multiplicity of the points of views (with multiple focalisers of the narration) and their often mutual incompatibility, in spite of the fact that all of them remain true when seen from their own perspective. Time, in a novel, is intrinsically linked to the subjective sense of the time passing and the time lived, but also to a highly personal way of living through historical times and historical events, a perspective through which literature actually reconstructs not only an individual but also a collective consciousness of history (the history two of Sobti’s definition).

In DoD, this dimension is present in the adoption, by the protagonists, of the changes impacting their societies and by their own adaptations to those changes (though not all the protagonists show the same capacity to adapt). In DSB and ZN, the two other historical novels, history turns into the reclaiming of a world that is gone forever through reproducing, in a literary text, a polyphony of voices of innumerable nameless people (*anām log*).

### 6.3.2 The Subjectivity of History in a Novel: *Zindagīnāmā* and *Ḍār se bichūī*

For Sobti, literature records and analyses history in a very different manner than the way history is practiced in the academy or as historiography (understood here as the academic writing of history). The writer’s concern lies with the personal, the ‘subjective’, but, through this, it also lies with what can be said to reflect the universal potentiality of human nature – to reveal ‘a truth of life’<sup>711</sup> – in the singular stories related through a literary text. This aspect is

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<sup>710</sup> This is parallel to the vision of time of Ammu, the mother, in AL, who explains to her daughter the strict order of the time-regime imposed by the family, see AL, Sobti 2010: 58.

<sup>711</sup> See MSRS, Sobti 2014: 398, “[. . .] she [the writer] ought to read life and the living, with a candid gaze and to proceed, picking up the truth by engraving it with her pen. Use [*lekhak*

very dear to Sobti, who compares devotion of a Sufi saint to God with the devotion of a writer to the human being.

In her drawing a distinction between a writer and a historian, Sobti establishes the existence of what she calls ‘history one’ and ‘history two’. The first concerns itself with facts and events, while the second, the ‘other history’, may be found in the lived experienced of individuals and societies, their legends, their aspirations and their dreams.<sup>712</sup> Sobti construes literature as a place where both kinds of history intermingle to recreate a world gone so as to reclaim a past or a universe lost. This is particularly evident in ZN and in DSB, two novels set in Sobti’s native Punjab, and therefore presenting a possibility to return to a homeland which has been obliterated by time and new borders.

Before turning to these two novels, I would like to look more closely at Sobti’s notion of the two histories and her concept of writer as the chronicler of what one could call the ‘non-factual history’, which is informed however by a writer’s sound knowledge of facts, events and contexts. I have already examined the core idea of the two histories in the first part of this chapter. Underlying it is the notion that a writer’s task, in opposition to that of a historian, is to delve into the feelings of the people, to perceive and depict their dreams, their

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*ko] khari nazar se zindagi ko jinevalom ko parhnā hai aur kalam se ukerkar satya ko cunte cale jānā hai.”*

**712** This point is essential for Sobti, see SAM, Sobti 2015: 69–70: “Literature alone possesses the ability to display the conflicts and the dreams of the human being for her destiny. Its evaluation is much deeper and more finished than the exhaustive details of history.

The boundaries of literature keep assembling within themselves the changes of space and time; they keep highlighting joy and pain, exuberance and conflict, all of which are interwoven in human existence. Emerging equally from the society of individuals and from the clashes of the caste system, they challenge time and they keep stirring them [joy, pain, conflict . . .] up in order to live. This is the thread that connects our past and our future to our present. As well as that consciousness, which, under the fear of endless evanescence, in the attempt and the struggle to be able to be preserved, revives even from the hands of death and remains alive.

*Sāhitya hī insān kī niyati ko uske saṅgharṣ aur sapnoṁ ke saṁjone kī sāmarthya rakhtā hai. Uskā ākalan itihās ke saṁpann byauron se kahin zyādā gahrā aur mukammal hai.*

*Sāhitya kī simāem deś-kāl ke parivartanoṁ ko apne meṁ sameṭti calī jāti haiṁ aur rekhān-kiṭ kartī rahtī haiṁ sukh-dukḥ, haṛṣ-viśād ko, jo mānaviṃya astitva meṁ guṁthe-bune haiṁ. Ve barābar vyakti-samāj aur varg-vyavasthā kī ṭakrāḥaṭoṁ meṁ se ubharkar samay ko cunauti dete haiṁ aur jine ke lie uksāte rahte haiṁ. Yahī vah tār hai, jo hamāre atī aur bhaviṣya ko hamāre vartmān se joṛe rakhtā hai. Us bodh ko bhī jo nirantraṅ naśvartā ke ātamṅ tale apne ko kāyam rakh sakne kī kośīs aur kaśamkaś meṁ maut ke hāthoṁ bhī jī jātā hai, zindā rahtā hai.”*

Thus, literature is not only the place where all the aspects of human life and human experience of the world can be represented and meditated upon, but also the space wherein the transience can be challenged by the recreation of a lost time and a lost universe, by means of intertwining past, present and future.

wishes, their subconscious views and their understanding of their own world. It might be interesting to look at one example of these two types of narration here to acquire a better view of the distinction made by Sobti between both:

One event: one history

The Anglo-Sikh battle of Gujarat became the last symbol of the rallying of Punjab. Having been defeated by the Sikhs in the first battle of Chillianwala, the British replaced Lord Gaff by Charles Napier as chief commander of the army. This time, the Sikh armies joined the army of Akram Khan, the son of Dost Muhammad, near Gujarat. The Sikhs and the Afghans faced the British together. On both sides, the battle was fought just with cannons and guns. After thirty hours of cannon shots and bullets raining down, the British won.

This victory at Gujarat was perceived by the British as final. The British historians consider this battle as the most memorable in Indian history.

On the 13th of March 1848, the Sikh armies laid down their weapons.

On the 28th, the last independent province of India was annexed to British India.

The same event and the other history

In the village, a crowd gathers for the performance. (The village is approximately 20 miles away from Chillianwala).

'O goddess Durga, ease our pain!'

Speak up, Jamura:<sup>713</sup> Take the name of Kali, Durga, Chinnmastaka, Sati, Ambika, Bhavani, Uma, Parvati, Gaura and Chamunda; remember old times when crowds of shaved heads used to gather! Whose names should I mention? Alexander the Great, Shah Gauri, Shah Ghazni, Babar, Shah Nadir, Shah Abdali, and the King of the Lions, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the King of Kings!

Doda pulled Kokla's sheet and tied it like a turban on his head. He twirled his moustache with his fingers. Haughty as if he had caught the reins of a horse. Watch out, keep to the side! The armies of the Khalsa<sup>714</sup> are on the move in all their splendour.

Damm-damm.

In front, the great commander. Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Military camps in all five riverbeds. Gazni, Kabul and Kandahar. Strong Sardars<sup>715</sup> with big moustaches. Kokla called out:

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**713** Actor usually performing a sidekick-role in Indian folk theatre. Here, he is obviously introducing the play.

**714** The Sikh army.

**715** Lit. 'chieftain'. Honorific title for a Sikh.

- Hey Doda! Why are you silent?
- Well, the thing is, Kokla, that the string is broken and the pearls are lost.
- Ah, Doda, what are you saying? What string?
- You’ve heard the name of that slaughter-place, Chillianwala, haven’t you? It is said that on this ill-omened plain the ornament containing the Kohinoor was lost.<sup>716</sup> Fell into the hands of the whites. Now the diamond adorns the Emperess’s brow. And the whole of India is under British roof.<sup>717</sup>

**716** This could also be a metonymic use of the word and point not only to the ornament but also to its wearer.

**717** CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 378–379: *Ek ghaṭnā: ek itihās*

*Cillyāmvālā gujarāt ke ‘aṅgrez-sikh yuddh’ pañjāb ko sameṭne kā aṅtim niśān ban gae. Cillyāmvālā ke pahle yuddh meṁ sikhon se parāst hone ke kāraṇ aṅgrezon ne lārḍ gaff ke sthān par cārls nepiyar ko apnā senāpati banāyā. Is bār sikkh senāem gujarāt ki or baṛhkar dost muhammad ke putr akaram khān ki senā se milim. Sikkhon aur afgānon ne milkar aṅgrezi senā kā mukāblā kiyā. Laṛāi donom or se sirf topom se huī. Tis ghaṛṭom tak golā-bārūd barsāne ke bād aṅgrez vijayī hue.*

*Gujarāt ki yahī vijay aṅgrezon ke lie niścayātmak siddh huī. Aṅgrez itihāskārom ne is yuddh ko bhāratīya itihās kā sabse adhik smaraṇīya yuddh mānā hai.*

*13 mārc, 1848 ko sikkh senāom ne hathiyār ḍāl die.*

*28 mārc, 1848 meṁ bhārat kā aṅtim svādhīn pradeś aṅgrezi bhārat ke sāth milā liyā gayā.*

*Yahī ghaṭnā aur dūsra itihās*

*Gāmv meṁ svāṅg ke lie bhīr iktṭhi hai. (Gāmv cillyāmvālā se lagbhag bis kos dūr)*

*Durgā bhavānī aṅg saṅg hamāri muṣkil āsān kar.*

*Bol jamūre – Kālī durgā chinn mastakā satī aṅbikā bhavānī*

*Umā pārvatī gaurā camuṅḍā kā nām lekar yād kar*

*Purāne vaktom ko jab muṅḍiyom ke ḍher lagā karte the.*

*Kis kiske nām gināūm. Śāh sikaṅdar, śāh gaurī*

*Śāh gaznī, bābar, śāh nādir, śāh abdālī aur šerom*

*Kā śāh simh mahārājā ranjīt simh mahārāj.*

*Ḍoḍe ne khīnc kokle ki ciddar, sir par sāfābāndh liyā. Umṅliyon se mūchom ko maror die. Akaṛkar māno ghoṛekī rāsem khīncī. Khabardār, lag jāo kināre. Khālsā fauzem cal paṛim gajjavaj ke.*

*Dabaṛ-dabaṛ.*

*Āge-āge vaḍḍī sarkār. Ranjīt simh mahārāj. ḍere pañcanad aṭkom pār. Gaznī, kābul aur kaṅdhār. Tagrī muchomvāle mahābalī sardār. Kokle ne āvāz dī –*

*Ḍoḍeyā, cup kyom ho gayā.*

*Bāt yah hai kokle ki mālā ṭuṭ gāi maṅke bikhar gae.*

*Ḍoḍeyā, yah kyā bol diyā. Kaun-sī mālā.*

*Cillyāmvālā katlgarh kā nām sunā hai kyā. Sunā hai usī manhūs maidān meṁ pañjāb ki kohnūri kalgi kho gāi. Hāth o jā lagī gorom ke hatth. Caṛh gayā hūra mālkā ke matth. Sāre hiṅdustān par paṛ gāi aṅgrez rāj ki chatt.*

I keep the layout found in CNZNP.

In the first paragraph, the facts are duly listed and connections are established between events, dates and numbers. In contrast, the second version is linked to a folk representation of history: the villagers have come together to watch a theatrical performance; the action is taking place at the height of the kingdom of Punjab, in the 1830s, during the times of maharaja Ranjit Singh. After the first moment of elation brought on by memories of the glorious past and associated with military victories, the spectators realise that the second battle of Chilianwala had been lost and that they are now a colonised people. The loss of the kingdom is symbolised in this second version of the narration of the events by the loss of the Kohinoor, one of the world's biggest diamonds, which, after passing through many hands, had come into Ranjit Singh's possession.<sup>718</sup> The second narrative does not include any specific detail and presupposes, on the part of the villager's interlocutor (and the reader who is the third recipient of this discourse), a shared knowledge of the basic context of what is being narrated, namely, that the Sikh army lost the battle and that, subsequently, the whole kingdom was lost. However, through the possibility of building the narration on associations of ideas, this second method of telling history is much closer to the thought process and the life experience of the protagonists of the story. It represents how history is felt.

Sobti's vision of academic history-writing as based on records and documents without any attempt to understand the feelings of the people involved and the way myths and folklore become part of history would probably not be accepted by many historians.<sup>719</sup> However, it needs to be placed in its specific

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**718** The odyssey of the Kohinoor is quite interesting. It belonged to the Mughals and was for a long time an ornament embellishing their throne, the Peacock Throne, before being taken away by the Iranian Shah Nadir during his sack of Delhi in 1739. Shah Nadir's grandson gave the diamond to the Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Durrani in return for his support. A descendant of Ahmad Shah Durrani, who had taken refuge in Lahore, gave the gem to Ranjit Singh to thank him for his protection. After the collapse of the Kingdom of Punjab, the Kohinoor was given to Queen Victoria and became one of the crown jewels. It is indeed possible to follow history through the long journey of this diamond!

**719** In her opposition of the role of the historian and the writer, Sobti is clearly making such a strict distinction, see SAM, Sobti 2015: 118–119: “The historians assess the regional and national state of affairs, institutions, associations; after binding them in causal frameworks, they dress them up in the attire of trustworthiness – the social and political complexities – [and] identify ethical and practical values in the people's consciousness and their subconscious. The evidence authenticating this entire process is preserved in literature.

The author pierces the upper layers of the country-wide circle of events, uncovers them and then enters into the deep layers that we call the consciousness of the people.

*Iihāskār sthāniya aur rāṣṭriya sthitiyoṃ-paristhitiyoṃ, saṅgaṭhanōṃ aur saṃsthānōṃ kā jāyā lete haim – śṛīkhlāom kī cauhaṭe meṃ kaskar un ghaṭnāom ko viśvasaniyatā kā jāṃā*

context. When Sobti wrote ZN (1978), and even DoD (1995), a vision of history that would include narrative forms, history as understood by Hayden White or suggested by Ricoeur had not yet become prevalent.<sup>720</sup> For White, historiography could take on the form of a narrative and be comparable to literature and literary criticism. In his essay, “The Burden of History”,<sup>721</sup> for example, White calls for a new understanding of history which would make history much closer to literature and the role assigned to literature, namely a way of linking the past, the present and the future by examining how the past and the perception of time are constitutive of the vision of the world of a community and of individuals. This, incidentally, was also Sobti’s view. Such new understanding of history could not claim to be perfectly objective or comprehensive, but it was very aware of presenting only one of the many possible perspectives, thus reflecting the multiplicity voiced in literature.<sup>722</sup> In this new writing of history, presented as a narrative, the structure of writing, through the use of literary devices such as the metaphor, is very close to the literary discourse. The historian would no longer claim to present the facts as a whole or a whole truth about an event, but rather to shed light on one perspective of an event, through means such as the use of analogies or other literary tropes:

This [the application of a methodological and stylistic cosmopolitanism in historiography] would allow us to entertain seriously those creative distortions offered by minds capable of looking at the past with the same seriousness as ourselves but with different affective

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*pahnāte haiñ – sāmājīk, rājnītik jaḷilatāem – lok ke cetan aur avacetan meñ naitik aur vyāvahārik mūlyoñ kī śinākht karte haiñ. Is sampūrñ prakriyā kī prāmāṅiktā kī sākṣī sāhitya meñ surakṣit rahtī hai.*

*Racnākār deśvyāpī ghaṭnācakra kī ūparī partoñ ko bhedkar, ughāṛkar un gahrī tahoñ meñ praveś kartā hai jise ham janmānas kahte haiñ.”*

This extract shows how, in Sobti’s view of the work of the historian and of the writer, their respective conceptions of temporality become verily the factor of a distinction between them. While the historian has a vision of the effects of an action in a linear time frame, the writer sets the individual (ephemeral) temporality within a larger time frame, the time frame of tradition, and even in a cosmic time frame, established by the recurrence of seasons and the order of nature or the universe.

**720** See Ricoeur’s *Temps et récit* (1983) and White’s *Burden of History* (1985). Both authors consider history and history writing as a form of narrative, possessing similar structures and referring to similar narrative devices as literature. For Ricoeur, the main difference lies in the relationship both forms of writing (historiography and fictional writing) have to reality. For White, history actually constitutes a narrative and is therefore intimately linked to literature and the literary devices of text-construction.

**721** White 1985: 27–50.

**722** For Sobti, the multiplicity of perspectives and voices is indeed central, as I have shown through the example of DoD and as is manifest in the structure of ZN itself.

and intellectual orientations. Then we should no longer naively expect that statements given about a given epoch or complex of events in the past “correspond” to some pre-existent body of “raw facts”. For we should recognize that what constitutes the facts themselves is the problem that the historian, like the artist, has tried to solve in the choice of the metaphor by which he orders his world, past, present, and future. We should ask only that he neither overburden them with data nor fail to use them to their limit; that he respect the logic implicit in the mode of discourse he has decided upon; [ . . .].<sup>723</sup>

Although this vision of history writing present similarities with what Sobti does in her novels, it is important to bear in mind that when Sobti wrote ZN in 1978, this concept of history was not yet discussed among historians and her vision of historiography corresponded therefore to what she knew of history-writing herself. For her, indeed, the multiplicity of voices and the plurality of temporal dimensions expressed by literature remains something specific to this genre of texts, something that non-literary texts fail to achieve. She is able to write history – the time lived, the view of the events and the construction of myth – by using, inside a novel, a plurality of voices and points of view, as well as by representing through literature the interaction between all the layers of temporality. In her historical novels, Sobti merely hints at events, she leaves much unsaid, in order to focus the narration on the perception of history and on the lived time of the protagonists. However, knowledge of the historical background is implied, and for it, Sobti relies on what she calls the history one. This first history is constructed by her as a history which is based solely on archives and official documents. This view is derived from her understanding of history (the academic field) as relying only on such material. At the time when Sobti wrote ZN, the consultation of archives or the gazetteer, the two sources she names in her discussion on her own research, was very much representative of the methods used by historians. It is therefore important to read Sobti’s distinction between the historian and the writer in this particular context.

In her dialogue with Krishna Baldev Vaid, Sobti explains how she proceeded to gather facts while writing ZN and DSB. The passage is particularly interesting because it is one of the rare occasions where Sobti mentions her sources and her background research. Her approach to the records seems to be rather uncritical, and she contradicts herself in her statements by ending her description of her research work with the words “I don’t call this *research*. I only *checked* facts I already knew.”<sup>724</sup> However, earlier in the dialogue, she clearly mentions the research she undertook before writing ZN. A writer has to

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723 White 1985: 47.

724 SVS, Sobti 2007: 67, *Maiñ ise risarc nahim kahī. Jo tathya merī jānkārī meñ the unki cākiñg mar thī.*

be particularly cautious when writing about a time which is not her own. She must accumulate knowledge and find ways of staging events or mentioning them which would not seem unlikely to the reader but would also be well embedded in the plot. Above all, no event must appear as having been artificially constructed and implanted in the text:

I was certainly cautious [while writing *Zindagināmā*], but not because I was groping around in the dark. For example, some families of the village used to go to Bengal for the drapery trade. Their profession was just to sell cloth in the villages of Bengal. But they could not ignore what was happening around them. I connected this time and the context of the partition of Bengal in the letter written to Nasib Singh.<sup>725</sup> This is neither a fact nor a piece of information.<sup>726</sup>

The letter is a perfect example of a literary strategy to introduce a context. The reactions of the villagers when they learn of the events in Bengal<sup>727</sup> also allow Sobti to show what is understood and what is not, in a very lively way, namely through a village gathering. However, it is important that the writer be certain of the facts and events of the time, the context, even if she is not presenting them directly and plainly. It is through this knowledge and through the writer's ability to grasp the idiosyncratic understanding of historical events as related to individuals and communities that the writer can establish links between the past, the present and the future and between the layers of time which each individual experiences (the personal time, the time of a particular community, and the historical time):

When a writer stages a specific historical period, she has to take some precautions according to the literary discipline. Knowledge about some important events and the time and society in which she is setting the novel. General contexts of the time before and after can't be ignored either before introducing the present, the contingencies of the past advancing towards this present and those of the future emerging from this present!<sup>728</sup>

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**725** Around the middle of the novel, Nasib Singh, one of the villagers, receives a letter reporting the tensions in Bengal. The author of the letter is a relative of his who sells cloth there.

**726** SVS, Sobti 2007: 64, *Niḥsandeḥ mair̄n sacet thī par islie nahīm ki mair̄n andhere mer̄n ṭaṭol rahī thī. Udāharaṇa ke lie gāmv̄ ke kuch parivār bajājī ke lie baṅgāl jāyā karte the. Unhem̄ baṅgāl ke gāmv̄om̄ mer̄n kaprā becne se hī kām thā. Par vah apne āspās ho rahe se anjān ne rah sakte the. Mair̄ne us vakt ko aur baṅgāl vibhājan mer̄n torphor̄ ke prasaṅg ko nasib̄ siṅh ko likhe khat mer̄n joṛ diyā. Yah na mātr̄ tathya hai, na hī jānkārī.*

**727** In 1905, the then Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, announced the partition of the province of Bengal into two distinct provinces along religious lines. The decision was heavily objected to as an example of the policy of 'divide and rule' and the two provinces were reunited in 1911.

**728** SVS, Sobti 2007: 65: *Lekhak ko jab kisi aitiḥāsik kālkhāṁḍ viṣeṣ ko ughārṇā hotā hai to use lekhakiya anuśāsan ke tahat kuch sāvdhāniyām̄ baratnī hotī haiṁ. Us samay aur samāj ke bare mer̄n kuch zarūrī ghaṭṇāom̄ ki jānkāriyām̄ jismeṁ āp upanyās ko sthit karne jā rahe haiṁ.*



Literature is a space of interaction between the past, the present and the future, but also between the reality of facts depicted by the historian and the reality lived and experienced by communities and individuals, with the idiosyncratic understanding of facts it presupposes. In order to depict this faithfully, the writer needs to be acquainted with facts. Sobti speaks rarely about her own sources, but in the dialogue with Vaid, she mentions the research she undertook before writing ZN. Her method is striking by its uncritical acceptance of the records and archives consulted:

You will find it interesting to learn that to start with, I opened the files of the regimental records. In the district where my novel is centred, the average enrolment in the army was higher than in all other districts. The highest. It was common practice for farming families to have one son in the *police*, another in the army and the remaining in the village, working the fields. Another fact related to this was that in comparison with the other districts, the statistics for murders, crimes and litigations were quite high, too.

I had now basic information gleaned from the gazetteer and had to skilfully flesh it out.<sup>729</sup>

Before writing, Sobti delved into the archival records in order to get a picture of the life of an average family of that time. Her sources and her vision of research must however be put into perspective in order to understand her conception of history as opposed to her vision of literature. Her approach to the colonial records seems to be uncritical and suggests that Sobti sees the archives of the government as the official writing of history without questioning their content. Sobti does not look for more sources and documentation or at least does not seem to consider it worth mentioning. This hints at her vision of historiography as an ‘official writing’ of history in the form of annals and archives, which is opposed to the broader vision of life and time offered by literature.

Sobti insists in the passages quoted above that, with ZN, she is far from writing a historical novel: the knowledge of the context and background of the characters is indeed important, but more important is remaining true to the

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*Samay se pahle aur bād ke sārvaṅjanik prasaṅgōṃ ko bhī andekhā nahīm kiyā jā saktā. Kisi bhī vartmān ko prastut karne se pahle vartmān kī or baḍhtā huā atit aur us vartmān se ubharte hue bhaviṣya kī sambhāvnāem!*

729 SVS, Sobti 2007: 66–67: *Dilcasp lagegā āpko ki mainne sabse pahlā khātā kholā rejimem-ṭal rikārḍs kā. Jis ilāke meṃ merā upanyās kendrit thā vahām senā meṃ bharti kā ausal anya sab zilom se zyādā thā. Uccatam. Khetihar parivār kī sādharantayā tarz aisi ki ek baccā pulis lain meṃ, ek phauj meṃ aur bāki gāmv meṃ kheti karne ko. Iske sāth hī juyā yah tathya bhī ki dūse zilom ke mukāble vahām katl, aprādh aur mukadamebāzī kā ānkṣā bhī kāfi ūmcā thā.*

*Mujhe gazaiṭiyar se ise bas sahī bhar karnā thā.*

perspectives of the protagonists and recreating their own world. This, in turn, enables her to offer another view of history, namely history as it was experienced (and remembered) away from the places of power and decision-making – the history two.

In ZN, one finds traces of everything Sobti lists in her descriptions of the results of her reading of colonial records. Most families have a son or a brother in the army, another in the police force, and several protagonists are involved or have been involved in court cases and never-ending lawsuits. Thefts, break-ins and murders are part of daily life. The picture of pre-partition village life drawn here is not one of perfect and unadulterated bliss. In her quest for closeness to life, Sobti does not allow herself to idealise rural society. This last point is particularly remarkable in contrast to depictions of pre-partition times or portrayals of the village conveyed by many other authors, where the countryside is seen as a lost paradise.<sup>730</sup>

The connection Sobti possesses to this land and its history constitutes clearly a starting point for her. Whenever she speaks of ZN, memories of her childhood spring up, more particularly reminiscences of her grandfather's haveli and the treasures she and her siblings found in the basement and different corners of the house. However, the novel is not autobiographical. According to Sobti, the writer must enlarge her perception of the world to include all aspects of humanity. She is neither a biographer nor a historian but has a different task. She investigates the perceptions of time and the experiences of human beings. For Sobti, time and history are indeed to be taken at the human scale.<sup>731</sup>

From the passages above, it emerges that Sobti sees academic history as the study of archives and documents put together by institutions, governments, newspapers and official organs in contrast to the writer's human vision of time from the perspective of individual destinies and from the perspective of communities who understand and 'digest' an event in their own fashion, as the example of the history two given above has already illustrated. In order to obtain a broader view of a historical event and the past as it was felt and lived, it is necessary to take into account more than only the official archives and the facts as

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**730** Even in some of Premchand's novels and short stories, for example; see the selected short stories of Premchand for depictions of rural life. It is also present in the representation of the village as idyllic, particularly after the independence, but also before that, in connection with Gandhi's understanding of the Indian village as the 'heart of India'. It also draws on the image of the Indian village as being resistant to change and modernity in popular imagination.

**731** One must remember here that history is in fact always the history of humankind; what Sobti does is to place her narratives in the perspective of the individual subjects or communities, away from the centres of power and decision making.

recorded by historians. Yet, as Sobti mentioned in her discussion with Vaid, she undertakes research before writing – as do most writers – and uses the work of historians as one of the sources of her account of an epoch.<sup>732</sup> However, literature goes further than presenting an ‘account of an epoch’; through a subjective history, it can bring forth the self-perception and self-representation of communities and individuals.

In the context of the partition and of the depiction of Punjab before the partition, like in ZN, the self-understanding of communities becomes all the more important because it can show how people construct their identities and how the feelings of belonging to a group can change with time, something which was not voiced in the official narratives of the partition and the creation of the new states of India and Pakistan.<sup>733</sup>

In SAM, a very interesting passage from a speech given at a conference about the partition and Indian independence on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the independence in 1997 examines the relationship of the writer to history. In the introduction to this speech, Sobti explains that she speaks from “the perspective of a common citizen” (*ek sādharmaṇ nāgarik kī haisiyat se*)<sup>734</sup> and not as an expert. She elaborates on this idea at the beginning of her speech as well:

It is nothing short of a challenge for a ‘non-expert’ like me to examine thus the history and the geography of such a huge democracy as India. [. . .]

I am a writer, a regional writer even. A helpless writer who is neither a historian nor a sociologist, nor a philosopher. [Yet] her creative being, her literary individuality made of

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**732** I want to point out here that, to my knowledge, Sobti never presents her sources nor her research for the context of DoD. For DSB, she briefly mentions her research on Ranjit Singh in her dialogue with Vaid, see SVS, Sobti 2007: 67.

**733** The historian Gyanendra Pandey highlights this in his monograph on the partition and its narratives, see Pandey 2001: 6–7: “Stated badly, there is a wide chasm between the historians’ apprehension of 1947 and what we might call a more popular, survivors’ account of it – between history and memory, as it were. Nationalism and nationalist historiography, I shall argue, have made an all too facile separation between ‘Partition’ and ‘violence’. This is one that survivors seldom make: for in their view, Partition was violence, a cataclysm, a world (or worlds) torn apart. Whereas historians’ history seems to suggest that what Partition amounted to was, in the main, a new constitutional/political arrangement, which did not deeply affect the central structures of Indian society or the broad contours of its history, the survivors’ account would appear to say that it amounted to a sundering, a whole new beginning and, thus, a radical reconstitution of community and history.” Sobti proves to be aware of this other apprehension of the events in her writings.

**734** See SAM, Sobti 2015: 54.

small pieces, is filled with who knows how many situations, experiences, and familiar and unfamiliar personalities thronging constantly in front of her eyes.<sup>735</sup>

The writer is conjuring up a picture which is not based on facts and figures, unlike those proposed by sociologists or historians. She is not necessarily acting with the same awareness either: her method of working is more experimental. In this passage, Sobti draws a portrait of the writer as a seeker of some hidden truth who works following instincts as well as logical thinking and planning. The writer is in the middle of life; she experiences and remembers. This image is expanded in yet another passage of SAM wherein Sobti opposes the writer to the historian (once again in the context of a conference on the partition).<sup>736</sup>

The historians observe the local and national situations and circumstances, the institutions, the associations [. . .] – the social, political complexities – they identify the ethical and practical values in the consciousness and the sub-consciousness of the people. The evidence of the authenticity of this whole method is safeguarded in literature.

The author pierces the upper layers of the circle of events found in the whole country, she uncovers them and then enters into the deep layers that we call the consciousness of the people.<sup>737</sup>

History as an academic discipline and a political tool analyses society and constructs identities around set values and notions of communities. Literature, on the other hand, is the place where the same matters can be discussed, examined and questioned in their authenticity. History and literature have thus quite different purposes.

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**735** SAM, Sobti 2015: 54, *Aise meri bhārat jaise viśāl loktantra ke bhūgol aur itihās kā jāyā lenā, mujh jaise ‘aviśeśajña’ ke lie ek cunautī se kam nahīm. [. . .]*

*Ek lekhak hūm aur vah bhī deśaj. Lekhak bicārā na itihāskār, na samājśāstrī aur na hī dārśānik. Uske kāryakārī astitva meṁ ṭukṛom-ṭukṛom meṁ bane racnātmak vyaktitva meṁ jāne kitne hālāt, tajurbe aur jānī-anjānī śakhsiyateṁ āmkhom ke āge bākāyā bhī lagāe rahī haiṁ.*

**736** A conference on the partition at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Shimla. Sobti does not give any further clarification. It is interesting that a large part of her discussion on writing history revolves around the partition. It seems to me to be the context in which her opposition between the writer and the historian becomes the clearest in the difference between the official history and the lived experienced of the people.

**737** SAM, Sobti 2015: 118–119, *Itihāskār sthāniya aur rāṣṭriya sthitiyom-paristhitiyom, saṅghāṭhanom aur samsthānom kā jāyā lete haiṁ [. . .] – sāmājīk, rājnītik jaṅilatāem – lok ke cetan aur avacetan meṁ naitik aur vyāvahārik mūlyom kī śinākht karte haiṁ. Is sampūṇ prakriyā kī prāmāṅiktā kī sāksī sāhitya meṁ surākṣit rahī hai.*

*Racnākār deśvyāpī ghaṭnācakra kī ūpari partom ko bhedkar, ughārkar un gahrī tahnom meṁ praveś kartā hai jise ham janmānas kahte haiṁ.*

Literature, through its peculiar lens directed at the individual or rather at several individuals or communities, complements official histories, providing thus a better understanding of all the aspects of an issue. It achieves this by presenting a large picture of a social world or even of several social worlds. It challenges the logical and scientific method of history by adding the individual (and collective) dimension(s) and relating larger historical events to individual destinies.<sup>738</sup> Here, Sobti does not resolve the question of whether looking at literature will reveal how such an event as the partition was possible. However, she views literature as closer to the reality experienced by the involved parties – and to the perceptions and feelings generated by the events in individuals – than the ‘official’ or ‘academic’ history. Sobti investigates what she calls the people’s consciousness or the collective consciousness (*janmānas* or sometimes *lokmānas*) through her narration of history two.

In order to understand Sobti’s views on the relationship between history, historiography and literature, the terms ‘collective memory’ (*jansmṛti*) and people’s consciousness (*janmānas*) are worth examining in greater detail. These notions certainly sound familiar in the discussion of history and, more specifically, of traumatic events. The ‘people’s consciousness’ (or collective consciousness) refers in this context to the people’s awareness of an event, their understanding of it, not merely at the moment it happened but afterwards as well, in the form of memory. In this collective memory, or reconstruction of the events, the writer is able to follow the feelings of the people and, by digging them up and bringing them to light, highlight them and, hopefully, work them out.

In the vision of history presented by Sobti, one can say that historians are concerned with facts: circumstances, institutions, events on a scale which surpasses, but also overlooks, the individual lives.<sup>739</sup> The writer, after looking at these, delves deeper under this first layer to make people’s feelings, values, perspectives on history and judgements apparent. In Sobti’s metaphorical vocabulary, the image used here is that of the ‘Ganges of people’s consciousness’ (*lokmānas kī bhāgīrathī*), the

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**738** Pasho, in Sobti’s very first novel, DSB, is an excellent example of this: the heroine herself is barely aware of what is happening around her and of what is at stake, even in the very last battle against the British army. One could think of later developments of history as an academic field with the notion of micro-history elaborated by someone like Carlo Ginzburg, where a community or a village is examined (see Ginzburg, 2005). But at the time Sobti wrote, history had not developed those methods of working; for her, it is the literary aspect of a text, its ability to capture the subjectivities, which enables the recreation and the better understanding of the past.

**739** Ricoeur or White would however consider history-writing as a narrative, presenting similarities with literature in the modes of narration (plot, main characters). See Ricoeur 1983, and White 1973 and 1978.

flow or stream of collective consciousness. The Ganges, linked by the epithet *bhā-gīrathī* to the goddess of the river and the idea, present in the myth, of the cult of the ancestors and the perpetuation of the memory of the ancestors, constitutes a symbol of the continuity of a tradition in a recurrence of the similar. The collective memory is compared by Sobti to this stream; literature presents not only an account of the individual experience of time, but also of the tradition transmitted from generation to generation, forming the people's consciousness (*lok mānas*). Through this, it is not only a chronology of events within a socio-political and intellectual context that finds depiction in literature, but also the everyday life and the construction of identities (individual and collective). By examining the individual and the collective perception of time and history, literature also possesses a greater 'universality' than history.<sup>740</sup> This point is essential for Sobti; in her novels, she not only reconstructs collective and individual identities by intermingling history, legend and individual destinies, but also attempts to express something which can reach any individual.

In order to obtain such a level of universality and carry human values, the writer's approach to history must be more intrinsically connected to the individual destinies and perceptions than the historian's.<sup>741</sup> Because of this, a writer does not use merely archives as material for her works, but also mines the 'collective memory' as expressed in folk tales, legends, folk history and songs.

This aspect is particularly important in the context of ZN, where intertextuality – especially with regard to folk songs, poems and tales – is constantly at work.<sup>742</sup> In ZN, as in DoD and, even more so, in DSB, the readers themselves must supply the knowledge of the larger contexts and be able to reconstruct the historical framework, since no major event is really clearly named nor depicted – the facts are only alluded to. Indeed, in the second epigraph of ZN, before the long poem-preamble which opens the novel,<sup>743</sup> the author informs

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**740** An idea present in Aristotle already. See Aristotle's *Poetics*, 1987: 40–42.

**741** Here, once again, one encounters the notion of universality as a possibility of literature through the depiction of human potentiality, something which opposes historiography and literature according to Aristotle.

**742** I do not give a summary of ZN here because the text is difficult to summarise into a linear plot; it contains many characters who each have their own storyline(s). Let us just say that it presents a rich depiction of life in rural, pre-partition Punjab, with the interaction between the groups and social classes but also with individual destinies and choices in those given socio-cultural structures. The life of the village is dominated by the family of Shahji, the most important landowner and moneylender of the locality.

**743** ZN begins with two epigraphs and a long passage in free verses expressing nostalgia at the loss of the homeland and the fact that this past will never come back. This poem-preamble constitutes the 'agenda' of the novel: if the past cannot re-emerge concretely, it can be brought

the reader that ZN is not a document of history one would find in a textbook or an archive.

History  
that is not  
  
and history  
that is  
not the one  
recorded in the archives  
and preserved  
with evidence and proof  
in the power halls  
of the rulers  
but the one  
that flows  
with the Ganges  
of people's consciousness  
flourishes and spreads  
and lives on  
in the cultured sagacity  
of the common people!<sup>744</sup>

This poem, placed as an epigraph to the novel even before the long poem-preamble which introduces the text, already indicates the claim of the writer. In ZN, no official history is written, not even history as it is recorded in the archives, but history as it is perceived and then transmitted by the 'common people' (*jan sāmānya*). The history at work in literature is subjective inasmuch as it does not concern itself with furnishing evidence and analysing numbers and figures but rather with those living in this history and their view of events. In the different goals set by the writer and the historian, literature's perspective on history is more concerned with people's consciousness, illustrated again by the image of the river Ganges in this passage, and by the history two described earlier. In ZN, this is particularly apparent.

In this novel-fresco, as I like to call it, history and the understanding of history of the protagonists border on legend and allow for the analysis, below the

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back to life by literature and revived at the time of reading. After the poem, set in the 70s, thus coinciding with the actual time of writing, and addressed like an ode to the lost homeland, the prose text with its depiction of life in the village begins.

744 ZN, Sobti 2013: 7, epigraph 2, *Itihās jo nahīm hai // aur itihās jo hai / vah nahīm / jo hukū-matoñ kī / takhtagāhoñ meñ / pramāñorñ aur sabūtoñ ke sāth / aitiḥāsik khāorñ meñ darz kar / surakṣit kar diyā jātā hai, / balki vah / jo lokmānas kī / bhāgīrathī ke sāth-sāth / bahtā hai / pan-patā aur phaitā hai / aur jan sāmānya ke / sāmśkṛtik pukhtāpan meñ / zindā rahtā hai!*

surface of socio-economic and political relationships, of the deeper layers of people's consciousness through the uncovering of their emotions and the perception of time and the past which forge their mental grasp of the world. Sobti associates this consciousness with the Ganges, the flowing river of the dead (but also of rebirth). It represents therefore the link binding the 'linear' (historical) time and the simultaneity of the time lived by the people in a time frame which is embedded in a tradition and the natural rhythm of life (i.e., in a recurrence of the similar, in a larger notion of temporality).

In ZN, history two is manifest in the rituals, in the succession of the seasons, but also in the perception of events and actors of the past voiced by the villagers at their gatherings, where history and myth are not easily distinguished from one another. The men of the village gather almost every evening in front of the haveli of the Shahs to discuss business, crops, politics and anything happening around them. These gatherings bring to light the very idiosyncratic perception of history of each protagonist and, although the shared culture is still fully lived by all of them, the signs of tensions between the religious communities begin to show.

It is interesting to examine one extract here, set in the second half of the novel, when the cousins of Shahni (the wife of Shahji, the head of the powerful Shah family) come from Jammu and Kashmir on a short visit and join in the village talk. The topic of the conversation is the army and the situation at the then court of the Maharaja of Kashmir.<sup>745</sup>

Kashi Shah changed the topic. 'It is heard that after reclaiming his crown, the king of Jammu has come to a good understanding with the British.'

Hajiji wisely observed, 'Treaties and agreements open ways of passage, and hands are shaken in friendship. One gets what he needs, the other gets his way!'

Roop Chand ventured to say, 'The lay public could never forge a treaty with the British rulers if they wanted, could they? Treaties are among equals.'

Munshi Ilmdin couldn't stomach this. 'Don't mind what I say, dear guests, but for fifteen years, Jammu Darbar was struggling to get a grip on things. The old lion was reinstated fairly late in life with Lord Curzon's support.'<sup>746</sup>

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**745** After the defeat of the Sikh armies by the British, Kashmir, which had been part of the Sikh empire, was bought from the British by the Maharaja of Jammu, Gulab Singh (1792–1857). He and his descendants, known as the Dogra dynasty, became then the rulers of the joint territory under the 'patronage' of the British Crown. This situation and the connections of the Maharaja with the British is alluded to in this passage of the novel.

**746** Feeling reluctant to attempt a new translation of such an arduous text as ZN when there is already a formidable translation, I quote here and in the following passages the 2016 English



The men discuss politics here, and their very choice of words shows their awareness of social codes of politeness – there are clear attempts not to offend Roop Chand and Mitth Chand, the two guests from Kashmir, by openly stating that the British dominate the Maharaja and his politics. However, the insinuation voiced by Munshi Ilmdin does not escape the guests, and they get up, begging to be excused, so as not to hear anything more against their king. To lighten the mood, one of the Muslim men starts to praise the Maharaja, and the other men join in, describing everything they have heard about the royal court of Jammu and Kashmir. Then they speak about the army, in which their two guests serve, and Roop Chand and Mitth Chand are very pleased. Nevertheless, some tensions can be felt because a touch of irony remains present in some of the men's comments. It is however only when it comes to the Maharaja's support of religious men and their schools that the mood changes again, because Munshi Ilmdin is once again upset at the freedom given to Kashmiri Brahmins and the restrictions placed on the Muslims in Kashmir. Aware that Munshi's words would lead to a conflict with their neighbours and that they defy the codes of politeness, two of the other Muslim men beg forgiveness and express their wish to leave, but Shahji, who is the authority in the village, cools everything down by stating that tensions, taxes and restrictions are part of the eternal way of life and governments, no matter who the party in power is:

Shahji shook his head and laughed. 'Don't take it to heart, Chaudharyji! Munshiji, these are but the twists and turns of history! Jazias were levied, so was tax on labour. But did the people of Hindostan leave their homeland and go elsewhere? And, Rabb do you good, all manner of shahs and badshahs have ruled in the Mughal dynasty too. Simple like Babur, generous like Akbar, and cruel like Aurangzeb . . .'

Inspired, Ganda Singh came into his own. 'I say, Jahangir inherited a changed generation. Father was, by His grace, a true Mughal like Akbar, and his mother, a true Rajputani. The

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translation by Mani and Mazumdar, and indicate each time the reference of the Hindi original. Sobti 2016: 311 and ZN, Sobti 2013: 274 for the Hindi original.

Although Gulab Singh had had many victories on the battlefield – already at the time when he was still serving the Sikh empire – it is true that it was ultimately his alliance with the British against the Sikh which enabled him to acquire Kashmir. His descendants were clearly dependent on the British rule. Lord Curzon (1859–1925), was the Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905. In the context of the Great Game and the instability of the North-West borderlands, Lord Curzon was very anxious to consolidate British rule in this region, for example with the creation of a North-West Frontier Province. This may partly be what is alluded to here. However, George Curzon was born after the Anglo-Sikh wars and the purchase of Kashmir by Gulab Singh.

temper of blood had to change perforce – and change it did! Now tell us, Munshiji, do you have an answer to this?<sup>747</sup>

The whole passage is very similar to the scene with the villagers Doda and Kokla in its treatment of history and legend. Through a discussion wherein each participant states his own point of view and comes with his knowledge of history, the novelist can draw a picture not only of how history is lived and felt (and even reinvented or improved), but also of how it is assimilated into the construction of identity and then used by the communities to their advantage. These points are illustrated by the reference to Lord Curzon in relation to a situation that preceded him and, in the end, by references to the Mughal rulers. The simultaneity of the memory of several events within a person is demonstrated here, something which literature renders possible, but that historiography cannot do.

More importantly, the frustration engendered by a current situation is paralleled with the past (the time of the Mughals) and, in this context, Munshi Imdin voices his discontent with the situation, forgetting the rules of politeness and diplomatic talk required at such gatherings in order to preserve peace and good relations between neighbours. It may also be read as a hint at the growing tensions between Muslims and Hindus. As in the other instances of such situations in ZN, it is always a financial and economic issue which lies at the bottom of those tensions. Historical events as well as the current news are perceived, in the village, through the specific lens of each individual and her experience and knowledge of the world (for example, Hajiji who has a grandson in the police force asks about the soldiers' wages in Kashmir to compare them; all characters show a particular sensitivity to the topics to which they can relate).

It is also worth noting the depiction of historical figures like the Mughal rulers. Shahji uses simple and straightforward adjectives to define each of the emperors he mentions. In his words resonates a conciliatory tone which attempts to render the status quo tolerable by assuring that it is the way life is and ought to be (it is indeed in his own interest to stop the questioning of the prevailing order). Ganda Singh's conclusion about Jahangir and the syncretism he symbolises through his double heritage is remarkable as well. It sums up a vision of tolerance and common culture, but at the same time plays on stereotypes (the 'true Mughal' and the 'true Rajputani') and distinctions made in the popular consciousness between the communities.

In ZN, the characters' understanding of history, legends and songs alternates with the depiction of everyday life. This description is rooted in history

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747 Sobti 2016: 313 and ZN, Sobti 2013: 276 for the Hindi original.

one, whereas the other perceptions, in their subjectivity, correspond to history two and offer an insight into the feelings and frustrations which, according to Sobti, rendered the partition first possible and, later, inevitable.<sup>748</sup>

For a novelist, it is as important to be receptive to this subjective and personal understanding of an event as it is to know the official history. Indeed, since the writer is depicting the life and time experience of the individuals, she must be aware of the discrepancy between these perceptions as well as of what a certain – sometimes biased – view of an event or a series of events can imply for the self-understanding of a community and the construction of its identity. For Sobti, it is through legends and songs that the genuine feelings and perceptions of a population, in relation to a particular situation, emerge.<sup>749</sup> Looking at this, a writer is able to draw a picture of the reality at the smallest scale, while historians tend to be more concerned with the broad outline and the changes brought about by an event. In ZN, the song of Maulu the Mirasi<sup>750</sup> about the condition of the poor peasants is a good example of the use of such means to convey the feelings and attitudes of the majority of the people.

Invited to sing at a wedding, Maulu narrates an imaginary trip of a Dervish to heaven, first to Indra's palace and then to Allah's abode. The difference between Allah's poverty and the huge splendour of Indra's lodgings is striking. Having enquired, the Dervish learns that because of court cases based on false claims, Allah's land was confiscated making Him poor. To fight in court and finance lawyers, he would have to take a loan from the moneylender.<sup>751</sup> This

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**748** In her interview with Bhalla, Sobti surprises him by stating that the partition was ultimately inevitable because of the construction of economical conflicts along religious identities. See Bhalla 2007: 146 and chapter seven.

**749** In CNZNP, she quotes not only poems of the Sufi saints but also children's songs, showing how this informs the mental picture each individual acquires of a time and context, and how cultural *topoi* and images are created. See CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 378–379.

**750** Mirasi is the name of a caste of traditional singers and dancers, but also – through their songs and performances – genealogists.

**751** This is an explicit reference to the situation in Punjab at the time. The moneylenders were often also the great landowners, just like the Shah family in ZN. In Punjab, land was the greatest source of income and power. The policy, first of the Sikh kingdom, and then of the British colonial administration, promoted agricultural production. Many landowners acted also as moneylenders and many moneylenders acquired land by default, when the debts could not be repaid, since the land deeds held as security were vested on them. The Punjab agriculture had become a part of colonial economy, so that the price of the agricultural goods was dependent on their price in other parts of the Empire. The small landholders (like the poorer peasants depicted in ZN, most of them Muslims), were more affected by these changes than the big landowners. They became more and more indebted because of the fixed prices and the fixed taxes they had to pay, as well as other factors (costs for land irrigation, recurring drought), so that the small landholders

satirical narrative is aimed at the dominating class of the Hindu landowners and moneylenders – represented in the novel by the paternalist and benevolent Shahs – and, read retrospectively, hints at the tensions that will eventually bring about the partition.<sup>752</sup>

History and politics, in ZN, merge in the people's tales, songs, poems and talks. Yet, again, these specific visions of history allow the writer to account for the reasons that led to the partition, among them, growing economical inequalities between social classes. With landed and mercantile classes predominantly Sikh and Hindu, and the farming and artisan groups largely Muslim, the inequalities came to be increasingly linked to religious communities and the divide kept growing. The end of the novel is therefore prophetic.<sup>753</sup> At the very last gathering of the men of the village, two tales are told about Chhajju Bhagat and Miyan Mir Shah. These two historical figures, to whom many legends are connected, were famous saints from Punjab, the first a Hindu and the second a Sufi. They were reputed to be great friends and many anecdotes about their respect for each other and their cleverness and wisdom are told. However, in the second of the two tales, the end of their friendship is narrated as a premonition of the end of the friendship between the Muslim and the Hindu communities. While the assembled men first interpret these stories in their spiritual meaning and in connection with their friendship, Ganda Singh, one of the Jats<sup>754</sup> of the village, dares to link the stories with a contemporary situation. This is how he reinterprets the first tale which stages a ridiculous Mughal emperor, who is in great distress because he cannot pass gas, and who is ready to give up his crown and kingdom to Chhajju Bhagat if the saint can free him from his predicament.

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were often in a situation where they had to mortgage their land. See Kumool Abbi's analysis of the relations between moneylenders and tenants, Abbi 2008b, for more details. In the district of Gujarat, which is at the epicentre of ZN, the moneylenders were in majority Khattris (Hindus and Sikhs), and their 'tenants', heavily indebted, were mainly Muslim Jats. This is the situation which is alluded to in the song of Maulu the Mirasi.

**752** See ZN, Sobti 2013: 328–332 and Sobti 2016:372–380 for the English translation. The story is too long to be given in full here, but it satirises the dramatic situation of the local peasants. If it is still met with laughter by the assembly (in that case, guests at a wedding), it is however very bitter and hints at further troubles.

**753** A prophecy post eventum, but the point is made: even if the whole village still gathers with respect around the family of Shahji, his authority has already been challenged and it is, ironically, Shahji himself who speaks of the situation where no means other than the sword may be chosen (this is the very last paragraph of the novel).

**754** A community of North India and Pakistan traditionally associated with agriculture. Many of the peasants of pre-partition Punjab belonged to this community, which is not a religious category; indeed, there are Muslim Jats as well as Hindu Jats.

Ganda Singh's interpretation elicits a summing up comment from Shahji and on this note the novel ends:<sup>755</sup>

Ganda Singh's thoughts were elsewhere. He first adjusted his turban, then unwrapped and carefully rewrapped his khes,<sup>756</sup> and said, 'Shahji, this is a matter of roohani ishq, divine love. But if someone asks me, the context of your badshah's story points to the firangi<sup>757</sup> government. What will now happen is that the Ghadar and inquilabi revolutionaries are going to stop the Sarkar's piss and breath.<sup>758</sup> I am ready to give it in writing, Shahji, that the writ of sovereignty is ultimately bound to pass into the hands of the people. Once the Sarkar is lightened of crown and kingship, there will be no holding our people back. Only one slogan will resound then: *The voice of the people is the voice of God!* It is said that Saturn was born to the Sun and the Sun lost a sixteenth part of its power and glory. The same applies to the government. On one hand, the war and on another, the Ghadar revolutionaries set upon martyrdom!

Shahji kept nodding for long moments. 'Badshaho, the tenth Patshahi Guru Gobind Singhji Maharaj wrote to Badshah Aurangzeb in response to his cruelty and oppression:

*'When all other means fail  
It is justified to lift the sword against tyranny!'*

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**755** The Mughal emperor depicted in this story is probably Shah Jahan (1592–1666). In the tale narrated here at the gathering, the emperor is feeling so sick that he is ready to do anything to be released from his misery and therefore, on the recommendation of Miyan Mir Shah, consults the famous saint Chajju Bhagat, who agrees to help if he receives the whole empire in exchange. Afterwards, the saint renounces this reward, stating that his wisdom and learning is worth much more than any material kingdom. The Emperor is thus completely humiliated.

Most of those popular stories ridicule the power of the Mughals and the Mughal emperors; in this respect, they prove quite subversive. Usually, the two saints stand together against the political power and enjoy the sympathy of the public. In the last story, a misunderstanding between them leads to the end of their friendship. Interestingly enough, this comes about because Miyan Mir respects the social conventions of the Hindu community by not entering his friend's kitchen while he is preparing food. This hurts Chajju Bhagat's feelings, who then declares that if Miyan Mir thinks that such conventions are above their friendship, then their friendship is no real friendship. Those very conventions (the Hindus would not eat from the same pots and bowls as the Muslim, for example) constituted causes of divide and tensions between the communities. On the subject, see for example the accounts collected by Urvashi Butalia (1998).

**756** Here, a cloth put around the shoulders in the manner of a shawl. The Hindi sentences read, "*Pahle pagṛī ṭhik kī, phir khes kī 'bukkal' kholi. Bāmḥem phailā dobāra oḍḥ lī aur sir hilākar kahā* [ . . . ]. He first adjusted his turban, then unwrapped and carefully rewrapped his khes, and said [ . . . ]." *Bukkal*, given here by Sobti in the inverted commas, is a Punjabi word referring to the style of wearing a shawl or a wrap-around so that it covers the head and/or the upper part of the body.

**757** European, from the Persian *firang* or 'the country of the Franks: Europe'.

**758** The Ghadar movement was a Punjab-based movement for the independence of India. *Inquilabi* means 'revolutionary', from *inquilab*, 'revolution'.

‘Waah-waah, Guru Sahib, glory and praises to your bravery and courage!’<sup>759</sup>

The interpretation of the first tale, the Mughal emperor’s story, as an allegory of the contemporary British rule in India seems logical to the men discussing it in front of the haveli. WWI has just ended, early revolutionary movements are already at work – they predate the Gandhian non-cooperation movement and are ready to use violence – and it appears, indeed, that the British Empire is crumbling.<sup>760</sup> The second tale, not quoted here and related to Miyan Mir’s reluctance to enter Chhajju Bhagat’s kitchen, calls attention to the intercommunal dealings, with the quote from the tenth Sikh Guru, addressed to a Mughal ruler, contextualising both the underlying tensions between the communities and the legitimacy of violence, provides a coda. In this way, history meets legend and legend offers a new understanding of history in its becoming part of a larger narrative in Sobti’s novel.

Thus, Sobti clearly distinguishes between literature and history. Literature holds a specific place in the portrayal of an event – of any event – because it is, according to Sobti, “the most particular account of the human mind” (*mānavīy man kā sabse vilakṣaṇ ākhyān*).<sup>761</sup> It is deeply connected to human experience and, paradoxically, through this subjectivity (the subjectivity of the memory and the retelling), it remains less susceptible to the influence of any political agenda than the official history, as long as there is both memory and forgetfulness in individuals. Unlike historiography, history as it is narrated in literature is therefore primarily rooted in the human perception of time passing, linked to memory and its subjectivity. It can give an account of the state-of-mind-in-time only at the precise time of writing. However, by doing exactly this, the literary text has a capacity of universalisation, of giving an example of human nature which historiography does not possess. The literary text is indeed a recreation of history, a fiction, which can therefore delve deeper into the consciousness of the protagonists by presenting their thoughts, feelings and emotions, in a way impossible in history writing. Literature can tell a history known and transmitted by sources other than the historical records, through folklore and tradition,

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**759** Sobti 2016: 452, and ZN, Sobti 2013: 392 for the Hindi original.

**760** WWI, where over a million Indian soldiers were deployed as part of the British forces, and over sixty thousand died, exposed Indian servicemen to global political trends and independence movements. Punjab was one of the main recruiting areas for the British army in India. For revolutionary movements in India, see, for example, the Ghadar movement, an anti-colonialist movement active in Punjab, and the actions of revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh (1907–1931), Ramprasad Bismil (1897–1927) or Chandrashekar Azad (1906–1931). These are indeed the movements mentioned (and admired) by the characters in the quoted extract of ZN as well.

**761** SVS, Sobti 2007: 33.

for example, and bring these sources to the foreground. It is also the place where the dreams, the myths and the 'dark places' of humanity come to light and, by being expressed and embedded in words, challenge the natural human transience.

Sobti writes history as literature: the setting is historical, the narrative, indeed, 'brings to life' a time and characters, but does it by mentioning only vaguely historical actors and major events. The main body of writing is an account of the past the way it has been preserved in collective memory. Sobti's approach makes it impossible to expunge the literary (and subjective) dimension from her works in order to interpret them as historical documents alone. Indeed, in her three historical novels, it is never primarily the official history or even the historical component which is at the centre, but rather the protagonists' views – or one single protagonist's views, as in the case of Pasho in DSB. Nevertheless, it is through these individual perspectives that the changes at work in society at the important turning points of history depicted in Sobti's three historical novels (the end of the Sikh Empire, Delhi's social transformation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the pre-partition period in West Punjab) become apparent.

In DSB, the last example I wish to discuss here, history is the broad context which overwhelms the young heroine. The context is not detailed. The story is actually being told in the first person by Pasho and it is verily her point of view on the events that is foregrounded in narration. Pasho does not quite understand what is happening around her. She is carried away by forces beyond her, and yet in all this, she remains a self-aware individual, with her will to live and survive intact. The description of the historical events – the gathering of the Sikh armies for the last battle, the life in the camps, the defeat – are seen through her eyes. She is the sole narrator of the story (*histoire*, in Genette's terminology) and the sense of history is hers. It is indeed through her perspective of the events that the feeling that something significant is at stake becomes palpable in the last chapters, when Pasho is brought by her second husband to the camp of the Sikh army and when she understands through his words and his despair that the war is about to be lost. Until the end, the impression of the catastrophe and of something coming to an end is constantly present, paralleling the destiny of Pasho who will pass from the Sikh war camp to the house of another native chief and ultimately to the English army camp. The narrative strategy – Pasho as intradiegetic, homodiegetic narrator and focaliser – contributes to creating in the reader the feeling of growing confusion and loss which the women brought to the camps experience. This strategy illustrates particularly well Sobti's statements about the task of the writer, namely to give a voice to history two (the 'other history') by fictionally representing the events as they are lived by

people who do not have the same distance from them as historians have, and yet still have their opinions on what is happening. Indeed, in this case, as with ZN and DoD, the reader must be familiar with the historical context in order to place the story in its temporal frame: the events as such are referred to very vaguely and, in DSB, without even being named (neither the name of Chilianwala, nor that of Napier or of any main Sikh commanders appear in the text).

Interestingly, the character of Pasho emerged in Sobti's mind in the context of post-partition Delhi, when Sobti and her family were providing help to the refugees from Punjab who were streaming into the capital. In the preface to the new edition of her first novel,<sup>762</sup> Sobti refers to this experience and relates a chance encounter in the refugees' quarters with a young girl who walked proudly, apparently genuinely very happy with her hair and her dress, in the midst of all the misery which Sobti had witnessed that day. All this misery and suffering weighted heavily on the writer, but the vision of the young girl stirred other images in her mind and brought back memories of her grandfather's haveli and its basement. Out of this emerged the idea of the life of Pasho, a woman who managed to keep herself above the dreadful events around her and represents the force of life which persists despite all the violence and destruction threatening it. Sobti's 'vision' of 'Pasho' (her model) was in bright colour tones standing for light, life and youth: a yellow salwar-kameez and a green dupatta. In the whole depiction of the scene, this girl becomes a symbol of the strength and resilience of life. The progression of the description from the misery and the despair to the smiling eyes, with the use of colours to represent this contrast, unfolds in such a way that it becomes immediately clear that Pasho will convey a message about life's resilience in extreme situations.

The memories evoked in Sobti's mind by this vision led to the decision to place the action long before the partition, at another turning point in Punjab's history. However, through this description of the young girl, Sobti builds a bridge between these two difficult periods of time and highlights the fact that, in all the historical events which overwhelm the individual, there remains, in her, a drive towards life and living.<sup>763</sup>

The description of the young girl is an example of how Sobti's memory banks work; it illustrates the mixing of the genres in Sobti's non-fictional texts through the use of colours to convey a message of human resilience. It also demonstrates the mechanisms of memory: "The shyness of a young girl, a face full of pride. On

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762 Sobti 2001.

763 See Sobti 2001 : vii–xiii. .



the clothes of yellow chintz, a very green dupatta. This girl with laughing eyes, pressing the edge of her dupatta in her mouth, where does she come from?"<sup>764</sup>

This vivid description is the re-emergence, in Sobti's memory, of an image from the past; the preface to the novel illustrates thus the transformation, through the act of writing, of a lived event into a universal tale of humanity and resilience. The fleeting image of a young girl gave birth to the whole personality of Pasho. The memories of the old, ancestral haveli of Sobti's family provided the setting for the story, and the tales and songs learned in childhood were also combined in the creation of the novel. The writing took some time, the text did not emerge immediately from those elements and memories, but it was indeed triggered by them. The memory bank was thus the place where the images were stored and where they could acquire more flesh before being transformed into the text by the writer.

In DSB, history is bigger than the individual, but the main character shows a strength of another kind which shifts the perspective of writing completely and highlights the individual experience of time – and of history.

## 6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how important time is in Sobti's works, both in her non-fictional writings and her novels. Here, time is not only part of the literary process in the very acts of reading and writing; it is also the dimension in which the protagonists of a text undergo an evolution, in which they reflect on their relationship with the past and the future, and in which this evolution itself occurs.

But time is 'multiple' in Sobti's understanding, because it encompasses several layers of perception. It is not only the time of the individual, with its finitude and ephemeral nature, but also the time of a group, embedded in a tradition, and thus transmitted further, generation after generation, through rituals and through a culture which, although it is liable to change, can be seen as possessing a certain continuity. Continuity is illustrated by the metaphor of the river, of the "Ganges of people's consciousness" (*lokmanas kī bhāgīrathī*). Finally, the third level of temporality is the time of nature, which is represented for Sobti by the recurring seasons, by the larger cycles of life.

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<sup>764</sup> Sobti 2001: x, *Nakor kaivār kā śarmātā, itrātā mukhā. Pile chūñṭ ke jore par harī-bharī orhni. Cunnī ke chor ko muñh meñ dabāe āmkhoñ se hañstī yah laṛkī kahām se ā rahi hai.*

One of the tasks of literature is to embed the finite temporality of the individual as well as the consciousness of the group into this larger, infinite temporality, through the power of language and through its capacity of ‘holding the instant’. This function of literature as challenging death and transitoriness is central for Sobti who sees in literature the capacity to recreate a world, an experience, an instant, and to bring them back to life.

Contrasting the vision of history and time of the writer with that of the historian, Sobti develops the notions of ‘history one’ and ‘history two’. In this context, the writer, unlike the historian, is not only interested in presenting facts and documents (history one), but also in understanding how history was lived, experienced and then transmitted further by those who lived it (history two). The picture of history presented in literature is therefore not considered from a singular perspective but from a multiple one, where many voices can be heard, especially those of the nameless people (*anām log*) who can thus receive a name, an identity, and be not only ‘heard’ but indeed ‘brought back to life’, together with the socio-cultural frame in which they lived. The moment of reading (the text) becomes the place where all the layers of time unite and where the past, the present and the future converge into one point of simultaneous existence, of infinity (represented by the image of the trident of time, the *triśūl*), defying the finitude to which human activity is otherwise subjected.

The tension between literature as ‘fixing time’ and ‘recreating’ a lost world and Sobti’s strong awareness of the inevitability of change in human life and human experience is not resolved, but, for her, literature becomes the space where this can be brought to light and reflected upon. In Sobti’s texts, all the layers of time experienced by an individual in her life are intertwined and constitute the dimension in which she lives.

Literature is therefore not only concerned with the individual and her temporality; it also deals with the perception of time of a community and with the larger dimension of the cosmic time as well. Indeed, literature has the capacity to bring those three dimensions together in its representation or recreation of life. For example, in the very specific context of the partition, literature becomes the place where the lost homeland can be re-created in all its complexity, namely through the voices given to the many characters of ZN – each in their own particular idiolect(s). In DoD, the end of the era of the courtesans and of the composite Hindu-Muslim culture of Delhi is told through the destiny of four individuals with their own subjective perspectives. The individual level is thus never cut off from the level of the community, while both are set in the larger frame of the natural order of time. However, when literature brings a historical time to life, Sobti insists on differentiating the aims set for the historian and the writer. For her, literature is to be understood as the record of human

memory and human values.<sup>765</sup> Literature is concerned with a larger dimension of human life than history, showing not only the interaction of individual, socio-cultural and cosmic temporality, but also highlighting the ‘dark places’ of human life experience as well as dreams and aspirations of individuals and groups and their construction of identities. As such, it digs deeper than any historical representation and presents the human being as a whole.

Beyond the reflection on history, in Sobti’s texts, time and temporality raise the issue of identity. In a constantly changing life – with changing feelings, opinions, even an evolving and aging body (this material aspect of life is essential for Sobti) – what is it that constitutes the ‘self’, the speaking subject, the individual? What makes those individualities which literature attempts to examine and give permanence to in the face of human transience? Sobti reflects on this in AL and SaS, for example, when time and the perception of time of the protagonists is observed through the workings of memory.

Memory itself is also central to the very act of writing according to Sobti. It is through the re-emergence of an image from her memory bank that a literary text gets to be created, under the joint influence of the writer’s imagination, experience and knowledge, and the text’s own needs and voices. Literature is closely linked to memory because it is a record of human life, hence a work of memory. Through literature, the past can be brought back to life, identities can be analysed, and this proves particularly important for Sobti’s recreation of pre-partition Punjab. In her novels, she acts as a writer, avoiding any political agenda. However, the topic of the partition is one of the subjects on which Sobti breaks her reserve and voices her opinions in the public sphere. As a last point, I want to turn in the next chapter to Sobti’s political statements and her public persona.

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765 See SAM, Sobti 2015: 118, at the very beginning of the speech: “In it [literature] indeed the source of human memory is preserved. *Vahīṁ mānavīya smṛti kā srot saṁcit hai.*”

It is striking that here again memory, like time, is associated with a source, hence a stream, a flow.

## 7 Literature and Politics

Before and after 1947, Hindi literature was very politically oriented, with a large divide or polarisation between the leftist Progressives (the *pragativādi*, grouped mostly in the All-India Progressive Writers' Association, AIPWA or simply PWA)<sup>766</sup> and the non-leftist Experimentalists (the *prayogvādi*, not really political), who had conflicting agendas and often engaged in personal attacks. In this context, Sobti insists on keeping the writer independent from party politics and political agendas, while still believing in the role of the writer as an intellectual who takes political positions and defends individual freedoms.

Her political statements are voiced in the form of public speeches (particularly at times of commemorations such as the anniversary of the independence) or in interviews. Although she is direct in expressing her ideas and what she condemns, she never explicitly names the groups she is opposing or criticising, thus protecting herself but also demonstrating her will to remain a public voice and not a party voice. By not adopting fully the position of one or the other party, Sobti avoids being instrumentalised<sup>767</sup> and keeps her writer's freedom.<sup>768</sup>

Both Sobti's political statements and the contexts in which they are made seem directly related to her personal background and position in society as a middle-class woman – to be taken here in the sense of the educated bourgeois middle-class, part of the Nehruvian project of building the nation – and as a member of the generation that experienced the partition. In her last novel, *Gujarāt Pākistān se Gujarāt Hindustān* (2017, afterwards GPGH), Sobti tells more about the experience of the partition and the building of a new independent nation around the notion of a “plural and secular democracy” (*bahultāvādi dharmnispekṣa loktantra*),<sup>769</sup> corresponding to her own definition of Indianness (*bhāratīyatā*).<sup>770</sup>

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**766** The same movement of the ‘progressive’ (*pragativādi*) writers took up several names and forms in the course of time, so that many abbreviations refer in fact to more or less the same group of writers sharing a similar view of literature's potential as a tool for progress. In this chapter, I use the abbreviation PWA for the sake of simplification.

**767** I believe it is indeed in this way that Sobti's refusal of several awards, like the Padma Bhushan, the third highest civic award in India, must be interpreted.

**768** Freedom is essential to her views on writing, as I have shown. See also Sobti's statements in her interview with Rama Jha, Jha 1981.

**769** This is the term employed by Sobti in her interview with Anamika in SAM, Sobti 2015: 177.

**770** See chapter four. Sobti's views on Indianness and the nation are very close to a Nehruvian secular ideal, which was supported by the educated middle-class. ‘Nehruvian’ is the term used, for example, by the historian Gyanendra Pandey to describe the vision of India as a plural and secular democracy dear to many intellectuals of Sobti's generation. See Pandey 2001: 6.

In this chapter, I look first at Sobti's assertion of the writer's independence from any form of political alignment and state patronage, before examining how this position relates to her middle-class background. I then turn to her depiction of the middle-class and her insistence on belonging both to it and to the rural Punjab. According to Sobti, these two backgrounds inform the two parts of her identity: they influence her vision of the world and shape her political awareness. This allows one to read Sobti's political statements in the context of her memories of the partition and her fear of the resurgence of communal violence.<sup>771</sup> Finally, I show how Sobti's political statements and her wish to clearly separate the writer from the political parties make her an illustration of Barthes' notion of the merging together of the roles of the *écrivain* (writer) and the *écrivain* (scribe/scriptor).<sup>772</sup>

## 7.1 Sobti's Views on Literature and Politics

Literature, as a powerful means of communication, can be a political tool; this is a fact that has been proved throughout human history, from the poems of praise written by court poets for powerful rulers, to official writers of political establishments or writers who clearly support (or object to) the politics of a particular regime, party or politician in newspaper columns and speeches. The close links that most of the Indian writers of the 60s and 70s had with the Communist Party (like the Bengali writer and activist Mahashweta Devi)<sup>773</sup> are a good example, as is the relationship between some writers and a specific politician and her circle (like Amrita Pritam's relationship with Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party).<sup>774</sup> The concept of the writer as an intellectual, expressing

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771 The word 'communal' is used here to describe the feelings of loyalty towards the interests of one's ethnic or religious group rather than to the society as a whole. In this sense, it constitutes exactly the opposite position to Sobti's vision of the Indian citizen. It is important to keep in mind that Sobti never names the movements she is opposed to; therefore, the word *hindutva* (lit. 'Hinduness'), for example, does not appear in her speeches or interviews, nor do the names of any political parties.

772 See Barthes 1964 or the essay on *Ecrivains et écrivains* and my discussion of it in chapter three.

773 The Indian Bengali writer and political activist Mahashweta Devi was close to the Communist Party and actively worked for the rights of the tribal (Adivasi) people. Her political beliefs are very manifest in her writings.

774 Amrita Pritam (Amṛtā Pritam, 1919–2005) was a Punjabi and Hindi writer and poet, member of the PWA and at a time quite close to Indira Gandhi (as becomes apparent in her autobiography, *Rasidi fikaṭ*, 1976, Revenue stamp); she was a member of the Rajya Sabha on Congress nomination between 1986–1992. She is most famous for her partition poem referencing the shared Hindu-

her position on social matters and participating in public life through her writings, also contributes to the complex interaction of art and politics.

I have already highlighted how central the notions of communicability, audience and service to society were at the beginning of the creation of modern Hindi literature. In later years, through the activity of the PWA, the role of literature as an educational tool and a means to raise socio-political awareness about the problems of contemporary Indian society was stressed once again. If the PWA was most influential during the time of the nationalist struggle for the independence, it remained active afterwards as well and its spirit left its mark on the next generations of writers. Although Sobti was never close to this movement nor to any political party, her views on the role of literature in society are embedded in a context where the PWA's advocacy of a committed literature, which can have a direct effect on society, was particularly influential.

After the independence and the traumatic experience of the partition, a new class of intellectuals, mainly consisting of members of the educated middle-class, many of them refugees from the provinces allotted to Pakistan, emerged in Delhi. These artists, writers, poets, journalists and other intellectuals met in the tea and coffee houses of the capital, thus creating a space in which to discuss and develop new ideas and currents of literature and art. This context, coupled with the work of the PWA and the trauma of the partition, shaped the works of many intellectuals at the time, as well as their positions in the public sphere. Some intellectuals, however, like Sobti herself, were part of the gatherings and meetings but never embraced any political cause. While the combined context of the partition and the meetings of the Hindi bohemia gave rise to the writer-activist as described by Alessandra Marino in her article on writing and activism,<sup>775</sup> it also left space for some independent writers who refused any political agendas. Sobti is one of the most prominent among them, particularly because she is very clear in her statements against the politicisation of literature.<sup>776</sup>

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Muslim-Sikh culture of Punjab, *Aj akhan Waris Shah nu* (Today I call Waris Shah; Waris Shah was an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Punjabi poet).

775 See Marino 2017.

776 See, for example, her interview with Rama Jha, Jha 1981: 69, "I belong to no group. I do not try to intellectualise the commitments. I am with those who stand up against oppression, exploitation and strive to keep human dignity at any cost. A writer needs fresh air all the time. Freedom from inhibitions, traditions and degenerated morality. He must create a large territory within himself which he has to nourish constantly." This statement attests to Sobti's will not to be used by any party and to be able to remain free in order to write. It also corresponds to her conception of literature as a space where the human being is not judged or shaped, but portrayed and explored.

Before turning to Sobti's statements, let me look more closely at the context of the coffee house culture in which she was active herself. The life of the intellectuals at the tea and coffee houses shaped the new literary movements and encouraged discussions between the various political and literary groups as well as between the generations (an anecdote about the writer Mohan Rakesh reported in *Dillī tī haūs* by his fellow writer Kamleshwar shows that the writers pretty much lived there).<sup>777</sup> Ravikant Sharma's article about the tea and coffee houses in post-colonial Delhi gives a detailed analysis of how this space was adopted by the intelligentsia as a 'second home' where the changing times could be processed and discussed.<sup>778</sup>

Shortly after the independence, many middle-class intellectuals, mostly not very well-off to say the least, moved to the capital, attracted by the prospect of a job and the possibility of starting a new life in the political centre of the newly independent India. At the same time, many partition refugees settled in Delhi and struggled to create a new life for themselves:

Delhi's population had swollen as a result of the Partition-related influx of the refugees trying to rebuild lives after gruelling months in the makeshift camps. The trauma of the event left an indelible mark on the physical and cultural landscape of Delhi as much as it remained inscribed in the mindscape of those forcibly uprooted, violated and marooned. From these migrants emerged several Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi writers who wrote of their dreams of a new India as they did about their loved worlds forever lost to the Partition. To them, the coffeehouse was an essential emotional anchor where they found fellow-sufferers with similar stories or at least empathetic ears, as well as different stories so essential for forgetting their own.<sup>779</sup>

However, the refugees were not the only ones to be attracted to the capital and the promise of a new life and a new job. Several publishers, writers and translators made their way to Delhi which soon became the new centre for Hindi journalism and literature. Indeed, being in the capital also meant being close to the centre of politics and power.

As the initial enthusiasm generated by the independence slumped, many writers who were very loud in the public sphere sunk into a darker vision of the future. They developed a tendency to set urban life (the reality they lived in) against a

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<sup>777</sup> See Vanshi 2009: 75–79, for an 'interview' of Rakesh where the writer makes fun of the journalist, declaring that he divides his time between his bed and the coffee house.

<sup>778</sup> Sharma 2016.

<sup>779</sup> Sharma 2016: 276. In this context, Sharma also refers to Sobti's short piece, first published in *Hamis* in 1987, "Abhī Dillī dūr hai" (At the moment, Delhi is far away), where she specifically describes this feeling shared by many intellectuals who experienced the trauma of the partition.

romanticised vision of the village or the province.<sup>780</sup> This was reflected in literature and in the political orientation of many writers. Politics was indeed at the centre of their preoccupations, and among the main topics of debate at the tea and coffee houses, where discussions could sometimes be pretty virulent.<sup>781</sup>

As Sharma states, the intellectuals became aware of their power during the inflation of 1964, when their refusal to pay for the over-priced coffee led to the creation of an influential 'consumer movement'.<sup>782</sup> Shortly after this, however, the coffee house culture lost its place in the life of the Delhi intelligentsia as, with the growing liberalisation, the city and its structure changed once again.

Nevertheless, this period and culture were very conducive to intellectual exchanges on artistic, literary and political issues and they shaped the streams of literature as well as the socio-political awareness of most of the writers of this generation, Sobti included.

In this effervescent climate where ideas and positions on all imaginable topics were discussed, the conception of the writer as an activist developed and was expressed through magazines, newspapers and short stories, forms to which, nowadays, blogs and social media platforms have been added.<sup>783</sup> Marino, in her aforementioned paper, stresses this evolution in continuity with the activities of the PWA, thus showing the long tradition of the interaction of literature and politics in India, before as well as after the independence.<sup>784</sup>

Among the contemporary writers as well as among the writers of Sobti's generation and those of the era of the tea and coffee houses, two groups of writers can be identified: the writers-activists, engaged in one or several causes, and the writers who sometimes make their opinions public, but who consider themselves primarily as writers. At times, both groups join in by expressing their agreement or disagreement on a particular topic.<sup>785</sup>

Sobti belongs to the second category, keen to keep the writers separate from political groups and agendas. I have shown in the preceding chapters how important it is for her to present, in literary writing, a view of life and of the human being which remains free from any judgement. In order to do this, the writer

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**780** See Sharma 2016 and Vanshi 2009.

**781** According to the Hindi writer Mannu Bhandhari referenced in Sharma 2016: 278.

**782** Sharma 2016: 279–280.

**783** The political and literary blog culture in India, particularly within the Hindi public sphere, is indeed very active.

**784** Marino 2017.

**785** This sense of a 'community of interests' of the writers and of their role has grown in importance in the past decades and translated itself into a wave of writers, from all the Indian languages, Sobti included, who, in 2015, gave back their awards to protest against the growing intolerance for divergent opinions in Indian society.



must also possess a great freedom – and therefore not be bound by ties to a political party or an official institution. Indeed, it is not only her own private freedom that Sobti values, but also the freedom and distance from any kind of establishment, be it the power in place or an ideology. For Sobti, the relationship between politics and literature is not based on boundaries and links, but on distance, allowing the writer to remain aloof from politics and to consider society with neutrality. Sobti does not see literature as a world in itself, having no connections with the outside. Yet, she is not an activist either. She is particularly sceptical when it comes to political establishments and power, defending the independence and freedom of literature and writers against any kind of partisanship:

Putting aside the literary quarrels and literary politics, if we turn to the word culture, we will have to say that the emblem of culture is not some holy book, nor some ascetics' school or dogma, nor one science, nor one writer, nor one caste, religion or sect – it is different from the shared power of the people and the individual worldwide. The heritage of hundreds and thousands of literary pens are assembled together in it. Today its worldwide publishing organisation and system are so powerful that it can corner whoever it wants. What we writers would say through words, what we would write, this cannot be directed by any power whatsoever.

The thought control dictatorship will never be accepted by the community of the writers. We are not speaking of these individuals and fractions who are being prepared to be put on duty by political camps. In literature, the act of washing the expressed thought, and the delusion of adding it up in those ideologies are not only destroying the power of thinking but also the dignity of the individual citizen. If we think about it, literature has never left religion, philosophy and ethics out. Literature has its own ethical rules that are connected deeply to the human family and to culture.<sup>786</sup>

Here, Sobti voices her opposition to the establishment and to the involvement of literature in politics, but also her optimistic feeling that literature will always remain an area of free thinking. When she raises her pen and her voice in the

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**786** SAM, Sobti 2015: 65–66, *Sāhityik kalah aur sāhitya kī rājñiti ko alag rakhkar śabd-saṁskṛti kī or muṛeṁ to kahnā hogā ki saṁskṛti kā pratik na koī ek granth hai, na koī ek maṭ-sampradāya yā dharm, na koī ek vidvān, na lekhak, na koī jāti, dharm, mazhab – yah viśva-bhar lok aur vyakti kī sāmijhī śakti kā paryāya haiṁ. Saikaṛoṁ-hazāroṁ-lākhon racnātmak kalamoṁ kī virāsat ek sāth ismeṁ saṁcit haiṁ. Āj iskā viśvavyāpī prakāśaniya saṁcār tantra itnā śaktiśālī hai ki jisko cāhe gher le. Ham lekhak śabd kī abhivyakti ke sāth kyā kahēṁ, kyā likhēṁ, iskā nirdēś kisi bhī sattā se nahīṁ liyā jā saktā.*

*Vicārak tānāsāhī kā yah amkuś lekhakiya birādārī ko kabhī svikār nahīṁ hogā. Ham un vyaktiyōṁ aur guṭōṁ kī bāt nahīṁ kar rahe jo rājñitik khemoṁ dvārā paharedārī ke lie taiyār kie jāte haiṁ. Sāhitya meṁ pravāhit vicār ko khamgālne kī mudrā aur use vicārdhārā meṁ dhālne ke prapaṁc sirf vicārśakti ko nahīṁ – vyakti nāgarik kī garimā ko bhī naṣṭ karte haiṁ. Socēṁ to sāhitya ne dharm, darśan aur naitikā ko kabhī apne se bāhar nahīṁ kiyā. Sāhitya kī apnī maryādāeṁ haiṁ jo gahre tak mānaviya parivār aur saṁskār se juṛī haiṁ.*

public sphere, it is always to defend this freedom, all the while maintaining her own independence as an individual and a writer. She likes to think of a 'community of writers', using the Hindi word *birādarī* (fraternity, community of interest). In the subcontinent, this term designates a social group in which a person interacts, mostly through familial ties or shared professional interests, but often through other types of interests as well. This illustrates Sobti's wish to see writers defend, as a group, the freedom of the individuals, their independence from any power or political party, as well as to see them build a unity which can be equated with a vision of a world literature, namely of a literature which does not recognise borders when it comes to nationalities, religions or ideologies.<sup>787</sup> Literature and the writers who advocate Sobti's vision of it, are bound to an ethical code of respect for human beings and their individual rights, thoughts and identity. Defending this code in the public sphere is the writer's duty. Letting one's self be recruited by a political faction or ideology would result in the end of the freedom of thought which Sobti deems essential in literature.

Sobti's vision of the role of the writer in the public sphere as a preserver of the rights of the individual and her freedom is in turn reflected in her own writing. Indeed, in her texts, as shown in earlier chapters, she adopts the points of view, the language, the diction and the world of the characters she portrays, suspending all judgement in her quest for truth about life and human beings. Her writing strategy not only involves the use of various types of language, but also a constant shift in points of view and focuses within the narration. This highlights the fact that her views on literature and the relationship between literature and society is centred on the individual and on the understanding of individual perceptions of the world. Were she to put her neutrality aside (by taking a specific political position, for example), this humanist side would be jeopardized. For Sobti, such an openness towards life and individual human beings is essential to good literature. As a consequence, she wants to strictly distance herself from political agendas. Yet, she also believes in the role of the writer as a public voice that must speak for values such as freedom and

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**787** The writers would thus not only constitute the chain of literature and a family (a 'genealogy') within it, as was discussed in the previous chapter; they would also constitute, in the present, in their everyday life, a kind of family which would give each of them an identity and a sense of belonging. One can see here an answer, perhaps, to the fact that Sobti places the writer (and herself) outside of the traditional way of life (the constitution of a family), as she explains at some length in Hashmat's encounter with Sobti. See the whole text of "Mulakāt haśmat se sobtī kī" (HaH, Sobti 2013, vol. 1: 252–271) and my discussion of this topic in chapter five. If the writer is never entirely 'within' society but in an in-between space, she is not alone either, but part of the community or brotherhood (*birādarī*) of writers.

humanism.<sup>788</sup> She therefore sometimes makes public political statements or even writes open letters.

This was the case during the 1980s protests against the construction of dams on the Narmada river, which caused the displacement of local villagers and Adivasis with only a small compensation offered to them.<sup>789</sup> The movement against the construction of the dam, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA, Save the Narmada Movement), sought and obtained the support of many prominent writers, among them Arundhati Roy and Krishna Sobti, who wrote open letters and essays to raise awareness about the issue amongst the general public.

Recalling being asked to participate in this movement in a passage in SAM, Sobti interestingly does not express her feeling of duty to inform society, as explicated in Premchand's "Sāhitya kā uddeśya" (The Aim of Literature),<sup>790</sup> but rather shows the empathy that she felt while reading about the displaced Adivasis, a feeling which she links to her memories of the partition. Those memories accompanied her as she wrote her poem-letter to India's president:<sup>791</sup>

I want to tell you that I am no poet – it is the Adivasis of the banks of the Narmada alone who are speaking in these lines.<sup>792</sup> For me, the tragedy of the last partition kept knocking at my heart. Constantly! Such an unfeeling decision that would erase your geographical and cultural roots, the forest, the vegetation, the trees, the earth – everything from before your eyes! This meant no less than that either. Years later, I experienced the pain of the partition again. I saw it again.<sup>793</sup>

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**788** As seen earlier, Sobti's humanism consists of seeing each human being as an individual made out of a multiplicity of identities and not limited to only one of them. In this conception of the individual, Sobti is close to the values of the educated middle-class she comes from, and distances herself from the politics of division and communalism.

**789** The project of the construction of dams on the Narmada river had already been planned in the 1960s, but the construction itself (and the controversy) began in 1987.

**790** See the introduction.

**791** See SAM, Sobti 2015: 109–117.

**792** Sobti wrote her open letter in the form of a poem expressing the attachment to the soil and to one's own land and roots, where she adopted the voice of the Adivasis. As shown in chapters three and four, Sobti rarely writes in verse. Her choice of this mode of expression always corresponds to a particular need of expression, usually in connection to her own process of writing. In the context of the NBA, the poem echoes Sobti's poem-preamble to her novel-fresco ZN, where verses are the means to express the loss of a homeland. I discussed Sobti's views on literature as bringing back the voices of the nameless people (*anām log*). This idea is present here again in Sobti's claim that her poem-letter is the voice of the Adivasis. It would be beyond the scope of this chapter to enter into the whole debate about literature as 'giving a voice' to the 'voiceless' keeping in mind Spivak's essay, Spivak 1988b.

**793** SAM, Sobti 2015: 109–110, *Tumheñ batānā cāhti hūm ki main kavi nahīñ huñ – narmadā kināre ke ādivāsī hī in pañktiyoñ meñ is bhāv ko pravāhit karte haiñ. Merī or se vibhājan kī*

The parallel between the displaced Adivasis and the partition refugee illustrates how traumatic and significant the experience of the partition was for Sobti and her generation and how much it shaped their sensitivity in the field of politics. Indeed, it is this feeling of empathy, of compassion (in the etymological sense of ‘suffering with someone’), which brought Sobti to seize her pen, even though she was not usually an activist writer, preferring to keep her distance from any kind of group. As Alok Bhalla suggests, this can be traced back to her fear of seeing history repeat itself, a fear that flares up whenever she witnesses the increasing intercommunal tension or any kind of discrimination.<sup>794</sup>

Though not an activist writer, Sobti does make political statements at times. When she does so, it is always related to her memories of the partition, her fear of communalism or her need to defend the middle-class values of freedom and Nehruvian secularism she grew up with. Political positions and their frame seem to be always directly connected to Sobti’s background as the member of the educated middle-class and the generation which was a part of the project of ‘building the nation’ after the independence,<sup>795</sup> as well as her identity as someone who has experienced the partition. I will now turn to these two aspects of Sobti’s personal history and their influence on her political awareness.

## 7.2 Personal History and Political Awareness

### 7.2.1 “A Liberal, Middle-Class Woman”

On several occasions, Sobti points out that she belongs to the educated middle-class.<sup>796</sup> The values she defends are indeed closely related to the middle-class

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*pichlī trāsadi mere dil ko khaṭkhaṭāī rahī. Lagātār! Aisā nirdayī nirṇay jo āpki bhaugolik aur sāṁsṛtik jāyē, hariyālī, phal-phūl, peṛ, dharti – sab āṁkhorṁ ke sāmne se vilīn kar de. Yah bhī kuch usse kam nahīn. Barsom bād vibhājan ke dard ko phir se jhelā. Phir se dekhā.*

**794** Bhalla, quoted in Trisha Gupta’s write-up on Sobti, see Gupta 2016. It is interesting that Urvashi Butalia makes the same parallels in her work on the partition. In Butalia 1998, she shows how it was the context of the Sikh demands for a more independent state, combined with the shock of the army attack on the Golden Temple (the June 1984 Operation Blue Star), followed by the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh body guards in November 1984, that brought back to her mind (as to many others’) the time of the partition and the curse of religious divides.

**795** Partha Chatterjee stresses this role of the middle-class as ‘builders of the nation’ in some of his essays collected in *A possible India* (2003).

**796** Sobti defines herself in her interview with Tarun Bharatiya and Jayeeta Sharma as “a writer who happens to be a liberal, middle-class woman”, see Sharma 1996: 106.

intellectual society which also constitutes the world in which she grew up. However, Sobti often insists on her ties to rural Punjab as well – often leaving out the fact that her family were wealthy landowners, like the benevolent but at the same time exploitative Shahs in ZN. These two sides of Sobti's background are presented by her as cornerstones of her political awareness and of her own habits and lifestyle. Although she is able to speak with irony of her own social class, her values and her thoughts are very much those of this middle-class that supported the building of the new nation-state in 1947.<sup>797</sup> When she comes out of her silence to defend a cause or values, it is also arguably the values dear to this very middle-class – freedom, Nehruvian secularism, rights of the individual – that she embraces.<sup>798</sup>

In MSRS, Sobti speaks with a certain humour and yet with a lot of affection about her middle-class background and the love of discipline which it taught her, constructing an image of this specific social class (to which she belongs) as industrious, educated and self-restrained. However, she insists at the same time on her connection to the 'cultivators' (*khetihar*) with whom she associates values such as openness and a closeness to nature. In her praise of the middle-class way of life, self-irony is not completely absent, but it is obvious that she identifies with this social class and its conception of the human being as a free individual who can (and must) take her life in hand and control it:

A particular kind of careful organisation and restraint, attached to the ranks of this class [the middle-class], is also acknowledged, that is not directly related to the abundance of money. Any regular income, small or large, forces you to hold a discipline, [as well as] your temperament, your hopes, desires and aspirations. So much so that your heart is not given permission to desire and crave. Use what is at your disposal intelligently and wait for what is not. Wait as long as it takes, keep waiting, do not tire of waiting. And even if the opportunity doesn't arise, keep silent. It is true that in this household, the splendour is not money but the comforts and the refinements accumulated wisely by reflecting alone. Do not misunderstand! The idea is not that a person should be absorbed in thought; the idea is merely that she ought not to become thoughtless because of the rules or the orderliness in which she dwells. A few money problems must remain, so that we can lay a foot firmly on the lower rung of the ladder of the well-to-do and gaze intensely in the direction of dreams on the upper rung of the ladder. The clear and careful calculations

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**797** On the place of middle-class in the nation-building discourse and the role of the middle-class in shaping the new nation, see Partha Chatterjee's essays collected in *A possible India* (2003), more specifically 'The Indian Big Bourgeoisie: Comprador or National' and 'The Nehru Era'.

**798** Even more than in the aforementioned case of the NBA, one can think here of Sobti's participation in the conferences Pratirodh (lit. 'resistance') I and II at JNU in 2015 and 2016.

should be just right to enable us to establish ourselves on a solid base and to entertain the dream of rising higher.<sup>799</sup>

It is against this middle-class background that Sobti places herself (she grew up in the ‘security’ of this class),<sup>800</sup> that is, between poverty and riches, at a point where the worries for the daily bread are no longer the main preoccupation, but where an individual is not entirely detached from this material reality either. In this position, there is still something to strive for, and yet there is security, too. This is what makes this class ‘industrious’, so to speak, able to become partners in building the nation, but also to constitute a leading force in a democratic society, by setting the standards and the rules and establishing the values.

Sobti is aware of what this situation implies for her personally, and one finds in her tone a note of irony (“the comforts and refinements accumulated wisely”, “careful organisation and restraint”). Nevertheless, it is to this situation that she owes her awareness of the world around her and in it that she sees the roots of her ability to imagine and adopt different worlds, be it those which are present simultaneously in each individual’s life or those which coexist next to each other without much interaction. Sobti is indeed very conscious of the plural identity of each individual. She even traces back her consciousness of this plurality to the various settings to which she was exposed to from childhood and which gave her the ability to grasp situations:

This environment<sup>801</sup> gave me the understanding to grasp situations. I also received the understanding and the education to see news as news, an event as an event and what has

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**799** MSRS, Sobti 2014: 406, *Isī varḡ kī kor se ṭamkī ek khās tarah kī sutharī vyavasthā aur sarīnyam ko bhī jānā hai jiskā sīdhā sambarāndh paise kī bahutāyat se nahīm. Kam yā zyādā koī bhī barāndhī-barāndhāī āmdanī āpkō, āpke mizāj, āpkī ummīdōrī, hasratōrī, ākāmkṣāōrī tak ko anusāsan meṃ bāndh detī hai. Yahām tak kī nadīdepan se apnā dil lalcāne aur tarsāne kī bhī izāzat vahām nahīm dī jātī. Jo maujūd hai uskā akalmarāndī se istemāl karo, jo hai nahīm – uskā imtazār karo. Imtazār kitnā bhī lamḡā ho, karte rahie – bas thakie nahīm. Is par bhī koī sūrat na nikale to khāmoś rahie. Sac to yah hai kī is caukhaṭ meṃ raunak rupae-paise kī nahīm, sockar akalmarāndī se jamāī huī suvidhāōrī aur salikōrī kī hī hai. Āpkō galatfahmī na ho jāe – soc itnī bhī nahīm kī ādmī fikr meṃ hī dubalā jāe – bas kāyde karīne se soc itnī hī kī vah befikr na ho jāe. Kuch-na-kuch jeb kā dard paltā hī rahnā cāhie, tākī hazrat safedpoś nice kī sīrhī par mazbūtī se pair ṭikāe rahēṃ aur ūpar kī sīrhī par nigāh se khvāboṃ kī or ṭakṭakī bāndhe rahēṃ. Sīdhāsādā hisāb itnā ho kī pānḡ tale apnī rozmarā kī asliyatēṃ barkarār rahēṃ aur ūpar māthe kī sīdh ūnce uṭhne ke khvāb bhī.*

**800** As she states in MSRS, just after the quote given. The middle-class really constitutes her background, her social milieu, despite her ability, as a writer, to move in other spheres through her writing.

**801** Sobti just referred to her childhood spent between Delhi, Shimla and the district of Gujrat in Punjab.

happened not only as a reality but as the web of the lines emerging from its past. It was the atmosphere of that time that kept you vigilant. How does a foreign power rule the country; how do misunderstandings and rumours spread; how much governmental acceptance and how much resistance of the people there is in them; and this as well: what particular matters preoccupy the government, how much firmness and how much pressure it must give and how much pressure it will receive from opposing directions – the course of action of the imperialist government started to sink into my understanding. This consciousness alone formed my inner perspectives as a writer. [And] with this, the experience of my lands, the rough, straightforward rural atmosphere of the house of my maternal grandmother.<sup>802</sup>

For Sobti, her background as a middle-class woman who, from childhood, was confronted with two very different ways of life (the cities and the rural area), was instrumental in shaping her mind and her personality. Her awareness of the intricacies of colonial politics and of power games stems from this as well. She knows that she belongs to the middle-class and that the values of this class, more specifically the focus laid on the individual and her freedom, shaped her vision of the world. In the meantime, her ties to rural Punjab opened her mind to another reality and tuned her ears to other idiolects as well.<sup>803</sup>

Middle-class values also include the possibility for any individual to climb the social ladder, to look upwards – and to fall down as well. Belonging to the middle-class therefore means standing in the middle, a position with which Sobti associates intellectual mobility and openness too – and a middle space, once again. She is proud of belonging to this class because she identifies with its values of restraint, discipline and striving, but also with the concepts of social mobility and individual freedom.<sup>804</sup>

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**802** SAM, Sobti 2015: 337: *Is pariveś ne mujhe sthitiyom ko samajhne-būjhane kī samajh dī. Khabar ko khabar, ghaṭnā ko ghaṭnā aur ghaṭit ho cuke ko mātr hakikat nahin, uske pichvāre se ubhartim ṭip-ṭippaniyom ke tantujāl ko bhī dekhne kī samajh aur tālim miltī rahī. Yah tab kī ābo-havā thī jo āpko caukas rakhtī thī. Videśī sattā deś kī hukūmat kaise caltī hai, galatfahmiyān-afavāherī kaise failāī jāti hai, unmeṃ kitnī sarkārī svikṛti aur kitnā jantā kā pratirodh hotā hai; yah bhī kī kis viśeṣ mudde ko sarkārī havā lagānī hai, use kitnā pakānī aur dam denī hai aur viparīt diśāom se use kitnā dabānī hai – sāmrajyavādī sarkārī mukhṛom kī kārya-praṇālī samajh meṃ baiṭhne lagtī. Is sūjh-būjh ne hī merī lekhakīya antardṣṭiyom ko tarāsā. Iske sāth apnī zamīnom kā anubhav, nanihāl ghar kā khurdarā sīdhā-sādā khetihar vātāvaran.*

**803** This brings to mind Sobti's ability to grasp local dialects, as demonstrated in chapter four.

**804** See her interview with Anamika in SAM, Sobti 2015: 188, "I consider myself a proper seedling of the middle-class. It makes me feel proud. A middle-class, too, which has descended from higher up and settled [somewhere] in the middle. Neither the high seems overwhelming, nor the low insubstantial. I respect, from the bottom of my heart, all laborious attempts at upward move, each footstep, each rung, rung by rung. No group or community has an [exclusive] right over this. It is a way open to all citizens. For some it takes a decade or two. Others need one or two generations to reach there, and a great number might reach this stage only after a century-long journey.

In the meantime, however, she objects to the conservatism of this particular class, for example in the question of the freedom of the individual outside of the socially established order, something which she herself experienced as an independent woman:

If we haven't lived the individual freedom that we earned ourselves, then, with the diseases of grudge-bearing and frustration, we shall dress ourselves all our life in the *special* pose of the middle-class. To save our freshly laundered clothes, we shall bundle our emotions in rags and hide them in a heap of trash, then, in fake innocence, search for them in the folds of others' loin clothes.

Individual freedom is not merely sexual freedom. Its boundaries are vast. Hence, one may appear naked even though one adheres to the commonly accepted social norms.<sup>805</sup>

The middle-class is not only an industrious class, out of which writers and artists can emerge because of their position at the middle of the economic ladder and the mobility it confers on them; it is also the part of society that sets and settles the rules of how to behave. As such, it is an enemy of the individual freedom as well, since individuality is perceived as a potential danger to order. The middle-class can also easily fall prey to the tendency to conceal the longings of the individual in the name of the established social order.<sup>806</sup> For Sobti, this attitude is hollow. Indeed, to abide by social norms only to abide by them but without being true to one's self and personality is wrong according to her vision of

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*Apne ko theṭh madhyavarg kī paudh māntī hūn. Usmeṁ garv mahsūs kartī hūn. Madhyavarg bhī aisā jo ūncāi se utarkar bic meṁ sthīt ho gayā ho. Na ūpar kā vazandār lage aur na nice kā halkā. Mehnat se har kadam har sīdhī caḍhkar ūpar pahuṁcane kī kośīsoṁ kī mainṁ dil se izzat kartī hūn. Is par kisī samūh-sampradāya kā hak nahīn. Yah rāstā sab nāgarikoṁ ke lie khulā hai. Kisī ko das-bīs baras lagte haiṁ. Kahīn ek-do piḍhiyān ismeṁ gark ho jātī haiṁ aur ek baḍī samkhyā śatābdī ke safar se guzarkar is maṁzil tak pahuṁctī hai.”*

Sobti demonstrates her lucidity towards the middle-class and yet she praises this particular class's will to better themselves, as well as the opportunity it seeks to allow everyone to be free to work to reach a better social position. This illustrates once more her attachment to democratic (and middle-class) notions such as equal opportunities.

**805** MSRS, Sobti 2014: 401: *Agar hamne svayaṁ arjit kī huī vyaktigat āzādī ko jā nahīn to kurhan bhārī paśopeś aur kuṁṭhāoṁ kī mār se ham ājīvan bhadrakol speśal bhaṅgimā hī orhe raheṅge. Apne dhule-dhulāe ujle kapṛoṁ ko bacāne ke lie, āp apne hī dil ko cithṛoṁ meṁ lapeṭ kisī kūrre ke ḍher meṁ chipā deṅge aur phir nihāyat bholepan se use dūsroṁ kī aṁṭī meṁ ḍhūrhte raheṅge.*

*Vyaktigat svataṁtratā keval yaun svataṁtratā hī nahīn hai. Iskī simāeṁ bahut baṛī haiṁ. Viparīt ṭek par āp sāmājīk mānyatāoṁ meṁ saje-dhaje maryādā meṁ les hokar bhī vastrahīn dīkh sakte haiṁ.*

**806** This brings to mind the issue of obscenity in MM, for example, as discussed in chapters four and five.



the human being as a free individual. Her relationship with the middle-class is therefore ambivalent and she is perfectly aware of it. She is not uncritical towards it. She adopts a tone of affectionate irony which brings to mind her alter ego, Hashmat. But it is thanks to her position as a member of the middle-class that she was able to develop her political and social awareness as well as the vision of India as the democratic and plural nation which she describes, for example, in her speech given on the occasion of the fifty years of the independence in 1997.<sup>807</sup>

This speech provides important insights into Sobti's political orientation, placing her in the context of the so-called Nehruvian middle-class. It highlights her awareness of the changes in society since the independence, with the main actors of change being the associations and institutions of the new Republic. In this speech, she also describes the situation of writers in India after 1947 and their involvement in public affairs through associations, political parties and other organisations. Although the political establishment shows a propensity to control literature, Sobti sees in the community (or 'fraternity', *birādarī*) of writers the strength to resist those power games, something she really wishes for.

The relationship between writers, democracy and power is a complicated one: officially, cultural organisations have been established to support the artists. However, they are promoting agendas of their own. Writers have therefore to be vigilant to protect their own freedom as well as the democratic values – those very democratic values, particularly individual freedom, which are actually middle-class values. According to Sobti, democracy constitutes the perfect setting in which literature and writers can thrive: "When it comes to thought, the democratic principles and values make her [the writer's] expression progress, they give her self-confidence; on the other hand, they also reveal her literary abilities."<sup>808</sup> However, despite this, politics and power will always try to influence literature and obtain the support of the intellectual class. In this context, it is important for the artists, particularly the writers, to reflect on their relationship with society and with others: do they have to bring a service to society?<sup>809</sup> Or is

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**807** See SAM, Sobti 2015: 54–64.

**808** SAM, Sobti 2015: 56, *Vaicārik star par loktantrīya siddhānt aur mūlya uskī abhivyakti ko gatišil karte haiṁ, use ātmaviśvās dete haiṁ to dūsri or lekhakiya kṣamtāom ko udghāṭit bhī karte haiṁ.*

**809** One is reminded here of Premchand's notion of service (*sevā*), and the opinion he voiced in his speech on the purpose of literature; see the preceding chapters and particularly my discussion of the inside-outside interaction of the writer in chapter three. Sobti questions the role and place of art in society in the aforementioned speech published in SAM, see Sobti 2015:56: "The issue worth thinking about is the following: is the writer beholden to anyone for her literary talent? Does she, being a creator, enrich society through her literary activities? *Vicāryogya*

the fact of being a creator, of being free, a service to society in itself? Is art something which makes society reflect about itself and thrive? These questions are not directly answered by Sobti but can be interpreted as rhetorical in view of her positions in favour of the freedom and independence of the writer. Democracy is the space where an artist can be free; in the meantime, the artists have to be vigilant guardians of democratic (especially individual) freedoms.

In her speech, Sobti remains constantly aware that politics is everywhere – as is corruption. After praising the younger generation<sup>810</sup> for its openness and its freedom from caste and class prejudices, Sobti draws attention to the existence of clientelism in politics and among the economic elite. According to her, each citizen has the duty to remain vigilant to this. In her assessment of the situation after fifty years of independence, she therefore denounces the corruption and the clientelism of the political and economic elites, while she praises the efficiency of the judiciary system and the progress brought about by education.<sup>811</sup> Sobti also evokes progress in women's rights and their access to the

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*bāt itnī hī – kyā lekhak lekhakiya nidhi se kisī ko upakṛt kartā hai? Kyā kṛtikār hone ke nāte apne racnātmak kriyākālāpoṃ se vah samāj ko samṛddh kartā hai?"*

**810** She probably refers to the younger generation of writers as well as to the growing urban middle-class who were able to acquire a higher level of education. This would be the generations following hers, people born and raised in independent India.

**811** Although Sobti never promotes a specific programme which would make India become the plural and democratic society she longs for, she does stress the importance of education. This is especially the case when she speaks of bettering the condition of women, see for example in SVS, Sobti 2007:158–159, "Education and economic independence alone will strengthen the social status of women. [. . .] The truth is, K.B., that we have changed the mentality of the woman confined to the four walls of the household. Now she is ready to go out of this trap. The response to this whole set up lies in education and economic independence. It lies in the equality of [all] citizens and its promises. *Śikṣā aur ārthik svatantratā hī strī ke sāmājīk pakṣa ko mazbūt kareṅge. [. . .] Sac to yah hai K. B., ki hamne gṛhasṭha kī caukhaṭ meṃ auratoṃ kā manovijñān badal diyā hai. Ab vah is caṅgul meṃ se nikalne kī taiyārī meṃ hai. Is pūrī prakriyā kā javāb 'śikṣā' aur ārthik svatantratā meṃ hai. Nāgarik hone kī samāntāoṃ aur unki sambhāvnāoṃ meṃ hai.*" The same argument is emphasised in the interview with Anamika, see SAM, Sobti 2015: 197. The identity of women as citizens in their own right is a central point for Sobti: the key to an open society lies in equal rights for women and equal opportunities for education and development.

However, education works both ways. The elite must learn to accept as equal citizens all the so-called subaltern (Dalits, women, lower castes), see SVS, Sobti 2007: 141: "Look, we must find [in ourselves enough] refinement to spontaneously accept as citizens the mass of the marginalised, the poor, the Adivasis, the uneducated and women. This responsibility lies with the well-educated and the writers. *Dekhie, hamerṃ pichvaṛe, nirdhan, ādivāsī aśikṣit aur strī kī bhī ko nāgarik ke svarūp meṃ sahaṅ hī svikār karne kī tālīm juṭānī hogī. Yah zimmā śikṣitoṃ aur lekhakoṃ par hai.*"

public sphere, as well as a certain amount of progress in the reduction of the caste divides. However, much remains to be done, especially in rural areas where citizens are still considered second-rate citizens. Hope exists in the form of the more educated new generation and because of the judiciary power, which stands in the way of corruption. Nevertheless, the danger of the resurgence of communal divides always looms over the country, especially after events such as the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. Sobti therefore concludes her speech with a call for unity against all forms of casteism or religious divides, thus voicing her concern that what happened during the partition could happen again. The speech is indeed centred on precisely this idea of an open and plural democracy which must prevail over all divisions. Only in such a society can each individual be considered as an independent human being and not be defined by other criteria in a biased reconstruction of history and identity:

Friends, whatever the political party, I consider wrong [all] attempts, made in the spirit of violence, and in the name of caste and religion, to find proof of social differences by [marshalling] historical evidence. This is sheer interference in the human being's sense of self. An attempt to alter history. My simple and straightforward hope regarding our democracy is that the autonomy and right to disagree will be vested not only in the intellectual class but in every single individual.<sup>812</sup>

From this long speech, which I have summarised here, it is possible to infer Sobti's vision of the nation-state, a vision which remains very close to the Nehruvian ideal and thus reflects Sobti's background. In her eyes, it is indeed essential that India should uphold democratic and secular values, in her own understanding of the term, namely the absence of discrimination using criteria such as religion or caste. India as a nation has many cultures and languages, and it is essential to maintain this diversity while constructing the identity of its citizens around a pluralist vision of nation and culture. In her use of the word 'secular' (*dharmnirpekṣa*, literally 'independent of religion', 'indifferent to religion', 'non-religious'), Sobti is careful, because she is aware of its connotations and cannot ignore the debates on the existence of several codes of law in India.<sup>813</sup> Nonetheless, she likes the idea of inclusivity and tolerance which she herself connects with this word, in her own particular definition of it:

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**812** SAM, Sobti 2015: 64: *Dosto, rājñitik dal koī bhī ho, ham himsā ke adhyātma ke tahat dharm-varḡ aur jāti ke nām par sāmājīk dūriyom ko aitihāsīk pramāṇom se siddh karne kī ceṣṭā ko galat samajhte haiṁ. Mānavīy asmitā meṁ yah sīdhā-sādā hastakṣep hai. Itihās ko palaṭkar likhne kī kośīś. Apne loktantra se hamārī sādā-sī ummīd itnī hī ki sirf bauddhik varḡ kī hī nahīṁ, asahmatī kā adhikār har vyakti kī svāsattatā meṁ nihit hai.*

**813** See chapter four.

Let us leave to the experts discussions regarding the when and the how the word secular has been used in the constitution. I can say this much: this word and [the sense of] Indian culture implied by it, including the all-pervasive ethical code, are present even now in the warp and weft of Indian life and democracy. And it will remain there. The era of this century is drawing to an end. Despite all the political intrigues, I do not see in the future of our democracy a communal, a ritualist<sup>814</sup> or a dictatorial system.<sup>815</sup>

The future of India, as Sobti saw it at the time (around 1997), was to be inclusive, tolerant and pluralistic. This illustrates her wish for the individual to be considered in her singularity, with all the complexity and the multi-layered character of her personality. It is precisely her wish to see those middle-class values of individual freedom and rights (and through this also the privileges of the educated, intellectual middle-class) upheld, which bring back her fear of communalism and the shadows of the partition.

This fear is connected to the other ‘side’ which constitutes her background, namely her ties with Punjab and her experience of the partition. In order to understand Sobti’s political statements and involvements, it is therefore important to turn now to her own discourse on the partition and to the influence it has on the positions she voices in the public sphere, whenever she breaks her reserve to raise socio-political issues.

### 7.2.2 Sobti’s Discourse on the Partition: “Afraid of Reviving the Old Bitterness”

Sobti’s discourse on partition takes place on two levels, that of her fictional texts and that of her other writings and interviews.<sup>816</sup> Whereas the partition does not constitute a central point – at least not explicitly – in Sobti’s fiction, with the exception of four short stories and of ZN and GPGH, it was an important personal experience and is therefore also a topic she discusses in almost all her interviews

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**814** Here Sobti uses the word *karmakāṇḍī*, lit. ‘following the ritual actions/rites’ or ‘related to the religious ceremonies enjoined by Hindu or Buddhist law and rituals’. There is no exact English equivalent and I believe that Sobti points here at the question of religion, in this case Hindu, since she witnesses the rise of the Hindu nationalist movements.

**815** SAM, Sobti 2015: 62, *Dharmnirpekṣa śabd vidhān meṁ kab aur kaise prayog huā, iski vyākhyā viśeṣajña kareṁ. Ham itnā kah sakte haiṁ ki yah śabd aur ismeṁ nihit bhāratīya saṁskār pūrī vyāpak naitik saṁhitā ke sāth āj bhī bhāratīya jīvan ke tāne-bāne aur loktantra meṁ maujūd haiṁ. Aur rahegā. Is śatābdī kā kālkhāṇḍ khatm hone ko hai. Ham tamām rājnitik hathkaṁḍorṁ ke bāvjud apne loktantra ke bhaviśya meṁ sāmpradāyik, karmakāṇḍī, tānāshāhī vyavasthā nahīṁ dekh rahe.*

**816** Sobti comes back to the experience of the partition in the context of more recent political issues as well and expresses the fear of “reviving the old bitterness”, Bhalla 2007:161.

and in many essays.<sup>817</sup> The discourse on the partition proves to be very different if one looks at these two groups of texts. The fictional works illustrate Sobti's views of literature as a space of freedom from any form of judgement. The non-fictional texts, on the other hand, show her great sensitivity towards and awareness of political questions and, in them, Sobti does not refrain from stating her beliefs, particularly her vision of India as a "plural secular democracy" (*bahultā-vādī dharmnispekṣa loktantra*). With regard to the partition, the fictional works focus on human emotions and perceptions of the events and the violence. In the non-fictional texts and speeches, Sobti becomes more political.

In her fictional works dealing with the partition, one can recognize two periods. The first period, soon after the partition, shows Sobti as a representative of partition literature in short fiction as it was written by most of the authors at the time. The second period is that of the very first novel *Cannā* and *ZN*, where Sobti does not idealise the situation before the partition but hints at the tensions and potential sources of conflicts. This is what really sets her apart from the mainstream partition fiction. It also constitutes a very striking point in her interview about the partition with Alok Bhalla: she states on several occasions that it had become inevitable whereas, judging by most of the other writers, the dominating feeling is one of incomprehension.<sup>818</sup>

The partition is central to many short stories and novels published after the independence and it is obvious that it deeply affected not only the writers who experienced it personally, but also those who witnessed the settlement of the

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**817** Of Sobti's short stories collected in *Badlom ke ghere* (1980, Encircled by clouds), four narrate events related to the partition: "Daro mat, main tumhārī rakṣā karūṅgā" (1950, Don't be afraid, I shall protect you), where a husband must witness how his young wife is mutilated while he himself, seriously wounded, is incapable of protecting her against the violence; "Sikkā badal gayā" (1948, The times have changed), one of Sobti's most famous short stories, inspired by her maternal grandmother's traumatic leaving of her ancestral house and the old lady's incomprehension of the fact that the village in which she felt at home now rejects her; "Āzādī Śammojān kī" (1951, Shammojan's Independence), depicting the celebration of the independence with a focus on the refugees' feelings towards the festivities in Delhi, where Shammojan is a resettled prostitute; and "Merī mām kahām" (1949, Where is my mum?), narrating the life in a refugee camp through the story of a lost little girl who could have been adopted by a Muslim officer but turns against him with hatred while remembering her dead family. All those stories are free of resentment but present very objectively – although with a certain pathos – the states of mind of the protagonists. In this regard, they are representative of the partition literature of this time and generation. On the subject, see for example Bhalla 1999 & 2007.

**818** See Sobti's interview in Bhalla 2007: 146.

refugees in the capital, even though they did not suffer the violence and the loss of their homeland themselves.<sup>819</sup>

The literature of the partition still constitutes a rather new area of research. In India as well as in Pakistan, this literature, which testifies to the horrors related to the creation of the two nations, thus clashing with the official writing of national history and the great narrative of the achievement of the independence, was indeed not welcome, to say the least.<sup>820</sup> However, this perception changed in the 1990s, which saw a real surge of interest in the stories around the partition where a voice was given to the subalterns, the eye-witnesses and the survivors of the violence.<sup>821</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that even if partition literature had not yet been really studied and analysed (nor even defined as a genre), many writers did not wait decades before processing the trauma through writing, thus illustrating the fact that “la souffrance appelle récit”, as Ricœur writes in his literary theory.<sup>822</sup> Some of the writers who personally experienced the partition and the loss of a home, like Intizar Hussain (1925–2016) and Saadat Hasan Manto (1912–1955) never recovered and made the partition the main topic of their works. In these texts, most writers voiced the feelings of the loss of identity and being up-rooted by the partition, as well as their nostalgic longing for the lost culture: “Produite en grande partie par des auteurs de langue hindi, ourdou, Panjabi, Bengali ou anglaise, directement ou indirectement victimes de la Partition, elle [la littérature de la Partition] se caractérise à la fois par une succession

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**819** Without discussing this topic in depth, let me mention the connection between the partition and the short-story movement of the *Nai kahānī* (the ‘New short story’, a movement in Hindi literature, started in the 1950s, which focused on depictions of feelings of isolation, on alienation in the big anonymous city and on individual perceptions, see chapter two). Kamleshwar, one of the most prominent writers of the movement, explicitly expresses this when he writes, in the manifesto of the group, “we are all refugees” (*Ham sab śaraṅarthī hairī*), see Kamleshwar 1966, *Nai kahānī kī bhūmikā*. Although he himself is originally from Mainipuri (in today’s Uttar Pradesh) and not from one of the partitioned provinces, he is most famous for his novel about the partition, *Kitne Pākistān* (2000, *How many Pakistans?*, translated into English as *Partitions*) which he later made into a very successful TV-series script. However, in the manifesto of the *Nai Kahānī*, it is not only to the partition itself that Kamleshwar refers, but to a feeling of alienation induced on the one hand by the misery of the refugees who swarmed to the capital, and on the other hand, by the utter disillusionment which settled in during the decade following the independence. In her article titled “Nous sommes tous réfugiés”, Anne Castaing highlights this very point as well as the relationship of the *Nai Kahānī* movement with the traumatic experience of the partition, see Castaing 2015.

**820** On this topic, see Castaing 2015: 236–242 and Gyanendra Pandey 2001.

**821** An important work in this regard was Urvashi Butalia’s series of interviews with witnesses of the partition, see Butalia 1998.

**822** Ricœur 1983: 143.

de stéréotypes (sur la violence, la solidarité intercommunautaire, etc.) et par l'expression parfois poignante du sentiment de déracinement."<sup>823</sup> Most writers, by adopting the point of view of characters who do not make religion their ideology and do not identify primarily with the project of a new nation but rather with the piece of land they know and always lived on, present a nostalgic vision of the life before the divide. As Castaing highlights, partition literature is characterised by stereotypes about violence and solidarity, among others, as well as by the expression of the feeling of being 'uprooted' that inhabits the displaced people.

In her short stories, written in the decade following the partition, Sobti is very close to this discourse on partition, probably because of her own experience of the events. Although her close family already lived in Delhi at the time of the partition, she was then studying in Lahore and had to give up her studies. She also lost her birthplace of Gujarat (Pakistan), to which she never returned. Several of her relatives who had not wished to leave their homes until the very last moment spent time in refugee camps. Moreover, she and her family supported the refugees in Dehli, supplying food and help.<sup>824</sup>

In her first period of producing texts on the partition as a young woman, Sobti shows nostalgia for the lost land and incomprehension about what happened. In her four partition short stories, Sobti resembles many other partition writers. The two points highlighted by Bhalla as central to partition literature are indeed recognisable in Sobti's stories as well: first, the depiction of a shared life and history or the notion of its existence, and second the bewilderment at the event and its violence.<sup>825</sup>

In the first story, "Ḍaro mat, maiṁ tumhārī rakṣā karūṁgā",<sup>826</sup> no names are given, making the story thus really universal and free from any communal

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**823** Castaing 2015: 239.

**824** All this is narrated by Sobti in her interviews with Alok Bhalla (2007), Kamal Ahmad (see SAM, Sobti 2015: 326–340) and with Zamarrud Mughal, for the online platform for the promotion of Urdu literature rekhta.org, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=az7nW3sfkxE>, part 1 and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKPhQVYNOWE>, part 2), as well as in her last novel GPGH, largely autobiographical.

**825** These are the two points which Bhalla finds in all the stories and novels on the partition, see Bhalla 1999: 3120–3121: "[. . .] there are two structural and thematic elements that they [the stories about the partition] have in common. The first is that they either assume the existence of a communally shared history in pre-Partition India [. . .] the second element that informs nearly all the novels and stories about the partition is the note of utter bewilderment. There is hardly a fictional text which presents the partition as an inevitable consequence of an ancient hatred between the Hindus and the Muslims."

**826** Sobti's four partition short stories have been translated into English. "Ḍaro mat, maiṁ tumhārī rakṣā karūṁgā" was rendered into English as "Don't be Afraid, I'll Protect You" in

identification of victims and culprits. The three other stories present Sikhs and Hindus as the main protagonists but without sparing any community. On the contrary, “Merī māṃ kahāṃ” shows how the feelings of communalism grow in the mind of a child as the main protagonist, a young Hindu girl, suddenly completely rejects the only person who shows humanity and affection towards her because of his religion. Shammojan’s story, “Āzādī śammojān kī”, demonstrates the ambivalence of the festivities celebrating the independence. It parallels memories which Sobti narrates in her dialogue with Vaid as well as the scenes from the second part of her article “Abhī Dillī dūr hai”.<sup>827</sup> While the crowd is cheering the speeches and the hoisting of the new flag, the refugees see their lives as broken and do not consider it possible to start a new life again after losing everything and witnessing the horror of the violence and the riots of the partition. “Sikkā badal gayā” is centred on the notions of ‘home’ and ‘identity’. Although the main protagonist is a Hindu woman, the plot and the feelings described are universal and it is not a feeling of acrimony but of nostalgia and loss which permeates the story.

Later in her writing career, Sobti did not go back to the topic of the partition directly.<sup>828</sup> Her very first novel, *Cannā*, was set in this period, but when she returned to the manuscript, Sobti decided to modify it completely and it became ZN. In this, she already differs from ‘partition writers’ like Manto, Hussain, but also Kamleshwar, Vaid or Sahni, in whose work the partition theme is recurring. However, Sobti is included in most of the studies on partition literature and was invited as a speaker at conferences on the topic.<sup>829</sup> ZN is always read in the context of the partition, and, as shown in earlier chapters, this reading is implied in the poem which serves as a preamble to the novel as well as in the ambiguity of the closing sentences of the text.<sup>830</sup>

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Singh 2007: 60–61. “Merī māṃ kahāṃ” is translated as “Where is my Mother” and included in Bhalla’s collection of partition short stories, see Bhalla 2012: 135–140. “Āzādī śammojān kī” is translated as “Shammojojan’s Freedom” in Rai 2003: 60–63. “Sikkā badal gayā” was translated into English with the same title and included in Bhalla’s collection of short stories on the partition, Bhalla 2012: 255–262.

**827** See SVS, Sobti 2015: 52–55 and “Abhī Dillī dūr hai” in the magazine *Hamś*, Oct. 1987, 35–41.

**828** Indeed, even her latest novel, GPGH, does not depict the events themselves but focuses rather on life after the partition in the newly constituted independent nation of India.

**829** As she says herself in SAM, see Sobti 2015: 118–120.

**830** Sobti had planned a second part to ZN, set during the partition, but it was never written, in large part because of the court case about the name *Zindagīnāmā*, a controversy between Sobti and the Punjabi and Hindi writer Amrita Pritam, who had used the same word as the title of one of her novels. The court case went on for several decades and Sobti states that she gave up on



In their depictions of life in the villages, *bastīs* (settlements, hamlets, colonies) and small towns before the partition, most authors show a certain nostalgia for a common life and a shared culture. However, this nostalgia must not be equated to the description of an Eden, where everyone lived in perfect bliss and harmony with their neighbours. The communities were aware of their differences and tensions existed. However, in spite of this, life was possible with ‘the other’ and next to ‘the other’. It is this sense of belonging and of the possibility of a common life, based on shared history, shared land, shared language, shared tales and even shared worship of holy men (in the interviews conducted by Bhalla, all the authors confirm that Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs went to the same shrines and worshipped *sants* and *pirs* alike), which the displaced people long for and fail to find in the new homeland.

In ZN, it is the world before the partition that is brought to life. The element of nostalgia is present through the pathos of the poem-preamble: the common culture and the life to whom the seasons and the rituals gave a regular rhythm are forever gone and lost (to the migrants, but in fact to those who stayed as well; life will never be the same again). However, Sobti, unlike most partition writers, does not idealise the situation before the partition. Instead, she hints at the tensions and potential sources of conflicts.

In ZN, Sobti distinguishes herself from other writers in her shrewd perception of the reality, both in terms of the moral conduct of her characters and of her depiction of economic issues:

Sobti’s version of life in rural Punjab between 1920 and 1940 may not be moral or peaceful, but it is certainly not under the sign of a curse. It has its usual share of violence and iniquity, but it also has the amplitude to permit a variety of human beings to fully present themselves in their complex interactions with others. Its tensions, which are increasingly voiced as the novel progresses, are never a result of religious intolerance but of economic deprivation. Hindu, Sikh and Muslim peasants speak together about the blessings ‘rab-rasool’ showers upon the Shahs and their own ill-fated lives of hard necessity. Thus, when the young and arrogant Muslim peasant, Mehr Ali, complains about the fact that the Shahs take away all that they produce, Allah Rakha chastises him and says: ‘The truth is that the Shahs are destined to be Shahs! Jats are fated to be Jats’ (p 84). It is in a similar idiom that Mayaar Singh, a Sikh, voices his unhappiness over his lot and is

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writing this second part for this reason. See for example her interview with Anamika in SAM, Sobti 2015: 172–197. However, in view of the fact that even in her last, semi-autobiographical novel, Sobti does not speak directly of the events of the partition, I am not certain that it was only the court case that made her decide not to write about the partition again. It could also reflect the difficulty of such a personal topic and the need to deal with it in a manner which differs from what other partition writers do.

jealous of the wealth of the Shahs: 'I say, even the Shahs plough the land, but differently. In these fields, they sow coins of brass and reap a crop of gold' (p. 100).<sup>831</sup>

As Bhalla shows here, ZN does not draw a blissful picture of pre-partition Punjab: the socio-economic inequalities are addressed and, although none of the protagonists consciously links those issues to the question of religious communities, the seed has already been sown. In her interview with Bhalla, Sobti says that in later years, the socio-economic conflicts were redefined in terms of religious and communal issues.<sup>832</sup> In the same discussion, she expresses her fears of seeing this being used again and economic conflicts turned into religious ones once more.<sup>833</sup>

After the experience of the partition, Sobti is indeed very afraid of seeing history repeat itself. The tensions between the communities in independent India are rooted in socio-economic inequalities as well as in unequal opportunities. These could in turn be placed in a discourse of communal or religious identity. It becomes apparent in Sobti's interview with Bhalla that the partition is always present in her mind and that it shaped her understanding of politics as well as her choices as a citizen. Although she always refused to be involved in politics, she sees it as her duty to raise her voice when she recognises that the partition or some of its patterns could repeat themselves.<sup>834</sup> This point also constitutes the major difference between Sobti's fictional work on the partition and her tone and discourse in interviews, speeches and essays.

The tone adopted by Sobti in her fictional work is never moralising or didactical. As shown in the previous chapters, even when a story is narrated partially by an omniscient narrator, like ZN, SAK or DoD, it is not a voice which dictates one single authorised judgement and opinion on the plot and the characters portrayed. In those works, the omniscient narration switches to a multi-focal perspective, where at times it is difficult to understand whose point of view is being voiced. Through this, a distance to the topic is achieved which is

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**831** Bhalla 1999: 3121. The pages given by Bhalla refer to the novel ZN, in the 2015-edition quoted in the bibliography.

**832** See Bhalla 2007: 145–147.

**833** See Bhalla 2007: 147, "Bhalla: You are right in saying that in Punjab the conflict was between peasants and zamindars. This economic conflict wasn't confined to Punjab. Did it ever seem to you that an economic conflict would turn into a religious one?"

Sobti: Yes, that was the greatest danger in the past – it still is. Remember that if a poor Muslim student wanted a seat in a medical college, he couldn't get one. That was also true of engineering colleges. Indeed, only the children of the Muslim aristocracy could get an education."

**834** As was the case, for example, with the displacement of the Adivasis due to the Narmada dam project.

the opposite of any form of ideological writing. To speak of Sobti's discourse on the partition in her fictional work becomes therefore difficult: judgement and opinions are suspended, there only remains a depiction of human attitudes and reactions to situations.

In her interviews and other non-fictional writings, on the other hand, Sobti insists on the need, on the part of the writers, to call for human feelings in the face of the horror and violence of the partition. She proves a very shrewd analyst of the political situation and does not view the divide as the result of the geo-political interests of the powerful only but, through the exacerbation of socio-economic inequalities and their transformation into an issue of communities and religion, as something inevitable. In the meantime, this utilisation of existing injustices to stir up religious conflicts is one of her major concerns in independent India as well. Indeed, the discourse of a divide between communities is completely opposed to her vision of what the Indian society ought to be, namely secular (understood by her as 'not based on any religion') and cosmopolitan, accepting all the regional languages, religions, traditions and identities as equal.<sup>835</sup>

In all of her interviews, Sobti refers to the question of the partition and how she herself experienced it. It is certainly an issue in her discussion of the context of ZN, but it proves important as a background for DSB as well. Sobti shows a great sensitivity and awareness to political questions, particularly when the freedoms and rights of the individual are at stake or when the policy of a government threatens intentionally the peace between the many communities which constitute Indian society. The shadow of the partition and its aftermath is present in her mind when she discusses the politics of the Indian government after the independence. It is also present in her observation of the evolution of society in recent years.

In the interview with Anamika, Sobti explicitly makes a parallel between the anti-Muslim riots of Gujarat in 2002 and the partition, hinting at an article she wrote for the Lucknow literary journal *Tadbhav* which prefigured her most recently published book, GPGH.<sup>836</sup> For her, it is important to remember the past and, in its light, to avoid making the same mistakes. When she looks at the present events, memories of the partition re-emerge in front of her eyes:

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**835** See the discussion of the issue of language and the complicated notion of secularism (*dhamnirpekṣatā*) in India in chapter four. Sobti's vision coincides here with the vision promoted by Nehru at the independence. This shows Sobti's roots in the educated middle-class which was to be the partner of the political class in the constitution of the new nation.

**836** See the interview with Anamika in SAM, Sobti 2015: 177. I could unfortunately not unearth the article mentioned by Sobti.

Looking at the landscape of Gujarat today, I am disturbed. Slaughter and killings, arsons, setting fire to living citizens – it is a mark of shame on the past fifty years. How can we keep forgetting that when divisive forces raise their head then, as the violence of riots becomes a reality, it not only destroys the peace of the civil life, but, by putting a crack in the foundations of the life of the country, it also pushes it towards this fearful stage from where no country can come back to its old place without having been hurt and harmed? Whatever the political party or the government might be, to whatever ideology or camp it might be connected, it has no right to take a stand against its citizens. In a plural and secular democracy such as India, after having avoided the calamities with political discernment, the reoccurrence of such events is inexcusable. Memories of the earlier partition have caused an upheaval inside [me]. Who knows in what deep vault were they locked, these scenes, flitting now in front of [my] eyes one after another, like some film?<sup>837</sup>

For Sobti, the parallel is very clear. It is striking that the danger she sees is that of reaching a point of no return, where the violence has been such that it can neither be forgotten nor forgiven, and where the landscape of a place has changed so much that the life that was can no longer be revived – just as it happened after the partition. Sobti's ideal is a “plural and secular democracy” (*bahultāvādī dharmnirpekṣa loktantra*), a vision popular among the intellectuals of her generation.

The ambiguity of this vision resides in the fact that it can always be asked whether it was ever actually achieved, as Pandey does in his discussion of the partition and the construction of history in contemporary India.<sup>838</sup> For Sobti,

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**837** SAM, interview with Anamika, Sobti 2015: 177: *Āj ke Gujarāt-paridrśya ko dekhkar main vikṣubdh hūn. Mār-kāt, āgjanī, balātkār, zindā nāgarikoṃ ko āg meṃ bhūnnā – hamāre piche pacās varṣoṃ par kalām̃ hai. Ham kaise bhūl rahe haiṃ ki yah alagvādī tākateṃ jab sir uṭhātī haiṃ to darigoṃ kī hirsā hakikat bankar na sirf nāgarik jīvan kī sānti bhaṅg kartī hai, vah rāṣṭriya jīvan kī nīnv meṃ darār dālkar use us khaufnāk maṅzil kī or bhī dhakeltī hai jahān koī bhī rāṣṭra binā ghāyal aur jakhmī hue apnī purānī jagah par nahīṃ lauttā. Koi bhī rājnitik dal ho, sarkār ho, kisi bhī vicārdhārā aur kheme se juḍā ho, use nāgārik virodhī hone kā adhikār nahīṃ hai. Bhārat jaise bahultāvādī dharmnirpekṣa loktantra meṃ rājnitik vivek ko balāe-tāk rakhkar aise prasāngoṃ kī punarāvṛtti akṣamya hai. Purāne baṃtvāre kī smṛtiyoṃ ne andar uthal-puthal macā dī hai. Jāne kis talghar meṃ pare the ve drśya, ek-ek karke purī ṣṛiṅkhilā ān-khoṃ ke sāmne calcitra kī tarah ghūm rahī hai.*

**838** See Pandey 2001. In his introductory chapter, the author accuses the elite of having been blind to the tensions and the resentment which survived in the non-official narratives of the constitution of the nation. See Pandey 2001: 6, “In India the 1970s already saw the beginning of the end of the Nehruvian vision of a modern, secular, welfare state – leading a developing society to socialism and secularism through the gentle arts of persuasion, education and democracy. [. . .] The 1980s saw the emergence of exceptionally strong Hindu (and Sikh) right-wing movements – very much in line with the rise of fundamentalist and absolutist forces all over the world. Above all, that decade saw the naked parade – and astounding acceptance – of horrifying forms of violence in our own ‘civilised’ suburbs. [. . .] and a shocked radical

the notions of democracy and secularism (equal treatment of all religions and all individuals) are really essential. These are the values which she defends, although otherwise she keeps her distance from politics and the political establishment – just as she does from the literary establishment. Her definition of these notions, which has been touched upon in the chapter on language, are centred on the idea that each individual is a complicated being, whose identity is not only linked to a religion or a social class (or a level of education), but is instead composite, made out of a wide range of external and internal factors.<sup>839</sup> Those values are, as I have shown, those of Sobti's social class and thus correspond to her generation, who were to be the builders of the nation.

This vision of the individual is also expressed through Sobti's ideal image of a 'new Indian' or a 'complete Indian' (*samūca bhāratiya*), a citizen of the newly independent country, who shall step over the regional, religious, linguistic and community boundaries to be first and foremost an individual (with an individual relation to the state) and a citizen of India as a pluralistic nation: "A complete Indian is born. He shall certainly cross all minute dividing lines."<sup>840</sup> In Sobti's eyes, 'after the partition' means 'after the independence of India' as well, and because of that, she sees the need to redefine the identity of the individual in the new country along lines other than religion, caste or economic background.<sup>841</sup>

In her discussion with Kamal Ahmad, the question of homeland (*vatan*) and the notion of country or nation (*deś*) in opposition to the region to which an individual feels bound by her roots and family ties, is developed in connection with the partition.<sup>842</sup> For Sobti, it is important to keep in mind the feelings of identity

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intelligentsia greeted this, as it greeted other instances of the kind, with the cry that it was 'like Partition all over again'."

**839** See above in chapter four, as well as a passage of SAM, Sobti 2015: 277–278, for Sobti's vision of all the factors which influence a writer (and "any offspring of the human being", *har insān kā baccā*) in the course of her life.

**840** CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 376: *Ek samūce bhāratiya kā janma ho cukā hai. Vah choṭī-choṭī had-bamdiyom ko yakīnan ulāngḥ jāegā.*

It is interesting to note that this sentence refers, in the context of CNZNP, specifically to the issue of language and of Hindi as an inclusive language, open to dialects. The question of language and Sobti's vision of independent India as a plural democracy are intrinsically connected, since for her, the language must become a tool of integration of the people from all the social classes on the same level as equal individuals and citizens of the country. See above in chapter four.

**841** See chapter four and the already quoted extract of MSRS on a "composite Indianness" (*mīlī-julī bhāratiyatā*), MSRS, Sobti 2014: 405.

**842** See the interview with Kamal Ahmad in SAM, Sobti 2015: 326–340. The whole interview concentrates on the question of the partition, its literary representation and the parallels with the resurgence of violence under the growing influence of the Hindutva movement. Hindutva

of the people before the independence and what the creation of a new nation implied in relation to the notion of ‘homeland’. For displaced people, it is a part of their identity which was taken away from them when they received a new passport and were thus officially severed from the place which they had previously considered as their homeland. Indeed, for them, homeland was the region where their ancestors were buried, their place of origin as well as, for many, the land (the soil) they ploughed. However, even for the people who were not directly affected by the partition, the region had always been the primary factor of identification. The constitution of a new nation required an effort in shaping a new identity as a whole, through legislation but also through the formation of the idea of a nation. As discussed in the chapter on language, Sobti is attached to a notion of the nation and Indianness (*bhāratīyatā*) which encompasses all the communities, whether the term secularism is used or not.<sup>843</sup> It is precisely this plural nation which must be promoted by the writers as being the definition of the nation which allows for the human being to be at the centre as an individual.

With Sobti, however, this is not done through activist writing, but through her statements outside of her fictional work. Even if she narrates episodes of the lives of some of her relatives during and shortly after the partition in the interviews with Ahmad and with Bhalla,<sup>844</sup> in her fictional work, she avoids giving a personal account of what she witnessed. In ZN, the narrative is not a personal tale but the life of the community of the village. The universe of pre-partition Punjab is created again here, through Sobti’s recollections of the past, but also through her research and more importantly through the freedom given to the characters to find their authentic voice, to be seen as individuals within communities, juggling several social codes and identities.

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(lit. ‘Hinduness’) is a term coined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) which designates an ideology defining the identity of a Hindu around the notions of common nation (*rāṣṭra*), common race (*jāti*, meaning here the birth from Hindu parents) and common culture/civilisation (*sarīṣkṛti*). Savarkar’s vision of Hindutva is largely accepted and defended by the Hindu nationalist parties, be it a political party like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), or other organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) or the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), also regrouped under the umbrella term Sangh Parivar (lit. ‘The Family of Organisations’).

**843** See SAM, interview with Kamal Ahmad, Sobti 2015: 329, “In the diverse parts of the country, the national thought-power which is born from the various castes, religions and sects is that which has given our thinking and reflection a deep scope. [It makes no difference] whether we call it secularism or not. *Deś ke vibhinn bhāgoṃ meṃ vibhinn jāti-dharm-samprasāyoṃ se janmī vah rāṣṭriya vicar-ūrjā hai jisne hamārī soc aur cintan ko ek gahan vīstār diyā hai. Isko dharmnirpekṣa vicārdhārā kā nām denā na denā.*”

**844** See SAM, Sobti 2015: 335–336, and Bhalla 2007: 155–157.

However, her last novel, GPGH, highlights more specifically how the partition affected her personally. In it, it becomes obvious that the partition is arguably the experience which gave her a deep awareness of the complexities of politics and of the issues of identities within communities, as well as a sense of how the elements of identification of a group or an individual can suddenly shift.

GPGH is largely autobiographical and, according to the book cover, mainly based on real events and characters.<sup>845</sup> Nevertheless, it is called a novel and is not a first-person narrative, although the main character, Ms. Sobti, is the focaliser of the narration.<sup>846</sup> The reader is only given her perception of characters and events. The stories of her family members narrated at several points of the novel are recounted through the memories of what the young woman has been told by relatives.

The novel follows Ms Sobti's journey to Sirohi, a small princely state between Gujarat and Rajasthan, originally for an interview to teach in a school which the local government intended to build, but in the end she stays to work there as a private tutor to the young Maharaja Tejsingh. The novel also constitutes an internal journey for the young woman who revisits what she witnessed in Punjab and finds echoes of those divisions and discriminations in Gujarat (India). Being herself a firm believer in the rights and equalities granted by the new constitution of independent India, she has to acknowledge that in the new nation, the condition of women – her own and that of the two women sent to serve her – is far from being equal to that of men, that the inequalities between the castes still prevail, and that superstitions abound.<sup>847</sup> She is also constantly reminded that she is a refugee (*śaraṇārthī*), and it is as such that she is perceived by her new employers. While there is occasionally some interest shown

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**845** See the description of the novel on the back cover of GPGH: "It is worth noting that almost all the events and characters in this novel are real. *Ullekhanīya hai ki is upanyās meṃ lagbhag sabhī ghaṭnāṃ aur pātra vāstavik haiṃ.*"

**846** Since the text is termed a novel by the author, it seems important to bear in mind that the character is not the author herself, even if parallels to autobiographical circumstances are evident. I therefore call the character Ms Sobti throughout the discussion of the text, as opposed to Sobti the writer.

**847** There is a very interesting passage about a ghost cottage in which Ms Sobti decides to settle against the advice of all her acquaintances. See GPGH, Sobti 2017: 95–104. Although Ms Sobti initially laughs at the fears of the two women who work for her, during her first night in the cottage, she is visited by the ghost of a childhood friend who died in the partition riots. It is a passage where the main character has to find her peace with the past and the horror she knows of. As such, it illustrates how the trauma of partition was constantly present in the mind of the refugees, even of those who, like Ms Sobti, did not witness the riots in Punjab (but probably those of Delhi) and were not held in the refugee camps.

for her place of birth, the general attitude is one of animosity and the feeling that the government is doing a lot for ‘those refugees’. Nevertheless, the reality with which the young woman is confronted is quite different. Not only was it difficult for her to ensure an independent future in New Delhi (the reason why she accepted the invitation for a job interview in Sirohi), but she also sees for herself the circumstances in which her aunt and uncle, refugees from Punjab, live, and remembers their house and land back in Punjab. In comparison, the comfortable, upper middle-class lifestyle of another aunt and her husband, who are long since established in Ahmedabad, offers a complete contrast. From this internal journey, Ms Sobti loses some of her enthusiasm for the newly founded nation, but none of her desire to stand on her own feet.

This novel is based on autobiographical facts and real characters and events. However, it is termed ‘a novel’ and therefore must not be taken as the same type of discourse as Sobti’s essays and interviews. Nevertheless, through Ms Sobti’s gaze, GPGH depicts the struggles of the refugees, even those benefiting from a higher education and from good connections in their new homeland, to rebuild their life.<sup>848</sup> Through the stories and memories of relatives and acquaintances of the main character, it also emphasises the lasting marks left by the partition on all those who experienced the riots, the caravans of refugees and the camps. For the generation of Ms Sobti’s grandmother, a feeling of loss dominates, and the old lady is portrayed as someone who dwells on the past. However, the younger generation, represented by the main character, demonstrates a potential to look to the future and to a new life in the just constituted nation . . . with the looming shadow of disillusion. Indeed, it is particularly striking that Ms Sobti is full of hope for the future of the new nation and speaks of equal rights for all citizens as something which has been obtained together with the independence, while she must witness that in reality, the hierarchies remain the same and the caste system still prevails.<sup>849</sup>

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**848** Ms Sobti received the offer to come for a job interview (and subsequently the job offer), through a friend of her father’s. Connections and relations do play an important role and this is perceptible throughout the whole novel.

**849** The most striking passage of the novel in respect to this question ought to be brought to mind here, see GPGH, Sobti 2017: 94: “She [Ms Sobti] explained: ‘Do you know, the country is free, now the royal family and the people will all be equals.’ Phulibai [the servant] first kept staring at her – as if the lady was talking nonsense. Then she said: ‘Lady, when the Mahatma Gandhi had departed for the heavens, the Rajputs here said, ‘Well, look at that, the father of the Banias [a caste of merchants] has been brought down by a bullet.’ Lady, all the Banias of the kingdom shaved their heads [in grief].’

*Samajhākar kahā – tumheñ mālum hai deś āzād ho gayā hai, ab rāj parivār aur jantā sab barābar hoṅge. Phūlibāi pahle use tākatī rahī – aise jyom bāī avā-tavā kah rahī ho. Phir bolī –*



By highlighting the young heroine's enthusiasm for the independence and her understanding of the reality, as well as by showing how the refugees were perceived and how deep the wound of the partition is for those who have experienced it, GPGH offers a new image of this period. It highlights how this personal history affected the whole society, particularly Sobti's generation who came of age at the time of the independence and had great expectations for the creation of the new country. In this respect, the experience of the partition and the hopes associated with the independence were constitutive of the political and social awareness of Sobti – and other writers of her generation.

It is also worth noting that GPGH was not written shortly after the events, but quite late in Sobti's writing career, since it is her last novel. This demonstrates, on the one hand, how long it took to write this very personal novel, and on the other, how essential this particular experience was for Sobti. The partition may not be the main topic of her novels and short stories, with the exceptions examined above, but it is an essential part of Sobti's background and an event about which she has thought a lot.

Coming back to the topic of the partition seventy years later, Sobti becomes suddenly more personal – GPGH is largely autobiographical, even if the author chooses not to write in the first person and to distance herself from her main protagonist by staging Ms Sobti as a character. In this text, the political beliefs and the enthusiasm for a Nehruvian secularism of the young heroine are obvious and correspond to the positions voiced by Sobti herself in her interviews and speeches. Although, like in all of Sobti's other fictional works, the points of views of Ms Sobti are not advocated as universal truths, the novel illustrates precisely what Sobti stresses herself as being the cornerstones of her own political awareness, namely a background in the educated middle-class (upholding values like secularism, individual rights and freedoms, and distance from superstitions and religions), and the trauma of the partition, echoed in all the other existing divisions and discriminations within Indian society.

With regard to those divisions, Sobti considers that a writer has a duty to stand for freedom – freedom of thought and expression – and must constantly

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*bāi jī gāndhī-mahātmā svarg sidhāre to yahām ke rājpūt bole – are dekho-dekho baniyom kā bāp mār girāyā golī se. Bāi jī rāj-bhar ke baniyom ne sir munḍā liye the.”*

The shaving of the head can be read as indicating mourning for a departed relative, it is an important part of the Hindu death rituals and a sign of temporary impurity. This passage illustrates the tensions existing between the diverse castes. Some lines further, Ms Sobti wonders about the backwardness (*pichṛāpan*) and the lack of education (*aśikṣā*) she witnesses here and witnessed in Punjab, paralleling the caste problems in Gujarat to the problems of the religious communities in Punjab.

defend a vision of the human being as a complex and plural entity. Each individual belongs to more than one identity group. In the context of India, and particularly of Sobti's native Punjab, this plurality resides also in a culture shared by all religious communities, something which is very visible in the texts and intertexts of the partition writers, be it in Sobti's works or Intizar Hussain's.<sup>850</sup> Literature constitutes a space where this common heritage can be expressed and manifested, and where, as highlighted in the preceding chapters, universal human values and experiences are transmitted:

When politics, religion, and humanism are transmitted in literature, the human faith is transformed. I feel in my inner recesses a certain richness that is part of our common heritage. Guru Nanak, Baba Farid, Amir Khusro, Bulle Shah, Waris Shah, and Shah Latif – can we divide this whole lot of poets into theirs and ours? No doubt we divided the territory – but tradition, music, art, and literature are not like geographical areas; they continue to remain undivided and are indivisible.<sup>851</sup>

Because the partition did not only set a new border on a map, the pain of the victims of the partition is not only the pain of the horrifying violence which accompanied it, but that of the loss of a homeland and a cultural home as well. Literature has the power to bring this cultural home back to life, as highlighted in the previous chapters.

According to Sobti, the duty of the novelist is however not to give solace to the victims but to highlight human values (*manāvīya mūlya*). This is the case of partition literature, where a feeling of 'what is right' remains evident and comes into prominence in spite of all the horror depicted (Sobti excludes Manto's desperate and pessimistic writing from this perspective on partition literature).<sup>852</sup>

The literary depictions of the partition oscillate between rage, despair and nostalgia. The later works of the partition writers tend to be more nostalgic, while their earlier writings are filled with bitterness and incomprehension.

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**850** By intertexts I mean here the legends, the folk tales, the poetry and other cultural references present explicitly and implicitly in the works of different writers. ZN illustrates this quite well.

Intizar Hussain (1925–2016) was a Pakistani Urdu writer, well-known for his works on the partition. He always acknowledged the influence of his readings of Buddhist philosophy and Hindu myths on his work.

**851** Sobti in the interview with Bhalla 2007: 138. Guru Nanak (1469–1539) was the founder of the Sikh religion; Baba Farid (1175–1266) was a Punjabi Muslim and a Sufi mystic; Amir Khusro (1253–1325) was a poet and a Sufi saint; Bulle Shah (1680–1757) was a Punjabi Sufi poet; Waris Shah (1722–1798) was a famous Punjabi Sufi poet; Shah Latif (1689–1752) was a Sindhi Sufi mystic and poet. All of their works are well known, not only in Punjab but throughout the Indian subcontinent.

**852** Bhalla 2007: 162–163.

However, all those accounts show how the materialisation of the religious identity was used to bring about the divide. The fear of what such constructions and deconstructions of identities can provoke remains present in the minds of the people who experienced the partition. For Sobti, this experience, added to the diversity of the situations to which she was exposed from childhood, was instrumental in shaping her awareness as a writer and as a citizen, and lies at the core of the positions she voices in the public sphere. Indeed, although she remains aloof from political affiliations and usually does not openly voice political opinions – she even refrains from naming the movements which she opposes – Sobti considers that writers have a duty to stand up for individual rights and for what she calls human values. This leads her to construct the image of a community or fraternity (*birādari*) of writers, who speak with the same voice. It is as part of such a community that she returned all her awards in 2015, after the murder of the South Indian scholar and writer M. M. Kalburgi, or that she refused the Padma Bhushan in 2010.

This image of the writers as remaining distant from any establishment and yet functioning as ‘public voices’ contrasts with Sobti’s poetics of the complete freedom of judgement of the writer towards characters, plots and events, where no agenda must interfere with the literary freedom and the search for a truth about the human being, away from notions of good and evil, as demonstrated in the previous chapters.<sup>853</sup> However, I would argue that here Sobti distinguishes between the writer as a public persona – an intellectual with a duty towards society – and the writer as a seeker of an authentic voice, of a truth on life and the human being, who therefore uses literature as a space of free thinking. In this division into two roles, conjoined in one and the same person, I see the distinction made by Barthes between *écrivain* (writer) and *écrivain* (scribe/scripitor), and the realisation of their merging into one and the same person, which he had predicted in his essay.<sup>854</sup>

### 7.3 Conclusion: The Construction of a Public Persona

Through her speeches and writings, Sobti demonstrates a great awareness of political situations, of the subtleties of the interests of all the parties involved in an issue, as well as of her own personal perspective and its origins. She consciously sets her background – Punjab and the middle-class – as her particular points of

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<sup>853</sup> The episode of Rabia al-Basri, presented in chapter three, is the best illustration of this point.

<sup>854</sup> See Barthes 1964, *Ecrivains et écrivains*.

reference, whence she drew her knowledge and her ability to analyse and understand the world which surrounds her. Because of the two very different universes she was confronted with from childhood – the life of the village in the vacation months and the life in the two administrative capitals of British India, New Delhi and Shimla<sup>855</sup> – she developed a capacity to examine other perspectives and to be open to them; this capacity lies at the heart of her literary work. Her literary oeuvre is indeed rooted in the idea, on which she strongly insists, that the work and its characters must remain free and not be directed by the author according to her personal agenda nor to any programme which would be dictated by an organ of power.

This position, through which Sobti voices a tolerant and open attitude towards her environment, has not prevented her from becoming involved in some civil movements, nor from publicly voicing her opinions on socio-political issues. This may seem paradoxical, especially considering Sobti's insistence on her personal freedom. Unlike many writers of her generation or the later generations in the Hindi literary sphere, she remained distant from political parties. In spite of the accurate depiction of the social structures, the power relationships and the diverse tensions of the Indian society in her novels, she cannot be defined as a political writer.<sup>856</sup> Her agenda, if one has to use such a word, is humanist in the sense that it places the human being, as an individual with a multi-layered (plural) identity, at the core of literature and life.<sup>857</sup>

Sobti's vision for the future of India as well as her public statements at conferences like Pratirodh I (2015) and II (2016) show that although the freedom and the independence of the authors from any group or party are essential to her, she sees it as the duty of the writers, as intellectuals, to defend the freedoms and the rights of each individual.<sup>858</sup> The words she refers to in this respect are democracy (*loktaṅtra*), secularism (*dharmirpekṣatā*) and pluralism (*bahulatāvād*). On these three pillars, she wants to build a tolerant society,

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**855** See the autobiographical part of MSRS, Sobti 2014: 406–409, for example. It is worth noting that Sobti reconstructs her personal history as an explanation of her convictions as a writer and thus produces the image of herself as a versatile author, moving between the worlds, with which she wants to be associated and with which she wants to see her work associated: she stages literature as a dialogue.

**856** Ashok Varma's PhD thesis analyses the structures of power in several novels by Sobti and shows the precision of Sobti's understanding of their mechanisms. See Varma 2013.

**857** This vision is in perfect accordance with her own creation of Hashmat as her *alter ego*, stressing her own plural identity. See chapter five.

**858** See Sobti's speeches at Pratirodh I and II: Pratirodh I (1.11.2015): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJUu1eArlfg>

Pratirodh II (8.04.2016): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FNeC5-7IJo>.

where neither caste, religion or gender define the individual; this corresponds to the Nehruvian ideal which Sobti's generation was to support and carry as the ideal of the independence.

Interviews are ideal for expressing such opinions, since they offer a tribune to writers, allowing them to create their public persona. While reading and viewing Sobti's interviews, one recognises certain patterns in her ways of expressing herself and in the image of the writer which she intends to create. Several points have already been highlighted in the preceding chapters. Sobti presents writing as stemming from memories, from images and from the characters themselves – and their idiosyncratic voices – in an interaction, where the writer gives her work room to evolve. As such, the writer is staged as an intermediary. She can be defined as someone who builds bridges and establishes relationships (inside society by attempting to bridge the gap between the elite and the masses, but also between the readership and the text). She has thus a role to play both as a writer and as a public persona, committed to society (and to democracy) and to the human being.

If Sobti remains discreet about her own private life, she recalls in almost all of her interviews memories from her childhood, describing both the rural setting of the Punjabi village and the life in Shimla and New Delhi in the context of the struggle for independence. In those very selected memories, she illustrates two elements which helped shape her as a writer and as a citizen: her ties to Punjab (and, therefore, the wound of the partition), and her early exposure to a political context (the struggle for independence), which rendered her very sensitive to the issue of individual freedom. These two points are in fact those which become central to her activity within the public sphere.

Indeed, as I highlighted in the course of this chapter, whenever Sobti has broken her silence to comment on an issue, it was linked either to the freedom of the individual or to the trauma of the partition. This was namely the case with the displaced people along the Narmada river during the Narmada Bachao Andolan, as well as after M. M. Kalburgi's assassination in 2015, when, like other writers, Sobti decided to give back her awards in protest against the lack of reaction from the government and the Sahitya Akademi, and against the growing climate of intolerance (in which it becomes more and more difficult for intellectuals to openly express opinions which deviate from a mainstream nationalist perspective). Her appearances at conferences and seminars such as Pratirodh I and II also always bring to light her concerns for the freedoms and rights of each individual in the Indian society and for peace between the communities. The fear of

seeing the past – the partition and its aftermath – re-emerge is manifest in all those public speeches as well as in her last interviews.<sup>859</sup>

But in her relationship to power as well, Sobti has always been very cautious, as it is evident in Hashmat/Sobti's words in the epigraph to the first volume of HaH:

Friends, each writer is a writer in her own eyes. A writer by her own making. A writer by her own will. If she struggles, battles against circumstances, she is not doing a favour to anyone else, only to her own pen. A good pen writes to uphold [certain] values, not for those who lay claim on those values. Were it not so, writers and artists would end up as mere decorations at social gatherings and halls of knowledge.<sup>860</sup>

This powerful statement in favour of the freedom of the artists from the establishment stresses the status of writers and artists as intellectuals, bound to their society and time and advocating values – namely the values of freedom, and above all the freedom from any judgement. In her interviews and speeches, Sobti thus positions herself as a writer, free from all ties and bounds, but also as an intellectual who will defend individual freedom and tolerance in the public sphere. In those two aspects, she reflects the conflation of the scribe/scriptor (*écrivain*) and the writer (*écrivain*) prophesied by Barthes in his article *Écrivains et écrivains*.<sup>861</sup>

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**859** See Trisha Gupta's portrait of Sobti in *The Caravan* (Gupta 2016) or the speeches given at Pratirodh I and II.

**860** HaH, Sobti 2012: vol. 1: 9, *Dosto, har lekhak apne lie lekhak hai. Apne kie lekhak hai. Vah apne cāhne se lekhak hai. Agar vah sarīgharṣ meṁ jūjhtā hai, paristhitiyom se ṭakkar letā hai to uskā ahsān kisī dūse par nahīm, sirf uskī apnī kalam par hai. Koi bhī acchī kalam mūlyom ke lie likhtī hai, mūlyom ke dāvedārom ke lie nahīm. Agar aisā nahīm to lekhak aur kalākār śāmiyānom aur vijñān-bhavanom ki śobhā bankar rah jāenge.*

**861** See the article in Barthes 1964.

## 8 Conclusion

Next to the pile of papers, a rose.  
From the gardener. This tribute from the gardener.  
The papers too are flowerbeds. Flowerbeds indeed.  
I stand up and take out one more flower from the vase.  
I dry the stem, put it near the first rose.  
From me, a flower for time as well.  
The rain petered out.  
On the window pane the reddish ray of the setting sun.  
I stand next to the table. Stand there for some time.  
Not a scratch near the heart. Neither happiness, nor grief.  
No pain, no joy. A separate expectation.

I open the pen and clean it. Fill it with ink.  
I bend my head over the blank paper. Like a lightning, the flash of the village springs  
before my eyes, behind the oriel window of childhood and in my ears resounds the azan,  
the call to prayer . . .  
Allahu akbar  
Allahu akbar  
Allahu akbar  
Allahu akbar  
Ashaualla illah illallah  
Ashaualla illah illallah  
Ashaduanna muhammadarrasulullah  
Ashaduanna muhammadarrasulullah  
This call was the beginning of *Zindagināmā*.<sup>862</sup>

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**862** CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 384–385, *Kāgazom̄ ke dher ke pās ek gulāb*.

*Mālī se hī. Mālī ke pās yah nazar.*

*Kāgaz bhī kyārī haiṁ. Kyārī hī.*

*Uṭhakar guldān se ek aur phūl nikālī huṁ.*

*Ṭahnī poṁch pahlevāle gulāb ke sāth rakh detī huṁ.*

*Merī or se ek phūl vakt ke lie bhī.*

*Barkhā tham gaī hai.*

*Khīṛkī ke kāṁc par ḍūbte sūraj kī am̄jurī-bhār lālīmā.*

*Maiṁ mez ke pās kharī huṁ. Kāī kṣaṇ kharī rahti huṁ.*

*Dil ke āspās kahīṁ koī kharoṁc nahīṁ. Na khuśī, na gamī.*

*Na dard, na sukh. Ek argī ṭhahran!*

*Kalam kholkar sāf kartī huṁ. Kalam merī syāhī bhartī huṁ.*

*Kore kāgazom̄ ke āge sir jhukātī huṁ. Kī bijlī kī tarah bacpan ke jharokhe se āmkhom̄ merī  
gāmv kauṁdh jātā hai aur kānom̄ merī azān gūmjane lagtī hai . . .*

*Allāhu akbar*

*Allāhu akbar*

Images, metaphors and free verse to explain the process of creation. The writer is a gardener. The text is a plant, a flower, which grows from a writer's inner earth, watered by external elements and nourished by a writer's inner world, by time, by experiences. This is how Krishna Sobti stages the process of writing and the figure of the writer. Her non-fictional texts are filled with literary devices which enable her to illustrate her points but also to surround herself and her writing process with an aura of mystery. For example, from her use of the field metaphor and her construction of the writer as a gardener emerges an image of the writer as a catalyst and transmitter of voices, not as the sole owner and almighty creator of her work. The writer listens, observes, assimilates and interacts with her surrounding world and with her inner world; writing is a dialogical process.

The free verses quoted above illustrate Sobti's distinction between the writer and her work – how sounds and images from the past resurface in the writer's mind from her 'memory banks' (storage rooms of impressions and recollections) to give shape to the text. It also demonstrates how she uses free verse, metaphors and parallels between states of mind and natural phenomena in order to draw a picture of the writer where clichés coexist with a more serious depiction of her writing process.

The poem-description of the moment of the creation of ZN found in CNZNP (and from which the quote above is an extract) starts with a depiction in short, often verbless sentences, of a storm in a mountain station, near a lake.<sup>863</sup> The setting is dramatic and reflects several romantic clichés of the representation of the poet/writer: loneliness, nature, rainy (and then even stormy) weather. The writer, who was looking at the weather, uninspired, goes out into the rain and runs. Waves agitate the small mountain lake, clouds pass in the sky, the storm builds up, the writer's umbrella turns over. While she is running, the writer feels that time is standing still, and then she is renewed, becomes 'younger': "I am renewed. I am twenty years younger."<sup>864</sup> The poem goes on to show that inspiration is not there yet, in spite of this feeling of renewal. Instead, the writer is 'dry',

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*Allāhu akbar*  
*Allāhu akbar*  
*Aśaduallā ilāh illallāh*  
*Aśaduallā ilāh illallāh*  
*Aśaduanna muhammadarsūlullāh*  
*Aśaduanna muhammadarsūlullāh.*  
*Yahī gūmj Zindagināmā kī šuruāt thī.*

**863** See CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 382–385.

**864** CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 382: *Maim nāi ho gai hūm. Maim bīs baras choṭī ho gai hūm.*



in contrast to the nature around her: “Soaking myself in water, I want to wash off the dryness spreading to my soul. I am a frozen ground, not a blooming meadow.”<sup>865</sup> This dryness incapable of turning out in foliage symbolises the lack of inspiration.<sup>866</sup> Those metaphors are not unfamiliar; in fact, they could even be considered as conceptual metaphors in Lakoff’s understanding of the term. Yet, by setting them into a description of a complete scene, Sobti invest them with a new power. This reappropriation of images and metaphors is very typical of her writing.

If at first inspiration is absent and the writer (or her land) is ‘dry’, the right time is about to come. Here, it is the proximity to nature which will bring the possibility of finding inspiration. Reaching home after the exhaustion of getting drenched, the writer feels neither new nor old, neither pain nor joy, and this state of detachment or indifference (*taṭasthatā*) constitutes the perfect state to seize the pen and plunge back into the past. The states of mind of the writer – mirroring or mirrored by the states of nature – are at the centre of the depiction of the emergence of inspiration. After the storm, nature and the sky calm down. The rain, succeeded by calm weather, will eventually bring plants to bloom again. For the writer, the inner and outer agitation is followed by a deep calm, a state of balance, in which the flash of a memory can resonate and find its way to the blank page.

This long poem-description illustrates the process of staging the act of writing through the use of images, but also through the use of a specific dramatic setting (drawing on some clichés of the romantic poet or writer) and through parallels between a state of mind – the writer’s ‘block’ – and nature. By building this link between the writer, inspiration, and nature, Sobti implies that there is something primordial, but also magical, in the source of inspiration, thus constructing the writer as a figure deeply set in the natural and cosmic order, but who has no control over the right time of creation. Like a gardener, the writer can only tend to her inner world and cultivate her images, experiences and observations of the world. She doesn’t know if and when something will come out of what she stores in her ‘memory banks’.<sup>867</sup> Neither does she impose her way of thinking on the work. She absorbs the surrounding world,

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**865** CNZNP, Sobti 2014: 383, *Maiṃ pānī maṃ bhīg-bhīgkar apnī ātmā tak phaile hue sūkhe ko nahlā denā cāhtī hūm. Maiṃ thār hūm, sabzā nahīm.*

**866** This state also parallels the signs of obstruction and the infertile soil of the didactical poem found in MSRS. See MSRS, Sobti 2014: 409–410, and chapter three for my analysis of this text.

**867** The concept of memory bank seems to be really central in Sobti’s depiction of the writing process. The image is combined with those of the plot of land and germination, and illustrates

but with a mind free from any moral judgement, in a perspective of constant exchange and dialogue with life.

The quote given above also illustrates a relationship between the writer and time other than that of the time of waiting, namely through the author's offering to time. With this image, Sobti shows how the act of writing consists in fixing or stopping time and, particularly in the case of ZN, in bringing back to life a time gone, in making it alive again and thus setting it (as an offering) into a larger temporality, which surpasses the finite individual temporality.

This whole scene therefore introduces the key elements of Sobti's poetics, of her construction of the writer and of the role of literature. Through it, Sobti's construction of the process of writing through a tension between the inside and the outside is revealed, and depicts the unresolved paradox of Sobti's depiction of the 'magic' (*jādū*) of writing with regard to her statements about the ordinariness of the writer.<sup>868</sup> Tensions and contrasts are at the core of Sobti's poetics, where they not only reflect her awareness of the paradoxical and complicated nature of her reality and the reality of the world she writes about, but also constitute a dynamism which enables the creative process. For Sobti, this dynamic interaction is intrinsic to life and must as a result be part of literature, where life is recreated after having been absorbed and assimilated by the writer. In her novels, Sobti often shows this complex interaction and the plurality of reality and identities through the multiple focalisation present in most of her texts. Her awareness of the paradoxical and convoluted reality of the world is also part of her creation of a double, Hashmat. Paradoxes and tensions establish a dynamism which reflects reality but is also at the root of the possibility of creation.

For example, Sobti strongly believes, on the one hand, in individuality (and, in her political statements, in individual rights and freedoms), but, on the other hand, she does not consider the written text as the possession of the writer, because she believes that a good writer can surpass her own limitations and her own experiences to draw from a wider, shared, universal pool of memories, histories and experiences. The writer is a listener of the voices of the 'nameless people' (*anām log*), which she brings back to life, after a long process of maturation, assimilation and transformation in her memory banks, by producing narratives which recreate the multitude of different subjective perspectives. In the memory banks, those voices are assimilated by the writer who will

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the relationship of the writer to time: with time, something can develop (or not), which will be more than what was there at the beginning (the bank will produce interest!).

**868** See the beginning of MSRS, Sobti 2014: 394–395, where Sobti insists that anyone can be a writer.

then be proactive in her creation of a written text where all nuances and colours are expressed – hers as well as those of the characters she stages.

However, literature is also the field where a reflection about the plurality of life and the coexistence of a multitude of layers – of time, of language, of understanding and of identity – can happen. In the relationship between literature and time, Sobti does not solve the tension between literature as ‘fixing time’, ‘recreating a lost world’ and time as dynamic and constantly flowing. On the contrary, she shows a picture of the life of individuals and communities where several layers of time coexist and forge an individual’s idiosyncratic and subjective perception of temporality and her own socio-historical time. Literature is the place where the three layers of time presented by Sobti can be integrated – the larger frame of the cosmic temporality with recurring seasons; the socio-historical time of a community, i.e. the time frame set by a tradition and by genealogies; and the finite individual time. Literature is also the place where a reflection on these layers and on time’s constitution of identity through memory becomes possible. As in life, there is no real ‘resolution’ of the time paradox in the written text, although, during the act of reading, a world re-emerges and is (temporarily) set out of the constant flow of time.

With regard to history, Sobti sees literature as a means to convey and even recreate the feelings of time and historical events of individuals, away from the places of decision-making. Through language, a universe and an epoch can be brought back. Here, literature is not only concerned with the recreation of a historical setting, but it also attempts to reveal what lies deeper in the consciousness of a community and of individuals, providing a better understanding of traumatic events as well as of the construction of group identities through the constitution of myths and legends. In her novels, be it the so-called historical ones or the others, Sobti shows the complexity of the human perception of temporality. Literature becomes a space where it is possible to ponder on all the temporalities intertwined in human life, with all the contrasts and even tensions existing between them and their significance for the self-perception of individuals and the creation of an identity – or of a multiplicity of identities.

Identities in their multiplicity and their complexity can be expressed through language with all its nuances and layers. For Sobti, language is indeed heteroglossic: it consists of a wide diversity of dialects, sociolects and idiolects, which must all be part of literature in order for it to really recreate a time, a setting, but also a psychological state of mind, a mood or a character. For Sobti, heteroglossia corresponds on the one hand to a rejection of the uniformity of standard Hindi (*mānak hindī*), a language which she perceives as non-democratic and elitist, and on the other hand to her own process of creation. Indeed, this diversity is the diversity of the voices which Sobti heard and recorded in her

memory banks and which she can express in literature, through her careful attention to all the nuances (or ‘colours and shapes’, ‘character’, *raṅg-rūp*) of the words, thus revealing the complexity and the plurality of life and of each individual. This happens after a long process of assimilation in the inner core of the writer (her plot of land, to refer to Sobti’s field metaphor), a process which remains an ‘astonishing magic’ (*vilikṣaṇ jādū*), a very mysterious process.

With her views on language and her discussion of the heteroglossia of Hindi, Sobti sets herself within a language debate which is less known and studied than the Hindi-English or the Hindi-Urdu debate, namely the issue of the place of dialects and local idioms in literary works in Hindi. It is worth noting that she constantly refers to Renu’s use of regional idioms to justify her own use of local dialects, sociolects and even her creation of idiolects for some of the protagonists of her novels, for example for Mitro in MM. Renu, whose style and choice of diction is accepted and even acclaimed for the genre of the regional novel (*āṁcalik upanyās*), does not however develop or argument for a poetics of language as Sobti does. For Sobti, the variety within a language is an expression of the diversity and the complexity of life and of a multi-layered identity. It can voice not only socio-historical and geographical contexts but also psychological traits or frustrations. An example of this is the character of Mitro in MM. In this novel, Sobti also addresses the accusation of obscenity (*aślītā*) by asserting the right of women to express themselves, also through adopting particular attitudes, through a ‘body language’. Inhibitions and rules as to what a woman can express have no reason to be. Therefore, Mitro can speak about her own body, her needs, her frustrations very freely. This language is hers, it is her genuine voice.

Sobti is very sensitive to the possibility to voice, through language and its almost material quality,<sup>869</sup> all the complexity of the mind and the physical reactions of an individual. This enables her to express the reality of life as being not only intellectual and spiritual, but also more tangible. It is particularly clear for several of her female characters, like Mitro in MM or the mother in AL, who embody the enjoyment of life in all its material aspects. This depiction of female characters can explain why Sobti’s work has been read, up until now, in the perspective of gender issues and gender constructions. However, for Sobti herself, there is no ‘feminist agenda’ in her writings. She perceives herself as a writer (beyond any gender, caste or class issue) and rejects the label of woman writer (*ma-hilā lekhak*) imposed on her. Her position on ‘women’s writing’ is complicated.

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**869** Words can produce a reality in the mind of listeners or readers; this, together with the sounds and thought associations they produce, constitutes their materiality.

She is not an activist: her concern lies with the representation of life in all its aspects. Her use of language and her depictions of female protagonists are in accord with her need for freedom – in this case, the freedom to express all aspects of human life, both for men and women, without any restriction. Through her sensitivity to language, Sobti adopts a diction which reveals a truth about the characters she stages and about life. This will to find the appropriate words for each character or plot lies at the core of her poetics of language.

The heteroglossia of Sobti's novels reflects the complexity and the plurality of language and life – it shows how an individual can belong to several groups and have several identities at the same time. Language is the tool through which a reality can be brought to light. It is also the means to give genuine voices to the characters staged in a text, with all their complexities and their plural identity. Sobti's awareness of the coexistence of a multitude of (sometimes conflicting) identities within each individual can be read as one of the reasons behind her creation of her double, Hashmat. Sobti's work has been interpreted so far mostly from the perspective of gender issues, and therefore her creation of a male alter ego seems at first to be part of a gender debate. While it is true that Sobti's use of the masculine/neutral form throughout her fictional works may be considered as a desire to avoid being saddled with an identity as woman writer (*mahilā lekhak*), a label to which she was always opposed, I argue that the double represents more than an attempt to put herself on equal terms with men. Sobti considers herself as the equal of men writers as demonstrated in her writings under the name of Sobti and is widely recognised as one of the most prominent contemporary Hindi writers. Her alter ego has therefore another function, or even several other functions. Hashmat illustrates the liminality of the figure of the writer. He can assume several identities and roles, open up new perspectives and speak with unlimited freedom. He constitutes a site of exploration and is thus a 'complement' of Sobti and an expansion of the self. He is the expression of the multiplicity of selves within the self, of the 'androgyny' of writing. This androgyny is voiced in Sobti's essays through the image of *ardhanārīśvara*, which becomes the symbol of literature's ability to encompass both genders and to offer thus a complete understanding of life. A good writer is not a 'woman writer' nor a 'man writer', but a listener attentive to all voices, able to adopt all perspectives without judging. Hashmat seems to be a means to explore and uncover new horizons. But he is also a writing game, a double who enables Sobti to take another tone – less serious, more ironic, perhaps – and to look at life and at the self from other angles, sometimes quite unexpected or unconventional. He becomes a real partner of dialogue. With his usual freedom, Hashmat also discusses topics which are at times political and polemical – something which Sobti never does directly in her novels written as Sobti, where

no judgement and no agenda must be imposed on characters or plot. However, he cannot be considered as Sobti's political voice.

Indeed, although Sobti remains mostly distant from politics, she has also developed a public persona and taken position, mostly through interviews and speeches, when she deemed it necessary. She believes that the writer is an intellectual who possesses a duty towards society, but away from party politics. In this quality, she expresses her concern for individual rights and freedoms and defends those values (in her middle-class and Nehruvian ideal of Indian society) whenever they are threatened. However, she separates this commitment to society from her commitment, as a writer, to the human being, to humanity, in her conception of humanism as the recognition of the plural identity of each individual and as the acceptance, without any moral judgement, of all aspects of human nature. This latter commitment is expressed in literature through the absence of judgement and the freedom left to the characters and plot to develop according to their own contingencies, independently from the writer's control and from her personal beliefs.

In this distinction between her public persona and her role as a writer, Sobti illustrates Barthes' distinction between *écrivain* (writer) and *écrivain* (scribe/scriptor), and the merging of the two roles which he had predicted. Thus, she also constructs an image of literature as a place apart from party politics and from any kind of agenda, where the only commitment is to a search for a truth about life and the human being. Literature constitutes a free thinking space where a writer reflects on time, identity and human nature, and where a dialogue can establish itself between the inner world of an individual (the writer, but also the reader) and the outside world in which she lives. This dialogue develops at several levels and raises important questions for the understanding of life and literature and their reciprocal relationship. Indeed, through her conception of literature as an interaction and a dialogical process, Sobti opens the discussion on the relationship between reality and fiction and, ultimately, on the capacity of the human being to perceive reality itself.

Sobti places the writer in a liminal space, an in-between, as a figure of constant and dynamic dialogue, not only with society and time (past, present and future), but also with the self. The writer is also some kind of hybrid figure, between a passive transmitter and recipient of voices and a more proactive (re)creator of worlds through words. From this emerges an image of literature as a space of free dialogue, where, as Kundera states in *L'Art du roman*, no one is judged, but everyone can be understood,<sup>870</sup> and where, in the search

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870 See Kundera 2008: 193.

for a truth about the human being, the writer can experiment with thoughts and forms in all freedom from conventions, ideologies and other agendas.

Images of a middle space abound in Sobti's essays and speeches. They are markers of her conception of the writer's role as a transmitter, but also of her general conception of literature – and of life – as a dynamic interaction, as a constant exchange and dialogue. In her non-fictional works, Sobti blurs the genres, being mostly very close to her style in her fictional works and making intense use of metaphors both to reveal meanings and to surround her own creative process with an aura of mystery. Metaphors and analogies are the distinctive marks of her tone and style throughout her non-fictional works, something which sets her apart from more theoretical thinkers and emphasises her self-representation as a writer, not a philosopher – despite her conception of the writer as an intellectual.

With her views on the process of writing, on time in literature and on the role of a writer in society, Sobti converses on these topics with several other writers of her generation, like her personal friends Krishna Baldev Vaid and Nirmal Verma. Her reflections on literature and language offer a good example of an important yet rarely studied part of the activity of Hindi writers, namely their activity as critics, as active interpreters of their own works and those of others. The writers, through their fictional and non-fictional works, are thinkers reflecting on the society and time they live in – on life – and on literature.

The analysis of Sobti's non-fictional works has not only allowed to unravel the philosophy behind her very diverse work and her use of metaphors to reveal her writing process (or shroud it in mystery); it has also presented the on-going discussions on an array of literary topics in the context of Hindi literature and demonstrated that Hindi writers are very active thinkers on issues of aesthetics, philosophy and politics. In this specific field, much still remains to be studied and discovered.

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### 3 Some digital resources around Sobti’s work

#### Interviews:

- Interview with the Hindi writer Susham Bedi: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAUwoUStZaY>
- Interview with Zamarrud Mughal for the Urdu-platform Rekhta: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=az7nW3sfkxE> (part 1)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKPhQVYN0WE> (part 2)
- Interview in the series “Racnākārom ke rubaru” (Face to face with writers): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6j8VdcBtd1M>

#### Speeches:

- Pratirodh I (1.11.2015): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJUu1eArlfg>
- Pratirodh II (8.04.2016): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FNeC5-7IJo>
- 4<sup>th</sup> Nirmal Smriti Vyakhyan, presidential remarks (3.04.2009), speech in honour of Nirmal Verma: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCWZj3bSS5M> (part 1)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dImp9wN-SC4> (part 2)

#### Audio material

- Ms. Sobti reads from her work: Library of Congress, South Asian Literary Recordings Project: <https://www.loc.gov/acq/ovop/delhi/salrp/krishnasobti.html>

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