

*Writer in Context*

# KRISHNA SOBTI

## A COUNTER ARCHIVE

Edited by

Sukrita Paul Kumar and Rekha Sethi



## Krishna Sobti

This book engages with the life and works of the distinctive Hindi writer Krishna Sobti, known for making bold choices of themes in her writing. Also known for her extraordinary use of the Hindi language, she emerges as an embodiment of a counter archive. While presenting the author in the context of her times, this volume offers critical perspectives to define her position in the canon of modern Indian literature.

Alongside important critical essays on her, the inclusion of excerpts from the translations of some major works by the author, such as *Zindaginama*, *Mitro Marjani* and *Ai Ladki*, greatly facilitate an understanding of her worldview and the contexts in which she wrote. Also included in this book are some of her reflections on the creative process that help in unfolding the complexities of her characters and her specific approach to the language of fiction. Writing in the times of significant political and cultural churnings, her fiction includes themes such as the Partition of the country and its aftermath, women and their sexuality, desire and violence, history and memory. Her writing subverted the dominant narratives of the times and de-historicised history. Her own essays and other critical writings demonstrate the way Krishna Sobti's characters are abundantly polyphonic and seeped in social realities. They encapsulate the cultural milieu of their times and serve as a site of resistance to the dominant archive of power. Her interactions with her fellow Hindi writers such as Nirmal Verma and Krishan Baldev Vaid, as also her letters, her memoirs and the reminiscences of others, further enrich this volume and establish her unique voice.

Part of the 'Writer in Context' Series, this book will be useful for scholars and researchers of Indian literature, English literature, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, gender studies, translation studies and Partition studies.

**Sukrita Paul Kumar** is a former fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, and has held the Aruna Asaf Ali Chair at Delhi University. An honorary faculty at Corfu, Greece, she was an invited resident poet at the prestigious International Writing Programme at Iowa, USA. She has published several collections of poems, the recent ones being *Country Drive*

and *Dream Catcher*. Her critical books include *Narrating Partition*, *The New Story* and *Conversations on Modernism*. She has co-edited several books that include *Ismat: Her Life Her Times*, *Cultural Diversity in India* and *Speaking for Myself: Asian Women's Writings* as well as published translations of Urdu and Hindi fiction. Amongst many other fellowships and residencies of international significance, she was also invited to be an honorary fellow and resident poet at HK Baptist University, Hong Kong. Her special academic interests are world literature, Partition literature, gender studies and translation. She has held solo exhibitions of her paintings.

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## Writer in Context

Series Editors

Sukrita Paul Kumar

*critic, poet and academic*

Chandana Dutta

*academic, translator and editor*

The 'Writer in Context' series has been conceptualized to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of Indian writers from different languages. This is in light of the fact that Indian literature in English translation is being read and even taught extensively across the world with more and more scholars engaging in research. Each volume of the Series presents an author from the post-Independence, multilingual Indian literature from within her/his socio-literary tradition. Every volume has been designed to showcase the writer's oeuvre along with her/his cultural context, literary tradition, critical reception and contemporary resonance. The series, it is hoped, will serve as a significant creative and critical resource to address a glaring gap in knowledge regarding the context and tradition of Indian writing in different languages.

Sukrita Paul Kumar and Chandana Dutta are steering the project as Series Editors with Vandana R. Singh as the Managing Editor.

The first book, *Krishna Sobti: A Counter Archive*, features an eminent Hindi writer. So far, twelve volumes have been planned covering writers from different parts and traditions of India. The intent is to facilitate a better understanding of Indian writers and their writings for the serious academic, the curious researcher as well as the keen lay reader.

**Krishna Sobti**  
A Counter Archive  
*Edited by Sukrita Paul Kumar and Rekha Sethi*

For more information about this series, please visit:  
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# Krishna Sobti

A Counter Archive

*Edited by Sukrita Paul Kumar  
and Rekha Sethi*

First published 2022  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-367-53598-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-07966-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-09513-2 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003095132

Typeset in Sabon  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

AND THE GRANDE DAME LIVES ON . . .



**KRISHNA SOBTI**

**1925-2019**



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## Preface to the Series

The conceptualisation and making of the 'Writer in Context' Series must in itself be seen in the context of a historical evolution of literary studies in English in India. It was as late as the mid-eighties of the 20th century, decades after the Independence of India, that the angst to redefine English literary studies in the universities manifested itself in thoughtful discussions amongst scholars. In 1986 the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o published his well-known book *Decolonizing the Mind*, which had a widespread appeal amongst academics and people in general who were struggling to shed their deep-set colonial hangover. Soon after, English departments of the Indian universities and the Centers of South Asian Studies abroad began to incorporate Indian literatures in translation into their syllabi. This encouraged more translations of Indian literatures into English, even though translation studies never picked up as a popular academic discipline. Other than the translations of a few critical texts from Indian languages, the creation of appropriate critical material for an understanding of the comprehensive context of the writers remained minimal. There still remains an impending need to place Indian writers within the context of their own literary as well as socio-cultural linguistic traditions. Each language in India has a well-developed tradition of creative writing, and the writings of each writer require being understood from within that tradition even if she/he may be writing against the tide. Readers, translators, editors and publishers ought to be able to acknowledge and identify these writings from within their own intimate contexts. Familiarity with the oeuvre of the writers, with their times as well as with the knowledge of their critical reception by the discerning readers of their own language facilitate an understanding of certain otherwise-inaccessible nuances of their creative writings. Apart from getting an insight into the distinctive nature of the specific writer, this would also add to the sense of the fascinating diversity in Indian literatures.

Each volume in this Series is designed to provide a few extracts from the creative and other prose writings by the author in focus, followed by the English translations of selected critical essays on the author's works. For better insights into the writer's art and craft, self-reflexive essays and

articles by the author about the creative process and her/his comments on the writerly environment are also included. Much of this material may be available as scattered correspondence, conversations, notes and essays that lie untranslated and locked – as it were – in different *bhashas*. A discreet selection of such material has also been included in each of the volumes in this Series.

In the making of this Series, there has been an ongoing exchange of ideas amongst the editors of different volumes. It is indeed intriguing that while the writers selected belong to more or less the same times, the contexts vary; and, even when literary conventions may be similar in some languages, the author stands out as unique. At times, the context itself creates the writer, but many a time the writer creates her/his own context. The enquiry into the dialectic between the writer and the context lends a significant dimension to the volume. While the distinctive nature of each volume is dictated by the uniqueness of the author, all the volumes in the Series conform to the shared concept of presenting an author from within the literary context of her/his language and culture.

It is hoped that the ‘Writer in Context’ Series will make it easier for the scholar to first examine the creative interventions of the writer in her/his own language and then help study the author in relation to the others, thus mapping the literary currents and cross-currents in the subcontinent. The Series presents fiction writers from different Indian languages of the post-Independence era in their specific contexts, through critical material in translation and in the English original. This generation of ‘modern’ writers, whether in Malayalam or Urdu, Assamese or Hindi, or for that matter in any other Indian language, evolved with a heightened consciousness of change and resurgence fanned by modernism, postmodernism, progressivism and other literary trends and fashions, while rooted in tradition. Highly protective of their autonomy as writers, they were freely experimental in form, content and even the use of language. The volumes as a whole offer a vision of the strands of divergence as well as confluence in Indian literature.

The ‘Writer in Context’ Series would be a substantial intervention, we believe, in making the Indian writers more critically accessible and the scholarship on Indian literature more meaningful. While the Series would be a creative attempt at contextualising Indian writers, these volumes will facilitate the study of the diverse and multilingual Indian literature. The intent is to present Indian writers and their writings from within their socio-literary context to the serious academic, the curious researcher as well as the keen lay reader.

Sukrita Paul Kumar & Chandana Dutta  
Series Editors

## Preface

A series of conversations with Krishna Sobti over several years is what has actually led to the making of this volume finally. It was way back in 2003, soon after my book *Ismat: Her Life Her Times* was published by Katha (Delhi), when Krishnaji and I first discussed the possibility of a book focused on her. The objective was to provide the serious reader in English with some of Sobti's seminal prose pieces along with some selected critical essays on her works, translated into English. Sobti narrated to me with utmost angst as well as strong conviction the entire history of the court case she was pursuing against Amrita Pritam, not for selfish reasons, but on behalf of the entire writers' community to safeguard and assert the copyright of the writer on the title of her work. She gave me the notes she had prepared to explain her case. Also, she handed over a bundle of papers and books to me from which we finally selected material for the book to be prepared. It is a matter of great delight for me to mention here that some of the essays included here are her own selection. The 'book-to-be' somehow lingered on due to several exigencies of circumstance. It was only in the last few months of her life that this project surfaced again and both Krishnaji and I began talking about resurrecting and updating the material that was put together earlier. But alas, she passed on without seeing the project through.

When I offered the proposal of this book to Routledge, lo and behold, the idea actually developed into becoming a whole series of books, entitled 'Writer in Context'. I hastened to call upon my dear friend and scholar/translator Rekha Sethi to co-edit this book with me on Krishna Sobti as part of the Series. What has been added to the earlier concept of the book on Sobti is the additional focus of providing a context for her writings and also showcasing their critical reception. Each novel by the author in some way or the other questions the status quo in society, thus nudging for an accommodation of 'difference' and democratic ideals. What is sought by her is a cultural re-orientation and the acceptance of the autonomy of a writer. In doing this volume, Rekha and I have tried to keep to both the vision of the Series and, more importantly, the wishes of Krishna Sobti herself, who we believe would have been happy to see this book happen in the way it has.

Sukrita Paul Kumar

# Acknowledgements

To begin with, we would like to put on record our deepest gratitude to Krishna Sobti herself, who was the greatest source of inspiration for the doing of this book. We spent endless number of hours in conversation with each other over a long period of time intermittently planning this book. She shared with us her books of fiction and non-fiction, several envelopes of notes typed in a large font, essays and newspaper cuttings of material on her writings. Ever so grateful to her for all this as well as the conversations . . .

Thanks to Geeta Dharmarajan, who involved me in the planning of seminars on Sobti, translations of her novels and also conceptualisation of the Katha Chudamani Award which was given to Sobti. Thank you to Geeta Dharmarajan also for the permission to include her tribute to Krishna Sobti here, and thanks to Katha to reprint extracts from the following translations included in this book:

- *To Hell with You Mitro* (Trans. Geeta Ranjan and Raji Narsimhan)
- *Sunflowers of the Dark* (Trans. Pamela Mansi)
- *Listen Girl!* (Trans. Shivanath)
- *The Heart Has Its Reasons* (Trans. Reema Anand and Meenakshi Swami)

We gratefully acknowledge the generosity of Ashok Maheshwari, the Managing Director at Rajkamal Prakashan, for writing a special article for this book and for granting permission to us for the translations of the following articles by Krishna Sobti for this book:

- “Nirmal Verma” from *Hum Hashmat*.
- “Kyunki Manto Zinda hai” from *Sobti Ek Sohbat*.
- Extracts from “*Zindaginama: Chand Notes*,” *Sobti Ek Sohbat*.
- Extracts from “*Dilli: Nayi-Purani*,” *Sobti Ek Sohbat*.
- Extract from *Yaaron ke Yaar*.
- Extracts from *Sobti-Vaid Samvad*.

To the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (Shimla) and Anupama Jaidev Karir, we owe our gratitude for allowing us to publish the English translation by Jaidev of the story “Sikka Badal Gaya,” published in *Summerhill*, Vol III, No. 2, 1997.

For the reprinting of the extract from Sobti’s *Zindaginama*, translated by Neer Kanwal Mani and Moyna Mazumdar, we thank HarperCollins India for giving us the permission. The translator, Neer Kanwal Mani, graciously wrote an article for this book.

Thank you Penguin Random House, India, and Daisy Rockwell, for their permissions to reproduce in this book Rockwell’s introduction to the novel *A Gujarat Here, A Gujarat There*.

Thanks are due also to Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, for permission to translate and use in this volume Krishna Sobti’s article “Mitro jo Marjani Hui” published in their publication, *Samakaleen Bharatiya Sahitya*.

We are grateful to Dr. Andrea O’Reilly of Demeter Press and *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* for permitting us to reprint excerpts from Florence Pasch Guignard’s article, “Lessons in Life on the Verge of Death: Spiritual Mothering in *Ai Ladki* by Hindi Author Krishna Sobti,” Issue 7 (2016).

Thanks to Sabiha Zaidi, Director, Jamia’s Premchand Archives and Literary Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, for giving us access to the ‘Krishna Sobti Collection’ archived in the Centre.

For permission to translate articles published in the special issue on Krishna Sobti in the Hindi journal *Hans*, April 2019.390/33 (9), we are indeed grateful to Rachna Yadav, Managing Director, Hans Monthly.

Thanks also to Sh. Shambhunath, editor of the journal *Vagarth*, for allowing us to translate the article “Sahitya mein Janpad aur Bhasha Drishti” for this book.

We extend our hearty thanks to all the following contributors who permitted us to use their articles in this volume: Nirmala Jain, Florence Pasche Guignard, Sara Rai, Prayag Shukla and Daisy Rockwell.

We are grateful to the following critics for having specially written articles for this volume: Stefania Cavaliere, Meenakshi Bharat, Priyadarshan, Rekha Sethi and Savita Singh.

To the following who shared their reminiscences of and dialogues with Krishna Sobti to be included here, we owe special thanks to Anamika, Ashutosh Bhardwaj, Ashok Vajpeyi, Om Thanvi, Girdhar Rathi, Ashok Maheshwari, Vimlesh Mishra and Sukrita Paul Kumar.

This book would not have been possible but for the wonderful team of the following translators who conscientiously translated the material collected for this book: Babli Moitra Saraf, Rachna Sethi, Anupama Jaidev Karir, Srinjoyee Dutta, Seema Sharma, Girija Sharma, Meenakshi Faith Paul, Meenakshi Bharat, Rajul Bhargava, Madhu Prasad, Vinita Sinha, Ranjana Kaul, Preeti Gupta Dewan, Sapna S. Pandit and Pragati Mohapatra.

For the photographs used in this book, we are thankful to Manish Pushkale, Executive Trustee of Krishna Sobti Shivanath Foundation, for his permission. Thank you to Zamarrud Mughal for digitising the Sobti albums.

We wish to also thank Devesh Kardam for enhancing the quality of the photographs chosen for this book. Thanks to Sonam Kumari for according help in organising the Krishna Sobti chronology.

To our families, we need to bow and acknowledge their patience and support in the making of this book. Thanks indeed to Sonu, Sheila and Ila for constantly supplying us with food and tea to keep us going.

We also gratefully acknowledge here the kind support accorded to us by the Series Co-Editor, Chandana Dutta, and the Series Managing Editor, Vandana R. Singh.

Thanks to the reviewers for their constructive suggestions and a patient and meticulous reading of our manuscript.

For facilitating the making of this book in the 'Writer in Context' Series and for always being there to attend to our endless queries and travails, we owe our sincere gratitude to Shoma Choudhury, Commissioning Manager, Routledge India. To Shloka Chauhan we owe thanks for her assistance in preparing the manuscript.

# Introduction

*Sukrita Paul Kumar and Rekha Sethi*

Krishna Sobti was an embodiment of a counter archive in her writings as much as in her living. To understand her through such a perspective, we need to engage a little with the critical premise suggested here. Counter archives are disruptive of conventional narratives, and while they tend to engage with the past and historicise differently, there is also a futuristic intent built into them. Jacques Derrida in his book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996) describes this feature as a promise and responsibility for tomorrow. The so-called mainstream or the dominant normative gets off-set by a dynamic narrative of a different present identified by the writer within the dialectic of remembering and forgetting. It is the creative impulse of the writer such as Krishna Sobti that led her to an ontology that referred to ‘difference’ and not the status quo. Inscribed into this position is the spirit of resistance that de-stabilises the linear flow of time, throwing up perceptions of the past if only to de-historicise it – in that the present informs the past to work out the possibilities for a future. This is evidenced amply in Sobti’s post-Partition novel *Zindaginama*. Or then, in a different way, in her construction of a character such as Mitro, who in her candid expression of bodily desire in *Mitro Marjani (To Hell with You Mitro)* defies the conventional portrayal of a middle-class wife as a domesticated, almost desexualised woman.

‘The romance of life is not in a straight line. Things would go stale if that were to happen.’ So said Krishna Sobti, who, over the long span of nearly a century of her life, would never allow life to be a straight line, especially if the track were to be laid out by others. That is how she never let life become stale. This we believe was the primary context of the vision or the perspective to life that she built upon, both in the living of her life as well as in the fiction that she created. In order to keep her romance of life intact, she was extraordinarily alert to diverse sounds and sights thrown up by people in different locales she found herself in, whether in Gujarat (Pakistan), Calcutta, Delhi or Shimla. Soaked in the historical echoes of the past and sharply reacting to the political and sociological ambience of the present, she committed herself ardently to carving the path for democratic and polyphonic

social environs for the future. Disturbing images from the bloody Anglo-Sikh Battle of Chillianwala of 1849 played heavy on her child's mind, as she narrates in her untitled, unpublished article, shared by her with us:

As we kids stood on a kutchra mound we imagined the horses, soldiers with glittering swords and the Topkhana which destroyed our forces. I remember clearly, my throat was choked with emotion – I understood the meaning of being a defeated people. Suddenly the faces of my father and grandfather floated before my eyes; they are the ones who work and walk in the corridors of secretary's symbol of sovereignty of the British. We are not free. We are slaves.\*

With this history floating in her mind, even as a child she completely understood why Indians were not allowed to skate in Shimla Blesington Rink, meant to be used only by the British. It is this alert consciousness of the history of colonial India that pressed the need for independence from the British and also defined the idea of individual freedom for her, freedom from any dictates of establishment or centres of power from above. Conserving this individual memory within the context of a larger historical consciousness, Sobti lived with a repository of a counter archive within herself. In 2010, when she refused to accept the commendation of Padma Bhushan, a prestigious award being offered to her by the Government of India, it was primarily, as she declared in an interview with the newspaper *The Indian Express*, 'to keep distance from the establishment'. Her efforts to safeguard her autonomy were demonstrated amply through such decisions and choices. In fact, as an extension to this feature, was her concern to also establish her distinct identity with her heightened consciousness about her lineage. She would often tell me with a glint in her eyes, 'You know, my ancestry can be traced to Greece.' She would continue, 'Can you please do a bit of research for me on Google; can you find the image of the old Greek coin which I know has the name 'Sobti' on it?' I did try but couldn't find any. She also wrote thus in the same article mentioned previously:

My ancestors came from Greece to Ghazni and somewhere over a period of time migrated to Central Punjab, the city of Gujarat, on the bank of the river Chenab and in the foothills of Jammu and Kashmir. This was a part of Saptasindhu, when Alexander came to India, Greek governor Sohytus ruled this province. When the Sobtis got Indianised or they were Indian citizens in Greece, we have no historical evidence, but the family kept alive some semblance of it by way of customs, rituals and traditions. My maternal family was a follower of Baba Farid. Before the child was sent to the pathshala, he was required to beg *bhiksha* from seven households.\*

So self-conscious was she about her name and lineage that when she received the copy of the magazine *Prateek* edited by Agyeya with her story “Sikka Badal Gaya”, she kept reading her name over and over again and said, ‘this name Krishna is such a common name, but never mind, *Sobti* saves it.’ That gave her the pride of ancestry.

Krishna Sobti’s fiction offers an abundant array of characters who assert the power of their personalities with an absolute nonchalance for societal reaction or even sanction. In her essay on creative writing, Sobti refers to the author as the most convincing first reader of her own work. Led by her characters, she proceeds onto an unfettered exploration into the depths of their psychology and brings back to herself an increased sense of confidence and wisdom for her own living. The relationship between her characters and herself seems dialogic. That is why she has often critiqued them or recorded comments on them just as she would write on her different contemporary writers and people in the four volumes entitled *Hum Hashmat*. Writing on the character Mitro of *Mitro Marjani*, Sobti declares, ‘Mitro is not simply a test of the writer’s boldness, she is a discovery and a challenge too’ (from ‘Mitro be Damned’ in this volume). Mitro, Sobti is clear, happens to be self-begotten, and she emerges out of her own self. Similarly, her other characters too carve out their own identities and confront their social realities in their own manner. How Krishna Sobti the person is born again and again to grow up all over again with each novel is described succinctly by her in her essay on the creative process included in her book *Sobti Ek Sohbat*. It is crucial for a serious Sobti reader to read the many reflective essays written by her on this subject if only to understand the writer’s own probe into why and how she wrote, how she approached her characters and what she chose to write on. She knew that ‘as you give yourself the license to make your individual choices, you also keep determining your limits’ (Sobti 2014a: 400). However, it is indeed true that simple though it may seem, it is not easy to be a writer who from her own volition and no external pressure conjoins her inner solitude with the outer din. Krishna Sobti used her full autonomy to choose to do so in her own way and on her own terms.

Yet, what needs to be reckoned alongside the previous perspective is her acute sense of history that provided the context for several of her writerly commitments. In her essay entitled “A Few Notes on *Zindaginama*”, Sobti indicates how for her, history is not one but there are two histories (and sometimes even more), one that is documented and the other that lives on into the present through people’s songs, legends and stories. She knew that as a fiction writer, she needed to have an interface with history from below. No wonder then that her magnum opus novel *Zindaginama* is a conglomeration of legends, songs, myths and characters who are Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs living together in a composite cultural mode in the pre-Partition

rural landscape of undivided India. Note these lines from her preface-like poem, opening the novel:

*History that is not  
And history that is  
Not the one recorded in chronicles  
With proofs and evidences*

*But the one  
That flows  
Along the sacred Bhagirathi  
Of people's consciousness  
Flourishes  
Spreads  
And stays alive  
In the vital resilience  
Of ordinary people.*

This actually sums up her unique stance to the kind of history that the novel encapsulates. Nirmala Jain's article on *Zindaginama* in this book examines this very thrust of the novel that presents according to her 'all the colours of the totality of life of a particular geographic region' throbbing with different rhythms of the language spoken there – in that the writer wishes to fathom the depths of the roots of the 'gigantic living tree' (Zinda Rukh, as she called it) that is the culture of the region, which would inevitably challenge the traditional frameworks and styles of writing. This is the culture of the yet undivided region that Krishna Sobti wished to hold onto and document, to remain intact in the memory of people as an important reference point for the civilisational forces, to remember as cement for the fissure caused by the 1947 Partition of the subcontinent. Here is where people of all faiths nurtured and cherished the myth of Pir Khwaja Khizr, whose boat lay anchored on the bank of the river ready to be ferried across, as the guardian of peasants of all ages, religions across caste and class. This was the chunk of memory that served as a site of resistance to the dominant archive of power and insularity. Excavated from memory, this was soon to become a counter archive in the form of a novel.

If one were to ask what motivated Krishna Sobti to write the novel *Zindaginama*, the answer is clear. It was yet another historical phenomenon which left a deep penetrative impact on a vast population of the subcontinent: the communal, irrevocable division of the country into India and Pakistan and the ensuing unprecedented violence. As described by Sobti herself, she was 'deeply rooted in the eclectic integrated cultural stream' of the undivided country, and thus Partition came as an unacceptable and painful experience of rescinding the sanctity of the shared past. The process of

re-contextualisation of the lived past into the shaping of the consciousness in the present provides layers of fresh meanings to ruptures and continuities in history. Just as Qurratulain Hyder in a way processed her angst about the historical apocalypse of the division of the country by writing and sensitively recording the evolution of composite culture from the 11th century onwards in her Urdu novel *Aag ka Darya (River of Fire)*, Krishna Sobti, too, in *Zindaginama* captured the social fabric of the agrarian landscape in which different streams of culture flowed unrestrained into each other. It was decided to have a complete section on *Zindaginama* in this volume primarily because this novel was quite central to Krishna Sobti's own focus and vision. She had herself written several essays on it in addition to her engagement with the court case for 26 years over its title.

Sobti's story "Sikka Badal Gaya", written soon after Partition, is autobiographical, in which she narrates how her maternal grandmother was taken to a refugee camp by a Muslim friend, when she just didn't want to leave. However, what is pertinent to note is Krishna Sobti's comment made in an interview with Alok Bhalla:

Writers on both sides soon realized that after so much hatred, violence, and killing, human values had to be affirmed and restored. As writers we had to reassert that in spite of political and religious divisions, the two communities had lived for centuries in a workable harmony, almost like cousins.

(Bhalla 2006: 137)

In her story, as she says, she seems to have wished to look beyond the immediate horror to salvage something that was untouched by violence. The established mode of representing the violence of Partition gets challenged by this story that creates a counter archive. In effect, this becomes a creative intervention of offering a humanistic connect in the dominant atmosphere of a violent communal divide.

The unthinking division of the communities along with the brutal violence and forced migrations that followed created for Sobti the context to visit the inner recesses of her mind to feel the richness of the common heritage. She asks in the interview with Bhalla: 'Guru Nanak, Baba Farid, Amir Khusro, Bulle Shah, Shah Latif – can we divide this whole lot of poets into theirs and ours?' (Bhalla 2006: 141). It was important to preserve the voice of sanity and humanity in moments that were overwhelmingly ominous. That is the essential difference between history and literature: 'Literature goes beyond the empirical reality, beyond treaties and wars and probes the silence of the mind. It asks itself the question: how do we narrate history?' (Jain 2007: 4). While questions related to sense of belonging, roots, relatedness, guilt etc. get raised, there is also an engineered forgetfulness perhaps created by trauma, which demands exploration in literature. This is

when memory comes into play with the aesthetics of narration, and this is when seeds get sown for Krishna Sobti to write her novel *Gujarat Pakistan se Gujarat Hindustan (A Gujarat Here, A Gujarat There)*. The narration of this novel is part recapitulation of Partition-related dislocation and part articulation of the author's own rather disconcerting sense of loss thereof. Written intermittently over several decades, this novel evolves from a historicist impulse to acquiring snatches of events from the storehouse of memories that eventually become metaphors of dispersal. The novel was finally completed and published in 2017 when the author was 92 years of age, persistently carrying memories of uprootment from her place of birth for over 70 years. Political borders cannot diminish or demolish memories. This is a novel in which Krishna Sobti herself is a character who has been as much an active participant in the history presented in the story as she is a witness. She is a victim of history but also someone who is able to re-create herself alongside the creation of possibilities for a new present.

Writers such as Bhisham Sahni, Yashpal, Kamleshwar, Intizar Husain and many others were witness-participants of the tragedy of Partition, and several of them, perhaps in their desire to exorcise themselves of their painful memories, were compelled from within to create narratives of Partition experiences. Each one was different from the other and yet gripped within the net of the same history. Bhisham Sahni in fact had shared the manuscript of his novel *Tamas* with Sobti, which she had endorsed for publication. The long shadow of Partition with intermittent communal riots and political manipulations of minority appeasement, all through the modern times in the subcontinent in post-Independence India, defied sequencing of events in linear time, and while the past lived on into the present, there has been an emphatic oscillation establishing the connection between the present and the past memories. When there is no closure, the writer's reflexive engagement with the context of the past persists. In this regard, Wolfgang Ernst argues convincingly about how the site for archiving shifts from a single event to a 'dynamic' location of ongoing regeneration (Ernst 2013). Also, the body of Partition literature continues to grow perhaps due to the non-narratability of the completely meaningless violence as also indeed to remind ourselves of the need to constantly re-establish humanitarian values.

Immediately after Partition, Krishna Sobti wrote her first novel *Channa*, which was completed in 1952 and accepted for publication by Bharti Bhandhar Leader Press, Allahabad, a well-known publisher. While the press copy was made by the Hindi writer Kamleshwar, the copyediting was done by Lallu Prasad of Nagari Pracharini Sabha. This is a significant detail in the context of Sobti's rejection of the language changes made in the manuscript of the novel of which 300 pages had been printed without her approval. What made history is how the novel was withdrawn by the author and all copies of the printed material destroyed, since Sobti did not want the language of the novel to be tinkered with at all. She 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. The original manuscript, *Channa*, was retrieved from the publisher and kept safely in a trunk for decades to come. Interestingly, *Channa*, the first novel written by the author, was in fact her last published novel. It appeared in print in 2019 when Sobti was in and out of the hospital in the last few months of her life. The story of the publication of *Channa* is extremely pertinent to the question of use of language in fiction, in this case the Hindi language and the concern for its ‘purity’ on the part of publishers, institutions, critics and, perhaps not so much, the readers.

In view of Sobti’s linguistic ventures and concerns regarding the language used in her first novel, it is important here to mention the emergence of what came to be known as the ‘anchlik (regional) novel’ in Hindi in the first decade after the Independence of India. The trend was set in motion with the publication of Phanishwarnath Renu’s novel *Maila Anchal* in 1954 and later in 1966 with Rahi Masoom Raza’s novel *Aadha Gaon*; in both, the writers had actually created a new language, a new Hindi, to project an authentic ring to the cultural ambience in their novels. Ironically, the initial critical reaction that questioned Renu’s use of a variant of Hindi later transformed into veneration for his innovative linguistic skills that accommodated the sounds of Purnea district of Bihar in Hindi. The admixture of Bhojpuri with standard Hindi by Rahi in *Aadha Gaon* too evoked a similar reception. In the writing of *Channa*, Krishna Sobti had already been inspired to carve out a different Hindi to suit her characters and their locale. But in her novel *Zindaginama* published in 1979, she excelled in producing what she called ‘Zinda Rukh’ (a massive living tree) by way of fiction that was soaked in reality. Krishna Sobti’s sensitivity to the ‘writerly’ use of language stayed with her for all her life, and she often wrote and spoke about the magic of the word, not chosen by the writer, but by the characters and the locale of the novelistic domain. Also, as she said:

Your language is not merely the one you have been taught – with linguistic skills and grammar – it comprises also of what you have experienced and imbibed in life as well as what are your concerns. . . . It is not the vocabulary, but the deeper sense of words. . . . Before writing on paper one has to create a pool culture – recognizing ethnicity, linguistic outfit and the class of the characters.

(Jain 2007: 22)

As a translator of Krishna Sobti’s *A Gujarat Here, A Gujarat There*, Daisy Rockwell discusses Sobti’s language as experiential and shows how her prose bears a semblance with poetry: ‘she is writing to reveal and learn what language can do.’ Expressing her angst as a translator, she also remarks how Sobti’s ‘idiosyncratic technique’ for creating a simulacrum for

Punjabi-ness within her Hindi becomes almost impossible to convey in English, especially when added to this is the translator's challenge of dealing with Sobti's idiolect, which she refers to as 'Sobti-lect'! Looking at the vast family of Indian languages, Sobti was extremely alert about the existent linguistic energy here; she writes in her book *Shabdun ke Alok Mein* (in the glow of words): 'The democracy of our diversity resides amongst the common people of India.' Her writings as well as her life presented a challenge to the established norms.

When Stefania Cavaliere writes on the 'Polyphonic Voices in the Works of Krishna Sobti', an essay included in this volume, she is not just mapping the multivocal identity of the country as depicted in the writings of Sobti, but she also engages with the 'dynamic flux of exchange' and negotiations that happen between different linguistic cultures here. That is why while accepting the challenge of translating *Zindaginama* with its variegated Hindi, Neer Kanwal Mani writes how she has had to grapple intensely with the cultural codes woven within the language of the novel. The eminent linguist Anvita Abbi uses the concept of 'sociolects and dialects' in her comment on Krishna Sobti's linguistic alertness in projecting the ethos of the region in this novel. The physical context of the narrative gets represented in the language created by the author with her sensitivity to the sounds and rhythms of the language collectively used there. If her novel *Dil-O-Danish (The Heart Has Its Reasons)* effectively makes the reader enter the world of the old city of Delhi, it is primarily because the author has delved deep into the psyche of the people living there and has captured the style of communication evolved here. The language of this novel has a lot of polysemy and sarcasm, along with the specific linguistic register of the area. The same is also true of Sobti's much-discussed novel *Mitro Marjani* but with a difference. Sobti actually creates the language of female desire in addition to using the admixture of Rajasthani and Punjabi linguistic flavour within the Hindi used in this novel. What is interesting is how the same author is also capable of using 'silence' to express what words cannot – as pointed out by Rekha Sethi, whether in Shahni's pain of uprootment from her land in "Sikka Badal Gaya", or through the ring of silence drawn around Pasho after the horrific sexual violence suffered by her in *Daar se Bichhudi (Memory's Daughter)* (Sethi 2021: 206). Krishna Sobti's pen reflects linguistic democracy that includes the language of silence. The many kinds of Hindi(s) used in the body of her work cross gender boundaries as well.

In the history of her career as a writer, many a time Krishna Sobti has been questioned by her critics/readers for 'taking liberties' with the use of language. Using Punjabi/rural Punjabi, Rajasthani, Urdu and words and idioms from other languages in her Hindi was done by the writer with full conviction that the language of her writing needed to have a living, breathing vitality. Meenakshi Bharat in her chapter on "Word Sculptor, Krishna

Sobti” in this book remarks: ‘Astutely picking her idiolect to suit them [characters and the setting], her choice of words was crucial to the creation of fictional worlds that sprang to life and pulsated with energizing rhythms.’ For Sobti, every word picked by her was actually demanded by the context of the narrative. So invested was she in these linguistic choices that she took the celebrated Punjabi writer Amrita Pritam to court and engaged for 26 years in a legal case against her, for Pritam’s use of the word ‘Zindaginama’ in the title of her book, since Sobti herself had coined it and earlier used it as the title of her own novel. Subsequently she wrote several articles explaining her standpoint, with some of this material reproduced in translation in this volume.

Krishna Sobti’s comments on her commitment to words that came to her from her inner recesses actually best explain her understanding of her own language in the following words:

Every word has a body, a soul and an attire. They coalesce vibrantly to express a living and vibrant thought. No true writer can have a superficial relationship with language and words because a writer is forever absorbing the kinship of words, the stability of words, the meanings that echo in words, the timbre, the tone and texture of words. A writer showers with equal love the costume, the body and soul of words. For a writer, an experience may emerge from its own context and then slide into the inner realm of his/her consciousness, or then some sensitive issue may spring from within the writer suddenly and take an outward leap. In this process a relationship is struck between the inner mind and the external reality, and a new autonomous experience is born out of this.

(Sobti 2005: 68)

No discussion on Krishna Sobti’s use of language can be seen as complete without a mention also of two more prominent features, self-consciously presented by the author. One was regarding her unrestrained use of expletives in her short story “Yaaron ke Yaar”. When she was criticised for this, she reacted sharply and wondered if any objections would have been raised in case of a male writer using such language that was so commonly heard in an all men’s offices filled with the expression of their frustrations. Sobti would in no way accept a gender discrimination regarding the question of language. Ismat Chughtai had used and legitimised, as it were, *begumati zubaan* (language of women), the language of the inner courtyard, in Urdu fiction; Krishna Sobti used her writer’s prerogative to use male language to create the tenor and tone of communication the way it happens in an office of the male clerical staff. Why, she asked, would one use sophisticated and unrealistic language for people who were not sophisticated?

While talking to her fellow writer Krishan Baldev Vaid in the book *Sobti-Vaid Samvad*, Krishna Sobti dwells on the issue of gender and language:

Our society should develop a habit of perceiving the differences as well as similarities between men and women. . . . Now, a woman has begun to express her sexual urges and her own feelings of love. Earlier only men had the right to do so but now the woman is taking this on. . . . She is trying to locate herself in her own autonomy. Also, she has a new way of viewing a man for which she is carving out a new language and searching for new words. She is emerging out of the physical oppression of being under the man.

(Sobti and Vaid 2007: 148–149)

The boldness with which Sobti candidly narrated the sexual act between Diwakar and Ratti in her novel *Surajmukhi Andhere ke* (*Sunflowers of the Dark*) is exemplary and perhaps described for the first time in the Hindi novel by a woman writer. There is an intertwining of body consciousness with what may be perceived as a metaphysical experience of a ‘beyond’. There is a fresh language found for sexuality, and especially for female desire by Sobti.

The four volumes of *Hum Hashmat* by Krishna Sobti intrigue many a reader. Why did she choose to write these series of anecdotal profiles in the male voice? Reading through her piece “Mulaqat Hashmat ki Hashmat se” (A Meeting of Hashmat with Hashmat), one sees that some of the intrigue explains itself. Indeed it is significant that while she had undertaken to present all those profiles, she was also compelled to meet her own self, but with a difference, man to man in the form of Hashmat meeting another Hashmat! She built a web of curiosity around the phenomenon that is Hashmat here. Why did she write these volumes in a male voice? As she herself explained, she wanted to create within herself an androgynous self; she wanted to have an alter ego or a self that would give her another perspective from within. She often said that even her handwriting changed and so did the style and approach as she sat down to write as Hashmat. Adept at getting under the skin of each of her characters, why would she not have the ability to acquire another voice from within herself? In fact, as she put it in an interview:

One day I just felt that there was a presence of someone else across the table. It took me years to discover that presence. . . . I felt Hashmat was a part of me. . . . We both survived across the same table.

(Sobti 1999: 41)

In that she becomes an androgynous being or what she calls *ardhnarishwar*. This is a metaphor, a mythic reference that stayed with Krishna Sobti throughout her life. For instance, she also sees an amalgam of both female