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
Ashaduanna muhammadarrasulullah
Ashaduanna muhammadarrasulullah
This call was the beginning of Zindagināmā.862

Mālī se hi. Mālī ke pās yah nazār.
Kāgaz bhi kyārī hain. Kyārī hi.
Uṭhakar gulḍān se ek aur phūl nikālti huṁ.
Ṭahni poṁch paḥlevāle gulāb ke sāth rakh deti huṁ.
Meri or se ek phūl vakt ke lie bhi.
Barkhā tham gai hai.
Khīrī ke kāṁc par ḍubte sūraj kī anījurī-ḥār lālimā.
Mainī mez ke pās kharī hain. Kī ḍaṁ kharī raḥṭi hain.
Dil ke āṣpās kainī koī kharaṁc nahiṁ. Na khusī, na gamī.
Na dard, na sukḥ. Ek argī ṭhahran!
Kalam kholkar sāf karta hain. Kalam meṁ syāhī bharta hain.
Kore kāgazoṁ ke āge sir jhukātī hain. Kī bijlī kī tarah baṁpaṁ ke ḍharkhe se āmḵhoṁ meṁ
gāṁv kaurīṁ jāṭā hain aur kāṁoṁ meṁ azān gūṁjane lagṭi hain . . .
Allāhū akbar
Allāhū 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. 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.” 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
Aṣaduallā ilāh illallāh
Aṣaduallā ilāh illallāh
Aṣaduanna muhammadarsūllāh
Aṣaduanna muhammadarsūllāh.
Yahi gińį Zindagināmā ki ṣuruāt thī.

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.”

This dryness incapable of turning out in foliage symbolises the lack of inspiration. 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 (tatāstatā) 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’. Neither does she impose her way of thinking on the work. She absorbs the surrounding world,
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. 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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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’, raṁg-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’ (vīlikṣan 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 not-
ing 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 (āṁcalīk 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
(aślīltā) 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 lan-
guage is hers, it is her genuine voice.

Sobti is very sensitive to the possibility to voice, through language and its
almost material quality, all the complexity of the mind and the physical reac-
tions 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 em-
body 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 per-
spective of gender issues and gender constructions. However, for Sobti herself,
there is no ‘feminist agenda’ in her writings. She perceives herself as a writer (be-
yond 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 ‘androgyne’ of writing. This androgyne is voiced in Sobti’s essays through the image of ardhanāriśvara, 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 écrivant (scribe/criptor), 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, 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.