



Breaking the Silence: Feminism, Realism, and Resistance in the Writings of Ismat Chughtai

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Abstract— *Ismat Chughtai remains one of the most influential literary voices of twentieth-century India. A pioneer of feminist Urdu literature, she explored themes such as gender discrimination, female sexuality, class hierarchy, and social oppression with remarkable boldness and realism. Her writings challenged patriarchal structures and gave voice to women whose experiences had long remained suppressed within conservative society. This paper examines the relationship between Chughtai's life experiences and her literary vision through a study of her autobiography *A Life in Words: Memoirs* and major fictional works such as *Lihaaf*. It further analyses her contribution to feminist discourse, her association with the Progressive Writers' Association, and her portrayal of women's resistance against social and cultural restrictions. Chughtai's realism, sharp social observation, and fearless narrative style enabled her to expose the hypocrisies of a male-dominated society and redefine women's representation in South Asian literature. The paper argues that Chughtai not only transformed Urdu fiction but also emerged as a revolutionary literary figure whose works continue to remain relevant in contemporary feminist studies.*



Keywords— *feminism, female sexuality, Ismat Chughtai, patriarchy, realism, Urdu literature.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ismat Chughtai (21 August 1915 – 24 October 1991) emerged as a powerful literary voice in twentieth-century Urdu literature, known for her fearless exploration of themes such as female sexuality, gender roles, and class dynamics. Rooted in literary realism, her writing broke barriers and reshaped the narrative space for women in South Asian fiction. In 1976, the Government of India honoured her with the Padma Shri in recognition of her significant contributions to literature.

Chughtai's determination to pursue education met with strong resistance from her conservative family, yet she persisted and went on to earn a Bachelor of Education from Aligarh Muslim University. It was during her time at Aligarh that she became actively involved with the Progressive Writers' Association, a group that deeply influenced her ideological and literary growth.

Sukrita Paul Kumar, in *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times*, captures her essence by stating, "Ismat Chughtai wore no purdah.

And her pen worked as an instrument to sheer the purdah behind which the whole of middle-class Muslim women vibrated in gossip and scandal, desires and urges, jealousies and tensions, rituals and traditions, repressions and little rebellions" (Kumar & Siddiqui, 2000, p. 42).

Bold, unapologetic, and revolutionary, Chughtai's writing challenged the silences around women's inner lives. Her sharp wit, unflinching honesty, and courage to confront social taboos made her not just a literary icon but also a trailblazer who lived the very rebellion she wrote about.

Ismat Chughtai is celebrated for her bold portrayal of women who lived on the fringes of society—widows, beggars, sex workers, and those from marginalized communities. Through her writing, she brought to light the harsh realities faced by Indian women under the weight of patriarchy. Her work exposed issues such as widespread illiteracy among women, poor sanitation and living conditions, systemic disempowerment, lack of employment opportunities, and the suffocating grip of regressive social norms.

What sets Chughtai apart is her representation of both Hindu and Muslim women, especially those from the middle class. She delved into their private worlds with honesty and empathy, giving voice to their struggles, dreams, and suppressed identities.

Tahira Naqvi remarks:

“One of Urdu’s boldest and most outspoken female writers, Ismat Chughtai played an important role in the development of the modern short story as we know it today” (Naqvi, 2013, p. vii).

Ismat Chughtai gave voice and visibility to those hidden behind the metaphorical and literal veil. To truly grasp the essence of feminism in her work, one must delve into her life and the pivotal experiences that shaped her. Her autobiography *A Life in Words: Memoirs* offers a vital lens through which her literary vision can be understood.

With a bold and impassioned narrative style, Chughtai left an indelible mark on Urdu literature. She contributed significantly to the evolution of Urdu fiction by portraying the everyday realities of middle-class Muslim life. Her characters reflected not only the world around her but also her refusal to conform to patriarchal norms.

M. Asaduddin observes:

“It is her power of close observation that helps Ismat Chughtai to pick up on trivial yet extremely interesting and relevant details about people and their lives which are then woven into her stories” (Asaduddin, 2012, p. xxii).

II. ISMAT CHUGHTAI AND THE QUESTION OF WOMEN’S EDUCATION

Ismat Chughtai was born on 21 August 1915 in Badaun, Uttar Pradesh, into a conservative Muslim family. Her father, Khan Bahadur Mirza Qasim Baig Chughtai, served as a Deputy Collector, while her mother, Nusrat Khanum, managed a large household. Growing up as the ninth among ten siblings, Chughtai became aware of unequal gender treatment from an early age.

In her autobiography *A Life in Words: Memoirs*, Chughtai reflects critically on patriarchal structures that governed women’s lives. She observed, “Lack of equality is not only found between the rich and the poor, it is also present more deeply in the power relations between men and women” (Chughtai, 2012, p. 8).

Unlike her sisters, who largely accepted conventional domestic roles, Chughtai resisted patriarchal expectations. She aspired to enjoy the same freedom as her brothers and recalls, “I was just interested in climbing trees and cycling like my brothers” (Chughtai, 2012, p. 8).

Education played a transformative role in Chughtai’s life. At a time when higher education for women was considered shameful, she insisted on receiving an English education similar to that of her brothers. While several family members opposed her ambitions, her father and elder brother Azim Baig Chughtai supported her intellectual growth.

Chughtai later studied at Women’s College in Aligarh and at Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow. Reflecting on her years in Lucknow, she writes, “The two years I spent in Lucknow proved to be important in my life. My mind found new avenues, and new doors opened in front of me” (Chughtai, 2012, p. 155).

M. Asaduddin notes that women’s education was strongly resisted in conservative society, and even sending daughters to boarding schools invited severe criticism from relatives (Asaduddin, 2012). Chughtai’s struggle for education therefore represented a broader resistance against social oppression.

III. AUTOBIOGRAPHY, REALISM, AND FEMALE EXPERIENCE

Chughtai’s autobiography *A Life in Words: Memoirs* provides valuable insight into the formation of her feminist consciousness and literary realism. Her autobiographical reflections reveal her determination to expose uncomfortable truths rather than idealized social images.

One of the most striking aspects of her autobiography is her unconventional portrayal of motherhood. Rejecting romanticized representations, Chughtai writes:

“We were so many brothers and sisters that my mother felt nauseous at the sight of us” (Chughtai, 2012, p. 1).

Through such observations, Chughtai exposes the emotional and physical burden imposed upon women within patriarchal structures. She challenges traditional literary depictions of motherhood as purely sacred and instead presents it as an experience shaped by pain, exhaustion, and social expectation.

Chughtai also criticized the concept of purdah and what she called the “veil of the mind.” For her, patriarchal control extended beyond physical restrictions and deeply influenced women’s thoughts and identities.

Economic dependence was another major concern in Chughtai’s feminist vision. She believed that women’s oppression was closely connected to their lack of financial independence. A woman without economic freedom was often compelled to tolerate injustice and abuse within marriage and family structures.

Chughtai's realism stemmed from her close observation of everyday life. Her characters reflected the experiences of ordinary people rather than idealized literary figures. Asaduddin observes that her ability to notice trivial yet meaningful details enabled her to portray the lives of both middle-class and marginalized individuals authentically (Asaduddin, 2012).

Her literary realism often unsettled conservative readers because it exposed social hypocrisy without concealment. Chughtai herself insisted that literature must reflect society truthfully, even when that truth appeared uncomfortable or disturbing.

IV. LIHAAF AND THE POLITICS OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

Among Chughtai's most celebrated and controversial works is *Lihaaf* (The Quilt), published in 1942. The story explored themes of female desire, loneliness, repression, and same-sex intimacy at a time when such subjects were considered taboo in Indian society.

Lihaaf led to accusations of obscenity and eventually resulted in a court trial. Chughtai strongly defended her work and refused to apologize. She argued that literature merely reflects social reality and that obscenity lies within society itself rather than within artistic representation.

Chughtai responded boldly:

"The world is also littered with filth. If it is raked up it becomes visible, and people feel the need to clean it up" (Chughtai, 2012, p. 37).

Through *Lihaaf*, Chughtai addressed subjects such as suppressed female sexuality, homosexuality, and emotional neglect within patriarchal marriages. The story became a landmark in feminist literary history because it challenged the silence surrounding women's desires.

Although many critics labelled her writing obscene, Chughtai rejected such accusations and identified herself instead as a realist writer. She later observed:

"Since then, I have been labelled a pornographer... the younger generation has recognized that I am a realist and not a porn writer" (Chughtai, 2012, p. 39).

The controversy surrounding *Lihaaf* ultimately strengthened Chughtai's literary reputation. The story opened new possibilities for women writers and contributed significantly to feminist discourse in South Asian literature.

V. RASHID JAHAN AND THE PROGRESSIVE WRITERS' MOVEMENT

Rashid Jahan played a crucial role in shaping Chughtai's literary and ideological outlook. Chughtai regarded her as a

mentor whose boldness inspired her to challenge patriarchal traditions fearlessly.

The Progressive Writers' Association further strengthened Chughtai's commitment to social reform through literature. Writers such as Sajjad Zaheer, Krishan Chander, Mulk Raj Anand, and Saadat Hasan Manto were associated with the movement. The PWA encouraged progressive thought, secularism, social equality, and resistance against exploitation.

Chughtai actively participated in the movement and believed that literature should address the pain and struggles of ordinary people. Reflecting upon the purpose of the Progressive Movement, she argued that reform would continue as long as human conscience opposed oppression and injustice.

The influence of the PWA is clearly visible in Chughtai's writings. Her stories consistently challenge rigid social customs, religious orthodoxy, gender discrimination, and class inequality.

Editorial writers such as Rashid Jahan and Ismat Chughtai went beyond conventional discussions of women's issues by addressing sexuality, desire, and emotional repression. Their writings expanded the scope of feminist discourse within Indian literature.

VI. ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S FEMINIST REALISM AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

One of the defining characteristics of Ismat Chughtai's literary genius is her commitment to realism. Unlike romantic or idealized representations of women commonly found in earlier literature, Chughtai portrayed women as complex human beings shaped by social pressures, emotional desires, frustrations, and contradictions.

Chughtai believed that literature should not merely entertain readers but also reveal hidden social truths. Her stories dismantle the superficial respectability of patriarchal society by exposing the emotional suffering concealed within domestic spaces.

A major strength of Chughtai's fiction lies in her portrayal of female psychology. She presented women not as idealized symbols of purity and obedience but as individuals with ambitions, desires, jealousy, loneliness, and emotional complexity.

Another significant aspect of her work is the representation of domestic spaces as sites of conflict and resistance. Homes in Chughtai's stories are not peaceful or idealized environments; instead, they often become spaces where women experience confinement, surveillance, and emotional suffocation.

Her critique of society also extended to class structures. Chughtai observed the relationship between gender and class oppression with remarkable sensitivity. Many of her stories portray servants, widows, lower-middle-class women, and socially marginalized individuals whose struggles are intensified by economic inequality.

Chughtai's language further strengthened her realism. Rather than using excessively decorative literary expressions, she employed colloquial speech, humour, and conversational rhythms that reflected everyday life.

Her realism was often misunderstood as obscenity because she refused to conceal social realities. However, Chughtai insisted that confronting difficult truths was necessary for social reform.

VII. ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S LITERARY LEGACY

Ismat Chughtai is regarded as one of the four pillars of Urdu short fiction alongside Saadat Hasan Manto, Premchand, and Krishan Chander. Her contribution to literature extends beyond thematic boldness; she transformed the narrative representation of women and introduced a distinct feminist perspective into Urdu fiction.

Her writings influenced later generations of women writers, including Qurratulain Hyder, Khadija Mastoor, Razia Sajjad Zaheer, Mumtaz Shirin, and Hameeda Akhtar.

Another significant aspect of Chughtai's legacy is the translation of her works into English. Translators such as M. Asaduddin and Tahira Naqvi played an important role in introducing her writings to a wider global audience.

Chughtai's literary voice remains remarkably relevant in contemporary feminist discourse. Her critique of patriarchy, gender inequality, and social hypocrisy continues to resonate with modern readers and scholars.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Ismat Chughtai emerged as one of the most courageous and transformative voices in South Asian literature. Through her fearless exploration of gender inequality, female sexuality, economic dependence, and patriarchal oppression, she challenged dominant social and literary conventions.

Works such as *Lihaaf* and *A Life in Words: Memoirs* demonstrate her commitment to exposing the hypocrisies embedded within conservative society. Influenced by Rashid Jahan and the Progressive Writers' Association, Chughtai developed a literary vision rooted in realism, reform, and feminist consciousness.

Her contribution extends beyond Urdu literature into broader feminist and postcolonial discourse. Chughtai gave

voice to silenced experiences and redefined the representation of women in Indian fiction. Her writings continue to inspire readers, scholars, and writers by asserting the importance of truth, resistance, and creative freedom.

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