

**BREAKING FREE: A STUDY OF SELECT SHORT STORIES OF ISMAT CHUGHTAI**

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**Abstract:** The present article deals with a fiery Urdu woman writer, Ismat Chughtai's select short stories. Ismat Chughtai was the first Muslim woman to earn a B. A. Degree and B. Ed. Degree. A very outspoken and liberal woman writer, Chughtai, was in fact a pioneer of Urdu women writers. Through her writings, Chughtai, brought out the abuse and neglect of women from behind the facade of beauty and coyness. Her writings focused on the much needed importance that should be offered to the emotional and psychological needs of a growing-up girl. She also included in her narratives that part of the humanity, i.e. the elderly, which is abandoned by the society and deserted by their own children. Chughtai, who started her writing career when the fight for independence was at its peak, also brings out another important aspect of independent India to the fore; the plight of common people at the time of Partition of India.

The objective of this article is to bring out the significance of the writings of Ismat Chughtai not only as a Urdu woman writer but also as a feminist.

**Key Words:** Muslim feminists, Partition stories, Urdu women writers, Urdu short stories.

Ismat Chughtai (1915 - 1991) was an eminent Urdu writer born in Badayun, Uttar Pradesh and grew up in Jodhpur. She was the ninth of ten children. Her elder brother Mirza Azim Beg Chughtai who was her mentor was a famous writer and satirist. She was the first Muslim woman to earn a B. A. Degree and B. Ed degree. Chughtai was a contemporary of Sadat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chander, Hijab Imtiyaz Ali, Sundar Lalji, Mahendar Nath. Sadat Hasan Manto's wife, Safia was also a dear friend of Chughtai. Chughtai was influenced by the writings of Dr. Rashid Jehan, Nazar Sajjad Hyder, Somerset Maugham, and Guy de Maupassant.

Novellas: Ziddi (The Stubborn One), Dil ki Dunya (Realm of Heart), Masuma (The Innocent)

Novels: Tehri Lakeer (The Crooked Line), Saudaai (The Mad Man), Anthology of Short Stories: Kalyan (Buds) and Coten (Wounds/Injuries) Ek Baat (A Word), Chutmut (The Sensitive One), Dhani Banken (Green Bracelets), Do Hat (Two Hands), Xarid Lo (Buy), Ek Qatra e Xun (A Drop of Blood), Thori si Pagal (Just a Little Crazy)

Anthology of short stories and essays: Hum Log (We people)

Anthology of essays: Yahan se Vahan Tak (From Here to There), Collection of plays: Saitan (The Devil)

Collection of short stories and plays: Afsane Drame

Chughtai is the author of substantial work in Urdu literature and some of the short stories, novels and essays are available in English translation. Her short story, Lihaaf published in 1942 brought her both notoriety and critical applause. Many conservative people turned a blind eye to her efforts to highlight the loneliness and desperation of a young married woman rather they focused and resented the depiction of lesbianism in an orthodox Muslim Nawab family. Chughtai was sued when this short story was published in a collection of short stories by

Shahid Ahmad Dehlavi. She was severely censured by her husband and in-laws. Many orthodox people turned against her and she received a vast amount of hate mail. She admits that contemporary writer and her friend, Sadat Hasan Manto was the only person who stood by her in these trying times (Lifting the Veil 244). Chughtai reveals that this story was based on a real life incident and the Begum finally divorced her husband and re-married (Lifting the Veil 260). She also goes on to say that she visited the Begum's infant son from her second marriage and felt that the child was "an offspring of [her] my pen (260)."

Looking at the happy mother and child definitely might have made her forget all the trials and tribulations she had to undergo due to the huge conservative public outcry [1]. Chughtai also enacted the role of a spirited elderly woman in a 1978 Shyam Benegal's movie "Junoon." She also worked as a screenplay writer, dialogue writer, story writer and director for a few films. she received Ghalib Award for her novel, Tehri Lakeer, in 1974, shared Filmfare best story award for Garam Hawa with Kaifi Azmi in 1975 and Samman Award for Urdu literature in 1990. Awards have come very late to her and she is yet to be officially acclaimed as a pioneer of Urdu literature though she received critical acclaim from many quarters.

Themes: Ismat Chughtai is a realistic writer whose writings reflected meticulous observation of her surroundings and detailed impressions of the incidents in her life since her childhood. Chughtai's narratives are rooted in tradition and culture and she brought out the appalling conditions of Muslim women behind the purdah. She wrote boldly about the abuse of young girls in the hands of their male relatives (Lifting the Veil 258, The Wedding Suit) as well as by the same sex (Quilt). Her narratives on discarded and unwanted people in the society,

beggars and old people and people afflicted with life threatening diseases were full of particulars which make the readers realize her compassion towards them as seen in her short stories *Tiny's Granny*, *Mother-in-Law*, and *The Invalid* and also in her autobiographical sketch, *Hell-bound*. She writes candidly without hiding any feelings nor does she put up an act for the society. Her courage is reflected not only in her autobiographical writings (*Hell-bound*) which is about her feelings towards her elder brother and mentor, Azim Beg Chughtai but also in real life where she recollects in *In the Name of those Married Women . . . a conversation with Mr. Aslam regarding her court trial for obscenity in The Quilt*. She expresses horror that Mr. Aslam who could pen vulgarity just for the sake of exploiting the public in his *Gunah ki Ratein* could censure her short story *Quilt* on the basis of the author's gender and religion. Somerset Maugham's philosophy regarding love seems to have left a lasting impression on Chughtai. Chughtai's short story *All Alone* resembles Somerset Maugham's *Judgement Seat*. Both the stories are about wasted life of individuals who were unable to profess love for each other. Stories like *Homemaker* and *Quit India* also remind the readers of another short story of Maugham, *The Force of Circumstance*. Some of her stories on marital relationships and love remind the readers of Maugham's short stories in colonial countries. *Gainda* (1938) and *The Quilt* (1942) are two stories which have become very popular and controversial regarding the subject matter. Both these stories deal about repressed sexuality in orthodox homes. *Gainda*, the protagonist in *Gainda* and the narrator, a minor girl in *The Quilt* are sexually abused. *Gainda*, a child widow is impregnated by the young son of the family in which she works. When the news breaks out, she is immediately beaten and thrown out of the house. *Gainda* is left to fend for herself and the boy is sent to a distant place to complete his studies. A centuries-old story where young girls are abused by the masters of the house has been narrated from the viewpoint of the sister of the boy. Chughtai chooses a topic which everyone is familiar with and yet at the same time no one is willing to talk about. People would rather have controversial topics like this brushed under the carpet than try to rectify the issue. This story brings out the fragile and unsure world of a young girl and gives the formative period in a young girl's life due significance. *The Quilt* is a short story which has both negative and positive criticism levelled against Chughtai. It deals with a taboo subject, "lesbianism" in a very orthodox Muslim family as witnessed by a young girl. The theme of the story, same sex orientation in an orthodox Muslim home, written by a Muslim woman author had all the fireworks set.

The protagonist, a young girl, is left with a distant aunt when the girl's mother goes to Agra. There the girl witnesses incidents involving the aunt, Begum Jaan and the servant, Rabbu in a lesbian relationship. The young girl is also subjected to abuse by Begum Jaan, her aunt, in the absence of Rabbu, the servant. The story also implies that Nawab, the elderly husband of Begum Jaan, could be of homosexual orientation and abused poor young men who were "young, fair, slender-waisted boys"

(*Quilt* 16). Published in 1942, the story caused a lot of controversy and Chughtai was charged with obscenity. After two years of fighting in the Lahore court, the court dismissed the case as it could not find any objectionable words per se. In this story Chughtai mentions that the Nawab promoted young boys whereas it is Rabbu who initiates the relationship with Begum Jaan as interpreted by the line,

"[i]t was Rabbu who rescued her from the fall" (17).

Chughtai's narratives are not only on exploitation of poor young girls like *Gainda*, the protagonist in *The Quilt*, but also about young women like *Rani*, in *The Mole*, *Lajo* in *The Home Maker* and *Sakku bai* in *Quit India* who were initiated into sex at a very young age by their masters who go on to become seductresses of other men. One cannot judge them as that is the life they know. It is interesting to note that Chughtai's portrayal of young women from lower economic background are very sensual and seductive like *Lajo* in *The Homemaker* and *Rani* in *The Mole* but young girls from middle class families like *Bi Aapa* in *The Wedding Suit* and *Shahzad* in *All Alone* are very modest and are eternal waiters of marital suitors. Chughtai also writes about inter-religion marriage (*Sacred Duty and Kafir*), friendship between Hindus and Muslims in the time of partition (*Roots*) and friendship for political and material gain (*Survivor*). In the essay, *From Bombay to Bhopal*, Chughtai talks about the hypocrisy of the society towards reality. In this essay, she reveals the true nature of the "light" discussions that men and women have in privacy. She goes on to say that if this topics/oral literature is published, there would be a great furore (*From Bombay to Bhopal* 426). In the same essay, Chughtai also argues that women have a right to praise men's physical attributes similar to men who have been doing it since aeons. Moreover, Chughtai talks about attacking the roots of discrimination instead of dressing the wounds of inequality of men and women meted out by the society [2]. Chughtai also wrote essays to draw attention to communal violence and the literature that hit out at the consequences of partition of India. It is incomprehensible that an outspoken woman like Chughtai mentions her year of birth as 1915 whereas it

is documented as 1911 in many places. In the introduction to *Lifting the Veil*, M. Asaduddin, mentions that it could be due to the reason that she wanted people to believe that she was much younger than her husband, Shahid Latif.

**Significance of Ismat Chughtai's Works:** Ismat Chughtai's writing career began in the later part of 1930s. No doubt her main inspiration was her brother, Azim Beg Chughtai who passed away in 1941. She was also inspired by the narrating style of literary greats like Maugham, Maupassant, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, O. Henry, Charles Dickens and Leo Tolstoy. She admired Munshi Premchand, Hijab Imtiaz Ali, Majnun Gorakhpuri, Niaz Fatehpuri, and Dr. Rashid Jehan among Indian writers. Her narratives described the middle-class Muslim families of Uttar Pradesh, their culture, tradition, and mores. The culinary of the Uttar Pradesh Muslims, the various dialects of the well-to-do and the servants, idioms, the beauty and crux of Urdu language, women in sheltered and secured homes and their struggle to survive despite the constraints, the concerns of young girls, female sexuality, repression of sex, patriotism, consequences of partition, and lack of emancipation which comes through education were some of the topics of her narratives. Moreover, she writes about the highly dreaded killer disease, TB, to which her own brother fell a victim. Her narratives bring awareness to the problems of the women, children, the sick and the elderly in great detail. Tahira Naqvi says that critics have found her subjects limited but again Naqvi asserts that Chughtai was a master at writing about her own world [4] though her narrative grip falters when she writes about high society and filmi world.

Chughtai's narratives which bring out her enduring passion regarding women's issues in a patriarchal, cloistered society are unparalleled in Urdu literature. She was a pioneer in writing about the numerous issues of women related to society, gender and class. Coming from a sheltered and religious background, Chughtai did not hesitate to write about repressed sexuality in Muslim households. Right from the beginning of her writing career she was firm about

lifting the veil on various concerns related to young women so that women can be educated and liberated from the tyranny under the guise of religion and traditions. Like many other progressive writers and activists, Chughtai also sincerely felt that education for woman is the beginning of progress for both woman and mankind. In Progressive Writers' Conference conducted in Bhopal in the year 1949, Chughtai talks with the younger generation women to take up reading so as to become well-versed, liberated and enlightened [2]. Ismat Chughtai is definitely not only a pioneer in Urdu feminist literature but also a forerunner in the field of literature in India, Pakistan and other South Asian countries as well. Her short stories bring out the wretched conditions of young women of middle class Muslim households. Her progressive views regarding religion as not a barrier for friendship and companionship come out powerfully in her narratives. The readers can also gauge her patriotism in her short stories and essays. Chughtai's narratives also deal with old age and its consequences like social exclusion from the mainstream, fighting to live against death and diseases, feelings of isolation and alienation and vulnerability. Chughtai wrote at a time when education for women was considered a taboo. She wrote at a time when women were considered as secondary citizens and unimportant. Through her narratives, she emphasized the importance of women and the issues they face. Coming from an orthodox family, she dared to write about feminine issues and repressed sexuality in Muslim households. She defied all norms laid down by society based on religion and gender in her life and works. Her writings promote education and independence especially for Muslim women who are still constrained in purdah. Based on the themes of her short stories, it can be concluded that Chughtai was not only a fearless and candid writer but also a feminist who envisaged the progress of Muslim women through education. In fact, her literary work broke free from the shackles of tradition and can be rightly termed as a harbinger of emancipation in both men and women.

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