

A Feminist Reading of Ismat Chughtai's *A Life in Words*: Deconstructing the Idealised Codes of Femininity and Constructing the Feminist Praxis

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Searingly honest and unapologetic in representing her life in her much-acclaimed memoir. A Life in Words, Ismat Chughtai acknowledges that education gives her an opportunity to prove her worth over the physical prowess of her brothers and assert her identity publicly. In her memoir, she is fiercely critical of the gendered stereotypes and the hypocrisies of society. She boldly dismantles the idealised codes of femininity, and through the portrayal of the struggles of her life, she gives her female readers a possibility of community in identifying with the "I" of the memoir. While deconstructing the idealised codes of both femininity and masculinity is important to expose the oppressive power structure of society, equally important is the construction of the feminist praxis. This paper seeks to explore how writing serves the feminist self of the author to redefine womanhood and construct the New Woman through words.

Keywords: *Femininity, feminist praxis, New Woman*

1. Introduction

Ismat Chughtai (1911-91), one of the most courageous and controversial Indian Urdu writers, appeared on the literary scene during the heyday of the Progressive Writers' Movement. She was committed to women's empowerment and emancipation through education. Chughtai, the ever bold and outspoken Urdu writer, has wielded her pen to expose the decadent morality and hypocrisy of society through her works. Conscious of the secondary status allocated to women in the power structure of patriarchal society and aware of women's lack of agency since childhood, she wanted to secure a place of dignity for all women, especially for Muslim women of her

time. She explored female sexuality, class conflict and middle-class morality through her writings, often from a Marxist perspective. But unlike other communist writers of her time, she focused on the internal social and emotional exploitation in her stories instead of the external social exploitation. She portrayed the lives of Muslim women in a language and style, marked with spontaneity, raciness, repartee, witticism, freshness of idiom and imagery, and through these features she brought alive 'begumati zubaan', a language used specifically by women in the inner apartments of household.

2. Genesis of *A Life in Words*

Chughtai wrote her memoir *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* (henceforth *KHP*) for the Urdu journal *Aaj Kal* and its fourteen chapters were published from March 1979 to May 1980. It was in 1994 when these chapters were published as a volume in Urdu at the initiative of the editor of *Aaj Kal*, who added the opening chapter 'Ghubaar-e-Kaarwaan', written by the author much earlier in the same journal. *A Life in Words*, published in 2012, is the first complete English translation of *KHP* by author-critic M Asaduddin. A radical and unconventional writer like Chughtai wrote her memoir with little regards for coherence and biographical details set in a linear time frame. This freedom from adherence to a linear time that is otherwise absent in the grand narrative of autobiography is inherent in the genre of memoir. She hardly mentions dates and years, thereby undermining its value as a historical document; yet this is precisely what is making her work timeless and her voice representative of the voice of suppressed women across the ages.

3. The Making of the Feminist Chughtai

In her memoir, Chughtai (2012) eulogised men and women, who left an indelible mark in her life and were crucial in the shaping of the New Woman that she is advocating. She is forever indebted to her elder brother Mirza Azim Beg Chughtai, a noted novelist in Urdu literature, for guiding her to create an identity for herself through education. Her memoir chronicles her journey from having a sense of inferiority for being

born as a girl, for not being able to outdo her brothers in terms of physical strength to her realisation- "It is not necessary to be a boy, what you need is the intelligence and ingenuity of a boy" (p. 12). She records Azim Bhai saying, "Boys are like bulls, why do you want to be a bull? Take them on in the sphere of learning; there you will beat them hands down" (p. 9). She inherited a fierce sense of self-respect and the necessity to offer resistance at the face of oppression from her mentor Rasheed Jahan, whom she fondly called Rasheed Apa, who acquainted her with the basics of communism. Rasheed Jahan was a liberal and highly educated MBBS doctor and women's rights activist, who in 1932 together with Sajjad Zaheer and Ahmad Ali, published a collection of stories *Angare* which was confiscated upon the charge of obscenity and mutiny. She had always appreciated Ismat's outspokenness and her ability to judge things critically. During her higher studies at Aligarh Girls' College and then at IT College, Lucknow, Ismat immersed herself completely in studies. These were the shaping years of her life when she read Dickens, Gorky, Chekhov, Emile Zola, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Maupassant which brought her back from the world of romance to the world of reality. She learnt something from every book she read. These books shattered her romanticised worldview. This understanding of the real world gave her the quintessential insight into the lives of ordinary people and their pretensions which later on found expression in her fictional narratives.

4. Chughtai's Concept of Womanhood

Chughtai has demonstrated through her life that the concept of womanhood is a constructed one as it is also said in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 20). On one hand, she criticises the patriarchal society for containing women, muting their voices, curbing their rights and controlling their agency, while on the other hand, she does not falter to censure women who internalise and perpetuate the detrimental mores of patriarchal society,

I considered femininity a sham, and looked upon compromise as falsehood, patience as cowardice and

gratitude as duplicity. I was not in the habit of beating about the bush. Even de g up, wearing gaudy clothes and applying make-up to hide one's blemishes seemed a kind of deception. (p. 10)

She further reflected, "I hated moaning women, who bore illegit children. Fidelity and beauty, which are considered a woman's virtues; I condemn them. Love is a burden on the heart and nothing else. I learned this from Rashid Aapa." ("Profile of Ismat Chughtai," n.d.)

5. Chughtai's Criticism against Women

Chughtai, in her memoir, recreates the stories of her life in such a way that it holds a mirror up to society, and at the same time, provides a model to women to resist the oppressive and decadent norms of patriarchal society. At times, certain episodes are mentioned only to generate awareness among women that they too are responsible for their present condition. One such episode is the discussion on the first chapter of the Bible that she had in Miss Chacko's class during her days in IT College. She shares her feelings of humiliation and anger with her readers after reading: "The woman has to carry the burden of all transgressions, which is her secondary existence" (p. 269). She and her friends had fierce debates on the contradictory views of evolution offered by religion and the theory of evolution. Then, her narrative changes its tone from one of conversation to assertion, and records:

In the beginning, men and women had a more or less equal status. In terms of physical strength too there was not much difference... Women used to be the chief of tribes. Slowly, the quest for comfort made them physically weak. Just as the rulers wallowing in luxury lose their kingdoms and become kings in name only, women lost their importance and were turned into machines for producing children. They were gradually relegated to working at home. (p. 270)

Here, Chughtai explains how women used to enjoy a position of prominence due to their reproductive capacity in the earlier days, and how they were gradually relegated to a secondary position due to their love of comfort. When men gained the reins of governance in the tribe, they engaged themselves in constant warfare to acquire more and more power. Women were

reduced to the status of child-bearing machines to fill in the losses suffered in those wars, in terms of human lives. They, along with goats and rams, became objects of plunder as their numbers became deciding factors in the selection of the chief of a tribe. This custom of possessing women as property gradually gave rise to the institution of marriage. Chughtai further says,

Separate values developed for the possessor and the possession to live by. Man became the provider and woman's spiritual god. It became a woman's duty to serve the man. She did not have to face the challenges of life. As long as she kept her man pleased and produced more and more soldiers, she led a secure and peaceful life. After that she met the same fate as that of old, worthless cattle. That is why women are scared of old age and conceal their age; so far she has been dependent on the kindness of her husband and sons. (p. 271)

She also exposes the concept "Paradise is under the feet of the mother" (p. 271) as an ideology, constructed deliberately by aged women in order to ensure their survival as during old age they are dependent on their children. Such a frank and systematic analysis of women's loss of power compels the female reader to review her position from a critical perspective. Though this was meant to awaken women to their inherent power and encourage them to question the stereotyped value system, it drew less flak from the proponents of such system as Chughtai wrapped "the message neatly in a story or a narrative" (p. 13). She learnt this art from her elder brother Azim Bhai. She even portrays her mother as a spokesperson of such separate value systems, evolved and perpetuated by agents of patriarchy over the years. She records her mother saying,

This was a man's world, ... made and distorted by man. A woman is a tiny part of this world and man has made her the object of his own love and hatred. Depending on his whims, he worships her or rejects her. To make a place for herself in the world a woman has to resort to feminine wiles. Patience, prudence, wisdom and social graces- these will make a man dependant on a woman. From the start, ... make a boy so dependant on you that he feels embarrassed to sew his own button and would die of shame if he has to

prepare his own meal. Do all the small chores that a servant can do, bear with his injustices with quiet self-abasement so he eventually feels remorseful and falls at your feet to ask for forgiveness! (pp. 9-10)

But Chughtai finds this slavish mentality a sham, and womanly wiles cowardice. All through her life, she has protested against such false values and deceptions. She thinks that if economic dependence compels a girl to obey the men in her family, then that too is a deception. Chughtai believes, "To maintain the eternal relationship between man and woman it is enough for a man to be a man and a woman to be a woman" (p. 10). She compares the helplessness of a wife who stays with her husband because he is her provider with that of a prostitute. Such women will give birth to children who will perpetuate this tradition of helplessness and slavish mentality. She locates this slavish mentality in the larger context of developing nations being always dependent on the munificence of developed nations. Here she tries to make her female readers aware of the importance of self-respect. Through the story of her close friend Mangu, Chughtai has demonstrated the power of resistance. After giving birth to the third girl child, Mangu lost her importance to her mother-in-law due to her failure in producing a male progeny. She endured all physical tortures inflicted on her by her mother-in-law and husband, but when her rights were about to be curbed with the planning of a second marriage of her husband, she resisted that in her own way. She might be illiterate and uncultivated; but was aware of her rights. Chughtai says, "As long as the women of our country continue to suffer oppression without resistance we will be weighed down by a sense of inferiority in political and economic spheres too" (p. 11).

6. Chughtai's Views on the Purdah System

Chughtai was always against the purdah system, though as a child she could not openly protest against her parents who imposed purdah on her; she discarded its use in her own unique way, on one occasion by intentionally hiding it in the bundle of beds just before alighting from a train. She used to regard burqa as a source of humiliation; it gives her an intense feeling

of debasement. But patriarchal indoctrination was so deep rooted that many women themselves were in favour of its use; they used it on the pretext of guarding their privacy and honour. Young Chughtai's critical gaze could perceive the drawbacks of this system, and during her days in the Aligarh Girls' College, she expressed how important the lifting of the purdah is for a healthy social relationship between the sexes:

...once the purdah is lifted, some base emotions that thrive simply on imagination and become the cause of much mental confusion get resolved. One stands face to face with reality. One does not look at another simply as a member of the other sex but as an ordinary human being. The possibility of blind love gets reduced and life can be built on surer foundations (p. 155).

7. Education for Woman's Emancipation

Chughtai thinks that only education can bring women out of this quagmire of imposed and indoctrinated constraints. At an early age she realised, "For a country to develop, educated mothers are needed" (p. 272). But the society in which she grew up believed, "to educate a girl was worse than prostituting her" (p.72). It was against this belief system that she fought tooth and nail to educate herself. Through her memoir, she questions the false values of society: "If education is dangerous, it must be so for every living being ... What is poison to one cannot be elixir to the other" (p. 271). In her family, she was allowed to have education, but only to a certain extent after which it was considered harmful for girls as they believed that education beyond a certain level would ruin their capacity to become good wives and good mothers. When she wanted to go to Aligarh for taking the matriculation exam, her entire family went against her; but she was also not an easy nut to crack. When all means failed, she had to take recourse to threats. She threatened her parents with her decision to become a Christian convert if they would not give her permission for further studies. At this, her father finally gave in to her threats and her urge for learning, but his permission displayed more of indifference as he said,

This is a passbook. With your signature, you can draw money from the post office. You have six thousand rupees in your account. You may consider this your dowry or your portion of inheritance. We want to be freed from your

responsibility... We have also made over a house in Agra in your name. You could sell it or rent it, whatever you want (p. 119).

Fighting against all odds, she went to Aligarh Girls' College and then to IT College, Lucknow for completing her higher studies.

8. Writing about Woman's Desire and Sexuality

Her memoir is often considered her defence against her much-criticised story "*Lihaaf*". In "*Lihaaf*", we have seen the character *Begum Jaan* who finds pleasure in an emotional and sensual relationship with her masseuse. Charges of obscenity were levelled against her for writing such a story. The hilarious delineation of the courtroom proceedings, held as a part of adjudicating the charges levelled against her after the publication of "*Lihaaf*", shows the misplaced value system of the hypocrite patriarchal society. It was her sense of fierce independence, her acknowledgement of the existence of the woman's self and her awareness of women's rights that gave her the courage to write about woman's desire and their initiating the sexual act. In her stories, she delves deeper into the issue of carnal desire and female sexuality. Her female characters are not paragons of virtue, they are rather very much human with their physical and emotional needs which should be understood and fulfilled. In "*Til*", we have *Rani* who is bold enough to express her sexual desires blatantly. In "*Gharwali*", *Lajjo* is seen to be proud of her body; she is very much aware of her physicality. Through her writings, she has always tried to voice the unvoiced needs and desires of women, and that is why she has been termed "Urdu's Wicked Woman" (Naeem, 2019). As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001) have said in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*,

Male distrust and repression of female speech condemned most women to public silence, which in turn qualified their relationship to writing as a means of exploring and asserting an identity publicly. Women who presumed to claim fully human identity by seeking places in the public arena were seen as transgressing patriarchal definitions of their nature, or "acting like men". To challenge cultural conceptions of the nature of woman was to invite public censure (pp. 114-5).

9. Conclusion

Chughtai redefines womanhood by systematically recreating her self through her memoir and thereby constructing the New Woman whom she is championing in her works and in real life. This new woman is educated, aware of her rights, accepts things only after judging them critically and she is economically independent. This new woman does not hesitate to meet men with an open mind or share a hearty laugh with them; Chughtai (2012) says, "I like intelligent men who are sharp at repartee. I also hit it off well with clever and outspoken women" (p. 202). By sharing all the trivial details of her life- like her fights with her brothers, her father's affection for her, her mother's disapproval of her manly pursuits, her brother Azim Bhai's instigating her to speak on controversial issues, her coming to terms with her sexuality and the changes in her body- Chughtai has offered her female readers a possibility of community as they can find an affinity with the "I" of the memoir. She has never followed the idealised codes of femininity in her life. She has unmasked the project of patriarchy as detrimental to the growth of women and society at large, and also shown the role of women in perpetuating gender stereotypes. She has always lived her life on her own terms, and through her memoir she has shown how she has chartered the unconventional path to explore the possibilities of life. Chughtai wants her readers to understand that they always have a choice between accepting the idealised codes of femininity as docile, submissive women and following their own free will; and this choice will determine their position in society.

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