

ISSN: 0976-8165

Bi-Monthly, Refereed, and Indexed Open Access eJournal

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 8, Issue- IV (August 2017)
UGC Approved Journal No 768

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Ismat Chughtai: The Formidable Emancipator: Reading Selected Short Stories

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Article History: Submitted-24/06/2017, Revised-22/08/2017, Accepted-24/08/2017, Published-10/09/2017.

Abstract:

An artist whose paradigm is beyond capture, social reformer and progressive thinker, Ismat Chughtai remains one of the most formidable among the South-Asian writers. A few translated works available give us only a tip of the iceberg. In a reading of some selected short stories available to us in translated form we come across the different themes that distinguish Chughtai's work and make her an awe-inspiring writer of all times.

Keywords: emancipation , women, middle-class , visionary.

Ismat Chughtai is one of the most revolutionary writers of all times. Thinking beyond her age, she has been a radical influence, a philosopher, a reformist and a feminist in the truest sense of the term. Born at a time when slight provocation to tradition spelt doom, Chughtai had the courage, the passion and the straight-forwardness to challenge the societal chains to the questions of womanhood. Her forcefulness in stating her observations of what happened around her, to ponder over the reality and its 'real' happenings made her at once a writer much appreciated and rumoured about. Her field of work was not expansive and concentrated mainly around the familial ties and along the path that she grew up, people she met during her studies and in her path to professional writing. It is beyond doubt Chughtai's emotionalism and her deep understanding of human psychology that makes her stories so endearing and close to our heart. However, Chughtai refrains from being judgmental and issuing a verdict. She presents people, situations and incidents. She draws pictures on her canvas and leaves it to the reader to explain its meaning. It is the reader who is left at most times, with a pungent taste. Chughtai's sensitivity to her characters makes even the most spurious person appear to us as possessing a human soul. She insists that man is forced to react by situations, incidents and circumstances in which they live. She was bold, unfettered, fearless, the pioneer of Urdu fiction and one of the foremost feminists in South-Asian literature. Tahira Naqvi in her essay, "*The Beguiling Ismat Chughtai-through her own words*" refers to what "the other great Indian writer Quarratulain Hyder , dubbed her 'Lady Changez Khan' partly because she could trace her lineage to Changez Khan but mostly due to her audacious and strident approach to life and writing." Chughtai writes "There's something in me that militates against putting faith in anyone uncritically, however great and intellectual he may be. Such a bad habit – I would first look for loopholes in his theory. One should first examine all points of disagreement before coming to a consensus. I cannot

believe anything suddenly; take it at its face value. I think the first word articulated by me after birth was – “why”” (Chughtai xvi)

Ismat Chughtai was born in Badayun (now in Uttar Pradesh) in the year 1911, controversy surrounding it as it was erroneously recorded as 1915(Chughtai herself is said to have rumored it to be so since her husband, Shahid Latif was younger to her by four years) and finally resolved after her nephew claimed it to be 1911. 2015 was celebrated in many places as the birth centenary year of Chughtai as it was still considered to be 1915 then. Later, the publication of *Ismat : Her Life and Times*(New Delhi:Katha.2000.print,pix) claimed it to be 1911. She died on 24th October, 1991. She was the ninth of ten brothers and sisters. She published her first short story “*Fasadi*” in a prestigious Urdu literary magazine called ‘*Saqi*’ at the age of 23. After completing her B.A she enrolled herself for the teacher’s training program, the only Muslim woman to obtain both degrees at her time. From 1939-41, she taught at Rajmohon Girl’s School, Jodhpur and later became the Inspectress of Schools in Bombay. In Bombay, she met and married Shahid Latif, a well-known film director along with whom she wrote screen plays and took to script writing for movies such as *Junoon*, *Garam Hawa*, *Jawab Ayega*, *Arzoo*, *Ziddi* etc. In her lifetime Chughtai adorned the robe of a writer both in screen and in print writing short stories, novels and non-fiction. However, it is her fervour and flavor in short story writing that gained Chughtai her popularity.

She was lucky to have among her fellow fictionalists – Rajinder Singh Bedi, Kishan Chander and most importantly Sadat Haassan Manto, and together they formed the four pillars of Urdu fiction. She was a member of the Progressive Writers Movement in Lucknow where she met Rashid Jahan, a doctor by profession whose liberal thinking influenced Chughtai to a large extent. Chughtai thoroughly complimented the movement with her progressive style and thinking. To her ‘progressive’ meant “all people who have said something good and nice for the good of humanity are progressive writers?”(Mehfil) She was born at a time when most Muslim women observed purdah and their subalternity did not give them a voice or face in the patriarchal and feudal hegemonic structure of the society in which they lived. Chughtai’s was the first voice that raised significant questions of enlightenment. Contributions of Muslim women in the past, in the field of education and social reform have been in most cases erased or overwritten by the agencies of narrative, and stories of resistance from behind the veil suffocated: this partially because of their segregation from the mainstream women population due to their elementally rigid and conservative societal structure. Chughtai says “Our family was progressive, but this attitude was acceptable only for boys. I was after all just a girl. Every woman in the family – mother, aunt, sister – was terrorized. Society had a fixed station for her. If she overstepped these limits, she would have to pay the price. Too much education was dangerous” (Chughtai xii).

“*Childhood*” records the infinite miseries of being born a girl including the choice of toys for girls at home “chunnu and Shamim would run to play games, but, being a girl, I would play with dolls. They say playing with dolls teaches one good conduct. My aversion to dolls was infinite. (52)” “Chunu after all, was a boy. His faults were no faults. However, the girls must be

perfect; otherwise, they would ruin their husband's families" (54) and along with this, the nostalgic longing to return back to childhood.

Ismat Chughtai's stories draw generously from her life. Her characters are more than often chosen from real life. Chughtai's *A Life in words: Memoirs* translated from the original Urdu *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* by M. Asaduddin is an important point of reference in this context. The book "demonstrates that as far as Ismat Chughtai was concerned, there was a close correspondence between her life and her art" (Chughtai:Memoirs. xvi). Some critics have criticized Chughtai for her myopic field of work, her pre-occupation with middle class life, women. However, it is her zest, exuberance and celebration of life that adorn the pages of her writing. No wonder that it would later be given a visual medium as well. As we read her stories, the characters seem to come alive and unfold their vicissitudes before us and appear endearing even in their worst position.

Chughtai's encounters with writers, her view of the socio-political situation of her times, women's emancipation and financial independence- such and more questions related to a Muslim women's growing self-awareness of her position come alive in her writings. She writes in an easy flow, there is almost or no redundancy of words and the writer's mind seem to over-speed the pen as narratives are intermingled. One would wonder whether fact meets fiction here or is fiction revisited in the guise of fact; for her, life itself is a multi-narrative, the microcosmic incidents dissolving into the macrocosmic author narrative. Her stories can be read as a historical document, recording a young Muslim woman's growing sensitivity and challenging her position in a rigid patriarchal hegemony. Chughtai is an institution on her own because of her bravery, courage to write about themes that were considered taboo in a conservative Muslim society at a time when Muslim women did not have a dais to voice their dissent. Women's subjectivity and individuality are features that Chughtai stood for. In *Ismat Chughtai- A tribute*, Taahira Naqvi writes "The better part of her writing shows a deep and abiding preoccupation with women's issues, particularly their cultural status and their myriad roles in Indian society. By underscoring women's struggles against the oppressive institutions of her time, she brings to her fiction an understanding of the female psyche that is unique ; no other Urdu fiction writer has approached women's issues with the same degree of sensitivity and concern"(The Annual of Urdu studies, Naqvi 41).

Chughtai's own brother, Azim Beg Chughtai (Munna Bhai) was a renowned writer and one of the forerunners of women emancipation. He had a considerable influence in the growth of Chughtai as an independent thinker. "In those days Azim Bhai had created quite a stir by writing such articles as 'The Quran and Purdah' and 'Hadith and purdah'. There were fierce debates both in favour of and against purdah"(49, Memoirs.)*Hell-bound* records Azim's last days , his vivacity as a writer and Ismat's deep-rooted respect and love for his writings and thoughts "Never defeated, always smiling. A wrathful and tyrannical God had visited upon him every torture that his constant coughing and asthma could bring him and he responded to all of them with a laugh. No pain that this world or the next could produce was spared him, but nothing

could reduce him to tears.”(213) “He too felt pain - he was poor, ill and destitute. He too was oppressed by capitalism, and yet with all that, he had the courage to make faces at life and to laugh at his distress. It was not only in his stories that he laughed; in every department of life he defeated distress with laughter”.(215)

The subtlety with which Chughtai touches the core issues of middle class life is poignant. In *The Wedding Suit* we have the story of two sisters Kubra and Hamida. The elder daughter not yet married and the younger slowly growing up into a lascivious young lady. The sudden arrival of Rahat brings in hopes for a groom but the shy, introvert Kubra distances herself, pushing her sister all the while to know him. In the process Rahat falls for Hamida. Kubra’s silent endurance of her fate and her overt goodness breaks her down – the wedding suit now stitched into a shroud – “the mark of the white cotton on the red twill. How many young girls would have merged their longings in its red, and how many unfortunate virgins would have mingled its white in the whiteness of their shrouds”.(38). We really agree with M. Asaduddin when he says that “while one reads her stories, one enters a culture – the culture of the Muslims of UP and all the ingredients that make up its texture: the beliefs and superstitions, religious observances, rites and rituals related to birth, marriage, death and other social occasions, manners and styles in dress, social hierarchy, speech patterns, topography of dwelling units, food preferences, culinary skill , and so on.”(xx). *Of fists and rubs* is similarly set on a voting day where we find a character Ganga –bai who comes there to cast her vote for her caste man so that she can obtain her farmland, go back home, thrash the paddy and stay happy, none of which materialized in the last election. The narrator locates her acquaintance with Ganga Bai to a Ward in the hospital and her constant bickering with Ratti Bai , their soiled life and character and the horrific story of ‘fists and rubs’ – another name for abortion ‘bai-style’ which would lead several women maimed. The horror does not end here as the narrator comes to know soon- that the cotton used for cleaning wounds is reused by these Bais to supply cotton to traders who then sell it to furniture makers. Only to think that the new sofa set in our well-polished house may have come from the dustbins of a hospital. Our sympathy in the first part is turned into abomination for this macabre deed. Chughtai was classless, she believed in movement across class and caste and in her basic understanding of human psychology she remains exceptionally gifted. *Of fists and rubs* questions the very justification of the voting system as a sanction for lifetime peace. Selfishness and greed has wringed out the basic human feelings and empathy.

Chughtai wrote about female sexuality, from the first arousal of sexuality in a child (Gainda) through adolescence (*Tiny's Granny, The Net*) and adulthood. Love is dealt with in its myriad aspects. We have the story *The Invalid* where the husband ‘invalidly’ (physically due to tuberculosis and mentally due to the loss of his earlier position) looks on as his young wife is admired by many “His wife had once promised to be a companion through life and death. But now she was scared of the viruses, washed her hands with carbolic acid and gargled with sodawater. What a wide gulf there was between them now!” Again the love of Shahzad Hasan in *All Alone* is entirely different. True love does not always end in consumption- Shahzad and

Dilshad hold their precious love in their hearts for years “Am I lonely? Someone has been living his life beyond the seven seas enshrining me in his heart. Whenever I had wanted, I took refuge in his arms. My art and my imprisonment are of my own choice. My desires are under my control.”(184). *Sacred Duty* is a beautiful story of love between a boy and a girl belonging to different religions and their parents’ opposition to their match and ends with a beautiful statement that all religions are one “I’ve told papaji and now I’m telling you that we don’t have any religion. All religions are gifts from that supreme Being who is called Bhagwan or God.”(143). Chughtai was a non-conformist, a visionary and this is reflected in all her writings. A similar vein is also found in the story *Kafir* where an inter-religious couple take the alternative path to elope fearing non-acceptance from their family members “...If I tell the people of the mohalla, that you’re trying to make me an infidel, they’ll make mincemeat of you. If I become a Hindu, my nose won’t be safe even if I get one made of rubber. Pushkar, we are slaves. We’ve no control over our lives. Society dictates it. It can do with us whatever it wants. We can’t do anything about it.” And Pushkar retorts “I’ll rip apart this society into pieces.” Chughtai’s *The Quilt* (*Lihaaf*) is an infamous tale of queer, presented through the eyes of a child. She along with Manto(for *Bu*) was charged with obscenity for *Lihaaf* and taken to court in Lahore but the charge was dropped as no ‘words of obscenity ‘ could be found. *The Quilt* is a tale of pain, of a women’s dissatisfaction and ultimate quest for it .Chughtai voiced the need for female sexual satisfaction much before theorists spoke about it. In *In the name of those married women* (translated from *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan*), she writes “But when I wrote *Lihaaf*, there was a veritable explosion. I was torn to shreds in the literary arena...Since then I have been branded an obscene writer. No one bothered about what I had written before or after *Lihaaf* I was put down as a purveyor of sex. It is only in the last couple of years that the younger generation has recognised that I am a realist and not an obscene writer.”(Chughtai. Memoirs 39-40). Chughtai wrote openly about the hypocrisy of the society “Which boy would have taken interest in a plain Jane like me? I had studied so much that whenever there was a debate, I would beat to a pulp all the young men who were scared of the sight of books. They considered themselves superior to women merely because they were men!”(39). The word does not connote vulgarity but it is the mind which gives shape to it “When I had read it (*Behishti Zevar*, a book of conduct written by Maulana Ashraf Ali Tanvi and a favourite with the believers of Islam in South-Asia) in my childhood I was shocked. Those things seemed vulgar to me. But when I read it again after my B.A. ,I realized that they were not vulgar but important facts of life about which every sensible person should be aware. Well, people can brand the books prescribed in the courses of psychology and medicine vulgar if they so want.”(30) Later, in her interview with *Mehfil* in 1972, she says “When I wrote on this subject, I thought – how stupid of me!- that this was something only women did. I thought that men always went to prostitutes but because girls can’t go to prostitutes they do this...I didn’t know about it because no one ever discussed it. They might discuss sex, but not this aspect of it, perversion.”

Manto had unwittingly called Chughtai ‘a mere woman after all’ as he felt that the last line of *Lihaaf* was a giveaway and could have been omitted. Later he felt that it was these womanly

qualities that made Chughtai a sensitive soul “If she had not been a “mere woman after all” then we would not have found such fine and sensitive stories like *Bhulbhuiyan*, *Til*, *Lihaaf* and *Gainda* in her collection. They portray different facets of a woman –neat and transparent, purged of all artifice...The objective of these spiritual gestures is man’s conscience which encompasses the unknown and unintelligible but tender nature of a woman.”(Manto)

In *Quit India* we find a story of an English man’s love for the land and the people he has colonized. Sakku Bai’s body becomes a site of conquest, the undying love of a man for the gifts that he has obtained. In 1942 , as the country rises with its slogans of Quit India, Jackson Saheb feels dislocated, displaced, disassociated “Every object in the house seemed to cry out: you’ve no country...you’ve no race...no colour. Sakku Bai is your country, and your race, for she has given you unending love...Because she is among the wretched in her country... Exactly like you and like millions of other human beings who are born in different parts of the world...whose births are not celebrated and whose deaths are not mourned...A deep sigh went up from his heart, and a tear dropped from his real eye onto the dirty durrie.”(116) Chughtai’s story captures that aspect of post-colonialism that still needs more research.

M.Asaddudin states “ Chughtai’s own perception of the issue: sexual attraction and raw sensuality is vested in women of the lower strata of society, while shame , silence and erasure of sexuality is the lot of middle class, ‘respectable’ women.(xxii)In this context he draws the assertion of Kumkum Sangari “This particular construction of sexual desire, as that which is contained or repressed by middle class morality, in fact presumes a desire that is always there ready to be un-discovered as a form of primal energy, thus facilitating a conflation of sexuality and the unconscious.”(xxii-iii). In stories like *The Mole* and *The Homemaker*, Rani and Lajo tantalizes both the characters and the readers with suggestions of their overt sexuality or the Bahu whose agility and voluptuousness troubles the Ma-in-law in the story *Mother-in-law*. This is contrasted with suppression of libidinal urge in the Begum (*Lihaaf*) which later finds its escape in suggested lesbianism. In the story *The Net* a piece of flimsy net garments brings two sisters Attan and Saffu to distrust each other suggesting that it is the primal instincts of need that control human behavior to a large extent. However, Chughtai does not criticize or condemn one succumbing to instinct nor is she in revulsion of women forced to pursue sex as a profession such as in *Vocation* “Poor woman! I felt pity for her. It is quite possible that she was compelled to part with her precious virginity. Perhaps some brute had violated her virginity, thus forcing her to become a public commodity. I felt a sudden affection for her.”(161)

Quit India and *Roots* are historical captures of the transitional phase of India. Chughtai captures the essence of rootlessness and dislocation embedded deep in the mind of several people during the partition eras. In the former we find “the fading relic of the British Empire” and in the latter Amma’s refusal to cross the border and her innate belief in the goodness of her Hindu neighbours. “What’s this strange bird called “our land”? Tell me where’s that land? This is the place where one was born; one grew up in body and mind. If this cannot be one’s own land, then how can the place where one simply goes and settles down for a couple of days be one’s own?

And who knows whether one won't be driven out from there as well and be told "Go and inhabit a new land?"?"(206) echoing the sentiment of many people during the partition era.

Ismat Chughtai remains a non-conformist, opinionated writer, stubborn and formidable. It is a pity that many of her works have remained inaccessible to the readers in English language because of the absence of translations. Chughtai had said that my children come first in my life and everything second. What a great mother the posterity have been blessed with! Her indomitable spirit, ever-lingering smile challenged the society in which she lived not only through her writings or films but through her very personality. She is the embodiment of a never-say-die attitude; of living life to the fullest and the very few translated works available bear testimony to this. One of the pioneers in feminist progressive thinking in South-Asian literature, her works call for a bigger celebration and greater recognition; although Chughtai's works have now reached many book shelves, yet faint is the recognition and dim the limelight.

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