

Chapter – Two

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A rebellious attitude, radical thinking, progressive mind, and a daring voice to speak on the taboos, is what makes Ismat Chughtai(1911- 1991) a writer of unforgettable repute and caliber who carved a niche for herself in the Urdu world of literature. Chughtai was one of the foremost writers of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) which was formed to address unprecedented and ignored issues and problems. Chughtai introduced the urban middle-class Muslim society and culture into mainstream Urdu literature.

This chapter focuses on the events, influences, convictions, and beliefs that have gone into the making of Ismat Chughtai's (1911-1991) artistic sensibility. The people, who molded her personality and shaped her voice as a writer, will also be included in it. Her work is the reflection of her beliefs, and her writing especially her short fiction has put many women's issues at the center of discussion for people to understand and thrash out which were not discussed in the past and had been ignored. Her own struggles, turmoil, problems and issues on the personal level have come under scrutiny and have been analyzed in order to understand her writings better as her fiction and personal life are inextricably linked and are inseparable from each other. Some biographical incidents which have facilitated her in becoming an ardent feminist and realist in her approach and writing have also been examined to have a comprehensive understanding of her world.

Ismat Chughtai in the world of Urdu literature reigned supreme and made her presence felt in it with her bold, frank, and witty style. Avowedly associated with Progressive movement, she played a pivotal role in the development of Urdu short story by portraying the existing

clashes of her time in the middle-class Muslim contemporary society. In the early decades of twentieth century when women were behind the “purdah” and it was unconventional writing of woman and about the woman as they were marginalized and never deemed important enough to be talked about, she emerged as a staunchly feminist writer. She unreservedly lashed out patriarchal ways of subjugating and suppressing women in her writing, especially in the world created in her stories. Her many short stories and novels have been translated into English, placing her as a writer of international recognition.

Her forthright manner and undaunted attitude won her accolades and criticism alike, and made her unforgettable legend in her own right. Writing at a time when the society was orthodox and purdah-ridden for Muslim women, she spoke in support of women’s liberty, autonomy and self-reliance. She berated patriarchal system that devalued women, and interrogated the discriminatory ways of the society which harassed and exploited the women just because of her corporeal distinctions from men. She drew our attention to the stark realities of downtrodden and their quotidian lives. To emancipate women, salvage their dignity, and ameliorate their condition, she delineated such characters in her stories and novels which served the purpose of being a clarion call. Through the portrayal of various characters in her short stories, she warned women against their unsavory position and told what dire consequences women had to face after child marriage, or for remaining illiterate, and extensively delved deep in the issues related to women’s sexual, cultural, social, and psychological lives.

She wrote on implausible and unexplored themes which could shy away in day light. Her stories are steeped in traditional Muslim household and their rituals and lifestyle. She actually gave vent to unheard issues, and made taboo subjects a part of dining-table discussions and thus, paved the road to better understanding of sensitive issues like widowhood, loss of freedom,

exasperation of a married woman devoid of love, and unfulfilled woman becoming a soft target of molestation in the household, and domestic violence. She dared to go beyond the physical aspect of women, and explored psychological and emotional territories of her characters. She made furor in the literary Urdu circle, and heralded a new era of frank discussion and depiction of female sexual desires and their body. Chughtai indomitably wrote and raised female consciousness. The corpus penned down by her proved to be instrumental in raising feminist consciousness. It generated awareness among both, men and women, regarding the reality surrounding women's status, and thus guided which way to go.

Chughtai was a trail-blazer in terms of the themes she chose to write on. Her fiction gave ample opportunity to explore the unexplored in terms of women's exasperation, helplessness, and exploitation, and through the portrayal of her society, one could see their mind-working and inner world. She examined the minute details that governed their lives. Her stories exposed the gendered reality of their existence. In her article "Ismat Chughtai – A Tribute", Tahira Naqvi writes about the importance of Ismat Chughtai as a writer in these words:

Her greatness as the grand dame of Urdu fiction, as one of the four pillars of modern Urdu short story (the other three being Manto, Krishan Chander, and Rajinder Singh Bedi), as the indomitable spirit of the Urdu *afsana*, the last chronicler of the Uttar Pradesh Muslim culture and its associated semantics, was affirmed again and again in tributes by old friends and contemporaries, new and young writers, journalists, and critics she developed the markings of a feminist in the early forties when the concept of feminism was in its nascent stage, even in the West; she spoke her mind unreservedly; she was afraid of no one, nothing; she was a rebel. (37)

The importance of Ismat Chughtai as a writer lies in the fact that she played the “role (of) an innovator and revolutionary in the area of fiction” at a time when “women were discouraged from involving themselves in intellectual pursuits” (Naqvi, “Tribute” 37). Born on August 15, 1911 in a conventional middle-class Muslim family of Badayun, Ismat Chughtai was the ninth child of Nusrat Khanam¹ and Qasim Beg Chughtai. Her father, Khan Bahadur Qasim Beg Chughtai, Khan Bahadur being the title given to him by the British government as the recognition to his services to the government, served as a judicial magistrate, and retired as a Deputy Collector. Due to his various transfers to different cities of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan: two states of India, she got an opportunity to travel and mingle with people belonging to different cultures and places. For some years, she lived in Lucknow, Agra, Sambhal, Aligarh, Behraich, Badayun, Jodhpur, Sojat, Javare, Bareilly, and Bombay (Maharashtra). Her mother Nusrat Khanam was a conservative and conventional woman who always remained apprehensive about the future of Chughtai, considering her tomboyish ways and stubborn nature. In her unfinished memoir, *The Paper-thin Garment/A Life in Words: Memoirs of Ismat Chughtai (Kaghazi hai Pairahan²)*, she tells how she was a part of a joint family, crowded with uncles, aunts, and cousins. She grew up with her six brothers as her three elder sisters³ got married when she was very young: “My three sisters had already been married off before I grew up. Even so, being the only girl amongst many boys, I seldom lost out. . . .So I aped the boys and learnt to climb trees, and race on the bicycle everywhere” (Kumar & Sadique 24 -25).

This resulted in the intimacy with her brothers who gave her their company in her growing years, especially with Azeem bhai, as she used to call him. By living in the atmosphere where majority was of boys in the household, she unconsciously learned to be open, frank, and candid which is reflected even in her writing. In the interview, *Guftagu (The Conversation)*,

which later was being used as a Foreword to one of her collection of stories, *Khareed Lo (Buy It)*, Chughtai shared:

We are all frank, my father, my brother, all of us. We never used to sit in a separate groups . . . my father was very progressive and broadminded. He believed in education and gave me equal chances with my brothers . . . I never had the feeling that I should be shy and nervous. Because of that upbringing, I'm this way (frank and outspoken). (Naqvi, Introduction viii)

Her bonding with her elder brother Mirza Azeem Beg Chaghtai⁴, an established writer of that time, was really strong. He was one of the most decisive influences on Chughtai. Prompted by him, she began to read Qur'an, and became aware of world politics and literature. He introduced to her a plethora of literary writers of English literature from whom she learnt the art of storytelling: "Starting with Hardy and Bronte sisters, I arrived at George Bernard Shaw. But the books by Russian litterateurs had the greatest influence because I encountered them when I was looking around for a guiding spirit." She claims that Chekhov is one writer who inspires her even today (Kumar & Sadique 29). She remembers how her brother, Azeem Beg Chaghtai, instigated and encouraged her to take translation exercises. In "Apbeeti", which is translated by Salman Hashmi, she mentioned how Azeem Beg became her mentor and guide and goaded her into writing. Instigated by him, she read extensively and evolved her own distinct style:

After coming to Aligarh, I grew more and more conscious of Azeem Bhai's existence. God knows why all of a sudden he started taking such a keen interest in me. . . .Azeem Bhai gave me neither money nor sweets. He always talked to me in a serious manner. . . . And then, he started giving me lessons in History and

English. . . . Later on, he gave me discourses on the Quran and the Hadees. . . . Hardy was the first novelist I read thoroughly and according to Azeem Bhai, swallowed fully. During that period Azeem Bhai influenced me so much that I became his echo. . . . According to my family, I was totally under Azeem Bhai's influence during this period. As it was, I was headstrong and stubborn. On his instigation, I really went berserk. (152)

Goaded by Azeem Beg, Chughtai took writing in earnest. In "Apbeeti" she mentions that on his prodding, she began to take writing seriously as a career and confessed that it was after reading his short stories that I too felt motivated and started to write. She further says that reading stories by Hijab Ismail, Manju Gorakhpuri and Niaz Fatehpuri, she began to imagine herself as the heroine of these stories and this prompted her to write stories where she could have God-like powers of making a character cry or laugh. In "Destined to Hell"/"Hell-bound" ("Dozakhi"), Chughtai brings out a powerful piece on her deceased brother, Mirza Azeem Beg, as a tribute which has two diverse contours.

The other lasting impression on Chughtai was that of Rashid Jahan⁵ (1905- 1952) whom she considered as her mentor. Jahan left a profound influence on her personality which later on shaped her voice as a writer. Rashid Jahan, a gynecologist by profession and the daughter of Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah⁶, was her senior in Aligarh school days, known for having a defiant attitude:

She had shattered all the marble images that I idolised. Life stood before me in its stark nakedness. Even after talking to her for hours one felt the urge for more. Those who have met her know this very well. If they meet the heroines of my

stories, they will feel that they are like twin sisters (Rasheeda *apa* and Ismat's heroines). This is because unconsciously I have lifted her bodily world of imagination. But when I reflect deeply about my stories, I feel that I could take hold of only her courage and outspokenness. But her whole mercurial personality has remained beyond my grasp. (Negi 23)

Rashid Jahan always inspired Chughtai to be independent, outspoken and bold. After reading *Angaare* clandestinely, Chughtai's interest in her increased. Jahan's recalcitrant attitude fascinated her, and she recorded her fascination and appreciation for her in "In the Name of Those Married Women" in these words: "Rasheeda Apa was the only person who instilled a sense of confidence in me. I accepted her as my mentor. In . . . Aligarh she was a much-maligned lady. She appreciated my outspokenness and I quickly read up all the books recommended by her" (Kumar & Sadique 65). She was one of the three daughters of Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah and A'la Bi. Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah was a champion of women's education who worked for women's emancipation. He staunchly advocated for the women's education and to encourage them founded Aligarh Girls' School which later came to be known as Abdullah Girls' College. His daughter was a living example of his liberal thinking and emancipating stand that he took for women. In an interview with Afsar Farooqui, Ismat Chughtai admits that she learnt her first rule of writing from her mentors, Rashid Jahan and Sajjad Zaheer whom she met in 1935:

Their credo was that one should learn to express oneself openly on the basis of one's experience and observation, instead of toeing the treaded line out of fear of defying the traditional norms. The culture and the ways of life of the landed gentry had made the women of the house suppress their desires, feelings and

ideas. I have depicted these very women and their psychological contradictions in my stories. (68)

Even in the story “The Quilt” (“Lihaaf,” 1942) she narrated what she experienced on one hot-afternoon. But this story raised many controversies and the “custodians of culture” couldn’t tolerate a woman talking about the taboo issue in a book meant for public. The other significant influences on her were those of Nazar Sajjad Hyder and Hijab Imtiaz Ali who were the popular writers of that time. But they had not been a long lasting influence on Chughtai as their themes were rather romantic, and their women characters were submissive and conventional. A clear departure from this influence could be seen in her writing, *The Troublemaker (Fasaadi, 1937)* and “The Quilt” (“Lihaaf”, 1942).

Ismat Chughtai was a rebel even in her personal life. Rebellious against the customary rules of the society which discouraged a woman to get education, she attended college and completed her graduation from Lucknow. She rejected all the gender roles that were reserved for women. In her memoir, *Kaghazi hai Pairahan*, she narrated the whole episode where she had advocated for her right to education and had convinced her parents to let her go to Aligarh for her matriculation. This was particularly one episode which changed the course of her life. Her mother cursed herself for having given birth to a stubborn girl like Chughtai. Seeing her temerity and resoluteness, her father was compelled to deliberate over the matter, and reweigh his decision. After three days, he gave his consent and allowed her to pursue her dreams if she has the insuppressible willingness to get education from there. Here in I. T. College, hostel life offered her an opportunity to mold and live her life on her own terms. In 1932, she passed her matriculation exam. Struggling to attain education was a norm of the day and a few were fortunate enough to be granted permission to obtain it. It was all the more difficult if you were

the first one in the family to fight for the right to education. In Chughtai's case it holds true as Nayana avers:

Some of them were the first to be educated in their families, and with a lot of struggle with family and community to achieve it. They persistently suffered the weight of both blatant and clandestine restrictions clamped on them that left them crippled, curtailed and wingless. The emotional turbulence and the physical and mental anguish they endured as a result of such restrictions, they found, were stifling and sickening. Unable to find concrete ways to protest and fight the confines around them, unable to contain the surging thoughts of insurgency and counter action, many women writers claim to have chosen the pen as a weapon for survival, as a mark of defiance. (76)

On the tendency of Women writers and their writing, Nayana has rightly remarked that in India, women never seemed to have taken up writing with the desire to attain fame or recognition. In most cases, the urge to write, to express, remained dormant and groping for several initial years of their life; but found direction gradually (75). As far as Chughtai is concerned, it was her brother Azeem Beg who guided her path and helped her to take writing.

In 1933, Chughtai took admission in Isabella Thoburn (I. T.) College, which was one of the most reputed colleges of that time, run by Christian missionaries associated with the Methodist Church of America. The years spent here, were the most crucial and liberating times of her life. Sultana Jafri, a childhood friend of Chughtai, who later got married to Ali Sardar Jafri, informed that in the college, Chughtai instead of participating in sports, excelled in debates. During her college days, she got the opportunity to participate in the first meeting of the Progressive writers in 1935 and saw Munshi Premchand and Rashid Jahan and other writers of

Angaare group. Voraciously she read in graduation which left her mind bristling with many questions. It was shocking for her to know that in Christianity women had been accorded only secondary place and how religious preaching had succeeded in perpetuating patriarchy. Much to her relief, she came to know that Islam was at least one religion which gave equal rights to women. Many characters of her magnum opus, *Tehri Lakeer (The Crooked Line)*, have been modeled on the people she met during her B.A., especially her friend, Elma Mohanlal. Reading Sigmund Freud proved to be an eye-opener for her that washed away her romantic notions which had sprouted after reading Hijab Intiaz Ali. But she questioned the validity of Freud's psycho-sexual theory and scrutinized it minutely before believing or non-believing it because of her innate skeptical nature. She asserted:

“There is something in me that militates against putting faith in anyone uncritically, however great an intellectual he may be. Such a bad habit –I would first look for the loopholes in his theory. One should first examine all points of disagreement before coming to a consensus. I cannot believe in anything suddenly, take it at its face value. I think, the first word articulated by me after birth was – “why”.” (Asaduddin, Introduction xvi)

Graduation fetched her many lucrative teaching jobs, and she was first appointment at Javare as Principal in 1937, then at Bareilly in Islamia Girls School. She decided to leave the job and took admission in Aligarh Muslim University to pursue B.T. She became the first Muslim woman who earned both B.A. and B.T. degrees. “Parde ke Peechhe se” is one essay which describes the experiences she underwent during B.T. classes. It was during this time when she had first met with Shahid Lateef to whom she would get married in 1942. At that time, he was a student who was doing his Masters from there. In *Kaghazi*, she informs:

He was doing his M.A. and I was doing my B.T. Then I once had a cursory meeting with him in my heart. After that he came to Bombay and joined Bombay Talkies as a scriptwriter for the sum of Rs. 225. I met him again when I reached Bombay as a school inspector and started living with my brother. (Negi 26)

Having completed B.T., she joined Rajmahal School in Jodhpur in 1939. In her novel, *Tehri Lakeer* (1945) and in her memoir, *Kaghazi hai Pairahan*, she recorded her experiences of working at these schools. During this period, she got ample time to concentrate on her writing as by now she had already read the best of Urdu and English literature and her pen ached to write. After the death of her dearest brother, Mirza Azeem Beg in 1941, Chughtai got shifted to Bombay as a school inspector. Her essay “Ek Shauhar ki Khatir” (“All for a Husband”) records her journey from Jodhpur to Bombay. In Bombay, she began to live with her brother Mirza Jaseem Beg Chaghtai.

As Chughtai informs that in Bombay, Shahid had started visiting their home and they got to know each other better. But “it was just friendship”, Chughtai maintained. But on the contrary, Shahid got fond of Chughtai’s company and resolved to marry her. Initially, Chughtai attempted hard to dissuade him from marrying her, explaining how difficult it would be to live with a stubborn and liberal woman like her who spoke her own mind and followed her own rules and had done everything against the societal rules: “I explained to Shahid that I am a troublesome woman. That I have broken all the chains in my life and I would never be able to stay bound in them. To be an obedient blameless wife was a role not suited to me” (Negi 27-28).

But ultimately they got married on May 2, 1942. Although Chughtai's brother Mirza Jaseem Beg was against their marriage who wanted her to marry Jugnu (Athar Hussain), the son of her maternal uncle Zafar, against his wish, she got married to Shahid. As a result of this, he didn't attend the wedding, and broke his relations with her, and never saw her until the day of his death. As Chughtai narrates her experiences of living with Shahid after their marriage, it reflected the general outlook and perception of the society of treating a married woman and how their relationship was different from other married couples:

As for Shahid, he kept me very happy. . . . a man is ready to worship a woman to the extent of making a goddess of her. He loves her. He respects her. But he cannot give her a reason to be his equal. . . . Shahid treated me as an equal.

Though marriage is supposed to toll the death-knell of friendship, ours survived with great stubbornness. That is why we lived a happy married life." (Negi 29)

In a letter, Chughtai wrote that she had an aversion for the word "marriage" and felt nauseated with the expression "husband-wife". She rather considered Shahid and herself as friends because they were the equals. Probably Chughtai reacted and felt that way because "husband-wife" in patriarchal set-up don't sound equals but binary opposition where men have higher standing. Many people had believed that Chughtai detested the institution of marriage but that was a fallacy. Her intimate friends and relative stressed on the fact that definitely she was a feminist and a woman believing in women emancipation, but it didn't deter her from considering marriage as a "sacred institution." Her close family friends, Sulatana Jafri and Ali Sardar Jafri and Dr. Mujib corroborated this fact. In the interview with Afsar Farooqui, she further made it clear:

“I am not against marriage as such but against its extraneous ramifications. When we trust each other why can't two people actually have faith and be with each other? If there is no wrangling over *mehr* (the amount given to the bride by the groom), they can live together with impunity as long as they like. In Europe, the institution of marriage is proving a failure, as I understand. It is nothing unusual for the couple to come to blows soon after marriage. It is said that if a woman is capable of taking care of herself there is no need for marriage.” (Negi 31)

Saadat Hasan Manto, one of her contemporaries, a critic and her unfailing friend in his collection of essays, *Bald Angels (Ganje Farishte)*, stated Chughtai as a stubborn woman. Stubbornness in nature, he said, was her characteristic trait. Manto opines that it is perhaps her way first to deny, question, examine then accepting things. Manto and Chughtai were very close to each other and during the trial that Chughtai faced on writing the story “The Quilt” (“Lihaaf”), it was Manto who unconditionally supported her, and stood by her when she needed the moral support of her friends and family. In her lecture on Chughtai, Tahira Naqvi informs, “Manto once said about Chughtai, ‘If Ismat had been a man she would have been me and if I had been a woman, I would have been Ismat.’ That’s how close they were in the way they approached writing and their ideologies” (Kazmi n. pag.). Chughtai wrote a sketch on Manto “My Friend, My Enemy” (“Mera Dost, Mera Dushman”) in which she described the kind of relationship she had shared with him. Manto described her in these words:

Ismat is thoroughly stubborn. She is by nature rigid, just like a child. She begins with not accepting any rule in life, any natural law. At first she refused to marry. When she was persuaded to it, she refused to be a wife. She gradually reconciled herself to becoming a wife but she did not want to become a mother. She goes

through a lot of suffering but she persists in her stubbornness. I believe that this, too, is her way through which, by confronting the reality of life, or in fact by colliding against it, she tries to understand it. (Kumar & Sadique 162-63)

Chughtai remembers participating in the first meeting of All India Progressive Writers' Association which was formally inaugurated in Lucknow on 10 April 1936 under the leadership of Syed Sajjad Zahir and Ahmed Ali where Premchand presided over. She mentions in her memoir, that at that time, she was in Lucknow and pursuing her B.A. from I.T. College. Under the influence of Rashid Jahan, Chughtai got herself associated with Progressive Writers Movement and remained a progressive Urdu writer, and heralded a new era of bold writing.

Chughtai asserts that her relationship with the Progressive Movement and Writers was not just intellectual as she was attached to them emotionally as well. She corroborated this fact by recalling the time of the Partition when her family had migrated to Pakistan, the writers, friends and artists associated with PWA, gave her sustenance and moral support. At another place, Chughtai avers that her association with Progressive Movement has been very beneficial: "When I say beneficial, I mean beneficial to my literary interests, which inspired me to write" ("Progressive Literature" 127). Being inspired by the spirit of the movement, she began writing as a realist and attempted to capture the social, political and cultural milieu of her society. The publication of *Angaare (The Burning Coals, 1932)* was the first step of the progressives who made it clear that their writing was revolutionary and they wished to shake society from their long smugness. Under the leadership of Munshi Premchand, literature turned out to be a vehicle of bringing change and making lives better. Her reportage "From Bombay to Bhopal" captures the experiences of Progressive Writers Conference which she attended in Bhopal in 1949. Discussing the problems that a society faces, she proposed that as the writers they had to address

them to make conditions better and suggested that: “Pruning the leaves and branches of trees is sheer folly when it is the roots that require a change. Only when the roots change, will new leaves and branches emerge” (Kumar & Sadique 114).

Many scholars claim that Chughtai started her writing career with the play called *Fasaadi* (*The Troublemaker*) which got published in a reputed literary Urdu magazine *Saaqi*. It is true that it was published in *Saaqi* but Chughtai refused it in the course of the interview with Afsar Farooqui when asked if *Fasaadi* was her first play, she replied:

It was “Bachpan”, not *Fasaadi*. I sent it to *Tehzeeb-i-Niswan* and they returned it with the remark that I should bear Allah in mind and write something about him. After that I wrote *Fasaadi* and it was published in *Saqi*. I followed it with “Gainda” and later on with “Neera” which is about a prostitute who dreams of marriage with every client who sleeps with her. (Kumar & Sadique 68)

In “Un Biyahtaaon ke Naam” (“In the Name of Those Married Women”⁷), Chughtai explains why the editor of the journal *Tehzeeb-i-Niswan*, Mumtaz Ali, the father of Imtiaz Ali Taj, had the objections. In “Childhood” (“Bachpan”) she had compared her childhood with that of Hijab Imtiaz Ali who is the daughter-in-law of Mumtaz Ali. The objection that he made was: Chughtai had described in the story how she was beaten by the Maulvi Sahab on failing to pronounce certain alphabets like “ain” and “qaaf”. He objected to the fact that by narrating these episodes in such a hilarious manner, she was indulging in blasphemy. Later, this story also gets published in *Saaqi*. “Gainda” and “Neera” were the next stories which she penned after “Bachpan” and they published in 1938.

Her oeuvre includes diverse forms of literature like short story, novels, novellas, memoirs, sketches, essays, dramas, plays, reportage, radio dramas, screenplays for various films, and letters which shows her versatility as a writer. Although she has tried her hands at various genres, her forte in which she remarkably excelled is *afsaana nigaari* or short story writing. In “The Short Story Genre, Postcolonialism and Women Writers”, Kalpana. H. writes that women, who are generally considered to be ‘sensitive’ and ‘instinctive’ when compared to men, can better relate to the form of short story which is intense and focused. She believes that women writers “are able to portray the predicaments/ oppressions/ injustices/ joys of women with intensity and with a comprehensiveness that allows them to use the form inwards, and depict the feelings and the emotions of the inner body and mind” (100).

All the stories written by Ismat Chughtai breathed in the fresh air which was devoid of any conservative approach and traditional outlook on the contemporary society. She was a writer ahead of her time, writing about controversial issues which were taboo in contemporary society and Urdu literature. Her earliest collection of short stories which saw light during the lifetime of her brother, Mirza Azeem Beg Chaghtai, are *Buds (Kaliyaan, 1941) and Wounds or Injuries (Chotein, 1945)*. Her first collection of stories, *Kaliyaan (Buds, 1941)*, was published from *Saaqi* whose editor was Shahid Ahmed Dehlavi. Her second collection, *Wounds or Injuries (Chotein, 1945)*, not only included stories but also some essays, sketches and travelogues. The third collection titled as *Touch-Me-Not (Chhui-Mui, 1952)*, was named after her one short story of the same name. It included several essays, reportage and many stories. Her fourth collection was *A Pair of Hand (Do Haath, 1966)* which published her many memorable stories. The most remarkable and famous stories of Chughtai are “The Little Mother” (“Gainda”), “The Quilt” (“Lihaaf”), “Phew! These Children”^{*8} (“Uff Ye Bachche”), “Neera”, “Tiny’s Granny”

("Nanhi ki Nani"), "The Wedding Suit/Shroud" ("Chauthi ka Joda"), "Quit India" ("Hindustaan Chhor Do"), "Cot" ("Charpai"), "The Homemaker" ("Ghar Waali"), "The Veil" ("Ghunghat"), "Aunty Scorpion" ("Bichchhoo Phuphi"), "The Vamp"* ("Daayin"), "The Net" ("Jaal"), "Profession"/ "Vocation" ("Pesha"⁹), "Roots" ("Jadein"), "Touch-Me-Not" ("Chhui-Mui"), "A Pair of Hands" ("Do Haath"), "The Rock" ("Chattan"), "Kallu", "Non-believer" ("Kaafir"), "Mother of Kallu"* ("Kallu ki Maan"), "The Flower-Pot"* ("Guldaan"), "A Morsel" ("Nivala"), "The Survivor" ("Kaar Saaz"), "New Bride"* ("Nai Dulhan"), and "The Virgin" ("Kunwari").

Her most controversial story "The Quilt" ("Lihaaf" 1942), for which Chughtai faced a long trial on the charges of obscenity, portrays the inside story of a Nawab and his Begum who being ignored and exasperated for long, solicited a lesbian relationship with her maid. At that point of time when she wrote the story, she was staying with her brother and before submitting the story had taken the reviews about the story which were positive. She narrates:

I was staying with my brother when I wrote "Lihaaf." I had completed the story at night. In the morning I read it out to my sister-in-law. She didn't think it was vulgar though she recognized the characters portrayed in it. Then I read it out to my aunt's daughter who was fourteen years old. She didn't understand what the story was about. I sent it to *Adab-e-Lateef* where it was published immediately. Shahid Ahmed Dehlavi was getting a collection of my short stories published and included it in the volume. The story was published in 1942 when Shahid and I . . . were thinking of marriage. Shahid didn't like the story and we had a fight. But the controversies surrounding "Lihaaf" had not reached Bombay yet. (Kumar & Sadique 52)

In the story “The Quilt” it is shown how a young bride deprived of marital love seeks love, even if it is in alternate relationship. By narrating the story from the point of view of a small girl who happened to stay in the *kothi* of Nawabs where Begum Jaan lived, Chughtai astutely spared readers from the awkwardness that could have sprouted if the narrator had been an adult. It further lessened the discomfort of the readers as the nine-year-old narrator is seen recounting a past experience of her childhood, recollecting it as she remembered and understood it. In the story, the poor parents of Begum Jaan had got her married to a Nawab who was of “ripe years” and very virtuous, hoping this would be the end of her miserable life and beginning of marital pleasure and bliss (Asaduddin, *Quilt* 16). But unfortunately the Nawab whom Begum Jaan got married to, was more interested in exploring the territory other than that of women. This loneliness, isolation and deprivation made Begum Jaan search for the love which she found in her dark-complexioned maid, Rabbu. Such explicit references to gay and lesbianism had never been discussed hitherto and the story came out as a bombshell on the conservative readers, and made furor in literary world.

In “In the Name of Those Married Women” (“Un Biyahtaakon ke Naam”) she narrates the whole episode right from the receiving of the summon to meeting the Begum on whom the story was based. Thus, it begins: “It was about four or half past four in the afternoon when the doorbell rang loudly” (Asaduddin, *LTV* 240). The servant opens the door and finds Police at the door with the summons issued from Lahore Court. Chughtai was reluctant to sign it but on the insistence of Mohsin and Shahid, she did sign on the summons. After that, they had to go to the Police station for completing the formalities. It was disgraceful and humiliating for Shahid and as a result, they fought all night. The story was published in 1942 and in December 1944 she received summons, by then Shahid and Chughtai had married and been blessed with a baby, Seema. In the same

court, a suit was also filed against Saadat Hasan Manto for his story “Bu” (“Odor”/“Smell”). “Thanda Gosht” (“Cold Meat”) and “Khol Do” (“Open It”) are two stories for which Manto was prosecuted. He had to appear on the same day, in the same court for his story “Bu” (“Odor”/“Smell”). Chughtai recounts in *Kaghazi hai Pairahan* how Manto’s presence seemed as a mirage in the vast desert of worry, disgust and anguish at the time of trial:

Manto phoned us to say that a suit had been filed against him too. He had to appear in the same court on the same day. He and Safiya landed at our place. Manto was looking very pleased with himself – as though he had been awarded the Victoria Cross. Though I put up a courageous front I felt quite embarrassed. I was nervous too, but Manto encouraged me so much that I forgot all my qualms. (Kumar & Sadique 51)

During the trial, Manto and Chughtai spent a great deal of time together and became intimate to each other. Later on, in the sketch on Manto, “My Friend, My Enemy” (“Mera Dost, Mera Dushman”), she described the special bond that they shared. The suit by the Crown was brought not only against Chughtai, but also against the editor of the journal, Shahid Ahmed Dehlavi along with the calligrapher who had copied the manuscript of “Lihaaf.” This whole episode of trial which has been recorded in “In the Name of Those Married Women” is important from the viewpoint that it brings out the special place that Manto had in Chughtai’s life and for bringing characteristic traits of Chughtai at its best as she wittingly argued, and remained true to her belief having unflinching faith in the story. One such argument takes place with Aslam when she goes to stay with him: “You’ve used such vulgar words in *Gunaah ki Ratein* (*Nights of Sins or Sinful Nights*)! You’ve even described the details of the sex act, just to titillate,” I said. “My case is different. I’m a man.” Listening to this, Chughtai attempted to make him see how his being a

man didn't give him the right to be justified. She asserted that if she was a woman that didn't mean that she would feel any need to seek anyone's permission to write as she was autonomous. She argued that "Perhaps my mind is not an artist's brush like Abdur Rahman Chughtai's but an ordinary camera that records reality as it is. . ." Chughtai asserts that she wrote "Lihaaf" as it was a reality of someone's existence. She opines that if "Lihaaf" could be seen as obscene then such people can brand the books prescribed in the courses of Psychology and Medicine vulgar if they so want" (Kumar & Sadique 56). Chughtai herself says that she didn't imagine the story but as a child she had happened to hear people talking about lesbian relationship which two women were having: "My brother and I hid under the takht . . . the women were talking about forbidden subjects, and although in the beginning what they were saying didn't make sense to us, gradually we began to understand" (Naqvi, Introduction xi).

It was the second hearing which took place on November 1946, when the actual question-answer round started where Chughtai left everyone bemused by her presence of mind, wit and argumentativeness. The judge asked her to join him in the anteroom and remarked that he had read most of her stories and they were not obscene, neither was "Lihaaf" and added that Manto's writing were often littered with filth. Hearing this Chughtai replies: "The world is also littered with filth," I said in a feeble voice. The judge asks if it was necessary to rake it up. On this, she answers: "If it is raked up it becomes visible and people feel the need to clean it up." This was her progressive spirit that endeavored to bring about positive changes in the lives of millions through her writing. It is unfortunate but true that Chughtai is "still labeled as the writer of "Lihaaf." She sighs that it has "become a proverbial stick to beat (her) with" and whatever she wrote after "Lihaaf" "got crushed under its weight" (Kumar & Sadique 63, 66). Chughtai wrote that after the publication of "Lihaaf", life had become miserable. It won her so much infamy that

she had begun to receive hate letters, people criticized her in articles published in newspapers and in public debate and discussions. Though she was relieved due to the fact that “the progressives neither appreciated nor found fault” in her story. Later in her life, she writes:

My stories had been branded obscene and my own friends pronounced that Manto and I indulged in sex-related vulgar story writing. I read and re-read my stories on the basis of these remarks and found these conclusions to be false. But I never felt the need to justify my stories in this regard. Nor did I resent those who raised objections about my writing. (Kumar & Sadique 131)

But Chughtai heaved a sigh of relief when in Aligarh she met with the Begum on whom the story “Lihaaf” was written. She felt greatly rewarded when the Begum told Chughtai that her story had changed her life and it is because of her story now she was blessed with a child. Chughtai says that when she looks back to her journey as a writer, she remembers regretfully that writing “Lihaaf” turned out to be waging a war against conventionalist and conservatives and the whole world had become a battlefield where some supported her, and others condemned her and still she is best known as the writer of just one story “Lihaaf” which is for her very heartrending a fact:

But when I wrote “Lihaaf,” there was a veritable explosion. I was torn to shreds in the literary arena. Some people also wielded their pens in my support. Since then I have been branded as 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 recognized that I am a realist and an obscene writer. (Kumar & Sadique 65)

According to Sugra Mehdi, towards the last years of her life, Chughtai was distraught by the fact that people remembered her as a writer of “Lihaaf” and ignored the other stories which depicted the poignant tales of exploited and oppressed women. Not only stories but there had been various essays also that Chughtai wrote on diverse and different occasions. “Parde ke Peechhe se” is one essay/reportage that recalls her BT days in Aligarh; “Ek Shauhar ki Khatir” traces her journey from Jodhpur to Bombay after the death of her dearest brother and mentor, Mirza Azeem Beg Chughtai. Chughtai writes another autobiographical essay, “Hum Log” (“We People”, 1964) which gives vital information on her family members and their lives. “Kya Taraqqi Pasand Adabi Tehreek se Adab ko Nuqsaa Pahuncha Hai” was a literary essay published in 1965, probing the meaning and impact of Progressive literary movement on literature. This essay published in *Kitaab*. “Yahan se Wahan Tak” (“From Here to There”) is a reportage that describes her experiences of visiting Pakistan for the first time, after the Partition. It talks about the loss and trauma that people went through because of the Partition. In “Bambai se Bhopal Tak” (“From Bombay to Bhopal”), she records her experiences of attending the Progressive Writers Conference held at Minto Hall, in Bhopal which she had attended on the insistence of Ali Sardar Jafri. “Maile ka Tokra” talks about the village life and its problems that needed to be addressed.

Chughtai’s best-known novel is *Tehri Lakeer (The Crooked Line, 1945)* which is, her magnum opus, traces the life and different phases of the protagonist, Shamman. While tracing the events of her life, the conventional contemporary society and its rules that pressurize women to follow its dictates, came into the focus. Many characters in the novel have been modeled on the real people whom she had met in IT College during her graduation. Shamman is so much similar to Ismat Chughtai that many writers are of the opinion if Chughtai has projected herself in the character of Shamman. In “Introducing Ismat”, Sukrita Paul Kumar asks the question:

“How much of Shamman is Ismat herself?” She thinks it is an intriguing question. As one reads the novel, it is difficult to ignore the similarities between Chughtai and her character, Shamman. Kumar observes: “Shamman’s childhood fantasies and urges described in the novel *Tehri Lakeer*, available in English translation under the title, *The Crooked Line*, are strongly reminiscent of Chughtai’s own childhood” (ii). It is in the Introduction to *The Crooked Line* that Tahira Naqvi draws a parallel between Ismat Chughtai and Simone de Beauvoir, and shows how in Chughtai’s fiction there are fictionalized prefiguration of Beauvoir’s description and analysis of childhood playacting and fantasy (ii). *Masooma (The Innocent)* and *Saudai (The Madman/Obsession)* published in 1962 and 1966 respectively.

Her novel *Ek Qatra-e-Khoon (A Drop of Blood, 1976)* is based on the *marsiya*s of the renowned Urdu poet, Mir Anees and it narrates the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Husain, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad. Qurratulain Hyder after the death of Chughtai wrote an obituary on her entitled as “Lady Chengez Khan”¹⁰. Although Chughtai in “Pompom Darling” had criticized Hyder as a modernist, belonging to elite class who were rarely anxious to focus on poor people and their lives, this obituary highlights the best of Chughtai as a Progressive writer. Therein, Hyder corroborated the fact of her writing on Hazrat Imam Husain:

. . . during the month of Muharram, Ismat Apa would attend congregations held at women’s Imambara dressed in a black blouse and black sari, listening with rapt attention to the narration of the trials and tribulations of Imam Husain. . . . No one knew how she had developed an interest in Imam Husain but from then onwards Ismat Chughtai was frequently seen attending congregations dressed in black and became very popular amongst the Shi’ite community in Bombay. Everyone seemed extremely impressed by her “Hubb-i-Ahle Bait” (love for the members of

the family of Imam Husain). She explained, “I am actually rendering Mir Anees’ Marsiyas (elegies) into prose.” (208)

Chughtai had a penchant for writing sketches and on a number of famous people she has written sketches. “Haste-Haste” is one sketch that she wrote in 1959 on Patrus Bukhari. “Mera Dost, Mera Dushman” published in 1960 in *Nuqoosh*, a journal of repute, is a famous sketch which she wrote on her contemporary and friend, Saadat Hasan Manto. “Neend ki Maati” is a sketch on Surayya; “Behti Ganga” on Meena Kumari, a famous actor; “Kaanto Bhari Waadiyaan” on Jaan Nisar Akhtar; “Chirag Roshan Hain” on Krishan Chander, her contemporary; “Ishq, Ishq, Ishq” is a sketch on a hero. Chughtai wrote a sketch on the lady that was a girl supplier and this sketch has been entitled as “Sorry, Mummy.”

Chughtai wrote a drama, *Hell** (*Dozakh*)(1960), on the plight of an ageing woman who was struggling with menopause and Alzheimer’s disease. *The Troublemaker*(*Fasaadi*) is her first play that published in 1938. *Green Bracelets*(*Dhani Bakein*) is an elongated drama based on the Partition of India. For her Urdu drama, *The Poison of Loneliness**(*Tanhai ka Zahar*), Chughtai received the prestigious Ghalib Award. Other than this, she wrote six dramas for Radio: *Devil** (*Shaitan*), *Without Reason** (*Khwah ma Khwah*), *Pictures** (*Tasveeren*), *How is the Bride** (*Dulhan Kaisi Hai*), *Blushing Acts** (*Sharmate Aamaal*)and *Green Bracelets*(*Dhani Bakein*). She also tried her hand in writing some novellas, which most notably are *The Wild One/The Stubborn One*(*Ziddi*, 1939), *The Heart Breaks Free/The Realm of Heart* (*Dil ki Duniya*, 1962), *Three Novice* (*Teen Anaari*, 1964), *Obsession* (*Saudai*, 1966), *Strange Man* (*Ajeeb Aadmi*, 1968), *The Slave* (*Baandi*, 1971), and *Wild Pigeons* (*Jangli Kabootar*, 1971) .

Shahid Lateef introduced Chughtai to Bollywood – the Indian film industry and she unrestrictedly started writing screenplays, dialogues and stories for films. Many of her stories were also adapted into films. Her novella, *The Wild One/The Stubborn One(Ziddi)*, written in 1939 was later in 1948 made into a film in the same name. Dev Anand and Kamini Kaushal made their debut in the film and Kishore Kumar got a chance to start his career as a playback singer from this film. For the film, *Complaint* (Shikayat)*, she wrote dialogues. There were many films which she made in collaboration with her husband, Shahid Lateef, and many others were done independently. Shahid Lateef and Chughtai started their career as the producer and director with the film *Aarzo* which was produced under the banner of “Filmina” which Lateef and Chughtai owned. It was *Aarzo*, starring Dilip Kumar which won him the title of being “Shahenshah-e-Jazbat” (“The King of Emotions”). Chughtai wrote the screenplay for the film and Shahid Lateef directed it.

The Coward (Buzdil, 1951) was one film which was later turned into a novella *Saudai*. In *Buzdil*, Kishore Sahu, Premnath and Nimmi were in the cast. The third film under the banner of “Filmina” was *Sheesha*. Next, Chughtai scripted *Faraib*, starring Kishor Kumar & Shakuntala. *Darwaaza* was another film for which she wrote the script. *Chhed-Chhad, Society, Lala Rukh, Sone ki Chidiya* and *Garam Hawa* are some other major films with which Chughtai has been associated. Released in 1973, the story of *Scorching Wind (Garam Hawa)*, a film in the backdrop of the Partition of India, was based on her stories “Chauthi ka Joda” (“The Wedding Shroud”) and “Jadein” (“Roots”). It was directed by M. S. Sathyu, and Kaifi Azmi wrote the story for it. It is one much critically-acclaimed film which won the best film and the best story award. In *Junoon*, she acted also though it was a small role. *The Golden Bird (Sone ki Chidiya)* was a major hit as it portrayed what the realities were of successful heroines and how their personal lives

were in sharp contrast to their “reel” life which was glamorous. Nutan, the heroine of the film, counted *Sone ki Chidiya* as the one of the two best films of her career.

Chughtai broke the conventional and stereotypical way of looking at and talking of women. The world created by her pen is vibrant with diversity of India’s languages, customs, colors, and hues. Chughtai used the ‘*begumati zubaan*’ - a distinct language spoken in the *zenana* for interacting which lent an enchanting charm and authenticity to her women characters. Again this language reflected her association with Middle-class Muslim class whom she knew intimately. In her tribute to Ismat Chughtai, Naqvi acknowledged this fact that (she) was inseparable from her milieu and was thoroughly steeped in her culture and its particular linguistic expressions. She holds it true that:

Ismat was at her best when she wrote about ordinary people, especially women.

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. (41)

Chughtai gave voice to the muted group – Muslim middle-class and its culture, lifestyle, rituals, language, and traditions. She represented it in the world of Urdu literature, and made its existence felt. Coming from a Muslim family herself, it was easy for her to portray and present an intimate and authentic picture of the group she belonged to. In his Preface to the collection of Chughtai’s stories, *Chotein (Injuries/Wounds)*, Krishan Chander stated that in Urdu literary

world there were a very few Urdu short story writers who could compete with her. In her writings, Chughtai brought the whole environment, ambiance, and the milieu of Muslims, belonging to Uttar Pradesh (North India) before our eyes. One such scene is the opening paragraph of her celebrated novel, *Tehri Lakeer*:

She was born at a most inopportune time. Bari Apa, whose friend Salma was to be married soon, was working spiritedly on a saroi-crêpe dupatta, stitching gold lace to its borders. Amma, who regarded herself as a youthful maiden despite the fact that she had given birth to so many children, was scrubbing off dead skin from her heels with a pumice stone. Suddenly the clouds rolled in, and in the ensuing commotion the longstanding desire to send for the English midwife came to naught, and “she” was born. The minute she arrived into the world, she let out such a yell. . . God help us! (Naqvi, Introduction xvi)

Many critics alleged her for having limited themes and for writing stories which revolved around the homes where her prime focus was women. Indeed she had been preoccupied with women but the characters she created were true to life and the psychological aspect that she concentrated on was unprecedented and had novelty, reality and freshness. In defense of Chughtai, Krishan Chander very rightly says that: “Her stories may not have the vastness of an ocean but, certainly, they have its depth” (177). In his “Foreword to *Chotein*”, he echoes the same sentiment that Chughtai by portraying middle-class Muslim society introduced it in the Urdu literary world:

Ismat has convincingly portrayed the spirit of an urban middle-class Muslim household by exploring the fame and fortunes of various persons who are an integral part of the joint family structure. Although one or two other writers have

successfully portrayed this picture before Ismat, they have done so largely from the male point of view – which is limited and partial, as men usually stay away from the four walls of the house. Unlike them, women from middle class families spend much of their lives in their homes. This home embodies their spirit and is the centre of their physical and spiritual existence. Ismat's stories about the middle class Muslim house (actually her own?) are written with such an intensity of expression, that the reader experiences a closeness to the characters of her stories appear drawn from real life. (174)

She excelled herself in the exploration of the world which was surrounded by women and crowded with members of a sprawling family, living jointly. According to Sukrita Paul Kumar, the importance of Chughtai as a writer lies in the fact that she explored the women's world, took their cause, and with the force of a crusader, made them aware of their ignoble situation. She writes in "Introducing Ismat" the bold entry that Chughtai took into the literary world:

Writing in the man's world, delineating mostly the microcosm of the women, discerning women's modes of empowerment or looking at women as victims of exploitation by men or other women in the patriarchal society, Ismat entered the literary scene as though sounding a clarion call for awareness and change. Her active engagement with literature for more than half a century has resulted in creating sensitive avenues into unmapped territories. (15)

The world created by her pen is full of *Ammis* with their yearning to play with their grandson; with a wish to see the *sehra* of their sons, and with the *dua* to see *mehndi* in the hand of their dear daughters. She wrote these stories in a way that it enabled readers to peep inside Muslim

household and their distinct culture as realistically as it could be. In the Preface to *The Quilt and Other Stories*, Anita Desai opines that Chughtai was a liberated soul and she could criticize and sympathize with the culture which she was the product. Chughtai's work encompasses almost the whole of the development of the Urdu short story from 1930s to 1990s.

The poignant and sensitive stories which Chughtai wrote were the reflections of her astute understanding of women world and her genuine concern for them. Her feminist sensibility endowed her with the prowess to get inside the psyche of her female characters. As in her real life also, she had to go through the struggles and experiences that most women faced in their lives, this fact provided authenticity to her women characters. Being a woman herself, she was aware of the pressures and restrictions that society put on women. On the sensitive portrayals of Chughtai, Saadat Hasan Manto remarks: "Had Ismat not been a woman through and through, we would never have got to read tender and sensitive stories like "Bhool Bhulaiyan," "Til," "Lihaaf," and "Gainda." These stories present woman in her varied expressions – neat, transparent, unsullied by artifice" (160). Her personal understanding and experiences provided her the ability to authenticate the portrayals of her women characters. In "Some Aspects of Ismat's Art," Varis Alavi has rightly remarked about the plethora of characters she sketched:

Her fiction abounds in young girls, middle-aged widows, grandmothers, sister-in-law who produce a baby a year, obese beauties of yesteryears, women from respectable families using helpless women for the flesh trade, women abandoned in some corner of the household, frigid yet ideal wives of the house, passionate maid servants, the chains of marriage, the shackles of motherhood, the mutual distrust among women, jealousies, cruelties and oppression. In fact the portrayal of romance, of sex, the song of the body, the flight of emotion, the ecstasy of

consummation, rarely find a place in her stories. If there is sex, then it is shown in blood and grime, wallowing in debauchery and obscenity (for instance “Masooma”). It is therefore erroneous to hold the view that Ismat is obsessed with sex. In fact, she peels off the layers of sexuality clinging to the identity of woman so that her inner human self can emerge, lending crispness, boldness and a rebellious quality to her style and themes. (213-14)

In her stories, Chughtai made ordinary people her characters like beggars, sweepers and sweepresses, bondmaids, servants, farmers, prostitutes, house wives, widows, and similar ones. In “Pompom Darling” a satirical piece of writing written on the rising sensation of Urdu literary world, Qurratulain Hyder, Chughtai criticized her for not writing about the middle class and therein she suggested her that if she had a limited knowledge of that class, she could write on her own class more realistically: “It is a duty of those . . . who are closer to the middle, to not only present a picture of their own class but also to present through their art a healthy point of view by painting in it attractive colours.” Through portrayal of such characters belonging to middle class, she adeptly highlighted their positive aspect and exposed whichever was flawed (125).

The striking feature of Chughtai’s characters are that they are presented as they are without being stamped as good and bad, or heroine and vamp. Gaiinda in the story “Gaiinda”, Begum Jaan in “The Quilt”, Rani in “The Mole”, Lajo in “The Homemaker”, and Rukhsana in “Eternal Vine”, are presented as human beings, a combination of white and black, the writer never passed her judgment on them. It was always left on the readers to decide who was negative and at fault. Chughtai takes a character from the quotidian life and delineates the character in all its totality as a real man is. In her writing literariness, in language sharpness, in style boldness, and maturity in her characterization, could be found which lent them liveliness of a living human

being, capable of breathing, smelling and touching. Her description of people took into account all the aspects of a human being – the physical description, the state of mind, emotional status, psychological labyrinth and sexual satisfaction – all blended in one:

Having married Begum Jaan, he tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her. The frail, beautiful begum wasted away in anguished loneliness. . . . Begum Jaan was heartbroken and turned to books. But she found no relief. Romantic novels and sentimental verse depressed her even more. She began to spend sleepless nights yearning for a love that had never been. She felt like throwing all the clothes into the fire. One dressed up to impress people. But the nawab didn't have a moment to spare for her. He was too busy chasing the gossamer shirts. Nor did he allow her to go out. Relatives, however, would come for visits and stay on for months while she remained a prisoner in the house. (Asaduddin, *Quilt* 16-17)

Chughtai by presenting the psychological and emotional side of women confirmed them the identity of human beings. She dared to touch upon the aspects from which they had never been seen in Urdu literature. Though many male writers had delineated many sensitive women characters, but they lacked the intimacy and conviction with which a woman could write. Knowing a problem is one thing and experiencing it another; Chughtai not only knew the problems of her women characters, but also experienced it. Experiencing the same problem lent her an urge to write more vigorously. In his book, *Taraqqi Pasand Adab* (1945), eminent critic Aziz Ahmad criticized and accused her for being sex-obsessed. Many critics showed the tendency to label her so without scrutinizing the whole. In the article "Ismat Chughtai's Art of

Fiction,” Sadique defended her and made it clear why some critics tried to reject her out rightly by labeling her as an obscene writer:

Patriarchy has gripped woman in a vicious circle from which there is no escape. She is forced to compromise with all kinds of oppression and humiliation. Ismat attempts to break this vicious circle through her stories. She knows the art of mocking at the false pride of the male, of exposing and satirizing his hypocritical and egotistical nature. At the same time, she spares no mercy in her attack on women’s blind emotionalism and weaknesses. Ismat is the only one who has the boldness and the courage to present women in their true image. (225)

Her stories are diversified in terms of themes. Right from the issues of child marriage, polygamy, extra-material affairs, religious-fanaticism, honor-killing, to the issues of sexual exploitation, lesbianism, and of achieving Independence, Chughtai voiced it all. If some critics think that her writing lacks diversity then they are erroneous and wrong in their estimation and assessment of her art. There is a variety of theme and in each story treatment is different. For reaching to any kind of conclusion and judgment on Chughtai, a comprehensive understanding of her oeuvre is indispensable. Maulana Salahuddin Ahmad, an eminent critic, has rightly said about Ismat Chughtai:

It is the good fortune of Urdu literature that it has a woman writer who not only did away with the traditional hypocrisies, pretensions, and fears that have repressed woman’s soul but who, through her realism and range of vision, familiarized us with those fine and delicate aspects of human nature which seem to be beyond the reach of even the best of male writers.” (Sadique 224)

Ismat Chughtai has a multi-dimensional personality with multi shades in it. Throughout her writing career she attempted “to salvage the dignity of a woman as a human being” as her first loyalty lied with women. After that, she was an Indian – living in a country diverse in culture and religion where people live in close proximity regardless the differences in faith, and her many stories like “Non-Muslim”/“Non-Believer”* (“Kafir”), “Sacred Duty”(“Muqaddas Farz”), “Roots” (“Jadein”), and “Who Was He?” (“Wo Kaun Tha?”) highlight the theme of Hindu-Muslim unity and give testimony to this. In “Caravan Dust”, she writes: “My father was a progressive man who maintained cordial relations with quite a few Hindus. Hindus and Muslims of a particular class lived in close proximity and shared a genial relationship” (Kumar & Sadique 23).

There are enough similarity between the two religions, and through her writing, she tries to establish that religion is a veneer, what matters is the inner goodness. After the Partition of India, many asked her why she stayed back in India when Pakistan had been created for Muslims. She herself says that her family and a lot of relatives had been migrated to Pakistan after the Partition. Baffled, she ruminated and gave it a good think. It is true that by her faith she was a Muslim but her being a Muslim does not make her less Indian and she in her characteristic style, she said:

I am a Muslim; idol worship is a sin. But Puranic mythology is a part of my national legacy. Aeons of culture and philosophies are saturated in it. Religion and culture of a nation are two different things. Here, I have an equal share just as I have in its soil, its sunlight, its water. (Kumar & Sadique 60)

In the course of an interview, Ismat Chughtai expressed her views on religion where she explained what it does mean to be a Muslim:

“A Muslim is one who stands for peace”. She said: “I regard myself as a Muslim because I am peace loving. According to me one who aspires for peace, whether he is a Hindu, a Sikh or a Christian, is a Muslim at heart. I believe that Islam is a great religion. It believes in the welfare of women. But now Muslims have snatched away everything from Muslim Women.” (Kanwal 171)

In another interview with Afsar Farooqui, she candidly expressed her views on religion:

I have high regard for all the religions. All religions impart the same moral instruction – don't grab, give; don't deny others their rights. I regard Islam as the most perfect religion. It is so fulfilling, a complete answer to all our needs – spiritual, and mundane. A Muslim may be a big landlord, a moneyed man, even a king and yet he may not be a Muslim in its religious sense of the word. Many Muslims are anything but Muslims. On the other hand, many Hindus are good Muslims. Even many kafirs are good Muslims! A Muslim in the true sense is one who leads one towards goodness, truth, serenity of mind. There are many people who are greater Muslims than I am – particularly those who became Muslims out of a sense of conviction. (188)

Even in the Holy Qur'an, a Muslim has been defined as a person from whose hands and tongue nobody fears. Living all of her life in India, she was disillusioned by the violence and Hindu-Muslim riots. Many of her stories are more like a plea for peace. In “Kyun re Kutte” and “Uninvited Guests” (“Bin Bulaye Mehmaan”), she explicitly describes Hindu-Muslim riots. In

another set of stories like “Who Was He?” (“Who Kaun Tha”), “Non-Believer” (“Kafir”), and “Sacred Duty” (“Muqaddas Farz”), she demonstrated the kind of amiable relationship that two major religious communities have in the absence of turbulent times. She adroitly describes how Hindu-Muslim live in India in a cordial manner when they are not marred by religious fanatics. In these stories, she dexterously establishes how futile and meaningless these religious distinctions are and ultimately it is the humaneness that matters. Perhaps her last wish which took everyone by surprise, to be cremated, was her genuine gesture that proved her conviction and belief in the goodness of a human being.

In her entire life, Chughtai spoke her mind and did what she strongly believed in. Her writings are reflection of that mind which never gave in, considering the threat, risk or consequences of an action. She lived the way she wanted to, without having dread, trepidation or fear of defying the norms set by the family or society. Padamshree Award, Ghalib Award, Makhdoom Literary Award, Soviet Land Nehru Award and Iqbal Samman are some most prestigious awards which she received in the recognition of her work. The tributes, accolades, and praise that she received all her life were truly in recognition of her extraordinary personality that she was. Chughtai was always ahead of her times who revolutionized Urdu literature by introducing domestic and personal themes. In her hands, short story came to be accepted as a potent genre which could be used forcefully to bring change in the lives of women whose voice had been muffled, silenced, and muted. With an intensity of a woman’s spirit, she put forth their issues vehemently and authentically.

She familiarized Urdu world with *begumati zubaan*; enriching it with novel linguistic aspect, bursting with idioms and colloquial flavor, not hitherto an integral part of literary language. Chughtai pragmatically and realistically depicted the lives of women, taking into

consideration the inner and the outer world of women. Her radical thinking, revolutionary themes, and feminist notions long before it became the way of life are some steps for which she would always be credited and remembered. Her effort in representing women authentically and bringing them voice, agency and space, reclaimed them their self-esteem, autonomy and identity.

Notes:

¹ Chughtai's maternal ancestry goes up to the third Caliph of Islam, Hazrat Osama ibn Affan that she mentioned in the story, "Bichchhoo Phuphi" which is based on her aunt Badshahi Khanam.

² Tahira Naqvi translated *Kaghazi hai Pairahan* as *The Paper-thin Garment* whereas M. Asaduddin titled it as *A Life in Words: Memoirs: Ismat Chughtai*.

³ Rifat Khanam, Farhat Khanam, and Azmat Khanam are the names of her elder sisters.

⁴ All the other members of her family wrote Chaghtai with an 'a', but Chughtai, unlike all her sisters who used Khanam in their names, she preferred to have "Chughtai" and that too with 'u' instead of 'a'.

⁵ For information on Rashid Jahan, see Rakhshanda Jalil's *A Rebel and Her Cause: The Life and Work of Rashid Jahan*.

⁶ He was a Kashmiri Brahmin who converted to Islam. Popularly known as "Papa Mian", he was a staunch supporter of Women's education and edited a journal, *Khatoon*.

⁷ It is one episode which describes her Quilt trial and has been taken from her memoir, *Kaghazi hai Pairahan*. For its English translation by M. Asaduddin, see *LTV*, 240-261 or *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times*. 47-67.

⁸ All asterisks indicate that the translated titles have been provided by the research scholar.

⁹ Two versions are available of the story "Pesha"; Tahira Naqvi has translated it as "Profession" whereas M. Asaduddin has given the title "Vocation".

¹⁰ Qurratulain Hyder addressed her as "Lady Chenghez Khan" because in an interview with Yunus Agaskar (*The Shair*, 1976), Chughtai claimed to have a parental lineage from Genghis Khan (c 1161-1227).