

## ISMAT CHUGHTAI : A LADY WITH A DIFFERENCE

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*ISMAT CHUGHTAI, Urdu's most courageous and controversial writer, had become a legend in her own lifetime as much for her unconventional writings as for her mercurial personality. Born at a time when the Indian society, particularly the Muslim part of it, was largely orthodox and tradition-bound, and women spent their whole life behind the purdah, Chughtai challenged the mores and values of her time and fiercely advocated selfhood and self-definition for women. With brutal frankness and devastating honesty she pointed her accusing finger at the superstitions, follies and foibles prevalent in the society, especially the injustices meted out to women. She had a special place among her illustrious contemporaries in the field of Urdu fiction - Rajinder Singh Bedi, Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan Chander - and brought into its ambit the whole terrain of feminine sensibility with a sharp focus on female sexuality which was hitherto regarded as a taboo. Her writings have transformed the complexion of Urdu fiction in significant ways by bringing about a change in the attitudes and terms of reference in assessing literary merits of works in Urdu. Her contribution to the language - pert, racy, colloquial, idiomatic with a liberal sprinkling of expressions special to women with its raw and rough edges intact, as it was spoken by women of Agra, Aligarh, Rai Bareli and some parts of Rajasthan - is no less remarkable.*



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**I**smat Chughtai was born in the western Uttar Pradesh at a place called Badayun, associated with the memory of Gautama Buddha, on August 21, 1911. She was the ninth child of Mirza Qasim Baig Chughtai and

Nusrat Khannam. Her family name was Ismat Khanam Chughtai and she was called by her nickname, Chunni. Qasim Baig Chughtai was a Judicial Magistrate who served in different capacities at Agra, Bahraich, Jaunpur, Kanpur, Lucknow and later at different places in the princely state of Mewar like Sojat, Sambhar, Balotra, Jawra, and particularly, Jodhpur. He retired as Deputy Collector in 1924 and returned to his family home at Agra. He soon got fed up with the dirt and filth of Gali Panjshahi at Agra and moved to Aligarh. However, the Maharaja of Jodhpur called him back with honour to Jodhpur where he served again as the Judicial Magistrate. He died in 1937.

Being the ninth child of her parents and that, too, a girl, her birth into the world was not greeted with enthusiasm by her parents or other members of the family. Even her mother never let her feel wanted or cared for. Describing the occasion of her birth, she says: "My mother was dressing up to attend the marriage of her friend's daughter in the neighbourhood. The cleaning woman was sweeping the floor when I chose to arrive into the world, unannounced. When my brothers and sisters were born, the mem (the white nurse/midwife) used to come. But my delivery was managed by the sweepress. That is why my brothers and sisters teased me by calling me 'a sweepress's offspring'. Rather than suffering from any inferiority complex I also started to believe that I was not my parents' child but the sweepress's who fed me with milk." Burdened with so many children and other responsibilities, her mother had no time for her. Not to speak of cuddling, cajoling and pampering which every child is used to in an Indian household, even the necessary motherly duties were performed by the ayah when she was an infant and later, when she grew up, by her elder sister, Farhat Khanam alias Manju. In fact, Ismat Chughtai had begun to look upon Manju not as her elder sister but as her mother and gave her all respect and affection as long as she lived. As far as her mother was concerned, Ismat Chughtai's feelings about her were very complex. So ingrained was her sense of childhood deprivation that she later on commented – "Amma used to hate me,

perhaps." This cryptic sentence says a lot about her innermost feelings. A psychoanalyst would certainly trace the seeds of rebellion in Ismat Chughtai to her neglect and deprivation as a child.

Ismat Chughtai spent her childhood days playing football and *gilli danda*, (tipcat), riding bicycles, plucking guavas and hogging them, wandering about the neighbourhood and generally looking for some mischief or the other. When she saw her brothers riding horses, she insisted on doing the same and despite her mother's strong opposition, had her way. Day in and day out she was made aware of the difference between men and women and boys and girls. But she was not ready to accept her subjugated status as a woman lying down. She reminisces, with a chuckle – "realised that being a girl had its advantages. Abba's standing instruction was that girls should not be pulled by their locks or nose. If girls beat anyone, the person should lodge a complaint with the *sarkar* (her father). Well, there was just one girl – and that's me – against whom complaint was lodged every other day. However, my brothers' reputation in this regard was so low that I was hardly ever punished. On the contrary, they would be reprimanded."

When she was four years old, Ismat Chughtai was introduced to the *Baghadadi Qaeda* (Arabic First Reader to teach alphabet). Tutors would come home to teach children. In her short story, "Bachpan", she gives a graphic description of the way elementary education was imparted to her. Her early school education began at Agra where she used to go to the Municipal school along with other children in a palanquin, carried by two kahars (palanquin-bearers). From Agra the family moved to Bahraich and later when Ismat Chughtai was about nine years old, to Aligarh. Somehow she completed reading the Quran at the age of twelve. Rather than complimenting her on her achievement, the members of her family derided her for having accomplished something which Naiyer, her sister's daughter, had acquired much earlier in addition to other accomplishments that were considered necessary for competent house-keeping. Ismat Chughtai never showed any inclination towards these so-called accomplishments that were considered necessary for a woman to

make her life happy, particularly after marriage. When she was twelve, her mother one day gave her an old *gharara* (skirt) to practise sewing. She did not show the slightest interest. The same happened when she was asked to learn how to cook. Ismat flatly refused to learn culinary skills. The mother was horrified and began to have nightmares about what would happen to such a wayward girl after marriage. The matter was brought to the notice of Ismat's father. When he wanted to know why she did not want to learn 'womanly' skills and asked her what she would feel with her husband after marriage if she did not know how to cook, her answer was – "If he is poor, we'll make do with *khichdi*; if he is rich, we'll keep a cook. Her father was rendered speechless by this splendid display of common sense. It seems she was already on the way to acquire the essential traits of her character – fierce individuality and clear-mindedness about what she wanted and what she did not want.

When Ismat Chughtai was in the ninth class, marriage proposals began to arrive. During those days it was very common to get girls married at the age of fourteen or fifteen. Her parents approved the proposal from a boy who was a deputy collector. Preparations for the marriage began in right earnest. One day she noticed some unusual activities at home. After making discreet enquiries she came to know that the preparations related to her marriage. She wrote to her elder brother Azim Baig Chughtai requesting him to stop this marriage. He wrote back saying that the proposal, in fact, was sent by him, that the boy was suitable from all counts and that she could continue her study after marriage. Then she told her parents that she was not going to marry, at least not just yet. When all persuasions failed, she thought out a plan which was sure to succeed. She wrote to her cousin Jugnu (Athar Hussain, son of her elder maternal uncle, Zafar) a letter in which she made an impassioned plea to him to rescue her from the impending catastrophe. She asked him to write a letter to his father conveying his wish to marry her. Jugnu went along with her plan and conveyed 'his' wish to his father who pleaded with his sister (Ismat's mother) to break off the other engagement. Nusrat Khanam, who was deeply attached to

her brothers and was very fond of Jugnu, was only too happy to do that. By this extraordinary sleight of hand Ismat was successful in warding off an early marriage which, in all probability, would have effectively closed the doors for further development and literary creativity in her.'

Ismat Chughtai had studied Islam, Christianity and Hinduism at some depth, but she found what she termed as *mazhab-e-insaaniat* (religion of humanity) to be the best. Hinduism attracted her; particularly, she was fascinated by the Hindu mythology and the image of Krishna, the dark god. Though she sometimes attended religious rituals of both the Sunni and Shia schools of Islam, they were more of social rather than religious occasions for her. She accepted the validity of all religions in the conduct of human life and man's social behaviour, but she did not seem to believe in their transcendental nature. Neither did she seem to believe in a life after death. A streak of agnosticism runs through her stray comments about religion. All this becomes clear in her answer to the question on the presence of religion in her works:

**J.P.** – There isn't too much of Islam in your stories...Are you a believer?

**I.C.** – Now don't get me into trouble. I can recite the Kalima beautifully – when necessary, for example, when I visit Pakistan!

I believe there is some power, but I'm not afraid of it. If I jump from my window with Allah's name on my lips, I know He won't save me. I don't pray, but I don't do anything bad either. I've never cheated anybody.

There's no harm in following any religion. I became a Hindu too. I fell in love with a Hindu boy; he took me to the temple, made me drink cow's piss. It was quite fragrant. ...I've been to temples – I love their *prasad*, their *pooris*.

In some sense she always remained a child – curious and precocious. Her love of mischief and child-like wonder never left her.



She was always game for novel experiences, meeting new people and seeing new places. She travelled to China, Soviet Russia, France, England, Finland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Pakistan and her excitement is evident in the travelogues that she wrote after her travels.

In her twilight days she had lost her memory and had become quite frail. However, neither age nor the vicissitudes of life could blunt her rapier-sharp wit or subdue her aggressiveness. Despite her failing health her confidence in herself and her innate stubbornness did not leave her. She could never accept that she was wrong or bring herself to accept defeat. Whenever she committed a faux pas and contradicted her own statements because of her failing memory and people pointed them out to her, she would shout them down and coolly disown her own earlier statements. Similarly, she used to shout at doctors who said that she had lost her memory. Eventually, the end came on October 24, 1991 when she was found dead in her bed in the morning. She was not buried in accordance with the Muslim funeral rites but quietly cremated, as she is said to have wished, in the electric crematorium.

### EXERCISES

#### A. Let's Answer

1. How did Ismat describe the occasion of her birth?
2. How did Ismat Chughtai spend her childhood days?
3. How was elementary education imparted to her?
4. Which religion did she find the best?
5. 'In some sense she always remained a child.' Do you agree?
6. What light does the story throw on human behaviour?

#### B. Let's Discuss

Discuss the following in groups or pairs.

- a. Gender bias must be discouraged.

#### C. Let's Do

- a. Do a project work on the woman who left her imprint despite adverse social circumstance.