

Bold and Beautiful Memoir Kaghazi Hai Pairahan by Ismat Chughtai

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Abstract:

This paper throws light on Ismat Chughtai as a creative and innovative writer who gives a new direction to Urdu literature. In her memoir, *A Life in Words: Memoirs* is originally written in Urdu entitle *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* and translated by M. Assaduddin described the position of Muslim women of her society of Uttar Pradesh, India. She fights against patriarchy and cultural norms to get an education and has described the discrimination showed towards girls' education. In this unfinished memoir, she narrates different facets of a woman's life. She also describes her doom days when Lahore court in 1944 summoned for her short story 'The Quilt' (*Lihaaf*) published in 1942 in the Urdu literary journal *Adb-I-Latif* labeled a charge of obscenity. Her characterization is unique. The readers feel and visualize the characters; they smile, laugh, wonder and sometimes cry with the characters.

Keywords: Memoir, patriarchy, discrimination, obscenity

Introduction:

Ismat Chughtai was an influential Indian writer in Urdu known for her furious, outspoken and controversial writing style. This peculiar style of writing made her strong voice for the readers and inspired the younger generation to follow her path. She was the leading figure of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA). This group of writers produces various prominent works between 1935 and 1955. Her writings enlighten women who were suppressed and depressed under the patriarchal society in the early 20th century. She gives voice to their inner urges and aspiration and educates them to break the male-dominated rigid structures. She takes up subjects most uncomfortable to her times and with her wit and raw irony, demolished set ideas.

Kaghazi Hai Pairahan (The Robe is Made of Paper: 1979-1980)

Ismat Chughtai, in her later career, was proposed to write something of her life by her well-wishers and literary writers. So she had written a series of autobiographical essays under the title *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan*. These essays were first published in a famous Urdu literary magazine, *Aajkal* in 1979 and 1980. According to the editor of the collected essays Urdu scholar Varis Alavi, Chughtai had wished to edit the collected manuscript herself, but she was unable to do so before she died. At the editor's discretion, *Ghubaar-e-Kaarwaan* (Dust of the Karwan) another autobiographical essay published in *Ajkal* in November 1970, (Preface xi) was added the first chapter.

A Life in Words: Memoirs is a translation of original Urdu work titled *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* by Ismat Chughtai, was published in 1994 three years after her death. Mohd Asaduddin is a translator of this text. He is an author, critic and translator of several languages. He is currently a professor of English, Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Languages, Director of Academics at Jamia Millia Islamia

University in New Delhi, India. The fourteen chapters of the book, *A Life in Words: Memoirs* is a fragmented and disjointed autobiographical work. It is not an autobiography in chronological order – ‘from the birth to the points of writing the book’ – it’s a collection of her reminiscence.

“*Kaghzi Hai Pairahan*, generally known to be Ismat Chughtai’s autobiography, is a curious piece of work. It is certainly written by Ismat Chughtai, and it is about her life, her family and her growth and development as a writer. But it is not a straightforward autobiography in as much as it does not record the author’s life story – from her birth to the point of writing the book – in chronological order. It is fragmented, jagged, written in fits and starts when spurts of memory propelled her to record her reminiscences, without consideration for chronology, repetition or narrative coherence.” (Preface x)

Kaghzi Hai Pairahan (The Robe is Made of Paper) refers to the initial line of the *gazel* of the great Urdu poet Mirza Galib.

Naqsh fariyadi hai kis ki shokhi-e-tahrir ka

Kaghzi hai pairahan har paikar-e-tasvir ka.

[Whose mischievous writing is the picture suing over?

Every image from wears a **robe made of papers.**]

The second line has a phrase ‘robe made of paper’ is a metaphor. Galib explains that in ancient Iran the seeker of justice would be done paper garments before approaching the monarch to ask for redress. The image of the paper garment, therefore, calls to mind a seeker of justice, an apt description for Ismat Chughtai herself, reflecting the abiding concern for justice in Chughtai’s writing. (Paul 18)

Parentage and Childhood:

Born on 21 August 1911 in a conventional middle-class Muslim family of Badaun, Uttar Pradesh, India, Ismat Chughtai was the ninth child of Khan Bhadur Mirza Qaseem Bag Chughtai and Nusrat Khanam. Ismat’s father received the title ‘Khan Bhadur’ by the British Government as the recognition for his service to the government, served as a judicial magistrate at Agra, Bahraich, Jaunpur, Kanpur and later in the princely state of Mewar. He was retired as a deputy collector. Due to his various transfers to different cities of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, Ismat got an opportunity to meet different people and understand different cultures and beliefs. Her mother, Nusrat Khanam was not happy at the birth of Ismat.

“Apa (Ismat Chughtai) was not a welcome child – in a part because she was the ninth of ten children and in parts, because she happened to be a girl – a fact that she seemed to detest from as early as she could remember or understand. Even her own mother never let her feel wanted or cared for. Burdened with so many children and other responsibilities Nusrat Khanam had not time for cuddling, cajoling, and pampering or performing even perfunctory motherly duties. Apa was brought up by an ‘ayah’ when she was an infant and then by her older sister, Farhat Khanam.” (Negi 8)

She shared her innocent childhood memories in ‘Dust of Carvan’. In her neighbourhood, a Bhramin Hindu family was living. Lalaji was the elder of this family. His daughter Shushi was Ismat’s closest friend. Lalaji’s family was celebrating Janmasthan festival. Anyhow, Ismat entered in Lalaji’s home. “No one in Shushi’s family noticed me; after all, my religion was not written on my face.” (8) Ismat was Muslim by caste but by gender female. When she first time noticed the idol of Krishna, her motherly love stirred up. How beautifully she describes the idol of Krishna and how innocently she expresses her emotions. She narrates,

“What delightful fancies the eyes of childhood weave? The room was filled with the aroma of ghee and frankincense. A silver cradle hung in the middle of the room. Nestled on mattresses and between silken pillows, decked with gold and silver edgings, was a silver infant swaying in the cradle. It was a beautiful piece of artwork. Hair drawn beautifully, he had a necklace around his neck and a diadem of peacock feather on his head.

What an innocent face he had! The eyes shone as though lit with lamps. Maternal love welled up in my heart. The child broke into a laugh and spread out his arms longingly. I touched the child’s cheek softly. My entire being danced with joy. Unable to control the impulse I picked up the child and clasped him to my breast.” (6)

This narration proves that Ismat was a firm disciple of the Progressive Writers’ Association who believes in nationalism and humanism. Worship of idol is against in Muslim religion. The Muslims believe in the oneness of God. Yet distinguishing between faith and culture, she claimed Hindu mythology as part of her national inheritance as an Indian.

“I am Muslim, worshipping idols is akin to infidelity. Yet the tales and legends of gods are my nation’s inheritance. Encompassed within them are centuries of culture and philosophy. Faith is one thing; the culture of one’s homeland is another. I am entitled to an equal share of it, just as I am entitled to an equal share of its earth, sunshine and water. If I splash myself with colour during Holi, or light up diyas during Diwali, will my faith suffer erosion? Are my beliefs brittle and judgments so shaky that they will fall to pieces?” (19)

Being a curious child, Ismat minutely observed the surrounding and aroused questions. She narrates, the first time she understands the meaning of the songs of lamentation (*marsiya* and *nauha*) at a *Muharram Majlis*, a gathering to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husain and his family. When she heard the story of Ali Asghar, the infant child of Husain, who was shot in the throat with an arrow she morally collapsed. ‘Who was shot in the throat with an arrow? Why?’ She wrote that she started crying loudly, after which,

“The women observing *matam* suddenly became quiet and stared at me in amazement. They thought that the long wait for the *tabrruk*, the consecrated food, had become unbearable for me, or that I had been hurt, or beaten by an insect. ‘Why shoot the arrow? And why in the throat?’ I asked in my unusual, obstreperous manner. No one cared to reply.” (3)

The story of Ali Asghar and Imam Husain is a symbol of all innocents who have been killed or otherwise abused. Her love for humanity is developing from childhood. She is the voice of compassion in a cruel world.

Marriage and ‘Lihaaf’ (The Quilt):

Ismat had bitter experiences and she regretfully admitted that education to girls seemed like an unnecessary hindrance in the process of their marriage business. She shared her experiences as to how scary the ideas of marriage to one of her cousins.

Ismat also showed how parents of daughters were pressurized to get their ‘grown-up’ daughters marry at the earliest. In the first chapter *Dust of the Caravan*, Ismat shared how her mother always repelled by her tomboyish ways and insisted her to have some feminine qualities.

“It was a man’s world, she said, made and distorted by man. A woman is the tiny part of this world and man has made her the object of his own love and hatred. Depending on his whims, he worships her or rejects her. To make a place for herself in the world a woman has to resort to feminine

wiles. Patience, prudence, wisdom and social graces – these will make a man dependent on a woman...” (25-26)

According to the text, though most women in her community are being prepared for marriage and turning the plans of her social circle on their heads. Ismat frames her rejection of marriage in the context of systematic pressure to quell her self-reliance. She narrates the incident of how she was told that she was too independent and that any husband she married would divorce her. She says,

“From my childhood, I had heard from everyone that I had no merits, that I would run the family to which I would go that I was outspoken and stubborn and that in two days my husband would divorce me and turn me out of his house. I had very low self-esteem – I did not have a good physique or a beautiful face [...] If I did not marry, no stupid fellow would have the chance to divorce me. I would rather get an education and become independent.” (112)

Ismat writes that she desperately wanted to ensure that her parents refused a marriage proposal sent to the family for her since she was concerned that marriage would put an end to her educational aspirations. To protest the proposal, she first writes a letter to her brother, but he is not sympathetic. Next, she reaches out to her childhood playmate and cousin, Athar Husain Usmani, nicknamed Jugnu, imploring him to send a counter-proposal. She wrote a letter to Jugnu,

“I swear to by God, I will not insist on marrying you, but only you can stop my marriage now. Write a letter to Mamu saying that you want to marry me. He should come to Sambhar immediately and stop the marriage. If you do not help me, you will regret it.” (112)

As a result, her cousin does as he is instructed. In a few days, Bade Mamu reached Sambhar. He talked to Ismat’s parents that Jugnu was ‘regarded as a golden swan. Everyone in the family with a marriageable daughter had an eye for him.’

Later, when her parents would not allow her to stay in the boarding house after the family leaves Aligarh, Ismat recalls that she wrote again to Jugnu and told him that he should demand she be educated; threatening that otherwise, he would call off the wedding. Her strategy proves successful and her parents allowed her to continue her studies, even though she does not follow through with marrying Jugnu. Playing on her parents’ fears of a unwedded daughter, Ismat points to her ability to use parental anxieties about marriage to achieve her goals of liberation. Notably, this is much like her mother’s strategy, in that it could be seen as manipulation carried out by one who is relatively powerless against those with more power.

Ismat love story is full of complex and interesting. She shared her romantic anecdote in her autobiographical essay *Under Lock and Key*. In her earlier essay, *Leaving Aligarh Once Again*, she had mentioned that when she was studying in IX standard in Aligarh her parents had decided to make her marriage with a deputy collector and she had appealed to Jugnu to rescue her to marry deputy collector. Incidentally, in her later life, the deputy collector turned out to be none other than Zafar Qureishi Zia. She has narrated beautiful romantic love affair with Zia in the essay *Under Lock and Key*. She described, “I felt as though I had known Zia for a long time and would continue to know him for the rest of my life.” As her capricious style of narration, she keeps the reader in the dark about the secret not to marry Zia.

After then, Shahid Latif came into her life as a friend. He was a scriptwriter in Bombay Talkies. She had met Shahid first time in Aligarh when he was doing his M.A. and she was doing her B.T. In 1941, Ismat was appointed as the Inspector of Schools in Bombay and started living with her brother Mirza Jasim Beg. At that time Shahid had started visiting her home and came closer to her. Ismat shared,

“On time Shahid took my stories to sell them to Bombay Talkies. Someone told my brother about it and he got very angry. He thought that since his sister earned Rs. 300 months, she should get married to someone earning at least Rs. 1500 a month. He didn’t like my consorting with a scriptwriter who earned a pittance of only Rs. 225 a month.” (27)

Ismat left her brother’s home thinking that her freedom was restricted and started living in a hostel. Ismat depicted her decision to get married to Shahid as one of the necessities. Since she had left her brother home and cancelled betrothal to her cousin Dr Athar Husain Usman (Jugnu), Ismat claimed that she needed her own place to live in Bombay. In a 1983 interview in the journal *Manushi*, she was asked to discuss her marriage to Shahid Latif and how she had been able to get out of an engagement to her cousin. She answered,

“Once I was earning, they could not impose anything on me. I met Shahid when I was staying at my brother’s house in Bombay. Shahid proposed marriage. At that time, I was Inspector of Schools for the whole Bombay area, but I could not find a place to stay. No one is willing to rent a house to an unmarried woman. I was not willing to spend my life in a hostel. So I thought I would have to marry somebody. Here was Shahid pursuing me. Why not marry him? [...] In fact, I told Shahid that I was willing to live with him without marriage. He said: ‘No, you will leave me and run away.’ I said: ‘Why should I run away? I need somebody, some friend, some man. It doesn’t have to be a husband.’ But since he insisted on marriage, I agreed.”(Kishwar 5)

Ismat portrayed her marriage with Shahid Latif as a marriage of convenience. They were married on May 2, 1942.

Ismat shared her miserable days in the autobiographical essay *In the Name of those Married Women*. Her controversial short story *Lihaaf* (The Quilt) was published after her marriage in 1942. *Lihaaf* has given her popularity and troubles too. It was published in the Lahore – based literary journal *Adab-a-Latif* by Shahid Ahmad Dehalvi. This story has charge of obscenity so in 1944 the Lahore court issued a summons in favour of Ismat Chughtai – the writer; Shahid Ahmed Dehalvi – the publisher; and calligrapher who copied the manuscript. *Lihaaf* deals with a theme of lesbian encounter as well as homosexual relationship within an all-woman setting (*zenana*) in a traditional Muslim household.

Ismat narrated her troubles that people wrote ‘filthy letters’ to her. These letters filled with ‘inventive and convoluted’ obscenities and in this matter, they dragged her whole family, including her husband and two months old child. She expressed her pathos,

“I am scared of mud, muck and lizards. Many people pretend to be courageous but they are scared of dead mice. I was scared of my mail as it envelopes contained snakes, scorpions and dragons. I would read the first few words and then burn the letters.” (25)

Ismat was not the only Urdu writer of her generation to write about same-sex desire. Muhammad Hasan Askari writes two stories based on same-sex desire in the early 1940s: *Phislan* (Slipperiness, published in *Naya Adab*, 1941) and *Chai ki Pyali* (A Cup of Tea published in *Adabi Duniya*, 1942). Here the question is that why Ismat was targeted as an obscene writer? Under consideration of the time of Ismat, one possibility is that a writer identified as a woman, it was particularly offensive to social sensibilities for Ismat to approach such topics. Another possibility is that on this topic (same-sex) the only man can write and a woman who is coming from a respected family and well-educated should not write about sexuality or alternative sexuality. The realist authors and critics claimed that in the literary form of the realist short story to bring private into the public can be seen as threatening the social order.

Ismat described the mentality of Shahid Ahmad Dehalvi the publisher of *Adab-a-Latif* based on gender discrimination. Ismat and Shahid Sahib were in Lahore for a court trial. Shahid Sahib raised questions on obscenity in Ismat's writing. Ismat furiously replied him, 'And you've used such vulgar words in your *Gunah Ki Ratein!* You've even described the details of the sex act merely for the sake of titillation.' I said.

'My case is different. I'm a man.'

'And I to blame for that?'

'What do you mean?' His face was flushed with anger.

'What I mean that God made you a man, and I had no hand in it. You have the freedom to write whatever you want, you don't need my permission. Similarly, I don't feel any need to seek your permission to write the way I want to.'

'You are an educated girl from a decent Muslim family.'

'You are also educated and from a decent Muslim family.'

'Do you want to compete with men?' (29-30)

Ismat raised a question against gender discrimination and started a movement for opposing male-governed society where all values are male-oriented. As a component of women's liberation *Lihaaf* favours for sexual rights for the women. At this point, lesbian feminism takes the view "If women continue to have a sexual relation to men, they would forever remain in the oppressive heterosexual bondage. Therefore, it is better for them to create distinct communities based on the principle of sexual love among women themselves." (Mittapalli)

Lihaaf drastically affected to the personal life of Ismat. Her husband Shahid threatened to divorce her "Shahid fought with me the whole night, even threatened to divorce me." (24) After publication of the *Lihaaf* she was labeled as the 'obscene' writer. She observed,

"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 recognized that I am a realist and not an obscene writer." (39-40)

In this miserable situation, Saadat Hasan Manto came forward to help her. Ismat made clear that some readers expressed their views to punish her for her writing. But in critical essays, Manto praised her work. Manto phoned to Ismat's family and informed that the suit had been filed against him. His story *Bu* was declared obscene and Lahore court summoned for that. She explained, "Manto was looking very happy, as though he had been awarded the Victoria Cross. Though I put up a courageous front, I felt quite embarrassed. I was quite nervous, but Manto encouraged me so much that I forgot all my misgivings." (24) Another one of the progressive writer Khwaja Ahmed Abbas (1914-1987) had translated *Lihaaf* in English and published. So that non-Urdu readers can also understand the reality of *Lihaaf*.

In 1946, Ismat and Manto were put on trial in Lahore court for obscenity. On the first day of the trial, the judge asked Ismat her name and wanted to know if she had written the story. Ismat accepted the crime. The second hearing was scheduled for November 1946. The witness who had to prove that Manto's story *Bu* and Ismat's story *Lihaaf* were obscene. The cross-examination in the court is very interesting.

Bu is taken up first.

'Is this story obscene? Manto's lawyer asked.

'Yes' answered the witness.

‘Can you put your finger on a word which is obscene?’

Witness: ‘The word ‘Chest’.

Lawyer: ‘My Lord, the word chest is not obscene’.

Witness: ‘No. But here the writer means woman’s chest’.

The debate went on. The witness could find no other words except ‘chest’ and it could not be proved obscene. (34)

Next day, the turn of *Lihaaf*. Some persons advised Ismat to tender an apology, pay the fine, but Ismat decided to fight the case in the court. Ismat’s lawyer implemented the same cross-examination techniques to the witness as Manto’s advocate did. Witness were not able to put their fingers on any word in the story would prove it obscene. One witness finds out the phrase “[...] collecting lovers” is obscene. Cross-examination goes ahead.

‘Which word is obscene – ‘collect’ or ‘lover’? The lawyer asked.

‘Lover’ replied the witness a little hesitantly.

‘My lord the word ‘lover’ has been used by the great poets most liberally. It is also used in *naats*, poems written in praise of the Prophet. God-fearing people have accorded it a very high status.’

‘But it is objectionable for girls to collect lovers,’ said the witness.

‘Why?’

‘Because.....because it is objectionable for good girls to do so.’

‘And if the girls are not good, then it is not objectionable?’

‘Mmm....no.’

‘My client must have referred to the girls who were not good. Yes, madam, do you mean here that bad girls collect lovers?’

‘Yes’.

‘Well, this may not be obscene. But it is reprehensible for an educated lady from a decent family to write about it’, the witness thundered. The trial went on. After the trial the judge called her into the anteroom and said to Ismat quite informally “I have read most of your stories they aren’t obscene. Neither is *Lihaaf*. But Manto’s writings are often littered with filth.” (36-37)

Maulana Salahuddin Ahmad, an eminent critic 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 seems to be beyond the reach of even the best of male writers.” (Sadique 224)

Conclusion:

Ismat Chughtai is one of the powerful voices in Urdu literature of contemporary Indian writing. She is the one who raises the status of Urdu literature to the pinnacle of success. Through her powerful writing, she fearlessly raised the issue of women of her generation and till the last breath she fought for the rights of women of her community and women in general.

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