

# Ismat Chughtai: A Progressive Writer of Progressive Literature

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## **Abstract:**

Ismat Chughtai was one of the remarkable Urdu authors whose career began in association with the Progressive Writers' Movements. The Urdu writers belonging to this group produced various influential works. They inspired people through their literary pieces to understand the importance of equality and social justice.

**Keywords:** Progressive writer, Progressive literature, equality, social justice

## **Introduction:**

Ismat Chughtai is celebrated by readers of Urdu for her short stories and novels and is recognized throughout India for her importance as a cultural critic. Chughtai's evaluation of society is based upon the equality of all Indian people, whether they are women or men, Muslim or Hindu, master or servant. Her writing is the description of realities of her times' women's lives.

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## **Progressive Writers' Association**

In 1934, the Progressive Writers' Association was founded in London. The Urdu name of this organization was *Anjuman Taraqqi Passand Musannifin*. In 1936, the first All India Meeting of the Progressive Writer's Association was held in Lucknow. The aim of the organization, adopted during its first conference, promised a vigilant approach to literature:

"It is the duty of the Indian writers to give expression to the changes in Indian life and assist the spirit of progress in the country by introducing scientific rationalism in literature. They should undertake to develop an attitude of literary criticism which will discourage the general reactionary and revivalist tendencies on a question like family, religion, sex, war and society, and to combat literary trends reflecting communalism, racial, antagonism, sexual libertinism, and exploitation of man by man." (Hafeez 649)

In the same year, the association's first manifesto in English was published in the *Left Review*. (*Premchand literary journal 'Hans'*) Munsif Premchand delivered the inaugural address at this conference and the writer Rabindranath Tagore sent a letter of support. (Sabana 447) The progressive writers' believed that writing was a tool that could be used to instigate social reform. This group dominated the Urdu literary scene throughout the period leading up to Indian independence and partition. It was a group of intellectuals committed to social reform through the art. Chughtai maintained the lifelong affiliation with the Progressive Writer's Movement.

Before Ismat Chughtai, Progressive Writers' Group used fiction to explore the effects of tradition, social convention, and the class of the poor and unprivileged. She was one of the first writers to shift focus

towards upper-middle-class females and domestic hierarchies. The Progressive Writer's Association's manifesto mobilized India writers against social conventions that disadvantaged the poor and lower classes. The group formalized a tradition of critical and realistic investigations of religion, class and taboo in everyday life. The movement was "inescapably committed to social transformation and nation-building", which it hoped to achieve by generating art to redefine cultural production and social debate. (Gopal 11)

### **Ismat Chughtai a Progressive Writer**

Chughtai was a prolific writer, publishing over one hundred short stories, novels, essays, and stories for film and radio plays. Initially, she was under the influence of Imtiaz Ali "I was probably jealous of the poetic aura that Imtiaz Ali had." (38) She follows Imtiaz Ali's overtly romanticized themes and overstated character and had written her first story *Bachpan* (Childhood) in October 1937 when she was performing the duty of a principal of Islam Girls' School in Bareilly. Unfortunately, it was rejected by the editor.

"I had written my first story *Bachpan*, after a good deal of reflection. The only journal our family subscribed to was *Tahzeeb-i-Niswan*, to which I sent this story. It came back along with a letter of reprimand from the editor, Mumtaz Ali Sahib, the father of Imtiaz Ali Taj. In the story, I had compared my childhood with that of Hijab Imtiaz Ali. The point of his objection was that I had described in the story how I was beaten by the Maulvi Sahib for my inability to recite verses from the Quran correctly." (38)

In 1938, her second work *Fasadi* (Troublemaker), a play was the first to get published in *Saaqi*, a renowned Urdu journal, edited by Shahid Ahmed Dehlavi. After that she has written many stories: *Kafir* (Infidel, her first short story); *Dheet* (Stubborn, her only soliloquy); *Gainda* and *Khidmatgaar* (her short stories); *Dhani Bankein* (Green Pastures: a collection of six Radio dramas: 1955). Ismat has written eleven novels and Novellas: *Ziddi* (The Stubborn on: 1941); *Tehri Lakeer* (The Crooked Line: 1943); *Masooma* (The Innocent Girl: 1961); *Saudai* (The Crazy one: 1964); *Dil ki Duniya* (The Realm of the Heart: 1966); *Jungli Kabooter* (Wild Pigeon: 1970); *Ajab Aadmi* (A Strange Man: 1970); *Ek Katra Khoon Ka* (One Drop of Blood: 1975). She also wrote two novellas for children: *Teen Anarhi* (Three Novices: 1988); and *Naqli Rajkumar* (The Fake Prince: 1992). Her collection of stories include: *Kaliyan* (Buds:1941); *Chotein* (Wounds: 1942); *Do hath* (A Pair of Hands:1955); *Badan ki Khusboo* (Scent of the Body: 1979); *Amarbel* (The Eternal Vine: 1979); *Thori Si Paagal* (A Little Crazy:1979); and *Aadhi Aurat Aadha Khwaab* (Half Woman Half Myth: 1986) and *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* (The Robe is Made of Paper: 1979-1980), an unfinished autobiography). Moreover, her non-fictional pieces ranging from commentaries such as *Fasadat aur Adab* (Communal Violence and Literature) and *Chirag Jal Rahe Hain* (The Lamps are Burning). She has written two outstanding pen-sketches (personal narratives): *Dozakhi* (Hell Bound) about her brother Azeem Bag Chughtai; *Mera Dost Mera Dushman* (My Friend My Enemy) about Saadat Hasan Manto.

### ***Lihaaf* (The Quilt) controversial short story**

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)

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