

Ismat Chughtai's Thrust for Education and Hate of Pardha or Burqa

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Abstract:

This paper depicts Ismat Chughtai as an inventive and imaginative writer who offers Urdu literature a fresh perspective. Her autobiography, *A Life in Words: Memoirs*, which was translated by M. Assaduddin from the Urdu work *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan*, discusses the status of Muslim women in her Uttar Pradesh, India, community. She has written on the prejudice against females' education and battles against patriarchal and cultural norms in order to pursue an education. She describes several aspects of a woman's life in this incomplete memoir.

Keywords: Burqa, prejudice, Muslim community

Ismat Chughtai fights patriarchy and cultural norms to get an education and has described the discrimination showed towards girls' education in her well known autobiographical essays *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan*. The *Burqa* is not a choice of Ismat. She revolts against this rude *burqa* tradition. Ismat discussed here she emerged from *Pardha/Burqa* during the time of great social and political changes in India. *Pardha* was a custom that affected both Muslim and Hindu women but in reality, it affected the lives of Muslim women more profoundly.

'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', this statement of Simon de Beauvoir, a philosopher of existential tradition appears to be true in on text with Chughtai's life. Since childhood girl gets trained in such a way that they come out as a perfect woman ready to sacrifice herself at the altar of life. She discloses the hypocrisy prevailing in the society regarding girls' education and *burqa* tradition. The conservative Muslim society of U.P. strongly opposed girls' education and strongly favoured the *burqa* tradition.

In *A Life in Words*, Chughtai describes like other middle-class families in the reform period, her parents took part in the effort to educate their daughters. When Chughtai was very young, her father sent two of her elder sisters to Karamat Husain Boarding School, a Muslim Girls' School in Lucknow, established by Sayyid Karamat Husain (1854-1917), the former professor of law at Aligarh Muslim University and an educational reformer. They stay at school for short-period and came back. When Ismat became young and matured, she asked, she was told that,

"The entire family threatened to boycott us, saying that my father was making his daughters Christians, that it would be difficult to marry us off and that he would have to maintain us all our lives. Amma shed bitter tears. Abba finally gave in. His friend also advised him to withdraw my sisters from school as, according to them, to educate a girl was worse than prostituting her." (72)

Hasmat Khanam (Cousin of Ismat) was the first girl in their family to complete her education and took up a job. The entire society stood against them and threatened to burn down their house. Sometimes when her father was away during nights, only mother and daughter lived in fright.

This was the scenario of U.P. where Ismat was born. She had cherished many dreams for future life and she knows that only education could fulfill her all dreams. Ismat states in her memoir that her parents were hesitant to give in to her demands to send her to school. Chughtai depicts her parents as constricted by their social standing, bound to the systems the past. She writes “I didn’t feel anger at my parents; rather I feel pity that they were imprisoned in such a limited circle.” (72) This was not a matter of callousness on the part of her parents towards her; “In their opinion, they were saving me from the bad atmosphere of a boarding school.” (73)

In the Muslim family, gender discrimination was prominent at that time. They thought the man was the breadwinner and the woman the homemaker. So they educate the boys who may help them to earn and for the girls religious education, cooking, sewing, embroidery and other household works which will be helpful to them to look after their husband and in-laws. A crisis within Ismat’s own family, her brother Shamim decides to quit the school. The bitter irony of her family was that they feared to send their daughters to a school who wants to study and forced Shamim to go to school though he was not interested. Ismat says,

“It was as though the doomsday had arrived! Shamim didn’t want to study and I wasn’t allowed to study! Shamim had the right to ruin his life. I didn’t have a right to make my life better! Who is the arbitrator of this world? Who is the architect of my life? If it’s my parents, why did God give me a brain? What should I do with it?” (60)

Ismat started school education in Aligarh in 1922 but her education was discontinued when the family moved to Sambhar (Rajasthan) in 1929. At that time she was studying in IX standard. She had a dream to complete her education at Aligarh Girls’ School. The lonely environment of Sambhar and unfulfilled desire for education forced her into depression and thoughts of suicide. She had a strange nightmare that she was dead and the whole family was mourning it. She could hear the mourning of millions of women who mourn someone or the other. This shows her helpless stage of her as well as the other women in the male-dominated society. She writes,

“I would dream about the boarding school for entire nights. It was a strange feeling that felt as if it was suffocating me.....for several days I had a strange nightmare – I was dead and the whole family was in mourning. I seemed to hear the wailing of those millions of women who were mourning someone or the other.” (113-114)

But being a bold woman, she recollects her courage and shakes off all this stupid thought. She firmly decided, if she wants an education, she must declare her wish in front of her father. So one day she confronted her father, without blinking eyes, she stared her father’s eyes. According to her “It was no joke to be able to look at Abba’s eyes. It was said that a hundred criminals cringed under his glare and began to confess right away.” (114) She was not criminal and she was not afraid to confess the truth. The conversation between father and daughter narrates by Ismat in this memoir is heart touching.

‘I want to go to Aligarh to study’, I blurted out. There was no tremor in my voice.

‘You are studying here with your Bade Abba, aren’t you?’

‘I want to take the matriculation exam.’

‘What’s the use?’

'I want to do matric'.

'Why? What's the use? It is better that you learn how to cook and sew dresses. Your three sisters are efficient in housekeeping and you.....?' (114-115)

This conversation is not between father and daughter, but between a domineering male and a submissive female. The female shows her strong desire to get an education at any cost. Male denied his proposal, but she insisted to allow her to study. When she found that her hopes and desires are going to ruin, she carefully threatens her father. She is continually demanding, claiming that she will leave on her own.

'I have no interest in housekeeping. I want to study.'

'No, it's of no use...'

'Then I'll run away.'

'Where will you run away?'

'Anywhere...'

'Just like that...'

'Yes. I'll take a tonga to go to the station. There I'll get into any coach on the train.'

'Then...'

'I'll get off at any station and ask people about the mission school. Once I reach there I'll become a Christian. Then I can study as much as I want.' (115)

Ismat's mother retorted "Go to hell, Kalmohi! She hurled her shoe which missed me..." (116) After three days her father accepted her proposal and handed over a passbook with six thousand rupee deposit and the documents of a house as her share and allowed her to study and gave fifty rupees for her expense to buy books and clothes.

Now, the eternal way of education is open for her, she joined the Aligarh Muslim Girls' School and completed her matriculation and FA. (Faculty of Arts). There were only six girls in FA. She enthusiastically participated in all games and extracurricular activities. She minutely shared her experiences about her beautiful roommate Qaiser; history teacher Mumtaz Abdullah, Kahatoon Abdullah, Miss Ram; bad-food in the hostel and many of.

Then Ismat went to Lucknow and joined Isabella Thoburn College run by Christian Missionary and got her B.A.

"After FA, there was no provision for doing B.A. from Aligarh. My bank book had a substantial balance. Abba Mian gave me permission to do B.A. from I.T. College, Lucknow." (155)

Ismat's mother was happy with her B.A. degree but she regretted that if Shamim had passed B.A. rather than Ismat, Mamu would have found him a lucrative job in Jodhpur. "Unh! What do women need degrees for? Men need them for jobs otherwise their lives are ruined." (159)

In Ismat's memoirs, education is presented as a process of powerful constant self-realization. It was a life-stage that saw her from lifelong relationships with writers and ideas, but also with young women from background likes hers who were benefiting from this type of education for the first time.

At Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, Ismat studied politics and contemporary literature from around the world. She writes that her favourite teacher, Dr Tucker, had retired from the American and European University systems to teach in India. In the text, Ismat relates that the study of literature is not just about learning facts – rather it could create an emotional experience. Throughout her education, Ismat comes to appreciate the power of literature to affect the emotive response. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is through literature that Ismat connects to cosmopolitan demands for human dignity and respect, irrespective of the context or cultural background.

“In Aligarh, Kahtoom Apa was regarded as the best English teacher. What she taught had a deep impact on one’s mind. But when we meet her teacher, Dr Tucker, we felt as if she were a river overflowing with knowledge. I will always remember the day when she taught us Wordsworth’s ‘Little Match Girl’ and ‘We Are Seven’. First, there was absolute silence in the class, then there was muffled sobbing and then the girls began to cry loudly. Dr. Tucker was glowing like a red-hot ember and her tamarind-seed eyes had brimmed over with tears. She would get so wrapped up in the feeling evoked by poems that her own hands and feet would begin to shake all over.” (163)

While Ismat writing is rooted in Urdu literary tradition, she describes her readings in the world’s literature at Isabella Thoburn College, providing her readers with a virtual syllabus in the process “In prose, I started with the Bronte sisters and then read all the Russian writers, especially Chekhov, Tolstoy, Gorky, Dostoyevsky. Then I read Charles Dickens, Emile Zola, Balzac, Maugham and Hemingway.” (96) For Ismat the realism of Russian authors, especially that of Gorky, would become a major influence in her writing, and she spoke of the influence of Russian literature frequently in her interviews. The authors Ismat took as influences were themselves involved in deep social critique around gender, religion and education.

Ismat describes one of the emotional and heart-touching rituals of the graduation ceremony or farewell ceremony from Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow.

“At the end of the year when true to the tradition of I T College, the senior girls of B.A. were given a farewell dinner, there was again a festive atmosphere. The rituals were going through in a fashion wrought with emotion. All the furniture in the hall was tucked away near the walls. The outgoing girls stood in a group in the centre and the final year girls stood behind them. The girls standing in the front were holding multi-coloured candles in earthenware bowls. The candles were burning. After the college anthem was sung, at the end of the rituals, the senior girls passed on the candles to the junior girls.

‘These candles of knowledge that our senior sisters passed on to us, we pass on to you.

Let this lamp no die out.’

The girls burst into tears. The eyes of the professors also become moist.

The lights of these candles are still stored in my mind.” (278)

For Ismat education was an opportunity to discover and enrich the self for its own sake, not for the sake of one’s family and reputation. In her *A Life in Words*, Ismat becomes her own story’s protagonist, as she expresses a sense of pleasure and belonging to educational institutions she attended and provides an idealized model for other readers of similar background. In her self-fashioning in the text of her autobiographical essays, it is her constant hunger for knowledge and her experiences in fighting for her right to an education that shapes her in a formidable intellectual, one who is not afraid to court controversy and use her pen to advocate justice.

Ismat opposed a *burqa* in her memoir she expressed her dissatisfaction and suffered a lot. Even today wearing *burqa* is not stopped among Muslim women. The debatable and universally recognized memoir title ‘*I am Malala*’ is about a Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai became a global inspiration after surviving an assassination attempt by the Taliban. In an exclusive interview, she talks about the man who tried to kill her, life in Britain and why she wouldn’t give up campaigning. She says in an interview,

“I believe its women right to decide what she wants to wear and if a woman can go to the beach and wear nothing, then why can’t she also wear everything?”

“My mother always told me, ‘Hide your face people are looking at you.’ I would reply, ‘It doesn’t matter; I am also looking at them.’ (Malala interview)

In Ismat’s autobiographical essays she described, when she was in her teens, her father died and her family moved to Jodhpur when her uncle was Inspector-General of police. She used to go to and from home and school by train. Her uncle, seeing her arrived in Jodhpur unveiled, reprimanded for her behaviour, but she recalled that she never listened to anyone – except her father – and by then, he was gone.

When she went off to college, she refused to wear either a *burqa* or chador. Her uncle threatened to marry her off, but she held out for further education, arguing that she needed to teach in order to support the children of one of her siblings, who was ailing. She chose to go back to Aligarh for teacher’s training course since there she could live with relatives. She was prepared to attend classes with men, but several other women students were not, so they persuaded the principal of the men’s training college to screen off part of the classroom so that women students could attend the lectures. Ismat earned her Bachelor of Teaching (B.T.) in 1939.

Ismat writes that she hated having to wear the *burqa*, which describes the greatest calamity ever to have occurred in her life, that made her feel so degraded she felt like jumping on the tracks.

“I had to wear *burqa* for the first time, and I cannot put in words the sense of humiliation I had to suffer so intense was this feeling of abasement that several times I thought of jumping off the train and committing suicide.” (49)

The elder brother of Ismat, Azizbhai Chughtai was against the *burqa*. He forbade his wife to observe *burqa* and also supported Ismat not to wear a *burqa*. He had written articles opposing *burqa*. The articles were entitled *The Quran and Purdha* and *Hadith and Pardha*. These articles had created great commotion in the Muslim community. Through this joint effort to overtake the norms of their parents, Ismat displays the potentialities of a new generation of educated young Muslims.

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