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SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE: RELIGION, NATIONALISM AND THE DYNAMICS OF
SELF- NARRATION IN ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S *KAGHAZI HAI PAIRAHAN*

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Abstract

In this paper, I hope to examine the dynamics of self-narration and the complex struggles and dilemmas one comes across in Ismat Chughtai's autobiography as typical of the transitional period in the history of India's journey towards modernity. I will try to argue against a simplistic and reductive reading of Ismat as an outright rebel and complete radical and suggest that instead of reading the text as a string of incidents that convey this picture of an agenda- driven protagonist, we must read it as a significant document that brings out the angst, anxieties and vulnerabilities of a sensitive woman at a critical juncture in national history, representing Indian women's conflicts with tradition and their desire to be modern. Ismat Chughtai's autobiography *Kaghazi hai Pairahan* locates formation of subjectivity at the intersection of gender, religion and literature at a critical juncture in our national history. It is a significant milestone in the history of women's movement in India as well because it's candid depiction of struggle for self-assertion in a deeply conservative society which was still on the nascent threshold of modernity in its outlook towards women's education and role in public sphere.

Keywords: Ismat Chughtai, Women's Life Narratives, Memoire, Muslim Women, Feminism, Indian Women in Public sphere, Urdu Literature

Ismat Chughtai (1911-91) is one of the most acclaimed names in Indian literature. She was the boldest and one of the most controversial woman writers in Urdu, who changed the complexion of Urdu short stories in significant ways. She brought the complex issues of feminine sensibility into the domain of Urdu fiction and treated them with flair and insight. With the energy and dynamism of a crusader, Ismat Chughtai used her lived experience to fearlessly unravel the world behind the veil – so far quiet and almost invisible in Urdu fiction, being

dominated as it was by male writers. Her creative work marks the birth of revolutionary feminist politics and aesthetics in 20th century Urdu literature.

Ismat Chughtai's autobiography *Kaghazi hai Pairahan* locates formation of subjectivity at the intersection of gender, religion and literature at a critical juncture in our national history. It is a significant milestone in the history of women's movement in India as well because it's candid depiction of struggle for self-assertion in a deeply

conservative society which was still on the nascent threshold of modernity in its outlook towards women's education and role in public sphere. Therefore, relative paucity of critical engagement, feminist or otherwise, with Ismat Chughtai's autobiography is indeed baffling.

In this paper, I hope to examine the dynamics of self-narration and the complex struggles and dilemmas one comes across in Ismat Chughtai's autobiography as typical of the transitional period in the history of India's journey towards modernity. I will try to argue against a simplistic and reductive reading of Ismat as an outright rebel and complete radical and suggest that instead of reading the text as a string of incidents that convey this picture of an agenda-driven protagonist, we must read it as a significant document that brings out the angst, anxieties and vulnerabilities of a sensitive woman at a critical juncture in national history, representing Indian women's conflicts with tradition and their desire to be modern.

Fragmented, Jagged Narrative Structure

Kaghazi hai Pairahan (My Clothes are made of paper), is not a straightforward autobiography in as much as it does not record the author's life story in a chronological order. It is not a conventional autobiography and is structurally more akin to a memoir. Roughly speaking, it depicts the period from 1920 to 1942 and is, in a way, a 'coming of age' narrative. The text, apart from the episode of the obscenity trial, which happened after her marriage, covers the period from her childhood to graduation from IT College Lucknow and her work as

Headmistress in Bareilly for some time. A major part of the memoir focuses on her struggle for education, how it changed her self-perception and helped her in taking on the domestic patriarchy for her rights, cope with social pressures and in fulfilling her aspirations. "It is fragmented, jagged, written in fits and starts when spurts of memory propelled the writer to record her reminiscences without any regard to chronology or narrative coherence" (LIW, x). Initially the fourteen chapters appeared in a serial form in the Urdu journal *Aajkal* between March 1979 to May 1980. It was put together as a volume in Urdu much later (and without the author taking a

second look) in 1994. This underlines the fragmentary nature of the autobiography and raises significant questions about the motivations and intentions of the author and about the notion of authorship, representation, selfhood and subjectivity. The fragmentary nature and the fact that it was compiled as a single volume posthumously could be the reason for the relative paucity of critical attention despite her stature as one of the most significant, radical and modernizing voices in the postcolonial India and also the historic importance of the time-span depicted in the text. It was the time of heady nationalistic fervour as well as the time when middle-class women began to move toward self-perception, self-expression and self-construction.

Reflection of Nationalist Middle-class Ethos of the Early Feminist Movement in India

Sukrita Paul Kumar writes that the title *Kaghazi hai Pairahan* and the concept have been borrowed from the poet Ghalib's first verse in *Diwan-e-Ghalib*. "Ismat is conscious of her role as a complainant seeking justice on the behalf of the weaker, the exploited and the needy. For this reason, she calls her autobiography *Kaghazi hai Pairahan*" (ILT, 18). She also seems to be quite self-conscious about depicting a confluence of several narratives: gender stereotypes, gender oppression, social reform, religious tensions, and public role of women in her self-articulation. In short, the text becomes a medium of articulating feminist consciousness though it mainly speaks the language of reforms echoing the dominant nationalist narrative about women's question in that period.

The self in the making becomes a site of psychological conflicts in the private domain as much as a reflection on the reformist currents in the public sphere. M Asaduddin observes that Chughtai's milieu was the Muslim middle-class of UP that emerged in the first quarter of the twentieth century and she moved from Badayun to Agra to Jodhpur and Aligarh. She observed the ambience in families of doctors, lawyers, civil servants and professors while growing up. Most of them came from landed aristocracy. Though their class accepted western liberal education in a

limited way, it was still ritual laden and tradition bound. The liberating influence of education hardly percolated into the inner apartments of homes. Women were denied any significant social role and their lives were confined to childbearing and domestic chores ("Alone on a Slippery Terrain", 78).

The informing energy of the memoir comes from a sense of painful identification as well as impatience with the lot of suffering, servile women around her as a woman and a strong desire to carve identity away from the traditional mould. It bears a testimony to a significant epoch in history when middle-class Muslim women in north India were coping with accelerated social change brought on by the growth of nationalism, the Great War and the equally great depression. There was a strong realization that lack of modern education was hampering the growth of the community and the imperatives of modernizing within the Muslim middle-class were becoming evident. In line with the predominantly nationalist middle-class ethos of the early feminist movement in India, she deploys the narrative of education as foundational to the formation of an emancipated girl, and projects herself as one who liberates herself by rejecting the "old rules" of feminine conduct.

However, along with the nationalist reformist feminist undercurrent in the memoir, we also need to locate her subjectivity in the pan-Islamism of the early twentieth century. M. Asaduddin notes that Urdu women's magazines in the early decades of 20th century carried spirited and informed articles on women's movements in Muslim countries, mainly Turkey and Egypt. Chughtai mentions a visit to IT College Lucknow when she was a student there by Halide Adib (1884-1964), the Turkish writer activist and champion of women's rights. Therefore, Chughtai seems to have been brought up in an environment where pan-Islamism had its resonance therefore we should try to locate her radicalism and modernity in the larger context of women's liberation across the subcontinent and the world rather than see her only within the paradigm of the Progressive Writer's Movement in India (*A Life in Words*, xxii).

Three Broad Parameters of self-negotiation: Gender, Religion, Literature

In *Kaghazi hai Pairahan* (hereafter referred as *KHP*), one can identify at least three broad parameters in relation to which self is negotiated and identity is charted. These broad parameters are gender, religion, and literature. Two things stand out prominently in Chughtai's narration of her childhood. First, there is hardly any romantic nostalgia about childhood. Secondly, her childhood world is inhabited and shaped in a major way by numerous female characters in the shape of mother, grandmothers, aunts, grand aunts, sisters, cousins, nieces, friends, neighbours, servants, sisters-in-laws, schoolmates, teachers, principals, hostel wardens and so on. She repeatedly refers to the idea of 'womanliness' as embodied in her mother, her sisters, only to emphasize her complete alienation from it and, hence, an inner compulsion to create an alternative for herself. 'womanliness' or culturally normative femininity in Chughtai's 's reflection emerges both as a core marker of identity and something which she constantly needs to confront and assert the validity of her divergence. The intersectionalities of gender, religion and the nationalist discourse of the early twentieth century will be explored further later on.

The text frequently reveals Chughtai's self-consciousness about her being part of a prominent family and in particular, her barely hidden pride of her Chughtai lineage on her paternal side and the Chishti and Usmanii on the maternal. She repeatedly mentions the role of the *Chughtai* and Usmani blood in the making as well as in the shaping of her personality. She also wittily attributes all eccentricities, her headstrongness and stubborn attitude to the Mughal blood running through her veins. From the very childhood, her subjectivity seems to be shaped by an awareness of her Mughal identity with the embedded notions of superiority of Islamic culture along with a romantic attraction for the vibrancy of festivals and general air of celebration surrounding Hindu rituals. Though community-based solidarities were coming to the fore in public and private arenas and identity politics spreading hatred and distrust was

gradually gaining ground, there was a fair bit of intermingling, proximity and shared genial relationship between the two communities.

Chughtai seems to be highly aware of her specificity as a woman and as a Muslim in transitional times. Thus, religion emerges as another vital and complex parameter of self-construction. In her childhood, the dichotomy of the inherited religion on the one hand and the larger cultural landscape of India on the other turns out to be one of the most prominent sites of crisis and negotiation; her youth is marked by assimilation of difference. Christianity, which was sometimes associated with education and progress and sometimes with the disliked missionary, provides the third dimension in the complex negotiation of religious identity. The narrative records the complex journey of her subjectivity from a romantic attraction of the "other" to a reflective awareness of her cultural heritage and validity and respect for coexistence of multiple religious faiths in the emerging nation. One can rightfully say that the narrative self in *KHP* speaks for the complex heritage of an emerging nation state.

Chughtai firmly puts across her conviction that religious identities must not be allowed to play any role in the public sphere. This view situates her in the emerging nationalist discourse wherein a majority of liberal intellectuals believed that in the course of time, a person's religious or caste identity would be irrelevant and insignificant in the public domain. Along with the influence of liberal nationalism and socialism, her rightful apprehension that, if religious identities were given eminence in public life, the male authoritarian voice would be even more oppressive toward women, might have contributed toward this alignment. Chughtai, as she emerges toward the end of the autobiography is thus a truly liberal and democratic subject respecting all religions but fiercely protecting her individuality and rationality. "The male Muslim authoritarian voice, however, continues to remain a problem with mature Chughtai. Between childhood and adulthood, the difficulties with religious identity seem to acquire increasingly gendered dimensions for Ismat"

(Siddique,70).

KHP gives a fair measure of indication of the resistance Chughtai had to overcome in her pursuit of education and financial independence. The book, however, ends at a time when her short stories just began to be published. Except for a chapter dealing with the famous obscenity trial for her short story 'Lihaaf', which apparently marked her for life, the book contains only scattered references to her writing practice, or the literary influences that shaped her creative persona. However, it is quite evident that literature has played a major part in Chughtai's self-negotiation right from her childhood. She acknowledges that writing has indeed served a cathartic purpose in her life: "My writing has helped me endure the most interesting and difficult moments, helping to get rid of many burdens and of shrugging off many others ..." (*ILT*, 31).

Sense of Alienation from the Culturally Constructed and Socially Expected Normative Femininity

Right from the childhood, Chughtai could see no reflection of herself in the homebound, submissive womanhood she came across everywhere. She felt neglected in the big joint family at home. She writes in a sarcastic tone, "We were so many children that our mother felt nauseated by the very sight of us. One after the other we had come trampling down her womb. Having repeatedly borne all the vomiting and pain, she did not consider us anything other than an infliction." (*LIW*, 7) Her childhood companions included the dhobi's daughter, guard's daughter or the sweeper's daughter (much to the annoyance of her elitist family), who lived in the compound of her father's sprawling official bungalow. She writes, "Somehow childhood passed. I have never understood why people sing praises of childhood. To me, it is a period of helplessness, of deprivation. Only on becoming an adult, does one acquire the strength to fight against injustice. Having experienced the condescending kindness of eight older brothers and sisters, I was etching to grow up" (*ILT*, 24)

As the youngest daughter in a large family

full of strong and energetic brothers (they were ten siblings in all plus nephews, nieces and cousins were also part of the flourishing household), Chughtai writes that aggression and flippancy came to her as natural attributes essential for survival. She loved to spend time with her brothers and compete with them and her brothers bullied or scorned her efforts to equal them, compete with them. Ismat writes that the 'progressive' outlook was acceptable only for the boys in her family. Every woman in the family was terrorized, "society had a fixed station for her. If she overstepped these limits, she would have to pay the price. Too much education was dangerous" (*ILT*,28). Whereas her elder sisters were well instructed in embroidery, stitching and knitting, she was neither interested in any of these pursuits nor in the habit of stifling her desires so she grew up playing with boys, riding bicycles, climbing trees but compared to her brothers she was an absolute straggler.

Though from contemporary perspective, there is nothing rebellious in participating in boys' games, eschewing typically female jobs like cooking, sewing and knitting, avoiding the role of a 'ideal housewife', or not observing purdah and desiring to take up a job, in Ismat's time, they were understood as rebellious. Women, as a rule, were denied access to education and were left to wander about in the darkness of superstition and backwardness. It was argued that education would make the women assertive and quarrelsome. Her father and grandfather encouraged her and her elder brother advised her that instead of competing with the boys in sports, she should compete with them in studies. That is where she could defeat them (*ILT*,25).

The most significant woman figure that emerges as a point of reference in Chughtai's self-negotiation in the narration is her mother. She portrays her with a lot of affection. She was the epitome of all those essential attributes, which she then believed a woman might need to lead a happy and fulfilled life in the traditional scheme of things. Her mother knew how to get her way around in the family and is shown to be manipulative and a master strategist in the familial politics. The mother's worries revolved around social rituals and

prestige and her most favoured means of getting her way were feminine wile and covert strategy. She is not exactly a role model and constitutes a problematic dimension in Ismat's self-negotiation, because she is simultaneously close to and alienated from this pattern of womanhood.

In fact, not just her mother, there are a number of female characters, her sisters, cousins, friends, aunts, teachers, servants, doctors, midwives, who represent a cacophony of voices. Thus, almost all the time she is surrounded by women, they shape her worldview. It is with reference to their lives, pros and cons of their experiences that she maps, understands and narrates her 'self'. They act as reference points which propel her towards taking certain decisions that help her self-definition. But often she feels alienated from the model of womanhood that included feminine wiles and strategies considered important to have some measure of power in the domestic world which otherwise always upheld submissive, passive and repressed femininity as an ideal to be emulated. The narrative reflects her interaction with the cultural meaning of 'Woman' with its connotations of passivity, dependence, helplessness, and her strong sense of dissatisfaction with conventional womanhood. Her personal sense of oppressive structures always finds a correlative in the experiences of women in general.

While her mother has been depicted as a successful woman within the parameters of "ideal" womanhood in her milieu, Chughtai makes it clear that her self-alignment is with her paternal aunt Bichu Phuphi. In the chapter titled "Adhuri Aurat", Chughtai writes about her reputation as a rude, outspoken, angry woman who was unforgiving and unbending but actually finds her to be a loving, sensitive and self-respecting as well as well-meaning individual who undoubtedly has been wronged and suffered for failing to measure up to the cultural expectations of so-called 'ideal womanhood' where deception can pass off as obedience and submission as well as manipulation are deployed as strategies to exercise power and find happiness. Though Chughtai never compares herself with this aunt, her self-alignment with this

'incomplete woman' is obvious.

The constant nagging to imbibe the virtues like self-restraint, containment and chastity and learn the domestic skills like cooking, knitting and embroidery, curb her argumentativeness and flippancy played at the back of Chughtai's mind. It seems that being constantly labelled as a rude, unfeminine spoiled brat made her vulnerable and anxious about her identity. When she saw her young, lissom cousins much praised and appreciated as model daughters, sisters and ideal homemakers, her self-doubt and vulnerability also surfaced occasionally. She lets it slip that her inability and unwillingness to conform to the culturally accepted norm filled her with a sense of deep inferiority at times. There is a simultaneous sense of deep bonding, affection and antagonism with these attractive cousins and nieces who are often described in a sensuous manner. There's envy and self-doubt too though she clearly saw no reflection of herself in the homebound, submissive womanhood she came across everywhere and writes that instead, she learnt a great deal sitting in the knowledgeable company of her father and his friends. Though she projects childhood and adolescent years as marked by self-assurance, rebelliousness, and impertinence, one notes an unmistakable susceptibility to self-doubt and uncertainty as well.

Generally speaking, Chughtai is projected as this bold, radical writer who laid bare the oppressive hypocrisy and pretensions of her society in its treatment of women. I feel the projection of Ismat as an unconventional and unfeminine, firebrand and flippant writer who unhesitatingly put people in their place, who defiantly took in her stride the often-hostile reactions to her stories, does not do justice to the complex layers of a subjectivity in transitional period that one finds in her memoir. *KHP* depicts the dilemmas, uncertainty, challenges and inner psychological conflicts, it is not simply a triumphal narrative documenting the journey towards the self's achievements. She writes about her sense of indecision and suicidal temptation when her education came to a halt abruptly. In her work, Chughtai describes many incidents when she felt

helpless. She found herself lonely, deserted by her family and friends many times.

Early marriage was more a rule than exception for girls and one can see the vital part played by the idea of marriage in shaping Chughtai's subjectivity. Her entire childhood was shaped around the idea that because she was assertive, argumentative and more interested in intellectual pursuits, she cannot prove to be a good wife. She felt alienated because society offered marriage and domesticity as the only goal and destiny for a woman. Very early in life, she developed a marriage phobia of sorts because she was repeatedly told that as she was a foul-mouthed, impertinent girl, she would be divorced by her spouse and dumped back ignominiously into her parent's house. "I had a deep-seated sense of inferiority", she writes, "My fear of marriage was stronger than my desire to study. Ever since I had been a child, I had been constantly told that I did not have any accomplishments and that I would be the cause of the ruin of the family into which I was married..." (*ILT*, 72).

Moreover, what Chughtai saw happening in marriages all around disturbed her a lot. Her friends, she writes, "were married off around the age of twelve and I saw their lives. They told me that terrible things happen on the wedding night and after. They wanted me never to get married because it was a painful business. I was terrified; I knew nothing of these matters... Also, the whole business of marriage seemed to be dreadful – sex, cooking, beatings from the mother-in-law and all the other in-laws" (Tharu and Lalitha,127). The apprehension that marriage would mean an unconditional surrender of her individuality and freedom persists even when she was a young adult. Her unconventional views regarding marriage even provoked her teacher in Aligarh to ask her why she despised marriage so much and Ismat replied with complete honesty:

Following the orders of another human being- I don't think I will be able to tolerate that. I have spent my life protesting against the tyranny of the elders. I want to make my own way in life. The very idea of being an

eastern, virtuous wife fills me with loathing... I am delighted with my madness and *I want to be responsible for my happiness and pain, my reward and punishment.* (ILT, 76, italics added for emphasis)

During their stay in Agra, Chughtai saw the helplessness of women in the stifling atmosphere around her. Everywhere around her, she saw how the conservative setup made heavy demands on women, expected them to imbibe the so-called ideals of duty and self-sacrifice, for which they put their lives at stake and despite all that, they were subjected to treatment that could only be described as humiliating. She soon realized that in the conventional setup, women were heavily dependent on men and the essential insecurity and dependent status resulted in lack of self-respect and servility among women, which she most despised. She writes, "I had always wanted to be independent, even as a child", and in Agra, she realized even more strongly: "Without education, it is not possible for a woman to be free" (ILT, 256).

Single-minded Pursuit of Education

Though born in a highly educated and affluent Muslim family, Chughtai had to put up quite a struggle to get education and chalk out a career. In the conservative milieu around her, education for women was considered unnecessary; desire for education was regarded as subversive. She faced a lot of resistance to complete formal education, permission to stay in a hostel for higher education mainly because of the notions of social prestige and general conservatism of her community.

With her father's transfer to Sambhar in Rajasthan as judge, Chughtai's studies abruptly came to a halt and her parents started to look around for a suitable groom for her. She was just fifteen and restless, as she wanted to continue her studies. When her education was suspended and she had to live a confined life in a haveli in Jodhpur; her experience of confinement is identified with the conventional confinement of Rajput women. She writes, "Then I understood why women would commit sati" (LIW, 109). So, we can see how

Chughtai's self-construction in connection with other women goes beyond her relationship and responses to specific women around her

Chughtai won a major battle in her life when she managed to thwart the plans for her arranged marriage to a deputy collector by the cheeky ruse of getting engaged to her cousin Jugnu (most eligible bachelor and loved by everyone in the family). She ensured his support by writing to him and assuring him that it was a ploy only to fulfil her desire for education and he would have no obligation toward her once that aim was achieved. Thereafter, she successfully managed to put a stop to all future talks regarding her marriage. It was another battle to persuade her parents to let her go to Aligarh to resume her studies because her parents believed girls become wayward in hostels and feared for their family's reputation in society.

The idea of conversion is a fairly recurrent trope in Chughtai's narration. Conversion to Christianity or Hinduism becomes a vital issue at least thrice in her autobiography. She used the threat of conversion to Christianity as a last resort to get her parent's permission for further studies. Ismat threatened her parents that she would run away to a mission school and convert to Christianity if they don't allow her to go to Aligarh for further studies. She went on hunger strike even threatened that she will become Christian, "I'll get down at any station; ask my way around to the Mission School. There I'll convert to Christianity. I'll be able to study as much as desire over there" (ILT, 73). Seeing her determination and unbending resolve, her father finally relented and sent her to Aligarh for further studies. What comes across powerfully in the narrative is Chughtai's realistic and practical assessment of the situation around her and her single-minded pursuit of the goal of education and independence as that alone would ensure her dignity and self-respect. With every little success in defying the combined forces of domestic patriarchy, Ismat grew more confident about taking on the injustice, double standards and the oppressive forces in the public domain as well.

Those days Aligarh was a bastion of liberal Muslim intellectuals. Ismat narrates one particular

incident that marked her initiation in the progressive intellectual circles. The publication of Angaareii created uproar and a Mullah Shahid Ahrarvi launched an attack on the Girl's College; calling it a whorehouse, he demanded it to be shut down immediately. Therefore, when Chughtai read the Mullah's paper after reading Angaare, she angrily wrote a long and emotional article lamenting the backwardness and deprivation faced by Muslim girls and appealing the six thousand students at the University to take steps for their protection. The anger of students forced the Mullah to disappear from Aligarh. For a few months, it gave them a heady feeling of victory. This incident also marks the beginning of her tussles with the male authoritarian voice and religious chauvinism that routinely gag liberal opinion.

When Ismat became Headmistress of a girl's school in Bareilly, women had just about the time started becoming visible in public sphere as professionals; a Muslim young graduate was a rarity in small towns like Bareilly. There was a widespread curiosity and prejudice about working women and their behaviour was under scanner. Ismat appears to be self-conscious about her responsibility as she was conscious of being watched all the time like all the women professionals who were making their presence felt in the (often hostile) public sphere. In addition, she was also conscious of the community pressure and the repercussions her behaviour would have on the prospects of education and career for other Muslim women. If her family had given in and allowed her to pursue her desire for higher education and a job afterwards, the move outside the familial home was permitted with the implicit understanding that she would remain within the bounds of its sexual norms. "I am the headmistress of the only Muslim girl's school in the town. I may be half-mad but I detest irresponsibility of any kind. I know what struggles Muslim schools have to face ... take a wrong step and they will cut the ground under your feet. I can't change the attitude of the community in a day" (ILT, 45).

As Chughtai has noted in the memoir, religious orthodoxy and social conservatism have

ensured strong resistance and bias against women's education among the Muslims. Widely common prejudices such as 'when girls are treated on par with the boys, they fail to become model wives' (LIW, 71) and 'to educate the girls is more condemnable offense than forcing them into prostitution' (LIW, 72) made many women ambivalent about education. Elderly matriarchs viewed female education as not just redundant but reprehensible. Moreover, one can see that the educated and working woman's independence, financial status and confidently moving about in public sphere along with their husbands also made many women, particularly the ones from the conservative background, feel insecure or envious. One incident mentioned by Ismat bears testimony to this social reality.

As a young, unmarried Headmistress of the girls' school in a small town like Bareilly, Chughtai had to negotiate an intricate web of personal, professional and social relations during the period of transition. She narrates how once she became friendly with a highly educated neighbour who was interested in literature and how this made his childless wife insecure and take recourse to black magic address her insecurities. Chughtai directly addressed the woman's insecurities and assured the concerned wife that she was not a home-breaker and under no circumstances would harm the cause of any woman.

Chughtai shifted to Mumbai in the early 1940s and commenting on the difficulties of managing things on her own in the big city and pervasive conservatism of people she writes, "a single woman in those days couldn't get a house. "You will turn it into a brothel," one property owner finally explained to me. "All the girls come here as teachers, then they find the income insufficient, and start selling themselves" (conversation with Punwani cited in ILT). In the 1940s, a woman working away from home was a rarity and women in public sphere had to tread cautiously. There was curiosity and the prejudice and apprehension as to how these newly empowered women would conduct themselves in their relatively 'autonomous' status. Ismat's autobiography reveals her self-consciousness

regarding her privileged status in the community as one of the rare Muslim graduate women around in the early 1940s and she appears to be conscious of being watched all the time and aware there are many other girls who would aspire to be like her and that fills her with a sense of responsibility. We can also see how in the newly available, modernized public space, a woman professional had to tread cautiously and reckon that in the absence of institutional and material changes, education and financial independence alone would not necessarily be emancipatory.

Nationalist Feminism

Attributes and position of women in India had assumed central importance during this period of Indian nationalist self-fashioning. Their emancipation was projected as necessary part of the project of rejuvenating India's moral and cultural identity. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the feminism Chughtai espouses in her memoir as well as her other writings is fiercely nationalist. "As long as women in this nation remain helpless and continue to accept maltreatment from men, we will remain victims of an inferiority complex, both economically and politically ... only weak and subservient children will be born of the womb of such women" (*ILT*, 26). Chughtai considers economic freedom key to independence of women. Economic dependence keeps women hostage and does not allow them any freedom. She doesn't dwell much on the structural inequalities, social conservatism or power of patriarchal structures in determining women's agency and put too much onus on the individual herself.

Chughtai also criticizes the women who accept their fate as given and do not resist. She considers this abject submission the worst. She thinks that women who see no active role for themselves cannot be good mothers either. She sees no essential difference between a prostitute and a girl who listens to the men in her family only because she is financially dependent on them, or a wife who sticks to her husband simply because he supplies bread and butter (*ILT*, 26). All are equally helpless in her opinion. She was not at all

interested in victim feminism either. In a women's interactive session in the PWA in Bhopal (1949), she fiercely declares, "I have no sympathy at all for girls who do not know how to help themselves" (*ILT*, 109). She wants women to be proactive, aggressive and energetic in their fight against societal oppression. Unless women fight for themselves, they can't get any rights. They will have to challenge the status quo. As she says "till the time the woman of this country remain helpless, weak, and are forced to bear injustice and brutality. We shall continue to suffer from inferiority complexes, both socially and politically" (*ILT*, 110).

KHP presents an irrefutable account of her contemporary society in terms of the subjugation and oppression of women. There is a continuous sense of her battle against patriarchy and other orthodox elements that control and exploit women. More so, because it vividly brings out women's ambivalence, caught as they were between a strong desire for modernization and equally strong hold of conventions and religious orthodoxy. One finds a constant struggle between tradition and modernity. One finds women challenging orthodox interpretations of Islam. "Muslim girls are as such deprived and backward; on top of that this fundamentalist Mullah Ahrarvi is turning into an enemy of our progress" (*ILT*, 78). The question of female education in Muslim societies is also the central point of her autobiography. She expresses her feminist concern in terms of female's education and claims that "the college may certainly be closed but only our dead bodies shall leave the premises. Let us see who has the guts to close this college. We shall handle them" (*ibid*).

To conclude, Chughtai's memoir is a valuable resource for rendering the social ethos, the norms and conventions that governed the middle-class Muslim communities in northern India in the pre-independence era. It demonstrates how despite the strongly felt need and the imperative to modernise, women's education was fiercely resisted. Even when the progressive, educated and influential people like Chughtai's father keenly desired to educate their daughters,

they had to take a step back when entire family stood together against him for sending his daughters to a boarding school and threatened to ostracise. The ominous warnings that their daughters would never be married and they should be ready to keep them in their own house all their lives and maintain them, parental anxieties regarding the perceived implications of modern education, the fears of parents regarding their daughters' lives while living with their husbands or after getting divorce must be weighing heavily on the minds of parents who decided against the education of their daughters. Comments such as "educating girls was worse than prostituting them" made by apparently sensible people only indicates the length to which people were ready to go in their opposition to women's education. The women themselves had internalised the mores of the patriarchal society to such an extent that they themselves were ambivalent regarding their deplorable conditions.

KHP narrates the coming of age of an exceptional woman who was able to move beyond the socio-cultural confines that kept other women domesticated and invisible. It manifests a strong urge to refashion her own as well as women's place in society. Chughtai meticulously recreates the domestic scene, which in turn merges into the social and reveals the norms, attitudes, behaviour patterns, rituals and practices of the Muslim middle-classes in the pre-independence era along with a poignant awareness of the grip of oppressive patriarchy over the Muslim middle-class. She manages to do this without ever losing touch with her acerbic wit and her trademark sense of humour. She lays bare the oppressive hypocrisy and pretensions of her society in its treatment of women even as she masterfully narrates her own struggle while swimming against the tide.

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