

## **Empowerment of women in Ismat Chughtai's Quilt and other short stories**

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### **Abstract**

Ismat Chughtai was a great muslim woman writer of the days when no one could ever think of writing. She was born in 1914 and turned to writing at a very young age. She has written various short stories with a powerful insight about women. How the women were treated and in spite of the harsh treatment, she has shown that they did whatever they felt proper to them. As in Lihaaf her very famous short story it is considered or in fact given the title of lesbianism, in fact I would call it Empowerment. Though her writing turned out to be controversial yet she was very strong with her feminist ideology. Straight forward and deliberate personality. I call this as empowerment as her female characters are fighting for their rights though living in stubborn society. Empowerment is just not for earning and getting name and fame in society it could be also search for rights, this is what Ismat Chughtai has shown in her short stories.

**Key Words :** Empowerment and survival of the strong feminist.

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The topic of empowerment is one of the ongoing burning issues all over the universe including India since last few decades. No doubt the women today as felt by writers and critics should be given utmost priority. Undoubtedly this was there in the religious books of Islam since ages, and women have always been held high, not only this but also given utmost priority.

The position of women all over the world has risen incredibly in the twentieth century. Hence one can understand what would have been the position of women in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century when Ismat Chughtai became a writer. As Ismat Chughtai says "I was influenced by Rashid Jahan who was a doctor by profession but a great short storywriter", who introduced her to the writers club and left a lasting impression on her mind. As Rashid Jahan was a very bold, open minded and free thinking lady. As Ismat says "she spoiled me because she was very bold and used to speak all sorts of things openly, I even wanted to copy her" Later she met Shahid Latif while studying at under graduate and he became very close to her and was going to be her future husband but was opposed by her family as he was a film person. But before she got married she did publish her short **Lihaaf**, which brought her lot of obstacles and she was charged with obscenity, also she was submitted to a court for trial in Lahore. Here she met Manto who also

supported her. He was also a story writer and both sailed in the same boat, as he was also charged for writing a similar type of story. From here she changed her style as she was influenced by Freud's psycho sexual theory and this is what she became more bold , innovative, rebellious and explicitly realistic in its representation and analysis of character and the human condition.

There has always been inequality between men and women and even women have been discriminated all over the world. Therefore there has always been a quest among women for a search for equality which is a universal phenomenon; this is what Ismat Chughtai has portrayed in her short stories. No matter whatever be the situation like education, employment, inheritance, marriage, and politics and may it be religion. Women have always remained and tried to prove as to be superior this is what Ismaat Chughtai has also proved in her short stories.

Story writing has been the oldest form of human expression. From times immemorial men and women have been sharing the sorrows and smiles of their lives through tales. It is also natural human tendency to recall the good great deeds of their ancestors as well as project the problems and complexities of present life through stories. No wonder till today the story continues to be one of the most popular literary expression.

Ismat Chughtai happens to be one of the most prominent short story writers of Urdu literature. Born on August 15, 1915 into a middle class family in Badayun, played pivotal role in the development of the modern Urdu short story. Not only did she make strides in the areas of style and technique, she also led her female contemporaries on a remarkable journey of self awareness and undaunted creative expression.

In almost all her stories women play a pivotal part. The bulk of her work reflects a deep and abiding pre-occupation with themes directly related to women and their culture, status and role in the Indian society. Stressing the struggles of women against the oppressive social institutions of her time, she brings to her fiction an understanding and perception of the female

psyche that is unique to her alone, no other writer approaches the subject of women in life the same close probing and the readable way that she does.

Ismat Chughtai's heroines are real characters from life while presenting the women characters she is nowhere seen taking sides of a woman. She portrays them as they are found in the society. Her heroines on one hand can be submissive like 'Goribi' but on the other hand she portrays characters like 'Gori' in "A pair of hands", 'Begum Jaan' in "The Quilt" and 'Farhat' in "By the grace of God" who know how to live and find happiness in the male dominated society.

In story named 'Veil' Goribi is rejected by Kalemian just because of her immense beauty which gives kalemiaan a complex as he is unusually aware of his inky complexion. The Veil that covered Goribi's beauty was not opened by Kalemian throughout her life time she waited for 80 years but under her bridal veil all her dreams and desires took their last breadth. When Kalemian died just when Goribi was about to lift the veil. The white veil of widow hood was replaced by the bridal veil.

Here one has the glimpse of the difficulties and confusions faced by women due to conflict between the old hard traditional values and the new ones. Goribi is torn between these two. Her conditioning makes her shy, meek and docile person but what is expected of her by her huaband is just the opposite what she had been taught from her childhood. These old traditions that have established their roots in her mind make her husband and her beauty remains unseen by her husband.

"The wedding shroud" gives a touchy picture of Kubra, the mute and ill-fated sufferer. I quote:

**"What kind of womanhood was this that never put a sparkle in her eyes, nor allowed her tresses to caress her cheeks, no storm ever rager in her breast, nor did she ever sing playfully to the dark swirling monsoon clouds for a beloved . her shrinking trinorous womanhood which stole up on her without warning left as furtively as it had come."**

The characterization of Kubra pervades the whole story with its tragic aura she travels the entire length of the story struggling between hope and despair. Ismat Chughtai explored the rotten

meaningless traditions and customs of her age; she exposed the double standards and exploitation of women in a bold way. In her story “Lingering Fragrance” women are compared with the animals who are mute and suffer. I quote:

**“The Mahal tradition was that when cattle became heavy with child they were despatched to the village .....Maids received identical treatment.” Unquote.**

It is really shocking and humiliating that women the mother of man, the great idol of love and sacrifice is compared with the cattle. But maybe it shows the status of women in the society in which Ismat Chughtai lived .Maids were supplied to dear sons of the Nawabs as a luxury item and to prevent rivalries between brothers, the elderly Begums made a just division of flash.

Ismat Chughtai through her short stories brings before us the sufferings and sorrows her women characters have to face when they are not able to cope up with the expectations of the males. In ‘The Rock’ she presents the man as a rock who can make the waves that hit it suffer, they are destroyed after hitting the rock. I quote:

**“Waves leap towards the rock. Crash at its feet shatter and disintegrate, and weak exhausted return, to the sea. Some die at the feet of the rock, while new waves, nourishing a desire for self sacrifice find themselves irresistibly drawn to it.” Unquote.**

Here the writer presents the picture of a wife who moulds herself to the wishes of her husband so much that she forgets her own individuality and tries to become an ideal housewife. But what she gets after all this is only the divorce papers flung on her. Is this the treatment a faithful wife, an Ardhangini receives for all her sacrifices? And the rock that is the man is unaffected.

Distanced from this worship it continues to smile cynically unmoving, careless and pitiless. While Ismat Chughtai’s women characters like Goribi, suffer, her bold characters find their own way. They dare to cross the moral limits drawn by the society. Ismat Chughatai doesn’t present an ideal woman that is Sita , but her women characters are people who are liberated or struggling for liberation. Her heroine in ‘**Sacred Duty**’ though being a Muslim has courage to run away with a Hindu boy. Representative of a new age, she is content to be an Indian. In her

story ‘**A Pair of hands**’ we meet a bold sweepress’ who protects her daughter-in-law when the whole world was out to destroy her. The sweepress though a woman has courage enough to challenge and fight with the whole village.

Ismat Chughtai presents the real state and place of women in society. In ‘**The Veil**’ we are confronted with a woman whose loyalty to the institution of marriage tragically consumes her entire life, a phenomenon deeply ingrained in the very fibre of one culture. ‘Kubra’ in ‘The Wedding Shroud’ wants to marry not due to desire but due to food and clothing. I quote

‘She is a widow’s burden and the burden has to be removed’ Unquote

Against these in ‘**The Quilt**’ we see a frustrated house wife whose nawab husband has no time for her and she finds sexual emotional solace in the companionship of a female servant. In Ismat Chughtai’s collection ‘The Quilt and other stories, we meet variety of women characters in Indian society. We meet women who suffer, who challenge, who create, who make their own mark and women who are bold.

One must not forget that in India of thirties and forties writing by and about women was tentative; it was generally held that literature had no place in women’s lives. Making a break with tradition, Ismat Chughtai’s skill as a writer Ehtesham Hussain a leading critic of Urdu literature, says about her art:

Ismat’s undaunted intelligence and her power of expression were so well integrated that from the very beginning her stories caught everyone’s attention.

#### **References:**

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