

Discovering the Self: Gender Politics
and Subjectivity in Ismat Chughtai's
A Life in Words: Memoirs

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically explores the intersections of gender politics and the construction of subjectivity in Ismat Chughtai's A Life in Words: Memoirs, situating the text within the broader framework of Muslim women's life-writing in twentieth-century India. As one of the most formidable voices of Muslim feminism, Chughtai deploys autobiographical narrative not merely as a mode of personal recollection but as a form of resistance against the normative ideologies of patriarchy, class, and communalism. Her memoir becomes a site of self-fashioning where the self is constituted through the lens of memory, dissent, and desire. The study examines how Chughtai's articulation of the female self destabilizes hegemonic notions of womanhood and authorship, especially in a socio-cultural context marked by silence and censorship. By foregrounding the politics of everyday life and the subversive potential of writing, this paper argues that A Life in Words exemplifies a feminist reimagining of the autobiographical form. Chughtai's narrative emerges not just as an individual's memoir but as a collective voice challenging the socio-economic hierarchies and gendered injustices of her time. The self constructed in A Life in Words emerges as conscious, resilient, and deeply attuned to the social, economic, cultural, and political realities of its time. It blurs the boundaries between the personal and the political, adopting a distinctively collective perspective.

Keywords: Autobiography, gender, muslim feminism, subjectivity, patriarchy, voice.

Articulating the self in public sphere has long posed a formidable challenge for Muslim women, as entrenched religio-cultural orthodoxies rigorously restrain such expression. The deeply embedded and pernicious tenets of Muslim personal laws force women to observe *pardah (hizab)*, thereby excluding them from avenues of modern education, economic participation, and social engagement. The structural rigidity of these laws precludes Muslim women from subverting the status quo or deriving emancipatory gains from reformists movements initiated by Indian intellectuals such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chander Vidyasagar, Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi, Jyotirao Phule, Periyar, Bhimrao Ambedkar, among others. The Shah Bano Case (1985) epitomizes the extent to which Muslim religio-cultural institutions have remained impervious to progressive or reformative impulses. Muslim women, ensnared in doctrinaire religiosity, continued to endure regressive practices like triple *talak* and polygamy, despite constitutional guarantees of equal rights and categorical repudiation of discrimination based on caste, class, religion, or gender. Though triple *talak* has been proscribed in India by BJP-led central government in 2017, the proscription elicited vehement resistance from Islamic fundamentalist factions, who decried it as a transgressive incursion upon their religious, cultural, and identitarian autonomy. They characterized the BJP government as anti-minority and insisted on preserving the practice of triple *talak*, regarding it as integral to their religious identity. This reveals a broader inability among Muslims to extricate themselves from rigid theological structures and to renounce the fait and traditions that perpetuate the subjugation and dehumanization of women. This persistent acquiescence to inherited injunctions rendered Muslim women disproportionately silent, and their educational and economic positioning remains markedly disadvantaged in relation to their Hindu and Christian counterparts. Additionally, their representation in the realms of political, economic, social, and literary discourses remains regrettably negligible,

perpetuating their systemic silencing and marginalization. This paper undertakes a critical inquiry into the ways in which Ismat Chughtai articulates and negotiates her sense of self in her autobiographical work *A Life in Words: Memoirs*. It explores the narrative strategies through which she resists patriarchal conventions, challenges entrenched gender hierarchies, and asserts a gendered interiority shaped by her unique positionality. Furthermore, the analysis foregrounds how Chughtai deftly weaves her socio-political and economic consciousness into the fabric of her personal narrative, thereby chronicling her lived realities as both a Muslim and a woman in a deeply stratified society.

Ismat Chughtai began her literary pursuits at a remarkably young age, initiating her writing while she was still a school-going girl. Influenced by progressive ideologies, philosophers, and writers such as Buddha, MK Gandhi, Rasheed Jahan, Halide Adib, GB Shaw and others, her writings serve as an apparatus to address serious socio-economic and political concerns and resist prevalent injustices in both colonial and post-colonial India. Besides, they document women's specific suffering and articulate their agency, expressing their will, and desire in heavily masculine Indian Muslim society. Her plays, novels and short stories such as *Phisaddi*, *Ziddi*, *Terhi Lakir*, 'Dayin,' 'Saas,' 'Chattan,' 'Til,' 'Gharwali,' 'Bandan ki Khushboo,' 'Chui Mui,' 'Chauthi ka Joda,' centrally foreground women's issues and hold steadfast for their rights and emancipation. Some of her revolutionary works such as 'Lihaf,' which depicts the same sex love as a result of women's neglect, not only brought her notoriety and a sustained opposition from patriarchal forces but also labeled her as an obscene and controversial writer. Her autobiography *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan*, which is translated into English as *A Life in Words: Memoirs*, is a staggering account of an educated Muslim woman who dares patriarchy by writing about herself and defying received social, political, economic, and cultural conventions.

A Life in Words reads like a song of the self, involuntary outpourings from the heart about prevalent gender injustices, emotional, and psychological problems. The heroism and dignity

with which Chughtai moves from silence to speech is captured in such a candid and buoyant manner that, with our defences lowered, we are naturally drawn to the charm of the book. Each event recounted in her life story grips readers like a thriller or popular romance and leaves them yearning for the next. The writer does away with all the barriers between the readers and herself so that there is a total identification and instant rapport. Reading becomes here a rich and rewarding experience. Written within the framework of Indian feminism, the autobiography opens with an unreserved and evocative portrayal of her family background, formative childhood experiences, and broader socio-cultural milieus. It chronicles the experiences of despair and hardships that she endured on the account of her gender and religio-cultural identity, and traditions. Chughtai particularly details how she faced criticism and sustained opposition from Muslim fundamentalists on the account of her profession as a writer and how patriarchal forces joined together to stifle her voice. She articulates her mental anguish and reveals the inner self, which enhances the text's authenticity and emotional credibility. Chughtai constructs and represents the self as a dynamic and multifaceted subject that resists fixity and embraces contradiction. Rather than adhering to the linearity and coherence often expected of autobiographical writing, she presents a fragmented, episodic narrative that mirrors the complexities of memory, identity, and selfhood. Her autobiography does not follow a chronological progression; instead, it foregrounds moments of personal significance, socio-political commentary, and literary reflection, thereby constructing a self that is in constant dialogue with its surroundings. In the 'Introduction' to *A Life in Words*, Asaduddin also highlights the fragmentary nature of the text: "It is not a straightforward autobiography inasmuch as it does not record the author's life story – from her birth to the point of writing the book – in a 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" (2012: x). Chughtai is selective in her description of her lived experiences. She does not write much about her married life,

though her husband appears frequently in her narrative. He is mentioned when a charge of obscenity was levelled against her story 'Lihaf' and when they travelled to Lahore for the hearing of law suit. But there is no indication of whether her married life was happy or not. Asaduddin writes that "it was either because Ismat was exercising her agency as a writer by being selective or she was reluctant to talk and admit the failure of her married life" (2012: xii). She also does not elaborate much about the partition of country and communal riots followed by the independence. She again picks to conceal her psychological anguish that she might have undergone after partition and when Muslims were declared a minority group in their own country. Chughtai omits several events from her life narrative, but her self-representation is deeply informed by her experiences as a Muslim woman writer in colonial and postcolonial India, negotiating the intersecting forces of patriarchy, class, religion, and language politics. She deliberately foregrounds her rebellious spirit, often portraying herself as a defiant figure who challenges normative gender roles, familial expectations, and literary conventions. Through a candid and often irreverent tone, she dismantles the ideals of the "respectable Muslim woman" and reclaims narrative authority over her life and work. Her use of irony, humour, and introspective critique allows her to navigate the politics of self-revelation while simultaneously critiquing the social structures that seek to define and contain women's voices. The very act of writing her autobiography becomes a political intervention – a space where she asserts her autonomy, critiques oppressive systems, and reimagines the boundaries of Urdu literature. Ultimately, Chughtai's construction of the self is not a search for unified identity, but rather a bold assertion of multiplicity, dissent, and intellectual freedom.

Although the autobiographical self, as emerging from this autobiography, is primarily focused on the articulation of individual struggles, conflicts and triumphs, it is not completely indifferent to the society at large. As the narrative moves, the autobiographical self becomes exceedingly responsive and cognizant of collective, it blurs the boundaries of private and public and indicates a constant interaction between them. Similar

to contemporary Western feminist thought, Chughtai asserts that the “personal is political,” emphasizing that women’s subjective experiences are inextricably linked to their socio-political contexts, and realities. In addition to her own desolations and indignation, the author describes the subordinated position of her mother, sisters, and cousins and highlights the plight of other Muslim women who have to bear the brunt of male-centric religio-cultural conventions. She depicts women’s place in contemporary Indian society and explains how they are subordinated and marginalized by men who are positioned at the centre of power structures. They decide and determine women’s roles according to their will and requirements. Chughtai says, “This was a man’s world... A woman is a 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” (2012: 9). Chughtai portrays her childhood as fragmented and marked by unhappiness. It is characterized by an absence of emotional security and individual freedom. Khushi Bajaj says that Chughtai does not look at her earlier years or childhood days with happiness as she did not feel a sense of autonomy and agency. All the decision were taken by the elders and were imposed on her. Chughtai uses her life narrative as a forum to address Muslim women’s distress, to assert their personhood and articulate their agency. Asaduddin says, “Perhaps the most important insight that *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* contains is about the position of women, particularly Muslim women, in the society of the time. Ismat Chughtai was writing silences, recording the suppressed voices of women from different strata of society. The traditional patriarchal society, in which she was born contained women, muted their voices and screened out their agency. Her literary oeuvre, among other things, is a chronicle of restoring this agency” (2012: xviii-xix). Ismat finds it unjust that a woman is assigned subservient roles in society. She contests these roles and strives for women’s education, their intellectual growth, autonomy, and economic self-reliance. She strongly holds popular feminist viewpoint that education and economic empowerment enable women to counter patriarchal institutions

and emancipate themselves. She scorns the conjecture that education spoils women, fills their heads with fancy ideas, and turns them against conventions. She criticises the fundamentalists who compare female education with prostitution and obstruct women's intellectuality and economic progression. She finds it disheartening that even the highly educated Muslim men are blinded by the precepts of Islam and oppose women's education, and force them to fit themselves in the roles of homemakers. Chughtai exemplifies it through her own father who was liberal and always safeguarded the girls' rights more than boys. His gender bias comes out when the author requests him to allow her to study more: "Why what is the use? It is better that you learn how to cook and sew dresses" (p. 115). Here the author exhumes the patterns of Muslim patriarchy and shows how they are deeply embedded in Muslim men's psyche.

A Life in Words records Muslim women's plight and highlights their pain, and sufferings, but it is not merely register of their misery and a parable of their vulnerability. Anchored in a strong ideological orientation, it manifests a powerful voice that is highly aware of the mechanisms of women's subjection. It negotiates with the dominant forces and strives to create a just and viable space for women. Chughtai registers a sustained resistance against diverse oppressive structures and demands women's autonomy, personhood, control over body, and reproductive power. She strongly opposes patriarchal conventions such as *purdah* system which not only discounts women's presence and makes them invisible from public spaces but also affects their psychological wellbeing. Asaduddin writes, "The *purdah* was not merely a physical segregation; women themselves internalized the mores of the patriarchal society to such an extent that they evinced the symptoms of what may be termed as 'purdah of the mind'" (2012: xix). Employing a feminist lens, Chughtai rigorously scrutinizes every tradition that perpetuates discrimination against women. Marriage as an institution comes to frequent condemnation in her autobiography as she is well aware that patriarchal power operates through it. She finds it unfair that the Islamic views and sanctions of marriage force women to background and empower men to treat

their wives as they like. Fortified by religio-cultural codes, Muslim men not only coerce their wives to remain behind veil but also beat and desert them without any reason, and paying them alimony. Women are denied agency to resist unilateral divorces and are compelled to leave their marital homes in silence, as prescribed by certain interpretations of Islam. Critiquing Muslim notions of marriage in a dismissive tone, Chughtai writes, "Such a mundane interpretation of marriage threw cold water on our notions of love and longing. It was as though a wet blanket was thrown on our colorful dreams. Women were looked after like cattle and harvest. Separate values developed for the possessors and possession to live by. Man became the provider and woman's spiritual god. It became a woman's duty to serve man" (2012: 271). The author deconstructs the myth of sacrosanctity of marriage and attempts to redefine it from a feminist point-of-view. She rejects the ideal Muslim wifehood as it subjects women to male authority. She says, "I can't be slave to someone else and obey his commands. I have spent my life resisting the oppression of the elders. I want to make my own way. I feel repulsed by the idea of a proper Eastern wife devoted to her husband" (p. 148). She advocates for the democratization of marriage, insisting that women be granted equal rights and space within it. She demands that women should have the right to divorce if they do not want to live with their husbands. They should likewise be granted the right to abortion if they do not wish to have children. She also opposes the child, unmatched marriages, and polygamy as they further expose women to violent oppression. Chughtai brings to light the anxieties and insecurities faced by Muslim women within received patriarchal and religious frameworks when she teasingly called Amina, one of her classmates, grandma. Amina was terrified as she thought that the author was looking for a match for her grandfather. She broke into tears as she thought that she may be forced to marry an old man of her grandfather's age (p. 277). This incident is significant not only for exposing the subjugation and hopeless existence of Muslim women in society but also for revealing their lack of consciousness, which renders them incapable of challenging existing power structures and

pursuing emancipation. In addition to Muslim women, Chughtai articulates the concerns of the Hindu women and strongly condemns the practices such as sati, child marriages, and dowry system. She maintains that patriarchy functions in largely similar ways in the lives of Indian woman, regardless of their caste and community. She emphasizes the need of an intersectional approach to dismantle Indian patriarchies and to liberate women as a whole.

Besides gender politics, *A Life in Words* captures socio-economic, religio-cultural, and political conflicts and turmoil in contemporary India. The colonial oppression, racial slur, and sexual exploitation of native women are powerfully articulated in this life narrative. Additionally, mounting communal hatred among Hindus and Muslims and caste, and class-based oppression receive a serious consideration. Sunita Agarwal says, "Ismat Chughtai's life story is not restricted to the dissection and criticism of patriarchy alone. It offers certain minute observations on the overall condition of the country. She, for instance, exposes the pretentious communal harmony and condemns the sati system" (2022: 6-7). Chughtai highlights class-based oppression as she perceives it through the relations between domestic helps and their employers and identifies how power operates, and circulates within institutional structures. She fervidly condemns the inequalitarian system which allows a class of people to control maximum economic resources and be masters and deprive the other to be servants only. She says, "In my limited world, class differences manifested themselves in the relationship between servants and their masters, and it left a deep impression on my mind. But as I came in contact with the wider world I realized that the distinctions between the high and the low and between the castes are only a sham. The real distinction is between wealth and poverty. This is the way of the world. A rich person, however devout and patriotic, treats the poor like a servant" (p. 2). She offers a critical interrogation of evolving capitalist structure in India, wherein dominant socio-economic groups systematically exploit marginalized populations and infringe upon their fundamental human rights. The image of a giant beating a child, which she engraves at the very beginning of

her life account, suggests that she was sharply oppressed to the oppression and exploitation of weak and helpless (p. 1). Although the author rejects the hegemonic power structures and relations, at the same time, she deconstructs the myth of absolute powerlessness. She presents the image of a magnificent building being devoured by moss, verdure, and weeds sprouting on its wall to indicate that the process of exploitation can be inverted if all the supposed powerless groups realize their intrinsic power and join together to fight against those who hold the centre of power (p. 1). Chughtai, however, displays the Marxist view of power and struggle, her life narrative is not a representation of class struggle only and it does not suggest economic empowerment as a device to abrogate discriminations prevalent in the world. Her life story offers a wider purview and condemns all differences based on caste, class, gender, religion, race, and community. It speaks for all unprivileged sections of society. Chughtai censures the prejudice of caste and describes how untouchables are treated as low and defiling by the higher castes and how they are relegated to social, economic, and political margins. She locates the nexus between caste and class and writes that it is because of the edicts of caste that most untouchables are impecunious, and disadvantaged. They are alienated from education and are forced to follow caste-based unhygienic professions such as sweeping, washing, and cleaning simply because they are born in a particular caste which is considered polluting (p. 261). Besides the Hindus, Chughtai criticizes Indian Muslim communities for observing untouchability, though Islam disapproves all differences on the basis of birth. She points out that it is because of the influence of dominant Hinduism that most Muslim families practice untouchability and discriminate against the low caste such as sweepers, leather workers, washer-men, carpenters, blacksmiths, and others. As a progressive writer and radical feminist, Chughtai censures prevalent socio-economic divisions and hierarchies and protests against exploitation resulting from them. She strives for justice and equality.

Muslim women portrayed in *A Life in Words* are muffled and their agency, autonomy, and personhood are heavily suppressed

by patriarchal forces. Apart from the author, scarcely any other Muslim woman exhibits consciousness and fortitude required to assert her autonomy, articulate her rights, and strive to disrupt patriarchal structures. As an erudite and perceptive observer of the structures underpinning women's suffering, Chughtai demonstrates a pronounced feminist consciousness, records a powerful inclusive voice, and revolts against oppressive institutions. She bares the roots of Muslim patriarchy and endeavors to mobilize Muslim women against it. Agarwal rightly says that Chughtai resists patriarchal oppression of Muslim women and speaks for all women who endured brutalities silently and never stood up to fight against the perpetrators (2022: 4). A born rebel, Chughtai critiques gendered dichotomy and breaks herself free from stereotypical roles levied on women in a masculine society. She asserts that men and women are equal and restrictions and prohibitions forced on women are the parts of strategies devised by patriarchal forces to control them. In an interview to *Manushi* she herself says, "I do not think men and women are two different kinds of beings. Even as a child, I always insisted on doing everything that brothers did" (qtd. in Khan 2020). It is because of her strong feminist conviction and perseverance that she voices a sustained rebellion against demeaning religio-patriarchal structures prevalent within her own household and society at large, and asserts her individuality. Her uprising is characterized by her refusal to conform to traditional Muslim womanhood and by her demand to educate herself at a time when female education was strongly opposed and was considered sacrilegious. She decides to desert her religion for it denies her education and threatens her father to run away and embrace Christianity which allows female education: "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" (p. 115). Highlighting the resistant tone set in Chughtai's life story, Nishat Zaidi says, "*A Life in Words* offers a glimpse into the turbulent and unconventional life of the author who refused to be bogged down by societal norms" (2012). Chughtai's commitment and fortitude are further manifest when she repudiates her daily Islamic prayers to register her revolt

against God: "I had not performed any prayers after the dawn prayer. It was as though I had a fact with Allah Mian that only if He listened to my morning prayers would I pray to compensate for the missed prayers. If not, no one knew which church I would say my next prayer in!" (p. 116). It suggests not only her courage to speak out but also reveals a profound sense of selfhood, individual freedom, and agency. A pioneering figure in the landscape of Muslim feminism in India, Chughtai strives for autonomy and condemns patriarchal institutions and conventions. She rejects the notions such as purity, chastity, and virginity that objectify woman's body and spearheads a demand for gender justice, and equality. She articulates her agency and asserts her body against all odds and prohibitions. Her expression of her will, desire, and sexuality is evident when she writes about her love for Zafar Quraishi Zia, and describes her ecstatic experience of the first kiss by him (p. 217).

Finally, it can be stated that in her autobiography, Ismat Chughtai constructs a richly layered account of female subjectivity that both defies and reconfigures dominant discourses of gender, identity, and authorship in twentieth-century South Asian literary culture. Refusing to conform to the idealized, sacrificial model of Indian womanhood perpetuated by both colonial modernity and indigenous patriarchies, Chughtai's autobiographical voice is marked by irony, defiance, and a deeply embodied sense of intellectual agency. She does not present the self as coherent, stable entity but rather a site of negotiation and contradiction, shaped by intersections of class, gender, and religion. The episodic, non-linear form of her autobiography functions as a narrative strategy to resist teleological closure and instead foreground the fragmented, often chaotic nature of a woman's lived experience in a society that disciplines female behaviour through moral, familial, and institutional surveillance.

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