# The Unrestrained Echoes: Reading Amrita Pritam's *The Revenue Stamp* and Ismat Chughtai's *Life in Words*

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> I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too have felt so full of luminous torrents that I burst . . . [1]

Mnemosyne, a Titan, was the Greek goddess of Memory. From the illustrious deity would soon come the faculties to remember, to utilise logic and intellect, and to make proper use of rhetoric. Language thus, since time immemorial, became intricately related to a yearning for past memories and a time long gone. It is this distinctive quality of words that marks autobiographical writings as a unique literary genre, characterized by an unusual investigation into the author's own psyche. It involves a retrospective evaluation of one's own ideas about the self and hence centres around complicated questions of memory, truth and time. However, the search for an "I" within a non-fictional narrative becomes an even more difficult quest for women who constantly have to break free from the shackles of gendered prejudices to resume their journey into the deeper crevices of their minds. In a society that constantly suppresses women as the subservient sex, it is indeed a herculean task to free one's own desires, wants and needs from the iron curtains of parochial restrictions and present them naked in the public eye.

Although 'self' is often depicted as being "genderless, sexless, raceless, ageless and classless, feminists argue that these notions of 'self' are designed to mask a white, healthy, youthfully middle-aged,

middle class and heterosexual man".[2] It is thus only held appropriate for men to establish and eulogize the socio-culturally valorised image of their masculine "self" in writing, as opposed to women who are largely the "Other" face of society—the meek, the inglorious, the ordinary. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* was absolutely correct in pointing out that in a society "He is the Subject, He is the Absolute—she is the 'Other'", explicitly documenting why the exploration of a tangible identity is such a concerning issue for feminists across all ages. Female autobiographies in that respect thus become a tool for social transgression itself—a medium to disregard the patricentric rules of society that desperately try to stifle women's voices and strangle their exigencies.

It is interesting to note, however, that when autobiography as a genre first started gaining prominence in India as a result of the Literary Renaissance that began with India's contact with England, it was unanimously discarded by male writers as a frivolous form that did not ask for any serious effort. As a result, 19th century India saw a significant rise in female figures involving themselves in the secret task of writing autobiographies. Autobiography as a genre thus irreplaceably intertwined itself with the objective of the literary rebirth of women. The female autobiographies, however instead of being just a mere retelling of individual experiences, served as a medium through which the writers avowed their identity, establishing an unmitigated authority over their own creations—something that they possibly could not experience elsewhere under the puissant grasp of patriarchal conventions. The moment women started picking up their pens, albeit in an extremely furtive and wary manner, was monumental—it finally delineated a strong deviation from the literary portrayal of the "ideal Indian woman" as propagated by the obdurate male gaze, be it in the depiction of the chaste Sita or in the characterization of the demure "Matangini" (*Rajmohan's wife*). By writing their own stories and by laying bare the malicious carcass of contemporary society, women finally succeeded in slowly

demystifying the superficial figure of the "ideal woman" by taking a significant step towards adding another page to "herstory".

Malavika Karlekar, in her book entitled *Voices from Within* (1991), notes that any personal writing by a woman is a conscious act to reflect upon her inner mind, thus helping to form for herself "a sense of self". This holds true for Rassundari Devi, the first female autobiographer in India, and the long line of venerable women who followed her, waging an undeclared war against "*male*volent" society and its cornucopian machineries to debar any liaison between women and personal literature. As the conflict with the British colonial forces accreted in the mid-1900s, more women started taking up their pens, shattering years of deliberate denigration and objectification. Even at the expense of being labelled the "wicked women" of their days, fierce and revolutionary writers like Amrita Pritam, Lalithambika Antharjanam, Ismat Chughtai, Fahmida Riaz among others, became daring champions of women's rights, inventing a language for the "second sex".

This paper aims to read the autobiographical works of two of the strongest female voices of the past century—Amrita Pritam and Ismat Chughtai—through the lens of what Cixous termed as the "écriture feminine" and draw a parallel between their ideologies, beliefs and unadulterated, often contentious, acts of transgression. Introduced by Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa", écriture feminine refers to a definite feminine style of writing that can be considered eccentric and even incomprehensible at times—a sign characteristic of the years of suppression levied upon the female voice. Evading male monopoly, such a language staunchly talks of and asserts the agency of the woman as an individual herself. This paper argues that both Pritam and Chughtai consciously or unconsciously revelled in the freedom that came with the use of such a language. Both the writers were uninhibited and seldom were intimidated by male disapproval—a quality manifested unequivocally through their autobiographical voices. While Chughtai grounded her authorial

voice in the unpolished visage of reality, Amrita Pritam expressed her radical views with mellifluous poetic sensibility. But what becomes a sturdy commonality between them is the relentless assertion of their unassailable individuality over the pages of literature. The Gorgons of their times—they broke the expectations of what and how women were expected to speak, giving free expression to 'dangerous' ideas and passions, with an unparalleled frankness.

## AMRITA: THE REBEL, THE ICONOCLAST, THE OTHER

Unabashedly intrepid and eloquent, both in her writings and personal life, Amrit Kaur alias Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) was an epitome of everything that a woman of her time was not permitted to be—a vociferous writer, an uninhibited lover and a true defier of regressive social confinements.

Pritam's father, a poet himself, had named his daughter "Amrit", the Punjabi word for elixir. Blessed with the grace of immortality, Pritam's writings went on to become a fortuitous manifestation of her rejection of a patriarchal world order. Her autobiography, *Raseedi Ticket* (The Revenue Stamp) stands as a representation of her dissentious soul. Her narrative "subtly presents an alternative history and severs itself from a typical misogynist nationalistic discourse",[3] as it portrays a staunch resistance against the accepted conventions of religion and morality. Her unwonted approach towards life is reflected in the unusual way in which she starts the first chapter of her autobiography: "Is it doomsday?"

Pritam's chronicle of her birth and the years that followed portray a significant inquisitive nature that does not move back from questioning her theist father about the existence of God, after her mother's death:

> "There is no God."
> "You mustn't say that."
> "Why not?"[4]

Despite coming from a strict orthodox background, the author hardly cared about maintaining the pious image of the archetypal subservient daughter of the house, and staunchly questioned the soundness of religion, when she found out that her grandmother kept separate tumblers for Hindus and Muslims. An agonised Pritam failed to understand the relevance of a religious boundary that hindered humanitarian tenets of harmony and refused to follow any commandment of the same.

She questioned "the entire stratified social scheme" and articulated her desire to change the stifling parochialities of the religious dictums with the more empowering doctrine of 'Ruhaniyat' (Spirituality). Her rebellion soon found its way into words, as she consciously defied her father's mandates to meditate on God and write religious verses. Instead, she delved deeper into her own spirit, seeking a partner for herself in an imaginary fragment of her mind, 'Rajan'. Refusing to think about God, a young Amrita Pritam consciously transgressed the man-made moral boundaries, by fabricating her reveries around the fancies of her own mind. She admits dreaming about being entrapped in a "big dark castle" or being chased by a vexed mob, only to escape and transcend into a territory that was exclusively her own. The autobiography, just like her dreams, echoes the resonating cries of a defiant mind enmeshed in a society that demands absolute subordination.

Rebellious thoughts thus entered her mind, which she deliberately tried suppressing by tearing up her writings, only to understand slowly that she was a terrible social misfit. Growing more aware of her own conscience, she soon picked up her pen to give vent to her blasphemous convictions, gradually creating a literary niche of her own.

Hence in Pritam, one can find a deliberate endeavour to break the barriers of social rules and to present an empowered narrative, juxtaposed with an assertive individuality that refuses to bow down

before masculine autocracy. Her writing, from a very early age, is testimony to her resistance. Pritam consciously tries to deviate from the phallocentric tendency of articulating one's thoughts in a male-gendered vernacular, which reaches its zenith in her portraiture of the different aspects of her feminine self. She is essentially a woman in a man's world, gifted with an iron will and the power to defy. She is not afraid of anyone, nor does Pritam care about the variegated social agents—a fact that she harps on occasionally in *The Revenue Stamp*. She does not mince her words and directly uses her authorial voice to chastise the critics who had often denounced her writing for being too "sensuous". Condemnation did not stop following her for long; even her autobiography was accused of being a public depiction of her vendetta against past enemies. It is interesting to note that Pritam knew quite well about the possible backlash she might face after the publication of *The Revenue Stamp* (which authorities were urged to ban), and yet she composed the book, with a characteristic unflinching boldness that is reflected in almost all her writings. She does not shy away from openly confessing her habit of chain-smoking, that was complemented by occasional drinking. Her uniqueness as an author however lies in the way she poetically evokes the idea of "*kraah prasad*" to insinuate that the cigarette becomes a purer concoction in her hand, only to help make her thoughts "ready for distribution". By attaching a religious undertone to an otherwise stigmatized subject, she simultaneously defends her cause and expresses her desires with an unchallenged authorial clarity. In an era that looked down upon an open discussion on mental health and even more so, if it concerned a woman, Pritam showed an incredible fortitude in noting down her suicidal thoughts and a gnawing sense of loss and gloom in the pages of her autobiography:

> I made up my mind to live, but to wear gloom as a king wears purple: never to smile again . . .[5]

Pritam hardly regrets her deeds; she openly professes her uncontrollable love for Sahir Ludhianvi in *The Revenue Stamp*. Engaged at four and married off to Pritam Singh at sixteen against her consent, the author never found happiness in her marriage, and eventually left her husband. She fell in love with friend and fellow poet Ludhianvi, sharing an agonising relationship with him that was sustained through letters, silences and echoes. Having started at a *mushaira* (poetry reading session), their love was poetic, as it was tragic. Pritam did not hide her extra-marital affair from the capricious eye of society; instead, she went a step ahead to document the intensity of her longing for Sahir in her autobiography. She confesses to hysterically writing Sahir's name on a piece of paper while being photographed by journalists, and admits being shattered after learning about his new affair. She accepts her past without a trace of any moral dilemma. Crude emotions of intimacy, passion, jealousy and betrayal crept into the pages she wrote and lingered around the forgotten pages of her missing diaries, as she dedicated thousands of words to the lost memories of her one true love. Once she penned down:

> *"Tera milna aisa hota hain jaise koi hatheli par*
> *ek waqt ki roti rakh de"*
> ("Meeting you feels like getting one portion of
> my meal in my hand")

To Pritam, her emotions needed to be reflected—a desire as rudimentary to her as the need for food. Coming out from the ensnared hegemony of accepting that women's physical and emotional impulses were only relevant when considered in context with that of a man's, Pritam gave herself the autonomous agency to feel and act like a truly liberated individual. It is a mystery why she never changed her name ("Pritam" was a marital addition to her name, based on her husband's), but she vehemently denied being entangled in a set-up that restricted her true potential, even if that meant confronting the

accusations of society and eventually her children.

Imroz, with whom Pritam was to later spend forty years together in a live-in relationship, came into her life quite late, at a point when she was dejected, lonely and still in love with Sahir. A painter by profession, Imroz varnished the author's life with hues she had never known:

> "No relationship with man,
> Not one word—father, brother, friend, husband
> Could have described you . . ." [6]

Pritam embraced the dichotomy her mind snared her in, as she struggled between her burning desire for Ludhianvi and the unconditional love Imroz showered on her. Her autobiography documents her deep yearning for Sahir that led her to ravish his used cigarette stubs—a painful trope that she also explored in her novel *Iksi Anita*. And yet, with the same passion she articulates the pangs of guilt she experienced for involving Imroz in her struggle. However, what beautifully highlights the searing lines that she penned down was an unfettered honesty—one that echoed when she insinuated that Imroz was the "15th August" of her life, celebrating the raw liberty with which she embraced her 'sacrilegious' feelings, emotions and wants.

One of the brightest stars of the Progressive Writer's Movement, Pritam sought to fight injustice and advocate the tenets of universal equality. The traumatic Indo-Pakistan partition scarred the author deeply, for she herself was forced to leave Lahore, and this is clearly reflected in her autobiography. She contemplated deeply the lingering sense of dislocation, loss and past memories through the ordeals of her grandfather who refused to leave his home after Partition. An alternative portrayal of India, post-independence, rises through Pritam's words—one that shies away from the boisterous celebrations of freedom that followed August 1947:

> The most gruesome accounts of marauding invaders in all mythologies and chronicles put together will not, I believe, compare with the blood curdling horrors of this historic year.

The utter deprivation and agony of the "homeless" vagrants pained Pritam, who consciously turned the remorseless bloodshed into her ink, composing hymns for the victims on both the sides. Her most famous dirge "*Ajj Aakhaan Waris Shah nu*" encapsulated the true horrors of the Partition:

> Rise o beloved of the aggrieved…Someone has blended poison in the five rivers of Punjab

Her novels (like *Pinjar*) and poems distinctively countered the male gaze that looked at the Partition through a lens of community and creed, and extensively articulated the trauma, pain and violence of the everyday world, especially from the veiled view of the doubly marginalised female. She uses the same political, feminist awareness to compose her autobiography and embraces her identity as a "dark" postcolonial woman with candour, by rejecting the "white piece of marble" in her dreams for "the ebony dark damsel" as her "daughter", thus harmonizing her racial, cultural, maternal and creative urges simultaneously.

*The Revenue Stamp* is resplendent with a scintillating sense of sisterhood, which she facilitated better through her travels and meetings abroad. On one occasion, she met a poet named Zulfia in Tashkent and developed a strong bond with her: "For me Amrita and Zulfia are the names of the same woman". She took up the pen to inspire and emancipate, despite having to bear tremendous criticism and social humiliation. Her writings ruptured the phallocentric discourse and established a fluid, semiotic narrative, which was stridently condemned and denounced. Religious groups attacked her, while uncomfortable male critics hated her audacious flow of

words. And yet, Pritam did not "flinch before looking at a man's eyes" and vocalizing her demands. Writing was an antidote to her, and her pen her exclusive weapon against the deleterious patriarchy. Deconstructing the phallic symbolism attached with the 'pen', Pritam claimed that it was as much a part of her body as her limbs, and had the sole right to be placed beside her when she passed away:

> There have been so many days when I have held my pen close to my breast and wept and wept. It is impossible to say who comes to support you and when. My pen has always been the perceptible . . . I can hold it to my heart.[7]

Pritam's autobiography is a mesmerising synthesis of various identities: those of a writer, a rebel, a lover and a woman. Khushwant Singh had cynically remarked once that Amrita Pritam could fit her entire life "on the back of a revenue stamp". Aptly titled, *Raseedi Ticket* thus not only became a daring response to a pejorative challenge, but indeed transformed itself into the mouthpiece of a writer par excellence.

## ISMAT CHUGHTAI: THE MEDUSA WITH A GLIB TONGUE

"The personal is political",[8] an oft-quoted, powerful phrase attributed to Carol Hanisch, which also served as a rallying slogan of second-wave feminism from the late 1960s, directly pertains to the question of the relevance of autobiographies. Every anecdote chronicled in an individual's biographical account becomes political as it questions the social significance of personal relationships and blurs the lines between private and public spheres. A girl child belonging to a middle-class, seemingly 'progressive' Muslim family, aspiring for something as fundamental as education and subsequently being denied the same, becomes a relevant part of the discussion of the utterly preposterous injustice prevalent so flagrantly in contemporary society. Ismat

Chughtai, one of the dissident authors of Urdu Literature, represents the aforementioned child. She lobbied relentlessly and successfully to get an education and finally embarked on a path to express her voice vociferously in order to subvert and expose the gendered double standards of the patriarchal, feudal structures that subjugated her and her tribe. A resolute iconoclast, Chughtai partook in the pre-partition, anti-imperialist and left-oriented Progressive Writer's Movement and became an eminent figure. She was progressive in every sense of the term and lived up to it by championing the cause of the marginalized, especially, women. Her choice of subjects, like something as bold and contentious as female sexuality, and the style she used to animate them elicited considerable disapproval during her time, but that distinguished her from her equally gifted and trailblazing peers. She carved a niche for herself in the Urdu literary canon and lent a voice to those agonies and conflicted passions that were muffled by the restrictive domestic ambits set for women. It would be no exaggeration to say that the circumstances of her life and art help us understand both the cultural economy in which women write and the politics of canon building as it affected women.[9]

The journey Ismat Chughtai took to establish her authorial identity in order to bring to the foreground her subaltern identities—as a Muslim and a woman, was a perilous struggle. In the normative hyper-nationalistic narratives of feminism in India, the Muslim woman is either erased or contained within the confines of 'purdah' or orthodox stagnation, victimized by her own community; in fact, she is the 'other', against which the picture of emancipation and modernity of more visible upper-caste Hindu women is inscribed.[10] Chughtai's secularized sight did not fail to see the complex intersectionality at play which analyses the 'othering' of the minorities resulting in double subjugation. Rather, she highlights, unequivocally, the ludicrous inequities that were meted out to women notwithstanding their class and religion. Her protagonists, like her, show an inkling for acts of defiance against the phallocentric traditions, like Cixous' Medusas,

transgressing by simply asserting their 'feminine' sensibilities and a free will to wield their agency. Chughtai drew inspiration from the circumstances and the people of her own personal life to craft her fictional world. Needless to say, it becomes imperative to peek into her own life in order to understand how she discovered herself and decided to employ her notorious glib tongue to unmask the follies of the society she grew up in.

*Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* (Life in Words)is known to be Ismat Chughtai's autobiography written for the Urdu journal *Aaj Kal*, which was published from March 1979 to May 1980. However, like the author herself, this interesting piece of writing has its own distinctive feature which sets it apart. The non-fictional piece of writing consists of 14 chapters with no sense of linearity and captures her metamorphic years right from her childhood till the litigation against her controversial short story, 'Lihaaf'. By employing the stream of consciousness technique, the readers are invited to her mind palace: a museum with each chapter being sporadic pockets of memories carefully exhibiting how her evolution took place. Perhaps it is not realistic to expect a conventional autobiography from such an individualistic, expressive and radical writer like Ismat Chughtai, who never moved on a straight or predictable path, much like the heroine, Shaman, of her autobiographical novel, *Terhi Lakeer* (Crooked Line).[11]

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Englishmen came to India with, as Rudyard Kipling puts it, the white man's burden of civilizing the purportedly uncouth natives. Introduction of anglicized education, especially to the weaker sections of society was a stepping stone towards their orientalist project. The heinous practice of Sati and the deplorable condition of Indian women who had to be perpetually submissive to patriarchs and subject to their capricious chastisements gave impetus to the British to bring about reform in the 1850s by establishing institutions for women's education. However, the poetry of legislation did not distill down to the prose of implementation.

Orthodox social structures looked down upon the very concept of educating a woman, associating it with the seemingly 'blasphemous' profession of prostitution. Emancipation through education was particularly difficult and a distant reality for privileged upper-class daughters and wives as they had to bear the burden of maintaining family honour through the maintenance of purdah or seclusion.[12] Such was the case for Ismat Chughtai as well. Born to Qasim Beg Chughtai, a judicial magistrate, and Nusrat Khanam in a well-off, upper-middle class, Muslim family, Chughtai was one of their six sons and four daughters. The endless row of queasy pregnancies was the reason why her mother "felt nauseated by the very sight of us".[13] Childhood was not really one of her memorable times as is evident from her words: "I got past childhood somehow."[14]

Chughtai recalls her father as a 'Liberal' who, on principle, used to stand up for the rights of women more than those of boys. However, she immediately introduces a tone of derision by undercutting the meaning of 'liberal' because in practice, "girls and boys were equal in the same way as Hindus and Muslims were brothers".[15] There was a clear distinction in the privileges of each family member in accordance with their gender but it was Chughtai who flouted these gender roles outright. She always considered herself a misfit among her sisters who were 'perfect' women adept in the arts of housekeeping and embroidery and also proficient in Urdu, Farsi and the Quran. Chughtai was clumsy and took pleasure in playing with her brothers and learning as much as she could from her elder brother Azim Bhai. She would read the translated Quran and engage in debates with her father's friends with her new-found knowledge. She even rejected donning burkha or hijab as a proclamation of her autonomy over her body; subsequently questioning the visibility of women in the public realm. Although her mother considered these as manly pursuits that did not suit women, it did not curb Chughtai's volition. In a strong attempt to hold on to the family's Mughal roots and not give in to colonial subservience, Chughtai's Taya Abba advocated Farsi as the mother tongue of the

family but such a rebellion bore consequences economically. Hence, from thereon, Qasim Beg made an exception and decided that the men of the family would not study Farsi. Chughtai's brothers mocked her as she had to learn Farsi which compromised her learning and relegated her to an inferior status. In another instance, the extreme antagonism against women's education can be witnessed in the case of her elder sisters going to boarding schools for studying. The entire extended family and associated friends threatened to ostracize her father for committing such an imprudent crime.

Gerda Lerner in her investigation reveals that education is a major area of domination; and the systemic exclusion of girls from educational institutions has perpetuated the subordination of women within the patriarchal structure and she terms this phenomenon as the condition of "trained ignorance".[16] This fear of letting Eves, over the course of time, pick and eat the forbidden fruit of knowledge which would lead to loss of 'innocence' and the collective fall of mankind has been ingrained since the beginning of time. Chughtai had to resort to devious routes in order to get around such perils standing in her way and oust the archaic fear of bringing doom on mankind by letting a woman know too much. It is noteworthy to mention how she rejected the fate designed for her and weaved her own destiny when, on what one might refer to as the most memorable incident of her life, she asserted with fortitude her desire to enroll herself in Aligarh Girl's College and take the matriculation exam. Although there was a lot of opposition in the beginning, she was ultimately victorious in paving her way with the façade of an engagement with Jugnu, the accomplished son of Chughtai's maternal uncle. It is interesting to observe how women played their constraints to their advantage in order to achieve their aspirations. Chughtai promised to marry Jugnu in exchange for her freedom to study: a transaction reflecting the sheer lack of agency women had to work within. However, she did not marry him although she considered him her 'soulmate'. Marrying Jugnu would have robbed Chughtai

of her mercurial elements. Like Emily Dickinson, who denounced her chance at being united with her mortal love for the sake of her immortal Art in her poem ‘I Cannot Live with You’, Chughtai too, chose the luminous flame raging within her over spending a lifetime with Jugnu, her soulmate. Later in Bombay she met Shahid Latif and their love grew out of a beautiful friendship where Shahid helped Chughtai in honing her literary prowess. With Shahid, she was not tamed and that is what she looked forward to in a lifelong partnership. Initially, Chughtai’s accomplishments were never given as much importance by her family as was given to her brother’s failures. She received her Bachelor’s degree in Humanities from IT College, Lucknow. She went on to become the Inspector of Schools in Bombay while dazzling the Urdu literary circle with her firebrand realistic writings. Chughtai frequently held illiteracy responsible for the despicable plight of women just as, in her case, it was her literacy that freed her from the shackles of conservative sexist moralities. She gained respectability in the eyes of her family who had always considered her an ‘imperfect’ woman.

On witnessing the subjugation of women perpetuated in every nook and cranny of domestic life, ever since childhood, Ismat grew up with a peculiar disdain towards femininity:

> “I considered femininity a sham, and looked upon compromise as falsehood, patience as cowardice and gratitude as duplicity. I was not in the habit of beating about the bush.”[17]

However, it was the male gaze that associated femininity with helplessness and subservience and it took many powerful influences to emancipate her from her patriarchal appropriation and contempt towards her identity as a woman. Chughtai had always been a keen observer of her surroundings. It was the complete reversal of the bitterly abused coachman’s daughter Mangu’s disposition that ended Chughtai’s sense of inferiority about women being weak.

Femininity is a social construct which is subjected to multiple layers of interpretation. Chughtai was never able to come to terms with the patriarchal definition of femininity as it demanded a demure, tongue-tied, self-effacing, submissive ideal of an 'Indian wife'. It is no wonder that when Mangu hit back and revolted against her brutish mother-in-law and husband, she was considered 'possessed' and demon-like and Bacchu Phupi was regarded as an 'incomplete' woman because of her volatile temperament and educated status.

> One of Ismat's literary mentors, Azim Bhai, immortalized in her 'Dozakhi', said, "if you want to say something, wrap the message neatly in a story or a narrative and you will draw less flak. People will read your stories and be influenced by them"[18]

She followed that advice throughout her career as a writer as she essentially deconstructed the pre-conceived notions of femininity and gave it the much-needed female gaze through her fictional characters. 'Ismat' means 'chastity', which is quite antithetical as she was one of those hand-picked writers that celebrated sexual overtness in women and was intersectional and inclusive enough to explicitly write about homosexuality in her strident epoch. However, it would be wrong to compartmentalize Chughtai as an obscene writer and the purveyor of sex that she was labelled as after the controversy around 'Lihaaf'. For her, 'Lihaaf' did prove to be a veritable explosion as it dislocated her identity as a realist. It was only because of her honest story-telling in 'Lihaaf' did the Begum, from whom Chughtai drew her inspiration for the story, break free from a hapless marriage and remarry to experience nuptial bliss. Another instance of her authorial voice creating reverberations was when Chughtai's article, staunchly proclaiming her fearlessness, against Mulla Ahrarvi's disparaging remarks against her alma mater, was published in *Aligarh Gazette* and Shahid Ahrarvi was given a taste of his own dreadful medicine by the brothers of the Aligarh Muslim University from whom she

sought solidarity. In her autobiography, Chughtai recorded the silences and the gagged voices of the women belonging to different strata of society who were stripped of their agency and subjected to brutal retribution from the arbiters of patricentric society when one woman held a mirror up to their ugly, self-serving, dubious intentions. Chughtai understood that the prevalent inequalities were never a case of class, creed, gender or religion but emerged from the desperate need of the flagbearers of moral codes and ethics to maintain the status quo of their lopsided power dynamics.

Chughtai's astute sensitivity towards class, gender and religious discrimination drew her to the ideals of communism and secularism which were introduced to her by Rasheed Jahan. The inferior and vulnerable status of women and people belonging to the lower rungs of society irked her and recollections of the same are amply scattered throughout her autobiography. Her empathy towards the distressed lot is palpable: the evocative way she chronicles the absolute denial of dignity to widows by the society; the gut-wrenching descriptions of little handprints of child wives who were sacrificed at the altar of the sacrilegious practice of Sati in the royal crematorium of Sambhar; the issue of untouchability rampant in the Hindu dominated areas of Sambhar and the treatment meted out to the servants in a familial household. These lurid instances of injustice invoked in Chughtai her unstinting vigor to fight for an egalitarian future.

Chughtai's family was quite progressive in regard to religious politics. One can see the interplay of Chughtai's triple identities: one being an Indian which bestowed on her the inheritance of reveling in festivals like Holi and her Ammi's right to give panditji money for Satyanarayan puja, another being a Muslim who was severely berated for touching the Krishna deity and adoring it like a little baby during Lalaji's Janmashthami puja, and lastly, as a woman. Her religious identity and national belonging and their subsequent intermingling bewildered her. Such a sense of listlessness can be traced in her short story, *Roots* which delves into the displacement of

identities as a Muslim and an Indian during the Partition of India. The development of her secular ethos can be vividly witnessed in her recollection of personal experiences that led to the negotiations among her variegated subaltern 'I's. As Sadaf Jaffer rightly puts it,

> Chughtai's critique of society hinged upon the equality (barābarī) of all Indian people, whether they be women or men, Muslim or Hindu, master or servant. The primacy of "humanity" (*insāniyat*) over other identities was the keystone of her formation of the secular, and has roots as in the longstanding critique of religious boundaries in a tradition that can be termed Islamicate humanism.[19]

Autobiography has always served as a powerful tool for self-construction and self-expression. It brings to the foreground, the nuances of personal life which under critical assessment, can be instrumental as rubrics of a much more grandiose socio-political fabric. A descendant of the fierce Mughals and the Sufi saint Salim Chisti, Ismat Chughtai inherited an unstinting fighting spirit combined with a sublime spirituality. Her glib tongue was unperturbed and always articulated the grim realities of contemporary society. Amrita Pritam, likewise, was an embodiment of resilience, grace and courage. As the popular saying goes, Rome was not built in a day and neither was the metamorphosis of these valorous women with unrestrained voices. Their autobiographical writings can bear testimony to it. Like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Rassundari Devi and Kamala Das, they led their rebellions through their puissant pens despite their misogynistic milieus demanding that they be quiet. Thus, one might be bold enough to claim that writing about the self and letting the echoes resonate with the innumerable lives oppressed under the same patriarchal paradigms transcending time, space and borders is a revolution in itself. Like Lilith who earned infamy in the course of his-story for avowing autonomy over her individuality, a woman

retelling her story symbolically of claiming that representative space she has been so long denied. The urgency to pen down her-story can thus, conclusively, be very well explicated by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who, in The Madwoman in the Attic, observed:

> A life of feminine submission, of 'contemplative purity', is a life of silence that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of 'significant action', is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story.[20]

## NOTES

1 Cixous, 876.
2 Dharmani and Sailpar, 483.
3 Dutta, 229.
4 Pritam, 9.
5 Pritam, 34.
6 Pritam, 82.
7 Pritam, 115.
8 Hanisch, an American feminist, wrote an essay of the same name in 1970 which became a rallying slogan during the second-wave feminism.
9 Tharu and Lalitha, xix.
10 Chughtai, xiv
11 Chughtai, X
12 Nayeem, 35
13 Chughtai, 1.
14 Chughtai, 8.
15 Chughtai, 8.
16 Nayeem, 36.
17 Chughtai, 10.
18 Chughtai, 13.
19 Jaffer, 2.
20 Gilbert and Gubar, 36.

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