

Muslim Girl's Education: A Critical Study of Ismat Chughtai's 'A Life in Words'

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Abstract: Autobiography is one of the best the suitable genres to study the Muslim women's experiences of their life. This genre is chosen by women to express their deference and resistance. Ismat Chughtai is one of the famous Urdu writers of India, describes her childhood in a large Muslim family and also focuses on the discrimination showed between boys and girls in family and in the society. This paper critically examines how Muslim girl's education is effected by region, religion gender discrimination through the autobiography of Ismat Chughtai 'A Life in Words'. The autobiography describes various situations prevailed in the Muslim household and society in the pre independent era. Gender discrimination, religion and region have effected girls' education adversely. The Gender discrimination did not allow girls to be treated equal to boys to get education and the religion has put them behind Purdah. The Islamic society of U.P forced her father to withdraw his daughters from the school.

Key Words: Muslim girls, Education, Religion

Muslims are the followers of Islam, the religion of peace. Approximately 1/5 of the world population is Muslims. Though the religion has given equal rights and privileges to women as men, the customs and traditions have imposed some restrictions on them.

Autobiography has become an ideal vehicle to convey women's issues and experiences. This genre is also chosen by women to express their deference and resistance. Being Muslim women, they are able to provide insight into the exploitation, suppression, in the domestic arena which is closed to the outside world and their experiences in the contemporary society in their Autobiographies. So by studying autobiography we can explore and analyze the conditions of the women, in their gendered role of daughter, wife and mother in the tradition bound, patriarchal Muslim society.

Ismat chughtai was one of the Urdu literatures most prominent and courageous writer who was associated with the progressive writers. In her autobiography 'A life in words' Ismat Chughtai has described about the position of women especially Muslim women in the society of her times. She has written about the suppression of women in the male dominated Muslim society of Utter Pradesh, India. The author fights patriarchy, and cultural norms to get education and has described the discrimination showed towards girls' education.

Ismat Chughtai says "I got past childhood somehow. I never understood why people sing such paeans to childhood. Childhood exemplifies restrictions and deprivation." (p.no:8) She was the only sister among several brothers as her elder sisters got married already. She competed with brothers in everything for which they felt her as pain in the neck and gave her the crushing defeat. Azim bhai her elder brother encouraged her to defeat her brothers in the sphere of learning. Soon she found herself ahead of her brothers in studies. Within a short time she was ahead of her brothers in studies.

Soon she has completed reading the Quran and Hadith and started discussing on religion, with Abba's friends, who are from different faiths, which was encouraged by her father. But mother, who strongly believes the primary role of women is domestic, felt horrified on this and said "these manly pursuits do not befit a woman. This was a man's world, made and distorted by man. 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 women has to resort to feminine wiles."(p.no:9). These thoughts of Ismat Chughtai's mother clearly shows the superiority of man over women and the ultimate goal of girl is to get place in the man's world. As a typical Muslim woman, she considers this world belongs to man – whom she meant he is the superior and woman is his subordinate. Mother wanted her to learn house hold works to be a good wife like her elder sisters. But Ismat Chughtai did not show any interest towards those household works.

"Society has accorded a place for woman and if a woman sets her foot outside its boundaries, her feet would be cut off. Too much education was dangerous. In our family there were no restrictions on speech and action; but this was valid only for men and if I wanted to exercise the same freedom I was reprimanded" (p.no 12)

In her Muslim mughal family only boys were considered appropriate to participate in discussions. All the women and other relatives in her family were horrified on this and felt that she may not adjust with her in laws with her glib tongue.

There was strong opposition to girls' education in those days. Once Abba (Ismat's father) has joined his two daughters in a boarding school, it has caused a great uproar. Then the entire family and relatives stood against him and threatened to isolate him. They warned him that he could not get them married and he has to maintain them throughout his life. This created panic in mother as she believed, the ultimate goal of girls was marriage and this made her strong opponent to the education of girls. The people said, "To educate a girl was worse than prostituting them" (p. no: 72). Some of his relatives and friends complained of converting them into Christians. This incident proves how the society strongly opposed to the girls' education. In the Muslim family the man is the bread winner and the woman the home maker. So they educate the boys it be able to earn for the family and for the woman the religious education, cooking, sewing, embroidery and other household works were taught. Her father who worked as a judge did not show discrimination between boys and girls. He safe guarded the rights of the girls, but the fear of their future being remained as spinster made him withdrew them from school.

The Muslim society of U.P strongly opposed to the girls' education. Hasmat khanum (one of the cousins of Ismat) was the first girl in their family to complete education, training and took up job. The entire society stood against them and threatened to burn down their house. Sometimes when her father was away during nights, only mother and daughter lived in fright. This is the another incident which shows the strong opposition of Muslim society towards girls education.

Bashahi Khanuum , who is called as Bacchu phuphi, the one and only paternal aunt of Ismat who was a bit educated was not successful in her married life. In those days it was thought "When girls are doted as much as boys they do not prove to be good wives"(p. no 71) .She was the darling sister of three brothers and a bit educated too. The family members gave this as a reason for her to be an 'incomplete women' and for her unsuccessful married life.

Farsi was the language of Mughals and the official language in India. Taya Abba (the elder brother of Abba) insisted on all the children in their family should learn Farsi and restricted from English education. Those who got the English system of education only got the jobs and survived. As a result they could not get a livelihood (eg.,Dillu Chacha) after the British occupied India Farsi has lost its significance. Farsi was suppressed by English and slowly it disintegrated from India. . So Taya Abba was convinced to teach Farsi to the girls and allowed the boys to get English education. As a result Ismat was forced to learn Farsi from Taya Abba. Her brothers took this as a source to tease her saying the popular adage "study Farsi and sell oil" (p. no: 16).her brothers took this as a proof of their superiority and declared her inferior.

Ismat 's Abba miah left for Sambhar to work as a judge when there was vacation to schools after her completion of IXth class. All the doors of her education were closed. She begged to allow her to stay in the boarding house bur her parents did not agree, girls who stayed in the boarding houses were thought to go in a wrong way. Ismat started reading all the books available to her at home. She started analyzing what she had read. She says" when I had read that women are the weaker sex and that they were easily corruptible, it has strange impact on me. I felt angrier with myself rather than the society thinking there must be something lacking in me." (p.no.110). She did not get angry on her parents but felt pity for them. Till then she was feeling that mother is against her studies. She understood that her parents were trapped in their limited world. They did not hate her. Mother loved all her children alike and she gave generous dowries to her daughters and was worried about Ismat's marriage. Her mother thought that she is protecting Ismat from the morally corrupt environment of boarding house by not allowing her to go there for studies.

The boys were allowed to get education which may help them to earn their livelihood and the girls were given training in housekeeping to look after their husbands and in- laws.

There is quiet contrast in the interests of boys and girls. Shamim (the elder brother of Ismat) who was not all interested in studies but was allowed to study on the other hand Ismat who is very interested to get education was not allowed to study. The lonely environment of Sambhar and unfulfilled desire for education forced her into depression and the thought to commit suicide. Soon she could come out of this situation and thought it is not necessary to be a boy, but needed the intelligence and ingenuity of a boy, and concentrated on getting herself an education

Mean while the marriage proposals and mother's plans of her marriage even worsen the situation. She recollected what her mother and relatives has said about her that she had no merits to lead successful married life. Hence she decided to get education and lead an independent life. She thought first she has to avoid or at least has to post pone the marriage. For this she plots a plan along with Jugnu (her cousin with whom her marriage was fixed) and get succeed. She decided to fight the battle alone. She had strange night mares that she was dead and the whole family was mourning it. She could hear the mourning of millions of women who mourn someone or the other. This shows her helpless stage of her as well as the other women in the male dominated society

The date of reopen was approaching and she had not yet got the application form. One day she gathered all her courage and went to Abba and expressed her wish to do matric. He said it is of no use as her marriage has already fixed, instead she can learn how to cook and sew dresses to be efficient in housekeeping like her sisters. But she insisted to

allow her to study. Her burning desire to get education was met with a stern refusal. She went on hunger strike and silent war for two days. She threatened to run away from home and even to convert to Christianity. This shows her strong desire to get education at the cost of family and religion. Her parents were stunned on this drastic decision taken by her. On the third day father handed over a passbook with Rs.6000/-deposit and the documents of a house as her share and allowed her to study and gave Rs.50/- for her expenses to buy books and clothes. This shows her struggle to get education and how she has achieved it.

She joined in the Aligarh Muslim girls' school and completed her matric and F.A. there It was must for the girls to observe purdah strictly If one has to get education from a male teacher, there should be a curtain between them. The teacher would not know whom he is teaching and to how many members like in Aligarh Muslim women's' college especially in Urdu class which was taken by Mubarak Ali.

Then she went to Lucknow and joined in Isabella Thoburn College run by Christian missionary and got her B.A. Ismat had sailed against the wind and finally reached the shore. Amma's only regret is that if Shamim , had passed B.A rather than Ismat ,Mamu would have founded him a lucrative job in Jodhpur.

In the pre independent era not only in Muslim community but also in all the religious sectors girls' education was not given importance. It is evident from the present study that Mangu, coachwaan's daughter who is poor and from lower strata was not given education and got married at a younger age. Susie daughter of Lalaji though rich and belonged to higher strata of society also not given much importance to education and got married soon.

Even in such adverse situations there were some people who struggled for girls' education. They have dedicated their lives for the cause of girls' education. They are Papa Miah and his family and mister Abdus Shukur.

Born as Thakur das, Papa Miah was a kashmiri bramhin, converted to Islam and took the name shaik Abdullah. He married Waheed jahan Begum popularly known as Ala Bi. This noble couple understood the importance of girls education, devoted their life to the mission of educating Muslim girls. They together found Girls' school in Aligarh, later upgraded as college. Their daughters Mumtaj jahan, Khatoon Jahan and Rasheeda jahan studied in that school and worked as teachers in that college. They too have progressive thought and worked for the welfare of girls.

Once Mullah Shahid Ahrarvi, a moulvi spread ill about the girl' school and college that they were the whore houses and should be closed down. He also published vulgar pamphlets of Rasheeda Apa, one of the author of 'Angare' and declared it obscene. Ismat read it and found no obscenity

in that. She was deeply offended and wrote an article in which she said,"Muslim girls are backward and deprived of many opportunities. On the top of it Mullah Ahrarvi has become their mortal enemy. Let the college be closed, but only our corpses would go from here. Who would come to close the college? We will deal with him appropriately. We have six thousand brothers in the University; will they see our corpses defiled and remain quiet?" (p.no.153)Papa miah listened to this and send it to Aligarh Gazette for publication. The next morning the boys in the university read this and gave a good thrashing to Ahrarvi and destroyed his office. In this way the students fought with the people who are against muslim girls education.

Mister Abdus shukur (manager sahib), a lawyer was the another person who fought for the cause of education. He spent all his money in running the girls' school in Bareilly against the wish of his wife and she grumbles at him for ruining his career on account of school. He is much worried that the people are threatening that they will burn the school. The people who donated money insisted him to appoint a Muslim woman as a Head Mistress. So he appointed Ismat on a salary of Rs.100/-per month though she is inexperienced. His daughters Zahida and Abida were intelligent in studies but his wife was against their education and did not allow them to study at home. So he requested Ismat to keep them under her care and he was ready to pay the amount for their boarding demanded by her. Ismat accepted take care of the girls but rejected to accept the money saying "manager sahib, no child in the world can be burden on anyone." (p.no.222)

She felt anguished "why were lawyers obsessed with women's education? Papa Miah invested his entire life in the girls' school. Mister Abdus Shukur was bitten by the same bug. What did they get in return except abuses and curses? The community knew only this way to reward these pioneers" (p. no .197)

In her autobiography Ismat says "I have given an account of the poor condition of the school, Manager saheb's struggle, the absolute dedication of Mrs. Marks and other teachers, the love of learning in girls and their dire circumstances." (To Miss. Phillips, the inspector of schools p.no.198)

Earlier she had worked as a teacher in Jawra, the princely state in undivided India. There she taught to the girls of all ages from the families of royals and higher officials of the state. The girls were mainly interested in speaking. So she taught them that. They did not have passion towards studies. Most of them were engaged and many of them were married, waiting to join their husbands. The poor girls were taught Quran by an old woman in a separate room.

The girls who have money, infrastructure and all facilities do not have passion for studies on the other hand the poor girls, who are lack of facilities and opportunities have love for learning.

Religious education was given more importance. It was compulsory for everyone i.e., for both boys and girls to study Quran and Hadith .

In the present days the situation is better. The parents have understood the importance of education and economic freedom of girls. The religious education was given priority. Girls are being sent to schools up to the age of attaining puberty then they were dropped from that school and are being joined in the Madrasas for religious education. There are two types of courses,, the basic and the Alim .they are helpful to them to get the religious education and at the same time economic benefits too.

Anita Desai has rightly said about Ismat chughtai, “one could read her work as an exposure of Indian traditions of religious bigotry, of the male hegemony and female illiteracy and dependence”

From the present study we can understand the discrimination shown between boys and girls in the Muslim families towards their education, the position of girls in other communities, the domination of society on individuals and the sacrifices of few people for education in Utter Pradesh in the pre independent era.

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