



MADHU AND RUTH

# An Irrepressible Spirit

An Interview With Ismat Chughtai

*Ismat Chughtai, born 1915, is one of the better known women writers in Urdu. She began writing in the 1940s when the outspokenness of her work attracted much attention, both friendly and hostile. She is known for her readable, naturalistic style, subversive sense of humour, earthy depiction of detail and fine ear for dialogue. She uses the language of daily life, and of ordinary people. She has written many novels and short stories and several film scripts. She has also acted in some films. Many of our readers may remember her memorable performance as the grandmother of Ruth, the main woman character in Shyam Benegal's film Junoon. Her brother, A. A. Chughtai, also a well known writer in Urdu, acted as an important supportive influence in her early life.*

*In her youth, Ismat created quite a furore in Aligarh Muslim University by her bold, unsubdued speech and conduct. In her writing too, she angered many by daring to venture into areas that women were not supposed to know about or talk about. For instance, her novel, Ek Katra Khun, generated a fierce controversy because it recreates an event from Muslim religious history, and depicts the prophet's grandsons, Hasan and Husain, as champions of oppressed humanity, confronting the tyrannical power of the state. In another famous story, Lihaf, she depicts, through the eyes of a child narrator, the sexual relationship between a woman confined in the zenana of a feudal household and her maidservant.*

*However, as she herself says, though she was outspoken and daring in many ways, she did not, in some important aspects of her lifestyle, too far overstep the limits laid down for a woman by "respectable" society. Thus she lived the role of a wife and mother, not allowing her other relationships with men to transgress the limits laid down by conventional morality. Sometimes, she had to make major compromises in order to survive within the family and community structures.*

*Her philosophy is one of intense individualism. She says she does not believe in fighting anyone else's battle. Her attempt has been to prove herself as good as a man in a male dominated world rather than to struggle along with other women to eradicate male domination. Thus, while achieving a certain kind of autonomy for herself personally, she betrays a certain impatience with a woman who is not so successful in her individual battle. She also tends to feel alienated by any organised women's struggles.*

*What we found most remarkable was her iconoclastic ability to laugh at almost anything, however solemn it may be considered by "respectable" society. We reproduce here some extracts, translated from Hindustani, of a taperecorded interview with Ismat Chughtai, by Madhu, Ruth and Nasira.*

*Ismat Apa, can you tell us something about your experience of growing up as a girl ?*

I have always thought of my self first as a human being and then as a woman. I do not think men and women are two different kinds of beings. Even as a child, I always insisted on doing everything that my brothers did. If they climbed trees, I climbed trees too. If they played cricket and football, so did I. I refused to play with dolls. My sisters were much

older than I was, so they were engaged in needlework and embroidery while my brothers and I belonged to the same age group. I remember, one day, my brothers were riding a horse, and I too wanted to ride, but they refused, saying : "Girls don't ride horses." I said : "Why don't girls ride?" "That's enough. Don't natter so much", they replied, and rode off. I ran behind them, howling loudly. Then my father came along and asked what the matter was. When he was told, he

picked me up and put me on the horse, saying : "There, sit on the horse if you want to."

My father was a deputy commissioner. He belonged to a Mughal family. His sister was very good at riding and fencing. So my father encouraged me to do what I wanted.

When I grew older, I was expected to learn cooking, but I refused. My sisters would cook nice dishes and then my father would give them presents—

bangles, necklaces, earrings. My father said to me : “If you don’t learn to cook, how will you manage when you get married ?” I replied : “If my husband can afford it, we’ll have a cook. If not, we can eat fruit or bread and eggs. At least, I am quite happy eating such things.” “And what about your husband ?” he asked. “If he wants to cook, let him”, I said, “Otherwise let him starve to death.” “Who will ever accept you ?” exclaimed my father. “Well”, I answered, “*Hum bhi kisi ko nahin kabulenge jo humko nahin kabulega*—neither will I accept anyone who is not willing to accept me as I am.”

*Did you see other women being oppressed in the society around you ?*

Nobody could oppress me. My family was the only society I knew. In our family, men and women always socialised separately. If we had visitors, the women would sit with my mother in the inner room and the men with my father outside. I moved freely both inside and outside. I was not ready to tolerate all that the other women tolerated. Not that I objected to it on behalf of others. But for myself, I was very clear : “I will not tolerate this.”

*How did you get to study ?*

It was with great difficulty that I managed to continue my education. In 1930, when I was 15 years old, and was studying in class ten, my parents began to arrange my marriage. Suddenly, I found my mother busy buying clothes and jewels for me. But I was determined not to get married. I wrote to my elder brother to say that I did not want to marry because I wanted to study. He wrote back, saying that the family was a nice, educated one, and they would allow me to continue studying after marriage. But I said : “No, I do *not* want to marry.”

So I wrote to my cousin who was studying in Bombay. He and I had grown up together and we were very friendly. I wrote to him : “Look, I swear that I will not get married to you, but please, to save me, write to my parents and tell them that you want to marry me so they should not get me married to anyone else. If you don’t do this for me,

my blood will be on your head.” Among us, cousin marriages are permitted. So he wrote to his father saying that he wanted to marry me. My parents agreed, and stopped their other arrangements.

Well, I had managed to avert the marriage. Then came the question of studies. My father said : “There is no need for you to study further. In any case, your cousin will complete his studies in two years, and then you will get married.” I couldn’t very well say that I had no intention of marrying my cousin ! So I said : “Please send me to a hostel to study further. If you don’t, i’ll run away.” “Run away ? What nonsense are you talking ? Where will you run to ?” “I’ll catch a train to the next station, go to a mission school and convert to Christianity.” My father was aghast : “What ? You will leave your religion ?” I said : “One’s religion is in one’s heart. Just now, I am not in need of saving my religion. I am in need of an education so that I can stand on my own feet.” The outcome was that I was sent to Aligarh, where I passed intermediate. Then I went to Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, and did BA. My father died while I was still studying. It was with great difficulty that my mother managed to pay for my education.

*How come you were so determined not to get married ?*

When I was small, my friends were the washerman’s daughter, the sweeper’s daughter, the watchman’s daughter, who all lived in our compound. These girls were married off around the age of 12, and I saw their lives. They told me that terrible things happen on the wedding night and after. They warned me never to get married because it is a very painful business. I was terrified. I knew nothing about these matters. Neither did my parents tell me, nor was any literature available on these subjects. Also, the whole business of marriage seemed to be dreadful—sex, cooking, beatings from mother-in-law and all the other in-laws.

My family did not approve of my mixing with those girls. They used to remark that I surely must have been a chamari in a former birth. I would retort : “Yes, I was a chamari in the last birth and I will be a chamari in the next birth. It’s only in this birth that something has gone wrong.”

*How did you start earning ?*

In those days very few girls passed BA so one could easily get a job as a school teacher. There was a girls’ school in Bareilly where the headmistress was a



Courtesy: Biswin Sodi

Christian but the local people were unwilling to send their daughters unless the teacher was a Muslim. My being a Muslim came in handy. I taught there for a year. After that I went back to Aligarh where I stayed with my uncle and aunt.

What battles I fought there to get admission into BT (Bachelor of Teaching) course. There was no arrangement in AMU for girls to do BT. There were six of us girls who wanted to join. The vice chancellor told us : "Please go and study elsewhere." "We said : "We have our homes here. It's too expensive for us to go anywhere else." When he still refused, we threatened to go and sit down in the class anyhow. He was horrified. Then we said : "Look, let us put up a curtain at the back of the class. We girls will buy the curtain." The principal of the college agreed, and said : "The university has enough money to buy a curtain." So a curtain was put up and we joined.

*Didn't you mind sitting in parda ?*

No. If we could get what we wanted by sitting in parda, we would sit in parda. We were interested in studying. If they had told us to wear burkas, we would have agreed. All we wanted at that time was to be allowed to study.

*What was the college atmosphere like in those days ?*

At IT college in Lucknow, the atmosphere was quite free. One day, four of us girls were walking together on the campus. A boy came up from behind, pinched me, and began to run away. I turned round and hit him, and down he fell with a thud. All the boys standing around burst out laughing. The girls who were with me began to scold me : "Why are you hitting men?" I said : "He pinched me. I didn't wait to see whether he was a man or a woman or some other creature. I just hit out." When we got back to college, the principal, an American woman, called me and asked : "Did you hit a man ?" I said : "He hit me first. If you want, you can expel me, but I will definitely hit anyone who hits me." She said : "Try not to create rows." I said : "I didn't."

I had a nice group of friends. Many

times, we went to see Gandhiji. Once, we asked for his autograph. When he saw us, he said : "I don't give my autograph to those who wear foreign cloth." We were 15 girls together. Off we went at top speed to the *khadi bhandar* and bought saris. Then we changed our clothes and ran back to Mahatama Gandhi. He recognised us at once. After that, I never wore another scrap of foreign cloth until India became independent.

*What was the reaction of your family and community to your doings ?*

I was the first girl in my family to have passed BABT. Some of my relatives were proud of me. Many others used to scold me a lot, even curse and abuse me, but I was very obstinate. I would just laugh, and ignore them.

When I passed BT, my mother was staying in Jodhpur state with her brother. He held a high position in the administration of the Nawab of Jodhpur.



He went to the court and said : "My niece is a BA BT." The Nawab arranged for me to be appointed as headmistress of the girls' school which was aided by the state. When I went to take up the post, I was told by the education minister : "You will begin with a salary of Rs 150 and the scale goes up to Rs 1,500." I said : "Why don't you give me Rs 1,500 now and reduce it every year till it comes down to Rs 150 ?" He said : "Are you crazy ? What do you mean ?" I said : "After 15 years I will be old. I won't be able to digest good food. I would rather have more money now." He laughed and said

: "Not a bad idea, but shut up !"

When I joined as headmistress, I said "All the girls of the family are coming with me. I am going to admit them in the school." My uncles and aunts said : "No, no." I said : "If you won't send the girls, then I won't take the job. I will catch the evening train to Delhi. If the school is not fit for your daughters, neither is it fit for me." They said : "What are you saying ? What will the Nawab say if you don't take the job ?" So I saw to it that all the younger girls in my family were educated. Today, two of them are doctors.

*Tell us how you began writing.*

When I was a girl I used to write, and tear up what I had written. When I began to earn, I got the courage to send my writing for publication. I wrote a play called *Phasadi* about a girl who is sexually teased by her cousin during the summer vacation. This kind of thing does go on but is not spoken of or written about, especially not by women. I also wrote a story about a little servant girl who becomes pregnant. Her employer's son is responsible for the pregnancy. However, he is quietly sent off to Delhi while she is badly beaten up. This was based on the experience of a servant girl who used to be a friend of mine.

These stories created a big sensation and shocked people. Some were even heard to say that no woman could have written such indecent stuff, so it must be a man writing in a woman's name. I used to receive dozens of insulting, abusive letters. I still receive them. I just tear them up. All these letters are written by men. It seems as if more men read my stories and get angry. No woman has ever written such a letter.

In spite of all this criticism, my stories were very popular and widely read. They were hardly ever rejected for publication. In 1935, Premchand founded the Progressive Writers' Association in Lucknow. I joined it, but no association could dictate to me what I should or should not write.

In 1941, three months before my marriage, I wrote a story called *Lihaf*. In 1944, I was charged with obscenity by

the Lahore government. A summons arrived : “George the Sixth versus Ismat Chughtai.” I had a good laugh at the idea that the king had read my story. So we went to Lahore to fight the case. Lots of my supporters who knew me through my writing came to meet me. We had a nice time, buying the famous Lahore shoes. When anyone asked how the case went, I would calmly say : “I bought lots of shoes.”

The obscenity law prohibited the use of four letter words. *Lihaf* does not contain any such words. In those days the word “lesbianism” was not in use. I did not know exactly what it was. The story is a child’s description of something which she cannot fully understand. It was based on my own experience as a child. I knew no more at that time than the child knew. My lawyer argued that the story could be understood only by those who already had some knowledge. I won the case.

Another story I wrote was called *Apna Khun*. It was about a little girl who is brought as a maidservant into a feudal household. Both the master and the mistress fall in love with her. The master already has four wives but he wants the girl as well. His wife is very fond of the girl and makes her sleep in her bed. She says that the girl is distantly related to her so she cannot allow the master to exploit her. He then decides to marry the girl. On the wedding night, as the girl is leaving for his quarters, the mistress feeds her a sweetmeat with her own hands. The girl is discovered dead in the palanquin because the mistress has poisoned her.

Actually, it is not references to sex that these men object to, but the exposure of their attitudes. Once, I went to a meeting in Patna where some elders accused me of writing indecently. I asked them : “is the sex act obscene ?” They said : “Certainly.” I asked : “Was the sex act between the prophet’s parents pure or not?” They said: “Yes.”

So I said : “It is not dirty, it becomes dirty only if you drag it into the marketplace and mix it up with bargaining, dowry and many other things.”



**Ismat Chughtai**

*What happened to the intended marriage to your cousin ?*

Oh, no more talk of it. We remained very good friends. My family had given up hope of my getting married. Once I was earning, they could not impose anything on me. I met Shahid when I was staying in my brother’s house in Bombay. Shahid proposed marriage. At

died, though we fought and quarrelled all the time.

*What did you quarrel about ?*

What did we *not* quarrel about ? I am not an easy person to live with, you know. And I must have seemed a queer customer to him. Where had he seen a woman like me—doing *bar bar bar bar* all the time ? He thought I didn’t behave like a wife. I would ask : “Do you want me to sit down with a *ghunghat* or what ?” I felt he was trying to gain the upper hand, so I gave him as good as I got.

For example, when we went to parties, men and women would sit separately. The women would be talking about the saris they had bought and about their children’s stomach ailments, while the men were discussing politics. I would go and sit with the men. Shahid would mutter under his breath : “What have you come here for ? Go and sit with the women.”

“Why don’t you go and sit with the women ?” I would retort, “If you enjoy their company, you are welcome to sit

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***“It is not the depiction of sex that they object to, but the exposure of their attitudes.”***

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that time, I was inspector of schools for the whole Bombay area, but I could not find a place to stay. No one was willing to rent a house to an unmarried woman. I was not willing to spend my life in a hostel so I thought I would have to marry somebody. Here was Shahid pursuing me. Why not marry him ?

My brother said to me : “You’re going to marry that innocent, you little rogue ?” I said : “I don’t insist on marriage. It is he who insists on it.” In fact, I told Shahid that I was willing to live with him without marriage. He said : “No, you will leave me and run away.” I said ; “Why should I run away ? I need somebody, some friend, some man. It doesn’t have to be a husband.” But since he insisted on marriage, I agreed. I told him : “Look, whenever you can’t bear it any more, you are welcome to divorce me. Don’t worry, I’ll forgive you.” He said : “Don’t say such things.” I was 28 when I got married. Well, we stayed together till he

with them. I feel like sitting with the men so I will sit here.”

*But didn’t you feel that the woman were talking about things in which they were perforce immersed, and they should all be somehow brought out of segregation ?*

That was not my job. All I knew was that I wanted to listen to what the men were saying.

*How did you manage after your two daughters were born ?*

We had a nursemaid and a cook so I didn’t have to do much.

*But what about women who can’t afford servants and are forced to stay with the kids and be mentally involved with them all the time ?*

I don’t know about them. I only know about myself and how I managed. After Shahid died, in 1967, not one of his friends from the film world helped me. I earned my living by keeping paying guests. I made some money from my

writing. Somehow, I managed. I could survive without eating much. In any case, I was plump, so it was a kind of enforced dieting for me !

*How did you begin to work in films?*

Shahid was a director and producer. When he was too busy to write a script I would write it for him and it would go in his name. Later, I wrote in my own name as well. I wrote the script of the film *Darvaza* which was about widow remarriage, and also of *Sone Ki Chiriya* about an actress who is exploited in the film industry.

At a later stage, Shahid refused to work with me. What happened was that he got involved with another woman. He went away to live with her. I didn't take the hurt very deeply. I was detached. I was earning, and by now my elder daughter had also started working. We managed. After some time, that woman left him and then one day he came back. I let him come back. I did not dictate any terms. I said: "Look, Shahid, you are primarily a friend of mine. I don't demand any rights from you as a husband. Between friends there are no demands. I have never placed any economic burden on you. I am not dependent on you." He said: "That is precisely what hurts me." I said: "If you are hurt by that, it can't be helped." He wanted a woman who would treat him like god.

*What do you feel about a woman who snatches another woman's husband ?*

Snatches ? Is he a *laddu* to be snatched ? If anyone snatched my husband, I would say : "Please take him." I don't want a man who can be snatched like a *rasagulla*.

In any case, who am I to interfere ? If she tries to snatch my husband, it means she is more in need of him than I am. She must be under some compulsion. After marriage, I realised that I could not love any man in that sense. If my husband wants another woman, he can go, with my blessings.

*Did you claim such freedom for yourself as well ?*

Well, I could have, but I didn't...

*Do you think you had to make a compromise in some way ?*

Yes, in many ways. There he was, moving around with another woman, living in a hotel with her, taking away his belongings from the house, and then when that woman left him, he came back. I was hurt, but I told myself that no one can hurt me unless I let them.

It was a very complicated affair. I don't fully understand it even now. People tried to come between us and talked against me to him. But we stayed together till the end. He could not work successfully in films without me, neither could I without him.

But I was not in love with him. I told him so. I had been madly in love once before, with another man.

*When was that ?*

That was when I was headmistress of the school in Jodhpur. I was violently in love with someone to the extent that I even thought of suicide when I was let

that." The next morning, we had full attendance ! I told the police inspector who came to investigate, that I would sit on *dharna* at his office if he did not clear my school of blame. The truth about the child's corpse was soon established and came out in the papers.

After that, I wrote a letter to my friend but got no response. Eight days later, I heard that he had got married to the daughter of a millionaire. I wired my congratulations to him. I suffered very much in my heart but I did not show it. Three months later, he came to see me. I acted very cheerful. He said : "What a stonehearted creature you are. You don't know how I have suffered. Now I want you to marry me." My mother had always told us that the worst tragedy for a woman is her husband marrying again. This was because after the birth of several children, my father had wanted

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***"Man tries to destroy woman because he is afraid of his own dispensability."***

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down. He belonged to a rich family. We used to meet often. One day, a kite dropped the foot of a newborn baby in our school compound. The next day a rag of an Urdu newspaper splashed the news, saying : "What is going on in Muslim schools ? It seems a newborn baby has been killed and buried in the girls' school compound." A scandal was created and the parents were scared to send their daughters to school. The manager was perturbed. He had sacrificed a lot to establish the school. We were discussing the matter when my friend turned up. He seemed upset, and asked me to go with him there and then, and get married to him. I said I could not leave my school in such a crisis and go off to be married that day. Instead, I asked him to arrange four cars for my use. So he went off and sent the cars. The manager and I went in those cars to the house of each student. We told the parents : "If you don't send your daughter, people will suspect her. You should definitely send her for at least a couple of days, to clear her of suspicion, even if we close down the school after

to remarry. So I exclaimed : "What ! I marry someone else's husband ?" He said : "That's why I asked you to marry me that day but you refused." Actually, he had wanted to entrap me into marrying him first, and then he would have gone on to marry the girl arranged by his parents. Thus, he would have left me no choice. That day, it was the child's foot which saved me.

I answered : "All right, that's fine. But what about my children ? I think it is better if I marry someone else publicly and marry you secretly. Then I can have children who will be his heirs." He said : "How can you marry twice ?" I said "Well, how can you?" He said "That is permitted by the Shariat." I said : "I don't believe in any such Shariat. I make my own Shariat. I will marry twice and have two husbands." He said : "You are mad." I said : "Sure, I am."

But since I enjoyed his company I was not going to give it up. We carried on a long friendship and correspondence. When I got married, he stopped writing. After Shahid's death, he wrote again.

I have many friendships with men, which have no element of romance in them. They are friendships just as exist between men. I have friendships with women too. It makes no difference whether my friend is a man or a woman. Isn't it possible to forget gender ?

*But isn't gender consciousness imposed on us ?*

It may be imposed, but if we want to transcend it, we can. I have transcended it in my friendships. People don't believe that there can be deep friendship between a man and a woman. But I have men friends who respect me from their heart.

*What do you think is the cause of women's oppression ?*

As long as Indian woman does not become economically strong, she will remain helpless. She is weak because her whole upbringing and background make her weak.

If we want our daughters to be respected by their husbands and in-laws, we should educate them just like sons, and see to it that they acquire the skills to earn a living. Why give lakhs in dowry to the in-laws ? That money should be used to give training to the daughter, to start a business or a trade for her.

Women do come to me with their problems. One woman teacher came to me and complained that her husband used to beat her a lot.

I told her : "Hit him back." She exclaimed : "How can I raise my hand against my husband ?" I said : "Don't raise your hand, then. Keep getting beaten. Why come and cry to me ? My husband never hit me, but if he had, I'd have hit him back"

*Do you think Muslim women suffer from more constraints than others ?*

Women are kept under restraint everywhere. Among non Muslims they don't make women wear the burka but everywhere men terrorise women so as to keep them in a kind of parda.

*What do you think of the Koranic permission to men to marry four times ?*

In those days there was a practice of enslaving the women captured in war, and treating them as concubines. It was Islam which restricted the number of

wives, and emphasised that all four should be given equal status. It is better to marry a woman than to keep her as a concubine. Even today, rich businessmen keep many women as mistresses, produce many children, but do not give all the children a share in the property. It is for the protection of these big businessmen that the monogamy laws function. He can't marry more than once so his business will not be broken up by all the children demanding a share.

After all, one bull serves many cows and one rooster many hens. If artificial insemination methods are applied successfully, the world can go on with just a few thousand men. All the rest are not needed. Man knows he is not needed as much for the survival of the human race. That is why he goes on grabbing everything in his hands. He tries to destroy woman because he is afraid of his own dispensability.

*Why is it that no other such outspoken woman writer in Urdu seems to have emerged amongst the younger generation ?*

She will come.

*Do you agree with those who think*

*Urdu is being eclipsed in this country ?*

No. Urdu cannot disappear. Urdu may wear on the garments of Hindi but will survive. Urdu words are increasing every day in popular usage. I don't think the survival of a script is necessary for the survival of a language. The ordinary Hindi speaking person uses many Urdu words. In India, foreign words have never been treated as untouchable.

Urdu is not the language of Muslims alone. Many great writers in Urdu have been Hindus, for instance, Premchand among novelists, and Firaq Gorakhpuri among poets. Urdu has been made the language of Muslims after the partition. Actually, the Punjabis, Sindhis and Baluchis in Pakistan are not Urdu speaking. Urdu is being imposed on them. In Pakistan, Urdu is the language only of Lahore and Karachi.

As far as I am concerned, I don't acknowledge the partition at all. The country may have been divided but nothing fell to my share. You don't divide a country just by drawing lines on a map. Politicians divided the country for their own ends, their own vested interests. Human beings did not divide it. □

## A New Sita

Valmiki and Tulsidas have portrayed Sita as the daughter of earth, all suffering and all forgiving. This version of Sita has often been held up as a model of ideal womanhood. However, there are many other versions of Sita to be found in literature and art. One of them is the Sita portrayed by the radical Malayalam poet Kumaran Aasan in his poem *Chintavishtayaya Sita* (The Brooding Sita) published in 1919.

The poem depicts Sita in a garden near Valmiki's *ashram*, remembering how she was banished by Ram 14 years ago, and wondering whether he will recall her if he recognises his children who have now gone to Ayodhya where Ram reigns. She is shown undergoing mental turbulence "like a girl with her dress in flames." Aasan shows her criticising Ram for his injustice towards her, and

demolishing all the justifications put forward in his defence. When she thinks of the possibility of returning to her husband, she cries out : "What ? Does the emperor think that I should once more go into his majesty's presence and once again prove myself a *devi* ? Do you think I am a mere doll ? Oh dear, please forgive me, my mind and soul revolt at the very thought. Never doubt this, even if my body, bound by humility, comes before you...."

Aasan's poem generated a fierce controversy because it showed Sita asserting her selfhood, not perishing in despair. By sinking into the earth, Sita was proving her righteousness. Hindus could not have worshipped Sita if her martyrdom had been merely a desperate person's escape.

—condensed from a summary of the poem sent by Shreekala K.S.