

Question 1: Construction of a feminine self and the condition of the contemporary women in IsmatChughtai's A Life in Words.

Answer: Spontaneity, boldness and unconventionality are the hallmarks of the writing of IsmatChughtai. The writer looks at the happenings around her through the lens of a woman as she grows. Thus the most important insight that A Life in Words or Kaghazi Hai Pairahan contains is about the position of women. The section 'Dust of the Caravan' narrates how IsmatChughtai's formative years of childhood have been influenced by a strong sense of womanhood.

The knowledge of unequal power relationship between men and women has been a feature of IsmatChughtai's childhood psyche. Her mother has been quite particular about the domain of women's pursuits. For the mother, a woman has only a tiny existence in the vast patriarchal world or society. Women could only make themselves relevant in this unequal relationship exploiting their femininity--- 'feminine wiles.'

The 'condition of women' in the contemporary society is also highlighted through Chughtai's description of her three elder sisters. The sisters have been well trained in the art of housekeeping, sewing, embroidery and cooking. They have been married early. Mary Wollstonecraft's society's norms for women find an echo in the lives of Chughtai's contemporary women. The utter helplessness of women is displayed through the physical description of Chughtai's mother --- 'she had become a grandmother at the age of thirty five.' Similar fate waits for Mangu, who is married at the age of thirteen or fourteen. Mangu's condition, the torture she faces from her husband, her three daughters at a young age --- all are 'advertisement of the insignificance of womankind.' Although there have been liberal and progressive men like Chughtai's Abba, rights of girls and freedom of speech for women are considered only lip services. Ismat's participation in the discussions among Abba's friends worried her mother about this kind of 'manly pursuits' by Ismat.

IsmatChughtai's individualistic, temperamental and radical nature helps her break free of the contemporary sexual discrimination. Her stubborn craving for unconventionality finds expression in her interests in climbing trees, riding a bicycle, riding the horse, playing gullidanda. She even insists on playing football with her brothers. This rebellious nature is quite opposite to the submissive femininity of her elder sisters.

As a child, Chughtai develops the sense that knowledge, intelligence and ingenuity are necessary to become self-reliant. Mangu's transformation influences her greatly. So 'I shelved sewing and needlework and concentrated on getting myself an education.' Her rebellious and bold steps surprise other women folk in the family --- 'Too much education was dangerous.'

Rejection of objectification of women is another aspect that develops a strong feminine sense of selfhood in IsmatChughtai. 'Wearing gaudy clothes and applying make up seemed a kind of deception.' Ismat's encounter with the Russian girls helps her broaden this sense of female selfhood. Women's economic dependence on men only results in deception and helplessness in women. If women continue to lag behind in this fashion, they would always suffer from political and economic inferiority. Such ideas of emancipation of women makes Chughtai produce great tales like 'Lihaaf.'

Question 2: IsmatChughtai's childhood and her step by step growth to maturity in A Life in Words.

Answer: IsmatChughtai's a Life in Words can be considered a bildungsroman. The autobiography narrates various incidents that play a formative influence on her childhood psyche. The section 'Dust of the Caravan' describes several such episodes. The first and foremost aspect of human nature that draws Chughtai's attention is domination and subjugation of one class of human being by another. She gradually develops an awareness that the master and servant dichotomy should be erased from human society. As a child, she would often see the big beating the small. In her own household she would see the lives of servants. Gradually she is able to relate the master-servant relationship to that of rich and poor. At the same time, Chughtai becomes aware that the oppression of women by men is another manifestation of this division. She would enjoy the sight of moss covering the walls of a palace. It metaphorically captures the force of resistance against domination that shapes Chughtai's adult life.

Chughtai's childhood surrounding presents her the knowledge of the role played by men and women in the power-structure of society. Her mother's plight, her elder three sisters' focus on household chores and the condition of her friend Mangu ---they open her eyes to the ways society mutes women's voice and rejects women's agency. Mangu's transformation shows how intelligence and education could restore to a woman her agency. Ismat's struggle to get education, even against hurdles created by her family member, is another aspect of her journey from childhood to adulthood. Through her interaction with the Russian girls, she realizes that women's subjugation would be hindrance in the progress of a nation.

A Life in Words is also a record of IsmatChughtai's journey into the world of writing as she grows from childhood to adulthood. Her elder brother Azim Beg Chughtai provides enough encouragement to Ismat to shift from Essay writing to story writing. She learns how a story provides enough opportunity to convey the message without drawing much flak. Her reading habit also provides her succor in moments of sorrow. Talking to people also provides her opportunity to know stories, kathas. All these contribute to Ismat's personality as a writer.

An important aspect of IsmatChughtai's journey from childhood to adulthood is her awareness of the multi-religious nature of Indian culture. The day Ismat as a child picks up the 'silver infant' in Sushi's home, a virtual storm erupts. She is then made to go through the notions of Islam's superiority. But in college, her reading habit acquaints her with Buddhism. Her visit to Sushi on the occasion of her marriage revives the memory of the childhood incident involving the idol of Krishna. Sushi eats the same Laddoo from which Ismat has taken a bite. This gesture breaks the artificial barrier that the Politics of religion creates between Hindus and Muslims. Both Sushi and Ismat become part of the same culture. Thus A Life in Words becomes a piece of work that celebrates Community Life while preserving Individual selfhood.

Short Note

1. Women's education in IsmatChughtai.

One of the important aspects of IsmatChughtai's journey from childhood to adulthood is the awareness about the importance of women's education. The contemporary society resists women's education. Women's training mostly focuses on household chores like sewing, embroidery, cooking and housekeeping. Ismat's three elder sisters acquire these arts.

Therefore Ismat's decision to get education creates a ruckus in the family. For the contemporary society, women have a specific place. Education does not occupy any place within that specified space. Societal restrictions demand strict adherence so that whoever dares to circumvent these boundaries would meet severe punishment. 'Too much education was dangerous.' But such restrictions are not imposed on men. Women would be reprimanded if they would try to exercise the same freedom in terms of education and also for many other things. However, IsmatChughtai's father and her brother Azim Beg Chughtaiguide her. Breaking free of the societal rules, IsmatChughtai finally sets an example of herself for others to emulate.

2. Mangu

Mangu is the daughter of the coachman of IsmatChughtai's household. She is a little older than Ismat is. Mangu is married at the age of thirteen or fourteen. She leaves for Lucknow after marriage. She returns after her first daughter is born. She has been already tormented by the beating of her mother-in-law and husband. When Mangu comes back with her third daughter, she has the look of a tuberculosis patient. She is tortured by her husband's family for not bearing a male child. But she comes back with a transformed personality when she appears again after a year. She looks quite healthy, although she has not produced a son. It is found that Mangu has been possessed by a vile spirit. The spirit has influenced her to attack her mother-in-law. The exorcists announced that Mangu would bear seven girl child if she stays with her mother-in-law. Hearing this, Mangu's husband takes her along with him to Daliganj. There Mangu now stays with her husband. Ismat immediately realized that Mangu has played a trick to come out of the torture of her mother-in-law. This makes Ismat aware of the fact that intelligence and education would help women live a respectable life.

3. Azim Beg Chughtai

Azim Beg Chughtai is the elder brother of IsmatChughtai. He has had great influence on her during her formative years. He instructs Ismat that girls would be able to beat boys once they go ahead in the sphere of education. He then teaches her the school texts. Later Azim Beg Chughtai influences Ismat to read the Quran in translation and the traditions of the Prophet and Muslim History. Azim Beg Chughtai would also strengthen the urge for rebellion in Ismat. He would also explain to her the benefit of writing stories --- 'things could be conveyed easily without drawing a flak or reaction.' From him, Ismat gets the training in story writing--- 'one can say whatever he or she wants through his stories.' Thus Azim Beg Chughtai remains an important figure in Ismat'sChughtai's life as an individual as well as an author.

Short Questions:

1. Kaghazi Hai Pairahan is the Urdu title for A Life in Words.
2. Chunni is Ismat Chughtai's pet name.
3. Why does Ismat Chughtai howl during the majlis?

Answer: The description of an arrow piercing Ali Asghar's throat overwhelms Ismat Chughtai with grief. For this, she howls in grief.

4. Ismat Chughtai had three sisters and six brothers.

5. What mischief the innocent child Ismat plays in the house of Sushi?

Answer: Ismat visits Lalaji's house on the occasion of Janmashtami. She enters the room where the idol of Lord Krishna is placed on a cradle. She feels so much in love with the idol that she picks up the idol into her bosom.

6. At First, Ismat Chughtai wrote for the magazine--- Saaqi.

7. Which was Ismat Chughtai's first story published?

Answer: Lihaaf.

8. Who was the editor of Saaqi?

Answer: Shahid Ahmad Sahib.

9. Who are the authors of English Literature whose books Ismat Chughtai has read?

Answer: Bronte Sisters, Bernard Shaw, Hardy, Chekhov.

10. Which language is considered mother tongue in Chughtai's household?

Answer: Farsi.

11. What was the name of Ismat Chughtai's husband?

Answer: Shahid Latif.

12. Which is the children's novel by Ismat mentioned in the book?

Answer: Teen Anarhi.

13. Which religion except her own religion had an impact on Ismat Chughtai?

Answer: Buddhism.