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Section B: STORIES

Salim and Anarkali	51
<i>Poile Sengupta</i>	
Of No Use to Me	56
<i>Ramesh K. Srivastava</i>	
Dove's Hawkish Dreams	66
<i>R.K. Bhushan Sabharwal</i>	
Hide and Seek	72
<i>Sarojini Sahoo</i>	
The Painted Windows of the Rue Quincampoix: A Short Story	82
<i>Mariam Karim</i>	
The Shadow of a Shadow	91
<i>Nandini Sahu</i>	
Purple Diary	111
<i>Manish Arora</i>	
The Evil Spell of Saturn	122
<i>By Jaydeep Sarangi; Sunil Kumar Das (Translation)</i>	

Section C: CRITICISM

My Views on the Short Story	127
<i>Ramesh K. Srivastava</i>	
Culture and Gender Apathies in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's <i>Arranged Marriage</i>	132
<i>Beena Agarwal</i>	
Conflict and Resolution: A Study of Srivastava's <i>A Christmas Gift and Other Stories</i>	138
<i>Leela Kanal</i>	
Society and the Individual in the Short Stories of Basavaraj Naikar	147
<i>O.P. Mathur</i>	
✓ Voices from the Veil: A Reading of Ishmat Chughtai's " <i>Lihaaf</i> "	156
<i>Alka Rani Purwar</i>	

Voices from the Veil: A Reading of Ishmat Chughtai's "*Lihaaf*"

Alka Rani Purwar

ISMAT CHUGHTAI (1915-1991) was an eminent Urdu writer, well known for her indomitable spirit and feminist leanings. Influenced by Chekhov, Somerset Maugham and O'Henry, she grew up as a committed, radical and truly liberated writer, exploring the complex social and sexual behavior of the people. Writing with utter honesty and straightforwardness, Ismat Chughtai rips apart the hypocritical masks of morality and lays bare the double standards in her short stories and novels. Consequently, she has been in the midst of many controversies throughout her life. Her rebellious writings are so ironically sharp and stinging that they cut like a knife but at the same time charm the readers with their utter straightforwardness and the assertion of her individual beliefs. Her biographer Manjula Negi appreciates her mastery as a short story writer:

Though the partially autobiographical *Tehri Lakeer* [A Crooked Line] is considered her masterpiece, her soul resides in the numerous short stories. Stories are churned out of her own experiences which include real-life characters from within her own circle of family, friends and acquaintances. Her characters leap out of the pages—to shake you, hold you, make you laugh and cry along with them as though they breathe even today. And mere identification with her characters doesn't take away from the fact that you do so, in spite of them being placed in a very specific milieu and time. The identification is at an emotional level. (Negi 7)

Saadat Hasan Manto considered Chughtai's "*Lihaaf*" as the best short story ever written by her. It is the narration of the experiences of an adolescent girl who, because of her quarrelsome nature, was punished by her mother by throwing her out of the house and leaving her in the Haveli. It is there that she witnessed the sexual encounters of Begum Jaan