
Iconoclastic Perception and the Chaotic Narrative in the Select Fiction of Ismat Chughtai: Theorising the First Wave of Feminism

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Abstract:

Ismat Chughtai was an iconoclast, an educationist, and an emblem of women's empowerment. She was a revolutionary woman who understood the complexities of a woman's life and their secret desires that remained to be unheard. Her daring protagonists appeared determined to stand out from the ordinary, her outspoken approach jolted regressive minds and her rebellious themes made many to be critical about her. Her strong feminist ideology, blunt and deliberate, made her one of the most controversial and successful writers of her time when India saw the formative stages of women liberation. The notion of masculinity, in the Asian context is, naturalized as essential and desirable. As a corollary and in contrast to the dominant "male" emerged the neglected "female". In a nation where 'hyper-masculinity' was a coveted ideology it was only natural that the female population should be marginalized and viewed as the impassive 'Other' at the best and the hostile 'Other' at the worst of circumstances. So during that tragic period Ismat Chughtai emerged as one of the prominent female writer who amazed all with the revolutionary and controversial themes of her writing. As a feminist author she succeeded in giving the voice to the unheard and to express the inner desires of women. Thus the present paper seeks to investigate the 'marginalization' and 'othering' of the female in the select fiction of Ismat Chughtai.

Key words: Empowerment, Marginalised, Masculine, Survival, Women

Ismat Chughtai, a prominent name in the literary world of Pakistan has become immortal not only because of her cerebral creations but also because of the piercing revolutionary tone of her writing. She was a true icon of women's empowerment. The woman inside her was not ready to be suppressed by the prevailing patriarchal system of the society. Being a fearless crusader she supported the women through the power of her words and never underestimated the potential of women, giving a voice to their hidden desires that could never be expressed before her time. At a time when Muslims preferred to keep the ladies of the house at home she insisted on a university education and finally graduated. She initiated with her writings when 'any attempt on the part of women to write poetry and fiction was viewed as intellectual vagrancy'. (Naqvi Xiii)

The different phases of the Euro American Women's Movement and the postcolonial women's movements show how the female aspirations have been belied by the so-called legislative gains. The focus is also on the neglected factor of economic security for women in the context of religious edicts restricting co-habitation and divorce. Feminist criticism in America received a major stimulus from the civil rights movement of the 1960's and has differed somewhat in its concerns from its counterparts in France and Britain, notwithstanding the undoubted impact of earlier figures such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. A seminal work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was authored by Betty Friedan, who was followed by Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969) which argued that patriarchy as a political institution which relied on subordinated roles for women. In India this wave of feminism had its impact in the writings of the female writer.

Though the feminists bob and weave their threads of understanding as per their perceptions failing to give something concrete.

Ismat Chughtai was certainly the prominent author of the Progressive Writers, 'the generation of Urdu writers who came of literary age and produced their most influential work between 1935 and 1955. Including Ismat, Manto, Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Ahmaed Ali, Sajjad Jaheer, Rashid Jahan and others.' She took her inspiration from the left-wing Progressive Writers group and in particular Rashid Jahan, who was the only woman member of the group well known for her bold, raw, transparent and ideological fiction. Thus she became an ideal figure for her because of her pungent tone and attitude. She opted for a didactic view of Literature in her writing where she sympathetically dealt with the downtrodden people and had been critical towards people of upper and middle class strata. She succeeded in providing a vivid picture of female suppression by the masculine power as the women were treated as property, objects of exchange between men to fulfil their lust. Women were 'commodified as sexual creatures to serve male desire'. (Lim 817)

The notion of masculinity, in the Asian context is, naturalized as essential and desirable. As a corollary and in contrast to the dominant "male" emerged the neglected "female". In a nation where 'hyper-masculinity' was a coveted ideology it was only natural that the female population should be marginalized and viewed as the impassive 'Other' at the best and the hostile 'Other' at the worst of circumstances. Among the common devices employed by them to advocate the veneration of masculine ideals is the method of comparative study that they apply to study man- woman relationship. Women were viewed as fragile enough to be unfit for survival in a rugged topography, competent only in domestic affairs which did not require either much labour or power of endurance, or they were equated with the antagonistic landscape serving as

impediments in the early years of present Indian history. What was overlooked was the strength that was necessary to meet the demands of the domestic front. As Ismat Chughtai was greatly influenced by Rashid Jahan she took up the responsibility of depicting the social status of middle class women in her work, their role and positioning in the society. Her fictional imagination was highly charged with humanistic thought, secularist ideology, nationalist commitment, cosmopolitan spirit, traditionalist approach, and modernist hypothesis.

In her stories Chughtai exemplifies the transformative practices of her generation and carves out a distinctive place for herself with respect to the subject matter, narrative, style and authorial identity. Her stories are meaningful text with important qualities in varying degrees, approaches, and are serious commentaries on life and society. Her stories express her deep commitment to Indian Fiction in terms of the text. An objective analysis of her fictional pieces reveals that they cover “philosophical and religious beliefs, historical developments in Indian sociological settings, and its cultural transformation”. Though she is well known, read and loved among Urdu writers but to her tragedy she is not very popular among non-Urdu readers. Her revolutionary creations have been translated into English to make it available for non Urdu readers and as a result now a substantial body of her work is available in English in three recent publications by Tahira Naqvi that includes *The Crooked Line* (Tehri Lakir; Oxford: Heinemann, 1995), *The Quilt and Other Stories*(Riverdale-on- Hudson, NY: Sheep Meadow Press, 1994), and *The Heart Breaks Free and The Wild One* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993).

The Quilt and Other Stories is a wonderful collection of fifteen of Ismat Chughtai’s popular stories. In this collection nine stories are translated by Tahira Naqvi and the rest by Syeda S. Hameed. *The Quilt* remains to be the most popular and controversial story out of this collection. It became controversial

because of the unnatural depiction of Lesbian theme for which Ismat Chughtai was forced to face a trial for obscenity. *The Quilt* vividly sketches the desires of a female protagonist who tries to gratify her lust in the company of a female aid. The author has succeeded in gaining the sympathy of readers by providing a lively picture of her loneliness and the tragedy of her married life where she remained completely ignored by her husband who appears to be more interesting in 'young, fair and slim-waisted boys'. The Begum feels forced to spend sleepless nights in the absence of love that culminates in her tragic union with Rabbo, her maid, 'Rabbo used to sit by her side and scratch her back for hours together – it was almost as if getting scratched was for her the fulfilment of life's essential need. In a way, more important than the basic necessities required for staying alive.' (10) The depiction of lesbian relationship in order to gratify the lust of a woman has various facets as it brings out the revolutionary tone in her writing where she is not ready to make a compromise with her monotonous life and refuses to surrender to the patriarchal system that expect females to act as Devi and to be an emblem of sacrifice. Here she dares to come out of the ancient confinement to get her desires fulfilled. 'Lesbian', as the term itself denotes the homosexual relationship, specifically the sexual relation between two females. So she goes beyond the set boundaries of society to get physical satisfaction. In this story one can see 'the late colonial experiment around same – sex desire in motion.'

Now what we need to remember here is that the relationship started not because of choice but because of necessity as it was the only remedy to the loneliness of the Begum who felt isolated and deprived in the huge mansion. The Nawab never paid attention to the sexual gratification of his wife rather used her as a Showpiece to be decorated in the house. So the Begum finally tried to search for satisfaction in others rather than developing a suicidal tendency. Analysing it from a liberal perspective there appears to be nothing wrong

but then it certainly does not augment to the dictates of Patriarchy. Unlike 'The Quilt', 'Sacred Duty' is an engaging story that depicts another universal, parental reaction to a mixed marriage here between a Muslim man and a Hindu woman. The story humorously deals with a real and difficult situation that not only persists in India but also abroad.

In another story of Ismat Chughtai, '*The Rock*' we again come across a ghastly fact of miserable existence of women where they are merely used as objects for the sexual gratification of men. Here in this story we see a nameless male protagonist who treats women as an inferior creature meant to satisfy the lust of men. He keeps on experimenting with women to satisfy his lust and other needs. He switches from one to another woman just to turn them to a perfect housewife and to fulfil his physical needs. He looks at them with come-hither eyes and after exploiting them as per his needs, moves ahead. After leaving his first wife for another woman i.e. Shabnam who 'swayed like an intoxicated female serpent' he again feels dissatisfied and then starts searching for another to use her as a sex toy. Nothing succeeds in fulfilling his burning desires as he keeps on searching other options. In the process of the same he comes across an Egyptian dancer and feels like swallowing her with his eyes as the narrator confesses that, 'Bhaiya's hungry eyes crawled over her body like scorpions.' (89) Thus the story gives a tragic picture of men's lustful behaviour and the sufferings of females in a male dominated society.

'*Lingering Fragrance*' (Badan Ki Khushboo) is again a marvellous story that depicts another sordid side of human society. It gives a bitter picture of social setup where females themselves remain instrumental in the sufferings of other females as in this story we see the employment of poor village girls in the hawelis of affluent to train their young Nawabs for the sexual complexities. The young girls are manipulated to provide sexual service to the youngsters of rich and on top of it is all done under the supervision of females. It is sarcasm on

the idea of sisterhood propagated by some feminists. The readers feel shocked to come across a social setting where 'women are turned into commodities totally disposable, totally dispensable, to be used and discarded.' (Kudchedkar 5) One who fails in her task is not worth of staying at mahal. Chhamman the protagonist of the story revolts against the existing system of concubinage and decides to marry Haleema whom he accepted for sexual services under pressure. With this decision the wheel of fortune changes for him and he is also dispelled from the mahal to lead a miserable life. We witness the inhuman acts at its peak where goodness is not only suppressed but also forced to suffer. It is truly said about the writings of Chughtai that 'Many of Chughtai's short stories, some of her best nonfiction, and her novels are invested with the kind of power given to words that shred, tear and rip.'

'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman', this statement of de Beauvoir appears to be true in context with all the women characters of Chughtai's work including Chughtai herself. Since childhood girls get trained in such a way that they come out as a perfect woman ready to sacrifice herself at the altar of life. In another tragic story of Chughtai entitled '*Tiny's Granny*', we come across the hypocrisy of the society as we witness the sexual exploitation of little poor girls by upper class people who take them as an object to be played and thrown. The protagonist of the story dies at the end while cursing the entire world, 'she showered continuous abuse upon the world'. (129). The tragic end forces the readers to contemplate over the cruelty of men who remain instrumental in the miseries of women, 'On Judgement Day....(Granny) burst into the presence of God the All –Powerful and All- Kind....and God, beholding the degradation of humanity, bowed his head in shame and wept tears of blood' (129). We notice here that female sufferings are more emotional than physical and this connection between women and emotion is customarily associated with the masculine notions of the female what is also

worth noticing in a Chughtai story is how in the guise of a woman's suffering she actually propagates the superiority of masculine power. What is a difficult task for a woman is only a fringe of the troubles. Moreover, such pictures of women also show them to be dependent on men – both emotionally and in terms of sharing of physical toil. They are the ones who stand at the receiving end while men are the 'givers' of love, care, shelter and security to the women, even if they come at the cost of their own lives

This volume also includes *'The Veil,' 'Kallu,' 'Choti Apa,' 'The Mole,' 'By The Grace Of God,' 'Poison,' 'A Pair of Hands,' 'Bichu Phupi'* and *'Scent of the Body'*. Most of these stories show 'the mix of social commentary focusing on some aspect of Muslim family life...' Anita Desai in her Preface to the book characterizes Ismat as 'a truly liberated soul, as someone who is both inside and outside traditional culture and consequently able to depict it both sympathetically and critically.' She felt the needs of women, read their mind and understood the tortures they had to undergo and that was the point where she grew rebellious not only in her theme but also in her tone. She had a magical power with which she succeeds in seducing us to believe the naked truth of her writing. We get so involved that we sympathise with those characters even when 'they do not compel our intellectual conviction or belief.'

'Ismat Chughtai was nothing if not bold'. She was seen as a crusader who wilfully desired to disturb the civil. In the words of Geeta Patel, 'Writer after writer, friends, relatives, companions, attested to her remarkable obstinate demand to disturb the civil, to disrupt the idea that constituted civility, to upend the notions that gave force to how women ought to be. As a supplicant asking for our attention, she was ironic, playful, moving, funny, cutting, witty, she spoke to desire and grief, but rarely succumbed to propriety. As a supplicant who grounds stories of her life with a call to Ghalib, one of the most complex, subtly lyrical writers in the world, Ismat Chughtai audaciously

insists on a place for herself in the annals of Urdu writing, in the canon of Urdu literature.’ She played with writing taking it as a tool to attack the uniform civil code and in that process nothing could stop her daring soul. She questioned the patriarchal system and refused to follow the set norms. She wanted women to come out of their confinement to cherish the hues of life. She could not see the miseries of women and decided to rebel in her tone and attitude, ‘...so many of Chughtai’s stories are disturbing, and seem to offer a naked, painful, prurient glimpse into the world of women.’ Chughtai gives subjective interpretation to the events and inscribes the socio-cultural, philosophical, political and empirical specificities. She presents Indian culture and tradition in her stories, and combines the worlds of reality, fantasy and universality of human knowledge depicting the bitter truth of human society. The universality of her themes makes her immortal where she paints a terrific picture of tragic women who are still treated as inferior to men in spite of the hollow talks of women empowerment. We remember her more as a crusader than as a writer as she succeeds in bringing us close to the traumatic miseries of women that often remain unheard in the complexities of life. We salute her for the daring spirit with which she revealed the blood stained lives of countless who struggle to make their way amidst the darkness of life.

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