

CHALLENGING THE MYTH

WOMEN IN ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S SHORT STORIES

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There is no denying that in the formal feminist narrative of Indian literature, the Muslim woman is either erased or contained within the paradigms of veils or backwardness. In literature, especially pertinent to Muslim culture and custom, the image of veil has sometimes been so overemphasized that there is a risk of ignoring and erasing the contribution of women of remarkable grit and fortitude who were associated with significant socio-cultural-political reform and resistance. Sarojini Naidu, the Nightingale of India, chose to reveal the plight of Muslim women in her poem, 'The Pardah Nashin'¹, but that could never amply bring into relief the 'unheard-of songs'² of those, who, through their discursive strategies, sought to intervene significantly in reversing the male gaze that has traditionally characterized the construction and depiction of women and in the refiguration of the female body as a site to create multiple spaces of agency and those of social and political empowerment. Ismat Chughtai (1911-91) is one such iconoclastic writer of Urdu literature, who, through her writings, especially her short stories, challenges and interrogates the traditional representation of Muslim Women in Indian literature.

Ismat Chughtai, whose family takes pride in its Mughal descent and its Arab-Persian heritage, is, if her multiple lineages are taken into account, an Indian, Muslim and Mughal at the same time. In all probability, Ismat's upbringing in a pan-Islamic milieu led her to assert and re-assert her Indian identity and later on her education lent her a worldview of the general condition of women vis-à-vis those in the Muslim community. In her autobiography, *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan*, Ismat mentions Halide Adib (1884-1964)³, the Turkish writer, an activist and champion of Women's rights, who visited Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, while Ismat was pursuing her B.A. Course there. Adib came to India several times to meet the leaders of Indian freedom movement and spoke on the urgency of Muslim women's empowerment. Ismat Chughtai's stories show a woman, to use the words of Simone de Beauvoir, "living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other...the drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)—who always regards the self as essential—and the compulsion of a situation in which she is inessential."⁴

A close study of Ismat Chughtai's stories reveals not just the traditional roles performed by the women in a Muslim society, but also a woman, who is curiously aware of the socio-cultural constraints which impede the process of redefining herself in society. Interestingly enough, there runs a potential current of mockery in her stories at the hegemonic prescriptions pronounced by this rigidly male world. She does not exaggerate the plight of women, nor does she only seek to denigrate the patriarchy, nor does she depict woman as a

being of extraordinary merit and sensibility, but she just touches upon their lives as she has come across them in her day-to-day journey. Her own experience as a female child in the family was not that sweet. As M. Asaduddin describes, “Being the ninth child of her parents and that, too, a girl, her birth into the world was not greeted with enthusiasm by her parents or other members of the family”⁵, the numerous obstacles to her continuing education in a college, her fierce individuality, clear-mindedness, uncompromising attitude and, above all, a rare faculty of observation and farsight came to be instrumental in her taking up the issues of women in a strikingly unconventional manner.

Stories like “Bahu betiyaan”(Wives and Daughters) not only show the circumstances of marriage, the qualities sought for in a bride and the nature of their conjugal life, but they question the double standard the society continues to practice even when the society is believed to have progressed much. A story like “Chhoti aapa”(The Younger Sister) deals with the subtle tension in an educated Muslim girl wavering between the pull of tradition and modernity, orthodoxy and liberalism. “Bhulbulaiyan”(The Labyrinth) is about the terrible urge for gratification that propels even the children to the exploration of sex. Sex, here, has not been looked upon as a taboo or transgression of social mores, rather as shackles society imposes upon the natural sex-urge. Another such story, “Jaal”(Net), depicts the irresistible curiosity in two young girls for ‘an intricate web of delicate silk laces.’⁶ So, the writer’s aim is to lay bare the anxiety caused by the imposition of repressive laws of conduct and behaviour and the human desires to overthrow them. On the one hand, outwardly there is the hurry to cling to the proclaimed public morality and on the other, there stands this sinister, unbridled personal urge, a vicious tug-of-war between appearance and reality. In fact, nowhere in these stories is there a conscious attempt on part of the author to intervene directly with her personal predilections; still a note of dissent cannot be wholly ruled out. It is the society that compels the individuals⁷ to practice hypocrisy and deceit by discouraging natural expressions of thought and desires and thus robs them of their completeness and perfection.

Again, the story like “Kallu ki ma”(Kallu’s Mother) or “Nanhi ki naani”(Tinny’s Granny) depicts the total facelessness and self-effacement of Indian women. One cannot but remember Saratchandra Chattopadhyay’s “Abhagir Swarga” while reading through “Kallu’s Mother.” One is surprised to know about Lajo, who is a woman of easy virtue in the story “Gharwali”, and who finds love to be the most beautiful experience of life. The bondage of marriage, of which she was ignorant and to which she was indifferent, gradually embittered her life, thus raising—unlike Hardy’s Sue Bridehead, who denied the necessity of marriage in a church from her privileged position—a big question about the efficacy of this age-old social system. “Soney ki anda” (The golden Egg) delineates a shockingly yet truly Indian reality: even today most of the Indian families desire desperately for a male child and when the contrary happens, they just accept their destiny with unwillingness. So is the case with Bandu Mian in the story, whose wife fails to understand how she can manipulate the sex of the child in her womb. The hypocrisy prevalent in society is ruthlessly exposed in the story “Gainda”(The Marigold), in which Gainda, a young widow who works as a maid in the narrator’s house⁸, is constantly sexually harassed by the narrator’s elder brother and their

clandestine relationship culminates in the birth of a so-called illegitimate child. The narrator's brother is, of course, dispatched elsewhere and the entire responsibility falls upon Gaiinda, who continues to live a very wretched life amid the censure of all. It may be fruitfully studied along with another similar story "Badan ki Khusboo", where the treatment of the theme is complex and curiously different. The story "Amarbel"(The Eternal Vine), apart from highlighting the common familial tiff and bickering, envy and jealousy, discontent and disagreement, shows how diabolical sometimes the marriage turns out to be. Marriage, which is hailed as a sacrosanct social institution becomes too claustrophobic a relation from which the bride suffers the most, as the suffering increases even after the husband's death. "Lihaaf"(Quilt), almost squarely, brings to the surface the question of female sexuality. The way the begum of the story takes recourse to sexual gratification may remind one of a kind of protest, which the dance-in-the-moon episode in D.H.Lawrence's *The Rainbow* highlights. This very different sexual behaviour has been invariably interpreted by critics as a perversion, an alternative way of sexual gratification which the society does not approve of. However, really few attempts have been made to regard this lesbianism as a celebration of women's difference---their "fluidity" and "multiplicity"---which, according to Luce Irigaray, a French feminist thinker, "rupture conventional Western representation of them."⁹ This very behaviour, traditionally seen as culpable and reprehensible, is, in fact, another kind of modality to assert one's own self, one's individuality and above all, one's power which seeks to undermine the repression that marriage inevitably brings with it.¹⁰

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Quoted in Makarand Paranjape, ed., *Sarojini Naidu: Selected Poetry and Prose* (New Delhi: Indus, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers India Pvt Ltd, 1995), p.70. Sarojini's description-'Her life is a revolving dream/Of languid and sequestered ease;/...But though no hand unsanctioned dares/ Unveil the mysteries of her grace'- is all too romantic. It is interesting to note that Ismat Chughtai's collection of short stories and essays, selected and translated by M. Asaduddin, has been entitled *Lifting the Veil* and this indicates that Chughtai is bent on subverting in her stories what patriarchy terms as 'mysteries' to bypass the reality of the oppression and subjugation of women in Indian households.
2. Quoted in Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, Peter Brooker, ed., *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2006), p. 145. In her celebrated essay 'The Laugh of Medusa' (1976), Helene Cixous pitches her argument in favour of a positive representation of femininity, meaning thereby a detailed description of the desires that female body alone knows, of the 'female imagination' that is 'infinite and beautiful.'
3. Quoted in M.Asaduddin, trans. *A Life in Words: memoirs* by Ismat Chughtai (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2012), p. xxii. In fact, the early decades of twentieth century saw the publication of invigorating articles on women's movements in Muslim countries, mainly in Turkey and Egypt, in Urdu women's magazines.

4. Quoted in H.M. Parshley, ed. and trans., *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir 1949. (New York: Published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p.xxix.

5. Quoted in M.Asaduddin, ed., *Ismat Chughtai* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1999), pp. 13-14.

6. Quoted in M.Asaduddin, ed., *Ismat Chughtai* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1999), p. 93.

7. Even there is a subterranean criticism of the expectation of the society in the story 'Jaal', in which, Attan and Safia, the two young girls in a traditional Muslim household are expected to read the Quran everyday and say their namaz on time. This is , of course, reminiscent of the furious rebellion brewing in the hearts of little Heathcliff and little Catherine in the opening part of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*.

8. Although not directly, "Gainda" is reminiscent of the plight of women like Jashoda in Mahasweta Devi's story "Stanyadayini", which is available in *Breast Stories* by Mahasweta Devi, Translated with introductory essays by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2010), p.38.

9. Quoted in Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, Peter Brooker, ed., *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2006), p. 147.

10. Quoted in Barry Smart, ed., *Michel Foucault* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p.97. The argument furnished by Foucault goes thus: "Perverse forms of sexuality are then conceptualized as the effect or the product of the exercise of a type of power over bodies and pleasures...Power in its exercise has not taken the form of law, it has been positive and productive rather than negative, and has ensured a proliferation of pleasure and a multiplication of sexualities."

11. In this context, one does remember Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

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