

Eating Her Way through Crisis: Eating as an act of Defiance in

Ismat Chughtai's *The Rock*

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Abstract

Ismat Chughtai, an iconoclast, throughout her writing career has examined the various modes of patriarchal oppressions that engulfed the lives of women. An ardent critique of the institution of marriage that deprives women of their agency, Chughtai has used her mighty pen to give voice to the pangs of anguish that has remained silent since time unknown. Arguing against the traditional mode of writings which merely reflects the lives of women, Chughtai, in her writings explores “the gestures of defiance or subversion implicit in [the lives of women]” (Tharu & Lalitha 35). The present paper is a close reading of one such narrative of defiance – *The Rock*. The present paper will do a textual analysis of the short story and discuss how the act of eating, to be more precise, overeating can be interpreted as an act of defiance against patriarchy. The paper will discuss how the patriarchal body politics has subjected female bodies to corporeal disfigurement and the women, in their turn, have resisted the ideologies of the larger social bodies.

Keywords: Ismat Chughtai, agency, defiance, eating, patriarchy.

In the name of those married women

Whose decked up bodies

Atrophied on loveless,

Deceitful beds

—Faiz Ahmed Faiz (Qtd. in Kumar & Sadiq 47).

Ismat Chughtai, an iconoclast, throughout her writing career has examined the various modes of patriarchal oppression that engulfed the lives of women. An ardent critique of the institution of marriage that deprives women of their agency, Chughtai has used her mighty pen to give voice to the pangs of anguish that has remained silent since time unknown. Sukrita Paul Kumar writes: “Questioning gender inequalities throughout her life, she accords the women of her stories either the same posture of defiance or she lays bare the oppressive hypocrisy and pretensions of her society in its treatment of women” (13). Arguing against the traditional mode of writings which merely reflects on the lives of women, Chughtai, in her writings explores “the gestures of defiance or subversion implicit in [the lives of women]” (Tharu & Lalitha 35). The present paper is a close reading of one such narrative of defiance – *The Rock*. The present paper will do a textual analysis of the short story and discuss how the act of eating, to be more precise, overeating by the female protagonist can be interpreted as an act of defiance against patriarchy. The paper will discuss how the patriarchal body politics has subjected female bodies to corporeal disfigurement and the women, in their turn, have undergone a radical physical and psychological transformation and resisted the ideologies of the larger social bodies.

“The Rock,” written in Urdu as *Chattan* is set in ‘modern’ cosmopolitan India on the threshold of independence. Narrated by an unnamed first person female narrator in her late adolescence, the short story recounts the sad plight of married women who are nothing but objects of patriarchal transaction in marriage. The sister-in-law of the narrator, whom she calls ‘bhabi’ remains unnamed just like the narrator. She seems to be a symbolic figure, the

'domesticated' sister in -law seems to be a representative of all those married women "whose decked up bodies/Atrophied on loveless,/Deceitful beds" (Qtd. in Kumar & Sadiq 47). Her education remained incomplete when her elder sister eloped with her Christian lover and fearing that she will follow the transgressive footsteps of her elder sister, her family arranged a hasty marriage for her. Married at the age of fifteen with a man nine years older than her, the bhabi was subjected to strict censure at the hand of her husband and family who "earnestly embarked on the task of moulding her into a homemaker" (Chughtai 73). The physical and emotional exploitation that she underwent after her marriage is pointed out by the narrator in symbolic language: she recounted how the young newlywed bride "as playful as a doe" gradually transformed into "a complete housewife." She is made to discard every kind of beauty rituals that she was fond of as her enlightened 'modern' husband craved for simplicity. A reproductive machine, she became a mother of four children in quick succession and is undergone a massive corporeal change: with the birth of her every child she is said to have gained ten or fifteen pounds. To the dismay of the narrator, her bhabi started looking like a dirty rag but "her husband found her pleasing just the way she was, untidy and dishevelled. And her parents and in-laws also praised her simplicity" (Chughtai 74). Thus, she was led to the path of self negligence and self-sacrifice to conform to the role of a "simple" housewife: "[Bhabi] was pretty, no doubt. Fine features, a butter-white complexion and small, dainty hands and feet. But she had let herself go and her body slackened like dough left out overnight" (Chughtai 74). By using the food imagery, Chughtai points out how her integration "into the patriarchal family structure is an act of symbolically consuming her - of taking her into another (familial) body and manipulating her body for its own regenerative ends, something that can be shaped, moulded, and consumed" (Singh 152).

Soon to her dismay, bhabi finds a sexual rival in their 'modern' neighbour Shabnam, an overt critic of the former's neglectful appearance. Interpreting bhabi's obesity as a mark of

her failure as a woman, Shabnam becomes sympathetic towards bhaiya who according to her deserved better. Though bhabi is unable to save her marital rights, she manifested her aversion for her unfaithful husband's desire for Shabnam by avidly devouring unhealthy foods:

[Bhabi] became more shabby in appearance and ate with vigour. We were all busy laughing, but she kept her head down and proceeded to devour the cake with intense concentration; she ravenously swallowed fried potatoes dipped in chutney, and rapidly gulped down pieces of toast laden with butter and jam. Bhaiya and Shabnam had become a source of apprehension for us, and Bhabi must have been worried too, but she was burying her dread in rich foods. Constantly suffering from gastric distress, she nevertheless managed to successfully digest pulao and *korma* with the aid of *churan* (Chughtai 81).

Her overindulgence in the unfeminine act of foraging denotes both her aversion for and helplessness at the same time. Her "obesity is not only a sign of her literal embodiment of the social expectations imposed upon her as wife, it is also her recognition of and resistance to her husband's hypocritical craving for evermore taught female figures" (Singh 152). Much to the disgust of Shabnam and her husband she savours apricot jam. Her arduous gluttony made the former shudder "as though it contained not apricots, but snakes and scorpions. 'Its poison, just poison', she said, nibbling on a slice of cucumber"(Chughtai 83). Being indifferent to the censorial glare of Bhaiya, Bhabi "continued to gobble up the jam noisily" much to the disgust of the people present there (Chughtai 83). The disruptive effect that her act of defiance produces is presented by the narrator thus:

Seeing her devour the jam in this manner, you felt as if she were building a dam to halt the waves of envy and jealousy. The cream would be converted to granite and make the castle that was her body invincible. And perhaps then her heart

would ache no more, and the flames that darted every time Bhaiya's eyes met Shabnam's would lose the power to melt those granite walls. (Chughtai 83)

Thus her act of “envy and jealousy” disrupted the patriarchal structures that sabotage her. Her act of defiance made her embarrassed husband feel emasculated and reacts thus:

“Stop, for God’s sake! The doctor said you shouldn’t – what kind of greediness is this!” Bhaiya finally said. Bhabi melted like a wall of wax. Bhaiya’s remark cut through the layers of fat and plunged right into her heart. Thick tears trickled down her puffy cheeks; sobs wracked the pile that was her body and caused a tremor like an earthquake. Slim, delicate-looking girls look so attractive when they cry. But seeing Bhabi cry one was amused rather than saddened. She looked like a heap of cotton-wool that was being thrashed with sticks.

Wiping her nose, she started to get up, but we scolded Bhaiya and cajoled her into staying. The poor thing sniffled and sat down again. But as soon as she had deposited three spoonfuls of sugar in her coffee and extended a hand towards the cream, she became inert. With a fearful expression in her eyes she looked at Bhaiya and Shabnam. Shabnam curbed a twitter with great difficulty, and Bhaiya fumed. (Chughtai 83-84)

Thus leaving her husband “fumed”, Bhabi persists on her act of resistance. Though initially “melted like a wall of wax”, she “eats her way through [her husband’s] betrayal and in so doing exceeds his control” (Singh 156).

Towards the end of the story, bhabi is discarded by her husband in favour of ‘modern’, youthful and slim Shabnam. But within a few years Shabnam is subjected to the same corporeal transformation like her predecessor. Meeting her after a gap of few years, the narrator is in a state of utter shock: “I have never called Shabnam “Bhabi”. She always looked like Shabnam. But today the word “Bhabi” suddenly escaped from my lips. How could a sprinkle of dew

become a dome of flesh?” (Chughtai 55) Shabnam’s transformation into “a dome of flesh” denotes her to be both the subject and object of the patriarchal politics of consumption, just like the previous bhabi. The story ends with Shabnam also eating her way through the crisis of being threatened by a young, slender body of an Egyptian dancer:

Bhabi, who used to be Shabnam, who, like the Egyptian dancer, was once an electric current that burned Bhaiya, sat immobilized like a hill of sand. Bad diet and anemia had given her plump cheeks the yellowed-green look of a mummy. Viewed under the neon lights, her complexion made one think of someone bitten by a cobra. The Egyptian dancer's hips were creating a storm and Bhaiya's heart bobbed up and down like a boat in the maelstrom. Shabnam, Bhabi now, and the mother of five children, fearfully watched them both. She rapidly downed large morsels of roast chicken in order to distract herself. (Chughtai 89)

Thus by their gendered act of gluttony, these two women exceeded the patriarchal control of her husband who can chose and discard them very easily, but cannot control their appetite.

Women, especially married women, have to undergo various kinds of physical and emotional oppression at the hand of patriarchy owing to the socio-religious practices pertaining to marriage. In addition to exposing these oppressive measures at the hand of patriarchy, Chughtai has also recognised the ability of women to subvert their site of victimhood. Despite their subordinated status in the patriarchal superstructure, the women characters of Chughtai’s narratives are often seen to exercise a sense of agency, however limited it seems to be. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, Helen Tiffin in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, the term agency in contemporary theory refers to “the ability to act or perform an action” (8). The book further defines agency as something that in contemporary theory, “hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways in which their identity has been

constructed” (8). The female protagonist of “The Rock” is seen to defy the pervasive societal expectations through her subversive act of gluttony – an act which in some sense determined by the ways in which her identity [as a wife and mother with pulp body] has been constructed. By indulging herself in deviant appetite, Bhabhi subverted the hegemonic control of patriarchy. She “sinks into food as a revolt to Bhaiya’s agency of making her fat because he did not like thin and skinny girls but she doesn’t try to think of making herself slim and thin” (Yadav 62). The double standard of patriarchy gets exposed when we see the one responsible for her obesity, wants to make her feel ashamed of her body:

Bhabhi was pushed into the water that day she slid from our hands like a heavy bundle. Her wet clothes clung to her body and revealed her unshapely figure, a frightening sight; it seemed as though someone had wrapped a comforter around her waist. She didn’t look that horrible when dressed in normal clothes. ‘Oh God, how fat you are; Bhaiya exclaimed, squeezing lump of fat on her buttock. ‘Oh my goodness, look at your tummy! You look just look like Gama, the wrestler.’ ‘Hunh! After four children my waist...’ ‘But I also have four children and my waist has not been transformed into a Dunlop tyre. (Chughtai 82)

The sharp contrast between the physical appearance of his wife and the man denotes the sexual politics that transfigures the bodies of the women to their own selfish ends. The bhaiya seems to symbolise the oppressive patriarchal structure itself – a rock that remained steadfast down the ages:

I looked at Bhaiya. He was the same. Lean and slim, not an ounce out of place. Hair still thick like a boy’s. Just two or three shiny gray strands peeped out from his temples, giving him a rather distinguished look. He was as solid as a rock. Waves leap toward the rock, crash at its feet, shatter and disintegrate, and weak and exhausted, return to the sea. Some die at the feet of the rock, while new

waves, nourishing a desire for self-sacrifice, find themselves irresistibly drawn to it. (Chughtai 87)

Chughatai has always been praised for her female protagonists who defy the oppressive shackles of patriarchy with their authoritative, individualistic stance. Wazir Agha writes: “The importance of Ismat Chughtai’s female characters lies in the fact that they demonstrate the moving away from the category of stereotypes and in doing so inspire the readers to realize themselves” (200). The female protagonist in “The Rock” is not an overt feminist like her other counterparts in Chughtai’s fictional world. But it is her denial to conform to the patriarchal ideal that expects women to control their appetite, presents her a deviating agent against the patriarchal construction of womanhood. Though her gluttony hints at the psychological disorder that demands clinical assistance, the impact of her revolting stance against male chauvinistic action cannot be ignored: while operating through and against the patriarchal system of dominance by embodying its oppression, she subverts it simultaneously.

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