

Scrutinizing the Notion of Sexuality in Ismat Chughtai's *lifting the Veil* and *The Quilt* Stories

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Abstract

The research paper aims to have a thorough knowledge of how Chughtai deals with the notion of sexuality in her short stories. Also, it is questionable, that how accurate her description of sexuality is when she didn't make any significant efforts to ponder on the obstacles that men face, even if she was living in an era where men dominated the society. Moreover, one would have a conclusive answer to the question — Was Chughtai truly modern? One cannot deny that this woman had an insane amount of courage in her, for the reason that, her indomitable stories and characters were a blow to the conservative society. Another noteworthy point that one mustn't discard intentionally here, is that she was writing in the twentieth century when there was more or less no awareness about the other sexes, or forms of sexuality, or even gender identity. As a consequence, one cannot wholly blame her for portraying gender or sexuality in binary terms, but then her misrepresentation of men remains troublesome.

Introduction

Ismat chughtai was the first Urdu woman writer, who unravel the social and psychological aspect of women's life. Ismat Chughtai was enlightened with modern education and inspired by the Western thought. The Urdu writer, displayed a tendency to write on bold topics. Ismat Chughtai, reflects deep insight into the development of female consciousness in her works. She had an artistic vision and critical observation.

For these reasons, Ismat Chughtai continues to hold a pivotal stature in Urdu Literature, for her bold revolutionary writings defying the socio-cultural norms concerning sexuality, in her times, when *sharif* women weren't supposed to discuss sex publicly. Chughtai's iconoclastic writings are a product of her personal experiences and socio-cultural background. She was never a conformist and the seeds of rebellion in her can be traced in her childhood as well.

M. Asaduddin, in his introduction of 'Lifting the Veil' rightly said, "In her short stories, she deals with the entire range of sexuality—from arousal of the sexual urge in a child, through adolescence, to adult sexuality. Besides sexual attraction between men and women, she also deals, in a limited way, with homosexuality and lesbianism which was, in the context of her works, the inevitable product of a hypocritical, sexually repressive society".

Chughtai's works have been mostly regarded as maverick and bold threatening patriarchy and the traditional Muslim family values. Chughtai's best known short story, *The Quilt*, gained immense notoriety, for her depiction of lesbianism,

although, the story doesn't make any reference to homosexuality. Chughtai, brilliantly depicts the erotic relationship between Begum Jaan and Rabbu, but never goes on to make a moral judgment on such relationships. A point that is noteworthy, about *Lihaaf* is that Chughtai chooses a child narrator, which avails her to talk about female sexuality with a greater sense of freedom. This girl unreservedly recalls the incidents as she remembers them, without the pressure that arises from social taboos. The sheltered space of the *zenana*, becomes the locale where, homoerotic desires find the freedom of expression.

By sexualizing, this sacred space, Chughtai, breaks apart the patriarchal notion that the *zenana*, a sanctum place in a Muslim household, is free from erotic passions. Begum Jaan's marriage raises significant questions on marriage as an institution as well. The Nawab and Begum Jaan's arranged alliance was more of a business transaction, which aided the former to hide his homosexuality, while the latter enjoyed economic stability out of this enterprise.

If one examines the story thoroughly one discovers that the *lihaaf* as a metaphor serves a multitude of purposes. Firstly, it veils the homoerotic relationship the two women share, which liberates Begum Jaan from the shackles of patriarchy and brings about in her a new gendered consciousness. Just like Begum Jaan and Rabbu avail the *lihaaf* to hide their 'unbefitting' sexual relationship from the traditional society they were living in, likewise the quilt can be seen as a metaphor that veils the sexuality of men like the Nawab, who themselves are prisoners to the ideology of patriarchy and consequently have to live a life of secrecy.

What is Sexuality? This research paper is an endeavour to deeply examine the connatural-seeming coherence of the categories of sex, and sexuality, thereby debunking the fallacies associated with sexuality.

Short stories such as *'The Mole'*, *'Gainda'*, *'Vocation'*, *'The Homemaker'*, *'The Net'*, *'The Wedding Suit'*, *'Mother-in-Law'*, *'In The Name of Those Married Women...'*, along with *'The Quilt'*, are the primary works of Chughtai and the focal point of research in this paper, in order to unfold and study minutely the notion of sexuality and how the society peruses it.

Aspects of Chughtai's stories

Chughtai's short stories are a remarkable representation of the world, she was living in. Her writings are a remark on the moral degradation and the stark hypocrisy of the society, that subjugated women by their double standards. She depicted the socio-economic hardships and sexual exploitation faced by women in their everyday lives. She is till date, known as an audacious feminist writer. Her stories have been analyzed minutely by a no. of critics and researchers.

In *'The Quilt'*, Chughtai weaves the character of the Nawab in a fashion that doesn't evoke sympathy for him. Chughtai builds on the psyche of Begum Jaan throughout the story, even when she is not the narrator. Begum Jaan "wasted away in anguished loneliness", while her husband remained busy with his

"strange hobby". The Nawab's coldness sows the seeds of rebellion in Begum Jaan, because of which, she begins to explore her sexuality with Rabbu. The reader feels Begum Jaan's despair and understands her reasons for having an extramarital affair with Rabbu, thereby cheating on her husband.

However, the Nawab is portrayed as a headless man. He has been shown to have no emotions, whatsoever. He lets Begum Jaan wither away in her misery, by being outrightly heartless and denying her existence in his mental world. When the reader, becomes aware of his strange hobby, it adds up to his villainous character. It wouldn't be wrong on the reader's part to loathe this man, for not owning up to Begum Jaan and making her suffer because of his cowardness. However, if one comprehends the society, he was a part of, one cannot deny that even the Nawab was a victim of the patriarchal structure. One can advocate, that he married Begum Jaan, a girl coming from a poor stratum of the society, not because he wanted to sexually exploit her, which he could, but simply to protect him from the world that could possibly tear off his sense of self and 'masculinity', in case he came out of the closet. Even if the Nawab was a homosexual man, he could have sexually assaulted Begum Jaan, within the four walls of his home, if he truly were a monster in the garb of a human being. Chughtai, paints the Nawab's character in a manner that even a bleak suspicion, becomes enough for the reader to label him a sexual offender, even when Chughtai doesn't distinctly mention any action of the Nawab, that could possibly provide evidence of him being a criminal. To expatiate, on the point mentioned above, one goes back to the point in the story where, Chughtai mentions that Rabbu's son runs away from the Nawab's house declining all the luxurious comforts that the Nawab bestowed him with. Here, the reader automatically assumes that the Nawab must have acted inappropriately, with the boy, however, one critical point that one must take into notice, is that there is no actual evidence in the story that proves that the Nawab was guilty of the crime.

Nonetheless, one cannot deny that he, did suffocate Begum Jaan, by not letting her go outside of the house, but how can one blame a man, who himself was living the life of a prisoner, even if, he could walk outside his house freely. If Begum Jaan was literally trapped within the four walls of her house, the Nawab was metaphorically trapped in his act of playing a heterosexual. Both, the characters were victims of the orthodox beliefs, the society held onto. Chughtai through her stories also portrays how by sexualizing the zenana, threatens the patriarchal structure of the society. This paper doesn't only aim to talk about female sexuality, but sexuality in general, and how the society's perception of it, affects countless people like Begum Jaan, the Nawab or Rani, the female protagonist of *'The Mole'* who wants to live a life of sexual promiscuity, but is restrained by the society's rules and regulations.

Analytical view

Chughtai's stories, are different in terms of the language. She focused on the language and keep it as simple and as exact used by the common people in their domestic arena. Muhammad Sadiq, actor, singer and politician complains, that a few of her short stories are not stories at all but 'psychoanalytic pieces', appreciates her use of language; "In her mastery over the spoken language and dialogue, she has no equal in Urdu." Ismat, used a different kind of language from men.

Virginia Woolf, asserts the need for a different idiom and language, "to carry the reader on easily and naturally from one end of the book to the other." According to Woolf, the use of different idiom was essential for female writers to portray the problems and aspirations of women different from the male tradition. This is essential to present the natural shape of their thought without, as Woolf says, 'crushing or distorting it.' It is possible only if a woman is well determined and can stand the opposition "to be true to herself."

Woman is not only considered inferior to man but is largely perceived by man only as an object of sexual gratification. Ismat Chughtai, reveal in her stories, how sexuality works in middle-class Muslim households. Ismat Chughtai's through her stories present some images of reality in our society. Female sexuality, is kept invisible as passive in patriarchy, more in Muslim families where 'purdah' is an additional custom to keep the woman's physical person hidden. Ismat Chughtai not only exposes the abuse of woman's body for man's gratification, but she also delineates woman's sexual desire – a theme or subject considered forbidden in the patriarchal set-up.

A lesbian relationship, considered a deviance by patriarchy. More than the bonding between women, the story reveals the deprivation of a poor young woman to a homosexual Nawab on the one hand and the assertion of woman's sexuality on the other.

The child, in her innocence could not analyze the thoughts in Begum Jan's mind, but the child becomes fearful and terrified and runs out of Begum Jan's room. The child narrator wishes her mother to come and take her back home. Finally, Rabbu returns and Begum Jan was very happy. The child narrator, is so terrified from the day of her encounter with Begum Jan that she tries to stay out of Begum Jan's room and spends time with servants of the household. Thus, the child narrator's encounter with Begum Jan brings to light the fact that a woman who has been oppressed can at times become oppressive and this is how Begum Jan acted with the child. She herself is oppressed and in turn, she tries to oppress the child, for whom Begum Jan becomes a terrifying entity. The nine-year-old girl, recounts things as she remembers them without self-consciousness or any inhibiting sense of social taboos and this gives a greater freedom to the writer to write on a theme, which was to be hid behind the veil at the time in which, she was writing.

"*The Quilt*" (*Lihaaf*) is a powerful story by Ismat Chughtai, which daringly sketches female sexuality and the loneliness of a woman who yearns for her husband's love. Written in 1942, "*The Quilt*", proved to be a landmark in Urdu short story writing. A frustrated housewife, whose Nawab husband has no time for her, finds sexual and emotional solace in the companionship of a female servant. At a time, when any talk of female sexuality was unthinkable, Ismat Chughtai, had the courage to portray a lesbian relationship.

The focus on woman's sexual desire and its fulfilment in a relationship with a woman is Chughtai's way of asserting the protagonist's humanity and her basic human needs. A woman's identity is not defined only by her relation to the male's world and male's literary tradition. The powerful bonds between women are a crucial factor in women's lives, and the sexual and emotional orientation of a woman profoundly affects her consciousness and thus her creativity.

Not only patriarchy has been silent about women's sexual needs, but even within feminist criticism, lesbianism has been marginalized. Radical feminists turned women's attention to sexuality and the disparities of power that pervade heterosexual relationships in patriarchal cultures. According to radical feminists, male heterosexuality objectifies the female body. They aimed to reshape society and restructure its institutions which they saw as inherently patriarchal. They assumed all women to be good and all men to be bad and laid emphasis on the idea of "sisterhood." Radical feminism thus, over-simplified the question of sexual

discrimination. They failed to see that in real life, often the women of a superior class or race oppress women of lower class or of a subjugated race.

No one can deny the truthfulness with which Ismat portrayed socio-economic and sexual exploitation suffered by woman. "The Wedding Suit" depicts the pathetic situation of a widow and problems generated for her and her two daughters, because of poverty. Qualities of soul like piety, sincerity, hard work and skilfulness in domestic chores, all become insignificant without affordability of good dowry. Kubra's mother, a seamstress, has spent her life sewing dowries of many young girls. She never disappoints anyone and resolves the problem even if someone runs short of cloth. Her sole dream is the marriage of Kubra, her elder daughter, who is aging. She does not realize that her younger daughter has also grown up. How can she think of her when there is no one to ask for Kubra's hand? Ismat has successfully used black humour to present a timeless problem. Bi Amma, regardless of the hopelessness, continues sewing clothes for Kubra's wedding and puts them into a wooden box. Ismat uses the metaphor of 'heavy coffin like wooden box' to make it clear that a poor widow cannot expect much for her daughter.

Ismat is sarcastic about the social convention that forces a woman to become an obedient servant to man. In one of her interviews, Ismat strongly criticized these taboos and the girls who followed them. She vehemently opposed the submissive role of a girl. She did not believe in compromise and thought it to be a deception. A girl's self-esteem should not be tamed to compromise with every injustice done to her. In this way, she is rightly called as the first rebellious woman or the feminist of Urdu literature.

"*The Net*" is a remarkable example of the psychoanalysis of the development of female psyche from early childhood to adulthood. She presents how innocent friendship between two friends grows, with changing desires, into rivalry. In a conservative society, where everyone gets conscious about the physical changes, girls become even more conscious and the only safe emotional outlet for them is to read sentimental stories and identify themselves with the heroines.

"*Gainda*", like "*Bandi*", states the bitter reality of a feudal society, where maids are used as objects to satisfy the needs of growing sons and discarded later. At the same time, Ismat discusses the problems faced by a young widow, her deprivations, her desires that she has to crush in order to live in a society that expects only strict austerity on her part. Parallel runs the theme of the development of a child's consciousness of her surroundings through observation and mimicry. Gainda, a maid and playmate of Bibi, becomes a widow at a very young age. She can no longer play bride as she cannot wear 'sindoor' or bangles anymore. Life's pleasures are banned for her though the flame of life is not extinguished in her. Voicing the social code cannot help and later, not only she accedes to play bride with Bibi, but becomes mistress of Bibi's brother. The reality is perceived from the eyes of a child, who tries to behave coyly like Gainda, with an elderly servant Meva Ram, who fortunately paid her no attention. She cannot bear her brother paying attention to Gainda, ignoring her. She suffers from Electra complex.

The incestuous desire and Electra complex are referred to in stories like "*Amar Bail*", "*The Mole*", "*The Net*", "*Tiny's Granny*". In "*The Net*", both Attan and Saffiya are attracted towards 'Bhayia', lover of Aapa; in "*The Mole*", Rani is attracted to

Choudhry, much advanced in his age and vice versa; in “*Tiny’s Granny*”, it takes on a horrible and satanic form, where Haji Saheb rapes a nine-year-old Nanhi.

Ismat’s strong female characters like Lajo, Rani and this woman of the roads survive because they can endure pain that is part of life. They accept the natural course of life. They do not suffer from scruples like shame, embarrassment and public opinion. They do not follow the norms of the society and follow their instinct. This freedom and independence, though won at the cost of physical abuse, gives them strength. On the other hand, girls brought up in strict restrictions, leading their life in traditional passive roles become incapable to continue their existence and finally lose the battle in favour of their male counterpart.

“*Vocation*” calls into question the strict line drawn between a whore and a respectable woman. The line becomes more obscure when one’s seemingly respectable aunts are involved in this business to earn their living at the expense of others’ domestic life. The social attitude is to look down upon this marginalized group of society i.e. courtesans. The protagonist voices the conventional social views while expressing her hatred towards her neighbour. At heart, though, she knows that men adding to a prostitute’s wealth are no others but her own pious relatives. She encounters a strong conflict raging in her when she compares her vocation of teaching to prostitution. She finds herself in loss. She sells her ‘squeezed up brain’, while the other sells her body. She looks worn out, while the other looks younger than her age. Above all, she cannot earn in life what the other earns in a day. The protagonist, to her amazement, comes to know that the courtesan in her neighbours was no other but her relative. To curse a courtesan is easy but to trace her links in one’s own lineage is like looking into oneself and raking the filth that one disgusts in the surroundings. Ismat was true to herself and all her struggle was to express herself and women without pretension. Ismat and Virginia aim at a new order, to change the established values to give importance to what seems insignificant to man.

Conclusion

Chughtai was ahead of her times and introduced such themes in the literature, which were unprecedented like homosexuality, lesbianism, child-bearing, marriages and its related themes and its consequences like mismatch in marriages, forced marriages, child marriages, second marriages, unfulfilled married women, single mothers’ problems, childless wives, widowhood, marital violence, marital rape, extramarital affairs, child-birth – outside and inside wedlock, and the pangs of motherhood.

Chughtai played the role of a pioneer who instead of postulating a theory of feminism, put in practice and writing what she believed with a fiercely feminist stand. She raised some important ‘woman question’ and put the discussion of women at the centre for getting attention and focus. The men-favouring practices and traditions have been presented in such a manner in her writings that the duality and biasness that exist in this patriarchal society gets exposed. She made women aware of their unsavoury position and by making them realize, helped them to safeguard from all the impending and possible danger that lurk in the women’s lives.

By portraying the suffering and abuse of women, Ismat Chughtai projects the individuality and humanity of women. Her writing about things usually kept invisible becomes an act of resistance and an act of interrogation of the prevailing social order.

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