

FEMINIST READING OF ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S WRITINGS

Dr. Shweta Awasthi

Assistant Professor (English)
Faculty of Modern studies
Uttarakhand Sanskrit University, Haridwar
Email id: dr.shweta@usvv.ac.in

Abstract

To her goes the credit of voicing the voiceless women's feelings when it was forbidden to discuss. Ismat Chughtai is primarily interested in women and all her writings focus on the atrocities faced by them in the society. She unveiled the problems and the deplorable condition of Indian Muslim women who had never stepped out of the zenana and viewed women in a larger social context. She created a new literary template that tore apart the layers of societal hypocrisy. Her characters step out to break the existing moulds of femininity. She portrays the society as ugly and brutal as it is; there is no place for sugarcoated expression in her fiction. The present paper is an attempt to highlight feminist concerns in her writings.

Keywords: Feminist, Indian Muslim Women, Voiceless, Society.

Ismat Chughtai as a writer is known for her straight forward and candid writings. She was able to see through the hypocritical attitude of the society of her times and was bold enough to pen down exactly what she saw. This was at a time when women and especially Muslim women spent their life confined within the zenana. Unfortunately though, her penchant as an author was overshadowed by her single story *Lihaaf* which was criticized for its radical theme and whatever she wrote before and after was swept under *lihaaf*. Her autobiography is seminal to the understanding of her writings. Her confidence to do what she believed in is the predominant feature of her life as a writer. From childhood only she was aware of the gap between the rich and poor, strong and weak, man and woman and how it operates in the society. She writes in her autobiography:

"It was probably then that I realized that the big beat the small, the strong batter the weak. That was when the strong man implanted himself in my subconscious, like a tall pillar, the weaklings strewn like garbage about his feet.... But there was.... Something of which I was not aware. Whenever I saw a magnificent palace eaten away by moss sprouting on its walls...I would smile secretly. The power within those insignificant grasses and weeds would overwhelm me."(Chughtai, 2000:1)

She was sensitive enough to observe life around her, being part of a large family there was no dearth of occasions which served to spur her creative faculty. Major themes and characters of her writings are taken from the sphere she knew intimately- the middle class Muslim families of Aligarh Agra and Bareilly with their elaborate network of relatives, hangers on and servants. This atmosphere has lent liveliness to her style of writing. It appears that she is chatting with her readers. She preferred to characterize her writing as photography rather than painting; some of her plots are taken directly from her real life with minimal changes, and biographical and historical contexts are extremely important for revealing the significance of her works. That is why, the world depicted in her stories is not at all idyllic rather it is complicated, replete with dirt and filth as they exist in real life without any pretenses: "Her world is primarily that of the poverty stricken, the coarse and the rustic, and not of the wealthy, sophisticated or the elite. There is starvation, filth, (which Ismat describes with anger but an anger which seems to relish) illiteracy, foul language, scuffles, disease, hordes of children." (Sukritapaul Kumar and Siddique, 2012:184)

Her personal experiences taught her the huge disparity that existed between the two sexes in the society, albeit she never followed such injunctions herself. Simone de Beauvoir had written in her famous book *The Second Sex* that one is not born but rather becomes a woman. From the start she was a misfit in the role traditionally designed for woman and had an undying urge to challenge them. She drove mare, played all the games meant for boys as *gilli danda*, flying kites and playing footballs. Her mother often explained her the ways of the world. She did not like her activities at all. "These manly pursuits do not befit a woman, she would say...." But gradually she understood the concerns of her mother: "This was a man's world....made and distorted by man. A woman is a tiny part of this world and man has made her the object of his own love and hatred."(chughtai, 2000:9) Her writings voice her desire to see women as emancipated beings. Though perceived as a writer writing for women she is not a feminist in a narrow or reductive sense, her concerns being much wider and more inclusive than merely the world of women. They are not merely the allegories of gender oppression. Anita Desai stresses this point when she says:

"One could read her work as an exposure of Indian traditions, of religious bigotry, of the male hegemony and female illiteracy and dependence- but that would be a limited interpretation for- beside her obvious and

instinctive iconoclasm- there was also an intimate involvement with that world, her delight in it...the squabbles and rivalries amongst women, the displays of affections and indulgence, the rich and colourful language, spiced with salty proverbs and aphorisms....-whole that one can only exclaim, on reading her work, 'oh, human nature! Ah, the human race!' (Chughtai, 2000: xxi)

Like many other writers in progressive writer's movement, Ismat Chughtai proved over and over again that she was a progressive more by inclination than by indoctrination. This evidence is vibrant in almost all her writings; in Masooma too we see her depicting the effects of a world cleft by social and economic injustices upon the life of a young girl. The trade of women and the commodification of woman's body, she seems to be saying here, is a direct consequence of human frailty and lust but also of poverty and inequality. Masooma, probably the darkest novel by Ismat Chughtai draws heavily upon her experiences in the film industry where she cuts open the underbelly of India's political landscape and the underpinnings of the Bombay film world. The novel offers the entire trajectory of how a girl from a decent family is reduced to a commodity ready to use by anyone who offers to pay for her. The descent of Masooma, is a tragic journey into the world of deceit, hopelessness, injustice, corruption, failed morals, treachery, debauchery and criminalization of politics.

Her short stories reveal that she was in many ways ahead of her western feminist counterparts. She lived her belief that a woman was not a puppet and her stories only elaborate what she felt within her heart. She discarded the stereotypical images of women as they existed in literature and presented them as real beings. She laid bare the hypocritical attitude of the patriarchal society and how it uses the tools like marriage, motherhood to exploit the women. Her stories "Chauthikajoda" (The Wedding Suit) "chui- mui" (Touch-Me-Not) and Gharwali (The Home Maker) deal with the institution of marriage as it operates in society.

Simone de Beauvoir once wrote in her phenomenal book *The Second Sex* "Marriage is a destiny traditionally offered to women by society. For the woman marriage is the sole justification of her existence.... For girls marriage is the only means of integration to the community." (<https://justiceforwomenindia.wordpress.com>) Ismat Chughtai underpins this very situation in "Chauthikajoda" and "chui-mui" whereas "gharwali" serves to deconstruct this norm and allows the protagonist to move beyond and realize her existence outside marriage. Girl's life in India especially during Ismat's time was a preparation for marriage; even their dreams were controlled and fettered. The predicament was worse in Muslim households. Such is the world of "kubra" and "bhabhjaan" Kubra wishes to get married for the security it offers while bhabhijaan longs to become a mother to sustain the security offered by marriage. Chauthikajoda shows kubra's gradual degradation as her desire of getting married remains unfulfilled. Her mother had started preparing her dowry at a very early stage but her father's untimely death ended all the hopes of marriage. She is coy, docile, hardworking a perfect homemaker but this is not enough. No one bothers for a girl devoid of dowry. So, her mother is out of her wits when she gets the news of Rafat's (her nephew) arrival. Like Mrs. Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* she starts dreaming of Kubra's marriage. The house is prepared for his welcome. Kubra whose life is already on the edges feeds him kebab, fried paranthas, creamed milk and as her sister says she could have scraped her flesh to feed Rahat just to get rid of the curse of spinsterhood: "Did my sister hunger after men? No....The thought of a man did not come to her as a longing, but as an answer to her need for food and clothing. She was a widow's burden and must not continue to remain so." (Chughtai, 2000: 36) Boys like Rahat enjoy this hapless condition of women. Kubra's sister is sent to him to get a clue about his feelings but he ends up crushing her. After filling his belly with loads of delicious food prepared by Kubra and having is time with Hamida Rahat leaves the women destitute. Bi amma who had spent her life stitching the wedding suit for Kubra ends up preparing her shroud: "Two large tears slowly trickled down her cotton-soft cheeks. The wrinkles on her face glowed, and she smiled. It was as though today she felt sure that Kubra's wedding suit was finally complete and the trumpets would ring out at any moment." (Chughtai, 2000:38) It is easier for a woman like Kubra to die rather than living a useless life. In a patriarchal society girls are trained to be devoted wives and loving mothers. They are not taught to live for their own sake; just as woman. That is why; life becomes a burden for an unmarried girl like Kubra.

"Chui-Mui" takes up from where "Chauthikajoda" ends. Bhabhijaan, the tender one has and enjoys all that marriage offers. But a married woman in a patriarchal society has to perform certain functions to keep her marriage going. If she fails, her marriage also fails. Bebel Engels once commented: "From the beginning of time oppression was the common lot of woman...Woman was the first human being that tasted bondage, woman was a slave before the slave existed." (Bhaskar A. Shukla71) Bhabhijaan's marriage depends on her ability to procreate. She remains under the constant vigil of Bimughlani and endless number of pirs and phakirs are summoned all the time but in vain; she has suffered two miscarriages. She can feel her bliss slipping away: "Lying in her bed bhabhijaan seemed to hear the shehnai of Bhaijaan's second marriage." (chughtai, 2000: 96) When she is pregnant for the third time, doctors are summoned from Delhi. When doctors declare everything to be normal and under control the family starts for Aligarh by train. Bhabhijaan is nervous to death: "Her horizon was darkening. She knew that another miscarriage would be her husband's ticket to a second marriage. Now Bhaijaan could do anything in the name of projeny." (Chughtai, 2000:97) Mahadevi Varma commenting upon the deplorable condition of women in India once remarked: "Evenwhile catering to his sexual needs, if she fails to provide him offspring...if she is sickly or guilty of her husband's displeasure through no fault of hers, she will still have to accept the position of a slave in that home." (Varma, 2003: 32) Ismat Chughtai cuts open this hypocritical attitude of society towards woman; a pregnant peasant woman boards the coach occupied by bhabhijaan and

her family. Bimughlani curses her for being pregnant. Motherhood is a virtue for one and vice for another. Birth of a baby can sustain bhabhijaan's marriage but the same act done by the peasant woman wins her the category of whore and a bitch. Chughtai celebrates the idea of liberated womanhood through the peasant woman. She doesn't require any outside help; she is self-reliant unlike bhabhijaan and Kubra.

Lajo in "Gharwaali" (The Homemaker) presents a contrast to Kubra and Bhabhijaan. She is pulsating, lively and vibrant. She loves her life. Lajo can be termed as Ismat's 'new woman'. Through her character Ismat at once breaks down all the stereotypes related to the fictional representations of women. She seems to be telling the entire woman race not to be guilty of them, that a woman can be as careless and pleasure-seeking as men: "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 reader to realize themselves." (Wazir Agha, 202) She serves as a housemaid and liberally offers herself to her masters. She gets a chance to be Mirza's housemaid. This opportunity sparks her desire to be the mistress of the house. Here she had full freedom to manage the entire house without anybody's interference: "She was in love- not with Mirza but with the house. Without a mistress it was as good as hers.....She was the queen." (Chughtai, 2000: 82) The house is kept so prim and proper that Mirza is reminded of her late mother. All the men in the mohalla wish to have her and are ready to offer her whatever she wants. But she hurls abuses at them and at the same time enjoys her situation. She regards it her duty to serve her master in every way. She gets jealous of the courtesans whom Mirza visits and feels victorious after seducing him. Here, Ismat Chughtai reverses the power structure between the sexes. Mirza is dumbfounded before Lajo. But he wishes to control and possess her. In present situation he cannot control her and hence, proposes marriage. But marriage does not suit her; though she takes care of Mirza and his house but she is not interested in marriage like other women. Marriage is a patriarchal tool to control and subjugate women; maybe she is aware of the trap set in the name of marriage. She had seen and experienced several married men whom she had served. Therefore, she pleads before Mirza but succumbs finally. No sooner does Mirza marry Lajo he acquires the position of subject and she becomes the object, inessential: "A man can do anything to please his mistress but a wife is altogether a different kettle of fish." (Chughtai, 2000: 90)

Lajo feels stifled in the new role of wife. Here, Ismat focuses how marriage encroaches on the individuality of woman. The role of wife restricts rather circumscribes women's self-development. "Sometimes women play their roles not so much because they want to, as because they have to in order to survive economically and/or psychologically. Virtually all women engage in the feminine role playing." (Rosemary Tong, 1993:208) Lajo tries hard to fit in the role of wife but fails. She is used to men's attention and the present venerable situation is unbearable to her. Men who used to pass comments on her now maintain a distance as now she is the wife of Mirza. She feels her body dying and ends up with Mithwa, is caught by Mirza and is beaten to death. In fury, Mirza decides to divorce her who is informed that marriage with a whore is as it is invalid. He feels relaxed because in his opinion if the marriage was invalid then no harm was done to family's honour. Ismat uses such kind of situation to highlight the hypocrisy of society whose norms are decided by man for his convenience. Religion, marriage, chastity, virtue etc. are the fabrications of patriarchy and are applied in the society to subjugate women. Lajo feels happy at being liberated once again; she does not need commitment as commitment serves to stifle her individuality. Being Mirza's maid she had her freedom along with the home but by becoming his wife she found her femininity under restrictions; she loves what she is and is not ready to sacrifice even for the sake of marriage.

Ismat Chughtai peels off the layers of sexuality clinging to the identity of woman so that her inner human self can emerge, lending crispness, boldness and a rebellious quality to her style and themes. The stories discussed above bring out the essential qualities of rebellion Ismat Chughtai; her characters bare the imprint of her personality which makes them more vibrant and memorable. The issues dealt by her in her stories might not appear revolutionary to present day readers but they served their purpose when they were written. She indeed lifted the veil and brought out the pulsating woman who had been suffering for ages; a woman who has learnt to respect and celebrate her womanhood.

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