

Women, Identity and Marriage in the Short Stories of Ismat Chughtai

Nida Eqbal

Research Scholar, Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India
Email - nidaeqbal@gmail.com

Abstract: *This research paper proposes to interrogate the cultural underpinnings of the time when Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991) wrote to assess the making of women and identity in her writings. While portraying emotional barrenness of life and rebellion of the protagonist in traditional household set up, Chughtai highlighted the lives of women where female sexuality is experienced, but never explained. She was conscious of the largely feudal and patriarchal social structure of her times, and she fiercely rejected, exposed and subverted it.*

Key Words: *Hegemony, Identity, Gender, Marriage, Resistance.*

Around the world and across many communities, strong social and cultural norms are prevalent that perpetuate an imbalance in power between women and men. While on one hand, it's the male who has more agency as compared to women in their lives, men's behavior and decision making is also profoundly shaped by the socio-cultural expectations and norms with regard to masculinity. A critical inquiry into gender norms and its resultant effect on both men and women can perhaps lend us a better understanding of the complex ways in which this unequal power distribution and gender imbalance distorts the fabric of our society, and shall also help in engaging men and enlightening them about the inequalities thereby bringing about a positive change in the society.

Ismat Chughtai started writing in 1930s when women writing; writings about women, and writing for cause of women was considered a transgression of the boundaries of morality and respectability. The image of women was largely idealistic and flawed until women writers unveiled the female quarters to bring the reality of women as it was. Chughtai, through her writings strives to resurrect women from the disempowering images created by the patriarchal society that largely impact her identity construction. Where women and their bodies were largely seen either as sexual entities or were celebrated as ideals of beauty and monuments of sacrifice, there has been hitherto an absence of the 'real woman' in the fiction dealing with women. Wives were largely portrayed in their idolized forms as the 'Laxmi' of the house or the living epitome of self-sacrifice and devotion thereby debarring the basic human feeling and emotion to the women. Chughtai visualizes her women often as characters with a powerful mind, who have control over their mind and body and are independent.

In India, strong patriarchal values that regulate morality, sexuality, and social productions are expressed through specific cultural norms. The creation and celebration of self-sacrificing and pure image of women since ancient times emphasized the role of women as faithful devoted wives and sacrificing mothers. It is interesting to analyze the self-limiting and constricted behavior of females which is not only due to their conditioning of being the 'weaker sex,' but also, because of the deprivation of decision-making power and limited agency offered to them by the society. Also taking into account how any deviation from the norm such as any behavior that challenges gender-based discrimination, female subordination, exploitation of women and their subjugation is seen as a transgression of boundaries marked by the patriarchal society and that calls for immediate remedial mechanism. Where on one hand we see how society controls its women as per the gender norms dominated by the patriarchal mindset, some men too fall prey to the gender norms constructed around masculinity and male sex role, that of being manly, aggressive to an extent, exercising of control over women, head of family, provider, strong and in control of his emotions. So much so, that a man's masculinity and honor is tied to the women of his house.

Ismat Chughtai holds a unique place in the field of Urdu literature as she was the first Urdu female writer to unravel the psychological and social aspects of a woman's sexual life. Chughtai critiques not just the patriarchal institution of marriage but also the role of family, the state, religion, law and order with an aim to identify a woman's body as the locus of masculine power. Several short stories written by her provide instances of practices that maintain oppression of women. Chughtai exposes this oppression, locates the pattern and practice of domination, challenges the patriarchal discourses and renounces the hierarchical authoritarian mindset. By investigating the indigenous social practices within the patriarchal family, Chughtai exposed the way a woman's gender and body politics was generally perceived in the North Indian society in the 20th century. Chughtai projects the silenced truth of woman's everyday experience in hearth and home, and infuses her body with considerable mechanism to resist patriarchal power and to

negotiate her position within the marriage. Thus, this paper theorizes the ways in which female bodies are read, interpreted and silenced by the society as reflected in the works of Ismat Chughtai.

Cultural violence against women is primarily rooted in the discourse of male privilege and gender bias. Where boys learn early in life the importance attached to their gender, they eventually grow with sense of entitlement. Being seldom reprimanded for the male chauvinistic attitudes, men continue their authority and male aggression even later in life as a husband and a father. It is argued that since Indian men are so pampered and made to feel important and special as young kids because of their exalted position in family and society that they tend to perpetuate domestic violence at later stages in life. While on the other hand, women are internalized of their subordinate roles in family and they believe that sacrificing roles as wives and mothers are their ideals. Often women's emotional and financial dependence along with the denial of their rights and resources serves as an excuse for their abuse.

Chughtai examines in her writings how not just traditional practices, financial situation, religion, family structure and society condition the lives of women, but also factors like education and a lack thereof and marital incompatibility too add to the current state of women. The role of a family, parents in particular is essential to understand the modelling of a young mind in a society where gender discrimination is omnipresent and control of space, speech and body of a woman is exercised in the name of disciplining, where marriage often adds to the existing pitiable state of a woman.

Before Ismat Chughtai, awareness about female issues was already being raised by social reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagr, Ram Mohan Roy and Sir Syed Ahmed who condemned issues like Sati practice, child marriage, purdah system and confinement of women, yet critical analysis of the patriarchal attitude of the society and its biased and discriminatory behaviour towards women and an enquiry into the larger role of women was missing. Chughtai brought about a radical change in her study of women by highlighting the use of culture and tradition to justify violence against women, she projects women as not just a biological entity but as human beings.

While problematising marriage, Ismat Chughtai states the reality of young brides in marriage, the violence meted out to them turning them into non-entities, psychological and physical damage that they endure because of sexual abuse in early marriage. It is evident through the fiction of Ismat Chughtai how early marriage violates the basic human rights of women in the society marred by patriarchal mores. Chughtai aims to raise awareness through her writings about the rights pertaining to women's rights over body, freedom and space that every being is entitled to, which gets curtailed often in oppressive households, thereby depriving them of self-respect and a dignified life.

Women in the fiction of Ismat Chughtai and in literature afterwards can be seen resisting dominant discourses and orders surrounding that of women and their bodies. Especially in the fiction of Chughtai, one comes across women who are not only victims of the society but also women who empower themselves with strategies to resist the dominant marital discourse. Chughtai's women often present before us an alternative reality, and through her fiction Chughtai identifies the elements for a woman's empowerment. She is vocal of the autonomy of wives and questions the prevalent derogation of the rights and status of a woman, thus she charts a path to reframe the traditions and leads to women empowerment. Where on one hand Ismat presents women in a vulnerable position caught in the complex web of hierarchical relationships and troubled marriages, on the other hand, she also projects women who demand a status of equality in marriage and life thereby emerging as New Women.

REFERENCES:

1. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*, translated by H. M. Parshley, New York, Vintage Books, 1989.
2. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1990.
3. Connell, R.W. *Gender and Power*. United States, Stanford University Press, 1987.
4. Connell, R.W. *Masculinities*. Polity, 2005.
5. Chughtai, Ismat. *Ismat Chughtai: A Life in Words Memoirs*. Translated by M. Asaduddin. Pearson, 2012.
6. Chughtai, Ismat. *Lifting the Veil*. Translated by M. Asaduddin. Penguin Books, 2009.
7. Chughtai, Ismat. *My Friend, My Enemy: Essays, Reminiscences, Portraits*. Translated by Tahira Naqvi. Kali for Women, 2001.
8. Kalpana, R.J. *Feminism and the Individual: Feminist Issues in Indian Literature*. Prestige Books, 2005.
9. Menon, Nivedita, ed. *Sexualities: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism*. Women Unlimited, 2007.