

Leisure and the Fictional Existence: A Sociological Insight on Ismat Chughtai's Selected Short Stories.

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Abstract: *Leisure studies have contributed in raising pertinent issues that involve intersectional concerns, it is significant to fathom how people use their free time and thus the power equations associated with it are established. In this article everyday leisure and the politics around it is focused upon, short stories of Ismat Chughtai, Gaiinda and The Quilt have been chosen for the purpose. The exchange that began during a leisurely playtime ended up in a situation that jeopardized relationships as expressed in Gaiinda. In The Quilt Chughtai problematized the concept of leisure, it is perceived from several layers in the story. Chughtai's portrayal of leisure in the short stories unfolded the social dimensions that are mirror images of the prevalent societal conditions not just during that period but even today. The study of leisure has remained limited to consumption, sports, recreation and the like. It would be interesting to explore leisure from multiple angles. Content analysis has facilitated to analyze two short stories from two books translated from Ismat Chughtai's original work. Purposive sampling has been applied in the study to select the samples. The objectives of the present paper are associated with discerning the crucial social exchanges during leisure and recognizing the multifaceted nature of leisure.*

Key Words: *Leisure, Chughtai, fiction, marriage, sexuality.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

The association of leisure is established with individual satisfaction in many definitions offered in social sciences. Some have often ignored the quotient of social attachments during leisure. Others have recognized the contribution of leisure in social transformation. Leisure, even though is still not the priority for discussion in serious social science debates, has contributed in raising pertinent issues that involve intersectional concerns. On a wider scale of leisure studies, it is significant to fathom how people use their free time and thus the power equations associated with it are established. Ismat Chughtai in her short stories validated *personal is political* from numerous directions, leisure being one of them. It would be difficult to suggest whether she consciously chose leisure as an experience to portray aspects of interpersonal relationships or leisure being an inevitable part of everyday life found required mention in her fictional work. It may be presented with instances that she chose intersectional attributes to explore the everyday existence of her fictional characters. In this article everyday leisure and the politics around it will be focused upon, short stories of Chughtai have been chosen for the purpose, *Gaiinda* and *The Quilt*.

2. Review of Literature :

Bengali, Hindu, upper-caste, middle-class women indulged in story-telling and listening during their leisure hours during the colonial period as documented by Aparna Bandyopadhyay (Bandyopadhyay, 2017). They conducted sessions of story reading and even performances based on stories. Familial and domestic relationships were majorly the topics that were chosen for story-telling and performing. Love and domesticity are especially chosen even today for telecasting on the television megasericals to appeal to a specific group of audience. Discussions regarding marriage, conjugal life, domesticity and so on are found to be a part of the leisurely experiences of women. The root lies in the patriarchal ideology which encourages families to provide their girl children with kitchen-sets to play during leisure. In Bengal, during the nineteenth century women engaged in performative traditions during leisurely hours that included reading of religious texts, singing songs (mainly devotional), engaging in theatrical narratives and so on (Bandyopadhyay, 2017). The Bengali '*bhdroloks*' (educated, middle class, upper caste, elite men) and the Victorian colonizers were apprehensive about moral standards of women who participated in the performances. The intention that they had while objecting to the performances is to regulate leisure and pleasure of women (Bandyopadhyay, 2017). The morality of the

performers and their content were under constant moral policing by the *bhodroloks* and the British colonizers. Aparna Bandyopadhyay pointed out, the kind of books that women read during their leisure was regulated (Bandyopadhyay, 2017). Only a few women got the chance to experience live performances in a theatre during their leisure, accompanied by a male member of the family. The anxiety of the patriarchal society during the nineteenth century revolved around the chances of women's emancipation under the influence of novels (Bandyopadhyay, 2017). Some women utilised their leisure time after heavy domestic work to write novels. They had to be secretive about it and often adopted pseudonyms so that they were not rebuked by their family members (Bandyopadhyay, 2017). Women in Bengal according to (Bandyopadhyay, 2017), have been subject to unnecessary control and surveillance during the nineteenth century and had minimum or no autonomy to spend their leisure according to their choice, they have however, shown resistance and have come a long way demanding freedom of leisure so that they can have an agency and can be the decision-maker during their leisure time.

Leisure dynamics in a personal relationship impacts the relationship in general, amount of time that one spends with the self and amount of time spent together as a couple determines the health of the relationship (Stapley & Murdock, 2020). The capability of an individual to balance both matters in this context. According to the balance hypothesis, individuals who have more differentiation of self, maintain better balance, they approximately devote equal time to their partners and to their own selves (Stapley & Murdock, 2020). Sometimes people with higher sense of differentiation of self are able to adjust their own desired levels of couple and self time while in the relationship, regardless of the time spent with or without the partner, this is termed as the satisfaction hypothesis (Stapley & Murdock, 2020). Individual or the self however, is a social category. The social attributes like gender, age, caste, class and other categories often permits or denies the individual to have a personal leisure time. In Chughtai's story, *The Quilt (Lihaaf)*, the leisure time spent by Begum Jaan with her maid Rabbu was personally and sexually intimate (Chughtai, Chughtai - The Essential Stories, 2019). In their personal space, they were involved as a couple however, Rabbu contributed in Begum's leisure with her labour whether voluntarily or because of her position as a maid, is a debate whose roots lie in the various social attributes. If leisure time is when one participates in activities other than occupational reasons (Stapley & Murdock, 2020), then how can Begum Jaan's leisure be Rabbu's leisure even when they are sharing the same space and time to get involved in an intimate exchange? Rabbu after all works under Begum Jaan as her maid and even though they are personally and sexually related, does Rabbu have an autonomy in spending her leisure? Some earlier studies suggested, the amount of time spent together as a couple, in a relationship results in the quotient of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Recently, it is argued that it is not the amount of time that is the priority but how satisfying was it overall that matters (Stapley & Murdock, 2020).

3. Methodology :

Content analysis that is the study of recorded human communications such as books, websites, paintings and laws is the intention of this study, it will only include analysis of two short stories from two books translated from Ismat Chughtai's original work (Babbie, 2007). The individual stories have been analysed to decipher the labyrinth of leisure in them therefore two individual short stories are the units of analysis. Purposive sampling has been applied in the study to select the samples. Some stories of Chughtai are mentioned in the study but two stories *Gainda* and *The Quilt* have been chosen as the samples of the study because they serve the purpose of the present paper as the stories majorly revolved around leisurely experiences of the characters. Attributes like gender, marriage, class, caste and sexuality enhanced the analysis of the content. Class, caste, gender and sexuality were major attributes in analysing *Gainda* and *The Quilt*. The objectives of the present paper are: 1) to explore the fictional existence of *Gainda* and discern the crucial social exchanges during leisure. 2) to navigate through *The Quilt* and recognize the multifaceted nature of leisure.

4. Analysis :

The Fictional Existence of *Gainda* and the Crucial Social Exchanges During Leisure

Gainda, the story revolved around a girl upon whom the story is named. She was fourteen or fifteen years of age, referred to as the "low caste bitch" by another character in the story, was a widow and was poor (Chughtai, Chughtai - The Essential Stories, 2019). *Gainda* was a playmate of the narrator, she was like a maid at the narrator's house. *Gainda* and the narrator spent their leisurely hours playing, they prioritized marriage in their games and in the chit-chat that followed. One may fathom the obsession with marriage in the cultural context among the adults that percolated down to the children and impacted them even during their leisure. Child marriage especially for girls as experienced by *Gainda* is in a way assuming marriage as the solution to all the problems. Later, *Gainda* is seduced by the narrator's brother. It is a debatable issue whether it can be considered child sexual abuse because even though *Gainda* was below eighteen years but Chughtai did not clarify the age of the narrator's brother. After *Gainda* was pregnant, she was cursed as the "low

caste bitch” by the narrator’s family and was made to suffer physically and emotionally. The man was sent away to a metro-city for a better life away from all the responsibilities. After the birth of the child, Gainda who was sick herself had to take care of the child single-handedly.

The story *Gainda* begins with a leisurely note where the narrator and her friend Gainda were beginning to play their favourite game *dulhan-dulhan*. The precision they showed in arranging the red dupatta and covering the face of the bride, the way it is covered conventionally and the posture they imitated reassured the fact that even in the game they were “*real brides*” (Chughtai, Vintage Chughtai, 2013). Later, they made *sindoor* with brick powder and pretended to put make-up. The narrator, like an experienced woman parted Gainda’s hair and had put *sindoor* in it. Gainda pretended to be shy like a real new bride. It was then Gainda’s turn to put *sindoor* and *bindi* on the narrator. Their game involved marrying each other and wearing *sindoor*, *bindi*, *dupatta* and adorning each other after putting *sindoor* on each other’s forehead. The two girls among whom one (Gainda) was a widow were aware that if any adult saw them playing the game, they will be rebuked, had no inhibition among themselves in marrying each other. Gainda was once smacked by *bahu* (an elderly woman) for making braid and parting her hair while playing. To them, during this leisurely hours, it was the most desirable game yet had to be played secretly. When Gainda was married to a man, she was still a child and her marriage occurred in front of the village (Chughtai, Vintage Chughtai, 2013). As a widow, she was still a child, playing with her friend and both the girls pretended to marry each other and enacted to be shy like a real bride is expected to be, that however had to be a secret mission otherwise they feared to be scolded by the adults. It is interesting to note Chughtai’s narration of the leisurely time that these two characters engaged in, they called the game “*dulhan-dulhan*” (bride-bride) which is usually known as *dulha-dulhan* (groom-bride) (Chughtai, Chughtai - The Essential Stories, 2019). They pretended to be married to each other and turned red and got shy. Marriage as an institution is considered compulsory especially for girls who are trained since they are born to ultimately become the wife. The games that they are encouraged to play during their leisurely hours as a child mainly involved responsibilities after marriage like taking care of dolls, cooking, marrying their dolls off and so on. Even though the marriage that the adults of the village made compulsory was a strictly heterosexual form of marriage, the narrator and her friend was intrigued by marriage and the ritual involved but not adhered to the stringent heterosexual form of it in their game. They were aware that they have to hide it from the adults, there can be two reasons for which they were secretive because they knew that they will be rebuked firstly because, Gainda was a widow, she had no right to pretend to wear *sindoor* or red *dupatta*, secondly, they were two girls who were pretending to put *sindoor* on each other. In the story, the narrator expressed that she and Gainda spoke about marriage for hours during their leisure and even felt shy. According to the narrator, even the adult women in their family spoke about marriage whenever they had leisure time (Chughtai, Vintage Chughtai, 2013). During the playtime the narrator’s brother appeared and they were scared of getting scolded. He was in a good mood, according to the narrator and tried to playfully pull Gainda towards him. Later, while the two girls were playing *dulhan-dulhan* he went upto Gainda and asked if she wants to marry him. The exchange that began during a leisurely playtime ended up in a situation that jeopardized relationships whose bitter consequence was experienced primarily by Gainda and her son.

The Quilt and the Multifaceted Nature of Leisure

The Quilt is Chughtai’s one of the most controversial and talked-about stories. The narrator of the story recalls her childhood in this story. In this story, the concept of leisure has been problematized and can be studied from multiple perspectives. She enjoyed her leisurely hours playing with her brothers and his friends. She identified herself to be aggressive who fought with other boys and girls while her sisters were keen on drawing attention of admirers (Chughtai, Chughtai - The Essential Stories, 2019). She narrated, her mother was not quite impressed with her behavior and decided to keep her at her aunt’s (her mother’s adopted sister) place while going out of station. The narrator here transcended all the boundaries made for girl children in specific cultural contexts, that did not approve of girls to play with boys and become aggressive. Girls are encouraged to have female friends and are taught to play with dolls and kitchen sets and remain timid and shy even when they are enjoying their leisure time. The narrator’s mother was apprehensive of keeping her daughter behind because she was travelling outstation and she found no one to be reliable enough to keep a check on her daughter, therefore she left the narrator at her aunt’s place. The aunt whom the narrator referred as Begum Jaan was married to a Nawab. The story unfolded when the narrator went to stay with her aunt for a week. The nawab sahib was believed to be pious because no one ever witnessed him spending his leisure with any nautch girl or sex worker unlike other nawabs of that time. He did not get involve in any other leisurely activities of the nawabs like breeding pigeons or watching cockfight. He only took interest in young boys who were fair and slender (Chughtai, Chughtai - The Essential Stories, 2019). Chughtai later mentioned an instance where a young boy escaped from the nawab, never to come back even when the nawab gave them gifts and new clothes. It was referred as “*strange hobby*” of the nawab,

he encouraged the boys to stay with him and called them his students. The nawab was considered a virtuous man because he abstained from any heterosexual engagements during leisure like visiting nautch girls. There was however a homosexual layer in his leisurely engagements with the young boys whom he called his students (Khanna, 2014). The leisurely intimate encounters of the nawab were not leisurely enjoyment for some or many of his young partners, their consent was not even a consideration in this instance. Begum Jaan, the nawab's wife was ignored by him since the day of their marriage. The begum witnessed herself the amount of care and the intensity of special treatment given to the boys according to the instruction of the nawab. It completely broke her heart and she tried to find relief in at least reading books. One cannot say for sure whether it can be called her leisure because to her, reading books especially romantic novels was an escape route from unrequited love. She left reading novels because the sentimental verses pushed her towards more depression (Chughtai, Chughtai - The Essential Stories, 2019). The narrator declared, nothing stopped Begum Jaan from living her life to the fullest. Begum Jaan's entire life was a leisure if the storyline of *Lihaaf* or *The Quilt* is followed, whether she chose it herself or circumstances left her with no other choice is a profound issue. The narrator expressed, the reason why Begum Jaan finally received comfort, it was because of Rabbu, a maid assigned to massage Begum Jaan for hours. Rabbu massaged Begum Jaan for long hours and the massage became the most significant part in the latter's life. The long hours were leisurely hours for Begum Jaan, she was the receiver and Rabbu, being the maid performed her duty, those were working hours for her. A constant itch bothered Begum Jaan, doctors and hakeems opined that there was nothing unusual on the skin, it might be an infection under the skin (Chughtai, Chughtai - The Essential Stories, 2019). Rabbu comforted Begum and smiled saying, there was nothing wrong, nothing to worry about. Begum Jaan, as described by the narrator did not move out, she spent her eternal leisure lying on a carpet and munching dry fruits while Rabbu rubbed her back. To add another perspective to the story Chughtai mentioned that the other maids were jealous of Rabbu and gossiped about her and Begum during their leisure. They gossiped that the Begum of the house ate, sat and even slept with a maid, their curiosity about the two knew no end.

When the narrator visited Begum Jaan, she witnessed Rabbu massaging her. Ismat Chughtai as a storyteller bridged sexual gaps of the society as she established a sexual intimacy between Begum and Rabbu, class, caste, gender, sexuality, appearance being some of the categories. The narrator of the story was not aware of her aunt's sexual encounters with Rabbu rather, as a small girl she could not identify it to be a sexual act when she woke up at night to find out that Begum's quilt was vigorously shaking. While Rabbu was out for few days, the narrator found out that Begum Jaan was feeling uneasy. It was a leisure trip for the narrator when her mother dropped her at her aunt's place. She was shuffling a deck of cards and noticing her aunt's discomfort in the absence of Rabbu asked her if she should rub her back. To her, this was a happy leisurely experience to make her favorite aunt feel comfortable and take care of her in the absence of her care taker. Her vacation turned into a lifelong trauma when her aunt asked her to lie down beside and started counting her ribs. She felt an unusual discomfort when her aunt tried to touch her inappropriately in Rabbu's absence. Her leisure trip was terrifying and she started counting days for her mother to return. Her aunt's leisurely activities turned out to be a trauma for her. In case of child sexual abuse even today where adult family members are found guilty, the culprits seek out opportunities during playtime to abuse the child. Leisure time no longer remain a fun experience for the child, sometimes it stays as a lifelong trauma like the narrator of Chughtai's *Lihaaf*. Attachment theory proposes, human beings are capable of establishing strong emotional bonds with others especially if they experience emotional distress and are lonely and isolated. Sometimes lack of intimate relationship with peers result in frustration that led them to seek intimacy with under-aged individuals (Theories and Etiology of Child Sexual Abuse by Males, 2022). In this story Chughtai problematized the concept of leisure itself may be not intentionally. Leisure here can be perceived from several layers. Firstly, the narrator was discouraged by her mother to play with boys and therefore was sent to her aunt when her mother went out of station. She found out later that during her leisurely vacation at her favorite aunt's place, Begum Jaan was "more terrifying than all the loafers of the world" (Chughtai, Chughtai - The Essential Stories, 2019). Secondly, the nawab or Begum Jaan's husband was involved with young boys and preferred to spend his leisurely hours with them, question of consent gets problematized here. Thirdly, this led Begum Jaan to look for leisurely activities that would keep her engaged to spend her hours of the day. In stories of Chughtai like *The Rock*, the wife was engaged during her leisurely hours to contribute to her husband's and his family's leisure activities. It is a part of the wife's job to satisfy her husband's leisurely hours along with performing other duties for him. In *The Quilt*, Begum Jaan was entitled to a leisure forever which initially depressed her, she felt lonely. She tried to engage herself in reading romantic novels but got disturbed by them. Fourthly, during Rabbu and Begum Jaan's hours together, one might argue that it was working hours for Rabbu and leisure hours for the latter. However, one cannot be certain about the idea that whether the entire time that Rabbu spent with Begum Jaan were working hours for her or not. When did her working hours end and leisurely hours began, lies in a labyrinth. Her relationship with Begum Jaan sometimes turned into that of a couple. Fifthly, the other servants who were jealous of Rabbu spent their leisure gossiping about Rabbu and Begum Jaan. Sixthly, the

narrator's vacation turned into a traumatizing experience that would haunt her in the years to come. While the narrator felt discomfort by Begum's touch, Begum was quite casual about her activities.

5. Conclusion :

Chughtai's portrayal of leisure in the short stories unfolded the social dimensions that are mirror images of the prevalent societal conditions not just during that period but even today. Another story titled *Kallu* expresses a complete shift in the understanding of leisure, it considers the socio-economic diversities. In this story, Chughtai offers, it is the socio-economic status that decides who will be privileged enough to experience a leisure time to play. Not every human in the society is entitled to encounter a time to relax and spend according to her or his or the person's will that they can call leisure. The concept of leisure at the end stands in a labyrinth. The study of leisure has remained limited to consumption, sports, recreation and the like. It would be further interesting to explore leisure from multiple angles. The present study has limited itself in analyzing two stories of Chughtai in details. It would contribute to further enhancement of the discourse of Sociology of leisure if more content by other authors is approached to explore the leisure quotient.

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