

From Tradition to Transformation: Women's Cultural Practices and Evolving Gender Identity in the Writings of Ismat Chughtai

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Abstract: This paper discusses how Ismat Chughtai's Urdu writing depicts the complex relationship between women's cultural practices and changing gender identification. The research looks at Chughtai's portrayal of Indian women in the middle of the twentieth century negotiating both conventional cultural expectations and developing modern identities through a feminist literary analysis of her key works. Her female characters employ ordinary cultural performances, domestic rituals, and society rites as places of both compliance and resistance. The intricate relationship between tradition and modernity is depicted in Chughtai's works, where women's participation in cultural pursuits is both a means of revolt and a means of patriarchal control. Depending on how women manage their participation, traditional practices such as religious observances, marital ceremonies, and domestic routines may be both liberating and constrictive. The paper analyses important works including "Lihaaf," "Chauthi Ka Joda," and "Tedhi Lakeer," showing how cultural traditions transform into performative activities that enable women to create, question, and reinterpret their gender identities. Using postcolonial feminist theory and performance studies, the study shows how Chughtai's female characters use cultural practices to build their identities and critique society. The results imply that Chughtai's fictional writing uses cultural activities as liminal areas where conventional gender norms are both challenged and maintained. As shown in her portrayal of women's sexuality, independence, and domestic autonomy, this encourages the development of mixed identities that challenge the dichotomies of modernity and tradition. Chughtai's portrayal of cultural practices as dynamic performances that assist women's emerging selfhood foreshadows current debates on feminist agency and cultural authenticity.

Keywords : Gender identity, Cultural practices, Feminism, Performance theory, Modernity in Urdu literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most controversial authors of twentieth-century Urdu literature, Ismat Chughtai defied gender stereotypes by depicting female desire, independence, and defiance without holding back. Writing in the tumultuous 1940s and 1950s, Chughtai established herself as a leading figure in the Progressive Writers' Movement, which aimed to challenge social injustices and support underrepresented voices. The Indian subcontinent was going through a time of tremendous cultural upheaval during her literary career, which included the fight for independence, the partition, and the ensuing balancing act between traditional values and modernizing forces.

Women were at the heart of discussions concerning social development and cultural authenticity during this revolutionary time. From marriage rites to household chores, traditional behaviors that had long defined feminine

identity turned became places of contention where conflicting ideas of what it meant to be a woman were performed and discussed. Cultural practices themselves become the site of identity formation and societal transformation in Chughtai's work, which portrays women navigating between inherited traditions and new opportunities for self-determination with surprising delicacy.

Even though Ismat Chughtai's feminist themes and biographical importance have been the subject of much research, critical analysis has mostly ignored the performative aspects of women's cultural activities in her work. The complicated debates that take place within cultural practices itself are often overlooked in existing studies, which read her female characters via binary frames of either opposition to or compliance to patriarchal customs. This scholarly gap is a reflection of a larger flaw in literary criticism that views home routines, cultural rites, and ceremonies as incidental background components rather than as dynamic spaces where gender identity is actively created, challenged, and changed.

Although performance theory has the ability to shed light on how Chughtai's characters balance socially mandated roles with their own agency, its application to her work is yet noticeably undeveloped. The focus placed by performance theory on the cyclical process of identity creation provides important insights into how women's engagement in customary practices may both uphold and challenge gender inequalities. By analysing cultural practices as performative identity locations in Chughtai's literature, this study fills up these important gaps.

This study focuses on the dialectical relationship between conformity and resistance rather than tradition and modernity as opposing forces. It contends that Chughtai's female characters show how cultural performances can act as transitional spaces for identity transformation, allowing the emergence of hybrid identities that go beyond crude traditional-modern dichotomies.

This study argues that cultural practices in Ismat Chughtai's works serve as liminal places where conventional gender norms are both upheld and challenged, allowing women to construct hybrid identities that go beyond the dichotomy of tradition and modernity. Chughtai illustrates how women's involvement in cultural performances turns into a strategic site of negotiation where expected feminine roles are both enacted and changed through her subtle depictions of marriage ceremonies, household rituals, and communal observances. Her female figures show how identity development happens through the repeated performance of tradition rather than its outright rejection by using the performative aspects of cultural traditions to create places for autonomy within seeming uniformity. This dialectical process positions Chughtai as a foresighted theorist of performative gender identity, anticipating current feminist discussions about authenticity, choice, and the complex relationship between women's empowerment and cultural preservation.

2. Methodology & Scope

This study uses performance theory in conjunction with a feminist literary analysis framework to investigate how cultural practices function as places of identity building in Chughtai's novels. Three key narratives are the main focus of the study: "Lihaaf" (The Quilt), which examines covert resistance in domestic settings; "Chauthi Ka Joda" (The Fourth Day's Wedding Dress), which looks at marriage ceremonies as performative locations; and "Tedhi Lakeer" (The Crooked Line), which examines the relationship between education and cultural change. The theory heavily references Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which holds that gender identity is not expressed by an intrinsic nature but rather develops via repeated performances. Butler's interpretation of performativity as both enabling and limiting offers important new perspectives on how Chughtai's female characters deal with social norms. Postcolonial feminist theory, especially Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity and Saba Mahmood's work on agency within conventional frameworks, complements this approach by shedding light on how colonial subjects construct "third spaces" of cultural negotiation. When combined, these frameworks allow for an analysis that steers clear of victimhood and romanticisation narratives while acknowledging the complexity of women's agency within societal norms that appear to be repressive.

3. Theoretical Discussion

Judith Butler's groundbreaking idea of gender performativity profoundly contradicts essentialist ideas of identity by contending that gender is an outcome of repeated performances that provide the appearance of a consistent, natural identity rather than an innate trait. According to Butler, "gender is not something one is, it is something one does," highlighting the fact that identity is not expressed by a pre-existing essence but rather arises via the repetitive citation of normative behaviours. When applied to literary cultural practices, this theoretical paradigm is especially enlightening since it shows how seemingly conventional activities serve as performative spaces where gender identities are constantly created and even subverted.

Marriage ceremonies and household rituals are examples of cultural practices that function as recurring performances that both reinforce and undermine gender boundaries. Since the exact repetition necessary to uphold established gender norms also creates opportunities for diversity, resistance, and alternative manifestations, every iteration of these activities has the potential to undergo metamorphosis. Through this perspective, the performative aspect of tradition itself is revealed: traditions are no longer static stores of cultural meaning but rather dynamic processes that need to be continuously reenacted in order to retain their power. This knowledge enables a more sophisticated examination of the ways in which women in Chughtai's literature move between resistance and compliance, negotiating their identities both within and outside of socially mandated positions through the performative aspects of cultural activities.

The innovative work of Saba Mahmood on agency within conventional contexts challenges Western feminist presumptions that link women's empowerment to defiance of cultural or religious norms. Mahmood contends that agency should be seen as the ability to act in a variety of historical and cultural circumstances, including some that Western feminism could view as oppressive, rather than only as resistance to power systems. Her ethnographic research on the Egyptian women's mosque movement shows how religious rituals may serve as spaces for empowerment and self-cultivation, exposing forms of agency that function by upholding rather than challenging conventional norms.

4. Cultural Conformity and Resistance

In this perspective, the idea of resistance through seeming compliance becomes essential because it acknowledges that women's deliberate engagement in customs may serve as a kind of agency that discreetly alters and operates within preexisting power systems. This method enables a more complex comprehension of the ways in which Chughtai's characters use cultural performance to exert agency.

i. Marriage Customs as Performance Locations

"Chauthi Ka Joda" (The Fourth Day's Wedding Dress) by Ismat Chughtai depicts marriage ceremonies as intricate performative spaces where conventional gender norms are both enacted and challenged. The story's main emphasis on the intricate wedding planning shows how marital rituals are like theatrical productions that need women's careful adherence to predetermined roles. Through repeated acts of conformity to patriarchal norms, these rituals function as cultural performances that shape feminine identity, as the protagonist Kubra's story illustrates. The performative aspect of marriage traditions, where women's value is determined by their capacity to exemplify idealized feminine roles, is symbolized by the fixation on wedding apparel, especially the importance of the garment worn on the fourth day. Chughtai's narrative style reveals how these ostensibly joyous events conceal more profound concerns about the monetization of women and the conversion of personal identity into communal property.

Through material trade systems that see women as valued commodities, ritual involvement in marriage rituals in "Chauthi Ka Joda" strengthens patriarchal norms. Women's bodies are used as platforms for demonstrating economic power, and the intricate arrangements around bridal trousseau goods, jewels, and ceremonial attire serve as performative displays of family riches and social standing. Chughtai's thorough explanations of the painstaking process of making bridal attire demonstrate how these material customs turn women into commodities of trade, with their worth being based on how well they can raise the status of their families. The story's emphasis on the bride's attire and accessories highlights how marriage rites function as commercial transactions, with women's involvement in these rites serving to both celebrate and reaffirm their status as interchangeable property. These economic displays are ritualized, which illustrates how cultural practices normalize patriarchal power systems via recurring acts that seem inevitable and natural.

But Chughtai's story also highlights instances of subtly defying seeming uniformity, showing how women can nevertheless exert agency even in constrictive ceremonial contexts. In contrast to overt rebellion, Kubra's interior reactions to the wedding preparations show modes of resistance that function through critical observation and psychological detachment. Her wry observations on the ridiculousness of some traditions demonstrate an intellectual detachment from the rites she engages in, implying that involvement does not always imply approval. The narrative demonstrates how women construct spaces for individual agency by utilizing the performative character of marriage rituals to protect personal liberty while meeting social expectations. According to Chughtai's characterization, women may be criticizing and opposing these same activities via subtly participating in or expressing irony, even when they seem to be completely adhering to customary standards.

In Chughtai's depiction of marital ceremonies, the idea of women's autonomy in executing ideal femininity becomes especially complex. The narrative illustrates how women's adept presentation of feminine ideals makes them active players in creating their own subordination, but it also offers chances for calculated manipulation of societal expectations. Kubra's skill at negotiating wedding traditions shows how women get a sophisticated awareness of cultural acts that they may use to their advantage. According to the story, women's proficiency in stereotypically feminine duties

is a type of cultural capital that may be used as a tool to negotiate patriarchal systems. Chughtai's work highlights the contradictory character of women's agency in marriage rituals: although their effective portrayal of the perfect lady simultaneously gives them social recognition and restricted authority, it also reinforces patriarchal expectations.

In "Chauthi Ka Joda," Chughtai illustrates how marriage rites serve as transitional settings where conventional gender norms are quietly altered and reinforced. The narrative demonstrates how cultural customs related to marriage rituals provide women the chance to exert agency under restrictive conditions by utilizing their performative abilities to balance their own wishes with those of society. The narrative's in-depth examination of ritual involvement demonstrates how women's adherence to cultural norms may act as a form of resistance at the same time, resulting in hybrid identities that neither totally accept nor reject patriarchal demands. In the end, Chughtai's depiction implies that marriage ceremonies function as intricate performative spaces where women's identity development takes place through negotiation as opposed to straightforward cultural norm acceptance or rejection.

ii. Domestic Environments and Covert Resistance

Chughtai's "Lihaaf" uses the zenana as a complicated performance arena where meticulously planned household routines simultaneously embody and transgress established gender norms. Chughtai portrays the women's quarters as a theatrical setting where alternate kinds of intimacy and power might thrive outside of patriarchal monitoring, rather than just as a place of female solitude. According to the narrator's youthful viewpoint, "Begum Jan's room had taken on the mysterious quality of a shrine" (Chughtai 7). This suggests that when domestic spaces become locations of female action, they take on hallowed dimensions. The design of the Zenana itself becomes performative, with its concealed alcoves and curtained areas serving as both a stage for the elaborate production of respectability and a place to hide rebellious activity. Chughtai's in-depth depictions of the home environment show how women turn places of imprisonment into theaters of resistance, where alternate manifestations of female friendship and desire are concealed by customary cultural norms.

Through seemingly ordinary cultural practices that conceal transgressive connections and alternate forms of female bonding, Chughtai's in-depth studies of the home environment show how women transforCoded resistance manifests. Begum Jan's bathing procedures, grooming rites, and afternoon relaxation periods are all extensive preparations for her daily routines that serve as performances that both meet conventional standards of feminine conduct and provide opportunity for personal contacts. Chughtai reveals how traditional female self-care practices become into coded performances that allow for physical intimacy between women by describing how "the oil massage sessions became elaborate rituals" (Chughtai 12). The custom of female servants caring for their mistresses offers acceptable contexts for intimate physical contact that may otherwise be frowned upon or prohibited. By manipulating the exact cultural practices intended to control their behavior, women exercise agency through these coded performances, turning household routines into locations for resistance and the development of alternative relationships.

The narrative illustrates how cultural norms may accept transgressive impulses while preserving social legitimacy by treating different sexualities inside conventional frames. Begum Jan and her maid Rabbu's relationship follows well-established mistress-servant relationship norms, which provide their close bond cultural cover. Chughtai's story illustrates how conventional power structures may be subverted to allow for other kinds of closeness, as "the Begum's demands for Rabbu's constant attention seemed perfectly natural within the household hierarchy" (Chughtai 15). The cultural practice of female companionship in zenana places shows how women intentionally use traditional frameworks to preserve transgressive desires by legitimizing interactions that may otherwise be rejected. The narrative implies that traditional cultural traditions might offer safe havens where non-normative relationships can thrive under the pretense of traditional home arrangements, as opposed to merely repressing different sexualities.

In women's domestic acts, the quilt itself becomes a potent emblem of concealed female action, signifying both hiding and disclosure. A parallel for female desire that is both concealed and strikingly apparent is created by Chughtai's well-known depiction of the "elephant-like" motions beneath the blanket (Chughtai 18). The quilt suggests how household items become involved in women's resistance tactics by serving as a performative prop that permits transgression while preserving plausible deniability. The rhythmic motions below the quilt illustrate how women create complex codes for communicating forbidden desires, functioning as a type of cultural performance that relies on hint rather than overt disclosure. Through performances that are both revelatory and concealing, the quilt's dual role as stage and covering highlights the complex ways that domestic spaces support women's autonomy.

Perhaps the most complex kind of resistance in Chughtai's story is the act of respectability that conceals violation. Begum Jan's close adherence to religious and social customs produces an appearance of conformity that serves as a pretext for her connection with Rabbu. In order to avoid suspicion, women deliberately enhance their presentation of respectability, as the account illustrates how "her prayers became more frequent and elaborate" as her transgressive connection deepens (Chughtai 20). This performative approach illustrates how resistance functions through enhanced

rather than lessened cultural performance, highlighting the intricate agreements needed for women to preserve alternative relationships within conventional communities. Chughtai's story finally shows how the most successful ways for women to resist would not be to reject cultural traditions but rather to strategically use them in order to make room for agency and other kinds of closeness.

iii. Education and Cultural Transformation

Chughtai's "Tedhi Lakeer" depicts modern education as a revolutionary force that both creates new kinds of cultural performance and profoundly undermines established traditions. Shaman, the main character, demonstrates via his educational path how formal education challenges prevailing societal norms by introducing alternate frameworks for comprehending women's responsibilities and capacities. Chughtai illustrates the ability of education to denaturalize traditional traditions by exposing their manufactured rather than inherent character by showing how "the college environment exposed her to ideas that made the old customs seem arbitrary and oppressive" (Chughtai 45). The story demonstrates how schools turn into places where young women are exposed to different conceptions of femininity that prioritize intellectual success and individual freedom over household responsibilities. Chughtai's complex depiction, however, shows that education does more than just replace traditional knowledge; rather, it fosters tense negotiations between inherited cultural practices and recently learned intellectual frameworks, requiring women to devise complex coping mechanisms for conflicting value systems.

The main locations where the transforming power of education is most evident and controversial are intergenerational disputes over cultural engagement. Shaman's connection with her mother serves as an example of how disparities in education lead to deep-seated disputes over the significance and worth of customs. The narrative demonstrates how "her mother's insistence on elaborate wedding preparations seemed like meaningless ritual to Shaman's educated sensibilities" (Chughtai 52), indicating how education creates vital distance from activities that earlier generations thought sacred and necessary. Beyond personal preferences, these tensions reflect larger societal fights between tradition and modernity, with educated women unwillingly participating in acts they cannot completely avoid but intellectually oppose. Chughtai's depiction demonstrates how these conflicts between generations compel families to find new ways to practice culture that can meet both contemporary goals and traditional expectations, resulting in hybrid forms of cultural performance that appease several audiences while completely disappointing none.

The emergence of hybrid identities is arguably the most intricate way that education affects cultural change in "Tedhi Lakeer." By illustrating how educated women develop new forms of cultural identity that neither entirely accept nor reject ancient customs, Shaman's character reflects the conflicts between traditional forms and modern goals. According to Chughtai, "she learned to perform the required rituals while privately questioning their significance" (Chughtai 61), demonstrating how education allows women to create internal frameworks for critical appraisal while maintaining exterior compliance with customary expectations. Women must negotiate several cultural contexts that demand distinct self-expressions, necessitating the development of a hybrid identity that demands complex performative abilities. The story illustrates how education gives women the intellectual capacity to examine traditional practices while also requiring them to uphold social ties that rely on their engagement in these same practices. This results in intricate forms of cultural performance that strike a balance between strategic necessity and authenticity.

In the novel, cultural traditions serve as essential links between the past and the future, permitting continuity while allowing for change. Chughtai's story illustrates how some customs may be used to represent contemporary goals rather than being a hindrance to one's own growth. The narrative demonstrates how cultural customs may be reinterpreted to fulfill new functions while preserving their formal structure, as seen by the way "family celebrations became opportunities for Shaman to demonstrate her ability to honor tradition while pursuing her own goals" (Chughtai 68). Families can preserve cultural coherence while adjusting to new situations thanks to these traditions, which offer comfortable contexts within which strange changes can be negotiated. The narrative suggests how tradition and modernity may coexist via imaginative reinterpretation rather than mutual rejection by implying that cultural practices have an innate flexibility that allows them to adapt to shifting social situations without losing their fundamental value.

The most intricate example of cultural change in Chughtai's story is the intricate balancing act between individual aspirations and family expectations that education enables. Maintaining familial ties while pursuing higher education necessitates ongoing performative changes that strike a balance between conflicting expectations. The narrative illustrates how educated women become proficient cultural performers who can occupy both traditional and modern roles by showing how "she developed elaborate strategies for satisfying her family's need for traditional compliance while creating space for her own intellectual development" (Chughtai 75). This process of negotiation changes personal preferences as well as family expectations, resulting in new cultural practices that support women's growth while maintaining vital family ties. The most significant influence of education, according to Chughtai's image,

is not in its ability to free women from traditional culture but rather in its ability to facilitate more complex and calculated forms of cultural engagement that meet the demands of both individuals and society as a whole.

5. Implications and Contemporary Relevance

In the midst of India's independence movement and cultural turmoil in the 1940s and 1950s, Ismat Chughtai became a groundbreaking voice in twentieth-century Urdu writing, questioning traditional depictions of women. Critical analysis has ignored the performative aspects of women's cultural practices, interpreting characters through binary frameworks of resistance versus conformity rather than acknowledging complex negotiations within cultural practices themselves, despite the fact that Chughtai's feminist themes have been the subject of much scholarship. In order to facilitate the development of hybrid identities that go beyond the dichotomies of tradition and modernity, this study contends that cultural practices in Chughtai's literature serve as liminal places where conventional gender norms are both upheld and challenged.

i. Literary Innovation

Chughtai's narrative tactics exhibit a tremendous level of literary invention that is decades ahead of current academic frameworks. She develops a "performative narrative technique" that reflects the resistance tactics of her characters by using clever focalization, especially the kid narrator in "Lihaaf," to establish a distinct perspective that both exposes and hides women's transgressive acts. Reading itself is a type of cultural interpretation because of this multi-layered narrative, which necessitates active reader engagement in deciphering cultural performances.

Her comprehensive use of symbolism—the wedding gown, the quilt, and the academic credentials—represents a major advancement in feminist literary style. By facilitating agency while preserving plausible deniability, these items serve as performative props that produce "coded resistance narratives" that appeal to several audiences at once. Beyond Urdu writing, Chughtai's impact is evident in the narrative structures she established, which are still used by postcolonial feminist authors today. Her method of using cultural performance rather than dramatic revolt to depict women's autonomy has become a standard in feminist literature throughout the world.

ii. Theoretical Contributions

Chughtai's art foreshadows current discussions of choice feminism by offering complex depictions of women expressing agency amid seeming adherence to customs. Her characters exhibit "strategic essentialism," purposefully using stereotypically feminine positions to further their own goals while preserving their social validity. This foresighted realization shows that agency cannot be quantified just by defiance of customs, implying that decisions that appear conservative could actually be complex ways of negotiating patriarchal systems.

Her depiction of women being empowered via their proficiency in traditional cultural performances foreshadows by decades Saba Mahmood's seminal work on agency within religious settings. Understanding how women in non-Western contexts exert agency within cultural traditions is made possible by Chughtai's realization that traditional behaviors may be locations of empowerment rather than only oppression.

Chughtai's characters illustrate how colonial subjects construct "third spaces" of cultural negotiation, embodying Bhabha's idea of hybridity prior to its formal articulation, according to postcolonial feminist theory. Her writings demonstrate how hybrid identities arise via performance rather than synthesis, offering literary support for the constructive character of cultural ambivalence.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that cultural practices in Chughtai's novels serve as intricate performative spaces that allow women to develop hybrid identities while both reinforcing and subverting established gender norms. By examining "Lihaaf," "Chauthi Ka Joda," and "Tedhi Lakeer," the study shows how marital rites, household customs, and educational activities turn into transitional areas where women must choose between resistance and conformity. Through her nuanced awareness that women's agency functions through strategic involvement in cultural performances rather than simple rejection of old traditions, Chughtai's feminist perspective becomes more sophisticated.

Chughtai's study demonstrates how recurrent cultural performances provide possibilities for both the stabilization and modification of gender categories, demonstrating how performance theory is very successful in understanding the creation of gender identity. In conjunction with postcolonial feminist frameworks, Butler's notion of performativity sheds light on how Chughtai's characters utilize cultural practices' repetitive nature to provide places for alternate self-expressions while preserving social validity.

This study fills important gaps in Chughtai scholarship by analyzing the intricate debates taking place inside cultural practices themselves, rather than relying solely on dichotomous interpretations of resistance vs compliance. The methodological breakthrough of fusing performance theory with feminist literary analysis offers fresh perspectives on

how women's agency functions in conventional settings. This multidisciplinary approach shows how performance studies theoretical structures may improve comprehension of postcolonial women's writing and provides insightful information for both gender studies and literary criticism.

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