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Ismat Chughtai idea of womanhood and identity analysed in the ‘*The quilt*’ (*Lihaaf*)

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Abstract

Ismat Chughtai is regarded as a cultural critic who discarded the set traditions unsuited to the modern life and challenged the societal norms set not only womanhood but on an individual's identity in a multicultural society. She spoke with an authenticity that eluded many and her writings are representative of the quest for personhood to delve into the depths of what it means to be a woman. This paper explores the two modes of identity, gendered and religious, to present a nuanced and inclusive reading of multiculturalism and feminism. Taking Chughtai's path-breaking story, *The Quilt (Lihaaf)* into consideration, the paper seeks to analyse the idea of womanhood and the female identity as portrayed by her.

Keywords: Womanhood, identity, multiculturalism, feminism, deconstruction

Introduction

“I am still labelled as the writer of *Lihaaf*. The story brought me so much notoriety that I got sick of life. It became the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight.” These were the words of Ismat Chughtai in her book *A Life in Words: Memoirs* about how the short story changed her life, and not for good. Ismat Chughtai is regarded as a cultural critic who discarded the set traditions unsuited to the modern life and challenged the societal norms set not only womanhood but on an individual's identity in a multicultural society. She spoke with an authenticity that eluded many and her writings are representative of the quest for personhood to delve into the depths of what it means to be a woman. This paper explores the two modes of identity, gendered and religious, to present a nuanced and inclusive reading of multiculturalism and feminism. To analyse this, Ismat Chughtai's short story *The Quilt (Lihaaf)* is studied in accordance with the ideas presented by Judith Butler regarding the fluidity of identity and sexuality, and through a multiculturalist perspective as synthesised in the composite nature of women's customs.

The piercing honesty, sarcastically tragic, the wry humour, a melody of cruel irony and bitter reality -- the life and works of Ismat Chughtai are a commotion of fierce emotions which demonstrate a comprehensive blend of feminism and multiculturalism, which are both associated to progressive movements and have compatible and congruous goals. Ismat Chughtai was a first on numerous accounts. Regarded as the "Dame of Urdu literature," she left behind its arrogance to write with a boldness that retained the intricacy of the language. Chughtai spoke with an authenticity that eluded many. Her career spanning over four decades gave a new direction to the women's movement in the country. She was one of the leading writers of the Progressive Writers' Movement who rebelled against the idea of an 'ideal woman' and broke stereotypes, dismantling the dichotomy of femininity and masculinity created by the society. Along with repudiating societal norms set on a woman, she rejected normative constructions set by religion and instead advocated for a multicultural society that promoted the interaction of traditions and practices. By analysing her short story, *The Quilt*, this paper reviews her work and the controversial questions she raises in them regarding the idea of womanhood and identity.

In, bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of “sex”, butler argues

“The misapprehension about gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on,

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as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a 'one' who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today”.

Likewise, Ismat Chughtai through her works unwraps some of the most tightly held layers, thereby exposing the imposed gender-roles, manufactured ideas of feminine and hypocrisy of a patriarchal society. She wrote in Urdu, yet her language wasn't very ornate or of a baroque kind. Her writing was simple and frank. As she mentioned in an interview in *Mahfil*: "I didn't write what you would call "literarily" (169).

Language is, as post-structuralists like Foucault or Derrida believe, intimately connected to power. Foucault in his discourse analysis seeks to critically study the relationship between the text and the context within which it emerges. Derrida too, tries to use his tool of Deconstruction to manifest the underlying oppositional hierarchies created. Language then becomes a crucial turf of power relations. Chughtai keeps in mind the "graphic, colourful and colloquial" language of women in her stories as well. She primarily uses a faceless, first-person narration to accord a certain amount of intimacy and authenticity to the stories making them even more compelling and forceful.

Chughtai, herself came from a very liberal family at a time when most Muslim elites were still stuck in the feudal framework and conservative values. Such tolerance and open mindedness helped Chughtai delve in matters that had never been tackled before. Though many of her stories dealt with Muslim society and had Muslim women as protagonists, the themes reach out to the other sections of the country too, raising varied social questions. She highlights their vulnerability in the face of overarching religious codes, social mores and a State engrossed in its own narrow minded political gains. Her short stories, though a work of fiction, are an expose of the shocking state of women and their confrontations with the structures of domination that seek to bind them. Taking her path-breaking story, *The Quilt* into consideration, the paper seeks to analyse the idea of womanhood and the female identity as portrayed by Chughtai.

Women are subordinated in the Patriarchal structures of power and this subordination is reproduced by various means to force a sense of resignation and acceptance of the set norms. Simone de Beauvoir very aptly remarks in her work 'The Second Sex' that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 267). This act of "becoming" is guided and moulded by Patriarchy. Thus, a woman's identity is often confined as the "Other" to "Man". A woman only attains identity in association with a man and so, the ideas of marriage, family, and honor become of critical importance. These further continue to repress and strangulate women and reproduce the concept of 'an Ideal Woman'. Chughtai rebels against this ideal type and dismantles the notions of 'womanhood' as superimposed by the society. She takes apart the overt eroticism, the cultural burden and the idea of bearers of tradition associated with women.

The short story analysed is *The Quilt* or *Lihaaf*. This was one of the most controversial and well known works of Chughtai and was variously labeled as being obscene, and path breaking. The story first appeared in 1942 in an Urdu magazine *Adab-i-Latif* and Chughtai had to face a lot of criticism for the same, including an obscenity charge. While

lesbianism is often the talking point regarding *Lihaaf*, the story succulently brings to front numerous other issues such as a class biased society, the role of other women in taming or disciplining girls into accepting social norms, the composite culture of women within their domesticity etc. The story revolves around Begum Jaan who is very beautiful and was married off to a Nawab by her poverty-stricken family. It clearly points at the commodification of women and the marriage is a contract, where the woman's body becomes the means of upward mobility for her destitute family. The Nawab is older than the Begum and attracted to "young, fair and slim-waisted boys" whom he keeps at his place and showers them with both gifts and his attention. Thus, she bears the burden of an unsatisfactory marriage that she can't escape. Having no children or any other means to escape her ill fate, the Begum develops a lesbian relationship with her maid Rabbu. Rabbu provides a relief to the Begum's irritable 'itch' and the relationship goes beyond the contours of sexual into the emotional. "It was Rabbu who rescued her from the fall" (Chughtai 17).

The company and support provided by Rabbu to the Begum made up for the lack of love and care from the Nawab. De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* writes, "The Lesbian" is a description of sexual relations with women, which Beauvoir believed that society thought was a "forbidden path" (Beauvoir 479). However, a more apt idea is one presented by Judith Butler when she talks about fluidity of identity and sexuality (Butler and Salih 119). A multicultural world while according space to pluralistic identities, often ends up reinforcing the act of labeling oneself. Butler argues, "Conventionally, one comes out of the closet... so we are out of the closet, but into what? What new unbounded spatiality? Curiously, it is the figure of the closet that produces this expectation, and which guarantees its dissatisfaction. For being "out" always depends to some extent on being "in"; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being "out" must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as "out." (122)

To categorise Begum Jaan as 'homosexual' or 'bi-sexual' is not possible or justified. Chughtai, unintentionally, brings into focus one of the biggest banes of identity as mostly it is not self-affirmation, rather external recognition that is seen as validating a sense of self. Amartya Sen criticises how multiculturalism often strides on a 'solitaristic' (Heywood 267) path, exploring one role of the individual while ignoring others, of a multi-dimensional person. Chughtai's heroines are a product of their various facets -- their class, religion, marital status, sex, age all play a determinant role in moulding their characters. More importantly the Begum is portrayed as human rather than feminine whose sexuality is important for a contented life without paying heed to the 'divinity of abstention' often associated with the women in India. She engages with the intimate and 'sinful' to bring out the beauty and ugliness of what constitutes womanhood.

The first narrator is shown as a feisty young girl who manages to fight off the norms of 'femininity' being imposed by her mother and society. She is shown as aggressive and 'un-womanly,' something that she as a grown up, 'socialised' woman narrating her story, herself can't seem to understand. So to prevent any more fiascos, she is sent to the Begum by her mother who doesn't 'trust her to behave in a suitable manner in her absence.' The young narrator is seduced by the demure Begum and her frivolous rituals. One can draw a parallel to Beauvoir's description of how such personalities

(Begum) inspire consent in the non-conformist (narrator) and encourage the acceptance of 'womanhood'. In Rabbu's absence the girl becomes the victim of the Begum's discontent.

Ismat Chughtai unmasks the farce of marriage wherein the Begum is only a cover for the Nawab's 'heterosexuality' while her desires and sexual expectations are left unfulfilled. Rabbu is the only consolation in the aging Begum's life. She brings to light the subjugation and oppression witnessed in an unequal marriage; thus, one can't ignore the difficulty in attaining a divorce by a woman because of her dependence on her husband for basic needs and the stigma associated with the same especially if the divorce is sought on sexual grounds.

In this private realm while segregation from the outer domain seeks to confine the woman, Gail Minault writes how within this sphere, women get to spend a great deal of time together thereby giving rise to crucial relationships of friendship, sisterhood and love. This encourages various avenues of cooperation based on empathy. The maids in the household of Begum Jaan are jealous of the power enjoyed by Rabbu due to her closeness to Begum. They also poke fun at the relationship between the two and are obviously aware of what is transpiring between the two women. However, either due to lack of power or out of sympathy for the lonely Begum, the gossip is confined to the four walls of the zenana keeping it away from the ears of outsiders including the adopted sister of Begum, the narrator's mother. At the same time, story also talks of the vicissitudes of relationship among women. The Begum and Rabbu have their share of quarrels and pangs of jealousy. Nancy Hirschmann talks about the external and internal barriers to a woman's freedom. While many reformers focused on removing the external hurdles, Hirschmann points out the interdependence between constituting of the inner-self and the outer environment and remarks how the abstract "woman" whose "freedom" is allegedly restricted by her context is who she is because of that context (Hirschmann 46). Thus, both Begum and Rabbu are products of social-constructivism.

Chughtai's stories, their characters as well as the environment all reflect the multiculturalism of the land. Charles Taylor in his *Multiculturalism* puts forward, "We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us. Even after we outgrow some of these others – our parents, for instance – and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live."

Multiculturalism has become an anthem for a world grappling with demagogues, tyrants, states with bloodied fault lines, stateless masses searching for a home, and those feeling homeless in their own backyard. Wrought by an age of Enlightenment where liberty rested on shaky foundations of formal equality, recognition of differences was brushed under the carpet. However, the crisis ridden 'short 20th century' gave rise to introspection and dialogue. Multiculturalism sought to move away from the atomised individual to an 'embedded' one (Heywood, 1994). And it was this embeddedness that sought to throw light on the marginalised -- be it on the basis of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion or language. Gail Minault suggests the idea of 'composite nature of women's customs (Minault 109).'

Likewise, in the short story, the Muslim identity of women does not stop them from adopting local customs such as talisman or various other practices of warding off evil. Traditional reformers like Thanwi were often critical of these practices as these find no mention in the public or private sphere. The Western, educated reformers on the other hand found these as a sign of the ignorance of women. However, they fail to acknowledge the environment of constant pressure that often leads to faith in such beliefs. Similarly, superstitions or home-remedies for health were a result of doctors mostly being male thereby, not easily accessible to the women. Chughtai beautifully conveys all of this and much more through the ointments, oils, amulets resorted to by the Begum to cure her husband's indifference and the perennial itch. The kind of multiculturalism penetrating works of Ismat Chughtai is what Rochana Bajpai regards as "weak multiculturalism." (Bajpai, 2015) Considered as an "unconscious feminist" she laughed in the face of blasphemy and provided a refreshing take on the identity of not just the Indian Muslim woman, but the idea of womanhood in general. (Naqvi "The Beguiling Ismat") For Chughtai literature could never be viewed in isolation. She argues,

"History and literature always go hand in hand and will continue thus. Culture too can never be separated from literature and, as for politics, despite the forced separation of politics and literature induced by political pressures; something of its real colour will eventually seep through" (Chughtai "My Friend")

'*The Quilt*' and her other stories remain the face of progressive feminist literature and provide inspiration to take up the challenges of femininity, sexuality and family, to find solutions to the conundrum, especially in contemporary India which remains straddled in the fundamental and traditional models of identity set by the society.

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