Breaking the Prolonged Silence of Agonies: A Glimpse into Ismat Chughtai's Short Stories

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Abstract

Ismat Chughtai was one of the most prolific and courageous Urdu writers known for her revolutionary and unconventional writings. She was a legend of Urdu literature who remained champion of 'terhi lakeer' instead of 'the straightway'. She often struck an outrageous attitude in her writings. Undoubtedly, she was an excellent story writer of an individual and unique style. Instead of adopting the common path Chughtai presented the hidden sexual relations and problems of the male dominated society in a very ingenuous and impressive manner. She made a special place among the hearts of women because in her short stories there was a settled new world concerned with women. Here the women were not weak, wretched and exploited. They were not constrained to fulfil the duties of women against the injustice of the patriarchal society but they were always two steps ahead of men. She has written many memorable stories in which some recognizable stories are Lihaaf, Chauthi Ka Joda, Gainda, Nanhi Ki Nani, Ghar Wali ,The Wedding Suit, The Home maker, Tiny’s Granny, etc. Some of her stories (Lihaaf,Gainda, The Wedding Suit, The Home maker, Tiny’s Granny) will be analysed in the present paper to focus on the conservative patriarchy of the society and rebellious steps of her women against it.

Keywords : ingenuous; irrepressible; susceptibility; zenana; impertinence; vulnerability
Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991) was one of the most famous and accomplished Indian writers in Urdu. She was born into a muslim family of Uttar Pradesh. She was the ninth of the ten children born to Mirza Quaseem Beg. Her father was an honest civil servant. All her sisters were older than her. When she was quite young she got married. Her father supported her education while her mother and relatives were against her education. In her Memoir, “Leaving Aligarh once again,” Chughtai says “When I read that the women were the weaker sex and that they were easily corruptible; it had strange impact on me. I felt angrier with myself rather than the society, thinking there must be something lacking in me. I felt pity, not anger, for my parents. They were trapped in their limited world.” (Chughtai 110) She was a writer and director, known for Arzoo (1950), Junoon (1979) and Scorching Winds (1974). She was the first Indian Muslim woman who had the degrees of B.A and B.Ed. In this period she started writing in secret, due to violent opposition to her education from her Muslim relatives. Chughtai’s short stories reflect the cultural legacy of the region in which she lived. She was a liberal Muslim whose daughter and nephew were married to Hindus. Her brother, Mirza Azim Beg Chughtai, an established writer, was her first teacher and mentor. The frankness in her nature and writing was due to the fact that the better part of her childhood was spent in the company of her brothers. Many of her books have been banned during their publication history because of her reformist and bold attitude.

The miserable situation of women, their pain, affliction and exploitation have been some of the much-written-about themes from ancient time to the present day. Many renowned innovative writers have given an account to the sentiments, problems and struggle of women with utter disgust and despair. Ismat Chughtai was one of them who justified and explored women’s desires and women’s sexuality through her writings. She writes art for life mode with irrepressible honesty and truthfulness. She advocates modernity and progress in her writings and is known for her indomitable spirit and a fierce feminist ideology. The focus of the present paper is on some of the
most memorable Urdu short stories by Ismat Chughtai which are concerning the mutiny and serenity of women for ages.

Ismat Chughtai is perhaps one of the most evocative, controversial and powerful writers of Urdu literature. Along with Rashid Jahan, Wajeda Tabassum and Qurratulain Hyder, Ismat’s work stands for the birth of a revolutionary feminist politics and aesthetics in twentieth century Urdu Literature. Ismat Chughtai was such an artist who popularized female susceptibility by articulating their feelings and problems. She speaks ardently in opposition to orthodoxy and obstinacy of the society through her writings. She also offers middle class manners and other emerging conflicts of modern India. She conveys the themes in bold, innovative, rebellious and unabashedly realistic way. Chughtai was a successful supporter against hackneyed traditions and customs that were draining the middle and lower-middle class social order. She writes against the cultural practices of the society and gives the fervent voice for the unheard.

Chughtai wrote in multiple literary genres starting from afsanas to novels, novellas, drama, and traditional genres of Urdu literature. Her well-known novel Terhi Lakir (The Crooked Line) produced a lot of readers to Chughtai both at home and abroad, and it also enhanced the reputation of modern Urdu fiction. But her most noteworthy achievement lays in short story form. She especially used the common Urdu words and idioms which were prevalent among the women within the zenanas. Her language vividly describes various aspects of a woman whether it is related to her individual or social life. An economical and appropriate use of words is the best quality of Ismat’s writings. After reading her stories it seems that Ismat is like a photographer who is taking pictures around her. In present time, many of her works have been not only translated, but also adapted and performed. In her stories Ismat portrays rich heritage mingled with sturdy western influences. She comprehends the intricacies of a woman’s mind and evidently presents it in the world of modernity and nationality.
It is said that Ismat Chughtai represented that society in her writings which she faced in reality. In his book *A History of Indian Literature* Sisir Kumar Das says that Ismat Chughtai was one of the best writers who gave new direction to Urdu literature. She had good family background yet she had to fight for her education, only because she was a girl. He says that Ismat Chughtai was known for her short story *Lihaaf*. About her Qurratulain Hyder said that ‘as a friend Ismat Apa was loving, warm-hearted and sincere. She had a lot of self pride and never mentioned her financial difficulties. During the lean period she never sought any sympathy or help for anybody.’ This self pride could also be seen in many of her women characters.

Ismat has presented different aspects of a woman in her stories *Chauthi Ka Joda* (The Wedding Suit), *Lihaaf* (The Quilt), *Gainda* (Marigold), *Gharwali* (The Home Maker), *Nanhi Ki Nani* (Tiny’s Granny), *Badan Ki Khushboo* (Lingering Fragrance), *Chui-mui* (Touch Me Not), *Til* (The Mole), *Beemar* (The Invalid), *Bachchu Phupi* (Her Father’s Elder Sister) and so many. One can see in her stories an educated girl, a lower class girl, a prostitute, a devoted housewife, a repulsive girl, a passive girl, a lesbian, a conventional woman, a proficient woman etc. These female characters of varied shade of Ismat’s stories are related to some common basic qualities that facilitate to determine their status.

Ismat’s short story *Lihaaf* (The Quilt) has been published in 1942 in Urdu literary journal ‘Adab-i-Latif’ published from Lahore. This is the most celebrated and controversial story which created a splash in the field of Urdu literature and made Ismat a recognizable path breaker for women writers. Ismat has taken a step first to write on the sexual life of women and on this point she has obtained so much reputation that no one could attain so far. This story has charges of obscenity and Ismat was summoned by the Lahore court in 1944. In an effortless translation by M. Asaduddin, *A Life in Words: Memoir* allows a welcome glimpse into the tales of Ismat Chughtai’s life. *Lihaaf* is the most famous story which deals with a lesbian encounter as well as homosexual relationship within an all-woman setting (zenana) in a traditional Muslim household. Bonnie
Zimmerman refers to Faderman’s definition of lesbianism as follows: “‘Lesbian’ describes a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed towards each other … the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other”. (Zimmerman, 1997:81)

The main protagonist of the story Lihaaf is Begum Jaan who does not receive consideration, love, truthfulness, consent and companionship even after her marriage to a rich Muslim. So she begins to find happiness in her housemaid Rabbu’s service. The story is narrated by a young girl who does not directly express about the relationship between Begum Jaan and Rabbu but she describes what she hears at night from the Begum’s bed and what she sees under the Begum’s quilt. In her memoir Kaghazi hai Parihan (1998) Ismat Chughtai tells to older writer M. Aslam about her inspiration of writing this story, ‘Actually Aslam Sahab, I was never told by anyone that I should not write on this particular subject of Lihaaf. Neither did I read in any book that one should not write about this…illness (marz)...or...addiction (lat). Maybe my mind is not the brush of Abdurrahman Chughtai, it is instead a cheap sort of camera, whatever it sees, it clicks, and my pen becomes helpless in my hand.’

Chughtai describes about the Nawab as, ‘the Nawab who was of ‘ripe years’...very virtuous. No one had ever seen a nautch girl or prostitute in his house... He, however, had a strange hobby. Some people are crazy enough to cultivate interests like breeding pigeons and watching cockfights. Nawab Saheb had contempt for such disgusting sports. He kept an open house for students- young, fair and slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him.’ This shows Nawab’s habit for same-sex desire. Nawab Saheb had married Begum Jaan but had ‘tucked her away in the house with his other possessions’, as he is to other hobbies. Begum Jaan is neglected by her husband who favours young men instead of her. This is the reason that she started to find pleasure in the arms of her housemaid. Even after knowing about her husband’s homosexual
relation and his uncaring nature, Begum Jaan has to depend upon her husband. Because it was not allowed for a woman to say something against her husband as he is the dominant member of the society. It also shows that only a married woman has a position in the society because she has a man with her.

However, it is revealed in *Lihaaf* that after marriage a woman’s life becomes disastrous and she has to face humiliation and impertinence.

*Gainda* is a more mature and subtle story than other stories. In it the narrator, who was the younger cousin of Gainda, tells the story in an indirect way about a girl named Gainda who was her childhood playmate. Gainda was married at a very young age and soon after her marriage she is deprived of happiness. She had become a widow at the age of thirteen. Even after her husband’s death Gainda used to play with her cousins the games of bride and bridegroom. Afterwards she was seduced by one of her cousins and gives birth to a child, whom no one takes care of. In spite of knowing the fact, the elders sent him far away to study. Here it is obvious that the girl or woman has not the permission to speak against the male dominated patriarchal society. Even in this story, Gainda was very young to know anything about family life, yet she was married without asking her desire in this matter, as “Gainda hardly fourteen or fifteen did not understand many things...” In just a few pages of fragmented conversation and expression Chughtai manages to convey the subject matter of gender and class without the self-consciousness. She does not unveil a lot about this however she is successful in transmitting the issues to the readers.

*The Wedding Suit* is the story of three women- Bi Amma and her two daughters Kubra and Hamida. This is Ismat’s admirable story of great pain and suffering. It portrays a living picture of disillusionment and vulnerability of the poor class in our society which is also related to the mortification of dowry. Kubra belongs to a poor family and her widow mother is very much
worried about her marriage. She tries to collect the money for her daughter’s dowry by stitching clothes, but she is unable to do so. The conversation between Bi Amma and her cousin is sufficient to prove the dowry system, ‘Well, if one can afford to give fifteen tolas of gold as dowry and a job in the Burra Saheb’s office thrown in, there should be no dearth of suitable boys’. This demonstrates the real problem of a woman that she cannot talk to a man directly about the marriage. The same condition was with Kubra’s mother as there was no male member in the house. So she was incapable to communicate her desire to Rahat who was Kubra’s maternal uncle’s elder son. But because there was no male in the house to represent their wish for marriage, Rahat leaves the place after a couple of days. One time Bi Amma becomes unwell, “after that, Hamida gave up making demands for sweet roti, and Kubra’s marriage proposals somehow lost their way. It was as if no one ever knew that behind the ack-cloth curtain someone’s youth was at its last gasp. And there was another whose youth was raising its head like a serpent’s hood.” And at last Bi Amma departs away from this world with a thousand wishes in her heart. These lines clarify that women are still unable to break their silence if there is not any man to support them.

The story The Homemaker is about a girl named Lajo who was an orphan. She had to work as a maid in various houses for livelihood. After becoming young she was used by many men in the society and she also takes pleasure in it. Afterwards Lajo meets Mirza who is attracted towards her and despite being conscious about the facts of her life, Mirza marries Lajo. He does not ask for Lajo’s permission and takes the decision, “That evening, Mirza decided that he would marry Lajo, and to hell with family honour.” Mirza wishes to make her a traditional housewife, ‘Mirza puts ban on lehenga and instructed her to wear tight fitting churidar pyjamas. Lajo was used to open space between her legs. Two separate clothes joined by a strip of cloth were really bothersome.’ But Lajo fails to become and has again sexual relationship with Mithwa. Then Mirza beats Lajo badly and decides to divorce her without asking her. Even Mullaji, the chief of the community, supports Mirza and says that ‘The Nikah was not valid, brother. No one knows whose
illegitimate brat she was. Nikah with a bastard is haram-strictly forbidden.’ Here Lajo could not
voice her problem to the society. And she also had to listen to the norms and conventions laid on
her by the dominant group.

_Tiny’s Granny_ is also a living and notable creation of Ismat Chughtai in which Granny
(grandma) used to shed tears on her poverty, adversity and impoverishment throughout her life,
but neither the people of the society paid attention to it nor did the Almighty God. She spends her
life as a beggar and does not get any comfort and pleasure throughout her life. Her granddaughter
Tiny used to do "job at the Deputy Sahib’s for her food, clothing and one and a half rupees a
month". Granny always stands with her "like a shadow" but "a pair of old hands cannot wipe out
what is inscribed in a person's fate". Nevertheless her innocent granddaughter Tiny was sexually
exploited by the men of the upper class society at a very small age and she was also badly beaten
by Deputy. Tiny and her grandma could not say anything about it to anyone as they belong to the
lower class of the society and they also had no male, as father, brother or husband to support them.
Grandma had to suffer a lot and keep her difficulties within herself. She spends an isolated life
with her little granddaughter and gives comfort to "the wounded bird" with sweets. As a result,
Tiny lost her innocence at a very young age and becomes a woman and not a “fully-fashioned
woman moulded by Nature’s skilled and practised hand, but one like a figure on whom some giant
with feet two yards long had trodden-squat, fat, puffy, like a clay toy which the potter had knelt
on before it had hardened”. Moreover, the men of the society demonstrate their claim on Tiny as
“when a rag is all dirty and greasy, no one minds too much if someone wipes nose on it”. Consequently, Tiny runs away to some unknown city and works as a prostitute, for the reason that
“they say that in places like Delhi and Bombay there is an abundant demand for this kind of
commodity”. Poor Granny did not know anything and with a lot of sufferings and misfortunes of
her life she passed away in an extremely awful condition. Here Ismat brings to light the artificial
and repulsive face of the society and makes an effort to present the torments of men whether it is
physically, mentally or sexually through the characters of Tiny and her grandma. The concluding lines of the story are very significant as it reveal the truth of society: “On judgement Day… (Granny) burst into the presence of God the All-Powerful and All-Kind... and God, beholding the degradation of humanity, bowed his head in shame and wept tears of blood.” (Russell, 1959:129)

As depicted in these stories, women are just treated as sexual objects or things of exchange in patriarchal society. By presenting the miseries and exploitation of women, Ismat Chughtai makes a sketch of the wishes, requirements, humanity and individuality of the women. She has the courage to expose female sexuality along with the other dimensions of social and existential reality. Through her writings Chughtai tries to lift the veil the women wanted to say truth to the society. She questions male authority and hierarchical power structure in patriarchy with great sensitivity. The subject matter of her writings is chiefly associated with women and their position in Indian society. In fact, Ismat gives voice honestly against the prevailing social order in which women were not allowed to break the conventions and talk to the society. Undoubtedly, Ismat Chughtai was a reputed name among her contemporaries of Urdu fiction writers- Rajinder Singh Bedi, Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishna Chander and they together are also recognized as the four pillars of Urdu short stories, and after the demise of Ismat the fourth pillar stands lost. It is now difficult to find her replacement.
Works Cited


