



Resurrecting the Victimized Voices: A Study of Ismat Chughtai's “The Quilt”

Shabina Fatima*

Department of English, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar University Agra – 282004 Uttar Pradesh, India
ORCID: 0000-0002-8390-5539

*Corresponding Author: Shabina Fatima, shabikhan0184@gmail.com

Department of English, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar University Agra – 282004 Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

Aim: *The purpose of this paper to catch the attention towards the victimization and double marginalization of woman in the Indian Sub-continent. Ismat Chughtai through her story “The Quilt” created a stir in the conventional and patriarchal society and lashed the male centric environment in which women is not able to liberate her sexually and cannot express her body.*

Methodology/Approach: *This paper is based on critical and interpretative analysis.*

Outcome: *This paper analyzes the women traditionally cloistered in private; conception of gender constructs man an ideal for humanity and considers woman*

as deviant or defective. The patriarchy places woman as 'other' in relation to their male counterparts. They were forced to be silent, their histories erased, and their resistance was ignored. Our society modeled them as 'veiled- haremed- silenced-oppressed-victimized' other. The researcher in the present paper shows how Ismat Chughtai questioned the accepted values, and how she through her protagonists raised her voice of protest against the existing moral codes that are prejudicial to woman.

Conclusion and Suggestion: *This paper concludes how the author like Ismat Chughtai boldly and explicitly protests against the victimization of women and expresses the desires which have been prevented and oppressed by the male-dominated society. She creates the consciousness regarding the women's private space and talks about it before the masses openly and fearlessly.*

Keywords: Victimization, Gender discrimination, Ismat Chughtai, Resistance.

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Women more often than man – they are immediately asked in whose name and from what theoretical stand point they are speaking, who is their master and where they are coming from: they have, in short, to salute, and show their identity papers.
(Helen Cixous)

Woman has always been considered as subordinate to her male counterpart, the subaltern across cultural boundaries. Men need her, love her, adore her, and write about her; but they all do this for their own personal gains and to impose the patriarchal powers to control women and the society. Cultural representations have been designed to accommodate male *Chauvinism* and its gratification. Woman's pleasures have been reduced in importance to implant morality. Our society considers man as an embodiment of power and boldness whereas women have been treated as helpless victim of conspiracy hatched by man. Repression of female sexuality became a form of power that gave pleasure to man which he achieved by watching, speeding, and controlling the female. But there is another form of pleasure that a female felt from evading this power. Hence it is apt to quote Foucault that "Pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap and reinforce one another" (48)

This repressive power can be seen in our patriarchal society. Ismat Chughtai, a rebellious author, is among those feminist writers who wrote about women and pose the questions regarding the issues of female sexuality and consciousness. In her short stories Chughtai has explored the issues related to their sex and gender. Her storytelling demonstrates the silence of a woman, and erased individual woman's histories perpetuating tendencies, conceptions authenticated by Chughtai and placed her as a trust worthy feminist i.e. her voice position her as an authority, a prominent sociologist and a fire feminist that lends her narrator's voice credence and renders her narrative one to be taken seriously.

Chughtai, an active member of the Progressive Writers Movement came from an upper-middle class Muslim society. Since she was writing at the time of partition, her works were greatly influenced by those who raised the burning issues which were prevailed at that time. Women were considered as an embodiment of the honor of the community they belonged to. A large number of women were abducted and sexually assaulted during the partition. In exploiting women sexually to exert the power of one community over another was the purpose behind. In this way women became the bait in the political power-play between Hindus and Muslims. Hence it was mandatory to save the body of woman from any dishonor.

This new Indo-Muslim community started their social reformation to maintain the honour of the woman; books were written on the proper conduct of women in the household especially in regards of the upper-class Muslim women. The sole purpose of this movement was to accustom them by controlling their behavior. They were portrayed as symbols of culture and tradition consequently, texts which came out to the public sphere representing these sentiments, "What a dominant culture permits to be made visible is always in the interest of maintaining its own equilibrium (Chow, 35). As a result, the space that Muslim women occupy is made especially problematic. Muslim women are treated as twice other, as women and as Muslim.

Chughtai opposed this notion of the proper housewife and showed how the women character in her stories establishes their autonomy by questioning their adherence to the code of conduct assigned to them in a patriarchal sphere. Before Chughtai, the members of PWA were writing about the exploitation done to under privileged women of the lower class of the society. But it was Chughtai who for the first time wrote about women of the upper middle class families and challenged the notion of ideal Muslim woman by resurrecting the victimized

voice by Muslim women, which is a declaration of women's emancipation against the 'will' of male domination and society.

"The Quilt" is a very controversial story of Chughtai where she represented transgressive desire within a typical Muslim family. The narrator was a child who described the strange incident that she witnessed while staying at Begum Jaan who was an adopted sister of the mother of the narrator and it is obvious that the child was left with her aunt when the mother was away. It is quite ironical that the aunt's household presents a picture that is contrary to what would be considered as proper domesticity. This house presents a picture of apparent heterosexuality. Where a husband is attracted towards a young male student and neglects his wife. In this way she became an instrument for Nawab to maintain his image of hetero-sexual relationship and thereby have the power and command to his subjects. Begum Jaan is surviving under the pressure of passion that absorbs mind, body and soul and that she is struggling against something that is beyond her control. The mental stress of Begum Jaan is expressed through these words of the narrator: Begum Jaan was heartbroken and turns to books. But she found no relief. Romantic novels and sentimental verse depressed her even more she began to spend sleepless nights, yearning for a love that had never been. (14)

This deprivation of sexual desire drags Begum Jaan to wither and "It was Rabbu who rescued her from the fall"(15). The effect of the special massage which Rabbu uses to do for hours shows the sexual behaviour of Begum Jaan. Soon Begum Jaan "began to fill out. Her cheeks began to glow and she blossomed. It was a special massage that brought life back to the half dead Begum Jaan" (15). Refusal of notice from one gives rise to normativity to declaration of sexuality to the other. Nawab's rejection of Begum Jaan's existence in his life represents the reality that how female sexuality is ignored by the male chauvinist of the society. "A woman's wants and desires are unacknowledged in such matrimonies and how women are trained against any expression of their sexuality" (Singh 312).

Thus Chughtai with a deep understanding exposed the psycho-pathetic condition of those women who are victimized by the fate and patriarchy. This notorious writer dared to question the existing social order. She realistically portrayed the crisis of under privileged section of society especially of Muslim women who were pushed under the carpet. She was a realist and dares to portray the lives of women as she has witnessed and by doing that she attempted to empower women and made her independent. Her endeavor has always been to capture the issues related to women and “by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus that women will confirm women in a place other than...silence. Woman should break out of the snare of silence” (Cixous, 88).

Chughtai’s demonstration of lesbianism and homosexuality in this story is one of the brave steps she has taken because it is very crucial for a writer like Chughtai to give the narrative on such themes. It is important to notice the diction which she uses in this story. She uses the different metaphors and tropes to comment on the sexuality and reveal the suppressed desire of her character like Begum Jaan. The choice which Begum Jaan makes shows clearly that Chughtai had the uncompromising spirit that reflects through her narrative and the use of words showed fearlessness towards the patriarchal society and empowers her character. The lesbian theme and the language which the writer has demonstrated in this story is one of the challenging tasks which Chughtai has taken. To present such narrative in the traditional religious orthodox society is undoubtedly an uphill task. Chughtai through the character of Begum Jaan does not compromise even in her domestic life. Chughtai questions the sexual discrimination against women in the patriarchal society and attempts to create social and gender consciousness. Through this narrative, the author tries to create new woman in the societies which is sexually and socially discriminative. In her essay *The Laugh of Medusa*, Helene Cixous remarks, “Women must write herself: must write about

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women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal” (320). The story reveals the discourse of self-consciousness of women’s identity.

Chughtai uses the woman’s body as the symbol of the protest to express the sexual discrimination and uses the language of protest and demands the attention of public and breaks the social codes and conventions which she considers as the constraints in the progress of a woman. She expresses the desire of Begum Jaan “despite renewing the cotton filling in her quilt each year Begum Jaan continued to shiver night after night” (5-6). The narrative attempts to liberate the victimized women and undermines the narratives which are socially and patriarchally dominant.

Chughtai attempts to organize the life style of a woman which is very crucial task, and “The Quilt” is the story which makes it confirm the role and the position of a writer and other literary scholars. Tahir Naqvi, one of the translators of her works opines, “She developed the marking of a feminist in the early forties when the concept of feminism, was in its nascent stage, even in the west; she spoke her mind unreservedly; she was afraid of no one, nothing; she was a rebel. (Naqvi 1993: 37) “The Quilt”, according to Ismat “created quite a stir then continues to be considered one of the most controversial works ever produced by a woman writer (39). The story has created a much uproar and “created the most amazing furor...the subject matter was bold innovative, rebellious and unabashedly realistic... (40)

Geeta Patel comments about the sexuality and the body in the story says that it organizes and identifies the homosocial atmosphere. She says that Chughtai’s story as “a covert incursion into the home by a woman writer rather in an acceptable display... It called into question not only the ways in which the home/zenana had been produced but also the acceptable alternative representation

of sexuality” (Patel 187). Female body and sexuality do not find naturally in constraints but it is social and cultural construction which has made it so deplorable that it is being immoral and unethical to talk about it in our society. It brings the female body and sexuality into limelight and attracted the attention the masses how the victimized and marginalized women is not being taken into the mainstream discourses, and how her desires are not being taken into as serious as men are being taken. Chughtai attempts to challenge the predominant patriarchal discourse with the controversial plot.

The story highlights the hidden truth about which the authors from the Indian sub-continent shivers to write. Chughtai’s bold step to catch the attention of the public has been much applauded later by the western and liberal critics and scholars. The story completely deconstructs the patriarchal narrative and exposes the hypocrisy.

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Fatima, Shabina

<https://literaryherm.org>

Shabina Fatima

Shabina Fatima is research scholar at the Department of English Studies and Research at Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar University Agra. She is working on her PhD dissertation entitled *"Voices of Resistance: Male Hegemony and Female Imagination in the Selected Works of Ismat Chughtai and Qurratulain Hyder"*. She is also working with AIFEST (All India Forum for English Students, Scholars and Trainers). Her areas of interest are Translation Studies, Feminist literature, Indian writing in English, Subaltern Studies, Gender Studies, Modern and Postmodern Literature.