



BEYOND CONFORMITY: RE-READING RESISTANCE AND TRANSGRESSION IN ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

*This paper seeks to traverse beyond conformist readings of Ismat Chughtai by re-examining resistance and transgression in three of her stories from *The Quilt and Other Stories* (1994) — 'The Veil', 'The Quilt', and 'The Sacred Duty'. *The Quilt and Other Stories* offers a wide spectrum of reading experiences as Chughtai explores diverse themes, thereby providing a glimpse into the mindset of the society around her and the milieu in which she lived. Her act of writing becomes one of commenting, criticising, and correcting, wherein she voices a multitude of concerns about the angst, anxieties, apprehensions, agitations, fears, and frustrations of women and their relationship with men. Centred on marriage as a crucial juncture in a woman's life, the paper examines how Chughtai invests this institution with different shades. It analyses, on the one hand, the suppression and silencing of women trapped within marriage, and on the other, their acts of resistance and transgression — their refusal to conform, their rebellion against patriarchal codes, and their negotiation of agency within and outside the institution. These stories thus powerfully echo Chughtai's feminist politics as she rejects and protests the prototypical roles prescribed for women in society.*

KEYWORDS: Resistance, conformity, transgression, marriage.

INTRODUCTION:

This paper re-reads marriage as a site of conformity and contestation through a close analysis of three stories from Ismat Chughtai's *The Quilt and Other Stories* — 'The Veil', 'The Quilt' and 'The Sacred Duty'. Chughtai, who has consistently challenged patriarchal ideologies through what Ehtesham Hussain calls her "undaunted intelligence" and "power of expression," offers a nuanced critique of gendered institutions in these narratives. The paper analyses, on the one hand, the suppression and silencing of women trapped within the institution of marriage, and on the other, their acts of resistance and transgression — manifested in their refusal to conform, their rebellion against patriarchal codes, and their negotiation of agency both within and outside the institution. Chughtai's preoccupation was 'with the themes directly related to women and their cultural status and role in Indian society. Stressing the struggles of women against the oppressive social institutions of her time, she brings to her fiction an understanding and perception of the female psyche that is unique to her alone' (Chughtai, xiv- xv), provides the critical lens for this re-reading.

CONFORMITY AS TRAGEDY: THE SILENCED SELF

In the story 'The Veil', the crucial point in a woman's life is 'marriage,' and the way it is provided with different shades by Chughtai is central to this paper. It attempts to debate and discuss the suppression and silence of women caught in the institution of marriage on the one hand, and resistance and rebellion against the same institution on the other. Such an effort has been made to highlight the issue of the empowerment of women that Chughtai was strongly pointing out throughout her literary career during the 20th century. 'Marriage' as an institution and the importance attached to it is central

to many of Chughtai's short stories. The manner in which women succumb to the burden of marriage and become victims of the whimsical attitudes of men is the key point in the story. *The Quilt and Other Stories* begins with this poignant piece where we encounter 'a woman whose loyalty to the institution of marriage tragically consumes her entire life, a phenomenon deeply ingrained in the very fibre of our culture' (Chughtai, xvii). *The Veil* narrates the plight of a fair young girl, Goribi, whose dark-complexioned husband Kale Mian refuses to accept her for the only reason that he is secretly 'terrified of her beauty.' Chughtai here tries to capture the mindset of the patriarchal setup in the way elders around Kale Mian, especially the men, try to pressurize and convince him for the wedding: "Goribi would become his possession and comply with his every wish. She would say 'day' if he wanted her to, 'night' if he wished it thus..." (Chughtai, 2). The story reveals how a judgemental attitude can make or mar a marriage. Goribi's womanly shyness about lifting her veil is judged by Kale Mian as "arrogance" and "defiance". He swears that he will not lift her veil and disappears from her sight, while Goribi moves from square to square like a pawn "suspended between her parents' home and that of her in-laws" (Chughtai, 4). To prove his manhood and to shield his own inferiority complex, Kale Mian indulges in all kinds of vices. He even enters into relationships with prostitutes and homosexuals, while Goribi spends all her life within four walls, "smouldered away behind her veil" (Chughtai, p. 4), waiting for her so-called husband till his return after 30 years as a sick man. In a dramatic scene steeped with irony, Chughtai narrates how, as per Kale Mian's instructions, Goribi, no longer young, tries to lift her veil for him in vain, for exactly at that moment, Kale Mian dies.

The bridal veil that is never lifted by the groom is instantly replaced by a veil of widowhood. 'Ghunghat' thus becomes a powerful metaphor for Chughtai to debate the silence and subaltern role of women caught between the false ego and complexities of the men around them. Goribi, till the end, remains "untouched, uncared and unseen wife", veiling herself in the 'Ghunghat' that not only covers up her female body but also her feminine desires.

BEYOND CONFORMITY: RESISTANCE AND TRANSGRESSION

It is interesting to note that Chughtai does not create stereotypes, for her women, many a time, refuse to be victimised and marginalised. They display rebellious responses and resilience in varying degrees within the folds of marriage itself, thus changing their limitations to their strengths and even taking bold steps in defining their own identities through their acts of resistance, as is depicted in stories 'The Quilt' and 'The Sacred Duty'. *The Quilt*, which stormed Urdu literature way back in 1944 and is narrated through a child protagonist, remains her most popular story even to this day. Chughtai here enters into forbidden territory by exploring the issue of lesbianism. It was natural for the story to generate much criticism and controversy, and she was even dragged to court on charges of obscenity, which she ultimately won. Though Begum Jan is painted as a meek victim of patriarchy, on parallel levels, Chughtai stresses the strong sense of individualism and independence manifested by Begum in the manner in which she fulfils her sexual desire by finding solace in the arms of her maid Rabbo. Begum Jan, like a dutiful wife, initially submits herself to the subordinate role of wife of Nawab Sahib, who has a strange hobby of rearing boy-students by bearing all their expenses. The young, delicate Begum Jan is dumped in the house as an asset whose presence is not even acknowledged and remembered: "Who knows when Begum Jan started living? Did her life begin when she made the mistake of being born, or when she entered the house as the Nawab's new bride, climbed the elaborate four-poster bed and started counting her days? Or did it begin from the time she realised that the household revolved around the boy-students, and that all the delicacies produced in the kitchen were meant solely for their palates?" (Chughtai, 8). Eventually, her interest in life is murdered by the Nawab. It is against such boredom and unfulfilled sexual desire that Begum rebels. She decides to make meaning out of her confinement and utter neglect by the Nawab with the arrival of a maid servant, Rabbo, who is freed from all other house duties in order to fulfil the essential needs of Begum. Begum substantiates a mute assertion of identity as, "A quarrel between Begum Jan and Rabbo was being settled on the bed itself. The quilt started billowing. It seemed as if frog was growing inside it and would suddenly spring on. The elephant somersaulted beneath the quilt and dug in. During the somersault, its corner was lifted one foot above the bed" [Chughtai, p. 13 & 19]. All these details revealed through the

child narrator and the insipid remark, "What I saw when the Quilt was lifted, I will never tell anyone, not even if they give me a lakh of rupees" [Chughtai, p. 19], adds beauty and an enigmatic touch to the relationship between the two women. The major effort of Chughtai to clarify the position of women gets fulfilled not only in *The Quilt* but also in *Sacred Duty*, which loudly echoes the feminist stance of Chughtai by once again rejecting and protesting the prototypical role of women in society. The story revolves around the female protagonist Samina, the daughter of Siddiqi Saheb, who has passed B.Sc. with highest honours and wants to pursue higher education. But her father thinks he has better choices for her, and she is soon engaged to a young man employed in Dubai with a lot of incentives and a huge salary with one pre-paid vacation every year. The patriarchal attitude has not given any choice to women to raise their voices for their basic rights, as Samina was not able to disapprove the bridegroom despite knowing that he was not suitable for her, as, "the match had been arranged over phone. He was not all that good looking, also just short, but does a girl have to put up her husband for rent? One doesn't bother with a man physical attributes it's his qualities that count. And in this case qualities numbered twelve thousand and total comforts even more." [Chughtai, p. 20-21]. However, Samina defies the domination of her father by marrying the man of her choice who is a Hindu and moving to his parents' home in Allahabad. Chughtai wants to show that marriage and men are not the only orbits around which women are destined to revolve; they have their own wishes and desires to shape their lives. Samina, no doubt, gives a blow to the patriarchal set-up through her bold step, but again she becomes a scapegoat of religion when her father-in-law forces her to become a Hindu and again when her own father plays a secret game to convert the daughter and son-in-law into Islam. Chughtai cleverly balances the story through sudden twists. Samina and Tashar's final escape from parental pressures to save their love and marriage leaves an invaluable message that all religions lead to a universal God. Chughtai here deconstructs the submissive and passive role assigned to women by making them assertive about their own remarkable identities.

REFERENCES

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