

SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE INDO ISLAMIC WORLD: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S FICTION

Dr. Jyoti Tabita Hermit
Lecturer
Amity School of Liberal Arts
Amity University, Haryana.
jyotihermit@gmail.com

Abstract

Indo-Muslim writers have always remained an essential part of Indian Literature and portrayed the dynamic gamut of Islamic culture in their works. Ismat Chughtai, is a significant and controversial Urdu writer who has carved a place for herself in Indian Literature by exploring areas of social and existential reality. Chughtai's fiction confidently deals with varied facets of middle-class, North Indian Muslim families especially families of Aligarh, Agra and Bareilly and tries to fuse social commentary and fiction. Independence and Partition are the major backdrops against which much of her nonfictional writing develops. Her writings are replete with themes and characters taken from her own personal experiences in the Indo Islamic ethos. Chughtai, by giving voice to the unspoken issues of a segment of society not previously represented in Urdu letters, paved way for a succeeding generation of women writers in Urdu in both India and Pakistan. In her narrative, Chughtai probes questionable societal norms of the Indo Islamic society of the Nineteenth Century. She ventures into addressing issues that were considered a taboo at a time when the status of women in society was extremely subservient and inhibited, breaking new ground in terms of subject and style. Her characters are not individuals but types, product of a certain social environment who lose their charm on being detached from their social environment. Chughtai's exploration of social and cultural issues like gender bias, religious hypocrisy, homosexuality, women's domesticity, terror of partition is marked by a local flavour with renders it authenticity and local touch.

Keywords: gender bias, homosexuality, patriarchy, partition

Fictional Literature is often described as the most popular genre of social criticism. It acts as a social document, portraying life in all its hues and providing an accurate image of the sensibilities of people and their social and cultural ethos. Indo-Muslim writers have always remained an essential part of Indian Literature and. presented the dynamic gamut of Islamic culture in their works. They have been keen observers of the political and social trends in India, presented a realistic glimpse of the vices and follies prevalent in the Islamic milieu in their literary works and played a significant role in recording the consistent growth of the

Islamic community. Ismat Chughtai, is a significant and controversial Urdu writer who has carved a place for herself in Indian Literature by exploring areas of social and existential reality.

Ismat Chughtai was the leading lady of the Progressive Writers group, the generation of novelists and poets who intended to contribute to Indian social and political awareness. The Progressive Writers' Association was established in London in 1935 by Indian writers and intellectuals, with the encouragement and support of some British literary figures. A group of writers, including Mulk Raj Anand, Sajjad Zaheer and Jyotirmaya Ghosh drafted a manifesto which stated the aims and objectives of the Association:

Radical changes are taking place in Indian society... We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of our existence to-day – the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness, and political subjection. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and un-reason we reject as re-actionary. All that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive. (Gopal20-21)

Progressive writer's Association dealt with the kinds of issues that were taken into consideration by Urdu writers who had embraced the Progressive point of view. Their approach to fiction was instilled with that perspective. They provided a stark picture of society in transition by dealing with issues that most of the contemporary authors are addressing like plight of women, caste and gender discrimination, child marriage, multicultural relationships, partition etc.

Chughtai's candid writings about the Islamic world are influenced by authors like Saadat Hasan Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander, Josh Malihabadi, Ali Sardar Jafri, Khawaja Ahmed Abbas, who provided her the inspiration to write candidly about the sphere she knew so closely. Chughtai's fiction confidently deals with varied facets of middle-class, North Indian Muslim families especially families of Aligarh, Agra and Bareilly and tries to fuse social commentary and fiction. Independence and Partition are the major milieus against which much of her nonfictional writing develops. The slow disintegration of the Progressive Writers' Association and its gradual loss of vivacity, as well as the dispersion of writers and the resulting sense of loss, finds its most vivid expression in nearly everything Ismat Chughtai has written. Her writings are replete with themes and characters taken from her own personal experiences in the Indo Islamic ethos. Chughtai, by giving voice to the unspoken issues of a segment of society not previously represented in Urdu letters, paved way for a succeeding generation of women writers in Urdu in both India and Pakistan. Gender bias and discrimination is one of the themes, Chughtai deals with comprehensively in her narratives.

Gender is a socially instilled rather than a biologically determined construct. Social constructs result from people being acculturated to a shared tradition belief or convention and made to believe that such constructs are meaningful systems. It is the multi-dimensional intersection of social constructs that institutionalizes people's perceived social roles. Erich Fromm affirms that even "the most beautiful and the ugliest inclination of men are not parts of his biologically fixed nature but result from the social process which creates man" (Fromm 12).

Man's self-consciousness enables him to contemplate himself as a whole and his interaction with other members of society enable him to bring himself within his own experiential purview; "and thus he can consciously integrate and unify the various aspects of self, to form a single consistent and coherent and organised personality" (Mead 269). This assertion can be applied to the concept of gender and be used to prove that gender is not a biological construct but a social constructed idea. Simone de Beauvoir remarks in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 86). Individuals do not merely internalize gender roles as they grow up, but they actively respond to the changing standards of the society. For instance, children learn to classify themselves very early in their lives and a part of this learning is how to display and perform gender roles as masculine or feminine.

Millett asserts, "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society, a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole." In the traditional set-up, a woman's existence is defined in accordance with the hierarchal structure, where man controls a woman's sexuality, mobility and lifestyle. In Komarovsky's words "to be born a woman means to inhabit, from early infancy to the last day of life, a psychological world which differs from the world of men" (18). Judith Butler asserts that being female is not "natural" and that it appears natural only through repetitive representation of gender; these presentations in turn, reproduce and define the traditional classification of sex and/or gender. Women, therefore, since the very early phases of their lives, begin to act in the societal desired way which fosters a neurotic tendency in their subjugated psyche. Thus, they happen to be the most sufferers of the social norms and moral codes in male dominated societies.

This neurotic crisis has encouraged Ismat Chughtai to treat their psychological malaise in her works consistently and thereby give voice to the agony of the vast majority of women globally. Chughtai provides ethnography of Middle-class Muslim women of her times. Their thoughts, questions and predicaments are usually at the centre of her narrative. Tahira Naqvi characterises one of her works as "a vehicle whereby Ismat Chughtai exposes the social-cultural conflicts and psycho-sexual determinants that govern the development of female consciousness" (3). She dared to address taboo topics at a time when the role of women in society was extremely stifled and repressed and when women were not granted any degree of freedom. She touches directly upon the anathemas that woman writers usually contend with, and the hypocrisy that lies at the heart of the Patriarchal society. Her works provide a realistic portrait of emotional sterility of the traditional household against which her female protagonists rebel. One of the most powerful forms of psychological stereotyping is at work in the creation of the ideal woman- wife, daughter, and sister. Sunny Hundal says, "In patriarchal and feudal societies, women are almost always seen as the bearers of culture and 'honour'. "Traditional, conservative South Asian culture fetishizes women to such an extent that, while the official line says they are held in high esteem and regard, in actual fact, they are treated simply as vessels of that honour, and their lives are forced to be structured around preserving that. They are not allowed to do anything that compromises those ideals, while men have much freer [rein] without the same burden" (Guardian).

Chughtai's short story "The Quilt" ('Lihaaf') is a daring depiction of female sexuality in a way not attempted before in Indian Literature. It also extensively discusses problems posed by arranged marriages. Begum Jaan, daughter of a poor couple is married to a virtuous Nawab who is of "ripe years" (Chughtai 13). However, he cultivates a strange interest of giving refuge to young boys. Eventually after marriage, Begum Jaan is confined within the walls of Nawab's house. The Nawab discards his new wife both physically and emotionally and she merely remains an ornamental object in his large house. Thus, the relationship is only kept virtually alive. The plight of Begum Jaan throws light on the state of women in marriage in the traditional society. Deprived of physical freedom and emotional support, Begum Jaan is objectified. The begum is not allowed to step out of the house and is forced to lead a life of seclusion. Even her husband does not cater to her needs. On the other hand, the Nawab is free to act as he desires and indulge in his diversion of recruiting young boys; hypocritical religious practices and the institution of marriage act as a garb to conceal his unethical activities. Thus, the issue of gender discrimination and gender dichotomy in Muslim society is also emphasised and highlighted. As a result of this marital condition, a more intimate relationship develops between Begum Jaan and Rabbu, the masseur. This affiliation is antithetical to the traditional master/servant relationship. Thus, rejection and feelings of ennui and isolation in Begum Jaan, are the primary reasons behind this relationship. The story also throws light on the devastating experience of a small child who is physically harassed by Begum Jaan during her stay at her house. She recollects, "I wanted to run away but she held me tightly. I tried to wriggle away, and Begum Jaan began to laugh loudly" (20). The Quilt attracted a lot of criticism and Chughtai was prosecuted on charges of obscenity. Nevertheless, she writes,

In my stories I've put down everything with objectivity. Now, if some people find them obscene, let them go to hell. It's my belief that experience can never be obscene if they are based on authentic realities of life. These people think that there's nothing wrong if they can do things behind the curtains. They are all halfwits. (Chughtai xi)

Ismat Chughtai's "Childhood" deals with the deprived childhood days of a girl child who grows up in a large Muslim household in pre-Partition North India. Always rebellious, she is constantly seen as a trouble-maker by 'Aapa'. However, she is brilliant and ready to challenge the traditional gender norms. She says, "As we came out of the khus room, Chunnua and Shamim would run to play games, but, being a girl, I would play with dolls. They say playing with dolls was infinite. How could one play with them" (Chughtai 52)? This is the narrator's first attempt to subvert and redefine gender roles. She further says, "Chunnu, after all was a boy. His faults were no faults. However, the girls must be perfect: otherwise, they would ruin their husband's families (54). Chughtai explores many issues in her biographical novel, among them female sexuality and agency. Through the protagonist, we perceive that Chughtai has learned that forthright, outspoken women are always put down and have to develop ways to cope, but often end up unhappy. Mohanlakshmi Rajkumar is of the opinion that women in the Muslim setup were considered guardians of national culture, indigenous religion, and family traditions by Muslim reformers. Chughtai protested against

these beliefs. “Chughtai’s writing challenges “traditional view of fore fathers” in her stories which focus on life within upper class Muslim household. (Kumar 29).

Child marriage is another issue, discussed by Chughtai in her works. In the book *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood*, Mahua Sarkarsays, “nothing good comes out of the child marriage. The practice is more harmful for girls than boys. After marriage girls are deprived of habitual happiness and care freeness associated with childhood. Not only does early marriage disrupts their education, but it also leads to inhuman treatment of girls in most cases, some women conceive so early and give birth to weak and lifeless children”. (10) Bashariya, Lajo and Gainda are victims of child marriage. They are deprived of all the pleasures of childhood as they are married off as children. They are compelled to conform to the norms of marriage and regulate their behaviour. Gainda is a young widow who is physically exploited by her cousin who is already married. However after the revelation of her pregnancy, he deserts her and goes to the city. Gainda is humiliated and tortured by the family members. “Gainda recounted a hundred thousand’ strange’ happenings. How she was beaten up for months together! Gaina, hardly fourteen or fifteen, did not herself understand many things (Chughtai 11). Gainda’s condition throws light on the predicament of women in male dominated conservative society. Similarly in Tiny’s Granny, Tiny is physically harassed by deputy “one of the leading men in the mohalla, grandfather to three grandchildren, a religious man who regularly said his five daily prayers(149). Tiny’s Granny is a representative of women who live on the periphery of the society as they do not have a husband, a son or a grandson to look after them.

In Indo-Muslim ethos, marriage is another essential social institution which is used by the male-centered society for female suppression. Seemanthini Niranjana in her book *Gender and Space* says “Marriage is a critical turning point for a girl, allowing her to translate into reality latent reproductive capacities and there by realize her claim to woman hood in the eyes of the community. The pressing obligation on the part of parents to marry off a girl underlines the high cultural value attached to wifehood”(56). Ismat Chughtai’s stories like the Homemaker, Mother-in-law, Touch –me-not, etc are a clear example of this statement. Arranged marriage by means of matrimonial advertisements insistently signifies the subordinated, passive role of a daughter who is brought up to obey male authority. Ismat Chughtai’s stories provide articulate speculation on the married life of women in middle class Muslim society. Decent marriage, a term used by Ismat Chughtai in her short story Mother-in-law to describe a perfect marriage has derogatory connotations. It not only implies an arranged marriage but also a marriage arranged with proper consideration given to dowry.

“The Wedding Suit” is another story which depicts a mother’s anguish and anxiety for her unmarried daughter. Bi Amma had lost her husband when her elder daughter Kubra was young. Now it was her responsibility to marry her two daughters. She had started preparing Kubra’s dowry at an early age as dowry was an essential factor for a girl’s marriage. Girls brought up in conventional societies are faced with insecurities of marriage since the fact that they have to get married and move to another house is incessantly hammered on their consciousness since the very beginning. Kubra’s desires and wishes are not even taken into consideration. Bi Amma’s hopes rose when she came to know that her

brother's son was coming to stay with them. She began fostering the hope of getting her daughter married to her nephew Rahat. Even in the midst of poverty, Rahat was treated with the best of food. He is already treated like a son-in-law. Soon Rahat begins to complain about the food. But at the end, his marriage is settled and he goes back to his town. Bi Amma's hopes are shattered and she is left dismayed by the news. However, she still continues to stitch her 'wedding suit', hoping to see her daughter married.

Chughtai's "Roots" is a realistic commentary on the trauma of the victims of partition. It explicitly discusses the effect of partition on the peaceful lives of people. Hindu and Muslim families which had otherwise lived in complete unity and harmony had to depart from each other in the name of religion. She depicts that in this act not only a country was divided but the heart and soul of two communities were fragmented. The families which were friends before partition became enemies after the marriage in the name of religion. In her narrative, Chughtai has described the after math of partition by vividly drawing a gruesome picture of communal riots. "There was no question of sleep amidst the nightmare in which she saw the mutilated corpse of her youthful daughter, her young daughter-in-law being paraded naked and the grandchildren being cut to pieces (Chughtai209). The story illustrates the fact that those who opposed the idea of the partition were relegated to isolation and desolation. It recounts the effect of partition on 'Amma' who was nourished at a time when the Hindus and the Muslims lived in harmony and used to share each other's joy and pain. Her agony intensifies when her family deserts her to settle down in "our land" where "wheat was sold for four seers a rupee" (208). It is surely an artistic display of the emotional crisis which the two communities had to suffer.

"Kafir" and "Sacred Duty" demonstrate Chughtai's freedom in exploring an identity not influenced by religion or caste. In Chughtai's works, religion acts as a hegemonic power that exerts its control over female psyche by manipulating religious practices and beliefs. The Indo- Muslim community of early 19th century was controlled by the religion institution which was indirectly controlled by the dominant men of the society who perpetuated and modified religious norms to employ their dominating power over their female counterparts. Hence, women were relegated to the margins of the society which is very much evident in Chughtai's fiction. Chughtai's narratives lift the women's 'purdah' and throw a search light on women's tribulations. "Sacred Duty" explores the theme of religious discrimination and depicts the progression of a Muslim girl who shatters the norms of the society in order to marry the man she loves. The orthodox society, failing to provide consent to her decision of marrying a Hindu, tries to pull her back to conformity. However, she breaks free from the fetters of the society to liberate herself.

In her narrative, Chughtai probes questionable societal norms of the Indo Islamic society of the Nineteenth Century. She ventures into addressing issues that were considered a taboo at a time when the status of women in society was extremely subservient and inhibited, breaking new ground in terms of subject and style. Her characters are not individuals but types, product of a certain social environment who lose their charm on being detached from their social environment. Chughtai's exploration of social and cultural issues like gender bias, religious hypocrisy, homosexuality, women's domesticity, terror of partition is marked by a

local flavour with renders it authenticity and local touch. She efficaciously deconstructs social and cultural stereotypes by entering “the culture of the muslims of UP and all the ingredients that make up its texture” (Chughtaixix).

Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*, trans. Parshley. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1983. Print
- Chughtai, Ismat. *Lifting the Veil*. Trans. M. Asaduddin. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009. Print
- . *The Crooked Line*. Translated by Tahira Naqvi. New Delhi: Kali, 1995. Print.
- Fromm, Erich. *The Fear of Freedom*, Routledge Classics United Kingdom, 2001. Print.
- Gopal, Priyamvada. *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence*. Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Hundal, Sunny. “The Sexual Politics of Partition”. *The Guardian*. 17 August 2007. Print.
- Kumar S. P. *Ismat: Her Life Her Times*. Katha, 2002. Print.
- Mead, George H. *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Ed. Charles W. Morris. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1934. Print.
- Niranjana, S. *Gender and Space: Femininity, Sexualization and The Female Body*. New Delhi : Sage Publications, 2001. Print.
- Sarkar, Mahua. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal*. Duke University Press. 2008. Print.