

REVISITING THE PARTITION NARRATIVES BY ISMAT CHUGHTAI

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Abstract

The paper aims at a psycho-cultural analysis of two of the remarkable short stories, namely "Roots" and "Quit India", penned by Ismat Chughtai, a celebrated name in the world of modern Urdu fiction. Both the stories depict two dissimilar narratives set around the time of Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. They present in each case a central character unable to leave India after 1947 but the reasons differ drastically in each case. While Amma, the protagonist of "Roots" refuses to leave India even when her entire family is ready to migrate to the newly formed Pakistan, Jackson, the protagonist of "Quit India" also finds it impossible to leave India and return to England. In both of these short stories, Chughtai thus presents two contradicting yet similar dilemmas concerning two simultaneous events in Indian history- one involving the mass migrations across the newly marked borders and the other concerning the return of the colonisers to England- in 1947.

Keywords: Alienation, Independence, Oppression, Partition, Syncretism

Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991) was one of the leading Indian Urdu writers, who along with Sadat Hasan Manto, Rajender Singh Bedi and Krishanchander, is rightly regarded as one of the four pillars of the Urdu literature. As a story teller she undoubtedly occupies the position of unmatched excellence and eminence. Chughtai throughout her life preferred to diverge from what was conventional, and was one of the Muslim writers who stayed on India after the subcontinent was partitioned. She used her pen as a powerful means for social criticism and adopted an attitude that was often shocking and unacceptable for the orthodox contemporary society. She brought into light the hidden aspects of the society that were regarded taboo in the mainstream literary writing and thus became a passionate voice for the unheard.

Although essentially regarded today as a fierce feminist, Chughtai's writings do not remain confined to feminist issues but also explore other evolving conflicts in modern India. Her short stories focus on a diverse range of issues such as old traditions that were prevalent in joint families of India; small town life and its social aspects; sufferings inflicted by

Partition, both on minds and bodies; country life that emerged soon after Partition, and the hypocrisy prevalent in it; the plight of the marginalised; the increasing gap between the rich and the poor; and issues relating to women and their unique and often unspeakable experiences. Her contribution to Urdu literature lies particularly in the creation of such thematically diverse and convincingly powerful stories that shall forever remain unforgotten.

Chughtai wrote extensively on the flaming social issues of her time and even most of her fictional writings were portrayals of the contemporary real life conditions. One of the most important political events of her time was that of declaration of independence of India in 1947 that came along with the partition of the country. Both the return of the colonisers and Partition of the country had a significant impact on every realm of the society including literature. Writers of both the nations recorded both of these events in their writings and today an entire body of literature recapturing the events of 1947 stands before us. Among the many writers who portrayed the contemporary society of this time in their writings was also IsmatChughtai. "Roots" by Chughtai is often regarded as one of her most memorable short story dealing with partition, and another of her short story titled "Quit India" deals with the return of the Britishers to their homeland after independence. Both of these short stories are set around the same time but present two protagonists captured in drastically different conditions, but sharing the common inability of leaving India.

"Roots" by IsmatChughtai is a short story that explores the theme of India's partition, while at the same time revives in its readers a sense of hope by highlighting cultural inseparability of the countrymen that no political division could overpower. Though throughout the story we find references to both the physical and psychological violence inflicted by partition, the story ends on a note of happiness when the strength of human relations wins over the communal differences between the families.

The story begins with a description of the circumstances prevailing in post-partition India. The country had gained its independence but only at a heavy cost of Partition. While the English had left and, while leaving, had inflicted such a deadly wound that it would fester for years to come. India was thus "operated upon by such clumsy hands and blunt knives that thousands of arteries were left open. Rivers of blood flowed, and no one had the strength left to stitch the wounds" (Chughtai 2011:126).

Chughtai sets her story in the town of Marwar, a place she describes as one signifying the cultural togetherness of the native Hindus and Muslims. Until the declaration of partition of the country, both the Hindus and the Muslims had been living in close harmony with one another and had become almost culturally inseparable. However, the conditions changed drastically after the splitting across of the country into two separate nations. Almost all of the Muslim families in Marwar began reconsidering their future based on their social and economic standing. The majority decided to migrate to Pakistan, and the narrator of the story is a member of one such well-to-do joint Muslim family who were packing their bags and preparing to leave India.

The story centres around the narrator's Muslim family and their relations with the neighbouring Hindu family headed by Roopchand. Despite their religious differences, both the families shared strong bonds of love and friendship and stood united like a strong human family. Roopchand was the family doctor of the Muslim family and his friendship with the narrator's Abba was highly respected by both the families. However, the conditions changed drastically overnight by the news of partition: "The two families were so close to each other over three generations that no one had the slightest suspicion that the country's partition would rupture their relationship" (Chughtai 2011:129). However, "The Partition violence and hatred created a gulf between those who had lived together happily sharing one another's joys as well as sorrows" (Chopra 177). The distance between the families began to grow slowly by one event after another. It all began by a minor fight between the children of both families that gradually extended to a fight among the adults. The news of the communal riots and arrival of relatives who had become victims of such violence enlarged the gulf between the families.

It was finally decided that the entire Muslim family would migrate to Pakistan. But when all the members of the family began to pack, the narrator's Amma declared that nothing could make her leave her own home and migrate to a new land. Everyone tried to persuade her to change her decision but she remained silent and stuck to her decision. In the following words the narrator beautifully captures the pathos of a woman who cannot accept the altered reality and finds it impossible to detach herself physically as well as emotionally from her 'roots':

If my taciturn Amma had a sharp tongue, she would have retorted: 'What's this strange bird called "our land"? Tell me where's that land? This is the place where one was born; one grew up in body and mind. If this cannot be one's own land, then how can the place where one simply goes and settles down for a couple of days be one's own? And who knows whether one won't be driven out from there as well and be told "Go and inhabit a new land"?...There was a time when the Mughals left their country to inhabit a new country. And today you want to establish a new one. As though the land is no better than a pair of shoes- if it gets a little tight, throw it away and get a new one.' (Chughtai 2011:135)

The family eventually leaves and Amma is left behind all alone in the empty house. Roopchand, who had been mute witness to their departure, finds it impossible to remain calm anymore. His wife silently goes over to meet Amma and both the women spend the night in silence. While silently mourning over the situation she had been left in, Amma finally falls asleep and when she awakes, her world had changed once again. Roopchand had brought back her entire family and the bonds of mutual love and respect had proven themselves stronger than any communal divide. The story thus ends on a note of hope and happiness and

presents before the readers the possibility of a happy ending to something as mournful and disastrous as the partition:

“Roots” by Chughtai is thus one of the memorable partition stories that portrays the trauma that people were forced to undergo while aligning themselves with the altered national identities. But unlike most of the partition stories that focused entirely on the psychological and physical sufferings inflicted by the event, this story eventually highlights the strength of human relations that managed to survive even in the face of the inhuman conditions that prevailed at the time. Regarding this story, Tarun K. Saint writes:

The sustenance provided by a sense of roots and the inherent strength of intercommunity ties in the Ganga-Jamuna belt, given the shared cultural inheritance, is the underlying theme of the story. There is eventual vindication of Amma’s determination to remain in the domain of ancestral roots, this situation in some ways mirroring that of many Muslims who decided to stay on in India such as Ismat herself. The author, for long associated with the Progressive Writers movement, here effectively conveys a Progressive ideal without excessive preoccupation with the ‘message’, despite the element of sentimentality that characterises the ending. (Saint 273)

Through this story, Chughtai thus seems to highlight the feelings of love that existed between the Hindus and Muslims even after the country’s partition. Chughtai herself had opted to live in India after partition and did not migrate to Pakistan. She was a liberal Muslim whose daughter and nephew were married to a Hindu. According to her, she came from a family of Hindus, Muslims and Christians who all live peacefully. She had said that she read not only the Qur’an, but also the Gita and the Bible with openness. In her autobiography, Chughtai herself points out the liberal environment in which she grew up: “Religion was never imposed on us as an instrument to enter paradise or avoid hell. Abba’s friends came from different faiths and beliefs. After listening to their conversations many of my superstitions and fears were allayed” (Chughtai 2013:12). Her ideas and experiences thus find a reflection in her narrative.

This short story also holds eminence as it provides a deep insight into a women’s perspective regarding the question of national identity and homeland. In the words of RakshandaJalil:

Many of her [Chughtai’s] contemporaries too wrote on Partition-related violence but Ismat’s writings are unique in that she wrote of issues that concern men and women from a woman’s perspective. She used wit and satire as tools to sharpen her depiction of harsh social realities and her trademark begumatizubaan gives an extra edge, a piquant flavor that sets her apart from, say, Manto or KrishanChander. In her hands, Urdu acquired a new zest, an added spice that made it not only more readable but also better equipped to

reflect new concerns that had hitherto been considered beyond the pale of literature. (Jalil 6)

“Roots” on one hand thus portrays the strength of emotional attachment a women might feel for a place where her ancestral roots lie, and on the other hand highlights the strong inter-community ties shared by two families even during a time when the communal riots had flamed both sides of the border and had burnt up not just the land, but also the dream of a united nation forever.

“Quit India” by Chughtai is another of her major short stories that is set around 1947 when the country was undergoing the time of a great transition. The independence was won in 1947 but only after a very long struggle that had demanded many sacrifices and in the process had filled every native heart with a deep sense of pride and love for our motherland and hatred for the British masters. The departure of the British was thus the source of greatest joy for every Indian for whom it was not easy to forget the atrocities inflicted by the white masters on the natives. However, in her present short story Chughtai compels her readers to sympathize with an Englishman whose story she puts forward to her readers.

The story opens with the arrival of the news that ‘Saheb’ has died, which takes the unknown narrator back into the reflection about an Englishman who had finally left the country on his death. This man, referred to as ‘Saheb’(a common name given to the English) was named Eric William Jackson and was the narrator’s neighbour whom she had been observing for years. The narrator slowly unfolds the story of this white man in parts. It is revealed that this man named Jackson was an outcast in his own society. Being the illegitimate son of a noble lady, Jackson was given over to be raised by a farmer family that was paid by his maternal grandfather. The farmer with whom Jackson lived had been a harsh, tyrannical man. He had many sons who found ways to torture Jackson. He was beaten every day. But he was well fed. He had started making attempts to run away when he was thirteen or fourteen. Finally after four years of failed attempts, he made his way to London with great difficulty. Here he tried every profession under the sun, but by now he had become so hardened, stubborn and devious that he couldn’t hold a job for more than a few days. However, Jackson had been fortunate enough to marry Dorothy, the daughter of a very rich and influential man. Though Dorothy was beyond his reach, Jackson was somehow able to entrap her and she had married him despite her father’s disapproval who had later sent Jackson to India.

Commenting on the political and social conditions of the time, the narrator describes that time as one when every Englishman was dispatched to Hindustan, and regardless of whether he was mending shoes there, he would arrive here and immediately become a *sahib* (name used for British men in India). But even on arriving in India, Jackson could not settle down here easily. He turned out to be as useless and careless as always when he arrived in India. His biggest flaw was his lack of good taste. Instead of living a style exemplified by poise and dignity, he started mixing in an uncouth manner with the natives. When he was

appointed Forest Officer in the area near Basti, he frequented all kinds of questionable opium houses instead of going to the club. Describing him, the narrator writes:

When Jackson came to India, he was richly endowed with all the evils associated with a one-eyed person. His tendency to get into brawls led to quick transfers from one place to another. He was shifted from the forestry to the police department. This disappointed him because he had fallen for a hill woman. Having reached Jabalpur, he would have called her, but he fell so deeply with a rope dancer there that his wife spent her entire vacation in Nainital and he didn't visit her even once before she returned to England. (Chughtai2011:83)

However, Jackson was soon transferred to Delhi and had to live there with his wife Dorothy who was now suspicious of his relations with other women. This was the time when the second World WarI broke out. Separation from the dancer and Dorothy's permanent stay in Delhi became a source of extreme distress for Jackson. During this time, a woman named SukkuBai had been hired to take care of the children. When Dorothy left for home with the kids after she got tired of the heavy rains, Jackson turned his attention to SakkuBai, who was the head waiter's keep and was a victim of his exploitations. However, she soon got rid of her miseries by assuming the role of Jackson's substitute wife in the absence of his British wife.

Thus, in the course of time the Englishman Jackson grew very close to an Indian woman SakkuBai with whom he even had two children. SakkuBai, who though was often mistreated by Jackson, also reciprocated his love with all her devotion. However, when India was declared an independent nation and the British return back to England, Jackson refused to leave India. Dorothy did everything in her power to call him back but he resigned from his job and stayed on in India. The narrator had been away from Bombay during this time and recalls these incidents as they were told to her by SakkuBai who came to visit her. SakkuBai had informed the narrator that Jackson had been put in a lunatic asylum and she had been left alone and it is her love for Jackson and her despair on being departed from him, that moves the narrator deeply:

The sight of Sakkubai crying for Jackson affected me deeply. I totally forgot that sahib belonged to the community of oppressors who, joining the military service, had contributed to the subjugation of our country. He had sprayed children with bullets and showered fire from machine guns on unarmed people. He was a cog in the huge and hateful British imperial machine and had stained the road with the blood of our valorous fighters whose only fault was that they were demanding their rights. (Chughtai2011:78-79)

Through this short story, Chughtai seems to portray an altogether different picture of the life of a British man living in India. Being a man who had never really been able to establish his roots in any particular place, Jackson eventually finds home in India where SakkuBai becomes the source of unending love for him. Chughtai thus leaves her readers with an

altered perspective about the British stay in India through the story of a white man who finds it impossible to leave India and return to his homeland.

An exceptional quality of Chughtai's narrative remains her frequently adopted characteristic of presenting viewpoints contrary to generally prevalent perceptions regarding particular events. Here, in this short story too Chughtai instead of portraying the conventionally depicted relationships of racial tensions focuses on the cultural assimilation of the coloniser and the colonised. Thus, we find the relationship between Jackson and Sakkubai eventually succeed with Jackson finally becoming a part of Sakkubai's family that includes no one else but he himself, Sakkubai and their two children.

Thus, we may conclude that IsmatChughtai, who wrote not just about issues concerning women but explored almost every aspect of the social life, recaptures the social and political scenario of 1947 in her short stories- "Roots" and "Quit India." In both of these short stories, Chughtai explores two different social spaces but presents before us two characters, who though differ in their race, gender, class and even their life-conditions, become the victims of the circumstances that prevailed during 1947. Also, in both of these short stories, Chughtai presents perspectives that are contrary to common perceptions regarding the concerning circumstances. In her short story "Roots" exploring the after-effects of Partition, Chughtai focuses not on issues of despair and communal divide, but instead portrays hope and syncretism. Similarly, in the other story "Quit India" relating to the return of the colonisers, Chughtai instead of focusing only upon the racial gulf, highlights the coloniser's assimilation with the subject. Both of these short stories thus stand out among the best of Urdu literature that portrayed the contemporary life of its time.

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