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What is the Place of Ideology in Literature?: Examining the Case of *Angaarey*

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Abstract:

Comparing *Angaarey* (1932), a collection of short stories (and one play), with the works of Ismat Chughtai this paper will assess the literary merit of *Angaarey* and will participate in the debate on the difference between literary and ideological texts. The publication of *Angaarey* was a significant political event because it sparked off the All India Progressive Writers' Movement, an extremely influential literary movement in India; however few people discuss the actual stories in the collection. Chughtai, who was associated with the movement, and was yet separate from it, is recognized as one of the greatest Urdu writers of the twentieth century. The comparative analyses of these texts will be done within the framework of commentary on literature and ideology by James Farrell, John M. Reilly and Jean-Paul Sartre's seminal work *What is Literature?*

Keywords: *Angaarey*, Progressive Writers' Movement, Ismat Chughtai, Literature, Ideology

A debate that has raised its head time and again is the one on the place of politics in literary writing -- there are those who have argued that ideology is all important in a literary work and those who have said that even though it may be a part of a piece of writing no literary work can be reduced to its ideological basis or more precisely no literary work should be composed in order to put forth an ideology. I would like to contribute to this debate by examining the 1932 short story collection *Angaarey* that triggered off the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWA) in India alongside the works of Ismat Chughtai who was associated with the PWA but was not subsumed under it and was even criticized and distanced by the members of the movement. What I propose to derive from my reading of these texts alongside commentary on politics in literature is an understanding of what literature is.

In the article “Literature and Ideology” John M. Reilly defines ideology thus: “Ideology is a way of living. More precisely it is the values, ideas and images people develop as they experience their social roles. Ideology is as immediate as the conscience or super-ego, as grand as a world view. It is our sense of our relationship to reality” (13). Ideology that is so pervasive can oppress and make people accept the condition they’re in. And hence Reilly endorses Ramon Saldivar’s view that literature is not simply a reflection of ideology. “Literature,” he says, “uses ideology, gives it a shape and form that permits us as readers to gain a distance from it so we may become conscious of its effects and limits” (13). Art here gives perspective on ideology, it does not propound an ideology. “Successful art can, then, resist harmful ideology, but not by substituting unexamined slogans or by mechanically replacing one set of doctrines with another” (13). Art may offer an understanding of ideology, not though in order to advance an alternative ideology.

In an article on the relationship between literature and ideology James T. Farrell says that mixing literature with an ideological edict does not do justice to either ideology or literature. He says when literary men try to smuggle ideology into literature they try to educate people in an indirect manner about the most serious problems the human race faces. He characterizes such moves as irresponsible. Politics he says is serious, an arena in which the struggles of individuals and entire nations are conducted. The problems of politics he says are concerned with “action and power.” Farrell explains that the spheres of ideology and literature are distinct from each other. Ideology is about action, whereas literature is about rhetoric, about language. To equate ideology with literature is to disregard politics’ purpose of bringing about change in the world. Literature argues Farrell is self-directed unlike politics that is directed towards the world outside. Science permits man to understand nature and literature facilitates an understanding of the self. He says very emphatically that literature by its very nature, in and of itself, cannot solve social and political problems. These problems he says are “problems of action”.

An examination of the stories and the one play in the collection *Angaarey* along with a reading of Chughtai’s story “Gainda” will further these views on the debate. The literary pieces of *Angaarey* were written by Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Rashid Jahan and Mahmud-uz-zafar with the explicit purpose of bringing about change in the social, religious, literary and legal orders of the world in which they lived and to challenge the conventions prevalent in Urdu literature. The purpose of this collection was explicitly directed outwards. The world was outraged upon its

publication and charges of blasphemy and indecorous use of language were made against it and the book was banned on 15 March 1933 by the government of the United Provinces. The police destroyed all but five copies. The banning of the book and the episode of its publication became the ground for the formation of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association or the Akhil Bharatiya Pragatisheel Lekhak Sangh in Hindi and the Anjuman Taraqqi Pasand Mussanafin-e-Hind in Urdu. The manifesto of this Association launched one of the largest literary movements in South Asia, a movement that began in the hope of "challenging censorship in its conjoined-twin form: censorship as a symbol of both colonial repression, and religious conservatism and orthodoxy" (Singhavi x). Singhavi points out that few copies of the book were available and few people claim to have actually read it "and the literary tradition makes mention of the short stories as an event, but there is very little critical attention paid to the stories themselves. *Angaarey*, then, is usually either "lionized as a harbinger of new innovations in Urdu letters or is seen, unfortunately, as a literary failure" (xi-xii). Singhavi herself believes that the book is a work of art even though she never emphatically makes that statement. She is more interested in refuting the claim that the book is a literary failure. Her most assertive statement about the literariness of the book is hardly convincing: "It bears repeating that many of the pieces in the collection suffer from all of the problems of early, young writing -- placing criticism over critical attention, function over form" (xxii). Attributing the lack to youth to the paucity of art in an artwork does not make a very strong case for the collection. She further adds "But the craft is also undeniable, especially in the careful attention to rhythm, rhyme, image, and in the rapid shifts of focalization" (xxii). That there is craft may be true, but how effective and how artistic is the craft, how convincing rather? She does not care to comment. The very next line focuses confidently on the politics of the collection: "Most importantly, though, they are still relevant as indices of the range of ideas that were inspiring Muslims all over the subcontinent to challenge British colonial rule and the forces that placed unfair restrictions on women" (xxii).

The collection, which was not read by too many people, served the purpose of starting a literary movement, that is it served as a sign (rather than as a work whose writing attracts) symbolizing the need for change. While we are told this is the view of critics, or of whatever critical attention was given to the work as literature, it will be revealing to undertake an actual literary analysis of the text and comparing it with the stories of Chughtai that have established literary value.

“Gainda” by Chughtai and “Dulari” by Sajjad Zaheer revolve around figures of the female servants in the houses of their employers. “Gainda” is narrated by a young girl, the daughter of the house where Gainda is employed as a house help, and the two girls are shown to be playmates. Gainda is a widow who is widowed soon after she gets married. Everyone sympathises with Gainda when her husband dies in the rainy season. The story begins with the narrator being in awe of Gainda for the things she is allowed to do, that is wear her bridal jewellery, a veil, a dupatta, none of which are allowed the narrator. She also has more knowledge of the world than does the narrator. Right from the beginning “bhaiya” the narrator’s brother is shown to be flirting with Gainda, asking her jokingly if she will marry him, causing Gainda to blush in response. All of this is narrated without judgment, without understanding, in the way the child narrator views it. When “bahu” who is perhaps another servant in the house ill-treats Gainda, the narrator seethes and in one way or the other takes revenge on her. Bhaiya’s attention to Gainda arouses child-like jealousy in the narrator: “Bhaiya sprinkled attar on Gainda. Perhaps he has forgotten me. [. . .] Come to think of it, I was his own sister. And Gainda? She was nothing to him. I detested Bhaiya at that moment and kept on churning the muck furiously” (6-7). The nature of their relationship is lost on the narrator. She cannot understand why Gainda blushes or how to interpret her supple gait. On the other hand Gainda herself knows little about her relationship with Bhaiya. She enjoys his attention, blushes, but cannot comment on the nature of her affair. After all she is not much older than the young narrator. Through a chink in the door she sees her brother making a move at Gainda and she runs away out of fear, not for what his action actually means, but because she cannot understand what is going on. She tries the theatrics that she had seen Bhaiya and Gainda engaging in with Mewaram the gardener and only gets rebuked by him for roaming in the sun and spoiling her clothes. The focus of the story is Gainda’s view of the world around her where she appears to be the rejected, neglected person. The narrator goes away from home for two years and upon her return when told of Gainda’s baby expresses joy but is reprimanded for doing it -- again to her incomprehension. Bhaiya has been sent away to Delhi. Gainda is turned out of the house. The narrator goes to meet her and Gainda’s eyes are filled with fear when she sees her. The narrator coos the child, tries to play with it. When Gainda is convinced that the narrator is not upset with her she begins to behave normally with her. We are told,

I sat on the gunny sack with the baby in my lap as Gainda recounted a hundred thousand 'strange' happenings. How she was beaten up for months together! Gainda, hardly fourteen or fifteen, did not herself understand many things. How could she explain them to me? We stopped invariably with, 'How?', 'Why?' 'How Strange!' (13)

The two young women cannot understand what is happening to Gainda and why. They nevertheless enjoy the baby and express their child-like joy at his presence. Gainda even mentions Bhaiya fondly and asks the narrator to pass on her messages to him.

The story is a very realistic depiction of what happens to female house helps, their position in the household, the clear divide between them and the people of the house and the position of widows especially if they're of the lower class in relation to the higher class masters. That however is not the thrust of the narrative. The narrator who is herself of the upper class, the daughter of the house, is as perturbed by the happenings as is Gainda. Her sympathies are with Gainda and like Gainda she is at the mercy of her elders. The story instead of dividing people along the lines of class (which reality is of course present), divides the world along the line of age. All the adults, both masters and servants, understand what has passed and what should have happened and they blame Gainda and her child for it; none of the children, this includes Gainda and the narrator, have any understanding of it. Their child-like response to the situation and their ability to laugh through it realistically captures the circumstances -- they're oppressive, but not everyone of a given class is the oppressor and there is life and joy despite the given state of affairs. In fact a realistic depiction of the situation, Gainda's innocence, her lack of comprehension and the hope she harbours, similar to her friend the narrator's, lends pathos to the narrative, drawing attention to it and the reality it highlights. Even Bhaiya we're told puts up a fight for Gainda but is packed off to Delhi. The young people, both male and female, of either class do not understand why Gainda is treated the way she is. They have not been socialized into the adult's sense of the world.

The story gives the impression of emerging from the writer's sense of a certain aspect of reality and the impact that it has had on her. The affective force of the text derives from its inability to generate a villain in a tale of exploitation and discrimination. What it does is unravel the ideology prevailing in the world it depicts. It is not itself attempting to propose an alternative ideology. The text sensitizes the reader to the circumstances it describes. Chughtai herself claims

that she does not write because she wishes to bring about reform in society; she writes as people have because they suffer when they see the world around them (Jalil xix-xxi).

“Dulari” by Sajjad Zaheer the organizer of the *Angaare* collective focuses on a theme similar to “Gainda”. A young girl named Dulari has been living in the household of a rich man named Sheikh Nazim Ali Sahib and is friends with his daughter Haseena Begum, until they reach adolescence and become distant from each other. Kazim the son of the house, who is about twenty years old has gone away to college and when he returns on Diwali he has an encounter with Dulari in the kitchen. Desire brings them together and the text says, “The truth, unfortunately, was that, like debris, they were being carried away by an ocean of dark forces” (52-53). Kazim is shown to be annoyed with old traditions and customs of the house but would not do much to implement his own ideas. A year later his marriage is arranged, and unexpectedly Dulari disappears one night. She is eventually discovered hiding somewhere but she refuses to return. A few months later she is found in the area where poor prostitutes live and is convinced to return to the house. Upon her return Haseena Begum approaches her but is unable to either understand her or sympathize with her. She looks upon her as a pitiable servant girl. The mistress of the house comes and begins to rebuke Dulari for what she has done. The whole household gathers to witness this spectacle. Kazim too emerges from one of the rooms and angrily asks his mother to stop, saying, “Mother, for God’s sake, leave this poor girl alone. She has suffered enough. Can’t you see what you are doing to her?” (56). Kazim, who had once made love to her, is viewing her like his sister does -- as a pitiable servant, with no sense of what she must feel. Her feelings, her sexuality, her desires are non-existent for the members of the household. Enraged, Dulari leaves the house one last time that night. While both stories deal with the same theme more or less, of the place of the desires of the female househelp “Gainda” moves the reader; “Dulari” entirely fails to have an impact.

None of the characters in the story come alive. Not even Dulari. The story does not build character at all. When Dulari gets angry that comes as a surprise for the reader. Up until that point Dulari is just a name, and circumstances -- she is not given a personality. So when she gets angry, one realizes she has some sense of self. But where did she get it from? Is it inherent in her personality or is she getting ideas from outside? The narrative does not answer these questions. When she had run to make sherbet for Kazim she appeared to be docile and obedient. Should one assume that she was docile because she had never been done an injustice in the house? If the

house is so just how can one lapse justify the class divide the narrative appears to be highlighting? On the other hand if she is really docile what then do we make of her anger?

One can identify the theme of the story but one cannot say anything more about the theme. In a work of literature that would have happened indirectly through the use of language, characterization, narration, dialogue and setting. At the end of “Gainda” we feel sad for Gainda, for her friend the narrator, for the child and we realize that lines of gender intersect with lines of class, age and sex. None of this nuance is seen in “Dulari” because the story’s purpose appears to be to *tell* that female sexuality especially of the lower class is non-existent in the minds of the upper classes. Dulari gets enraged and she leaves. But not much more is said about the theme. How do different people view Dulari? In the story everybody has more or less the same view and the story is not able to capture the different shades of their indifference. Nor does the story manage to say whether Dulari’s anger is the anger of an individual or a class? The story gets caught up between propounding an ideology and moving the reader to action *and* creating a work of art, a story. And in the process it is not able to do either the one or the other. An ideological edict explains the problem or the politics logically and suggests how action needs to be taken. The story does not succeed in doing this. Literature, if good, leaves an impact on the reader--an image, a turn of phrase, a character, a circumstance--some aspect of the literary work impacts the reader. That however does not happen. An important aspect of literature that the text fails to address is that a literary work does not “tell” the story it “shows” it. That is we will not be told what to think, we will be made to experience it. “Dulari” perhaps because of the writers’ preoccupation with its political interest fails to make the reader experience anything--in fact, we cannot even be sure what we are supposed to experience in the text -- Dulari’s anger? The indifference of the rest of the household? The fellow-feeling of the other servants of the house? Or Dulari’s absolutely degraded position in the household, lower than all else? Or the force of sexual feelings that make Dulari leave the house? Or that ideology oppresses all? Even the thrust of the narrative is unclear.

In “Gainda” on the other hand one is sure that the text while speaking of the perception of the sexuality of a woman of the lower class in a household is commenting on the lack of awareness of young women of their own sexuality. Gainda feels shy when Bhaiya dallies with her, she is desirous, but she cannot explain any of this. She does not have the language to either explain her sexual desire or the treatment of her desires at the hands of the household. The

narrator is little different from Gaiinda and together their child-like understanding of sexuality generates pathos in the text and moves the reader. This rhetorical impact generated by the writing of the text then leads the reader to think about the text. The rhetoric of the text draws attention to the text and the theme that lies at the heart of it. And this is what leads one to analyze the text. Upon focusing on the text the complex relationship between language and sexuality, between one's sex and sexuality, between age and language comes to the fore. The text does not give any definite answers, but it does reflect the complexity of the various issues it raises. The text does not tell us what to think; but its rhetoric compels us to think, question, reason. This is not a call to action -- it is an attempt to sensitize the reader, to make the reader more aware of their own perceptions and question how much they're affected and shaped by existing, even though inconspicuous ideologies. As Farrell pointed out, a literary text is directed towards the self.

"Dulari" on the other hand tells us what to think. It tells us that we must recognize that society is oppressive and there is the oppressor and the oppressed. And if we do not recognize oppression then we will ourselves become complicit in the process of oppression. It never though directly or indirectly in the narrative tells us the causes of oppression, who exactly is oppressed and who is not, what action needs to be taken, and how. "Dulari" neither functions as a story that sensitizes us to the reality it depicts nor does it move to action.

Likewise other stories by Zaheer like "A Vision of Heaven" and the play "In the Women's Quarters" by Rashid Jahan or the story "Virility" by Mahmud-uz-zafar make declarations about the state of male sexuality. The stories can be adequately told in a line each with little left to say beyond that: "A Vision of Heaven" is a story about the stifling impact of the widely prevalent blind faith in religious rituals dissociating men from their sexuality and thereby themselves; Jahan's play depicts the insatiable male sexual desire that leads to the wasting away of the woman's body that is little other than an object of male lust; "Virility" focuses on a husband's self-obsession, so much so that he is unable to show any sympathy to his ailing wife, and she eventually dies because of his mercilessness. Religion and society disallow men to have a healthy relationship with their sexuality, either they restrict it completely or allow it too much freedom, neither of which helps either men or the other sex that is at their mercy and that they're allowed to neglect. These narratives fail to move because they present the realities they depict as statements of fact without presenting factual information or by making the reader feel the force of these realities. On the other hand Chughtai's famous story "The Quilt" leaves one feeling

disgusted; and the intense affective power of the text moves the reader to question the sexual oppression in the narrative in all its complexity and the position of women in the text and in society at large.

Jean Paul Sartre's essay "What is Writing?" is useful in considering what characterizes a literary text and how it is different from other kinds of writing. For Sartre the relationship of poetry and prose with words is absolutely distinct. Sartre's use of poetry and prose refers to literary writing and non-literary writing loosely but especially for our purposes to literary writing and ideological edicts respectively. He says poetry is like painting, sculpture and music in that "one does not paint meanings; one does not put them to music" (4-5). In explanation of this he gives the example of Picasso's *Guernica*:

And that masterpiece, 'The Massacre of Guernica', does anyone think that it won over a single heart to the Spanish cause? And yet something is said that can never quite be heard and that would take an infinity of words to express. And Picasso's long harlequins, ambiguous and eternal, haunted with inexplicable meaning, inseparable from their stooping leanness and their pale diamond-shaped tights, are emotion become flesh, emotion which the flesh has absorbed as the blotter absorbs ink, and emotion which is unrecognizable, lost, strange to itself, scattered to the four corners of space and yet present to itself. (4)

Poetry like painting will never give meaning clearly. One can sense what the text is upon reading it but can never articulate it with certainty. Ironically, words make their own meaning ineffable. This is primarily because of the way poetry is written. The poet, says Sartre, treats words as things and not as signs. The poet sees words in their "wild state". For him "they are natural things which sprout naturally upon the earth like grass and trees" (6). Sartre is saying here that words are not laden with meaning when he encounters them. When a poet encounters them he meets them as if for the first time divested of all the meaning lumped on them. He sees them "inside out" "touching them, testing them, fingering them, he discovers in them a slight luminosity of their own and particular affinities with the earth, the sky, the water, and all created things" (6-7). However, he is aware of the meanings words are assigned in the world. It is these already existing meanings that give words their "verbal unity" without which they will merely be ink blots (6). He treats words such that the emotion that he brings to the word and the inherent meaning that the word carries combine to form an independent entity that goes beyond the word

and beyond the poet's meaning to become something new and unreadable. He says that emotion, dissatisfaction with the social or political situation could be the origin of poetry; they are not however expressed as they are in a newspaper editorial or a magazine article (10).

"Gainda", we will recognize emerges from the poet's response to the plight of lower class women, the suffering of women when their sexuality goes unrecognized, the suffering of children as they have to exist in a world where meaning is created and controlled by adults. Upon reading the text, however, the narrator does not remain merely an object of pity -- she is a silly girl who tries to woo the mali Mewaram, who feels jealous when her brother pays attention to Gainda, who plays with Gainda's child even when the adults are angry, who wants everything Gainda has, who leaves home in a fit of anger. While one can "feel" the text, the world it creates, its characters, one cannot say what it is or what any of the characters is with certainty. The reader can in a way apprehend the text, not comprehend it. The text communicates the author's meaning without allowing us to completely know it. As Sartre says both the words and what they mean in the world and the poet's emotions lose themselves when they come together in a poetic text and the text itself resists being understood.

Prose or for our purposes non-literary texts are a different genre in Sartre's opinion. He defines the prose-writer as someone who "*makes use of words*" (11). The nature of prose is "significative; that is, the words are first of all not objects but designations for objects; it is not first of all a matter of knowing whether they please or displease in themselves, but whether they correctly indicate a certain thing or a certain notion" (11). Words in and of themselves do not matter -- to a prose writer words are signs and they matter for the meaning they are assigned in the world. He goes on to explain how more often than not we remember the ideas that have been passed on to us but have no memory of the words in which they were delivered (12). Saying something is bringing it into the world. So when words are *used*, they add to the existing values in the world, and at the same time transform those values; hence prose writing which conveys ideas is used consciously or unconsciously for disclosure. "The 'committed' writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change" (Sartre 14).

If we look at the stories of *Angaarey* as "prose" pieces as against works of poetry or literature, since their explicit purpose is to bring about change, what kind of values are they addressing? In the story "A Summer's Evening" by Sajjad Zaheer the writer appears to be

highlighting class issues. When the story opens the text appears to be interested in highlighting the plight of the middle class through the meditations of the protagonist Munshi Barkat Ali and when it ends to shows the pitiable state of the lower class. In between the focus of the text shifts and it appears to be interested in showcasing human nature more than class: When Jumman, the orderly Munshi runs into in the park, asks Munshi for a rupee explaining the poor financial condition of his family, the narrator says, “These kinds of conversations always made the Munshi very uncomfortable. It doesn’t matter if there’s a legitimate reason to turn someone down or not, it is still very awkward. That’s why he has been trying from the start not to let things get to this point” (44). Here the narrative moves beyond class to focus on the complexity of the human psyche. However, as mentioned earlier, at the end of the story when the protagonist makes off with his rich aristocratic friend, a forlorn Jumman is shown to be standing on the street abandoned by Munshi and attention is drawn to the callousness of Jumman’s betters. The narrative fails both at the level of ideas and the level of story. A story can work at a variety of levels; however, the narrative always comes together at the end as is the case with “Gainda”. In “A Summer’s Evening” however the variety of “ideas” raised by the narrative only confuse the reader instead of enveloping the reader in a complex world. Even at the level of ideas one has no sense of what statement the story makes on class. It dwells on each aspect of class furtively, moves into the realm of story, and is back to discoursing on economic disparity. The narrative, neither falls into the class of poetry, nor prose. The stories of *Angarey*, the analysis undertaken in this paper suggests, do not qualify as literature because they fail to focus on words, as a matter of fact they use words as signs, and they do not engage either with words or with the world; instead they *use* words to communicate preformed ideas about the world. In fact the paper illustrates how engagement with words is a reflection of an ongoing engagement with the world in the process of writing itself. The writing itself unearths for the writer his or her association with the subject of the narrative. Forming a relationship with words is at once forming a relationship with the world. And this relationship that the writer forms with the world sensitizes the reader to the self and the world. Being sensitized by literary texts can indirectly affect one’s ideological stand; literature, however, does not tell the reader what to think.

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