

Sexuality: A Path to Self-Actualization in Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt"

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"It is we sinful women
Who are not awed by the grandeur of those
Who wear gowns
Who don't sell our lives
Who don't bow our heads
Who don't fold our hands together." (Ahmad 1991:31)

These powerful lines a sort of manifesto of feminist writing, claim for a new kind of emotional gratification which is physical as well as spiritual. These lines have been used as means to challenge male-dominated society, even with an awareness of every day's compromised and defeats. Triggering the manifesto geared towards asserting woman identity; these lines arouse public opinion of channelizing will and motivation to influence the conscience of society.

This paper is an attempt at demonstrating the close relationship between the agency of gender and culture as mirrored in the story 'The Quilt' by Ismat Chughtai, the first feminist writer of Urdu fiction. My choice of the topic was determined by the increased interest of gender issues in South Asian Literature. First, it will study the ways in which gender is regarded at the theoretical level and at the level of everyday representations and its influence on behavior, attitudes and other components of human being. Second, trying to capture the musing of feminist perspective, it will certainly interrogate the meaning of identity for a woman. Through the experiences of a woman in patriarchal ideology, it will also explore the meaning of sexuality and its connection to self-actualization and self-realisation.

In an Indian society where nursery rhymes fed to generation of young minds, portray the lopsidedness of a culture in which men and women have been segregated. It forms the basis of the patriarchal attitude which has been reinforcing discrimination against women. This gender based difference turns male and female (i.e. sex) into masculine and feminine (i.e. gender). Sex is natural but gender is socio-cultural and manmade. The difference is based on the words 'nature and nurture.' Because of this male is considered as a synonym of 'power,' 'strength' and 'domination' while the female is confined to the words as 'pretty,' 'beauty' 'delicate' etc. The concept of gender divides human beings on the basis of sex-difference. This gender aspect imposes more restriction on women in socio-cultural practice, and makes them subordinate, voiceless instrumental in procreation. Both Butler and Beauvoir assert that gender is a process which has neither origin nor end, so that it's something that we 'do' rather than 'are'. Butler claims that gender is a discursive construct, something that is produced, and not a 'natural fact' (Salih 2007: 51).

[. . .] gender is 'unnatural', so that there is no necessary relationship between one's body and one's gender. In that case, it will be possible to have a designated 'female' body and not to display traits generally considered

'feminine': in other words, one may be a 'masculine' female or a 'feminine' male. (46)

By using the word matrix, Butler characterized gender as a 'structure', a 'mould' or a 'grid' in which subject is 'cast' (52). Kate Millet, the second wave feminist remarked that gender is a psychological concept, which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity (Dutta 2011:1). Gender differences are not natural but they are framed by the cultural components of the society. From the moment children are born, their world is prepared along gender related roles. As we grow up, ideas of masculinity and femininity become central to the way we think about ourselves. (1).

In *Lives of Girls and Women*, a novel by Alice Munro, the narrator called Del Jordan is surprised by an article written by a New York psychiatrist which clearly points towards the discrimination between the sexes. According to him looking at the full moon, " the boy thinks of the universe, its immensity and mystery"; the girl thinks, " I must wash my hair" (Munro1971: 150).

Beauvoir accepts that there are certain minor physiological and biological differences between women and men [. . .]. In fact, Beauvoir recognises sexual difference, but does not accept that the valuing of these differences, between women and men should justify the oppression of women and their traditional status as second-class citizens in patriarchal society (Tidd 2007: 52).

This is in turn of gender discrimination; feminist consciousness emerged as a spirit of the age and has become a global trend. No, doubt, in the beginning, it was an individual trend, but it has now become a movement or school-of- thought, popular among the modern sensibility. By feminist consciousness, we mean an awareness of modern movement in this male- governed society where all values are male- oriented. Feminism Vs Radical feminism originates as a movement against the patriarchy and other social systems which perpetuate the domination of one group over another. As a component of the women's liberation, it favours for sexual rights for the women. It delves into the factors contributing to means for emancipation of women. At this point, lesbian feminism takes the view that, if women continue to have sexual relation with men, they would forever remain in the oppressive heterosexual bondage. Therefore, it's better for them to create distinct communities based on the principle of sexual love among women themselves. (Mittapalli 2007: 66)

Towards the homosexuality Smith states that the history of (homo-) sexuality is thus a history of imaginary figures which can be reappropriated and rearticulated with positive messages. He explains:

[. . .] attitudes towards homosexual behavior are , that is to say, culturally specific and varied enormously across different cultures and through various historical periods [. . .] the physical acts might be similar, but their social implications are often profoundly different[. . .] marks the crucial change, both because it provided a new subject of social observations and speculation, and because it opened up the possibility of new modes of self-articulation.(Smith 2005: 98)

While Witting claims that lesbian is a concept that is beyond the categories of sex and calls for the destruction of heterosexuality as a social system, Butler argues that sex and

gender are discursive constructed and that there is no such position of implied freedom beyond discourse (48). But Adrienne Rich has called “compulsory heterosexuality”- the dominant order in which men and women are required or even forced to be heterosexual. (49). Adrienne Rich, a distinguished American lesbian feminist poet, emphasizes the need to establish this new order (lesbianism) to subvert the heterosexual institutions which are hostile to women. She further believes that if life confronts us with the specter of incompleteness, it also opens for us the doors leading to great possibilities. (Mittapalli 2007:68)

On this point, narrating the story of Begum Jan in *'The Quilt' (Lihaf, 1942)*, Ismat Chughtai definitely raises this question of sexual discrimination with frankness in the social consciousness. While exploring other dimensions of social and existential realities, she explores the idea of her New Woman in the fantasies of gender and sexual conflicts where patriarchy nurtures gender concept legitimizing hierarchy of the male and repressive sexuality of the female. For women writer this ambition connotes the threatening possibility that men will criticize her “sexually appealing” and “unwomanly” (Dutta 2011: 1). Helene Cixous, the French Philosopher urges women in *The Laugh of the Medusa*:

“Women must write herself: must write about 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).

Fiction writing is also an important field and it can be traced in modern Urdu fiction. Ismat Chughtai, one of the pioneers of Urdu fiction, was most courageous and controversial woman writer of the twentieth century. Often perceived as a feminist writer, Chughtai uncovers the female sexuality (Chughtai 2009: I). She had a deep and abiding preoccupation with the lot of women, their cultural status and role in Indian society. Her stories abound with nubile young girls, middle aged matrons, widows. She enabled us to see that is possible for women to write like that we should not just be relying on men writing about women but women themselves should be writing about their lives and their feelings. Ismat Chughtai's novels and short stories portray the home as a site of myriad forms of oppression for women and of violations of contemporary Muslim ideals of the family in North India. In so doing Chughtai challenged the central tenet of Muslim nationalism, the idea of the family as the means of preserving Muslim culture and virtue. A socio-political critique of reform attitudes, Chughtai's work responds to the ways in which the behavior of the Muslim housewife was used to refute Hindu and British colonial encroachment on Indo-Muslim culture.(Rajkumar 2008: 36)

Chughtai herself admits: “Purdah had already been imposed on me, but my tongue was a naked sword. No one could restrain it” (Chughtai 2000: 34). According to Tahira Naqvi, Ismat was “unselfconscious feminist.” Ismat was doing all the things that we imagine feminist or women who are truly liberated (would) do but she didn't think she was doing anything extraordinary. That was the way she was. She never shied away from voicing her views on relationship, men, love, sex, religion and traditions at any forum. Gender was an issue that Chughtai tackled well. *'The Quilt'* reveals a discourse of self consciousness about women's identity. In *'The Quilt,'* sexuality occupies a central position in the exploration of identity, and functions in a variety of important way, both thematically and formally. The

strength needed in the battle for self and the journey of discovering one's root is vividly depicted in *'The Quilt.'* Cultural heritage and patriarchal ideology also occupy as the main factors in the story:

“Having married Begum Jan, he tucked her away in the house with his other and promptly forgot her. The frail, beautiful Begum wasted away in anguished loneliness. One did not know when Begum Jan's life began whether it was when she committed the mistake of being born or when she came to the Nawab's house as his bride, climbed the four – poster bed and started counting her days. (Chughtai 2009:14)

Ismat Chughtai tries to juggle the life of a woman, which is not a simple task. *'The Quilt'* is the story which confirms the opinion of the writers on her role and importance as a writer and as a human being. Tahira Naqvi, the translator of her works states:

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)

In 1942, two months before her marriage, Ismat wrote *'The Quilt'* which created quite a stir then and continues to be considered one of the most controversial works ever produced by a woman writer (39). When it was discovered that the writer was a woman, the story created “the most amazing furor, states Naqvi. The subject matter was bold innovative, rebellious and unabashedly realistic in both, its portrayal of characters and its analysis of human condition (40). In her autobiography, Kaghzi Hai Pairahan, Ismat expresses:

When I wrote “Lihaf”, there was a veritable explosion. I was torn to shreds in the literary arena. Some people also wielded their pens in my support. Since then I have been branded an obscene writer. No one bothered about the things I had written before or after “Lihaaf”. I was put down as a purveyor of sex. It is only in the last couple of years that the younger generation has recognized that I am a realist and not an obscene writer. [. . .] I am still labelled as the writer of Lihaaf. The story had brought me so much notoriety that I got sick of life. It had become the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight [. . .] “Lihaaf” had made my life miserable. Shahid and I had so many fights over the story that life had become a virtual hell. (Ismat 1999: 35)

'The Quilt' considers how Chughtai envisages sexuality as embodied specifically in women's bodies and how this embodiment is expressed through her particular use of figurative language to speak of the female body and female sexuality. She expresses the sexual desire of a new married Begum Jan as “despite renewing the cotton filling in her quilt each year Begum Jan continued to shiver night after night” (5-6). Here, in style typical of her, Chughtai raises important questions on marriage as an economic and social enterprise, the socially constructed sub- ordinate role of women in marriage, her sexual fantasies and frustration and her subsequent sense of loneliness. The Nawab “installing her in the house along with furniture” (5) highlights how the institution of marriage commoditised women and reduced her to the object of a mere business transaction, instead of a “united and

inseparable pair” (Sukthankar 2007: 143). The marriage between Begum Jan and Nawab presents the social taboo of having an unmarried woman in the house. Even the Nawab, irrespective of his immense power and formidable position had to marry although the opposite sex had no appeal for him owing to his “mysterious hobby” (6). In the process, he imprisoned the poor Begum Jan to the repressive customs which marriage and society forced a woman to comply with. However, while the Nawab continued his homosexual exploits, Begum Jan was condemned to a life of confinement and subjugation. As Arundhati Roy depicted in “*The God of Small Things*” a very realistic picture of the contemporary society where “women are supposed to be secondary sex, treated as a mere commodity not as a life partner of man”(Jahan 2006:44). Begum Jan is also a victim of sexual paralysis experiences, disillusionment in sex and suffers a silent humiliation, which happens only after marriage, a social approval. Chughtai lends credence to this argument in an interview with Afsar Farooqui in *Ismat: Her Life and Times*, “I’m not against marriage as such but against its extraneous ramifications. When we trust each other why can’t two people actually have faith and be with each other? (Negi 2003: 31)

The Nawab had no “time to spare from the boys to look at her” (6) and he would not let her “go visit other people” (6). All of her fantasies related to marriage, husband and new home were shattered. The life was tasteless for her as Nawab “totally forget her presence” (6). “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir 1974: 301). The sentence with which Beauvoir initiates a discussion of childhood could be said of all the women characters in Chughtai’s works, include Chughtai itself (Patel 2001: 352). ‘*The Quilt*,’ indeed a profound comment by Chughtai on the terrible plight of women under patriarchal society that subjects the female race to discrimination and oppression. (Web)

Geeta Patel’s reading of the story’s subversive qualities recognizes dual homosocial environments. She reads Chughtai’s story as “a covert incursion into the home by a woman writer rather than 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 representations of sexuality” (Patel 2001: 187).

Female sexuality is not there ‘naturally’ from the start but its formed by early experiences and adjustments and Fraud shows the process of its being produce and constructed (Barry 2008: 131). Chughtai fiction is the fiction of the repeated traumatic, and in the ways in which she reiterates loss her work participates in the kinds of questions raised by Sigmund Freud [. . .] (Patel 2001: 352). The story ‘*The Quilt*’ also brings at how female sexuality is never paid heed, her need and desires are not acknowledged even after marriage (Web). The Nawab never bothered to acknowledge the sexual expectation of his wife, who lay confined and neglected. The very fact that the willfully imprisoned a young girl to meet the social obligation of marriage, never bothering about how he would never be able to fulfill her sexual needs. How such inequality and oppression can lead a woman into a sense of complete loneliness, detachment and depression is another important aspect. While the Nawab fulfilled his homosexual desires, Begum Jan, peeping from the chinks in the drawing room,” felt she was rolling on a bed of live coals” (6). She was heart- broken and her self-esteem was destroyed. Gripped by sense of failure, Begum Jan sinks to a pitiable condition and becomes “a bundle of regret and despondence” (6). So Chughtai shows the

frustration of a married woman in structure in which they function as role fulfiller rather than as people. (Rajkumar 2005:178).

But Chughtai does not leave Begum Jan in this state of complete desolation and immense depression but allows her the agency to make a bold 'choice' of homosexuality in indulging with the maid servant Rabbu. Rich believed that this womanly power would usher in a social order and a new "civilization" (68). Adrienne Rich discusses:

Constant and true love for women and her contempt for male dominated culture which caused failure of communication "between men and women on both personal and cultural level" compel her to conceive of a visionary community of women as an alternative to the contemporary social order ruled by the men. She calls it "the lesbian bond" or "the lesbian continuum". (Mittapalli 2007: 67)

Thus Chughtai leads Begum Jan towards a path of alleviation where she can remove her loneliness through an unconventional manner an intimate relationship with a female servant (179).

Rabbu arrived at the house and came to Begum Jan's rescue just as she was starting to go under her emaciated body. Suddenly she began to fill out. Her cheeks became rosy; beauty, as it were [. . .] Rabbu had no other household duties. Perched on the four – poster bed she always massaging Begum Jan's head, feet or some other parts of her anatomy. (Chughtai 1994:6-7)

Once, when Rabbu went on leaves for some task, Begum Jan became restless so she called the girl of nine years, her relative and the narrator of this story. By making the pretend of itching on her back she felt the touch of the girl's small hands on her fleshy body parts and fulfilled her need:

Here... a little below the shoulder . . .that's right . . . Ah! What pleasure . . . 'she' her satisfaction between sensuous breath. ' A little further . . .' Begum Jaan instructed though her hands could easily reach that spot. But she wanted me to stroke it. How proud I felt! 'Here . . . oh, oh, You're tickling me . . . Ah! She smiled. I chatted away as I continued to massage her. (Chughtai 2007:19)

Although, Psychoanalysts always defines women negatively, for Freud, men are seen as active agents while women are define in terms of passivity (Homer 2005: 98). Freud described femininity as a "dark continent" and never resolved the question 'what does woman want'? (97) On the other hand Foucault suggests the "sexually diseased "male" and the "aggressive" female (Smart 2002: 100). Assad expresses:

By sexuality, I mean not only the biological instinct towards sex, "mere genital, but a social construction created by and through the physical and social interaction of the individual with those around him or her. (Assad 1992: 10)

Sexuality thus bears the imprint of the culture in which it's developed and is historically specific. Foucault describes its sex "put into discourse, a discourse practice (11-12). Chughtai reveals a central preoccupation with the varied ways in which sexuality can function as a force that controls and inhibits individuals, but can also empower them. Although Chughtai's 'New Woman' abides by the man-made rules under patriarchal authority and possesses the womanly virtues of shame and sexual restraint but when she asserts her sexual rights, she does not like to be a chattel property. For her sexual satisfaction, she rejects customs, traditions and other male framed rules in her private space and asserts her sexual right whether by unnatural (lesbian) way. As a detached observer and an attached woman activist, Chughtai gives a realistic touch to Begum Jan's suffering and presents homosexuality (lesbian relationship) as her escape from loneliness.

Thomas Laquer in *Making Sex* writes, "Sex is like being human is contextual and it's different and sameness exhibited in men and women, is interpreted according to cultural demands" (16). Likewise literature is not simply an "imperfect mirror" of sexuality but actually constitutes the problem of sexuality by perpetuating and generating sexual differences through representation. In '*The Quilt*,' the negative aspect for women sexuality and power are balanced by positive representation of empowerment. Chughtai's complex representations of women's sexuality does not simply mirror of social phenomena but demands equality for women and men in the realm of sexuality in which both are active and unabashedly claim their pleasures and powers. Begum Jan in the story '*The Quilt*,' isn't exception of this rule.

The major interrelationship of the internal and external, reality and imagination - is a major feature of her fiction. Elements such sexual desire, men and love frequently haunt Chughtai's female protagonists' fantasy and imagination, suggest them the rise of the existential search for self identity. '*The Quilt*' concerned with a woman's quest for self, an exploration into the female psyche and understanding of the suffering of married life. The focus is not on uncovering the material and ideological specificities that constitute a group of women as "powerless" (Mohanty 34). Instead, this analysis reveals how control of women's mobility and sexuality challenged national and ethnic conceptions of social orders. These texts demonstrate how the maternal, domestic, and sexual elements of a woman's private life engendered her position within Muslim society. (Rajkumar 2008 : 125)

The image of an elephant is used throughout the story as a metaphor for the physical relationship the narrator observes between the two women. This metaphor becomes a figurative refusal to label these women's relations: "In the depth of winter whenever I snuggle into my quilt, my shadow on the wall seems to sway like an elephant. My mind begins a mad race into the dark crevasses of the past; memories come flooding in" (Chughtai 1996: 5). The symbol of the elephant is a deliberate choice on Chughtai's part to underscore the unnamed relationship that will unfold in the story. The image of an elephant in doors and underneath a quilt becomes a metaphor for the nature of the fantastical relationship between the two women. That a landowner's wife would be physically or even socially intimate with her servant was outside the borders of polite society at the time the story was written. Rajkumar expresses that Chughtai's subtlety is manifest in her choice of the story's narrator. It's told through the narrator's childhood reflections and thus handles the physical

relationship between Begum Jan and her maid Rabbu, delicately, as the innocent observation:

“ I am scared,” I whimpered.

“ Get back to sleep [. . .].

“ May I come to you, Begum Jaan?”

“No child . . . Get back to sleep” [. . .]. Then I heard two people whispering. Oh God, who was this other person? I was really afraid.

“Begum Jan [. . .] I think a thief has entered the room.”

“Go back to sleep, child[. . .] there’s no thief.”

This was Rabbu voice. I drew the quilt over my face and fell asleep. (Chughtai 1994: 7-8)

Gopinath points out that the narrator’s ability to see but not name empowers the relationship between the Begum and her maid. Their homoerotic desire for women is shielded from categorizing or labeling. It exists outside the heteronormative structures used to describe desire. The non-naming of the space beneath the quilt also served a practical purpose when Chughtai was tried for writing obscene literature. The fact that the relationship between the women was not defined was critical to clearing Chughtai of all charges. The focus of the obscenity trial was rendering of female-female desire; the objections to female homoeroticism underscore “the danger associated with the expression of female bodily desire.” These two women engage their sexuality outside of either category of male formulated uses for female sexuality. Their failure to conform to male sexual fantasies or sanitized versions of womanhood consolidates personal control of their desire. (Rajkumar 2008: 64)

Chughtai complicates the idea that domestic instability arises externally; she uncovers conflicting identities originating from within the home. Chughtai is interested in both the literal spaces women physically occupy and the figurative spaces they fulfill in familial hierarchies. Her female characters come from disparate household environments. In some cases, their struggles lead to successes, while in others, the results are disastrous failures. In explorations of imperfect domesticity, Chughtai resists exhortations for proper Muslim womanhood (42). Dutta states that “the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity – a stunting or evasion of growth” that’s perpetuated by what Betty Friedan calls “the feminine mystique”

To conclude, Chughtai is concerned not only with the manner in which men treat women, but also with the manner in which women conspire to undermine other positions (Rajkumar 2005:166). By understanding women’s struggles against the oppressive institutions of her time, she brings to her fiction an understanding of the female psyche that’s unique; no other Urdu fiction writer has approached women’s issues with the same degree of sensitivity and concern (Naqvi 1993: 42). At the center of this home was the figure of the Muslim housewife. The Muslim housewife was the perpetuator of cultural values and tradition, and the visible marker of difference through the practices of veiling and gender segregation. In *‘The Quilt,’* the abnormal romance such as ‘lesbian relationship’ is the mean for the woman to find escape from the familial and social repressions and is the expressions of female psychological desires. It presents that women also need more than the food or clothes. They also have sexual desires for which they have fantasies. Thus she brought the idea of female sexuality and self-actualisation in her works and restored a female

perspective by decentralizing this male-centered perspective and criticized the way of marginalizing the women.

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