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An Engagement with Modernity: *The Crooked Line*

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Ismat Chughtai's *The Crooked Line* reads like a classic Bildungsroman in many ways. It is the story of a child born in an environment which is fairly hostile who grows up and is able to move away from this hostile environment on a journey of self discovery. This basic structure is, however, where the similarity ends. A Bildungsroman is a novel of development of the central protagonist from birth to a position of stability within the social sphere. This normative form functions as a basis for Ismat Chughtai's novel *The Crooked Line* but instead of being the pattern followed, it is the path *not* taken. The normative Bildungsroman is that against which this novel rebels and tells the story of a protagonist who follows a trajectory which is individualistic to the extent of being patently against the socially accepted notions of social stability. The central protagonist, Shaman, is introduced to the reader as a neglected child in a large household already overflowing with children and in the climatic moments, is a pregnant woman whose husband has just left for the war. She is unemployed, alienated from her family and is therefore, akin to her childhood, lonely. This ending can be considered 'open' as it situates Shaman on the brink of a new phase of her life; one which she actively yearned for earlier. At the same time, this ending is in no way stable, for the simple reason that it is about possibilities and eventualities, not about any certainties in Shaman's present life.

In tune with the novel, the ending is depicted through a negation of the normative and through therein admitting the desire as well as the possibility of an alternative. Evidence of this supposition is in abundance throughout the novel in form of the other characters' lives seen through Shaman's eyes.

One such character is Noorie. She is presented as a contrast to Shaman's character in the first phase of the novel. Chughtai creates a character similar to Shaman's in the main but different in certain essential areas. While Noorie is only another child in a household already overflowing, she is also under the protection of a mother who is conscious of all which is due to Noorie as her daughter. This difference creates the foundation for further differences in the upbringing of the two girls. Noorie follows the 'type'; she is educated only enough to be deemed as such and is made conversant in the workings of the household. Her life is set on the path of normative as a consequence of her being supervised by her widowed mother. In her descriptions in the first phase of the novel, Chughtai mentions that this alienation of Shaman from the main household becomes a source of anger and violence in the child. However, it is this violence which serves as the catalyst for Shaman's escape; she is sent off to school as punishment. Formal education is the first alternative presented to Shaman in her quest to look at new avenues of personal growth.

Interestingly, like in *Jane Eyre*, a novel which Shaman will grow to like, this education is not the ideal it appears initially to Shaman. Chughtai takes care to vividly describe and continuously reinforce that this sphere is not idyllic. School is not the domain of the purely intellectual. It is

not untouched by the problems that plague the outside world; it is essentially a miniature. For the narrator, her school is also a disillusionment as it exposes the inadequacy of a token education which encourages literacy but not learning. It is also the space where certain social structures are replicated which again reinforce that which Shaman has been seeking to escape. That the alternative reproduces those problems which Shaman has been facing in the norm is one of the central motifs in the novel. The alternative is not better; it is simply the other which cannot be evaluated without engagement. Shaman's engagement is complete only when she becomes a school principal. The transformation from a student to a principal is a movement from one end of the totem pole to another and therein lays recognition and thereafter understanding. The shortcomings of Shaman as well as the school system are not excused by Chughtai but are explained in great detail, with both sides of the story being carefully exposed. This structure is one which is repeated throughout the novel. Chughtai situates her protagonist in such a way that Shaman can engage with the norm as well as the alternative. It is only through engagement that Shaman can arrive at any understanding of her own position regarding the options available to her. This 'true' understanding is critical as it is the only measure available for Shaman's emotional maturity and psychological development. At the same time, this structure also functions as the agent of destabilization for any notion of Reality. The real is that which is always negotiated with; and against. This flexible reality is interrogated and critiqued in manifold ways through the choices made by Shaman. This is borne out most obviously in the personal sphere; love and motherhood.

Shaman's platonic idealizing of Ifthikar is the alternative to the imposed betrothal with her cousin. In Ifthikar, there are elements of the poet as well as the tragic hero who is dying a painful death and will be forever deprived of his beloved. This paragon turns out to be a married man who has been manipulating women for entertainment. The shock of this revelation pitches Shaman's character into another, new archetype entirely; she becomes a 'flirt'. In her role as an educated and 'emancipated' woman who is entertained by the antics of her suitors, Shaman engages with an existence which is not only alien to her but also ultimately, self destructive. This phase becomes the catalyst for her final relationship with Ronnie.

Her marriage to the Irish-American Ronnie is the result of a courtship which is almost forced upon Shaman. She remains skeptical about the relationship till the last moment and it only her intense fear of loneliness which propels her into matrimony. The fact that this marriage falls apart is the final and telling criticism of any illusion of social stability. Noorie's normative Bildungsroman finds its denouement in marriage; an arranged marriage where she will be reduced to being a broodmare. As opposed to that Shaman has married for love and therefore, could theoretically, can lay claim to an emotional stability over and above merely social and economic like Noorie. Chughtai shatters this claim by exposing the fallacy of Romantic Love. For Ronnie and Shaman, love cannot be enough and this lack can never be fulfilled. The alternative which Shaman had wanted is exposed as one with glaring problems, thereby denying any satisfactory conclusion to the novel.

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The main problem which the reader of the novel faces is, then, this paradoxical relationship which exists between the normative and the alternative. Though the alternative exists, by definition, to provide an escape from the normative, in this novel, Chughtai does not in

any way construct it as an ideal. The alternative is as problematic and as fallible as the norm. More often than not, this alternative is only the normative couched in a different garb. This paradox seems to be the symptom of a larger crisis.

The realist novel cannot be a stable genre. As it avows to depict reality and change is a fundamental feature of reality, it is imperative that the realist novel changes constantly as well. This implies that the structural foundation of a Bildungsroman would also have to be modified in order to make it contemporary and also realist. The nature of this change, especially in the European context is obvious in terms of the transformation of the novel from depicting stability into a genre which hinges on the inherent instability of a society. In his essay on this topic, Franco Moretti in his introduction to *The Way of the World* argues that the new novel is the transformative novel. In this, he uses the model of the novel of adultery in which the growth of a character is located in the sphere of adultery and thereby is essentially an unstable stability. This instability forms the foundation of the novel form in one more significant aspect; one which is critical for Chughtai's Shaman as well. Youth is important for the central protagonist because it is the site of potential which is hitherto untapped. This potential encapsulates the heroic potential of the protagonist and manifests itself in the larger system of causality in the text. The trajectory which the central protagonist will choose to follow is begun in a young age. The decisions of the character work as milestones against which one may measure the success or the degree of closure provided by the ending. However, as Moretti further elaborates, this Bildungsroman encapsulates within it another paradox; the individual's growth cannot be parallel to societal growth as the social sphere exists in order to suppress the individual. This implies that any authentic Bildungsroman hinges on the discovery of a stable and viable alternative. That the protagonist will in some way find a balance between the self and the world and therefore s/he will be able to develop personally as well as socially. This developmental trajectory depends on various decisions the protagonist would make during her youth that would serve as determining factors for her 'maturity'. Chughtai's protagonist is also put in a situation where she is asked to constantly determine her own trajectory. Her violence against the entire household during her childhood, her fight to study in a college and later her relationship with Alma, these are all moments in which Shaman chooses to deviate from the norm. The deviation, in all these instances has consequences entirely unforeseen by Shaman. She is constantly disillusioned by the reality she faces and thereby is forced to confront the futility of alternatives. It is in this light that the novel becomes not a stable structure but, one proposes, a process of exploration. Through exposing the gap between the idea of the other and the actuality of it, Chughtai, is making an argument about modernity; its idea and its actuality.

The modern world into which Shaman enters as a student, in spite of being different from the claustrophobic domesticity is not better in any real way. Chughtai's satiric narration of the progressives in Shaman's college makes it clear that progressivism is also susceptible to a certain kind of opportunism. Invested with a certain revolutionary vocabulary, even a jilted lover can lay claim to an ideology, which it seemed, had forgotten its original idea. This approach becomes a critique of pretension itself. The damage wrought by an ideology which is inauthentic or a vocabulary which has become jargon is exemplified in Shaman's relationship with Ifthikar. In this instance, the alternate is worse than the normative because it is essentially a perversion of the norm instead of being truly different. The poetic lover is actually a fraud as well as an exploitative husband. The problem then is not simply of a Bildungsroman which is deviating

from the norm but of one which seems to reject this deviation as well. Not only does it reject the conservative as well as the radical but herein lays the crux of the novel; the rejection is in both cases, of inauthenticity. The novel seeks the unknown but always engages with it in its entirety and thereafter interrogates it and consequently exposes it. It is quite evident in the last phase of the novel, especially in the disintegration of Shaman's marriage. The marriage to Ronnie is a direct consequence of Shaman's loneliness. Their courtship is quick and there is the added pressure of her friend and his friend being a couple. In this relationship, there is absolutely no commonality, not even, sometimes, of mutual attraction. Their wedding and the subsequent initiation into married life exacerbates the problem when instead of stabilizing, their relationship seems to unravel even to the extent of self destruction. Marriage, in this instance acts as the space whereby both are forced to encounter that which they had not acknowledged; the public aspect of their relationship. If the function of marriage is to connect the public with the private, their marriage forces Shaman and Ronnie to acknowledge the public censure and tragically, also absorb it. The marriage becomes yet another disaster in Shaman's life.

This adds to the structure of the novel by suggesting that even this apparently radical step of marrying an Irish American is also essentially fallacious because of its inherent inauthenticity. This inauthenticity is the inability of the protagonist to understand that there cannot be a completely stable existence. The constant movement towards a meaningful existence is an exercise in futility because the supposition ignores factual reality. Chughtai critiques Noorie's normative existence, Alma's radicalized lifestyle is exposed- in her initial antagonism and later an obsessive love for her son - and Shaman is not given a closure. The radical as well as the conservative are considered inadequate because both have become stereotypes. Both are also unavailable for Shaman because of her need to engage with her existence. Her engagement lends the quality of individuality to her story, thereby saving her from being reduced to a stereotype. It is this quality which leads to the success of this novel.

Shaman, the central protagonist, does not become stable at the end but she has come a full circle. The climax of the novel hints at her pregnancy which implies that she is at the brink of a new phase in her life. At the end, though alone, she stands empowered after having engaged with and rejected various trajectories for herself. Her yearning for a straight line is symptomatic of her yearning for ignorance, but the reader knows that it is impossible. The very crookedness of her line lends her agency. A straight line is the norm; it is by definition devoid of causality as one point needs follow another at precisely the required angle. This lack of individuality is absent from the novel. Though her individuality is in no way 'rewarding' in any material way, Shaman is able to exist as an individual and more importantly, can disclaim deliberate inauthenticity in her life. It is this quality in the novel which also makes it progressive. Chughtai chooses not to define progressivism in any way except perhaps as a search for an alternative to a life defined through stereotypes. She rejects a modernity which is self-serving and decadent but she also rejects a conservatism which is terrifyingly claustrophobic. Unlike her favorite Jane Eyre, Shaman is not triumphant at the cost of the madwoman in the attic because she understands, through Noorie and Alma, the pathos of the other. At the same time, Shaman does not become a figure of defeat; her agency is still her own. Her progress, if anything in the novel qualifies as such, is that however crooked a line she may have drawn, Shaman is the architect of her own trajectory.

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