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Interfaith Marriage is ‘the Secular India’: Ismat Chughtai’s Treatment of Interfaith Marriage in her Short Stories

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Abstract:

Interfaith marriage is a type of marriage between a couple professing different religions, tied the knot with each other. An interreligious marriage is a challenge to conservative religious marriage institution and it gives importance only love, not the established religious norms. Ambedkar also advocates intermarriage because it is the only way to annihilate caste with right perspectives. Ismat Chughtai (1911-91) is aware of the socio-cultural and political reality in India, therefore, she said “an inter-religious marriage is not a crime, but it is an open invitation to trouble”. The aim of this paper is to analyse the religious and cultural phenomenon of interfaith marriage in India. Being Urdu literature’s most courageous and controversial writer, Ismat Chughtai has experienced the social reality and represented it in her writings which she prefers to characterize as ‘photography’ of real life. This paper also explores the treatment of interfaith marriage by Ismat Chughtai in her short stories.

Keywords: Interfaith, religion, kafir, love, marriage.

Introduction

Interfaith marriage is a type of marriage between a couple professing different religions, tied the knot with each other. Interfaith marriage is free from any types of religious restriction and stresses more on equality and love. It is traditionally called inter-religious marriage or ‘mixed marriage’. An interreligious marriage is a challenge to conservative religious marriage. Every religious and cultural practice whether it is in Islam or Hinduism or even Christianity or any other religion opposes it, but Islam strongly prohibits it.

India is a multi-cultural, multilingual and multi-ethnic country. Interfaith marriage in India has been practiced since Mughal period. Akbar (1542-1605), the Mughal emperor is the pioneer of interreligious marriage. Though, Akbar's marriage with Jodhaa Bai is more political than an emotional attachment. In the contemporary time of Chughtai, Kazi Nazrul Islam (Bengali poet) and Krishan Chander (Urdu writer), both engaged in inter-religious marriage. In recent times, Bollywood witnesses many interfaith marriages such as Nasiruddin Shah and Ratna Pathak, Kishor Kumar and Madhubala, Amir Khan and Kiran Rao, Shah Rukh Khan and Gauri Chibber and many others. They all realized that love is more important than love of religious conversion. Day by day the number of interfaith marriages are growing and it is reflected through literature and films. The aim of this paper is to analyse the religious and cultural phenomenon of interfaith marriage in India. Being Urdu literature's most courageous and controversial writer, Ismat Chughtai has experienced the social reality and represented it in her writings which she prefers to characterize as 'photography' of real life. This paper also explores the treatment of interfaith marriage by Ismat Chughtai in her short stories.

Religious Perspectives

Islam and Hinduism, both religions, forbid inter-religious marriage. The interfaith marriage is one of the main taboo issues in debates in Islam. According to Quran and Hadiths, the inter-religious marriage is strictly forbidden. According to Quran:

And do not marry polytheistic women until they believe. And a believing slave woman is better than a polytheist, even though she might please you. And do not marry polytheistic men [to your women] until they believe. And a believing slave is better than a polytheist, even though he might please you. Those invite [you] to the Fire, but Allah invites to Paradise and to forgiveness, by His permission. And He makes clear His verses to the people that perhaps they may remember (The Quran 2:221).

Through this Quranic verse, it is clearly stated that a marriage between a believing (Muslim) and 'a polytheist' (non-muslim) is strictly prohibited. However, a marriage with "an idolatress" or "a fire-worshipper is not void, but merely irregular" (Hidayatullah 226)

Hinduism stresses a marriage between two individuals of the same 'varnas' or castes. Early and Later Vedic literature identified four 'varnas' or castes: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. In Hinduism, caste is an important part of cultural and religious discourse which is acquired mostly at birth. Therefore, Hinduism does not accept interfaith

marriage. Hinduism does not even allow inter-caste marriage, whereas inter-religious marriages are naturally banned. Hindus who are engaging outside the four castes, are allowed to have interfaith marriage if the spouse has a ‘purification’ ceremony.

Interfaith relationships should be based on mutual respect on the basis of faiths, and marriage should be solemnized without imposing religious conversion of a spouse. After marriage, both spouse’s faiths should get equal respect and consideration in personal life and raising children by finding their own solutions to the irreconcilable differences between the two religions.

Interfaith Marriage in Ismat Chughtai’s Stories

Ismat Chughtai’s two stories, “Sacred Duty” and “Kafir” deal with the issue of interreligious marriage between a Hindu boy and a Muslim girl. To understand the stories, it is important to understand the cultural, political and autobiographical context of the stories. Chughtai has started writing since 1937; her first short story is “Bachpan” (“Childhood”), and “Kafir” is written in 1938 and “Sacred Duty” is written before partition of India. Before partition and even during partition, India is witness several riots and religious hostilities. The political upheavals and the British’s policy create the bitter relationship between Hindu and Muslims. Inter-religious marriage is quietly prohibited in a conservative society for political and religious biases. Even there are a few writers who deal with inter-religious marriage. In Hindi literature, Munshi Premchand is one of them who portrays the inter-caste marriages of Gobar and Jhunia, Mataadin and Seliya and Rudra Pratap and Saroj in his *Godaan (The Gift of a Cow)*. Ismat Chughtai as a writer of the Progressive movement, challenges odd cultural norms and old values, even in personal life she was a stubborn. Sadique points out, “Ismat Chughtai’s contribution lies in the fact that she established the tradition of understanding and presented issues from the women’s point of view” (Kumar and Sadique 222).

Chughtai, since her childhood, tried to break all types of conventional norms and in her short stories she demonstrates it boldly. Perhaps, she finds herself in every female character in her fiction. She states:

I tried to break all the restrictions I had suffered within the four walls of the house. I projected a female character in my stories who refused to live by old values, that is, false ideas of shame and honour, one who was not prepared to sacrifice her life for the

sake of a mere show of so –called respectability of her family or 'khandaan' (Kumar and Sadique 129-30).

In "Sacred Duty" and "Kafir", both the female characters Samina and Munni are courageous and face the religious restrictions for their inter-religious marriage but ultimately their love wins over their religion. Chughtai's non-traditional view of marriage is formed since her childhood, and it is well reflected in her autobiography. In this piece of writing, she expresses her love for freedom of expression as an individual, and her open repulsion of the subservience is that marriage often entails for women (Khan 176).

In "Sacred Duty", 'the sacred duty' means the conventional marriage performed by parents. In this story, Samina is "very dear to her parents and had passed B.Sc. that year with the highest honour" (129); she has an affair with a Hindu boy named Tushar. Samina's father Siddiqi Saheb has arranged his daughter's marriage to a Muslim man who works in Dubai "on a monthly salary of twelve thousand" (129). The matter is settled over the phone, though the groom is not "very handsome" rather "a bit short as well". Samina's parents have never asked Samina's consent about her marriage rather they have immersed themselves thinking "an opportunity like this did not come every day". Samina becomes 'absolute quite' for this forced marriage. The day-before her wedding, she elopes with Tushar Trivedi, after that she informs her parents by letter, "I regret that I can't agree to this match: I'm going to Allahabad with Tushar Trivedi to his parents' home. We've been married in court" (130).

After receiving the letter, her family becomes furious and has been thinking about the murder and revenge. Though, Siddiqi Saheb is a liberal-minded person, yet it does not mean that "his blood wouldn't boil if his daughter went astray". However, Siddiqi Saheb and his wife somehow try to manage the news of their daughter's elopement. Meanwhile a newspaper has been sent to them from Allahabad, which reports on the Hindu wedding ceremony of Samina and Tushar. Tushar's father, Seth Saheb who is much like Siddiqi Sahib conservative enough for marriage, does not consider 'civil marriage', thus he has arranged a Hindu marriage ceremony according to Arya Samaj rituals for them. The marriage rituals, how Samina changing her faith, taking a dip in the Ganges in Allahabad are highlighted in the newspaper by photograph.

After reading the newspaper, Siddiqi Saheb gets into "such a rage that he very nearly had a heart attack" (132). He assumes that Tushar's father has taken such an unfair advantage of this situation and it inflates Siddiqi Saheb's humiliation. His friend Jawwad

assists him to think up a plan to re-convert Samina and Tushar to Islam. Forcing someone to re-convert is indeed a sign of religious hostility. So, they dexterously handle the matter and bring them to his house and convince them; somehow forcefully re-convert them to Islam and perform the marriage according to Islam. After the marriage the couple stays at Ashoka Hotel and from there they left to an unknown address, leaving a letter to their parents and by this they disclose the hypocrisy of their parents. The letter is written in two hands writing every alternate sentence:

He (Tushar's father) invited us lovingly to Allahabad said my mother (Tushar's mother) was crying her heart out and that I (Tushar) must console her. When we reached there he arranged this marriage around the holy fire. We thought, what's the harm? Then he played other tricks. We put up with all that. Then, Papa (Samina's father), you appeared on the scene. You're such a good actor! How you won over Papaji (Tushar's father) with your sweet talk! ...You made us do the monkey dance before you. We took all this as a big joke, this farce too (142).

They also say that "we don't have any religion" and do not worship any specific god rather they worship love. But parents do not understand the value of love; rather they concentrate on family respect and cultural practices. In the name of "respectability" and "the family honour," they seem willing to do any number of disreputable and hurtful things. (Indeed, the old tradition of the "honour killing" is alive and well, even in the South Asian diaspora).

In "Kafir", Munni and Pushkar are childhood friends. The story is told from first person point-of-view; from the beginning the story is developed by the sweet hindu-muslim quarrels of both the characters and continues to like each other despite frequent quarrels. Even their family has a very close relationship in the meantime of religious hostility. They take the extreme step of marrying in an atmosphere of communal hatred and frenzy.

Though, Munni and Pushkar perform the civil marriage like Samina and Tushar but unlike them Samina and Tushar are the lesser victim of religious and cultural norms. Both Munni and Samina are well educated and autonomous characters and have taken their life's decision themselves. Wazir Agha states in "Ismat's Women", "Ismat's characters enter the story with little knowledge of their future and come into their future true form gradually" (Kumar and Sadique 197). From the beginning of her stories, the readers hardly understand the future of the characters, but by the innovative style and language she draws them towards different directions. In the story "Kafir", Munni is a conventional girl who obsesses with

religious norms and even her quarrel with Pushkar is only a religious issue; yet this type of girl turns into an autonomous and independent character. Both Samina and Munni believe in freedom of expression and action within patriarchal society; thus they become unconventional characters.

The parents of both Samina and Munni are 'enlightened' and maintain a good relationship with Hindu friends; but they are very much conservative about the marriage of their girls. Munni explains the reason, "boys of our community are allowed to marry Hindu or Christian girls, but we are not allowed to marry boys from other religions" (45). The women in Muslim are silenced and restricted in their freedom of choices and actions because the cultural norms are patriarchal. Walby defines "patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby 20). Patriarchy exists on the basis of gender division and projects subordinate position of women. Ismat Chughtai says "society has accorded a place for women, and if a woman sets her foot outside its boundaries, her feet would be cut off" (Chughtai 2012, 12). Patriarchy never registers women's identity. Rather, it subjugates women's autonomous identity and restricts women's independence. Munni in "Kafir" states "We are slaves. We have no control over our lives. Society dictates it. It can do with us whatever it wants. We can't do anything about it" (46). Thus, both Munni and Samina are victimized by the society and family, which are even today known as 'a repressive and oppressive institution' especially for women. Gender inequality is the prime source of this institution; Chughtai, in her autobiography, says "A lack of equality is found not only among the rich and the poor; it exists in a more intense form in the power relationship between men and women" (Chughtai 8). The gender inequality and women's oppression do not exist only in the Muslim community; rather it is a universal phenomenon.

Samina and Tushar are the victims of the cultural norms because "an interreligious marriage is not a crime, but it is an open invitation to trouble" (45). Both the couples in two stories face the 'trouble' courageously and challenge the conventional norms of marriage. Wazir Agha in "Ismat's women" elucidates, "each character of Ismat is a unique being and by carrying the imprint of the writer's personality, moves independently and becomes something different" (Kumar and Sadique 201).

In her autobiography Ismat Chughtai details, Hindu -Muslim relationship; she describes, on the outer level, both Hindus and Muslims embrace each other, but in the inner world, the difference exists. She is against this disguise and says "I felt suffocated by this

hypocrisy. They talked about enlightenment and liberal ideas, professed a deep love each other and recounted tales of great sacrifice of each other” (Chughtai 2012, 5). For interreligious marriage they never negotiate; rather it is forbidden. Chughtai always challenges the traditional views of marriage; even in her personal life she does not easily accept the concept of marriage. Saadat Hasan Manto, a contemporary writer of her time comments about her in these words:

Ismat is thoroughly stubborn. She is by nature rigid, just like a child. She begins with not accepting any rule in life, any natural law. At first she refused to marry. When she was persuaded to it, she refused to be a wife. She gradually reconciled herself to becoming a wife, but she did not want to become a mother. She goes through a lot of suffering, but she persists in her stubbornness. I believe that this too, is her way through which, by confronting the reality of life, or in fact by colliding against it, she tries to understand it. . . This peculiar stubbornness or refusal to accept is also generally evident in Ismat’s male and female characters (Kumar & Saqidue 163).

In an interview with Afsar Farooqui, Chughtai declares that she is not against marriage, but “against its extraneous ramification” She questions “when we trust each other why can’t two people actually have faith and be with each other?” (Kumar & Saqidue 68). Here Samina and Munni are the self-reflection of Ismat Chughtai. In “On Radha and Krishna”, Ismat Chughtai scrutinizes “the world’s different literature, there is no comparable expression of a woman’s love for a man; portrayed so freely and with such courage. No other tradition has drawn attention to the women as lover and man as the beloved” (Kumar & Saqidue 135).

Ismat Chughtai, here, portrays the love relationship of Samina-Tushar and Munni-Pushkar in a different context and represents Samina and Munni as an active female lover. In this context Wazir Agha justifies “the importance of Ismat Chughtai’s female characters lies in the fact that they demonstrate the moving away from the category of stereotype” (Kumar & Saqidue 202).

Conclusion

Literature, first and foremost, is a record of the lived experiences of people belonging to a particular period in a particular region, so it also embodies the specificities of historical circumstances. Chughtai is one of the most important writers in Urdu literature in partition era in India. She represents the pains and sufferings of women in domestic surroundings. She scrutinizes the concept of marriage and the cultural perspectives of marriages. In her stories,

she portrays different types of marriage, such as arranged marriage, child marriage, and interfaith marriage. The marriage institution has been used to support both patriarchal and capitalist systems. Chughtai has broken the conventional notions of marriage in two ways, one is interfaith marriage, and another is lesbianism. By portraying the interfaith marriage, Chughtai establishes the bonds between the Hindu and the Muslim. In the contemporary of Chughtai, Hindu-Muslim marriage has been prohibited for political reason. Chughtai, in the meantime of political upheavals and riots, establishes the secular bonds. Chughtai's stories may not have the vastness of an ocean, but certainly those have its depth. She uses the everyday language spoken in almost all Indian homes. Metaphor, similes and proverbs fit appropriately into the larger structure and embellish her style (Kumar and Sadique 177). Chughtai has the 'mind of a rebel, the tongue of a woman and the sensibility of an artist'. However, by virtue of a being woman, Chughtai has acquired the same status like George Eliot in English Literature.

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