

## **Female, Faculty and Fabric: An Analysis based on Ismat Chughtai's *The Quilt* and Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi***

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### **Abstract:**

India has silently yet essentially continued to breed a patriarchal society. An integral product of this complex cultural and psychological nexus is a set of carefully constructed rules and regulations which is intended for the female existing in it. What comes along, is a gradual realization in a female, of the need and a desperate urge to break those constructions. It is undoubtedly followed by a consequential sense of trauma, one of shame and fear. A piece of fabric along with assigning tradition, sexuality, and identity to a female, plays a significant role to veil the internalized humiliation and conditioned guilt. However, this paper discusses fabric as a means to assert faculty and resist the imposed norms. Ismat Chughtai's short story "The Quilt" and Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi", uses fabric to re-define their position from an object to a subject of agency. One uses it to cover their stereotypical "violation" and the other uses it to expose their wounds that have been covered for ages.

**Keywords:** Fabric, Faculty, Female, Patriarchy, Tradition.

"Shame is a soul-eating emotion."

— Carl Gustav Jung

Shame has been described as an irrational, primitive, wordless reaction, experienced largely 'visually' and through autonomic activity (Lewis 1978). However, what is necessary to analyze is the root of this word which would help us in understanding the concept better. Though derived from a Germanic root *skam/skem* which means disgrace, it took a slightly different mold in the Indo-European language which was often used to indicate the dire need to cover or to mask

oneself. In India, it is popularly termed as *lajja*. It is undoubtedly a morally loaded concept which especially governed the conduct of an Indian civilized woman, commonly known as *Bhodromohila*. Hence, *lajja* here is an idea that has dual signification. Along with shame, what succeeds and accompanies it is modesty. But we often forget to discuss the agent that creates this sense of shame within a woman. Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", talks extensively about the Male Gaze and its relation to power, masculinity, and subversion. This gaze often empowers a male and others a woman by disempowering her. She is reduced to the status of an object who is to be looked at. This creates a sense of *lajja*/shame which is a result of what Mulvey calls "fetishistic scopophilia" and sadistic "voyeurism".

A piece of fabric in the form of a veil or a *purdah* is then introduced and worn which thwarts the pleasure and power experienced by a male. Often regarded as a means of oppression and as a prison, in this paper, a piece of fabric will be discussed as a tool to assert power or faculty and as a medium to showcase one's resistance.

Begum Jan, in the story "The Quilt" by Ismat Chughtai, was described as an object in the house of a Nawab who "tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her" (36). Though the middle-aged Nawab was considered virtuous by the society because he was never seen to have got engaged or entertained a "nautch girl or prostitute in his house" (36), he couldn't keep his young bride happy and satisfied. She was often seen to be in solitude and engrossed in a feeling of dejection. While the Nawab was busy with "young, fair and slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him" (36), she continuously questioned her silent existence and thought "whether it was when she committed the mistake of being born or when she came to the Nawab's house as his bride" (36). With the coming of Rabbo, the servant/maid, however, Begum Jan's life started afresh.

Kate Millett in her book *Sexual Politics* talks about the inter-relation of power and sexuality. The politics of power which is often transmitted through complex and overlapping mechanisms lead to a dominating sexual authority called patriarchy or as Millett refers to it as "male supremacy in all things" (114). She further states that, "Patriarchy tends to convert woman to a sexual object. She is made to suffer for and be ashamed of her sexuality, while in general not permitted to rise above the level of a nearly exclusively sexual existence" (119). It is this patriarchy that is credited for the curation of the regulations to be followed and the code of conduct of a

woman in a society. Any attempt to violate it, is thus, regarded as an act of shame and therefore needs to be masked or kept hidden. These established ideologies lead to certain forms of repression in a society which is mostly emotional and sexual desires. Freud believes that “People's naturally strong instincts towards sexuality were repressed by people in order to meet the constraints imposed on them by civilized life” (“Sexual Suppression and Repression”).

Ismat Chughtai, through the character of Begum Jan, portrays how repressive sexual desires often surface later in an uglier way and in the form of distracted behavior. Repression, which according to Freud, “is a psychological mechanism equivalent to incarcerations” (*Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness* 134), creates a certain level of inhibition within a woman and conditions her to become a slave of conventional moral codes. This inhibition in India is termed as *lajja* and in general as “shame” which is nothing, but a product of strategic psychological and social mechanisms led by patriarchy.

Very rarely do we discuss or talk about sexual fulfillment, especially in India. However, the often veiled life of a woman and her sexuality was unveiled in this story through the characters of Begum Jan and Rabbo. Introducing Begum Jan as her mother’s adopted sister, the narrator seems to be sympathetic about her aunt who according to her was lonely and had, therefore, began to wilt gradually. When no education or relatives could help her out, Rabbo came for her rescue. The narrator though had empathetically described Rabbo as the one who gave Begum Jan her the ultimate fulfillment by scratching her back and massaging her with oils, very quickly it had turned to hatred and anger. Rabbo and Begum Jan’s camaraderie had become the talk of the town and had also made the other servants along with the narrator envious. Therefore, the narrator was later seen to have called Rabbo as “Filthy wench” and “The Witch” (*The Quilt & Other Stories* 8).

An inevitable character of the story that needs to be discussed and understood to deconstruct this companionship of Begum Jan and her maid Rabbo is the Quilt or the *lihaaf*. The narrator had compared this piece of fabric to an elephant, one that “swings”, “jumps”, “convulses” and “flutters” (12). This quilt though sheltered the narrator's “mouse-like” (12) fear and confusions, it most essentially veiled the repressed sexual desires of a female existing in a patriarchal society, be it of a rich Nawab’s wife or a poor maid’s.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) challenges the socially constructed and acknowledged “natural” and in relation to that claims

gender to be a performative act. According to Butler, an individual of any gender thus subscribes to nothing but a culturally influenced act. These genders and their respective performances are not absolute or solid making it open for interpretations and resignifications. Though this encouraged the readers to trouble the gendered performances, it most importantly, tutored how to do the same. Subversion of various performances by transgressing the boundaries set by the patriarchal society helped in the fluidic movement of these embanked genders. Begum Jan subverted the established sexual norms by reclaiming her sexual orientation. Her homosexual relation with Rabbo was used as a means to subvert patriarchy and her position from a mere object to a subject. This relationship brought to Begum Jan, pleasure and “soon her thin body began to fill out. Her cheeks began to glow, and she blossomed in beauty. It was a special oil massage that brought life back to the half-dead Begum Jan” (Chughtai 6). The fabric which was once used to mask her up and dominate was subverted by Begum Jan and was now used to veil her newly found autonomy and freedom.

In the epic Mahabharata, a distinctive event that involves fabric or cloth is the Draupadi's *cheelharan*, where drunk in power Dushasana forcefully tries to strip Draupadi of her sari. Vulnerable and weak Draupadi had then prayed her Lord, Krishna who was seen to protect her *lajja* by providing her with layers and layers of unending fabric which Dushasana couldn't unwrap. Possible echoes could also be traced in the story “Draupadi” written by Mahasweta Devi, where we are introduced to the protagonist Dopdi.

Name Dopdi Mejhen, age 27, husband Dulna Majhi (deceased), domicile Cherakhan, Bankrajarh, information whether dead or alive and/or assistance in arrest, one hundred rupees...an exchange between two medallioned uniforms. (Draupadi)

Dopdi, the one who had dedicated her life to fight against the exploitative feudal system was regarded as the most wanted rebel of the Naxal affected areas. She had decided to sacrifice her whole life for the cause of common people which in turn made her life full of pain and misery. However, the most important turn in her life happened with the murder of the landlord Surja Sahu. The death of the landlord was actually an act of revenge that they had taken against him who had treated them as untouchable beast during the horrible droughts.

In 1971, in the famous Operation Bakuli, when three villages were cordoned off and machine gunned, they too lay on the ground, faking dead. In fact, they were the main

culprits. Murdering Surja Sahu and his son, occupying upper-caste wells and tube wells during the drought, not surrendering those three young men to the police. In all this they were the chief instigators. In the morning, at the time of the body count, the couple could not be found. (Draupadi)

Just like her archetypal namesake, Dopdi along with her husband was forced to leave her native place and hide in the dark forest of Jharkhani, for they were now hunted down by the police lead by Senanayak. She had disguised herself during this period of exile and tried all possible means to keep her spirit of resistance alive.

Dopdi kept walking. Villages and fields, bush and rock – Public Works Department markers – sound of running steps at the back. Only one person running. Jharkhani forest still about two miles away. Now she thinks of nothing but entering the forest. She must let them know that the police have set up notices for her again. Must tell them that bastard sahib has appeared again. Must change hide-outs...Footsteps at her back. The steps keep a distance...Dopdi turned left. This way is the camp. Two miles [...] Why is Dopdi going this way? [...] Dopdi will lead the cop to the burning 'ghat'. Patitpaban of saranda had been sacrificed in the name of Kali of the Burning Ghats. (Draupadi)

Though at last, she had fallen prey to the trap laid by the police she made sure that the movement continued and therefore did not disclose the details of their hide-outs. Dopdi with her audacity and strong determination was successful in not letting out any information even after being held under the police's custody. However, she was cruelly made a prey of patriarchal power and position where they had unveiled her and destroyed her honor. She was tied up and molested brutally for days.

Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years. Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nail heads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says 'water' she catches her lower lip in her teeth.

She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her...She turns her eyes and sees something white. Her own cloth. Nothing else. Suddenly she hopes against hope. Perhaps they have abandoned her. For the foxes to devour. But she hears the scrape of feet. She turns her head, the guard leans on his bayonet and leers at her. Draupadi closes her eyes. She doesn't have to wait long. Again the process of making her begins. Goes on. The moon vomits a bit of light and goes to sleep. Only the dark remains. A compelled spread-eagled still body. Active pistons of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over it.

(Draupadi)

However, the turn of events takes place when Senanayak commands his fellow policemen to clothe her up and she declares:

Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, the object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me? [...] Where are her clothes? [...] Won't put them on, Sir. [...] Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice, what's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? (Draupadi)

Here, Gayatri Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" was answered, where a marginalized woman asserted her faculty by questioning the concept of "shame" constructed by this society and choose not to mask her body which then was a breathing witness of the shameful act done by the patriarchy. The mythological prototype of Dopdi seems to have screamed back and voiced her pain and anger through the ink of Mahasweta Devi in this story. Shankar Lal Jhanjhnodia & Sanjit Mishra in their article had rightly quoted Pushyamitra Upadhyay's poem "Suno Draupadi Shastra Utha Lo, Ab Govind Na Aayenge"

छोडो मेहँदी खडक संभालो, खुद ही अपना चीर बचा लो

घूत बिछाये बैठे शकुनि, मस्तक सब बिक जायेंगे  
सुनो द्रोपदी शस्त्र उठालो, अब गोविंद ना आयेंगे।  
कब तक आस लगाओगी तुम, बिक्रे हुए अखबारों से,  
कैसी रक्षा मांग रही हो, दुशासन दरबारों से।  
स्वयं जो लज्जा हीन पड़े हैं, वे क्या लाज बचायेंगे  
सुनो द्रोपदी शस्त्र उठालो अब गोविंद ना आयेंगे।  
कल तक केवल अँधा राजा, अब गूंगा बहरा भी है  
होठ सी दिए हैं जनता के, कानों पर पहरा भी है।  
तुम ही कहो ये अश्रु तुम्हारे, किसको क्या समझायेंगे?  
सुनो द्रोपदी शस्त्र उठालो, अब गोविंद ना आयेंगे।

They translate the above as:

*Stop wearing henna, pick up your sword, save your garbs on your own,  
Shakuni is well set with the game of dice, the glory of the good will be sold soon,  
Hark Draupai, Pick up your sword, now Govind won't turn up to protect your honour.  
How much would you hope from the paid newspapers?  
What pleading you are doing to Dushasana (corrupt) courts.  
One who is itself shameless, how would save your modesty,  
Hark Draupai, Pick up your sword, now Govind won't turn up to protect your honour.  
The king who had been blind until now, has turned himself dumb and deaf too,  
The lips of common men have been puckered; the ears have been covered too,  
You yourself tell us, what will your tears explain to anyone else?*

*Hark Draupai, Pick up your sword, now Govind won't turn up to protect your honour* (45-46).

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