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Exploring the Female Sexuality and Existential Crisis in the Writings of *Ismat Chughtai* Emphasizing Upon *The Quilt*, *Gainda*, and *The Homemaker*

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Abstract:

This paper analyses and explores the female sexuality and existential crisis of women in the Indian society as portrayed by Ismat Chughtai in *The Quilt*, *Gainda*, and *The Homemaker*. Ismat Chughtai was born at a time when the Indian society was highly orthodox and tradition-bound. She challenged the mores and values of her time and fiercely advocated her own idea of being a woman. She is known to have explored the dimensions of female sexuality, social and existential reality. Women have always been projected as a subject of honour and the preserver of traditions and cultures in our society which hinders their freedom and their emotions are suppressed; they are being subjugated and are positioned in the position fixed by the society. She believed that a woman has complete right over her body and soul. An in-depth analysis of the aforementioned works of hers has been done to bring forth the tabooed ideas of society and the positioning of women in this patriarchal society.

Keywords: Female, sexuality, identity, existence, crisis, society, stereotype.

Introduction:

Ismat Chughtai, Urdu's most Courageous and controversial woman writer in the twentieth century was born in 1911 in Uttar Pradesh at Badaun. She had been the most controversial writers India has ever produced, controversy stuck to her even after her death, as she was cremated and not buried according to her last wishes. She has created a position for herself among her contemporaries of Urdu fiction writers- Rajinder Singh Bedi, Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan chander. She introduced areas of experience not explored before. She spoke

heatedly against the orthodoxy and inflexibility of the Progressive Writers' Movement of which she was a member. She is known for her unconventional writings; she "challenged the mores and values of her time and fiercely advocated selfhood and self- definition for women," and she became a legend in her lifetime. . Ismat Chughtai's family was a progressive one but the attitude was not acceptable for girls and freedom was limited to the male members only. In the words of Ismat, "Every woman in the family- mother, aunt, sister- was terrorized. Society had fixed a station for her. If she overstepped these limits, she would have to pay the price. Too much education was dangerous."

The concept of female sexuality has always been a taboo in India since ages, even today; women struggle to express their sexual emotions freely, they face an existential crisis as they are dominated by the male counterparts. Women have been subjected to certain stereotypes, their sexuality and existence are not adequately expressed, even if somebody dares to do, they are abused with various types of slang: a whore, bastard, raand (if a widow), even women curse woman who try to show her sexuality, she is referred as showing and spreading obscenity. Sexual feeling is completely a natural phenomenon but is considered a taboo in case of women in particular. Male, if they show their manliness by expressing their sexual desires, are praised and given a tag of strong man, but in case of women, they receive a completely different reaction from the society. Men are allowed and even insisted to marry twice if they aren't satisfied in their married life, but the situation is altered in case of women. Men are allowed to visit the brothels any number of times they wished, but that same prostitute whom the men visit is viewed as an outcast in the society. Men are allowed to have multiple partners but it is forbidden for women. Women are stereotyped to wear particular type of cloth, when tempered, they are rebuked and assaulted. These issues of women have been dealt with in the works of Chughtai discussed below.

The Quilt

Ismat Chughtai in 'The Quilt' unravels the women sexuality, she unveils the sexual expectations a woman has from her partner, and also she explores the existential dilemma a woman faces in her life time. It is strange to discover that the themes chosen by Ismat Chughtai back then is highly relevant in today's context; it proves that women condition was never bettered. 'The Quilt' talks about Begum Jaan who is married to Nawab Saheb, but later she

discovers that the Nawab has an obsession for “young, fair, slender- waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him.” She is neglected by her husband, “he tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her. The frail, beautiful Begum wasted away in anguished loneliness.” She tried multiple tactics to gain her husband’s attention but in vain, “one cannot draw blood from a stone. The Nawab didn’t budge an inch.” She yearned for love. Soon she started living her life to the full, “It was Rabbu who rescued her from the fall.” She felt loved after Rabbu’s arrival in her life. There grows a sexual attraction in between them and it is witnessed that Rabbu highly satisfied Begum Jaan. Various scenes in the story reveal the sexual urge of a woman and how it leads to homosexuality. The idea of homosexuality has often been a taboo and is hardly discussed, but prevails in the society even now. In the story a women’s sexual urge has been documented with much ease and efficient manner. The existential dilemma is reflected in the following lines, “One did not know when Begum Jaan’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.” She at times, “felt like throwing her clothes into the fire. One dressed up to impress people. But the Nawab didn’t have a moment to spare for her.”

A female develops physical attraction at a very young age, when not regulated it would lead to homosexuality. The narrator in the story is witnessed developing an attraction for Begum Jaan “I was fascinated by her looks and felt like sitting by her for hours, just adoring her.” Begum Jaan is witnessed to get herself satisfied by the little narrator in the absence of Rabbu, she, the narrator feels great at the attraction of hers being reciprocated by the Begum “she, too, was fond of me.” The narrator wanted to feel like Begum Jaan and she considered herself a grown up, “No Begum Jaan...I don’t want dolls... Do you think I’m still a child? So, you’re an old woman then, she laughed.” The confusion of a young girl regarding the development of sexual desires is highly reflected, she as a child didn’t know much in this regard and hence was perplexed. She felt uncomfortable or the sense of bad touch, “she made me lie down with my head on her arm. How skinny you are...your ribs are showing. She began counting my ribs. I tried to protest. Come on, I’m not going to eat you up. How tight this sweater is! And you don’t have a warm vest on. I felt very uncomfortable.” Although she felt bad, but she didn’t dare to confess it to anyone because somewhere in her subconscious mind, the fact that it was a taboo was ingrained. Also, the teenage perplexity is evident here, she might have not known as how to

react in such a strange situation. She feared the experiences she gained, “But Begum Jaan here was more terrifying than all the loafers of the world...I was helpless and had to stay there much against my wish.” She exclaimed, “I want to go home.” These experiences left an everlasting print upon her life and this proves the condition of women in our Indian households. Female sexuality in a natural urge but is often looked as an unhealthy practice if a woman expresses those desires openly and freely.

Gainda

Ismat Chughtai in ‘Gainda’ unveils the condition of a widow in a society and the vulnerabilities she is made to experience in the society. In the story, Gainda is a young widow who is abused and rebuked. Initially, she is portrayed as a healthy young and beautiful, who is widowed, later at the end of the story she is seen as a lean, thin and an unhealthy mother. A widow is not allowed to wear beautiful and attractive clothes or beautify herself with amulets or ornaments; the society decides for her and fixes a station for her. A widow too has the natural urge to be loved and accepted by someone of the other gender, but this urge of theirs is not accepted by the society and she is verbally and physically assaulted and exploited. She is scolded by various slangs; “Raand” is one such. Men often have the urge to have them and exploit them physically and most of the times sexually as nobody care about the widow, whatever happens, it is the widow who is to be blamed for even the wrongdoings against her and not the exploiter. The young widow here gets attracted towards the narrator’s “Bhaiya,” they share a sexual relationship and she bores his child despite the circumstances that might occur, her natural urge or desire to have a man and be loved was fulfilled, but near the end of the story it is witnessed that she is left along with the baby to suffer in deplorable conditions, “she was beaten to a pulp and abandoned without food. She survived somehow.” Bhaiya, the father of the child is sent out to Delhi, “he doesn’t come even during the holidays.” The widow “Gainda” was deprived of the happiness she deserved as a human. She too desired a life of having a happy family but that happiness of hers was snatched and she was labeled an outcast “these low-caste bitches” as she dared to cross the boundary a widow has been confined to.

The teenage perplexity of a female is portrayed here in the story, when the narrator is witnessed to gain the attraction of Mewaram, not knowing about the boundaries or the complexities of a human relationship with the opposite gender, “take this sindoor, and sprinkle it

on my head,” “Mewa ... will you marry me...?” She as a teenager longed to have a man in order to feel loved and wanted like Gainda, she didn’t know whom to woo as she was not well informed regarding this and she was too young to discuss this issue or confusion with anyone openly. She as a teenage wanted to have a full body so that she attracts a man like Gainda, “Just look at Gainda! And me?” In the state of confusion she developed a strange feeling for Mewa, “The sound of Mewa’s footsteps startled me. A sweet thought, a desire invaded my mind once again, and hiding my face with both hands I threw myself on the ground, face down.” Despite all her efforts to attract Mewa, there was minimal chance of the attraction being reciprocated; this made her “fumed in anger.” She was too young to understand certain things that were happening around her, “I sat there lost in thought- first with eyes closed and then, with eyes wide open. But I could not make head or tail of it. Why didn’t I understand such a lot of things? In the desolate, hot afternoon I waged a weary struggle to unravel strange riddles but could not.” She felt an existential dilemma at times when she was not paid heed by anyone, “Who was there to share my hurt? Bhaiya never spared a thought for me, Amma never cuddled me. The result- I became very obstinate. Because of this sense of deprivation, I made everyone my enemy. Throughout the day I wandered about aimlessly and fought with everyone.”

The Homemaker

The Homemaker by Ismat Chughtai explores the extreme level of sexual urge and at the same time unveils the hidden sanctities of a woman. Every woman deserves and desires to have a home and a family; it is not only the sexual gratification that attracts a woman towards a man but the sense of a safe home and a comfortable place to live in. A woman is not allowed to live her life freely and everywhere she is eyed upon. In this story, the maid “Lajo” is witnessed to openly express her sexuality and the equivocal sanctity that is hidden inside a woman’s heart. Lajo, the maid, shows her sexuality in extremities but also the sanctity of a good and loyal wife is portrayed by her. Her life prior to meeting and getting married to Mirza was like hell. Wherever she worked, her masters used and exploited her sexually and disgraced her, and then she was handed over to some other master depriving her of the money she deserved. She got used to this condition of hers, the desire to live in a safe and comfortable home was killed and she was psychologically subjugated to the false belief that she doesn’t own a life. She had the notion that

she is liable to satisfy a man and she shouldn't raise her voice against any brutalities or hostilities she is marked with.

After getting acquainted with Mirza, her life was changed to a great extent. She now lives her life as if she owns it, she does all the household chores and Mirza felt, "As though Bi Amma, his late mother, was back! Every object in the house- the earthen pitcher, the newly scrubbed bowl, the lantern- was sparkling." Every male member in the neighbourhood eyed upon her, until she was married to Mirza. Initially, she wasn't ready to get married as she had the notion that, "only virgins got married, and she could not remember when she had lost her virginity. She was not fit to be anyone's bride." "Mirza was obsessed with the idea of marriage. So, one night, an auspicious hour was chosen after the isha prayer, and they were married." The female urge to live a life of her own was gratified and she now lives happily but this happiness didn't last for long as she now had to live her life according to her husband and wasn't allowed to cross the barriers fixed by the society. Gradually it is seen that Mirza didn't pay much of an attention to her. "One night Mirza stayed out, celebrating Dussehra with friends. He returned in the morning... Lajo was left fuming," and she gets attracted to Mithwa, "that day Lajo's eyes went up the terrace once again. She saw that Mithwa's eyes were piercing her wet body like spears... It was as though a lightning flashed and thunder fell on Mirza's house." "The love of which she had always been generous was now available to Mithwa." She was beaten up for showing and expressing her sexuality. She was also abandoned by the people surrounding her. It is evident when Ramu's grandma exclaimed, "I don't want to see your face. You've disgraced us; now leave this place." She had always been generous in sharing her love with the males she ever acquainted with. Although female sexual desires had been a taboo, she never compromised with her sexuality and expressed it openly. "In a fortnight she was on her feet again. It was as though she had been spring cleaned after the beating, which left her complexion glowing more than ever before. There was a magic in the swing of her hips." These feelings of hers must not be suppressed as they occur naturally and she did that.

Conclusion

Women in our society have always been viewed as an inferior member in this patriarchal society, she is made to serve and satisfy the men in every spheres of life. It is a natural

phenomenon to get attracted to the opposite gender, but if a woman shows her sexual urge, she is not accepted by the society and is verbally abused and rebuked. Many a times, homosexuality is witnessed, they are drawn closer to other women when neglected by husband, as in the case of “Begum Jaan”. In the case of widows, society always shows an indifferent attitude, she is abused, exploited and abandoned, and the character of “Gainda” is an excellent example. Women are not allowed to express their sexual urge freely, if they dare to do she is assaulted and exploited, the character of “Lajo” can be taken up as an example to support this statement. Ismat Chughtai through her stories excellently brings out the female sexuality and unveils the true desires of a woman despite it being considered a taboo in an Indian society in particular. Chughtai felt that realities of life must be expressed freely and women should be given the right to express her emotions freely. In the words of Chughtai, “IN MY STORIES I’ve put down everything with objectivity. Now, if some people find them obscene, let them go to hell. It’s my belief that experience can never be obscene if they are based on authentic realities of life. These people think that there’s nothing wrong if they can do things behind the curtains... They are all halfwits.” According to Ismat Chughtai a woman should be allowed to live her life to the fullest experiencing all the realities of life and she also discards the ideologies which considers these naturally occurring phenomenon as a taboo. The society often tends to judge others for the same thing they do in privacy, this idea is disregarded by Chughtai. She believes emotions that occur naturally must be presented and expressed without any fear and there is no portrayal or showcasing of nudity or obscenity in the expression of those feeling. If men are allowed to express their sexual urge freely, a woman too must be allowed to do so. There should not be any notion as forbidden for women in particular. A woman also has the right of sexual gratification, a widow too must have the right to live a happy life and every woman whether beautiful or ugly, fat or lean, privileged or unprivileged has the right to live her life to the fullest.

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