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Resisting Hegemonic Masculinity: Women, Identity and Marriage in the Short Stories of Ismat Chughtai

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Abstract:

Cultural studies have transformed the perception and research paradigms of a literary text. A text puts forward multiple issues concerning identity, culture, location and self. This research paper proposes to interrogate the cultural underpinnings of the time when Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991) wrote to assess the making of women and identity in her writings. While portraying emotional barrenness of life and rebellion of the protagonist in traditional household set up, Chughtai highlighted the lives of women where female sexuality is experienced, but never explained. She was conscious of the largely feudal and patriarchal social structure of her times, and she fiercely rejected, exposed and subverted it. In her personal life, she too had to struggle to get education and make her mark.

A critical enquiry into the writings of Ismat Chughtai, most notably her short stories replete with themes like female sexuality, self-representation, and agency as experienced in a marriage is eminent as her writing is radically different from the traditional versions of Indian feminism in the 20th century. While problematising the gender role, woman's identity and sexuality, Chughtai 'unveils' the inner world of women of her times and exposes the socio-cultural and psychological problems faced by the women.

In Ismat Chughtai's writings, the women often rise beyond the cultural mandates of the roles assigned to them by the society and threaten to disrupt the discourse of dedication and submission that generally surrounds them. The aim of this research paper is to prove that though Chughtai predominantly presents women as victim in the patriarchal society order, she doesn't project her only as a locus of desire, sexual object, and a figure of domination and

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control especially with regard to the marriages, rather she also presents women as site of self-expression, subversion and a rebel who turns the table in resisting hegemonic masculinity by challenging the male figure and stereo typical notions laid by the patriarchal society. In the process, her women liberate themselves and reclaim their selfhood and sexuality.

Keywords: Hegemonic Masculinity, Identity, Gender, Marriage, Resistance.

"I have always thought of myself first as a human being and then as a woman."-Ismat Chughtai¹

Around the world and across many communities, strong social and cultural norms are prevalent that perpetuate an imbalance in power between women and men. While on one hand, its the male who has more agency as compared to women in their lives, men's behavior and decision making is also profoundly shaped by the socio- cultural expectations and norms with regard to masculinity. A critical inquiry into gender norms and its resultant effect on both men and women can perhaps lend us a better understanding of the complex ways in which this unequal power distribution and gender imbalance distorts the fabric of our society, and shall also help in engaging men and enlightening them about the inequalities thereby bringing about a positive change in the society.

Ismat Chughtai's writing replete with her iconoclastic wit, her fine eye for detail opens up the secret world of women that was rarely mentioned in works before her. Chughtai through her writing interrogates the oppression of women at the hands of patriarchal set up of Indian society during 1930s when women and their issues were silenced in oblivion. Her writing threatened the social structure of the repressive society and posed a threat to the traditional set up of Indian household which expected women to sit silently, performing their stereotypical roles without raising a voice or questioning the established social paradigm. Chughtai wrote during the time when women writing; writings about women, and writing for cause of women was considered a transgression of the boundaries of morality and respectability. The image of women was largely idealistic and flawed until women writers unveiled the female quarters to bring the reality of women as it was.

¹ Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991) born in the city of Badau in Uttar Pradesh, fearlessly depicted the position and roles of women in middle class U P families.

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Ismat Chughtai through her writings strives to resurrect women from the disempowering images created by the patriarchal society that largely impact her identity construction. Where women and their bodies

were largely seen either as sexual entities or were celebrated as ideals of beauty and monuments of sacrifice, there has been hitherto an absence of the 'real woman' in the fiction dealing with women. Wives were largely portrayed in their idolized forms as the 'Laxmi' of the house or the living epitome of self-sacrifice and devotion thereby debarring the basic human feeling and emotion to the women. Chughtai visualizes her women often as characters with a powerful mind, who have control over their mind and body and are independent. Talking about the representation of women by the male writers as per their own convenience and understanding, an image which was far removed from reality, Ismat reprimands women in an essay from Bombay to Bhopal, -"You fools, this is your punishment. Remain behind the curtain and sit there to your heart's content. People will make up ghouls to represent you and to frighten each other. Do you know how many minds have been twisted and distorted by your purdah? And now you have become accustomed to being victims. I have no sympathy for women who don't know how to help themselves"².

In India, strong patriarchal values that regulate morality, sexuality, and social productions are expressed through specific cultural norms. The creation and celebration of self-sacrificing and pure image of women since ancient times emphasized the role of women as faithful devoted wives and sacrificing mothers. It is interesting to analyze the self-limiting and constricted behavior of females which is not only due to their conditioning of being the 'weaker sex,' but also, because of the deprivation of decision-making power and limited agency offered to them by the society. Also taking into account how any deviation from the norm such as any behavior that challenges gender-based discrimination, female subordination, exploitation of women and their subjugation is seen as a transgression of boundaries marked by the patriarchal society and that calls for immediate remedial mechanism. Where on one hand we see how society controls its women as per the gender norms dominated by the patriarchal mindset, some men too fall prey to the gender norms constructed around masculinity and male sex role, that of being manly, aggressive to an extent, exercising of control over women, head of family, provider, strong and in control of his emotions. So much so, that a man's masculinity and honor is tied to the women of his house.

²Chughtai, Ismat, *My Friend, My Enemy: Essays, Reminiscences, Portraits*. Translated by Tahira Naqvi (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001), p.82.

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Ismat Chughtai holds a unique place in the field of Urdu literature as she was the first Urdu female writer to unravel the psychological and social aspects of a woman's sexual life. Chughtai critiques not just the patriarchal institution of marriage but also the role of family, the state, religion, law and order with an aim to identify a woman's body as the locus of masculine power. Several short stories written by her provide instances of practices that maintain oppression of women. Chughtai exposes this oppression, locates the pattern and practice of domination, challenges the patriarchal discourses and renounces the hierarchical authoritarian mindset. By investigating the indigenous social practices within the patriarchal family, Chughtai exposed the way a woman's gender and body politics was generally perceived in the North Indian society in the 20th century. Chughtai projects the silenced truth of woman's everyday experience in hearth and home, and infuses her body with considerable mechanism to resist patriarchal power and to negotiate her position within the marriage. Thus, this paper theorizes the ways in which female bodies are read, interpreted and silenced by the society as reflected in the works of Ismat Chughtai.

In her introduction, Sukrita Paul Kumar writes:

Writing in the man's world, delineating mostly the microcosm of the women as victims of exploitation by men or other women in the patriarchal society, Ismat entered the literary scene as though sounding a clarion call for awareness and change.³

While her work reconstructs the history and society of her time, Ismat Chughtai strongly believed that literature has the power of bringing and promoting reform in the status of women, "Literature and life, Literature and society, and literature and history go hand in hand. If any one of these is separated from the other it will be destroyed altogether"⁴. Cultural violence against women is primarily rooted in the discourse of male privilege and gender bias. Where boys learn early in life the importance attached to their gender, they eventually grow with sense of entitlement. Being seldom reprimanded for the male chauvinistic attitudes, men continue their authority and male aggression even later in life as a husband and a father. It is argued that since Indian men are so pampered and made to feel important and special as young kids because of their exalted

³Kumar, Sukrita Paul, and Sadique. ed. *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times*. (A Katha Book, 2000), p. 15.

⁴Chughtai, Ismat, *My Friend, My Enemy: Essays, Reminiscences, Portraits*. Translated by Tahira Naqvi (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001), p.26.

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position in family and society that they tend to perpetuate domestic violence at later stages in life. While on the other hand, women are internalized of their subordinate roles in family and they believe that sacrificing roles as wives and mothers are their ideals. Often women's emotional and financial dependence along with the denial of their rights and resources serves as an excuse for their abuse.

Chughtai examines in her writings how not just traditional practices, financial situation, religion, family structure and society condition the lives of women, but also factors like education and a lack thereof and marital incompatibility too add to the current state of women. The role of a family, parents in particular is essential to understand the modelling of a young mind in a society where gender discrimination is omnipresent and control of space, speech and body of a woman is exercised in the name of disciplining, where marriage often adds to the existing pitiable state of a woman.

Very early in life Ismat learnt the norms society lays down for a girl, modelling her for future in order to become a perfect wife, daughter-in-law and a mother. At a young age of 13 years, Chughtai had to hide her romantic stories that she had written which she eventually destroys, since girls from 'decent' families were not supposed to read or write about romance. As a matter of fact, she had to be discreet about her interest in reading romantic novels. However, she fought with her family to get education, and continued writing. In 1942, "Lihaf" her most controversial short story to have been published till date saw light of the day. The subject of homosexuality chosen in "Lihaf", for which Ismat had to face obscenity trial, might be quite a common subject to deal with in today's time, but in early 20th century India, many people could not believe the fact that a Muslim women could write on such topic especially using the colloquial Urdu language.

A remarkable example can be traced in the controversial short story "Lihaf," wherein the lady of the house, Begum Jan who is presented as a sexually frustrated upper-class housewife who manoeuvres to overcome the loneliness in her newly married life by indulging in a homoerotic relationship with her maidservant to counter her sexual repression which leads her to the road of emancipation.

A major translator of Ismat Chughtai's work, M. Asaduddin states in the preface to *Ismat Chughtai: Makers of Indian Literature*, "She registered the presence of women in uncompromising terms and boldly portrayed them in their multifarious dimensions, most notably, the hitherto unexplored and unmentionable

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dimension of female sexuality”.⁵

Before Ismat Chughtai, awareness about female issues was already being raised by social reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagr, Ram Mohan Roy and Sir Syed Ahmed who condemned issues like Sati practice, child marriage, purdah system and confinement of women, yet critical analysis of the patriarchal attitude of the society and its biased and discriminatory behaviour towards women and an enquiry into the larger role of women was missing. Chughtai brought about a radical change in her study of women by highlighting the use of culture and tradition to justify violence against women, she projects women as not just a biological entity but as human beings.

While problematising marriage, Ismat Chughtai states the reality of young brides in marriage, the violence meted out to them turning them into non-entities, psychological and physical damage that they endure because of sexual abuse in early marriage. Explaining the point further, Chughtai talking about the plight of her young female friends who were married at an early age says:

[Her friends] were married off around the age of twelve and I saw their lives. They told me that terrible things happen on the wedding night and after. They wanted me never to get married because it was a painful business. I was terrified. I knew nothing about these matters. Neither did my parents tell me, nor was there any literature available. Also, the whole business of marriage seemed to be dreadful- sex, cooking, beatings from the mother-in-law and all the other in-laws.⁶

It is evident through the fiction of Ismat Chughtai how early marriage violates the basic human rights of women in the society marred by patriarchal mores. Chughtai aims to raise awareness through her writings about the rights pertaining to women’s rights over body, freedom and space that every being is entitled to, which gets curtailed often in oppressive households, thereby depriving them of self-respect and a dignified life.

Urdu literature critic, Wazir Agha comments:

Somewhere in the constitutional make-up of each of Ismat Chughtai’s female characters, exists a woman who is not merely a nameless adjunct of the household machinery, but who, while asserting her

⁵ Asaduddin. M., *Ismat Chughtai: Makers of Indian Literature*, (Sahitya Akademi, 1999), p. 7

⁶ Susie Tharu and K Lalita, *Women Writing in India, Vol. II: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 127.

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independence shakes to the core, if not demolishes, time-honoured values and customs.

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Chughtai's interest to delve deep into the female psyche also draws parallel to other psychologists who study the workings of stages in the development of the self and its identity. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*- the pioneering work on female sexuality elaborates on the "formative years", experiences and conditioning of the childhood, the process that determines a woman's role in society. Beauvoir claims- "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman".⁸

With the gradual and imminent change in society and its cultural practices, an institution like marriage and the discourse surrounding it is also undergoing a drastic change. With a rise of individualism among women and rising feminism and awareness, women now seek more than just financial security or marriage as a tool for procreation alone. Women now are prioritizing mental and sexual compatibility in marriage, claiming for the space and identity within the parameters of marriage. With the amendments in laws regarding same sex relationships, marriages and live-in relationships, along with possibilities of adoption and surrogacy, the discourse of marriage has gained new dimensions with time. There is a major shift from hierarchical relationships to that of partnership and egalitarianism. Women in the fiction of Ismat Chughtai and in literature afterwards can be seen resisting dominant discourses and orders surrounding that of women and their bodies. Especially in the fiction of Chughtai, one comes across women who are not only victims of the society but also women who empower themselves with strategies to resist the dominant marital discourse. Chughtai's women often present before us an alternative reality, and through her fiction Chughtai identifies the elements for a woman's empowerment. She is vocal of the autonomy of wives and questions the prevalent derogation of the rights and status of a woman, thus she charts a path to reframe the traditions and leads to women empowerment. Where on one hand Ismat presents women in a vulnerable position caught in the complex web of hierarchical relationships and troubled marriages, on the other hand, she also projects women who demand a status of equality in marriage and life thereby emerging as New Women.

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⁷Kumar, Sukrita Paul, and Sadique. ed. *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times*.(A Katha Book, 2000), p.194.

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