

## Ismat Chughtai's *Masooma*: A Saga of Pain and Exploitation

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### **Abstract**

The miserable plight of women, their pain, exploitation and subordination have been analyzed by various writers till date. Many eminent writers have penned down the struggles, difficulties and predicaments of women with utter disgust and despair. Ismat Chughtai was one of the prolific and bold women writers belonging to the category of women's issues and dilemmas. Undoubtedly, she was an excellent writer of Urdu genre. The present paper focuses on the much acclaimed novel *Masooma*, translated into English as *The Innocent*, a poignant tale of a girl called Masooma belonging to a muslim family of Hyderabad and how her aristocratic mother leads to her downfall. The little innocent girl is sold off by her mother into the occupation of prostitution and she herself is transformed from a snobbish begum to an expert madam. Through her novel, Chughtai eloquently exposes the patriarchal norms and narratives which leaves a woman in a helpless and vulnerable state. She has not only addressed the issues of oppression and confinement of women in their narrow domestic spheres but has also explored the vast area comprising the psyche, the inner dilemmas, the pain, the frustrations that eventually results in anxiety, alienation and depression.

**Keywords:** Pain, Exploitation, Subordination, Patriarchal norms, Inner dilemmas

The most dauntless and fierce women writers of the twentieth century Ismat Chughtai was undoubtedly the ‘doyenne’ of the Urdu literature. She was a true feminist in every sense. A forerunner in addressing the exploitation of women and exposing the cruel patriarchal laws and stereotypes is a key subject of all her novels and short stories. Her prominent presence could be visualised in almost all those areas which had not been discussed and scrutinised earlier. In all her works like *Masooma*, *Lihaaf*, *The Crooked Line*, *A Very Strange Man*, *Lifting the Veil*, *The Eternal Vine* etc, she presented the true picture of women’s exploitation in the harsh patriarchal structure of society. She tried to instil the attributes of self confidence and freedom in one’s life as she remarked “And now it's important that we develop self confidence... It will be disappointing if our writers don’t use their pen for the betterment of common people, because if writers, journalists and thinkers turn away from present day circumstances and write merely for personal gain, their work will lack vigour, and anything that is lifeless is not meaningful.” (Chughtai)

“ When sin becomes a necessity of life, then its no longer sin, it is a requisite of good judgement.” (Masooma 108).

Published in 1962, *Masooma*, one of the best known novels of Chughtai is regarded as a feminist work. The novel revolves around the innocent girl Masooma and her mother Begum Sahiba and their psychological dilemmas and predicaments. It is undoubtedly a saga of disturbing and distressing pain and exploitation on the part of the weaker section of the society. It reveals the passive condition of women who are seen as an instrument to satisfy men’s lust. The patriarchal ideology is a fundamental element that is inbuilt into the Indian system. This ideology believes in male domination and female subordination. It not only exercises control over the female body but also over the female mind. In this context, the well known feminist Simone de Beauvoir poignantly expresses in her seminal book *The Second Sex* “... it is understood that she is inferior and dependent; she has not learned the lessons of violence, she has never emerged as a subject in front of other members of the

group; enclosed in her flesh, in her home, she grasps herself as passive opposite to these human-faced gods who set goals and standards" (725). Thus, society has set the goals and standards for these women and they are expected to be in their limits. Michel Foucault's concept of power relations wherein he propounded the idea that "Power is everywhere, diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge and regimes of truth." (Foucault 1991), interprets the objective status of both Masooma and Begum Sahiba. Both the victims felt the acts of domination or coercion, arising from the male chauvinistic norms and regulations inherent in the society.

The protagonist of the novel Masooma is ensnared into the world of pain and exploitation, betrayed at every step and earns a new name Nilofar i.e a thing or an object that can be bought and sold at man's will. No doubt she had a very protected childhood but one day her father and brothers migrated to Pakistan leaving her mother, Masooma and her siblings along with no source of income. The plan was that they would all be sent for once he had settled down there. But they were never called by him. It became difficult for Begum Sahiba to look after the family as Chughtai writes

"four months rent  
servants salaries - amount owed to shopkeeper  
electricity bill - washerman's bill  
children's school fees - water rises above my head.  
drowning, I float up and see. (1)

As a result the present situation forced them to move to Bombay to pursue Masooma's hand in an acting career. There both mother and daughter fell into the trap of flesh-peddlers and rich seths resulting Masooma into a high class, lewd and debauched call girl. Initially Masooma as her nature was an emotional person who at one point had beaten up her buyer Ahmed Bhai but later this profession of call girl had made her feel the importance of her lovers, their gifts and the money they used to bestow upon her. "These

cars arrive here early in the evening and depart in the morning after the all-night celebration. Their drivers consort with the ayahs in the nearby buildings while their owners conduct the business of pleasure in the glimmering flat in the front.”(Chughtai 1)

This metamorphosis of an emotional girl into a haughty and materialistic one shows the cruel working of patriarchy as Gerda Lerner aptly states, “women become symbolic of an inferior intermediate order of being.” (Lerner 25). Chughtai has presented this inferior position of women very aptly, showing the picture of a strangled and crushed woman under the shackles of patriarchal norms and ideological beliefs.

Chughtai has promoted modernity and progress in her writings and is very much known for her invincible spirit and bold feminist ideology. The women characters of the novel are just being used by one and the other characters for their own personal gain and motives. Throughout the novel, the novelist describes scenes and incidents which designates women an inferior position in almost every work which she does. Even the Begum Sahiba is also corrupted by Ehsaan Sahab who treats her badly almost at every occasion. Be it any male figure, Ahmad Bhai, Majid or Ehsaan Sahab, they exploited the women for the sake of their physical lust. Chughtai has described not only their physical suffering but also the psychological dilemmas and miseries. As in one of the incidents, she describes the psychological situation of Begum Sahiba as she writes, “All night the Begum paced restlessly on the balcony. She had agreed, but how was she going to do it? Was she going to bluntly broach the subject with Masooma? She couldn’t do it. There were moments when she wanted to wake her up, clasp her to her bosom and explain. But what? All her life she had told her: ‘Dear daughter, a woman's jewels are her honour. Lose your life but don’t let your honour be tarnished.’” (Chughtai 15). But Begum Sahiba has no option left as she can only see her daughter who can support her by making this sacrifice. The novelist describes her helpless situation, the mental dilemma of how can a mother tell her daughter to sell her honour which she had been advised to protect throughout her life. Not only this

but the poor social and economic conditions too had led Masooma to turn herself into Nilofar and hence sustain her family.

The best part of Chughtai's writing is her portrayal of ordinary people especially women, her social and cultural status and her myriad roles in Indian society. She has depicted the oppressive working of institutions of time, be it family or society and also the female psyche that is unique in every aspect. The novel is the study of the world cloven by social and economic oppression upon the life of an innocent girl. The so-called occupation of women, the trade of passing her on in different hands is a direct attack on human frailty, hunger, poverty and inequality. Ismat herself has worked in the film industry and is well versed with some hidden facts and avaricious practices that are a part of such magic and charm of the film industry. Through *Masooma*, she has exposed such incorrigible deeds being practised in cheap hotels where people watch french films and perform shameful acts. She has unveiled the bare irony of society in general and film industry in particular. As she remarks, "So many avatars and prophets struggled, lost and relinquished their lives while trying to teach lessons of goodness; evil is interesting and exciting while goodness is like chewing tough metallic marbles... But this was not the fault of evil or goodness. The fault lay with the artificial society in which she had been raised. There were fasting, namaz, Hajj and Zakat - but there was also whoring and vice carried out in secrecy." (Masooma 42)

Besides promoting the gloomy and shabby picture of women along with the lust, hunger and corrupted minds of various characters, *Masooma* is a story of myriad mental dilemmas of its protagonist and her mother. The pain they suffered and the exploitation they faced had crushed them from in between. In the end of her journey, Masooma ponders on her present situation, her life and her various ups and downs. She is not the same innocent girl now rather she is transformed into Nilofar as she realises in the end that not Masooma but Nilofar is corrupt. "It is only Nilofar who is morally corrupt, the Nilofar who supports her family, the mother of their illegitimate children, their saviour - she is the one, who is an

immoral person! Masooma-Nilofar! Nilofar-Masooma! Who, as if crushed between the two stones of a grinding mill, is not a human being but a significant grain of wheat...” (Masooma 143). Her realisation of her “Self” results into a broken person who is no longer able to suffer the calamities of life.

### **Conclusion**

Ismat Chughtai is one of the most creative and powerful writers of Urdu literature. She, along with her contemporaries Qurratulain Hyder, Saadat Hasan Manto, Rajender Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander, Wajida Tabassum has questioned male authority and patriarchal power structure with boldness and indomitable spirit. Throughout her life, she has supported both the middle and lower middle class folks, their issues and agendas. Her works are representative of contemporary times presenting the picture of almost all sorts of women- an educated girl, a prostitute, a submissive housewife, a silent girl, a revolting woman, a lesbian, a proficient woman etc. Moreover, “She was indeed at her best when she wrote about the world she was most familiar with, a world crowded with mothers-in-law, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandmothers, servants and a whole network of neighbours.”(Naqvi 41). Not only this, she was quite familiar with the ardent journeys of her characters and thus depicted them in their milieu with brilliant and excellent realism. There is no denying the fact that no other Urdu fiction writer has approached female issues and difficulties with such masterful sensitivity and concern. In a true sense... “ she was a rebel. But one tends to forget that she was more than all this... as a woman writer whose work is a living document of traditional linguistic patterns, in all their colloquial, idiomatic and dialectal richness”. (Naqvi 37)

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