

Social Realism and Marginalization in Ismat Chughtai

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Abstract

Social Realism refer to depiction the truth of a society's harsh realities. It is style of narrating art, and fiction which depict the unpleasant reality of working-class people. It was against idealization in which reality cannot be revealed. Marginalization also highlights the experiences, challenges, and viewpoints of underrepresented communities, including women, LGBTQ individuals, minorities, the working class, and people with disabilities. This form of literature seeks to amplify unheard voices, question dominant narratives, and encourage readers to engage with the realities of marginalized groups. Ismat Chughtai was a remarkable writer who brought attention to the struggles of the marginalized, particularly women, in Indian society. Through her works, she strongly upheld progressive ideals, addressing themes of social justice and gender equality and deconstructing oppressive societal norms. Her narratives were fearless and direct, challenging patriarchal structures and exposing societal hypocrisies. This paper examines Chughtai's most notable novels viz; *The Crooked Line*, *The Innocent*, *The Wilde Pigeons*, and *A Very Strange Man* on the basis of social realism and marginalization.

Keywords: Social Realism, Progressivism, Patriarchy, Marginalization, LGBTQ, Subalternity.

Introduction

Social realism is a literary and artistic style that portrays the everyday lives of the working class and the poor. It seeks to provide a realistic and detailed depiction of life, aiming to reflect the true conditions people face without any form of romanticization or idealization. Rooted in Russian revolutionary thought, the concept of social realism emerged from the belief that literature should serve a societal purpose particularly in advancing the ideals of a socialist society by highlighting social injustices and promoting change. Social

realists believed that all forms of art should reflect aspects of humanity's struggle toward social improvement and a better future. They emphasized that artists should align their creativity with the needs of the working class by portraying life in a realistic, hopeful, and heroic manner. Social realism is also described as the element in art that seeks to present an honest and accurate depiction of reality as perceived through everyday human experience.

Socialist realism has its roots in neoclassicism and the 19th-century Russian literary tradition, which focused on depicting the lives of ordinary people. This style was championed by Maxim Gorky, whose novel *Mother* is often regarded as the first example of socialist realism. (Mother, 1906) Gorky played a pivotal role in the movement's rise, and his pamphlet *On Socialist Realism* outlines the principles that governed Soviet art. In the context of Indian or post-colonial literature, realism can be particularly effective in addressing contemporary societal issues. Realism in both art and literature seeks to portray life as it truly is, embracing all its harsh, painful, and unsightly aspects without idealization. Realist writers aim to depict what they observe through their senses, presenting an honest portrayal of reality. Emerging as a distinct movement in the 18th century, realism became a dominant art form by the mid-19th century. It was, in many ways, a reaction against classicism and romanticism, both of which idealized life. Classicism portrayed life as orderly and rational, while romanticism emphasized its emotional excitement and fulfilment. In contrast, realism endeavours to present life with all its imperfections and challenges.

Socialist realism is a narrative technique of art that portrays social reality not as it exists, but in an idealized form, reflecting how it should be according to socialist ideals. This approach is a hallmark of Marxist literature. The theory of socialist realism was formally adopted by the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 and was endorsed by prominent figures such as Joseph Stalin, Nikolai Bukharin, Maxim Gorky, and Andrey Zhdanov. The core tenet of socialist realism was that all art must depict humanity's struggle toward socialist progress and a better life. It called for creative artists to serve the proletariat by creating works that were realistic, optimistic, and heroic. The doctrine rejected any form of experimentalism, labelling such work as degenerate and pessimistic. Social realism is a style of art and literature that focuses on portraying the everyday lives of working-class and impoverished individuals. Its goal is to provide a truthful, unembellished representation of life, free from idealization. The term originates from Russian-influenced ideas about literature's role in a

revolutionary socialist society. Social realists insisted that all art must reflect humanity's struggle for social progress and a better future. They advocated for creative artists to support the proletariat by producing work that was realistic, optimistic, and heroic.

In India, the emergence of the Progressive Writers' Movement marked a turning point in embracing social realism, establishing it as a key element of progressive Indian literature. This movement arose during a period of intense political and social upheaval, as the nation was undergoing significant revolutionary changes. Literature experienced a profound shift not only in its thematic focus but also in its style and objectives. Writers sought to produce reformative works that upheld traditional and cultural values while passionately preserving India's heritage, all driven by a strong sense of patriotism. Writers of that era came to recognize that literature carried a deeper social responsibility. They viewed it as a powerful instrument for social change and reform. Many progressive writers drew inspiration from Russian literature, which influenced their thematic and stylistic approaches. Among them, Munshi Premchand stood out for integrating European techniques into his short stories. He challenged conventional notions of beauty in literature and firmly believed that literary works should serve as vehicles for social transformation. Through a realistic lens, Premchand addressed pressing societal issues such as poverty in both rural and urban settings, the subjugation of women, and the deeply entrenched caste system (Khalil,89).

The Progressive Writers' Movement aimed to portray the genuine social issues facing the nation, such as poverty, political oppression, caste discrimination, and widespread ignorance. Ismat Chughtai emerged as one of the leading voices of this movement. Her work was deeply influenced by Soviet socialist literature, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Marxist theory. Through her bold and unfiltered storytelling, Chughtai sought to present an honest and vivid depiction of human conditions, capturing their raw and often uncomfortable realities.

Social Realism in Ismat Chughtai Novels:

Ismat Chughtai embodies the essence of a true social realist. The themes she explores particularly those concerning women reflect the real, everyday struggles women face, whether social, psychological, or physical. Her writing is grounded in lived experience and unflinching honesty. Ismat Chughtai stands as one of the most fearless and revolutionary voices in Urdu literature. Often hailed as the fourth pillar of modern Urdu fiction alongside Saadat Hasan Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, and Krishan Chander, she used her pen to

challenge conservative norms and push for societal transformation. Chughtai's unflinching realism and courageous storytelling established her as a significant figure in both Urdu fiction and novel writing. Her narratives consistently shed light on social injustices, especially those endured by women. Chughtai's focus often centers on emotionally neglected and psychologically repressed women, vividly illustrating their struggles within patriarchal structures. Her novels depict a world where women face economic, social, and sexual oppression, with men dominating nearly every aspect of their lives. By highlighting these systemic imbalances, she boldly questioned the subordinate position assigned to women in a male-dominated society. Drawing from personal observations and real-life experiences, Chughtai infused her work with authenticity and empathy, giving a voice to the silenced and elevating the struggles of women to a central place in modern Urdu literature (Khalil, 109).

Ismat Chughtai rose to prominence as a key figure among the Progressive Writers, drawing significant inspiration from Soviet socialist literature, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Marxist ideology. Her writing is marked by a bold and unfiltered portrayal of human experiences, using realism to expose the stark conditions of life. Through vivid storytelling, she challenged entrenched social norms and highlighted systemic inequalities. Chughtai's novels are typically grounded in contemporary settings, with a strong emphasis on the social environments that shape her characters' lives. Like other social realists, she concentrated on pressing social concerns, particularly those affecting women. Her narratives frequently explore the emotional and psychological frustrations of women living under patriarchal constraints. With insight and clarity, Chughtai reveals the impact of outdated traditions and oppressive economic structures on women and the working class. This paper will examine four novels of Ismat Chughtai based on realistic issues. Her each novels depict the live realities of a patriarchal society in which women are subjugated and oppressed economically, socially, and morally. She truly depicts the social reality and gives voice to the marginalized.

Chughtai's novels are typically set in contemporary times, with a strong focus on the environment and social context of her protagonists. As a social realist, her primary concern is highlighting the prevalent social issues of the time. In her narratives, she delves into the emotional deprivation and psychological repression of women, revealing the deep frustrations they face. Her writing brings attention to the forces at play within the economic and social

systems, often burdened by outdated traditions. Al Ahmad Suroor a renowned critic observes that Chughtai's novels resonate with a specific age group and capture intense emotions. Her storytelling is characterized by realism and an unwavering commitment to truth. Despite the simplicity of her narrative style, it remains profoundly effective, offering readers an honest portrayal of life's harsh realities and its cruel experiences. Middle-class women often spend the majority of their lives within the confines of their homes, a space that embodies their spirit and serves as the cornerstone of their physical and mental well-being. In Chughtai's novels about these women and their households, the portrayal is so vivid and intense that readers can easily relate to the characters, experiencing their joys and sorrows, as they are drawn from real-life situations (Khalil, 112).

Chughtai's depiction of the middle-class Muslim household is grounded in reality. Unlike the fantastical characters of royalty, her novels feature everyday people college girls caught up in trivialities, housewives enduring the daily struggles with mothers-in-law, and mothers concerned about their daughters' marriages. She presents both the beauty and the harshness of the household, reflecting the true nature of middle-class life. The reality in these novels is not exaggerated or fictionalized; it is a part of the woman's lived experience. Though her novels may not be vast in scale, they are rich in depth. The patriarchal system portrayed in her work leads to the widespread subjugation and disempowerment of women. These women live in a constant state of compromise, humiliation, and oppression, trapped in a cycle of male domination with no means of escape. They are burdened with guilt, forced to accept lives defined by societal expectations and limitations.

Ismat Chughtai's most famous work *Terhi Lakeer* (The Crooked Line) was one of her most powerful and famous examples of social realism. Chughtai's masterpiece and most acclaimed work is her novel *Terhi Lakeer*. It showcases a rich and extensive imagination, blending as T.S. Eliot does in "The Waste Land" 'memories and desires' along with elements of history and psychology. The novel is marked by vivid imagery, sharply drawn characters sketched with minimal strokes, and often a dark humour that occasionally veers into the macabre. While the narrative draws heavily from Chughtai's own life experiences, it also transcends the personal to attain a mythic quality, much like Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or Marcel Proust's *in Search of Lost Time* (Asaduddin, 45).

The novel explores the growth and development of the protagonist, Shamman, a fiercely independent spirit with rebellion coursing through her attitudes. Born as the unwelcome tenth child, she enters the world already burdened by rejection and indifference. Her extended family treats her with cold detachment, perceiving her very existence as a threat to their conventional ideals of decency and respectability. She remains undeterred, compelled by an inescapable force that draws her toward the raw, the earthy, and the unsightly aspects of life. Determined to confront and understand the elemental passions of human existence on her own terms, she embarks on a journey of self-discovery that defies societal expectations.

Shamman grew up in a deeply conservative environment in which young girls are socialized into submission, where their bodies, choices and even voices are controlled by patriarchal society. Through the character of Shamman Chughtai explores the female sexuality, in which female voices are muted and their desires suppressed. This unfiltered depiction of female experiences, reflects the social constraints imposed on women's sexual agency.

Shamman's character in *The Crooked Line* reflects Ismat Chughtai's boldness in delving into the intricacies of the female psyche. Through her character, Chughtai traces the journey of an innocent girl navigating her path into adulthood, capturing with sensitivity the evolving thoughts and emotions that accompany each stage of a woman's life. Frustrated both sexually and emotionally, and feeling unfulfilled in her conventional roles as wife and mother, Bari Apa channels her dissatisfaction onto her younger sister. In contrast to Shamman, who questions societal norms, Bari Apa suppresses her own desires and conforms, which only deepens her resentment a bitterness that has simmered since her birth.

Chughtai vividly portrays Shamman's emotional deprivation, even within the chaotic confines of a household filled with siblings, nannies, servants, and parents. This sense of isolation is further deepened by the neglect of her wet nurse, Unna, and the indifference of her older sister, Manjhu. Moreover, the rejection Shamman endures from her elder sister, Bari Apa, solidifies her belief that she is destined to be unloved. As Shamman enters college, she faces similar emotional and sexual struggles, which dramatically shape her relationships with men in ways she had never anticipated. Overwhelmed by a flood of intense emotions and a burgeoning sexual awareness, Shamman finds herself grappling with feelings she cannot fully

comprehend or accept, making her journey into adulthood a complex and painful exploration of self and desire.

Through Shamman, Chughtai critiques both modernity and conservatism, illustrating that neither offers a clear solution for women like Shamman, who refuses to be confined by societal structures. Shamman forges her own path, drawing a crooked line imperfect entirely her own. *The Crooked Line* chronicles the life of Shamman, the youngest child in a middle-class Muslim family, where societal expectations and cultural norms create a stifling environment, particularly for women. In this setting, women are shackled by rigid conventions that define their roles and behaviours, leaving little room for personal growth or autonomy. Chughtai uses Shamman's character to expose the oppressive nature of patriarchal structures, while also highlighting moments of defiance and resistance. Her family and the domestic sphere function as microcosms of the larger societal pressures that limit women's choices. The household is entrenched in traditions that demand compliance, especially from women, who are expected to fulfil predetermined roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. The young Shamman resists these restrictions from the start, demonstrating a rebellious spirit through acts of violence and defiance. Her actions symbolize her rejection of the confining expectations placed upon her.

The *Teri Lakeer* is a landmark depiction of feminist social realism in Urdu literature. Chughtai presents an unvarnished view of social life especially for women. Chughtai using personal narrative to reflect the broader social issues such as patriarchy, gender discrimination class-conflict and many more. Through the character of Shamman she depicts all these issues very boldly and also committed toward their solutions. In the novel Chughtai's depiction of social realism is not just external factor, it develops into protagonist's internal struggles like guilt, desires, rebellion and confusion. She is not at all a idealized heroine, but a flawed, complex individual shaped by her social world.

Ismat Chughtai novel *Masooma* is a poignant tale of an innocent girl. Masooma, who is coerced into concubinage by her aristocratic mother in a desperate attempt to maintain the family's financial stability. Ismat Chughtai strips away the false veneer of morality, revealing the double standards that underlie society's expectations. The story intricately explores the intersection of morality and sexuality, blending raw anger and searing realism with a sharp eye for detail. Chughtai not only unveils the darker aspects of Bombay but also exposes the

facade of respectable families, shedding light on the hidden poverty and distress that lie beneath their outward appearance. *Masooma* portrays the devastating impact of a world divided by social and economic injustices on an innocent young girl. Set against the backdrop of a Muslim family from Hyderabad during the partition of India, the story traces the hardships faced by Masooma and her family. Her parents, who had longed for a daughter after two sons, had great hopes for her future. However, after the annexation of Hyderabad to India, Masooma's father decided to migrate to Pakistan. He left with his two grown sons and the few assets they could carry, leaving behind his wife and children with a promise to return. Once settled in Pakistan, Masooma's father remarried a young woman and completely neglected his first family. Over time, his sons became absorbed in their own lives, forgetting both their mother and sister, while the family they left behind endured abandonment and emotional isolation.

In *Masooma*, Ismat Chughtai intricately explores the dynamics and motivations of the male figures who represent the patriarchal oppression that entraps the women in their lives. The male characters Ehsaan Sahib, Ahmed Bhai, Raja Sahab, Surajmal, and Majid embody a disturbing mindset that exploits the vulnerability of economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized women. Ehsaan Sahib, one of the major male characters in the novel, represents the quintessential manipulator. His initial kindness toward Begum Sahiba and her children is merely a façade, masking his true intentions. While he pretends to offer support, it is clear that his assistance comes with strings attached, ultimately aiming to turn Masooma into a "living, breathing commodity." Ehsaan's actions reveal the economic dependency that keeps women trapped in a cycle of exploitation, as he feigns benevolence to gain control over their lives. His imposition on Begum Sahiba is particularly significant, highlighting how men in positions of power exploit their influence under the guise of offering help (Chughtai, 110).

Chughtai effectively exposes the insidious nature of patriarchy through her male characters, illustrating how their flawed mindsets and selfish desires contribute to the suffering of women. Their actions not only reveal personal moral failings but also reflect the broader societal norms that sustain such exploitative behaviours. Through this exploration, *Masooma* becomes a compelling critique of the male-dominated structures that perpetuate inequality and suffering, urging a critical examination of gender dynamics in society. The novel challenges readers to recognize and confront the patriarchal values that allow such

exploitation to persist, emphasizing the need for social change and empowerment. Chughtai also shows remarkable psychological depth in analysing the minds of Masooma and her mother. She reveals how the Begum, in her own way, sought revenge on her husband for marrying a girl young enough to be his daughter, by leading "his" own daughter down a path of exploitation.

Chughtai's novel *Masooma* is vividly expressed through the realistic portrayal of a woman's journey in a patriarchal society that judges and defines her worth based on her sexuality, and beauty. Set in the backdrop of Bombay's film world, the novel depicts the exploitation, objectification, and emotional toll on women. Through the character of Masooma Chughtai concentrate how poverty and class constraints force women into difficult choices. It reflects the grim reality of many working-class or lower-middle-class families. *Masooma* is a powerful work and depicted social realism. Chughtai exposes the unacceptable harsh reality truth about gender, class, sexuality, and morality in late twentieth century Indian society. She doesn't offer any romantic narrative, she wated to paints a raw emotional, and deeply critical portrait of what it means to be for a woman in a patriarchal world.

In essence, *Masooma* serves as a powerful commentary on the social, moral, and economic injustices that shape women's lives within a patriarchal context. Chughtai's incisive critique exposes the hypocrisy of societal expectations and underscores the urgent need for a revaluation of the values that govern gender relations. By illustrating the struggles and resilience of her female characters, Chughtai not only sheds light on their plight but also challenges readers to question and confront the structures that perpetuate inequality and suffering. Through her portrayal of these characters, Chughtai invites us to critically examine the systems that uphold the marginalization of women and the complexities of their resistance.

Ismat Chughtai most famous novel *Jangali Kabotar* (Wild Pigeon) written during her latter period. It was published in 1970. The story of the novel revolves around three characters. Chughtai this novel is different from her other novel. In this novel she depicts the brutality of patriarchal society in which the heroine of the story faced a major challenge in her life. She was not able to fought against the system. Her lower status doesn't allow her to critique the patriarchal system. In a male dominated society men has an ample opportunity to

enjoy and live a pleasant life. In this society women always treated as 'other'. She has no right and no value. She always treated as a sexual object and dehumanised at every stage.

In a patriarchal society, men have the right to marry more than one woman at the same time but it is not acceptable for women. Through the character of Zabida, Chughtai depicts the harsh reality of male dominated society in which women desires are burnt like a chinara tree leaf. Through a sharp honest portrayal of Indian Muslim upper-class society Chughtai uses social realism to expose the hypocrisies and injustices embedded in the domestic and social spheres. The novel reveal and highlights the repressive domestic environment in which women are subjugated especially in joint families, where their lives are governed by strict codes of behaviour, surveillance, and moral expectations. Chughtai always depicts women's suppressed sexuality, and showing how societal expectations force them to deny their desires, leading to emotional and psychological trauma (Tahira, 140).

The novel subtly critiques the class discrimination especially among aristocratic and orthodox Muslim families in which they behave like lion and a cat with the women and other working-class people. Through this Chughtai depict the harsh reality of aristocratic society, where women and working-class people not only suppressed but also commodified. For them marriage is not a romantic union but it portrayed as a tool for subjugation and social status. Through this Chughtai revealed that women are not idealised. They always show their inner conflicts, frustrations, and small acts of rebellion, creating a realistic and psychological portrait of those trapped in a conservative society. Through nuanced and dynamic character development, Chughtai presents women who, despite some limitations, show moments of resistance in thought, word, or small actions against the oppressive social order.

In essence, *Wild Pigeons* is deeply a realistic portrayal of gender, class, and societal norms, using fictions to critique and reflect the lived realities of many women in early twentieth century in India.

A Very Strange Man is another major novel of Ismat Chughtai. It was originally published as *Ajeeb Aadmi* in 1961. It was translated into English by Tahira Naqvi and published in 2018. The story of the novel revolves around the film director and producer Daram Dev who brought Zarina into Bombay Bollywood industry and made a successful actress. The novel unfolds the compelling tale of Dharam Dev, a famous actor, director, and producer. At its core

is his intense and ultimately tragic obsession with Zarina Jamal, a gifted and striking dancer from Madras. He introduces her to the Bombay film industry and transforms her into a celebrated star. Meanwhile, Dharam's wife, Mangala a prominent playback singer—spirals into moral decline and alcoholism, leaving him distraught. When Zarina eventually abandons him, his despair drives him to suicide. Through this narrative, Chughtai exposes a deeply dehumanizing and patriarchal society in which women regardless of their roles as wives, servants, professionals, outcasts, sex workers, or naïve individuals are subjected to relentless physical and emotional suffering. The novel starkly reveals the brutal realities women face in patriarchal Hindu and Muslim communities, with Zarina's story serving as a powerful example of the sexual, psychological, and physical abuse they endure.

The novel exposes the grim and sorrowful reality of women's existence in a patriarchal society, where they are regarded as inferior and denied the freedom to pursue their own dreams and desires. When Dharam becomes obsessed with Zarina's sexuality, he completely disregards her emotions. Randhir even advises him, "If she creates a ruckus... just strangle the wretch if she does" (Chughtai, 100). Furthermore, as noted in *Ismat Chughtai: A Feminist Voice*, "there is no such place in her life where she is able to express herself" (Khalil,3). Through this depiction, Chughtai underscores the disturbing reality of a man who reduces a woman to an object meant solely for his gratification. To Dharam, Zarina is nothing more than a tool to fulfil his desires. Men continually exploit women both physically and emotionally, often excusing their behaviour by claiming it is inherent to their nature, as though divinely ordained. As Randhir boasts, "Men are rotten by nature. This is what is so magnificent about man. He commits foul acts, but repents afterwards" (Chughtai, 100). Taslima Nasrin aptly observes that society imposes ideals of chastity and loyalty exclusively on women, while men are rarely held to the same moral standards. Women are judged most harshly, with their character subjected to the strictest scrutiny and condemnation.

In addition to Zarina and Mangala, the novel introduces several notable minor female characters Rita, Padma, Dillu, and Ameena who also suffer under the weight of a patriarchal system. These women represent the broader condition of female oppression, forced to conform to the desires and control of men. Dillu and Padma endure both systemic and blatant discrimination, confronting sexism as part of their everyday lives. Randhir exploits Dillu for his sexual gratification before eventually marrying her, while Rita, an actress, is maintained

by Verma Ji purely for his personal pleasure. Through these characters, the novel illustrates how deeply entrenched gender inequality pervades every layer of society.

Chughtai's *A very Strange Man* is a true example of social realism. Her nuanced dissection of everyday relationships, where patriarchy, hypocrisy, and class tensions quietly shape people's lives. Chughtai through her novels doesn't romanticize but lays bare the ordinary, painful truths of human interaction.

Conclusion:

Ismat Chughtai was indeed pillar of modern Urdu fiction writer and a true social realist. Her fearless exploration of social issues, particularly female sexuality, gender-discrimination, and class-conflict was remarkable. In her novels she depicts the daily life incidents happening in a patriarchal society. Through her characters she underscores how women were commodified and dehumanised in a male dominated society. Her writing was deeply rooted in realism. Her fearless and bold spirit doesn't restrict her to tackle taboo subjects that were not openly discussed in her time. Through her narrative technique she fearlessly delved into the inner thoughts, desires, and struggles of her characters. Her writings served as a powerful and unstoppable tool for social commentary. Through her novels, she critiqued societal injustices, economic inequality, hypocrisies and prejudices. Chughtai use of humour also makes her very unique in her contemporaries. Analysing the novels of Chughtai like *Masooma*, *A Very Strange Man*, *Wild Pigeon* and *The Crooked Line* one can easily be called her a trailblazer, who addressed issues of women with remarkable technique and challenge the conservative orthodox societies. In her novel *Terhi Lakeer* she underscores the frustration of protagonist whose desires are suppressed and subjugated. In her novel *Masooma* she depicts the commodification of female characters in a film industry. Through this novel she highlighted the dark side of Bombay Bollywood film industry in which female characters are subjugated and dehumanised.

Similarly in her novel *Wild Pigeon* she criticised the patriarchal society in which female desires are suppressed while allowing male to enjoy as he can. Her novel *A Very Strange Mann* also depict the reality of film industry in which protagonist Daram Deve exploit her first wife and moved toward another women. Through these novels Chughtai, highlight and depict the reality of patriarchal society in which women become only their

economic asset. In her novel she depicts the true picture of religion and culture in which evils are socially constructed. She always talked about humanity. According to her no religion is above humanity that's why she talked about herself "I have always considered myself first as a human being and then as a woman". In her every novel she highlighted the issues of suppressed women's like widows, maids, and working-class women's. In her writing she not only highlights the issues of women but also encouraged them to fought for their rights.

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