

Challenging the Institution of Marriage: A Study of Select Works Of Ismat Chughtai

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Abstract

Considered as the grand dame of Urdu Literature, Ismat Chughtai, is one of the most courageous and controversial writers of the twentieth century. Her short stories revolve around the oppressed women of the society from diverse household environments. In Islam, marriage is regarded as a devotional act which sanctions the conjugal relationship between man and woman as it propagates procreation. It is a social contract which promises to provide a better and happy life to a woman in this male dominated society. But in reality, marriage becomes a tool of oppression for exploiting women sexually and psychologically. Women are dehumanized and denied their rights as individuals. Chughtai in her short stories like *The Quilt (Lihaaf)*, *The Rock (Chatan)* and *The Homemaker (Gharwali)* presents the institution of marriage as a social and economic enterprise, which reduces women to mere commodities for the sexual gratification of men. This paper seeks to unearth the silent suffering of these voiceless married women and how finally they emerge as phoenix for the ashes and protest against the patriarchy in their own way and assert their own identity. They are the New Woman, who can dare to challenge the constricting societal and cultural norms and bring in a transformation in the society.

Keywords: Marriage, Ideal woman, lesbianism, patriarchy, sexual desires, New Woman.

In the Indian subcontinent, the age-old tradition of arranged marriages, lead to the foundation of Indian marriage system, dates back to the fourth century. Since free mixing was considered as a taboo, marriages were made to establish relationship between not only two individuals but also among two families. Marriage thus becomes a means to socially and legally sanction the union between a man and a woman which is regulated by law, rules, custom and believes. In the pre-Islamic Arabia, within the wedlock, women were treated as chattels, denied of their basic rights due to the patriarchal superiority. It was Prophet Mohammad, who gave women equal status with men in marriage by conferring them their legal rights. In Islam, as referred in the Quran, 'Nikah' or marriage, which literally means 'to tie up together' is a formal binding civil contract between the bride and the groom. The term 'Nikah' is an Arabic term

which means ‘the union of sexes’. For the Muslims, marriage was created by Allah to provide a base for family life and the larger society. Muslim marriage is a devotional act where the spouses are strictly enjoined to love and honor each other. According to R.K.Sinha, as per the Muslim Law, “Islam introduced a marriage (Nikah) in which the husband and wife are bound together for an infinite period. Nikah or a ‘Muslim–marriage’, ensures stability in the matrimonial relationship” (Sinha 38). Within the wedlock, conjugal love and enjoyment which leads to procreation of children, is considered as a noble act. It is thus a contract which promotes procreation and legalization of children. Woman is given a particular higher status in the society through the institution of marriage. On the contrary, divorce or talaq, is an Arabic word which literally means ‘to release’ is repudiation of marriage by the husband. R.K.Sinha states that as per the Muslim Law, “Talaq is peculiar because a Muslim Husband has an unrestricted right to divorce his wife without giving any reason. Muslim law does not require the existence of any fault or matrimonial offence as an excuse for Talaq” (Sinha 82). Thus the stability promised to women via marriage is threatened by Talaq which confers absolute authority to the husband to terminate the marriage just by pronouncing the word ‘talaq’.

Women in India, in the ancient times, were held in high esteem and enjoyed equal status with men. Wives were called as ‘Ardhangini’, i.e, the better half of their husband. There was no ritual which could take place in her absence. But with the advent of Islam, there came the dark and sad phase of women in the society. Women in society are regarded as the ‘second sex’, the inferior ‘other’, who will have to perform the set roles defined by the patriarchy. Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* that, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauviour 267). In the act of ‘becoming’, controlled by the patriarchy, the woman loses her identity and is forced to ape the character of the ‘ideal woman’. According to the *Quran*, ‘ideal woman’ is one who is active, humble, intelligent, honest, productive and independent and yet remains rooted in her iman (or faith) and akhlak (or character). She would execute all her duties towards the family and also enjoy economic autonomy. Thus, the *Quran* empowers women. It is here that the concept of marriage plays a crucial role. Instead of emancipation, marriage curbed their status and was relegated to the innermost zenana of the society. She was engaged and their freedom was snapped off. They lost their identity and were treated as objects of sexual gratification of male members of the society. They were commodities lacking any subjective existence. The condition of Muslim women became all the more worst as they had to wear burkhas and perform all the daily chores at home. Devoid of education and emancipation, both physical and financial, they remained as a parasite within the four walls of the home which was never their own. While men could satiate their sexual urges as and when required through various ways, women never enjoyed this freedom.

It is at this critical point, the dame of Urdu literature, Ismat Chughtai, being a conscious feminist and social reformer, questions the institution of marriage in the society through her mighty sword, the pen. This paper seeks to highlight the protest of Chughtai against the hoax called marriage conducted by the male modulated society to expand its restriction over women even in her sexual private life. In this paper, three of her short stories- *Lihaaf (The Quilt)*, *Chatan (The Rock)* and *Gharwali (The Homemaker)* will be discussed to highlight the various ways the female protagonist protest against the hoax called marriage. These three stories represent the miserable plight of women, from three different sections of the society, and their transformation due to marriage and the way they revolt against the patriarchy.

Hailed as one of the most controversial writers of Urdu literature, Ismat Chughtai, in her autobiography, *A Life in Words: Memoirs*, writes, “Society has accorded a place for women and if a woman sets her foot outside its boundaries, her feet would be cut off” (Chughtai 12). The patriarchal society propagated the women to be ‘the angel in the house’, the epitome of sacrifice, thriving under the shadow of the patriarchy, inhabiting the sacred inner space of the society. Women are ordained to be the observers of various traditional customs and preserver of the indigenous culture. They are never allowed to enjoy any freedom and would always survive as a parasite. They will raise the future generations, take care of the family but are never allowed to cherish their own dreams. They can never raise their voice against their exploitation as there are considered as mere sexual objects destined to gratify the carnal desire of the male members of her family. She is never allowed to concentrate upon her own wellbeing. But as we read the works of Chughtai, we come across the bitter reality regarding the condition of women. Her works emerges as a comprehensive blend of feminism and multiculturalism. She presents a commotion of emotions of the characters to promote the idea of womanhood and their quest for identity.

Anita Desai opines that the works of Ismat Chughtai exposes one to the Indian traditions of religious bigotry, of the male hegemony and female illiteracy and dependence of women. Chughtai, an iconoclast, boldly unraveled the female body through her writings. She unknotted the psychological turmoil of a women’s sexual life and exposed the male hegemony over the society and women at large. She played an active role in Progressive Writers Movement in India, which declared jihad upon the socially accepted literary topics. Nonconformity to social realism in literature made her reject the conventional idealism and romanticism, prevalent in the works of contemporary Urdu writers. Her works dealt with queer topics like homosexuality, lesbianism, prostitution, women’s sexuality, et al. Her perspective in the short story, *Lihaaf*, or *The Quilt*, was one of the most radical feminist perspectives which brought her notoriety and controversy. First published in the Urdu literary journal, *Adab-e-Latif*, in 1941, depicts the homosexual relationship between the wife of a Nawab, Begum Jan and her maid servant, Rabbo.

In the short story, *Lihaaf*, to enjoy a life of comfort and luxury, the protagonist, Begum Jan was married to an aged Nawab who failed to provide her a good conjugal life. In this story, marriage is a form of economic enterprise where woman is bartered as a commodity, a favorable economic option. Chughtai says that after the marriage, the Nawab “deposited her in the house with all his other possessions and promptly forgot about her! The young delicate Begum began to wilt with loneliness” (Chughtai 8). Marriage was a social contract in which Begum Jan plays a subservient role and acts as a social stamp of approval, a heterogeneous cover, through which the Nawab can escape the ridicule and suspicion of his inborn sexual orientation. Her husband, the aged but virtuous, Nawab, was interested on ‘young, fair and slim-waisted boys’ rather than his wife. Being left alone, without any attention from her husband, she was forced to live a life of loneliness. Chughtai says- “From the chinks in the drawing-room doors, Begum Jan glimpsed their slim waists, fair ankles, and gossamer shirts and felt she had been raked over the coals!” (Chughtai 6). She desperately yearned for her husband’s love and company but the Nawab never spared a single minute for her. He never displayed any interest for his wife’s desires, wishes or problems and completely dismissed her presence in his life. His action highlights the patriarchal repression of women and absolute indifference to female sexuality that pervades in the society. Her physical needs remained insatiate. Though she was sexually frustrated, without stepping out

of her domestic area, ordained by the society, she fulfilled her carnal desires in a bold and proactive way. Being broken hearted due to her failed marriage, she took the aid of education but it proved futile and she was engulfed with more depression and melancholy. Instead of rectifying the immorality of her husband, she established a homosexual relationship with Raboo, her maid servant. To fulfill her sexual desires, she sexualized the domestic space which was traditionally considered as sacred and desexualized. She resisted from being the prisoner of the house and emerges as a modern lady who does not look forward to compromise in order to survive in this patriarchal society.

Chughtai advocates for lesbianism, alternative sexuality, an abnormal romance, as a means of protest against the restricting norms of a male dominated society. Bonnie Zimmerman defines lesbianism as “a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed towards each other ... the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other” (Zimmerman 81). Lesbianism was never approved by patriarchy as it propagates the fact that a woman’s search for fulfillment in life (sexually) can be possible only through a man. Barbara Smith opines that a lesbian “might well embody the culmination of women’s capacity to love and be committed to each other” (Smith 792). Begum Jan’s homosexual relationship is a silent assertion of female sexuality through her secret bonding with Raboo, dark skinned masseuse. “Raboo used to sit by her side and scratch her back for hours together – it was almost as if getting scratched was for her the fulfillment of life’s essential need. In a way, more important than the basic necessities required for staying alive. Raboo had no other household duties” (Chughtai 10).

Their relationship overturns the heteronormative coupling sanctioned through the institution of marriage. She seems to launch a crusade against her own culture and tends to find solace in the western traditions and culture which promotes homosexuality or lesbianism which is considered a taboo in her culture. She is modern in the true sense of the term as she protests against the constricting traditions and culture of India. Marriage of poor Begum Jan and rich Nawab highlights the fact that marriage is a patriarchal social tool to oppress women into the domestic confines and is used in suppression of the female sexuality. Her homosexual relationship with her maid is a mode of self-actualization where she articulates a new gendered consciousness. She rises like a phoenix from the ashes and liberates herself from the repressive customs of a married life. Outwardly she wears the façade of a virtuous lady but she remains within the zenana. She exists as a modern lady who is reluctant to forego her needs and radical desires and thus resorts to a deviant way of sexual relationship as she gathers its motivation from the homoerotic love relationship of the Nawab. It is through the character of Begum Jan, Chughtai, asserts her revolt against the heteronormative relationship sanctioned through marriage, as she projects female sexuality as something empowering. She sexualizes the zenana by transforming it into a site of articulation of homoerotic desires of the female, thereby challenging the oppressive politics of the patriarchy which curbs female sexuality. Though Begum Jan belonged to a financially poor family, got upgraded in her social position by marrying the rich Nawab, but yet failed to improve her real condition in the society. After her marriage, she got a position among the aristocratic class but her suffering aggravated and thus she revolted in the most unconventional way possible to assert her self-identity. Though she had no dearth of money, yet money failed to reduce her suffering as a woman of the patriarchal society.

The Rock (Chatan) is a story of loveless marriages depicting the miserable plight of young high-spirited women as brides and their suffering due to the male chauvinism. Bhaiya marries beautiful young women to exploit them sexually and finally leave them as fat and docile housewives and then marry a new young bride. The patriarchal society restricts the women with limited options for marriage but permits men to abuse women as per their wish. A female body is dehumanized and commodified. The story also portrays the lack of solidarity among women to fight against the masculine abuse and how they themselves conspire to undermine other women.

Bhabhi or Shehnaz, a convent educated independent young girl, was forced by her family to leave her studies and enter into an obligatory married life. It was her family which terminated her freedom. Her husband, Bhaiya, cherished age old conventional ideology, and wiped her independence in all possible ways. He never permitted her to wear tight clothes, apply makeup or do her hair. The narrator says- “Bhaiya was anxious to set up her as a housewife” (Chughtai 48). Her transformation was obvious as the narrator says –

“Her husband was nine years her senior, but compared to her, Bhaiya looked really young. Still quite slim, with a well-kept figure, he exercised daily, carefully monitored his diet.... He was still boyish in appearance. Although he was thirty-one, he didn’t look a day older than twenty-five” (Chughtai 48).

Shehnaz silently suffered all kinds of tyranny but still she was divorced and discarded with the entry of another young lady, Shabnam. Shehnaz cried hard and begged to get back her married life. Her reaction depicts the helpless situation in this patriarchal society-

“With a loud scream Bhabi lunged toward Bhaiya. But she didn’t have the courage to scratch him. Terrified, she stood transfixed. Then she relinquished the last shred of her womanly dignity. She fell at his feet. She begged” (Chughtai 55).

Bhaiya being a sexual predator, the plight of Shabnam was in no way different from Shehnaz. The narrator states-

“Shabnam was singed, muddy-looking ash; her dark, gleaming complexion had turned yellow like a lizard’s stomach; those liquid eyes had become murky and lifeless; the thin, serpentine waist was nowhere in sight – Shabnam looked permanently pregnant; the well-rounded arms that had glowed like the delicate, shiny limbs of a tree were now thick and ungraceful and looked like a pair of dumb-bells” (Chughtai 56).

Once she found her husband conversing with the Egyptian dancer, she could invariably imagine his transgression and out of utter frustration started devouring the food. Women in marriage is being depicted as a “dough left out overnight” (Chughtai 52).

Bhaiya is symbolic of the rock whose misogynist feeling for women would remain unaltered through ages. Chughtai seems to warn all women of the society to realize this patriarchal exploitative attitude of the husbands and thrive in their own ways to become independent and establish their own identities in the society. The notion of marriage is again dismantled by Chughtai, as it is preached to be the sole culmination of a woman's life, in this male dominated society. But this marriage fails to promise a secured future even to young women like Shabnam and Shehnaz. In spite of being subservient to the needs and whims of their husbands, they endure incessant physical and sexual exploitation in the hands of their husbands. The relation between husband and wife lacks love and sympathy and is like that of the master and the slave. Marriage which promises the husband to take care and respect of the wife is actually violated and it is the patriarchal society which allows it to occur. Marriage plays a significant role in bringing transformation into the lives of the young women as brides as they lose their freedom, identity and respect. As they hailed from middle class society, their suffering in the hands of the patriarchy was no less than Begum Jan, the protagonist of the story *Lihaaf*.

Gharwali (The Homemaker), also called the 'Dirty story', is a story about an illegitimate orphan girl, Laajo, who worked as maid servant in different houses despises wearing constricting pants in place of free flowing lahenga. Here Chughtai seems to portray the suffering of a woman who belongs to the poor working class of the society. Wherever she worked, she used to serve as an object of sexual gratification for the master of the house and was thrown out at the end. She is a woman of precise pleasures. Laajo defies the archetype of pious woman and willingly allowed her body to be exploited for money or without money. She was satisfied with the thought of sexual play with the person who gets attracted to her. Being brought up on the streets she hardly is bothered about social status and her love knows no discrimination for in the hours of love, she holds back nothing for a man who is rich or man without a penny. Chughtai says-

“Her body proved to be her only asset. She did not haggle. It was wonderful if it was cash down proposition; if not, it was sex on credit. And if someone could not pay even on credit, it was sex on charity” (Chughtai 77).

She was taken to Mirza's house by Bakshi for executing the household works. Mirza was an old bachelor and a grocer and though Mirza initially detested her, finally he had fallen for her. Entry of the sexually liberated Laajo as his domestic help transforms his demeanour. Mirza's visit to the courtesans for the fulfillment of his sexual expectations made Laajo jealous – “Till now, where ever employed, she gave full satisfaction to her masters in every way. But here, a full chaste week had passed. Mirza seems like an iceberg” (Chughtai 78).

Laajo continued with her efforts to seduce Mirza and finally one night Mirza could not resist her call. She boldly seduced him and the flames of carnality burning within him made him fall a prey to her sexual desires. The author states- “Laajo turned on her side and grabbed him. Mirza was dumbfounded. He had never encountered anything like this before. He went on pleading as Laajo seduced him thoroughly” (Chughtai 76). Despite her disinterest, the two get married to discover the fact that the institution of marriage came on the way of their love. She is re-christened to Kaneez Fatima and was forced to wear 'pyjamas' instead of 'lahenga'. Afraid of being called an uxorious husband, Mirza starts restricting her freedom and neglect her by asserting his

masculinity. The two finally get divorced but they started living together like a live-in couple of the modern times.

The story unearths the hypocrisy of the polite society which on one hand demands the wives to be chaste and on the other hand allows the men philander. She turns down the institution of marriage through the character of Laajo. She defies the archetype of pious women and her name proves to be ironic. She acts contrary to her name which originated from the Hindi word 'laaj' which means 'shame'. She questions the validity of conjugal union institutionalized through marriage. Laajo and Mirza's relationship rebukes marriage as a farcical devoid of emotions such as love, which is founded only on the need to repress and regulate female sexuality and to glorify monogamy. Chughtai through the powerful character of Laajo seems to question the validity of marriage in the society and how fidelity is possible without marriage. Mirza and Laajo seem to be happier after their divorce or 'talaaq'. Mirza unlike her other masters never treated her like a dirt and farmed her out to other men. He considers her worth keeping.

She castigates marriage as farcical, lacking in love and founded upon the need to subjugate and modulate sexuality and glorify monogamy. Mirza fails miserably in his attempt to tame Laajo into the archetypal 'good woman'. He finally was forced to divorce her as she was sexually engaged with Mithwa. When she heard about divorce, her reaction was worth noting- "Laajo heaved a sigh of relief as she heard about the divorce. It was as though a heavy load was off her shoulders. Marriage did not suit her" (Chughtai 79).

But unlike Nora, the protagonist of Ibsen's *The Doll's House*, who slams the door on her husband's face, Chughtai's protagonists do not become complacent with the hostile situation but rather choose to fight their war for freedom silently. Marriage strangulates a woman to a life of suffering, suppression and subordination. Marriage becomes a repressive apparatus of the society which is shunned by Chughtai in all these three stories. She gives a clarion call to all women to voice their protest against this so call repressive institution of marriage which superimposes the burden of womanhood upon woman. All women should thrive to achieve their aspirations and build their own identity. Her characters potently highlight the injustice meted out by the society upon woman. They bring out all types of exploitation practiced in the name of marriage and thus they voice forth their revolt against this hoax in their own possible ways. Thus, Chughtai tries to teach all women of the society to protest against the institution of marriage which has been categorically used by the patriarchy to thwart the freedom of the women. She portrays the female protagonists of her story as goddess Medusa, who used to threatened the identity of the patriarchy.

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