Battle against the Veil in Ismat Chughtai’s Short Stories

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Abstract: Ismat Chughtai is Urdu’s most courageous and controversial woman writer in the twentieth century. Her work not only reflects the complexion of Urdu fiction, but also is considered to be instrumental in bringing about an attitudinal change in the assessment of literary works. She makes women’s struggle for freedom and self expression dominant concern of her long and short fiction. Ismat Chughtai wrote Short Stories, novels and political essays. She explores human relationships, their joys and sorrows, their loves and hates against the background of the larger social world and its changing environment. The present paper proposes to explore in Ismat Chughtai’s Short Stories from two volumes namely A Chughtai Collection and Lifting the Veil the theme of women’s social and sexual oppression in the name of religion and middle class morality. Women of all ages from a crawling baby, little children, adolescent girls, young women, mature mothers to grandmothers and cronies figure in her novels, novellas and Short Stories. She found customs and religions also are heavily loaded against women. She wrote about such subjects to show the misery caused by religious and sexual oppression to individuals and also to show the possibility of happiness for both men and women in equal relationships characterized by respect for mutual freedom. Same sex attractions in closed societies are also in her opinion the result of Purdah. Most important of the social evils are caused by unusual social and sexual repression of women in India.

I. INTRODUCTION

Chughtai has so far written over a hundred short stories. Her better-known collection of short stories are; ‘Veil’, ‘The Quilt’, ‘Sacred Duty’, ‘Kallu’, ‘ChhotiApa’, ‘The Wedding Shroud’, ‘the Survivor’ and ‘Tiny’s Granny’. All the stories are not uniformly good but some of them are certainly ‘Classics’ in their own right and can be compared with the best in world literature. Her name is usually associated with the effort of the Urdu story to come to grips with the problems of everyday life and to expose some of the hidden problems of life. Her realism is essentially a powerful tool to reveal the foibles of contemporary life rather than being escapist and unreal.

The male characters figure in her short stories mainly to illustrate and illuminate aspects of women’s lives. She touches on almost all aspects of a woman’s life: her unwanted entry into this world, her frustrated aspirations, suppression of her innermost urges and so on in her short stories and she deals with the whole range of female sexuality from arousal of sexual urge at the infantile stage through adolescence to adult sexuality. This is rather unusual in the short stories of her time and context. Besides normal sexual attraction between men and women, she also deals in a limited way, with homosexuality and lesbianism, the inevitable products of a moralist, sexually repressive society.

II. EXPLANATION

“The Veil” is a well known short story of Ismat Chughtai. In Chughtai stories the sociological dimension constitutes a more crucial aspect of fiction than the cultural details. The story is an example of how social and cultural conventions of the communities can affect the individual lives in the most dangerous way. “The Veil” is symbolic of religious and sexual oppression of women.

Chughtai’s genius is particularly suited to short fiction and apart from ‘Quilt’ which brought her overnight fame there are innumerable short stories which are centered around the theme of enclosure or covering. ‘Veil’ ‘Quilt’ and ‘Wedding-Shroud’ indicate the point. Since women’s body is found threatening in orthodox Muslim community many of her short stories are also woven around women’s bodies such as “Rock”, “Home Maker” and “The Mole.”

Speaking about the system of Purdah M. Asaduddin remarks Women are compelled to lead a limited and claustrophobic life, in strict Purdah, within the four walls of the house. Any attempt to lead a more ‘realized’ or independent life would be considered as rebellion and seriously discouraged. Women were supposed to have no sexual desire of their own except when required by men. The difference between the ages of the husband and the wife would be staggering, but none would think it incongruous.... What needs to be emphasized, however, is the fact that though, as a result of their contact with Western liberalism, such social iniquities were being discouraged in other communities, there was no organized effort in the Muslim community to rectify them. As was only inevitable, excessive restriction and suppression of natural urges,
sexual incompatibility in marriages, segregation of sexes gave rise to another set of social malaise like illicit love. Incest, extra-marital relations, sexual exploitation of young widows, homosexual and lesbian tendencies and so on.

The story titled “The Veil” is a short one narrated retrospectively with great irony about an eighty year old virgin covered in a veil which could be compared to “… stationary cloud of finely-ground silver”. Another brilliant short story is “Quilt” which brought her overnight fame as well as notoriety when it was first published in 1941. “Lihaaf” is narrated by a young girl, who tries to recreate memories of a time when she was a little girl. She recalls the time when she visited Begum Jan for a few days. These memories are inextricably part of her growing up experiences and awakening of sexual curiosity. The story she narrates uncovers the gendering of this girl child. It also focuses on nuances of sexuality and of the feudal class structure of the society.

The story “Lihaaf” creates a great stir because it dares to explore the issue of lesbian love. The charge of obscenity that it faced led to energetic debates not only on obscenity but on the role that society assigned to the woman writer. An ordinary and common place object such as the quilt is put to a multiplicity of uses. It is used to convey young Begum Jan’s loneliness and sexual frustration after the Nawab’s persistent disregard of her. Begum Jan a young and extremely beautiful but poor girl is married to Nawab who is of ripe years and is supposed to be very pious. After the marriage, Nawab treats her thus uncovering the gendering of this girl child. It also focuses on nuances of sexuality and of the feudal class structure of the society.

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Nawab Sahib spends most of time with the fair and young male students whose education he supports. Begum Jan yearns for her husband’s love, pines away for his company, but the Nawab has no time to spare for his young wife. She is not allowed to move out of the house nor have any male company. Feeling lonely and depressed Begum Jan turns to Rabbu who is her maid, for the satisfaction of her sexual desires. The transition from a gaudy crooked appearance to a hair-raising nightmare is perhaps most suggestively evoked in the love-hate relationship between Rabbu and Begum Jan. The story created a lot of heat and dust in the literary circles as well as middle class Muslims of the time, and Chughtai was accused of obscenity. Chughtai own objective in the story is articulated in one of her interviews with Chand Gul. I wrote about a woman’s loneliness that had all worldly comforts but who was deprived of her husband’s Love and company. I wanted to portray her tension and desperation.

“Lihaaf” provides an even more ambivalent treatment of female sexuality. The story of a lesbian relationship between a nawab’s wife, Begum Jan and her servant Rabbu, is presented by an adult narrator who recalls the events that she witnessed as a child. The story deals with the lesbian love of a woman and her maid. Even liberal-thinkers at the time, who could accept interclass relationships, could not tolerate the theme of same-sex love.

Lihaaf is a story about homosexuality, focusing on lesbianism. Begum Jan, a woman neglected by her homosexual husband, turns to lesbianism as the only option left to respectable women who fail to engage the interest of their husbands either sexually or in any other way. The situation first fascinates and puzzles, and then frightens the little girl who witnesses it. Her fear, especially when her innocence and youth attract the attentions of Begum Jan, infects the reader. The story is most subtly and artistically done without giving any awkward details in description. It works through indirection and suggestion.

Ismat Chughtai’s sympathetic identification with Begum Jan was reinforced by her negative feelings towards Rabbu. The child protagonist’s gradual participation in the relationship between Begum Jan and Rabbu undermines the authority of the adult narrative voice as both child and adult narrator encounter hidden sexual desires. Chughtai’s use of the metaphor of the ‘Lihaaf’ provides a useful allegory for the way in which she constructs her narrative. It suggests that women’s lives are clouded by unjust and unhealthy sexual repressions and ruin their lives and they cannot be openly dealt with in fiction.

Chughtai tries to destroy the power and influence of an established system of Purdah through this story. The traditional purpose of veiling is the seclusion of female sexuality from the male gaze. She illustrates how this seclusion provides a sanctuary for lesbian sex with in the space of the traditional home.

The lesbian relationship between the Begum Jan and Rabbu is vividly drawn through the symbol of the quilt to the wonder and horror of the child narrator. The greatest strength of the story lies in its subtle combination of the saying things that are intended to be clever and funny but are really absurd and annoying. The story creates a furore and Chughtai was taken to the court at Lahore on charges of obscenity.

The narrator of the story is a woman remembering a childhood experience. Because of this readers get a viewpoint which is utterly refreshing since a child may naively and artlessly say things an adult may not. Ismat Chughtai becomes a legend while she is alive primarily because of her story “Lihaaf.” But this
legendary writer is rarely accorded a serious critical evaluation. Either dismissed as a writer who writes too freely on sex and relationships or appraised for the very same reasons, Ismat’s true worth did not receive much critical appreciation.

Thus Chughtai deals with the social and sexual oppression of women in households in a number of tragic, ironic, satirical, comic and even hilarious stories. She has keen power of observation. Through minutest details of everyday experience and a fresh outlook, she recreates the atmosphere of claustrophobic homes, ordinary households teaming with women, mothers, aunts, children and a happy home reined by a street woman. The kind of experiences she creates through bold and deft strokes are not created by any other women writers of India in 1940’s and 50’s. She uses her pen as a mighty weapon to break all enclosures and create sunnier, open homes and societies for women.

III. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work is the biography of Ismath Chughtais who brought a tremendous change for women in opposing the veil system. This research work is completely based on her biography. The author would like to thank Ismath Chughtai for her great service in providing privacy for the woman.

REFERENCES