

Women in the Cross-Currents of Tradition and Modernity: Reading Ismat Chughtai in Translation

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Abstract

Ismat Chughtai began to write in the 1930s even before India's independence from colonial rule and continued to write in the post-independence period. Chughtai's stories focus chiefly on the predicament of women in the India that is in transition from subjection to the British rule to political independence. The 'New Woman' of the transitional period, who is anticipating and striving for a future, nonetheless with the traditional inputs from the past – is Indian as well as un-Indian, in its specified sense. The characters of Chughtai are oppressed by patriarchy and religion, and yet show signs of upheaval and remonstrance in their own distinct, restrained ways. Chughtai chooses to challenge, to voice the subordination and relegation of the lives and language of women around her, irrespective of their class or caste, by registering their search for self-respect and articulating their angst. Her characters are beings that are caught in the cross-currents of tradition and modernity, between ideal political 'freedom' and the actual social, familial subjugation which lead them to tremendous inner conflicts and leave them bewildered.

KEYWORDS: Ismat Chughtai, male gaze, muslim women, silence, seize the opportunity

Ismat Chughtai, one of India's bravest and the most uninhibited women writers, chose to write in Urdu, the mother tongue of herself and her characters. Chughtai's fiction deals largely, if not exclusively, with those women who are not autonomous individuals but are products of a certain social environment which moulds their psyche. The social milieu they inhabit has an overwhelming influence on them making them culturally rooted. Her stories can be read as hitherto untold cultural history of the Muslim women of Uttar Pradesh. The stories explore and reveal the innermost feelings of these women who are literally and figuratively behind the veil of custom and adherence to male standards of 'life'. Chughtai's artistic preoccupation is employed mainly to unveil the invisible aspects of women's lives, in which she uses her male characters as instruments to underscore the quandary of her female characters.

Chughtai writes in the realist tradition and her formalistic engagements are restricted. She is an outspoken writer who does not believe in mincing words. Her style is therefore termed as "direct, uninhibited and spontaneous" (Asaduddin xx). Belonging to the Progressive group of writers, Chughtai's stories were more socially committed. She is unlike the other writers of her time who are criticized for lack of complexity in their fiction's characters and the absence of skill in using language. Chughtai's creative disposition is said to be specially suited to the genre of short story.

This paper engages in a reading of three of the translated stories, of prolific Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai, that portray the 'silence' that women take recourse to writhing under imposed norms, domestic violence and sexual harassment in India. As in many of Chughtai's stories, women -- young or old, married or single, rich or poor --

are all in the confines of social injustice and autocratic customs and are unable to find their way out for them.

Three of Chughtai's stories '*Bachpan*' and '*Jaal*' translated by M. Asaduddin; and '*Niwala*' translated by Tahira Naqvi, are portrayals of norms imposed upon growing-up Muslim girls and girls expecting to get married as they are conditioned to believe that marriage is their only aim, and the ultimate source of salvation.

'*Bachpan*' (Childhood) discusses the pangs of growing up suffered by all children, more so by girl children. A list of do's and don'ts keep hovering around and haunting them leaving their wings of freedom clipped. Chughtai takes up the theme of the trauma of a girl child who is nameless in the story suggesting the universality of her experience. The girl wonders why childhood is glorified by everyone when in reality it is filled with suffering and painful moments. Just to fit in her peer group she too says sweet things about her life as a child. However, she is completely aware that she merely feigns joy in being one. She addresses the reader innocently and asks, "Tell me, what else can I do? Shall I tell everyone that I thank God for sheer survival?" (Asaduddin 48)

The girl is constantly rebuked by Aapa, her elder sister who seems to have donned the role of mother, for everything she does. When the sister forgets to add sugar in the cup of tea and the girl asks for it, she is instantly reprimanded for "dying for sugar, ant that she is." Grumbling under her breath, the girl gulps the tea without sugar for which she is again rebuked and called greedy. "Such greed – that too in a girl....," the sister snaps.

It would be useful here to bring in Helena Michie's discussion of how American object-relation theorists like Nancy Chodorow and neo-Lacanian like Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray observe that "it is the problematic bond between mother (mother figure) and daughter that produces language, identity, and a provisional notion of 'self' in the little girl" (Michie 59). She suggests that basically "motherhood and maternal body" have been seen by recent critics and feminist theorists as the source of the 'self' where the "female subject" is formed and reformed. They acknowledge a strange ambivalence in the mother-daughter relation in which the daughter is stuck between love and aversion, similarity and difference, the need for care and the need for freedom. Chughtai's story effectively portrays the tension between the girl and her sister who is a mother figure to her. The imposing demeanour of the sister cuts the girl into size every time she tries to be herself.

The girl is forced to undergo a sort of molestation by her Master Saheb who comes to teach her language at home. As punishment for her poor skills in learning the sentences he teaches, he gives her "sweet pinches" in her arms and thighs. He also threatens to kill her if she dares to inform the elders about it. This pain and insult is doubled when the sister pinches her again cursing her for those marks, thinking that she has been falling from places and injuring her body.

Whatever the little girl asks for, she is awarded abuses. Tired and famished after the grueling language class, if she asks for food she only receives food which is rotten that is either too hot or too cold, along with an irritable word or two. After a compulsory rest at noon, if the boys run out to play games, she is expected to play with dolls although she despises them. She continues to play the game of the marriage of dolls with the question "How would one play with them?" in mind. Amidst many dolls one is 'guddu', a male doll which she considers 'filthy' but invariably becomes the 'divine lover' to all the female dolls one after the other. This clearly symbolizes the liberty man enjoys in the sphere of love and sex while woman is left with few or

no choice owing to her traditional image of ‘receiver’ of love rather than of ‘giver’ or ‘maker’ of love.

The children of the household are made to gain religious education from the Maulvi Saheb who comes home to teach them verses from the Arabic Reader. Aapa, the “Mussolini or Hitler” of the house decides that the girl should be taught the recitation of the Quran which would open the Heaven’s windows to her. However, the girl narrates the hell she has to undergo to attain that heaven, as a result of her failure to produce the right sounds while reciting the words. She suffers painful pinches from the Maulvi Saheb for getting distracted, which makes her writhe in pain and shame.

The girl notices the discrimination against her and says, “Chunnu, after all, was a boy. His faults are no faults. However, the girls must be perfect; otherwise they would ruin their husbands’ families” (Asaduddin 54). Exhausted of paying the price for being born as a girl, she feels free and independent from the compulsions of fitting into the role of ‘the perfect girl’, once she grows up and has the choice to lead her life her way. At the end of the story, the girl feels she is her “own boss – free and independent” (55).

The girl, like every other grown-up, itches to be nostalgic about her childhood and to speak as the world does – “alas! If only childhood could...once more...”, but she does not, as it is not her reality.

In ‘*Jaal*’ (The Net), Chughtai addresses the theme of growing-up girls who are constantly exposed to the ideas of love and marriage. The story is about the childhood experiences, companionship and betrayal between two girls, Attan and Safiya. It begins with a suggested portrayal of their mischief and playfulness which come under constant vigilance and control by the older women in the family. They are pitilessly objected for “acting crazy” even on a Sunday, for not having their dupatta on their head, and for not performing the *isha namaz* on the previous night. When the “wretched girls” are unable to offer sufficient convincing explanation for their behavior, they are asked to “get lost”.

The girls rue about the freedom that boys enjoy and feel miserable about their own existence. Attan wished she were dead, and so did Safiya. They would read sentimental stories in the dark room, get worked up on them and fall into each other’s arms.... The heroines of those stories were lucky that they were dead. If only these two could die like them! (Asaduddin 57)

On Sundays, the girls are given a bath “which was no less than the ritual bath before burial” (58). Their heads are rubbed so vigorously that one wonders if even the hair on the head is not a cause for suffering to girls. But in summer, when they are allowed to sit under the tap the bathroom becomes a place of liberation. They can be there without any inhibition.

Chughtai’s depiction of the lives of girls is simple, yet complex as she also narrates their sweet joys amidst the otherwise constrained atmosphere. Apart from the usual ones, they suffer “a million other aches that made (the girls feel) miserable” (60). Growing up in a family with several elder sisters and many male cousins they are witness to the male attention their sisters obtain. They are also used by the ‘Bhaiyas’ to pass gifts to their loved girls secretly. The girls Attan and Safiya nurture the desire to receive envelopes and packets from boys but are unhappy about being “confined to carrying the messages across and to soiling their hands as happens in the business of coal” (61).

Unable to suppress their temptation to find out what is in the packets they deliver, they once open a bundle without delivering it and are embarrassed to see some ‘fine pink netting border and thin silk and elastic threads’. They conceal it in the

almirah amidst old clothes and keep thinking of nothing but that. Unable to suppress their excitement over what they have done, they guffaw and run around. They are chided by Mullani Ma, one of the elderly women in the household for this ‘unruly’ behavior, “God’s fury on you! Growing-up girls hopping like mares!” (62)

Betraying her closest associate Safiya, Attan once takes the stolen bundle out when alone and holds the silk skein gently and floats in a world of tender feelings about love and marriage. “...she moved ahead gingerly as though she were a new bride proceeding towards the bridal chamber on the wedding night...” (64). To Attan’s dismay, as she is absorbed in the “pleasurable sensations”, Safiya appears with the sister who was, indeed, to receive the bundle. Attan bends her head lower and lower in shame, until her face is completely covered inside the “smelly, hideous vest” she is wearing.

The story finely etches the girls’ ambition to soar into the world of fantasy despite the restrictions heaped on them. Also, Chughtai depicts how girls in a traditional Muslim family are habituated to dream of nothing but marriage as the ideal and reality in life. Their minds are not aware or open to any other endeavours of the human world. The girls are preoccupied with the desire to be the ‘privileged’ recipients of male attention. In the society and family they live, these growing up girls are physically and psychologically entrapped in the notion that their only function is to learn to ‘behave well’ so that they can become obedient wives to their husbands.

Chughtai’s sensitivity to microscopic details and her apparently spontaneous narration is once again evident in ‘*Niwala*’ (A Morsel). It is an insightful story discussing the magnitude of marriage in a woman’s life and the efforts of people to make a match for Sarlaben, an unmarried woman of thirty-four, who is working as a nurse. Painting a convincing description of the popularity of Sarlaben in one of the ‘chals’ of Bombay, the author leads the reader to “the one thing that saddened everybody: Sarlaben was still unmarried” (Naqvi 129).

The story offers a vivid glimpse of life in a Bombay ‘chal’ where people of all religious communities co-exist. The fact that all the women folk are pestered by nothing but the thought of the possibility or otherwise of Sarlaben’s marriage, goes to speak of the consuming importance ascribed to marriage in a woman’s life. All of Sarlaben’s friends and well-wishers believe that “an unmarried woman is a burden for all creation” (129). They are worried about Sarlaben as they concede the age-old belief about woman that “if you weren’t married you were like an open wound” (130).

Unlike most of the stories by Chughtai, the protagonist is a Hindu woman. She is a ‘plain Jane’ and is the kind who comforts and offers solace to everyone but spends no time for herself. In the society she lives, such plainness sans glamour and coyness in woman is simply not appreciated and therefore no man pays any attention to Sarlaben.

Her humdrum life gets a twist when a man begins to regularly offer his seat to Sarlaben in the bus by which she commutes every morning for work. The matter catches the imagination of many of her well-wishers in the ‘chal’ who advise her ‘to feed a morsel forcibly down his throat,’ to lure him and not let “the bird” escape. When they earnestly suggest that “a woman must wear some make-up, a little colour on her face”, wear “pretty clothes...some oil and perfume...bangles on her wrists” to look like a woman, Sarlaben reproaches and sends them away. On pondering over their suggestion later, she realizes that “this is the way of the world; when women dressed in flashy clothes with heavy make-up, are milling around...why would anyone want to pay attention to someone drab and colourless?” (138).

Chughtai renders through this story, an elaborate picture of the romantic ideal of a wedding for women and the stereotypes they constantly attempt to fit into. When the women coerce Sarlaben to groom herself according to the stereotypical image of an 'attractive' woman, she thinks, "Is it not enough to be a woman? Why should one need to stuff in so many condiments and chutney in one morsel (niwala) ...and then, a lifetime of punishment to preserve this one little morsel" (140).

The story meets with a dramatic end when Sarlaben, after transforming herself as per the instructions of other women, into a fashionable lady, goes to catch the same bus with the intention of winning 'his' attention. The man, however, fails to recognize her that day although she is right next to him, and keeps looking for her around.

The end subtly postulates the need for a woman to retain her 'self'. Sarlaben loses her identity the moment she tries to fit into the stereotypical image of 'woman', and drifts away from her true personality.

In rearticulating Freudian image of woman as a lack, as an imperfect man, Lacan describes her as an absence and a silence, and the images of the women in these stories apparently endorse that view. Through her chart of binary opposites, Helene Cixous too demonstrates that femininity has been defined as lack, negativity, non-being. However, Chughtai, subtly or overtly, depicts that her protagonists are what they are not due to a lack in them but due to being constantly molded by "the male gaze" (Barthes 4). They inhabit a world made by man as he wants it, and are being what man wants them to become.

When Cixous says that woman "must write herself, because this is the invention of a *new insurgent* writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history," (337) she connotes that women ought to begin expressing themselves; must make their voices heard by which they 'seize' "the occasion to *speak* (and make a) shattering entry into history, which has been based *on her suppression*" (338). The characters depicted in Chughtai seem to be waiting for an opportunity to 'seize the occasion to speak' and to "break out of the snare of silence" (338). Nonetheless, in the compulsion and anxiety to fulfill social expectations they behave in a self-effacing, unassuming manner that scarcely attracts any attention or rather ensures a near-absence of existence. This phenomenon suggests, in a way, that they can achieve self-awareness only when they learn to throw away their feminine crutches of family, friends and the loved ones, learn to fly by themselves, and take independent steps, however small they may be, of individual choice.

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