

Woman as Object: An Analysis of Ismat Chughtai's Short Stories

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Abstract: Woman and literature share an interesting relationship which has been explored by the writers in all the languages. Gender discrimination, sexual abuse, child marriage and widowhood have been the key social issues. Ismat Chughtai (1911-91), an Urdu writer gave a new direction to Urdu short stories. She established the tradition of understanding and presented issues from women's point of view, which even the male writers could not dare to write about. Through her works she gives us glimpses of conflicting emotions and complex psyche and experiences of woman and a girl child. She portrays the lives of women and their sexual and psychological problems, with remarkable boldness and courage. The present paper proposes to explore the sensitive issues like marriage, child mother, sexual abuse, unsuccessful marriage dealt by Chughtai in her short stories, like "Gainda" ("Gainda"), "Wedding Suit" ("Chauthi Ka Jora"), "Quilt" ("Lihaaf"), "Home Maker" ("Gharwali") etc. (trans. in English by M. Asadudin) with utmost reality.

Keywords: Child mother, gender, widowhood, sexual abuse, object.

Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991) a prolific Urdu writer is remembered as the writer of short stories. Her short stories hold the mirror up to nature and life. In her short stories she depicts the lives of a large section of lower middle class Muslim women and the girl child with great reality. According to Anu Celly:

When women writers write a short story dealing with aspects of gender consciousness, they attempt to present facets of female sensibility, wherewith the women characters question and probe the links between cultural conditioning, psycho-sexual determinants and socio-political economic factors which govern their destinies.... (2002:46)

Chughtai's women characters are strong characters but their condition is pitiable. They are mere objects in the hands of men, who are the custodian of the society. Discrimination between the sexes in India begins at birth, or even before it. It starts before the child is born in the mother's womb. None of the conventional blessings showered upon a pregnant woman mentions daughters. Finally when the girl is born she acquires a pre-destined role in a family. As Sudhir kakar observes that late childhood, " marks the beginning of an Indian girl's deliberate training in how to be a good woman, and hence the conscious inculcation of culturally designated feminine roles" (1981:62). From dressing to the codes of behaviour of a girl child are different. As Mary Wollstonecraft (1929) points out, "Women are told from infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that... softness of temper, outward obedience,

and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety will obtain for them the protection of man..." (1982:23). That's why they are called "Female". They have no power over their own lives. A girl has to compromise at every stage of her life.

Every major decision of a girl's life is taken by her elders, whether that is related to her education or marriage. That's what is called gender injustice. Boys are not born aggressive and boisterous, girls are not predestined to enjoy dolls and play bride games. But their personality is shaped into male and female patterns by many social pressures. And that's how even the games have gender. The child narrator and Gaiinda in the short story "Gaiinda", play the game of *Dulhan Dulhan*, in which they act as brides. As if preparing themselves for the role they have to play. They have to be someone's sister-in-law, daughter-in-law and above all that the bride of someone. The story "Gaiinda" ("Gaiinda", 1938) is about the two young innocent girls of fourteen or fifteen. One is Gaiinda, the washerwoman's daughter and the other is the narrator. Gaiinda is a child widow, but the irony is that she herself does not understand what being a widow means. For hours Gaiinda and the narrator talk about marriage and feel bashful. At one point, narrator makes *sindoor* out of brick powder and, "dabbing it with water, and sprinkled *sindoor* in her parting. Gaiinda's face flushed a deep red, and she hid her face shyly in her *dupatta*" (2001:4)¹.

Chughtai has very artistically expressed and conveyed the gentle innocence of the two young girls, who are in the process of discovering their sexuality. Gaiinda, who is too young to differentiate between lust and love, becomes the victim of her own innocence. Through the narrator's eyes readers get the description of what the narrator's brother 'Bhaiya' does to innocent Gaiinda. When we meet Gaiinda next she has turned as thin as a stick and has given birth to a baby, who is like a slippery lump of flesh. She is beaten for months and abandoned without food. The narrator's brother is sent to Delhi for studies. The narrator's mother says, "I sent him off to Delhi immediately. A studious boy... these low-caste bitches! Trap... the nobles" (2001:10). A girl of fifteen experiences the ages of misery. Despite the injustice done to Gaiinda, her life revolves around 'Bhaiya'. "At his name her eyes lit up with old sparkle. And then she could not stop herself from talking about him" (2001:1). As it is said for woman love is life and for man it's only an episode. At the end of the story we see Gaiinda performing her duties of a mother. Gaiinda's magnanimity stands in contrast to Bhaiya's cruelty, who treats Gaiinda merely as a plaything. As Simone De Beauvoir (1949) puts in, "the feminine flesh is for him (man) a prey, and through it he gains access to the qualities he desires, as with any object" (1997:393).

Begam Jaan's position in the short story "Quilt" ("Lihaaf", 1942) is also not more than an object. She is a beautiful lady but a lonely soul. She longs for love of her husband Nawab Saheb, who is too busy with the his young students and has no time even to look at his wife. "Having married Begum Jaan, he tucked her away in the house with other possessions and promptly forget her" (2001:4). Begum Jaan is not even allowed to move

out of the house. She remains a prisoner in the house. It reminds one of Hira Bansoles's poem "Slave", that speaks of gender injustice:

In that country
 where doors are adorned
 with flowers and mango leaves,
 the house decorated / with lighted lamps,
 in that country the woman is still a slave
 Where *Sita* had to pass
 the ordeal by fire
 to prove she was *pativrata*,
 Ahilya to sacrifice herself
 to Indra's sexual desire,
 and Draupadi was divided up
 among five men,
 the women of that country
 still remains a slave...² (1-16)

One is also reminded of a young woman in Anees Jung's *Unveiling India*, Who says, "when I became his wife, I became his property" (1987:67). Due to such indifferent attitude towards Begam Jaan, she inclines towards her maid servant Rabbu. Rabbu rescues her from the fall. Rabbu is the only person who eats, sits and even sleeps with Begam Jaan. When Rabbu is away she is like a fish out of water. Through the character of Nawab Saheb, it has been shown that the indifferent behaviour and other habits of a man can lead a simple housewife to an unnatural path. Begam Jaan is no more than an object in the house, and that too of no use.

Lajo's life in "Homemaker" ("Gharwali", 1980) is similar to that of 'Gainda' or 'Begam Jaan'. Bakshi, Mirza's friend after using Lajo, thinks of making a gift of her to Mirza. As "he (Mirza) wastes money at Brothels, why not savor this dish for free," (2001:80). Mirza treats Lajo like a queen. Lajo, who is a free bird now puts up in a cage by Mirza. He now thinks her to be his property. She is not even allowed to wear *Lehanga* and is instructed to wear tight fitting *pyjamas*. Mirza inspite of knowing the kind of lady Lajo is marries her, in the hope that marriage will enslave Lajo. Lajo too in the greed of some shelter and belongingness agrees to marry Mirza. Marriage becomes a game for both of them. A marriage is secret kinds of contract for both, which both of them hide from each other. As Anees Jung lays down, 'Marriage is an ideal, a sacrament, a bond forged between a man and a woman. Time has diffused, the ideal. It has little to do with the act of love. It is more a social act that originates in need...' (1987:67).

Lajo has no meaning for emotional attachment, because in her life she has met many men, which treat her only as a thing. In Bakshi's house she was given the room which was earlier occupied by a buffalo. Finally Lajo is released from the bond of marriage, Mirza gives her *Talaaq*³. "She had no illusion about herself, only virgins got married, and she could not, remember when she had lost her virginity. She was not fit to be anyone's bride" (2001:88). The poor Lajo does not understand the sacred bond of marriage. She is only attached to the walls of the house of Mirza, which are emotionless and never expects anything from her. Mirza divorces Lajo yet appoints her as his maid as he needs her. As Rahat in the short

story "Wedding Suit" ("Chauthi ka Jora", 1946) comes to the house as he need the place to live while on police training. "Wedding Suit" is the story of three women characters, Kubra, her mother and her younger sister Hamida. Kubra is a burden upon her widow mother.

The girl in general is seen as a responsibility and a burden whose birth means expense in terms of both marriage and dowry. Parents start thinking about the girl's marriage the moment she is born. In "Wedding Suit", Kubra's mother has started preparing her dowry at an early age, and now her only dream is to get her daughter married. It reminds one of Attia Hosain's novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1967), where the protagonist says, "The cure for a good girl is to get her married quickly, the cure for a bad girl is to get her married quickly" (29). Whether the upper or the lower strata of a society, attitude towards marriage is same. Vrinda Nabar's "Viewpoint": (A Modern Ballad)" presents realistic detail:

We've got a daughter we're willing to sell
This bargain, the profit as well:
He's coming to see for himself, so he said,
How she and our money would
look in his bed
Our daughter is graduate, he's no
cause to moan.
She's a well brought up girl with no
mind of her own. (97,8-19)

To get a girl married is the sole aim of the parents. In "Wedding Suit" when Rahat comes to stay with the family, Kubra's mother makes dream of Kubra and Rahat's marriage. It seems not Rahat but the barat has arrived on the threshold. Bi Amma's life revolves around Rahat, serving him, cleaning his room and so on. Kubra's mother "taking just a glass of water herself, she would fry paranthas for Rahat" (29). They "starve to feed the son-in-law" (29), as they think him to be Kubra's would be husband.

Domestic life of the woman is a daily sacrifice of the self. She lives to make her children happy. But the thankless and heartless Rahat would never speak a word of praise. In him there seems to be an absence of any emotional attachment in relation to any member of the family. Each person of the family harbours a hope that Rahat will eventually marry Kubra. Dreams, hopes of wedding parties and sadness of old wedding clothes can be seen in Kubra's eyes. But Kubra's sister Hamida knows that nothing will happen. She knows Rahat is not a good man, his filthy eyes sting her heart like arrows. Hamida knows very well that he will never marry her sister. She wishes to crush Rahat under her feet, but whenever she looks at her sister her rage, and anger cools down, "Will there be no buyer for her, will no one kiss her lovingly" (2001:33).

Rahat turns out to be a villain. He plays with their emotions, and takes away hope of Bi Amma, life and dreams of Kubra and Hamida's honour. The family has nothing more to offer. As Simone De Beaviour (1949) asserts, "the young girl has hardly more than her body which she can call her own; it is her greatest treasure; the man who enters her takes it from

her" (1947:405). As Rahat leaves change comes over the household, "After that no one fried eggs, made *paranthas*, or knitted a sweater in that household...Bi Apa quietly surrender futile existence to its fatal embrace"(2001:38). Men like 'Rahat', 'Mirza', 'Bakshi' or 'Nawab Saheb' need food on time, clean place to live in, woman to play and to satisfy their hunger. When the needs are fulfilled they throw them away like worn out clothes as Rahat leaves the house, Mirza divorces Lajo yet appoints her as maid and Bakshi presents Lajo to Mirza, Bhaiya leaves Gainda and Nawab Saheb caged Begum Jaan. Thus the above mentioned stories presents woman as a mere object, possession or a pretty plaything in the hands of men, who only use them according to their needs. These stories present men in a very bad light. They are the caricatures of brutish, lustful and insensitive creatures which use 'masculinity' as a potent force for subjugating women.

Notes & References :

- ¹ Quotes from the short stories are from (Ismat Chughtai *Lifting the Veil* 2001).
- ² Hira Bansole's "Slave" is quoted in: Vrinda Nabar, *Caste as Women* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995) 118-119.
- ³ The word *Talaq* comes from the word *Talaqa*, which means to release an animal from tether.

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