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Decoding the Labyrinth of Criminal Minds: An Analysis of Ismat Chughtai's Short Stories with a Focus on Crime against Women

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the deeply-rooted reasons that breed contempt against the fairer sex. It discusses why there lies duality in the perception and standards of the society which finds women as inferior and dependent entity. In the present scenario when crime against women has shoot up tremendously, it has become all the more necessary to understand the problem and to take measures to cope up and get rid of the problem. It traces the normal conventions of the patriarchal society and how it works as a workshop where women are being subjugated and marginalized.

Keywords

Patriarchy, Classical Patriarchy, Gendering, Violence.



Ismat Chughtai (1911- 1991) is one of the boldest women writers in Urdu literature who captured the prevalent clashes of her times in 1930s and 40s and represented middle-class Muslim contemporary society in the literary world. She is an unrivalled writer in the history of Urdu short stories who voiced her vent through her writing when women were behind the *purdah*/veil and writing was not considered as an activity meant for women.

When Chughtai started writing, violence against women was rampant in that society and it was a daily routine for many women to be a victim of violence at the hands of their male counterparts. Chughtai was well aware of the fact that women have since times immemorial been subjugated, harassed and exploited on the pretext of their gender. Therefore she wrote not only about women, their problems and lives, but also about a variety of themes related to women; highlighting the defiant and active side of women, projecting them as capable of deploying different agency to guard their selves and falsified such illusions that they are weaker sex. From suppressed corners, margins and periphery where women had been pushed, she brought them up at the centre and made people acknowledge that women could speak, have voice and be autonomous.

Her stories are social commentaries and therein she explores the trauma women are subjected to have as women. Their struggles and crimes against them have found voice in her writing. In India, the Constitution of India under Article 14, guarantees “equality before the law” and “equal protection of the law”. It empowers the State to take affirmative measure for women under Article 15 (3). All gender specific laws find their genesis under this Clause. Article 21 guarantees the right to life to every citizen which includes a life with dignity and without violence (Ray 3). But unfortunately in reality, crimes against women have not reduced; only the laws to curb it have increased. “The Little Mother/Marigold” (“Gainda”) is a story in which Chughtai has depicted the fate of a child-bride, Gainda, who was married at the age of fifteen and

within a year of marriage, gets widowed. The feelings of two women characters – one Gainda, married “a year before” and another “a virgin” who is the narrator of the story and Gainda’s friend, have been rendered with the innocence of the adolescence. Gainda’s status of being a widow within a year of her marriage proves to be a full stop to her pleasure, freedom, voice and identity and threats begins to lurk for her from every corner. The female family members proscribe her to wear good dress, or use *sindoor*, *bindi*, *kajal* or even bangles. They deprive her from braiding her hair or parting it and insist on her to live a life of deprivation and widowhood. Whereas the male member of the family, referred to as Bhaiya begins to take advantage of her vulnerability and innocence. He advances towards her to fulfil his sexual desires and forced himself on her. Later in the story, it is revealed that he has impregnated Gainda. As a result Gainda faces abusive and violent behaviour as if it is normal daily routine of her life:

Gainda recounted a hundred thousand ‘strange’ happenings. How she was beaten up for months together! Gainda, hardly fourteen or fifteen, did not herself understand many things. How could she explain them to me? . . . She was beaten to a pulp and abandoned without food. (Asaduddin, *Quilt 13*)

How easy it is in this discriminating society for a man to get away from the blame. The blame always falls on the woman as Patriarchs have deeply ingrained in the minds that such incidence of sexual assault and rape take place when the girl entices and entraps the boy. In the story, different punishments are given to the victims proves the very discrimination it breeds. Gainda was beaten and abandoned without food whereas Bhaiya went to Delhi. Gainda was held responsible for enticing him to do so: “...What a lot of trouble it was!’ Biwi said. ‘I sent him off to Delhi immediately. A studious boy...these low-caste bitches! Trap ... the nobles” (11). One more important fact that comes to the surface is this vicious circle of duality is kept alive even by the

women themselves. Patriarchy uses one woman against another woman and it goes on. Clearly, it is the women too who have kept alive the flame of injustice against women and reinforce and contribute in exploitation and harassment of women. Commenting on the same sentiment Abrams concedes:

Women themselves are taught, in the process of being socialized, to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology (That is, the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority), and are so conditioned to derogate their own sex and cooperate in their own subordination. (235)

The story “The Homemaker” (“Gharwali”) also resurfaces the same theme of sexual harassment and violence against women. It is a story of an orphan, Lajo, a New-born woman who lives on her own terms and is anti-male, anti-patriarchy and anti-marriage. She grows up on the leftovers of others and survives on the rules which she has made in the hope to stay alive against all odds. In the vicissitudes of life, “her body proved to be her only asset” which she used in order to live on. When Mirza Irfan Beg hires Lajo as his maid, her way of working and keeping the home clean reminded him of his mother, Bi Amma. Gradually he gets emotionally attached to her so much that wished to get married with her. On hearing the wish of Mirza to get married to Lajo, Ramu’s grandma says: “Mian, why do you want to put the bell around the neck? Is she throwing tantrums? Give her a good thrashing, and she’ll be all right. Why think of marriage when a shoe-beating would do” (55)?

There are various reasons why violence against women is still rampant in the society. One main reason is the overdependence of women on men could be. As they don’t see any future without their beating husbands, they tolerate the brutality of their husbands and in-laws as their destiny. In the story, “Lingering Fragrance” (“Badan ki Khushboo”) it was the “the tradition in the mahal” to present bondmaids who worked as a sex-agent for young nawabs to make them learn the nuances of sexual intercourse. And fourteen-year old

Sanobar was one of them who was presented to Hashmat Mian who made her “pregnant within a year”:

It was the custom in the mahal that when cows became pregnant they were sent away to the village and brought back after they had calved. When they became useless, bondmaids and maidservants were also sent away to the village, and after they delivered they would leave the babies behind so that the constant yelping of these puppies would not cause a disturbance in the house. (Naqvi 115)

These bondmaids working in the household of Nawabs and Zamiddars are poor orphans who are sold by their own parents. They live a life of a slave and sacrifice their lives in taking out the orders of Begums and the Nawabs till their last breath. In his article, “Ismat Chughtai: Makers of Indian Literature,” Mohammad Asaduddin throws light on the tradition of the mahal where Nawabs hire a wet nurse to feed the baby and these poor girls have no options available as they have been sold and used as the private properties of these zamidaars and Nawabs:

While their children languished, they had to return alone, their breasts tingling with milk, to spend the rest of their lives as maids. If they were lucky, they would breast feed the Nawab’s legitimate offspring because the begum could not afford to allow their own breasts to sag by doing so. (89)

But when Sanobar, a bondmaid, rebelled and denied to leave the mahal as was the tradition in the mahal, she faced the most dehumanizing behaviour. Hashmat Mian kicked her so hard that she was flung down next to the drain and that kick caused great damage to her. For three days she bellowed like a buffalo, then the infant died in her belly. On the third day after this cruel incident, Sanobar breathed her last in the darkest corner of the servant quarters.

The fire of violence is not limited to women alone but it is extended to everyone who is a subaltern – a woman, or a boy serving in these ‘respectable’ household. The children working in these household as the domestic help do not get treatment fit for a human being with dignity. Chughtai in “Caravan Dust” acknowledges this fact:

In my limited world, class distinctions were clear in the relationship between flunky and master. This affected me greatly. When I came into contact with the world at large, I learnt that discrimination on the basis of class and caste was merely a ‘farce’. The real issue was the distinction between the rich and the poor. (Kumar & Sadique 21)

“Kallu” (“The Black One”) is one such story which exposes this distinction between the rich and the poor. It depicts the brutality and atrocities of their masters who do not consider these servants better than slaves or machines:

Mumani, sitting in the sunny part of the courtyard, combing her hair, was privy to this exchange between kallu and her daughter. Livid with anger, she removed her sandal from her foot and smacked him one with it. A blow landed in the wrong place, Kallu’s nose began to bleed and soon blood was streaming down the side of his face...

“Get out of my house, you hypocrite!” Mumani yelled and ordered both mother and son out. Kallu’s mother wept and begged forgiveness, but her pleas went unheeded (Naqvi 253).

As one looks into the matter closely, one finds that Mumani’s cruel act was a reaction to a statement that Kallu had made. The question arises what it was that infuriated Mumani to an extent that she hurled her slipper at him that made him bleed. As there was talk of weddings all day long – who’s going to marry whom was the question to be asked to the little ones in the family. Nanhi’s reply to this question sent everyone into fits of laughter as she wished

to marry Apa. But when the same question was answered by Kallu revealing his wish to marry “Salima Bi”, Mumani cursed him and boxed his ears.

It is conspicuous how brutally and disrespectfully masters behave to their servants who make their lives easy and smooth. Kallu was seven when he started doing the work of “a grown man.” The list of the inhumane behavior and the treatment they received from their masters, is long including shaking them out of their sleep early in the morning without bothering about the fact how late and tired they must have had got into their beds; throwing some discarded, worn-out and tattered clothes for them to wear; behaving with them as they are not human beings; but aliens or some other species belonging to a race other than human race. Kallu used to do all the household chores from putting the water on for tea to setting the table for breakfast; from making a hundred rounds to the door and back carrying butter , bread, milk, and the eggs (which masters feel they are allergic to) to taking care of small errands of his own age. Other than these unconcerned, indifferent, and discriminatory acts, they are fed on left-overs and burnt ends of toasts and parathas. It is disappointing to see how servants are robbed of their childhood by their masters who treat them as the slaves.

Ismat Chughtai breaks the conventional stereotypical way of looking and talking of women and dared to take that aspect related to women which were pushed under the carpet in the conspiracy of silence. The world created by her pen is vibrant with the diversity of opinions and feelings of ordinary and suppressed women. She goes beyond the physical descriptions of women characters and explores psychological and emotional territories of their characters and therein recorded the wounds and scars they owned to survive in this phallogocentric world. She never “towed the treaded line out of fear of defying the traditional norms” and mirrored the hidden lives of Muslim households behind the veil. She took the cause of women and through her writing sensitizes women to raise their voice against violence and exploitations.

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