

FEMININE QUEST IN CHUGHTAI'S NOVELLA

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ABSTRACT

Ismat Chughtai is one of the boldest and most outspoken Urdu writer of the subcontinent among both male and female writers. Women's lives contained and restrained by social and sexual oppression are her predominant preoccupation. 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. Much of the action centers around them. Though she deals with the experiences of Muslim women mostly, Hindu and Christian women are also seen in her fiction as in "The Wild one" and the short story "Aunt Grace."

KEY WORDS: *sexual oppression, Muslim women, adolescent girls.*

INTRODUCTION:

Ismat Chughtai was considered as an inimitable writer of Urdu fiction as she had dealt with so many feminist issues that no other Urdu fiction writer had approached women's questions with the same degree of sensitivity and concern. In the early 1930's she started writing in secret about women's lives and daily experiences. She kept her writings hidden at a time when the voices of women writers were still muffled and any attempt on their part to write literature was viewed as an intellectual vagrancy.

The better part of her writing shows a deep and enduring preoccupation with ordinary women's issues, particularly their cultural status and their myriad roles in Indian society. By underscoring women's struggles against the oppressive institutions of her time, she brings to her fiction an understanding of the female psyche that is unique.

She explores feminine sexuality, Middle class gentility and other evolving conflicts in the modern Muslim world. She is associated with the membership of the Urdu progressive writer's movement in Luck now.

She explores human relationships, their joys and sorrows, their loves and hates against the background of the larger social world and its changing environment. She portrayed the true psyche of the middle class Muslim girls with such fearlessness and openness that it gave the real shock of their life to the custodians of the society and religion.

Ismat Chughtai deals with a volume of two novellas comprising "Heart Breaks Free" and "The Wild One." "Heart Brakes free" deals with two women – Patani Bua and Qudsia

Banu who are compelled to live lonely and frustrated lives. Patani Bua who enjoys her great freedom in her insane bouts of roaming in the jungles and streets becomes a thorn in the flesh among the women of respectable society who try to cure her sickness through Hakim's potions. These vile medicines destroy her physically and cause a slow death. Qudisia is deserted by her husband for a white woman, but learns a lesson from Patani Bua's life. She too is given to hysterical fits and finally she gets away from religious and sexual oppression to find happiness with her silent lover, Shabir. The second novella in the volume is "The Wild One" in which Puran and Asha were Hindu lovers. Since Puran belongs to a royal family and Asha is a lower class girl, Puran's family separates them and forcibly gets Puran married to another girl. He loses his mental stability for not finding Asha and both were destroyed in a raging fire at the end. The fire of course, symbolizes the unrequited passion. The point she makes is though there is no Veil or Purdah, the religious and social repression of love is very much part of Hindu society too.

Patani Bua is a strong proud woman though single and lives fearlessly. In contrast, Qudisia is deserted by her husband for another; she looks depressed and withdraws from the social world. When circumstances betray Bua, Qudisia begins to come out of seclusion and flourish and in an unexpected reversal the two change places in this ironic and poignant tale.

Qudisia is married more than ten years ago. Soon after her marriage, her husband leaves for England. He returns from there with an English wife, a Mem Sahib. This is why Qudisia endlessly chants verses from Quran, spends long hours in worship and prayers. When all this proves fruitless, she suffers from attacks in which her jaw gets locked. She writes several letters to her husband at the beginning. Beginning with, 'My master may you live long' she wrote:

Give me a spot in a corner of your house as a maid of the memsahib.
I'll serve you both; I'll eat your left-over's, wear your cast-offs, and
if I utter one word of dissatisfaction, you may punish me as one
punishes a thief. You are the master, I your slave, what better fate can
I ask for than dying at your feet.¹

But he thinks it foolish to bother himself with a reply. Usually Qudisia is introduced to people with words like, "This is Qudisia, and her husband has taken in a white woman." She takes pride in such words as if her husband has honored her by bringing a white woman to be her rival.

There are other men as well from the community who marry and bring home white women, but they at least keep good contacts with their Indian wives and visit them. But in the case of Qudisia her husband loses complete contact with her and does not even enquire how she is. So she becomes hysterical during Urs, which is a popular Muslim festival.

Shabir is related to Qudisia by marriage, a brother-in-law to her. The only child of poor parents, he is a shy and weak man. He is very thin and three feet taller than Qudisia. He is in love with Qudisia, but it is timid love. He never sits close to her and never moves close to

her because she belongs to another. Patani Bua is probably just a few years older than Qudisia and lives next door. Throughout the narrative, Chughtai builds up an implicit contrast between them since both are lonely and single women. About Bua's fears, Ismat says:

From the time she is young, a woman's heart is filled with thousands of fears, so that when she reaches puberty she thinks of herself as a fragile, unbaked clay pitcher that must encounter with stones at every step.²

Once she loses her mind, her fears are vanished. Now she is no longer a hollow clay pitcher and has become a solid rock. She introduces herself as the treasured beloved of Ghazi Mian, who was martyred four hundred years ago. She says, "Love is not fettered by the chains of time." There was an Urs at Ghazi Mian's shrine every year. People of every religion and caste, old and young, children, women and men, all make the pilgrimage to the shrine. They offer vows and receive answers to their prayers.

The story is narrated through the eyes of a child character and there are a few more children along with the others in a large household. For the Children, Patani Bua who wanders boldly in the streets and bushes at all times of the day and night is a fascinating figure. She would sing songs loudly and tell tales of her lover Ghazi Mian's teasing and flirtation with her. There is popular myth around Ghazi Mian's shrine which people believed. A long time ago, Radha Bai, alias Zehra Bibi, a child widow from a family in Rudali, lost her heart to Mian. Ghazi Mian appeared to her in a dream and accepted her love. Her father was an oil merchant, who forcibly dragged her off from Ghazi Mian and took her home. The parents subject her to punishments. She had to walk on coals. Her mother beat her senselessly; her father whipped her with moistened rope and tied her to a peg in the cowshed. The whole village spat at her. When she was tired and unable to sleep because of wounds, Ghazi Mian came to her and washed her wounds with his tears, clasped her to his sacred chest, and made the bridal mark with blood in the parting of her hair. The next morning people find Radha lying dead in front of the shrine without a single scratch on her body. The people in Rudali were shocked and feel that she belonged to another's world now. The Hindus call her Radha and the Muslims call her Zehra Bibi. So her plain grave is built close to Mian's tomb.

In the myth of Meera Bai also, Meera fell in love with her Girdhar Gopal. Those who oppose their love set vipers on her person and gave her a cup of poison to drink But Krishna's flute turned the viper into a garland of flowers, and the cup of poison brimmed over with the elixir of life.

These loves in the two stories are compared with that of Shabir by Bua. She says Shabir was neither Krishna Murari nor Ghazi Mian, but is an incomplete hollow man. He cannot turn the snarling vipers in Qudisia life into garlands with his flute, nor can he change the cow dung into sandalwood.

Qudisia at the age of twenty six pines away and becomes weak. She does not have enough courage to be like Bua to lose her sanity. One day Bua goes to the water pitchers, sprinkles some water on chameleon buds, and ties them in a corner of her duppata over her head. Placing her hands on her hips like a dancer, she starts smiling. Her clothes are clean and spotless. A starched pink duppata is drooped neatly across her shoulders. She says, 'My eyes are red from weeping.' The wild act looks as if she is teasing Qudisia.

Bua goes wherever she pleases, whether it is night or day, wandering from one village to another. Wherever she goes she is treated with respect and people regard an opportunity of doing something for her as a stroke of good fortune. The things like a pink duppata, fragrant oil, attar, bangles, and flowers are offered for her at Ghazi Mian's shrine, whenever somebody's wish is fulfilled. She distributes food among beggars, which is brought by the people in the village for her. She has been living alone since the death of her parents. She owns some land but never bothers to take any profit from it. In this regard people have begun to view her as Ghazi Mian's cherished beloved. There are many people ready to surrender their lives for her. Therefore she is a weak woman, but she is not handicapped or helpless.

Rejecting our world, Bua had created a free world of her own where she ruled. She had sealed all doors but after all she was a woman; a chink remained somewhere.³

In a way her personal frustrations leading to her derangement makes her socially strong and fearless. In this regard Nani Biwi a traditional grandmother finds her wild roaming offensive.

The good women enclosed in the four walls of their home, tightly bound by the constraints of society, also could not tolerate Bua's freedom. She was a woman, but she enjoyed the rights of men, and every one resented that.⁴

The narrator's family decides that Bua is mentally sick and needs medical checkup, from Hakim. They take the traditional medicine and administer it to her. One day Bua suffers helplessly, collapses from a wave of diarrhea that continues long. A doctor Hakim Sahib prescribes medicine to her. The fever subsides, but for several days Bua is so weak that afterwards she cannot even talk properly. Her digestive system is permanently damaged. Later her health gets relatively better. She develops the ability to tell the difference between what is proper and what is not. So Nani Biwi calls the change in her 'Maturity' while in fact she becomes dull losing all her high energy. Once Bua was of wheatish complexion, but now her skin has become muddy and restless. All of a sudden people find her stooping like an old woman. The old vitality and high spirits have disappeared after leaving Bale Main's love and she becomes dispossessed and dispirited.

Qudsia who is administered the same kind of medicine refuses to take it again after suffering from its terrible effect. She is no longer the same either. A soft, delicate change has appeared in her. Instead of staying in bed for hours she started walking regularly. Her hair is uncombed for many days, and cloths are filthy. People have recounted tales of her patience and loyalty to the absent husband with awe and wonder earlier when she carelessly dipped her duppatas in odd shades of colours and threw them out to dry. But now

In the evening she bathed, donned a soft-hued, crisp gharara along with an embroidered muslin shirt with which she wore a gathered duppata, put on the ear rings, with flowers and gazed into the empty air smilingly, gazed into the empty air before her as if she too had a Ghazi Main standing there and teasing her.⁵

The older women in the household get a little worried about the changes that they see in Qudsia. When she suffers from the attacks of hysteria, they understand it. It is common among such unfortunate women who are rejected by their husbands. But she misses her morning prayers and every other day she receives a fresh batch of novels in the mail. In this regard Nani Biwi, her mother, thinks:

No, the signs were not at all good; reading those wretched, cheap books all night long, pacing the veranda and sighing, looking up at the sky and smiling to oneself... no, these are not the ways of girls who sacrifice their lives for the family.⁶

Nani Biwi used to pray for Qudsia's husband's return, but he never did. On the other hand Shabir comes regularly. He comes and sits down at some distance to her. She insists on his looking into her eyes. However he avoids her eyes. When it is evening Shabir leaves, but lights continue to glimmer in Qudsia eyes. The smile that now played on her lips resembles the cocky smile that hovered on Bua's lips when she saw Bale Main.

After the first dose of the country medicine, Bua no longer seems to be lost in the love of mythical Gazi Mian. She begins imagining that they have quarreled. But now Bua's eyes have an empty look. Instead of the fragrant odor of freshly dug earth, now her body smelled of garlic, onions and stale food. Meanwhile Qudsia seems to blossom some more. She solicits Shabir's help in reading novels and poems. He comes home every evening to explain things to her. Once he leaves, Nani Biwi reprimands Qudsia for her capricious behavior. But Qudsia defends herself saying that he is a decent man, who is not an outsider and no one can see harm in his visits to their house. Nani Biwi, her mother however scolds her:

A woman's person is like a mirror; once there's a crack in it you'll forever see a crooked image of yourself.⁷

The old woman is worried that her daughter might go astray morally and cause social ostracism of the family. But the mother of the narrator called Amma in the novella defends Qudisia saying because of Shabir only the unhappy girl gets to laugh and relax a little. She must have a reason to continue living. But things do not continue in the same way for long. Shabir stops visiting them. The day Qudisia learns how Nani Biwi has instructed Shabir in a very polite tone to stop coming to the house she asks:

Yes, why shouldn't I be out of my mind? I'm human, I'm not a stone. You hurled me into hell when I was fifteen, the colour of my wedding henna hadn't faded yet when he crossed the seven seas to a faraway place, and there he was stung by a white snake. But tell me, is this all my fault?⁸

Nani Biwi reprimands her further by saying that he hasn't done anything wrong. There are thousands of women, who suffer like her, but they endure hardship gracefully since a man is faithless by nature. Qudisia begins to curse herself thus:

O Allah! Please take me from this world! Mighty ruler, make my body dirt so I can at least be rid of this hell, or else take his life so I can be rid of the vile creature.⁹

When she takes recourse to loud abuse none of the women dare to approach her since they value their lives but they continue to rant and rave. Qudisia starts crushing the broken pieces of glass. Before she could bring her hand to her mouth, to eat pieces of glass Shabir calmly places his hand on her shoulder. With the first male touch after ten years, her hands fall helplessly to her sides. She turns to look into Shabir Hassan's eyes. Shutting her eyes, she swoons and falls upon his chest. He involuntarily gathers her slender body in both arms. Women around them are shocked. No one has anything to say in what Allah has fated. But they think her ways are bad. Later her status begins to improve in the house.

The incident is narrated with subtle irony by Chughtai underlining the hypocrisy of women and their tradition bound perceptions. Quarrels between mother and daughter about the need to be modest stop. The family believes she is possessed by the spirit of some saint. From then onwards great change takes place in Qudisia's behavior. She would adorn herself like an unmarried girl. She wears white clothes, attar and aromatic oils and wanders in the garden all day. She begins enjoying a life of ease and comfort. Like a princess she reclines all day on a bed that was draped with sparkling sheets and reads the poetry of Sauda and Zauq. Shabir's visits her regularly now as he had done in the past. She becomes restless if he is late even for a few minutes. It looks as if Bua and Qudisia have reversed their roles.

One day Bua's sweeperess comes and reveals that Bua has been suffering from fever for several days. The previous night she left the house and in the morning, she was discovered lying face down in the cemetery. Qudisia seemed to be in great distress and runs

anxiously from one corner to the other and exhibits perturbation. By now she began identifying so much with Bua no one in the house is surprised by her behavior. Bua suffers all night and dies. The real cause of the demented woman's death seems to be rejection in love.

She was always cross with Bale Mian, but when he turned away from her the whole world rejected her. Bua suffered in this terrible manner and not once did he bother to turn around and ask how she was doing. Ah, poor, unfortunate Bua. The world polices dreams as well; the very reason for living becomes a sore point with people.¹⁰

The terror of Bua's death hangs over the entire household. Freedom Bua enjoyed in her dreams is disapproved by conventional women and their treatment for her supposed cure results in terrible physical suffering and death. Bua cannot live without her romantic dreams and lover. Bua's death completely unsettles Qudisia who sees the other woman as her alter ego. For two days she does not eat anything. All night she paces about restlessly, and stares at the floor in the veranda in the dark. The evening Shabir comes, but he leaves home without casting a look at Qudisia. That day Nani Biwi wakes in the middle of the night and searches for Qudisia. Her bed is found empty. She screams and rouses the whole household. She stomps up and down, yelling Qudisia name. The imprints of Qudisia's small bare feet are traced to the edge of the large well from where they disappear. On the left there is a path that leads to railway station. It is full of marks made by animals and people, but there are no signs of Qudisia's tiny white feet. They search thoroughly but Qudisia's body is not found. People think she is dead. Nani Biwi weeps uncontrollably on the third day of mourning, saying "My daughter was meant for heaven."¹¹ Dadi Amma proceeds to recite verses from the Qurran under her breath in the belief she is dead.

Some strange stories begin circulating within a few days of Qudisia's disappearance. One of them is that a window suddenly opened in the floor when Qudisia jumped into the well. When the dust settled, she saw a golden throne held by four fairies, holding the throne before her respectfully. Finally Qudisia was escorted to the throne which then ascended in to the sky. It was uncle Machu who invented all these tales though some people begin saying that she ran away with Shabir. From that day Qudisia's name becomes taboo in the house. As long as Nani Biwi is alive no one dares to mention her name for fear of rebukes from her. Then people forget everything because "forgetting is profitable, your conscience doesn't torment you."¹²

Throughout her life Qudisia puts up with the bitter fruits of Purdah system, with the familial, social and religious oppression for no fault of hers. In fact the one who commits an error is her first husband who marries a white woman and deserts her. Finally she breaks the purdah

to elope with Shabir to lead a happy life. The reader comes to know of this fact only when Qudsia's daughter Rabiah Hassan comes to meet the narrator who is grown up now and is a writer. She reveals that when Qudsia was on her way to jump in to the well and kill herself uncle Machu saved her and told her to leave her shoes near the well. This, of course, leaves room for spreading of the strange stories. It is through Manchu's efforts the lovers proceed to the railway station and leave town. She tells the narrator what troubles her parents have gone through afterwards to marry legally and live a dignified life. Since Qudsia's first husband refuses to divorce her even after repeated entreaties from Shabir and Qudsia. The unreasonable man is symbolic of tenacious hold of religious dogma on people. So Shabir and Qudsia who love each other deeply chose to marry and live in isolation for long years for no fault of theirs. It is Bua's terrible death which loosens the hold of dogma on Qudsia and compels her to break free which results in happiness for her. All the stories of Chughtai thus are preoccupied with the rebellion against religious and sexual oppression of women symbolized in the veil. She also suggests that though such oppression results in misery and wasted lives for women, it also can make men unhappy for life. If Bua's terrible and avoidable death makes Qudsia to rebel against tradition, it is through the efforts of Manchu that Shabir and she leave town by night. But for this bold step, Shabir too would have remained unmarried and unhappy throughout his life. When the story of their happy life together is told by their daughter decades later, it suggests that the younger generation can be happier if the hold of religious and sexual of oppression of women is loosened. The fact that Rabiah is going abroad alone for doing Ph.D indicates such a positive change in Indian Muslim women's lives.

CONCLUSION

Another point Chughtai seems to be making through this novella is critiquing the myths that people believe in through indirect means. In "The Heart Breaks Free" Patani Bua can live in romantic dreams in dalliance with Bale Mian who died hundreds of years back because his life is real and he is alive for her. Since people also believe the myths woven around the man and his lover, and his supernatural power they allow Bua to live in peace. They also believe that she is the ladylove of their local deity who can shower his beneficence on them and listen to their prayers. The most important point the writer makes here is that these tragedies involving love across castes and communities were avoidable in the past as they are in modern India. The present allows the writer and the players involved in the present to read the past critically. The trope of a mad woman in the background, an important one in feminist writing all over the world, is used to symbolize repressed sexuality in this novella.

Chughtai is an unusual woman striking out on her own and asserting her feminine identity and claiming to be an independent entity in her own right. Such a woman may be rare in Urdu fiction. Most of her narrators are women or girl children who present a satirical view of the world they present. They question and challenge everyone held belief trying to seek a positive new world of justice and fair play. Krishan Chander says he wrote the article to mitigate such a feeling. Manto has been a lifelong friend with whom she discussed issues as well as fought for long hours.

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