

**CRITICAL REALISM, MIMICRY OR DISCURSIVE COLONIALISM:
ANALYSIS OF ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S DEALING OF QUEER THEMES**

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Abstract

Queer studies have monolithically been considered as a taboo in most parts of South Asia, mainly because of the overall culture prevailing in these societies. Yet, writers such as Ismat Chughtai, following the footsteps of the global north challenges these myths contribute to the field of Queer Studies under the banner of Progressive Writers Movement of India, ending up in getting summoned by, and finding herself defending her literary texts at, the court of law in Lahore. This study examines Chughtai's oft-quoted critical-cum-realistic stance that makes her go against the prevailing culture and writes so boldly about queer issues. The study uses the Postcolonial scholarship, with special focus on the issue of mimicry, as the theoretical underpinning for this study.

Keywords: *Queer Issues; Mimicry; Progressive Writers Movement; Fanon; Ismat Chughtai.*

1.1. INTRODUCTION:

Ismat Chughtai occupies the position of the most bold and controversial female writer in the history of Indian short story. Her bold attempt in writing about a female's body is seen as a

part of the active project of modernity that she and the other radical feminist writers were engaged with. She was the first Urdu female writer who boldly unraveled the psychological and social aspects of a woman's sexual life in her stories. She started her literary career as the translator of French and Russian Fiction and this practice played a great role in the shaping of her revolutionary literary intellect. The Russian and French masters of fiction-Tolstoy, Gorky, Chekov, Maupassant, and Zola were the few whom she loved to read again and again (Negi, 2003). It was Anton Chekov and some other European writers about whom she once said, "They were the great influence for me because I encountered them when I was looking around for a guiding spirit". She was greatly inspired by the cotemporary European writers and tried to copy the style of her favorite French and English writers in many of her short stories.

About Chekov Ismat said, "I believe in Chekov, I read him to be blessed" (Negi, 2003). Chughtai was one of the most prominent writers of the Progressive writers Association and played a very active role in Progressive writers movement which was at its peak in 1930s and 1940s. This was the time for the blossoming of her literary career. This research will investigate that how the strong impact of European literature on her mind and the company of Progressive writers lead her to write on the topics which were unacceptable for the common reader at that time. She tried to break the religious and cultural mold of the respectable Indian Muslim woman by writing about the unmentionable topics like woman's sexuality, Lesbianism and Prostitution.

The present study examines the main factors working behind the introduction of bold concepts by Ismat Chughtai in her stories with a particular focus on her two famous and controversial short stories *The Quilt* and *The Homemaker*. Ismat chughtai's most controversial story *Lihaaf* translated as *The Quilt* has been predominantly cited by the critics

as a bold instance of radical feminist perspective. The story was first published in an Urdu literary Journal entitled as Adab-e-Latif in 1941. This story created a great controversy at once and the main point of the entire controversy was the account that has been narrated in the story by a teenage girl, and depicted the homosexual relationship between Begum Jaan, wife of a Nawab and her maid servant Rabbu. This concept was in complete contradiction with the prevailing social and religious values and hence opened the doors of harsh criticism for chughtai. Story of 'The Home maker' shows how a woman can extract benefits by offering her charms and body to men. Lajjo, the main female protagonist of the story denies all the moral values in order to get herself provided with material and physical needs.

In both of these stories she has questioned the institution of marriage in Muslim families through the choices made by the female characters of her stories. This study is particularly significant as it will help to provide the understanding of different negative and bold ideologies and complexities present in her mind. It will also help to indicate that how these westernized concepts stand in complete contradiction with the local culture and traditions, and hence are upsetting for the minds of young readers.

1.2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Ismat Chughtai is assumed to be engaged with the project of boldness and impudence in her writings and the vocalization of this boldness and modernity makes her a true personification of the Colonized Psyche. There must be some factors and motivations that led her to present bold western practices in her writings as a true moral standard. It is important to trace all such elements of her writings to prove the claim of modernity and boldness in her stories as has been hypothesized in present study.

1.3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims to explore the important social and psychological factors which played an important role in presenting the revolutionary and bold concepts in Ismat Chughtai's stories. This research primarily intends to bring all these factors into light. The study is also focused to demonstrate different ways in which her female characters show divergence from the established traditions of Indian society. The study attempts to reveal her female characters as sexual beings that are unashamed at their desires and goes beyond the limits to satisfy their physical gratification.

1.4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The Present Research is guided by the Following Questions.

1. What are the factors, behind the project of modernity in Ismat Chughtai's fiction as are reflected in *The Quilt* and *The Homemaker*?
2. How do, according to the perspective of Fanon's Postcolonial theory, these two stories of Ismat Chughtai provide an evidence of the strong colonial impact on her mind?

1.5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Realism in literature is the theory or practice of conformity to nature or to real life and to actual representation without any idealization. It was taken up as a movement by young fiction writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They rejected the trends of idealism and romanticism of early fiction and poetry in literature. Ismat Chughtai was one of those writers who strengthened this tradition of social realism which already had been established by Ahmad Ali. She used to read famous Russian and French masters of fiction who were like a guiding star for her. She read Greek tragedies, Shakespeare, Wordsworth,

Shaw, Gorky, Chekov etc. The writer she was inspired by was also charged for their writings. Zola for a short period of time was banned in France and England, so was Anton Chekov because charges of obscenity were leveled against them (Kiran, 2012). She also admired Dr Rashid Jahan for her independent spirit and her advocacy of women's emancipation through education. A political and social rebel, Rashid Jahan was her senior in Aligarh days. Dr Rashid Jahan along with her three friend's i.e Ahmad Ali, Sajjad Zahir, and Mahmud-uz-zafar published a collection of explosive short stories, *Angaare*. The stories in that book changed the direction from romanticism to realism in literature. There was a great controversy and uproar about the book and Ismat Chughtai recorded the reaction, which the book received in her college. For Chughtai there was nothing controversial or obscene in that book. She was greatly inspired by the Progressive writer's movement in India who introduced new standards and trends in literature by their bold writings. These writers introduced the tradition of social realism in literature. Realism is defined as "an approach that attempt to describe life without idealization of romantic subjectivity" (Khuman, 2010, P.78). This tradition of social realism which consisted of Russian inspired belief about the function of literature in a Revolutionary social society was followed by progressive writers. The founders of progressive writer's movement- Ahmad Ali, Saadat Hassan Manto, Krashenchander, Ahmad Abbas are the prominent representative of this tradition. Ismat Chughtai also joined this association in 1935. She said, "The purpose revealed in the expression of the progressive movement was heartily accepted by my conscience" (Negi, 2003). The progressive writers displayed a tendency to write on bold topics. Under the influence of Marxist and Freudian theories, importance was given to sexual conflicts and to lay bare the conscious and subconscious aspect of the characters. They wrote realistically about the so far muted, yet very much present desires of their characters.

The detailed survey of the relevant literature has shown that although ample research has been done on works of Ismat Chughtai, but all that investigation reveals her efforts for

women empowerment in the male dominated society. The research which already has been carried out, simply attempts to highlight her concerns about the subject of female suppression. These previous studies do not raise any objection or question on her bold attempts; rather she has been admired by the critics for her revolutionary concepts in the world of fiction. It justifies her as the strong supporter of equality between men and women. Not much work has been done to highlight the negativity in her writings from cultural and religious perspective. The present research is aimed at exploring the factors responsible for her bold, controversial and naked endeavors in her writings. It is focused to bring into light the conflicting ideology, operative in Chughtai's stories and reflects the influence of culture of the British colonizers. Hence, the present study will fill the gap by providing the material to show the negative aspects of the western influence on her style, that makes it unacceptable for the local readers from social and cultural perspectives.

1.6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theories of colonial discourses are very influential in the development of postcolonial studies. Frantz Fanon's theory of post colonialism has been adapted as the theoretical framework of this study. His few ideas about colonialism as are theorized in his two famous essays 'Black Skin, White Mask' (1952) and 'On National Culture' (1967) have been taken as the theoretical framework of this research. 'Black Skin, White Mask' (1952) is an essay about the mind set or psychology of the colonized people, written by a great post colonialist thinker in which he has theorized some basic concepts of his theory. He analyzed the psychological effects of colonialism on both the colonizers and the colonized. Fanon thus develops a psychoanalytical theory of post colonialism in which he suggests that "in an attempt to deal with psychological inadequacy, the 'Native' tries to be as White as possible, by adopting the western rules, religion and practices of the 'White', and by rejecting his own culture" (Fanon, 1952). Fanon calls this phenomenon of wearing white masks over black

skin resulting in a duality. Further the sense of inadequacy in the colonized psyche results in violence, which is a form of self-assertion. Fanon also talks about the inferiority complex in the mind of the colonized being as “For the black man there is one destiny, and it is white” (Fanon, 1952). He is of the view that in order to get rid of his inferiority complex, the black or the native person tries to imitate or mimic the culture of the colonizer. He suggests that the ‘black man’ should not forget his real identity. This theory of Fanon has been employed to trace the influential factors that forced Ismat Chughtai to imitate the culture of west in her stories.

In his essay *On National Culture* Fanon gives the idea of ‘Native intellectual’. The term ‘Native Intellectual’ refers to the writers and thinkers of the colonized nation who often have been educated under the auspices of the colonizing power. Consequently, the western educated native intellectual is in danger of identifying more with the colonizing nation rather than with the indigenous masses (Fanon, 1967).

1.7. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

The *Quilt* and the *home maker* by Ismat Chughtai are the stories that label her as a writer who loves to break the established social, religious and cultural norms of society. In these stories, she appears as a rebel for her own culture, who blindly wants to follow the western traditions without any religious concerns. Ismat Chughtai hence portrays an image of a true ‘Native intellectual’. The western educated native intellectual is in danger of identifying more with the colonizing nation rather than with the indigenous masses (Fanon, 1967).

The bold concept of lesbianism or homo sexuality that she has introduced in her short story *The Quilt* (lihaf) can be taken as an attempt to get herself identified with the European culture that was the culture of the colonizers. The presentation of such a bold concept gives an insight to work out the main factors which were active behind the project of modernity in

her writings. Ismat rejects her culture when she describes the scene of the lesbian activity in the story because such concepts are strictly unacceptable in Indian culture both for Hindus and Muslims.

This aspect of her literary style is completely in terms with Fanon's post-colonial theory according to which "the 'natives' try to be as white as possible, by adopting the western rules and practices of the 'white', and by rejecting his or her own culture" (Fanon, 1952).

"I woke up at night and was scared. It was pitching dark and Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously as though an elephant was struggling inside. "Begum Jaan", I could barely form the words out of fear. The elephant stopped shaking and The Quilt calm down. "What's it? Get back to sleep." Begum Jaan's voice seemed to come from somewhere." (Chughtai 38)

It is important to notice that the language and the metaphors, she uses to show this sexual activity reveal her inner fascination and philosophy for this hostile act. The details that she adds in the scene as are narrated by the little girl clearly show what is going on inside The Quilt.

Sr-sr-phat-kitch..... in the darkness, begum Jaan's'slihaf was swinging again like an elephant, 'my god' I murmured, my voice faint with fear. I did my best to lie stillbut the lihaf began to take on such strange, grotesque shapes that it sent shivers down my spine. It seems like a huge, blotted frog inflating itself about to string on me... The elephant lifts inside the lihaf and then lay still. I heard noises, slopped, slop – as if someone was eating something with great relish.... I decided that I should gather all my courage and switch on the light at the head of the bed. Hesitatingly I brought my legs down on the other side of the bed, groped for the

switch and press the button. Under the lihaf the elephant turns a violent summer salt and collapse. But the summer salt had lifted the corner of the lihaf by a foot --- 'Allah!' I dived for my bed. (Chughtai, n.d)

“The scene is never opened completely in front of the readers. The reader is supposed to get the meaning from the described scene. He has to imagine and analyze the situation.” The non-naming of the space beneath the Quilt also served a practical purpose when Chughtai faced a trial for writing obscene literature (Kumar, 2012). Although there is not any explicit evidence of homosexuality, but the reader can easily get the idea by reading the whole story.

The Quilt is a story of a married woman Begum-Jaan who is married to an aged Nawab to lead a comfortable life. But the Nawab does not pay any attention to her and she lives a life of loneliness. This thing makes her sexually frustrated, being married to man who could not fulfill her physical needs. Instead of getting depressed she acts in a proactive manner and begins to fulfill her sexual desire from her maid servant Rabbo. It is important to mention that both husband and wife have been shown to be involved in a lesbian relationship. Nawab sahib was considered to be a very virtuous man because “No one had ever seen a Notch girl or prostitute in his house” but the reason was that, he was homosexual and was attracted towards young boys. This is shown in the story as:

He kept an open house for students, young, fair, slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him--- when begum Jaan watched through the drawing room door the increasing number of firm-calved, supple-waisted boys, she felt as though she was being hauled over burning embers! (Chughtai, n.d)

When Begum Jaan witnesses these things, she too engages herself in homosexual relationship with her maid servant. She does not try to reform the immoral ways of her husband but reacts in a proactive way and gets involved in finding sexual satisfaction from

the girl. This choice by Begum Jaan makes it clear that Ismat Chughtai does not believe in compromise by a female in her domestic life. Chughtai through the act of homosexuality tries to empower the character of begum Jaan. Lesbian existence is a lesbian continuum that records women's struggle against patriarchal system (Ferguson, 1982). She rejects the cultural ties by presenting these immoral choices of her characters. Such concept by her proves her identity as a born rebellion since her childhood. It gives some idea to readers about her own conflicting psychology which is actually a true mind set of the colonized subject. For the black man there is one destiny, and it is white (Fanon, 1982). The clashes and disagreement that Chughtai had with her family over the issues of her education and Marriage further confirms this claim of the present study. She vividly describes the scene of her conversation with her father in her autobiography "*KaghazihaiPerhan*".

I want to go Ali Garh to study, I blurted out and there was no tremor in my voice

You are studying here with your bade Abba (AzeemBahi)

I want to take the matriculation exam

"What is the use? Jungu has just two years of study left.... And then...."

"I want to do matric"

"It's no use (going to Aligarh)"

"Then I will runaway"

"Where will you go?"

"Anywhere"

"Just like that..."

"Yes, I 'will take the Tonga to go to the station. I will get into a coach"

"And then"

"I will get down at any station and ask people about the mission school (in Banna Devi area of the city) once there I will become a Christian. Then I can study as much as I want" (chughtain.d)

While her mother cursed herself and her fate at having given birth to such an evil brat and flung a shoe at her to express her disgust, her father was compelled to reconsider his decision, since the choices were obviously limited. The readers must not ignore the psychoanalysis of the female characters of her story who surrendered to sexual indulgence for their satisfaction. The readers of the subcontinent cannot accept the idea of this abnormal romance i.e. homosexuality as the main subject of the story because it can corrupt the mind of the young people. Begum Jaan sexualizes the place which was traditionally supposed to be desexualized. In her attempt to come to terms with her on sexuality, she rejects her traditional role and treads the path of modernization (Khanna, 2014). Ismat chughtai in her life faced the harsh consequences of writing such a bold story. A trial was held against her in Lahore high court in 1945 in which she faced the charge of obscenity for writing "lihaf" that was considered as an obscene story in the literary circles and caused a great uproar in the society. She herself said in her auto biography:

"I am still labelled as the writer of Lihaf. The story brought me so much notoriety that I got sick of life. It became the proverbial stick to beat me with, and whatever I wrote afterword's got crushed under its weight." (Ismat chughtai)

It is noteworthy that the European writers she was inspired by were also charged for their bold writing. Zola for a short Period of time was banned in France and England and so was Anton Chekhov because charges of obscenity were leveled against them. Although she faced many consequences, but she always defended this product, which was very particular of her psyche. She herself says about it “In my stories, I have put down everything with objectivity. Now, if some people find them obscene, let them go to hell.” These remarks show her rebellion soul, who is always ready to reject the moral values and the social norms of society. Another important factor behind such drastic and radical concepts was her strong emotional attachment with progressive writer’s movement. Her own statement that she gives in Kaghazi Hai Pairahan gives a strong evidence for this claim. She states as “the group of progressives I got involved with was a bunch of undisciplined revolutionaries. I remember spending very exciting moments in the company of these out spoken, crazy but intelligent people. I have never seriously taken it to be my mission to reform society and eliminate the problems of humanity; but I was greatly influenced by the slogans of the Communist party as they matched my own independent, unbridled and revolutionary style of thinking.”

In both of the stories which have been selected for consideration in present research, Ismat Chughtai has questioned the ‘institution of Marriage’. This according to her seems the best perspective to see the sexual power plays between men and women (Hussain, 2014). So, marriage for her is more like a sexual play rather than a strong bond of dignity and social protection.

Her story The Homemaker is about a girl named Lajo. She was an illegitimate orphan and worked as a maid in different houses. When she was grown- up, her body was used by many men in the society, and she enjoyed it. It is quoted in the story as:

Her body proved to be her only asset. She did not haggle. It was wonderful if it was cash down proposition; if not, it was sex on credit. And if someone could not pay even on credit, it was sex on charity. (Chughtai, n.d)

Now these lines strongly support the claim of present research that the female characters of Chughtai stories want sex to satisfy their physical needs and lust. It's not the need of money that compels them to do such disgusting acts. Lajo is happily willing to present her body to anyone who asks for it, no matter if she gets any money out of it or not. She can do it for free because this sexual play makes her happy. Her favours and charms are for every man who gets attracted to her. Lajo's smiles are for all and her relationships are open-ended (Ghosh, 2016). Wherever Lajo worked, she was used by the male member of the family and pushed out of the house after their use. When Bakshi's wife was full month pregnant, she was taken into his house for his wife's help. Then Bakshi brings her to his friend Mirza's house, who was a grocery shopkeeper. He did not like her in the beginning, but later appreciates her for her household duties being done. Later he was involved in a sexual relationship with her, whom the girl was waiting for, because she knew Mirza went near the courtesans for the sexual satisfaction which she didn't want because of jealousy.

Till now, where ever employed, she gave full satisfaction to her masters in every way. But here, a full chaste week had passed. Mirza seems like an iceberg. (Chughtai, n.d)

But she continued her efforts for sexual satisfaction. Finally, one night she got a chance to attract him. When he heard the tinkling of her anklets, he felt disturbed as a flame was burning inside him. He felt thirsty and drank a lot of water. She advanced boldly to fulfill her physical desires.

Lajo turned on her side and grabbed him. Mirza was dumbfounded. He had never encountered anything like this before. He went on pleading as Lajo seduced him thoroughly. (Chughtai, n.d)

This type of boldness by a female is a western concept and is completely in accordance with Fanon's concept about the Imitation of the culture of the colonizers. Fanon talks about the blind imitation of the culture of 'White' by the native 'Black' which is very harmful for his own identity (Fanon, 1952). This particular boldness cannot be expected from a girl in Indian culture. Lajo was so beautiful that everyone in the vicinity was attracted towards her and it's mainly because of her flirting charms and gestures. After few days, Mirza lost his interest's in the girl and started coming late to the house and puts restrictions on his wife. She is then attracted to the neighborhood boy Mithwa who has sex with Lajo. She was caught by her husband and beaten. He consults his friend Miran Mian for his advice to divorce her. The response of Mian for his friend's suggestion of divorce was, 'Divorce the whore, and get rid of her'. Mirza divorce her right there. Since she did not like a relationship of married life and wished that there had been no one to question her, she happily accepted divorce and felt greatly relieved as if a nightmare is over.

Lajo heaved a sigh of relief as she heard about the divorce. It was as though a heavy load was off her shoulders. Marriage did not suit her. (Chughtai, n.d)

This again is the rejection of her culture and values by Chughtai in the story because in the local culture of India and Pakistan divorce is the most unwanted thing and like a fierce punishment for a woman especially in a middle-class family. It is important to notice that how Ismat has questioned the sacred bond of wedding. The act which is liked by Allah means Nikah is disliked by her characters in the story. In the same way the act which is disliked by Allah i.e Divorce is liked by Lajo. By showing all these things Ismat wants to signify that the married life of a woman is very frail thing.

Then the Mullah says that their marriage was not proper because she was the illegitimate child whose parents were not known. So, if there was no Nikah, there is no question of divorce. But this is not the true verdict of Marriage in Islam as has been shown in the story. Both of them were happy knowingly that their wedding was actually not legitimate. Mirza could not digest her attraction towards other man after marriage. Lajo had no guilt of being caught with other man. And when she was divorced she was happier than leading a married life. She lived a life with many men and she could not lead now a controlled life. The end of the story is also very shocking when after few days of their divorce she asks Mirza to employ her again as a maid. He gets agreed and she comes back to his home and resumes all her previous duties. Both of them again start living together without any relationship.

At night when she spread two curtains on the kitchen floor and lay down, Mirza once again felt severe bouts of thirst.... he got up from his bed abruptly and gathered the Homemaker in his arms. (Chughtai, n.d)

This type of radical thinking is not appreciated by other women. It also indicates the psychological complexities in the mind of the writer. Ismat seems to break the established moulds and ties of the respectable Muslim families by introducing such concepts. It is shocking for a reader that how she attempts to present the relationship of Marriage in this story. Lajo was very charming and full of attraction for Mirza before their marriage and once they get married she loses all her charms and is neglected by her husband. Once the marriage is over by divorce, she again becomes charming and delightful for him. This concept is completely contradictory to her own cultural values. The episode of Ismat's own marriage in her life also brings out the element of liberty deeply rooted in her soul. She rejected all the proposals chosen by her family and made her own choice in selecting her life partner. Her family didn't even attend her marriage with Shahid Latif, a script writer in Indian film

industry. She mentions in her autobiography that before getting married to him, I explained to Shahid that I am troublesome woman. That I have broken all the chains of my life and I would never be able to stay bound in them. To be an obedient and blameless wife was a role not suited to me. Hence, she has not fabricated the character of blameless wife in her stories also. The present research demonstrates clearly, that Ismat Chughtai at each and every stage of the story confirms her label as a bold writer who likes to look at the things with a western perspective. Ismat argued that she was writing for female empowerment in the patriarchal society, but this rationalization cannot be accepted by the people even at present time. Instead of taking the bold steps in her writings it was much better for her to take some baby steps for the emancipation and freedom of women in society. She could fabricate the character of a female fighting for her rights to get education or protesting against the forced marriage etc. These baby steps could also be influential in her efforts as an active feminist but the concepts like sex and Lesbianism only labeled her with the reputation of an obscene writer and a radical feminist in the history of modern fiction.

1.8. CONCLUSION

The main influences and factors functioning behind the project of modernity and unabashed directness in the stories of Ismat Chughtai are: her born rebellion soul, Colonized psyche, emotional involvement with Progressive Writer's Association as well as her Russian and European inspired beliefs. The study well illustrates her inspirations with western culture that she freely presents in her writings through her characters. Sexual Indulgence of Begum Jaan which has been exhibited through a homosexual relationship and Moral degradation of Lajo's character, the way she seduces Mirza are purely western concepts and are still unacceptable in Indian society. Detailed analysis of *The Quilt* and *The Home Maker* from postcolonial perspective clearly describes the strong impacts of the European western culture on her mind that made her reject her own cultural values. A drama has been based on the

story of *The Quilt* which was telecasted through Hum TV channel, but it caused the same explosive reaction that it did in 1942, when the story was first published in an Indian literary journal. PEMRA (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority) issued a Notice to HUM TV for promoting the homosexual content. The issuance of this notice by PEMRA and a harsh criticism that the play received on social media confirms the claim of the present study that people even today are not ready to absorb and accept such bold and impudent concepts in their lives. Sana Hussain a critic on Ismat Chughtai has rightly said about her: The Chughtai woman takes ownership of her own body, rejecting the customs and edicts to satisfy her and get what she wants.

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