



Voice of the Voiceless: Exploring the Treatment of Maidservants in Ismat Chughtai's Select Short Stories

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Abstract: Ismat Chughtai is regarded as a harbinger of feminism in the Indian subcontinent. *The Outlook* remarked in the blurb of Chughtai's autobiographical novel *The Crooked Line (Terhi Lakir)*, "long before feminism and Simone de Beauvoir were available to women writers here (in India), Ismat Chughtai had her finger on the pulse of a changing cosmos". With the Progressive Writers' Movement, which Chughtai was a part of, infusing a new wave of thinking and reformation in India, the short stories became a weapon to fight out inoperative ideologies and introduced new and egalitarian ones. This paper aims to explore how maidservants are exploited and used by the feudal social system. Besides, the notions of identity and body of the maidservant in the heteronormative structure of society are also emphasised. This paper examines four short stories, "Tiny's Granny," "Scent of the Body," "The Quilt," and "Gainda."

Keywords: Maid-servant, identity, body, victim, patriarchy, tradition

Woman...woman...woman...

Very good, disloyal, loyal, this and that, and god knows what else.

--Ismat Chughtai

Introduction

Ismat Chughtai (1911- 1991) is regarded as a harbinger of feminism in the Indian subcontinent. *The Outlook* remarked in the blurb of Chughtai's autobiographical novel *The Crooked Line (Terhi Lakir)*, "long before feminism and Simone de Beauvoir were available to women writers here (in India), Ismat Chughtai had her finger on the pulse of a changing cosmos". She enters the literary arena of Urdu literature which was predominated by men with a great force and shows women as victims of exploitation by men or other women in the patriarchal social structure. In her contemporary time, she was one of the major radical feminists in India. Ismat Chughtai in her stories



explores the dominant and remorseless patriarchy and its hypocrisy in Muslim society. She shouts a clarion for all social awareness, inequality and change. In most of her writings, women are represented as the prominent voice. Her short stories were translated and published in English by Tahira Naqvi and M. Assaduddin in two separate volumes. This paper aims to explore how maidservants are exploited and used by the feudal social system. Besides, focus will also be given on the notions of identity and body of the maidservant in the heteronormative structure of society.

Objectives of the Study

The characters of Chughtai's stories are taken from the sphere she knew intimately and she presents each character with a different style but in a convincing way. She acknowledges the hierarchical social framework within Urdu speaking Muslims in Agra, Aligarh, Delhi and Bareilly and addresses the vulnerability of the servant class in "Dust of the Caravan", "There isn't a class of people more unfortunate and helpless than domestic servants. This is particularly true of India where unemployment and poverty have forced a large number of people to act as slaves to their small class that rule over them" (*A Life* 2). Class conflict and cultural hegemony are predominantly reflected in her stories. It must be noted that Chughtai's stories are set in "the period of decline of feudalism and depict the moral degradation that was a result of economic backwardness and the consequent cultural decline of the north Indian Muslim families" (Kumar and Sadique 224). North Indian Muslim families are explicitly Urdu speaking Muslims in Agra, Aligarh, Delhi and Bareilly. However, the objective of the study is to focus on the vulnerability of maidservants in the contemporary time of Ismat Chughtai who are subjugated and hegemonised by the upper class and upper middle class Muslim society. Identity is not a stable phenomenon. It is produced, reproduced and configured in the context of social, cultural and political situations. The political influence of Muslim feudal families had sharply declined during the colonial period. But the influence and authority of these families strongly impinge on the servant class. The social framework was heteronormative and patriarchy shaped and influenced value, morality and religion. This article will be analysed from feminist perspective. Chughtai was regarded as one of the forefront feminists during her time, therefore, her perspectives will also be used.

Body and Bodily Performativity

Nivedita Menon in *Seeing Like a Feminist* examines the social, economic and hierarchal positions of the servant class both in old feudal social order and modern capitalist framework. She states, "The polite term 'domestic help' that has replaced the word 'servant' in public usage is perniciously misleading. Make no mistake these are servants. They are treated as less than human, less than pet animals. Apart from facing physical and sexual abuse-which is common-domestic workers perform heavy unrelenting toil, for they have no specific work hours if live-in; no days off or yearly vacations if part-time" (Menon 18). The hierarchy of the classes as well as hierarchy of the bodies are visible where maid servants belong at the bottom of the hierarchy. Like Menon, Scott Wilson also traces the lowest ladder of the hierarchy:

Servants, slaves, and workers are generally defined as something less than their masters, owners or employers who provide moreover the measure of what is noble or dignified, of



what is more or less than human. There is something unsettling inhuman about slaves, something, from the point of view of an aristocrat [master] even a little uncanny about them, since they resemble their masters yet are of quite another nature. (Wilson 182)

In her short stories, Chughtai represents both ugly and beautiful maid servants. In "The Quilt", Rabbu is a maidservant of Begum Jan. Begum Jan is a fair and beautiful lady; on the other hand, Rabbu is a very dark woman, "Her face was scarred by smallpox. She was short, stocky and had a small paunch. Her hands were small but agile, and her large, swollen lips were always wet" (Chughtai "The Quilt" 16). So Chughtai represents the ugly physical features of a maidservant. In "Scent of the Body", Sanobar is a maid servant who is brought for the older Sahibzada. She is a 'beautiful child'; she possesses "small bones, taut body, tiny hands and feet, pearly teeth, and the large eyes of a goddess" (Chughtai "Scent of the Body" 131). Halema is another maidservant who is also beautiful, and for this reason Chhamman has chosen her for him. Lajo in "The Homemaker" is also an attractive maid. However, though maid servants are beautiful or ugly, they are regarded as 'maid' which is their only common identity and sometimes, they are regarded as identity less slaves. The physical appearance of the maid servants is not a matter of concern to the master; rather the master class regards them as commodities and uses them to satisfy their sexual appetite.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* states sex, gender and desire are culturally constructed. Foucault sees sexuality in relation to power. Both power and sexuality are considered binary oppositions. The question is how Chughtai depicts maid servants' bodies, gender and sexuality in the relation of power. The cultural hegemony of the feudal class legitimises their dominant position and subordinates their servants. Female body and male body of the servant class are distinguished by their performativity. Sexuality of the maid servant is constructed, reconstructed, justified and popularised by the dominant patriarchal framework. Women in the feudal class or the upper caste are used as mechanisms of patriarchy. The notion of chastity is a patriarchal notion and religious rituals act as tools of patriarchy. The maid servants are identified only by their bodies and sexuality. Their bodies and sexuality are seen as a threat to male members of the family. Often maidservants are represented as a seductress. This presentation of the maidservants' loose morality serves as a substitute for the texts in constructing the "chaste" identity of upper and middle class women. Maidservants, particularly the young ones, are suspected to be the biggest threat to morals of the male members of society. Ismat Chughtai's story "Scent of the Body" shows how maids are appointed for the sexual initiation of the sons of aristocratic families. In this story, Halema, a maidservant, is sent to Chhamman Mian's room "to rub his feet" by Nawab Begum (Chughtai "Scent of the Body" 128). Chughtai's representation of Halema draws the sympathy of the reader; she is not the daughter of a maidservant; she is brought into the palace after her father's death. She is a novice in this profession and when she is sent to the room of Chhamman, she feels humiliated. In this room, "Halema's face contorted, lips trembled. She sat down on the carpet, buried her face in her hands, and burst into tears" (Chughtai "Scent of the Body" 128). The vulnerable and voiceless maid servants are manipulated, controlled and subjugated. Their bodies are only used as a site of penetration and pleasure. Halema being a maidservant bears the physical torture and the young Nawab considers her an instrument to play with. Nawab Bahu's ten or twelve years old son, Jabbar used to beat her to a pulp. Sometimes he "touched a pair of red hot tongs to her soles,



squeezed an orange peel into her eyes or thrust a pinch of snuff up her nose. For a long time, Haleema sat patiently and sneezed like a toad, while the household collapsed with laughter” (Chughtai “Scent of the Body” 129). In “Gainda”, the narrator depicts how the body of Gainda, a low caste maidservant, is used and exploited. Gainda who is hardly fourteen years old is impregnated by the narrator’s Bhaiya and for punishment of this act “she was beaten up for months together” (Chughtai “Gainda” 11). The social hierarchy, the religious sentiment and the patriarchal judiciary do not consider this act as legitimate- consequently she becomes the victim. When she delivered a baby, she was beaten and abandoned without food. In this crucial situation, she survives somehow. Chughtai depicts the existing social hierarchisation where the privileged class gets all the advantages and the servant class is always exploited. Here, Gainda’s exploitations are two folded, firstly as a servant and secondly as a woman. The master class, perhaps, gets a sadistic pleasure by torturing the servant class. Foucault considers that power is dynamic and Chughtai sees power as hierarchical. The privileged class along with gender sustains its dominant position by penetrating and controlling bodies of servants. During the colonial period of India, the White masters tortured the native people and got sadistic pleasure. Even in the post-Independence period, the same ruthless and cruel torture is faced by the underprivileged sections based on their gender, sexual, caste, class, religion and ethnic identities.

Compartmentalisation and the Mahal Tradition

Ahmed Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi: A Novel* (1940) set around 1911 to 1919, provides a comprehensive description of the changing social, political and cultural spectrum. In this novel, Ali elaborately describes the compartmentalisation of upper class Muslim households. Like Ahmed Ali, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain in *Sultan’s Dream* (1905) also delineates the separation of the space in Muslim household that is zenana and mardana. The zenana, the inner part of the house, is the only space for women and mardana is considered a space for men. Both Rokeya and Ali provide this description for the early part of twentieth century in Indian Muslim household. Ali provides a picture of the zenana in the contemporary orthodox Muslim family:

In the zenana things went on with the monotonous sameness of Indian life... Mostly life stayed like water in a pond, with nothing to break the monotony of its static life. Walls stood surrounding them on all sides, shutting the women in from the prying eyes of men, guarding their beauty and virtue with the millions of their bricks. (Ali 39)

A similar picture is reflected in the stories of Chughtai. In “The Quilt”, Begum Jan is imprisoned in the zenana and she becomes a victim of this claustrophobic atmosphere. However, maid servants remain in the zenana and become a part of collective subjugation and control. Women are regarded as an honour of the family, therefore, patriarchal framework hides them and makes them invisible.

The concept of tradition is a complex phenomenon. Social, religious and cultural practices and rituals are created, formed and repeatedly practised in a specific time period which in a specific situation becomes a tradition. Tradition is not a stable conception, rather, multiple traditions can exist in a family, society and religion. The mahal tradition, what Chughtai notes, is a patriarchal tradition in the upper class Muslim household. Chughtai depicts such a type of tradition in “Scent of the Body”. In this tradition, every young Nawab gets a maidservant according to their choice and uses her as a



tool of pleasure and enjoyment. The rivalry among the young Nawabs for dividing maid servants becomes public at times, and “to prevent rivalries between brothers, the elder Begum made a just division of flesh” and having done that, “they were assured that each would respect the other’s property rights” (Chughtai “Scent of the Body” 134). In “Scent of the Body”, Sanobar, a maidservant, is brought and the Mahal has arranged a fake marriage of Sanobar and Hashmat Mian, a young Nawab. Fourteen-year old innocent Sanobar thinks it as real and “within the year she became pregnant” (Chughtai “Scent of the Body” 132). In the pre-pregnancy period, she has received much love from him, but after the pregnancy “he began showing the first signs of revulsion” (Chughtai “Scent of the Body” 132) and unfortunately, the pregnant maids have no place in the palace. The narrator describes the Mahal tradition:

The Mahal tradition was that when cattle became heavy with calf they were dispatched to the village. ... Pregnant ones were packed off to the village. There they delivered the brat and there it was left to grow or die. They returned, empty-handed, to the Mahal so that the Begum would not be disturbed by the sound of crying babies. (Chughtai “Scent of the Body” 132)

Sanobar does not want to give birth in the village, so she asks Bahu, the maid of maids, not to send her there. Bahu hates all maids, hates her own existence; she has seen too much of life and perhaps has a streak of love somewhere, therefore, she does not send her to the village. But the existence of Sanobar “kept souring Hashmat Mian’s mouth” (Chughtai “Scent of the Body” 132). One day she suddenly became angry, and started lashing out at him. For this reason, Sahibzada’s blood boils and his “exasperated kick landed squarely on her stomach and Sanobar was thrown into a running drain” (Chughtai “Scent of the Body” 132). To call a doctor for her would have been unthinkable; on the third day, “in the darkest corner of the servants’ quarters, Sanobar took her last few tormented breaths” (Chughtai “Scent of the Body” 132). Chughtai’s representation of maid servants is not morally loose; they are the victims of their fate and social hierarchical order, class and caste system. Chughtai examines the sufferings and helplessness of maid servants and portrays the pity and pain of maid servants.

Vulnerability

Chughtai in her short stories, discusses maid servants who have no specific names and have no specific identity. In the story “Tiny’s Granny”, Granny has been shown as a maid servant through her whole life, but in the story, her name is not mentioned, “God knows what her real name was. No one had ever called her by it” (Chughtai “Tiny’s Granny” 146). Again, Tiny is appointed as a maidservant when she is merely a child of nine years old. Tiny cannot be the name of anyone; the name is given because she is a small child. Throughout her whole life, perhaps, Tiny is called ‘Tiny’ which is not her real name. In society, servants are seen as a separate section who bear a collective identity of ‘servant’. A similar sense of identity is also reflected in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie* where Munoo is employed as a domestic servant in Babu Nathoo Ram’s house. Just like Tiny and Granny of Chughtai, Anand’s Munoo is not identified by his real name. Any random survey of Indian fiction in English or Urdu would assure that the servants are generally mentioned not by their names but by their masters and the narrative alike.



Chughtai draws pictures of the torture, the victims, the helplessness, and the bitter truth in her short stories. Maidservants are not regarded as human beings rather they are presented as sub-humans in feudal society. High commercialization of human beings is depicted here; the maids are recognized as a commodity to fulfil the lust of young Nawabs. Chughtai discloses the young Nawabs who are morally loose and have not the slightest touch of humanity, though Chhamman Mian is exceptional. Krishan Chander states that Chughtai "is concerned about the lives of people around her and does not weave imaginary fantasies. She tempers reality with incisive observation, and creates characters that are true to life. The reader applauds her astute analysis and laments the bitter reality of his own society" (Kumar and Sadique 176).

In "Tiny's Granny", Tiny is nine years old and recruited as a maidservant in Deputy Saheb's house. One day when the house is empty, the master is sleeping and Tiny is appointed to move the fan. When the fan stops moving, the master wakes from sleep and his "sexual appetite was whetted, and Tiny's fate was sealed" (Chughtai "Tiny's Granny" 148); and the nine-year old Tiny becomes the victim of rape. After the incident, she suffers rape-traumatic syndrome and she is leaning in a corner against the wall like "a wounded bird" (Chughtai "Tiny's Granny" 148). This is not the only one incident, she is repeatedly raped by deputy Saheb and "there was nowhere she could safely set foot anymore" (Chughtai "Tiny's Granny" 150).

Chughtai portrays the helpless condition of Tiny and Granny. Being poor, they have no voice, no social status and no value in society. There is no one in society to whom they could complain against the deputy. The narrator describes the reason;

If the deputy's son had done it, then perhaps something might have been said. But the deputy himself...one of the leading men in the mohalla, grandfather of three grandchildren, a religious man who regularly said his five daily prayers and had only recently provided mats and water vessels to the local mosque- how could anyone raise a voice against him? (Chughtai "Tiny's Granny" 148)

Chughtai represents herself as the voice of the voiceless people. She shows that the class division is as dangerous as the gender division for society. She portrays the lower class people who have no home, no shelter, no security for life and leading a decent life is totally prohibited by society. Krishan Chander examines, "the sexual desire and feelings of lust, which society tries to conceal beneath false layers of culture and religion, has been exposed by Ismat's various stories" (Kumar and Sadique 176). She exposes the double standards and hypocrisy of society. Her satiric tone pierces through the reader's heart.

Swapna Banerjee states, "in the case of the male employer engaging with the maid, the maid was always the temptress, the fallen woman. On the other hand, when the mistress had a relationship with a servant, she herself was always portrayed as the aggressor, the seductress" (189). The sexual relationship between master and maid servant is not only for the gender difference, rather class division is crucially important. Chughtai portrays maids in different perspectives; sometimes maid is actually actively engaged in a lesbian relationship with Begum Jan in "The Quilt"; sometimes maids



are used as sexual objects and commodities. She shows how the marginalization of maidservant's bodies are exploited, plundered and raped by male members of society.

Conclusion

Chughtai has highlighted "the individuality of these characters by situating them in a state of crisis, because it is only then that the latent capabilities of the characters become fully dynamic and active" (Kumar and Sadique 201). The characters appear as active both at the paradigmatic as well as the syntagmatic level. The writer peeps into the depths of the characters and represents their social as well as psychological conditions. Chughtai's female characters are far from the category of stereotypes and not fixed specimens of craftsmanship without any space for movement. Manjulaa Negi examines Chughtai's characters "leap out of the pages- to shake you, hold you, make you laugh and cry alone with them as though they breathe even today" (7). All the female characters of Chughtai are linked by some common basis attributes that enable the readers to determine their status. The lesbian, the ugly, the girl from a lower class, and the unmarried girl are recognizable characters precisely on the basis of their special qualities. In the context of the social, psychological and religious level, the characters have special categories. On the basis of their social, psychological and mental distinctiveness, the characters have their separate existence. Each character of Chughtai is a unique being and by carrying the imprint of the writer's personality, moves independently and becomes something different.

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