



## MARRIAGE: THE DELIVERANCE MYTH IN ISMAT CHUGTAI'S STORY *MORSEL*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper questions the role of marriage through Ismat Chughtai's short story 'Morsel' in achieving a respectable social status for women in society. She ridicules the undue attention given to the marriage ignoring women's achievements. It highlights how Chughtai raises a concern towards the emotional well being of unmarried girls due to the nerve wrecking match making in their daily life. She sarcastically makes a mention of the respectfully married women and gently hints that everything is not so well in their world as well. Finally she ridicules the mythical deliverance of women through marriage in which we so blindly believe as a society. Keywords: mythical deliverance, marriage an anchor, cultural forces, woman a morsel.

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Ismat Chughtai has a gift of recognizing the ills of the society and presenting them in an utterly farcical manner and finally ridiculing them to nothing. The sarcastic temperament of her work renders her message clear to the reader. In her story 'Morsel' Chughtai emphasizes on how the society creates a strong pseudo need in the minds of unmarried girls for a life partner. An unmarried woman is treated as a thing of pity. A divorcee or a widow commands more respect in the society than the girl who has crossed a marriageable age. Even a successful career or a comfortable living condition does not seem to resolve the issue. Precisely, marriage seems to be the only anchor which can absolve a woman of all her woes and miseries to a safe future. There also seems to be other cultural forces behind the question of getting married. Gordon, Phyllis A in her article *The Decision to Remain Single: Implications for Women across*

*Cultures* (Theory) In the Journal of Mental Health says that:

The rationale behind this question is twofold: first, historically the physical and financial security of women has been directly related to their marital status, and second is the notion of romance. (Levine, 1993) qtd in Journal Of Mental Health Counselling.

Chughtai minutely peers into this issue and brings home a serious message to the readers. Even in the twenty first century the story still holds relevance. As her translator Tahira Naqvi says in the translated version of her book *A Chughtai Collection*:

Many of Ismat's critics have accused her of being limited in her choice of subject matter. Perhaps that is true. She wrote only of what she knew well. But within these limits she perfected her art. The bulk of her work refers a deep abiding preoccupation

with themes directly related to women and their cultural status and role in Indian society. Stressing the struggles of women against the social institutions of her time, she brings to her fiction an understanding and perception of female psyche that is unique to her alone; no other writer approaches the subject of women in the same sympathetically probing, sharply cognizant and readable way that she does. One cannot discredit anything she offers....(Chughtai, xiv)

When we critically analyze Chughtai's story 'Morsel' we see indeed we cannot overlook or 'discredit' anything that Chughtai presents to us. Astoundingly it holds relevance to this day.

Sarlaben the protagonist of Chughtai's story an unmarried nurse is the responsibility of the *chal* she lives in, because she is unmarried. Chughtai aptly contrasts Sarlaben against other women characters of the story. The contrast is between Sarlaben a qualified nurse and other three other women Edith, Ramvai and lakshmi. The married women of the *chal* consider the professionally successful sarlaben as an underdog by them. The reason which makes these women superior and sarlaben inferior is their married status. It hardly matters if Ramvai gets beaten by her various husbands, Edith gets caught by police for drinking, and lakshmi has to give her daughter to convent for the lack of money. Their status, as said before, is better because they have the qualification of being married. Chughtai in the story morsel says that:

What helplessness! If you weren't married you were like an open wound; people tormented you with talk about possible cures, and then once you had found a husband there was talk of having children.(Chughtai, 130)

The 'possible 'cure' of sarlaben was nothing but getting married – to any kind of guy. Even if marriage is the last thing on a woman's mind the society tends to take up the issue and soon it becomes everybody's business. Ismat in her story Morsel says that:

It is said that an unmarried woman is a burden for all creation, ensuing sorrow

leaving its mark on each individual, making everyone accountable.(Chughtai,129)

The most important part which remains unattended is the emotional wellbeing of a girl in the whole process. It is not even considered an issue worth discussing. Society maintains that a woman always needs a man to sustain her life and also sets a certain age as a benchmark for marriage. Once a girl crosses the age benchmark her marriage becomes the business of the whole society. The worrying and the furor regarding the marriage around her helpless being strengthens the belief in her own mind that she needs a partner. On a psychological plane she begins to feel the longing for the proverbial other half. This longing and a multiple rejection at the hands of suitors takes a toll on the girl's self esteem. When sarlaben's stranger in the bus fails to recognize her she becomes totally shattered and Chughtai narrates her situation in the following manner:

Trembling and unsteady on her feet, she was walking home alone, without the groom by her side. Her face was heavily streaked with kajal, and she nearly fell as she stumbled towards her room. ....how did this happen? Why did it happen? Felled by the onslaught of questions, exhausted and numb, sarlaben fell on her bed.(Chughtai, 141)

The society is always on a look out for women with great virtue and character but the bitter truth stays. On the other hand people do not mind if their living daughters turn into just morsels for men to feed on. People take their daughters all dolled up in parties to get the best suitors who are good looking and financially well off. The people in the *chal* expect sarlaben to also do the same. They believe that women should all dress up in catchy and 'flashy' clothes and ensnare the 'catch'. This is in order to get married since remaining unmarried is a stigma like leprosy. The art of getting married is to bewitch the best available man and gain a secure match. Soberly dressed women/ girls like sarlaben often go unnoticed. Therefore her *chal* prepares sarlaben to attract the stranger she meets in the bus everyday and gives her seat. They prepare sarlaben to put the morsel in the mouth of the stranger. The neighbors

tell her to change her dress sense and attract the man towards her. They say:

And then everyone explained to a bewildered sarlaben that it was because of her own laxity and indecisiveness, that she, despite her many qualities, was not married yet. Men, by their very nature, are slow; until they are fed morsels forcibly, they are capable of nothing. (Chughtai,137)

This type of mindset prevails not only in south Asia but also around the globe. An article in BBC Magazine in the article, 'You're too smart,' and other jibes about being single states that Kelly's friends tell her that "If you start wearing more make-up and sexier clothes, someone will like you".. Marriage is socially secure and respectable state and society expects women to gain it by hook or crook. We need to prepare really well for putting the morsel in the mouth of the man. Precisely put beautifully dressed women themselves becomes a lifeless morsel to gain the so called respectable status in the society. Why it is that only a married woman is considered as a respectable one in the society? Why independent sarlaben have to look for respect in marriage? Why is it that the society does not take pride in the achievements of women like sarlaben who are sober and independent? Though we have examples of unhappy married women we still regard the married status as an achievement. Rebecca Adams of Huffington Post in her article *If you feel bad about being single it's not about being single* quotes Dr DePaulo professor of psychology at University of California, "I think that we are in a society that just so celebrates marriage," DePaulo said. "There's almost no voice for people who want to stay single and are doing just fine."

Chughtai puts forth a very apt question to the society through emotionally upset sarlaben, she says:

Is it not enough to be a woman? Why should one need to stuff in so many condiments in chutney in just one morsel? Tears floated in her eyes. And then a lifetime of punishment to preserve this one little morsel. (Chughtai,140)

Marriage is treated as such an important element that we as a society sometimes do not understand

that people often do not remain unmarried due to their shortcomings but it can also be because of choice. One read of the story makes it sound very comical but the essence of the story touches upon the bitterest realities in a very comical manner. Chughtai raises a very pertinent question through this very simple story that why marriage is the only deliverance for a woman and why not independence and acceptance?

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