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A VOICE OF PROTEST: EXPLORATIONS OF FEMININE SENSIBILITY IN 'THE CROOKED LINE' AND 'LIHAAF' BY ISMATCHUGHTAI

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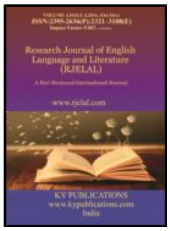

ABSTRACT
Ismat Chugtai's works are woman – centric stories narrated from the woman's point of view. Set into deeply ingrained feudal patriarchic Indian society the two seminal works, 'The Crooked Line', a novel and 'Lihaaf', a short story apparently deal with two diverse issues of nationalism and lesbianism. However, both are inter- connected by a strong exploration of feminine sensibility depicted through the interior world of female Muslim psyche. Chugtai hints at alternatives available to women in a sexually repressive world. The present research paper focuses on the breaking of silence and celebration of womanhood by reflection of complexities, inhibitions and secret desires of a woman's mind through the character of Shamshad in 'The Crooked Line' and Begam Jan in 'Lihaaf'.

Key Words: Feminism, Silence, Society, Patriarchy

In India's colonial past, in a time of political and social revolution, IsmatChughtai , one of the pioneers of women's writing in Urdu, producing works in a feminist strain masterfully unfolds her magna opus, The Crooked Line: the semi-autobiographical tale of a fiery-spirited, middle-class Muslim girl bent on exploring the shape and nature of consuming desire. Writing with the same honesty and passion as her scandalous short-story, "The Quilt," Chughtai exposes the complex relationships developed between women living and working in relative seclusion, and the intellectual and emotional contradictions lying in the heart of a rebellious country on the brink of independence from the British Raj and ultimately Partition.

IsmatChughtai's Crooked Line is a novel about a young woman, Shaman (nickname for Shamshad) who grows up in a large, very comfortable Muslim household in pre-Partition North India. Shaman, is introduced to the reader as a neglected child in a large household already overflowing with children and in the climatic moments, is a pregnant woman whose husband has just left for the war. She is unemployed, alienated from her family and is therefore, akin to her childhood, lonely. Despite being surrounded by people, Shaman grows up emotionally deprived. Always rebellious, she is constantly seen as a trouble-maker by most in her family and a bad influence on the other children in the household. Shaman however is brilliant, and grows up to be a very intelligent woman, who always challenges the system – gender, class and political. This ending can be considered 'open' as it situates Shaman on the brink of a new phase of her life; one which she actively yearned for earlier. At the same time, this ending is in no way stable, for the simple reason that it is about possibilities and eventualities, not about any certainties in Shaman's present life. Chugtai's masterstroke consists, in her reading of the entire politics of empire through Shaman's interior world of the Muslim female psyche. Shaman is the

metaphor for the permanent damage done by servitude. "When a bird's feathers have been clipped once, it remains imprisoned even when it's free, and the clipped feathers don't grow back in this life, and even if they do, they reappear all out shape and crooked"(1). The novel also exposes the power of woman-centered world of Indian Muslim women living in purdah. The lassitude of their condition is everywhere and represented in everyone, from the careless Amma, who births Shama as a late baby left to the care of older siblings, to the prematurely widowed Bari Apa, who deftly uses pity as her currency in the market of family obligations. The women of this world wield an indirect power over their men, one recorded in Shaman's observations at the wedding of her cousin. She says: "But when the bridegroom started walking away with Noori, Shaman had this feeling in some corner of her heart that Noori hadn't been sold, but that instead this man who had clasped her to his breast was about to place chains on his existence. This very Noori, this young experienced girl, will dig her claws into his beings in such a way that he will abandon the world, and handing her his reins walk on the path she chooses for him. How unfortunate that men think of women as a man's shoe, a creature with weak intellect and God knows what else. But when this same shoe strikes them on the head their ego is shattered."(Chugtai p.35)

The world of purdah, gradually disappearing as Shaman grows up, is one poised on manipulation, where women's lives are determined by the quality of control they wield over their men. At the same time, the world of modern ideas, of easy mixing between men and women, of education and progressive politics, does not provide the emotional or intellectual fulfillment that it seems to have promised. If anything, the rules are ambiguous and few know how to navigate them. The grownup Shaman, one of the few educated Muslim women, finds herself alienated from her family .The college friend Alma, who has a child out of wedlock, is unable to neither love it fully nor obtain the abortion she had imagined was the answer to the situation. In Bilqees, is a woman surrounded by men yet unable to figure out whether to choose one based on compatibility, attraction, love, or simply money.

Chughtai's feminism is not prescriptive but poised on its capacity to disturb. The turbulent dimensions of Shaman's sexuality provoke the reader into acknowledging their strength. Women are central, because it is their thoughts, their questions, and their predicaments that drive the narrative. Noorie is presented as a contrast to Shaman's character in the first phase of the novel. While Noorie is only another child in a household already overflowing, she is also under the protection of a mother who is conscious of all which is due to Noorie as her daughter. This difference creates the foundation for further differences in the upbringing of the two girls. Noorie follows the 'type'; she is educated only enough to be deemed as such and is made conversant in the workings of the household. Her life is set on the path of normative as a consequence of her being supervised by her widowed mother. In her descriptions in the first phase of the novel, Chughtai mentions that this alienation of Shaman from the main household becomes a source of anger and violence in the child. However, it is this violence which serves as the catalyst for Shaman's escape; she is sent off to school as punishment. Formal education is the first alternative presented to Shaman in her quest to look at new avenues of personal growth.

School is not the domain of the purely intellectual. For the narrator, her school is also disillusionment as it exposes the inadequacy of a token education which encourages literacy but not learning. The modern world into which Shaman enters as a student, in spite of being different from the claustrophobic domesticity is not better in any real way. Shaman's platonic idealizing of Ifthikar is the alternative to the imposed betrothal with her cousin. This paragon turns out to be a married man who has been manipulating women for entertainment and to counter that she becomes a 'flirt'. Her marriage to the Irish-American Ronnie is the result of a courtship which is almost forced upon Shaman. She remains skeptical about the relationship till the last moment and it only her intense fear of loneliness which propels her into matrimony. The marriage to Ronnie is a direct

consequence of Shaman's loneliness. In this relationship, there is absolutely no commonality, not even, sometimes, of mutual attraction. The marriage becomes yet another disaster in Shaman's life.

Shaman's violence against the entire household during her childhood, her fight to study in a college and later her relationship with Alma, these are all moments in which Shaman chooses to deviate from the norm. Shaman, the central protagonist, does not become stable at the end but she has come a full circle. The climax of the novel hints at her pregnancy which implies that she is at the brink of a new phase in her life. Chugtai through the characters of the novel not only rejects a modernity which is self-serving and decadent but she also rejects a conservatism which is terrifyingly claustrophobic. Shaman does not become a figure of defeat and her agency is still her own. No matter how crooked line Shaman may have drawn, she remains her own architect thoughout the novel.

IsmatChughtai's controversial short story Lihaaf is often revoked by critics and scholars as a bold instance of radical feminist politics. Published in an Urdu literary journal titled Adaab-i-Latif in 1941, the story created a huge uproar among its readers. The focal point of the entire controversy was what a pubescent girl who comes to stay with her aunt, Begum Jaan sees and hears every night: "I woke up at night and was scared. It was pitch 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 came down. "What's it? Get back to sleep." Begum Jaan's voice seemed to come from somewhere."(2)

Lihaaf tells the story of Begum Jan, who is married into a rich Muslim household, imprisoned in a life of desolation after her husband "tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her."(Chugtai,p 27) By delineating the character of Begum Jaan, Chughtai raises important questions on marriage as a form of an economic enterprise and women as commodities playing a subservient role in their marriage. While narrating the details about the arranged alliance between the Nawab and Begum Jaan, the narrator points out that the poor parents of Begum Jaan married her off to the rich Nawab "who was of 'ripe years' because he was very virtuous" (Chugtai,p 27) who after their marriage, installed her in the house along with furniture. Chughtai highlights how the institution of marriage was seen as a business transaction where the role of women was reduced to commodities mean to be bought and then installed in the confines of the house. The virtuosity of the Nawab is established on basis of the fact that "no one had ever seen a nautch girl or prostitute in his house" (Chugtai p.27). The absence of a heterosexual relationship is construed to be a guarantor of the Nawab's virtuosity. However, no one seems to have noticed the "strange hobby" of the Nawab which was to provide "an open house for students—young, fair and slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him" (Chugtai p.27). The sexual underpinnings of this homosocial activity go unnoticed. While on one hand, the Nawab continued his homosexual exploits under the garb of his pedagogical endeavours, Begum Jaan "wasted away in anguished loneliness" (Chugtai p.28). She did all that was in her power to divert the Nawab's attention from the "firm-calved, supple waisted boys" (Chugtai p.28) towards her: talisman, black magic and other ways for winning the love of her husband. Having failed in all her attempts, she turned to books but this increased her desolation: "Romantic novels and sentimental verse depressed her even more. She pondered over the insignificance of such a life that was devoid of any love but then something happened and "she started living and lived her life to the full. Soon her thin body began to fill out. Her cheeks began to glow and she blossomed in beauty" (Chugtai p.29). Begum Jaan's desire to live made her turn towards a transgressive relationship with another woman, Rabbu.

The story is narrated in the voice of a young girl and discusses marriage as a social obligation; the inequality in the arrangement and the subsequent oppression of the woman, all through the young girl's words. The quilt serves as a motif in the story. It hides beneath it the homosexual relationship between the two women. Begum Jaan's sexual liberation can be seen as a means of self-actualization. She refuses to give in to the repressive marriage customs that define her only in terms of

her relationship with her husband. Instead, she creates for herself the image of a new woman free from the shackles of patriarchy and articulating a new gendered consciousness. Begum Jaan uses her sexuality as an instrument for her empowerment. Although outwardly she abides by the patriarchal norms and possesses all the traits necessary for a virtuous woman in a patriarchal set-up, it is within the confines of the home she refuses to give up her needs and desires for sexual satisfaction even if the only way left to her is to fulfil them by resorting to a deviant way of sexual relationship. The metaphor also signifies the quilt's inability to provide Begum with any warmth, something she finds in and with Rabbu.

The quilt is also a metaphor for secrecy and hypocrisy with respect to homosexuality in the 20th century. It was considered a 'diseased condition,' and what Chughtai does is to launch an attack on this perception without ever needing to explicitly mention it. With Lihaaf, Chughtai envisaged female sexuality and homoeroticism through the use of a figurative language that speaks to its audiences, even today. Thus, both her works break the silence and celebrate womanhood by reflection of complexities, inhibitions and secret desires of a woman's mind.

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