

“All for a Husband”: Representation of Marriage in Ismat Chughtai’s Works

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Abstract

Ismat Chughtai’s oeuvre predominantly deals with women’s issues more specifically delineates the subject of marriage in the Muslim society. She has gone in to the psyche of Indian women who are always seen in the light of tradition, marriage boundaries or familial life. The present paper tries to seek how the writer has presented the realities of women’s lives through the concept of marriage. How differently Chughtai has seen marriage or women’s concerns in relation to marriage and in what all different contexts? How the writer uses marriage as a metaphor to unravel the psyche of women? Have women in her writings reacted against the societal norm, when and how? Is the writer trying to project that how women and their identities are bounded by marriage? What happens to her characters when they or the society find them out of familial life? What are those situations and circumstances when she is not found in this traditional bond? Further, are there any types of marriages found in her works like love, arranged, marriage for convenience and so on? For this, the paper tries to engage with the stories like “All for a Husband”, “Sacred Duty”, “The Eternal Vine” and various other works.

Keywords: Marriage, women, Chughtai, husband.

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I. ARCHETYPE OF WOMAN CHARACTERS IN LITERATURE:

Literature, culture and society share a strong connection. Society is a place where people from different communities and of various classes live together but each community has its own tradition. Though tradition is considered to be dynamic but there are certain features of it that remain constant. In the same way, the image of a woman though changes or presented in different situations but ultimately shown to crave for the same thing i.e. marriage. Marriage is something that becomes the sole purpose of a woman’s life. She is trained or her mind is filled with the concept of getting married very early in her life.

Further, there are different notions attached to the concept of marriage like when one is supposed to marry, there is a concept of age for marriage which differs in the case of a boy and a girl, with whom to marry within or outside of kinship relations, caste, class, sects etc., and marry for what-status, procreation, and more importantly age gap and how a woman should behave after marriage and so on.

Marriage is constructed through and around women characters. However, women are considered to be the epitome of love and sacrifice then only they can become ideal women or wives. Indian folklore has given us some of those ideal characters to look up to. These women characters of Indian folklore can be categorised into three forms (1) Goddess (2) Beloved (3) Householder¹. The representation of women as goddess’s is due to the epic characters like Sita, Savitri and the like. They are not just pacific but also Shakti like Durga and Kali. Women as a beloved are represented in the stories like *Heer Ranjha*, *Shirin Farhad*, and *Laila Majnu*. In these two distinct forms as goddesses and beloved she is either exalted and loved by all equally or only loved by one man with whom she could not unite. The third form of women characters are like house wives who are either struggling with the cruel mother or sister-in-law or husband. There is a conflict created by any of the household member in her life.

To achieve the position of a goddess or beloved a woman has to sacrifice herself. She proves her chastity or shows her power to the society either by patiently bearing or ending the evils of the society. Thus, she becomes a goddess and exalted by the members of the society. These women of the first two categories achieve great status. However, the women of third category that is ‘women as householders’ they are the women of everyday life. Their lives are filled with everyday drama, emotions and tension. The tensions created by the household members or by themselves. However, the life of these women and their everyday life, struggles, conflicts, emotions do not go unnoticed. It finds place in written literature apart from orature. This paper focuses on the women writers of Urdu literature and more specifically on the renowned Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai. Ismat has shown various aspects of women’s lives and marriage is one of them. She has shown how women’s sole aim of life becomes marriage or how they are constructed to achieve this goal or how they crave for it. Apart from that it also shows various aspect of a woman’s life in relation to marriage. Before that it seems

pertinent to talk about women writers who came before Ismat Chughtai on Urdu literary scenario and the kind of literature they were producing.

Muslim Women Writer’s Before Ismat:

There were many women writers who came before Ismat Chughtai and also of her times. Though these writers have published their works in magazines and some of them were never serious to peruse the art of writing. Among these writers the most significant are Abbasi Begum, who wrote *Gariftar I Qafas*, *Zulm I Bekasan*, *Do Shahzadia*. Nazr i Sajjad Haidar’s writings include *Khun I Arman*, *Hur I Sahrai*, *Nairang I Zamana* and *Haq ba Haqdar*. There were other women writers like Anjum Ara, Asaf Jahan, Saida, Begdadi Begum, Taj Unnisa. Among these writers Khatun I Akram needs special attention. She was the writer of stories like *Paikar I Vafa*, *Bichri Beti*, *Arzuo Par Qurban* etc.

Khatun I Akram dies young at the age of twenty four Shaista Akhtar Banu Suhrawardy writes “Had she lived longer, it is certain that she would have achieved a very high place amongst the modern writers of short stories. Most of the *fasanas* in *Gulistan I Khatun* were written between 1918 and 1920 when the authoress was merely eighteen.”ⁱⁱ She further writes that Khatun I Akram had the influence of Prem Chand and Rashid ul Khairi. Like Prem Chand her stories also revolve around everyday life incidents. For example *Arzuo par Qurbani* is one such example where Ruqyya like to party and in order to throw a party she forces her three years old child, Suryya to observe fast in the month of June. Early in the morning guests begin to arrive and Ruqqaiya busies herself in entertaining them and forgets about her child. She remembers her only at the time of *iftar*- the time of breaking the fast, but could not find her. At last the child was found “lying with her face on the *surahi*”. In her other works like *Bichari Beti* or *Paikar-i- Vafa* one finds women character dealing with the marital issues and polygamy. Shaista Akhtar writes that “ Khatun-i- Akram does not only make bad characters human but her good characters are not impossible...She further writes that the genius of Kahtun-i- Akram lies in short stories if she had attempted to write novels she would have failed in it like Prem Chand.

It shows that women writers of short stories were also aware and depicting the social issues more importantly the relevant issues of all times like polygamy and insecurity in women’s life. However, though the women writers of the times were very much writing the issues concerning women but the titles of their stories suggest that the women characters are seen pitiable like the title *Bechari Beti*, *Paikar-i-Vafa* and *Arzuo par Qurban*. There is a tendency to sympathies with the characters and do not make them resistance towards these issues.

Representation of Marriage in Ismat’s Work:

Ismat Chughtai has written so much about women’s issues from various perspectives. Her works depict different characters and situations in which human beings find in. Her characters are of different class and caste and of different nature.

However, there remains a one common thread running predominantly in her stories or among all of her characters in most of her stories they get effected for one thing, that is, marriage either they crave for marriage or of their daughters or any of their family members for instance as represented in *The Wedding Shroud or Fourth Day Outfit (Chauthi Ka Jora)*, *The Morsel (Niwala)*, *The Heart Breaks Free (Dil ki Duniya)*, and *The Eternal Vine (Amar Bel)*. If her women are not craving for desire of getting married then they are found suppressed in marital relationship by following the societal norms and doing every possible thing or else are ready to face the consequences of losing their husbands like in *Touch Me-Not*, and *The Eternal Vine (Amar Bel)*.

All these women characters have specific thing about themselves. However, if a woman as shown in the stories like *The Veil (Ghunghat)*, and *All for a Husband (Ek Shauhar ki Khatir)* is made realised if she does not listen to her husband who is her god or if she decides to remain unmarried. In this way when women go against the tradition then they have to bear its fruit by spending their entire life alone suppressing their desires. Ismat’s some of women characters come alive or achieve their desires with the help of their counterparts also as it is shown in *Lingering Frangrance (Badan ki Khusboo)*, *The Heart Breaks Free (Dil ki Duniya)*, *Kafir and Sacred Duty (Muqaddas Farz)*. Thus in all these mentioned stories marriage plays an important role it appears like a significant feature of Ismat’s stories without which her stories do not move further or in a way life of these woman characters. It can also be seen in her movie *Garam Hawa* as well. Here Ismat like in the *Roots (Jaren)* shows the results of partition here as well Ismat does not want to get the partition affect leaving without affecting the woman’s life where once again marriage is an issue. It also shows that for Ismat there were two major concerns one is to depict the conflict that arises due to religious differences which she has shown how trivial it is to fight in the name of religion and the other is marriage.

However, this the paper does not argue that Ismat wrote only about marriage rather it tries to show how differently marriage effects the life of woman the one single decision of marrying or not marrying makes her life upside down. She does not have any choice and has to get married if got married then in what all situations she is in like *Homemaker (Gharwali)* “Mirza put a ban on the lehnga and instructed her to wear tight-fitting churidar

pyjamas. Lajo was used to open space between her legs. Two separate legs joined by a strip of cloth were truly bothersome”. Women is an object, a desire when acquired she becomes an object and how to acquire this object only through marriage as pious man “Having installed her in in the house, Mirza seemed to have forgotten her existence. For weeks he would speak only in monosyllables....Now that she was married to a decent person, she became ‘mother, sister, and daughter.’”ⁱⁱⁱ Ismat has emphasized it through many of her character by describing that how names are so useless for women because she is always somebody’s sister, wife, mother, grandmother like in *Nanhi ki Nani* “God Knows what her real name was. No one had ever called her by it. When she was a little snotty-nosed girl roaming about the alleys, people used to call her ‘Baftan’s kid’. Then she was ‘Bashira’s daughter-in-law, and then Bismillah’s mother; and when Bismillah died in childbirth leaving Tiny an orphan, she become “Tiny’s Granny’ to her dying day.”^{iv}

The present paper takes some of her short stories and sees how Ismat has represented marriage.

Amar Bel is translated as *The Eternal Vine*, in this story there are two important things portrayed in it one is about the second marriage and the second is age. Here second marriage is possible only for a widower not for a widow and the Muslim imagination about ‘age’.

“Badi Mumani ka Kafan abhi maila nehi hua tha ke saare khandaan ko Shujat Mamu ki dusri shaadi ki fikar ‘dasne lagi’. The word ‘dasne lagi’ is important here because in general if someone is concerned about someone the term is used as ‘fikir hone lagi’. The term perhaps is used to show the worry of the unmarried girl’s parents who get worried about their daughters marriage as soon as she crosses marriageable age.

Age is an important element in the story a sixteen year old girl is married to a widower of fifty years old. When Rukhsana got married and came to house Baji ye to bacchi hai mamu ne baukhla ke kaha.

And when she calls one of her sisters-in-law as Khaala “Aey bhabi tum par Khuda ki sour, na sar ki khabar hai na pair (leg) ki, had dangi bani murghiyani khuded rahi ho!

Aey to kiya karo Khala moui billi

Oyi, lo aur suno aeyi bi mai tumhari khala kab se hogayi? Shajjan Bhai mujhse chaar saal bade hai. Masaallah Bade bhai Baap barabar... Tum bhi meri badi ho, Khabardar tum ne phir mujhe khala kaha”. This is one of the part of “acting married” by acting married here means performing the duties of a married woman dictated by the society. When girls get married to a man of her older age which always happen irrespective of her age she is obliged to perform the household duties as well as enact the age of her husband.

Age does not affect the prospects of getting married second or third time for widowed men, specifically when they are widower. At one side widowed men are shown to marry young girls but these old husbands’ of young girl dies she is prohibited to remarry. These girls have to adhere to the tradition and bear the pain silently by killing their bodily desires.

When Shujaat mamu’s health was deteriorating due to his growing age to which he began to resist unsuccessfully. At one side he was growing more old and weak by each day on the other side his wife was blossoming. However, she was struggling to keep up with Shujaat mamu and trying every other remedy to look old and destroy her beauty. This contrasting image and the struggle in the young woman’s life is created by the writer using ‘bargad ka paid’ and ‘amar bel’ as a metaphor. Here bargad ka paid is Shujaat mamu and his young wife ‘amar bel’. Here the writer says, “ Ek bail hoti hai---amar bail ----jade nehi hoti---ye har danthal kisis bhi sar sabz paid par dal diye Jayien to bail uska ras choos kar phalti phulti Jitni ye bail phalti hai itna he wo paid sukh jaata hai. Ju Ju Rukhsana begum ke chaman khilte jaate the Mamu sukhte jaate the”. The woman here is portrayed as the one who has brought this illness on her husband’s health.

When he dies this is what happens when a young girl becomes a widow

“Arey apni Kaneez Fatima kaisi rahegi. Arey hai bi, Ghaas to nehi kha gayi ho, Kaneez Fatima ki saas ne sun liya to naak choti kaat kar hateli par rakh dengi. Jawan bete ki mayat uthte he wo bahu ke gird kandal daal ke baith gayi...wo din aur aak ka din dehleez se qadam na utarne diya...” Even women who have seen if have not faced such situations in their lives were still not able to understand the problems of their daughters or daughters-in-law instead they become an upholder of this tradition by performing the duties of a good concerned sister or mother.

Thus women in society of Ismat’s world are expected to live according to the traditional norms. They do not hold any place and status in the society all they have to do is to live a dependent life in their husband’s home.

Kafir: *Kafir* is a story of two friends who likes each other from childhood days and playful mood they tease each other and promises to marry when grow up. They wanted to realise their dream in to reality but there stands a huge wall of faith in between them. Like her most of the stories, Chughtai innocently brings in the subject by showing the religious boundaries from the perspective of children. Children do not have the serious understanding of religion but as they grow up they understand it. However, they decide to get marry. In the Sacred Duty (*Muqaddas Farz*) the same issue is shown between the two mature adults who are very much aware of their religious identities still they decide to get marry against their parents’ wishes. However, when their

parents’ come to know about who are very progressive and politically active decide to get them married as per the norms of their belief system.

The stories are at one hand about the human hypocrisy and religious boundaries at the same time it projects how religion becomes an important issue between the people who otherwise eat, drink and live together.

Touch Me-Not: It is a story about a woman who is second time pregnant and in fear that if she does not give birth to the child and have a miscarriage then her husband will marry second time. However, for the second time also she had a miscarriage. The story is about the insecurity women have in their marital relationship where their husbands can leave and are ready to leave their wives at any pretext. Sometime they even force their wives to search a bride for them.

The Veil: It is a story about a woman who is married to a young man who is quite opposite in physical features in comparison to the bride. However, they are married but on the first night he asks his wife of fourteen years old to lift the veil but she does not listen to him. The same thing happens even the second time as well but the bride resists to life the veil by herself perhaps out of shy. Ultimately she ends up spending her life alone waiting and living in her in-laws home thorough out her life.

The Morsel: The Morsel (*Nawala*) is a story of a woman who lives alone in Bombay’s *chal* in a friendly and caring neighborhood. All her neighbours are worried about her marriage and once they come to know that a seat being offered to her in a bus that she travels in daily by a young man. Every one begins to make up stories and suggests her to get well dressed and attract the attention of the man. He must be interested in her. Thus she ends up doing that but unfortunately the man does not identify her and she had to travel all the way standing as he does not offer his seat to her.

In Ismat’s stories marriage has played a significant role to develop the conflict in her character’s life. She has shown marriage as the centre of woman’s life and due to this she gets affected in find herself in different conflicting situations like marriage and religion as in *Kafir* and *Sacred Duty*, marriage and age in *Amer Bel*, importance of marriage in *All for a Husband*, *Heart Breaks Free*, *Morsel(Niwala)* and so on. However, society remains unresponsive to her feelings and desires. If she has to fulfill her desires there is no her way of doing it, it is always as per the societal norms through which she can realises her dreams if not then has to succumb at the hands of it as in *Veil*.

Ek Shauhar ki Khatir (*All for a Husband*) shows how the society looks at the unmarried women and how much desperate the society is in getting a woman married. Ismat presents the various perspectives on this. For instance the first woman who enters the compartment asks the protagonist where she is heading. She assumes if the protagonist is not going to her parents’ home then surely she must be returning to her in-laws home but when she comes to know that the woman is unmarried then she feels pity on her.

II. CONCLUSION

Women characters of Ismat Chughtai are dynamic some of her characters go against the tradition and some of her women characters want to follow tradition. Apart from this there are various other women characters that fall under the category of grey shade like mother in law of the story *Saas*. However, Ismat has presented a large number of women characters who are eagerly waiting to become a wife. Nevertheless, through these women characters she has tried to show that how society constructs the minds of the girls. It does not like an independent woman rather it likes to see her married and soon after marriage it wants to know the details of her marital life and how many children she has. If she fails in any one of the stages or delayed it due to some reason then they present her a number of suggestions. Apart from that after marriage she should act according to the age of her husband as shown in the *Amer Bel*. Or the once beautiful and young and slim girl should become a round balloon after marriage by giving birth to children till then neither the husband nor the society will be happy with her as presented in the story *Chataan*. In other words it wants the woman to lose her identity and self in taking care of others. Even it snatches away her name that is given to her by calling her mother or wife of so and so. Thus, Ismat has presented the issues of women from different perspective specifically about marriage.

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ⁱ Mridula Garg, P.no.3

ⁱⁱ Shaista Akhtar Banu Suhrawardy, 235-36

ⁱⁱⁱ M. Assaduddin (trns) in *Ismat Chughtai: Lifting the Veil*. p.no. 90

^{iv} M. Assaduddin (trns) in *Ismat Chughtai: Lifting the Veil*. p.no. 144