



Rejecting the Phallus: Understanding Ismat Chughtai's Works with Respect to Gender and Sexuality

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Abstract: Indian Urdu novelist, short story writer, and filmmaker Ismat Chughtai wrote comprehensively on themes of female sexuality and its unabashed expression. All of her short stories introduce the reader to a patriarchal world where women find their own unique way of expressing themselves dissimilar to that of the phallogocentric expectation. French feminist writer, poet, playwright, philosopher and literary critic Hélène Cixous states in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* that when a woman is sexually liberated, she is able to express herself freely through her writing. This paper aims to study three of Chughtai's major works from her short story collection *The Quilt: Stories* under Cixous' critical lens and infers that Chughtai sexually liberates the female characters she writes in order to express them freely thereby breaking her writing away from the phallogocentric ideals.

Keywords: Urdu literature, Phallogocentrism, Sexuality, Medusa, Feminism.

Introduction

The Quilt: Stories is an anthology of several short stories by Ismat Chughtai that explores female sexuality in a society that constantly represses it. Dubbed as a feminist writer, Chughtai's subject matter involves societal conditions on female pleasure, female queer bonds and unabashed expression of female sexuality. These topics are in common with feminist discourse through the ages. This study aims at understanding three of Chughtai's major works from *The Quilt: Stories* with respect to gender theory.

Hélène Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa*

The Laugh of the Medusa is a critical essay by French feminist Hélène Cixous that talks about what woman's writing will do.

Comparing it to sexual liberation, Cixous urges the woman to write herself and thereby into the world and into history. She states that just like a woman's sexual desire, a woman punishes herself by feeling guilty for writing, when in fact it is extremely essential for women to write in an economy that works against them and hands them their narrative.

Cixous states that woman's writing, unlike men's, that caters only to the male audience, is bisexual. A woman writes to both men and women. She further declares that feminine writing is a manifestation of desire outside of heteronormative convention. It blurs all distinctions to make way for scripture that subverts binary opposition. Chughtai's writings attempt and succeed at doing exactly that. This essay is an attempt to study three of Ismat Chughtai's short stories; *The Quilt (Lihaaf)*, *Gainda* and *The Mole (Til)* as translated in English by M. Asaduddin in line with Cixous' theory.

The Quilt (Lihaaf)

The short story *The Quilt* is narrated by a little girl who has to spend some days with her aunt, Begum Jaan as punishment. Begum Jaan is trapped in a neglectful marriage and is subject to extreme loneliness with her only relief being her maid servant Rabbu's massages. We see that while other girls were engaged in 'girly' games, the narrator would be fighting with her brothers and his friends. This is clearly seen as a deviation from the existing performative gender roles. Chughtai lays out a distinctive pick-me-up character through the 'not like other girls' trope and immediately subverts it by making the girl as the object of Begum Jaan's affections instead of a male character.

Begum Jaan constantly suffers from an itch which never seems to go away despite treatment. This term 'itch' can be connoted as her homoerotic desire for her masseuse Rabbu. Since any romantic or sexual desire other than heteronormative

relations, however dysfunctional, were considered taboo, or worse, non-existent, such relations were given names adjacent to disorders that needed curing, in this case through rigorous massages.

Themes of internalized homophobia are seen through the narrator's attraction for Begum Jaan perceived as fear when she recites the Ayatul Kursi in order to protect herself. The girl's love for Begum Jaan is coupled with jealousy thereby calling Rabbu ugly because she herself can't touch Begum Jaan like Rabbu gets to. Cixous' theory that female repression stems from the patriarchy teaching them to hate their bodies and their sexual desires is seen through the narrator's self-hatred at the realization that she is attracted to Begum Jaan.

Furthermore, Begum Jaan is treated like a possession by her husband, tucked away and forgotten. Her emotional and carnal desires were overlooked and yet she is expected to go on without fulfilling them. Subversion of phallogocentric ideologies is at the core of the story as Begum Jaan does none of what is expected of a woman that society dubs as good. Cixous counters Freud's theory of penis envy. She believes in the cosmic superiority in women's sexuality in comparison to phallic single-mindedness. She berates Nietzsche's thinking that women are selfish and give only to take when it fact it is actually a male attribute to only take. We see this factor materialize in the short story through Begum Jaan's ability to love Rabbu and the little girl even after facing total neglect from her husband and family.

Cixous argues that once a woman is sexually emancipated, she will be able to create a true feminine text that not only overthrows the established order but also shatters the false truth with triumphant laughter. I wished that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body

knows unheard-of songs (Cixous). This interrelation between sexuality and writing is seen through Chughtai's expression of desire in *The Quilt*. Through her metaphorical descriptions, she meanderingly mocks the way society limits a woman's bodily autonomy. Without using any explicitly sexual language, Chughtai articulates the intimacy between Begum Jaan and Rabbu through sentences like "The slurping sound of a cat licking a plate" and "there was the sound of someone smacking her lips, as though savouring a tasty pickle". Chughtai's comparison of the relationship between Rabbu and Begum Jaan under the quilt to a voluminous elephant eludes to their unabashed queerness being the elephant in the room. *The Quilt* rejects the phallogocentric narrative that controls woman's sexualities and provides a feminine text that is a product of sexual emancipation.

Gainda

The short story *Gainda* is a story of an adolescent widow named Gainda as narrated by her play companion Bibi. It showcases how a woman's worth is tied to her existence in relation to a man. Gainda being a widow gets no worldly privileges and covets sindoor that other married women flaunt as 'Suhaag', a construct for women to constantly compete with each other. Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies (Cixous). Cixous states that men have created an antinarcissism for women which is a love for oneself only for what other women haven't got. This aspect is clearly seen through Bibi's jealousy towards Gainda's relationship with bhैया and desires the same thing for herself with Mevaram.

Referring to Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, Cixous states her concern of being overshadowed by the phallic symbol that women could never wield, yet man who is supposed to

brandish it is in constant fear of castration. This fear is seen through the double standards around the treatment of men and women who lose their spouses. Widows are repressed through patriarchal indoctrination that forbids them from romantic love because their worth is tied to her husband's life and is expected to diminish or cease to exist with the husband's death. We see Gainda endure complete material, physical and emotional annihilation as Bahu's unhealthy child born out of wedlock is celebrated while Gainda is beaten up and starved for having a healthy baby as an unfortunate result of her carnal desires. This story represents how while men benefit from phallogocentric ideals, women's autonomy is constantly silenced.

The Mole (Til)

The Mole is a story about Rani, a girl picked up from the street by an artist named Choudhry to be his muse. Throughout the story, it is seen that Rani exudes her sexuality instead of repressing it like young girls her age are taught to. Her sexuality is what enrages Choudhry and ultimately deems her unmanageable. He uses words like whore and illiterate chit to describe her.

Cixous reminds us of the patriarchal nature of the Medusa myth that articulated falsehood. She does so with reference to sirens who were female enchantresses enticing men in order to drain all their vigour. She claims this castration anxiety to be a masculine construct and calls men the real sirens. Cixous reclaims the myth by creating a laughing Medusa who refuses to take on the patriarchal role assigned to her. In relation to this, we see that Rani's dark skin shadows all of Choudhry's thoughts and transforms his art into bizarre and frightening shades. Rani's skin colour keeps changing shades in his eyes because of which he couldn't put her down on canvas. His inability to paint her is metaphorical to his inability to put her

dynamic nature and unapologetic sexuality in a labelled box. While he reprimands her for being 'loose', he himself is ironically fixated on her mole. When he is accused of sexually exploiting Rani, he wishes he were an accomplice even though he is innocent. Choudhry's character represents the hypocritical mind-sets of men who create womanly morality for the sole purpose of keeping them in control while also looking for opportunities to prey on them.

Conclusion

Through Ismat Chughtai's collection of short stories we understand the phallogocentric nature of patriarchy that represses female sexuality thereby repressing their expression. This can be undone through women writing their sexual narratives freely and in doing so, taking control of their autonomy. Through characters like Begum Jaan, Rabbu, the little girl, Gainda, Bibi and Rani; Ismat Chughtai rejects the phallogocentric ideals and in turn celebrates female writing through their sexuality.

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Azra is a writer, poet and critical theory enthusiast who finds writing inspiration in everything around her. She believes that discourse is the first step towards change and makes sure she is vocal about issues that matter.

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