

Tearing the Veil: Chughtai's Zenana as Rebellion

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Abstract

This article explores Ismat Chughtai's literary output as a transformational intervention in Urdu literature, with a particular emphasis on her contribution to the breakdown of the structural "culture of silence" that was imposed on women in South Asia in the middle of the 20th century. Chughtai's prose serves as a critical investigation of the domestic realm, which has historically been romanticised or hidden by patriarchal literary norms, within the ideological framework of the *Progressive Writers' Movement* (PWM). This analysis contends that Chughtai's stories go beyond simple social realism and constitute a radical "writing against silence" that reveals the zenana's physical and psychological claustrophobia. This study examines how Chughtai employs a "fearless narrative voice" to challenge themes of female sexuality, domestic exploitation, and the hypocrisy of middle-class respectability (sharafat) through a close reading of classic works like *Lihaaf* (The Quilt) and *Tedhi Lakeer* (The Crooked Line). In order to justify the visceral experiences of women, the research examines her distinctive verbal register, which is frequently marked by acute irony and colloquial vigour. The study shows how Chughtai's characters negotiate agency through subversion and survival, as opposed to portraying them as helpless victims of a patriarchal rule (contemporary feminist discourse). The study comes to the conclusion that Chughtai's creative resistance not only broadened the thematic reach of the Urdu short story but also significantly altered the course of feminist aesthetics in the subcontinent by recording the junction of gender, class, and power. Her writing is still essential to comprehending how female subjectivity is reclaimed in post-colonial literary contexts.

Keywords: Progressive Writers' Movement, Feminist discourse, Creative resistance, exploitation

Introduction

Urdu literature in the middle of the 20th century was marked by a deep conflict between the Progressive Writers' Movement's (PWM) emerging realism and old romanticism. Ismat Chughtai became a "disruptor" of the established literary and social order in this context, in addition to being a storyteller. Chughtai focused on the cramped constraints of the middle-class Muslim home, whereas her male peers frequently discussed larger political subjects like colonialism, class conflict, and division. By doing this, she demolished the "politics of the veil" (purdah), not by taking it off, but by describing the colourful, frequently painful life that flowed behind it.

Chughtai as Disruptor

According to scholar M. Asaduddin, Chughtai's fiction introduced a "bluntness of speech and a bold, iconoclastic vision" that was unprecedented in Urdu prose (Introduction, *Lifting the Veil*), rejecting the moralistic tone of reformist literature and the sanitised, flowery language of the Dastan tradition in favour of a gritty, colloquial realism that mirrored the actual speech and lives of women in the zenana.

Female Interiority Erasure

In the past, female interiority was systematically erased from Urdu literature. Women's lives were primarily seen through a patriarchal prism that emphasised their duties as mothers, spouses, or daughters, so stifling their personal aspirations, fears, and physicalities. Literary invisibility was imposed by this "politics of the veil"; the home was viewed as a place of obedience and silence. Chughtai recognised this gap as a place of extreme hypocrisy, where the maintenance of sharafat (middle-class respectability) frequently came at the expense of the mental and physical health of women.

Chughtai's work, according to this article, represents a dramatic remapping of the private realm. Chughtai turns the ordinary into the revolutionary by viewing the home, the kitchen, the bedroom, the courtyard as a site of fierce political and sexual opposition rather than a haven of tranquilly. Her literature argues that the home is intrinsically political and that she confronts the legal-social structures of her era as well as the underlying underpinnings of patriarchal morality by expressing women's suppressed experiences.

Methodology

The analysis employs a dual-framework methodology:

1. **Formalist Literary Analysis:** This research looks at Chughtai's particular narrative strategies, emphasising her use of Begumati Zaban (the ladies' vernacular), her ironic distancing, and her preference for visceral reality over conventional metaphors.
2. **Feminist Critical Theory:** Using the ideas of "the male gaze" and "patriarchal hegemony," the study examines how Chughtai's characters manage agency in oppressive systems.

Literary review

From early morality-focused reactionary critiques to complex modern interpretations based on post-colonial feminism and queer theory, the study around Ismat Chughtai has developed throughout time.

Realism vs. Morality

The "obscurity" of Chughtai's subject matter dominated early critical reactions to her in the 1940s and 1950s. Sajjad Hyder Yildirim and other members of the conservative school were among the contemporary critics who frequently labelled her work as "sensationalist" or "vulgar." Nonetheless, her colleagues in the Progressive Writers' Movement acknowledged her as a social realism pioneer. In his essay "Ismat Chughtai," Saadat Hasan Manto defended her, claiming that she was only a "mirror to a society that was too afraid to look at its own face" (Manto 158). Her "boldness" as a female writer was the emphasis of early studies, which frequently ignored the intricate structure of her writing.

Socio-Linguistic Studies and Feminist Reclamations

A second wave of scholarship appeared in the late 20th century, led by scholars and translators such as M. Asaduddin and Tahira Naqvi. This body of work shifted its focus from the "obscurity" controversy to Chughtai's linguistic abilities. Chughtai's use of Begumati Zaban, according to Naqvi, is a "subversive reclamation of domesticity" as well as a stylistic decision (Naqvi 14). In a similar vein, Sukrita Paul Kumar claims that Chughtai's writings offer a "sociological mapping" of the Muslim home, establishing her as a pioneer feminist who foresaw many of the issues of Western feminism in the 1970s (Kumar 45).

Post-Colonial and Contemporary Queer Views

There has been a "spatial" and "queer" shift in recent scholarship. Lihaaf was examined through the prism of queer theory by Bhaskar Sarkar and Geeta Patel, who contend that Chughtai was recording "non-normative desire" decades before the term was codified in scholarly discourse. According to Sarkar, the "quilt" represents the "opaque spaces" in post-colonial domesticity where patriarchal and state monitoring are ineffective (Sarkar 55). In addition, Priyamvada Gopal places Chughtai in the larger context of "literary radicalism," analysing how her writings interact with the nationalistic movements of the moment to redefine the "citizen-woman" (Gopal 88).

Finding a Literature Gap

Although Chughtai's "boldness" and "language" have been extensively discussed, there is still a large gap in the analysis of her work as a methodical philosophy of resistance. Her stories are viewed in most evaluations as singular acts of defiance. In an effort to close that gap, this article makes the case that Chughtai's whole body of work is a coherent "poetics of resistance" that purposefully uses the home as a political battlefield.

Discussion

It is impossible to separate Ismat Chughtai's literary rise from the profound changes that took place in the Indian subcontinent in the 1930s and 1940s. During this time, there was a concurrent internal movement against stagnant social customs and an intensified fight against British colonialism. Chughtai discovered her voice in this furnace of social reform and political activism, supported by the rigorous ideology of the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM).

The Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM) and Social Realism

The PWM, which was established in 1936 with Premchand's well-known speech in Lucknow, promoted writing that "should have the quality of being useful to us" (Premchand 12). The trend aimed to shift Urdu literature away from the Ghazal's aristocratic, escapist traditions and towards the hardships of the household and the street. As one of the movement's most steadfast supporters, Chughtai embraced the social realism mandate, but she applied it to an area that her male counterparts sometimes ignored: the inside of the home. The Great Depression and the emergence of Marxist ideas in India during the 1930s created a socio-political environment that encouraged writers to explore the material realities of life. For Chughtai, social justice was a struggle waged at the dinner table and in the bedroom rather than just in the factories through class conflict. Priyamvada Gopal points out that the Progressives saw literature as a "socially transformative practice," which Chughtai used to reveal how the "private domestic sphere was a crucial site for the reproduction of social hierarchies" (Gopal 42). Her emphasis on women's physical and psychological realities was a direct response to the PWM's exhortation to portray life as it is rather than how it ought to be.

The Muzzling of Women and the Sharafat Concept

The idea of sharafat, or respectability, is essential to comprehending Chughtai's opposition. Women were the main guardians of sharafat, which was the currency of social standing in the middle-class Muslim society of the time. The apparent silence and purity of a family's ladies were closely associated with their honour (ghairat). This cultural fixation served as a "muzzle," teaching women from birth that their opinions were sources of social shame, particularly when it came to physical desire or domestic abuse.

Sharafat is an instrument of patriarchal discipline, according to Chughtai. She emphasises in her fiction and memoirs how this fixation on respectability led to a "culture of hypocrisy." It was required of women to put up with "the violence of silence" in order to preserve the outward appearance of an aristocratic home. Because Chughtai ventured to express the "unmentionable" facts that sharafat attempted to conceal, scholar Tahira Naqvi contends that her work was a "frontal assault" on this idea (Naqvi 15). Chughtai not only broke a societal taboo by bringing women's hidden lives into the public literary discourse, but she also undermined the system that governs female behaviour.

Literary Lineage

Rashid Jahan, Manto, and Chughtai Despite belonging to a radical group, Chughtai had a particular focus. Saadat Hasan Manto, a contemporary of hers, shared her daring approach to sexuality; nevertheless, Manto's perspective frequently focused on the marginalised members of the urban underworld, prostitutes, and pimps. On the other hand, Chughtai discovered her "underworld" in the respectable house. Chughtai's characters were the daughters, sisters, and aunts of the "respectable" castes, whereas Manto's characters were outsiders. She also emulated Rashid Jahan, whose 1932 addition to the groundbreaking collection *Angarey (Embers)* had caused popular outrage. Chughtai developed Jahan's description of women's home and physiological struggles into a full literary work. Chughtai

used a "sharp, ironic humour" that made her criticisms more subversive, in contrast to Jahan, whose writing was frequently openly didactic (Asaduddin 147). Despite their revolutionary aim, male writers were never able to fully access or express a particular gendered vocabulary and a set of power dynamics that she was able to describe through her distinct focus on the zenana (women's quarters).

The Defiance Language Ismat Chughtai's literary resistance was ingrained in her linguistic choices rather than just being a result of her ideas. Chughtai's language was a dramatic departure at a time when Urdu prose was frequently judged by its closeness to Persianized elegance or flowery rhetorical flourishes. She turned family idioms into a public tool of socio-political criticism by weaponising the domestic vernacular. Zaban Begumati as Irony Chughtai's grasp of Begumati Zaban—the particular dialect, idioms, and speech patterns employed by middle-class and upper-class women in the home—was her greatest linguistic achievement. The male literary establishment used to disdain this language as "trite," "frivolous," or "domestic chatter." But Chughtai saw its potential for subversion.

According to academic M. Asaduddin, Chughtai "harnessed the creative and subversive energy of women's speech" piercing patriarchal ego with its earthy metaphors and innate wit (Asaduddin 148), she successfully broke through the barrier separating the public (male) and private (female) realms by introducing this language into the "sacred" realm of the Urdu short story. Her use of domestic analogies, such as equating societal hierarchy to household tasks or using laundry to explain family secrets was intentional. It was used to support an epistemology that was focused on women. In her hands, "women's talk" was no longer an indication of intellectual weakness; rather, it was a sharp, satirical instrument that revealed the "rot" that lay beneath the surface of the "respectable" family.

Un-literary Prose

Critics of Chughtai's era frequently referred to her writing as "raw" or "un-literary." She purposefully stayed away from the flowery, euphemistic metaphors that are commonly employed in Urdu literature to describe the bodies and emotions of women. Chughtai used visceral, physiological language to depict the body, whereas traditional poets might compare a woman's eyes to a narcissus or her walk to a gazelle. It was a political move to reject the idealisation of the female body. She made the reader face the fact that women are social and biological creatures rather than beautiful objects by removing the Ghazal's ornamental language. She was able to confront forbidden topics like menstruation, pregnancy, sexual frustration, and physical labour with a directness that was startling to the sensibilities of the 1940s thanks to this "visceral realism". According to Tahira Naqvi, this simplicity was a "liberating force," giving women a vocabulary to describe their own bodily experiences without the use of metaphors created by men (Naqvi 19).

The Trial of *Lihaaf*: The State's Attempt to Re-silence

When Chughtai was accused of obscenity in 1944 for her short work *Lihaaf* (The Quilt), it was the final clash between her language and the patriarchal authority. The narrative

became a lightening rod for social concern because it gently shows a lesbian relationship between a mistreated wife and her servant. The trial that followed in Lahore was an attempt by the legal and social establishment to "re-silence" a voice that had the audacity to record forbidden desire. Chughtai's language skill was demonstrated by the trial itself. The prosecution had difficulty locating a single "obscene" word in the text during the hearings. To tell the story, Chughtai had only used suggestion, ambiance, and the shifting shadows beneath a quilt. In her memoir, the absurdity of the scenario is described by Kaghazi Hai Pairahan as follows: "Not a single word in the story can be labelled vulgar... I had talked about a massage, a shadow, and a quilt (Chughtai 42). She successfully overthrew the state with her "language of suggestion." According to Bhaskar Sarkar, the trial focused on the state's incapacity to regulate "the slippery, multi-layered nature of female speech" rather than just morality (Sarkar 52). Chughtai's acquittal was a historic win for South Asian literary freedom, demonstrating that silence might be broken without resorting to the same vulgarity that her detractors had accused her of. Her defence proved that it was possible to say the "unspeakable" if one had the language skills to negotiate the complexities of social respectability.

The Unseen Desire and *Lihaaf*

Chughtai offers the most powerful illustration of utilising the inside of the home as a location of radical sexual opposition in *Lihaaf* (1942). The narrative decision to tell the story via the eyes of a young, naive girl allows Chughtai to capture aspects that an adult narrator may have been compelled to suppress while also providing a layer of "perceptual naivety" for protection.

The Quilt as a Symbol for Unspoken Truths

The quilt (*lihaaf*), the story's main motif, represents the "shroud of silence" that envelops Begum Jan's family life. Begum Jan's life is reduced to a "silent, heavy existence" due to her husband Nawab Sahib's neglect, as he is more interested in the companionship of young, "slender-waisted" guys (Chughtai 4). Chughtai puts the vibrations of repressed desire onto the fabric. The quilt symbolises the "unmentionable" agency of the female body as the narrator watches it billow and heave in the dark. Bhaskar Sarkar claims that the quilt serves as a "liminal space" where a "subaltern sexuality" can flourish and home social norms are suspended (Sarkar 48).

Validating Female and Queer Desires

Because it reframed female desire as a visceral reaction to patriarchal neglect rather than a moral flaw, Chughtai's portrayal of Begum Jan's connection with her servant, Rabbu, was innovative. Chughtai questioned the heteronormative notion that women's lives are centred only on the male gaze by depicting a homoerotic relationship within the zenana. Chughtai was the first, according to scholar M. Asaduddin, to "legitimise the physical needs of women," going beyond the stereotype of the "suffering wife" to show a woman who actively pursues fulfilment in the shadows of her own home (Asaduddin 150).

Tedhi Lakeer and the Fragmented Self

Tedhi Lakeer (The Crooked Line, 1944) is an epic investigation of the female psyche's rebellion against the straight lines of social norm, whereas *Lihaaf* is a study of the home shadow.

The "Crooked Line" as a Metaphor for Rebellion

The "straight path" (*sirat-e-mustaqeem*) that is recommended for women is rejected by the novel's title alone. Shaman, the main character, is a "difficult" youngster who defies her middle-class family's expectations. Her path is one of "jagged edges and sharp turns" rather than elegant domesticity (Naqvi 22). Shaman's existence serves as a vehicle for Chughtai's condemnation of the institutionalised repression of women in marriage, education, and motherhood. Shaman must negotiate with a society that sees her independence as a "crookedness" that must be fixed at every stage of her existence.

Dissecting the Bildungsroman

Conventional bildungsromans, or coming-of-age stories, typically conclude with the protagonist successfully integrating into society through marriage. Chughtai challenges this. The narrative of Shaman is one of "fragmentation and perpetual unrest." She exhibits resistance by refusing to be "finished" or "settled." The book is a "monumental achievement in psychological realism," according to Tahira Naqvi, since it depicts the inner life of a woman who is "neither a martyr nor a saint," but rather a complicated individual negotiating a terrain of fluctuating political and personal allegiances (Naqvi 24). Shaman continues to be a "crooked line", unbroken and unbowed, by the conclusion of the book, symbolising the tenacity of female resistance.

Opposition from a Domestic Angle

The kitchen and the courtyard were two of the most ordinary areas of the house where Chughtai's resistance persisted. She explores the relationship between sexual politics and domestic work in works such as *Gharwali* (The Housewife). For Chughtai, the kitchen served as both a theatre of power and a source of sustenance. She draws attention to the ways that women are bound to a particular identity through household responsibilities. She does, however, also demonstrate how women utilise these venues to collaborate and exchange "prohibited" knowledge. Chughtai de-romanticizes the housewife role by emphasising the "labour of the body," exposing it as a type of unpaid servitude that is frequently imposed by other women in the family hierarchy.

Complicated Victimhood

Chughtai's refusal to depict women as helpless victims was among her most insightful observations. She examined "complex victimhood," in which elder women frequently take on the role of "agents of patriarchy," imposing on their daughters the same silences that were previously imposed upon them. Because of this multifaceted perspective, her work remains a "deeply sociological study of the mechanics of power" (Gopal 45) rather than a simple diatribe.

Conclusion

In the history of the Urdu short story, Ismat Chughtai's fiction continues to be a turning point. Her "writing against silence" was a fundamental reorganisation of the literary

environment rather than just a thematic decision. She gave future generations of South Asian feminist writers a model by authenticating the Begumati Zaban, revealing the "rot" of sharafat, and emphasising the sensory experiences of the zenana. Her legacy is one of "unwavering honesty," demonstrating that the place where the world expects silence is frequently the most potent point of resistance.

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