

WOMEN AND SOCIETY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF ISMAT CHUGTAI'S *OF FISTS AND RUBS*

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ABSTRACT

Chughtai, one of the greatest writers of Urdu fiction in Indian subcontinent sets her 'myopic vision' for the middle class and socially downtrodden women that virtually become her forte, delineating with their lives and their realities without the colored glass of romanticism. The frank truthfulness and honesty that her short stories involve are having its inspiration from the western naturalism and her works have sufficient marks of it. The present story *Of Fists and Rubs* is thus a ruthless mockery on the society, caste systems, lack of education that together bring both the election and women to almost meaninglessness, a nothingness. The present essay thus aims to present the society and women as depicted in this short story where women, brought to a dwindling ruin but still having a hope to be categorized into their traditional role which this present situation and society deny.

Keywords: Chughtai, society, women, short story, naturalism.

Chughtai, the self stylized path breaker in the field of Urdu fiction and especially in short stories is undoubtedly one of the best women writers that this Indian subcontinent has ever produced. Rather it will be simply unwise and neglecting to confine her in the absolute boundaries of women writers in technical sense. In all her short stories, there is a veritable picture of womanhood that she had shown beyond the veil and often causing embarrassment for the readers. The groups in which Chughtai belongs with the other stalwarts of Urdu literature like Manto, Ahmed Ali, Krishan Chander etc., were thoroughly inspired by the naturalism in the western sense of the term and were socially more conscious than many of their contemporaries. In her writings, the woman appeared to be not only real but also with every kind of realities that they possess, inherit and has. In the earlier period, especially before the rise of feminism as a socio-political and cultural term, a woman writer would simply resort to describing the age in the perfect ambivalent mode that sufficiently denies the natural in the sense of the term. In the period when education of the women consists in as Elizabeth Jocelin said should consist in "learning the Bible, as my sisters do, good housewifery, writing, and good works" (Jocelin, 1994, 183). In the writing of the humanist Juan Luis Vives we also see that there should be a moral purpose in the writings that should be taught to the women as he wishes:

“And when she shall learn to write, let not her examples be void verses, not wanton or trifling songs, but some sad sentences prudent and chaste, taken out of holy scripture, or the sayings of philosophers...” (Vives, 1912, 55).

Chughtai’s case was thus more heroic than even her western counterparts in the history of women writings if taken as a whole. Coming of an orthodox Muslim family of North India and writing such stories like *The Quilt* or *Lihaf* even before her marriage was certainly not an easy task. But she did it and the truth is that she excelled both as a self conscious author and also as a woman writer. Tahira Naqvi, the distinguished critic on Chughtai and an accomplished translator of several of Chughtai’s works in her article ‘*Ismat Chughtai: A Tribute*’, published in the *Annual of Urdu studies* (Volume 8, 1993) comments very pertinently:

“Many of Ismat’s critics, past and present, lament her single-minded preoccupation with women’s lives, with a middle class society and its concerns, what they deem to be her myopic view of the world. I agree that there was much more out there in the villages and towns of India and Pakistan that Ismat Apa could have utilized to enhance her subject matter and the narrative texture of her stories, but if she had branched out and experimented with other themes and approaches, she would probably have lost that very special touch that sets her apart from all other writers of Urdu fiction.” The comment is apt and true and our present discussion on the above mentioned story in the title should be a sufficient proof on this subject.

Chughtai’s *Of Fists and Rubs* is a poignant story that adequately expresses both her sympathy for the socially downtrodden women as well as her deepest concern over the moth-eaten structures of the society that causes the women to the utmost sufferings. But somewhere the story ceases to be a social commentary as it actually turns to be more and more poignant, capable of drawing tears from the readers’ eyes. She has those unique capacities like many of those Saratchandra’s characters depicted in several of his short stories and novels where these sections of society are presented most straightforwardly without any unnecessary and unmatched romanticism. However the present story deliberately begins with a view of the people queuing and voting at the polling station in certain election. Chughtai’s description of it smells of Marxism or the socialist thinking, quietly negating the so called democracy and its systems that have negated and are veritably incapable to do anything for the betterment of the people that this story deals with. On the other hand, this is the greatest show of democracy and she says, “There was quite a crush of people at the polling station, as if it was the premier of some movie. Five years ago, too, we’d formed such endless lines, as if we’d come to buy cheap grain, not cast a vote” (279). People thronging outside the polling booth earnestly and voting for their own caste man in the hope for an all golden future where all their miseries will vanish like a past days nightmare, also comments ironically on the riddles of communities and caste systems that improvise and actually decide many of election contender’s fortune in many parts of India even after fifty years of independence from the British and despite the progress in science and technology. In the voting line we see the two protagonists of the story supposedly the author and one Ratti Bai and through them the dead Ganga Bai also.

It is the story of two women Ganga Bai and Ratti bai who had come from their village and also being uprooted from the women’s traditional work such as working for the household or thrashing rice of her own field. They are spending their days in the suburbs of Bombay for livelihood and also for their family with the hope in their eyes that they could one day gather enough money to get their farmland back and reclaim their women’s role in their respective native villages. The author recounts how she had met them in a hospital while admitted for

giving birth to her daughter in a flashback technique of narration which also helps significantly to stabilize the author's momentary pause over the present situation to bring out the fruitlessness of the whole affair. They were working in the hospital as hospital worker, something like *aaya* and vying with each other for capturing every means of livelihood from their world. Thus Ratti Bai accuses Ganga Bai as a bad woman and Ganga would use the very similar epithets as calling Ratti as the first rate tramp, informing the author about Ratti's illicit relationship with one Shankar, whom she calls brother publicly. Ganga quite confidently proclaims, "He's her lover. Why, she sleeps with him!" (286), we come to know about Ratti Bai's husband who lives in a village near Sholapur, who had a small piece of land and was stuck to it. The debt and interest payments sucked the entire yield and just a little was left and before long it would be paid up as she hoped and then she could return to her native village, living with the children and trashing rice to separate it from the husk. The narration says:

"Both women dreamed with such longing of living happily pounding rice in their homes, the way a person dreams of Paris" (280). The eternal symbol of thrashing rice in their own homeland that recurs repeatedly throughout the story is not just a dream that they longed to dream but is also a kind of allegorical dimension for their lost home and how dearly they wish it to touch and feel with all its bounty and wealth, that a downtrodden poor farmer woman can only wish and that stays beyond their actual physical touch. Even they have to endure their husband's living with another woman in their village home and only living with the hope that once the debt is repaid they will go back to their native land one day. The author also comes to know that Ratti Bai herself had chosen the poor helpless woman, left to care for her husband and children. When the debt will be repaid, she will assume her original role of the housewife and thrashing rice and "And what would become of the keep? Oh, she would find another whose wife has gone to Bombay to earn money and who had no one to look after the kids" (281). Now this kept woman is no different than these two women we are looking at. She has her own family and husband but the little land he had owned was eaten up and he had to work as a farm laborer but for eight months of the year having no work, usually he has to steal, pilfer or wonder into big cities and supports himself panhandling all day long. It is a through dismal gloomy picture of the womanhood tearing, sacrificing her own self, projecting herself also in the man's role to sustain the family only in the hope for a better future that can only elude them most perfectly and nothing else.

Ratti Bai sends all forty one rupees of her salary to her village for supporting the family and has to take the support of 'brother' for her own livelihood. They can only implore to our present narrator for any worn out old clothes that she might have and in order to have the possession of it they have to malign each other. They have to whore around because as Ratti Bai asks, "How else would I manage? Three rupees for renting the *kholi*, the rat-hole where I live, and then I have to pay five to *Lala*"(281-282). The case is quite the same for Ganga Bai also, only the sustained hope to return back to their respective native homes manages to sustain them in this all pervading gloom of livelihood as we see in the answer of author's question, "When will you return at your village?" "Ganga Bai's shrinking black eyes drifted off to the lush green haze of fields far away" and she could only say "May Ram give us an abundant crop this time, And then, Bai, I will go back. Last year the flood ruined all our rice paddy" (282-283). She can be embarrassed by the narrator's mentioning of her 'friends', she could be apprehending the narrator's husband's thrashing the narrator after giving birth only daughters consecutively. The narrator cannot make her understand otherwise, instead she can only think as the narrator reports, "If my *seth* didn't beat me black and blue, then he must be an absolutely third-class *seth*" (283).

The contemporary work culture in industrial fields that also contribute to their downfall have also been highlighted by the author in a simple characteristic narrative fashion, devoid of any ornamental elaborative language that also helps to demonstrate the rough reality of the story. Ratti Bai informed the narrator about the mill's working system where the authorities kicked the workers after a couple of months because if a person stayed for full six months, the factory law is enforced and so the entire staff changed every few months and thus a worker was employed for hardly four months a year. Many working woman preferred to return to their villages as a result, some tried to sell vegetables and as they carried on without a license, they had to cough up some dough to 'feed' the police men of the corner. The totally wretched ones make their survival through begging, where some others resorted to simply prostitution, strolling up and down in the half-lighted areas of the suburbs near the railway stations and other places waiting for the potential customers to sell themselves. These customers were mainly comprising of milkmen coming from *Uttarpradesh* or homeless laborers and their wives staying back in their native villages or may be permanent bachelors who have only the streets to live, stroll and call as their home. With these kind of horrible introduction where these women have been strangled into a veritable nothingness, we are shown another gloomy picture where these two hospital workers had a quarrel over some trifling thing and it came to be known that the cause is the cotton pads, used for cleaning wounds or for the pregnant women and then are discarded as a rule. According to the city ordinance they had to be carefully burned. But it came to be known that these two *bais* would carefully remove the soiled cotton from the containers, clean it and roll it into bundle and take it their home and sell it to the cotton merchants and they sell it then to the mattress man who uses these germ filled cotton stuff for making cushions for the rich man's furniture! The author felt an absolute revulsion thinking that perhaps her own mattress is fluffed with these germ filled cottons and her daughter as delicate and fair as a flower lying on this pile of germs. But this dismal picture proposes to bring the picture of womanhood, who are subjected to such hardship that almost negated their self hood and brings them utterly in the brink of inhumanity in the sense of the term. The contemporary social condition, the lack of education, the utterly inhuman atmosphere, the persistent and un-bridged gap between the poor and rich, the inhumanity of industrial authorities etc., that take a toll on the womanhood are subjected to close scrutiny by the author and criticized. The picture is not of Ganga Bai or Ratti Bai, but the entire womanhood deprived of education, tortured by the contemporary social conditions and coming on the verge of ruin. They ceased to feel and cease to be anything which may be called human, in any sense of the term.

The story comes to its climax when the author asks, "Friendship is one thing, but what if something went wrong, Ratti bai, isn't it better to go to the hospital?" (285), pointing out their relationship with others and whoring that they had to do for the livelihood and Ratti Bai informed about the plenty of *bais* among them who are as good as any doctor to get rid of the fetus. When medicine does not work they use the fist and rubs method.

" 'Rubs' works perfectly during early pregnancy-like a doctor, absolutely first-class. The *bai* makes the woman lie down flat on the floor, then holding herself with a rope suspended from the ceiling or to a club. She stands on the woman's stomach and works it with her feet real well, until the 'operation' is performed. Or she makes the woman stand against the wall and after combing her own hair she ties it tightly into a top knot. Then, after dousing it with a fistful of mustard oil, she bangs it against the woman's legs like a ram. Certain young women used to hard labor don't

respond to this. Then it's time for 'fists'. After dipping her unscrubbed hands with their grimy nails in oils, she just pulls the throbbing life from the womb" (285-286).

The matter is that the success of the operation depends on the performing *bai*, but if the performing *bai* happens to be novice and inexperienced then sometimes one of the hands are broken or the neck severed and dangles out or worst of that even the woman's own body spills out. The result is that the woman upon whom this veritable operation is performed fell into a permanent prey for all kinds of sickness and diseases that suck out her life gradually. The wounds are never healed and she dies in the due course of the time. The author in his pure horror could only think, "Oh, god, such a dreadful punishment for bringing life into this world" (286) and she could visualize the tiny fingers and the drooping neck in a sea of blood. The end is sufficiently poignant and a slashing mockery on the dozing society as the nurse tells the trembling narrator that she must have had a dreadful nightmare. She tried to tell the sister as the sister stabbed her with a syringe of morphine to cool the disturbed nerves of the narrator,

"Sister, please, don't. Look there, the dead body covered with blood from Ganga Bai's rubs is writhing on the cross. Its cries are piercing my heart like a poker. The feeble sobs of the child dying in some gutter far away are pounding in my brain like a hammer. Don't give me morphine to dull my senses. Ratti Bai has to go to the polling station. The newly elected minister is her caste man. Her debt will be paid up with interest now. Ganga Bai will happily thrash rice. Please lift this mantle of sleep from my mind. Let me be awake... Let me be awake" (286-287).

The end is poignantly symbolic as the narrator's moving into past comes to a drastic present and she standing in front of the desk of the man looking like a clerk stamping on one of her fingers of her left hand with blue ink, Ratti Bai had admonished her to vote for their caste man but the ballot box of Ratti Bai's caste man rose. "...like a massive fist and come down with all its awesome power on my heart and mind" (287) and she could not drop her vote in that box. Thus as a writer Ismat Chughtai's task was doubly difficult first as a woman she has to break the bondage of traditional womanhood keeping reticence even in the face of utmost difficulties and tumultuous pressure because the tradition demands it and secondly as a woman coming from the orthodox Muslim family and writing a story like *Lihaf* or *The Quilt* in her maidenhood was certainly not an easy task. But she did and the present story is a somewhat chilling example of her achievement. The frankness of character portrayal here is a triumph of literature in the sense that it brings the true picture of life, just holding the mirror in front of our faces and we cannot escape from it. The three women characters, the three protagonists of the story make a bipolar axis of the story where the narrator is the one and the two others woman, Ratti Bai and Ganga Bai propose to make the other. One of the chief characteristics of the story is that through the supposed narrator is from an upper class family where the husband does not beat the wife for giving birth to female child, she has no snobbishness to deal with these hapless women, trampled and pierced by the society and its ruthless, indifferent dictums. Rather she has exposed them with all their difficulties, problems, little vices and above all their undying hope to be categorized in to household woman's role-thrashing rice in the native village, which the present circumstances denies them altogether. It is actually a struggle of existence for them where society helps them to come to a dwindling ruin. Thus the present story is a triumph in the sense that despite off all besmearing mud these women could still eye for home which the time and circumstances have virtually snatched from them, snatched for almost ever.

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