

## THE CONFLICT OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN FICTIONAL WOMEN

**Dr. Nayana Kashyap**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Field Marshal K.M. Cariappa College,

Madikeri, Karnataka 571201

### Abstract

In conventional societies like India's, for woman to liberate herself from the overbearing patriarchy and to find her own voice to express her thoughts, to invent her own ways to manage her 'self' is a long and grueling journey against female-subservience, self-sacrifice, and self-denial. Several stories of the well-known Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai and of renowned Indian writer in English Shashi Deshpande are concerned not only with social and psychological problems affecting middle-class Indian women, but bring about the complexity of their situations and their changing attitudes to and their abilities in confronting those situations. Their stories reveal the manifestation of woman's diplomatic ways of negotiating with her life in order to gain autonomy over her body and mind, to have the freedom to decide her own identity released from all conditionings, freeing her from sex-determined roles and performances, in spite of what she has to many times face as consequences. In many of the stories of Chughtai and Deshpande, it is evident that while for men power means the ability to impose one's self on another, for the female protagonists it is the ability to defend one's self from such imposition. The paper analyses the fictional characters of Chughtai's 'Ghungat' and Deshpande's 'An Antidote to Boredom' as harbingers of change who do not necessarily let their 'beings' become 'identities' dictated by some of the gender ideologies and hierarchies that are embedded in the very fabric of life.

“The powers of the weak are, finally, more powerful than we think and can only be ignored by the powerful at their peril.”

(Janeway 103)

A fervent call to women to achieve a “frank, free, independent expression, untrammelled by conventions and meek female acceptance of traditional roles” was given by the American feminist writer Kate Chopin in *The Awakening* way back in 1899 (Stern and Seymour 199). Even

before that, in 1879, Henrik Ibsen gave Nora in *A Doll's House* the courage to say 'No' to man's superior authority. By that time, Mary Wollstonecraft's writings had already made a considerable break from the then male bastion of 'independent thinking'. She advocated independence as the grand blessing of life, the basis of every virtue. However, woman's condition remained largely unchanged. For, to say 'No' to the demands of 'becoming' means to say 'Yes' to individual 'being'. This involves an undeterred courage to question the need to lead a life of an animal, constantly controlled and utilized by the phallogocentric system.

In conventional societies like India's, for woman to liberate herself from the overbearing patriarchy and to find her own voice to express her thoughts, to invent her own ways to manage her 'self' is a long and grueling journey against female-subservience, self-sacrifice, and self-denial. Several stories of the well-known Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai like 'Ghunghat', 'Lihaaf', 'Allah ka Fazl', 'Lajo' and 'Saas' and renowned Indian writer in English Shashi Deshpande's 'An Antidote to Boredom', 'The Inner Rooms', 'The Duel', 'The Day of the Golden Deer', and 'A Day Like Any Other' are concerned not only with social and psychological problems affecting middle-class Indian women, but bring about the complexity of their situations and their changing attitudes to and their abilities in confronting those situations. Their stories reveal the manifestation of woman's diplomatic ways of negotiating with her life in order to gain autonomy over her body and mind, to have the freedom to decide her own identity released from all conditionings, freeing her from sex-determined roles and performances, in spite of what she has to many times face as consequences. Such freedom to decide is called 'power' by Judith Lowder Newton, which she describes as "ability...both as achievement and competence and...as a form of self-definition or self-rule" (769).

Another important aspect that must be noted about Chughtai and Deshpande is that, much before Judith Butler wrote *Gender Trouble* (1990) attacking the central assumption of 'feminist theory' that there exists an 'identity of woman', the two writers appear to have cognized that identity, like gender, too is a construct; that the effects of patriarchy are not similar on women and the nature of oppression is varied according to distinct time and places. The protagonists in the stories by Chughtai and Deshpande, therefore, are different in the way they perceive their predicament and in their subversive action. They are indeed 'troubling gender' through their 'performance'. By acting as they want to and not merely in the way they are expected to, the protagonists suggest that there is no solid, universal gender falling in the given pattern of behaviour. This is akin to Butler's position that 'gender is performative'; that "constituted through the practice of performance, the gender 'woman' remains contingent and open to interpretation and 'resignification'" (2010 Web).

Some of the exceptional protagonists of Chughtai and Deshpande invent incredible strategies and approaches to exercise volition, to combat the master-culture. Silence, deceit, resignation, submission, laughter, argument, violence, madness and sometimes even coquetry in some rare instances like Chughtai's Lajo in 'The Homemaker', have been the tactful and effective means for woman to assert herself and to cleverly manipulate and manage the existing situation to her favour. The 'self' here, is not a uniform, universal self of 'woman', but women's manifold selves struggling in a world that restricts them to certain marital and social conditions. Although the women here are married and are living with their husbands, they practically lead a life sans companionship from the husbands. Rather, they receive their apathy and disregard that finally compel them to draw courage to stand out, to be atypical, to appropriate their voice and will to action. Rejecting the man-decreed ineptness and the voicelessness reserved for women, they forge ahead.

In many of the stories of Chughtai and Deshpande, it is evident that while for men power means the ability to impose one's self on another, for the female protagonists it is the ability to defend one's self from such imposition.

### **Ismat Chughtai**

Chughtai's 'Ghunghat' (The Veil) is analysed by Tahira Naqvi as a story of "a woman whose loyalty to the institution of marriage tragically consumes her entire life, a phenomenon deeply ingrained in the very fibre of our culture" (xvii). It is evident that marriage "consumes" the life of Goribi but that she is loyal to the institution of marriage is merely an apparent truth.

The story begins with the description of the "eighty year-old virgin" Goribi, who "had never known the touch of a man's hand" (Naqvi 1). What ensues is a vivid description of her beauty as a young girl. This forms the basis for her unfortunate and strange future life of marriage with Kale Mian.

A sensitive display of Kale Mian's disgruntled response to the beautiful bride speaks of the chauvinistic attitude in him that cannot accept the superiority of woman, even in her beauty. His "desire to grind in his blackness with her whiteness" describes his violent and defensive mood. Goribi's first night with her husband Kale Mian turns out to be a nightmare with the husband ordering her to lift her veil herself and show her face to him.

Goribi is one such girl grown up in the conventional family system instructed never to lift her veil on her own to any man. The only man authorized to do it is her husband. When Kale Mian asks her to lift her veil, the young Goribi 'rolls up like a ball' in shame and chagrin. The bride only cringes and drops her head leading to Kale Mian's angry disappointment who misunderstands her inaction for arrogance. As a result he abandons her at that instance and takes a train to Jodhpur. The second time Kale Mian returns home is when his mother falls seriously ill. The elders perceiving this as another opportunity, advise Goribi to simply obey her husband as her "freedom lies in doing as he says" (5).

At this point the story begins to take a turn with Goribi's silent protest to her husband's queer, authoritarian demand that she must lift her veil. In spite of Kale Mian's order and tearful plea to lift her veil, Goribi "does not stir" (5). She even risks the possibility of not seeing her husband thereafter, of which he threatens her and promptly follows.

Driven by the guilt of abandoning his wife, he wants to wash it off by seeing her before breathing his last. Even in his death bed he only wishes his relief from guilt rather than feeling a sincere repentance for his act of prejudice against Goribi.

Chughtai portrays the pitiful manner in which Goribi plays the role of 'a dutiful wife' till the end by an apparently obedient gesture of appearing before the husband in veil. Up to this juncture she follows the convention but exercises her volition and protest when it comes to lifting her veil. Her refusal to lift the veil even to save her husband's life reveals her absolute disconnection and detachment from him in her mind. Her mechanical shift from 'the bridal veil' to 'the veil of widowhood' symbolizes both her vulnerability and autonomous decision.

The society that forces her to this decision is indeed to blame as it fails to help her blossom as a woman entitled to her rights and respect. In a way, she becomes the agent of salvation to herself by putting an end to her saga of suffering and humiliation in deciding not to lift the veil knowing fully well that her husband was holding his breath only to see her face once.

## Shashi Deshpande

Shashi Deshpande's 'An Antidote to Boredom', as the title suggests, is the search of a young married woman of a more satisfying and 'lively' relationship with a young widower, than that she has with her excruciatingly unexciting and dispassionate husband. At the phase when she is gripped by a deep sense of boredom and dissatisfaction, she meets the other man at her son's school and comes to feel that life is more enjoyable and interesting in the amicable company of that man. She is caught, however, in a sense of guilt towards her son, though not towards her insensible and indifferent husband.

Deshpande focuses not merely on the decay of human relationship between the husband and wife but also on its possibilities, its implications for the wife. The inner life of the protagonist, her sensitivity, her urge to break free from the shackles of a dreary marriage is communicated effectively by the writer.

The woman here is a 'being' who seeks companionship, who wants to be noticed, who wants her husband to be more articulate in his emotions for her, if any. In a nutshell, she wants to 'live' life with him. But he is intolerably mechanical and unresponsive. This coldness in his reaction is what makes her feel no guilt about her friendship with the other man.

The real woman in her surfaces when she decides to spend a day with the other man in the absence of her husband, who is planning to go to Delhi. She decides to leave her son with his grandmother and spend a day with her widower friend in his apartment. She eagerly waits for that day to come and is unable to contain her excitement.

The story takes a sudden turn when the husband asks her to accompany him to Delhi to get rid of the boredom she often complained of. She almost shrieks a 'no', unable to bear the disappointment of not being able to implement her plan. Although she doesn't bother much about what he would think or feel, she is overcome by an intense sense of guilt that compels her to "let go" of her wish to spend a day with her friend.

Deshpande transforms an ordinary story of a disgruntled housewife into an astonishingly honest and realistic one by exploring the possibility of the wife's earnest wish to spend a day with another man for probably no other reason but to 'live' a day of companionship, care and mutual interest.

As Mohini Khot put it, "the reality of the social situation and that of a woman's existence in India is a plural one and the business of (writing) is to give...a taste of that plurality" (60). When Chughtai and Deshpande speak from and for the position of women's lived experiences, identities of fictional characters are infused with various and varying positional perspectives. The characters do not present an essential, unified identity but rather multiple, and contradictory existences and subjectivities that are constantly in flux within specific social and situational locations. In their bid to construct subjectivity, how the characters have to endeavor for agency within each social location or gender relation is evident. The characters that choose to restrict themselves to specific gendered roles are shown to live very limiting, sometimes tragic lives, while those who simultaneously juggle or break apart from the manifold and sometimes contradictory roles that are conferred on them are shown to live self-determining lives. They are harbingers of change who do not necessarily let their 'beings' become 'identities' dictated by some of the gender ideologies and hierarchies that are embedded in the very fabric of life.

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**Bio note:** Dr. Nayana K. S, with the pen name Nayana Kashyap, lives in Madikeri, a hill town in Coorg, Karnataka. With an MPhil and a PhD in English, she teaches at Field Marshal K.M. Cariappa College in Madikeri. Her first collection of poetry in Kannada *Mettilla Haadi* received Attimabbe Pratishtana Award. She has translated Pablo Neruda's *Memoirs* into Kannada and has translated five of Vaidehi's stories in *Gulabi Talkies* (Penguin, 2006) and her novella in *Five Novellas by Women Writers* (OUP, 2008). Besides these literary works, she has translated Swami Ramatirtha's *Gospel of Work* (2010) and Sri M's *Apprenticed to a Himalayan Master: a Yogi's Autobiography* (2013) into Kannada. Also, she is the co-editor of *Jewel in the Lotus* and *Wisdom of the Rishis* by Sri M.