

Familial Plight of Women: An Insight into Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt and Other Stories"

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Abstract : This study provides an insight into women's status and their plight in relation to the cultural constructs of a patriarchal society as depicted in Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt and Other Stories". It attempts to understand the precarious situation of women like Sanobar, Shabnaz, Goribi, Begum Jan, and Saralabehan in the patriarchal society. Patriarchal norms, religion and its ideology, culture with its constructs have assigned roles like widow, mother, wife and spinster with in the family and exploited and marginalized them.

IndexTerms – Gender, Patriarchy, cultural constructs and roles of women as wife, spinster and maid

"WHERE IS SHE?

ACTIVITY / PASSIVITY,

SUN/MOON

CULTURE/NATURE,

DAY/NIGHT,

.....,

WHEN THEY AWAKEN FROM AMONG THE DEAD,

FROM AMONG THE WORDS,

FROM AMONG THE LAWS.....?"

- Helen Cixous, "Stories" Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader, Ed. David Lodge. p. 263

Majority of the societies in the world are patriarchal. Hence woman is an embodiment of woe symbolically and epitomizes pain and suffering wo/man, is a mere extension of man. In any phallocentric society women have been consistently marginalized, exploited by double standards of laws, customs, culture, religion, family, language and society. This subjugated position of woman is an offshoot of the cultural construct of an androcentric society and not by nature.

With the arrival of Feminism in 1960's and subsequently gender studies, cultural constructs that have been rooted for centuries in human civilization have been reviewed and deconstructed. In modern era, women are realising their subordination and exploitation meted out to them from centuries. Women suffered were subjugated and oppressed in all the spheres dwelling in a patriarchal society which apparently is in tune with religion and culture. With the passage of time women have gained the knowledge, turned self-reliant from their nightmarish experiences which in fact paved way for awareness and increased their strength by suffering patiently. She is rediscovering her position, status, identity, liberty, equality and truth as a rebel against patriarchal society. This awakening of women is shaping for the future's new-world.

In this Masculine world, men have converted the history of human civilization into a series of subtle and systematic attempts to acquire absolute control on women. A woman has been converted into a slave, marginalized and subordinated to a larger extent by various, imposed identities like wife, widow, motherhood, slave and modes like religious dogmas, purdah etc.. It is clear in the words of Beauvoir:

"No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and which is described as feminine."(Simone de Beauvoir, p12.)

Marriage is an institution which binds man and woman together, enables to know each other physically, psychologically socially, economically to lead a better life since both are incomplete and interdependent in nature. But Chauvinistic males have made it a mechanism to subordinate the women. It is religious and too ritualistic that makes woman to worship her husband who becomes a lord and living God for his wife.

Ismat Chughtai's short stories interrogate and puts-forth the subjugation and sufferings of woman. Though sincere and obedient to the masculinised institution of marriage women are always at the receiving end. For instance in the story "The Veil," Goribi adhere to the norms of marriage. Kale Mian, the husband of Goribi has an "unusual sensitive about his inky complexion"(Ismat Chughtai P.9) and Goribi's 'silk ness' and 'translucence' are transformed in him into demonic forces which keeps him away from his wife. Lifting the veil by herself as a bride is a sin and she repudiates the command of her husband to lift the veil. As a result, though being married remains a virgin and pure like an "awkward mass of while marble."

As a result she lives by herself without care and protection, remains alone in the house for long years. Finally, Kale Mian returns burdened with disease, waiting to be died. Goribi, at last lifts her veil only to transfer into the other white veil of widow. The narrator puts-forth the situation succinctly in: "Goribi calmly sat down on the floor beside his bed, smashed her glass bangles against the bedpost, and instead of the bridal veil, pulled the white veil of widowhood over her hand." (Ismat Chughtai P.5) Contrary to the patriarchal norms of marriage, though Goribi suffers externally in the eyes of common men, she negates the patriarchal institution of marriage. Her feminine virtue disrupts patriarchal operations, by the internalization of the norms. Her silence and femininity virtue causes fissures in a general hegemony achieved by patriarchal ideology. As a woman Goribi occupies ambivalent position in the patriarchal world of ideologies. She negotiates her identity neither by breaking free from the feminine claustrophobic existence, nor by endorsing the prevailing ideology. Gorbi in the story is her rescuer and her exploiter. She is both a victim and gainer in her own drama symbolized through her veil.

In another story 'The Quilt,' Begum Jan, is married to Nawab Sahib, a wealthy man of 'noblesse oblige.' The story brings out the frustrations of a house wife, whose husband always confines himself to the public life, neglecting his wife, who is dependent to lead her life. The narrator a young girl says: "deposited her in the house with all his other possessions and promptly forgot about her." (Ismat Chughtai P.8) Depressed Begum Jan begins to find her sexual solace in the companionship of a female servant. The story comes to a close with the narrator opining Its apparent here that Ismat is pointing that sisterhood or lesbianism are might be the plausible ways for women to remain as human beings first and then a women.

In the Story "The Eternal Vine", Rukhsana, marries Uncle Shaujaat, who marries twice and become the mother of two children and a widow in the very early years of her youth. In her autumnal years, she turns to be more beautiful and attractive while her husband withers, turning old. She becomes a silent a sufferer and restless, being humiliated by her sister-in-laws and old husband. After the death of her husband, she is left with plenty of years to live under the white veil, being widow, taking care of her two children. Her life becomes like an eternal vine, as the narrator says: "The Amarbel grew and flourished; the trunk of the Banyan tree was hollowed out; its branches became dry and limp, its leaves fell ... the vine crawled away to a nearby tree which was alive and green." (Ismat Chughtai P.54) Being a widow, Rukhsana becomes hapless, grief and fear stricken, desolate with her huddled children, thinking of her bleak future in this male dominated world. Kamala Das's lines are apt in this connection from:

"The Beginning of Autumn:
She floats in her autumn
Yellowed like a leaf
And free." (Kamala Das:My story p.177.)

However, marriage subjugates and enslaves woman and it leads her towards the death as Simon De Beauvoir puts forth:

"aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose." (Simone de Beauvoir, np. 9) Rukhsana ironically resists against the patriarchal norms. Shujaat marries her to keep her as his servant and to get fulfilled all his desires. When she is in her blossom, he begins to count his days. In his old age he becomes the dependent and suspects her behaviour through an ironic title the "Eternal vine" The story points that a woman can't leave without a man in sexist culture.

The "Sacred Duty" is a story about generation gap while the parents think that it is their sacred duty to marry off their children, the children decide to choose their partners. The story "Sacred Duty," brings us face to face with secularism as a way of life in contemporary India. The younger generations being rationale and wise, no longer care whether they are Muslims or Hindus. Tashar Trivedi and Samina marry each other, irrespective of their religion. It provides an ideal view of marriage, where only pure love binds man and woman together. As Tashbar and Salima express in their letter: "We have no religion. All religions are gifts from the same Bhagwan, they're for all mankind." (Ismat Chughtai p. 37) Writer provides an ideal view of what marriage should be against marriage as a patriarchal and a partial institution.

Spinster, female child, widow and purdah Etc., are the cultural identities, conventional customs and the roles to be played and followed by women in the phallocentric society. Its roots are laid in religious orthodoxy and in its morals, which are made and recreated by man to control and subjugate the woman according to their whims. In Islam, from childhood to youth and from youth to woman hood, from woman hood to wife and then wife to death including their role as spinster, wife, and widow, should strictly follow the purdah or veil. It should cover from head to toe and should not be unleashed in front of man except her husband. It is religiously ordained and injected into their blood. Gender persecution begins at the birth itself for a female child. Patriarchal norms are so strong that a woman is forced to imbibe the norms even before they mature. They acquire these norms and gets it internalized. A typical instance of culture over nature!

In the story" The Veil," Goribi remains chaste but leads cloistered life within the four walls. She believes in religious orthodoxy, without doubt. Even after the command of her husband, she refuses to lift the veil. At the end she lifts the veil only to wear the white veil, never to open till her death knell sounds. The veil keeps the women closed like a precious commodity that is used and kept safely till it wears out.

Spinster is another role in the society to be played by a woman in accordance to androcentric culture. In the story "Morsel", we come across Saralabehan, being a nurse who struggles and strives for the men's better health, irrespective of the gender discriminations and remains unmarried. Society considers spinster as a cursed women and unholy. Sarala is an educated, economically independent woman who lives in Chal of Bombay. In spite of match makers presence and attempts Saralabehan remains a spinster. Under patriarchal society spinsters and widows are considered as unholy, non-pious and are debarred from all functions.

Wife, maid servants were assigned the role of slave in the patriarchal society which exploited, oppressed, abused, and reduced them to the dust in the working spheres of women within the domestic world of a family. Men treat them as their machines and objects, having dominated over them from aeon as: "she [woman] was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused." (Mary Wollstonecraft, p 12)

The story "Lingering Fragrance" (The Quilt and Other stories, Ismat Chughtai) studies the plight of maid servants in the mahal, where servants are used as objects, made them to be workaholic but are devoid of rights and payments and other facilities, as Haleema says "such delights were ephemeral". Haleema is used and molested as if she is a desire fulfilling object and never allowed to get the status of the familial member. They all work day and night like bonded labours in the mahal and also as whores.

The story 'The Mole' (Isamat Chughtai's "The Quilt and Other Stories") explores the ideological investment of class in the construction of women's subjectivity within the prevailing patriarchal ideologies. Simultaneously, it also investigates the internalization of patriarchal norms by men and women and their relative imprisonment in ideology. Chaudhary, a painter by profession, picks up Rani a "Sprightly, illiterate chit of a girl from the filthy gutter to sit for his master piece". (p.115) As Rani becomes a part of politics of representation; she oscillates between the pit and the pedestal. As Chaudhary's muse, she refuses to be captured on the canvas, evoking patriarchal fantasies: "One day her complexion was inky the next he sees early morning vermillion bursting from it, and then suddenly her body would resemble litac clouds at night, while at other times he could definitely see the blue of a viper's skin shining through"(116) As a woman, she is seen as a charming seductress, as has been brought out through the brazen exhibition of her mole: "Did you see this black mole? so, you are looking, Chaudhary"(P. 117) Chaudhary gets attracted to her unabashed display of sexuality. However, before the picture could be completed, Rani disappears. Her sudden departure gives rise to suspicion and Chaudhary becomes the victim, instead of victimizer: "Chaudhary's life was reduced to a darkened hole. It seemed that the world wanted to roast and devour him"(P.119) Under patriarchal society, Rani is poor and belongs to lower class of the society. She is been looked as a seductress and also exploited by others. Through an apt title "The Mole" the story captures the relationship of art and artist, man and woman, society and its norms.

In the story "The Rock" from The Quilt and Other Stories, Shehnaz and Shabnam bring out the play of patriarchal power and passivity. Bhai restrains Shehnaz to household duties. He is attracted to Shabnam. After the second marriage even he loses interest in shabnam. But both negate the power of responsibility to be followed by being not beautiful and attractive to their husbands remaining passive they suffer. Through an ironic title "The Rock" the story points that male is like a rock without any feeling for a woman.

Servants like Haleema, Nanyab Babu, Sanobar from the story "Lingering Fragrance" project the existing patriarchal hegemony through class consciousness. They are the scape goats of power, who turn to be slave, and live by doing house hold duties and sexual duties on bed at nights. Servants always suffer physically and sexually. On the other hand it's their poverty which leads them to indulge in such activities which the powerful patriarchal power makes use of.

Maid-servants, poor, orphans and other lower people are always remain subordinated and subjected to sexual, and domestic harassment. Women especially become double victims. The interaction between patriarchal ideology and material conditions and the manner in which men and women from different classes are inscribed in patriarchal ideology is mind boggling. Women of lower class are constructed as the "other" of the upper cast. Hence the binary oppositions of patriarchal and material conditions such as inner/outer, caste/class, public/private, male/female, material/spiritual, makes them suffer perennially in the society.

However gender persecution is found in each and every corner of the existing place of human being and it is stamped in this phallogocentric society. Woman is the sufferer and inferior to man in every aspect. Thus it is evident from Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt and Other Stories" that woman no doubt are ill-treated and subjugated by an androcentric world. Ismat Chughtai through memorable creations ironically and subtly laughs at patriarchal ideologies and subverts them.

All the women whom we see in the novel Blasphemy or The Quilt and Other Stories are marginalized and suffer the exploitation, in all walks of life, viz, cultural, religious, class, colour differences and so forth. In family and society patriarchal norms remain to be functional from beginning to end. This becomes a significant factor for analyzing the position of women because their subordination has been primarily expressed in the form of patriarchal dominance. Invariably the husband becomes the head of the family, makes the decisions, rules over all others in the family through sexist ideology expressed in religion. The husband takes the position of demi-god, who has to be worshipped. Religious ideology that women are unworthy to practice celibacy and her creation is for man's station of sexual desire and safety has enabled them to exploit sexually. But Ismat Chughtai's women resist such domination and emerge victorious.

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