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EPISTEMOLOGY OF 'THE QUILT': ISMAT CHUGHTAI AND ANTI-COLONIAL DESIRE

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ABSTRACT

India, as shown by many recent scholars, was a land of *ars erotica.* No sexual behaviour was denounced in this land of great diversity. However, this frankness and liberal attitude was disrupted when the Imperialist forces from the Great Britain emerged as the colonial masters. Victorian ideas on sexuality were smuggled in and the frankness was replaced by a sense on overt morality and prudery. Keeping this in mind, the paper would engage in a discussion on the works of Ismat Chughtai to show how Chughtai subverted the heteronormative sexual order through subtle yet vehement projection of female sexuality.

Key words: Colonialism, Victorian, Prudery, Sexuality, Homoerotic

Ismat Chughtai, the Urdu writer of fierce feminist sentiments, has never got the accolades that have been bestowed upon her contemporaries- especially male contemporaries. She is remembered as a controversial writer who did not hide anything in her narratives; and hence irked her contemporary society in all possible manners. I am of the opinion that it is high time to re-evaluate the works of Ismat Chughtai by foregrounding her unflinching anti-hegemonic sentiments. Chughtai was a Feminist who challenged the status-quos and prudery of the Indian culture shaped up during the Victorian era. Her collection of short stories raised such a storm all across the country that she even had to face the court of law. The primary charge labelled against her was that of obscenity as the stories contained undertones of homoeroticism. Though she was able to avoid the fate of Oscar Wilde[1], the mere fact that she was reprimanded for projecting non-normative sexual behaviour is a reflection of an overtly puritanical society. Keeping this in mind, this paper would explore the reasons behind the storm of controversy that raged after the publication of her short story "The Quilt" (originally known as *Lihaf*. The projection of sexuality and desire in 'The Quilt' is not only non-normative but also anti-colonial in spirit. Before moving into further analysis of the text, an interrogation must be undertaken to understand the attitudes regarding sexuality during the period.

In his path breaking book *Decolonising the Mind* Ngugi Wa Thingo writes wrote how Language can act as a greater weapon than bullet for imposing the colonisers' hegemonic ideologies. When English language was smuggled in to educate the barbaric natives, a cultural overhaul was most notably anticipated because language never comes alone, it comes with its fare share of cultural trappings. Suppressive sexual sermon, which started to blow all across the Victorian England, embraced Indian culture as well and transformed the land of *ars*

[1] Oscar Wilde went through an epic trial under the allegation of spreading obscenity through his plays. He was finally executed with death sentence under article 377.

erotica into *scintia sexualis.* In the words of Michel Foucault, "...modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex, merely through the interplay of prohibitions that referred back to one another: instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence. Censorship" (Foucault, 17). How fascinatingly true Foucault's words seem when we look at what happened to Chughtai! Under the rubric of propagating Indian culture (Bharatiya sangskriti) this Victorian prudishness is still reified and upheld. Those who cannot stand any form of frank discourse on sexuality must dig deep into the treasure trove of literature and culture of ancient and medieval India only to enlighten themselves that there were no shortage of erotic as well as homoerotic representation. The prudishness that was imported during the colonial period contributed greatly in the evaporation of the frankness that previously surrounded sexuality. The very fact that Chughtai brought into forefront the idea of *eros*- especially being a woman—radically destabilised the way a heteropatriarchal society sought to function.

As suggested earlier ancient and medieval Indian societies had very few problems with sexual frankness. The sculptures of Khajuraho and Vatsyan's Kamasutra bear testimony to this fact. It is Christianity, however, which has always had tremendous problem with sexual frankness. In an article entitled "Christianity's Rocky Relationship with Sex" Emma Mcfarnon writes:

> The puzzle is all the greater because the central figure in this religion, Jesus, had very little to say about sex. True, he insisted on monogamy in marriage, and on no divorce (both insistences being new to his own Jewish culture, and rather shocking) – but beyond that, virtually nothing. Indeed, one story about him, in John's Gospel, is a clear rebuke to those who want to be punitive about sex. He was teaching in the Jerusalem Temple, where the Dome of the Rock now stands, when a group of men dragged before him a woman accused of adultery. They asked Jesus whether they should stone her to death, the usual Jewish penalty for adultery. All he said was: "He that is without sin, let him cast the first stone." And when they'd all shuffled off looking sheepish, all he said to her was that she should go off and sin no more. It's a story of forgiveness and mercy, both of which are themes that run through Jesus's teaching, and which might be thought to be at the heart of Christian teaching. (para5)

The oblique erasure of the word sex in Christian discourse is baffling. Hence, the pleasure phobic Evangelicals in the nineteenth century—working in unison with the overtly normative cultural stakeholders— England disapproved all kinds of sexual behaviour that did not fall under the purview of monogamous, reproductive sexual life. It is even more baffling if we read this phenomenal suppression of sexuality in contrast to pre-Christian cultures. Even the religious discourses of pre-Christian civilizations accommodated sexuality (or *eros*). Why, then, a religious temple would contain architecture that would be termed inflammatory if we are to go by today's standards? Greek culture was also not shy of talking about *eros.* In Plato's Symposium Eryximachus proposes to talk on eros: "isn't it an awful thing! Our poets have composed hymns in honor of just about any god you can think of, but has a single one one of them given one moment's thought to the god of love (eros), ancient and powerful as he is?" (32). The recognition of *eros* as ancient and powerful god marks the fact that Greek civilization had no problems with talking about intimacy and desire. Moreover, Unlike the other cultures, ancient Indian women were also allowed greater respect and freedom. All these facts taken together, we get a picture of a society that did not judge anyone under moral codes. However, as the stronger fluid of British culture started to sip in and dominate the weaker fluid of Indian culture, the indigenous tendencies gave away to a more uniform, homogenized understanding of society.

Ismat Chughtai, who most probably grew up breathing this stifling air of Victorian prudery, subverted the conventional views regarding sexuality by projecting alternative forms of sexulaity rather than heterosexual, monogamous and reproductive sexuality. Chughtai's achievement is even more astounding as she wrote at a time when

no constructed social movement started on gender equality in India. Her act of projecting transgression of desire is, therefore, an act of subtle subversion of the Colonial ideology as well. Ruth Vanita wanted to rethink "gender and sexuality to liberate humans into developing different kinds of family and living arrangements" (8). Chughtai's works, in the same manner, allow us to think beyond the normative understanding of Love and Marriage and introduce us with an alternative spectrum of desire and identity.

'The Quilt', published in the year 1942, created tremendous controversy for its homoerotic undertones and unabashed projection of female desire. It narrates the experience of a young girl who went on to live with Begum Jaan, an elderly woman whose 'illicit' love affair with her chambermaid, Rabbu, becomes the main subject matter of this story. Begum Jaan was married to a man who had "a strange hobby" (Chughtai, 16) of keeping "an open house for students—young, fair, slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him" (Chughtai, 16). The question that remains with me is whether Begum Jaan's husband used to practice sodomy and had desire for men. The apathy of him about his wife is also evident in the fact that "he tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her. The frail, beautiful begum wasted away in anguished loneliness" (Chughtai, 16). However, this wasteful life of Begum Jaan was transformed into a pleasurable one when Rabbu came into her life. Though not beautiful, Rabbu, the maid servant, had complete access to Begum Jaan's body. She rubbed her back, slept with her and enjoyed such great freedom that all other maid servants were jealous of her: "Rabbu and Begum Jaan were the subject of their gossip during leisure hours" (Chughtai, 19). The hints of homoeroticism become rather apparent at the end when the narrator, much to her horror, experiences the act of lovemaking:

> There was that peculiar noise again. In the dark Begum Jaan's quilt was once again swaying like an elephant. "Allah! Ah!..." I moaned in a feeble voice. The elephant inside the quilt heaved up and then sat down. I was mute. The elephant started to sway again. I was scared stiff. But I had resolved to switch on the light that night, come what may. The elephant started shaking once again, and it seemed as though it was trying to squat. There was the sound of someone smacking her lips, as though savouring a tasty pickle. Now I understood! Begum Jaan had not eaten anything the whole day. And Rabbu, the witch, was a notorious glutton. She must be polishing off some goodies. Flaring my nostrils I inhaled deeply. There was only the scent of attar, sandalwood and hena, nothing else. (Chughtai, 19)

These lines are erotic at worst and provocative at best. The narrative of the innocent girl seems to magnify the act of women-women lovemaking even further. The recurring motif of the elephant perhaps suggests the bestiality that women also have in the form of sexual desire. The projection of homoerotic desire is something that the readers were not greatly accustomed with. Chughtai was able to give her readers a cultural shock by positing alterity in the form of female sexual desire. The relationship between Begum Jaan and Rabbu undoubtedly challenges the paradigm of 'compulsory heterosexuality' that was smuggled in by the colonial masters. The erotic relationship that develops between Begum Jaan and Rabbu essentially remains the 'epistemology of the closet (or blanket)'.

However, the contemporary readers found the text extremely offensive because of its frank depiction of same-sex desire which was considered 'unnatural' in this era On the other hand, the expression of Begum Jaan's physical desire might also have surprised and shocked readers. In a heteropatriarchal[2] society women are often denied the freedom to express their sexual desire. Libido is considered to be an exclusive masculine privilege. Begum Jaan's burning desire to culminate sexually is indeed a point of deviation from the normative view on sexuality. In this respect we may refer to Adriene Rich who, in turn, refers to Kathleen Gough in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality". According to Gough men deny women their privilege to enjoy

[2] A society that privileges heterosexual males.

sexual pleasure. This invisible power vested on men denies women their essential biological demand "by means of clitorydectomy and infibulations; chastity belts; punishment, including death, for female adultery; punishment, including death, for lesbian sexuality; psychoanalytic denial of the clitoris..." (Rich, 638). If we understand the fact that the desire to culminate sexually is as natural in women as that in men, the fate meted out to Begum Jaan is nothing but tragic. She is treated like a passive object by her husband who doesn't even bother to care about her desire. Finding rejection from her husband Begum Jaan had to find ways to satisfy herself and the culmination with Rabbu is fulfilment of herself.

Hence, the discourse attempted in this story is problematic in two ways: a) it projects women's desire to sexually fulfil herself in an extremely candid manner, b) it projects same-sex lovemaking that was not only considered taboo but also was a crime in the court of law because of the presence of the article 377[3]. Written during the colonial period this story subverts the sexual narratives that dominated the age. Since the Christian missionaries did not approve of anything but the monogamous, reproductive social life, the natives, brought up under the colonial tutelage, started considering the same as well. The rich discourse that prevailed on sexuality has been utterly overlooked by the scholars with Puritanical mindset.

Female characters in Chughtai's stories refuse to buckle down to the standards set by the prevailing discourses on sexuality. Rani, in "The Mole", is another case in point. Rani, a teenage girl, is used as a model by a painter called Chodhury. She is frivolous, extremely sexy and not at all shy of her circumstances. She teases the painter by showing a mole near her breast. She does not stop here but narrates a story where she had shown her mole to Ratna, a young. The conversation that ensues between the two is not only hilarious but also tremendously subversive:

> 'Ratna? How does Ratna know where you have moles?'
>
> 'I showed it to him', she began to stroke the mole.
>
> 'You did? You...you showed the mole to Ratna?'
>
> Choudhury's blood began to boil again...
>
> 'Ah...well...wah! What could I do if he saw it?'
>
> 'How...how could he see the mole when you, you...' Choudhury's teeth clattered like door loose on its hinges.
>
> 'I was bathing when he...' ....
>
> 'Yes, I was bathing in the pond. I was scared to go alone, so I took him along lest someone came there without warning.'

The shock that Choudhury encountered while listening to this narrative of Rani is something similar to what Chughtai's readers often do while reading her storis. She is unabashedly frank and honest in her depiction of female sexuality. Her refusal to be shy (like a typical woman) is indeed a huge point of sedition. In a culture where women (especially Muslim women) are forced to live behind veils, Chughta's attempt is indeed laudable. The courage that she was able to show has rarely been shown by women. Challenging hegemonic structures do not always need overt commitment. One can challenge any hegemonic formation in the subtlest of manner imaginable. Chughtai's short stories, like "The Quilt", do so brilliantly by projecting a social paradigm that is undoubtedly subversive, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist in spirit.

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[3] This article of IPC is used to execute anyone for 'unnatural' sexual behaviour. The idea of unnaturalness includes homosexuality as well.

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