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HARMFUL HAVENS: HOME AND THE HOUSEHOLD IN ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S "THE QUILT"

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ABSTRACT

The public - private dichotomy remains an often used but ill-defined and perhaps even an artificial and extraneous demarcation. Notwithstanding this, it persists tenaciously with all its imprecisions in most of our communications. However, the two spheres – the public and private - do not exist as co-equals in terms of the attention and respect they receive. The public sphere has undoubtedly been the sure conqueror here with the private sphere being the poor also-ran. If the office, hospital, church, university etc. are viewed as places of serious work, colleagues and professional relations, the home is a place for comfort, kinship and familial relations. The affairs of the former are deemed important and the identities therein are considered worthy of veneration; but the affairs of the latter are regarded as being inconsequential and trivial. The identities that inhabit the private space, even though they be in a professional capacity, are commonly misjudged as shallow. While the invisible torpor of the public figure is seldom criticised, the blatantly visible labour of the private sphere goes without its due dignity. The little attention that the private sphere has received has been confined to only a few of its myriad aspects, chiefly the family, and that too as a ground for better performance in the public sphere. That the strongest criterion for the evaluation of the private sphere is its contribution to the public sphere simply shows the extent to which the latter dominates the former.

In this paper, based on a study of Ismat Chughtai's controversial short story "The Quilt", my endeavour is to understand this nebulously delineated territory of the private space. I ask what is the difference between marriage and cohabitation? Should marriage only be defined in terms of sexual relations, particularly those leading to procreation? Can celibacy not be the foundation of a fulfilling private life? In examining the silent, non-violent abuses in the private domain of the protagonist, I see her both as a victim and a victimiser. I read this story as a depiction of a sordid and dysfunctional domesticity, one which is born out of a denigration private sphere by the public sphere.

Keywords: Public Sphere, Private Sphere, Domesticity, Confinement.

Introduction

Ismat Chughtai's controversial short story *Lihaaf*, translated as "The Quilt" by M. Asaduddin makes for a gripping read, but leaves a rather unpalatable flavour. What the writer has encapsulated in the brief span of a few pages and in few simple words, is a matter that is weighty enough which stubbornly refuses any neat explication and lingers teasingly in the mind as an unsoothed twinge, causing much to the discomfiture of the reader. That the story lends itself readily to an array of interpretations is a testimony to the appeal of the work and the craft of the writer. However, most of the readings of the work have been from a feminist position. In this paper, my endeavour is to look at The Quilt from a different perspective - that of the private sphere.

The Story

"The Quilt", essentially, is a retrospective narration of a childhood trauma. The now adult narrator recounts an experience from her days as a child with one Begum Jaan whose quilt "is etched in [her] memory like a scar left by a blacksmith's brand" [Chughtai 36]. However, the predominant image in the story is not of the child but of the seemingly benevolent and beautiful aristocratic – by – marriage Begum Jaan. Born to poor parents, Begum Jaan ascended to higher class with her marriage to a Nawaab much older in age, having an impeccable social reputation, interest in young men for whom he kept an open house. His beautiful young bride did not interest him howsoever. In Chughtai's words, "Having married Begum Jaan he tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her." The Begum, though she enjoyed innumerable material comforts, had a train of servants to attend to her, was not allowed outside the house, and passed many years in "anguished loneliness" before she was rescued from her morose state by an homoerotic relationship with one of her attendants Rabbu. The Begum became dependent on Rabbu and her carnal services to the point of addiction. In the absence of Rabbu, she grew so listless that she exploited the narrator who was placed under the seemingly benevolent guardianship of the Begum while her mother was away. How does this narration

of abuse, loneliness, confinement, entrapment, paedophilia and unhealthy dependence warrant an examination from the perspective of the private sphere?

Historical perspective

That abuse of Private sphere was common in erstwhile less democratic world when Harems of the Kings were guarded by faithful eunuchs who were considered safe to be relied upon, to provide information and prevent spread of unsuitable gossip to outside world of public sphere.¹ Practice of polygamy supported by some and stated to be not against God's ordinance.² But it is against the ordinance of economic happiness and against the dictates of a happier social order. All those who run foul of that ordinance today, pay for it, with hypertension not only in themselves but also in their women and, only too often, painful inadequacies suffered by the children of this arrangement. In Nigeria, as in many other African countries, reports reveal a "shockingly high" level of violence against women. Domestic violence which is defined as a confrontation between family or household members that typically involves physical harm, sexual assault, or fear of physical harm is common in both urban and rural families in Nigeria³.

The public and the private spheres are terms which are used frequently but without a clear definition. Part of the difficulty in defining these comes from the many multiple and overlapping meanings ascribed to them. A rough understanding of the public can be that behaviour which occurs under the full gaze of others, while the private can be thought as that behaviour which occurs in relative isolation, one that is relatively shielded from both observation and judgement. The former connotes visibility, collectivity, democratic spirit, reason, institution and consensus. The latter, on the other hand is understood in terms of invisibility that facilitates an intimacy in which individuality is surfaced and articulated. Not just are the delineations of these terms imprecise, the dichotomous division which they purvey is even more misleading, for no matter how the two are defined, there is no empirical evidence of any sphere of human life being either purely public or purely

private. The porous boundary between the two is far more porous than has been acknowledged. This fluidity between the public and the private is witnessed in the histories of the institution of the family and the home. Phillipe Aries, one of the foremost historians of the family and lifestyles says that as late as the medieval period, the predominant style of living in both the east and the west was congregational.⁴ Echoing Aries, Kumar says:

The medieval household mixed up young and old, men and women, servants and masters, friends and family, intimates and strangers. It was open, almost like a café or a pub, to the comings and goings of a multitude of diverse types of people, intent upon a bewildering variety of tasks concerned with business or pleasure.

Till the decline of the Middle Ages, the public private existed as distinct but not separate entities in fact a momentous development marking out the modern age from the medieval ages is that in the modern times the public and the private have been increasingly and rigidly separating out oneself from the other (McKeon)⁵. The confused commingling of the one into the other, which perhaps is both natural and salubrious, has been hampered by tight compartmentalisation. Such a compartmentalisation is first witnessed in the upper class homes. Here a separation occurred between the status, function and accessibility of husband and wife, parents and children, masters and servants, and also between what is deemed work and non – work. With such a demarcation, conviviality contracted, as the “interstitial space” between different activities and people contracted. This was also a time where the public, defined as the collective will born of reason directed towards a shared explicitly stated goal, began to be valued over and above the private defined as the individual’s retreat into the subjective freedom from the burden of the public gaze. A conformist attitude to society was begotten by this – a conformity with the rigidly demarcated positions in the society.

Reaction of Society

A reaction against such a staunch endorsement of the public surfaced with the

romantics, who tried to resuscitate the realm of the private from denigration. They understood the private sphere in terms of privacy, which they defined as intimacy with the self, or deep soulful introspection. And the home was the cradle of such privacy. The hope was that the ills of the rigidly segregated and compartmentalised society could be set straight from home. This was perhaps the first major theoretical attempt at understanding the almost un-interrogated concept of the home. Home has evoked great emotional response from the ordinary people, but academically it has remained somewhat obscure. However, in our contemporary times the notion of home has begun to attract scrutiny. The idea of home suffered under the first spell of industrialisation, in the eighteenth century. The attitude to the home here, under the staunch advocacy of the public was negative. The home was understood only as domesticity, tending to which came at the cost of the more valued public life. The home thus was seen as enslaving. However, societies in the advanced stages of industrialisation have witnessed a new love for retreat of the home. At the turn of twenty first century Corporates have realized the importance of home and have gone all the way out to package work space requirements to be met through technological assist from the cosy confines of home by permitting work from home facility to employee. The housing bubble of America is a recent example. This love stems from a view of the home as being enabling and comforting. Saunders in *A Nation of Home Owners* says:⁶

[Home] is a place with which individuals can most readily identify and it easily lends itself to the symbolic expression of personal identity. It offers both physical and psychological shelter and comfort. It is the place where the self can be expressed outside of social roles and where the individual can exert autonomy away from the coercive gaze [of the public]. It is the private realm in an increasingly public and intrusive world. For many of us, its integrity is of utmost value.

Analysis of Malady

What makes the home truly private are privacy, intimacy and domesticity. The home depicted in *The Quilt* is an epitome of pervert domesticity, intimacy and privacy. The intimacy between Begum Jaan was sexual and compulsive and not emotional; domesticity, did not engage the Begum as they had a retinue of domestic workers; and finally privacy, understood in the sense of the Romantics, as deep calm slow self thinking about the conditions and desires of the self, that is honest introspection, was absent. This is why it was a harmful heaven, one in which the private sphere was vitiated.

Every human act has a public and private face. It can neither be totally private nor totally public. The marriage between the Nawab and the Begum was possibly no marriage at all because it only had a public or societal face and was non-existent on the emotional front. The reasons for getting married for both of them, but particularly for the Nawab were societal or public. The Nawab was constrained by the society in finding conjugal comfort in same sex partners, and also in being an elderly unmarried man, a figure the society does not take very kindly to. The Begum on the other hand, possibly overestimated the charms of the material comfort and status that would accrue to her by being the Nawab's wedded wife. So this is an example of the public encroaching and constraining the private, much in the same fashion as Mark Twain speaks of schooling interfering with the education.

Symbiotic Relationship of two Spheres

So what could explain such a dysfunctional plight of the private sphere? The reasons could possibly lie in too strict a marking out of one realm from the other, and not acknowledging their rather overlapping and symbiotic influence on each other. If either of the spheres is guarded or fortified too much against the other, it loses its reflective nature. So too much distance from the public is detrimental to the private realm just as too great a distance from the private is also detrimental to the public sphere. To quote Schwartz⁷

The political constitutions of liberal societies depend on distinction between public and private spheres of life, and they deem that preservation and enhancement of private life to be the goal of state action. Liberal political theorists see public life as a sphere of deliberation and coercion needed to protect private life, the sphere of spontaneous feelings and action the pursuit of happiness.

Many non-liberal political theorists have also worked on public and private spheres of life and they define it on many different lines. Hegel for example sees private as a sphere of material necessity as well as of spontaneity and public as a sphere of freedom where deliberation and coercion were not felt as such because they were performed in light of higher public knowledge.⁸

Arendt in an example of modern view differed from classical theorists and argued that many activities of voluntary associations should be considered public rather than private in nature. As also the American Supreme Court outlawing 'White Primary' in the South redefined a political party as a public body rather than a private club. It is perhaps that the precise location of the distinction between what is private and what is public is less important than its maintenance.⁹ Individuals require both a realm of private self-expression and intimacy buffered from the larger world of politics and a sense of belonging to a larger community that expresses obligation to all its members, even if they are strangers. The world would be a richer place if people can both live in the backstage territory [of private spheres] and still come forward to the front stage [territory of the public sphere] to work out their common lives by commonly agreed to rational standards.

The pre-modern congregational style of living allowed for a salubrious intercourse between the public and the private; the home was embedded in vibrant sociability and this was particularly healthy for vulnerable sections like the elderly and women. Krishna Kumar makes just this point when he says:¹⁰

If one considers specifically the condition of women, the households of the past gave them

a greater degree of involvement in the general life of society than became possible for the modern ...family. Women were co-partners with men in the system of household productions.// [However, with the onset of modernity, there was a separating out of the public and private spheres and also a gendering of the same. This] confined women almost entirely to the domain of the home. // In upper middle class families even much of the house work was taken out of their hands //They lived their lives as a protected species within the walled off domestic realm, its ornament and the guardian of the moral and expressive life of its members.

Conclusion

I think there is some merit in reading The Quilt as tragedy of the corruption of the private sphere. The Begum and the Nawab could not see themselves as both public figures with private selves. The Begum had no concept of herself as a public person; this made her wallow in sensual and sexual retreat, which turned criminally abusive. The Nawab's public sense was such that it could not accommodate his distinctive individuality. Furthermore, the behaviour taking place in the fortified and secluded private realm of the home portrayed in The Quilt, are corrupting the society at large in which a child is abused, servants of the household are scandalised, Rabbu is jealous, the Nawab is distant, secretive and guilty and the Begum is depressed.

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