



DISSENTING TRADITION AND BONDAGE: READING WOMEN CHARACTERS OF ISMAT CHUGHTAI

Dr. SAFIA BEGUM

Mail: safiaenglish@gmail.com



Dr. SAFIA BEGUM

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Abstract

Ismat Chughtai's oeuvre predominantly deals with women's issues. She has gone in to the psyche of Indian women who are always seen in the light of tradition, marriage boundaries or familial life. However, she has also created women characters that stand against these age old boundaries and dissent the traditional norms and take hold of their lives. To unravel the psyche of such women characters Ismat uses a language, deploys such narrative technique or places her characters in extra ordinary situations. Through it Ismat makes her characters bold and memorable.

The present paper using Chughtai's some of selective works tries to show how her distinct women characters' dissent bondage and cross traditional boundaries. It is important to see how these women characters have faced these realities and stood against them.

Keywords: dissent, women, Ismat, Rashid Jehan, Urdu women writers.

I. (a) Mapping the Beginning of Dissent in Urdu Literature:

Colonial period in India was a time wherein all communities and people of different class, caste and gender along with resisting the colonial regime began to reform their own self. Nevertheless, the beginning and process of reformation was different in different communities more importantly issues were also different. However, irrespective of community women were the major target of reformation project during colonial period. Thus, during this time women became the subject of discussion and the major reformation project began that is to educate women. With all the other communities Muslims also began to reform themselves. Initially it was men who were deciding the fate of women and in their reformation process two groups emerged as it always happens. At one side there were Deputy Nazir Ahmad, Khawaja Altaf Husain of Panipat (Hali)

(1837-1914), Maulvi Sayyid Mumtaz Ali (1860-1935), and later on many others joined them and on the other side stood Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Ashraf Ali Thanvi and so on. One group wanted to keep their women into the garb of tradition whereas the other wanted their women to break the barriers of tradition and come forward to get education but within the boundaries of *purdah* tradition. However, the groups were not very strongly dissenting against each other's ideology. Nevertheless, in the name of education and reformation the new modern project of dissent began and it is always through reading and writing minds change. Thus, began the literature of dissent and the project of modernity. Majorly the dissent literature in Urdu began in the form of periodicals. These periodicals¹ were in the form of journal,

¹ The first journal was *Rafiq-e Niswan* was published on 5th March 1884 from Lucknow by Christian missionary. *Akhbar-un-Nisa* the second in chronology began publishing for the cause of Muslim women's

magazine or newspaper. These magazines were encouraging women to write on various issues and engage in discussion concerning women. Some of the writings appeared in these magazines were like *Phat padey woh sona jinse tootey kaan* (Be damned the gold that hurts ear lobes) written by Aalia Begum and published in the magazine, *Khatoon* (lady) in 1911. It is a mocking piece written on the tradition of wearing dangling gold earrings that hurt earlobes. *School ki ladkiyaan* (School Girls) written by Zafar Jahan Begum and published in *Tehzeeb-e Niswan* (Refinement of Women) in 1927. It is a counter narrative prevalent at that time about school going girls. *Jinselateef Ki sargarmiyaan* (Engagements of the Gentler Sex) is by anonymous author and the write-up was published in *Ustani* in 1920. The anonymous author wrote on the women's active participation in the various anti-colonial movements. Similarly there was another article published in *Tehzeeb-e Niswan* in 1927 about everyday problems in using *Khaddar*

emancipation and is considered as the first journal for the cause of women's reform. It first published on 1st August 1884 from Delhi. Its editor was Syed Ahmed Dehlavi, the lexicographer who compiled the *Farhang-i-Aasifiya*. *Farhang-i-Aasifiya* is that "major Urdu-to-Urdu dictionary, having some 60,000 entries spread over four volumes and 2,500 pages, took about 30 years to complete. Its compilation began in 1868 and ended in 1898". Rauf Parekh. "Farhang-i-Aasifiya: A Dictionary Reflecting Cultural Heritage", Published in *The Dawn* on 29 April, 2013

<http://www.dawn.com/news/794661/farhang-i-aasifiya-a-dictionary-reflecting-cultural-heritage>

Similarly many periodicals began to publish one of the journals *Mualam-i-Niswan* (The Women's Teacher) by Muhibb-i-Hussain began to publish from Hyderabad Deccan. Muhibb-i-Hussain was from Etawah UP to Hyderabad in 1870 and was part of Nizam's administration. He was a translator in the Revenue Department.

The Modern education project and reformation began through Sir Syed Ahmed Khan but he excluded women from it. The reasons of Sir Syed's opposition to women's modern education were Asghar Ali Engineer writes, "Sir Syed had lot of troubles on his hand due to his campaign for a modern educational institution for north Indian Muslims. He was facing stiff resistance from orthodox 'ulama' and did not want more trouble" See his article here Asghar Ali Engineer. "Maulvi Mumtaz Ali: A Nineteenth Century Advocate of Women's Rights". http://twocircles.net/2009dec07/maulvi_mumtaz_ali_nineteenth_century_advocate_women_s_rights.html#.V215ANJ97VQ

(handspun woven fabric, *khadi*) by Zafar Jahan Begum.

Some of these writers are well known and some are anonymous. More importantly, the irony of their writings was most of them identified themselves as a wife, sister, daughter of so and so and some chose to remain anonymous. Thus here comes out an independent voice from a reformation project which is majorly headed by men or was carried out according to their ideology. The independent voice articulating her mind freely but with a constraint of identity without which she cannot think or forced to identify herself.

I. (b) *Mualam-i-Niswan*² (Women's Teacher): Literature Written by Men for Women

In Urdu literary writings like fiction and poetry Deputy Nazir Ahmed and Hali are the pioneers of women's education. Nazir Ahmed was writing didactic novels like *Mirat-ul Uroos* (*Bride's Mirror*), *Banatun Nash* (*The Daughters of the Beir*), *Taubatun Nash* (*The Repentance of Nasuh*) in 1877. In his other two novels *Muhsinat* or *Fasana I Mubtala* (1885) and *Ayyama* (1891) he raised the issue of polygamy and widow remarriage. He was teaching women how to be good or an archetype woman. His writings showcases that every difficulty that arises in women's life is due to lack of education and good manners. Further, he never allowed his female characters to explore the outside world and seek education. Moreover, the kind of education the girls get in his home school is like cooking, sewing, how to manage household work, religious and moral education. Hali wrote his *Majlis* before meeting Sir Syed. It clearly shows that he was an ardent and early supporter of women's education. Moreover, Hali did not limit his subject of writing to women's education alone. He has tried to unravel the women's psychic through his poem *Chup ki Dad* (Homage to the Silent) and *Munajat-e-Bewa* (roughly translated as Silent Prayers of a Widow). He was concerned about their emotional aspects of life too whereas Nazir Ahmed was trying to drag women's attention towards their own

² It means "The Women's Teacher". It is the name of a journal published by Muhibb-i-Hussain from Hyderabad Deccan.

follies and made them responsible of their own deeds. He was ignoring the traditional practices and cultural context of the times. However, all these men were writing for the cause of women and wanted to emancipate them through education.

(c) The Transition Period: Women's Writing to Reform

However, a new female character appeared in the Urdu literature with the publication of Mirza Rusva's *Umrao Jan Ada* (1899). Rusva gave life to a cultured woman of a different class and so far no one has spoken about her. Thus from here on one can say the literature about women or by women began to reflect change and the change was not just significant for the women's representation as well as for the Urdu literature in general.

There were many women writers who came before Ismat Chughtai and also of her times. Though these writers have published their works in magazines and some of them were never serious to peruse the art of writing. Among these writers the most significant are Abbasi Begum, who wrote *Gariftar I Qafas, Zulm I Bekasan, Do Shahzadia*. Nazr i Sajjad Haidar's writings include *Khun I Arman, Hur I Sahrai, Nairang I Zamana* and *Haq ba Haqdar*. There were other women writers like Anjum Ara, Asaf Jahan, Saida, Begdadi Begum, Taj Unnisa. Khatun I Akram wrote the stories like *Paikar I Vafa, Bichri Beti, Arzuo Par Qurban* etc.

However, the women writers of the times were very much writing about the issues concerning women but the titles of their stories suggests that the women characters are seen pitiable like the title *Bechari Beti, Paikar-i-Vafa* and *Arzuo par Qurban*. There seems to be a tendency to sympathies with the characters and not to make them dissent towards these issues or make them aware of it. Instead the stories were showcasing how women bear the pain silently without any question and the readers admire their pain bearing capacity. The same reflects in the writings of men like Hali's. *Chup ki Dad* (Homage to the Silent) and *Munajat-e-Bewa* (roughly translated as Silent Prayers of a Widow).

Shadab Bano opines that before Rashid Jehan emerged on the Urdu literary field when the women writers of Urdu magazines and Journals and the popular writers like Nazr Sajjad Haider and Imtiaz Ali were 'certainly discussing purdah, household customs and rituals and the rights of women in Islam,' but once again it was the reformist kind of writings that were not awakening the women rather as per the norms of the community and which were happily accepted by them. (Shadab Bano, 59) Thus, nothing seemed radical towards the patriarchal norms of the society till the *Angare* was published or to say in terms of woman writer until Rashid Jahan came on the literary field with her two unforgettable and provocative literary pieces.

II. Provocative and Rebellious: The Rashid Jahan *Angarewali*:

Angare is the foremost radical text of Urdu literature published in Nineteen-Thirty-two. It's a collection of short stories by a group of young writers- Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Rashid Jahan and Mahmuduzzafar. Through their writings they rebelled against the prevailing wrongs of the society. In their content and style they were radical and novel. It left a larger influence and for forever changed the trend in content of Urdu literature. For this they drew inspiration from western writers specifically James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence and in some cases from Marxist writings as well.

Angare gave the full perspective of both progressive male and female of the problems that were emanating from the chauvinistic masculinity in Muslim society and the subject condition of their women. (Shadab Bano, 03) As expected by them, there was a strong reaction against the book from both religious and civil society and newspapers and journals also condemned the book. Fatwas were also issued against them. Punishments like stoning to death and hanging were suggested for their literary and artistic crime. However, the young writers also did not desist from reacting to the society's reaction. They issued a counter-reaction after five months of the anthology's publication entitled "In Defence of *Angare*: Shall We Submit to

Gagging?" by Mahmuduzzafar. The most significant point to be noted here is that, it was in this statement that the idea of Progressive Writers Movement was announced and it was launched in the year Nineteen-Thirty-six.

To this anthology Rashid Jahan, the only woman in the group of writers, contributed a paly *Parde ke Peeche* (From Behind the Veil) and a short story *Dilli ki Sair* (A Tour of Delhi). The two works for the first time bring the real issues of Sharif household women out. Without mincing her words Rashid Jehan expressed the matters of intimacy in the form of dialogue in *Parde ke Peeche*. The short story, *Dilli ki Sair*, reflects upon the life of a married couple who goes on a travel to Delhi and their experiences specifically of the woman are presented in it. In other words it explicates a situation in which everything though seems to be in the favour of the female protagonist but this is not the case rather it turns out to be very disappointing for her. In this manner Rashid Jehan brought the matters of purdah both customary and institutionalised, into open and very critically and strongly placed them in front of her readers which shocked the community members. It is a very well-known fact that Rashid Jahan's experiences as a gynecologist and the exposure to the outside world have majorly contributed in penning those two and the later whatever she wrote. Though she did not write much but still she left her mark on the Urdu literary scene which will remain alive as long as Urdu literature remains.

This is also very well known that her liberal family background has played a very prominent role in making her aware of the women's concerns specifically related to education. One can opine that as she moved towards a specific career she began to understand the various issues related to them not only in terms of gender and health but also of class and caste. Thus, she had an understanding of women's issues and their lives from the beginning which is not so easily accessible to other girls of her times. She was so rebellious and that

III. Ismat Chughtai and Her Many Women Characters:

Ismat's literary influences were many and varied. To begin from her home the foremost influence was her elder brother, Azim Baig Chughtai, who taught her English, Translation, History, Quran and Hadith. He ignited the fire of learning and rebelliousness in her. Under his teaching she began to explore new writers like Emily Zola, Leo Tolstoy, Balzac, Dostoyevsky, Chekov, Thomas Hardy and Maugham³. At one point of time during under-graduation she was heavily influenced by the writings of Bernard Shaw and wrote the play *Fasaadi*⁴. She also maintained her touch with the Indian literary scenario by reading Hijab Ismail, Majnu Gorakhpuri and Niaz Fatehpuri, Premchand⁵. She seems to have learnt the art of narration from O' Henry and Premchand, the masters of short story writing⁶. However, the most decisive influence over her was of Rashid Jehan whom she met for the first time in school

I saw her for the first time at a meeting. Begum Bhopal was chairing it. Wearing heavy shawls and coats, the women in the audience were shivering on this cold, blustery day while Rashid Apa, dressed in a sleeveless blouse and sari, was delivering an impassioned speech. Her black, curly hair was blowing in the air because the window across from her was ajar. The women in the audience were muttering, complaining about her short hair, her sleeveless blouse and the bitterly cold breeze blowing in from the open window. But perhaps her speech was no less biting, because afterwards Begum Bhopal scolded her severely. That day her boldness caused a furor and, without understanding very much of what she had said, I gathered her

³ Tahira Naqvi, "Ismat Chughtai: A Tribute". Annual Urdu Studies. P-40

⁴ Ismat Chughtai. Translated by Tahira Naqvi. *My Friend, My Enemy: Essays, Reminiscences, Portraits*. 2001.

⁵ Tahira Naqvi, "Ismat Chughtai: A Tribute". Annual Urdu Studies. P-38

⁶ Ibid, p-38

words to my heart as though they were pearls.⁷

Such a huge impact of Rashid Jehan on Ismat Chughtai that she could not imagine anyone else as the heroine of her stories but Rashid Apa. She further stated that she could only capture her boldness and candour and she could not draw her striking personality completely⁸ and later as an adult in the Progressive Writers Meeting in 1936. Further, referring to Rashid Jahan in her autobiography Ismat Chughtai writes

She spoiled me because she was very bold and would speak all sorts of things openly and loudly, and I just wanted to copy her,...” Further Chughtai comments: “The handsome heroes and pretty heroines of my stories, the candle-like fingers, the lime blossoms and crimson blossoms all vanished... the earthy Rashid Jahan shattered all my ivory idols to pieces... Life, stark and naked, stood before me.⁹

Thus, Rashid Jehan had a great influence over Ismat Chughtai that reflected even in her stories and she herself has also claimed it. However, Rashid Jehan has left the mark on the Urdu literary scene and from there Ismat Chughtai has carried it further and formed her own niche in the Urdu literary scenario and through her translation she entered into the other literary languages too. Wherever she went she left her mark and distinct identity through her stories and women characters. Her women characters are from distinct background, belief system, caste and class who bring a new story into the world in an innovative and powerful manner.

One of the most interesting stories is *Zar Khareed* which literally means mercenary. In this short story Hydari Bua is married to Sattar Miya who was initially smitten by his young wife’s

charms and was doing anything that’s made her happy. After some years the so far exciting romantic married life began to appear boring to him more specifically the restricted routine life which began after the marriage. Hydari Bua seems to be enjoying her life whereas Sattar Miya was losing his friend circle and freedom. However, later he began to enjoy parties organised or arranged by his friends and spend money or did everything whatever his wife was against it. This troubled his wife and she planned to get him married for the second time and he readily agreed to marry as well. When Hydari Bua saw the changes in her husband then she brought third wife for her husband. To control both of them Hydari Bua makes a plan and fixes days for both of them and begins to control them. For them she appears their well-wisher.

Hydari Bua’s plans go well as per her desire till the second wife Abida begins to control Sattar miya. When Hydari Bua comes to know that everything is going out of her hands then she plans for a third marriage of her husband and brings a very young wife.

Generally it is the men who desire and take second or third wife and women suffer silently and forced to stay in the marital cord as a slave. They are made to think that they are left with no other option but to suffer the pain silently. The case of Hydari Bua is contrary to this. It is her strong desire to have a control over her husband has made her to do all the things. She did not think even once about herself as a possessive and emotional wife who desire for her husband’s love and in that effort to win her husband’s heart and in the process loses herself. Rather she somehow wanted to have control over him and in return she receives control over the other two wives of Sattar miya and gain sympathy of the outsiders as well for whom Sattar miya is the culprit and Hydari Bua is the silent sufferer. In this manner Hydari Bua goes against the tradition and acts as a woman who cares solely about her happiness.

Wazir Agah writes remarking on Ismat’s women:

If we look at the social ethos of the Indian subcontinent, where for thousands of years,

⁷ Ismat Chughtai. Translated by Tahira Naqvi. *My Friend, My Enemy: Essays, Reminiscences, Portraits*. 2001. P-107

⁸ Ismat Chughtai. Translated by Tahira Naqvi. *My Friend, My Enemy: Essays, Reminiscences, Portraits*. 2001. P-108

⁹ Amrita Dutta. *A Spark that Lit the Fire: A biography brings to life the forgotten Progressive Urdu writer, Rashid Jahan, whose stories opened the doors to the zenana*. May 23, 2014.

woman has continued to remain such a meaningless adjunct of society that the slightest deviation from the norm is deemed a stigma, then the rebellion of Ismat Chughtai's female characters, appear to equal the potency of a Kali or Tiamat. (Ismat's Women, 195)

He further states:

Somewhere in the constitutional make-up of each of Ismat Chughtai's female characters, exists a woman who is not merely a nameless adjunct of the household machinery, but, who while asserting her independence, shakes to the core, if not demolishes, time-honored values and customs. (Ismat's Women, 194)

This seems true in the case of the women characters like Gori Bi of *Ghoonghat (Veil)*. *Ghoonghat (Veil)* is also one of the stories where a very young and new bride Gori Bi refuses to obey the order of her husband on the very first night. More importantly she dares to repeat the same incident again even after facing the consequences of it. Rafiya of *Bhool Bhulaiyan (Maze)*, Ayesha Begum of *Zahar (Poison)*, Sameena of *Muqadas Farz (Sacred Duty)*, Lajo of *Gharwali (Homemaker)*, Saas (Mother-in-law), Hydari Bua of *Zar Kharid (Mercenary)*, Shahzad of *All Alone*, Gouri of *Do Haath (A Pair of Hands)*. These women dissent the social norms and stands guarding their rights and freedom.

The Veil is a story about a woman who is married to a young man who is quite opposite in physical features in comparison to the bride. However, they are married but on the first night he asks his wife of fourteen years old to lift the veil but she does not listen to him. The same thing happens even the second time but the bride refuses to lift the veil by herself. He once again runs away from the scene and ultimately the bride ends up spending her entire life alone in her in-laws home waiting for her husband who never returns.

The women characters or stories of Ismat Chughtai are quite different from the other women writers' stories or even the title of her short stories.

From the title of her stories one cannot reflect on the story line or characters. For instance see the title of her stories *Do Haath*, *Zarkhareed*, *Ghoonghat*, *Niwala*, *Kafir*, *Qidmatgar* and the like. Further, her stories reflect on the disparity in class, caste, religion, and gender.

Similarly though subtle and gentle but very strong woman Ayesha Begum of *Zahar* comes on the scene at the end of the story. She did not think about the societal norms nor she tried to tie her lover to herself or forced him to marry her. The author indirectly narrated about Ayesha Begum through Mrs. Nouman who is her antagonist or who has destroyed her life. Otherwise she could have also been happily married to Mr. Nouman. However, she chose to let him go and do what is best for his career. She chose to follow her heart and remained spinster. However, at the end she shocked not only Mrs. Nouman but also to the readers by presenting her sister's son who is a look alike of Mr. Nouman.

Conclusion: When one looks at the women characters in the Urdu literature from the beginning till the period when Ismat Chughtai came on to the literary scene one will find that there were hardly any women on par with the women created by Ismat. Initially it was men who were writing to reform women and in this act of reformation they gave pen in the hands of women from here began the journey of women's writing. Initially when women also began to write they too followed the footsteps of men. In this journey they were restricted from revealing their identity instead they were identified by the male members of their family. Production of literary works gave them some kind of engagement and relief from day to day routine life. However, the fact that they were not allowed to reveal their true identity reflect the restrictions imposed upon them. It did not allow them to explore various themes and issues or express their ideas openly. If they chose to write about the topics which go against the accepted norms of the society then they were putting the family name at stake. This does not suit to the women of *sharif* household. Though the freedom to write was helping them to master the art of creativity but it was not letting them to form their

identity as an individual female writer who can write about and on any subject without any hesitation. However, even during this time some exceptional women writers like Aalia Begum and Zafar Jahan Begum etc., showed the sparks of dissent through their writings but very soon they also disappeared. All these women were writing for journals or periodicals. The writers who are known in the Urdu literary world like Nazr I Sajjad Haidar and Imtiaz Ali were also writing on the similar themes.

In this literary scenario came Rashid Jehan who ignited the light of dissent and sparked a controversy through her first two literary pieces in the unforgettable *Angare*. Though she did not peruse the art of writing seriously but with some of her literary pieces she left a mark on the pages of Urdu literary history which will remain forever. With her writing the literary world tasted the literature of dissent in a real sense. However, with the emergence of Progressive Writers Movement came the fiction of socialist realism in Urdu literature which was largely dissenting against the social norms and gender and class differences. Ismat Chughtai who was greatly influenced by Rashid Jehan walked on the same path. She explored the women's issues like never before. She was not writing the stories of imaginary lands but presenting the social realities which she saw in and around her. In this act of presenting the realism she created so many memorable characters like Hydari Bua, Lajo, Saas, Gori bi and so on that are unique in terms of theme and characterization. In Ismat's women one can see many shades of women characters like innocent, shy, rebellious, and strong. These women characters have become a living reality that will remain alive forever in the minds of the readers. Her writing reflects the style of narration as if she is sitting in front of her readers and talking to them about her or her characters are so real and fresh even after so many years.

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Short Bio-Note of the Author: Dr. Safia Begum has completed her PhD from University of Hyderabad. Before this she has completed M. Phil in Translation Studies from the Centre for Applied Linguistics and Translation Studies (CALTS), School of Humanities, UoH and Master in English from Maulana Azad National Urdu University (Manuu), Hyderabad. She has presented papers in many seminars and conferences both in India and abroad.
