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IMAGING ODD PATTERNS: VOICE OF THE GIRL CHILD IN ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

This paper is a close-read analysis of two of Ismat Chughtai's short stories- *Lihaaf* ('The Quilt') and *Chauthi ka Joda* ('the wedding suit'). Both stories reflect a keen interest in the perspective of the girl child on a range of questions especially on sexuality and the institution of marriage. Without so much as a direct mention, both *Lihaaf* and *Chauthi ka Joda* bear testimony to the deliciousness of the playfully suggestive as also the dangers of such relish. What are the ways in which these ideas of female sexuality and the body are explored and what the implications of such exploration are? This paper engages with these questions through close-reading of both texts across this thematic axis.

Keywords: Ismat Chughtai, girl child, female body, sexuality, marriage.

"No, Begam Jaan...I don't want dolls...Do you think I am still a child?" (*Lihaaf*)

"There is no telling about a girl – she grows up by leaps and bounds as a cucumber grows." (*Chauthi ka joda*)

Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* has been surrounded by debates hinged upon the Lahore obscenity trial. *Chauthi ka Joda* has been read as a tragic tale of social indifference and oppression of the institution of marriage. However, both stories unfold through the eyes/ 'I's of young girls. With regard to narration, certain concerns become immediately apparent. First is Chughtai's refusal to stick with a singular narrative voice and its identity shifts at multiple points in both the stories. Secondly and crucially, one of the voices is vitally that of a girl 'child'. The narrator in *Lihaaf* is a 'small girl' when she first sees elephants dancing on the wall while Hamida in *Chauthi ka Joda* has her youth 'raising its head like a serpent's hood'. And finally that it is the voice of a

'girl' child. This paper shall attempt to explore these three particular aspects.

The use of the 'I' in Chughtai's fiction is tremendously interesting. Her child narrator in both stories is faced with unwished-for sexual advances and curiously, she slips into first person narration before the moment of intrusion arrives. In doing so she makes sure that the reader is identified with the child narrator and is as confused, scared and traumatized by such unwelcome advancements as she is.

Lihaaf begins with the narrator drawing the *lihaaf* over herself on a winter's day and being reminded of elephant shadows on the wall which return her to her younger self when she first witnessed the dancing elephant. Time moves seamlessly and the adult voice slips into that of the child narrator when she recalls her stay with Begam Jaan that culminates in the moment that is etched in her memory 'like a scar left by a blacksmith's brand'.

However, the transition is not neat and highly complex. There are moments when the distinction begins to blur. When while sipping her tea in Begam Jaan's room the narrator is yearning for Amma, she interjects and comments how this 'punishment' was too 'severe' for fighting with her brothers. It maybe the child herself who has already endured advances by the begum and is now frightened by her presence. It may also be the experienced adult voice who remembers the images inside the half lifted *Lihaaf* and realizes how it was too severe for her to witness then.

In *Chauthi ka Joda*, the narratorial voice shifts from a third person outsider perspective to calling Kubra 'Bi Aapa'. From that moment onward Hamida takes on the role of the narrator. She retains this voice till the male figure occupies the space of the house. Much virtual drama interlaced with physical occurrences unfold when Rahat's big mouth opens and the consecrated *malida* falls to the ground. In the violence, the narratorial voice is taken out of Hamida's mouth and restored back to the original. In the succeeding paragraph, Rahat's departure is announced. Distinctions of tense and time appear to complicate in the dealings with narration. *Lihaaf* is narrated as a revisiting of events. Though the events are recounted in the past tense, they are narrated as an immediate moment. Yet, as discussed, demarcations of past and present appear to be rubbed off with possibilities of an adult voice interjecting. *Chauthi ka Joda* shifts tense with the narratorial voice. The outsider narrator narrates in the past but with Hamida's voice, the tense shifts to the present. In this way, Chughtai ensures that in both the stories the moment of intrusion is never recounted and always experienced firsthand.

The narration takes on the tincture of being an unknowing exploratory voice that works well within the frame of the narrative unfolding itself. With Chughtai, the preoccupation with the voice of the child is transparent. It allows her to manoeuvre her yarn, feigning a certain level of innocence and expecting empathy. The child narrator allows the story to dwell on the curious terrain of knowing and unknowing that leaves room for exploration. Chughtai has gone on record for saying that she only knew as much as her narrator knows. (Chandra,

2016) Although the statement is extremely controversial, strictly within the space of the text, it makes sense in that the word of the narrator is final. It is for the reader to know more or less. Using the child as narrator then allows scope for this very ambiguity and plurality of reading.

The trope of knowing/unknowing is carried forward with the metaphor of 'cloth' that only half conceals and half reveals. The preoccupation with this idea is evident in the titles on the stories themselves- *Lihaaf* and *Chauthi ka Joda*- both of which become central metaphors in the memory of the child. They almost acquire the stature of a living entity- the *lihaaf* 'cast' terrifying shadows in the night but looked 'perfectly innocent' in the morning while the *joda* had the power to evoke delightful hope with every stitch and make wrinkles lighten up like 'sparkling candles'. Both stories are replete with imagery of clothing - the 'gossamer shirts' of the 'young', 'slender-waisted' boys; Begam Jaan's 'billowing Hyderabad white jaali karga kurtas and brightly coloured pyjamas'; the narrator's frock; Kubra weaving Rahat's woolen sweater. The imagery is finally made complete with the half lifted *lihaaf* that made the child gasp and sink deeper into her bed. The trope of half or partial knowledge is brought to light here. In *Chauthi ka Joda*, the sack-cloth curtain becomes the agent - "It was as if no one ever knew that behind the sack-cloth curtain, someone's (Kubra's) youth was at its last gasp".

Nothing is made explicit in the narration itself. So when both stories suggest sexual advances and activity, there are only allusions to it for the child narrator in the moment of their occurrence is believed to be ignorant and incapable of comprehending their substance. Thus the use of the child narrator allows Chughtai to successfully play with the trope of imagination as well. Hamida looks at the *malida* prepared for Maulvi Saheb and the thought of an incantation said over it lets her hear wedding trumpets and visualize her sister's *baraat*. The reader must follow the narrator's vivid imagination and believe in her narrative. It is between the weaves of narration that imagination dives in to sew the fabric together. This allows for a delicious blend of sexuality-sensuality-imagination and the delight then lies in the midsection of

ignorance and knowledge. It is in the imagination of the prospect of the unknown that the sensuality of Chughtai's art lies.

Both stories are an appeal to the sensational. All senses- visual, olfactory (Begam Jaan's warm scent of attar), auditory, gustatory, somatosensory are evoked as one traverses through them. An unwavering metaphor of sensuality in both stories is that of food. In *Lihaaf*- the slurping sound of a cat licking a plate; tasting raw mangoes; the sound of tasting pickle; Raboo is called a 'notorious glutton'; Begam Jaan's body begins to 'fill out' after Raboo's entry into the frame. On the other hand, in *Chauthi ka Joda* food is used to conjure some gory images that disturb. Chughtai presents visually contrasting images of shrinking and growing with (non-)consumption of food. Rahat is gobbling *koftas* and *paranthas* dripping with ghee while Kubra, who "would have cut some fat out of her own body and stuffed it in the parantha", was herself turned into a 'bag of bones'. Hunger takes on the turn for beastiality in *Chauthi ka Joda*-

"I feel shy"

"Just look at her! He wouldn't eat you up, will he?" said Bi Amma angrily."

Yes, he would and he does.

"But Bi Aapa looked at me with the gaze of a slaughtered chicken and I had to go"

On pretext of taking him food prepared by her sister, Hamida is offered and consumed as flesh when her brother-in-law-to-be makes sexual advances on her.

With this, the strikingly evident fact of the question of male figures in the stories seeps in. In *Lihaaf*, the nawab who has left Begam Jaan unsatiated with other furniture does not even appear before the reader. On the other hand, in *Chauthi ka Joda* though a few words are put into Rahat's mouth, his presence only sabotages the otherwise female household. The voice of the 'girl' child then becomes pivotal in speaking of this space of the Muslim *zenana*. Even in her interviews, something that Chughtai consistently reiterates is how for her, '*jag beeti*' was through the '*aap beeti*'- she experienced the world through personal

experience and that went straight into her stories. According to her own account, *Lihaaf* was based on the actual life story of the wife of Nawab Swalekhan of Aligarh who was a homosexual. (Assadudin, 1993) To speak of the *zenana* and female-community in the *mohalla*, the choice of a female is but obvious. It is a community of neighbours and *moh-boli behens* who help out in hours of need. Minault talks about the *zenana* in terms of an all-female space characterized by strong sisterly bonding. She uses the term 'fictive sisterhood' to speak of the tradition of the '*moh-boli behan*'- Begam Jaan and the narrator's Amma; Bi Amma and Bundu's mother. As far as language is concerned, *begamati zuban* or women's Urdu is earthy, graphic, and colourful. The reasons for this difference in expressive style are not far to seek. With *begamati zuban* women are not worried about whether the men think them 'ladylike' or not, since men are not party to the conversation. (Minault, 1984) So within the space of the story, the female narrator is not scared to talk about what transpires and yet only suggests and makes nothing explicit for it still works within the framework of the child narrating.

Yet, the space of the *zenana* has its own constraints. It is these *moh-boli behens* who become the cause for trouble in both stories. Begum Jaan herself is the one making sexual advances on the child narrator while it is Bundu's mother who comes up with the plan of 'teasing' the brother-in-law-to-be. Even with such problems within the space offered by the *mohalla*, yet by the complete rejection of allowing for a male to offer any possibilities for betterment, the *mohalla* is projected as the community for refuge. After Kubra's death while Bi Amma sits on the *seh-dari* cutting cloth, the women of the *mohalla* gather together and offer an image of collective comforting.

It is important also to consider who Chughtai was writing for. With her association with the progressives, she was invested in social change and much of her writing was directed at young audiences. Marriage being most prominent among issues concerning women and it having been one of her personal concerns as well, it is curious to observe how she makes her characters deal with it. *Chauthi ka Joda* is the tragic story of placing hopes for

liberation with a man in the institution of marriage. *Lihaaf* is the picture of loneliness and depravity post marriage. *Lihaaf* and *Chauthi ka Joda* can be read in conjunction in this regard. When the Rahat is brought in as a marriage prospect, hope for redemption is placed into the institution which is thwarted in the text. If we were to view it as a story of the pre-wedded state, alternatively *Lihaaf* offers a glimpse into what could have been Kubra's life if Rahat had married her. Begum Jaan and her fate in a pre-marital state seem similar. "Her poor parents had agreed to marry her off to the nawab who was of 'ripe years' because he was very 'virtuous'. But 'the frail, beautiful begam' only 'wasted away in anguished loneliness'. The alternatives offered for putting faith in marriage are either death or sexual dissatisfaction.

Any romantic associations with marriage that may be presented through Hamida venting out against Rahat *mian*, wanting someone to take her Bi Aapa's 'henna adorned hands' and 'kiss them lovingly', are overthrown completely in Begam Jaan's rejection of romantic novels as increasingly 'depressing'. Her reality post-marriage stands proof against such romantically fulfilling ideals. Adroitly, Chughtai mouths her opinion through Hamida with the kind of image she conjures for the reader- "She washed his dirty socks, his stinking vests and handkerchiefs filled with mucous. And on his oil-smearing pillow, she embroidered 'Sweet dreams'. The metaphor of the cloth reappears here in the image of the pillow and the projection of marital dreams on it. This is followed by images of the husband-to-be feeding himself and leaving the house.

Besides, Chughtai also complicates the alleged innocence of the child figure. Specifically in *Lihaaf*, the narrator is obsessed with Begum Jaan's body. When she first saw her, she was "fascinated by her looks and felt like sitting by her for hours, just adorning her". She later mentions how under her 'gaze', Begum Jaan's face looked as though it "were the face of her young boy". In *Chauthi ka Joda*, when Bi Amma and Bundu's mother sat talking in 'hushed whispers' while Kubra sat on the verandah winnowing rice, "she knew what these whispers were about". Interestingly, the sensual descriptions

and sexual encounters also mark a coming of age. Then as far as the debate around knowing and unknowing goes, it is interesting to notice how *Lihaaf* kicks start when the adult narrator covers herself in the *lihaaf*. It is another *lihaaf* that seems to cast shadows of the dancing elephant.

Though Hamida vents out against Rahat for not marrying her sister- "Dear sister, I wouldn't be able to noose this bull for you", since this is put into the narratorial voice, it takes on added significance. This is the image of the oppression of having to wait for a man for liberation- a 'bull' that needs to be 'noosed'. The women of the *mohalla* sit around the *seh-dari* while Kubra's mother sits there cutting cloth. They crack 'dirty jokes' and laugh heartily while the girls long for the day when they can join in the fun. But Chughtai's readers would not be the girls longing for this day.

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