



ISSN Print: 2664-7699
ISSN Online: 2664-7702
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00
IJHA 2024; 6(1): 102-105
www.humanitiesjournals.net
Received: 02-02-2024
Accepted: 06-03-2024

Mohit Nimariya
Research Scholar, Baba
Mastnath University,
Haryana, India

A feminist study of the short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai

Mohit Nimariya

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26647699.2024.v6.i1b.76>

Abstract

Ismat Chughtai, a prominent Urdu writer from India, gained recognition for her unwavering determination and fervent feminist beliefs. Ismat's work is often regarded as the epitome of Urdu fiction, representing the emergence of a groundbreaking feminist ideology and artistic style in Urdu writing during the twentieth century. This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of several short stories authored by Chughtai and the renowned writer Saadat Hasan Manto. This analysis examines the iconoclastic writings of Chughtai and Manto, focusing on their battle against feudalism, the prevailing feudal patriarchy, and the presence of double standards within Indian society. The works of Chughtai's *Quilt and Other Stories* (Penguin) and Manto's stories such as *Thanda Gosht*, *Khol Do* have been utilised. This study aims to examine the intricacies of the women's movement that was prominent during the period in which Chughtai and Manto were active writers. Through an analysis of their short stories, researchers will examine the intricacies of the era that influenced the development of their female characters and how they, as forward-thinking writers, reacted to that period.

Keywords: Ismat Chughtai, Saadat Hasan Manto, feminism, patriarchy, Urdu fiction

Introduction

During the pre-Partition period, leftist authors consistently generated controversy due to their radical viewpoints. Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai were two prominent Marxist intellectuals in their respective spheres. Chughtai's philosophy was more feminist, although Manto's feminist inclinations are still a subject of debate.

Chughtai and Manto originated from Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, respectively, and had modest origins. In addition to their significant impact on Urdu literature through their compelling work, the lives of these two poets intersected on several occasions. Both individuals were actively engaged in the leftist Progressive Writers' Association and were both apprehended on December 5, 1944, on charges of "obscenity" related to *Lihaaf* (Chughtai) and *Boo* (Manto). However, Manto's imagery and portrayal of the broader message of women's roles in patriarchy were more vivid and explicit, in contrast to Chughtai's more subtle mannerisms in *Lihaaf*.

Lihaaf (The Quilt) is a brief narrative presented via the first-person point of view of a juvenile female protagonist. The narrator is compelled to reside with Begum Jan, her mother's "adopted" sister, due to allegations of being a disruptive individual among her siblings and acquaintances. The young girl's experience with homosexuality in the household can be divided into two parts: firstly, she observes Begum Jan's husband engaging in sexual activity with "young, fair and slim-waisted boys," and secondly, she witnesses Begum Jan herself engaging in sexual intercourse with her servant Rabbo under the eponymous and symbolic lihaaf.

Thanda Gosht (Cold Meat) is a short narrative that employs an omniscient, third-person perspective, resembling the style of Manto. Its purpose is to let the reader to independently assess the chaotic sequence of events. The narrative begins with Eshwer Singh's return to his residence following a series of sectarian incidents that occurred in Amritsar. Upon returning home, he deliberately evades addressing the issue of his abrupt absence and instead entices his wife, Kalwant Kaur, as a means of diversion. When Singh experiences a lack of physical arousal, his spouse develops suspicions of his infidelity and starts to engage in a series of stab wounds while directing verbal abuse towards Singh, who is in the final stages of his life.

Corresponding Author:
Mohit Nimariya
Research Scholar, Baba
Mastnath University,
Haryana, India

During his final moments, Eshwer recounts to Kalwant his heinous act of destroying a Muslim household amidst the riots and his unsuccessful effort to sexually assault a female, only to be informed that she had already perished ("cold...like ice"), resulting in his demise with these same words.

Research Objectives

1. To critically evaluate the works of Ismat Chughtai and Saadat Hasan Manto from a feminist perspective.
2. To examine the impact of Chughtai and Manto on the advancement of feminist literature.
3. To demonstrate the utilisation of the literary technique of feminism within the literary works of Saadat and Ismat.

Research Methodology

This study aims to provide a thorough analysis of the chosen short stories, employing novel and pertinent viewpoints, while also drawing comparisons with existing critiques. The project will encompass a comprehensive compilation of pertinent source materials, which will be gathered through both manual and digital means. Throughout the study, the Internet will be periodically used to enhance the existing study material. This study will employ descriptive and analytical methodologies to examine the thematic intricacies present in the works of Manto and Chughtai, to elucidate the desired and expected conclusion. The research conducted in this study will primarily and completely utilise the 8th edition of the MLA handbook as the primary source for the research framework.

Discussion

In the foreword of Ismat Chughtai's anthology of short stories, Saadat Hasan Manto jokingly addresses inquiries from young women in Hyderabad regarding the necessity of his marriage to Ismat Chughtai. He expresses their sadness at learning that both he and Ismat were contentedly wedded to their respective partners. Ismat in Mumbai encountered comparable inquiries as well. Later, both individuals, who were familiar with each other, recounted the incident and shared a hearty chuckle. In the same Foreword, he contemplates the possibility of a potential marriage between them and fears the outcomes, as both individuals were excessively similar; obstinate and iconoclastic. The combination of these two traits would have been too unpredictable to manage, even for the most progressive literary critics.

Manto characterises Ismat as a resolute individual with a strong cognitive capacity. Her obstinacy is inherent to her character. Her inherent inclination is to harbour a sense of resentment towards societal norms. This characteristic manifested in her personal life, characterised by her animosity towards marriage, her reluctance to conform to the typical expectations of a traditional wife, and subsequently her antipathy to the role of parenting. However, upon becoming a mother, Ismat showed no hesitation in providing unwavering maternal care to her ailing child and meticulously crafting dresses for her with the same level of precision as she would employ in writing her stories, possibly even more meticulously than she would employ in her writing. Nevertheless, the writer and the mother led separate and distinct lives, with limited interaction but a lack of integration that would typically be

anticipated. According to Manto, "Mamta maa banney ke saath hi kokh se bahar nikalti hai!" (Maternal affection manifests during the initial stages of motherhood.) (Urban Studies 207).

The perseverance is seen in Ismat's characters, who yearn for love yet are hesitant to acknowledge it. Highly attuned to even the slightest touch of a feather on the beloved's cheek, yet unwilling to cause harm with the savagery of a dictator. The climax of Ismat's stories generally concludes with a highly sensitive tone, characterised by an aggressive manifestation of a negative, obsessive, and destructive love that first begins in humour. Ismat Chughtai expresses her thoughts about her writing in her own words:

The pen is my livelihood and my friend, my confidante, a walking talking friend in my hours of loneliness. Whenever I want I can send for anyone via the pen's flying carpet, and when these people arrive, I can say anything, make them cry, laugh, or reduce them to ashes with my harsh words. And if I feel like it, destroy them by tearing them up into innumerable tiny fragments... (Chughtai 1981).

However, Manto's writing has a greater preoccupation with sexual themes, a stronger inclination to provoke shock, and a striking contrast when compared to Ismat's style. Ismat's writing is characterised by the presence of airs and graces, mood swings, and sensitivity that are unique to women and maybe etched in their work. Ismat's female characters, such as Gainda, a teenage widow who becomes pregnant by a bhaiyya and is left pining with her baby, and Lajo, a servant girl who goes from being a keep to becoming a mistress and back to being a keep, are characterised by their earthy sensuality and irrepressible sexuality. However, these qualities often lead to their downfall. Nevertheless, she demonstrates a lack of restraint when it comes to her male characters, as evidenced by her creation of a pen sketch depicting her beloved brother in Dozakhi. This sketch, created shortly after his demise, has garnered acclaim as one of the most exceptional biographical portrayals in the realm of Urdu literature.

Manto acknowledges that during their five-six years of being acquainted, they only had one disagreement about a linguistic irregularity. This disagreement caused them to be cautious about entering each other's territory, as they were both quite protective of their literary domains. Manto expresses concern that this cautious approach resulted in a lack of significant and insightful deliberations.

A significant focus of Chughtai's short stories pertains to the challenges encountered by women. Chughtai was captivated by the plight of oppressed women who valiantly fought for their rights. In the majority of her short works, she attributes the unequal treatment of women to societal factors. While she did address the challenges faced by women from disadvantaged backgrounds, her primary focus appeared to be on women from middle-class households. Her expertise lay in articulating the characteristics of middle or lower-middle-class Muslim women and their households in a manner that was unique to the local context of Uttar Pradesh. Chughtai demonstrated exceptional proficiency in this context since it aligned with her upbringing and personal encounters.

The Quilt, also known as the *Lihaaf*, serves as a symbolic representation that conveys a range of messages. The quilt serves as a representation of a Pandora's Box, which, upon its revelation, inflicts profound emotional wounds upon the narrator. However, it also encapsulates the narrator's

enduring optimism over their eventual recovery. From a strictly Pavlovian standpoint, the narrator undergoes conditioning as a result of the unpleasant stimuli, specifically witnessing the "unspeakable" event. This conditioning leads to the narrator's continued relapse to the "dark crevasses of the past" triggered by the quilt. The quilt also serves as a representation of the secrecy that surrounds the activity and its need to be concealed and shielded from scrutiny.

In addition to delving into the topic of taboo homo-erotica within her narrative, Chughtai also subtly scrutinises the transgression of a traditional master-servant dynamic that functions as a means of challenging a societal structure driven by feudal caste and class stratification. The frequent mention of the pair as "Nawab Sahib" (prince) and Begum Jan (princess) serves to underscore the aristocratic status of the family within the context of social stratification. Despite her wealth and social standing, Begum Jan appears to be having a wretched and unproductive life. The liberation of Begum Jan from her perpetual condition of "melancholy and despair" is achieved with the entrance of the bonded servant, which presents a captivating oxymoron.

In this graphic literary piece, Manto prompts the reader to contemplate his concept of a conscience that is subject to modification by external factors. Singh serves as an allegorical representation of the multitude of individuals who participated in acts of communal violence, driven by a collective fervour and a fervent commitment to safeguarding their community. The bandwagon phenomenon compels him to perpetrate the act of killing the Muslim family and abducting the girl for personal gratification, devoid of any remorse. The distressing encounter of recognising that the girl was already referred to as "cold meat" serves as an unpleasant stimulation that hinders his ability to be stimulated by his wife.

The narrative also endeavours to communicate the fundamental concept of the necessity to pursue repentance and eventual absolution. Singh exhibits ambivalence in acknowledging his transgressions and thus embraces mortality by claiming that "what happened is for the best" Subsequently, the individual proceeds to recount the occurrence to his spouse, who undergoes a transformation from a state of disdain towards her deceitful spouse to a comprehension of the psychological distress he experienced. In the final scene, Singh requests Kalwant to offer him her hand, symbolically seeking repentance and solace. Kaur responds to his act of "reaching out" and offers her forgiveness by "placing her hand on his", only to realise that he is as frigid as the female he had previously described shortly before his demise.

Feminist concerns in the works of Manto and Chughtai

The primary objective of feminist literature is to critically analyse and investigate power dynamics, patriarchal systems, societal norms, and institutional frameworks that have contributed to the persistent disparities between genders. Feminist writing in the context of Partition-era India centres its attention on the prevailing concept of violence and assaults targeting women as a strategy to appropriate and tarnish the reputation of their families. The female body was regarded as a mere instrument or item, whose infringement was used as a means to assert community supremacy. Therefore, the literature of this particular period embodied misogyny at its core.

During the Partition, communal violence manifested in a highly emotional and abhorrent manner, with Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs resorting to acts of pillaging and rape as a means to demonstrate their dominance. Women emerged as the primary targets of these atrocities, which originated from religious and political tensions. In Thanda Gosht's novel, Eshwer Singh, a fervent nationalist, becomes so engrossed in the intense emotions of the moment that he also chooses to deprive a Muslim girl of her familial respect and dignity by engaging in sexual assault against her without any reason. Surprisingly, the name Eshwer carries connotations of the Almighty, potentially alluding to the presence of the Indian concept of Pati Parmeshwar (my spouse, my deity). Singh's vengeful nature compels him to go to abhorrent measures, hence presenting a striking paradox to the holy connotation associated with his name.

The juxtaposition in the narrative gives a subtle sense of stark contradiction, as the character's actions starkly conflict with the expectations associated with his faith, name, and morality. The act itself serves as a distinct portrayal of the man's desire to establish his authority by "possessing" a young girl who belongs to a different religious belief. Furthermore, Kalwant's portrayal of Kaur's reaction serves as a poignant illustration of the disintegration of a patriarchal societal structure, as a woman, rather than yielding, asserts dominance over her husband through a ruthless act of stabbing, prompted by his unfaithfulness. Kaur prioritises her identity over the well-being of her family, despite the potential perception of her actions as self-centred, motivated by her feelings of bitterness over her husband's lack of loyalty.

Kalwant's conduct of stabbing her husband is considered a heinous deed, mostly due to the perception that a woman is violating misogynistic standards by taking matters into her own hands and assaulting her deceitful spouse. Typically, women are often subjected to acts of violence, but in this particular instance, they are actively engaged in perpetrating such acts, so highlighting a clear violation of traditional gender norms. Hence, the presence of obscenity is evident not only within the context of necrophilia but also in Kaur's transgression of the societal expectations imposed upon her. Although her husband's sorry confession partially alleviates the abhorrence of his crime, Kalwant's actions remain open to interpretation due to the sudden conclusion of the story. The departure of Kaur from the trajectory of submission conveyed a profound message that tended to provoke offence within the patriarchal worldview prevalent among its readership throughout the 1940s. Hence, it was not the graphic violence or the heinous nature of the portrayed offence, but rather the challenge to the deeply ingrained norm of male authority that appeared to elicit opposition from the general populace, legal professionals, and the judicial system.

Lihaaf depicts a Muslim noble household governed by conservative principles and the requirement for prudence. An immediate outcome is the embrace of the purdah or veil as a lifestyle that women adopt after reaching adolescence. Within a cultural framework, a purdah refers to a garment designed to conceal or safeguard the sacredness and innocence of a woman. Nevertheless, the purdah and, thus, Chughtai's *Lihaaf*, ominously hide an abhorrent and "disgraceful" deed.

The phenomenon of confinement extends to all individuals inside the familial unit, signifying the presence of an

oppressive institution even within the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, the Nawab (a male) openly disregards the sanctity of the purdah by participating in his homosexual revelry. As a result, Begum Jaan, feeling frustrated, starts to investigate her methods of resistance while staying behind parda or within the previously described bubble.

The protagonist reinforces the concept of class disparity by participating in physical interactions with Rabbo, who occupies a far lower position within the hierarchical socio-economic structure. Therefore, both partners engage in noncompliance with established rules inside the boundaries of their residence to avoid damaging the family's reputation. Therefore, in the context of *Lihaaf*, obscenity pertains to the violations of heterosexuality, fidelity, and adherence to social norms, rather than the sexual aspect of the action.

Conclusion

Thanda Gosht and *Lihaaf* can be identified as early examples of feminist literature, in which the challenges to traditional gender roles are prominently explored. Both narratives share the same objective of reaching a powerful conclusion that captivates the reader. The main characters, Eshwer and Chughtai's narrator experience a state of astonishment as a result of the tumultuous events and revelations they have encountered. The unpleasant stimulus, which is named after itself, also serves as a significant symbol in both narratives. The quilt is a constant source of fear for the girl, and the girl's body, which is as cold as gosht or flesh, prevents Eshwer Singh from getting aroused by its recollection. At a more profound level, the patchwork also symbolises the imperative to challenge societal norms, while the *Thanda Gosht* comparison reaches its culmination when Eshwer Singh's demise occurs.

Both narratives also share a common theme of the sombre hiding of societal wrongdoings, symbolised by the quilt in *Lihaaf* and Eshwer Singh's initial endeavour to conceal his abhorrent act in *Thanda Gosht*, respectively. The researcher holds the belief that the metaphorical veil of prejudice and oppression has experienced a subsequent elevation, so rendering the deviances and atrocities shown in these narratives devoid of relevance within a contemporary framework. Nevertheless, the principles of liberty and dynamism face significant challenges in maintaining their position while tradition and stagnation persistently dominate. On one side of the Indian spectrum, there is support for Queer Pride marches, while on the other side, there are Supreme Court verdicts that establish homosexuality as a criminal offence. The nation that endeavours to guarantee complete security for its female population conveniently disregards heinous conduct such as marital rape.

The current situation presents a juxtaposition of divergent ideas and viewpoints, as we confront a predictable dystopia characterised by increasingly regressive mindsets.

References

1. Abbas S. Title: Ismat Chughtai: The feminist Manto of literature. Research Gate; c2018 Dec. Available from: www.researchgate.net/publication/329829710_Title_Ismat_Chughtai_The_Feminist_Manto_of_Literature
2. Bhat N. Manto on Ismat, who, like Independent India and Pakistan, was born on August 15. The Indian Express; c2016 Aug.

3. Chughtai I. The quilt and other stories. Translation. New Delhi: Penguin India; c2011.
4. Manto SH. Thanda gosht; c1982.
5. Sachdeva S. How Ismat Chughtai and Manto gave India its first feminist literature. Dailyo; c2018 Mar 8. Available from: www.dailyo.in/arts/partition-1947-saadat-hasan-manto-thanda-gosht-ismat-chughtai-lihaaf-feminism-8690.