

Deconstructing Femininity and Interrogating Male Hegemony: Ismat Chughtai's *Terhi Lakir*

Huma Yaqub

I was afraid of the nights. Nightmares tormented me. I saw in my dreams that my tongue was fluttering like frogs over live coals. I screamed and then someone punched me and I woke up. After that I was scared to close my eyes.... I was petrified of dozakh, the coachman's narak and Sheila Thomas's hell; all of these three were terrifying. I decided that I would go only to heaven. (Chughtai 2012: 258)

Determined to find her own salvation Ismat Chughtai found one through education and self-expression — her bold, frank and irreverent stance in life marks the true essence of her memoir *Kaghzi hai Pairahan (A Life in Words: Memoirs 2012)*. Writing was a passion for her and a medium to vent out whatever she saw around her with a purpose to bring about change even though it might come in small measures. She was proud to have lived life on her own terms and firmly believed that education alone could dispel the darkness of ills prevalent in the society and can liberate women from age old conventions and stereotypes. Ismat Chughtai possessed what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar would call a “female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and, society.” (Gilbert Gubar 2000: xii)

The range of emotions that Ismat Chughtai displays in her works is a testament of her pure feminine sensibility which enabled her to understand and unravel the female psyche where myriad feelings laid buried struggling to find a voice. Ismat Chughtai wrote in a language which was racy; spiced with wit and best suited to the kind of sensibility that she expressed and empowered her to speak her own mind with alacrity and frankness. The idiom in which she wrote is described as “*begumati zuban* (the speech patterns used specifically by the ladies of the house)” (Naqvi 2006: xiii). Tahira Naqvi in her introduction to the translation of Ismat Chughtai's short stories further writes:

In large part it is Ismat Chughtai's diction, her unique and rich idiom that pulls us along, especially those of us who view Urdu not only as a language, but an institution....Dialects and idioms explode on every page so that each paragraph becomes more than just a collection of sentences conveying an idea; it shapes itself into a representation of a way of life, traditions, a philosophy. (Naqvi 2013: xv)

Ismat Chughtai was a fearless but sensitive writer. She established a lasting friendship with Manto and also became the subject of some of the finest Pen Portraits (Khaka) in Urdu literature. Manto who has once been critical of Ismat Chughtai and called her “a mere woman” (204) corrected his stance later and went on to appreciate the sincerity and naturalness which gets reflected in Ismat Chughtai's works; he writes:

If she had not been “a mere woman, after all!” then we would not have found such fine and sensitive stories like “Bhulbhulaiyan,” “Til,” “Lihaf” and “Gainda” in her collections. They portray different facets of a woman—neat and transparent, purged of all artifice.

These are not flirtations or coquetry designed to conquer men. They have nothing to do with the coarse gestures of the body. The objective of these spiritual gestures is man's conscience which encompasses the unknown and unintelligible but tender nature of a woman. (Manto: 205)

Ismat Chughtai's vision is broad enough to embrace contrasting point of views, she is critical of the society of her times which tethered woman to the role of procreation and housekeeping thus keeping her away from intellectual pursuits and preventing her from realizing her true potentials. She challenges the appropriation of woman to domesticity, sex and procreation.

Ismat Chughtai was able to break the conventional mould of woman being represented as weak, submissive and voiceless. Ismat Chughtai's lived experiences always had some reflection and imprint on the characters who breathed through the pages of her works. For her writing always remained a medium of narrating self—fictional or otherwise. Shaman the protagonist of her magnum opus *Terhi Lakir* (*The Crooked Line* 2006) is in more than many ways Ismat Chughtai herself who lived life on her own terms. Ismat Chughtai was an avid reader and was exposed to the western literary conventions, in her memoir *Kaghzi Hai Pairahan* she refers to reading Bronte sisters, Charles Dickens, Hemingway, Emile Zola, Balzac, Maugham, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Gorky and Dostoevsky. It would not be wrong to assume that she must have read James Joyce as well. Ismat Chughtai's *Terhi Lakir* is a semi-autobiographical novel and a bildungsroman as well like Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Shaman; the protagonist of *Terhi Lakir*; quite like Stephen Dedalus of *Portrait* is also a rebel—she rebels against the conventions of the society, struggles to get education for herself, tries to come to terms with her sexuality and events of childhood leave a deep and everlasting impact on her mind.

Ismat Chughtai appeared on the Urdu literary scene fiercely voicing the dreams, aspirations and concerns of women at a time when no woman writer even in the west was writing with such frankness about issues related to women. She appeared much before feminism became a fad in the West. Ismat Chughtai's concerns in *Terhi Lakir* are real and grounded and reflect a phase when Indian woman particularly the Indian Muslim woman was trying to come out of the four walls to get education for herself and free herself from patriarchal domination and feudal mindset and to make her presence felt. Through this novel Ismat Chughtai not only interrogates the male hegemony but also challenges the established code of female behaviour. The novel is emancipatory and iconoclastic in the same breath as it looks towards female emancipation by breaking all previous moulds of femininity. Defining the basic objectives of feminism Maggie Humm writes:

Feminism incorporates diverse ideas which share three major perceptions: that gender is a social construction which oppresses women more than men; that patriarchy shapes this construction; and the women's experiential knowledge is a basis for a future non-sexist society. These assumptions inform feminism's double agenda: the task of critique (attacking gender stereotypes) and the task of construction. Without this second task (sometimes called feminist praxis) feminism has no goal. (Maggie Humm 1989: 194)

Ismat Chughtai's Shaman breaks away from the conventional paradigm of a 'heroine' in Urdu fiction. Her very birth was an act of rebellion; coming into this world on her own terms. When an infant she has been described as a "baby, with her diminutive nose, eyes tiny like tamarind seeds but keener than those of an eagle, when this little creature who had the face of a mouse smiled, Bari Apa and Manjhu both felt she was sneering at them...." (2) Shaman grows in a stifling and

oppressive patriarchal setup where unhappiness breeds unhappiness and the oppressed often become oppressors as it happens in the case of Bari Apa who serves as an example of frustrated and crushed womanhood, having lost control of her own life she feels empowered by controlling and subjugating the life of her younger sister. Far from considering women as weak and docile creatures Ismat Chughtai delineates several female characters exuding intelligence and worldly wisdom even if they are illiterate or seemingly living a cloistered life in their homes. On the occasion of Noori's marriage Shaman reflects:

How unfortunate that men think of women as a man's shoe, a creature with a weak intellect, and God knows what else. But when this very shoe strikes them on the head their ego is shattered. Suddenly she saw all men as victims, and all women laden with gold and rupees as tyrants.... (Chughtai 2006: 182)

Ismat Chughtai effortlessly subverts the perceived role of the woman and from victim she gets transformed into a tyrant who rules over her household and men indeed are oblivious of this freedom that is enjoyed by women within the confines of the four walls. Ismat Chughtai celebrates the intellect of women with which they can tackle even the most difficult of situations and if the straight forward path makes her life hell then off course she is well adapted to tread on the crooked line. She is not associating the worldly intelligence with educated women only but education definitely gives an added advantage to the woman and exposes her to the immense possibilities of life. While reminiscing about her childhood friend Mangu; the daughter of their family coachman who after getting married was being ill-treated by her mother in law and her husband for not having produced a son but finally Mangu was able to have a way out by her sheer intelligence; Ismat Chughtai writes in her memoir:

When she returned after a year she was unrecognizable. She had not produced a son, yet she looked healthy and plump. It emerged that Mangu was possessed by spirits. These were very dangerous and vile spirits who, after entering Mangu's body, inflamed her to give her mother-in-law a thrashing. One day she also bit her husband's ankle. Everyone was terrified of her.... That was when I realized that though illiterate and uncultivated Mangu was not stupid. (Chughtai 2012: 12)

Simone de Beauvoir whose pioneering work *The Second Sex* came a few years after *Terhi Lakir* famously remarked "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine." (295) Ismat Chughtai in *Terhi Lakir* deconstructs all such cultural constructs of femininity as Shaman refuses to adhere to the conventional roles she was expected to play. She has no interest in knitting, sewing or housekeeping and to the great agony of her mother went on to pursue her studies. Even in her marriage with Irish army Captain Ronnie Taylor she breaks the barriers of class, race religion and nationality.

Shaman shares many characteristics of her creator. She was born in a big family where children were more of a curse for the mother rather than bliss. Shaman was brought up by her sister Manjhu and suffered from the pangs of not having received the love of her mother. Terhi Lakir traces the various stages in the life of its protagonist Shaman—her childhood and growing up in a big extended family, her struggle to get education, her school days at Aligarh, her College days at college in Lucknow, her association with the progressives which led to her exposure to new thoughts and ideas of freedom; her experiences at Bareilly working as a Headmistress in a girls' school.

The first meeting of the Progressive Writers Movement in 1936 in Lucknow proved to be an important milestone in the life of Ismat Chughtai, besides meeting Munshi Prem Chand it was here that she met Rashid Jahan for the first time who had a lasting influence on Ismat Chughtai. Rashid Jahan's reference finds its way in *Terhi Lakir* as Shaman enjoys and discovers the true meaning of freedom in the premises of Lucknow University. This is the phase when Shaman starts drifting away from family and etches her own destiny. Her mutinous behaviour gets reflected right from her infancy and it continues till the end of the novel. This behaviour of Shaman often lands her into great many difficulties and sufferings but she embraces them all in her quest for freedom and individuality.

Shaman's story is the story of denial and deprivation, her very birth separated her from her mother; she found solace in Unnah, her wet nurse, but was snatched from her bosom; Manjhu her sister tried to fill the vacuum but was soon married off. Once in school she idolises her teachers and feels attracted to some of her hostel mates; an attraction which she herself is not conscious of. Then her heart flutters for Rashid who soon leaves for England but in all this the author writes that "Shaman forged ahead" (102) and then she encounters Rai Sahab the father of her friend Prema. Being a rebel that she is Shaman without caring for societal conventions admits her love for Rai Sahab which comes as a rude shock to him and soon Shaman hears about his death. Fighting against all odds Shaman enters a new phase of life where she encounters Alma, Satil and Iftikhar—the Progressives with revolutionary ideas—with whom she encounters a new world and discovers an all new self:

As long as a diamond remains in the darkness of the mine it's a useless stone....No one besides Satil had probed enough to know that behind Shaman's anxious and fearful exterior there existed the hidden embers of rebellion and self-reliance, that enclosed in this flat, silent, stony breast was a smouldering fire just waiting to be awakened, and once aroused all the slumbering powers were going to bubble furiously. Even Shaman had not been aware of this aspect of her personality. (Chughtai 2006: 185)

Shaman always fought a lone battle as she never had anybody from her family to support her. She was always deprived and left alone to wade through the strong currents of life. At the end she is left alone devoid of family and friends or a loved one. Whatever little support that she anchors her life on is always snatched from her. Shaman is a bitter woman towards the end of the novel. She has stopped making compromises her anger has given way to aggression and she spews venom. She hurts her husband Ronnie Taylor perhaps to avenge all the agony and denial she has suffered at the hands of different men and society at large. Simone De Beauvoir writes:

...the woman looks about for someone responsible against whom her indignation can find concrete expression. Her husband is the favourite victim. He embodies the masculine universe, through him male society has taken charge of her and swindled her. He bears the weight of the world, and if things go wrong, then it is his fault. (Beauvoir 1997: 618-619)

If Shaman becomes insensitive towards Ronnie then there are definitely reasons to it. Continuous heartbreaks have rendered Shaman incapable of loving anyone and besides she is living in constant fear of losing Ronnie. One morning Shaman wakes up to find that Ronnie is missing and immediately comes to the conclusion that he has dumped her on the very second day of marriage. Shaman's marriage to Ronnie is marred by insecurities and suspicions as she thinks that society cannot accept a white man marrying an Indian woman and this relationship will never be looked at with dignity. After the initial turmoil it seemed that things are getting sorted out between them but Shaman full of vengeance hurts and insults Ronnie and bears the tragic

consequences. The novel *Terhi Lakir* ends on a pessimistic note as Shaman is left alone still trying to have a grip on reality but very much on the verge of losing her sanity.

In *Terhi Lakir* Ismat Chughtai deconstructs conventional models of femininity and shows the mirror to the woman herself and the society as well. She wants society to accept woman as she is—with all her strengths and weaknesses, her fears and aspirations, her yearnings and revulsions, her anger and love. Through Shaman's character and her crisis it seems that Ismat Chughtai is posing a very grave question--- is the woman herself responsible for what she is or the society has suppressed her to the extent that she can be nothing but a *terhi lakir*; a crooked line. Shaman has to make some difficult choices in life in the face of various challenges that come through her way and try to crush her spirit time and again. In all such grinding circumstances she struggles to keep her calm and manages to gather her strength. The path that she chose for herself is her very own and crooked it may be according to the conventions of the society but she has the satisfaction of taking the unconventional route and of exploring the freedom and possibilities of life.

Works Cited

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, 1997.

Chughtai, Ismat. *A Life in Words: Memoirs*. Translated by M. Asaduddin. Penguin, 2012.

_____. *The Crooked Line*. Translated by Tahira Naqvi. Women Unlimited, 2006.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and The Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000 Second Edition.

Humm, Maggie. *Dictionary of Feminist Literary Theory*. Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989.

Manto, Saadat Hasan. "Ismat Chughtai". Translated by M. Asaddudin. *Annual of Urdu Studies*, Vol. 16, 2001, p.205.

Naqvi, Tahira. "Introduction". *The Crooked Line*. Women Unlimited, 2006.

_____. "Introduction". *Vintage Chughtai: A Selection Of Her Best Stories*. Women Unlimited, 2013.

Dr Huma Yaqub is currently working as Assistant Professor at Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Lucknow. She can be contacted at huma_yaqub@yahoo.com