



Exploring The Theme Of Sexuality With Special Reference To Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" And Khurshid Akram's "Coming"

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Abstract: Gender perspective in literature has been a great issue which emphasizes the importance of the social construction of the gender and the assignment of specific roles, responsibilities and expectations to men and women. Both the sexes must be given equal importance for a strong social set up but usually women fail to get their own identity in the male dominated society. Since time immemorial they have been relegated to secondary place in relation to male. Man suffers with male superiority that looks down upon the women and makes man 'absolute' and women 'subject', a silent sufferer. A vast majority of women is reconciled to a life of humiliation in the form of gender bias while performing the roles of wives, mothers etc. in the society they live in. In order to establish their identity and keeping in mind their subjugation in the hands of their male counterparts, the women have often tried to do away with supremacy of males; they are more attracted towards the same sex, giving rise to lesbian relationship. Ismat Chughtai, the great name of Urdu fiction is known for her indomitable spirit and other evolving conflicts in modern India, while resolutely refusing to bow to conventional norms, abstinence, and modesty. But Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" foreshadows the idea of exploitations of another corporal body to fulfil one's desires. The story epitomizes the excessive degree of suppression that one undergoes. It aptly suggests how the life of a woman by training is confined to her body; how one's desire are manipulated and how one swings between hopes and ethics. Khurshid Akram belongs to the generation of Urdu writers which came to the fore during the 1990s. His volume of short stories, titled *Ek Ghar Mashroot Muafinaama* contains a number of stories. The story "Coming" is one of the representative stories depicting the state of prostitute in our society. He has portrayed the realities hidden behind the lives of the marginalized women, especially the sex workers.

Both the writers have tried to depict objectively the characters in the novel. There is no possibility of reading simply 'what is there' is the texts, for the texts does not have the mode of being of some of neutral object. It is always possible to show that a reading of a text that claims complete objectivity is itself an interpretation. A person reading a text is himself a part of the meaning he apprehends. Indeed, Ismat Chughtai and Khurshid Akram both have tried to analyse the stories critically.

The present paper, intends to present a comparative study of Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" and Khurshid Akram's "Coming", related to the writer's points of view about the status of such women as are considered subjugated in our patriarchal social setup. They often suffer from identity crisis and as a result take recourse to such aberrations as are not given social sanction.

Keywords: Patriarchal attitude; sexuality; exploitation; identity crisis.

Analysis

Gender perspective in literature has been a great issue which emphasises the importance of the social construction of the gender and the assignment of specific roles, responsibilities and expectations to men and women. Both the sexes must be given equal importance for a strong social set up but usually women fail to get their own identity in the male dominated society. Since time immemorial they have been relegated to secondary place in relation to male. Man suffers with male superiority that looks down upon the women and makes man 'absolute' and women 'subject', a silent sufferer. A vast majority of women is reconciled to a life of humiliation in the form of gender bias while performing the roles of wives, mothers etc. in the society they live in. In order to establish their identity and keeping in mind their subjugation in the hands of their male counterparts, the women have often tried to do away with supremacy of males; they are more attracted towards the same sex, giving rise to lesbian relationship.

Writers like Uma Vasudev, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Shobha De, Ismat Chughtai, et al have tried to explore the theme of sexuality in their novels. Being women they understand and unfold the inner mind of the subdued women with their feminine sensibility and psychological insights. They present their protagonists as vibrantly alive in terms of feelings, intellect and emotions and reflect a kind of feminist approach, outlook and perspective. These women writers present the image of a new woman who is conscious of her place and position in the family and society. Their protagonists emerge as individuals who challenge the society for their existential survival. Women are no longer presented as meek and submissive, but dynamic with a sense of self-consciousness and self-assertiveness. These novelists have made the process of social change meaningful with their fresh perspective of man-woman relationship.

Literature reflects not only the social reality but also shapes the complex ways in which men and women organize themselves, their interpersonal relationships and their perception of the socio-cultural reality. The attitude of the author towards men and women portrayed by him in his works and the attitude of the characters, male and female, to one another highlight the gender relationship as well as the author's attitude towards these relationships. The author explores and examines the relationship of man with his fellow men, vis-à-vis the social forces at work around him in all their bewildering complexity. This process of examination covers the entire gamut of human experience, the most significant being the man-woman relationship.

The family in India, during the last few decades, has been under a process of social change, thus substantially affecting this relationship. This social change is marked in the Indian society at large; it has touched the fringes of the family and this interaction has brought a significant change in the structure and various relationships in a family unit. There is a conspicuous change in the spheres of roles and values. From the sociological point of view the role of husband-wife is the principal component in a family context that has undergone a vital change due to growing enlightenment and the movement for emancipation of women.

The age-old institutions of family and marriage have been under a tremendous strain in the modern times. One of the major factors for the disintegration of family is the rampant promiscuity in sexual relation. Yet another cause is that by winning the right to enter the labour market women have found a degree of economic freedom that makes marriage less necessary, resulting in estrangement between man and his wife.

Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* portrays a picture of contemporary Indian society, especially marriage and man-woman relationship. In the fictional cosmos of the book the family is crumbling and marriage comes to be redefined. The new definition of marriage postulates complete sexual freedom, with no notion of marital fidelity. Economic security for wife seems to be the cornerstone of this marriage arrangement which appears more like a contract than a living, vibrant, emotional relationship.

The present paper, intends to present a comparative study of Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" and Khurshid Akram's "Coming", related to the writers' points of view about the status of such women as are considered subjugated in our patriarchal social setup. They often suffer from identity crisis and as a result take recourse to such aberrations as are not given social sanction.

Ismat Chughtai, the great name of Urdu fiction is known for her indomitable spirit and other evolving conflicts in modern India, while resolutely refusing to bow to conventional norms, abstinence, and modesty. Chughtai, born at a time when Indian society was largely orthodox and tradition-bond, and women spent their whole life behind the *pardah*, Chughtai challenged the mores and values of her time and fiercely advocated selfhood and self-definition for women. Though she operated largely within the parameters of Indian patriarchy, she offered subtle critiques of its dominant assumptions through her writings. Her contemporaries include Rajinder Singh Bedi, Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan Chander. It was she who brought into its ambit the whole terrain of feminine sensibility with a sharp focus on female sexuality. Chughtai, too during her childhood was treated with heart-breaking indifference. In her unfinished autobiography *KaghazihaiPairahan* and her short story "Childhood" (Bachpan) she gives a graphic description of her childhood and early education. Her reading of Freud disabused her of her romantic notions about love and man-woman relationships. All these made a deep impression on her mind and went into the making of her artistic sensibility. Chughtai wrote novels, plays and travelogues. However, her most remarkable achievement lies in the short story form. A significant section of her fiction deals with concerns that are largely those of women. She operates within a limited range, usually confining herself to the problems and portrayal of women. She is the first significant writer in Urdu to acknowledge female sexuality and to portray it in a courageous and convincing way. Many of her stories underline her deep-seated conviction that sex is one of the most important and potent facts of life and the prime pivot of many human actions. In her short stories she deals with the entire range of female sexuality—from arousal of the sexual urge in a child, through adolescence, to adult sexuality. Besides sexual attraction between men and women, she also deals, in a limited way, with homosexuality and lesbianism which was, in the context of her works, the inevitable product of a hypocritical, sexually repressive society.

"Lihaaf" is one of the best stories written by Chughtai. It boldly depicts female sexuality in a manner not attempted before in modern Indian literature. This story was born of a real life situation and it is about "a woman's loneliness, her tension and desperation". (Anand, The Sunday Observer, 1990) The narrator girl was left by her amma for a week with Begum Jaan. Nawan Saheb having married her tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and immediately forgot her, "the frail, beautiful Begum wasted away in anguished loneliness ... She spent sleepless nights, yearning for a love that had never been". (The Quilt, 14-15) But very soon Begum Jaan started living her life to the full in the company of Rabbu. She used to massage her (Begum Jaan) body at all hours. She was afflicted with a persistent itch and her existence was totally centered on herself and her itch. The girl's bed was accommodated in her room. On the very first night she got scared:

It was pitched dark and Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously, as though an elephant was struggling inside. (17)

She tried to convey her fear to Begum Jaan but was silenced by Rabbu who was very much present in the room, on the same bed and under the same quilt. The narrator girl also took the matter very lightly. The same incident occurred the next day, too. And the girl heard Rabbu crying, "... And then came the slurping sound of a cat licking a plate. (18) In the absence of Rabbu she tried to rub Begum's back according to her instructions. She was very pleased with her and she offered lots of things to her (the girl). Not only this she asked her to lie down beside her:

She made me lie down with my head on her arm. 'How skinny you are... your ribs are showing.' She began counting my ribs (19-20)

In course of counting her ribs she undressed her despite her protest and satisfied herself:

Begum Jaan's deep-set eye focused on me and I felt like crying. She was pressing me as though I were a clay doll and the odour of her warm body made me want to throw up. But she was like a person possessed. I could neither scream nor cry. (20)

The girl was so terrified by this incident that she felt that Begum Jaan was more terrifying than all the loafers of the world. Since her amma had not returned by that time she was helpless and had to stay there

much against her wish. Despite Begum Jaan's best efforts to keep her (girl) with her, she could not succeed. Even Rabbu out of jealousy remarked, "Raw mangoes are sour to the taste." (21). This comment echoes nothing but the sexual connotation. The same thing continues night by night:

In the dark Begum Jaan's quilt was once again swaying like an elephant... The elephant inside the quilt heaved up and then sat down... The quilt began to assume such grotesque shapes that I was shaken. It seemed as though a large frog was inflating itself noisily and was about to leap on to me. (22)

The writer's use of words like 'quilt', 'elephant', 'frog' etc. very well suggest the sexual implications which are quite befitting to the theme of the story.

Khurshid Akram is another famous Urdu writer who became popular during the 1990's. He has been a poet, critic and above all a short story writer. He has also translated four books into Urdu from Hindi, Bangla and English as well as created a compilation of Hindi poems. He has also been associated with the media. The present story "Coming" by Akram has been translated from Urdu by Javaid Qazi. It is one of the stories from his volume of short stories entitled *Ek Ghair Mashroot Muafinaama*, which depicts the state of prostitute in our society. Through this story he has portrayed the realities hidden behind the lives of the marginalized women, especially the sex workers.

The story begins with the writer's returning to Calcutta, his native place after a gap of about eight years. But he claims, "All of Calcutta is in the palm of my hand" (*River of Flesh and Other Stories*, 158). The word "Coming" was heard by the writer and he very well recalled it, "Wherever there was darkness, I have heard this sound..." (159). Whenever he used to hear this word he left the darkness and ran towards the light. But with the passage of time everything got changed- nothing to be afraid of and quite conversant with the members of the dark corridor. Not only aged women but the tender under-aged girls were also working to earn their livelihood over there. He was rather surprised to see the younger lots. He thinks:

Has she been home, her father might have said to her: 'It is getting dark. Switch on the light.'... At her age, all girls know the sweet taste of goodness. But if she is here, then she most certainly knows what wickedness is. (161)

The writer further depicts the scene at the bus stop where five women are waiting, not for the bus; they are not speaking anything, but the quivering sound of their voices- 'Coming'... can be heard. Their lips do not move but under the bright lights their eyes are speaking. He found a change after so many years:

The business that was conducted in darkness is now being carried on under bright lights. Look wise there is no difference between them and housewives. The only difference is that housewives are actually waiting for buses, but these women await something else. (163)

The writer was rather shocked to see this sea-change. He asked them:

All I wanted to say was that your business ought be conducted in darkness, not under bright lights. In another few days will you come here and stand stark naked? Don't you have any sense of modesty, any decency? (164)

They replied to the writer's query:

We feel very embarrassed. Come and see us in our homes. We are also women. But out of twenty-four hours, if we don't spend four hours in the business then we won't even get a morsel of stale bread to eat. In these four hours we are not ashamed of darkness or of light. Nor do we discriminate between a lad, a youngster, a mature fellow or an old dodderer. Nor do we concern ourselves with the One who sits above. (164)

The entire conversation smacks of nothing but sexual overtones. The story ends with the sentence- "She came close and, gesturing towards the darkness on the right, said, 'Coming?' (167) The story very well reveals the low self-esteem, incompleteness, emptiness, self-doubt and self-hatred that comes from being the oppressed. It exposes the trauma and brutality of prostitution. The writer has proved that prostitution is an inherently exploitative practice, more akin to slavery than to occupation. According to him women do not choose prostitution, they are prostituted.

Thus we find that both the writers have explored the theme of sexuality in their writings. On the one hand, we have Chughtai who depicts everything with utmost subtlety through the use of a language that is bold, innovative and incredibly powerful in its suggestiveness, while on the other Akram's Story reveals the helplessness of the women in patriarchal society- how they are exploited in different ways in social fabric of the society. The story reveals the absence of choice, prostituted women and their un-prostituted sisters face in and outside marriage. Both the writers are similar in analysing the theme of sexuality- conveying through suggestions but their treatment is totally different. Chughtai is bolder: it is reflected in her style where the tone is racy and conversational rather than reflective. Her character have been treated not as autonomous individuals but as products of a certain social environment which shapes their psyche. She is a writer in the realist tradition and her style is direct, uninhibited and spontaneous; she never takes recourse to any complicated narrative devices. Krishan Chander has very aptly remarked about her style:

... Not only does her story seem to be running, but the sentences, images, metaphors, the sounds and sensibilities of the characters and their feelings-all seem to be moving along in a cluster with the force of a storm. (Choten, 5-6)

Most unlike his contemporaries, Khurshid Akram's portrayal of prostitutes is different. He has mainly tried to abuse the customers and the sex workers who treats this profession in their own ways. His only purpose is to de-normalise the efforts to legitimise the exploitation of women. Akram, as a feminist and campaigner for social justice has always tried to safeguard the prestige and honour of the women folks.

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