

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal



Volume 7, Issue 7, July 2019

www.ijellh.com

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Dismantling Patriarchal Slavery in Ismat Chughtai's 'The Quilt'

Abstract

The present paper evaluates the dismantling of patriarchal slavery in Ismat Chughtai's 'The Quilt' through J.S Mill and Woolstonecraft's observation of marriage. For J.S. Mill, marriage is another domain of patriarchal domination. It is not a sacred institution based on the equality of both the sexes. Women have to sacrifice their whole life in the service of men. Rather it imposes restrictions on women and they become the mere slaves for their husbands. The paper also examines Wollstonecraft's views of marriage as she exposes the fact that marriage is a 'legal prostitution' and women 'may be convenient slaves'. According to her, men used to marry in order to escape from any sort of sexual disease. Wives are merely safer and more convenient prostitutes to satisfy the sexual pleasure of husbands. The character of Begum Jaan in 'The Quilt' reflects the frustrations of married women. Her husband seems to be more interested in young boys and treats her as an object and not as a human being. It represents the irony present in her life. In order to degrade herself as a non-existent being in her own house, she finds solace in a lesbian relationship with her maid. It seems to be Chughtai's urge to break down the traditional properties of women. Chughtai used the lesbianism as a woman's way of overcoming the emotional void on her by her husband.

Keywords: Patriarchal Domination, Slavery, Lesbianism, Prostitution, Subjugation

As Simone De Beauvoir states: “One is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman” justifies the domination of patriarchal system over millions of women. From their infancy, society imposes several restrictions which made them an object rather than a being. To explore this subjugation of women, several thinkers and writers played an important role in this. J.S. Mill is one such writer who himself a male projected the oppression of women in the hands of patriarchal rigid norms. He even critiques marriage to legalize the harassment of women and to transform their lives into a sexual being. His essay ‘*On the Subjection of Women*’ draws an analogy between the marital servitude of women and slavery. He also suggests that superiority of males depend largely on physical strength not on mental levels. He even categorizes the existence of a wife as the ‘bond-servant of her husband’ who has no right of her own rather than to accept her husband blindly whether she has been loved by him or not. He said:

... men suppose that all is now as it should be in regard to the marriage contract; and we are continually told that civilization and Christianity have restored to the woman her just rights. Meanwhile the wife is the actual bondservant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called. She vows a lifelong obedience to him at the altar, and is held to it all through her life by law. Casuists may say that the obligation of obedience stops short of participation in crime, but it certainly extends to everything else. She can do not act whatever but by his permission, at least tacit. She can acquire no property but for him: the instant it becomes hers, even if by inheritance, it becomes ipso facto his. (22-23)

Mill’s conclusion was that in comparison ‘no slave is a slave to the same lengths’ as a century wife. The submissiveness of women can be illustrated further in the following lines:

Oh! Why was I born with a different fate?

Why was I not born like the envious race?

Why did Heaven adorn me with beautiful hand?

And then set me down in an envious land. (Blake 11)

Another thinker that can be taken into consideration is Mary Wollstonecraft who is regarded as the mother of feminism. She also analyzed the position of women in society. The society treats both the sexes on an unequal basis. Her essay '*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures On Political and Moral Subjects*' deals with the theme of marriage. She says that marriage is a sacred ritual but with the passage of time has become a root cause of the oppression of women. According to her, marriage serves mainly two purposes: 1) It secures women as permanent slaves to men for their lifetime. 2) It makes women safer and more convenient prostitutes. She further explodes the fact that after marriage a woman has to perform her duties as a wife, daughter-in-law, mother and so on. They lose their self-respect, sense of understanding, practice of reason, intellect and opportunities to develop as well. Thus, they become the mere slaves to men.

Further Mary Wollstonecraft argues that marriage also provide men safer and more convenient prostitutes. Women are treated as an object of sexual gratification of men. In general, men go to the prostitutes to satisfy their sexual needs. But they are not safer companions and to avoid any sort of disease they get married and even they do not have to pay their wives. Marriage is just a bond of two bodies rather than two souls. She says that the preparation of becoming slaves and prostitutes starts from their infancy. She takes the views of Rousseau on female education: "the whole tendency of female education is ought to be discussed towards one goal- to make women please". All these views are there only to degrade women and inspire them to please men. Therefore there is a need to subvert the thinking of the society and as well as the educational system:

The education of women should always be related to men to please us, to be useful to us, make us love and esteem them, educate us, when we are young take care of us, when we are grown up, advice us, make our lives agreeable. If we are the duties of women at all the times, and that they should be taught in their infancy.

Thus, women are subordinated to men across all the civilizations. In Muslim community, the condition of women is to some extent pathetic. They have to live behind the veil and they are treated as an object of lust not as a human being. Ismat Chughtai, a Muslim woman writer felt the need to dismantle the patriarchal slavery of women through her writings. Her short story '*Lihaaf*' which is translated in English as '*The Quilt*' sketches the female sexuality and the loneliness of a woman who yearns for her husband's love. It is proved to be a landmark in Urdu short story writing. It is also against the conventional attitude of Muslim Community.

The protagonist Begum Jaan is a frustrated housewife whose husband is a gay and has to time for his wife. Thus she finds emotional and sexual solace in the companionship of a female servant, Rabbo. At a time when any talk of female sexuality is unthinkable, Ismat Chughtai portrayed a lesbian relationship in a detailed manner. The story reflects her radical feminist perspective. Bennil Zememrman refers to Faderman's definition of lesbianism: "Lesbian describes as a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed towards each other". (81)

The character of Begum Jaan raises questions on marriage as an instrument of elevating slavery among women. She is a poor girl who marries Nawab to get a comfortable life in the society but he puts her in the corner of the house as an object. It shows that marriage is a business transaction where the role of a woman is reduced to a commodity. Unable to form any relationship with her husband, Begum Jaan uses her sexuality as an instrument of empowerment. Chughtai admits: "Purdah had already been imposed on me, but

my tongue was a naked sword. No one could restrain it” (34) Begum Jaan’s desperation can be seen when her husband discards her:

“After marrying Begum Jaan, he tucked her away in the house with his mother and promptly forgot her! The young, delicate Begum Jaan to wilt with loneliness... she realized that the household revolved around the boy students and that all the delicacies produced in the kitchen were meant solely for their plates.” (14)

Her youth withers away and at this crucial point, she finds another way to escape from her disillusionment. She turns to Rabbo, her maid for the satisfaction of her sexual desires. “Rabbo used to sit by her side and scratch her back for hours together- it was almost as if getting scratched was for her the fulfillment of life’s essential need”. (10) The image of elephant is used as a metaphor to reflect the lesbian relationship in ‘*The Quilt*’. Even the title exposes the sexual relationship between two women. In the depth of winter whenever I struggle into my quilt, my shadow on the wall seems to sway like an elephant...” (5)

The focus on woman’s sexual desire and its fulfillment is Ismat Chughtai’s attempt to dismantle patriarchal slavery. The abnormal romance in the story shows that a woman tries to escape from the social and marital obligations imposed on women. She even portrays the limited options that are available to women under the clutches of patriarchal system. Begum Jaan was highly dissatisfied in her marriage due to the lack of emotional attachment and love from her husband. By creating such a character in her story, she dismantles the notion that marriage culminates a woman’s life. Chughtai in ‘*The Quilt*’ exposes the plight of those married women who have been denied of sexual and domestic attention of their husband. Begum Jaan has been trapped in her house as her custom of Purdah restricted her movement in the public sphere. An alleviation can be seen in her character in her intimate and abnormal relationship with a female servant.

Ismat Chughtai had an unconventional educational and social childhood which gave her a different viewpoint to her stories. She often feels uncomfortable when any woman accepts the conventional roles perpetuated by patriarchal society. Tahira Naqvi explains the significance of Chughtai's role as a female author:

She played an important role in developing and shaping the modern Urdu short story form as we know it today. More importantly, she helped establish a tradition of self-awareness and undaunted creative expression for the Indian and Pakistani women writers who came after her. (xiii-xiv)

Therefore, her short story 'The Quilt' exploded the whole arena of so called mainstream literature like a bomb and caused greater tumult in the Indian society as well as no one could expect blasphemy from a woman. Because a woman's role in the society has always guided by conventional system of using them as an object of sex and lust without any voice of their own.

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