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Breaking the Chains of Gender Stereotypes in Ismat Chughtai's *A Life in Words: Memoirs*

Abstract

Patriarchy in the grab of orthodoxy has imposed a chain of restrictions on women to restrict their freedom and capability. Stern norms in the name of gender have been constructed in the so-called civilised patriarchal society to confine women within the boundaries of home. She is forcefully expelled from important tasks such as decision making process owing to patriarchal belief that women lack wit and reasoning. Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* explicitly points out that gender is merely a social construction which differs from one culture to another and the gender roles are merely based on irrational beliefs, "One is not born, but rather becomes a women" (301). Women are restricted to their household chores as they are assumed weak creatures that cannot perform works which include power and rational thinking as they lack both these qualities. Women are prevented from confronting and acknowledging their own proficiencies and capabilities as no chance is provided to them so that these set-stereotypes false. The paper based on Ismat Chughtai's *A Life in Words* (2013) highlights how through the medium of writing, she has voiced the ever-silenced issues of Muslim women and has thus become a voice for numerous voiceless suffering women. From a culture which considered "the education of women worse than prostitution" (ALW72) she set an example to all women in general and the Muslim women in

particular by becoming the first Muslim women of her area to graduate. The paper in the course of discussion also focuses on the various facets of violence against women and how through education, awareness and empowerment women challenge the stereotypical notions to create a congenial space for themselves.

Key words: gender, education, awareness, empowerment, stereotypes, identity.

Human being is blessed with the title of “epitome of all God’s creations”. He is made in the image of God himself, “God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (BibleHub). Human being, who is the top of all creations, is blessed with a unique gift of sense of discrimination so that he could distinguish between the good and the bad. Man and woman are considered as two wheels of a cart which should be equal in order to lead a balanced life. However, in the long-run journey of life, this principle somehow becomes obscure or blur and the smooth free-flowing balance of life between man and woman is disturbed. Man is placed forefront as he moves out of the boundaries of home in order to work and earn whereas woman is restricted to the house-hold chores as well as bearing and rearing of the offspring: “Men had the role of bread earning and protection of women and children. Women had the role of reproduction of heirs and home-making” (Sudha 1). This lifestyle is accepted in most of the societies due to its own advantages and slowly it became deeply embedded in the societal set up leading to the construction of gender roles. Man made certain standards and rules of life in order to achieve the bliss of perfection and happiness in the journey of his life. However, the rigidity and sternness of these norms and regulations itself sometimes become the obstacle in the smooth functioning of the life and make life miserable.

Gender-construction is so deep rooted in the patriarchal world that almost everything is judged in terms of its masculine and feminine virtues. There are different theories which have been put forth in order to explain the division of labour among men and women. According to anthropologists, the main reason behind the different roles that are assigned to men and women are due to their morphological and biological differences: “Anthropologists proposes that historically men and women have different roles because of their biological differences” (1). If we consider the conviction of functionalists in sociology, the gender roles are created in order to ensure the “smooth functioning of the family and its continuity” (1). Women are blessed with the power of reproduction. So the responsibility of rearing of children, their proper and adequate learning, and socialising is put-forth on the shoulders of women in addition to the carrying of responsibility to maintain the household chores. Men, however, have the only duty of earning and feeding the family.

However, the conflict-sociologists hold a contrary viewpoint, as they believed that the subjugation and confinement of women in the house is due to “the emergence of private property” (1). As men are actively involved in the economical activities, so they use the power of economy to dominate and subjugate women. Men became property-owners and “dominated women by depriving them of economic independence and control over wealth” (1). Thus, men take advantage of their economic stability and make it a vehicle through which they could limit women’s freedom and independence, thus, reducing them to mere slaves. However, feminists argue “that gender differentiation is not biological; rather it is cultural” (1). Thus, various gender roles are not innate rather they are product of culture as gender roles vary from culture to culture.

Since times immemorial, women have always been exploited and subjugated in the name of cultural and religious practises. They are treated as dangerous creatures whose freedom should always be kept in check in order to ensure that they do not bring disaster.

This traditional belief is supported through the statement of well-known philosopher, Aristotle who believes that women are born with some deficiency, “female nature is afflicted with a natural defectiveness” (qtd. in Sudha 3). Similar prejudiced opinion against women is held by St. Thomas who proclaimed, “...a female is something deficient” (3). Similarly Indian mythology also does not provide the status and position which women deserve. The author of *Manusmriti* and the Hindu law maker Manu has also not spared women as he also upholds the same prejudiced view and considers that women belong to the weaker section and need constant support and protection of men in order to survive, ““Since a woman is weak, she is unfit to enjoy freedom’. She should always be kept under a man’s protection” (3). Thus, it is clear from the above discourse that women are not born substandard rather the cultural beliefs and mythologies make one believe such notions of inferiority. Culture has played an important role in the subordination and dominance of women in almost every field, thus limiting their freedom.

Simone de Beauvoir has rightly stated that “one is not born a woman, one becomes one” (Beauvoir 14). Thus the roles that women are charged with are basically the product of culture and tradition and not due to their weaknesses and limitations. Women are preferred to be at home so that they could be limited to the process of reproduction in order to continue their progeny. In order to make the next generation well acquainted with the manners and traditions of community, women are made to limit themselves to home and household chores so that while maintaining household responsibilities they could also teach their children values and manners. Whereas men always prefer to remain away from such responsibilities, as according to them it is a feminine virtue to limit themselves to homely chores. Men mostly remain out of the home in order to roam about in search of economic pursuits and thus, enjoy greater amount of liberty and since being the “bread earners” (3), they also enjoy supremacy over women and family.

Thus it is very much clear that the deterioration in the prominence and position of women is not contemporary; rather it is a continuous process occurring since time immemorial. These prehistoric assumptions could not be instantly removed from the mindset of people but it is a slow process which is accelerated with the advancement of science and technology. Ismat Chughtai (1911-91), the prolific Urdu writer, also took major steps in her life in order to improve and emancipate the position of women, especially Muslim women in India. Her life is an example of her incompetent courage with which she fought against the set notions of subordinate position of women in the society. The story of her life in the form of an autobiography entitled *A Life in Words: Memoirs* represents struggle against the set norms of patriarchy which restrict women from exploring their full potential and thus, gaining power and freedom. She is the champion of education, freedom and liberty. She is considered as “an iconoclast, an educationist, and an emblem of women’s empowerment” (Tripathi 8516). She is the feminist in its true senses as she had started working for the emancipation of women even before the times when the whole concept of feminism was unknown to the Asian sub-continent, “She developed the marking of a feminist in the early forties when the concept of feminism, was in its nascent stage, even in the west; she spoke her mind unreservedly; she was afraid of no one, nothing; she was a rebel” (Naqvi 37).

She was born in an orthodox Muslim family in Aligarh. However, her family was not stereotypical as her father was highly educated and sternly believed in the freedom and education of women. However, the society in which they lived was not free from the malice that is generally held against women and strongly believed in limiting women’s liberty and economic independence by limiting and confining them within the boundaries of home. The society strongly upheld the viewpoint that “to educate a girl was worse than prostituting her” (ALW 72). So it was nearly impossible for women especially Muslim women to think about education and enlightenment. It is made clear through the fact that when Ismat Chughtai’s

father, Mirza Qaseem Beg Chughtai, dared to take a step against such prejudices and admitted his second and third daughter to a boarding school, he was greatly criticized for his act and was even threatened for severe consequences. However, he finally had to submit to the sternness and harshness of the society due to the fear of ostracism:

The virulence with which women's education was resisted is seen in the case of her elder sisters who were sent to a boarding school by their father. The entire family stood together against him for sending his daughters to a boarding school and threatened to ostracize him. He was warned that his daughters would never be married, and that he should be ready to keep them in his own house all their lives and maintain them. The spectre of spinsterhood and the associated stigma must have loomed large in the mind of her mother, who was against the education of her daughters" (xix).

As the doors of education were shut down for Ismat Chughtai's sisters so they were left with no other option but to get proficiency in the field of maintaining household duties and learning various arts associated with it such as cooking and stitching. However, Ismat Chughtai's character was completely antagonistic to the expected norms of the society. She was born a rebel and was keen to break free from the shackles of patriarchy that limit women's freedom. Her stubbornness becomes evident from the fact that she always took great interest in the games and activities that are meant only for boys such as "climbing trees and riding bicycles" (8) and was least interested in the household activities that are meant for women. Thus, she presented a sharp contrast to the set stereotypes of the society that are made to subdue women. Thus by surpassing the prejudiced notions against women, Ismat Chughtai became the pioneer of education. She was the first Muslim women of her territory who was successful in getting higher education. She had to struggle hard for getting her parents' permission to be admitted to Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow. Later she became the voice of myriads of voiceless Muslim women through the process of her writings. She

also became a prolific member of Progressive Writer's Movement in India, and along with Rashid Jahan, the only woman writer of the association including Saadat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Ahmaed Ali, Sajjad Jaheer, and others.

Ismat Chughtai was a staunch feminist who never restricted herself within the peripheries which patriarchy held against women. She was a stubborn child by birth who made her own rules and never sacrificed her will for the sake of maintaining fake standards of patriarchy. She was a high-spirited girl who never learned to easily give-up against the adversities of the life and this habit helped her to fight the tough battle against patriarchy not only for her own self but for the whole Muslim women, "whenever I [she] saw a magnificent palace eaten by moss sprouting on its walls and grass growing over it pitilessly, in the heart of my hearts I [she] would smile secretly. The power with those insignificant grasses and weeds would overwhelm me [her]" (1). The various battles which she fought for her education and upliftment clearly represents the struggle of every Muslim woman of her country. Thus, her autobiography is the life story of not only one woman rather it symbolically represents all Muslim women of the country.

Her life story is not plain and simple, rather like her personality, it is very complex and full of ups and downs. At every step of her life, she was made to face new challenges which her family and the society imposed on her in order to restrict her freedom so that she could not transgress the boundaries which were set for women. *A Life in Words: Memoirs* accounts for "decoding power structures that operate within the family and govern feminine sensibilities and interactions" (Farooqi and Tiwari 115). In her autobiography, Ismat Chughtai has thrown light not only on her own life, rather she has highlighted the plight of various other women with whom she came into contact in the various phases of her life. She depicts the plight of her mother who was reduced to a reproducing machine as she would give birth to a child every year. Thus, women are bound in marital relationship where their

identity is reduced to a reproducing machine. Further, Islam also supports the institution of marriage rather than celibacy and supports the reproduction of children through marriage as it helps in increasing the number of followers of the religion: “Get married (and reproduce) for I will boast of your large numbers in front of other nations (on Judgment Day) and do not opt to-celibacy or-monasticism” (qtd. in Laluddin et al. 142). Thus, religion is also motivated in such a way that it supports patriarchal standards, thereby subduing women’s rights and freedom:

Religion, particularly Islam is cited as a major stumbling block for women’s advancement. Studies have shown that in many parts of Africa and South East Asia women’s acquisition of knowledge is fervently opposed; regulated to secondary importance as compared to men or encumbered with so many restrictions as to make it almost impossible for female students to acquire a decent standard of education. (Abbasi)

Ismat Chughati has presented a sharp contrast to the expected loving and understanding relationship between mother and child. She was the tenth child of her parents. Due to repeated child-births and deteriorating health condition, her mother, Nusrat Khanam could not devote her motherly love to all her children as she “felt nauseated by the very sight of us [them]” (*ALW* 1). As there were so many children in her home including the children of her maternal uncle, so it was difficult for Nusrat Khanam to maintain all of them. So they were “left pretty much to the care of servants” (2). Thus, the expected mother-child bond that generally exists is somehow lacking in the case of Ismat Chughtai and her mother. Thus, because of health issues and presence of so many children, it was impossible for her mother to establish strong bond with her youngest daughter. Due to this difference between mother and child, Nusrat Khanam could not mould Ismat Chughtai according to her will unlike her elder daughters whom she had made adept in maintaining household chores. However, Nusrat Khanam was worried about the prospect of Ismat Chughtai because of her stubborn and

unyielding nature. She was well aware of the double standards of patriarchal world that makes it hard for women to survive. So she wanted her daughters to learn the art of remaining subdued and submissive in order to thrive in such cruel world. She told her daughters to adopt the womanly wiles to please men on the mercy of whom women are made to survive:

This was a man's world...made and distorted by man. A woman is a tiny part of this world and man has made her the object of his own love and hatred. Depending on his whims, he worships her or rejects her. To make a place for herself in the world a woman has to resort to feminine wiles. Patience, prudence, wisdom and social graces-these will make a man dependent on a woman. From the start, she'd say, make a boy so dependent on you that he feels embarrassed to sew his own button and would die of shame if he has to prepare his own meal. Do all the small chores that a servant can do, bear with his injustices with quiet self-abasement so he eventually feels remorseful and falls at your feet to ask for forgiveness! (9-10)

However, Ismat Chughtai was completely unaware of such bigotry and never learned to lead a submissive life. She considered womanly craftiness as shallow, superficial and disrespecting for the prestige of women. As she grew up in the company of her brothers, so she developed the ideology of her life similar to them. She never led her femininity to become an obstacle in the path of achieving her dreams and ambition:

But I spent my life in the company of my brothers. I was greedy to be like them and even outdo them. I considered femininity as sham, and looked upon compromise as falsehood, patience as cowardice and gratitude as duplicity. I was not in the habit of beating about the bush. Even decking up, wearing make-up to hide one's blemishes seemed a kind of deception. (10)

She was a product of the society that always considered women as inferior. So she chose to voice the various adversities and atrocities women are made to face at the hands of

superiority complex of men. She became the voice to ever-silenced voices of women of minority community. She faced the stance of being a woman who was taught to observe *pardah* (a long veil) and should confine herself within the boundaries of her home. However, she does not succumb to such narrow mind, sham standards of patriarchy. Ismat Chughtai, through her writings, encouraged the minority women to stand for their rights and not to limit their freedom which they are granted as human beings:

Ismat Chughtai was writing silences, recording the suppressed voice of women from different strata of society. The traditional patriarchal society into which she was born contained women, muted their voices and screened out their agency. Her literary oeuvre, among other things, is a chronicle of restoring this agency if we look at it necessarily as a negotiation with structures, often subterranean and subversive, rather than visible and frontal. Her own fierce struggle to get an education against heavy odds is indicative of the challenges and the devious routes one had to take to circumvent those challenges. (xix)

She was against the sham and hypocrisies which were considered as feminine tools. She always encouraged economical independence of women as they provide a space and identity to them. She believed that in a developing country like India, women should also contribute economically like men as it will improve economic conditions of the under-developed country and further would make them economically independent and would provide a sense of achievement to them. She ardently believes that if a woman simply obeys her husband because of the reason of economical insecurity it is not really respect but her helplessness. She is vulnerable to the extent of a prostitute who has to sell her body in order to gain monetary benefits. Further, she would not be able to give rise to healthy progeny; rather her children would become helpless and unconfident. So feels that it is necessary for woman to be economically independent not only for herself but for her family and children:

In my stories, I have written a great deal about women's economic subjugation and helplessness. If a girl obeys the men in her family simply because she is economically dependent on them, then it is not obedience but deception. If a wife stays with her husband simply because he is her provider then she's as helpless as prostitute. The children born of such a mother will only display helplessness and slavish mentality. Such a people would always be dependent on the munificence of developed nations. As long as the women of our country continue to suffer oppression without resistance we will be weighed down by a sense of inferiority in political and economic spheres too. (10-11)

Ismat Chughtai set an example for other women even before the actual movement for empowerment of women became predominant in India. She has taken up writing as her foremost weapon for attacking the double standards of the patriarchal society, though it is hard to combat against such injustice especially for a single woman. However, she was a courageous and high-spirited writer who never felt shame or shy for representing the actual condition of women and their vulnerability in almost every field. In her writings, she had depicted the deteriorated status of Indian women and her writings are not only limited to Muslim women rather she has also depicted the agonizing condition of Hindu women also:

If this was the plight of middle-class Muslim women, the plight of Hindu women chronicled in the memoir was even worse. *KHP* describes the condition of child widows in Rajasthan. Society denied any dignity to these widows. Deprived of the right to marry again and of economic empowerment of any kind, they were compelled to look for a provider and find one in the maharaja of Jodhpur's family....Deprived of any agency, they lived lives that were fashioned for them by those who dictated patriarchal structure. It also gives the context of how an oppressive and brutal custom like sati evolved as a resolution of the women's question. Ismat's description of the royal crematorium in Sambhar, Rajasthan, where the

walls were smeared with handprints of child wives who were burnt at the pyre, is disturbing, and brings out in lurid light the brutal injustice of the system. (xx)

In her writings, she points out the plight of married Indian women who have no identity and space for themselves. In the Indian society, a woman is respected and worshipped only in her role as a wife and mother. However, it is also evident that married women often lead a submissive and domesticated life. It is well described by Faiz Ahmad Faiz in verse as, “In the name of those married women/ whose decked-up bodies/ atrophied on loveless/ deceitful beds” (42). Ismat Chughtai is moved by the plight of oppressed married women and she questions the whole institution of marriage that puts women to disadvantageous and miserable condition. Thus, women are always considered as possession of men and without them, they have no identity of their own, even if they were great personalities like Sita or Mira Bai. The society always expects sacrifice and bowing down from women and they had to burn themselves on the altar of demands and wishes of their husband and family. Thus Ismat Chughtai exposes the culture that views women as subordinate creatures who should be selfless, sacrificing and pleasing things born to respect, serve and entertain men. If women lack any of these qualities, they are not accepted in the patriarchal world and their whole existence is threatened:

Sita, the embodiment of purity, whose lotus-like feet cooled the flames on which she had to walk. Mira Bai, who put her arms around God himself. Savitri, who snatched away her husband's life from the Angel of Death. And Razia Sultana, who spurned great emperors and joined her destiny with that of Moorish slave. Is she getting suffocated today under the lihaf? Or she is playing Holi with her own blood in Faras Road? (42)

Her writings are replete with examples that reflect the worst and helpless condition of women. Further, she exposes the severity of the condition for women as these double standards are deeply embedded in the society and it is almost impossible to emancipate the

polluted mentality of the society. Ismat Chughtai had devoted her life in the upliftment of women's position through her actions as well as through her writings. She is the champion of women's cause.

Thus, Ismat Chughtai is the pioneer of women's liberty and freedom. She is the one, who through her writings, boldly depicted the harsh reality of the existence of women in the double-standard society like India, where on the one hand women are worshipped as "shakti" but on the other hand women are marginalised and are treated as inferior and subordinate creatures. They always hold a subordinate position in almost every sphere including family as pointed out by D'Souza (1975), "In India, as in the other countries there is great discrepancy between the idealised concept of women and the real life situations in which women find themselves" (qtd. in Sudha 11). Ismat Chughtai fiercely stripped off the various shackles and chains of restrictions in the name of culture and religion which women are forced to accept and wear. They are the sole cause which restrict and bound women to subordinate roles and prevent them from performing important tasks and becoming economically independent.

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