

Marginal Subjects, Bold Subversions: Revisiting the Modernist Aesthetics of Obscenity in Ismat Chughtai

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ABSTRACT

Modernism in Indian writings is believed to have had its beginning in the 1920's and 1930's.

Modern Indian literature has to do much with the intricacy of India's encounter with colonialism. Instead of considering modernity as something that was bequeathed by colonialism, modernity in the colonized needs to be understood as a complexly layered process that critiques their own social traditions as well as the newly invented ones. The paper endeavours to understand the ways in which ideas of colonial modernity collide with the reformist impulse in pre-independence Indian society

through a reading of two of Chughtai's texts: the short story "Lihaaf" that earned her much notoriety and a legal charge of obscenity, and the essay "In the name of those married women" based on the same episode that describes the courtroom drama in great detail. Chughtai's essay and her short story when read together highlights the cultural effects British civilizing mission had on Indian life and society with its spillover on the arena of art, culture and literature by introducing new conceptions

and forms of the obscene in Indian society. Chughtai's writing is important because it shows the interlinking of these new categories of gender, ideas of obscenity and the rise of a new middle class morality and the role literature played in critiquing emergent forms of colonial modernity.

Keywords-*gender, marginality, modernity, new morality, obscenity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Modernism and Modernity are contested terrains. There is no single term available for either of these definitions or any one location. The notion of modernity has expanded greatly and today it includes a diverse range of voices and positions both global and local. The idea of a modernity defined primarily based on the tenets of European high modernism, its artistic movements and formal experimentations have undergone scrutiny and revision in recent times. Modernist studies today have broken away from the model of Eurocentric aestheticism that was the foundational definition for Western modernism. The notion of modernism has ruptured from its earlier idea of an aesthetic style that now includes a plurality of positions and multiple forms of cultural modernity. As Susan Friedman states in her essay "Planetarity", "Modernity became modernities, a pluralization that spawned a plurality of modernism and the circulations among them (474). While it is important to locate texts that exhibit the typical high modernist aesthetics, it is still more important to recover texts that indicate a departure on the level of representation from such a West-centered aesthetic. Given that there exists multiple forms of cultural modernities, clearly the analytic focus on modernity studies needs to shift towards prioritizing the study of connections and interconnections with different modernities. The modernism/modernity paradigm thus implies both: simultaneity but also a separation (Friedman 475). In such a situation it may not be such a bad idea to confront the hegemonic impulse of the Eurocentric narrative within modernist studies. The departure in modes of representation of Western modernism is not a simple polarization between the aesthetics and politics. Rather such a dislodging of Eurocentrism necessarily demands recognition of not just of the different forms of representational rapture but also an exploration of the "creative expressivities engaging that modernity and ask what cultural and political work those aesthetic practices perform" (Friedman 488).

Modernism and its trajectory in India

Modernism in Indian writings is believed to have had its beginning in the 1920's and 1930's. Modern Indian literature has to do much with the intricacy of India's encounter with colonialism. It documents the foregrounding of social and political realities with the aim of social transformation in public and private domain. Experiences of modernity outside the western metropolis have been categorized under various names to indicate their epistemic and locational difference from the Eurocentric narratives of modernity. A discussion of modernity in Indian literature cannot avoid a discussion on the relationship between colonialism and sociocultural reality in the colonized world. The view that it was British colonialism that brought modernity to the colonies and that it was "the only viable or genuine modernity that exists" has been found untenable (Mohanty 2). And as is the case with most colonial encounters, the pre-modern past of Indian society was considered incompatible with the values of a capitalist modernism of the West. Recent literature on alternative modernities has challenged this idea; now the emphasis is on a revisionary analysis that looks at these pre-modern societies through careful attention to literary and cultural texts, both popular and folk, that suggest modern values are discernible in writings from non-western contexts. Instead of considering modernity as something that was bequeathed by colonialism, modernity in the colonized needs to be understood as a complexly layered process that critiques their own social traditions as well as the newly invented ones (Mohanty 3). Modernism in Indian literature therefore needs to consider the nature of the particular modernity in question and recognition of the socio historical and locational specificities (Ramakrishnan and Kumar 2016). While major texts from European and American literatures continue to receive careful attention and study, not many literary texts written in the Indian languages receive proper attention. There is no doubt that the enterprise about proper textual study of Indian literary texts has many impediments. Some of the main problems include the multitude of language, communities, literary and other sub-cultures that resist easy translation, not to mention the strong emphasis on oral traditions in many of the ethnic and tribal communities that make translation a very difficult task.

The paper endeavours to understand the ways in which ideas of colonial modernity collide with the reformist impulse in pre-independence Indian society through a reading of two of Chughtai's texts: the short story "Lihaaf" that earned her much notoriety and a legal charge of obscenity, and the essay "In the name of those married women" based on the same episode that describes the courtroom drama in great detail. Chughtai's writing critiques the superficial ideas of Euro-modernity by focusing on the interlinking issues of class, gender, literary censorship, middle-class morality and their centrality in framing the debates on gender and the nation. The collision of middle class morality with the orthodoxy of Indian society, the understanding of the self and structure, the portrayal of female psyche and experiences, the emergence of the new Indian woman, the use of irony and sarcasm to ridicule the follies and foibles of the society and delineation of the lives of women as marginal beings, are some aspects of culture and society that Chughtai's work represents through her fiction and non-fictional writing. In all of her writing the unique modernist impulse to question, resist and give voice to the hidden aspects of reality comes through in a striking way.

Ismat Chughtai and the discourses of gender and modernity

The legendary feminist, Ismat Chughtai is highly acclaimed as a significant voice and a pillar in the realm of modern Urdu literature. She is one of the most prominent and courageous Indian writers who played a significant role in the construction of narratives of modernity through empowered representations of female characters. The accusation of obscenity for her short story "Lihaaf" made her life miserable branding her as a writer of obscene fiction. The hypocrisy connected with sexual morality is pointed out by Chughtai in a very bold manner. What we see in her account of the obscenity trial and drama that ensued following the publication of her short story "Lihaaf" are perspectives and values that are an outgrowth of the influence of colonial modernity embodied through the literary mode which subtly focuses its attention on the underpinnings of a new discourse of social reform and its relationship with the newly emergent ideas of middle class morality for women. Chughtai's text is therefore significant as it touches upon a whole gamut of variant discourses around reformatory ideas about gender and the idea of racial and cultural purity. This attitude is mainly seen in the way popular nationalist discourses set up Indian women as "pure" as opposed to her colonial counterpart who is regarded as impure because of her bold ways. As seen against this backdrop the history of textual reception of Chughtai's short story foregrounds many of these debates on the creation of a new nationalist modernity. Chughtai's response to it is vividly described in her essay, also known as "The Lihaaf Trial". It is refreshing to read it not just because of her sardonic humour but also because it shows the cultural effects British civilizing mission had on Indian life and society with its spillover on the arena of art, culture and literature by introducing new conceptions and forms of the obscene in Indian society. Chughtai's writing shows important interlinking of these new categories of gender, ideas of obscenity and the rise of a new middle class morality and the role it played in shaping the cultural life of colonial Indian society even as it mounts a critique of it. Chughtai breaks the shackles of bondage and gave voice to the patriarchal repression of women's needs and desires that are otherwise seen as not important except for its reproductive function within a patriarchal economy. The tabooed topics are dealt by Chughtai with much candour which earned her the reputation of a controversial writer. Her subjects ranged from issues regarding female sexuality, class conflict and middle class morality in most of her works. Female experiences were something which found expression in the skilful hands of Chughtai and the portrayal of the female psyche, their needs and fantasies are some very unique portraits that ground her narratives from a singularly female perspective. No other writer of her time is perhaps able to bring out the acute understanding and perception of the

female psyche as she does with the alacrity and sharp probing of her style. The new middle class Indian woman is introduced by Chughtai which is indeed a modernist approach to literature. Chughtai is bold enough to break the codes of so called civility by being obstinate to her own decision to carry forward her own way of writing. As Sukrita Paul Kumar notes, "Writing in the man's world, delineating mostly the microcosm of the women, discerning women's modes of empowerment or looking at women as victims of exploitation by men or other women in the patriarchal society, Ismat entered the literary scene as though sounding a clarion call for awareness and change" (15).

Chughtai's The Lihaaf Trial

The turbulence caused by the publication and the subsequent critical reception of her short story by the literary establishment and the ensuing trial is a defining moment in itself. This essay is an interesting work that gives readers an intimate view of her friendship with Manto and the influence each had on the other. It is also important because it gives valuable insight about the political underpinnings of literature at a very critical point in the evolution of Indian modernity. It was at the centre of the cultural debates on morality and obscenity in India which again was an effect of emerging colonial debates on obscenity and censorship in the reformist modernity cultural movement. It was from this time under the influence of colonial legal structures that art and literature came to be seen as potentially subversive; It is no coincidence that the first censorship laws in India were framed by the British (Chandran 34). The interlinking of law and literature and Chughtai's resistance to both is a powerful stance on the part of a woman writer of her times. Chughtai's subversion of the charges against her is a great move in establishing a role of a headstrong woman writer in the arena of modern Indian writing. She was charged with obscenity for her short story "Lihaaf" under the Obscene Publication Act. In her defence she claims to have presented the authentic realities of life. "Lihaaf" earned her infinite censure; it led to her being seen as a controversial writer. Chughtai in her essay "In the Names of those Married Women" recalls the happenings of her life that occurred during and after the penning down of "Lihaaf. Chughtai and her husband underwent a lot of turmoil due to the summoning of Chughtai to the court. The obscenity trial and the summons for it had been issued in December 1944 and were scheduled for January, 1945. She had to face the trial in the Lahore High Court in 1945. During her trial, she asked the prosecutor to point out any obscene words present in her story which he was of course not able to do due to the absence of any. There was no textual evidence to substantiate the charge of obscenity. The courtroom trial is an eye opener to the limitations of the laws of censorship and obscenity associated with literature which holds a writer accountable for his or her creativity without taking into account the cultural context and background under which it is written. This charge of obscenity was a landmark event in the history of literary censorship in India that shows the mechanism the British used to regulate literary and cultural productions in the public domain through various laws. In fact censorship laws in India have their roots in the British Raj (Chandran 34); many of these laws were brought in with the intention to put control on print publications and the press, under the pretext of obscenity and public outrage and it helped consolidate colonial legal authority over literary productions. Chughtai's trial added another layer to it because her short story was seen to have transgressed the norms of female propriety by writing about a same sex relationship. The court failed to find any obscenity in her writing and she was acquitted. Thus Chughtai's record of this trial is important in showing not only the way how imperial power used to justify their rule over the natives through elaborate legal rituals but also revealing the alliances and complicities between the colonial powers and local groups and their ambivalence to women's role in society. As Mini Chandran argues, "This ambivalence is also inherited from our colonial masters and that is why our existing laws that are invoked in free expression debates have their roots firmly entrenched in colonial soil" (Chandran 36).

The failure to point out any instance of the use of unrefined or obscene word in the story is due to the reason that the story is narrated through a naïve child narrator who unfurls the happenings of her life lost in the maze of her memories. Chughtai problematizes the gendered parameters of laws and morality connected with obscenity. The court was strictly of the view that girls of respectable and noble household should restrain themselves from composing narratives bearing such tabooed topics. It is also noteworthy that colonial laws concerning obscenity operated as a system to silence the expression of women. A middle class Indian woman was expected to adhere to certain codes of morality decided by the society at large. Any violation of them would result into her getting categorized as immoral and lascivious. The stark representation of her debate in the courtroom exposes the hypocrisy and double standards of the middle class Indian conservative society. Chughtai in her defence points out that she was castigated for her portrayal of a same sex relationship between two women as obscene and regressive simply because it was written by her, a woman, yet similar representations in literature by male authors were scrutinized leniently. Chughtai terms this differential treatment of writers because of gender as discriminatory and harmful to the spirit of egalitarian society.

Another reason for the sharp response to Chughtai's short story can be discerned in the way women's writings and issues of female sexuality were connected to the debates around social expectations of proper and correct modes of behaviour for women. Chughtai's essay thus provides insight into the gendered reality of women's position within the project of nationalist modernity.

Chughtai and the same sex politics of "Lihaaf"

Chughtai's writing resists the gendered norms of social propriety for women by consistently trying to give priority to the perspective to the lower orders of society, the subalterns so that the reader understands the contexts of reality that cuts

across class and gender. A woman's carnal desire is not something that is to be given an outlet according to the norms of the society. Chughtai gave voice to this area of silence in Urdu writings by women.

She provides a lengthy description of Begum Jaan's seeking solace in the arms of her maid Rabbu in the absence of her negligent husband who, as Chughtai points out with sardonic humour, was always surrounded by "slender-waisted" boys. This ironic and humorous way of hinting at the Nawab's predilection for the company of "young, slender waisted boys" reveals the implied homoeroticism of the Nawab and the unequal power dynamic that exists within such relationships. But such unequal relationship dynamics or the context of homoeroticism within male relationships

remains invisible during the courtroom trial. Chughtai's essay very clearly addresses these gaps and silences within the narrative of obscenity and literary censorship.

In "Lihaaf" the main protagonist, Begum Jaan, instead of pining for her husband's love takes matters into her own hands. Begum Jaan thus redefines her identity by transgressing and redefining the parameters of sexuality and asserting her selfhood. Begum Jaan's husband, who seemingly is a respectable man of the society who does not possess any nasty desires for prostitutes or dancing girls has even no interest in heterosexual relationships is however fond of young boys.

Chughtai's sarcasm is unmissable in such descriptions. It is through the use of such irony and satire that Chughtai critiques the unequal dynamics of gender politics. Chughtai attempts to foreground the needs of a woman which are generally not taken into account in a patriarchal society where the concern for women's needs is almost negligible. Chughtai also voices out the oppression meted out to the child who had no idea about the existence of such relationships. The many-sidedness and multiple layer of oppression in the story come to the fore with the delineation of the sexual advances made by Begum Jaan towards the child narrator. Chughtai impregnates the story with a number of metaphors, imagery and symbols. The interplay of these metaphors brings to the fore the association between Begum Jaan and Rabbu, finally divulging their intimate relationship. The quilt itself serves as the metaphor for a lot of entities. The title itself has a layered meaning with its many sided functions where it both conceals the encounter between the two women while also revealing to the adult narrator and to the reader what is happening. The quilt also symbolizes the suppressed and hidden sexual female fantasies. Chughtai's short fiction and her non-fictional writing often questioned the status quo subverting the dominant discourses of her times in a manner that Neil Lazarus calls "thinking with modernity against modernity" (Lazarus 6).

2. CONCLUSION

Chughtai's work can thus be located at the centre of a number of discourses related to the emerging form of nationalist modernity. As a modern writer Chughtai never shied away from speaking her mind and her bold, realistic and empathetic portrayal of marginal lives of women in colonial Indian society which invited criticism and controversy in equal measure.

Ismat Chughtai's writing responds to this awareness of change and her engaging with the plural and often conflicting claims of modernity gives her writing its unique place in the annals of Indian modernity.

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