

THE PROGRESSIVE NATION: IDENTITY OF MUSLIM 'ZANAANAH' IN ISHMAT CHUGHTAI'S *LIHAF*

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Introduction

Countries which became socialist later than the Soviet Union cannot simply adopt a formula of agreement reached after long and bitter ideological struggle. ... In Lenin's view the masses can only be convinced of the truth of something when they have experienced it themselves. In this respect writers, too, belong to the masses, though they may not care to admit this. Literature depends on actual experience; resolutions, however well meant, are no substitute (Lukacs ____: 106; Weir 1992: 136).

For Ishmat Chughtai (1911-91) the truth of woman body, her realization and consciousness and the under currents of the sexual desire is never obscene. In *Lihaf* (The Quilt, 1942) Ishmat Chughtai catches the real women and addresses the trauma of the challenging domestic space and gendered politics. Her reporting of the account of the upper middle class Muslim household in *Lihaf* provides every possibility of femaleness, desire and autonomy. She records reality as it appears. She notes;

I assumed a softer tone and said humbly, 'Aslam Sahib, no one has actually told me that it was a sin to write on the subject with which "Lihaf" is concerned. Nor had I read in any book that such a disease....such aberrations should not be written about. Perhaps my mind is not an artist's like Abdur Rahman Chughtai's but an ordinary camera that records reality as it is. The pen becomes helpless in my hand because my mind overwhelms it. Nothing can interfere with this traffic between the mind and the pen.' (Chughtai 2012: 30).

Ishmat Chughtai wrote what she experienced in her real life. She emerged in Urdu literature in a difficult time both the Urdu literature and the Indian nation being going through a complex era of subversive transition and change. M. Asaduddin has truly observed her position both as a progressive writer and as a feminist activist - nationalist of contemporary India:

Ishmat Chughtai (1911-91) has remained Urdu literature's most courageous and controversial writer and its most resolute iconoclast. Appearing on the scene during the heyday of the Progressive Writers' Movement, which changed the complexion of Urdu literature in significant ways, Ishmat remained a progressive in the true sense of the term throughout her life, even though

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the movement dissipated shortly after the Independence in 1947. Among her fellow fiction writers – Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander, Saadat Hasan Manto – she was distinguished both by the themes she dealt with and the style she developed to treat them. As the subcontinent’s foremost feminist writer she was instinctively aware of the gendered double standard in the largely feudal and patriarchal structure of the society she lived in and did everything to expose and subvert it. She lobbied relentlessly – and successfully – to get an education, struggled fiercely to find her own voice and wrote with passion and panache to depict the visible and subtle tyrannies of contemporary society and her conflicts with the values that made them possible (Asaduddin, 2012, ix-x).

The early 20th century colonial India had a greater gender bias. In the scheme of reformation, modernity and change in socio-cultural space, women’s body and behaviour became a part of the national and communal identity. The writings of Ismat Chughtai resist the symbolic representation of the identity of Indian women as nation as well as a cultural signifier. *Lihaf* the realistic narrative of the daily life and domestic affairs of the upper middle class Muslim household responds to the symbolic and physical disempowerment of women in a patriarchal society. ‘Begum Jaan’ the central character of *Lihaf* struggles to restore her feminine identity and femaleness by freedom and autonomy in an upper middle class Muslim household. In Chughtai’s writing the family lifewithin becomes a visible domain of gender politics that questions the existing patriarchal discourse of women as ideal, moral and pure in the Urdu literature of the late 19th and early 20th century. For Muslim women ‘zanaanah’ becomes a socio-cultural construction during the colonial period.

Geeta Patel rightly observes the location of ‘zanaanah’. She notes;

The word “zanaanah,” which comes into Urdu, is a transformation of the Persian word for women, *zan*, whose plural is *zanaan*. The place women occupy in a household is called a *zanaanah*. *Zanaanah* is also an adjective that means effeminate, womanly, feminine. So *zanaanah*, the place that houses the *zan*, is almost like something that turns women into space. It is both home, and an abstraction, the sense of enclosure where women are kept. The word *zanaanah*, taken as an adjective, suggests the feminine, not as a natural quality that women have, and that identifies them, but as a quality that produces the effect of womanliness, femininity. Taken this way it can qualify women, men, or other things, bring them, through how they seem, into the purview of the feminine. The word itself has no immediate moral resonance; it suggests no allegiances to civility, morality, or propriety. These, when they begin to texture *zanaanah*, change its shapes and colors under the pressure of social and historical conditions (Patel 2001:176).

Nation, the All-India Progressive Writers’ Association and Muslim Women

Nationalism in India is a plural discourse. During the British Raj, Indian nationalism found several layers of dominant forces working in it in various facets. The course of the passive revolution for the radical changes that constructs a non-Western nationalism in India is examined by Priyamvada Gopal. She agrees with Partha Chatterjee’s observations:

The Challenge

In his influential work on the discursive contours of Indian nationalism, Partha Chatterjee has argued that the Gramscian concept of ‘passive revolution’ best describes the general form of the transition from colonial to postcolonial states in the twentieth century’ (Chatterjee 1986:50). Because of its inherently contradictory nature – drawing on a modular Western form while attempting to assert a unique, oppositional cultural essence – non-Western nationalism adopts passive revolution as ‘the historical path by which a “national” development of capital can occur without resolving or surmounting those contradictions’ (Chatterjee 1986:43; Gopal 2005:19).

In the mid-1930s in British India a group of writers and readers bound by Marxist ideology substantiated a passive revolution for changes to come in social, political and economic spheres of the sub-continent. For the first time in British India writers from prominent language communities came into direct contact and Hindi, Urdu, Assamese, Bengali, Malayalam, Punjabi and other main stream Indian literature together formed a platform for a progressive national movement. The objective was to write and read for the larger cause of a progressive India free from the restraint of colonialism, social backwardness, poverty, caste and communalism. The association initiates a passive nationalistic revolution through a new literature supported by the Communist Party of India (Marxists). The 1936 manifesto of the All India Progressive Writers’ Association (PWA) drafted by Mulk Raj Anand states the view point of the association:

Radical changes are taking place in Indian society....We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of our existence to-day [sic] – the problem of hunger and poverty, social backwardness, and political subjection. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and un-reason we reject as re-actionary [sic]. All that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive (Anand 1979: 20-1).

The formation of nationalism in 1930s in India is the result of the working of various opposition forces against the British Raj. During making of the new nation, the new woman and her responsibilities cannot be overlooked. Educated women from upper-middle and high class family in India became active in the cultural and political spear of the nationalist movements. The All India Progressive Writers Association (PWA: 1936), Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA: 1942) and All India Women’s Conference (AIWC: 1927) and many other socio-cultural and political podiums congregated a large number of women responding in a diverse course in the making of the Indian nation. Priyamvada Gopal examines the active participation of women in the public sphere of the 1930s. She notes that the historical process raised the question of gender for the first time in India by the Indian women themselves that assured their political identity. She notes;

By the 1930s, women (largely from the middle and upper classes) too had entered the political and public sphere in unprecedented numbers; their presence was noticeable not just within nationalist organisations but also in trade unions and educational institutions. Issues around women’s rights and gender relations became linked to ideological diversity within the emergent national public sphere and to women’s own increasingly varied political allegiances and activities (Gopal 2005:21).

The publication of *Angarey* (The Coals, 1932) that brought forth a collection of ten controversial short stories contributed by four Muslim authors who belong to the highly educated upper class Muslim community of Lucknow became a controversial incident in the realm of culture, politics and religion in British Raj. The four authors; Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Mahmuduzzafar and RashidJahan later became the founders of the PWA. The All-India Progressive Writers Association found in 1936 had its nexus in the radical literature of the age. The literary radicalism of this era discourses around identification, self- criticism, inequality, gender and caste. Dr. Rashid Jahan who was the single woman contributor of *Angarey*, in the coming years became a mentor to Ismat Chughtai. In her interview with *Mahfil* Ismat Chughtai notes;

When I was doing my B.A. in '36, I attended the first meeting of the Progressive Writers in Lucknow which Premchand attended. I didn't understand much then, but I had read *Angare* ["coals"]. Then, of course, there was Rashid Jahan. She actually spoiled me. That was what my family used to say. She spoiled me because she was very bold and used to speak all sorts of things openly and loudly, and I just wanted to copy here She influenced me a lot; her openmindedness and free- thinking. She said that whatever you feel, you should not be ashamed of it, nor should you be ashamed of expressing it, for the heart is more sacred than the lips. She said that if you feel a thing in your mind and heart and cannot express it, then thinking it is worse and speaking it better, because you can get it out into the open with words (Chughtai 1972:172).

Safeguarding of Muslim socio-political and cultural interests on the face of the British Raj and the Hindu misconceptions catered to the construction of a prototype of domestic ideal space inside the Muslim zanaanaah in early 20th century in colonial India. The Muslim house wife became the symbol of the cultural values and tradition and was subjugated to gender exclusion. Publishing of Urdu literature on Muslim family and home life in 19th century in Urdu religious novels and household manuals by male social reformers confirms the Muslim community's urgent need to gain influence over colonial infringement. These moral tales were written by the majority of the male writers and were intended for female readership in zanaanaah. The typical pattern of the narrative was a female character telling a moral story to other female characters within the family. Ismat Chughtai looks into the other side of the moral tales of the 19th century Urdu literary tradition. During the progressive era she opens up the door of the Muslim middle class domestic space and in her writings liberates the challenges of patriarchy and nation, economy of female desire, freedom of choice and autonomy of women. Her short story *Lihaf* (1942) questions the very existence of an ideal Muslim woman – portrayed as in 'Zanaanaah' and it looks into the dangers of the patriarchal models based on the colonial ideology.

Violence, Gendered Politics and Identity in *Lihaf*

In *Lihaf* Chughtai finds a difficult gendered space within the upper-middle class Muslim household. In her introduction in the essay "Habitations of womanhood: Ismat Chughtai's Secret History of Modernity" Priyamvada Gopal has a thoughtful observation of *Lihaf* while she compares the gendered space in Rashid Jahan and Ismat Chughtai's short stories:

A few years after the *Angarey* fracas and the furore over Rashid Jahan's gendered insubordination, another literary scandal broke out. Scores of angry letters were sent to the editor of the Urdu literary journal, *Adab-i-Latif*, protesting about the publication of Ismat Chughtai's

short story, 'Lihaf' (The Quilt) in 1942. As it had done with *Angarey*, the Crown promptly stepped in to charge Ishmat Chughtai with obscenity, a charge that she chose to contest in court despite being advised to apologise and avoid a fine. The controversy hinged on what the narrator, a young girl sent to stay with an aunt, saw and heard (Gopal 2005:65).

Ishmat Chughtai in *Lihaf* introduces the upper middle class Muslim household, where 'zanaanah' is the originating space for an ideal housewife. Chughtai is the first woman in the sub-continent who goes a step ahead of the icon class platform of the Progressive Movement. Instead of looking into the exercise of the Urdu tradition, realistic social convention and class struggle of the PWA, she shifted her attention to upper-middle class females, their domestic trauma and patriarchal hierarchies existed in Indian family. *Lihaf* identifies the gender politics existed in the 1940s in the upper-class Muslim household. In Ishmat Chughtai's stories there is a shift in dealing with the idea of the story telling. She adapts the method of narration available in her time in traditional Urdu literature. While the literature of the earlier age dealt with the patriarchal fundamental ideology in the form of 'zanaanah', Chughtai bravely handles the politics of gender identities – the narrative model being almost prototypical - employing a young educated girl as the distant narrator, reporting the minute details of a lonely woman leading a tremulous life in suppression and patriarchal hierarchy.

Lihaf is about the deserted young wife of a homosexual Muslim landlord, and the wife's exceptional journey into a physical and emotional relationship with the maid of the household. A young Muslim girl from a poor family marries a rich land lord who is far older to her. The elderly man is a homosexual and never visits the connubial space. He deserts the young wife in the midst of loneliness. Surrounded by the material charm of the household the young woman leads the life of a recluse. Ishmat Chughtai notes the plea of the patriarchy;

Nawab Sahib had only contempt for such disgusting sports. He kept an open house for students – young, fair, slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him. Having married Begum Jaan, he tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her. The frail, beautiful begum wasted away in anguished loneliness (Chughtai 2001:16).

In *Lihaf* there exists three phases of Begum Jaan's identity transformation. First when she got married to a rich Muslim land lord; she received her socioeconomic stability and socio-cultural status. Secondly when Nawab Sahib distanced himself from their conjugal life; she turned into a mere possession of the household – from biological human being to a material possession. Thirdly when Begum Jaan met Rabbu and established a liaison of emotional and physical desire and lust with her; she discovered her femaleness and femininity. The significant contribution did *Lihaf* is its discussion of sexual politics in the gendered sphere. Priyamvada Gopal observes Chughtai's multiple themes in *Lihaf*. She finds liberation of the sexual desire of the female body in zanaanah is conditioned by the oppressive power of the patriarch.

Eventually the cocooned wife finds physical and emotional fulfilment in the bed she ends up sharing with her maid. The quilt functions as a trope in various competing narratives – romance, childhood nightmare, sexual fantasy, and coming-of-age story. But it is also the site and symbol of reworking of the wife's oppressive condition, first into survival and then into fulfilment (Gopal 2005:66).

The Challenge

In the progressive era Chughtai's *Lihaf* becomes a place for liberating gendered autonomy in educated upper middle class Muslim women's personal, community and national life. It is a time of reformation and modernisation in India and educated Muslim women in North India identify their gendered space in their writing in domestic and public sphere. Priyamvada Gopal records Chughtai's *Lihaf* both as historical project in the making of modernity as well as a lived experience of her time. She notes;

Ishmat Chughtai's investment in the politics of social change is combined with a keen-eyed interest in everyday life to produce a literary oeuvre that sought to illuminate the often fraught interstices between modernity as large-scale historical project and as lived experience (Gopal 2005:68).

In *Lihaf* the trauma of a dislocated upper middle class Muslim house wife catch holds the reality of the domestic life of the 1940s. In her new location, Begum Jaan's very existence in the gendered space questions her identity. Chughtai writes;

One did not know when Begum Jaan's life began – whether it was when she committed the mistake of being born or when she came to the Nawab's house as his bride, climbed the four-posture bed and started counting her days. Or was it when she watched through the drawing – room door the increasing number of firm-calved, supple-waisted boys and the delicacies that were sent for them from the kitchen! Begum Jaan would have glimpses of them in their perfumed, flimsy shirts and feel as though she was being hauled over burning embers! Or did it start when she gave up on amulets, talisman, black magic and other ways of retaining the love of her straying husband? She arranged for night-long readings from the Quran, but in vain. One cannot draw blood from a stone. The Nawab didn't budge an inch. Begum Jaan was heartbroken and turned to books. But she found no relief. Romantic novels and sentimental verse depressed her even more. She began to spend sleepless nights, yearning for a love that had never been (Chughtai 2001:16-7).

Once Begum Jaan goes beyond the ideological domestic rules of the zanaanah she finds her emotional and physical desire is culminated in Rabbu.

It was Rabbu who rescued her from the hell. Soon her thin body began to fill out. Her cheeks began to glow, and she blossomed. It was a special oil massage that brought life back to the half-dead Begum Jaan (Chughtai 2001:17).

The narrator in *Lihaf* is an adolescent girl. She playfully describes the encounters of sex and desire. The reformation and modernisation in the Progressive era submit Muslim women writers to come out with the hidden, the real, and to discuss in open the taboos of domestic life which was not allowed to a woman writer prior. Chughtai deciphers the patriarchal code of Urdu literature. Her journalistic account in *Lihaf* began an era of autonomy for Muslim women.

I woke up at night and was scared. It was pitch dark and Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously, as though an elephant is struggling inside. 'Begum Jaan...' I could barely form the words out of fear. The elephant stopped shaking, and the quilt came down.But the following

night I woke up again and heard Begum Jaan and Rabbu arguing in subdued tones. I could not hear what the upshot of the tiff was, but I heard Rabbu crying. Then came the slurping sound of a cat liking a plate....lap, lap. I was scared and went back to sleep.Once again the quilt started swinging. I tried to lie still, but 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 me (Chughtai 2001:20-7).

Conclusion

In *Lihaf* the narrator, an adolescent female member of a family reports an unusual sexual encounter of another female member in her everyday life. The narrative mode supplies a tone to erect a new kind of identity of Muslim women and is able to reach a large group of listeners and readers across the nation. In *Lihaf* a poor young girl is married to a rich man and her identity is transformed that stabilizes her socio-economic status by entering into the upper middle class Muslim household. The aged and homosexual husband is posed as an outsider in the marriage institution; he lacks interest in the relationship and deserts his young wife and the hierarchy forces the young wife to lead a life in extreme solitary. 'Zanaanah' - the early 20th century ideology of the patriarchal Muslim upper middle class family mutilates the gendered space of the Muslim woman. Her cherished socio-economic stability brings a threat to her conjugal life affecting her socio-cultural and political position. Begum Jaan in *Lihaf* strugglesto resist this social and cultural male hegemony. She did succeed by adapting an alternative encryption inclined in the female desire that is regulated within a feminine cipher. In *Lihaf* Ishmat Chughtai's keen observation of the suffering of the upper middle class Muslim women in domestic life brings forth the natureof the politics of a problematic gendered space. The gendered space in Chughtai's *Lihaf* may be perceived as it moves from the clutch of the patriarchal danger and in course of the time it meets its own way of liberty and autonomy by culmination of sexual and emotional desire in a lesbian relationship.

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