

Woman and Marriage: Reading the Select Short Stories of Ismat Chughtai, Shashi Deshpande and Githa Hariharan

Abstract

Contemporary Indian women writers' favoured form is the short story. In their themes, choice of characters and mode of writing they exemplify their creative release of feminine sensibility. They have depicted the social and psychological reality of Indian women. They have used it as a literary barometer to reflect reality of individual and social institutions, such as family and marriage. This pattern is common in Indian English short stories and Urdu short stories by women writers. The present research paper explores the plight of women in marriages in the select short stories of Ismat Chughtai, Shashi Deshpande and Githa Hariharan.

Keywords: Woman-in-transition, Traditional woman, Exploitation, Humiliation, Divorce, Probation

Introduction

Contemporary Indian women writers' favoured form is the short story. In their themes, choice of characters and mode of writing they exemplify their creative release of feminine sensibility. They have depicted the social and psychological reality of Indian women. They have used it as a literary barometer to reflect reality of individual and social institutions, such as family and marriage. Reading of their short stories shows that female characters portrayed by them are dissatisfied due to lack of emotional fulfilment available to them within the institution of marriage. They suffer from criticism of family and society because of their inability to come to terms with the traditional standards. This pattern is common in Indian English short stories and Urdu short stories by women writers. These women writers portray that limited choices are available to women, whether they are single or married in patriarchal society. They criticise the institution of marriage prepared by Indian society so that women feel, it is the culmination of their life.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the present research paper is to study the critique of patriarchal marriages offered by Indian English and Urdu women writers of short stories such as Ismat Chughtai, Shashi Deshpande and Githa Hariharan in their short stories. The paper also focuses on the plight of women in marriages, for example, Chughtai has portrayed the plight of a woman in the institution of marriage in "A Pair of Hands" (Do Haath).

Critical Reading

The story, "A Pair of Hands" revolves around the character of Goribi who is married to Ram Avtar. She tries to resist her husband, who is supposed to leave for the sake of his job, but she is unsuccessful in it. When her husband left, she is considered as an indecent woman by society and even by her mother-in-law because she is without her husband. Society forces her mother-in-law to send her back but her mother-in-law refuses because she is earning money and her mother-in-law needs her in her old age for survival.

The story focuses on general perspective of people about married women who are living without their husbands. They are considered as indecent. Chughtai offers misery and plight of married women/ Indian housewives who are exploited in the name of marriage through the character of Goribi. Their household work is never recognized. They become slave to their in-laws, and they are objects of sexual pleasure for their husbands.

In "A Pair of Hands" (*Do Haath*) Chughtai criticises the perspective of people about married women who are living without their

Mohd. Tariq

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of English and M.E.L.,
Lucknow University,
Lucknow

husbands, while in "Housemaker" (*Gharwali*) she criticises the institution of marriage which is often used as a tool to control female desires and sexuality. "Housemaker" (*Gharwali*) deals with the life of housemaid, Lajjo. She is an orphan girl. She works as a maid in Mirza's house. She has an intense affair with his employer. Her employer proposes her to marry him. After marriage, he loses interest in Lajjo. She doesn't know how to repress her sexual desires. She develops extra marital relationships with other men. Mirza is shocked by it, he beats her and drives out of the house. The short story offers plight of Lajjo, Chughtai is trying to suggest that the institution of marriage is often used as a tool to control female desires and sexuality. It also focuses on domestic violence faced by women in Indian society.

As "A Pair of Hands" (*Do Haath*) and "Housemaker" (*Gharwali*) offer the physical, psychological and sexual exploitation of women in patriarchal marriages, Chughtai's "The Wedding Shroud" (*Chauthi ka joda*) offers painful and pathetic story of Kubra who ruins her life and succumbs to death in order to enter in this institution.. In "The Wedding Shroud" (*Chauthi ka joda*), she shows how age old traditions, beliefs and customs ruin the lives of women. She shows that how societal norms and people compel a single woman into marriage. She also shows that how women make self sacrifice and bring changes in their personality in order to attract better spouse for them, for example, Kubra in "The Wedding Shroud". She is the main character of the story; her stigma is momentary because she dies after her family's plan to attract a groom fails. This character underscores the plight of women who scarifies everything in order to enter in this institution.

Chughtai criticises the misuse of feminine resources by patriarchy through the examples of rituals occur during the courtship. She also shows that women can go to any extent for the sake of matrimony. They are willing to present themselves as commodities in order to get married. Through the eyes of Hameeda (younger sister of Kubra) one can notice the economic deprivation of the family for procuring a groom which is a kind of necessity for their social and physical survival. The writer portrays the harmful effects on unmarried poor women in society that forces them to feed potential bridegrooms, rather than allowing them to attain socio-economic independence. Kubra is the daughter of a poor mother whose only dream is to see her elder daughter married. She and her family members spend entire savings in order to entice Rahat (who is prospective husband). But her devotion is never recognized by Rahat and one can see the injustices in Kubra's life through the eyes of Hameeda:

(She) thought: We remain hungry so that we can nourish the son-in-law. Kubra Apa gets up early in the morning, drinks a glass of water and starts working like a machine.... Rahat ate a hearty breakfast consisting of eggs and *parathas* every morning, returned at night to eat meatballs, and then went to bed. (QOS 63-64)

The writer shows that women are sacrificing everything for man in the hope of wooing him. In this way Chughtai shows inequality of labour and sustenance, she uses Hameeda as the narrator of the story and readers learn about sacrifices of Kubra in order to get married. Hameeda notices the exploitation of Kubra and her family for the sake of prospective husband. Chughtai incorporated intra-extra diegetic narrative technique in order to offer multiple perspectives- perspective of the author and the prospective of the narrator. Hameeda is aware of selfishness of Rahat and whatever is happening in the name of courtship, but she can only ruminate on it and can't do anything. Readers are emotionally attached with the narrator through her monologues. Her point of view is revealed in her monologues. She reveals her helplessness to subvert the system which is responsible for injustices on women like Kubra. Hameeda's observation offers ironies of women's life which is revealed in the ironical description of Kubra:

These "hands," which grind spices from morning to night, draw water, chop onions, make beds, polish shoes—hapless, these hands are at work from morning to night like slaves. When will their subservience end? Will they ever find a buyer? Will no one ever kiss them lovingly, will they never be adorned with henna, will they ever be drenched in bridal attar? I wanted to scream at the top of my voice. (66)

Kubra continues her services to Rahat at the cost of her health. She continues to labour while she herself suffers from the tuberculosis. Rahat never notices her sacrifices and devotion. He even molests Hameeda. The reading of the story reveals that his marriage had been already fixed even before his arrival at Kubra's house. He takes advantage of poor women and his departure results into ruining of life of Kubra, Hameeda and their family. After his departure Kubra dies due to tuberculosis. The plight and tragic death of Kubra symbolises hopelessness or women who are left without men. Marriage is the only refuse for women in the society of India, and they are not allowed to exist outside of this institution. "The Wedding Shroud" exposes harmful human effects of traditions and customs dominating the institution of marriage.

Kubra suffers due to lack of economic independence but the reading of Shashi Deshpande's "A Liberated Woman" shows that economically independent woman also suffers due to patriarchal bent of mind in the institution of marriage. The female protagonist falls in love with a lecturer and in spite of family opposition marries him. She breaks all bonds and leaves home. Her open resistance is further expressed, when she becomes economically independent. She is disappointed with her married life. She sarcastically remarks on her marriage, 'A romantic, runaway marriage' (CS 37). Marriage is the ultimate career for a woman in traditional Indian society. It hinders autonomy and self realization.

There is no room of her own, neither in her parental home nor in husband's house. She becomes a famous doctor and he turn out to be a simple lecturer. This made her socially and economically his superior. This subversion of equation give rise to ego clash because marginal comes on the centre and it hurts the male ego of her husband. The change of vertical equation into horizontal equation destroys their marriage:

'It was all right for some time. Until our second kid was born. Since then we've been getting on I've built a very good practice. I earn a good sum. I've earned a good reputation, too. Patients are now coming to me from far. In a few years, I've no doubt I'll be at the top. She said all this in a detached remote voice, as if she was speaking of someone else. But he - he's still teaching in that second rate college. Earning not much more than what he did when we met. We were so sure he'd succeed with his writing, We were so sure he'd succeed with his writing, give up teaching ...' (39-40)

She realises the actual condition of marriage and also false notion of equality. She sarcastically comments on the reality of married life:

Her eyes were bleak as she spoke 'Listen, have you seen really old-fashioned couples walking together? Have you noticed that the wife always walks a few steps behind her husband? I think that's symbolic, you know. The ideal Hindu wife always walks a few steps behind her husband. If he earns 500, she earns 400. If he earns 1000, she earns 999-or less. If he ...' (40)

She enters in the institution of marriage with excitement in order to achieve freedom but this sublime beginning result into psychological torment. She thought that this institution will be alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. She rejects the rule of traditional daughter to achieve freedom. She looks forward to the role of wife but again she is deceived. Her husband turns out to be a failed lecturer. Although he may not be absolute bread winner, he is still dominant force and authority. He finds himself impotent to protect his family from harsh and hostile forces he turnout to be a tormentor at home and the central character becomes victim of his frustration. The story offers the plight of middle-class woman who is highly educated according to her social standards and economically independent in the institution of marriage.

As "A Liberated Woman" deals with the plight of independent woman, Deshpande's "My Beloved Charioteer" deals with the plight of traditional women in the institution of marriage. The story revolves around the mother and daughter. After the death of her husband Aarti (daughter) comes, along with her daughter Preeti to live in her mother's house. His mother is an old woman who has been living all alone

since the death of her husband. The arrival of her daughter and granddaughter brings happiness in house and new life in old woman but the daughter is always lost in her thoughts. She lost all zest of life and her mother always consoles her and provides solace and comfort. Although mother consoles her but she has lost happiness and forgotten her talks even she is unable to sleep. She says: "I haven't slept well since Madhav died. I will never sleep well again all my life"(53).

The mother notices changes in her daughter. Earlier she was close to her father and after his death she never shared anything with his mother. She tries to console her but she never revealed her feelings with her mother. The old woman laments at this pathetic condition of her daughter: "She has never shared anything with me and now she hides her sorrow like a dog its bone. She guards it jealously and will not let me approach" (56).

Arti's attachment towards her father and estrangement from her mother fills the old woman with a deep mental anguish she says: "For Arti, it was always her father ... Even after his death, he can give her something I can't. The thought hurts hurts? It's like having salt rubbed into a raw wound" (57). But one day old woman reveals her past. The tortured and tormented self of a woman is revealed by her. She reveals her relationship that she shared with her father. She tells Aarti that her father was callous hearted and insensitive husband. She tells Aarti that her married life continued for twenty five years but she could only know him was that 'he didn't like unstringed beans and hated grit in his rice' that he liked tea boiling hot and his bath water lukewarm', that he hated tears', that he didn't like to see women with untidy loosend hairs' (58). He never showed any care and attention and never cared for his wife's likes and dislikes. Recalling her past and the inner torment and humiliation that she received from her husband she tells her daughter:

At night, I scarcely dared to breath, I was so terrified of disturbing him ... I slept there, afraid to get up for a glass of water, scared even to cough. When he wanted me, he said, "come here". And I went. And when he finished, if I didn't get out of his bed fast enough, he said, "you can go". And I got out. (59)

The reading of the story shows that women are only slaves and objects of sexual pleasure for husbands in such patriarchal marriage. Their undervalued work of household never recognises by husbands and in-laws, for example, in Hariharan's "The Republic."

In "The Republic". Mangla, the central character in this short story is like Kubra of Chughtai's "The Wedding Shroud". She is a housewife but her devotion and domestic duties are never recognized. The proud husband who is enjoying obvious authority, power of hierarchy but least concerned about his wife who was actually running the household machinery of thirty members, oiling this machinery, removing

the friction, not bothering him at all and not letting him feel any problem of this domestic machinery. Her contributions never recognized, husband thought about himself, his discomfort even he did not remember what he and his wife talked about and he didn't bothered about her comforts and feelings. She had been tutored to assume as the mistress of the house. Hariharan is suggesting that women are always in the background and their handling of household problems never noticed at all and regarded as trivial activities, in short their contribution never recognized. Through the character of Mangla she is suggesting that women forget their joys, dreams and feelings and it is a woman to whom men come for solace, peace and completion. Through the character of Mangla Hariharan is pointing out that men never bother about women's feelings and emotions but women care for them and they come to men when they require. Hariharan is suggesting that the plight of married women is like unpaid slaves in the institution of marriage.

Like "The Republic", in "The Closed Room" the wife helps her husband in the act of creation but her contribution is not recognized. Hariharan is here suggesting that women have potential to create but they are not given the role of creator due to male chauvinism and male prerogative. Women have to remain in the background. They are slaves for in-laws and objects of sexual pleasure for husband in the institution of marriage. Their feelings and desires are always neglected, but sometimes they take horrifying shapes as in "The Remains of the Feast". The short story is about a ninety year old dying grandmother, Hariharan in a very subtle way presents the suppressed desire of an old woman. The suffering had taught her a lesson and now she has learned to laugh at life's grotesque ways. The strange desires which were not fulfilled or not allowed to be fulfilled now they except at odd times. Her condition is critical and she is now in her last days of her life - the body licked away by a cancerous goitre, hands punctured by needles and tied to the I.V. pole, legs outstretched on a raised bed but she could not resist the temptation of her heart, the yearnings of the mind and craving of the tongue for spicy food and junk food. In the name of domestic peace and familial harmony, these three organs have to be muted but a week before she died she even broke all the conventions of a brahmin widow and conspired with her granddaughter to smuggle her cakes, biscuits, samosas and ice creams made from non brahmin hands. In this short span of time she tasted lemon tarts, garlic, three types of aerated drinks, fruit cakes, bhelpuri and peanuts with red-chilli powder, deep fried in oil and the next thing she wanted was to be wrapped in a red silk saree with a wide border of gold. She had desired all these trivial things all her life but her desires were not fulfilled. She had suppressed natural desires so long that now they had taken very horrifying shapes. Through this character Hariharan is

able to articulate exploitation of women in the name of marriage. She is also suggesting that age old traditions are patriarchal in nature. They are only favouring men. But these manmade societal norms are detrimental for women.

Findings & Conclusion

To sum up, stories of Chughtai, Deshpande and Hariharan draw attention to the falseness of customs and traditions. Their stories offer plight of women in the institution of marriage. They show through their female characters that women in patriarchal marriages are unpaid slaves for in-laws and objects of sexual pleasure for husbands in traditional society. Reading of their short stories reveals that they are dismantling the institution of marriage. Chughtai's stories focuses on the plight of married Muslim women belonging to traditional society, while Deshpande's stories offer plight of middle-class educated economically independent women and traditional women belonging to middle-class society in this institution. Like Chughtai and Deshpande, Hariharan has also pointed out no recognition of women's unpaid household work and their emotions, feelings and desires are neglected. Their short stories are sarcastic comment on societal norms which only favours men. Their short stories convey ironies that exist for women in society which has been perpetuated by women themselves accepting conventional roles. Their short stories posed questions about the prevalent acceptance of the societal norms and constrictions imposed upon women's lives in Indian society. These questions are still being explored by other Indian women writers in contemporary short fiction and novels in English and almost in all Indian languages.

List of Abbreviations

QOS : Chughtai, Ismat. *The Quilt & Other Stories*. Translated by Tahira Naqvi and Syeda S. Hameed. Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: Sheep Meadow Press, 1994.

CS : Deshpande, Shashi. *Collected Stories*. Vol. 1. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2003.

References

1. Asaduddin, M. *Lifting the Veil Selected Writings of Ismat Chughtai*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2001.
2. Chughtai, Ismat. *The Quilt & Other Stories*. Translated by Tahira Naqvi and Syeda S. Hameed. Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: Sheep Meadow Press, 1994.
3. Deshpande, Shashi. *The Legacy and other Stories*. Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1978
4. ---. *Collected Stories*. Vol. 1. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2003
5. Hariharan, Githa. *The Art of Dying and Other Stories*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1997.
6. Pilcher, Jane & Imelda Whelehan. *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. London: Sage Publications, 2004.