



Challenging the Societal establishments: in selected texts of Ismat Chughtai and Mahasweta Devi

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ABSTRACT

This paper will make a comparative study between selected short stories of Ismat Chughtai and Mahasweta Devi. They both belong to the progressive and radical writers' community. Chughtai was the member of Progressive writers association and one of the pioneer feminist writers of India. Mahasweta Devi's stories not only challenge the state but also the male-dominated and biased literary discourse. Later, she shifted her focus on Adivasi lives, their nothingness and on their struggle for existence. This paper will analyse the use of language in their writings. Especially in Mahasweta Devi's stories, Dialogic and polyphonic narration exist to identify different stratus and classes of Indian Society. In Chughtai's writing, a clear feminist voice is uprising and denying patriarchal society. Both of their writings stand for feminism and against gender discrimination.

Key words: short stories, gender, feminist, women's writing

The term 'Gender' means the social construction of male and female. Definition of gender by WHO is, "Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed. While most people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviours – including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex within households, communities and work places (www.who.int)". This 'gender consciousness' imposes some restrictions on women in socio-cultural practices which make them submissive, voiceless and just an 'object' of beauty, prettiness and tenderness. At the same time, 'male' becomes synonymous for power and domination. A hierarchy has been created through this over centuries. Through Literature Mahashweta Devi and Ismat Chughtai expand the horizon of expectation of the readers on these concepts. Protagonists of their work deny man-made gender stereotypes.

Dhouli was a 'lower caste' Dalit girl who was loved and exploited simultaneously by an upper caste Brahmin man Misrilal Misra. She was from Dusad community, who were tagged as untouchable and had no rights to live independently. Through economic and social means they are meant to be dependent on the upper caste people. The story revolves around love of two people who belong to two different social class, caste and strata. She challenges the concept 'love' where social norms and roles construct sharp gender discrimination. In love or

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in a relationship, the woman should be submissive; she should obey/follow her husband/lover's ordeals and she should worship her husband/lover whatever the condition. On the other hand, the man in a relation should be dominant and he should keep her lover/wife under his own control.

Dhouli too was deceived by 'love' that was forced upon her by Misrilal; she followed and believed in the concept fairy love between a Brahmin and a Dusad. But when she realized the bitter reality and conventional betrayal of lower caste women by patriarchal society, she said to Misrilal, "Thuu! To hell with your love! (Devi, 23)" What had insulted the Misra family's men was the 'love' between Misrilal and Dhouli. There is an unofficial legal consent that any Brahmin 'deota' can rape any untouchable women at any time and to compensate that the woman would be given a house and some land to earn livelihood. But as Dhouli was being loved by Brahmin 'deota' Misrilal, so the 'love' became a symbol of dishonour to them. That's why Dhouli accused Misrilal as, "if you had taken me by force, I could have got an acre of land. But you're not even a man! (Devi, 23)" 'Men will be men' and they will take women by force- that was told by Misrilal's elder brother. Dhouli, being threatened by Misra family socio-economically, chose prostitution over the concept of being kept by a rich Brahmin. She didn't submit to 'deota', she didn't accept defeat by starving to death. Rather, she created her own way of earning by selling her body to whoever came to her door for money and food. Thus, on one hand she became independent from the Brahmin-led economy and on the other hand she challenged the authority of Brahmins over a Dalit woman's body. That's why Kundan Misra got angry, "the door through which the lion entered is being visited by rats and swine! (Devi, 30)" Here, the narrator has used polyphonic narration to construct the text. A reader easily can differentiate between Misrilal or Kundan's voice, Dhouli's voice and the contractors' voice. From a reader's reception point, this text contains different voices unmerged into a single perspective. Each of these voices has its own weight to carry forward the story. Not just the language, but their way of speaking and the power relation dictate their dialogue to each other. So, when Dhouli raises her finger to at society, she also challenges that power relation. She was determined not to abort her and Misrilal's child. She decided to live as a 'single mother' ignoring Misra-made rule. She denied the societal establishment that would allow rich upper caste influential 'men' or 'Deota' to keep dusad, ganju or dhobi girl as their personal property whom they only use for sexual exploitation. Dhouli, at last, not only rejected her betrayer-lover Misrilal, but she also rejected the caste-based sexual oppression and she used her body to challenge the authority of upper-caste and upper-class people.

Draupadi too used her body against gender violence and state oppression. Dopdi Mejhen was a rebel who was apprehended by the police and army during naxalbari movement in '70s. She was a big threat to the state. Army and the state applied all their machineries to hunt her down. But she was too clever to escape those nets. She was too keen to her community and fellow comrades that the state failed to catch her. Here an obvious question arises, why did she revolt? She not only revolted against the oppressor landlord and their merciless exploitation but she also revolted against the woman-eater upper caste people. Generally, we see a gender rhetoric that men become rebels and go to war while women are born to do house work. Women don't go outside the home and especially not to fight enemies. But Dopdi Mejhen challenged that male-oriented 'war-concept' too. She led the agitated Santhals and Mundas to their enemy Surya Sahu's house. When she made an eye-to-eye contact with Surya Sahu to claim an answer to his malicious doings, she also challenged the Patriarchal and gender-biased society.

Landlord Surya Sahu didn't allow the lower caste peasants to take water from his house. He didn't give the canal tax, so the peasants had no water for irrigation in the scorching drought days. These had made Dopdi's community angry. But Dopdi's rage against Sahu grew for other reasons too. Upper caste and upper class people like Sahu thinks that poor women like Dopdi are easily available to satisfy their lust. When Dopdi successfully completed 'Operation Bakuli', she burst out in anger over Sahu, "He was so greedy about my body, and I'll pluck his eyes." (Devi, 106) Dopdi Mejhen is a representative of Adivasi society, oppressed class and lower caste people. But moreover she represents women of this society. Mahashweta Devi has clearly made a difference between 'poor people' and 'poor women' through 'Draupadi' that poor women have to suffer more due to gender discrimination. Dopdi Mejhen was raped and tortured severely all night inside the army camp. After apprehending Dopdi, the veteran army captain ordered his fellow army men, "Make her. Do the needful (Devi, 109)". That was a clear instruction to 'destroy' the most culminated enemy. Especially, when the convict is a woman, then this type of statement indicates to rape and torture her. Mahashweta Devi, as a narrator, put these words on his mouth to implicate the gender violence and to claim that whether it is landlord Surya Sahu or Army chief Arjan Singh, both believe in the same way to 'destroy' their female enemy. Here, narrating the painful rape of Dopdi, Mahashweta didn't hesitate to write the names of female organs but she described the 'manhood' as, 'the piston made of flesh' (Devi, 109). Dopdi Mejhen, after being raped by the state, denied to wear any cloth and stood stark naked before the army personnel. "The Captain became dumbstruck and saw that Draupadi was coming forward to him proudly with her stark naked body under the scorching sunlight. (Devi, 110)" Then, that most rebellious moment comes in the story, when abused and violated Dopdi Mejhen spits a blood-stained question on the uniform of the chief- "Why do I need cloth? You made me naked then how would you make me wear cloth again? Are you man? (Devi, 110)" In the stories 'Dhoulai' and 'Draupadi' Mahashweta Devi used language as her armoury against gender discrimination. Language is the skeleton of the literature. Mahashweta Devi dragged language to the core of Adivasi life. Dopdi Mejhen ululates to alert her comrades, she uses tricks to dodge markers which she has assimilated from her forest-life. Devi has made a clear distinction consciously between '*Bhadroloki* language (elite language)' and '*Nimnborger Bhasha* (language of the subalterns)'. When naked Dopdi Mejhen 'attacks' the army chief with her violently abused breasts and says, "Now, Counter me, come, Counter me", she says it with her own language, a distorted English pronunciation and with her own Adivasi-woman persona. This has been seen as an 'obscene' gesture to the elite and petty bourgeoisie culture. But she does it to challenge the elite and petty bourgeoisie culture which has tortured and made her naked. She challenges the authoritative patriarchy from the side of all oppressed and raped women. Mahashweta Devi, as the narrator, writes, "Draupadi keeps on pushing the army chief with her bruised breasts. For the first time in his life, the chief fears to stand before such an unarmed target, he becomes so scared. (Devi, 110)" The so called 'Weaker Sex' becomes the stronger one. Almost three decades after the protest of 'Draupadi', we have seen the protest of Manipuri women against the Indian army after a woman Manorama was raped inside the Army-camp. And, coincidentally, they had 'threatened' the army-men with their nakedness and with almost same voice, "Indian army, rape us". Dopdi Mejhen and those Manipuri women belong to marginalised community and gender and they have taken their own strategy to fight oppression, exploitation and patriarchy at the same time. In "Operation? Basai Tudu", Mahashweta has written, "they don't reject the so called civilization, but yes, they have rejected the war-strategy of this civilization (Devi, 78)". Devi challenges the societal establishments of suppressing the voices of marginalised people and at the same time she challenges the stereotypes of 'gender' constructions. In 'Draupadi', breast is no more a

feminine, tender organ; it's no more an 'object' to be played by masculinity. Rather, breast can be a potential threat to the patriarchal society.

Generally it's considered that when a woman breastfeeds a child, she becomes red and enjoys that divine feeling. Ismat Chughtai criticized that male-narrated clichéd hearsay, "...how painful it is for the mother when an infant first nurses at her breast. If the mother turned red and trembled, it definitely could not have been the tremor of love and exultation; her color must have changed because she was in pain (Chughtai, 39)" Yashoda was the working class poor woman who had to breastfeed a rich family's newborn offspring. Her only capital was her breast to be used to earn bread for her family. As she never stops giving birth to babies, her breast never dries. Yashoda has been described by the narrator as, "Yashoda is fully an Indian Woman, whose unreasonable, unreasoning and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children, whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women from Sati-Savitri-Sita through Nirupa Roy and Chand Osmani. (Devi, 45)" Here in this story, Devi consciously upholds the 'Divine Mother' concept and at the same time she is injecting pathos of a mother into the character. At first, Yashoda had been given 'divinity' as was requested to breastfeed a newborn in Haldar family. Then it became her duty and later it became her job to breastfeed them. A 'milking mother's' role was first imposed upon her and later she started to believe herself as Kamdhenu or the mythical cow of fulfillment! To sustain her mammals full and to earn bread from Haldar family, she and her husband decided to 'produce' babies continuously. "Kangalicharan became a professional father, Yashoda was by profession mother (Devi, 1076)" Thus, she becomes a machine-mother who gives birth and breastfeeds numerous children! Bourgeoisie makes everything a product; it squeezes every labor to earn its profit. Yashoda has been used in such a socio-economic structure. Kangalicharan, Yashoda's husband was a poor and lame Brahmin, though his lameness was caused by one of the Haldar sons. In the urban economy, they were poor and marginalized. They became dependent on the Haldar family. Halder's wife, for her self-interest made a division of labor. She ordered Kangalicharan to give Yashoda some rest and good food that she could be able to breastfeed her sons. Yashoda soon realized that capitalist and patriarchal society use women in this way and throws away them when their usefulness has been finished. "Yashoda understood that her usefulness had ended not in Haldar's family but also for Kangali. (Devi, 1078)" A reader can understand heteroglossia in the voices which has constructed the text. A mother's voice, her anxiety over breastfed sons, a poor Brahmin male voice, and a rich woman's voice are inherited in the text. They are carrying gender-notion in their dialogues and action; but these all are under surveillance of an urban market system. Yashoda was given a goddess persona by patriarchal and semi-feudal society and she breastfed more than 50 children. To keep on the 'goddess' performance, she had to sacrifice her own pleasure, desires and views of life. Her job brought her breast-cancer. In her death-bed, she was thinking in oblivion, "Yashoda thought she had suckled the world. (Devi)". Doctor said, "She sees her milk-sons all over the world." Narrator Devi deconstructed the mother-archetype through the urban labor Yashoda. In an analysis of Mahashweta Devi's writings, Sanjay Mukhopadhyay has pointed that, "the blossoms of a female body is not mere a thing to fascinate or to cry over. It's made of flesh and it can bring biological disaster; that fact has been inscribed in our heart. (Mukhopadhyay, p-6, Ei Samay)"

Now we can come to the urban set-up in the stories of Ismat Chughtai. In the story 'Mother-in-law', the story revolves around a nuclear family of Husband, Wife and her Mother-in-law. The wife or Bahu is still in her adolescences. She denies the feminine gender rhetoric. She, being a Bahu, plays with other boys and girls, she doesn't stay at home all the time wearing

her wifely dresses and she doesn't listen to her mother-in-law's ordeals. Even, she doesn't obey her husband or doesn't fear him. "Instead of feeling shy at the mention of her husband, the bahu could barely suppress her laughter (Chughtai, 193)". Here, Chughtai narrates the norms and values which a wife should follow in a patriarchal society. The crone, the mother-in-law show affection to her daughter-in-law in front of her son but at the same time she wants her to be a perfect wife. Consciously or sub-consciously she puts the feminine values to her Bahu. That's how a society carries its gender ideals through generations.

In the story, "Gharwali (The Homemaker)", Ismat sets it in an urban 'Moholla (slum)'. Lajo, in her adolescence, became aware of the patriarchal system and "her body proved to be her only asset. (Chughtai, 79)" Her femininity used to attract males and they had used her both as maid and as a courtesan. But Lajo wanted to take refuge in a house as she was an orphan from very childhood. When Mirza Irfan Beg employed her as a maid in his house, she did fall in love with 'home'. She didn't want marriage, she didn't even want 'status' of a wife but she only wanted to stay in a home. Ismat has narrated Lajo from the eye of this society. As she was known as a prostitute, so every male of the slum wanted sex with her. Some offered her a Bungalow, some offered her daily bread and luxurious life; but she denied them all. It was the society, which had tagged her as a characterless woman, a male-catcher and a worthless woman. M. Asaduddin has wrote about her story, "The characters have been treated not as autonomous individuals but as products of a certain social environment which shape their psyche... in other words, they are culturally rooted, and the local flavor adds significantly to their charm. (Introduction, xix)" Marriage, a most celebrated social institution, follows gender-rules in every way. Lajo had no belief in marriage, because to her marriage was a bondage rather than a relationship. Lajo did love her 'master' Mirza but didn't want any restriction or bondage. She wanted to remain free, though her heart would only beat for Mirza. Actually, in our society marriage follows some rules and regulation. Narrator Chughtai has given a commentary about that rules through Lajo's voice. "She had no illusion about herself: only virgins got married, and she could not remember when she had lost her virginity (Chughtai, 88)". No one cares about the virginity or purity of a groom. But the society is much concerned about a woman's virginity and the purity of a bride. A bride should abide by some rules such as to not wear tight-fitting dresses, not roam outside the house and of course not to chat with other men! But Lajo didn't fit in these restrictions and 'moral policing'. She started to miss her older days full of joy and liveliness, Mirza's care about her and her authority over the house as a 'homemaker'. Chughtai uses her mimetic strategy and a layered satiric style to differentiate 'masculinity' and 'femininity' of a man and his wife. Mirza, before marriage, used to rush home early to receive Lajo's care for him. But, Mirza after marriage, "like other husbands, he spent time with his friends so that no one could call him henpecked! A man can do anything to please his mistress, but the wife is altogether a different kettle of fish (Chughtai, 90)". Almost at the same thing, an unhappy marriage happened to Begum Jaan in 'Lihaaf (The Quilt)'. Nawab Saheb brought her newly married bride Begum Jaan home just like a possession and forgot her. He had more work and charities to do; so, he never had any time to love young Begum Jaan. She also didn't have permission to go outside the mansion. "She began to spend sleepless nights, yearning for a love that had never been (Chughtai, 14)". From that suffocating life, she had found her pleasure in her own way. She overcame loneliness and discovered her beauty's worth in falling in love with another woman. But such a way to celebrate sexuality was 'Haraam (guilt)' for woman, so the writer had been charged with obscenity! Lajo's desire for independence, her quarrelsome nature and her freeness was seen as sluttish in society's eye. So, she never became Mirza's dream bride because, she didn't fit into the 'decent woman' concept. And in a male-dominated society, marriage or divorce only depends on the husband's wish. When Mirza

decided to marry Lajo, he did that ignoring the reluctance of Lajo; and he easily made up his mind to divorce Lajo when the authorities assured him that she is a 'bastard'! Ismat through her narration has given a nudge to the readers to understand a difference between a 'Gharwali (the homemaker)' and a 'Bahu (the wife)'.

The next story I would like to take is 'Vocation'. The story is narrated from a woman's view. Ismat shows in this story that gender-notions can be constructed and 'successfully' carried on even by an urban, educated and working woman. Actually, it is the society, its norms and of course the individual which determine what a woman or man should do to project her/his/ masculinity/femininity. We can take Julia Kristeva into account, "Kristeva's account of the self displaces "masculine" adherence to principle as the prime mode of ethical agency and recognizes the urgent need for a "feminine" ethical approach. Viewing the self as a "questionable-subject-in-process..." (Encyclopedia of philosophy, Jul, 2015). If a woman moves away from the stereotyped concepts of a woman, she is projected and rumored as a courtesan! The story starts as, "I was sure that she was a courtesan. The dyed hair, tight outfits and the rush of men at all hours. Dance, music, loud and shrill guffaws... (Chughtai, 158)" The Narrator had strong senses in identifying a courtesan. She acquired that 'skill' from her experiences and social events. When the lady offered sweets to her on Id, she thought, "How could I tell her that I was chaste and pure? And her urgings! Well, she must have urged thousands of her admirers in this way (Chughtai, 160)". 'Chaste' and 'Pure' are the two most important words in order to be a decent woman. If a woman is found lacking of these, then she can be easily tagged as a 'slut' no matter what these words really signify! The narrator in this story was a teacher by profession. And, if a teacher has such ideas, he/she will obviously pass these ideas to next generation students. And thus ideology is constructed by state apparatuses. Ismat was concerned about the changes in society - how society had started to accept the education of woman (it was earned by women after a long-term fight against society) but in a restricted manner. At one hand, the teacher had the pre-conceived notion that a courtesan's daughter should be a courtesan too! On the other hand that tight-outfitted woman wanted her daughter to be English-educated to get her married in a good family. Both of these ladies are bound by patriarchy determined hegemony in their heads. Chughtai here kept mocking the womanish psyche continuously such as jealousy, curiosity "A woman usually gets jealous of other women (Chughtai, 162)". Then, monologues of the protagonist take the readers to the situation of price comparison of a market economy. She thought not about that courtesan's behavior but also about the market-price of her physique and every gesture. This is how a society measures a woman. But after all this happened, the protagonist came to know that 'the courtesan' was her relative! Her conservative culture which had forced her to hate that Sethani (landlady) now made her feel ashamed. The education of being chaste and pure which she had got from her family from her infancy, now pushed her to discomfort. "I was stunned as though I had kicked the Holy Scripture (Chughtai, 169)". Actually, she had kicked the society-made frame of a woman. Chughtai has defied prejudices of a so called 'reputed' and elite family. She expresses the freeness of a woman.

Mahashweta Devi gave importance to the oral tradition of Adivasi and aboriginal people of India to construct the texts. She gave names of her text's protagonist's namesake to the mythical and most important characters. In an obituary to Mahashweta Devi, writer Swapnamoy Chakroborty righteously asserted that, "for examining one's blood it's enough to collect sample of only a drop of blood. That's how reading Mahashweta Devi's story one gets the whole idea of the nation. (Chakroborty, P-3, Ei Samay)" It holds for Chughtai's stories too. Though Chughtai dealt mainly with Muslim families from northern India, Mahashweta Devi depicted a pan-Indian picture of women. Chughtai put more stress on the independence of

women from social prejudices, rejection of custom and conventional ideas and celebration of one's own body and mind ignoring the authoritative instructions. Mahashweta Devi too has talked about the independence of women, about the gender equality and of course about women empowerment challenging the power domination of male hierarchy. She has narrated how a woman's identity is interpolated with the question of class and caste in a semi-feudal, semi-colonial society. Baishali Barua has asserted about Mahashweta Devi's feminist standpoint as, "The feminist consciousness in Mahasweta's texts bring out the heterogeneity of the woman question in relation to multiple subjectivities and contexts. They are definite intervention/resistance to women's embodiment and are engaged in areas of contestation like representation, identity, invisibility within the framework of Indian culture and aim at understanding particularly the gendered subaltern... (Barua, IJELLH)". Ismat had observed gender-discriminations in middle class or upper middle class society, so she kept shouting against all the boundaries imposed upon women in workplace or in home. "You are neither weak nor strong; you are neither the weaker sex nor the tougher sex... Marriage is not your only goal (Chughtai, 43)" Mahashweta Devi took this objective forward with radicalism and she has also shaken the root of the conventional language of literature because language too carries domination, power and hierarchy in a society where class, caste and gender disparities co-exist. Thus, reading Ismat Chughtai and Mahashweta Devi, one can understand the mapping of women in Indian society and their continuous struggle to get rid of all bondage. The bondage and restrictions still exist and so these two progressive writers are becoming more relevant in present days.

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