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Dismantling Patriarchal Marriage in  
*The Quilt and Other Stories*  
(Student Paper)

IN HER COLLECTION of short stories *The Quilt and Other Stories*, Ismat Chughtai portrays the limited options available to women, whether single or married, under an oppressive patriarchy. In these stories the options available to women are that either the characters are dissatisfied by the lack of emotional fulfillment available to them within marriage or they suffer communal criticism because of their unwillingness or inability to conform to traditional standards. In each case, Chughtai dismantles the notion that marriage, the institution society prepares women to expect, is the culmination of a woman's life.

Chughtai is concerned not only with the manner in which men treat women, but also with the manner in which women conspire to undermine other women's positions. By depicting the lack of solidarity among women, Chughtai conveys the extent to which women are indoctrinated into the practices of a traditional system. Women abusing other women is a thematic focus in "Scent of the Body," "The Rock," and "The Eternal Vine." Each of these stories shows a man abusing the power society grants him over certain women (including, but not restricted to, his wife), along with women's acceptance of and promotion of such masculine abuse.

An overlapping theme in the above stories, as well as in "The Wedding Shroud," is the distinct advantages men have over women. The male characters in these stories procure female resources with no consequences or restitution. In each of the stories a man takes something of significant value from a woman, usually her body or her labor, leaving her depleted, while augmenting himself from her resources. These males do not have to pay for their exploitation of women and observers rarely restrain them. At the end of several stories Chughtai suggests that a man's

serial exploitations of a woman do not end with the close of the narrative, but rather, that the exploitation continues even after reading has stopped. Chughtai attacks the perpetuation of a system that allows men to assume and abuse their power over women.

A clear example of the perpetuated abuse of women by men, as well as by other women, appears in the story “Scent of the Body” in which Chughtai shows the denigrating effects of poverty upon women who are forced to become maids in a haveli in order to survive. In a society in which women are not allowed to be economically independent, lower-class women have no option but to become maids in the homes of the wealthy and depend on their masters and mistresses for their sustenance. The entire household, masters and mistresses alike, treat these maids without regard to ethical or moral guidelines. Female servants in this upper-class family are used by the women of the household as objects for masculine lusts, to be discarded when they become pregnant or when a male becomes too attached to them. Chughtai is criticizing the view promoted by Muslim religious writings in which a woman is defined as “*al-farj*” (slit, opening, passage) (Sabbah 1984, 24).<sup>1</sup> Although the Qurʾān does not promote the *al-farj* idea of women, several secondary religious writings by Muslim men have encouraged this outlook. The narrow understanding of women promoted by such secondary religious writings encourages men to think of women in terms that are “exclusively physical” and pertain only to their sexuality (*ibid.*, 25). Chughtai shows the hypocrisy of a society that uses religious teachings to validate the mistreatment of women. Chughtai portrays the insensitive and inhuman results of the notion of woman-as-opening through the experiences of the maids in “Scent of the Body.” For these women the sexual function of their bodies defines the meaning of their existence while their emotional or psychological aspects are ignored.

In “Scent of the Body” the maids are characterized as animals. The narrator dispassionately explains how the maids are disposed of when pregnant:

The *mabal* tradition was that when cattle became heavy with calf they were dispatched to the village. As soon as they were relieved of the calf

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<sup>1</sup>Shaykh Muhammad Nefzawi wrote *The Perfumed Garden* in the sixteenth century. This and similar texts promote ideas such as *al-farj* that reduce women to the status of being sexual objects. This text is still widely read alongside the Qurʾān for religious instruction (Sabbah 23–4).

and the milk started flowing, they were summoned back. Maids received identical treatment. Pregnant ones were packed off to the village.

(132)<sup>2</sup>

Equating the position of the maid with that of cattle (also one of the oldest and most widespread metaphors for women) focuses attention on their common status as possessions for their owners to move at their own discretion. The power of ownership becomes even clearer in regard to the children of these women. The children of maids, who are the illegitimate offspring of the masters of the house, are discarded in villages to unknown fates, while their mothers return to serve in the household. The treatment of the maids and their children further underlines the sexual irresponsibility in these households.

Another aspect of the dehumanization of women is highlighted when Chughtai shows women promoting degrading behavior towards other women. Knowing what consequences await maids who have relations with the men of the household, an upper-class woman still encourages this practice: "I am sick of this boy. Eighteen years old and no flirting with the maids. My brothers started at age eleven or twelve. Sixteen, seventeen, and they were stomping and fuming for the kill" (134). By contrasting the lives and positions of genteel women with those of the maids, Chughtai shows the dichotomy within the feminine hierarchy in a haveli. In this structure, women who marry into the family, or who are older, experienced maids are given control over the young maids of the household. No hope for feminine solidarity exists in such a system because, rather than being a unifying force, solidarity would hinder these women in the pursuit of status and power. The women in power will never aspire to equality because then they would lose their influence over other women—since they are powerless to influence men. Chughtai shows that the domestic structure encourages women to use other women in order to protect their own position in the household.

The narrator recollects a specific example of maid abuse through the mini-narrative of a maid named Sanobar. Her story provides a detailed warning of the punishment awaiting any maid who attempts to resist the system. When Sanobar resists being defined as a one-dimensional sexual figure by refusing to go to the village to have her child as is customary for maids, she suffers abuse at the hands of her child's father, the very man who used her sexually:

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<sup>2</sup>All quotations from the stories are taken from Chughtai 1994.

His exasperated kick landed squarely in her stomach and Sanobar was thrown into a running drain. For three days she bawled like a buffalo. To call a doctor for her would have been unthinkable.... On the third day, in the darkest corner of the servants' quarters, Sanobar took her last few tormented breaths.

(132)

Sanobar's death is only an anecdote in the life of the narrator. Her presence as a secondary character in the progression of the story attests to the painfully weak position of maids in this large household. Her attempt to gain status and power as a human being, results in her death, without any legal consequences for her murderer/lover. The detached recounting of Sanobar's story is accomplished in a few quick lines by a distanced, privileged female narrator whose observations underscore the lack of attention given to lower-class women in a social structure that favors the wealthy.

When Chhamman Mian, a young man in this household, rebels against the sexually irresponsible tradition of using maids and points out that it defies religious principles, he is upbraided for being ignorant of the benefits of such a practice. He is told by his older relatives, "This is the best way of preventing young men from falling into worse habits. They become responsible, remain healthy..." (136). Chhamman's response to their rationale is concise and biting. "Ways of legitimizing fornication," he tells his relatives (*ibid.*). His response is based upon a correct examination of the Qur'ān's attitude towards sexuality and women. Though Chhamman attempts to reject this practice, it is so engrained in the minds of his relatives that men and women encourage him to take advantage of willing women.

Chughtai shows the difficulty in reforming such a system through Chhamman Mian's costly sacrifices to honor his maid's life as a human being. He becomes the only sexually responsible male in this household, but his morality comes at the expense of his relationship with his family. After being presented with various willing maids and resisting their temptations, Chhamman Mian succumbs to one maid, Haleema, and becomes devoted. He does not consort with other maids of the household and proves to be a monogamous and caring man. Rather than using Haleema as a sexual object, Chhamman Mian is compelled into a physical relationship with her because his interest in her rescues Haleema from being traded to another family for a pair of English bloodhounds. He first offers to marry Haleema as an honorable means to prevent her from be-

coming a traded slave, but she rejects him based on her acceptance of her position in his household. Through dialogue, Chughtai reveals the injustice of Haleema's situation:

"Do you want to marry me?" he asked.

"God!" Haleema could hardly speak. "Hurma... everyone knows Hurma is your childhood fiancée."

"And you...?"

"I am your maid."

"Let us suppose you are my maid. Your mother was not. Your father wasn't the son of a maid. You are a Saidani, Haleema, your father was a farmer."

(137)

Chhamman Mian understands and resists the unequal distribution of wealth in this societal framework. He understands that poverty is what has reduced Haleema to her situation as his sexual slave and he refuses to accept society's construction of her role. As he is no longer able to ignore Haleema's presence, he begins to fall in love with her. His physical involvement and emotional attachment result in Haleema's pregnancy.

Chughtai shows the pressures that one man who wants to be different must undergo in order to reject an established abusive system. Rather than discard her, as is expected, Chhamman does the socially unthinkable and deserts his family for the sake of his honor. His behavior is strictly forbidden and contrary to custom, but Chhamman's ethical and moral sense of duty leads him to leave his family in order to fulfill what he considers his responsibilities as a man. Chughtai uses the relationship between Chhamman Mian and Haleema to show the possibilities that result when men are not restricted by accepted cultural practices. He is one of the few positive masculine characters in Chughtai's writings. In most of her stories Chughtai presents men who have no qualms about imposing their will on women.

In the story "The Rock," Chughtai presents a serial husband who migrates from woman to woman. This man makes sure he exerts his will on each wife in order to create the female body he desires. Rather than making her more slender, as one would think, this husband himself wants to be the slender one. He constantly encourages each wife to let her body and appearance deteriorate.

The goal of this man is to domesticate his wives in order to assert this authority: "[He] earnestly embarked on the task of moulding her into a

homemaker" (47). Indeed the man is not alone in his endeavors: "In four or five years, with everyone's help, she turned into a complete housewife. As the mother of three children she became overweight and ungainly" (*ibid.*). The young bride, who comes to her husband's house at the age of fifteen, turns her body over to her husband and her family in order to be recreated for their pleasure. The pleasure here is not sexual as in "Scent of the Body." Instead, this man receives pleasure from the contrast between his own body and his wife's:

Her husband found her pleasing just the way she was, untidy and dishevelled.... [She] had let herself go and her body slackened like dough left out overnight.

Her husband was nine years her senior, but compared to her Bhaiya looked really young. Still quite slim, with a well-kept figure.... He was still boyish in appearance.

(47-8)

The physical contrast between this couple startlingly reveals the control that this man imposes upon his wife's body. Her body becomes a projection of his wishes, not merely in the sexual domination seen in "Scent of the Body," but also in shape and substance. Through his direct influence over his wife's eating habits, he is able to create a woman by whom he is not threatened and whom the rest of society will not find more attractive than himself. Thus the main thematic thrust of "The Rock" is a man who is immovable, but who takes women in the prime of their youth and then discards them when his satisfaction in transfiguring them has ended:

Beautiful like the sun god, romantic, honey-eyed Bhaiya, unmoving like a rock—he sat smiling in the role of an immortalized martyr.

An old wave, tired and broken, lay dying at his feet.

A new wave, bright and undulating, was waiting breathlessly to be clasped in his arms.

(57)

Long after her youth has wasted away, eaten up by childbirth and by an unhealthy diet, both promoted by the man, the wife who begins the story is tossed aside for another, younger, slimmer beauty.

Chughtai allows readers two detailed encounters with the cycle of the "Rock," the same husband domesticating two different wives. The story ends with another beginning—a third woman, running to the "Rock" to devote herself to him. The irony is that the new woman in each of the

scenarios never realizes that she herself will end up like the former one. Instead, the young beauty always blindly stumbles forward into the trap. The last woman is a young dancer; her body is trim and she maintains her physique in order to showcase her sensuality. The horror with which she views the current wife's body shows her misunderstanding of the man's power:

It seemed that it wasn't Bhaiya's wife she was looking at, but his own body drenched in blood. She stared at Shabnam with horror. Then she filled her eyes with every ounce of maternal affection she could muster and gave Bhaiya a special look in which a thousand stories were concealed.

*(ibid.)*

The gazing at the wife's body by another woman, not a man, epitomizes the prevalence of dismissing women's bodies as appearance-based commodities. Here Chughtai shows the rift created between women when women themselves judge one another's body/life without seeing the manipulation of the man behind both. In "Scent of the Body" and "The Rock" female acceptance of marital conventions perpetuates the collective abuse of women. Chughtai presents her art in a subtle manner in which she shows that both men and women promote the notion of woman-as-body. She accomplishes this through the impersonal voice of her narrators who record the destruction of women's lives using unemotional prose. The withholding of narrative interpretation allows Chughtai to present the circumstances of each story in a realistic manner while leaving the reader to draw his or her own final conclusions as the scene closes around a tragic female figure.

The depiction of masculine and feminine abuse of a particular woman continues in "The Eternal Vine," but in this instance Chughtai examines the negative effects of child marriages. Chughtai dramatizes the story of a fifteen-year-old girl named Rukhsana who is manipulated by her husband as well as by her sisters-in-law because of her youth.

In this story, Shujaat Mamum, a widower in his fifties, at the instigation of his sisters, marries Rukhsana who is decades younger than he. Through this pairing Chughtai explores the intricate relationships among members of the extended family in colonial Indian society. The imbalance in age at first is a delight to Rukhsana's husband, but then his wife's youth becomes burdensome as his age and ailments increase. Shujaat Mamum grows obsessive and jealous over the youth and beauty of his wife whose body is contrasted to his own through Chughtai's delicate use of detail:

The beauty and youth which had once enslaved Shujaat Mamun now began to rankle in his eyes. When a crippled child is unable to keep up with his playmates, he turns on them and accuses them of cheating....

As Rukhsana Begum's foliage flowered, Uncle became weaker.

(30-1)

Rukhsana's development is in contrast to her husband's increasing decay and the images created by the narrator are humorous: "... the pain in one of his molars became unbearable and he was forced to have the tooth removed.... That was the time Rukhsana Mumani's wisdom tooth appeared" (29). Through such vivid images, Chughtai conveys the large gap in age between this husband and wife.

During Rukhsana's marriage to their brother, his sisters attempt to undermine a healthy relationship in order to reestablish their own prominence in their brother's life. The cause of Shujaat Mamun's sisters' bitterness is their brother's favoritism toward his wife, which interferes with their own perceived right to his attentions. Although it is their brother who is ignoring them in order to be with his wife, the sisters are angry with Rukhsana for upsetting the delicate balance of their familial relationships: "What a wonderful brother he had been and how he was changed, like roughened twine now, cruel and uncaring. The world turned bleak for the sisters" (28).

In their advice to the young bride, the sisters outline their discomfort with her upsetting the conventions of marriage: "My word, sister-in-law, how long can you tie him to your *dupatta*? He's a man, not a baby you can keep in your lap forever" (*ibid.*). The sisters are not happy for Rukhsana that she has found a man to adore her, as a woman deserves; rather they want her to be subject to the same indifference they suffer at the hands of their own husbands and to the rigid order of male-female, brother-sister relationships. Chughtai shows that, due to Rukhsana's youth, she is unable to understand the complex web of interactions that accompany marriage into an extended family. Her husband and in-laws easily manipulate Rukhsana's naiveté and this underscores the reason why young girls are preferred as daughters-in-law in large households.

At first husband and wife appear to enjoy close companionship, despite their age difference. Soon, however, Shujaat Mamun's love borders on obsession. He becomes increasingly paranoid about Rukhsana's fidelity, and his health declines. He harasses her regarding her youth and beauty because of his own insecurities: "You're sticking your chest out to

attract young men, aren't you?' He started spitting poison. 'Why don't you find someone young for yourself?'" (30).

This abuse continues until the husband dies. At the death of Shujaat Mamun, the fate of his powerless bride is sealed—his sisters are given his entire estate while she is left nothing. The final portrait of Rukhsana Mumani shows her as an isolated woman; deprived of a husband, she is lost: "Rukhsana Mumani leaned against a door, alone, apart from the others.... Rukhsana's face was clouded with helplessness and sorrow. An expression of fear and distress made her appear even more vulnerable" (34).

As a widow this woman has even fewer rights than she had as a wife. Although she is free from an imprisoning relationship, she does not have any of the social or financial protection that marriage offered her. Meanwhile the sisters in this household have not offered to help another woman in need; they discard her much as their brother did. Through the interactions between Rukhsana and her in-laws, before and after her husband's death, Chughtai shows the intricacy of the politics involved in haveli life, where extended families lived together and a husband's relatives had more power than his wife. In such an arrangement, the wife is the intruder upon her in-laws' lives and must serve their wishes in addition to her husband's.

In "Scent of the Body," "The Rock," and "The Eternal Vine," Chughtai shows that women's bodies are the locus through which men exert their power. In each of these stories women conform to masculine practices and are used directly against other women. As is often the case in Chughtai's fiction, characters work together in each story to show that although traditions do not benefit the average woman, most women succumb to them eventually. The maids are the least empowered of lower-class women, and for upper-class women the least amount of power is found in the role of the wife.

In "The Wedding Shroud" and "A Morsel," Chughtai continues to unravel the fabric of tradition in order to expose how deeply-rooted belief systems harm women's lives. Both "The Wedding Shroud" and "A Morsel" examine how a community's attitude toward single women can coerce women into marriage. The means by which women attract a spouse are based on self-sacrifice and change in order to entice men. In both stories the efforts of the community fail these women and they are left unmarried. Chughtai shows the dexterity of her prose with the different endings of these two stories. In "The Wedding Shroud," the main character Kubra's stigma is short-lived because she dies shortly after her family's plan to entice a groom collapses, further underscoring her plight.

One of the clearest examples of masculine abuse of feminine resources occurs during the courting rituals described in “The Wedding Shroud.” In this story Chughtai shows, through the lives of Kubra’s small family, the extent to which women are willing to market themselves in order to get married. Through the eyes of Kubra’s younger sister Hameeda, the reader sees the desperate economic deprivation of this household and the resulting necessity of procuring a bridegroom for their own economic and physical survival.

In “The Wedding Shroud,” Chughtai portrays the detrimental effects on poor women of being unmarried in a society that forces them to cater to potential bridegrooms, rather than allowing them to attain economic or social autonomy. Kubra is the daughter of a poor seamstress whose one ambition is to see her older child married. Kubra, her mother, and her younger sister spend the family’s meager savings in order to romance a cousin, Rahat, who is a prospective husband. Through Hameeda’s observations readers learn about the injustices in Kubra’s life:

[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.

(63–4)

Chughtai shows the inequality of labor and sustenance—the women are sacrificing everything for a man in the hope of wooing him. Chughtai’s use of Hameeda’s voice as the narrator allows passion and anger to enter into the story as readers learn of Kubra’s sacrifices in order to gain a husband. Although Hameeda notices the abuse of her sister and family by this selfish cousin, she can only ruminate on these ideas internally. But since Chughtai allows readers to follow the inner monologues of her narrator, readers become associated with her emotions. She understands the futility of trying to subvert an ingrained system and rails at the injustice of a woman like Kubra being used for labor rather than appreciated for her character:

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's services to Rahat increase at the expense of her own health until she is exhausted from trying to please him. She knits him a sweater, while she herself suffers from tuberculosis; she continues to labor all day to prepare the dishes she thinks he will like. But all of this is to no avail. Rahat fulfills Hameeda's worst fears and eventually leaves in order to marry someone else. Readers learn that Rahat's marriage had been determined even before his visit to his cousins. The family realizes that no method of persuasion would have created in him the desire to be a bridegroom. He had exploited them. The selfishness of Rahat, manifest in his taking advantage of these poor women, and his leaving result in the disintegration of Kubra's last hope for marriage. Chughtai shows the hopelessness of life for women who are left without men—Kubra succumbs to tuberculosis and dies shortly after Rahat's departure. In a society in which women are not allowed to exist outside of marriage, their lives are dominated by their futile attempts to catch a man. In the story "The Wedding Shroud" readers are exposed to the detrimental human effects of traditions governing marriage and courtship.

In "A Morsel" Chughtai examines a different scenario of courtship. She uses an employed single woman, Sarlaben, as a means to display how social attitudes towards unmarried women can shake even the most independent woman and cause her to change herself in order to end her undesirable status. Sarlaben is a hardworking woman whose parents both died at an early age without arranging a marriage for her. Sarlaben does not view her existence as dismally as her friends and neighbors do; she is satisfied with work in the hospital. But the narrator describes how the community views Sarlaben's position: "It is said that an unmarried woman is a burden for all creation, the ensuing sorrow leaving its mark on each individual, making everyone accountable" (84). Elsewhere the prejudice against single women is further explained: "What helplessness! If you weren't married you were like an open wound; people tormented you with talk about possible cures..." (85). Under the pressure of her friends, who in this story function as an extended family, Sarlaben listens to advice in order to catch a man. She prepares herself to catch a man's eye and thus his hand in marriage—two goals that previously had no importance for her but which, due to the influence of her surroundings, she now deems important.

Sarlaben is offered extensive preparation in order to elicit the romantic interest of a kind man who habitually offers her his seat during her commute home on the city bus. Against her wishes, she is dressed by her friends in a “pink nylon-georgette sari which had been embroidered with sequins, ... a lot of cream was applied to her face, ... [n]ext came a plastering of rouge and powder, followed by the creation of a huge dome-like hairdo...” (91). Sarlaben has been changed from the woman she truly is into a physical object to be evaluated only by her appearance. She is described as “a pliant toy in their hands” (*ibid.*), a statement that sums up her powerlessness against the dictates of society. Chughtai shows that even without a family to pressure her, the people who surround her can compel a woman into marriage.

The story turns ironic when Sarlaben encounters the object of her affection on the bus and he seemingly rejects her in all her beauty. During this encounter she does more to attract his attention than on any previous occasion. She attempts to make eye contact, she stretches, and she drops her scarf, to no avail. After Sarlaben descends from the bus and leaves feeling rejected by the man, the mystery of his behavior is revealed. The man stops to ask the pickpocket, “Hey, you scoundrel, where is Sarlaben today? Why didn’t she come?” (92). That is, he didn’t reject her; he simply didn’t recognize her in the artificial form she presented to him. Sarlaben had received more of his attention on the bus as an unassuming workingwoman than as a forward woman “dressed to impress.”

Chughtai shows through the character of this man that physical attraction is not necessarily all that is required to gain a man’s attention. She wants her readers to question not only the reasoning behind forcing perfectly contented single people into marriage, but also the assumptions behind courtship practices. The title of the story, “A Morsel,” signifies that everyone in the story, including Sarlaben herself, was persuaded that the way to entice a man was to prepare a woman to be a tempting morsel in his mouth. Chughtai shows that this mentality objectifies women and reduces men to passive drones needing to be stimulated into forming a relationship.

Ismat Chughtai is also concerned with the sexuality of young women in a society that is very detached from and ignorant of women’s needs. Largely due to her exposure and commitment to progressivism, her writings were the first in Urdu to openly explore female sexuality. In many of her short stories female characters are ignored or dissatisfied with their conjugal relationships. Rather than pine away, the dissatisfied wife finds

her own satisfaction in "The Quilt." Chughtai's exploration of female sexuality in this story has led to acclaim as well as censure from critics.

"The Quilt" is one of Chughtai's most infamous stories and it resulted in her being put on trial for writing obscene literature. Although she was eventually cleared of the charges, the story largely remains known for its "obscene" content. Chughtai herself bemoaned the fact that she would be remembered only for writing this one story which she did not feel accurately represented her writing or her interests. "The Quilt," because of its homoerotic themes, has been reduced to discussions revolving around scandal, but the story is actually rich in meaning. Chughtai explores the plight of a married woman who has been denied the sexual and domestic attention of her husband. Through the character of Begum Jan, a newly married wife, Chughtai shows the frustrations of married women in a structure in which they function as role fulfillers rather than as people.

Begum Jan's desperation is shown almost immediately when she enters the house and is discarded by her husband:

After marrying Begum Jan, he deposited her in the house with all his other possessions and promptly forgot about her! The young, delicate Begum began to wilt with loneliness ... she realized that the household revolved around the boy-students, and that all the delicacies produced in the kitchen were meant solely for their palates.

(5-6)

Begum Jan's husband is more concerned with young boys than with his wife. According to the terms of marriage in this society, he considers himself responsible only for providing for his wife's material needs, not her emotional or psychological needs. He treats her in much the same manner as "all his other possessions"—standard behavior in a society where marriage is considered a necessary duty to be fulfilled by men as well as women. Thus Chughtai shows that the role of woman-as-wife requires that a man-as-husband complement be present—even if it is in name only.

As the marriage continues, this young girl declines even further from neglect.

Begum Jan slowly let go and consequently became a picture of melancholy and despair.

She felt like stuffing all her fine clothes into the stove. One dresses up to impress people. Now, Nawab Sahib neither found a spare moment from

his preoccupation with the gossamer shirts, nor did he allow her to venture outside the home.

(6)

Begum Jan is trapped within her house, where she is ignored because of the prohibition, created by the custom of *purdah*, against women's free movement in the public sphere.

The rules governing seclusion and guaranteeing women's purity force Begum Jan to remain within her house even when she has no one and nothing with which to entertain herself, while her relatives are free to visit her: "Her relatives, however, made it a habit to pay her frequent visits which often lasted for months, while she remained a prisoner of the house" (*ibid.*). This woman begins to physically deteriorate due to emotional neglect and lack of human companionship: "But, despite renewing the cotton filling in her quilt each year, Begum Jan continued to shiver, night after night.... What the hell was life worth anyway? Why live?" (*ibid.*). The frustrated existence of this young woman shows the results of a system that imposes marriage upon women and then renders them immobile.

Chughtai presents alleviation for Begum Jan's loneliness in an unconventional manner—an intimate relationship with a female servant:

Rabbo arrived at the house and came to Begum Jan's rescue just as she was starting to go under. Her emaciated body suddenly began to fill out. Her cheeks became rosy; beauty, as it were, glowed through every pore! ...

Rabbo had no other household duties. Perched on the four-poster bed, she was always massaging Begum Jan's head, feet or some other part of her anatomy.

(6-7)

Chughtai's subtlety is manifest in her choice of the story's narrator. It is told through the narrator's childhood reflections and thus handles the physical relationship between Begum Jan and her maid delicately, as the innocent observations of a child. Readers understand the relationship between Begum Jan and Rabbo without ever seeing explicit scenes of intimacy. Chughtai uses their relationship to show that women forced into seclusion must create meaning out of their meager existences. She poses this intimate relationship as one woman's way of overcoming the emotional void imposed on her by her husband.

Ismat Chughtai was a woman of unconventional educational and social experiences which gave her a unique perspective on Indian society.

Her family's affluence allowed her to observe at an early age the inconsistencies of a society that was divided along class and gender lines. Chughtai's writings convey the ironies that exist for women in a patriarchal system which has been perpetuated by women themselves accepting conventional roles. Through her short stories Chughtai allowed her readers to glimpse the contradictions and difficulties facing women who lacked autonomy and were acculturated into accepting the notion of woman-as-wife as being the sole function of their existence. Tahira Naqvi explains the significance of Chughtai's role as a female author:

[She] played an important role in developing and shaping the modern Urdu short story form as we know it today. More importantly, she helped establish a tradition of self-awareness and undaunted creative expression for the Indian and Pakistani women writers who came after her.

(XIII–XIV)

Chughtai's fiction posed questions about the prevalent acceptance of the societal regulations and constrictions placed upon women's lives in India. These questions have since been taken up by other South Asian writers and are still being explored in contemporary novels in all of the languages of India. □

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