

Dismantling the Dominant and Empowering the Oppressed: A Study of Select Short Stories of Ismat Chughtai

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*Ismat Chughtai (August 1915 –24 October 1991) was one of the most eminent progressive Urdu writers whose iconoclastic, bold, feministic and rebellious texts created tremors across the whole of sub-continent. Chughtai's fictional pieces concern the psychological, socio-cultural and sexual realities that were prevalent during her times. She challenged the traditional feminine roles and sensibilities enforced by the patriarchal society which demanded women to be virtuous, modest and obedient. The conventional Muslim society made women an object of sanctity confined within zenana but Chughtai nullified all this through her writings by making the sacred veil/zenana itself a site of sexuality and freedom. Her unwarranted expressions of female sexuality breaks the long established deadlock of masculinist writings in Urdu Literature. The paper will analyze the ecriture feminine of Chughtai's *The Quilt* where she challenges the oppressive male dominated system by presenting the untold truths in complete defiance of social standards. The projection of the female protagonist's life, emotions, desires and her body itself become a means of resistance in the story. At the same time, the short story has subaltern aspects to it where the voiceless and oppressed maid-servant, *Rabbu*, succumbs to the desire and whims of her mistress *Begum Jaan*. Chughtai's work is not limited to female sexuality but also inculcates the values of liberty, equality and justice. Her short stories like *Gainda*, *Kallu*, *A Pair of Hands*, *The Wedding Shroud*, *Sacred Duty* and *Roots* drew attention to crucial issues like poverty, exploitation, gender justice, education and human rights and cover much broader socio-cultural themes of religion, marriage, belongingness and identity crises. *Sacred Duty* discusses how repute and religion becomes more important than the love and lives of two people. A person is not free to take the decision to choose his/her life partner as he/she bounded by the chains of family, society and custom. Ismat also wrote on communal tensions and ringed a note of identity crises and the question of belongingness in her texts like the *roots* where a Muslim family decides to leave for Pakistan after partition and break the long held relationship to the land, ancestral home and the Hindu neighbors on grounds of different religion. Her spontaneous style, sharp and witty remarks with sometimes humorous and ironic overtones make the reading of her texts a delight and make the themes more forceful and vehement. The paper proposes to study the socio-cultural, psychological, sexual and subaltern themes embedded in the select short stories- '*Roots*', '*Sacred Duty*', and '*Quilt*'- of Ismat Chughtai.*

Keywords: socio-cultural, patriarchal, female sexuality, ecriture feminine, subaltern, identity crises.