

## GENDER AND NATIONALISM

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### Abstract

*Literature being the forbearer of expressions, unifies the different subjects and ideologies like faith, politics, culture, history, tradition and migration into the identity Nationalism enfolds. Numerous literary works were written captivating the causes, effects and sense of Indian Nationalism. Writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai and others engaged in a constant battle against the stereotypical representations of the genders and celebrated the distinctness of the female characters in their works. The paper attempts to read Manto and Ismat Chughtai's selected short stories which talks about sidelining, the widely unspoken part of the society, i.e the third gender.*

**Key Words:** *Nationalism, Stereotype, Gender.*

## GENDER AND NATIONALISM

- Vinutha M.H.

**N**ationalism, Freedom struggle, Partition, Bloodshed, Revolts, Massacre and Religious upheavals were some of the most common topics dealt by the 19th and 20th century writers. The political milieu of India then was in a huge conundrum, so the major focus of the writers was politics and the new developments of a partitioned India. But we find a few writers taking a paradigm shift from these topics towards feminism and gender. Writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai altered the conventional perception of woman by exploring the untouched facets concerning female sexuality and transgender culture. Saadat Hassan Manto was born on 11th May, 1912. He was a voracious Indo-Pakistani writer and is considered to be one of the greatest writers of the time. He has twenty two collections of short stories, a novel, radio plays and three collections of essays to his credit. We can observe that Manto has majorly touched upon partition themes, but we see that he has also written some of the most controversial works of the time. He was charged for obscenity in his works many a times in both India and Pakistan. The work this paper focuses on is the "Price of Freedom". In this story, Manto describes the plight of his childhood friend Ghulam Ali, who is very active in the civil disobedience movement during which he falls in love with a girl called Nigar. Ali expresses his desire to marry the woman he is in love with and conjugate his marriage before he goes to jail. When he tells this to his 'blind motivation' Babaji, he initially gets a disapproval. All that Babaji does is order Ali to marry Nigar, see her as a friend, leave her in his ashram and go to jail and never consummate their love but rather focus on productive aspects of life like fighting and struggling for independence.

'The true purpose of marriage is comradeship. What is being sanctified today will serve the cause of India's freedom. A true marriage should be free of lust and those who are able to exorcise this evil from their lives deserve our respect.' Through this we get to see

Babaji's violence and dominance over people and how he oppresses them under patriarchy and dominance.

'I must declare with all the power I can command that sensual attraction even between husband and wife is unnatural. Marriage is meant to cleanse the hearts of the couple of sordid passion and take them nearer to God. Lustless love between husband and wife is not impossible. Man is not a brute. He had risen to a higher state after countless births in the brute creation. He is born to stand, not to walk on all fours or crawl. Bestiality is as far removed from manhood as matter from spirit.' (Gandhi pg73)

By this we clearly can observe how Babaji tries to puppet Gandhiji's ideas about a man and woman's relationship bound in wedlock, which advocated that women who held back their sexual desires would be successful in helping the man of the house to be completely engrossed in the country's development.

Michael Foucault defines the body as the principle target of power. The lifeless and pallid life forced to live over Babaji's command starts sickening Ali and he decides to marry Nigar and seeks permission from Babaji one last time and Babaji expresses his approval with the condition of non consummation, but Ali steps against Babaji and marries Nigar and realises how Babaji controlled his life. In all this we find Nigar the silenced victim of Babaji's vision which saw her as a mere symbol of the act of indulgence and Ali who independently took decisions over marrying her, later consummating and as we move further in the story he sees her body as a 'mere womb' to procreate, which becomes his life purpose.

'When I met Nigar after my release...we kept our promise to Babaji. It was hell...One day as we sat next to each other i had a mad urge to take her in my arms and kiss her...I let myself go, but i stopped just in time...I couldn't get rid of feeling of guilt...One day we hit upon a compromise. We would not produce children. We would take necessary steps, we would live like husband and wife'

So as we go through the story we see a woman's body bearing the stigma of being victimised in the absence of her resistance to this torture that she was being put through. To achieve self transcendence we find Ali using Nigar's body. Nigar never gets an opportunity to voice over her sexual urges and her desire to become a mother, clearly evident that Gulam Ali decides when they will consummate and when he will want her to mother his child.

'It was as if a blind man had been given back his sight of one eye...Nigar's agony was even more evident. She wanted to be a mother and she couldn't be. Whenever a child was born in the neighbourhood, she would shut herself in a room...If a man and woman are joined in wedlock, it is obligatory for them to procreate. And that day I peeled of my curse and have never looked back.'

Ismat Chughtai born on 21st August 1915 was one of Urdu's most prolific writers. She started her career as a writer in the late 1930's but the publication of 'Lihaaf' changed her fortune, it became such a work that it weighed down all her other works when it came to popularity. 'Lihaaf or The Quilt' is the story of a young begum jaan being married to an old Nawab who is pretentious, Hippocratic and pseudo religious. He is said to have a hobby of playing games and inviting young fair slender waist boys to his palace.

'He, however, had a strange hobby. Some people are crazy enough to cultivate interests like breeding pigeons and watching cock fights, Nawab Saheb had contempt for such disgusting sports. He kept an open house for students- young, fair and slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him.'

As days passed by the yearning of Begum jaan's love for the Nawab increases and at one point she gets to know she is married to the tables and chairs of the house rather than to the Nawab. 'One can't draw blood from a stone. The Nawab didn't budge an inch.' She spent her time alone and cultivates the habit of reading books, but that pushes her even further to the misery because of its romantic, sensual and love themes. Though Begum jaan has the

legitimate right to demand love from her Janab she doesn't, but rather starts withering in pain.

'The women themselves have very little agency in making their voices heard: in most cases they have no knowledge of their sexual orientation (because they have internalized the myth of compulsory heterosexuality). If they do recognize it, they either try to resolve their internal conflict, or choose to keep quiet about it for the fear of consequences. Their families, at times, lack knowledge about lesbian experience too; they also keep themselves disengaged from the issue and deny the expression— even the existence—of same-sex desire.' (Choudhuri pg140)

After a course of time we can see that the Begum starts living her life, her thin body starts gaining poise and blossoms, all this is possible with the help of Rabbu her maid servant who massages the Begum's body with a special oil using vivid strokes and the coldness the Begum suffered under her quilt seems like disappearing. 'Soon her thin body began to fill out, her cheeks began to glow and she blossomed in beauty.... Rabbu sat against her back massaging her waist.' All these details and narration is given by an eight year old girl through her observation.

'Rabbu had no other house old duties...if anyone were to touch my body so often i would certainly rot to death. Even this daily massaging was not enough. On the days she took a bath, she would massage the Begum's body with the variety of oils, pastes for two hours and she would massage with such vigour that even imagining it made me sick.'

The girl sleeps in the Begum's room and one day she encounters that the quilt of Begum jaan moves like an elephant under it with strange postures, 'Begum jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously as though an elephant was struggling inside... the elephant stopped shaking and the quilt came down.' The child is calmed by the Begum when she screams getting scared of it. Another notable thing in the story is that the discussion of the homosexual relationship amongst the servants in the house because homosexuality is a

completely unaddressed aspects of the society. When Rabbu leaves to her relative's house to see her son for two days Begum gets extremely pain struck and the itch in her body increases. Out of admiration and courtesy the girl thinks she could be of any help massaging the Begum's body, but later she finds herself in an extremely awkward situation as the Begum points to stroke her ribs. The girl moves off from the bed and the Begum teases her for this. Then on the little girl feels extremely hesitant and scared of the Begum's sight and becomes glad on Rabbu's return. The consecutive night when the girl faces the same elephant image by the quilt, she decides to turn on the lights and sleep for her courage, when she leaps off the bed and turns on the lights, the elephant under the quilt somersaults and the quilt rises one feet above the bed, though the girl encounters the sight, she goes to sleep.

'Once again the quilt started swinging. I tried to lie down still but the quilt began to assume such grotesque shapes that I was thoroughly shaken. It seemed as though large frog was inflating itself noisily and was about to leap on me....I stretched my leg nervously to the other side of the bed to grope for the switch and turned it on. The elephant somersaulted inside the quilt which deflated immediately. During the somersault the corner of the quilt rose by almost a foot.'

Chughtai's narration of this story gets her into trouble as the Nawab in the real life files a case against her. In one of the interviews Chughtai says that, she didn't know writing about Lesbianism was a taboo in the society and she believed that she had just depicted a fact of real life and not made up any story. Tanvi Khanna proclaims that 'Lihaaf introduces a "new woman" in the form of Begum jaan who stands against the hetero normative structure of relationships. Chughtai sees female sexuality as empowering.' Though the age demanded for a focus on freedom struggle, we can see how these two writers focused on a rather untouched and unspoken aspects of the society. Manto speaks about how women were the victims of the patriarchal structure and these voices were rather unheard. Chughtai showcases how Begum moved away from constrains of the society to gain

pleasure in her life. She voiced the feelings of a woman and moved a step away from the conventions of the society.

'I would like to take this claim a step further: "The Quilt" could be read as counter-colonial discourse because of its radical attempt to de- 154 classify pleasure. What I choose to call Chughtai's "homographetic" technique defies labels and descriptors and destabilizes the polarization between transgressive and acceptable desires that colonial discourse had inscribed so rigidly. Its ambivalent inscription of queer bodies subverts the cultural insistence on recording and tabulating sexual pathology, and ultimately makes same-sex desire unmappable.' (Choudhuri pg 153,154)

Manto in his other stories like 'Colder than ice', 'Mozail' showcases how women demanded their sexual freedom and questioned the patriarchal construct by a man. A woman moving away from the fabrication of the societal norms and celebrating her liberty over her own body is the actual freedom the society should see is the aspect focused through the stories of these notable writers. 'In her attempts to come to terms with her sexuality, she rejects her traditional role and treads the path of modernisation.' (Tanvi Khanna)

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