

Terhi Lakeer Drawn by Ismat Chughtai's Fearless Pen

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study Terhi **Lakeer** by Ismat **Chughtai**. This is a very famous social, sentimental, social, and intense Urdu local story of a young lady. Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991) was a fearless and trailblazing stalwart of Urdu fiction, unequivocally one of the four pillars of modern Urdu short story, the others being Manto, Krishan Chander and Rajinder Singh Bedi. She was a little above eighty at the time of her death, having led a largely uninhibited life, could be safely termed a rebel since her birth, made unconventional choices whether in terms of life or career and made it her explicit agenda to expose the hypocrisies peppering the lives of the contemporary middle class Indian society, Muslim households in particular because she lived in one and saw the chinks ever so closely from that vantage point.

Chughtai later wrote *Tedhi Lakeer* which was a quasi-autobiographical work. The novel met with success almost immediately. In the novel, she recounts the difficult circumstances that the Muslim community, and especially women, found themselves in with the waning of the British Raj in the backdrop. In the backdrop of India's colonial past and social and political revolution, lies the story of a middle-class Muslim girl. She is in the process of exploring desire and sexuality. The novel was controversial as it touched upon a topic as delicate as sexuality, talking about that which was considered a taboo back in the days. The novel won Ismat Chughtai a lot of fame as well as notoriety and it quickly became one of the most important works of Urdu Literature. Ismat Chughtai, hereby, became the queen of Urdu literature with her novels and short stories. She later wrote many more novels like *Masooma*, *Saudai*, *Dil Ki Duniya*, and *Ajeeb Aadmi*. Many of her novels revolved around sensitive themes of sexual exploration and femininity. Chughtai was one of the pillars in Urdu literature and through her writing she constantly shed light on issues like female desires and sexuality, conflicts of the middle class and their aspirations. One of her most enduring works remain the short story, *Lihaaf* (The Quilt). Published in 1942, the story sparked controversy and was criticised for its homoerotic theme. However, *Lihaaf* is one among a large body of her work. Chughtai has enriched the canon of Urdu literature with her other works as well.

Key words: Terhi Lakeer, Ismat Chughtai. Novels, Urdu

Introduction

"Terhi Lakeer" one of Chughtai's most autobiographical work (translated wondrously by Tahira Naqvi as "The Crooked Line") tells the story of Shamman and her world, the women in her family – from her mother to her sisters and cousins, to her time at a boarding school and experiences there and how she grows into a woman on the brink of India's independence, at the same time fighting her inner battles. "The Crooked Line" is about Indian women living in purdah (the world Shamman is born and grows into in the first part of the book) – her Amma who is callous enough to let Shamman being taken care of by her sisters. Her Bari Appa (oldest sister) who is a premature widow and uses this to her advantage time and again in the family. Her cousin Noori who very early on understands how to wield power over men. Chughtai's characters may appear weak and subdued but don't be fooled. They are strong and yet know when to appear weak.

The world of purdah disappears as Shamman grows up, with its own set of rules and it all comes down to how women control men around them. Shamman, now educated sees herself different from her family and is almost alienated by them. She doesn't even understand her place in the modern world and is somewhat stuck in a limbo. Ismat Chughtai's characters are also known to traverse paths of identity confusion more often than not. Be it Masooma (from the novel of the same name) or even Bichchoo Phoophee, they are always stuck, always searching and breaking paradigms in their small ways. Shamman does the same and is seeing the world change drastically – be it through her friend Alma, who has a child out of wedlock and is unable to love it fully or abort it – or through Bilqees, the femme fatale who uses men and is always surrounded by them, without knowing if she loves them or is just using them.

This is also a constant in the book – women who are neither here nor there. Women who were in purdah had no control and women who have the freedom don't know what to make of it. In all of this is Shamman's role as a headmistress (which reminded me so much of the Brontë sisters) and her relationship with the gossiping colleagues to her own sexuality as and when it blossoms, Chughtai's feminism is not contained or a listicle of sorts. It is the kind of feminism that questions and makes you very uncomfortable while asking those questions. She isn't apologetic and neither are her characters. Tahira Naqvi's translation from the Urdu is top-notch as she keeps all phrases and words intact, where they should be.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze **Ismat Chughtai's Novel Terhi Lakeer**. It is a social, romantic, cultural, and bold story of a girl who had a desire for love. Her psychological problems and the need for the absolute love of anyone.

Tedhi Lakeer coming of age

In the first few pages of Ismat Chughtai's novel, Terhi Lakeer, her heroine Shama, headstrong and rebellious, is introduced for the very first time to reading. It is not a happy meeting; the book, whose pages have been sewn together by her older sister, appears to Shama a useless object whose meaningless hieroglyphs for "alif" and "jeem" arouse a frustrated anger. When her sister leaves the room, the angered little Shama examines the book; in the English translation of the novel, the scene appears thus:

"Her teeth began to tingle again. She tugged at the piece of thread at one end of the seam and, like sutures on a wound, the sutures unraveled nearly all the way at the end of the seam. It felt good, as if she were hastily skipping down the staircase. Soon the pages were scattered all over the place."

Ismat Chughtai died 31 years ago. Her acidic explorations of the inner realms of women's lives, captured in books like Terhi Lakeer (The Crooked Line) and so many others, remain as probing and pertinent as when they were first penned. There is no trite recipe for emancipation, no paving bricks on the path to an educated enlightenment, but rather questions and complications left untouched by those who then and now believe liberation to be a slogan instead of a slog.

In Terhi Lakeer, touted to be the most autobiographical of Chughtai's works, the reader is first introduced to the woman-centered world of Indian Muslim women living in purdah. The lassitude of their condition is everywhere and represented in everyone, from the careless Amma, who births Shama as a late baby left to the care of older siblings, to the prematurely widowed Bari Apa, who deftly uses pity as her currency in the market of family obligations. The women of this world wield an indirect power over their men, one recorded in Shama's observations at the wedding of her cousin. She says: "But when the bridegroom started walking away with Noori, Shama had this feeling in some corner of her heart that Noori hadn't been sold, but that instead this man who had clasped her to his breast was about to place chains on his existence. This very Noori, this young experienced girl, will dig her claws into his beings in such a way that he will abandon the world, and handing her his reins walk on the path she chooses for him. How unfortunate that men think of women as a man's shoe, a creature with weak intellect and God knows what else. But when this same shoe strikes them on the head their ego is shattered."

World of purdah

The world of purdah, gradually disappearing as Shama grows up, is one poised on manipulation, where women's lives are determined by the quality of control they wield over their men. At the same time, the world of modern ideas, of easy mixing between men and women, of education and progressive politics, does not provide the emotional or intellectual fulfillment that it seems to have promised. If anything, the rules are ambiguous and few know how to navigate them. The grownup Shama, one of the few educated Muslim women, finds herself alienated from her family but also quite unable to buy into the totem and trinkets of modernity. In her friends, we see the casualties of a changing world. The college friend Alma, who has a child out of wedlock, is unable to love it fully nor obtain the abortion she had imagined was the answer to the situation. In Bilqeas, the femme fatale, we see a woman surrounded by men yet unable to figure out whether to choose one based on compatibility, attraction, love, or simply money.

In other words, if the women within purdah were confronted with limited or no choices, the women who have emerged into the world seem ill-equipped to make them. Poised in this limbo, the teachers at the school where Shama finds employment as a headmistress, use their workplace as a kvetching session for gossip about evil mothers-in-law, inattentive husbands, and meddling sisters-in-law. Littered with these relational concerns, the staff-room of the school, with its noble intent of educating girls, may as well be the courtyard of her childhood, where women still maintained purdah and dissected largely the same subjects. Dejected, Shama wonders aloud at the value of trying to preserve such a system of education: "She should go home, get married and increase the number of impoverished and beleaguered human beings: this is her national legacy." The monologue with herself is interrupted; but, wracked with doubt, Shama does not leave.

Chughtai's feminism, then, is not prescriptive but poised on its capacity to disturb and to jar. The turbulent dimensions of Shama's sexuality provoke the reader into acknowledging their strength. The female emerges as strong and willful thus – not in the clichéd modularities of becoming highly educated and consequently completely fulfilled, but rather as a product of her complications and contradictions. Women are central, because it is their thoughts, their questions, and their predicaments that drive the narrative. Shama's intense fixations on women early in her life, rife with romance and passion, present the question of whether men and women can ever love each other in a segregated context. After all, emotional bonds are borne of familiarity, impossible when the two inhabit different worlds.

Ismat Chughtai's Nativity

Ismat Chughtai's literary contribution is this presentation of conundrums – pulsing, passionate, and personal – in a voice that lives with the reader. The tragic fate of her stories is the contemporary evaluation of their relevance on the scales of nationalism, whether they be pinned to India or to Pakistan. Their curse is also that the conundrums dredged up in the sufferings of her characters remain as real and costly today, but are largely absent from Pakistan's contemporary narrative.

The girls of the Pakistani middle class still digest much Austen and Dickens and Blyton and many sayings of this or that leader, but are largely denied the literature that mirrors still the conflicts of femininity, the poverty of a borrowed progressivism or a self-destructive extremism. To read Chughtai in 2012, nearly one hundred years after she was born, is to regret the loss of such insight, available and yet ignored. Ismat's person, her life and her fiction, merge into one another. To know one of them, inevitably means having to know the other as well. Ismat's sense of self evolved through her confrontation with the reality of her 'formative years': she records at least two such experiences in 'Caravan Dust' (a chapter in her autobiography) — the haunting experience of crackling cane on the fingers of the child and her exposure to the painful image of the arrow stuck in the throat of Ali Asgher. Her progressivism sprouted and grew from such experiences of injustice and exploitation rather than from any theory. Much of Ismat's research comprised listening to women talking to one another, while hiding under the bed as a child, interacting with servants and gathering stories from real life situations. The critic, Fuzail Jaffery, describes Ismat's art as photography, not painting, precisely due to the authenticity of reproduction of domestic truths seen in Ismat's fiction. She entered the psyche of the nannies, servants, old and young women of the house and with her keen and perceptive observations, she wrote story after story bringing alive a whole culture of Muslim households. Ismat had declared "while writing I imagined that my readers were sitting before me. I was talking to them — like storytellers in the oral tradition, I narrate stories to my audience." The audience is a crowd. But she also wrote many letters to individuals, many of which she did not post! In a letter written to Ramlal, the eminent Urdu writer, Ismat Chughtai discusses Radha's love for Krishna and the unconventional role of the woman as the lover, and the man as the beloved. Ismat's forthright ideas, fearless and dynamic mind combined to produce a large body of fiction that corroborated with her own style of living.

Modernism

When Qurratulain Hyder emerged on the Urdu literary scene as a ‘modern’ intellectual and writer, Ismat wrote ‘Pom Pom Darling’, an article in which Ismat ranted against the upper class as a world of fossilised characters. Much later, after Ismat died, Qurratulain Hyder, by now an eminent writer, wrote a piece on Ismat ‘Lady Chengiz Khan’ and said: “In the battle-field of Urdu literature, Ismat was a Chughtai, equestrian and an archer who never missed a mark. Ismat Chughtai and Qurratulain Hyder — Ismat Apa and Annie Apa as they were affectionately called — stand as two strong pillars among some others, over which rests the edifice of Urdu fiction of the modern times.” Chughtai wrote in the language of the people she was writing about. She wrote from inside the tradition and spoke to it. You can write pretty much anything in English and get away with it in India because the readership is liberal and enlightened for the most part. Writing in Urdu, Chughtai was not, to make a pun, preaching to the converted. She was proselytizing among angry natives. Telling them about their culture and their lives and doing this in unvarnished fashion. Chughtai clarified that she wrote the things she would hear of, not necessarily experience. She had herself had a relatively free life, as the tolerance of her family to her early obstinacy showed. She said she hated the suffocation of the women and men she wrote about. That being trapped in the ideas of shame and honour was ridiculous. She wondered why people lied and lived with all this rather than reject it, but then she didn’t really understand all of our fragility.

She remained convinced about the goodness of the individual. She thought it was morality in society that was disturbing. Left to themselves, people would mostly behave in humane ways. She figured out that the real enemy of her heroines was society, state and environment. She wrote about change. Chughtai says her katib (calligrapher and proofreader) tells her she makes a lot of mistakes. She acknowledges this, and in her explanation confesses her exasperation at Urdu’s confusing alphabet. A script that borrows sounds from three disparate cultures, Arab, Irani and Indian, has, for instance, many variants of S and Z and H, and Chughtai was confused by what went where. Apparently the book (and the author) is praised for bringing out the story of the life of a Muslim girl, but there was nothing that can not be identified with a non-Muslim context. Yeah, slight change in the language and some differences in the way relationships are viewed, but the character – she could have belonged to just any Indian community of her time.

Like Manto, she was charged with obscenity not in Bombay, the place she lived and wrote in, but in Lahore, the citadel of morality, then as now (is it not remarkable that a city that produced so many talented writers, actors, directors and musicians could not produce a film industry? It is because of this morality, which stifles expression).

Conclusion

Considered one of the most celebrated works in Urdu literature, *Tedhi Lakeer* is Chughtai’s magnum opus. Her protagonist Shama is rebellious, headstrong and through her, Chughtai presents a picture of the way Indian Muslims would live under the colonial rule. She also wrote about women, their desires and struggles. *Tedhi Lakeer*’s Shaman has her charms and foibles, strengths and vulnerabilities in equal measure. So did Chughtai. As do all of us.

There are countless lessons to be learnt from Chughtai’s life and works. Her biggest gift to her readers is the inspiration to retain independence in thought and action. She has also shown us the way to retain our sanity and wit in the face of adversity. While the famous obscenity trial faced by Manto and Chughtai in 1945 embittered the former, Chughtai had a

good laugh. Getting arrested from Bombay without a warrant and facing the trial in Lahore did little to impact her infectious wit. She used this ‘opportunity’ to meet her fans and buy many pairs of Lahori shoes. Chughtai was a diva much before the word gained currency. The line between the actual life and experience of Ismat Chughtai and the fiction that she created melted for her. The members of her family, the servants of her household, her friends became the characters of her stories, sometimes with the same names as in life. The episodes and relationships that she goes through become the context of her fiction. At times the same episodes are narrated in her autobiography, novels and short-stories. Ismat’s acerbic wit, her linguistic prowess and her smart sense of humour combine to make her writings most readable. In fact, her contemporary, the well-known writer, Krishan Chander, compared the pace of Ismat’s sentences with the galloping of horses!

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