

Ismat Chughtai's Portrayal of Child Marriage: An Analysis from Islamic and Feminist Perspectives

Mahamadul Hassan Dhabak

PhD Scholar, Department of English, University of Kalyani, West Bengal, India

Abstract

Marriage is adhered to by the majority of the human population as a social institution throughout the recorded history. Marriage institution, as a unit of patriarchy, legitimizes only a specific type of marriage that is heterosexual marriage. Child marriage is such type of harmful heterosexual practice that controls female body and sexuality. In some societies, marriage is a sacred act and in some societies, it is a contract between two heterosexual persons. The marriage contract has legal, religious and social consequences and is sensed as a formal recognition of commitment between spouses. This paper focuses on how the Muslim culture framework has addressed the issue of child marriage. It explores the religious background and the cultural practices of child marriage in the Muslim community in India. This paper comprises an analysis of child marriage in India, especially in Ismat Chughtai's elaborate reflection on marriage in her short stories, as she holds a mirror of the society.

Keywords: child marriage, patriarchy, Islamic, feminist, lower class

Introduction

Marriage is adhered to by the majority of the human population as a social institution throughout the recorded history. The historical evidence contributes generously to the concepts of marriage. However, there is no specific definition of marriage, which has been found yet. The definition of marriage differs greatly amongst religion and society. The institution of marriage is generally recognized as one wherein two people, a man and a woman enter into a contract to form a family. In certain societies, marriage can happen between a man and more than one woman, referred to as polygamy. In recent years, marriage between two people of the same sex, known as same-sex marriage, has become progressively sanctioned in some countries in the world. The marriage contract has legal, religious and social consequences and is sensed as a formal recognition of commitment between spouses. This paper focuses on how the Muslim culture framework has addressed the issue of child marriage. It explores the religious background and the cultural practices of child marriage in the Muslim community in India. This paper comprises an analysis of child marriage in India, especially in Ismat Chughtai's elaborate reflection on marriage in her short stories, as she holds a mirror of the society. The structure of this paper is as follows. Initially, the way, people have understood the concept of child marriage will be analysed in details. The essay then examines the child marriage as portrayed by Ismat Chughtai. Finally, it explores how women in Chughtai's fiction become the victim of patriarchy through marriage institution.

Socio-Religious Notion of child marriage

If child marriage is examined in context of Islamic Culture, then it is a complex issue. Islamic Culture is based on Islamic Law (*The Quran* and *The Hadith*). In pre-Islamic age of Arab, the female infanticide was a common practice. Mohammad has become 'Prophet' 610 A.D and started to

spread Islam to the people. He ('Prophet') has changed the traditional social customs, evils of social systems and the female infanticide was one of the evil customs. In the context of this social condition, the people of 'early period of Islam' have started to practice child marriage because the child marriage was initially better than infanticide. So, in the early phase of Islam, child marriage has been exercised for cultural reformation of society and it has given rights to girls to live with honour. When the Islam is completed in 629 A.D by the announcement of prophet in Macca; it gives much more freedom to women about their marriage than the previous ages.

Islam does not give a specific age for marriage either for man or woman. On the issue of child marriage, Islam projects two types of instructions; women are given the freedom to choose their life partners; on the other hand parents are instructed to give their daughters in marriage. In Islamic law the girl's consent is always sought; even she has the freedom to choose her life partner or to reject him. It has been quoted from Mohammad:

"The widow and the divorced women shall not be married until their order is obtained, and the virgin shall not be married until her consent is obtained" (AlBukhari: 6455).

In addition, Islam enshrines the power of women to annul their marriage if it is found that they have married against their consent. A hadith is said about it:

When a man gives his daughter's marriage and she dislikes it, the marriage shall be annulled. Once a virgin girl came to the prophet and said that her father had married her to a man against her wishes. The Prophet gave her the rights to repudiate the marriage (Rahman, Hadith-'Abu Dawud').

All Sunni schools of thought agree that forced marriage is strictly forbidden in Islam; as Islamic Marriage is a contract between two consenting parties. Though, Islamic law has given the rights of women the right of consent in their marriage; but the cultural practices hardly follow the above Islamic rules. The rules can reinforce pre-existing disparities of power between man and woman. For example, a woman's consent is normally required for a valid marriage contract. However, the requirement that marriage contracts from virgins is made only with the consent of a guardian and it means that, in practice, the rules facilitate arranged and sometimes even coerced marriage. In reality, "the girls were never consulted about their own marriages and were given away to any men their parents selected" (Ali, 187). However, above all, Islam permits child marriage; even before their puberty, the father (guardian) can give his daughter(s) in marriage. So, based on the above argument, it can be stated that child marriage has been practising for long ages in both Hindu and Muslim cultures. The patriarchal society normalizes the child marriage in the name of honour and religion.

Child marriage is a human rights violation. Several international human rights agencies protect children from child marriage. All call for the free and full consent of both parties to the marriage, claiming a minimum age of 18 for girls; designation of child marriage is a harmful practice, therefore they call for protection for the rights of children in all forms of exploitation.

Child marriage completely denies girls' rights, whereas marriage is regarded as one of the life's most important decisions. It directly endangers girls' health and well-being. Marriage is often succeeded by pregnancy, even if a girl is not yet physically or mentally prepared. In developing countries, nine out of 10 births to adolescent girls occur within a marriage or a union. In these countries, complications from pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of death among adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 (UNFPA 2020) ^[16].

Child Marriage in Ismat Chughtai's Stories

Ismat Chughtai is free from any biases and puts down everything from an objective point of view. Being a critic of society, she examines all sorts of social evils like child marriage, purdah system and exploitation of women; she challenges all types of social evils and values of her time. Sadique, a critic of Chughtai, states "Ismat Chughtai's contribution lies in the fact that she established the tradition of understanding and presented issues from the women's point of view" (Kumar & Sadique, 222).

Child marriage is a social injustice to children. Ismat Chughtai portrays the practice of child marriage in her contemporary north Indian Muslim society. Her stories like "Touch-Me-Not", "The Veil", "The Mother-in-law", "Gainda" and "The Eternal Vine" portray the issues of child marriage. In those stories, she directly does not blame the patriarchy rather she indirectly condemns it.

In "Touch-Me-Not" she explores the child marriage in a middle class family. Narrating from the first person point of view, the narrator describes her 'Bhabijan' who is merely a child; she details her Bhabijan's age, "the fact is, the moment her mother stopped feeding her, she came to adorn Bhabijan's bed" (95). Being a little child, she is a novice and does not know about her imprisoned reality; actually, "she had a pretty little to do and blossomed like a flower,

fresh and fragrant without any sense of life's harshness" (95). She is a child who has no knowledge how to "pull up the salwar" and always needs an assistant like Bi Mughlani. When this child enters a family as a bride, the family projects her to become a woman, however, Simone de Beauvoir correctly states 'one is not born a woman but becomes one'.

Bhabijan's childish nature evaporates when she experiences the reality; narrator pinpoints, "the smile begun to fade in the second year of her marriage as nausea made her throw up all the time. Finding his beautiful doll like bride turning into permanently sick woman, Bhaijan began to lose interest in her" (95-96). This nausea is a symptom of pregnancy, and when the child bride is impregnated, the husband loses interest in her. These types of male attitudes demonstrate woman as a 'sexual object' and when the woman is unable to fulfil their expectations, either they become angry or lose interest in them. Here Bhabijan's condition, is similar with Mohammadi-Begum condition in Rashid Jahan's "Behind the Veil: A One-act Play". Both the women are the victim of their husbands' lust who place women as secondary position and as an object for their sexual gratification. Remarriage (Second marriage) is a threat for both the women and it terrorizes them always. Even Mohammadi-Begum's motherhood responsibility is snatched away, thus she states:

I am always terrorized by the threat, 'I will remarry if you breastfeed the children. I need a woman at all times. I don't have the patience to wait while you attend to the children (Jahan, 89).

The women in a Muslim family, in reality, hardly enjoy the equality; the husband and the family members are only decision makers and the brides are only silent followers; the women's sexuality and reproduction are controlled and placed in a secondary position. Marilyn French, a feminist, opines:

The family is the primary site of female subjection, which is achieved largely through sexuality: women are indoctrinated into their supposed 'natural state' by male control of their sexuality in the family (French, 53).

Although, Prophet Muhammad always demonstrates the equality between men and women; he states, "The most perfect man in his faith among the believers is the one whose behaviour is most excellent; and the best of you are those who are the best to their wives" (At- Tirmidhi: 627). Based on the above hadith, it can be said that it is statement where man is instructed. However, the Islamic law projects the gender equality, but the people do not care about the laws rather they place themselves in authority's position. The male authority over the women and children is called patriarchy.

Patriarchy, in its wider definition, demonstrates the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It designates that "men hold power in all the important institutions of society" and that "women are deprived of access to such power". However, it does not imply that "women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources" (Lerner, 239). Obviously,

patriarchy gives a few powers to women, but this power is given to them to control over other women. In this story the women family members of the narrator control 'Bhabijan' even they constantly demand for children and when she is impregnated, "they threw themselves into the baby project wholeheartedly- stitching diapers, etc. with such enthusiasm as though the delivery was imminent" (96).

The family has always projected the reproduction; "men in the family performed the instrumental role and women the expressive one. The family itself existed as a social institution because it performed essential functions for society" (Walby, 63). To perform the function for society, the family seldom takes care of women's physical and mental health. The male members think women just as 'womb' and just as a machine of reproduction. After first time miscarriage of Bhabijan the family members console themselves thinking "If the mother survived, more could come" but all "hopes again drew a blank" (96). After three miscarriages, 'Begum's terror-stricken face' is visualized "of her husband's second marriage".

There are multiple consequences of child marriage in terms of social, economic, mental and health situation of adolescent girls. Sagade in *Child Marriage in India* says:

Early onset of sexual activity and the pressure on young married women to prove their fertility as soon as possible after marriage results in high rates of fertility. This seriously affects their health as well as that of their children (Sagade, 14).

Here Bhabijan is the victim of the structural violence of the family and she is pressured to prove her fertility very soon after the marriage "The family is an institution that rigidly enforces systems of inheritance and descent and in this structure, individuals- sons, daughters, wives, husbands-are resources that are strictly bound by the violence, implicit and explicit, of this frame" (Menon, 49). In this structural family frame, Bhabijan is dragged to fulfil the family's expectation for inheritance. To fulfil the family's ambition, she is driven into high-risk of life; after the first miscarriage, her life faced a grave situation; the narrator states, "the blossoms withered away and the branches remained bare. But a thousand thanks to Allah that her life was saved" (96). The second and the third time of her miscarriage, she faces the same situation. "As a consequence of these conditions, pregnancy at an early age before the adolescent is fully developed, can result in elevated risks of maternal mortality, severe damage to the reproductive tract, pregnancy- related complications, perinatal and neonatal mortality and low birth weight"(Sagade, 14). So early pregnancy is a threat to women's physical and mental health, but in a male dominated society young wives have to tolerate and bear risks in their lives and thus, many young brides pathetically die in a pre-mature age.

In "The Eternal Vine", Ismat Chughtai deals with the issues of child marriage and unequal marriage in Muslim society. The narrator of this story is a daughter of one of the sisters of uncle Shujaat. Uncle Shujaat is "a handsome man" of "average height and lean build" and has "sharply delineated features". He has no more interest in his first wife, Bari Mumani while, "she was still a new bride". Unfortunately, "God did not bless her with a child" (27). The barrenness or to be childless, still, is considered as a curse for a woman. Hence, the sisters of Shujaat become busy to search for a

new bride for their brother. There is "no dearth of virgins" and Rukhsana is selected as their brother's second wife. Rukhsana is almost a child; she is "coy like a new moon. She is "slender and fragile and her complexion sparkled like crystal". After the wedding ceremony, she is closely scrutinized by her husband and he exclaims "she's only a child"; but his sisters cast off his anxiety and console him saying "two or three children later all the silver coating wears off. When surrounded by wet diapers little will remain of this beauty" (27).

Ismat Chughtai is a keen observer of social issues; she examines the child marriage in various angles in some stories. The girls are seen as the burden of their poor parents; hence, they often think about their daughter's marriage and never delay the girls' marriage even, if they are a tiny child. In this story, Rukhsana is "the burden of a poverty stricken home"; to avoid more expenditure to give marriage at a later age, her poor parents, perhaps, prefer to marry her off at an early age and of course, it is one of the major reasons of child marriage. Rukhsana is not the only victim of child marriage for poor economic condition of her father, Bhabijan in "Touch-Me-Not" and Gainda in "Gainda" are also victimized for the same reasons.

The family functions as a part of society as well as patriarchy which always controls women. In this story, Rukhsana is a child bride, whereas her husband nearly four times older than her, yet the family tries to manipulate the age gap by controlling sexuality. Thus, they state "She'll lose all her charms as soon as she is pregnant". But at the time of pregnancy unlike Bhabijan, she experiences "neither nausea nor vomiting; the gleam on her face intensified and she exhibited greater energy than before" (28). Even after becoming the mother of two children "She romped with the children. She looked no more than sixteen. It was as if she stopped growing older" (29). Initially, she is examined as an embodiment of silent protest; her nature unconsciously revolts against family's constructed conceptions.

Chughtai portrays the suffering of Rukhsana in two folded manner; firstly, she is the victim of child marriage; secondly, she has become a prey of unequal marriage. With the passage of time, Shujaat continues to dry up like a 'banyan tree'; on the other hand, Rukhsana who is like 'the Amara bel' continues to flourish. Shujaat suffers from inferiority complex and begins to be suspicious about his young wife's age and blames her "you're sticking your chest out to attract young men, aren't you?"(30). Even she is pressured by the family to adjust with her husband's age, therefore, 'Shalwar Kameez' is snatched away blaming as 'a young girl dress' and is forced to wear "something more elaborate". 'Five times prayers' in a day has become compulsory for her; even her black hair became unbearable to them, for this reason "She went from person to person asking for a formula for turning hair gray" (31). The family in patriarchal society, is an institution and it always puts all blame on women and men remain blameless. She is exploited and trained by the family members and her husband, for this reason she becomes thinner by "day-to-day harassment". At last, uncle Shujaat left the world, bequeathing 'the entire property to his sisters'. The story ends with Rukhsana and her two children sitting with 'helplessness and sorrow'. She becomes 'a more beautiful or sadder widow' and "the two children huddled close to their mother who looked like their older sister" (34).

Chughtai's sensitive treatment of child marriage and an

unequal marriage are poignant. The old husband controls his child wife, denying her autonomy and freedom. Being the property of her husband, she always has to obey her husband. However, patriarchy constructs women in secondary position and perhaps “the woman is not considered a human being, an individual with her own desires, aspirations and feelings. She is supposed to do whatever she is told” (Mann, 150).

Being a woman, the writer closely observes the sufferings of the early pregnancy, and describes the repeated pregnancy on her mother and states:

Sufferings endlessly from vomiting and labour pains, she looked upon us as objects of her punishment. Her body had flattened at a young age and looked like a platform. She had become a grandmother at the age of thirty-five and suffered continual punishment (Chughtai 2012, 1-2).

Thus, she is able to present the sufferings of pregnant women, the early pregnancy, labour pain, exploitation of women and above all utter helpless conditions of married women. She narrates in an essay: “I observed the utter helplessness of women. Nearly all the women of the neighbourhood looked consumptive and depressed, exploited by their husbands and other members of their husbands’ families” (Chughtai 2012, 11).

Conclusion

Chughtai’s short stories deal with not only the middle class Muslim families, but also lower class and upper class families. Her portrayal of child marriage is very much realistic and unique. Ismat Chughtai is a luminous star on the horizon of the new short stories in Urdu literature. She is regarded as a harbinger of feminism in Indian subcontinent. Her stories are drawn from the lives of women and are told largely in the specific language of women, since women live in a world separate from that of men. Naqvi remarks that Chughtai’s narrative can be read as “ethnography” for, through the depiction of the Urdu speaking Muslim societies she is part of it, she seeks to define the links between socio-political culture and female experiences by piercing and keen observation of the role of custom and ritual in leaving women underpowered and incapable to govern their destinies in a man’s world.

References

1. Chughtai Ismat. *The Quilt and Other Stories*. Trans. Tahira Naqvi and Syeda S. Hameed. Riverdale-on-Hudson, New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1994.
2. Chughtai Ismat. *Lifting the Veil*. Trans. M. Assaduddin. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009.
3. Ali Ahmed. *Twilight in Delhi*. Delhi: Rupa Publishing Co, 1993.
4. Chughtai Ismat. *Ismat Chughtai: A Life in Words Memoirs*. Trans. M. Asasduddin. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2012.
5. French, Marilyn. *The War against Women*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992.
6. Jahan, Rashid. “Behind the Veil: A One-act Play”. Angarey. Sajjad Zaheer et al. Ed., Trans. Vibha S. Chauhan and Khalid Alvi. New Delhi: Rupa Publication, 2014.
7. Lerner G. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
8. Mann, Rajwanti. *Social Radicalism in Urdu Literature*. New Delhi: Manohar Publisher, 2011.
9. Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing Like A Feminist*. New Delhi: Zubaan and Penguin Books, 2012.
10. Sagade, Jaya. *Child Marriage in India: Socio-legal and Human Rights Dimensions*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.
11. Walby Sylvia. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1990.
12. Kumar, Sukrita Paul, Sadique. ed. *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times*. New Delhi: A Katha Book, 2000.
13. Al-Bukhari. 6455. <<http://www.islamweb.net/en/article/135431/>> Accessed 12 Sept. 2016.
14. At-Tirmidhi. 627. <<https://sunnah.com/riyadus-salihin/introduction/627>>. Accessed 12 Sept. 2020.
15. Rahman Abdur. "The Free Consent of the Parties". University of Southern California. <<https://web.archive.org/web/20070329014505/http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/humanrelations/womeninislam/marriage.html#consent>>. Accessed 12 Sept. 2020.
16. UNFPA. “Child Marriage, 2020.< <https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage>>. Accessed 12 Sept. 2020.