

Ismat Chughtai's *The Crooked Line*: A Silent Quest for Queer Space and Existence.

Mohd Sajid Ansari

Literature is an expression of life and life becomes the subject of literary imitation when it draws inspiration from the social realities. Social situations, mirrored by literature, possess the feelings and emotions of the people, and manifestation of these feelings and emotions is an integral part of literary sensibility. Literary works become key to revive the muffled voices when they are intermingled with approaching issues of history and identity. Not so much for factual content, but for what they provide in terms of ideology and aspects of subjectivity. An interesting aspect of the modern Urdu literature's translation into English is that it has been enriched to a great extent by the theme of political and social realities, educational idealism, caste, class struggle and raising new voices and contexts related to individual benediction. The mainstream Urdu authors such as Saadat Hasan Manto, Sajjad Zaheer and Ismat Chughtai have been the creative release of the feminine sensibility and the issues related to gender discrimination. Those days the feminine world was covered under layers of prejudice, convention and ignorance. The problem of Indian women lies in their political, social and domestic periphery.

Though born in the traditional and conservative society, Ismat Chughtai has distinguished herself as a prominent writer of outspoken characters and liberal outlook. With all her candid expressions about the feminine sensibility, she is recognized as a writer of her own experiences. She discloses the secrets of the feminine world and startled all those who were accustomed to the traditions prevailing around us. From physical to spiritual and from spiritual to sublimation, appears to be the sole motive of Chughtai's writing canvass. She, as one of the pioneers of women's writing in Urdu, produces work in a feminine strain. She has been charged with obscenity (for *Lihaaf*) by the British government but after a two-year trial, the case was dropped as her lawyers reported that the story could not have a corrupting influence on "innocent readers" but only readers who are familiar with lesbianism would understand its theme. Chughtai counter challenges to establish social, economic and political extravaganza proving that her rebellion was a bit more complex than others. She was always extremely aware of the fact that being a woman, she is judged at another level. Joya Banerji remarks:

She also talked openly of... sexuality in days when women were considered mindless, opinion-free objects of desire. She never shied away from voicing her views on relationship, love, sex, religion and tradition. (21)

Due to her novel thoughts about the stark realities of the feminine world, she has been recognized and honored as a major figure among *Progressive Writer's Association*. There are quite a few women writers who have marked their presence steadily in the male dominated arena. She has refused to follow street and state censors and succeeded

in bringing unheard voiced to the fore. She appears at a time when literature by Indian women had moved on from colonial and nationalist themes to personal experiences. Chughtai's literary output covers a wide panorama of themes, more realized settings and deeper feelings, intensity of emotions and speech, complexities of life. In fact, after the political and unconventional strains of Rasheed Jahan, the offensive individualism of Chughtai appears as a jolt to the contemporary society. Even in this man made social construct, she raises her voice brazenly and her fiction is proven to be a product of uncontrollable emotion. Her characters are the stones that shatter the mirror of societal hypocrisy, challenge the readers to ponder over, demonstrate the double standards of sexual morality crossing the lines of race and gender finally revealing the question whether differences should be the reason for marginalizing and segregating others.

Tahira Naqvi's translation of *Tehri Lakir* as *The Crooked Line* reflects on the growth and development of a young woman whose experiences expose the socio-cultural conflicts and the psycho-sexual determinants that govern the development of female understanding. The novel portrays the emotional detachment of the traditional household against which the main character Shamshad alias Shaman feels agitated. The novelist skillfully depicts how sexuality is experienced but never explained, asserting the fact that women are oppressed particularly by other women. Shaman, Chughtai's most progressive character, comes to an understanding of the self and the progressive structure while trying to exhibit the role of new middle class Indian woman. Chughtai probes the psyche of Shaman vis-à-vis her relations with her family and her society. From the very beginning of the novel, Chughtai strikes the senses by introducing her readers to Shaman, an impudent child who is unwanted and whose arrival introduces changes to the domestic space as well. Shaman however is brilliant, and grows to be a very intelligent woman, who is always adamant to challenges, the system – gender, class and politics. Though she is always rebellious, but she is constantly seen struggling for a silent quest for existence and completeness in the novel. She is a neglected child but she enjoys certain liberties by an awareness of identity and she comes into being through social dynamics. It is noticed that though there are external forces and influences that Shaman either rejects entirely or accepts as a means of self-preservation, she does not ever try to define or label herself as anything but an assimilation of gender diversity. Through Shaman's character, Chughtai questions the writings of the Progressive Writers and puzzled the divisions between inconsistent terms like lesbian and homosexual. The difference exists because the strands of lesbianism not always impart same sex genital intercourse. Moreover, queer is more wide ranging in its sense asserting conventional sexual normativity that includes uncommon behavioral propensities in society. Her sexual and romantic attractions occur spontaneously which are not gender specific but the continuity of her personal affinity. Her fatuous longing for her wet nurse Una whose feeding breast developed into a sensual object of nourishment compelled her to become an allured seducer of this substituted mother. As the novel develops, we notice a strain of same sex preference witnessing the love triangle that develops among Shaman, Najma and Saadat. Gender is not an issue until much later when Najma had left and Shaman's relationship with Saadat is dissolved. Later, Shaman revealed an interest towards her

elder sister Manjhu, craving for her caressing and making her humiliate by glaring into her bathroom. It is a true reflection of human behavior in terms of sexual relationship. Take for instance, the present conversation between Bilquis and Shaman which reflects the very idea of sexual orientation.

"But what's the big deal? I too was crazy about Najma once, but Apa bi told me we should be crazy about boys, not girls."

"What? How awful!" Shaman jumped

Yes, because we can marry them and live with them forever, isn't that right?

"But... this is... Allah, don't talk such rubbish Bilquis." (TCL78)

This conversation reveals that it is appropriate to examine the character of Shaman as a queer protagonist rather than a merely lesbian. As a child, Shaman is of sexist temperament that society believes is not appropriate for feminine propriety. She is juxtaposed to her niece Noorie. Her journey of self-fashioning towards an integrated being is complex as well as difficult thereby shaping an identity which is distinctively obstructive. In the second phase of the novel, Najma is not only secretly attracted to Shaman when she is dressed like a man, she is also concerned by just how much Shaman looks like a man, how genuine her costume is. She breaks all imposed skeptic authority and starts to perform the things according to her wishes. Chughtai depicts the choice of sexuality with great courage which is generally expected of a modern novelist. She very subtly presents the moments of the Annual play in which Shaman is dressed as a young man with a moustache. The following dialogue reflects upon the hidden desire of Rashid who pines for love from the persons of same sex:

"Apa bi, in the next play, I'd like to be girl. If girls can put on some black paint and become men, why can't I be a woman? That's not fair." (TCL92)

One thing is clear, that Chughtai places female sexuality and women's bodies at the epicenter of the domestic and political arena. The society to which Chughtai belonged thought it heinous for a woman to rebel against the masculine yoke, against a man's sense of superiority because they almost occupied the position of a God. This kind of gender arrangement must have disturbed her like anything. She realized that a woman is not a slave and she has every right to seek freedom. This situation may lead her to enter into same-sex love relations. Almost all the three phases of the novel show the concerns for the social and cultural construction of gender, raising Shaman's protest against marginalization and exploitation of women specially those who live in the four fenced wall. In fact Shaman's portrayal is the exploration of early childhood experiences and conditioning of the feminine psyche and a woman's relationship with her body. Women psyche develops not through some instinctive return to the body, but in the social, political and economic challenges. The novel exhibits how Shaman or Shamshad Fatima is herself a crooked line, an ungended content who from the unwelcome moment of her birth, counters to be straightened into an effortless psycho-sexual subjectivity. The very meaning of "Shamshad" in English according to Urdu-English Dictionary is "tall, upright and straight". But Shaman is just the opposite

one whose straightness is noteworthy forcing a reconsideration of what rephrase it means to mold oneself along non-normative designs. Shaman as the protagonist of the novel gives us truth in the form of the illusion as she undergoes an arduous journey with herself and learns to free herself of guilt, shame and mystery of her existence. Shaman's dilemma of loss of identity and physical space results in her withdrawal from the close relationships with various women around her. *The Crooked Line* often refuses any sequence of sexual identity with selfhood in so far as selfhood might be considered to be entire stigma of sexual orientation forcing Shaman to forget more parts of her than the concepts of unified identity would suggest. We closely observe in the text that Shaman is mutually intimate with more than one female character in comparison to male one. She is initially attracted towards Miss Charan, her school teacher then to Najma and in the third phase her intimacy with Saadat grows in no time.

Chughtai's forthright presentation of Muslim women in the throes of a colonial encounter is interesting to note how the domestic space of home was always the locus of contest between the gender discourses that sought to create the good house wife, mother and well brought up girl, and the forces of subversion, resistance and autonomous self-realization that the target of such engendering brought to the contest. Shaman is one of the little serious delineation of the girl child in Indian fiction who suffers social exclusion not on the basis of caste or religion but for gender. Her childhood experiences force her to open up a new category of cognition that is neither sentimentalized nor romanticized, nor idealized. *The Crooked Line* is also a story of the daughters of reform. Shaman's house and the space of the girls' boarding school constitute the space of the familiar, whereas the space of the world beyond marks the unfamiliar. Shaman's familiarity with the homosocial labors, pains and pleasure of the first gives her at least the strength for critical rebellion in the first drawback - her ignorance of the unfamiliar transaction of heterosexual labors, on the contrary force her into deeper and deeper self-erasure. Shaman's attraction towards Miss Charan reflects her deep agony of loneliness and incompleteness. Though she is in the company of people at home with dozens of siblings together there is still a lack of self-assertion and self-exposure. All this happens due to her emotional dispossession that soon results in her physical dislocation from the highly populated home when she is sent to a boarding school. Here she encounters sapiosexual model of relationship developing an erotic love among female friends. This relationship entitles her to move towards her upcoming completeness and exactness. Miss Charan who helps Shaman to become a civil woman is in fact yet another substitute for her real loss. Shaman's attraction towards Miss Charan reflects her deep agony of loneliness and incompleteness. Under Miss Charan's guidance, Shaman develops a love for the finer things in life and this love inspires a deep impact on her psyche. Soon Shaman's love for Miss Charan becomes literally a haunting. As long as she finds in Miss Charan a ray of hope, she starts feeling her presence sexually too. In the following lines the same idea is expressed:

She began to feel her teacher's physical presence even when she was not there. She's standing and Miss Charan's image rushes by her side; she is sleeping and Miss Charan is petting her; she's thirsty, her throat is parched and Miss Charan is dripping cool, fragrant juices into her mouth. (TCL49)

Erotic affirmation in the shape of Miss Charan's acceptance and support of her, their easy sharing of love for one another give Shaman confidence. Shaman idealizes Miss Charan as she is offered an opportunity to make her realize and contemplate her individuality. Another phase of same sex love is seen in the image of Rasul Fatima (Shaman's roommate in hostel) whom Shaman hates with a passion for her slavish adulation. Meanwhile, Rasul's attempts at seducing Shaman are presented as bestial. Rasul Fatima is as helpless, impoverished and stupid in contrast to Miss Charan, who was resourceful, enriching and intelligent. Furthermore, Shaman's inner self surges into a deep agony of being incomplete as she is not able to forget her past that she enjoyed in the company of Miss Charan. The company of Rasool Fatima provides her but only a transient withdrawal from social taboos. Rasool's presence, however even permits Chughtai to explore another side of homoerotic desire. Shaman does not feel any fluctuation to Rasool's persuasion of her body without an appeal to her mind. Shaman's silent quest to identify herself in her surroundings does not go via the body but via the mind that offers an important clue to her personality. As far as with the case of Miss Charan, Shaman is looking for someone enriching, someone who will lift her into a world that is less commonplace and spiritually more refined, rather than someone who will defile her bodily and spiritually like Rasool threatens to do.

After these constituent phases of romance, in the journey of Shaman, suddenly Saadat's friend Najma becomes the new light. Now Najma is all the more promising than Sadat and Rasool. She is connotatively referred as "delicate", "warm and soft" like a "boiled egg". The pleasure Shaman feels in the company of Najma is a shared pleasure which many homosocial women feel in the company of other women. This pleasure may be sought by women who are not themselves aware of lesbian or bisexual feelings for the objects of their company. Shaman's liking towards Najma belongs to the realm of the erotic, yet desexualized joy that women get in gazing one another, a queer pleasure that functions within a feminine realm in ways that give female desire the agency of not only looking, but also taking pleasure in looking and being looked at.

Thus badly broken by the predicaments of social, political and sexual status, Shaman lost all hopes and started struggling against the oddities of her life. Her encounter with Alma, Aju and Iftexhar pricked her emotions and she decides to go on a journey to an unknown destination. Having given up her job as principal, she is gripped into a psychological trauma of the self. She becomes restless to rekindle the sparks of lost identity. Without waiting for the reversal of situation, she leaves her home. Her impatience to leave the household is a method to seek a continuity of personal relationship. At the railway station, having decided to get into the first train she sees, she finds her surroundings as –

"Sick, broken, ungainly human beings... perhaps they too didn't know what their destination was" (TCL231).

Here Shaman is completely distraught. The desire for personal relationship echoes in the very essence of Shaman and it escorts her to build the psyche of self identity and a sense belonging to the self. She contemplates suicide among other things when

waiting for train, her attention is diverted by a small child with an ayah. Shaman, sitting on her bundle of things clearly finds herself to be an anomaly: neither in purdah nor a male, she is an object of lascivious enquiry and looks, all of which make her public position on the station as distasteful to her as her professional position in the school had become. Young and able, she is an anomaly as she is neither at liberty nor at ease but a passive agent albeit in spiritual crisis, Shaman's sense of self is schizophrenically fragmented in the weltering angst produced by a world where:

Every vendor seemed intent on selling his wares to her. She was tired of saying no to them. In addition to the beggars, she was attacked by orphanage workers, people toiling for shelters for widows and those engaged in the sacred work of caring for the cow. She was extremely irritated by what she saw. If you go to an orphanage you are hard pressed to find a single orphan there, and a shelter for widows has no reason to exist when there are so many men around. And why do you need these shelters when there are streets available for orphans and for the women there are the kothas? Anyway, these are matters that are best left alone. (TCL 232)

Unable to belong either to self or to nation, it takes Alma's sudden metamorphosis on the scene for Shaman to come back to life. It is Alma who trains her with emotionally to search a place in society making her aware of her shortcomings and estrangement from society. In her company, Shaman's life is enlarged that helps her in finding a meaningful existence for identity. Shaman with her fervid refusal to become a "civil woman" like her elder sisters or their daughters reduces by standers to hysteria. *The Crooked Line* is also a reflection of how society figuratively and literally castrates the woman by conditioning her in numerous ways. In her twenties, Shaman thinks of herself as a crooked line, but her very "deformity" makes her head throb - the pain that crookedness produces is palpable. Nevertheless antagonism and reconciliation turn into self-assertion and self-nomination for Shaman. This is what Chughtai wants to explore that Shaman representing the existing real life woman, her conscious and unconscious psychologies, standing on crooked lines is only to celebrate her identity and completeness. At the end of the novel, she realizes that her life is not meant for her and she would not be able to decide what to do with it. Though her individuality resists any attempts to pin-down her sexuality to a fixed and predetermined category or identity location, she challenges the society of heteronormativity in the fluidity of her body and the multiplicity of her selves.

Works Cited

- Agrawal B.R. and Sinha, M.P.: *Major Trends in the Post-Independence Indian English Fiction*, Atlantic Publishers, New Delhi, 2011.
- Banerji, Joya: "Life Beyond 'Lihaaf'". *Biblio* 6:7 & 8 (March-April 2001).
- Bassnett, Susan: *Translation Studies*, Routledge, Oxford, 2013.
- Chew, Dolores: "Reading Race and Gender in 'Mummy' and *The Crooked Line*: How Writers on Marginality Represent Anglo-Indian Women". 2014. Web.

- Chughtai, Ismat: *The Crooked Line*. Translated by Tahira Naqvi. New Delhi: Kali, 1995.
- Das, Vijay Kumar: “A Companion to Translation Studies”, Atlantis Publishers, New Delhi, 2013.
- Kumar, Sukrita Paul and Sadique: eds. *Ismat. Her Life, Her Times*. New Delhi: Katha, 2000.
- Patel, Geeta: An Uncivil Woman: Ismat Chughtai (A Review and an Essay) *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, 1997.
- Sharma, Jasmine: “We should be crazy about boys, not girls” *Queer Shaman in Ismat Chughtai’s ‘The Crooked Line’*, IJELLH .Vol. 4 Issue - III. 2016. Web.
- Vasan, Kunj: *Girl, Interrupted: Queer Desire in Ismat Chughtai’s The Crooked Line*. ICJ 1990.
- Vanita, Ruth and Kidwai, Salem. *Same Sex Love in India: Readings From Literature and History*. New Delhi: Mcmillion. 2000. Print.
- Turner, Elen: “Indian Feminist Publishing and the Sexual Subaltern”. *Roopkatha Journal*. Vol. 6 Number – 1. 2014. Web.