The Veil and Beyond
Ismat Chugtai's Brave New World

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Aristotle's statement 'we are our desires', feels true. What we want and how we go about satisfying that want shows who we are. To map the histories of women, one would have to place them in dialogical relation within, between and among cultures and nation. The formation of mentalities, as an interaction between economic, political, socio-cultural and religious structures, needs to be understood more clearly. In the Indian context, it may be difficult to clearly distinguish between religious, magical or traditional beliefs, as they occupy complementary domains in the space of social cognition. Unlike in the West, there has been no internal confrontation between them. Muslim ethos, history and culture are different. Women, in these cultures live in different social and cultural realities. Western paradigms of free floating freedoms do not work in conventional closed Muslim society. The margins have to be viewed carefully. Gayatri Spivak makes a relevant observation, saying that, there

> can be no universal claim in the human sciences. This is most strikingly obvious in the case of establishing 'marginality' as a subject position in literary and cultural critique. The reader must accustom herself to starting from a particular situation and then to the grand shifting under her feet.[1]

Women's (Muslim) issues were first raised in public debate by Rokeya Shekwat Hussain (1880-1932). The activities organized by Rokeya and her associates initiated a crusade for women's empowerment. They worked for women's right to education and increased mobility and engaged in charity and relief work for destitute women in the slums. Neither the modernists nor the traditionalists supported Hussain's challenge to the 'divine'

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ordination of male supremacy. Ironically, the modernist's supported her for women's access to formal education as a necessary qualification for a good housewife and mother in a 'modern' household. Rokeya's dream of empowering women was forged into her famous feminist utopian short story, *Sultana's Dream.*[2] The story showed a reversal of gender roles, by letting women take charge of public sphere and by putting men in seclusion, and thereby usurping power.

If Rokeya's feminist utopian story explored new boundaries of freedom, Ismat through a large body of her work, articulated her concern about women's power and freedom. Seen as a chronicler of the middle class Muslim culture in Uttar Pradesh, she questioned the social fabric of her cultural milieu. The Muslim men and women that she portrays are not however bound by a meta-culture. She wrote in the 1930s when intellectual vagrancy was almost an offence. She was dealing with issues of gender, and marginalation when the vocabulary like periphery, marginality and subaltern had not gained currency. She showed what it meant to be and feel unequal.

Ismat challenged the traditional concepts of womanhood from the repository of lived experiences. She does not engage in inert theoretical concepts. Chabran assert the primacy of experience over theory. She appeals to the instructive status of intellectual's pre-institutions, history in the fields, the family and the factory on the grounds that we have to consider the shaping way which experience directs us to ask certain questions of a particular theory, which theory alone does not lead us to ask.[3]

Ismat challenged constructs like the 'family,' 'motherhood,' wife' and the complexities of invisible economics. She questioned concepts about 'body,' 'beauty,' 'gaze' long before such concepts, filigreed with rhetoric, sneaked their way into the Indian shores from the conference rooms of the Western Academia. Her, apparently 'small,' 'inner-courtyard,' stories are heavily loaded. The stories do not encourage a political reading but if read politically, reveal amazing plethora of meanings. In each story, there is a discovery of perception and multi-dimensionality. Everything said in the short story also contains all that has not been said. Truth comes out by reflection, implication or by exploitation of the symbolic configurations of the language. Situations may apparently seem trivial, unchallenging but within the fortress of their experience, the women face them squarely and resistance in each story is different. Ismat questions the dynamics of relationships

and shows that the self does not exist in isolation. She questions marriage, law, customs—all these being important elements of self-construction. Culture, says, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, may be seen as

> the product of the beliefs and conceptual models of society and as the destination where the trajectory of its desires takes shape, as well as the very day practices, the contingent realities and the complex process by which they are structured.[4]

Women's dresses and visibility continue as a symbolic identifier in Muslim societies even today. Purdah is more complex issue. Ins the broad sense, Purdah represents all the other symbols as well, because its implications are various and may not always be manifested through the actual wearing of the Purdah. Veil relates to by and large women's relationship with the world. Vrinda Nabar observes:

> In other words, a physical symbol like Purdah may signify a whole way of life, and in turn, incorporates several other modes of discrimination 'purdah,' extremely and etymologically, means 'curtain'. In the global context, it is commonly associated with the veil, worn by the women in many Islamic societies to hide their faces and bodies from the gaze of strangers. In other words, its gender connotations are by and large known to people familiar with Muslim culture or with women related issues. However serious commentators have insisted on its etymological meaning as a more comprehensive indictor of its various functions, including the gender-related ones. Purdah or curtain literally signifies a concealment of what lies on the other side.[5]

Veil, in Ismat's stories becomes an extended metaphor to explore the protected space. The stance of protectionism towards women is often mobilized on behalf of misogynists in Muslim countries today. Protectionism is a strange stance to take towards the individual who are best at making life and peace. For example Taliban seeks to protect their women from public display yet they are also abusive to women. Lot of women, today are trying to fight protectionism as violation of equal treatment and equal freedom, the crusade that Ismat in her own unique way started in 1930s.

Veil, becomes a powerful image of women's experiences of exile, alienation, objectification, struggle and rebellion in politico-socio-cultural contexts. Commenting on the politics of the veil, El Sadwaan syas:

> Consider, for example, Hejab, (veiling) and debates in the West concerning its role in empowering Muslim women by providing them

> a protected space. Under the rule of the Fundamentalists in the Middle East and North Africa, women who are persecuted, jailed and whipped for their non-compliance with 'Hejab' find the dress code anything but empowering. One can appreciate why the individuals who express such ideas do not live in the region.[6]

For her veiling and nakedness are the two sides of the same coin. Both mean that women are bodies without a mind and should be covered. Purdah also connotes an extreme form of sexual control. Apart from concealing women behind the veils or keeping them within the walls of the Zenana, Purdah implies multitudes of complex social arrangements which maintained social distance between the sexes. Ismat has tried to show how authentic identity is based on unveiling our minds and not on veiling our faces. Ismat plays a subversive game with the traditional codes. In today's global market, ethnicity has become a prized commodity, to be vended under the table of 'difference'. Ethnicities are manufactured and constructed for the consumption of the power centers of the first world. The post-modern specimens of the attitude to 'exotic' practice and institutions which viewed from afar, are celebrated as 'authenticity,' 'local' responses to indigenous problems—and excused as inevitable because they fit with the culture, did not work for Ismat. She does not glorify the veil, simply as a 'different' way of life. She has shown the horrors of suppression and subjugation behind the veil. For feminists at home in India, the agitation around Muslim women's rights to maintenance consisted of a series of bitter lessons. The Shah Bano case (under the section 125, the individual can choose secular alternatives), became a controversial issue that rocked the nation and hit the newspaper headlines for months. Abandoned by her husband (after the 'talaaq'), Shah Bano appealed in the court for right to maintenance from her husband. There was a lot of hue and cry by the Muslim religious leaders against the court's decision. It was argued that section 125 transcended the personal law. The whole case became a study of the ease with which, the Muslim religious leaders resorted to fundamentalist assertions, among which the control of women was one of the first. Communal agitations claimed that 'Islam' was in danger and the Ulema issued a fatwa, saying that the judgment violated the teachings of Islam. So much pressure was put on Shah Bano that she gave up the right, she had long fought or, abjuring the maintenance the court had accorded her. It is obvious how in the name of culture and religion power structures work and a status

quo maintained. Even today in the twenty-first century, things have not changed much. We can see however today in the major pockets of India, Middle East countries and some other Asian countries, Muslim women still live in a different time zone. Ismat's work becomes all the more relevant today because of her insightful critique of how women are subjugated in the name of religion and culture. Taliban, not far from home in Afghanistan and their bizarre methods of suppression and atrocities is a living reality. Since 1992, Algerian women too had to bear a dose of the fundamentalist's bitter medicine and these terrors in open daylight were known to the world.

Ismat's stories draw on the experiences of middle class Muslim women but her concerns are more comprehensive and wide-based. Stories are told from diverging viewpoints. Analysis of gender is made in the socio-political and cultural parameters: deconstructing from within, the Muslim ethos, history and culture, she questions confirmative roles. She shows through her stories how men's control over women, by constructing women as its vestiges, needs critical attention. The questions of power, justice, moral choice and identity are taken up largely in the socio-cultural context and not in the existential context. Developing around the relationship of gender and ideology, her stories show how gender and ideology are constructed socially and historically. Religion intersects with society, affecting women's location, status and position. Religion plays a vital role in constructing gender at the level of culture. These aspects of everyday life are all too often taken for granted and seldom subjected to close scrutiny. Ismat shows how at cultural level, religion informs our notions of sexuality, marriage and family. In her view Koran is potentially democratic. It is filled with open meanings for what equivalence can and should mean for men and women. The problem lies not with Koran but its interpreters and the self-empowered Ulemas. Commenting on the same issue, Azizah Al-Aibri says:

> No where does the Koran say that Eve was crafted out of Adam. Instead it states that males and females are created by God from the same soul or spirit (*nafs*). The founding myths are not inherently patriarchal. When read in this way.[7]

Ismat's stories are not stories about women but social institutions and the nature of freedom and choice. Stories like 'Hindustan Chor do', 'Do Haath', 'Bichu Phupi', 'Til' show the various facets of her art. She gave the short story a new vocabulary. The stories

open up a dialogue on the many contradictory ways in which the secular struggle can be strategized and sustained. Stories like 'Gainda' explore the painful process of discovering sexuality. Ismat explores sexuality as a serious subject. She shows how if sexuality is the site of love, desire, sexual fulfillment and physical procreation, it is also at the same time for women, the site of shame, confiment, anxiety and compulsion. She feels that experience can never be obscene. Questioning the whole concept of 'filthy' and 'dirty' she says:

> If removing the bandage helps the wound to dry and heal then that is not obscenity, that's just treatment—what is so wrong with eroticism, why are you so scared of eroticism in literature? And don't you see that the writer himself is trembling fearfully and is terrified of the worlds's obscenity.[8]

'Lihaaf' is one her most powerful stories which questions hetrosexism and the limits of eroticism. In most of the stories, on the first reading, there seems to be some internal disconnectedness, some disjointedness – but there is an internal design, an oblique reference which combines into a rich texture of trope, exposing a pattern of meaning within the symbolic structure. The silences in the story struggle to break open into speech. Enveloping the whole gamut of stories are images of exposure and concealment, sight and blindness. Stories become metonymic structures of understatement, revealing the suppression and exploitation that the protagonist face. As Manju Gorakhpuri says:

> I find Ismat's art akin to suggestion—avoiding evident linkages in the narrative, she reveals and illuminates meaning by sudden disjointed and suggestive hints. Her artistry is like the lihaf which reveals by concealment. One has to be adept reader to pick up the signs that hint at her message.[9]

Stories like 'The Veil' questions the socio-cultural traditions which glorify and romanticize feudal gender ownership. Images of ownership are of course universal and originate in patriarchal feudalism. Goribi's loyalty to the institution of marriage consumes her entire life. Living under the veil of non-being, life remains a big void for her. She is alienated and cocooned in a deadening silence. Her husband Kale Mian's repeated disappearance and resurfacing does not make any difference in her condition and is an oblique commentary on culturally constructed roles. The concept of 'izaat' pushes her towards 'martyrdom', Ismat shows

how such idealization of female martyrdom is cultural. Her non-role is her definition. Her 'grotesque' and 'absurd' existence is an overarching commentary on the socio-cultural situation, of which Goribi is a product. 'The Wedding Shroud' is a potent comment on how women internalize their social roles and how their minds and bodies are guarded from change. There is an irony and ambivalence implicit in the whole story. Kubra is the 'widow's burden' and has to be married at any cost. The story reveals a wide variety of pre-defined roles. The story shows how the so called wedding 'jora' obstructs the process of individuation. It is obvious how the idea of marriage as the central priority of social life, seems to be the end towards which all girls are conditioned to believe they should be moving. The stereotype is all the more potent because it is superimposed with moral values which posit it as not merely virtuous and desirable but also as representing everything that a long cultural tradition has sanctioned as necessary in a woman. Kubra's 'shrinking' womanhood, her 'waning' youth makes the search for a groom more urgent and desperate. Rahat Mian is wooed, bribed, pleased and baited by Kubra's mother. Crushed under the social set up, Kubra's weird expressions of hostility towards womanhood and symbolically towards her own self are subtly presented. The story shows the psychological impact of the experience which is the real context of the story.

In 'Lihaaf, Ismat forges a new definition of freedom. She puts the questions of sexuality and gender, challenging heterosexual assumptions. Heterosexism is the set of values and structures that assumes heterosexuality to be the only natural form of emotional and sexual experience. This story deals with a traditionally undefined social situation. Exploring the tabooed subject of female sexuality, she subverts the whole idea of abstinence as a sign of devotion. Begum Jaan tries to cope with an incompatible marriage. She finds emotional and sexual solace in her female servant, Rabbo, puts at ease her 'eternal' itch. Begum Jaan's aggressive sexuality is a way of keeping herself alive. Her act of drawing attention to her body is a defiance of norms. It is the beginning of the subject position. The story sent shock waves and the reading of the story just converged on the portrayal of 'bold' female sexuality, ignoring the allied (deeper) implications of the story. The quilt is used as a veil. The very object from which one hides one's action becomes the informer of one's deeds. In Muslim societies, the normative thrust has been increasingly towards the concealment of the female

body. This may be analyzed as a literal and metaphorical extension of Purdah. 'Curtain' denotes various modes of physical constraint in the public display of the female body. Metaphorically, Purdah makes a shift in emphasis to what is socially considered proper behavior for a woman. Deepa Mehta's film 'Fire' was an attempt to explore sexuality as a serious subject. The two sister-in-laws, seek solace in each others company and find their relationship very liberating. The movie was dubbed as 'filth' and criticized as an attempt to 'contaminate' the culture. Ismat, in 1944 propelled the issue of sexuality to the surface. Lesbianism in itself is not important. Ismat integrates the issue of lesbianism into the larger issues of 'choice' and 'freedom'. She shows through the story how a person's ethics and private symbols can become valid tools of social intervention.

Apart from all this the story also challenges the notions of 'motherhood' and the 'maternal' instinct. The nine year old girl, who comes to stay with Begum Jaan, does not not evoke in her any maternal instincts. Enveloped thickly in her sexuality, Begum's repeated calls 'come to me, come' sound ambiguous. They are anything but a motherly call. Rabbo's warning 'Raw mangoes are sour' imply Begum's intended exploratory adventures. Angela Carter, in another context says:

> The theory of maternal superiority 'is one of the most damaging of all consolatory fictions' and it places women out of history, where 'fertility' govems all decisions, choices and relationships.[10]

There are multiple perspectives from which the story can be decoded. A lot of damage seems to have been done by the industry of the so called fellow women critic. They get carried away by the gender issues, micro-categorize the women authors, circumscribing their works. Complex and wider meanings seem to be lost in an enthusiastic attempt to focus on just 'women's issues'. Ismat's reputation has oscillated between two extremes—from being trivialized to being canonized. She is much more than 'Lihaaf'. Even her male contemporaries like Manto and Krishan Chander wanted her to have a so called 'balanced approach' and not be obsessed with 'sex', glossing over her contribution in expanding awareness of the more institualionized form of inequality and suffering. Theorists like Faizia Gardezi echo what Ismat had said in the 1940s. Faizia Gardezi says:

> There may well be a narrow strain within feminism which views the

> struggle as simply open of achieving equality with men, while not calling for any broader restructuring of society. But increasingly there is a realization that feminism cannot be reduced solely to a concern with gender inequality, because this ignores the inequalities that exist among men. Again, women have different experiences based on characteristics other than gender to struggle around gender alone is to downgrade this diversity and generalize the experience of women. Feminism is and must be every woman's movement and the only way, it can achieve this is to bring every woman's experiences into its fold.[11]

There may be an obvious limitation of Ismat's project in terms of its focus on the middle class Muslim women in U.P. However no study can address itself to all the complexities of Indian womanhood. This does not diminish the validity of a study that defines its scope provided it offers a means towards solving a multi-dimensional jig-saw puzzle. Ismat does not see feminism as an end in itself. She uses women's issues as a springboard to explore other complex cultural and psychological dimensions of human living. She moves out of the narrow grooves of religion to define culture in a broader and more inclusive way. She says:

> I am a Muslim. Idol worship is a sin. But puranic mythology is a part of my national legacy. A eons of culture and philosophies are saturated in it. Religion and culture of a nation are two different thing. Here, I have an equal share just as I have in its soil, sunlight, its water.[12]

She moves from the micro to the macro, the issues gradually get broadened and she moves beyond the gender. There is a shift from identity to relationship, from a concern with oppression to the with the concept of freedom. She goes beyond resistance, and questions the moral premise of this inequality.

Ismat does not talk in a void. Her need for women to be recognized as individuals is her foremost concern. Her stories act as cultural radars for the self-correction of the society. In a Gramascian reading of the 'radical revolution in thought' the task of the intellectual is to eradicate illusions from the mind and imagination, disclosing specific interests which have become embedded in them and which draws sustenance from one dominant ideology a contentious struggle must be waged in society against hegemonic understandings, in an effort to create counter hegemony. Gramsci syas:

> This awareness develops through intelligent reflection ... on the reasons why certain situations exist and on the best means of transforming what have been opportunities for vassalage into triggers of rebellion

and social reconstruction.[13]

Ismat's consciousness raising, in the Gramscian sense, focuses on the equality in gender relations coming about when women have secured the space they need. She says:

> Are we going to continue advising them to be bashful and modest? Drowned in a sea of feminity as ancient custom demands, or will we explain to them that when they go to work, they shouldn't carry their feminist and coquettish ways with them?[14]

She moves from the womanist to the humanist, a redefining in ideological terms of humanism to become a category which does not demand the price of submerging gender differences or placing them in hierarchical relationships, but values them as of equal importance. Some of the hardliners may see the danger of such an interpretation as the return to same old 'universalism'.

For the inheritors of Rokeya's [Sultana's] dream, the task is complex and difficult. An alternate paradigm of development based on participatory politics, fair distribution of social resources and opportunities, free expression of pluralistic culture and non-hierarchical genderrelations in family, community and state have to be established. Ismat argues for a holistic perspective which is essential if any change is to take place. Her stories call for a more total and inclusive way of seeing things. Sub-texts in her work are usually ignored. The broad spectrum of the issues that she deals with is obvious. She starts with the so called 'just women's issues' and 'women's histories' and enters a gender free zone to talk about about human dignity, freedom and equality.

NOTES

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4. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 10.
5. Vrinda Nabar, *Caste as Woman*, Penguin, 1995, p. 53.
6. Nawal El Saadwai, 'Islamic Fundamentalism and Women', *The Nawal El Saddwai Reader*, Zed Books, London and New York, 1997, p. 97.
7. Azizah Y. Al-Hibri, 'Is Western Patriarchal Feminism Good for Third

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8. Ismat Chugtai, 'Ek Baat' *My Friend, My Enemy: Ismat Chugtai*, tr. by Tahira Naqvi, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2001, p. 19.
9. Manju Gorakhpuri, *Ismat: Her Life and Her Times*, eds. Sukrita Paul and Sadique, Katha, 2000, p. 23.
10. Angela Carter, in *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* London, Virgo, 1979, p. 106.
11. Faizia Gardezi, 'Islam, Feinism, and the Women's movement in Pakistan', in *Against All Odds*, eds. Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1994. p. 54-55.
12. Manju Gorakhpuri, *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times*, eds. Sukrita Paul and Sadique, Katha, 2000, p. 60.
13. A Gramsci, *Pre-Prison Writing*, ed. R. Bellamy, tr. V. Cox, Cambridge University Press, p. 20.
14. Ismat Chugtai, 'Aurat', in *My Friend, My Enemy: Ismat Chugtai*, pp. 40-1.