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Subverting The Site of Victimhood and Re-mapping It as of Power in *The Mole* by Ismat Chughtai

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Abstract: The present paper focuses on the short story *The Mole* by Ismat Chughtai and tries to answer: (a) how Rani, the protagonist of this story uses her sexuality as a tool for obtaining agency – to subvert her vulnerable status of a subaltern and remap it to power; (b) how Chughtai has shifted the significance of her protagonist's name and reconstructed its connotations and discusses the story in the light of recent literature on desire; And (c) how Rani defies the dominant and oppressive narratives of monogamy and virtuosity. The paper also throws light on the subtle and ironic language of Chughtai which invites the reader to be an active participant in the narrative along with the fictional figures and also details it as a commentary on the inscrutability of female sexuality and patriarchal hegemony towards it.

Keywords: Sexual Politics, Sexuality, Agency, Desire, Patriarchal Hegemony.

Ismat Chughtai, a pioneer of feminist tradition of writing in South Asian literature, has been highly acclaimed by the subsequent generations for her outspoken realist fervor. Born in an upper middle class Muslim family in Uttar Pradesh in 1911, she used her writing to tore apart the veil of hypocrisy over the various social institutions and society itself. Inspired by Rashid Jahan, a feminist writer and her brother Azem Beg Chughtai, she started writing at a critical juncture in Indian socio-political scenario – the nationalist leaders had already 'resolved' the women's question and relegated the women folk of the nation into 'home'; the nation was heading towards independence and the intellectuals of both Hindu and Muslim communities were busy writing 'manual' books for women to mould them into perfect wives and mothers. Almost every literary work revolved around woman, she was there but either as an all sacrificing divine figure or as the femme-fatale; but the



'real' woman was missing from the literary scenario. Even her colleagues at the Progressive Writer's Association limited their worldview to the plights of the downtrodden class of the society and were almost silent over the struggle more ancient than the class struggle - the sexual politics. Chughtai on her part gave a new dimension to the word 'progressive' and used her pen to explore an almost hidden territory in the context of South-Asian literature – feminine experiences. For her sexual and epistemological were inseparable. M. Asaduddin put it as: "... she brought into the ambit of Urdu fiction the complex and forbidden terrains of feminine sensibility and she treated them with panache and penetration" (Kumar and Sadique 76). Her writings radiated feminist fervor at a time when the waves of feminism have yet not touched this part of the hemisphere. A prolific writer, she tried her hand in almost every genre of literature, but her reputation nowadays lay mainly in the sphere of short stories. Written by her in Urdu, many of these short stories are widely available in English translation by scholars like M. Asaddudin, Tahira Naqvi and anthologized as *Quilt & Other Stories*. The present paper offers a textual analysis of one such short story *Til*, translated into English as *The Mole* by Tahira Naqvi, through the lens of feminist criticism. It argues how Rani, the protagonist of this story uses her sexuality as a tool for obtaining agency – to subvert her vulnerable status of a subaltern and remaps it to power. The paper argues the above in two ways: firstly, by demonstrating how Rani's act of defiance makes Chaudhry feel defeated in the gendered site of battle; secondly, by discussing how Chughtai has deconstructed the tradition of romanticized representation of women in literature and attributed symbolic status on her protagonist. At the same time, the paper argues how Chughtai has shifted the significance of her protagonist's name and reconstructed its connotations and discusses the story in the light of recent literature on desire and points out how Rani defies the dominant and oppressive narrative of monogamy and virtuosity. The paper also throws light on the subtle and ironic language of Chughtai which invites the reader to be an active participant in the narrative along with the fictional figures and also details it as a commentary on the inscrutability of female sexuality and patriarchal hegemony towards it.

Starting at 'medias res', *The Mole*, at a first glance seems to be a psychological tale, an "exploration of the psychosexual and affective landscapes of sexual repression"(Kumar 115) and



traces the journey of an artist from the state of sanity to insanity. But from a feminist lens it is a narrative of the power struggle between the sexes grounded on the field of class-caste and gender and places the artist as a victim of his own arrogance and hegemony, as his patriarchy-fed ego cannot handle the onslaught of unbridled passion of a woman. In the literature of that era, the figure of 'subaltern' woman, "whose labor as well as sexuality are vulnerable to exploitation" had already achieved "iconic status" as Mulk Raj Anand, the leading literary figure of that time put it (Gopinath 33). Chughtai in *The Mole* has subverted this image of vulnerability and has given it a new definition through her protagonist Rani who has agency over both her sexuality and labor. As the story opens we found the artist Garishchandra Chaudhury trying hard to discipline his subaltern subject Rani to pose for his masterpiece. But Rani, an adolescent, suffering from sexual titillations natural to her age is reluctant to obey him; she is bold, outspoken, passionate, vivacious and thwarts his sense of superiority by constantly uttering: "I am tired", "I cannot sit still anymore" (Chughtai 110) and makes him feel defeated:

And women from faraway places, both naked and clothed, felt honored to pose for him. But this sprightly, illiterate chit of a girl he had picked up from the filthy gutters to sit for his masterpiece, was completely unmanageable (Chughtai 116).

Romanticized representation of women in literature is an issue which has bothered feminists all over the world. Elaine Showalter in *Towards a Feminist Politics* says: "If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have learnt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be..."(quoted in Moi 75).Chughtai, was also highly skeptical about the romanticized representation of women in literature. But what gave her a special mention is her 'foresightedness'- she raised her pen against this 'tradition' in the 1940's, a few decades earlier when Showalter grounded her theory on feminist writing. The female protagonists of Ismat Chughtai do not fit into the prescribed format of conformity; they are warriors; like their creator they fight relentlessly against the agents of oppression working against them. They are flesh and blood characters, not the patient, meek, docile figures inhabiting the pages of literature down the ages. Rani is also no exception. But among the trope of these courageous women Rani deserves special mention because



of her vulnerable position in connection with her class-caste identity. Chughtai throughout her writing career was mostly engaged in writing about the upper-middle class, most of her characters and protagonists belong to this class. We can mention Begum Jan, the aristocrat wife of a Nawab in *The Quilt*, or Sarlaben in *The Morsel*, Bhabi Jan and Shabnam in *The Rock* etc. But Chughtai shows her diversity as a writer by picturing the plight of working class women in stories like *Tinny's Granny*, *The Homemaker*, *The Mole* etc. M. Asaduddin has praised Chughtai's ability "to portray full-blooded country maidens" in stories like *Homemaker*, *The Mole*, *A Pair of Hands* and have praised their "vigor", "freshness", "innocence", "earthiness and incorruptible vitality"(88). Rani, the protagonist of *The Mole* is a poor woman belonging to the downtrodden lower caste – she is poorer than the poor. Chughtai, with her characteristic subtleness has not mentioned any caste markers such as surname or her profession clearly. But there are enough suggestions in the text that hints at her belonging to the downtrodden community. There is an indirect reference to her profession in the text when Chaudhry utters: "... don't you get tired when you're out collecting cow-dung on the roads?"(Chughtai 111). Chughtai has also not mentioned Rani's family background or even her parentage. She seems to be a symbol, an epitome of 'subaltern' women as Chughtai does not place her in some specific community or caste group.

Chughtai has always exhibited an extreme craftsmanship in naming her protagonists. While the protagonist of *The Quilt* has not been given any proper name and is referred as 'Begum Jan' to mock the institution of marriage; the protagonist of *The Morsel* is named 'Sarlaben', Hindi counterpart of the word 'innocent woman' to mark her gullible nature; Granny, the protagonist of *Tinny's Granny* also does not have any proper name, as she embodies the vulnerable generation of older women whose only identity is their relation to their off springs - she is a helpless 'grandmother'; Chughtai, in *The Mole* has ironically named a subaltern 'Rani', a Hindi counterpart of the English word 'queen' and shifted the significance of her name to a quite unexpected level and reconstructed its connotation, refined the constructed pattern of victimhood, and reinvented its signifiers. Rani has nothing in the world to claim as her own. She is a lower cast woman with no material property – she seems to be a queen in devoid of a kingdom. But her real wealth is her free spirit, which keeps itself free from the annoyingly close surveillance of social norms and refuses to



follow its oppressive rules. She is not a passive recipient of reformist projects of the bourgeois reformers, rather a subaltern who constantly subverted the site of victimhood - she not only shows reluctance to sit patiently as a model for Chaudhry's painting, but constantly defies him by her disobeying acts. Right from the beginning of the narrative Chaudhry has an authoritative take over her and considered her to be his rightful property, as his speeches and acts reveal. But Rani shows him his real position in her life by constantly defying him. Chaudhry wanted to make her learn the lessons of 'chastity', 'honor' and 'shame' by forbidding her to meet other men like Chunan and Ratan but she refuses to pay heed towards him and his lessons which denied women their share of pleasure and agency and continues her rendezvous with them. When he catches Rani red hand with Ratan, his servant playing in a pond, Ratan flees away but Rani refuses to go away: "Ratan grabbed his dhoti about him and made his escape from his side, but Rani stood undaunted (Chughtai 120) and when Chaudhry orders her to 'come out' of water, Rani refuses to obey him and when Chaudhry threatens her with physical violence, Rani flaunts her naked body in front of him and asks him: "Do you hit naked women?"(ibid) and the omniscient third person narrator of the story put it as: "Her fear had made her bold" (ibid) and emerges as a 'deviant body' who not only subverts her site of victimhood but also remaps it as of power.

All Chughtai characters are something more than fictional figures – they act as mouthpieces of their creator and Rani is no exception. Through her Chughtai gives voice to an issue never heard of in this part of the hemisphere before her arrival into the arena – female sexuality and desire. Gayatri Gopinath in this context writes: "As Rashid Jahan had done in *Angarey*, Chughtai was claiming for herself the right to write about female body, but she was also going further by recognizing it's claim to pleasure and fulfillment... the gendered and classed subject..."(67). Society and its self-proclaimed guardians expect women to repress her desires and be a passive commodity to be exchanged between men. But, Rani, like Lajjo in *The Homemaker* and Gauri in *A Pair of Hands*, refuses to be what Irigaray termed as "obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies"(23) and emerges herself as a desiring subject. The modern literature on desire has recognized it as a driving force – "...a fluid, multiple, a dynamic force that is transformative, destructive and life-changing"(Gorton 1). In the light of Alice Deignan's extensive study on desire,



Desire as Metaphor, Rani's desire can be named an "appetite"(1) – appetite for sexual love, appetite to explore her own body, appetite to measure the amount of pleasure that her body can provide her. She is a human being who is highly conscious about the amount of pleasures her body can provide her. In fact she is very much vocal about her own desires. She not only defies Chaudhry through her acts but boldly expresses her desire for him. Through her, Chughtai has also exposed the double standard of caste ridden Indian society where Chaudhry, a representative of the privileged section of society does not find it wrong to make Rani pose for him or to beat her, but finds it impossible to reciprocate her desire. Rani along with Lajo, the protagonist of *The Homemaker* is an epitome of "newly- born women" who ruthlessly rejected the male authority over their bodies and get indulged in "sexual jouissance" (Wadood 445). Rani constantly defies the dominant narrative of monogamous, virtuous womanhood by her acts. Lucy Irigary asserts that women's desire speaks a different language than men's (25). We get a complete fictional reflection of this in the case of Rani. She not only defies the rules of patriarchy in her act of self- assertion but also speaks a 'different' language of desire which Chaudhry is unable to understand. Her act of tapping the mole on her breast is interpreted by him as an 'obscene' act of inviting attention. But he is unable to understand this act of auto-eroticism; he does not understand that Rani finds pleasure in caressing her own body. Through Chaudhry, Chughtai points out the limited knowledge and hegemonic attitude toward female sexuality that society share at large. The self-sufficient nature of female sexuality has been pointed out here through Rani's act of self-caressing. In her, Chughtai seems to give a fictionalized pre-figuration of Irigary's notion of "multiplicity of female desire" (30). Society always has repressed female sexuality and tried to confine it to the limit of vaginal intercourse and reproduction. But Chughtai, an "iconoclast", frees the female characters from the shackles of stereotypical representation and portrays them 'as they are'. Rani, like the other fictional creations of Chughtai cannot be categorized into a 'type'. The fictional form of short story does not provide much scope for 'development' in a character. Yet Chughtai was able to create a female character like Rani, who does not fall into the prototype of female characters popularized in fiction and refuses to play that prescribed, passive role and takes agency over her sexuality, refusing to be an object of transaction she claims her right to pleasure.



No discussion on Chughtai is complete without attention to her unique writing technique, her 'écriture feminine'. While the grand-dame of British feminist tradition Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own* and French feminists like Cixous, Irigary let out a call for distinctive writing style for women writers, Chughtai, on the other side of the hemisphere, in spite of being unaware of their call, laid out her own 'écriture feminine' – her distinctive writing style. Along with strong women characters, new techniques in form and content, innovative and thought provoking themes are notable hallmarks of her writings. The subtleness and ironic quality of Chughtai's language invites the reader to be an active agent in decoding the fictional language of her narrative. *The Mole* opens with Rani calling out Chaudhry: "Chaudhry, O Chaudhry..."(Chughtai 110). Chughtai has always been very precise in her use of language. She never wastes a single word on unnecessary information or description, rather in a very suggestive language invites the reader to be an active participant in the action in the narrative along with the fictional figures. Right from the beginning of the narrative the reader of *The Mole* gets conscious that the story is going to be something unusual as Rani's tone and manner of calling out at Chaudhry is highly suggestive. The two principle characters – Rani and Chaudhry develop gradually and it is mainly through their dialogues the reader gets a track of that development. Chaudhry's desire for Rani is not expressed in a direct language; rather the manner of expression and language is highly suggestive: when Rani "lovingly" calls out her name, "Chaudhry felt something jump in his chest. The foundation of the world's axis swayed just a mite. To be sure something did happen"(Chughtai 113). Chughtai remarkably uses irony and satire in her writings to explode the balloon of hypocrisy and exposes the double standard of the so called pious, rigid and superstitious society. Chaudhry, both a representative of patriarchal repression and its victim, unlike Rani, is never able to give voice to his desire for Rani and always is in complete denial of it. But through Rani, Chughtai points out his hypocritical nature when Rani accuses him of seeing the mole on her breast through "the corner of his eyes"(Chughtai 120). When Rani confronts him naked, his confused reaction gives a premonition of the doom that awaits him: "...he felt ants crawling inside his brain..."(ibid) and his repressed libido is suggested as: "... a strong gust of cool, black wind blew over the pile over of embers, the spark was ignited and soon there were flames leaping in all direction. His eyes plunged at the black, fleshy mole like hungry



vultures and... Ohhh...As if transformed into a black stone by his revulsion, the mole crashed against his forehead..."(Chughtai 121).

Wagir Agha, writing about Chughtai's work, states that, Chughtai's female characters are not merely nameless adjuncts of the household machinery but shake to the cores, if not demolish time-honored values and customs" (Kumar and Sadique 195). But Rani not only 'shakes', but also 'demolishes' them – when towards the end of the short story Rani was condemned by the legal authorities for hiding her unborn fetus, she stood dauntless. A victim of her natural impulses she has the courage to face society without any feeling of shame regarding her actions. Being sincere to her writing agenda of "project[ing] a female character [in her] stories who refused to live by old values, that is, false ideas of shame and honor"(Kumar and Sadique 129), Chughtai has not put Rani into the traditional categorization of moral or immoral. When left alone to face the natural consequence of her natural and spontaneous desire, she does not play any prescribed role that society and its norms compel women to play – rather than feeling shameful or guilty or remorseful, she retains "her usual coquettish manner" before the court and deconstructs the myth of virtue when she utters her doubt about the parentage of her child on being asked: "...ask Chunan or Ratan. I can't tell you which one it is, I don't know" (Chughtai 126). At the same time she 'frees' Chaudhry of all accusations by "carelessly" declaring his impotence and robs him of his 'masculinity'. M. Asaduddin draws a fictional parallel between Rani and Durga, the protagonist of Bengali novelist Tarashankar Banerjee's novel *Ganadevata*(1948). He writes: "they are frivolous village maidens and preach a robust morality that is far more healthy and creative than the attenuating social morals practiced by the middle class"(88). Rani does not follow the path of activism, but like her creator is a feminist by practice. In this paper I have discussed how Chughtai has made her 'subaltern' protagonist Rani a symbolic character who turns the status quo upside down and by subverting her site of victimhood has remapped her site of victimhood; how Chughtai has opened up some hidden truths about female sexuality through her and also detailed the short story as a commentary on the inscrutability of female sexuality and patriarchal hegemony towards it. At the same time the paper brings forth how Chughtai has put forward a critique against both the tradition of exotification of the female subjects and romanticized representation of them. The paper also put some light on Chughtai's distinctive use of language through textual analysis and in textual analysis it is needed



to have a close look at the 'words' of the text concerned. But here, doing the textual analysis of *The Mole* the paper faced a major drawback – the text is a translated one. Tahira Naqvi has been hailed as the most authentic 'voice' of Ismat Chughtai by many academicians, yet the fact of her being a translator cannot be ignored. Muhafiz Haider writes: "... Ismat's fictional language has added innumerable words, phrases, metaphors and similes, specifically relating to the world of women, to the Urdu lexicon"(Kumar and Sadique 228). The reader of the translated version is always at a risk to miss that vigor of Chughtai's fictional language. In this context we should look at the words of Walter Benjamin, who in *The Task of The Translator* writes: "the purpose of translation is not to conceal the soul of the original"(quoted in Naqvi, last para). He argues further that "the significance of fidelity as ensured by literalness is that the work reflects the great longing for linguistic complementation" and "allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium to shine upon the original all the more fully" (228). We get a complete reflection of this theory in Tahira Naqvi's soulful translation. Tahira Naqvi, the translator herself states, "What I have tried to achieve is, again, best expressed by Walter Benjamin: "a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade"(228) and any reader of the translated version of the text is a witness to her success at achieving this aim.

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