

## Exploration Of Contemporary Women Themes In Ismat Chughtai's "The Crooked Line"

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**Abstract:** The paper explores the study of women by a women contemporary writer in the post modernism conventions. The title of the paper enhances to the ideas and concepts brought out in the novel by Ismat Chughtai's "The Crooked Line" where several themes of women related needed to be studied. Common traits of human personality are addressed in the exploration of women themed novels. The novel explores the core of the female psyche. The novel surfaces the struggle of modern women's existential capacity to establish her own identity and individuality.

**Keywords:** women, race, sexuality, conservative

### Introduction:

Ismat Chughtai, a prolific women writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has brought her magna opus, The Crooked Line (Terhi Lakeer) in a time of political and social revolution during India's colonial period. Chughtai screens out the complex relationships emerged within women living and working in relative seclusion, and the intellectual and emotional contradictions lying in the heart of a rebellious country in the time of freedom movement. The Crooked Line was published in the year 1943. Chughtai explores out the inner realms of women's lives. The novel comprehends the story of a young spirited woman who rebels against the traditional Indian life of purdah or female seclusion. Shamman, the protagonist and her sisters are raised in a conventional Muslim household entitled to constraints. As a semi-autobiographical novel of a strong minded fiery spirited middle class Muslim girl bent on exploring the shape and nature of consuming desire, Chughtai explores the complex relationships between women caught in a changing culture. It is a fact that human relationships have been efficiently dealt in the novels of various Indian novelists and Chughtai was the one who shook the very foundation of the biasness in their society through her novel Tehri lakeer. In the novel, the novelist use the technique of bildungsroman which focuses on the development of the central protagonist from birth to a position of stability. The writer divides the narrative which encompasses India's movement for independence into three phases of shamman's turbulent life- childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

### **Nationalism as explored in the novel**

Ismat Chughtai in her novel *The Crooked Lines* exposes the intellectual and emotional contradictions lying in the heart of a rebellious country, battling traditions, cultural expectations and an uncertain future on the verge of freedom movement from the British Raj and ultimately partition. Shamman feels uneasy about the formation of Pakistan, an idea which was fast gaining currency among the Muslims of India. The school where Shamman was the principal becomes “an arena for political discourse”, a microcosm of society where discussions abound, where every point of view appears to presage distrust and division. Chughtai writes “The Hindu girls were all for ahimsa. The Christians were extremely nervous, as if with Islam and Hinduism, their crucifix is in danger”. The Muslim girls prepare for Pakistan and Shamman's fears about war are realised, as independence fast becomes a possibility and the country is divided.

Shamman married Ronnie Taylor, an Irish captain, but their relationship becomes like that of the colonizer and the colonized. The political war in India becomes correspondent to the mistrust, despair and confusion in their relationship. Thus all these affected Shamman personally.

### **Position of Women**

Women's problems are central to every society, mainly because they define all human relationship and social constructions. Basically women are called upon to make sacrifices and suppress their personal desires. With the emergence of various movements against such inequalities there has developed awareness in society regarding the rights of both male and female. Ismat Chughtai attempted to break this vicious circle through her works. The lethargy of their condition is in everywhere and represented in everyone, from the careless Amma who have given birth Shamman after nine children left her to the care of older siblings and got engaged in affairs of their day-to-day life. Here we can see the suffering of Shamman the main protagonist of the novel because lacking of proper upbringing.

Chughtai divided Shamman's life into three phases- childhood, adolescence and adulthood. As her mother has little time for her child, Shamman developed a strong relation with Unna, who is taking care of her in her childhood. This affords Shamman her first glimpse into adult sexuality. But the relationship she has with her boyfriend interrupts this sensual dream of fulfilment. After that she developed an attachment on her elder sister Manjhu, but she also marries and moves away which make Shamman upset again. This is where the terrible unfulfilment of relationships have shattered her dreams. Here Chughtai give an account how powerless women unable to govern their destiny oppress other women. In Shamman's childhood Bari Apa find it easy to make her as target of her dissatisfied life.

### **Race and gender**

Chughtai also explores many problems in her biographical novel, among them race and gender issues. Through the character of Shamshad, it is interpreted that Chughtai has learned already of

outspoken and liberal women, are always put down and needed to develop ways to cope, but often end up miserably unhappy. Racial issues come up fairly in the novel, often in the context of the nationalist struggle in India. Chughtai's handling of race removes it from a colonizer/colonized dichotomy. Shamman's views on racial aspects about White race and her contempt for Indians who regarded them as gods are explicitly stated. Ironically, Shamman realizes that at a private level, she will be charmed by a man to the purpose of marrying him. Perhaps the fact that Ronnie Taylor is the man she marries, who is Irish and not English is crucial.

Reading through the novel, Shamman's relationship with Alma, who is described as a "Christian friend", whose appearance was "typically South Indian". It is in this context where identity is dark maybe. Alma might be Indian, or Anglo-Indian. Shamman's marriage to Ronnie and her admiration for Alma demonstrates Chughtai's freedom in exploring an identity not influenced by race or religion. And this is often not some simple fascination with Westernism. The novel has characters whose lifestyle is western but who display social conservatism. Social radicalness was not bounded by race. Yet Shamman felt most comfortable with two people – a foreigner and an Indian Christian/Anglo-Indian, not because they were culturally and racially different (attraction of opposites) but because they said and did what they believed in.

### **Aspect of body and sexuality**

The terms body and sexuality are inter-related, the definition of which are not very easy if we leave one and explain the other. Especially sexuality is a much more complicated term when it comes to define it as is been neglected though it governs our existence. It is a broad term which includes one's emotional feelings that are related with sensual physical experience or thoughts. And body is the medium through which one can feel one's feeling of sexuality. So body is needed to experience sexuality and sexuality is a basic quality, which we can't ignore, that is present in a body.

The novel deals with the aspect of body and sexuality and especially with female sexuality. The main protagonist Shamman at the very early stage of her life feels a connection with her nurse Unna and considering the description of the bodily connection it can be said that it might be an example of Shamman's introduction to sexual and sensual feelings. The way Shamman is comfortable with the body of Unna compels us to believe that she has some physical affection towards the nurse. The concept of body comes here as they play with a doll whose vest they stuffed with cotton and immediately felt shame because of that. A girl's curiosity and the feeling of sexuality can be seen in their act of playing this particular game. In the novel there is the mention of physical attraction of Shamman towards her friends, mainly to Satil, her classmate, who, as described is like a male prostitute.

The aspect of body and sexuality is very prominent in *The Crooked Line* as there is several mentioned of these and that it is through one's body one can feel the physical needs including

sexuality. Ismat Chughtai traces the emotional and physical tension and needs of a girl or woman that gets suppressed in a reserved and kind of orthodox society.

### **Exploration of Feminine Sensibility**

The novel depicts Shamman's character as a brilliant and intelligent women who always challenges the system- gender, class, and political. The novel expresses the power of woman centered world of Indian Muslim women living in purdah. The women of this novel wield an indirect power over their men one recorded in Shamman's observations at the wedding of her cousin. Chughtai's feminism is not prescriptive but poised on its capacity to disturb. The turbulent dimensions of Shamman's sexuality provoke the reader into acknowledging their strength. Women are central because it is their thoughts, questions, and their predicaments that drive the narrative. Chughtai through the characters of the novel not only rejects a modernity which is self-serving and decadent but she also rejects a conservatism which is terrifyingly claustrophobic. Shamman does not become a figure of defeat and her agency is still her own. No matter how crooked line shamman may have drawn she remains her own architect throughout the novel. This is how author depicts the femininity aspect.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE "TERHI LAKEER"**

The title of a work is very important as they signify what is to be expected in the novel. Similarly here, the Urdu title Terhi Lakeer depicts the lines on the forehead which are believed by many to be the lines of destiny. The lakeers are never straight and have a very uncommon pattern. In the novel we find Shamman to be in a similar state defying the odds and the rigidness of the society in which she lived, she is seen to be an individual who creates her own life by her own choice. Shamman's life is seen to have ups and downs right from her birth and also it is seen in her relations with people. Her personal relationships are also very complex in nature. The title of the novel is very much apt when it is seen from the point of Shamman's life, especially her relationships with both men and women. Even after her marriage, she fails to sustain it and it breaks apart. Shamman, with so many broken relationships, creates a perfect justification of the title of the novel.

### **CONCLUSION**

Being a semi autobiographical novel, it has personal experience as well as the condition of women in general at the time of pre-independence era. So it is seen that Shamman, the central protagonist, does not become stable at the end, but she has come a full circle. The climax of the novel hints at her pregnancy which implies that she is at the brink of a new phase in her life. But there is no certainty in that. The novel ends with an open ending note unlike Jane Eyre, which is Shamman may start a new life or she may strangle with her own problem.

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