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Unveiling the Domestic: Gender, Desire, Sexuality, and Female Identity in Ismat Chughtai's *The Quilt: Stories*

Suresh Kumar
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Govt. College Indora, 176401
Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, India
vijaysuresh8890@gmail.com

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Abstract

Ismat Chughtai's short stories, collected in *The Quilt: Stories*, mark a radical intervention in Urdu literature through their candid portrayal of women's lives, emotions, and desires. This paper examines selected stories—The Quilt, The Mole, The Homemaker, Touch-Me-Not, All Alone, Mother-in-Law, Roots, and The Invalid—to uncover how Chughtai situates the domestic sphere as both a site of confinement and a space of subtle resistance. Her narratives foreground women negotiating gender roles, repressed sexual desires, loneliness, and intergenerational conflicts within the household. At the same time, she exposes the complexities of class divisions and female relationships, revealing women not merely as victims but as individuals with agency, contradictions, and voice. By engaging with themes of gender, desire, sexuality, and identity, this study argues that Chughtai's stories destabilize conventional notions of morality and womanhood, offering a subversive reimagining of female subjectivity in twentieth-century South Asian society.

Keywords: Ismat Chughtai, *The Quilt: Stories*, domesticity, gender, desire, sexuality, female identity; feminism, Urdu literature.

Introduction

Ismat Chughtai (1915–1991) is celebrated as one of the most uncompromising voices in twentieth-century Urdu literature. A bold stylist, a pioneering feminist, and a sharp social critic, Chughtai wrote against the grain of a conservative, patriarchal society that sought to restrict the

roles of women to silence, obedience, and invisibility. Her fiction, often set within the seemingly ordinary domestic spaces of kitchens, bedrooms, courtyards, and verandas, reveals the complex realities of women's lives—realities marked by longing, repression, negotiation, and subtle acts of resistance. (Sood, 37)

Her most famous story, Lihaaf (The Quilt), published in 1942, provoked widespread controversy and even obscenity charges in colonial India because of its daring portrayal of female desire outside the boundaries of heteronormativity. Yet The Quilt was not an isolated provocation but part of a larger project in Chughtai's fiction: the exploration of gender, sexuality, desire, and identity within the everyday lives of women. (Sood 38)

This paper examines selected short stories from The Quilt and Other Stories—including The Quilt, The Mole, The Homemaker, Touch-Me-Not, All Alone, Mother-in-Law, Roots, and The Invalid. Read together, these works reveal the "domestic" not as a private, apolitical space, but as a contested terrain where women confront restrictions and negotiate their own selfhood. Through irony, humour, realism, and daring candour, Chughtai articulates female voices that had long been silenced, offering alternative ways of imagining identity and agency.

The central argument of this paper is that Chughtai uses the domestic sphere to foreground the intersections of gender, desire, sexuality, and female identity. While her women are often trapped within patriarchal norms, they simultaneously resist, assert, and reimagine themselves—revealing both the suffocating power of tradition and the resilient force of individual agency.

Methodology

This research is grounded in a qualitative and interpretive approach, guided by feminist literary criticism through close analytical method. Literature is not treated as autonomous from its social milieu but as deeply embedded in the cultural and political realities of its time. Chughtai's work, emerging in colonial and postcolonial South Asia, provides a fertile site for feminist analysis because it confronts issues of patriarchy, sexuality, and women's agency in both direct and subtle ways.

Feminist Framework

The study draws on Simone de Beauvoir's notion of woman as "Other" (Abrahms124), Judith Butler's insights on gender as performative (Nayar 91), and Toril Moi's understanding of the

term's 'feminist', 'female' and 'feminine' as political composition, a matter of biology and a set of culturally defined characteristics respectively (Barry 117). Contemporary feminist theory argues that female sexuality has been marginalized as insignificant or that representation of women body, desire and sexuality have been made by men and feminist theorists use new models like psychoanalytical theories or devise radical feminism to promote sisterhood or female sexuality without men (Nayar 103). Together, these theoretical lenses illuminate how Chughtai represents women negotiating between social repression and individual desire.

Analytical Method

The Present Study adopts the Analytical Method, where a close reading is the primary tool, focusing on plot, character, symbolism, and narrative style. The analysis also traces recurring motifs across stories, such as silence, secrecy, repression, and resistance, showing how Chughtai positions domestic life as both oppressive and transformative.

Gender Roles in the Domestic Sphere

The domestic sphere in Ismat Chughtai's fiction is not a neutral haven but the very battleground where gender roles are imposed, contested, and redefined. The household, far from being merely a private space, mirrors the structures of patriarchal society, confining women within rigid expectations of duty, obedience, and silence. Yet, paradoxically, it is also the space where women improvise, subvert, and reshape their identities. Chughtai's fiction shows that the home is both a site of entrapment and a laboratory for resistance, where characters navigate the contradictions of domesticity in ways that unsettle rigid gender binaries.

In The Homemaker, Chughtai captures the paradox of domestic life with piercing clarity. Women are expected to maintain households yet receive neither recognition nor autonomy for their labour. Lajo, the protagonist, embodies this burden. Though she keeps her household running with painstaking effort, her identity is eclipsed by her husband's authority rather is bitten by him (Chughtai 60). Chughtai writes that "A woman's hands are never still, yet her worth is measured in silence" (Chughtai 59). This irony reveals how women's ceaseless contributions are normalized into invisibility. Rather than elevating her status, Lajo's diligence entrenches her dependence, reducing her to what Simone de Beauvoir would call "the other". Anticipating later feminist critiques, Chughtai exposes the undervaluation of women's work and the unjust distribution of domestic responsibilities.

The dynamics become even more complex in Mother-in-Law, where Chughtai dramatizes the maternal enforcement of patriarchy. The older woman, once a victim of oppression herself, assumes the role of disciplinarian over her daughter-in-law. Chugtai writes, "'May God ruin her!' The mother-in-law cursed her bahu—the daughter-in-law—who was playing kabaddi and having fun with the urchins of the mohalla. Why would anyone wish to live if one had such a bahu, wondered the mother-in-law. Come noon and she is up on the roof. Hordes of boys and girls arrive. One can't get a wink of sleep" (Chugtai 117). Chughtai describes her transformation giving an example of "the whip that once lashed her is now in her own hands, and she wields it with vengeance" (Chughtai 123). This unsettling cycle illustrates how oppression reproduces itself across generations. The mother-in-law's authority is not empowerment but a distorted form of control that perpetuates patriarchal structures. By presenting women as both oppressors and victims, Chughtai dismantles simplistic binaries of male dominance and female subjugation, showing patriarchy as a system that ensnares women in roles that turn them against one another.

In All Alone and Roots, Chughtai explores the emotional and psychological costs of domestic conformity. Sylvia,the protagonist of All Alone lives a life hemmed in by silence: "Four walls, and nothing but the echo of my own breath" (Chugtai 103). Though materially secure, she is emotionally suffocated, her individuality eroded by isolation. In Roots, Farida the protagonist's desires for personal freedom are stifled by family traditions. Chughtai writes, "A woman's roots are not her own; they are planted by others, and she must grow where she is told" (Chughtai 133).Such imagery underscores the lack of autonomy granted to women whose identities are predetermined by patriarchal expectations. The home, meant to nurture, becomes instead a cage that denies self-determination.

Perhaps the most provocative engagement with domesticity appears in The Quilt. On the surface, it is the story of Begum Jaan, neglected by her Nawab husband who shows no interest in conjugal intimacy. Beneath this surface, however, lies a radical reconfiguration of domestic space. The begum's suppressed desires erupt into intimacy with her female companion, an act that challenges both patriarchal and heteronormative definitions of the household. "The other maids were jealous of Rabbu. The witch! She ate, sat and even slept with Begam Jan!" (Chugtai 19), Chughtai observes through her narrator. The quilt thus becomes a metaphor for the secret

worlds of desire that thrive within the domestic sphere, worlds that unsettle the patriarchal ideal of the home as pure, orderly, and stable.

Yet Chughtai never portrays her women as passive sufferers. Even within constraint, they improvise strategies of survival and resistance. In Mother-in-Law, the younger woman resists domination not through outright defiance but through subtle refusals—eating at odd hours, withholding speech, or asserting her choices quietly (Chughtai 123).These gestures, seemingly insignificant, destabilize the structures of control and highlight the everyday ways women negotiate oppressive systems. Similarly, in The Homemaker, Lajo reflects that "If a woman's work is endless, so too is her capacity to imagine" (Chughtai 61). Such moments reveal that women's imagination itself becomes a form of resistance against the suffocating confines of patriarchal domesticity.

Generational conflict is another recurring motif in Chughtai's stories. Older women, having internalized patriarchal values, often become enforcers of tradition upon younger women. In Mother-in-Law, the older woman insists to hold on to the tradition like how it has always been, and this is how it must remain (Chughtai 122). Yet Chughtai subtly undermines such declarations, exposing them as constructs rather than inevitabilities. Tradition, she suggests, is not immutable but imposed—and therefore open to challenge.

Thus, the domestic sphere emerges in Chughtai's fiction as a deeply ambivalent space. It is both prison and sanctuary, site of suffering and seedbed of defiance. In The Quilt, female intimacy becomes a quiet rebellion against neglect. In Roots, even unfulfilled dreams of self-determination testify to the yearning for autonomy. Chughtai's women may not always break free, but their longings, ironies, and subtle acts of resistance complicate any attempt to read domesticity as either wholly tragic or wholly submissive.

Importantly, Chughtai avoids romanticizing the household. Her depictions of kitchens, bedrooms, and courtyards are neither sentimental nor purely despairing; they are rendered as dynamic spaces where power circulates and identities are contested. By drawing attention to everyday labour, hidden desires, and generational conflicts, she shows that the domestic is inherently political.

Moreover, Chughtai redefines the meaning of the domestic sphere. Rather than a passive backdrop to women's lives, it is the very heart of patriarchal power—and therefore the stage on

which resistance takes form. Through irony, nuance, and bold storytelling, she reveals how gender roles within the household are neither natural nor fixed but constantly negotiated. In doing so, she opens the possibility of reimagining domesticity as a site not only of entrapment but also of resilience, creativity, and transformation.

Desire and Female Sexuality

In Ismat Chughtai's fiction, female desire and sexuality are not shameful aberrations to be silenced but legitimate, powerful forces that challenge patriarchal control and reshape women's identities. This assertion, bold in Chughtai's literary milieu, confronts the cultural insistence on female chastity, obedience, and silence. At a time when women were largely reduced to symbols of purity, Chughtai dared to present them as flesh-and-blood beings who hunger, long, and act upon their desires. Her candid portrayal destabilizes the patriarchal myths of womanhood and offers a vision of female subjectivity that includes not only suffering but also passion, yearning, and agency.

The most striking example is The Quilt, perhaps Chughtai's most controversial story. It depicts Begum Jaan's intimate relationship with her maid, Rabbu, foregrounding lesbian desire at a time when such a subject was taboo in Indian literature. Chughtai destabilizes heteronormative assumptions by showing that Begum Jaan's sexuality is not deviance but a response to neglect. Her husband, the Nawab, is indifferent to her physical and emotional needs, preferring to spend his nights with young men. Deprived of marital intimacy, Begum Jaan finds companionship, comfort, and desire in Rabbu's embrace. "Began Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously, as though an elephant was struggling inside" (Chughtai 20), the child-narrator observes, her innocent perspective ironically highlighting the intensity of the unseen relationship beneath. By refusing to pathologize Begum Jaan's desire, Chughtai reframes sexuality as a vital part of female existence rather than an aberration. The begum's longing is not merely for physical gratification; it is also a quest for recognition, tenderness, and fulfillment—needs systematically denied by a patriarchal marriage.

In Touch-Me-Not, Chughtai turns to the complexities of sexual repression and bodily anxiety. Bhabhijan, the protagonist is haunted by fears of contamination and illness, anxieties rooted in cultural taboos around female sexuality. Her body becomes a site of both desire and dread, caught between instinct and prohibition. "She knew that another miscarriage would be her

husband's ticket to a second marriage. Now bhaijan could do anything in the name of progeny." the narrator says. This ambivalence illustrates how patriarchal discourses police women's bodies, instilling guilt even in the most natural impulses. By narrating such experiences with candour, Chughtai exposes the hypocrisy of a culture that enforces silence on women while tolerating men's indulgences. Her female characters, unlike their male counterparts, are burdened with shame for feeling desire at all. Yet by articulating these anxieties, Chughtai disrupts the silence, insisting that women's bodily experiences - whether pleasurable, anxious, or contradictory - are worthy of representation.

In IsmatChughtai's "The Mole", desire and female sexuality are articulated through Rani's playful boldness and her unapologetic body-consciousness. By flaunting her mole and teasing Choudhry (Chugtai 28), she challenges the patriarchal expectation of female modesty. Her flirtatious banter, coupled with her awareness of her physicality, transforms the body into a site of agency rather than shame. Chughtai presents female desire as natural, uninhibited, and resistant to repression. Rani's refusal to be silenced highlights the subversive power of sexuality, exposing male hypocrisy while reclaiming pleasure and control over her own body. The mole becomes a metaphor for hidden yet assertive female desire.

Chughtai's stories also reclaim desire as a source of female solidarity and intimacy. In The Quilt, the relationship between Begum Jaan and Rabbu is not only physical but also a mode of survival against patriarchal neglect. The two women create a world of mutual care, tenderness, and shared vulnerability—something the Nawab's presence obliterates. By situating female desire within bonds of intimacy and companionship, Chughtai challenges the heteronormative assumption that only men can complete women's lives. Instead, she suggests that women's fulfilment may lie in connections beyond patriarchal marriage.

The treatment of desire in these stories also unsettles the cultural myth of the "pure, self-sacrificing woman." Chughtai's women are not passive victims of duty but complex individuals who yearn, resist, and negotiate. In Touch-Me-Not, the protagonist struggles with her anxieties but also insists, "The body cannot be severed from the soul, no matter how much we are taught to deny it." This assertion reclaims female sexuality as integral to identity rather than shameful excess. Likewise, in The Quilt, Begum Jaan's turn to Rabbu reconfigures desire as a survival

strategy rather than a fall from virtue. Chughtai's women are not paragons of purity but flesh-and-blood beings who suffer, dream, and long, just as men do.

Importantly, Chughtai portrays female desire not as destructive but as transformative. In her fiction, repression leads to illness, isolation, and despair, while expression—though socially condemned—offers companionship, vitality, and dignity. In The Mole, Shaman's allure unsettles but also liberates those around her from rigid conventions. In The Quilt, Begum Jaan's intimacy with Rabbu allows her to reclaim some semblance of life within the suffocating silence of her marriage. Desire becomes a force that both reveals oppression and gestures toward alternative ways of being.

Chughtai's style is equally significant. Her irony, wit, and refusal to moralize prevent her depictions of sexuality from descending into sensationalism. Even in The Quilt, which provoked accusations of obscenity, Chughtai's focus is not titillation but the exposure of social hypocrisy. The narrator's childlike innocence ensures that the reader sees the scene not as scandal but as truth hidden beneath cultural repression. Through irony, Chughtai turns taboo into critique, suggesting that what is silenced in polite society is often the most revealing of its contradictions.

By bringing female sexuality into the literary domain, Chughtai democratizes desire. No longer is the exclusive domain of men, desire in her stories equally legitimate for women. This was revolutionary in an era when cultural narratives demanded that women embody chastity, obedience, and sacrifice. By contrast, Chughtai's women articulate longing, act upon passion, and even defy convention in pursuit of fulfilment. As she writes in Touch-Me-Not, "To feel, to burn, to yearn—is not sin but life itself." Such declarations destabilize the patriarchal belief that female desire is unnatural or corrupt.

In this way, Chughtai's treatment of female desire and sexuality represents one of her most radical contributions to modern Urdu fiction. By portraying characters like Begum Jaan in The Quilt, Rani in The Mole, and the anxious protagonist of Touch-Me-Not, she challenges the cultural silencing of women's bodies and desires. Her women do not conform to the model of the pure, suffering wife but emerge as full human beings who long, suffer, resist, and imagine. In doing so, Chughtai reclaims sexuality as an essential dimension of female identity, unsettling patriarchal narratives that sought to erase it. Desire in her stories is not merely a private impulse

but a political force—a challenge to silence, a refusal of shame, and a reassertion of women's right to be whole.

Female Identity and Resistance

In Ismat Chughtai's fiction, female identity emerges not as a fixed essence dictated by patriarchy but as a fluid negotiation shaped by resistance, irony, and small acts of agency within oppressive domestic structures. Beyond gender roles and desire, her stories wrestle with the question of how women assert individuality in environments that deny them autonomy. Chughtai's protagonists often resist being reduced to mere wives, mothers, or daughters, instead carving out selfhood in subtle but powerful ways. Their resistance is not always overt rebellion; sometimes it appears as irony, silence, withdrawal, or reimagining duty itself. In doing so, Chughtai redefines female identity as something constantly in flux, born out of conflict and negotiation.

In The Invalid, Chughtai explores the paradox of identity formed through physical frailty. The protagonist's illness renders her a burden within the household but also offers a peculiar freedom. Because she is an "invalid," she is excused from relentless domestic duties that define other women's lives. Chughtai notes, that her weakness shackled her body, but her hands were not tied to endless chores (Chugtai 114). Here, physical confinement paradoxically opens space for reflection, imagination, and resistance to the drudgery of patriarchal expectations. The character's frailty thus becomes both limitation and agency. This duality reflects Chughtai's nuanced vision of identity—not simply liberation versus oppression but a negotiation between the two, where women discover cracks in the structures that constrain them.

Similarly, Roots depicts a woman caught in the tension between tradition and modernity, exposing the dislocations of generational change. The protagonist struggles to reconcile inherited customs with her longing for personal independence. "A woman's roots are planted by others," she reflects, "but the branches ache toward the sky" (Chughtai 138). The metaphor illustrates how female identity is shaped by family, culture, and history yet still yearns for growth beyond those confines. Her resistance lies not in violent rupture but in refusing to let inherited roles completely define her. Chughtai thereby highlights how women's identities are never solely personal but also historical, shaped by time, place, and tradition.

In All Alone, Chughtai gives us another perspective on resistance through alienation. The protagonist lives within the suffocating boundaries of the home yet finds herself emotionally

estranged. Four walls and silence were her companions (Chugtai105), the narrative observes, capturing both her imprisonment and her refusal to dissolve into dutiful invisibility. Solitude here is double-edged: it isolates her but also preserves her individuality against relentless domestic demands. By choosing silence, she resists the endless chatter of patriarchal authority. Chughtai thus portrays alienation not simply as suffering but as a strategy of survival—an insistence on selfhood in a world determined to erase it.

Irony and humour are among Chughtai's most powerful tools for dramatizing resistance. By mocking the hypocrisies of social norms, she gives her women the ability to undermine patriarchal authority even when direct defiance is impossible. In Mother-in-Law, for instance, the younger woman's quiet refusals—refusing to eat at the prescribed time or keeping her thoughts to herself—become subtle but potent gestures of identity (Chughtai 122). Silence is used as a weapon to speak. Here, resistance is not dramatic but nonetheless transformative, a way of asserting selfhood in a space where voice is denied.

In The Homemaker, Lajo's struggle epitomizes the entrapment of female identity within domestic labour. Yet even as she tirelessly works, she questions the meaning of her existence: "If my worth is measured in cooked meals and clean floors, what is left of me?" (Chughtai 48). This piercing self-awareness itself becomes resistance, for it prevents total submission to prescribed roles. Though her work remains unacknowledged, her inner questioning resists patriarchal erasure, keeping alive the possibility of reimagining what it means to be a woman beyond duty.

Chughtai also portrays resistance in unexpected ways - through desire itself. In The Quilt, Begum Jaan's intimacy with Rabbu is not only about sexuality but also about identity. Denied recognition by her husband, she asserts selfhood through a relationship that gives her companionship and affirmation. The quilt that covers them becomes a metaphor for a hidden world where female identity flourishes outside patriarchal approval. Chughtai deliberately frames this not as scandal but as survival, showing how marginalized women invent spaces of belonging where none are offered.

What unites these diverse portraits is Chughtai's refusal to depict identity as static. Instead, she insists that women's identities are always in flux, shaped by oppression yet never wholly defined by it. For example, in The Invalid, illness is both confinement and freedom. In Roots, tradition is both anchor and obstacle. In All Alone, silence is both alienation and agency.

In each case, identity is forged in the paradoxes of daily life, revealing that even under constraint, women can carve out spaces for individuality.

Chughtai's irony further amplifies this vision. By exposing the absurdities of patriarchy, she empowers her women to resist even in small ways. One character quips, "They say a woman is the pillar of the home—but who builds pillars only to lock them in cages?" Such satirical remarks highlight the contradictions of cultural norms and give voice to a collective female frustration. Resistance, in Chughtai's hands, often takes the form of humour—laughter that punctures the solemnity of patriarchal authority.

At the same time, Chughtai acknowledges the costs of resistance. Her women often face loneliness, alienation, or ridicule. In All Alone, solitude weighs heavily on the protagonist, yet it remains preferable to the suffocation of complete conformity. In The Quilt, Begum Jaan's relationship with Rabbu must remain hidden, spoken only in whispers and seen only in shadows. Chughtai refuses to idealize resistance; she portrays it as fraught, partial, and difficult. Yet this very realism underscores her point: female identity is forged not in pure freedom but in the messy, painful negotiations of daily survival.

Through these depictions, Chughtai demonstrates that female identity is never silent, even when women themselves appear marginalized. Their silences, ironies, longings, and refusals all testify to their enduring presence. As she writes in The Invalid that Weakness is not voicelessness, sometimes it whispers more loudly than strength (Chughtai 113) Such moments reveal Chughtai's radical vision: women may be constrained, but they are never without identity, and never without the possibility of resistance.

In this way, Chughtai's fiction redefines female identity as dynamic, contested, and resilient. Whether through frailty, solitude, irony, or desire, her women assert individuality against patriarchal erasure. By portraying characters like the invalid who turns weakness into agency, the woman in Roots who seeks growth beyond tradition, and the protagonist of All Alone who embraces silence as defiance, Chughtai insists that women's selfhood cannot be extinguished. Identity, in her stories, is a constant negotiation between oppression and resistance, between silence and speech, between tradition and transformation. Through irony and fearless storytelling, she ensures that her women - though constrained - are never voiceless. Instead, they

emerge as complex individuals whose resilience challenges patriarchal structures and reclaim female identity as a living, evolving force.

Conclusion

IsmatChughtai's short stories are remarkable not only for their literary artistry but also for their fearless exploration of women's lives within the domestic sphere. By examining gender roles, desire, sexuality, and female identity, her fiction reveals how the household—often dismissed as a private, apolitical domain—functions as a site of power, repression, and transformation.

The stories analyzed—The Quilt, The Mole, The Homemaker, Touch-Me-Not, All Alone, Mother-in-Law, Roots, and The Invalid—show that domesticity is never neutral. It is charged with contradictions: a place of care and confinement, of repression and resistance, of silence and speech. Chughtai's characters embody these contradictions, living lives marked by longing, shame, defiance, and resilience. By giving voice to their experiences, Chughtai destabilizes patriarchal narratives and expands the possibilities of female subjectivity in literature.

In unveiling the domestic, Chughtai achieves more than provocation—she reimagines the very boundaries of women's existence. Her stories affirm that the personal is indeed political, and that within kitchens and bedrooms lie struggles as significant as those on the public stage. For this reason, her fiction continues to resonate across generations, offering enduring insights into the complexities of gender, desire, sexuality, and identity.

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