

Exploring L'écriture feminine through selected short stories of Doris Lessing, Ismat Chughtai, and Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract- This research paper presents a comparative study of selected short stories by Doris Lessing, Ismat Chughtai, and Maheswata Devi. Doris Lessing was a British-Zimbabwean, nobel prize winner author whose works varies from plays, novels to short stories. Whereas Ismat Chughtai was a Muslim writer of Indian origin who wrote short stories in Urdu. Mahaswata Devi was a Hindu writer of Indian origin who wrote in Bengali. The three women writers, despite being from different socio-cultural backgrounds shared similar observations when it came to the condition of women in society. The theory of le'criture feminine, as suggested by Helene Cixous, is applied to the works of the respective writers to see how these female writers dealt with various issues of women in their works. Their work highlights various socio-cultural factors that affected lives of women. The comparative study of various female characters portrayed by these writers reflects how these women effectively highlighted the mindsets of women as they dealt with the rules and regulations of society. The research also compares other aspects of short stories like plot of stories, a socio-cultural belief system that affected women negatively, and sexuality of women through the eyes of the respective writers. The paper will conclude how the writings of these women writers successfully contributed to the world of female writers who wrote about women.

Keywords: Feminism, women writing, patriarchy, tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Women have always struggled to find their place in society. Until the mid-twentieth century women had no identity outside the family structure. A woman is still not considered complete if she fails to play her role as a mother and a wife. The patriarchal structure of society exploits women for their ability to give birth and be a homemaker. To escape the patriarchal system women must write about their experiences. Voicing

women's experience through women help to bring a picture of women's sufferings more clearly in front of the world.

'Le'criture feminine' was a term given by Helene Cixous in her essay 'Laugh of The Medusa' which first appeared in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. It was later explored further by Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement in their book *The Newly Born Woman*. The concept of le'criture feminine refers to women writing about women. In the essay 'The Laugh of Medusa' Cixous boldly called out all women to "Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (Cixous 876). Cixous stressed this statement strongly because the writing genre has been heavily dominated by men. It has always been men describing women in their text and that's why women have ended up seeing themselves from a man's perspective. A woman's body and her sexuality have been labelled as something taboo in men's literature. We've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we've been made victims of the old fool's game (Cixous 885).

Cixous suggested that unless women take their bodies back from the literature written by men, their life and body will not be their own. A woman without a body is more like a shadow to a man who cannot fight. Such a woman is a false woman and needs to be killed through writing (Cixous 880). The word 'body' referred to both the literal bodies of women as well as the text written by women. So, Cixous boldly urged women to write more about their bodies to encourage individuality and regain their own bodies which has been kept away from them by a male-dominated society (Cixous 880). She related censoring the body to censoring the voice of women. By writing, women would "break out of the snare of silence" (Cixous 881)

and avoid women from getting “conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or a harem” (Cixous 881).

There have been many women writers in the nineteenth and twentieth century who wrote about women. To liberate the voice of women many writers devoted their works to the cause. Three such women writers were Doris Lessing, Ismat Chughtai, and Mahasweta Devi. In this paper, three short stories have been analysed to see how women characters have been portrayed in these stories and whether there are any similarities or dissimilarities between these characters. The three short stories are ‘To Room Nineteen’ by Doris Lessing, ‘The Homemaker’ by Ismat Chughtai, and ‘Breast Giver’ by Mahasweta Devi.

Doris Lessing, Ismat Chughtai, and Mahasweta Devi
Doris Lessing is one of the most prominent post-war writers in English. She was born in Persia in 1919 to British parents. She established herself as a talented young writer in 1950 with her first novel *The Grass is Singing*. In her lifetime she wrote many novels and short stories such as *Children of Violence*, *The Golden Notebook*, etc. which covered a wide range of social issues from the shallowness of colonial society, and politics of race to politics of gender. Her study of social and political issues and their representation in her works shows Lessing’s excellent critical observational skills. Her short story ‘To Room Nineteen’ shows the subtle functioning of a woman’s mind who struggles to find individuality in her marriage.

Ismat Chughtai was an Urdu writer who was born in 1915 into a middle-class Muslim family. She received her education from Aligarh Muslim University. She was a prominent member of the Progressive Writers Association and wrote many short stories. She came to the limelight when she wrote the short story ‘Lihaaf.’ The story revolves around women’s sexuality and Chughtai was charged with obscenity. Despite criticism, Chughtai continued her literary work and wrote many short stories that covered various social issues of her time like inter-faith marriage, the petty state of Dalit women, the duality of politicians, and corruption.

Mahasweta Devi was a well-known Bengali writer. She was born on 14 January 1926 in a culturally rich family of writers Manish Chandra Ghatak and Dharitri Devi. So, writing came naturally to her. Devi grew up

to become an activist and a writer. She used her literary talent to highlight the pathetic living conditions of indigenous (tribal) people. Her works such as *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977), *Choti Munda O Tara Tir* (1979), and collections like *Agnigarbha* (1979) were devoted to the cause. Her short story ‘Dropdi’ was one such effort to bring to light the condition of tribal people, especially women.

Even though the three writers came from different cultural backgrounds, there were some similarities in their observations when it came to the condition of women. In their short stories ‘To Room Nineteen,’ ‘The Homemaker’ and ‘Breast giver’ respectively, one can see that the conditions of women portrayed were not much different. Even though these three stories were set in three different cultural backgrounds, the conditions that the authors paint for women have many similarities.

Stories

Doris Lessing’s story ‘To Room Nineteen’ narrates the story of Susan Rawlings and Matthew Rawlings who used their practical intelligence when it came to making decisions about family life. Susan decided to quit her job and completely invest herself in family life for the sake of the kids. The story highlights what goes through the mind of a woman when she decides to invest her life in a marriage. Susan got married in her late twenties. Susan and Matthew enjoyed the initial years of their marriage by throwing parties and meeting friends. But as their marriage moved forward, it became monotonous.

Their life seemed to be like a snake biting its tail. (Lessing 397)

The monotony of life made them question their marriage. The conclusion that Susan came to was that it was Matthew’s love for Susan and Susan’s love for Matthew that provided meaning in the marriage (Lessing 398). Without love, there could be no family. However, the love faded away slowly. Matthew started to spend more time at work and parties while Susan was at home taking care of the children and the big white house. He even confessed once that he had slept with a woman. But Susan ignored that her husband was no longer in love with her and swept the issue under the rug to avoid further argument. Her intelligence did not allow her to entertain the issue, her

practical intelligence made her ignore the casual sweet afternoons her husband was having.

Meanwhile, her intelligence continued to assert that all was well. What if her Matthew did have an occasional sweet afternoon, the odd affair? For she knew quite well, except in her moments of aridity, that they were very happy, that the affairs were not important. (Lessing 401)

Susan's ignorance of the reality that her husband was not in love with her started to take a toll on her mental health. She started to see the big house and children as the entity that was growing on her. The children and the big house had started to become a burden on her. The unintelligent investment in a loveless family life pushed her mental health to a point where she committed suicide.

Ismat Chughtai's 'The Homemaker' is a story of a woman's love for running a house. Chughtai highlights the fact that a woman is a natural homemaker, but when she is trapped forcefully in the role of homemaker as a wife, then she starts to suffocate. The story offers a look at the traditional role of the wife. Lajo was a natural homemaker. She decided to live with Mirza because she fell in love with the house. So, her desire to run a house and turn it into a home was innate. But the moment she was labelled as a wife, she was made to live on certain terms and conditions in the house. Firstly, her name was changed to Fatima Kaneez. Secondly, Mirza asked her to always wear a tight churidar kurta instead of a skirt. Then she was asked not to fight with any man or curse. By marrying Lajo, in a way, Mirza owned her. After marriage people started to look at Lajo differently. When she was nobody's wife, everyone made advances toward her. But now that she was Mirza's wife, she had officially become Mirza's property. People did not look at her in the same way they used to look at her. Even Mirza's behaviour changed towards her.

Having installed her in the house, Mirza seemed to have forgotten about her existence. For weeks he would speak only in monosyllables. (Chughtai 90)

Lajo also understood that Mirza had started to visit courtesans again. He was no longer paying attention to Lajo's emotional needs. Her emotional and physical needs were as natural as her desire to be a homemaker. Her desire for running a house and satisfying her emotional and physical needs was as natural as Mirza's physical needs. But since she had become a

wife, ethics did not allow her to let any man other than her husband fulfill her. While the same ethics did allow Mirza to see other women. This created imbalance in the relationship. This imbalance turned marriage into a nightmare for Lajo. To escape the nightmare, Lajo turned to Mithwa, the only person who was interested in her after marriage.

When Mirza learned about Mithwa, he divorced Lajo. And the nightmare of marriage ended for her. Some weeks later she encountered Mirza and asked if she could come to his place again. Despite Mirza ignoring her question, Lajo went to Mirza's place and reclaimed her place as "the undisputed mistress" (Chughtai 90) of the house.

Mahasweta Devi's story 'Breast-Giver' represents how a woman gets exploited for her ability to give birth. The story's protagonist Jashoda was a natural mother. The motherly instinct came naturally to her. So, when her husband, Kangalicharan, became crippled she took the role of nurturer for him. She went to the Haldar family for help, whose car had crippled her husband. After some contemplation, the Haldar family acknowledged the huge milk-giving breasts of Jashoda and decides to turn her natural motherhood into professional motherhood. She got the job of breastfeeding the Haldar family's newborn babies so that the daughters-in-law of the family could maintain their figures. Jashoda spent most of her life staying pregnant and raising her own as well as breastfeeding the Haldar family's kids. But when her ability to give birth and breastfeed faded away with age, people left her. Neither Kangalicharan nor any of the kids whom she had breastfed, came to help her. At the end of the story, Jashoda died of breast cancer.

ANALYSES

In the three stories, one can see that the protagonist had a certain mindset when it came to marriage. Susan Rawlings was a modern housewife who believed that getting too emotional was impractical. For her, intelligence meant that one should not go deeper into the emotional side. Because her intelligence forbade emotions, that's why when she learned that her husband cheated on her she couldn't understand how to deal with the rush of emotions. Her intelligence told her to forgive her husband but the emotions kept overtaking her practical intelligence from time to time. She preferred to rather struggle in her mind to

understand the situation than confront her husband and fight about the infidelity. Her practical intelligence told her that “the whole thing was not important” (Lessing 400). But at the emotional level, she was angry about the incident. Every time her anger tried to come to the surface her intelligence made her think that “No, no, there is something wrong with this way of thinking, there must be” (Lessing 400). So, she calmed herself by telling herself that the flings of her husband were not that important because she was his wife. In her mind being a wife made her more important than her husband’s flings.

Well, if what we felt that afternoon was not important, nothing is important, because if it hadn’t been for what we felt, we wouldn’t be Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings with four children, et cetera, et cetera. The whole thing is absurd- for him to have come home and told me was absurd. For him not to have told me was absurd. For me to care or, for that matter, not to care, is absurd...and who is Myra Jenkins? Why no one at all. (Lessing 400)

The incident low-key left doubt in Susan’s mind that her husband often cheated on her. She knew that Matthew’s love for her, the love around which the whole extraordinary structure of the family revolved (Lessing 398) was no longer there. But she kept believing that sticking to marriage was necessary. She believed that children needed her to a certain age and her husband loved her despite her affairs. She kept justifying her marriage and continued to invest herself in it. She consoled herself by thinking that one day when children would grow up and start going to school then she could go back to the old life that she had before marriage.

Susan’s behaviour towards her marriage reflects her mindset. She wanted to stick to the family and marriage despite there being nothing for her at the emotional level. Her belief system, which was a result of social programming, made her commit to her role as a mother and a wife. She accepted her cheating husband and jobless state but did not give up on her role as a mother and a wife. She continued to invest herself wholeheartedly in the marriage. Her blind investment in a loveless life mentally exhausted Susan to the point where she became delusional and committed suicide.

Similarly, it can be seen in the short story ‘Breast-Giver’ that Jashoda took up the responsibility of nurturer of the family and single-handedly raised her

children as well as the Haldar family’s children. Jashoda was the product of a society where women are programmed to think that being a mother is a very divine thing and the concept of “Sati-Savitri-Sita through Nirupa Roy and Chand Osmani” (Devi 41) was still alive. This programming portrayed each “man the holy child and each woman the divine mother” (Devi 42). That is why Jashoda’s motherly love overflowed for Kangalicharan as much as for her children (Devi 42). This programming made Jashoda an “unreasonable, unreasoning and unintelligent” (Devi 41) woman who was devoted to her husband and loved her children. The programming blinded her from seeing that she was being exploited for her milk-giving breasts by both her family and the Haldar family. Her motherly love for her husband blinded her from seeing any fault in her husband, instead, she wanted “to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest” (Devi 42). Haldar family also exploited Jashoda’s milk-giving breasts so that the daughters-in-law of the Haldar family could maintain their shape and enjoy wearing European-cut blouses. Jashoda gave 25-30 years of service to the Haldar family as a mother by profession and breastfed 50 children out of which 20 were her own. But despite her years of dedicated service to the Haldar family and her own, she was left alone to die of breast cancer. In the end, her exploited motherhood laughed at her through the sores on her breast “with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes” (61)

In contrast to Susan and Jashoda, Chughtai’s protagonist of the story is slightly different because she was an orphan. Unlike Susan and Jashoda, Lajo was not raised in a decent society. She grew up alone. She became independent when she learned how she could use her body to get what she wanted. “She had no mother or grandmother to teach her what was right and what was wrong” (Chughtai 82). There was no one to put ideas in her head as to what a complete woman should be like. So, she never got programmed to think of marriage as an essential thing for a woman. Her mind was not used to the social customs the way Susan and Jashoda’s were. So, her desires and thoughts were natural and not directed by social programming. When Mirza insisted on marrying Lajo, she couldn’t understand the need for it. “The need for marriage escaped Lajo” (Chughtai 87). But she did have desires that came naturally to women, like having a home. When she met Mirza and realized that there was no

mistress in his house, she immediately fell in love with the house.

For Lajo it was love at first sight. She was in love- not with Mirza but with the house. Without a mistress, it was as good as hers. (Chughtai 82)

When Mirza married Lajo and started to visit courtesans again, Lajo didn't mind it. But the thought of sharing a house with another woman made her furious. "She could share Mirza with another woman, but as far as her home was concerned, she was the undisputed mistress" (Chughtai 90).

Lajo's other desires involved having someone to love her. When Mirza was interested in her and fulfilled her emotional, as well as physical needs, she did not look at any other man. She stayed committed to Mirza. But as soon as Mirza got married, he started to take Lajo for granted. "A man can do anything to please his mistress, but the wife is altogether a different kettle of fish" (Chughtai 90). So, Mirza started to visit courtesans again and spent more time with his friends. Mirza's negligence of Lajo's needs pushed Lajo to offer her love to her neighbour Mithwa. Since Lajo wasn't programmed with the concepts of a righteous woman, she did not feel anything wrong in satisfying her emotional needs through Mithwa. When Mirza learned about Lajo's affair, he divorced her, and Lajo was finally set free.

Lajo heaved a sigh of relief as she heard about the divorce. It was as though a heavy load was off her shoulders. The marriage did not suit her. (Chughtai 92) Lajo's behaviour reflected the natural desires of women which are repressed due to social norms. Through Lajo's character, one can see what women naturally desire. The desire of running a house and having someone to respond to her emotional and physical needs is natural. Where Susan completely ignored her emotions to focus on what needed to be done to keep the marriage going, Jashoda was programmed not to think about anything apart from her role as a mother and a wife. But Lajo understood what she wanted and how to get it without a doubt.

Both Susan and Jashoda were exploited because of the way they were programmed to think. It was because of a lack of social programming that Lajo managed to survive the ending of the story whereas Susan and Jashoda died.

Matthew understood Susan's practical intelligence and felt secure with her. He realized that Susan would never leave him because this is how she functioned.

That is why he continued to take her for granted. In the same way, Kanganalicharan was aware of the way his wife was devoted to him. He let her wife use her body to provide for him. In the later years of Jashoda when she lost her ability to give birth and consequently became of no use for Kanganalicharan, he abandoned her. Even when he learned about cancer and the doctor told him that Jashoda won't survive, "he put her out of mind almost painlessly" (Devi 67). Mirza also took Lajo for granted after marriage. He thought that through marriage he had "tamed and reformed" (Chughtai 89) her. But Lajo was not programmed for being a wife which led to their divorce.

Another similarity that we see in the character of Susan and Jashoda is a lack of individuality. Since both were programmed to stick to their responsibilities as a wife and a mother, they found it difficult to have an identity outside marriage.

Susan tried her best to find alone time after her twins started to go to school, but failed. Her mind constantly stayed occupied with the activities of the home. Her frustration rose to such a level that she started to rent a room in hotels to spend some alone time. Her frustration grew even more when she failed to find some alone time at the hotels. When Susan found out that her husband was spying on her activities, she got some hope that he might be jealous, which would mean that he still loved her. Instead, Matthew doubted that she might be dating someone and wanted to use it as an excuse to escape their marriage. Susan lied about having an affair so that the marriage could end. When it was for sure that the marriage had come to an end, Susan didn't know what to do or how to have her life back that she had before marriage. So, she committed suicide. The incident shows how deeply Susan had ingrained herself in the kids and the house. The idea of not having a family made her clueless because she had no other place to go. Suicide was the result of her failure to find the identity that she used to have before her marriage.

Similarly, we see with Jashoda that she spent her life raising children and providing for her husband. Her husband and kids were everything she ever cared for. But after she lost her ability to bear children and consequently, provide for her family, everyone left her alone. Kanganalicharan told her to go to the Haldar family as she had done nothing for the family. Haldar's family told Jashoda to go to her husband as they no longer required her services as a breastfeeder. Jashoda

had no life as an individual outside the family, and as a result, she started to pray to Lord Shiva for death. Her prayers were answered when she found out that she had breast cancer.

Lajo, however, was a different case. She grew up alone and had a life before Mirza. She neither expected Mirza to stay committed nor found it a compulsion to stay committed to Mirza. Her lack of social programming made it easier to survive after divorce and get back to her old life. Her lack of any belief system that made women seriously invest in family life, saved her.

CONCLUSION

Even though the three stories seem completely different, there are some striking similarities. In the three stories, the protagonist gets exploited for the quality they possessed. Whether it is Susan's practical intelligence, Jashoda's ability to give birth and breastfeed, or Lajo's ability to efficiently run a house. In the three stories, protagonists give their best in family life but end up being alone and abandoned. The portrayal of husbands is also similar. It cannot be a coincidence that three different storytellers from three different cultural backgrounds ended up portraying similar conditions of women in marriage. It is not a coincidence because the exploitation of women within the institution of marriage is a reality for many women around the world.

Doris Lessing, Ismat Chughtai, and Mahasweta Devi manage to capture the reality of women in their short stories. Where male-dominated society makes the role of women as deeply committed mothers and wife to be divine, these writers show how the very roles are used against women. Through their works, they indirectly question the blind investment of women in their marriage. By portraying the reality of married life for women, these authors have done justice to women's voices and have excellently contributed to the killing of false women.

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