

Hello and welcome to this analysis

of Ismat Chughtai's 'The Quilt.'

It is a short story that has been

translated from Urdu into English by M.

Asaduddin. I'm Prema Rocha

from Saint Xavier's College.

In this session we will be introduced

to the author Ismat Chughtai, we

will have an overview of the story,

we will look at the controversy

that surrounded the story;

we'll consider the themes and

style and techniques and reflect

on a few points in the conclusion.

At the end of this session you will

understand the thematic concerns

emerging from this short story.

You will identify the stylistic elements

prevalent in the story and you will

appreciate the wealth of writing

in different languages of India.

Let us get to know the author a little bit.

Ismat Chughtai was born in 1915.

What really distinguishes this

writer is her independent spirit,

and her strong will. Even as a little girl.

she was very independent minded

and where girls in India pre-

independence got married very young.

She wanted to be educated.

She was one of the first few Muslim

women in pre independent India who

went on to do her Bachelor of Arts her Bachelor of Education and she

even got a job as head mistress of a school in Aligarh.

She moved to Bombay and got married

to Shahid Latif, the filmmaker.

She wrote a lot of scripts for

Bollywood and many of them went

on to be box office hits.

Ismat Chughtai was influenced by the Progressive

Writers Movement in the 1930s,

and writers like Rashid Jahan

Writers like Shaw and Chekhov

exerted an influence on her style.

She has been recognized with numerous awards,

including the Padma Shri in 1976.

She is one of the four pillars

of the Urdu short story,

along with writers like Sadat Hasan Manto.

She died in Bombay in 1991.

Let us get an overview of the story.

This is a very interesting

story by a fascinating writer.

Have you ever made shadows on the wall

in the night like an eagle or a deer?

Well, the story begins with a lady who

in the night is looking at the shadow her quilt is casting on the wall and it

seems to remind her of an elephant. Now

that takes her back to a time in her

childhood when she had to spend a week

with an aunt and this story is told

from the point of view of that child.

In the story you have the

protagonist Begum Jaan.

She is married to Nawab Sahib

and Rabu is a maidservant. Now we

are told by this little child that

Begum Jaan was married to this man.

Her parents were poor,

so she was married to a man advanced in age and he had a strange hobby.

He kept open house for young handsome

boys and paid for all their expenses.

The writer is hinting at his

non-traditional orientation.

The nawab married Begum Jaan

and forgot all about her.

She was left to her quarters

to lead a lonely life.

She tried everything to get the

attention of her husband; from

religious texts to black magic.

But nothing worked.

And she had almost given up on life.

And then suddenly something happens

that turns her life around. We find  
out that it is Rabu the maidservant  
who has a special recipe and she keeps  
massaging this Begum Jaan the entire day.

Now the young girl,

the narrator,

finds his behaviour very strange,

In the night the young girl who is

staying there with her aunt for a week

because her mother has gone to Agra and

left her with Begum Jaan as punishment;

she sleeps next to the bed

of Begum Jaan. In the night

she wakes up and finds that the

quilt is casting strange shadows and she

feels an elephant is struggling in the quilt.

And one night she puts on the light to find

that the quilt rises a little bit by a foot,

and the story ends with the line,

“Good God I gasped and

sunk deeper into my bed.”

The story ends at this point.

You will be interested to know that

this story created an uproar when it

was first published and Ismat Chughtai

was summoned to the Lahore court,

but she refused to apologize

and won the case.

However,

Chughtai feels that this story cast

a shadow over everything that

she was to write subsequently.

Let's look at the themes in this story.

Have you heard of the English

idiom 'the elephant in the room'?

It refers to a subject that is huge.

An elephant cannot be ignored in a room,

so it's a huge subject,

but it's uncomfortable and people

are not ready to talk about it.

Ismat Chughtai wrote about female

sexuality at a time when it

was not only very bold,  
but also very dangerous. Under  
the British Raj,  
homosexuality was a criminal offense,  
so it was quite a daring theme  
to have in a patriarchal society,  
a woman who wants to find her own desires  
and pleasures and puts them uppermost.

Another significant theme in this  
text is that of societal oppression.

You have social pressures like  
marriage where people feel that  
they have to get married to please  
society and therefore it seems  
like the nawab in this story as well  
as the Begum Jaan are victims of  
such a kind of social convention.

The lady, the Begum Jaan  
finds that her marriage is not fulfilled.

And in turn,  
they both become victimizers the nawab

and Begum Jaan unbecome victimizers and in turn you have other people being exploited.

Critics have pointed out that even the ratio between Begum Jaan and Rabu is not one of equals because one is powerful and the other is powerless.

One is the employer and the other is the employee.

So it is a complicated dynamic.

Another important theme in this text, in this story, is that of child abuse.

You have one very uncomfortable scene where Begum Jaan, when Rabu is away, tries to find the little girl as a substitute for Rabu,

There is an uncomfortable scene where she tries to molest the child.

The child tries to struggle and go away, but it is to no avail.

She coerces her in that moment.



So critics have felt that child abuse needs to be regarded in this text as one salient theme.

And the final thing to talk about in this text is resistance.

It's very interesting that it's a woman centric text and the women are given agency. Begun Jaan looks at fulfilling her own desires and pleasures.

Similarly, one character with a lot of spunk in the text is a child narrator.

She is somebody who, even as a child, when her sisters were looking at 'aashiqs,' she is looking at getting into trouble and fighting with everyone.

And even later, when she subjected to abuse in this house, she speaks up. She wants to go, she cries, she throws a fuss.

And the writer invests the characters – the women characters, with a lot of agency.

Let us look at the style and techniques in this story.

The narrator is a child

and this gives the writer a fascinating

chance to look at such an important,

significant, and ignored theme; because a

child's vocabulary and lexicon allows

her to take on this weighty theme. It is also tackled with a lot of

humour and that makes it a sugar-coated pill that's easy to swallow.

The quilt in this story is very symbolic.

The quilt is like a cover that

covers the secrets in society; in

this household and in society.

And the layers of the quilt hints

to the rich layers of the story.

And finally, in conclusion,

in this story 'The Quilt'

we have a fantastic example of how

fiction can influence real life.

This story was based on

a real Begum in Aligarh.

And when Ismat Chughtai actually met

her in real life, she was mortified, she was terrified to meet this lady,

but instead the lady comes and

gives her a big hug and tells Ismat Chughtai that the

story changed her life,

because after that story was published,

she divorced her husband went on to marry again,

and had a child.

Isn't that an interesting end?

Chughtai was way ahead of her time in the

issues that she dealt with and her

work is celebrated for its brutal honesty.

In fact, today her work is still impacting and

influencing other works in popular culture.

For example, Deepa Mehta's movie Fire has also been

inspired by Lihaaf or the quilt,

and you also have movies like Dedh Ishqia

that have been influenced by the quilt.

Thank you.