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## South Asian Fiction and Marital Agency of Muslim Wives

By Hafiza Nilofar Khan<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This essay deals with the treatment of wifely agency as delineated by three South Asian women writers: Ismat Chughtai, Tehmina Durrani and Selina Hossain. It tries to prove that the Muslim wives as projected in the fiction of these writers from the patriarchal societies of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are not uniformly oppressed victims of socio-religious discourses. Though often their bodies are subjected to rigorous discipline, docility and even battery, these wives still demonstrate sufficient agential powers to resist the status quo and chalk out a fresh trope of identity for themselves. Their domestic agency, sexual agency and decision-making powers, are some of the agential strengths that are analyzed in this paper, along with their bargaining and networking skills. Under their "Micro Mechanisms of Power," gossip and indifference are also depicted as powerful tools for wives to retaliate against oppressive conditions in marriage.

*Keywords:* South Asian fiction, women writers, gender, marriage, wife, agency, net-working, gossip, silence, resistance, body, and sexual empowerment

### Introduction

Marriage as depicted in the fiction of South Asian women writers such as, Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991), Selina Hossain (1947- ) and Tehmina Durrani (1953- ) is often not an association of equal individuals in the patriarchal societies of their respective countries. The general picture of a typical Muslim wife that emerges from the writings of these authors is rather dismal. It shows wives primarily as victims of socio-religious customs and legal mechanisms that are based on the patriarchal societies of twentieth century India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The short stories and novels of these authors depict many wives who are turned into silent receptacles of their respective traditions and robbed of their courage to bring about positive changes in their lives. The bodies of these wives are often projected as sites of discipline, docility and surveillance no matter what language they speak, or which race they belong to. Sometimes they are literally marked in the name of Muslim marital rites, and put through

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humiliation for inadequacy to produce a son. Some of these wives also have to endure physical battery, incest, extra marital affair or polygamy as their husbands try to stifle their existential conditions and efforts of self definition. Indeed, the works of Chughtai, Hossain and Durrani provide innumerable instances of traditionally orchestrated institutional discourses and practices that maintain the regulation of wives' bodies, irrespective of age, education, location and class.

It is however, not the only aim of Chughtai, Hossain and Durrani to identify wives' bodies as the prime locus of masculinist power in different social, economic and historical settings. Despite the many repressive socio-religious mechanisms that militate against the concept of wives' bodily freedom and self-fulfillment, these authors do not project the wife's subordinate status as entirely monolithic. Indeed, a wife's capacity for autonomous action is limited, and the number of wives who know how to negotiate the mandates of wifeness and counter the deeply ingrained, pervasive social expectations of marriage is also very limited, yet not all wives in their fiction are portrayed as entirely repressed, passive, demure and obedient individuals. Despite different kinds of vulnerabilities or ordeals within the context of objectification and domestic violence, these authors also project wives with considerable subversive agency to resist patriarchal power, and to negotiate their position within the institutions of oppression. These wives use different strategies or measures to reframe the patriarchal values, and to refute the marital assumptions responsible for their tribulations. They also have considerable ability to improve their lot, and challenge the fixed trope of identity that is attached to them as wives. By addressing these not so prominent perhaps, but definitely existing aspects of Muslim wives' personality traits, Chughtai, Hossain and Durrani create a theoretical space in their writings for articulation of their subject position and agency. In fact, their fiction can be regarded as a template for the psycho-sexual changes that have occurred in the lives of 20<sup>th</sup> century Sub-Continental wives. These writers' attitudes, views, evaluations and representation of a wife's body are different from their predecessors because in their modern feminist thought a wife's body is also the site of abundant energy, desire, pleasure and innovation, allowing the woman to follow the trajectory of resistance and empowerment.

This paper is an attempt to highlight the alternative modes of empowerment used by wives to challenge the technologies of subjection embedded in patriarchal marital discourses. Here I analyze a few overt and covert everyday agencies that the fictional wives of Chughtai, Hossain and Durrani muster in order to negate the negative impact of marriage. According to Ashcroft et al, the editors of Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies, the term agency in contemporary theory refers to "the ability to act or perform an action" (8). The book further defines agency as something that in contemporary theory, "hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways in which their identity has been constructed" (8). I divide the different kinds of acts or indicators of the fictional wives' autonomy into the following three categories: 1. Domestic Agency, 2. Sexual Agency and 3. "Micro Mechanisms of Power." Under Domestic Agency, I discuss (a) a wife's decision-making power, (b) bargaining skills and domestic labor, and (c) networking. Sexual Agency covers the ability to use or control one's sexuality and fertility. In the section called "Micro Mechanisms of Power," a term coined by Harris Colette, I include gossip and indifference as powerful tools for wives to retaliate against oppressive conditions in marriage (268).

## **(1) Domestic Agency:**

### **(a) Independent decision-making power**

Ismat Chughtai, one of India's most prolific women writers, has set many examples from her personal life as a married woman that reflect some of her fictional wives' independent and bold characteristics. Chughtai married Shahid Latif, a film director, and a man four years her junior against the wishes of her family. Though she collaborated in many movies with him, she also had her own social and moral agendas about which she was extremely passionate, and did not tolerate anyone, including her husband, to criticize them unjustly. Chughtai's non-traditional view of marriage, formed from a very young age, is well reflected in her autobiography, Caravan Dust. In this piece of writing she expresses her love for freedom of expression as an individual, and her open repulsion of the subservience that marriage often entails for women. Chughtai tells her sister in simple words: "following the orders of another human being I don't think I'll be able to tolerate that, Ala Bi. I have spent my life protesting against the tyranny of elders. I want to make my own way in life. The very idea of becoming an eastern, virtuous wife fills me with loathing" (Ismat 76). Chughtai fears that a husband might stifle her emotional effervescence and prove to be nothing more than a huge obstacle to her development as an individual. She cannot imagine herself as a wife of a Nawab or Muslim elite man in particular, since she feels that this type of man will expect her to see him as a God, and force her to give in to every one of his whims. Prior to her marriage with Latif, she warns him: "All my life I have broken and cast off the chains which have restrained me; I can't change now. It won't suit me to try and be an obedient and sacrificing wife" (Ismat 260). Even after her marriage she sets her husband's mind at ease by saying that there is no compulsion for staying together, and he can feel free to divorce her if they cannot get along for any reason. Throughout her married life Chughtai demonstrates a headstrong nature. Inwardly she believes that even if her husband ever divorces her, people will think that it was she who left him because of her uncompromising, independent nature. Her friend and literary contemporary, Saadat Hasan Manto comments on her independence in these words:

Ismat is thoroughly stubborn. She is by nature rigid, just like a child. She begins with not accepting any rule in life, any natural law. At first she refused to marry. When she was persuaded to it, she refused to be a wife. She gradually reconciled herself to becoming a wife but she did not want to become a mother. She goes through a lot of suffering but she persists in her stubbornness. I believe that this too, is her way through which, by confronting the reality of life, or in fact by colliding against it, she tries to understand it. . . This peculiar stubbornness or refusal to accept is also generally evident in Ismat's male and female characters. (Ismat 163)

Mantoo's analysis of Chughtai's bold and dynamic personal ideology helps catch its reflection in the lives of her fictional wives. Drawing from her own experiences as well as from the experiences of other women in her family and community, Chughtai portrays wives as feisty and resilient when faced with traditional familial and social norms. Having both mind and body as locus of their agency, these wives establish the fact that not all of them are uniformly silenced receptacles of tradition. In "Progressive Literature and I," the author writes: "I projected a female character in my stories who refused to live by old values, that is, false ideas of shame and honour, one who was not prepared to sacrifice her life for the sake of a mere show of so-called

respectability of her family or 'khandan'" (Ismat 129-130). In keeping with the writer's own view of her non-monolithic characters, in her Introduction Shukrita Paul Kumar writes about the women in Chughtai's fiction in these words:

Questioning gender inequalities throughout her life, she accords the women of her stories either the same posture of defiance or she lays bare the oppressive hypocrisy and pretensions of her society in its treatment of women. Her stories expose manipulations and strategies employed by women for power in a family or they show how women may oppose other women. Or else, they showcase women who boldly decide to become rebels. (Ismat 13)

Kumar relates the way Chughtai conveys lived experiences and stories, particularly of the wives, in order to uncover a world hidden behind the veil. This world was mostly silent in the Urdu literature written by her male predecessors. Her intense desire to salvage the dignity of the wives as human beings and conceptualize their ability to demand recognition and personal fulfillment shocked the conservative people of the North Indian Muslim society in the 40s and 50s. Yet, with an indomitable zeal, Chughtai's pen produces story after story that stages wives of different potentials and abilities to the center, and grants her the covetable position of one of the pioneering feminists of the Sub-Continent. Wazir Agha's comments on Chughtai's women further reiterate the fact that she was deliberately projecting strong wife characters who knew how to evaluate and discard the outmoded marital traditions, while selectively embracing new ideas of self-empowerment and survival. According to Agha: "Somewhere in the constitutional make-up of each of Ismat Chughtai's female characters, exists a woman who is not merely a nameless adjunct of the household machinery, but who, while asserting her independence, shakes to the core, if not demolishes, time-honored values and customs" (Ismat 194). The list of authoritative, enterprising and individualistic wives who are the sole decision makers in their family is long in Chughtai's fiction.

In Ismat Chughtai's novella, *The Wild One*, Mataji provides an instance of those types of Indian wives who hold the power of decision making in their children's matrimonial alliances, and their husband's day to day affairs. Raja Sahib, her husband, may be the official head of the family, but it is his wife who has the ultimate say in matters of her son's marriage. Indeed, in her rejection of her maid Asha as her daughter-in-law, Mataji comes across as a classist, but as a mother and wife concerned for the well-being of her children, and her family's honor, her decision making powers rule and deserve consideration. Several reasons can be detected behind Mataji's agency for decision making. Her usurpation of the role of the family head as the decision maker is, as Colette suggests in the case of some Tajikistani Muslim wives, facilitated by the fact that she had more responsibility at home at an earlier age than her brothers. This sense of responsibility helps her control the younger generation of children in her own family more dexterously than her husband who had a more carefree and irresponsible life than hers as a child. Like the Tajikistani Muslim wives whom Colette calls, the "hegemonic women," Mataji's position within the family has been secured also by dint of the fact that she has mothered sons. Although son preference is detrimental for wives, as a mother of sons who are family heirs with a greater claim on their father's property, and a source of dowry, women like Mataji feel more entrenched in their marital household, and enjoy greater agency than a mother of daughters. The *begumati zaban* or the distinctive idiom of the upper class women that Mataji uses provides her yet another power base. With its sharp, idiomatic and witty style, its pithiness of expression or

euphemism, and curse words, this idiom that the courtesans of Mataji's times also used, was fit to prick the conscience of her men. Mataji uses this special dialect to occasionally deflate her husband's male chauvinistic activities. Indeed, there is no overt conceptualization of Mataji as head of family, yet there is a tacit acceptance of her place as the final decision maker of the family by all its members.

More examples can be cited from the fiction of Chughtai of wives who enjoy decision making powers in their marital homes. In her short story, "Poison," Chughtai depicts Mrs. Nu'maan as another upper class Indian Muslim wife who uses the sharp and witty *begumati zuban* with its smart repartees as a weapon to pull out the deeply buried secrets and past love affairs in her husband's life. Mrs. Nu'maan repudiates her primary role as a homemaker and mother, and decides to devote most of her time and energy to public service. She is interested in human rights issues and gives lectures on ways of alleviating poverty and spreading women's education. Besides her interest in politics, she also paints and plays tennis; occupations that were considered strictly male oriented in her times. Her husband contends with her long absences without complaint since she is a source of financial security for him: her father had given him his job, and provided a handsome dowry. Though her extreme disinterest in domestic responsibilities, and her hatred of children present Mrs. Nu'maan as a rather comic and idiosyncratic character at times, she is indeed one of Chughtai's wife characters who are trend-setters in many ways. A rebel against matrimonial orders in many ways, Mrs Nu'maan brings to mind Wazir Agha's evaluation of Chughtai's female characters in general: "The importance of Ismat Chughtai's female characters lies in the fact that they demonstrate the moving away from the category of stereotypes and in doing so inspire the readers to realize themselves" (Ismat 200). Agha holds that in Chughtai's times, for women to eschew typically feminine roles, mannerisms and vocations and to adopt masculine occupations and dress codes such as, getting a paid job outside the house, riding horses, playing outdoor games and wearing shirts and pants was quite shocking and considered as rebellious. According to the critic, although today these acts are not necessarily deemed as radical or subversive, in a 40s India they surely were. In her personal life Chughtai wrote fiction, directed and acted in movies, played tennis in bloomers, and smoked cigarettes - all of which were still considered to be primarily masculine preoccupations. A very feisty wife herself, Chughtai portrays most of her favorite wife characters as aggressive go-getters. Krishan Chander sees their zest, force and rebellion aptly reflected in Chughtai's narrative style, about which he comments:

One aspect of her stories that strikes the reader is the overpowering speed of the narrative structure, that is, its movement, pace and vibrations. . . . this extraordinary speed is a clarion call: Awake, arise, get into action . . . the Hindustani woman has finally woken up, refreshed and invigorated. All set to eliminate the suffering of her past, she plans to launch upon a more spirited and active existence! The swift pace of her narrative then, is almost a projection of the new life that she visualizes for women. (Ismat 175)

Chughtai's deep friendship with Progressive writers like Chandar, Manto and Ali Sardar Jafri and her close association with famous Indian directors and actors of her time influenced her writing as did the fact that during her era India had just attained independence. In the 30s Chughtai came to Bombay and worked with Shahed Latif, her future husband, for Bombay Talkie, a film industry. Later the couple launched their own film company, "Filmina." The

desire in women to break free from rigid social and familial conventions is the theme of many of these films. Although Chughtai largely adopted the point of view of the Progressive writers, she was by no means limited by their rigid communism and decision to write only about the peasants and laborers. All classes of housewives who strive to escape from the social tether and find unique voice deck her fiction.

Like Chughtai, Durrani (1951- ) also applauds wives who acquire the power to analyze their situation and examine their options, instead of hesitating to articulate their problems, or to question authority. Like her Indian counterpart again, through her autobiography as well as her fiction, she tries to inspire Pakistani wives to regain their voice inside their marital homes. Although her writings are quoted primarily as examples of Muslim wives' subjugation and oppression, they also depict wifely agency in terms of decision making power, and handling of domestic confrontations. In her autobiography, The Feudal Lord, once Durrani realizes that her husband Mustafa Khar deserted his previous wives because they have been weak and submissive, she tries to be less affected by his cruel treatments, and challenges him in open battle. Eventually learning to maneuver their fights onto his territory she writes,

The change in me was slow but sure. I had evolved. I was no longer the timid, docile, self-effacing little girl that he married. I was becoming a woman. I felt that I had to be heard in order for him to realise when he was wrong. I obeyed whatever he would impose on me but there was now a difference. It seemed that I performed under duress. I had developed a look which conveyed defiance and disagreement. Mustafa was caught on the wrong foot. He had to reassess his strategy and evolve new tactics to cope with my diffidence. (My Feudal Lord 79)

Durrani gradually musters the courage to make decisions about her own life, and make them known to her husband. She even engages in physical skirmishes with her husband. She narrates a couple of incidents when she surprises her husband by being as aggressive as him in her behavior. Once when he pulls her by the hair and swings her around, using his favorite threat to break every bone in her body, she retaliates by flinging at him the utensil full of steaming food that she had been tending over the stove. He is shocked, and burnt, but the moment he raises his hand again she pushes him back and threatens to kill him with a knife. In her words, "There was power and conviction in my tone. The days of appeasement were over. I had declared war" (90). Indeed, Durrani's decision to stand against her husband's battery was not formed overnight; for many years she had to suffer unspeakable humiliation in the hands of her husband who tortured her unmindful of the presence of servants, and irrespective of the opinion of her friends and relatives. Among other things, her education in English Medium schools, and her experience of living in London contribute towards her eventual transformation as a decision maker in life.

When Durrani narrates the incident of chopping off her long beautiful tresses in her autobiography, her own decision-making power as a wife is clearly expressed once again. Khar was fascinated with Durrani's straight long hair, and told her never to cut or even trim it. Once he wrongs Durrani with his extra-marital affair, she decides to chop off her locks out of vengeance, and also out of a strong need to stop her objectification in the hands of her husband. She describes her compulsion in these words: "I woke up one morning with a strange need to get rid of this object of his desire" (26). Durrani loved her hair as well, and considered it to be "the jewel of (her) crown"; however, in order to control matters of her own body at least, she gets her

hair cut to shoulder length (27). The act of cutting her hair relieves her of a huge psychological and moral burden of giving in to each of her husband's whims and desires. She expresses her sense of relief and mitigation in these words: ". . . as the scissors snipped away I felt Mustafa's heavy pressure recede. It was as if the exorcism was working. I was no longer possessed by this evil spirit" (26-7). For her husband, this subversive act holds instant repercussions. He realizes that his wife is serious, and he makes instant dramatic efforts to win back her confidence. In order to keep up her husband's public image as a Muslim political leader, Durrani had started wearing mostly white cotton dresses and silver jewelry instead of gold. For the same reason she had also started putting her 'dupatta' on her head but gradually she renounced these dress codes in order to free herself from imposed artificiality. Her brief career in modeling and her picture on the cover of Marbella magazine after divorcing her husband bespeak of her independent decision-making powers.

Hossain (1947- ) similarly believes that wives should muster autonomy in the decision making process of their household, and in her fiction recasts roles set for Sub-Continental Muslim wives. Married twice in her personal life, she makes no secret of the fact that she too had to strive hard to establish her position as an individual within each marital relationship. In a personal interview she narrates how, during the early days of her second marriage, she had been negotiating for the sake of her own peace and happiness by turning over her entire income into the hands of her second husband, who accepted her with two daughters from her first marriage. Eventually she is able to redefine her habitual ways of relating to herself, and escape essential categories of 'wife' in her second marriage; however, Hossain is aware of the fact that since a whole structure of material and psychological control is set up to support male dominance within the institution of marriage, it is often very difficult for wives to break out of the structural constraints and create a new way of living.

In "Motijan's Daughters," Hossain presents a strong and persistent housewife in Motijan who has to struggle hard to achieve the power of decision-making. At regular intervals Gulnur, Motijan's mother-in-law, and her husband, Abul ostracize Motijan for the dowry that her father had promised but failed to give at the time of the wedding. On one occasion Gulnur grabs Motijan by the hair and ties a rope around her neck. She then fastens the rope to a bamboo pole and leaves Motijan there for the whole day without any food. In the evening she drags her out near the pond and sarcastically orders her to feed on grass. Motijan feels utterly humiliated, but decides to be strong. Though Gulnur, is a very dominating woman who does not want to give up her own authority, Motijan soon learns how to defy her and bargain for her space within the confines of her marital home. When the next time her brother comes to visit, and assures her that her father and him are trying their best to get the watch and the cycle that was promised to her husband, Motijan forbids him to bother about those things. Since her father has already become a liar and a cheat in the eyes of her husband and mother-in-law, and since she is treated like an animal in their household, she does not see any reason for them to raise money for her dowry. Motijan's decision to release her natal family from the burden of having to pay for her is an innovative and courageous step for a Bangladeshi village wife.

## **1. Domestic Agency:**

### **(b) Ability to negotiate for domestic labor**

Hossain's character, Motijan asserts her self-worth and makes independent decisions in life mainly because of the domestic labor she provides by cooking, cleaning, making fuel for fire,



feeding the cows, and doing many other chores around the house. Despite Motijan's contributions and skills as a housewife, Gulnur neglects her daughter-in-law's worth, and stereotypically characterizes her household labor as trivial, dispensable and valueless. Since Motijan's labor in the house cannot be strictly defined in economic terms, Gulnur does not consider it to be 'real work,' or value it. This omission by Gulnur can be understood better in light of Nilufar Parveen's observations: "Women's household work remains unrecognized, unquantified and invisible. National Labour Force Survey also reflects this bias. Non-recognition of household work shows almost half the population as unemployed and inactive" (113). Parveen regrets the fact that in many "third world" countries including Bangladesh, women's household work is not only considered "non-economic," but also "inferior" or "low-status" work (114). Because of lack of national-level recognition of a wife's domestic labor, wives like Motijan are neglected not only by men but also by women themselves. Hossain's Bangladeshi wives, however, fast learn multiple strategies to obtain due household benefits in lieu of their domestic care and labor.

It does not take Motijan long to gather the courage to demand the value of the household chores and services that she renders for her mother-in-law and her husband despite their injustices towards her. When after spending an entire afternoon cleaning the cowshed and making cow dung cakes without any word, Motijan is forced to eat grass by Gulnur because she wants to punish her daughter-in-law for her 'bad behavior,' Motijan protests vehemently: "I am a servant in this house. I work for my food. I don't ask it for free. You have to give me food. Don't people give food to their servants?" (109). She then makes a dexterous move by bypassing Gulnur and entering the kitchen to look for some food. Gulnur stands transfixed throughout the time Motijan wolfs down the food. "This defeat of the tough woman was unexpected," exclaims the narrator. As for Motijan, the narrator comments: "A deep sense of satisfaction flowed like a Mahananda inside her, springing from misty depths" (110). Motijan faces many obstacles in her way to self-fulfillment, but she fights relentlessly for her rights as a wife who provides domestic labor to her husband's family. The reasons behind her success are similar to the ones that Harris Colette provides for Tajikistani Muslim wives' success in obtaining domestic agency. According to Colette:

After leaving their parent's home on marriage, they are placed in an alien environment, very often with little or no emotional support either from in-laws or husband, and are thus forced to develop inner resources, both for their own sakes and later for the sake of their children. Men, on the other hand, remain with their own parents and thus psychologically as well as materially dependent on them. The result is women are likely to develop agency more strongly and earlier than their husbands. (244)

Bangladeshi wives like Motijan are similar to the wives described by Colette since during childhood they often have to fight against gender discrimination by their parents and siblings. Their endeavor to make sure that justice is meted out towards them in their natal home helps them inculcate a sense of self-awareness in marriage as well. Once they find themselves in a hostile marital situation, their early training in self-defense assists these wives in devising tactics of survival. When Motijan discovers that she is trapped in a marriage where her husband, Abul is a total dependent on his mother, and is never going to defend her against the injustices meted out towards her by her mother-in-law, she decides to voice her own protestations.

“Homemaker” is one of Chughtai’s short stories that finds a housewife’s domestic agency embedded in her ability to bargain for the domestic labor she provides in her husband’s household. In this story, Lajo is a maidservant who is an expert in the tasks of housewifery such as cooking, cleaning, maintaining household finances, etc. The great care with which Lajo prepares meals for Mirza, her master, arranges his ‘*hookah*,’ keeps his house tidy, mends his clothes and shines his pots and pans makes him nostalgic for his late mother. Lajo also demonstrates business acumen when she sits at Mirza’s grocery store and helps him sell things much faster than he does. She bargains with the vendors and quarrels with the milkman to ensure that every penny Mirza spends is worth its while. “For Lajo it was love at first sight. She was in love - not with Mirza but with the house,” informs the narrator. In recognition of Lajo’s contributions to his household, Mirza decides to ignore his family honor and marry the maid. Because of her good house-keeping he also entrusts her with sufficient funds for day-to-day expenditure, buys her gold bangles, and even offers to keep a maid for her. Lajo, however, prefers to do all her household work by herself, and does not wish to have any intruders in the privacy of her kitchen space. She does not make a big deal about sharing her husband with prostitutes, but she absolutely refuses to share the credit for running her household efficiently with another woman, even if that woman is a maid. “Never before in her life had she got the opportunity to become the mistress of a household,” confides the narrator, and Lajo feels as empowered as a queen within the four walls of Mirza’s household (94). The narrator’s comments also bring to mind what Sohela Nazneen wrote with regard to Bangladeshi wives’ agency:

the quality of the relationship between the husband and the wife determines the level of wife’s agency and voice . . . . The relationship may be co-operative (this does not mean total absence of conflict) because the husband is less controlling and more caring and respects the wife’s management skills and intelligence. In these cases the wife has more agency.

With Mirza, Lajo has the freedom to spend on household requirements, and set up her new home the way she pleases because he appreciates the services she provides for him and his household. For Lajo domestic labor is not a source of oppression; it is rather, a source of her agency through which she entrenches her position in her marital home. In the line of the Marxist feminists, Chughtai portrays wives who are burdened with domestic and reproductive chores with sympathy, yet she also depicts that domestic labor can be a potential source of agency for a wife.

### **1. Domestic Agency:**

#### ***(c) Net-work of friends/family.***

In the fiction of Chughtai, Hossain and Durrani a wife’s domestic agency can be further detected in the spheres of her natal ties and the network of friends she maintains. Though kinship in South Asian families can be a site of oppression, it can also be agential. To get parental support in the form of property or gifts, or even to have one’s natal family by their side during a feud or sickness can enhance a wife’s sense of security, and empower her. In Durrani’s autobiography, *My Feudal Lord*, and also in her fiction, *Blasphemy*, one can find instances of domestic agency in networking. In her autobiography Durrani narrates how she mustered the courage to protest her husband’s beatings since they were initiated upon her in her father’s

house. Durrani's parents had let the couple use their house in England when they left for the Middle East for a couple of weeks. One day during their stay in that house, her husband Mustafa Khar lashes out at her and kicks her down a flight of stairs. When he continues his savage behavior even after that, Durrani remonstrates for the first time: "This is my father's house and I do not think that you should dare to lift your hand on me here" (55). During this incidence Durrani makes another point: she lets Khar know that she is not his chattel, but has other ties with people, and those ties are stronger than the ones that bind her to him. She hopes that as a feudal he would realize the importance of her blood ties with her own family, but Khar persists on shutting down all avenues of her connection with it. He does not like his wife visiting her mother's house in his absence, or even consulting with her father during a crisis. He puts restrictions on her phone calls to her brother, and discourages Durrani when she expresses her desire to meet Matloob, her brother-in-law in person. Defying her husband's overtly possessive mindset, Durrani maintains her ties with her natal family because of the agency it provides her in terms of establishing her identity and connecting to her roots. Durrani's brother, sisters, and maternal grandmother also provide legal and emotional support when she asks for divorce.

In Durrani's fiction, *Blasphemy*, Heer is a housewife like Durrani herself who finds ample agency in the support her natal family provides to subvert an oppressive system. Throughout the time that Pir Sain was alive, Heer's mother, brother and sisters could visit her only occasionally. They brought her small personal gifts, but could not intervene in her marital life despite their knowledge of the injustices she faced. Heer is forbidden to appear before male cousins even if they are much younger than her. After Pir Sain's death, when her son continues to torture her like his father, Heer's natal family comes to her rescue. They take her back with them and help heal. They sever all ties with her husband's family and tell them to consider her dead. With the help of her natal family Heer gains a new life and a new identity. Patricia Jeffery points out the importance of wives' links with their kin in circumventing or avoiding constraints and problems in marriage. She writes,

Crucially, it is appropriate for a married woman to maintain contacts with her natal kin, and they do, in general, offer her the best ways to ameliorate her position in relation to her in-laws, or to enhance her position in some spheres of her life. Thus, resistance based on such ties can usually be more readily legitimated than actions that are more openly defiant. . . . This provides a relative secret space for building on the social and economic resources that her parents can provide. (162)

Jeffery is aware that most husbands fear the agency their wives can marshal for their resistance and hence feel the need to control their contacts with their natal kin; however, she encourages wives to maintain contacts with their natal family. For the sake of self-empowerment wives like Durrani network not only with their family but also with friends. About the positive effects of maintaining friendships with Sabiha and Andrew when she was in the midst of marital crisis, Durrani maintains that not only did they help her fill the void, they became her pillar of strength and invigorated her sedated brain. In *Blasphemy*, Heer has a very restricted life within the four walls of her household, yet she is also able to disregard her husband's objections and builds up a small network of women friends like Kali, Tara and Cheel. These friends help her recuperate in her confinement and annihilate the pain caused by her husband. While Kali makes Heer aware of the injustice around her, Cheel becomes the main instrument of her vengeance on her

husband. Tara helps Heer with her decision to unveil the reality of her husband who was masquerading as a saint. Networking with friends proves tremendously agential for Heer. By deploying this strategy she is able to procure not only her personal freedom, but also that of the naïve people of her community who had been duped by false saints for generations.

## **(2) Sexual Agency:**

### ***(a) Wives' as subject of sexual pleasure.***

Though in most cases husbands control their wives' sexuality and lay down the unspoken condition that they are not supposed to enjoy sex, wives of all classes in Chughtai and Durrani's fiction demonstrate a considerable amount of sexual desire. Sexual satisfaction or the lack thereof, affects every aspect of the wives' lives. Just as they are made aware of their own responsibility to be sexually available for their husbands, they want their husbands to recognize the importance of the fusion of love and sex in forging and maintaining solid marital bonds. In the absence of a healthy and honest sexual relationship with their husbands, they conduct themselves as active sexual agents, claiming sexual autonomy to attract or denounce other men. Chughtai's highly controversial story, "Lihaf," presents Begum Jan, another sexually frustrated upper-class housewife who finds a way to tackle her loneliness, and emotional as well as sexual insecurities. When Begum Jan finds out that her husband, the Nawab, is gay, and is more content in the company of young men than with her, she feels compelled to find an alternative to satisfy her own sexual desires as well. Her housemaid, Rabbo rescues her from sexual repression when they get involved in a lesbian relationship. Written from the point of view of a little girl who comes to visit Begum Jan for a couple of days, the story was published in 1942 when Chughtai and Shahid Latif, her future husband, were contemplating marriage. In a chapter in her autobiography, titled, "In the Name of those Married Women," she writes about the fact that Shahid did not like the story and they had many fights over it. Chughtai still went ahead and published it. On charges of obscenity the British court filed a suit against "Lihaf" in 1944, and Chughtai was summoned to appear before the Lahore High Court. Her in-laws were upset and her husband was so furious that he threatened to divorce her. Many of her literary friends advised Chughtai to tender her apologies so that the case might be dropped, but she refused to take such a step. Eventually Chughtai won the case, but she had to face negative criticism from many quarters for writing a story that was considered to be "detrimental to morality" (Ismat 57). In her autobiography she shares her regrets over the fact that after publishing "Lihaf," many people put her down as "a purveyor of sex" (65), and her story became "the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight" (66). Though "Lihaf" made Chughtai's life difficult, she continued to write with a vengeance about the need for women's sexual autonomy. She felt rewarded when several years after the court case on "Lihaf" she visited Aligarh and, at a party, met the Begum on whose real life her story was based. The Begum, who knew by then that she was the protagonist of Chughtai's "Lihaf," took the author aside and thanked her for her story that eventually motivated her to have a beautiful son. Later she wrote about him in her autobiography: "I felt he was mine as well - a part of my mind, a living product of my brain, an offspring of my pen" (66). Although Chughtai does not clearly mention how the Begum conceived the child, or who the father was, from the following lines it becomes clear that her objective behind writing the story was fulfilled. She writes, "How I wanted that some brave fellow should release her from Rabbu's clutches, encircle her within his strong arms and slake her life's thirst. It's a virtuous act to provide water to a thirsty

creature” (Ismat 67). Chughtai’s prescription for Begum’s cure, and Begum’s own resolution to have a child by way of fulfilling her life, may not be well received amongst the radical feminists of today who consider neither a man as the sole source of sexual fulfillment for a woman, nor a biological child the only way of satisfying the desire for motherhood. There is yet no doubt that by emphasizing the importance of a wife’s sexual autonomy in the backdrop of Indian Muslim society of the 40’s, both women have proved themselves to be very progressive women of their times.

In Chughtai’s fiction not only upper class women like Begum Jan dare to challenge the status quo, but women from the lower strata also break many sexual taboos, and find agency in their sexual potentials. In “The Homemaker,” for instance, Lajo is a woman from the lower class, who finds herself a home not only by dint of her domestic agency, but also by her sex appeal and aggressiveness. Lajo, however, is not interested in marriage. A carefree person by nature, she prefers to remain single, yet permanently employed in Mirza’s household. For that she deliberately seduces Mirza and manages to get what she wants. Later when she learns from Ramu, Mirza’s teenaged help, that Mirza has been frequenting courtesans, Lajo takes it as a personal insult. Her anguish is expressed by the narrator thus:

Those courtesans were witches. For Mirza, it was a waste of money. After all, what was she for? Till now, wherever employed, she gave full satisfaction to her masters in every way. But here, a full chaste week had passed! Nowhere had she felt so slighted before. She had a very large hearted concept of the man-woman relationship. (Lifting 82)

Mirza cannot resist Lajo’s sexual invitations for too long, and is aware of the power of her exuberant sex appeal on other men as well. He becomes anxious to domesticate her through marriage; yet, once married, he tries to impose dress and behavior codes on Lajo, even neglecting her lest his friends call him a henpecked husband. He often stays out at night with friends and talks only in monosyllables with her for weeks together. He is eager to rush to work, and once home, he hardly seems to have the time to sit and relax with his wife before he goes to bed. Lajo is flabbergasted once she realizes that just like a typical husband Mirza is taking her for granted. The effects of his negligence are soon reflected in her reactions that are meant to give a jolt to her husband. The narrator reports:

That day Lajo’s eyes went up the terrace once again. She saw that Mithwa’s eyes were piercing her wet body like spears. The lad’s kite snapped, and the broken cord brushed against Lajo’s bare back. She gasped, and either unconsciously or deliberately, ran for the house without wrapping the towel around her. It was as though a lightning flashed and thunder fell on Mirza’s house. (Lifting 90)

Mithwa is a young lad who is smitten by Lajo’s physical charms. His favorite occupation is to sneak a peek at Lajo’s naked body while she is busy bathing. Lajo had been chiding the boy for his reprehensive acts until one day she feels really angry with her husband for leaving her alone all night and celebrating a religious festival. From then on she decides to bestow her love on Mithwa. Whenever Lajo needs someone to run an errand for her, she finds Mithwa loitering around her house. She gives him the meals that Mirza skips, and makes sure that he is there to catch a glimpse of her body while she is bathing. Chughtai uses a pinch of humor to relay Lajo’s

sexual maneuverings thus: “If he forgot to appear on the terrace while she was taking her bath, she would rattle the bucket loud enough to wake up corpses in their graves” (91). One day Mirza catches his wife with Mithwa inside his house. While Mithwa manages to run away, Lajo is beaten by her husband till she is almost unconscious. Eventually she is divorced. Instead of feeling remorseful, Lajo is relieved to be able to get out of the shackles of marriage. She regains her flirtatious gait, and enjoys her freedom, but misses the agency she enjoyed at Mirza’s house as the sole mistress of the household. She tries again to get her old job as a maid at Mirza’s. She knows that Mirza needs help with cooking and household maintenance, and she also believes that her expertise in these areas will regain her old position. Mirza is hesitant at first, but gives in after considering the mess his house has turned into in the absence of a good housekeeper. As soon as Lajo gets the clearance she sneaks back into Mirza’s kitchen, tucks up her *lehnga*, and begins to work. She cooks and cleans and makes the house spotless. When Mirza comes home he is so enthralled by the incense-filled air, the well-scrubbed bowls, and the new water pitcher that for a moment he feels that his dead mother is back! Lajo manipulates Mirza’s typical male inertia towards household labor, and plays upon his Oedipal weakness for her. When he sits down to eat his meal of stewed meat and hot rotis, Lajo tactfully sits beside him and fans him. The narrator concludes the story by emphasizing Lajo’s domestic as well sexual agencies in these words: “A nagging feeling that he did not value her worth overwhelmed him. . . . He got up from his bed abruptly and gathered the homemaker in his arms” (Lifting 94). Indeed, Chughtai attacks sexual objectification of women in her fiction, but by projecting Lajo as a woman who is aware of her own sexual powers, and utilizes it in order to find a means of sustenance, she groups with sex-positive feminists such as, Gayle Rubin, Naomi Wolf and Betty Dudson who emphasize sexual liberation and redemptive value of female sexuality. Chughtai’s fiction also supports Sudhir Kakar’s view that majority of Indian wives are sexually deprived and unsatisfied, yet by focusing on the changing sexual attitudes and behavior of wives like Begum Jan and Lajo, it effectively dispels myths about their sexual conservatism, passivity and dutifulness.

In fact Chughtai was ahead of her time in her understanding of Indian wife’s sexuality. Referring to husbands like Mirza, in “The Homemaker,” who feel free to have extra-marital affairs, but expect their wives to remain devoted to them, Chughtai holds: “They have forgotten that if the man is free while the woman is enslaved, their union can only be fraudulent” (Ismat 137). Chughtai’s radical ideas about wives’ sexuality have drawn the notice of many Indian male writers. Varis Alavi, for instance contends: “Ismat reacted to the negation of the very life that accords strength, as also to the humiliation of the body, and its natural demands. Ismat’s revolt against such an existence was total, fundamental and uncompromising” (Ismat 210). Comparing Chughtai’s treatment of sex with that of her contemporary male writer, Sadat Hasan Manto’s, Alavi contends that both were trying to wipe away the notion of a woman as a sex object, and bestow upon her a human personality. Because of contesting notions of sexual respectability, and depicting sexual transgressions in wife many of Chughtai’s critics find her to be distastefully obsessed with sex. Disregarding their views, Chughtai aims at peeling off the artificial layers of sexual identity hung on wives so that their inner human self can emerge.

## 2. Sexual Agency:

### *(b) Use of sex in asserting motherhood.*

Like Chughtai's, Hossain's fiction is also filled with examples of wives who are capable of making subversive sexual moves in order to break out of dominant sets of ideologies that their society tries to thrust upon them in the name of marriage. In her short story, "Parul Becomes a Mother," Parul is a housewife who uses her sexuality as a tool of rebellion against her insipid husband, as well as their callous society. When Abbas Ali deserts Parul without even a word, and later marries another woman without a word to her, she feels humiliated and dejected. One question keeps nagging at the corner of her mind: when does a husband stop needing his wife? Her conscience replies, "when she cannot give him her body" (Selected 162). Her entire being shrieks out, "but I could give him all" (Selected 162). Parul is confident about her sexual powers: she believes, "Never did the gush of erotic desire feel disrupted within the rainbow washed compounds of her body" (Selected 162). She is perplexed about what caused her husband to abscond, and feels insulted when she realizes that her husband has rejected her womanhood without any apparent reason. Parul had also accepted her lot as a poor day-laborer's wife. In fact, she had put her energy towards working house-to-house, and scrounging whatever rice and vegetable she could manage for both. Despite her contributions towards her marriage and household, when her husband betrays her, Parul decides not to wait for that man to return just because he has social recognition in her life as her husband. She hurls out a string of abuses towards her husband's impudence, and resists his action with the resolve that "a happy go lucky, carefree, society's ass kicking type life is the only life worth living" (Selected 163). Thus Parul begins to entertain men who can fulfill the hunger of her body, but she does not completely commit to any one of them in particular. She indulges her body only for the sake of sheer pleasure and does not demand any monetary remuneration. "I have whosoever I wish and whenever I wish," she brags, challenging male privilege in Muslim societies with regards to multiple sexual relationships. Soon she is pregnant out of wedlock, which she takes as an opportunity to avenge her lot, and to repudiate social norms that allow motherhood only within the parameters of marriage. Like Motijan, in Hossain's short story, "Motijan's Daughters," she proclaims that the mother's womb that holds a baby is the ultimate identity component for it irrespective of the father, or any cultural or institutional sanction. The women who had been dejected by their husbands, despite having children, secretly congratulate her. As further revenge on patriarchal society, when the men she has slept with become anxious to know the paternity of her child, she decides to keep the identity of her child's father a secret. By depicting a strong wife and independent single mother in Parul, Hossain propagates the belief that sexual agency is an essential component of a woman's right and freedom. It is evident from her writings that woman's sexuality is, as Carole Vance concedes, "simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency" (327). According to Vance, to focus only on sexual exploitation and violence is to obliterate women's experiences of sexual agency, gratification and choice. Because of globalization and the spread of internet culture Sub-Continental Muslim societies are forced to change their attitude towards female sexuality. Many fiction, plays, soaps, package dramas and films now depict sexually empowered wives who do not necessarily have to pay heavily for gratifying their physical or maternal needs outside of marriage by committing suicide or facing humiliation. Despite the difficulties of living in a society that does not openly recognize the discourse of women as subjects of sexuality, wives in Chughtai and Hossain fiction establish themselves as subjects of sexuality, thereby creating a pressure for egalitarian and compassionate marriage. It

is not very uncommon for married women in their writings to demand separation or divorce on account of sexual incompatibility even if their husbands are established, wealthy, pious, kind, from an honorable family, or father of their children.

### 3. “Micro Mechanisms of Power”:

#### (a) *Gossip and rumor*

Gossip and rumor are often dismissed as unimportant forms of daily conversation among women. Such modes of action may not be radical, yet they have considerable potential for building moral surveillance in society, and working as a source of agency. According to Harris Collette, gossip is a “micro mechanism of power” that can help regulate moral action in a society (268). Spreading of gossip or scandal mongering, especially in small and tight communities, can work as moral policing, preventing the person concerned from perpetuating the act for which s (he) is criticized. Durrani’s autobiography and fiction both deploy gossip and scandal as important grounds on which to work out certain strategies of subversive action. In *Blasphemy*, her protagonist, Heer uses gossip as a strategy to avenge the wrongs perpetrated upon her by her husband. Although her husband is acclaimed as a descendent of a great line of ‘pirs’, or religious leaders, he abuses his wife by compelling her to perform sexual acts with men of his choosing. Personified as Piyari, a prostitute from the city, and under cover of her *burqa* or veil she is taken out of the *haveli* or mansion to spend nights in the arms of strange men by none other than her own husband. His perverted mindset compels him to videotape his wife’s sexual acts with other men for private pleasure. He also sexually abuses the young maids of the house, and forces his wife to participate in his orgies with them. Though outwardly Heer seems to have adjusted to her imposed identity, she never fully internalizes the traits of subordination, or forgets the insults, humiliation and pain her husband causes her. After her husband’s death, she resolves to expose her exploiter, and also the evil that he kept concealed in his shrine under the garb of divinity. For this she has to first pull off her own mask, and expose her own true identity. Such open retaliation becomes a risky matter, and requires tremendous courage since speaking against the Pir’s shrine is considered to be blasphemy, punishable by death. Nonetheless, as the following excerpt shows, Heer contemplates using the devices of gossip and slander despite all odds:

O Allah, my morality serves nothing. My person means nothing. Allow me a transgression. Allow me to use myself to expose the evil this Shrine conceals behind your name. Allow me to take a course that will condemn me but expose the distortion of your message at the hands of your enemies. (197)

First she decides to announce over the mosque’s loudspeaker that Piyari, the prostitute was none else than herself, the Pir’s wife. After contemplating the risk involved in such a blatant act of rebellion, however, she plans another course of action. With the help of Tara, who was also abused by her husband, she gets back into skin tight, chest bulging attire and high heels. Since Tara was also sexually abused by the pir, Heer uses her as an accomplice, and both the women join hands in the mission of avenging the injustice done unto them by the Pir. At the dead of night Heer slips back into Piyari’s tight clothes, applies makeup and under the guise of *burqa*, secretly leaves the *haveli* with Tara. They knock at the doors where Heer had been sexually



exploited and divulge the secret in the hope of spreading the gory reality of her life by word of mouth. Heer justifies this act of hers thus:

Exposing my self as a whore exposed him as a pimp. The only way to establish this was to pull him out of the garb embroidered with the ninety-nine names of Allah. The only way for that was to throw off my own clothes. After every desecration, I stood over my husband's grave and spat on it. (198)

During the mission of spreading gossip, Heer faces many hurdles but she is able to convince people about the truth of her story with the help of maids who knew her real identity and by selling copies of Pir Sain's sex video to Pathan dealers of smuggled goods and heroin. She hopes that "they would spread the truth like germs spread a virus" (201). Indeed, her strategy works out faster than she had expected. "Gossip of two vampires on the prowl reached Rajaji even before his father's first death anniversary" reports Heer (203). Though many people like Sakhi bibi disapprove of her action, Heer is convinced that she has done the right thing by exposing her body to reveal the truth. In her words: "To me, burying the evil and preserving my reputation meant preserving the evil. No exposure meant maintaining the status quo. That meant no change. I knew I had done the wrong thing for the right reason. The truth was already simmering. It would rise like lava from the graves of mad men" (208-9). Though Heer has to relinquish her life as the mistress of the *haveli* after Heer's son and her brother-in-laws find out about her role in denigrating their shrine with the spread of gossip, she does not repent at all. Rather, with the help of her own family she is able to attain another chance to become "someone else," and live a life with a new identity (222). Heer's agential power is confirmed when one year later she hears an unknown woman pray on her grave: "O Allah, bless this soul for exposing the decadence of Shrine-worship. Bless her for bringing us closer to you" (229). Heer is able to help some of the blind followers of Pir into recognizing the blunder they had been committing by following an imposter and exploiter of God's name.

Indeed, Heer's underhanded subversions do not create the same sort of immediate transformation in her social situation as overt resistance might have, yet it proves to be an enduring strategy. While critically analyzing the lives of Tajekistani Muslim wives, Colette argues that though these wives may have indirect agency, it is definite agency. In Colette's words: "The strategies used by the subordinated may not always produce significant or fast transformation of the conditions of oppression but more often tend rather slowly and secretly to undermine them" (247). Colette uses Foucault's theory to argue that since power is always opposed by people upon whom it is thrust, and since power relations are bound to change with resistance, Muslim wives eventually find a way to oppose their suppression, no matter how feebly. Though Heer's resistance through the "Micro Mechanisms" of gossip and slander is indirect, and slow, it eventually allows her to challenge the hegemonic system, and pave the way for change in the status quo.

Durrani hopes that her own autobiography, The Feudal Lord, will in the form of gossip, rumor and scandal probe what went on in her everyday marital life with Khar, and provide her moral justice. As the spreader of gossip, her course of action is not received positively by many conservative groups of people which think that she should have been more dignified. Nonetheless, she believes that "silence is a greater crime. It condones injustice. It breeds in us subservience and fosters a malignant hypocrisy. Mustafa Khar and other feudals thrive on our silence" (360). Durrani does not want to feel like those rape victims who swallow the crime

simply because they are ashamed of getting exposed. According to her, “the villain must not be allowed to use society’s queasiness as his cover. Women must learn to speak out or be damned” (363). Durrani dedicates her autobiography to the ex-wives of Khar, who suffered like her. In the Foreword to My Feudal Lord, Asma Jahangir applauds Durrani’s efforts for breaking her silence in multiple ways. Jahangir, who is Durrani’s lawyer believes that like her client, many women in today’s world have realized the importance of making themselves heard by society if they are under duress on any account. She succinctly notes:

For centuries women have held their peace. Patience is apparently a virtue to be practiced exclusively by them. . . . Gradually, however, women are breaking through this oppressive silence. No longer it appears, are they prepared to accept the ‘virtuous’ role thrust upon them by society. Because they are more vulnerable and sensitive than men, they must speak out. (iii)

Durrani demonstrates patience in marriage for fifteen years before finally divorcing her husband. Throughout this time Durrani was compelled to separate from her husband four times on account of his torture and break of commitment. Although there were many proves of her husband’s breach of contract with her, it was Durrani who was taken to task by critics not only for exposing her husband’s dirty laundry in public, but also for throwing muck on the entire nation, particularly its religious as well as political leaders, and its landed gentry. It is often difficult to argue Durrani’s case as an important and influential writer in front of people who believe in putting up a false charade of respectability, and have blind faith in the contrived discourses of family, religion and nationhood. Despite various kinds of opposition from her own people, Durrani has not changed her strategy of using her pen and the media to propel what Seemanthini Niranjana has termed as “the circuit of information,” and gather support (98). According to Niranjana, in spite of its “quasi-underground nature,” gossip, “succeeds in effectively policing the spaces inhabited by people. Another central feature of gossip tends to talk about morality, especially deriving from context like the alleged sexual affairs of people, any transgression of moral behavioural codes or deviations from accepted norms” (95). Niranjana’s findings on gossip as an agential strategy, despite its status as a marginal or peripheral discourse, explain Heer’s and Durrani’s achievements in using it as a positive subversive devise. Durrani similarly believes that through doubt and probing, gossip tends to create and enforce moral rules governing human thought and behavior. Durrani uses the newspapers and media of Pakistan to attract attention to the incident for Fakra Yunus when her husband, Bilal Khar, who is also Durrani’s step son, mutilated her face with acid. As the response of donors, physicians, beauticians and lawyers show, Durrani has been successful in using gossip and scandal as what Roushan Jahan calls, a “shaming mechanism,” and “effective instruments of intervention” (Hidden 144). She gathered massive financial, technical and moral support for the young woman’s treatment from Pakistani as well as Italian organizations. She has also been successful in bringing legal action against Khar’s son despite the fact that like his father, Bilal is very influential in Pakistan. Indeed, Durrani’s strategies, like her protagonist, Heer’s strategies of using the devises of gossip and scandal as an agency, have been slow and prolonged, yet in the end they turn out to be effective.

### 3. “Micro Mechanisms of Power”:

#### (b) *Indifference and prayers*

Durrani further applies indifference and detachment as agential tools or “micro mechanisms of power” for fighting marital injustice. She uses indifference in her personal life to silently protest her husband’s injustice and torture. In My Feudal Lord, she writes:

My indifference tortured him. I wouldn’t sulk, I wouldn’t want him to apologise. I was completely detached. My composure upset him. He noticed that my crying had stopped. . . . He stopped beating me. . . . I was discovering the levers of power that were previously his. . . . In the past, my tears, my arguments, my pleadings had been like applause to his great acts of misplaced masculinity. My silence destroyed him. (91-2)

Indifference works as an agential trope because it reflects mature behavior, and is a better choice than throwing tantrums or sulking; both of which expose a childish mentality and give a husband the opportunity to show off his authority by having the last word in an argument, physically abusing his wife, or even by pardoning her so-called mistakes. Durrani learns fast enough in life that real agency lies in showing a cold shoulder to a husband who prefers attention. Her immunity, apathy and alienation alarm her husband more than her open revolts since he cannot fathom what is going on in her mind, and fears her transformation into an enigmatic, mysterious woman he is not used to dealing with. As a result of her prolonged indifference Khar falls on his knees and begs his wife’s forgiveness. The immediate change of mood and attention that Durrani receives from her husband the moment she decides to use the tactics of indifference and dispassion further points at the efficiency of these methods as agential tools of subversion.

In Chughtai’s short story, “Aunt Bichu,” Aunt Bichu’s way of avenging her husband’s betrayal can be cited as another instance of indifference as one of the “micro mechanisms of power” commonly used by Indian wives. The day Aunt Bichu gets an inkling of her husband’s affair with her cleaning woman, she declares herself a widow and never reconciles with him again. Like a widow in mourning she starts wearing all white, and smashes all the bangles on her wrist with a stone. She further bars his sexual approaches, and refers to him as her “late” or “dead” husband (The Quilt 178). “She refused to allow hands and feet that had known the touch of a cleaning woman’s body to come into contact with hers,” informs the narrator (The Quilt 178). Thus symbolically as well as physically she protests against the injustice done towards her by her husband while maintaining indifference. Since this unfortunate incident took place when she was a young bride, Aunt Bichu remains estranged from her husband for most of her married life. Her decision to practice indifference as a means of teaching her husband a lesson deprives her of the pleasures of a conjugal/sexual life as well, but as a woman of strong principle and sense of self-respect, she makes no compromise when it comes to sharing her husband with another woman. Her mode of action is also effective in exposing the nature of her husband’s injustice in front of the family, and bringing shame upon him without having to lose all her own marital comforts and privileges.

Like Durrani and Chughtai, Hossain similarly believes in indifference as an effective device for wives seeking agency. Most Bangladeshi women believe in the commitments they make in marriage, and do not want to completely jeopardize their relationship, hence they keep their protest at a low key by using backstage and surreptitious techniques such as gossip, indifference and prayers. Sohela Nazneen reports on Bangladeshi house wives’ undramatic yet

stable agency in these words: “Bangladeshi housewives whether they belong to a joint family or a nuclear one, do not aim at head on collision, but resist their husband’s control in “clandestine ways”. According to Nazneen, since wives have limited entitlements and restrictive movements, they decide to avoid overt conflict, and assert their agency through negotiation with their husbands. They realize that acting autonomously and independently may mean loss of money and social support. Indeed, for a Bangladeshi wife total emancipation from patriarchal power is not easy to attain, and she is not entirely free to make decisions about her life and act upon them. Responsibilities of motherhood and care for the elderly further make her less likely to engage in crass and overt resistance. As Patricia Jeffery and Roger Jeffery contend with regards to Indian wives, in some cases even educated housewives have to ameliorate their situation through covert ways since their education is aimed primarily at inculcating manners and middle class morality that subdues them even more by teaching them newer forms of respectable behavior. The critics further point out: “for the most part, woman’s struggles are more likely to be individualistic attempts to ameliorate their situation within their system, rather than confrontational insubordination that challenges the very basis of the system” (162). With very few battered wives shelters, foster homes and hot line agencies to support women who are victims of domestic violence, there is no chance for majority of wives in the Sub-Continent to expect prolonged organized assistance from their communities. Abused wives often do not get moral and material support from families as well who prefer to stay out of the privacy of marital life. This is one of the major reasons why the everyday forms of resistance that wives like Heer in *Blasphemy*, and Proshanti in *The Atomic Darkness* deploy, avoid direct challenge to the dominant system, and are not corporate and confrontational forms of struggle, but “micro mechanisms of power” such as gossip and indifference. Of course, in the oeuvre of Chughtai, Hossain and Durrani there are a few of those wives as well who do not consider gossip, indifference or prayers to be capable of damage limitation. These wives also do not expect NGOs, or government, or family intervention to rescue them from their abusive homes. Disregarding the fear of social and familial retaliation, they dare to declare open war, and take the drastic step of divorcing their husbands when they cannot take domestic oppression any more. As societies and cultures in the Sub-Continent are evolving, a typically social institution like marriage and the discourse around it are also undergoing drastic changes. With the rise of individualism amongst the Sub-Continental Muslim women, wives are giving high priority to mental as well as sexual compatibility in marriage, and claiming private space to nurture self within the parameters of marriage. Acknowledgement of gay and lesbian marriages around the world, and the facilities of adoption are also having their impact on the discourse of heterosexual marriages in the Sub-Continent by shifting their emphasis from hierarchal relationships to partnership and egalitarianism. In this atmosphere of socio-marital changes Chughtai, Hossain and Durrani help locate the evolving forms of wifely agency in different areas of their lives. Colette contends that in order to eschew the essentialist and universalistic concepts of earlier writing, in postmodernist feminist writing it is the trend now to emphasize the different strategies subjugated women employ in order to resist dominant discourses and orders. Read in this light, the works of Chughtai, Hossain and Durrani can be considered postmodern. In these works women are not only victims; rather, they are empowered with overt and covert strategies to resist dominant marital discourses. If their stories provide extraordinary insight into the vulnerable position of wives caught in the complex web of Muslim families, they also project these wives as inverting the social and familial constraints to emerge as new women; demanding the status of free and equal agents, and having control over their situation.

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