*Quest Journals*
*Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*
*Volume 12 ~ Issue 9 (2024) pp: 07-09*
*ISSN(Online):2321-9467*
www.questjournals.org

**Research Paper**

# (UN) Belonging To A Nation: Reading Ismat Chugtai's 'Roots'

Mitali Mishra
*(Department of English Lady Shri Ram College)*
*(University of Delhi)*
*Corresponding Author: Mitali Mishra*

***ABSTRACT**: In this paper, Ismat Chugtai's short story 'Jadein' translated as 'Roots' is analyzed. The paper provides an overview of the gendered reading of nationalism to provide the theoretical framework to reading the text. The protagonist's trajectory in the story is seen as reflective of the dichotomies of the Partition of India. It is finally argued that the story becomes a site for criticizing the foisting of religion as the sole marker of identity. Amma's character, though bound within the confines of her home becomes symbolic of a more positive figure of the nation.*

***KEYWORDS**: Nation, Gender, Mother, Religion, Identity.*

*"What is this strange bird called, our country? Tell me where is that country? This is the land where you were born, which gave birth to you; this is the earth on which you grew up; if this is not your country, how can some distant land where you merely go and settle for a few days become your country? Besides, who knows if you won't be driven, pushed out of there too" (16)?*
*Ismat Chugtai 'Roots'*[1]

***R**eceived 22 Aug., 2024; **R**evised 01 Sep., 2024; **A**ccepted 03 Sep., 2024 © The author(s) 2024.*
***P**ublished with open access at **www.questjournas.org***

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ismat Chugtai (1915-1991) has been described as the fourth pillar of modern Urdu fiction along with Saadat Hassan Manto, Rajendra Singh Bedi, and Krishan Chandar. She was part of the progressive movement. (Akhtar and Zaidi 2006)[2]. *Garm-Hawa*, the famous film made on Indo-Pak partition was also written by her. She also did a small role in Shyam Bengal's *Junun.* Her writing is reminiscent of Jane Austen's description of her work in a letter to her brother J. Edward Austen, dated 16 December 1816 where she described her canvas as "the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour" (Oxford Reference)[3]. She writes about the minute details of middle-income Muslim households and draws a realistic portrait of their lives and yet her works strive to remove the social ills in society. She had a fiery personality and wrote passionately about the lives of women. Qurratulain Hyder said "Wherever Ismat Chugtai lives, she would go about dissecting everything. What would have been the state of Urdu fiction if she had become a school teacher or a housewife—She bursts into the Urdu literature with a baton in her hand—her writings were bitter, satirical and full of anger." (*Naqoosh*, December 1959 qtd. in Mehdi 33)[4] She was awarded the Padma Shri in 1975.

## II. ROOTS

Her short story, 'Jadein', translated as 'Roots' in English tells of Amma in Marwar at the time of Partition. Amma refuses to relocate even as her large family is moving out as communal riots break out. Amma cannot fathom why she should be asked to leave the home she has occupied forever, where she gave birth to 10 children or how she is to understand that this is not her country anymore. Her bewildered incomprehension becomes a site to criticise the madness of Partition as it was experienced by the common people and the tens of millions who were suddenly displaced, made into migrants and refugees.

Amma is poignantly described as straddling two realities. "But Amma sat rooted in her place like a banyan tree which survives even as the storms rage around it" (Chugtai16). She is both the rooted banyan that will not yield, and she is the splinter that has been tossed aside. "She felt as if she was a splinter which they had pulled out and thrown away into the thorny bushes on the side road and had made their escape" (Chugtai 17).

Caught between two contradictory and incompatible realities she reflects the world around her. 'Pakistan Zindabad' and 'Akhand Hindustan', National Guard and Sevak Sangh, Abba and Roopchand, Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha…. the chasm between the two homes of Amma and Doctor Sahab is insurmountable. "The distance between the two houses seemed to crawl with venomous snakes" (Chugtai 14). And yet these are the same people whose lives have been inextricably interlinked for three generations. Many historians have noted that the partition was often not examined in terms of its causes because it was dismissed as an aberration. (Gyanendra Pandey)[5]. "Even more surprising is the absence of a serious attempt to analyse the causes and antecedents of partition, and a kind of glorification of the feudal past when Hindus and Muslims used to live in harmony" (Hasan 108)[6]. Ashis Nandy in the Foreword to Debjani Sengupta's *Mapmaking* book suggests that the silence was a deliberate effort to start life anew and "contain bitterness, a way of repairing community life, interpersonal trust and known moral world?"[7]

Amma in the story also becomes a symbol of the nation briefly. When her children and their spouses and grandchildren all leave her, Amma is desolate like the country metaphorically. "Ten human beings who had been born from her womb, had abandoned her that day" (17). The identification of the nation as a mother figure was an accepted trope in the nationalistic discourse of India's struggle for freedom. The moral and spiritual primacy that the colonised needed to affirm begged a new symbolic reference point. This was done by imagining the nation as a mother. The mother was not the biological woman but the goddess in the Hindu pantheon, the motherland as the supreme deity. (Sarkar 51)[8] The beginning of imagining the nation as a mother can be traced back to 1905 Bengal nationalists, fighting against the partition of Bengal. The magical vision that inspired the sons was first seen in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's 1875 song 'Vande Mataram'. It was included in his novel *Anandmath*. In the song and novel, the mother was limited to being the mother of Bengal but subsequently became one for the entire nation. This imagery has been criticised for being patriarchal. Jasbir Jain writes that while the "image of "Mother India" is used to represent the nation, but within this image the relationship of women to the nation does not find a place" (Jain 1655)[9]. The iconic figure of the mother goddess looms so large, as to render the woman herself invisible or reduce her to a sacrificial object (Jain 1657).

Ismat Chugtai's story 'Roots' offers a site to investigate what nationalism meant to a Muslim woman, who has almost lived her entire life within the purdah of her home. Khadija Mastoor's *Aangan /The Inner Courtyard* also provides an insight into the protagonist Aliya's life within four walls during the turmoil of the Partition[10]. Let us briefly look at the idea of gendered nationalism and then analyse the text further.

## III. GENDER AND NATION

In his famous work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an "imagined political community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (7)[11]. He says that the nation is 'Imagined' because "members . . . will never know most of their fellow members . . . yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Community because the nation is "always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). Anderson argued that despite dissent and inequalities within the nation, the imagined alliance among people of the same imagined nation was strong enough to drive men to heroic deaths to protect it. Partha Chatterjee in his book *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993)[12] critiqued Benedict Anderson's concept of nationalism for his Eurocentric perspective, arguing that Anderson's analysis is primarily based on the European experience of nationalism, particularly in the context of print capitalism and the rise of nation-states in Europe. While Anderson focuses on the "imagined community" as the basis of nationalism, Chatterjee introduces the concept of "political society" as a more relevant framework for understanding nationalism in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Chatterjee argues that in societies like India, nationalism was not solely based on an imagined sense of community but also emerged from the mobilisation of specific political identities and aspirations, often linked to colonial resistance and anti-imperialist struggles. Another idea that helps to understand nationalism in the Indian context is provided by social anthropologist Ernst Gellner who said that where nations don't exist, nationalism invents a nation. Nationalism is based on the idea that a community shares something in common that distinguishes it from others. Communities try to find ideological, ethnic, religious, or linguistic characteristics that bind them and mark them as separate from others.

In this regard, Amma in the story resists the overt communal politics that had become the basis for the two-nation theory and the division of India along the Hindu-Muslim axis. She does not identify with the places that her children plan to move. She has no sense of belonging as a Muslim to Sindh, Rawalpindi or Dhaka. Her cultural identity, family roots and the life she has led in a mixed-religious neighbourhood trump her religious identity at the moment of decision-making. For Ammis being asked to relocate to Sindh or Dhaka was alienating. She did not want to die among the Sindhis, "those shameless people who wander about in kurta and pyjama" (14). She refuses to go to her younger son in Dhaka because those "Bengalis slurp rice as they shove it into their mouths with their hands" (15)! In her refusal to move, she is a foil that highlights the loss of the millions who were unable to exercise this choice and forcibly moved.

Masculinity studies have focused on how male bodies became produced as colonial and postcolonial subjects. Many debates revolve around accounting for how "gender and ethnicity have come to determine who belonged, and how, in the Indian nation" (Daiya 21)[13]. Feminist historiographies have radically altered the domain of Partition Studies. A gendered lens provides a more nuanced understanding of the men who created the nation and how the nation is projected as feminine. Men get to participate in the myth of nation-making and exercising masculine hegemony and women are symbolically seen as its biological reproducers with little or no voice or agency in the nationalistic project.

Feminist scholars who have written on the gendered nature of nationalism include Deniz Kandiyoti, Nira Yuval-Davis, Floya Anthias, Anne Mcclintock and Malathi de Alwis.[14] *Woman-Nation-State* (1989) edited by Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias has a detailed discussion on feminist nationalism.[15] Anne McClintock is a prominent cultural critic and scholar known for her work in postcolonial studies, feminist theory, and cultural studies. In her influential book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, McClintock examines how colonial power shapes notions of race, gender, and sexuality, and how these categories are constructed and maintained through imperial control.[16] She argues that nationalist movements often rely on gendered ideologies to construct and reinforce national identity. She examines how notions of masculinity and femininity are mobilised within nationalist discourse, reinforcing patriarchal structures and marginalising certain groups. Cynthia Enloe has made significant contributions to the study of gender and nation through her work on militarism, globalization, and women's experiences in international politics. In her influential book *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*, Enloe explores the gendered dynamics of international relations and how women's lives are profoundly impacted by global processes and power structures. Enloe's analysis highlights the often-overlooked roles that women play in sustaining and legitimizing militarism and the nation-state.[17]

## IV. CONCLUSION

In her story 'Roots', Chugtai manages to weave a poignant story albeit with a happy ending that was unavailable to many people during India's partition. She writes - "The operation on India had been performed by such incompetent hands and with such blunt instruments that generations had been destroyed. Rivers of blood everywhere. And no one had the courage to even stitch the open wounds" (9). But the text itself can be seen to be a suture to repair the wide-open gash that the Partition left. Perhaps it is a wish fulfilment that the story offers. Her Hindu neighbour brings back her departed family to her from the station. That reconciliation was perhaps not available to many people whose personal journey was marred by unbearable loss, violence and trauma. However, it is not a story that lies outside ethe realm of possibility. Countless people also experienced kindness and reconciliation like Amma in the story. Amma says - "A nation seems to be no better than a shoe! If it becomes a little tight, discard it for a new one" (16). She refuses to transplant herself, choosing instead to stay with her roots.

## REFERENCES


[1]. Chugtai, Ismat. 'Roots' in Stories About the Partition of India Vol III. Ed Alok Bhalla, translated from Urdu by Vishwamitter Adil and Alok Bhalla pp. 9-20

[2]. Akhtar, Javed, and Humayun Zafar Zaidi. "Progressive Writers' Movement in Urdu Literature." Indian Literature, vol. 50, no. 4 (234), 2006, pp. 140–62. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23346444. Accessed 30 Aug. 2024.

[3]. https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00000601#:~:text=What%20should%20I%20do%20with,little%20effect%20after%20much%20labour%3F

[4]. Mehdi, Baqar. "Twenty Years of the Urdu Short Story (1955-1975)." Indian Literature, vol. 19, no. 6, 1976, pp. 23–50. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24157504.

[5]. Pandey, Gyanendra. Remembering Partition. Violence, Nationalism and History in India. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

[6]. Hasan, Mohammad. "The Wounded Sensibility —Urdu Writing in the Post-Partition Era." India International Centre Quarterly, vol. 15, no. 1, 1988, pp. 107–11. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23002205.

[7]. Sengupta, Debjani. (ed) Mapmaking. Srishti Publishers, 2003.

[8]. Sarkar, Tanika. Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001.

[9]. Jain, Jasbir. "Daughters of Mother India in Search of a Nation: Women's Narratives about the Nation." Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 41, no. 17, 2006, pp. 1654–60. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418143.

[10]. Mastoor, Khadija. The Inner Courtyard. Kali, 2000.

[11]. Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London and New York: Verso, 1983.

[12]. Chatterjee, Partha. The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial histories. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

[13]. Daiya, Kavita. Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2008.

[14]. Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation." Millennium, Journal of International Studies, 1991, vol. 20, no. 3, p. 435.

[15]. Jayawardena, Kumari and Malathi de Alwis. Embodied violence: Communalising women's sexuality in South Asia, Kali 1996.

[16]. Yuval-Davis, N. and Anthias, F.Y. (eds) Woman-Nation-State, London: Macmillan,1989.

[17]. McClintock, Anne. Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest. London: Routledge, 1995.

[18]. Enloe, Cynthia. Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics. 2nd ed., University of California Press, 2014.