



A Comparative Study Of Social Rebellion In The Works Of Buddhadev Bose And Ismat Chughtai

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Abstract:

The article compares how societal resistance is portrayed in the writings of two Indian modernist literary pioneers, Buddhadev Bose and Ismat Chughtai. The research focuses on how these authors question long-standing societal conventions around gender, sexuality, and autonomy via an examination of important writings like Chughtai's Lihaaf and Bose's It Rained All Night. This article explores how literary acts of rebellion offer a radical reframing of individual agency in conservative cultural institutions, while also subverting taboos. It does this by merging feminist, psychoanalytical, and sociological viewpoints. Despite coming from diverse language and cultural origins, both authors add to a growing conversation on identity, resistance, and liberty. The final section of the article evaluates the enduring influence of their subversive stories on modern literature and philosophy.

Keywords: Social Rebellion, Gender, Modernism, Feminism, Indian Literature.

Introduction:

Literature's representation of social rebellion has historically served as both a mirror and a megaphone, reflecting social contradictions and amplifying oppositional voices. This tradition in Indian literature gained a lot of traction in the 20th century, especially against the backdrop of colonial resistance, the nationalist movement, and the first decades of nation-building after independence. Writers began to explore not just political rebellion but also deeply personal and social insurgencies—especially around issues of gender, class, sexuality, and identity. Buddhadev Bose and Ismat Chughtai, though separated by linguistic and cultural milieus—Bose writing primarily in Bengali and Chughtai in Urdu—emerge as

formidable figures who harnessed the potential of literature to interrogate and subvert entrenched norms.

The work of Bose demonstrates an interest in the bourgeois family structure's silent tragedies, emotional complexity, and existential discontentment. According to Chaudhuri (2013), Bose's controversial novel *It Rained All Night* (Raat Bhor Brishti, 1967), which was initially banned due to its explicit treatment of female desire, is an example of how fiction challenges the moral fabric of his time. However, Chughtai's literary world exudes a sense of rebellion. *Lihaaf*, Chughtai's iconic 1942 novel about female homoerotic desire and emotional neglect in feudal households, was charged with obscenity, a case that she

famously fought and won (Ruthvan, 2000). While Chughtai's stylistic approach is more satirical realism with feminist critique, Bose's stylistic approach is more introspective psychological realism. However, both authors share a commitment to social dissent. As a result, the purpose of this paper is to conduct a comparative study to see how these two authors use narrative strategies to oppose hegemonic ideologies—particularly patriarchy and class hegemony—and create counter-discourses based on the lived experience of women and emotional authenticity. It asks how their respective literary interventions function not only as cultural artifacts but also as rebellions that continue to resonate with social justice movements and feminist literary theory today.

Literary Background and Thematic Orientation:

Buddhadev Bose, a pioneer in contemporary Bengali literature who lived from 1918 to 1974, was heavily influenced by Western literary forms and psychoanalytical concepts, particularly D.H. Lawrence. He sought to transform Bengali prose from its traditional, sentimental forms into a more nuanced and introspective medium. The female protagonist of Bose's *It Rained All Night* defies both her marital obligations and sexual repression in a candid look at a failing marriage. The novel's treatment of female agency and dissatisfaction broke taboos in Bengali literature and evoked strong critical responses. Amit Chaudhuri (2013) describes Bose's thematic obsession with his characters' inner worlds as "an early experimentation with Indian existentialism,"

in which personal autonomy is pitted against societal constraints. Bose's works frequently deal with marital strife, sexual dissatisfaction, emotional alienation, and the search for authenticity—especially in the bourgeois setting. Debali Mookerjee-Leonard (2005) claims that Bose's use of eroticism was not unintentional but deeply philosophical, with the intention of demonstrating that sexuality is essential to self-realization and emotional honesty. His female characters resist gendered expectations and are agents of rebellion rather than passive sufferers. Malati, the protagonist of *It Rained All Night*, refuses to end her marriage and eventually seeks emotional fulfillment outside of it. This is a narrative arc that raises questions about the very foundation of the sanctity of marriage in middle-class Indian society. A pivotal figure in the Progressive Writers' Movement, Ismat Chughtai (1915–1991) approached fiction with a fierce commitment to gender critique and social realism. The structural violence that is ingrained in daily life at home is brought to light in her stories, which are frequently set in Muslim middle-class and feudal households in North India. A subversive counternarrative to the moral pieties of her time is created by Chughtai's narrative voice, which is frequently peppered with irony. In *Lihaaf*, for example, Chughtai uses a child narrator to reveal the emotional vacuum of Begum Jan, a woman whose husband's neglect leads her to seek solace in a female companion. The story's elliptical references to lesbian intimacy shocked conservative readers, yet Chughtai defended it as an honest portrayal of unspoken truths (Kumar, 1993).

Beyond *Lihaaf*, stories like *Gainda* and *The Quilt* continue Chughtai's thematic preoccupation with female desire, class exploitation, and patriarchal hypocrisy. Her protagonists are often women who, despite material dependence, exhibit sharp emotional intelligence and subversive wit. According to Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1991), Chughtai's fiction "converts silence into speech," reclaiming tabooed experiences as legitimate subjects of literary representation. She breaks away from the elitist tone that characterized a lot of Urdu literature before her by using language that is blunt, informal, and frequently ironic. This further democratizes literary expression. Despite their stylistic differences—Bose's poetic introspection versus Chughtai's earthy realism—both writers confront the socio-political realities of their times through fictional narratives. They magnify the anxieties, contradictions, and desires that traditional Indian society frequently tries to suppress through their protagonists. As a result, their diverse bodies of work are connected by a common theme of social rebellion. Together, Chughtai's directness and Bose's psychological subtlety paint a compelling portrait of resistance—both in interpersonal relationships and in cultural discourse—in the public sphere. Their works, deeply situated within their linguistic traditions, also reflect the pluralism of Indian modernity. While Bose modernized Bengali prose through Freudian introspection, Chughtai revolutionized Urdu storytelling by inserting women's voices into domains historically reserved for male authority. According to Aamir Mufti (1995), their contributions underscore the "untranslatability of Indian modernities,"

where rebellion assumes different hues across linguistic and cultural contexts but remains fundamentally rooted in a critique of oppression.

Rebellion Through Female Sexuality:

In both *It Rained All Night* and *Lihaaf*, female sexuality becomes the crucible through which broader questions of autonomy, power, and rebellion are examined. Buddhadev Bose's protagonist Malati offers one of the earliest depictions in Bengali literature of a woman who consciously withdraws from the sexual expectations of marriage. Malati's refusal to consummate her marriage is not framed as a pathological dysfunction, but as an act of self-preservation—a radical reclamation of bodily agency. The novel avoids reductive binaries of virtue and sin, instead presenting Malati's emotional and erotic detachment as a complex negotiation of identity, self-worth, and trauma. As Chaudhuri (2013) notes, Bose's rendering of female desire in *It Rained All Night* "is among the first instances in Indian literature where female sexuality is neither idealized nor demonized but placed within a realistic psychological frame."

Malati's journey represents a rebellion that is neither loud nor socially explosive, yet deeply subversive. She silently dismantles the patriarchal expectation that a woman must suppress her desires to maintain familial honor. Her decision to seek emotional and physical satisfaction outside of marriage—though controversial—becomes a form of liberation. Bose's refusal to punish or morally censure Malati stands in stark contrast to the moralistic tone prevalent in much of mid-

20th century Indian fiction, especially that written by male authors.

Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*, written in 1942, takes this sexual rebellion even further by addressing same-sex desire—an even more taboo subject in the socio-religious context of pre-independence India. Through the character of Begum Jan, Chughtai unveils the psychic toll of emotional neglect and sexual frustration within a patriarchal marital setup. Begum Jan's husband, preoccupied with his male companions, abandons his wife to emotional isolation. In this vacuum, a same-sex relationship blooms between Begum Jan and her maid Rabbo. Chughtai refrains from framing this liaison as unnatural or grotesque; instead, she uses a child narrator to present the unfolding events with naive objectivity, thereby neutralizing potential scandal with innocence.

As Parveen (2010) observes, "Chughtai uses the trope of childhood innocence not to obscure the sexuality of women but to reveal its normalized existence behind the veils of domesticity." *Lihaaf* caused a furor upon its publication and led to an obscenity trial, but Chughtai defended her work by arguing that the story merely depicted what was already happening behind closed doors. In doing so, she challenged the moral gatekeepers of society who sought to regulate women's bodies and silence any articulation of non-normative desire.

The rebellion in both texts is deeply embedded in the private sphere, yet its political implications are profound. By foregrounding women's sexual subjectivity, Bose and Chughtai dismantle the idealized image of the chaste, submissive Indian woman—a construct that served the dual

purpose of upholding both colonial and nationalist patriarchies (Kumar, 1993; Tharu & Lalita, 1991). In centering desire as a site of resistance, these authors do not merely depict transgression—they legitimate it.

Narrative Techniques As Tools Of Resistance:

Bose and Chughtai's literary strategies are not just aesthetic choices; rather, they are deliberate acts of resistance. Buddhadev Bose's narrative structure in *It Rained All Night* is introspective and fragmentary, frequently employing stream-of-consciousness and interior monologues. By avoiding societal judgments and emphasizing emotional truth over external perception, these strategies give the reader direct access to the character's inner world. Malati's turmoil, doubts, longings, and defiance are filtered through her own consciousness, creating a narrative intimacy that demands empathy rather than condemnation. "Bose's narrative method serves to personalize the political, inviting the reader to inhabit the very psychic space where resistance is born," states Mookerjee-Leonard (2005). Bose avoids portrayals of rebellion that are overly simplistic by prioritizing internal discourse. His characters are not archetypes but real people who are trying to figure out their own moral and personal dilemmas. This is in line with modernist literature, where introspection is used as a subversive challenge to external authority. In a society where women were expected to repress emotion and suppress desire, Malati's inward reflection becomes a political act.

Chughtai's narrative voice, on the other hand, is outgoing, witty, and

combative. She frequently addresses culturally volatile topics by employing irony, satire, and a deceptively straightforward tone. Her most well-known works, *Lihaaf*, *Gainda*, and *Chhui Mui*, destabilize social hierarchies through domestic settings and informal language. For example, in *Lihaaf*, the choice of a child as the narrator is calculated: it reveals the absurdity and cruelty of adult conventions while deflecting any immediate accusations of vulgarity. "Chughtai's narrative stance subverts respectability by mimicking its own voice—she writes like the middle-class, only to show how hollow its values are," according to Aamir Mufti (1995). Additionally, Chughtai's resistance is encoded linguistically. By injecting women's voices, idioms, and kitchen gossip into literary Urdu, which has traditionally been a male-dominated, elitist form, she frequently subverts it. Feminist action is this linguistic democratization, which breaks down the barrier between "high" literature and the everyday realities of women's lives. She is able to sneak radical ideas into seemingly innocent domestic tales because she is able to combine humor with social criticism. Tharu and Lalita (1991) argue that Chughtai "weaponized the domestic" by making the home not just a site of oppression but also one of resistance and negotiation.

The numerous literary strategies available to dissidents are highlighted by the stark stylistic contrast between Bose and Chughtai—Bose's solemn introspection versus Chughtai's performative irony]. Both authors demonstrate that rebellion need not always wear the armor of polemic; it can also speak through silence, ambiguity, or even laughter. What unites them is the use

of narrative form to contest social hierarchies, unsettle normative codes, and carve out spaces for alternative truths.

Cultural Contexts And Constraints:

It is essential to appreciate the radical nature of Buddhadev Bose and Ismat Chughtai's literary rebellion to comprehend the sociocultural environments in which they wrote. In the middle of the 20th century, Bose worked in Bengal's literary circles, which were intellectually active and relatively progressive. He was a member of a modernist movement that also included Jibanananda Das and Samar Sen. This circle was marked by experimentation, cosmopolitanism, and a willingness to engage with Western literary forms. However, Bose's modernism did not come without drawbacks or dangers. Due to its open depiction of female sexual autonomy and marital estrangement, his novel *It Rained All Night* was met with suspicion and moral outrage despite his elite literary standing. "Even in the most progressive enclaves of Bengal, female desire was a site of cultural anxiety," according to Chattopadhyay (2007). The novel was initially banned for obscenity, underscoring how deeply rooted social conservatism could curtail artistic freedom, even within avant-garde spaces.

Unlike Bose, Chughtai navigated a far more conservative and patriarchal Urdu literary establishment. Writing from within the context of Muslim middle-class households in North India, Chughtai's thematic preoccupations were seen as scandalous. Under the colonial legal system, the story *Lihaaf* wrote in 1942 became the focus of an obscenity trial. Chughtai's bold

decision to neither apologize nor retract her work marked a pivotal moment in Indian literary history. Her defense in court argued that the story merely described what was already taking place behind the curtains of privileged households; realism was her weapon, irony her tool. Despite the trial's trauma, it propelled her into the public eye as an unflinching advocate for sexual and literary rights. As Nabar (1995) points out, Chughtai's real-life defiance was as significant as her textual provocations. She became a cultural icon who defied patriarchal orthodoxy and colonial censorship. Her works were not abstract treatises on gender or sexuality; they were grounded in the lived experience of a woman navigating the boundaries of respectability, religion, and rebellion. As a result, Chughtai's literary resistance went beyond the page and was manifested in her refusal to bow to social, legal, or moral policing. Therefore, Chughtai's rebellion was forged in the crucible of Urdu conservatism, making her transgressions even more audacious, whereas Bose's rebellion was shaped within the relatively liberal and secular framework of Bengali modernism. However, both authors had to deal with the harsh realities of moral policing and censorship, demonstrating the persistent restrictions placed on artists who dared to question societal norms.

Impact And Legacy:

The literary contributions of Buddhadev Bose and Ismat Chughtai extend far beyond their immediate historical and cultural moments. Indian literature has been profoundly influenced by their investigations of female subjectivity, sexuality, and

emotional autonomy. They challenged the canon itself by placing women's perspectives at the center of narratives that had previously been dominated by male perspectives. This made room for new discussions about identity, agency, and liberation. *It Rained All Night* by Bose remains a significant contribution to contemporary Bengali literature. His psychosexual realism paved the way for later writers like Sunil Gangopadhyay and Shobha De, who explored the complex terrain of human relationships with candor and psychological depth. Bose's novel "opened a door that had long remained shut in Bengali fiction—the door to the bedroom and to the psyche of the middle-class Indian woman," as stated by Mookerjee-Leonard (2005). His willingness to break down the false dichotomies of virtue versus desire, tradition versus modernity, and public versus private are what will live on in his legacy. In a similar vein, Ismat Chughtai had a profound and fundamental impact on Indian feminist literature. Generations of writers, including Kamala Das, Urvashi Butalia, and Taslima Nasrin, have been inspired by her refusal to romanticize or sanitize women's domestic lives. According to Tharu and Lalita (1991), Chughtai "redefined the permissible" in Urdu literature by emphasizing the stories of women and employing a writing style that was deeply rooted in everyday expressions. Her fiction continues to be taught, adapted, and debated—not just in South Asia but globally—as a model of intersectional resistance and feminist expression.

Their impact is not limited to the literary world alone. In today's increasingly polarized and censorship-prone political

climate, where artistic expression is frequently under threat, the works of Bose and Chughtai offer important lessons. They demonstrate that the personal is always political and that fiction can be a potent site of cultural resistance. Their tales are relevant to current discussions of gender, speech freedom, LGBTQ+ rights, and body politics. By anchoring rebellion in the emotional and sexual lives of their characters, Bose and Chughtai exposed the mechanisms of social control that operate within families, marriages, and communities. Although their characters are typically housewives, lovers, or disillusioned spouses—not revolutionaries in the traditional sense—their defiance reverberates throughout the social and cultural fabric of their time.

Conclusion:

The goal of this comparison of Buddhadev Bose and Ismat Chughtai has been to show how literature becomes a battlefield for social change and critique. Despite differences in language, region, and narrative style, both authors used fiction to challenge deeply ingrained social hierarchies, particularly those pertaining to domesticity, gender, and sexuality. Bose's psychological realism and Chughtai's biting irony may seem stylistically divergent, but they converge in their ultimate purpose: to unearth and contest the hypocrisies of a society that silences, disciplines, and marginalizes those who do not conform.

Their work illustrates that rebellion need not always be theatrical or militant; it can also be quiet, internal, and profoundly human. Both Begum Jan's unconventional relationship with Rabbo and Malati's decision to reclaim her sexual agency defy

heteronormative and patriarchal norms. These narratives offer not just critique but possibility—an imaginative reconstitution of what it means to be a woman, a lover, a writer, or an individual in a society bound by rigid conventions.

In acknowledging the contributions of Bose and Chughtai, we also reaffirm the enduring power of literature to disrupt, to expose, and to reimagine. Their tales continue to inspire not only due to the fact that they were ahead of their time but also due to the fact that they are still very much relevant. Returning to their works is both an act of homage and a rekindling of resistance in a time when conservatism and censorship are becoming more prevalent.

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