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“Sacred Duty”: Walled Secularism in Independent India

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Ismat Chughtai, an Indian writer in the 20th Century was influential in the Urdu literary scene for her role in furthering the women's cause. This paper focuses on her translated short story “Sacred Duty” in which the sanctity of ‘secularism’ is questioned by addressing interfaith marriages in order to polarise religious orthodoxy of older generations with that of the flippancy of the youth. It unfurls the pseudo-fraternal form of coexistence of the middle and upper class ‘progressives’ that was practiced to appease their own sense of modernity. By contextualising this within the communal riots of post-partition India, a seeming anxiety is noticed within the newer generations in contending with their ‘duty’ to the nation and religion. Offsetting this against the postcolonial scholarship by Partha Chatterjee based on Benedict Anderson’s notion of an “imagined community,” this story remarks on the strength of that argument in view of the religious boundaries that consecrate such a nation. The married couple Samina and Tashar’s stance heralds a crucial question about the possibility of climbing over this wall drawn out by Hindus and Muslims and escaping this ‘community’ altogether. Through this analysis, the restricted nature of Indian secularism post-Independence is highlighted as propagating divisionist ideology.

The battle of our political freedom is fought and won. But another battle, no less important than what we have won, still faces us. It is a battle with no outside enemy... It is a battle with our own selves.

- Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru

Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991) was an Indian writer, who spoke up against the rising issues regarding women and familial ties before and after the Partition of India. Cited as a controversial figure for her bold description of female homosexuality in the short story “The Quilt” (Lihaaf published in 1942) for which she went to court on charges of obscenity, Chughtai was unabashed in voicing the myriad experiences that the women of India faced daily, drawing closely from her own experience of growing up in a middle-class Muslim family in Uttar Pradesh in northern India. She wrote exclusively in Urdu, a language that surmounted the literary scene through its proliferation by celebrated writers like Saadat Hasan Manto and Kaifi Azmi, among others, all part of the Indian Progressive Writers’ Association that began in 1936. The English translations of Chughtai’s oeuvre by Tahira Naqvi and Syeda S. Hameed in the 1990s opened up a global dissemination of the author’s work which had been widely appreciated in India throughout her long and diverse career,

as a writer of books and screenplays. It is these translations which I will be using for the purposes of my argument.

Although academic criticism has focused on her feminist prose and realistic portrayal of everyday life, the scope of this paper is a forgotten short story written later in her career called “Sacred Duty” (Muqaddas Farz) published in 1983, on which there appears to be no scholarship apart from a recent dissertation by Harvard University doctoral student Sadaf Jaffer (2015). The resurgent attention being paid to the story now is, I believe, due to its topical subject of secularism in contemporary India; a topic that has postcolonial scholars questioning its relevance and resonance decades after it was adopted in Independent India’s Constitution. “Sacred Duty” was written following closely on the heels of the 42nd Amendment Act (1976) that incorporated the adjective ‘secular’ to the Indian Preamble, in the wake of the National Emergency enforced by the Indira Gandhi governmentⁱ. This story is seen to question the sanctity of this term ‘secular’ by addressing interfaith marriages in order to polarise religious orthodoxy of older generations with that of the flippancy of the youth regarding religious matters.

Through a comic, sarcastic tone that sets off the embedded communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims, this story unfurls the pseudo-fraternal form of coexistence of the middle and upper class ‘progressives’ that was practised to appease their own sense of modernity. By contextualising this within the communal riots of post-partition India, an anxiousness is noticed within the newer generations in contending simultaneously with their ‘duty’ to the nation and religion. Offsetting this against the scholarship provided by Benedict Anderson who argues that a nation is an “imagined community” (Anderson 6), this story remarks on the strength of that argument in view of the religious boundaries that consecrate such a nation, following Partha Chatterjee’s postcolonial angle to Anderson’s point. The married couple Samina and Tashar’s stance heralds a crucial question about the possibility of climbing over this wall drawn out by Hindus and Muslims and escaping this ‘community’ altogether, which this paper aims to understand.

Communalism in post-Partition India

As defined by historian and critic Gyanendra Pandey, “[i]n its common Indian usage the word ‘communalism’ refers to a condition of suspicion, fear and hostility between members of different religious communities.” (Pandey 2006 8) While this sentiment of religious consternation within communities predates British colonialism, Pandey proposes that its present form is a recent phenomenon abetted by colonial interference that used it to further the imperial agenda (14). In creating all-India Hindu and all-India Muslim communities, the Empire linked the communal question with that of nationalism (16, emphases in original). Thus, the inextricable ties between the two concepts begs the question not only of their interdependence but also of their parasitical nature in India. What Pandey suggests reconceives the idea of a nation as being tangibly linked to the rise of communalism which saw its culmination in the Two-Nation theory put forward by the Muslim League which led to the Partition of India into India and Pakistan on the eve of Independence from the British Crown in 1947. What is celebrated as the greatest triumph in Indian national history comes with an attached realisation of the triumph also of communalism that had the power to tear apart a multi-religious country that had co-existed for centuries before East India Company began trade relations. Pakistan was created out of animosity and fear for a Hindu-majoritarian country that, upon independence, would take over the imperial system of domination over the native subject whose suppression would be supposedly inevitable. The debate about whether the creation of Pakistan was the right decision or not is ongoing and Sisyphean, and not the intention of this paper to settle. What is of interest is the relation between nationalism and religion which Ismat Chughtai revisits in the 1980s, three decades after the Partition.

The date of publication of “Sacred Duty” is crucial to our understanding of the psyche of a society post-reconfiguration to gleam its current status in light of post-Partition trauma and consequence. The 1980s saw a resurgence of communal riots and violent destruction between the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities following the end of the Indian Emergency in 1977 (Pandey 2001 6). One year after the story was published, in 1984, the Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguard as part of a Blue Star Operation that saw further violence against the Sikhs (in retaliation). Conditions further escalated in the ’90s when the Babri Masjid was demolished by Hindu right-wing parties; this caused the largest riots in the country in

recent years with more than 2000 casualties on both Hindu and Muslim sides (Pandey 2001 16).

Chughtai's text comes to serve as a document that grapples with the conditions created by this hostile environment after Partition. However, what has always fascinated literary critics about her work is the careful disentanglement of the private and public spheres that women and men of upper-class Muslim families occupied respectively. In "Sacred Duty," there is no overt mention of any communal tension unlike her other stories "Roots" and "Green Bangles," either locally or on a national level; on the surface, there appears to be peaceful relations between the two communities. This is explained by Samina's mother Begum Siddiqi rather desperately upon hearing of Samina's elopement with the Hindu boy Tashar, "No, we have nothing against Hindus" (Chughtai 2004 22, emphasis in original). Samina's father Siddiqi Saheb corroborates this sentiment, saying he "had never been involved in a dispute over religious convictions" (22). Despite these testimonies, their actions following their daughter's 'betrayal' suggest otherwise. Chughtai's clever use of temporal and spatial faculties in her prose allude to more than her plot addresses. By making Tashar hail from a Hindu family in Allahabad (in Uttar Pradesh), it forms the subtext for the rising violence that Chughtai experienced in her home state. This story anticipates such atrocities that were germinating within the conscience of the two communities since the riots began before Partition. While describing Tashar Trivedi's father Sethji as a "king-maker" that had ties with the "winning party" (Chughtai 2004 26), her casual insertion of the adjectives "staunch Mahasabhi"ⁱⁱ (Hindu) are enough to signal a battle between the two families that exceeds their immediate social sphere.

Up until the point when the Siddiqi and Trivedi families' religious sanctity was kept intact, they maintained the illusion of mutually supporting the various communities residing in India. The moment Tashar and Samina's elopement causes an imbalance in the power relations between the two groups, they begin to simultaneously claim a stronghold over the other. Sethji beats Siddiqi Saheb to it by accepting Samina as a member of their family by forcing her to convert to Hinduism and abide by the rituals of a Hindu marriage ceremony. The pettiness of his scheme is conveyed to the reader through the elaborate news coverage it receives, which riles up Siddiqi Saheb. In order to get even, he in turn devises another plan by which to reconvert Samina and Tashar to

Islam. In the midst of all this plotting, from Siddiqi Saheb escapes a long-suppressed anxiety pertaining to the days of Partition: “This is a nation of Hindus, after all. Ah, such fine positions were offered to him in Pakistan, but he had been so full of the progressive spirit then — such stupidity!” (Chughtai 2004 24-25, emphasis in original). This not only notifies the reader that the story is in fact set after the Partition of India, but also that the feelings of regret and vulnerability still linger. After decades of living in a country that he considers his home, this one instance makes the nation itself sacrilegious. In this lies what I believe to be a significant anxiety within the Muslims that chose to remain in India instead of leaving everything behind and joining their ‘brothers’ on the other side of the border. That such sentiments resurface at such a time, i.e. the 1980s, is a nod to the rising communal tensions that parallel those of the two families.

Chughtai’s Role as a Progressive Writer

Siddiqi Saheb’s insistence on being a ‘progressive’ calls upon a history of independent India’s progress and modernity. In Chughtai’s case, it also refers to her involvement with the All-India Progressive Writers Association (PWA); they were a group of radical literary figures that used realism as an artistic technique (Flemming 200) in their works to capture not only the naked reality of human suffering in light of the Indian Independence Movement (especially Partition) but also the changing face of India that was moving towards modern sensibilities. According to literary historian Rakhshanda Jalil who studied the PWA, for them, “the partition was an opportunity to dwell on the present” (Jalil 3). Having been influenced and also contributed to such a discourse, Chughtai’s conception of a ‘progressive’ was shaped by this organisation’s motivation for uncovering the truth from the oppressive structures of society and relaying them to their readers in stark language and diction. It is also imperative to locate the character of Siddiqi Saheb against Chughtai’s own father who was liberal and progressive as he educated his daughter, against the norm. However, she had to resist her family’s pleas to give up education after primary school and fought her way to acquire a B.A. from university (Parekh). Often invoked as one of the “daughters of reform” (qtd. in Gopal 67), Chughtai grew up in a family that supported (to a certain extent) her desire to write and publish. Nevertheless, she published her first few stories anonymously which were mistakenly

attributed to her brother Mirza Azim Baig Chughtai who was already an established writer by then (Parekh).

This duality of freedom which, on the one hand, allowed her to be a free-spirited girl that spent most of her childhood playing boys' games with her brothers and, on the other, to lead a more restricted life that she was expected to lead upon becoming a 'lady' impacted her works of art in which she allowed the readers, for the first time, a glimpse into the private lives of Muslim women. Her stories thus have strong inflections of gender, sexuality and the domesticity that come with dealing with complex female characters that transgress these boundaries and question them. In "Sacred Duty," Siddiqi Saheb, "who is a product of a highly-principled, truly Muslim family" (Chughtai 25, emphasis in original), cannot fathom his daughter's audacity to go against his religion to fulfil her own wishes, since he never conceived of the existence of her wishes in the first place. In a manner similar to their contradictory relations with Hindus, who they have nothing against but also cannot stand to be associated with, this dilemma caused by Samina makes the parents reevaluate their ideological precepts. "It was true that Siddiqi Saheb was a progressive; allowing girls to obtain a higher education and letting them marry whomever they pleased — he certainly believed in all of this." (Chughtai 2004 21, my emphasis). Critic Parul Bhandari says that this new form of 'modern marriage' "rests in the ability to appropriate aspects of modernization and reconfigure elements of love, morality, and honour in which the family continues to play an important role" (Bhandari 132). However, when a suitable marriage proposal arrives for Samina, despite her desire to continue her education, "the girl was silenced with a few words of censure" (Chughtai 2004 21). Such expressions outline an emergent form of progressive thought after the partition of the country that was straddling the orthodox spaces of the past and present.

A sharp divide between 'belief' (as Siddiqi put it) and reality is seen to germinate, that is resonant of the larger problem of secularism that is practiced in India. Questioning his behaviour, he thought "[w]ould Tashar have been able to woo her in her own home if her parents had not been so liberal?" (Chughtai 2004 25, my emphasis) What emerges is a self-interest that banks on religiosity to thrive in the face of conflict. For Samina's father, being progressive ensured entry into the elite ranks of the social strata, it promised a life of peaceful relations in which he would seemingly remain untouched by the political and communal waves that inevitably engulfed the working class in its throes for victory over

the masses. When Siddiqi Saheb proudly asserts that he “had been living a life of quiet respectability as a member of an enlightened social class” (21), he acknowledges the privilege of inhabiting such a space that allows for his pseudo-progressive attitudes to prevail in order to keep up the guise in ‘modern’ India. Samina, who is a product of a newer generation of thinkers, calls out this bigotry by labelling it as a “farce” (Chughtai 2004 28) that she refuses to succumb to.

Despite drawing from her own experience that was restricted to a particular section, i.e. middle-class Muslim families, her prose is rich in its critique of the current political scenario of India. Being hailed as “self-critical literature” by critic Priyamvada Gopal, Chughtai’s work “identified an ‘us’ and an ‘our’ in the interests of reconstruction needed to be developed” in postcolonial literatures (Gopal 16). Published in the ’80s when Nehruvian Secularismⁱⁱⁱ was being replaced by jingoistic fervour along religious lines that was tearing apart entire communities of people, this rupture is visible in “Sacred Duty” through the actions of the older generation i.e. Samina and Tashar’s parents. Tashar’s father Sethji (Hindu) becomes an active political correspondent (as a Mahasabhi) with ties to right-wing extremists that are perpetrating violence against Muslims; Samina’s father Siddiqi Saheb on the other hand, while adopting a more neutral stance on the matter of religious dogmatism, still betrays a preferentiality for his ‘own kind’ by erecting a wall against the ‘other’ that his daughter surmounts.

Discussing the role of writers at large and the members of PWA in particular, Chughtai wrote in a powerful essay a couple of years after Partition that Tahira Naqvi translated in 2000 titled “Communal Violence and Literature,” that the need of the hour was to capture, with authenticity, the harrowing effects of a division that separated people on the basis of religion. She said, “With every aspect of life disturbed by this earthshaking event, how could poets and writers possibly sit on the side without saying a word? How could literature, which bears close ties to life, avoid getting its shirt-front wet when life was drenched in blood?” (Chughtai 2000 445) Thus, “Sacred Duty” manages to capture the changing temperament of a society that had not, and still has not, fully recovered from the havoc caused in 1947, that was encouraged to adopt cogent secularism as a legislative motto, while being a witness to renewed sectarian violence. In such turbulence, Chughtai manages to introspect the relation between the identities that people had come to

impersonate as 'progressives'. Religious identities come to circulate as national identities in the effort to gauge its similarities.

Conception of Secularism in India

Siddiqui Saheb recollects his rationale during Partition in his present moment of crisis: "can't leave my country, I will be buried in the earth that gave me life" (Chughtai 25). His country is the place of birth, a place that is reconstituted as the earth. Independent India was in fact only created recently, on 15 August 1947. A nation, as Benedict Anderson argues, is "an imagined political community, and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 6). It is 'imagined' because of a sense of "communion" that is felt by a group for each other, without having any physical conception of its individuals (6); it is based on an affinity that is as intangible as the nation that it creates. While his account focuses on Western modes that lead to this 'creation', his work in the Indian context leads to a reassessment of the nation as being 'imagined' into being in a dissimilar manner to the West. Partha Chatterjee's critique of this very homogenisation can be found in "Whose Imagined Communities?" where he argues for a different methodology with which to approach the postcolonial communities for whom a nation was created not on the basis of similarity but rather intrinsic difference from its colonisers (Chatterjee 216). Drawing from these sources, the central problem of "Sacred Duty" is the relationality between religion and nationalism; what is provided as a solution to mete out the differences is secularism which, argued in this paper, is inadequate and flawed.

Anderson provides an instance from Marco Polo's account of Kublai Khan that detects "the seeds of a territorialization of faiths which foreshadows the language of many nationalists ('our' nation is 'the best' — in a competitive, comparative field) (Anderson 17). In India, this sentiment is appropriated as 'our religion dictates our nation', especially in light of the mass conversions into Christianity that were being promoted by the British during their rule, which the Indians tried to resist. Thus, in a moment of condescension, Siddiqui is led to pronounce "This is a nation of Hindus after all" (Chughtai 2004 24) aligning the discussion in line with what right-wing Hindus and Muslims argued about a nation being constructed on sectarian lines. Despite its political motives, the desire for Pakistan germinated along this pattern that believed the country (after independence) would be governed by Hindus, compromising Muslim representation. However, this

Western conception was contested by M. K. Gandhi, the Indian National Congress and by millions who did not believe in this reduced notion of a nation. Siddiqui himself did not succumb to this justification during Partition, instead proposing his birthplace as his nation, irrespective of religious majority; he chose to remain in India.

While this line of thought did not echo universally (proven by the creation of Pakistan), it nevertheless promised the minorities of the country that post-Partition, India would not give in to the Western concept of a 'nation' by continuing to house people of all faiths. It was this confidence that allowed the Siddiqui family to stay back; this confidence was affirmed by the ruling party of Independent India (Indian National Congress) that had promised the masses a secular New India. The official inclusion of the term 'secular' into the Constitution in 1977 further solidified the country's stance on anti-religious sentiment.

Ismat Chughtai's project raises the question of this official implementation, in the context of the widespread sectarian violence that followed in the years after this Amendment. As mentioned, the families in the story, without directly engaging in the discourse of sectarianism, reveal the "farce" of this mode of secularism. Chughtai does this by focusing on inter-faith marriages that complicate the superficial peacefulness between the two communities and reveal the divisionism masquerading as secularism. When Samina and Tashar elope, shame and embarrassment supersede their 'progressive' outlook; in having to implement their "belief" (just as in the case of girls' education), they arrive at a crossroads and choose to follow the direction of orthodoxy. What separates this approach from religious fanaticism is the backseat that religion itself takes in this tussle between the two families. For Siddiqui Saheb, it is not the religious transgression that Samina commits which infuriates him, but rather the power imbalance created by such a transgression. It is a "game" (Chughtai 2004 28) that blurs the boundaries. What comes across as 'sacred' in "Sacred Duty" is not Samina and Tashar's duty owing to their respective religions, but to their community. The game played by both parties is a ridiculous attempt at upping the ante against the opponents by converting and reconverting the couple. First, Samina is converted to Hinduism so as to be accepted by the groom's family, then Tashar and Samina are forced to reconvert to Islam pertaining to Siddiqui's wishes. This back-and-forth undermines the sacrosanct claims of their religiosity by inversely showing the ease with which it is possible to break down these

boundaries. In trying to prevent collisions with the ‘other’ religion, the parents themselves prove the futility of their resistance by inviting the ‘other’ into their space; the example of Tashar being converted to Islam is an effort to keep the family ‘pure’ but actually is a warped notion of religious purity itself as even a Hindu can become one of their own within seconds.

This is not in any capacity an indication of their secularism; on the contrary, it resembles a self-patronising technique to prove to their respective communities that they remain ‘untouched’ by the other group. The parents’ efforts to deny the ‘inter-faith’ aspect of the union shows the walls that are erected that cannot contend with such a ‘mixed’ marriage. For them, either both will be Hindu or both will be Muslim; they cannot be a mixture of two. I see this struggle as representing the larger purview of secularism (as it is adopted in India) which, although guarantees the legal right to co-exist and to be heard without discrimination, cannot account for the decision of the communities to stay within their boundaries. In a bid to problematize this further, Chughtai alerts the reader of a clause mentioned in the civil marriage certificate form that Samina and Tashar sign in accordance with the civil ceremony that the State presides over. It states that “neither of you [Samina and Tashar] belongs to any particular faith” (Chughtai 2004 32). Is this a denial on the part of the Indian government to similarly accept inter-faith marriages? While the parents try to convert both to a particular religion, the law strips them of either faith. In a nation that claims to be secular, the law itself fails to acknowledge the possible breakdown of sectarian boundaries. Partha Chatterjee claims that when the idea of ‘family’ that is intrinsic to Indian national culture is modernised, it is done through a process that retains the “tradition” of the practice so as to offer a different version of the Westernised concept of modernity, which is still Indian (Chatterjee 220). However, in “Sacred Duty,” modern law that conducts ‘civil’ marriages, does so on an anti-religious mandate that complies with the ‘secular’ outlook of the nation.

It is in the midst of this confusion that the story ends with Samina and Tashar running away, leaving behind a letter addressed to Samina’s parents. They write jointly, “we don’t subscribe to any religion [...] We have no religion.” (Chughtai 2004 37) They, the newer generation, deny their religious affinities and comply with the state-ordained regulation to counteract the previous generation’s obstinacy. Yet, they believe in God (37). Is this what secularism constitutes now? Going from all-religions to no-religion? The

post-Partition India, instead of combating communalism by breaking down its walls and allowing the various communities to ameliorate their relations, strengthens them by denying the very possibility of such relations. The couple runs away to a place inaccessible to their parents and the readers where such alliances are welcomed; one wonders if such a place exists in India.

Sadaf Jaffer in his doctoral dissertation, which is the only extant piece of recent scholarship on this story, quotes Chughtai's preference for a "religion of humanity" (Jaffer 27), which further corroborates her stance against the current legislative system that fails to incorporate all religions under this larger umbrella term. If Indian nationalism was 'imagined' by the masses in opposition to the Western forms, as Chatterjee argues, in the quest to form an authentic national identity, religion is compromised. The newer generation recognises the unscalable wall that exists within religious communities despite seeming pseudo-progressive and chooses to relinquish religion altogether in the efforts to be able to 'mix' with each other. "Sacred Duty" manages to trace this anxiousness within the family members in order to question the meaning of secularism as a national decree.

Conclusion

Ismat Chughtai's 1983 story "Sacred Duty" (Muqaddas Farz) obliquely touches on pertinent questions that were germinating in the Indian national psyche during the aftermath of the Partition that displaced millions of people across the borders and proved not only to be a culmination of the communal divisionist framework but also a springboard for further violence. Set a couple of decades later, this sectarian sentiment lingers below the surface and festers until it finds the opportune moment to resurface while accounting for inter-faith marriages. Having drawn from Gyanendra Pandey's historical theories and chronologies of postcolonialism and communalism, this paper has intended to trace its bearing on a text of this kind that comes to be shaped by these social operatives. Considering Chughtai's style of writing which invokes a 'realist' technique, much like the other writers of Progressive Writers' Association, this history adds to the meaning-making of the text by underlining the paradoxical relationship that the Hindus and Muslims come to share after being declared as residents of a 'secular' nation. This challenges the concept of nation itself which is created from a sense of ownership that ties in with other descriptive categories of identity such as religion. Drawing from the

preliminary study by Benedict Anderson, compounded by Partha Chatterjee's later addition in the context of India, "Sacred Duty" calls into question the "imagination" behind the creation of Indian nationalism that fought against the 'Divide and Rule' policy of the British Crown by advocating a mode of secularism that was just as separatist. Through the inclusion/exclusion that Samina and Tashar experience, from which they eventually try and escape, the walled nature of the secularism of post-Partition Independent India is revealed. Just as the law is incapable of conceiving of a marriage (literally and figuratively) between the two religious communities without compromising that identity itself, the parents cannot fathom a relation with the 'other' in which the boundaries may remain intact. What this story hints at is a national dilemma surrounding the sectarian communities that exist within the larger secular community of India.

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Author Biography

Sheelalipi Sahana is a student of MSc. Literature and Modernity at the University of Edinburgh. Her interest in women's contribution to the modernist movement is reflected in her past work on Woolf, Mansfield and du Maurier. She is now venturing into an ethnographic parallel of this in the Indian context.

Endnotes

ⁱ From 1975-77, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi enforced a state of Emergency in India that curtailed the civil liberties of citizens, such as media censorship. The elections were suspended and the country was in a state of chaos. For a thorough account of the event, refer P.N. Dhar's *Indira Gandhi, the 'Emergency', and Indian Democracy* (Oxford UP, 2000).

ⁱⁱ A 'mahasabhi' is a member of the Hindu Mahasabha, a right-wing Hindu nationalist political party in India.

ⁱⁱⁱ India's first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru advocated a form of secularism that placed emphasis on humanism and democratic representation. For more on his views, refer Perumal's article "Nehru and Secularism" (1987).