

**SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities**

Print ISSN: 2773-7829; e-ISSN: 2773-7837

eJournal Site: [www.cdetu.edu.np/ejournal/](http://www.cdetu.edu.np/ejournal/)

- Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal
- Indexed in NepJOL; Star-Ranked in JPPS
- Permanently Archived in Portico



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URL: [www.cdetu.edu.np](http://www.cdetu.edu.np)

Review Article

## Redefining the Other: Sexual Politics in Ismat Chughtai's "The Mole" and "The Homemaker"

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*Article History:* Submitted 15 May 2022; Reviewed 9 July 2022; Revised 27 July 2022

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v4i2.47427>

### Abstract

In presenting the sexual politics in her stories, Ismat Chughtai is often quite deconstructive. In her stories, "The Mole" and "The Homemaker," she breaks the traditional power nexus of man as the subject and woman as the Other in the politics of sexuality by presenting the characters of Rani and Lajo respectively. These characters, with their bold and authoritative sexuality, choose their sexual relationships on their own and posit themselves at the centre of those relationships—Rani in her relationships with Choudhry, Chunnan and Ratna; and Lajo in hers with Mirza. By portraying these two women as the subject in their sexual politics, Chughtai redefines the Other to be the man, instead of the woman. The pattern that Chughtai weaves here to do that has two distinct threads: first, empowering both Rani and Lajo with their sexuality and second, making them reciprocal in the sexual politics they share with the men in the stories. Drawing on the theoretical perspective from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, this paper examines Chughtai's process of redefining the Other in the sexual politics between the men and the women in her stories. The study demonstrates that the author has redefined the Other to be the men in the stories when it comes to the question of a reciprocal sexual politics and thus she has contributed to the gynocentric Urdu narratives by manifesting an intellectual rebellion against the phallogocentric notions of her time.

**Keywords:** Subject, Other, sexuality, sexual politics

### Introduction

Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991) is one of the pioneering feminist writers in the South-Asian belt to work on the female sexuality in Urdu fiction. Due to her iconoclastic approach to presenting the female sexuality, her female characters are sometimes kept in the central zone of the sexual politics. In a time when women were always socially marginalized in terms of securing their rights for education and profession, she takes a long stride ahead of her time by making her female characters reign in the sexual

relationships and her male characters succumb to the female sexuality. This art of characterization is an effective way of establishing such a power nexus in the stories in which the women sit at the centre—thus becoming the subject, and the men remain in the periphery—thus becoming the Other. This paper will take into an account of two such stories: “The Mole” and “The Homemaker.” The female characters in these stories—Rani and Lajo respectively—are not only the ones who choose the sexual relationships on their own but also are reciprocal in the course of those relationships. They are women who are aware of their sexuality and of the significant role it can play in their sexual lives. In these stories, she thus redefines the Other in the sexual politics. First of all, the female characters here are empowered with their sexuality, and second of all, they play an active role with reciprocity in the sexual acts with men. This pattern of sexual politics in her stories can be theoretically analyzed by the argument of Simone de Beauvoir as she presents it on her rejection of the psychoanalytic definition of the Other in her groundbreaking book *The Second Sex*.

### **Beauvoir and the Politics of Sexuality**

In her book *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir discusses female sexuality and analyzes the traditional paradigm of power between a man and a woman in a sexual relationship. To define ‘woman’ according to this particular power nexus, in the introduction of her book, argues, “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (16). Keeping in mind the Hegelian concept of consciousness, she argues that the essential subject is only formed when it is set as opposed to the inessential object or the Other. She clarifies further by focusing on the reciprocity and relativity between the subject and the Other once the circumstances change (17). She points to the striking absence of that reciprocity and relativity between man and woman, and eventually raises the question: “Why is it that women do not dispute male sovereignty?” (18). In the chapter, “The Psychoanalytic Point of View,” she rejects the psychoanalytic definition of the Other on the ground of its being a failure “to explain why woman is the *Other*” (81). Beauvoir emphasizes the importance of sexuality in human life and claims that Freudian psychoanalysis in particular has never attempted to define female sexuality from the feminine perspective. She says, “He [Freud] declines to regard the feminine libido as having its own original nature, and therefore it will necessarily seem to him like a complex deviation from the human libido in general” (71). Not recognizing the female libido as an essential part of the female sexuality explains why the woman is always taken for granted to be the Other. Being the Other is rather forced upon the woman; it is not a choice given to her. Beauvoir also brings on the concept of choice and discusses at length on how the psychoanalysis of the sexual politics rejects it (76-78). Thus, she presents the woman not as the Other but as a human being who has all the capacity to take up the position of the subject.

In the context of the twentieth century Indian literature, the discourse of sexual politics is presented mainly through the creative writing as it is said by R. K. Gupta in the essay “Feminism and Modern Indian Literature.” He coins two terms: “creative feminism” and “critical feminism”—to differentiate the feminist creative writings from the writings that present “re-interpretation and revaluation of literary texts, old and new, from a woman-centred point of view” (180). The Progressive Writers’ Movement of India was a brilliant example of upholding the “creative feminism” in which Chughtai was a member. Gupta says, “Remarkably, whereas in American literature and in many European literatures feminism has expressed itself in both these modes, in Indian literature feminism has for the most part remained confined to creative literature, and has

not led to a sustained and comprehensive re-interpretation of literary texts from a new critical feminist stance” (180). In regard with the urgency of creating a lineage of critical feminism, Sukrita Paul Kumar opines in the essay “Decoding Gender in Literary Texts,” “Rather than constantly looking at “heroes” as ‘codified’ heroes in accordance strictly to the male perception, we ought to pay more attention to the “heroines” as live female consciousness and not as passive and “feminine” puppets; ...” (173). Kumar highlights upon the need of a “relatively new gender consciousness in criticism” that can generate “a fuller understanding of the sexual identity of the characters” from a text (173). In the twenty-first century, as feminism is going through its fourth wave, a re-interpretation of Chughtai from Beauvoir’s take on sexual politics by questioning the psychoanalytic power nexus becomes possible.

From Beauvoir’s theoretical framework, it can be seen that female sexuality is as real as male sexuality. This perspective opens up the possibility of the reciprocity between the subject and the Other in the politics of sexuality. Now, if Chughtai’s stories are seen in this light, the female protagonists are presented not as the Other in the sexual politics of the narratives. In their sexual relationships, they choose their own partners and are quite reciprocal in taking up the position of the subject. That is how her portrayal of Rani and Lajo exemplifies Beauvoir’s argument on the definition of the Other. This paper is going to discuss both Rani and Lajo’s characters in this respect. It has shown how they recognize their sexuality to establish the reciprocity in the relationships they form with the men in their lives, and how, through their portrayal, she redefines the Other in the sexual politics of the stories.

### **The Stories of Sex**

In the story “The Mole,” the female protagonist is Rani who is a young woman from the lower class of the society. The male protagonist is Choudhry, an artist, who hires Rani as his model for a painting. There are two other male characters in the story—Chunnan (a man from Rani’s neighbourhood) and Ratna (the male servant in Choudhry’s house)—with whom Rani is shown to have sexual relationships. She is quite overt in her sexuality and often shows off the mole on one of her breasts to the men in her life. The salient feature in her personality is how she teases these men with the mole. Both Chunnan and Ratna instantly respond to the teasing. However, Choudhry never has a sexual relationship with her but he feels strong sexual attraction to her. He neither can stand Rani’s relationships with Chunnan and Ratna nor can himself get involved sexually with Rani. Once Choudhry gets infuriated when he catches Rani with Ratna bathing together in the pond. This event compels him to succumb to his attraction to Rani. He goes to Rani’s hut at night and frantically searches for her in darkness only to discover that she is not there. To Choudhry, this indicates her being with some other man which he cannot take normally. However, the next morning he cannot query Rani about this as it will reveal to her that Choudhry went to her room the previous night. When Rani goes missing the following day, everyone starts asking Choudhry about her. Some even start suspecting him. After months she is discovered by the police when she is dropping her new born baby in the dustbin. The suspicion among people grows stronger and they take it for sure that Choudhry has sexually exploited her. In the court when she is asked who the father of her baby is, she nonchalantly says that Choudhry is not the father as he is impotent; the father may either be Chunnan or Ratna. With this twist at the end of the story, Choudhry is both freed and punished by Rani.

In the story “The Homemaker,” the female protagonist is Lajo who is a maid by profession. The male protagonist is Mirza who is a bachelor and runs a grocery store. On Mirza’s friend, Bakshi’s recommendation Lajo is appointed as the maid in his house as

he has become tired of doing the chores all by himself. Though Mirza does not approve of this on the ground of living in the same house with another woman out of wedlock, Lajo does not pay any heed to that and starts working there. Being an illegitimate child and growing up in the streets, Lajo cannot conventionally be taken as a 'decent' woman. Like Rani, she, too, has been consensual in the sexual advances from men. It is quite normal and fine for her to accept her masters as her sex partners. That's why Mirza's hesitance in forming a relationship with her and his visits to the courtesans instead dishearten her. However, after a week of resistance, Lajo and Mirza get involved sexually. Soon Mirza feels the need to chastise this relationship lest Lajo should flirt with other men behind his back given the past record of her. Despite Lajo's denial, he marries her and feels that he has secured Lajo's overt sexuality in the marriage. He now dislikes her coquettish nature which he has enjoyed a lot before their marriage, and tells her to behave like a shy wife. He forbids her to wear *lehnga* and encourages her to wear pyjamas like a decent Muslim married woman. He also starts spending less time at home to avoid being called henpecked. Lajo, being thus neglected and driven by her sexuality, begins a fling with Mithwa, a lad in the neighbourhood. When Mirza finds it out, he beats Lajo heavily and decides to divorce her. The divorce relieves Lajo as she is now no longer a married woman and needs not suppress her sexuality in the name of decency. However, after a few days when Mirza learns that both his marriage and divorce are invalid on the ground of Lajo's being a bastard, he is relieved too. Happily, Lajo returns to the house, despite Mirza's disapproval this time as well, to serve him as his maid and both of them resume their sexual relationship. So, the story ends with what it has started.

### **Sexual Politics between Rani and Choudhry**

In Chughtai's story "The Mole," Rani is quite vocal about her sexuality and knows how to tease and attract men towards her. Though she is from a class much lower than that of Choudhry, from her interactions with him it can be stated that she has empowered herself with her sexuality. This becomes evident when Rani whines a lot during the painting sessions with Choudhry. The author uses the mole as an apt metaphor for Rani's sexuality in the story. In the session with which the story begins, Rani shows off the mole to tease Choudhry with it while posing for the painting. She says, "Choudhry, have you seen this? ...Look at this—this black mole just below my neck. Over here, a little below, on the left. ...Did you see it?" (68). She speaks not only with her tongue but also with her body. Her body language enhances this empowerment over Choudhry which Chughtai draws with these words: "She held the floral pitcher with one hand as she peered down her cleavage, parting her lips wide. ...She pretended to be coy. ...She grinned shamelessly. ...She continued to snicker immodestly. ...Resting the pitcher, she leaned towards him" (68). It is interesting to note that the author uses contradictory expressions as 'coy' and 'shamelessly' to create an oxymoronic effect in Rani's body language. This only heightens the strength of her sexuality as it expresses that she has deployed her own tactic in winning over the subject position by both pretending to conceal and revealing herself immediately. This tactic is also symbolized by the trouble Choudhry faces to create the perfect "tint that would replicate the exact shade of her skin" because, according to him, her skin tone and the colour of her eyes keep on changing "constantly" (71). From the perspective of the sexual politics between them, this observation adds a chameleon feature to her sexuality through which she can camouflage herself from her socially attributed position of the Other, making herself mysterious and "completely unmanageable" to Choudhry (71). Moreover, the way she adores her mole establishes the fact that she is well-aware of the power that single mole can possess to overpower the men around her. Here, in the sexual politics between

Choudhry and herself, Rani takes up the subject position for a while through her seduction of Choudhry which Choudhry finds quite intimidating.

While Rani's body language is bold and seductive, Choudhry's one is nervous—"Choudhry's shoulders quivered. The beads of perspiration on his smooth skull grew larger"—which means he is receding from the centre (68). What follows this situation is a tug of war between the sexes over the position of the subject. Choudhry confronts the seduction and defends himself as he says, "I haven't seen any mole, nor do I want to" (68). Rani's quick reply to this is, "Hunh! Liar! You're looking at it from the corner of your eye" (68). Both of them throw bolts and arrows from their own quivers—Choudhry reminds her that she is too young to be talking in this manner; to prove him wrong, she retorts by narrating how she has tricked Ratna into bathing with her in the pond (68-70). When Choudhry is about to hit her in a fit of anger, she throws her final bolt, "If you hit me, I'll go out on the road. That will embarrass me, and I'll tell people that Choudhry, Choudhry...I'll tell them, 'Choudhry says that my mole...h'm...h'm.' ...I'll tell everyone, Choudhry. . . I'm so young. Just a little girl... You're very naughty" (70). The very suggestion of what she may tell people threatens Choudhry to the core. He gives up the war right there. Again, the body language of Rani—"She edged towards the door slowly"—and that of him who "sat there dumbfounded" present the reader with the redefined power nexus in which now she is the subject and he is the Other (70). She justifies the meaning of her name which is queen, and leaves the battle field victorious with her weapon, the mole. This same sort of battle is fought between her and him when he sees her "romping in the water" of the pond with Ratna (73). This scene of sexual playfulness makes him both jealous and angry to an extent where it seems as if "his height increased by a few inches," thus denoting him a monstrous energy to hold on to the subject position (74). However, the author juxtaposes this monstrous Choudhry with a defeated, retreating one in these words: "His hungry eyes landed on the black, protruding mole, which seemed to transform itself into a black stone and strike him on the forehead. He turned and ran like a vanquished dog to his room and lay down on the bed" (74). The increased height of him in the subject position escapes the battle the moment it faces the mole.

Though Rani and Choudhry never involve sexually, she is capable of bringing on "the reciprocal claim" in her sexual politics which Beauvoir regards as an important factor "to deprive the concept *Other* of its absolute sense and to make manifest its relativity" (17). Chughtai, in her pattern of redefining the Other, shows Rani to make that reciprocal claim in all her relationships. With Choudhry, the point of Rani's reciprocity is seen in the previous paragraph through her self-empowerment in front of him. In her sexual relationships with both Ratna and Chunnan, her reciprocal approaches are made clear. She initiates the relationship with Ratna while bathing in the pond as she says, "Yes, I was bathing in the pond. I was scared to go alone, so I took him along lest someone came there without warning. Yes, I was bathing. I also washed my blouse. ...He was sitting far off. Then I said, 'Ratna, I have a mole, but in a very bad spot'" (Chughtai 69). The reference to the mole gives enough invitation to Ratna. However, when he does not show much interest, she tricks him into believing that she is drowning. The pond becomes another metaphor for Rani's sexuality. When the bait of the mole does not work, she uses the bait of her feigned naivety to catch Ratna. She confesses to Choudhry while narrating this incident, "Oho! I wasn't going to drown really. I ... I was just going to show him the mole" (70). Chunnan, on the other hand, shows a great deal of interest to Rani by gifting her with her favourite *gurdhani* (a sweet made of jaggery) and *kheel* (puffed rice with sugar). She says, "Hunh! I don't beg him. He brings it to me and asks me to go to his shack. I don't like him at all—he has such a big moustache, it makes

me sneeze. Phun...phun!” (72). In this scenario, the *gurdhani* and *kheel* are like precious goodies offered to a queenly goddess of sexuality in an attempt to please her so that she approves of Chunnan’s request. Like Choudhry, Chunnan, too, is aware of how empowered Rani sexually is, so the question of forcing her into a coitus does not appear in his mind. Here again, in the sexual politics between Rani and Chunnan, Rani is reciprocal enough to voice her objection to his moustache, and her rejection of Chunnan as a preferred choice.

### **Sexual Politics between Lajo and Mirza**

In the story “The Homemaker,” Lajo is presented as a woman whose “swinging gait was so provocative that the onlookers lost their tongue and stopped in their tracks, staring at her” (Chughtai 79). That Lajo’s sexuality empowers herself is seen during her entrance in Mirza’s house. Her desire to become the mistress in the house is what motivates her the most to win over him, the subject, and for that she gets some benefits out of her sexuality. She is appointed as his maid when he is tired of “kneading dough and flattening rotis” (80). In her observation, “a simpleton” Mirza who “would come quietly, much like a guest, and eat whatever was laid before him” is not much of an obstacle in her way (82). Though he initially does not agree to keep a maid in the house, she does not wait for his permission. In this story too, the author attributes much power both to Lajo’s body and her tongue. This is evident in her words: “But Lajo had already invaded Mirza’s kitchen. Her lehnga tucked up like a diaper, she had tied the broom at one end of a bamboo pole and was stomping around the house” (80). The author’s diction—‘invaded,’ ‘lehnga tucked up like a diaper,’ ‘stomping around the house’—is notable here. These expressions add meanings to Lajo’s body language which is accompanied by her sharp tongue. When Bakshi, Mirza’s friend who brings Lajo to Mirza’s house, tells Lajo of Mirza’s disapproval, she kicks him out saying, “Get lost. I’ll tackle the situation here” (80). Even before meeting Mirza, the master of the house, she voices both the ability and the possibility of her becoming the subject in the sexual politics between Mirza and herself. On the other hand, Mirza, like Choudhry, shows a weaker body language as he “nervously” says, “*La hawla wala quwwat!* . . . I’m not going to keep a whore in the house” (80). The Arabic expression, ‘*La hawla wala quwwat*’ (‘There’s none other than Allah to save me’), is a reflection of his fear of confronting Lajo’s sexuality and of losing the subject position as well. The more her service as a maid pleases him, the more empowered she becomes and the more threatened he feels by her. When she tells Mirza of her decision, “No, Mian. I’m here to stay,” he cannot gather courage enough to say no to that (81). This shows how he starts receding from the subject position.

The episode of sexual act which does not take place between Rani and Choudhry in “The Mole” ultimately happens between Lajo and Mirza, thus furnishing the sexual politics in this story “The Homemaker,” with a more intense drama. Here, Lajo’s lehnga becomes a strong metaphor for her sexual empowerment. Her uncovered legs and the open space between them pose a threat to Mirza to uncover his weakness and lose the control over the Other. The author draws this beautifully with these words:

Mirza could glimpse Lajo’s lissome, golden legs through the door which was ajar. . . Her legs stretched further. Mirza drained one more glass of water and chanting ‘*la hawla wala quwwat*’, fell on his bed. . .

Then a harmless thought entered his mind: If her legs were not bare, he would not feel such thirst for water. This thought made him bold. . . Mirza had to do it for his own safety.

. . . He held the hem of her lehnga and pulled it down. (84)

This attempt of saving himself eventually brings him to the edge of the cliff from which he cannot help falling off if there is a slight push on him. Lajo's reciprocity provides him with that necessary push that he has been desperately trying to escape since her entrance to the house. This is interesting that Lajo, which means "the coy one," does not show a single bout of coyness in initiating the sexual act with him (79). The author's diction depicts how Lajo takes over the subject completely with her reciprocal approach towards Mirza, "Lajo turned on her side and grabbed him. Mirza was dumbfounded. He had never encountered anything like this before. He went on pleading as Lajo seduced him thoroughly" (85). The words 'grabbed' and 'pleading' at once posit Mirza as the Other and Lajo as the subject in this scene of sexual politics between them. However, in the tug of war over the subject position, he uses his own weapon—marriage. For him, marriage brings a way to defeat her sexual empowerment which is taking control not only of him but also of the other men in the neighbourhood who are "engrossed in her lehnga" (86). For her, it is a confinement in conventions as it will force her to become a 'decent' woman which is not her choice. Mirza deploys other tactics by putting "a ban on the lehnga" and by instructing her "to wear tight-fitting churidar pyjamas" in an attempt to save him the position of the subject (88). When her lehnga reflects the sexual empowerment of the subject, her pyjamas reflect the sexual passivity of the Other. He attacks her reciprocity, the very tool for the Other to diminish its absoluteness (Beauvoir 17), by telling her to be shy during sexual intercourse. The author's words are the most powerful here: "Lajo's coquetry that had seemed enchanting before marriage now seemed objectionable in a wife. Such sluttish ways did not become decent women. She could not become Mirza's dream bride—one whom Mirza would beg for love, one who would blush at his advances, one who would feign anger and one he would coax into submission" (Chughtai 89). The word 'submission' clearly summarizes Mirza's version of the sexual politics with Lajo, and, for a while, his "constant chastisement" makes her the "tamed and reformed" Other (89). Soon he finds himself at ease with this position and takes her for granted as the Other in their sexual politics. Being thus treated, she follows her own way of making him compensate for forcing her to be the Other by initiating an extramarital affair with Mithwa, a lad in the neighbourhood. This affair tells of her urge to be the subject once again, and also of the fact that she can defeat Mirza with her sexuality even after being ignored by him. The subsequent divorce and its being nullified by Mullahji serve as a collateral damage he has to undergo in the tug of war with Lajo over the subject position.

### **Redefining the Man as the Other**

While redefining the Other in these two stories, the author highlights upon the sense of insecurity in both Choudhry and Mirza which makes them look insignificant against the bold and confident sexuality of Rani and Lajo respectively. As Beauvoir does not see any substantial reason for the psychoanalysts to regard the woman as the Other (81), the author presents her portrayal of Choudhry and Mirza to show why the man can as well be called the Other. Both the characters are two agents of patriarchy who have inherited the patriarchal sense of decency and honour from the generations past. For example, Choudhry is taken aback when Rani utters a curse word: "Choudhry sprang to his feet. Rani had blurted out an obscene invective that left Choudhry aghast. How could she utter this, being a girl?" (Chughtai 71). Strangely, cursing is considered a manly thing to do as it involves an exhibition of strong emotions which is thought to be too sensitive for a woman to handle. If a man curses, he is appreciated for being manly enough; if a woman does the same, she is reprimanded for being unladylike. This is the strange system of patriarchy that does not allow a woman to be sexually dominating as it

is seen to be manly and unladylike in a society where Choudhry and Mirza live. The irony is that the sense of decency and honour works quite differently for men in the stories. Choudhry cannot believe his eyes to see a girl curse whereas he himself calls Rani “whore” and “bitch” (70). Similarly, Mirza hesitates on appointing Lajo as his maid as he does not want “to keep a whore in the house” (80); however, it is the same Mirza who makes a pompous show while going to the courtesan by putting on “a starched kurta with great flourish,” sticking “a scented cottonwool ball in his ear,” and grabbing “his walking stick” (84). Along with the patriarchal sense of decency and honour, there is also a sense of religiosity in Choudhry and Mirza. Mirza’s religious mind associates his house with the sacred bond of marriage, and that’s why for him, keeping a whore at home is sinful but visiting one with such preparation is not.

This sense of religiosity also associates Lajo’s sexuality with the devil and that explains why Mirza keeps on chanting “La hawla wala quwwat” and keeps on taking refuge in the mosque (80, 83). Similarly, when Choudhry’s “pious eyes” see Rani and Ratna “romping in the water,” he takes it to be “some delusion” (73). Both Rani and Lajo, as the author’s heroines from the lower class of the society, are marked with “sexual attraction and raw sensuality” as M. Asaduddin observes it in his introduction to the translation of Chughtai’s short story collection, *Lifting the Veil* (Asaduddin xxii). The lofty words like decency and honour are not in their discourse. Through them, the author mocks the importance patriarchy gives on virginity. One can find a prophetic reflection of that, decades after, in Kamla Bhasin’s bold utterance—“My honour is not in my vagina.” Chughtai gives both Rani and Lajo powerful words to scathingly attack such discriminating notions of decency and honour. When Choudhry is about to beat Rani, she says, “Won’t you feel ashamed, raising your hand to beat a woman? ... Do you beat naked women? ... What a thing to do!” (74). Similarly, the association of Lajo’s sexuality with the devil is mocked at by her when she compares the pyajamas, the attire that Mirza thinks will make her a decent woman, with their being “long as the devil’s intestines” (89). Sadique rightly says that Chughtai “knows the art of mocking at the false pride of the male, of exposing and satirizing his hypocritical and egotistical nature” (225). This is seen towards the end of both stories when the author presents some ironical twists by turning the very social conventions against Choudhry and Mirza that are taken as shields by both of them to protect themselves from the dominating sexualities of Rani and Lajo. Choudhry resists himself from having an illicit relationship with Rani as his intellectual and religious mind does not allow him to stoop to temptations putting his reputation at stake, and he is successful most of the time. However, on being asked in the court, who the father of her illegitimate child is, Rani declares, “It was not Choudhry’s. ... Choudhry is impotent” (Chughtai 78). The reputation which Choudhry has been so protective about throughout the story is finally shattered down to pieces by that single utterance of Rani. Similarly, Mirza’s attempt at chastising his relationship with Lajo through marriage brings him a momentary satisfaction of controlling her. However, after their divorce, when Mullahji confirms that the divorce cannot defame his honour as “marriage with a bastard was not valid” in the first place, the same institution of marriage that is thought to have shielded him is mocked at (93). Lajo enters the house one more time as the maid and Mirza accepts her the way she is. So, ultimately, the positions of both Rani and Lajo remain as towering ones over that of Choudhry and Mirza in the stories.

Chughtai’s stories are chronicles of her time and her society. Her literary career is based on a time when India was making progress—both socially and politically—in terms of women’s education and involvement in the outer sphere of life. According to Pamela L. Caughie, in “Introduction: Theorizing the ‘First Wave’ Globally,” the period from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s can be regarded as the first wave of



feminism in the non-Western contexts. Her point is that, besides being involved in the areas of education, election, and employment in the public sphere, women in non-Western countries contributed to set “a re-assessment of gender and sexual mores in the private sphere” (Caughie 5). On this, Gail Minault’s observation from her book, *Gender, Language, and Learning*, can be noted. Minault states, “Women exercised power, both as individuals and as members of the group, to the degree that decisions made in the private sphere—the women’s realm—influenced the fortunes of the family in the public sphere, dominated by men” (21-22). It was also the time when the heated argument on leaving the purdah was going on in the Muslim intellectual groups though, in Minault’s opinion in her essay “Coming Out: Decisions to Leave Purdah,” it resulted from “a lot of intra-family diplomacy” (94). She, nevertheless, gives a detailed account of Muslim women who decided to go against the tradition. Much of the discussion on the question of leaving purdah also happened in print media run by women. Minault in her book applauds the three famous women’s magazines in Urdu from the early twentieth century—*Tahzib un-Niswan*, *Khatun*, and *Ismat*—for reflecting on the issue of purdah (86). However, this progressive tendency spread by these Urdu magazines was in practice only in some educated families and groups of authors like Chughtai; the overall scenario was altogether different. M. Asaduddin notes:

...they [the Urdu magazines] could not make any impact on the society as a whole. Women were denied any significant social role and the whole *raison d’etre* of their lives was limited to child bearing and domestic chores.... A kind of Victorian hypocrisy vitiated social relations. *Ismat* was the product of this historical moment and exposed this hypocrisy in all its nakedness. (78)

Keeping Asaduddin’s remark in mind, it can be said that the author has caught these two contradictory ideologies of her society through the characters of the stories, “The Mole” and “The Homemaker”: the progressive one through Rani and Lajo, and the suppressive one through Choudhry and Mirza. Wazir Agha’s comment on her art of characterization is worth mentioning at this point, “...*Ismat* must be somewhat aware of herself to be able to unravel some of her own personality through her characters” (199). Thus, the author’s personal choice of leaving the purdah is just one example to support this comment. She reminisces about her experience of wearing a burqa (a loose-fitting gown worn by Muslim women to observe the purdah) in her autobiography, *A Life in Words*, as a “sense of humiliation” (Chughtai 48-49). Thus, the author draws the characters of Rani and Lajo who emerge to secure their subject positions in the narratives by eventually reflecting the author’s own rebellion against the hypocrisy of her society. Her process of redefining the Other is a powerful manifestation of her intellectual rebellion.

### Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that Chughtai’s presentation of the sexual politics in her stories shows how female sexuality can be an integral element in understanding characters—both male and female—in certain socio-cultural paradigms. In the male-dominated society where Mirza and Choudhry are privileged subject figures such as Rani and Lajo, who are the women of the periphery, are readily taken as the Other. In such societies, they are supposed to lack voices and this has been a convention for ages. However, by voicing the choices of Rani and Lajo in her stories, the author not only establishes them as the subject in their relationships but also deconstructs the determinist approach of setting up the woman as the Other in the politics of sexuality. The author questions and breaks down this determinist approach in her stories. In the time of her literary career, Urdu intellectual world was taking its first few steps in creating a gynocentric heritage of fiction and non-fiction writings. Her successful approach to

redefining the Other in her two stories contributes much to this gynocentric trend of narratives in the twentieth century Indian fiction and creates a legacy of such a trend for the generations to carry forward. Thus, through the portrayal of Rani and Lajo, the author has applauded many other Ranis and Lajos of her time and beyond.

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**To cite this article [MLA style]:**

Das, Shantanu. "Redefining the Other: Sexual Politics in Ismat Chughtai's 'The Mole' and 'The Homemaker'." *SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 2, August 2022, pp. 114-123. *NepJOL*, doi:10.3126/sjah.v4i2.47427.