

# The 'devi' and the 'dasi': Understanding the identity constructions of Indian womanhood in Ismat Chughtai's "The Homemaker"

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## Abstract

The gender dichotomy practiced by western philosophy does not inform the gendered constructions of South Asia. In fact it is caste and class, more than sex that form gender identities and patterns in India. Subhadra Mitra Channa, in her notable work, *Gender in South Asia: Social Imagination and Constructed Realities* developed a model to understand and analyse how Indian women occupy different standings in India. Through this model, Mitra Channa proves that women and men do not always hold opposing positions in India; rather women are placed in different hierarchical levels to better regulate them within Indian societal structure. Mitra Channa's model uses the terms 'devi' and 'dasi' to point out to this categorization of Indian women. The 'devi' refers to upper class/caste, asexual, chaste, devoted, domestic married women whereas the 'dasi' is used for a woman of lower class/caste who does menial jobs, is sexually promiscuous and whose body is easily accessible. Though Channa Mitra did not apply this model on Islamic society or its women, I have used this model to analyse a short story named "The Homemaker" by Ismat Chughtai. Chughtai's story deals with the promiscuous servant girl Lajjo who is forced to marry her master Mirza. Thus she occupies both the positions of the 'devi' and the 'dasi'. The objective of my paper is to understand the implications of these constructed identities in the life of Indian woman.

**Keywords:** devi, dasi, gender, caste, identity

Western philosophy as well as western feminism has always relied on a dichotomous understanding of gender. The Cartesian mind/body duality has influenced the relationship between the masculine and the feminine, with men being identified with the mind and women with corporeality. Hence, men and women often are seen to be occupying opposing positions and qualities within the purview of western thought. The anxieties surrounding transgenders, transsexuals as well as homosexuals point to the dichotomous nature of gender constructions and understandings in Western societies. However, such an understanding of gender does not work in the case of India. India, with its diversity and pluralities do not necessarily rely on the Western model of gender dichotomy.

One instance to substantiate the disparate nature of India's gender arrangements can be found in the prevailing notion of the third gender. Indian myths and history both boast of the presence of hermaphrodites, transgenders and also talk about the important position held by them. In Ramayana, the Hindu epic the third gender finds mention when Ram, Laksman and Sita go to their exile for fourteen years. In Islamic traditions, the third genders were given the esteemed position of royal guards. Though the positions of third genders have fallen in to disrepute, they are a germane part of Indian history, culture and tradition. So the two genders occupying opposing planes of social existence and also embodying opposing qualities do not necessary hold true in the case of India. Subhadra Mitra Channa comments on this unique nature of gender understanding in India in her

Thus, gender is not an essential dichotomy, embodied once and for all. The categories are not opposed but complementary if existing separately, but such separation is not natural or inevitable and the two may merge and become one; and ultimately, one may realize, as one often does, that they were not separate in the first place. (5)

The concept or patriarchal conspiracy of categorizing women as embodiments of a singular feminine gender identity becomes problematic in the Indian context where a monolithic theory of gender behavior is rendered moot. So women can embody opposing and diverse qualities given the position accorded to them in the society. Radha Chakraborty, in the introduction to *Bodymaps: Stories of South Asian Women* argues that such clear gender binaries, prevalent in Western philosophical traditions are not possible in the South-Asian context because of the multiplicity of cultures, languages, religions, social practices, ideologies and beliefs. The position and status of Indian women can be described ambivalent at best. Chakraborty clarifies it further by quoting Meenakshi Thapan

In India, for instance, women occupy an ambivalent position in the popular imagination, assuming, in different situations, an array of roles including beneficent goddess and destructive shakti or power, virtuous wife and dangerous evil, her body a token of purity or impurity, to be deified but also contained through a regulation of her sexuality (Thapan). (xx)

In India, women's identity is never stable or fixed. As Nivedita Menon so aptly points out in her *Seeing Like A Feminist*,

Every woman knows that the positions marked 'good woman' and 'bad woman', *susheel aurat* and *baazaru aurat*, *madonna* and *whore*, are not stable and fixed. Every woman lives in the constant knowledge of how easy it is to fall from the light side into the dark side, and how impossible it is, once

fallen, ever to get back again into the light. (131)

These ambivalent and conflicting positions occupied by Indian women will shed light on the differential treatment and privilege experienced by them. The objective of my paper is to examine these ambivalent identity constructions of Indian women and its implications through the short story “The Homemaker” by Ismat Chughtai. For the purpose of this paper I have used the “devi” and the “dasi” model underlined and developed by Subhadra Mitra Channa in *Gender in South Asia: Social Imagination and Constructed Realities*. Though she has not applied this model in the Islamic context, I feel it can be used given the subject matter of the short story.

As outlined earlier, gender is a tricky concept in India because of the intersections of caste, class, religion, language as well as location. Subhadra Mitra Channa confronts the difficulties of having a simplistic discourse on gender and identity in *Gender in South Asia: Social Imagination and Constructed Realities*. She argues that it is class and caste, more than biological sex that defines gender pattern and identities in India. There has been a long existing social inequality in South Asia as is evident from myths, stories and instances. These inequalities point to a hierarchical society where it is the classes and not men and women that hold opposing positions. She further states

Therefore, the categories male, female or even eunuchs are to be understood against the given conceptual hierarchies, inequalities and privileges and marginalization’s that accrue to markers of status, be it class, caste or talent, achievements or ascriptions (32).

These hierarchies of caste and class subsume the factor of gender and men and women are defined and understood along these lines. So an upper caste woman holds a much privileged position than a man from a marginalized caste. Also women by virtue of their sex do not embody one singular position nor do they receive the same treatment. The sexuality of an upper class/caste woman is carefully contained and regulated within the institution of patriarchal family and marriage whereas the lower caste/class women are always at the receiving end of sexual exploitation. So two diverse images and position of Indian women is born and sustained by the machinery of patriarchal value systems. Subhadra Mitra Channa uses the terms of the “devi” and the “dasi” to designate these opposing cultural images of Indian woman.

Mitra Channa’s model of the “devi” and the “dasi” is an attempt at understanding this positioning of women in Indian society. Mitra Channa stresses that “the goddess and the slave are not opposed to each other; they are situated at two different levels.” (32). The “devi” is a term that is associated with upper class women, a woman of high birth whereas the “dasi” were the women who did menial jobs, belonged to the lower classes and whose

bodies were easily accessible and exploited. She further gives a brief definition of the terms *devi* and *dasi*.

The term '*devi*' refers to a goddess and is also honorific manner of addressing any woman of rank and respectability. The word '*dasi*', on the other hand, is used for a slave or a woman whose body is public property, like a '*devadasi*', a courtesan, concubine or a woman of low caste. (32)

Mitra Channa's model is based on myths, stories, legends as well as the colonial and nationalist history of India. The construction and valorization of ideal woman has been a task of nationalist elites to counter the idea of women's inferior status in pre-colonial India posited by colonial regime. Uma Chakravarti's essay, '*Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past*', delineates how the image of upper caste, educated Aryan woman was constructed out of the conflicts between the forces of colonialism and nationalism. Chakravarty argues how the women's question was critical for ideological justifications for colonial rule

In seeking a psychological advantage over their subjects, colonial ideology felt compelled to assert the moral superiority of the rulers in many subtle and not so subtle ways. One of the not so subtle ways was in the area of gender relations. The 'higher' morality of the imperial masters could be effectively established by highlighting the low status of women among the subject population as it was an issue by which the moral 'inferiority' of the subject population could be simultaneously demonstrated. (154)

The project of the nationalist elites was to discredit this notion of an oppressed Indian woman and to circulate and popularize the idea of a spiritually superior, educated and enlightened upper caste woman who will attest to the moral superiority of the colonized subjects. Chakravarty cites the works of R.C. Dutt, Bankim Chandra, Dayananda etc who were vested in the creation of the ideal Indian woman who was akin to a benevolent goddess. The popularization of the *devi* image of Indian woman led to the complete denigration of the *dasi*- women from lower caste/class, who did menial jobs, were performers, had sexual liberty. Examples of these '*dasi*' are the *devadasi*, the *lavani* dancers, courtesans as well as the *Vaishnavites* of Bengal. These figures were erased from the national history under the pretext of reform as they were believed to be sexually promiscuous and were not bounded by the high ideals of chastity, devotion and spousal duty.

Mitra Channa also delves deeper into the pre-colonial and postcolonial times to point out how these opposing categories of womanhood were created and sustained. The '*devi*' was

created when the values upheld by Victorian society in England were adopted by traditional Brahmanical patriarchal family to construct the ideal Indian woman. And the ‘dasi’ were mainly the public or the courtesan who ‘were neither wives nor widows, but who led an independent existence.’ Some of these women were notable artists and performers and who later joined the Indian movie industry. Notable examples are Umrao Jaan, Amrapali, Binodini whose lives generated not only great works of literature but also myths. Based on her research and analysis, Mitra Channa identifies a list of qualities that were associated with these opposing categories of women. These qualities are listed in the table below.

Devi	Dasi
High	Low
Upper Class/Caste	Lower Class/Caste
Domestic	Public
Wife	Concubine
Mother	Sexual partner
Inner	Outer
Asexual	Sexual
Confined	Accessible

The paper aims to analyse the short story of Ismat Chughtai with the help of the model listed above.

Ismat Chughtai, often known as Urdu’s most controversial and courageous writer, wrote extensively during mid-twentieth century and was one of the first women writers who wrote candidly about female sexuality. Though she wrote novels, travelogues, poetry, her fame chiefly rested on her short stories. Notable among her voluminous work is “Lihaf” (The Quilt) which is known not only for its controversial subject matter (homosexuality) but also for the charge of obscenity that was levied against it. Chughtai still remains widely read and relevant today because of her exclusive portrayal of women’s lives and issues. “The Homemaker” published in 1940 is another brilliant example of Chughtai’s writings which deals with the fate of a promiscuous servant girl Lajo and her master Mirza.

The story begins with Lajo getting a job as a new maid for her reluctant master Mirza. At the very onset of the story, Chughtai’s description of Lajo places her in the “dasi” category. Lajo’s parentage is unknown; she grew up in the streets, fended for herself by

working as a maid and also selling her body when required. She is said to have no sense of shame or modesty though she was gifted with an innocent face. Mirza's friend Bakshi had found her at a bus stop and employed her at his house as a maid. The naïve bachelor Mirza owned a grocery shop and lived alone with no one to take care of his house. Bakshi persuaded Mirza to employ Lajo at his house as the latter was in the habit of visiting brothels. Bakshi believed Lajo can take care of all of Mirza's needs. The reluctant Mirza hides in the mosque to try and figure out a way to get rid of Lajo. But on returning home, he is amazed to see the transformations of his living quarters that was brought about by Lajo's housekeeping and decided to let her stay. Gradually Lajo seduces him and a sexual relationship begins between the two.

Lajo's "dasi" identity is further established by unabashed sexuality and her relationship with her master Mirza. She has no qualms about using her body to survive but she also exercises her will while doling out sexual favors. Mitra Channa underlined certain characteristics of the "dasi" which Lajo clearly embodies. Her unknown parentage places her as a member of the lower class/caste, she does menial jobs for a living, her body is easily accessible, she prefers being out in the marketplace, she does not mind being a concubine. The social values attached with sexual relationships make no sense to her. In Lajo's vocabulary sexual fidelity, chastity, passivity are unknown words- "She had a very large- hearted concept of the man-woman relationship. For her, love was the most beautiful experience in life. After attaining a certain age she was initiated into it, and since then, her interest had only grown" (82). It was Lajo who had seduced Mirza and never demanded to legitimize their relationship through marriage. However, her sexual agency and her free spirited ways made Mirza uncomfortable who has come to see her as his property.

They knew of her uninhibited ways that turned one crazy. She was utterly shameless. When she brought Mirza's lunch, she would get the entire bazaar crashing down on her....As she reached the shop swinging her buttocks and abusing people fulsomely, Mirza's blood would began to boil. (85)

Mirza's jealousy and insecurity gradually led him to decide to marry the reluctant Lajo. Lajo failed to understand the necessity of this union: "But the need for marriage totally escaped Lajo. She would remain his forever. And, what crime had she committed that the mian felt the need to marry her?" (87). Mirza's decision to marry Lajo was unacceptable to his friends and neighbors. They believed that Lajo could be controlled by a sound thrashing and Mirza's desire to marry her made no sense. Lajo had prior relationships with other men but they had all mistreated her. Mirza, on the other hand has shown great kindness to her and had also gifted her clothes and new bangles. Also Lajo had no illusions regarding her status in the society- "She had no illusion about herself;

only virgins got married, and she could not remember when she had lost her virginity. She was not fit to be anyone's bride". (88)

However, Lajo finally gives in and "Lajo alias Kaneez Fatima, and Mirza Irfan Beg, became man and wife" (88). After the marriage, Lajo's life takes a different turn. Accustomed to being a "dasi" all her life, the life of a married woman baffled her. It is at this point in the story that Lajo becomes the "devi", a married woman who is to remain confined to her house. Lajo's choice of clothing was a free flowing lehenga which is now replaced with tight-fitting churidar pyjamas. The lehenga which represented the free spirited ways of Lajo's premarital life, was thrown into the fire by Mirza. The change of attire is indicative of her restrained sexuality, another aspect of the "devi" that Lajo has to embody. Though Mirza is not the Indian elite whose wives were termed as the "devi" by Mitra Channa, nevertheless he occupies a respectable position in his society. Hence Lajo's new identity and status as "devi" imposed new restrictions on her from confinement to forced asexuality.

Lajo's coquetry that had seemed enchanting before now seemed objectionable in a wife. Such sluttish ways did not become decent women.... Mirza's constant chastisement had put restrictions on her freewheeling ways, and eventually she was tamed and reformed. (89)

Lajo understood the implications of being a respectable "devi" in the society. It was a restrictive life which had no place for her wayward ways. Her husband barely looked at her, the admiring glances of the men in the village were no longer aimed at her, and she remained confined and resigned to her household work. The attention and affection that she enjoyed from Mirza was replaced by his indifference and neglect. Mirza no longer indulged her nor begged for her love.

Mirza felt contented that he was able to make a decent woman of her. Now he didn't feel any urge to get back home in a hurry. Like other husbands, he spent time with his friends so that no one could call him henpecked! A man can do anything to please his mistress, but the wife is altogether a different kettle of fish. (90)

However, Lajo could not be cast in the mold of a chaste lady for long. She started indulging the mason's son Mithwa until she is caught by Mirza, who beats her up and eventually divorces her. However, she harbors no ill will towards Mirza. Her affection for Mirza did not cease even after the beatings and the divorce. Having grown up in the streets, she has barely known male kindness and generosity – "All her masters would, sooner or later, turn into her lovers. After that there was no question of wages. On top of that they would give her a thrashing now and then. They would even lend her to their friends" (92). After the

divorce, Lajo remains an outcaste for some time until she learns that her marriage to Mirza is invalid as her parentage is unknown. Lajo heaves a sigh of relief at this information, and goes back to Mirza as a maid. Mirza accepts her and their previous arrangement continues. At the end of the story both of them again began their sexual relationship.

“The Homemaker” illustrates how the valorized role of the ‘devi’ has its pitfalls and restrictions. It is also a critique of the institution of marriage. Chughtai cunningly portrays marriage as a system that works for the benefit of males. Marriage, the route to finding respectability and security is a tool to control women as is evident by Mirza’s intention of marrying Lajo. Lajo’s suffocation in the role of a wife stems from her living a life of sexual independence. The respectable identity of the “devi” might bring certain securities, yet it is a role that is created to regulate women’s sexuality for procreative purposes and the maintenance of a heteronormative society. Mitra Channa has stressed on the relative freedom of the role of the ‘dasi’. Lajo’s willingness to cast aside the role of a wife in favour of an unattached sexual partner justifies Mitra Channa’s assertion that the life of a ‘dasi’ is more independent. However, Lajo seems to uncritically accept the violence associated with her freewheeling ways. She time and again mentions being beaten by her past masters, being used as a sexual pawn and also she remains as a destitute most of the times. So the sexual independence she values also has shortcomings- the constant sexual gaze, being the object of male lust and not to mention the casual violence that she encounters. Also Mirza holds a special place in her life for two reasons- the lack of violence and also Mirza’s solitary existence which allows Lajo to run his house for him. Infact Lajo’s decision to stay with Mirza at the beginning to the story was based on the fact that she fell in love with his house. Her lack of education and financial resources mean that she could never find the means to afford a home for herself. At the end of the story, she is overjoyed to return to work as a maid at his house. She revels in the role of a homemaker, which justifies the title of the story. So it might seem that Lajo uses her sexuality to find a place for herself in a society that does not hold much prospects for women. The ‘dasi’ role allows her to change masters if the living gets tough whereas the role of a ‘devi’ restricts her life and her movements. Both the roles have a downside for women. However it is to be borne in minds that both these roles are constructed keeping male interests and desires in mind. So it is futile to expect that these roles can ever allow women to explore her potentialities as well as her freedom. What emerges from the text is the ambivalence of the position of Indian women.



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