

# Desiring Girlhood: Female Sexuality and Psychosexual Development in *Claudine at School* and *The Crooked Line*

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the way both Ismat Chughtai in *The Crooked Line* and Colette in *Claudine at School* have represented female sexuality and psychosexual development from a teenage girl's perspective. Despite setting in different periods, early twentieth-century colonial India and Belle Époque France, both novels portray the coming-of-age of young female protagonists navigating the tensions between personal desire and societal expectations.

Drawing insights from the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich, and Luce Irigaray, the paper examines how gender socialisation influences a young girl's relationship to her desire, identity, and agency over her body. The paper argues that these texts do not present girlhood as a passive stage on the way to adulthood, but as an active and often complex process of becoming. In doing so, Chughtai and Colette offer alternative representations of the female coming-of-age that is not shaped by conformity, but by desire, resistance, and the search for a self-defined identity within a patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Female coming-of-age, female desire, gender socialisation, feminist literary criticism, female sexuality, comparative literature.

**Introduction** - The paper "Desiring Girlhood: Female Sexuality and Psychosexual Development in *Claudine at School* and *The Crooked Line*" attempts to examine how the writers Chughtai and Colette have represented female sexuality and desire from the perspective of a female teenager in their novels, *The Crooked Line*<sup>1</sup> and *Claudine at School*,<sup>2</sup> from *The Complete Claudine* series. Even though both stories are set in different socio-cultural and political contexts, *The Crooked Line* was written in the early twentieth century, amidst India's freedom struggle against the British Empire. At the same time, the latter is set against the backdrop of the Belle Époque (a period often known for optimism, peace, economic prosperity and significant advancement in the arts, literature, and technology) of early twentieth-century France. However, the aim behind studying these two works is to compare and analyse the way both writers represent female sexuality and desire from the perspective of a female teenager. In addition, the way both writers critique the way the patriarchal system dictates a woman's sexuality, attempts to suppress it from childhood, and the adverse effects of it on their psychosexual development.

**Overview of the Primary Texts:** *The Crooked Line* traces the struggle of Shaman who finds herself in a subordinate position and struggles to find her voice and place in an oppressive patriarchal society. Through the character of Shaman, Chughtai discusses how young women are

conditioned since their birth and the way it eventually impairs their understanding of what is their role in the society and their own identity. *The Complete Claudine* is a series of four novels *Claudine at School*, *Claudine in Paris*, *Claudine Married*, and *Claudine and Annie*, written by Colette. The novel follows the life of Claudine from a schoolgirl in a boarding school to a married woman who feels lost after getting married and wants to escape and explore more than what her married life has to offer. The paper focuses only on *Claudine at School*, as similar to *The Crooked Line* that depicts the psychosexual development of a young girl, a similar thread runs through *Claudine at School*. Both protagonists of the two texts struggle for creating their identity and experience desire outside the prescribed norms set by the society. Claudine is bolder and more expressive while Shaman passive. However, both teenagers navigate their sexual awakening in a society that conditions them to be sexually available but not act upon their desire.

**Cultural Conditioning and Female Sexuality:** Female sexuality and desire have always been taboo and contentious subjects. There is an inherent stigma surrounding a woman seeking and acting upon her sexuality and desire. The issue not only has to do with how society has considered women as 'objects of lust or love,' always "the desired one" and never the "desiring one." Kate Millett, in her seminal work *Sexual Politics*<sup>3</sup>, describes this kind of relationship between men and women not as that of equals

but rather that of “dominance and subordination.”<sup>4</sup> She stresses that there is an “interior colonisation”<sup>5</sup> which has been highly institutionalised, and due to which men seem to sexually dominate women’s bodies and decide how sex should be performed as an activity.

Therefore, a woman’s pleasure has always been treated as secondary, and what and how she desires is shaped by oppressive gender norms. These gender norms dictate how women should be modest and passive, while men are encouraged to be assertive and sexually active. However, when a woman rejects these norms and seeks sexual pleasure, she is shamed for it, as if it is a ‘sin.’ Men, however, are often exempt from these restrictions. Simone de Beauvoir reflects upon this double standard of society when it comes to men and women exploring their sexuality and opines that “Patriarchal civilisation condemned woman to chastity; the right of man to relieve his sexual desires is more or less openly recognised... for her the act of the flesh, if not sanctified by the code, by a sacrament, is a fault, a fall, a weakness; she is obliged to defend her virtue, her honour; if ‘she gives in’ or ‘if she falls,’ she arouses disdain, whereas even the blame inflicted on her vanquisher brings him admiration.”<sup>6</sup>

This is even true now, as a woman, since childhood is conditioned to believe that premarital sex is against the culture and if she seeks sexual pleasure or acts upon her desire before marriage. She is bringing shame to her character and therefore her ‘family,’ or her ‘community.’ So, it is not surprising that young girls are always rebuked when they appear or behave in a particular ‘sexual manner.’ Though, quite ironically, the girl is encouraged to be seductive or more open about her sexuality when it comes to pleasing a man, while at the cost of ignoring her pleasure, whether sexual or emotional. This disparity is further highlighted in literature, wherein plenty of coming-of-age stories are centred on teenage boys going on adventures, falling in love, or getting to explore their desires and sexuality. Female desire, by contrast, simply isn’t up for discussion in these works: women can be “the object or the victim of someone else’s desire.”<sup>7</sup> but rarely be recognised as someone with sexual feelings of her own. In most narratives, the teenage girl is on the periphery of the larger story, where the boy ‘hero’ goes on adventures, falls in love, and gets to be with her.

However, with characters like Shaman, Rasul Fatima, and Najma in *The Crooked Line*, and Claudine, Aimee, and Luce in *Claudine at School*, Chughtai and Colette dispel the traditional conventions about sexuality and desire that celebrate sexual exploration by men as an integral part of male psychosexual development and eventually self-development. In contrast to the narratives of teenage girls who are depicted as decorous, desexualised, and over-achieving ‘deer,’ we have Shaman, who, with her ‘pulls and tugs of the flesh,’ is often labelled a “witch.”

Then we have Claudine, a school-going girl who is aware

of her sexuality, beauty, and the effect of it on others as she decides to seduce her male teacher to make her female teacher jealous and knows all she has to do is to “open my eyes innocently wide and to droop my head so that my hair fell lose all about my face. He swallowed the bait at once.”<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, both writers depart from the decorum that most writers, not just those of the 20th century, but also those of today, seem to maintain regarding childhood narratives.

**The Modern Teenage Girl: A Comparative Lens:** Let’s examine a few notable teenage narratives in Indian and French fiction from the early 20th century. One can notice how, whether it is Swami in *Swami and Friends*<sup>9</sup> or François Lepic in *Little What’s-His-Name*,<sup>10</sup> both trade within the conventions of romanticised, sentimentalised, and idealised childhood or coming-of-age narratives. And in a narrative about a teenage girl (though there are not many), we meet Durga from *Pather Panchali*<sup>11</sup>. She is an impoverished, quirky, motherly figure to her younger brother and often lies and steals food to make ends meet. We see the daily lives of Swami, Nicholas, Durga, and their idyllic and innocent childhoods, but there is no focus on their dreams, desires, or inner minds. But Chughtai and Colette digress from the depiction of derotised teenagers through Claudine, Shaman, and their peers. Their works not only focus on young girls’ journey to self-development, but also reveal the inner workings of their minds in a patriarchal world that does not allow them to dream and desire. It also shows how they perceive female sexual awakening as a crucial aspect of female coming-of-age, and therefore, the paper also considers the selected works by Chughtai and Colette as coming-of-age narratives for Shaman and Claudine.

The characteristics of a female coming-of-age can be identified in the novels *The Crooked Line* by Ismat Chughtai and *The Complete Claudine*, written by Colette, as both narratives focus on Shaman’s and Claudine’s journey from childhood to adulthood. It shows how their social, psychological, and even psychosexual conditioning shapes their perception of the world and their own identities. Since growing awareness of self-identity and sexuality is also a part of self-actualisation, both writers have, by exploring a young woman’s femininity and sexuality from a young female perspective, provided us with a unique representation of a young modern female teenager’s coming of age.

However, these works are not, per se, a coming-of-age story for a queer character because, by the end of the novel and series, both Shaman and Claudine are married and enter a heterosexual relationship. What intrigued me about reading these works on young female queer desire is how the writers, by presenting a young female protagonist who refuses to conform to many of the conventions of conventional heroines in plots with heterosexual resolutions, especially in young adult fiction, particularly resonated with me. For instance, reflecting upon the psychosexual

development of Shaman, who wakes up after dreaming about Unna, her wet nurse, where she sees Unnas all around her and finds her “fleshy and ripe like a mango... her soft, warm Unna... burrowed herself into the rounded softness, her lips moving, the veins in her throat throbbing as if she were gulping down great quantities of milk.”<sup>12</sup> Later on, after watching a wedding ritual of the groom happily licking kheer (Indian sweet dish) from the bride’s palm makes Shaman “in the grip of a strange longing,”<sup>13</sup> while Noori, her cousin, “insisted that they go to the storage room and play wedding games right away.”<sup>14</sup>

But one should notice that neither of the writers has defined or labelled their protagonists as lesbian or bisexual. Claudine or Shaman’s sexual and romantic attractions and desires occur organically throughout their childhood to adulthood, but are never gender specific. However, one can see their journey of sexual awakening as that of a queer character, and precisely of a bisexual woman. For instance, at first, Shaman is repelled by Rasul Fatima, her classmate and roommate’s, relentless adoration and physical advances. Only a short time later, she experiences similar feelings for her teacher, Ms. Charan and Najma, her friend. Then, the Shaman moves to college and gradually develops intense feelings for her classmates Satil and Iftiqaar, and eventually gets married to Ronnie Taylor, an Irish army man. Similarly, Claudine’s endless fawning and pitiful adoration for her teacher Aimee is one-sided. However, when Claudine receives the same treatment from her teacher’s sister, Luce, it ironically irritates and angers her. Her discomfort at Luce’s physical advances, when she shows a desire to kiss Claudine, she behaves aggressively at the idea, “Good Heavens no, I don’t want to!”<sup>15</sup>—exposes a deeper internalisation of patriarchal conditioning. Later, when she is married, Claudine has an intense desire for Rezi, Renaud’s friend. Still, throughout their courtship, she is constantly plagued by her shame and the constant reminder that she is not allowed to act upon her desires. The patriarchal construction of female (homo) sexual desire is discussed by Adrienne Rich when she explains how patriarchal society, “asserts that primary love between the sexes is ‘normal,’ that women need men as social and economic protectors, for adult sexuality, and psychological completion; that the heterosexually constituted family is the basic social unit; that women who do not attach their primary intensity to men must be, in functional terms, condemned to an even more devastating outsiderhood than their outsiderhood as women.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, women who do not attach their primary emotional and sexual intensity to men are positioned as doubly outside the dominant order first as women, and again as deviant women. Even though Renaud himself orchestrates Claude’s affair with Rezi, it is her own shame and guilt that prevents her from experiencing or acting upon her desires.

Therefore, both writers not only depict the fluidity of Shaman and Claudine’s sexuality but also challenge the

broader ideological norms that seek to restrict female desire. Neither of these protagonists are considered queer, yet their psychosexual development journey is filled with instances that extend beyond heterosexual norms. Their erotic experiences whether homoerotic or heteronormative are not isolated moments, but part of their evolving engagement with self. These moments exist alongside other significant events in their lives and together they shape how each woman navigates the search for her own identity. In this sense, Claudine’s and Shaman’s experiences show that female desire is not something that can be categorised into ‘abnormal,’ or ‘marginal,’ but an important and complex part of how they form their understanding of what it means to be a woman, even when that understanding involves confusion, inner conflict of condition.

**Social Morality and Cultural Restraint:** Chughtai and Colette not only represent and celebrate female sexuality and desire from a female teenager’s perspective but also draw out a very crucial argument regarding the negative impact of cultural restraint on a woman’s psychosexual development. There are still cultures across various religions, ethnicities, or communities which have compelled women to suppress their sexuality and sexual desires, making it a shameful act and something against cultural, societal morals and values. Women who do not abide by this notion are often labelled as morally loose characters. In such environments, a young girl grows up to internalise the idea that having sexual desires or acting upon them is something against culture or tradition. So, the girl grows up to be someone who stifles her sexuality; she feels trapped in her own body. As Beauvoir opines, a woman “does not admit this feeling to herself: but it is there, it distorts all her best efforts, it sets up limits, boundaries that are more than often hard to cross.”<sup>17</sup>

Also, regardless of the age we live in, both writers demonstrate that a woman will always be subjected to a different, and more often than not, an irrational moral code than a man when it comes to dictating the ways in which she should live and behave in society. However, the primary focus of both Colette and Chughtai is not only to depict female sexuality from the lens of young girls but also on the significance of women gaining sexual agency. As the conditioning of a girl child begins at home, it is there that she is taught how to live her life in a way that does not bring shame or dishonour to the family. Throughout her upbringing, a girl is continuously put after a male member in the family or school, etc. She is taught, time and again, that she is the ‘secondary sex.’ Even when it comes to sexual gratification, she learns that she can only discover her own body or desires through a male. But through their teenage female characters and their coming of age, Chughtai and Colette created an environment for young girls where they not only learn about their sexualities but also can explore them without being judged or made to feel ashamed about thinking them.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, Chughtai and Colette provided us with works that highlight the fluidity of female sexuality and how social constructs of femininity distort a woman's psyche regarding her sexuality and desires. They also focus on the exploration of women and their sexuality in and excluded from public and private spheres. *The Crooked Line* and *Claudine at School*, by depicting teenage female sexuality and desire, also helped invent the twentieth century's first modern adolescent girl. This teenage girl is rebellious, self-centred, erotically reckless, sexually fluid, and determined to create an identity different from what she was given at birth. This modern teen girl is also confused about how, or if, one can actually 'become a woman' without losing the 'person' she wants to create for herself. But no matter what, we as readers root for them and hope that 'girls on adventures' explore the world, their sexual desires, and get the boy or girl of their dreams, if that is what they want.

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