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Botanical Symbolism and Gender: Analysing Ismat Chughtai's Women through the Perspective of Plant Humanities

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Abstract: The study will endeavour to take and analyse some short fiction by Ismat Chughtai, a seminal Urdu writer, and investigate how she weaves her stories using botanical aspects to transmit nuances of the untold realities of women. Chughtai is one of the earliest women writers in the South Asian Literary Canon who asks society to see life from a woman's perspective, accepting all her overlooked truths. A subtle thread links natural elements—flowers, plants, and women—highlighting their shared struggles, resilience, and vitality. The lingual brilliance of a writer can effectively show that link. It generates various emotions in the minds of the readers, communicates an idea, and effects a needed change. Hence, the study will read into stories like The Quilt, Gainda, and Touch-Me-Not, along with many other references to understand how botanical aspects help understand the nuances underlying human behaviour. Through a feminist lens, this study aims to explore the connection between nature and women.

Keywords: Ismat Chughtai, Botanical Symbolism, Plant Humanities, Gender and Nature, Floral Symbolism

INTRODUCTION

The interdisciplinary study of plant-humanity has emerged as one of the most effective approaches to understanding the relationship between plants and humanity. The plant kingdom, with its panoramic presence around humankind, does not just serve as a topographic backdrop that helps sustain diversity and maintain a balance, but along with that, it is mingled into human history, culture, social development, and economic growth, and has witnessed the progress of *Homo Sapiens* from hunters and gatherers to civilised and cultured beings. Strictly speaking, it amalgamates into various spheres of our lives, serving as an active cultural and symbolic agent. Literature, which mimics the lives of people, has captured the emotional journey of mankind, often with a close relationship to nature and plants. The Indian literary canon, in particular, presents this mutual exchange of experience between plant and people from its genesis to the present socio-political reality. In Valmiki's Ramayana, one of the great Indian epics, Sita finds emotional support in *Ashoka Vatica* (grove) after being abducted and kept there by the malicious king of Lanka, Ravana. The Ashoka tree symbolically provides a maternal and protective presence where Sita's grief is empathised by the calm support of nature. Kalidasa, in his classical play *Abhijnanashakuntalam,* presents an intricate bonding of Sakuntala and nature; she is raised in the forest and is called the child of nature, representing its femininity and grace.

The Bible, arguably the book that has influenced humanity more than any other book in the world, has a beautiful reference to flowers in Song of Solomon 2:1. It reads, "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys." (Bible Hub, n.d.) The floral metaphor is used by a bride in conversation with her beloved when they admire one another, and the line is the bride's way of expressing herself. She employs these images of the flower to describe her humility and beauty, conveying, in the same breath, the idea that she is both desirable and humble, yet accessible. In Song of Solomon 2:3, the speaker describes the groom's unique and attractive quality with another vivid image when she pronounces, "As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste." (Bible Hub, n.d.) The mutual admiration of the couple, symbolically connecting themselves with nature, provides a universal understanding of the interdependence of people and plants at the linguistic and cultural levels.

A Greek female poet who composed lyrics and, in her creation, explored the theme of unrequited love, longing, passion, and beauty, often with the use of botanical motifs. She was from the island of Lesbos named Sappho, and is remembered for addressing issues related to female sexuality as early as the 6th century BCE. She articulates female emotion, challenging the established patriarchal mindset. Today, she is famously known as a lesbian poet because she touches the homosexual aspect of female love, passion, and emotion

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in her verses. From the treasure of her lyrics, here is an example where she employs the image of a flower to portray love.

But you, O Dika, wreathe lovely garlands in your hair,
Weave shoots of dill together, with slender hands,
For the Graces prefer those who are wearing flowers,
And turn away from those who go uncrowned. (Sappho, trans. 2005)

Sumana Roy's book *Plant Thinkers of Twentieth Century Bengal* enumerates some thought-provoking Bengali writers and thinkers such as Jagdish Chandra Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Jibanananda Das, Shakti Chattopadhyay, Satyajit Ray, and others, and details how their songs, arts, literature, and films have an impact on the lives of people of Bengal concerning plants. Similarly, Toru Dutt's autobiographical poem *Our Casuarina Tree* beautifully paints her childhood memories associated with the Casuarina tree, and with rich imagery and symbolism, it is regarded as one of the masterpieces and classic works of Indian literature. Other writers in modern Indian literature, like Ismat Chughtai, Bama, and Gieve Patel, have used plant imagery to explore the complex exchange of emotion between humans and nature.

DISCUSSION

In the richly woven fabric of Indian literature, Ismat Chughtai stands out as a bold storyteller, carving her path by focusing on women's issues and the realities that were sidelined in society. She is one of the first feminist authors to emerge in South Asia, and with her remarkable command over language, she shows a fresh perspective on the realities of women, which society prefers not to discuss. In her journey of addressing societal taboos, she has encountered significant opposition from social agencies. For instance, one of her famous stories, *Lihaaf*, was viewed as obscene for its content and language as she dared to narrate about homosexuality and the sexual reality of Indian women caught in a constrained atmosphere. Telling most stories, however, does require a symphony of blaring subtext, and one such subtext lies in how women interact with nature, particularly regarding plants. In her body of work, flowers, plants, and women are not mere ornamental appendages but are profound metaphors that encapsulate their fight, endurance, and life. This research analyses how Chughtai's short stories, *The Quilt, Gainda*, and *Touch-Me-Not,* from the perspective of plant humanities, expose more complex layers of gender dynamics and human actions. With a feminist approach to stylistics, this paper aims to highlight how women and nature come together in Chughtai's writing, using botanical metaphors as a primary vessel for evoking sentiment, ideology, and change. This is achieved in order to argue that Chughtai is a revolutionary figure who connects humanity to nature while changing the narrative of women.

A Symbolic Reading of Chughtai's "Gainda"

Among Chughtai's stories that present the plight of women, "Gainda" is remembered for its rich potential to draw empathy for a juvenile girl eponymously named Gainda. She gets impregnated by Bhaiya, her employer, after being destined to be a widow at a very tender age. Chughtai could never have named her protagonist randomly; instead, she chose to call her Gainda purposefully to evoke certain feelings in the hearts of the readers after learning the heart-wrenching story and the miserable life of Gainda. Gainda (Marigold in English) is a flower found in most parts of India, and has a rich cultural, historical, and religious value. Marigold or Gainda plants are lovingly nurtured by people of India in their gardens, terraces, and households for various purposes. Apart from being a choice for decoration at weddings, it serves as a sacred offering to the deities. Thus, marigold symbolises purity and joy and are a token that wards off evil and negativity.

In the story "Gainda", the protagonist is a tender-aged girl introduced to the reader by naïve girl Bibi, who is younger, more immature, and more innocent than Gainda. Chughtai's brilliance as a short fiction writer lies primarily in her skill to create naïve, innocent narrators like Bibi in the story. She does so deliberately to situate silences in crucial moments, avoiding detailed description. The narrator of this story, Bibi, for instance, discovers Bhaiya and Gainda involved in a moment of love banter. Whence, Gainda playfully slaps Bhaiya. This scene has never gone into the wisdom of an innocent narrator for whom it is a moment of sheer shock, as everyone in the house is dreaded by Bhaiya. Moreover, Gainda, being a servant, slapping Bhaiya, is a scenario from a dream world for the narrator. She could not understand the romantic involvement of Bhaiya and Gainda. Ismat Chughtai faced obscenity trials for writing bold stories like "Lihaaf"; however, she tries her best to leave things to the reader's imagination by weaving stories with an innocent narrator. Bibi, the narrator, happens to witness a moment of love involving Bhaiya and Gainda which she describes thus: "She lifted her eyes for a fleeting moment to look at Bhaiya frowned and then broke into a smile. When he tried to grab her, she ducked and threw herself on the carpet, face down, and would not get up" (Chughtai, 2009, p.7). Everything is left to the reader's imagination as to what those acts mean, but nothing is specifically mentioned in the story. From the beginning of the story, Bhaiya's flirtatious behaviour with Gainda could be observed by the readers, although through the naïve lens of the narrator, who could not understand why Bhaiya gives special attention to Gainda, not to her, his own sister. Throughout the narrative, it is evident that Bhaiya, being a privileged upper-caste and employer of a socially subordinate girl, Gainda, takes advantage of the fragile situation of the poor girl and tricks her into a relationship that he cannot acknowledge socially. Gainda's situation becomes pathetically hopeless after being a widow at a very young age without any social and financial support. In this condition, it is

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natural for a girl seeking love and support to fall for a man who is socially established. And when she receives love and a little attention, she bounds into this dangerous game without any hesitation. It is psychologically plausible for a hopeless slave/hostage to fall in love with their oppressor/master, typically known as "Stockholm Syndrome" in psychology. Encyclopædia Britannica defines this as a "psychological response wherein a captive begins to identify closely with his or her captors, as well as with their demands" (Lambert, 2025). The origin of the theory stems from a bank robbery where four employees of Sveriges Kreditbank were kept as hostages in Stockholm, Sweden, for six days. Interestingly, during a telephone call with the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, one of the hostages confessed that she had full trust in the thieves, whereas she couldn't fully trust the police and thought they would die from their assault. Several other studies on the master- slave relationship find that the subordinates empathise with their masters and take their little acts of kindness as a prize, akin to Gainda's situation in the story, who is left with no proper agency or choice but to engage herself physically with Bhaiya and reciprocate all the advances of him. However, she is far from knowing what the consequences of this socially detested relationship would be. For Bhaiya, of course, it is just fun, a game.

Another distinctive symbolism Chughtai might have intended to employ in the story is of *Kamarakh* trees. *Kamarakh* ("Starfruit" in English) is a juicy fruit loaded with fibre and antioxidants, typically found in South Asian regions. It is mentioned in the story when Bibi runs towards the *Kamarakh* trees right after discovering the moment of lovemaking between Gainda and Bhaiya. As discussed earlier, the symbolic significance of the *Kamarakh* tree, beads, or fruit is not traditionally used to mean a particular thing, but Chughtai's frequent use of the image of *Kamarakh* beads after a crucial moment of the story could not be casual. *Kamarakh* fruit is juicy and delicious; well may have been a reference to the juicy and unlawful love-making of Bhaiya and Gainda that Chughtai's narrator misses. When she runs to the *Kamarakh* trees, the narrator in the story recalls, "He grabbed her two hands and pulled her hard towards him. I held my breath. Oh no! I ran away, overcome by fear and wonder and pause, only when I reached the dense cluster of the *Kamarakh*" (Chughtai, 2009, p.7). Chughtai skilfully shows a parallel event through the use of plant imagery. Gainda committed the crime of having an illicit affair with a man socially above her caste, and inevitably, she has to bear the pains that are destined for her. She becomes pregnant, that too being a widow. Had she committed the crime with a man of the social order where she belongs, there could be a thin possibility of her escape and acceptance. But with Bhaiya? Society is not going to accept it. This is a classic exposure of toxic patriarchy and an unjust social order. One can go on searching exactly where she made a mistake—Is it where she was born? Is it the gender she was assigned? Is it her marriage at an early age? Is it her love for Bhaiya? You can't find a definitive answer, as all the questions claim to be the potential answer. It is her caste, gender, and social reality that have made her life hellish.

Gainda, like the Marigold flower, is projected as an image of beauty and purity. Chughtai metaphorically chooses her name to bring an image of a marigold flower that can generate a picture of sacredness and purity, contrary to the social beliefs of the time. Gainda—who is impregnated despite being a widow—represents purity. An unmarried girl with a baby in her arms is as sacred as a marigold flower that is offered to the deities. Gainda is not impure; rather, she is a victim of the unfavourable realities of that time. Like the beauty of the marigold flower is loved and enjoyed by all in the morning, but it ends up in a dustbin at the close of the day, Gainda's fate is equally doomed. At the end of the story, when she receives no news of the father of the child in her arms, we see Gainda ending up as a victim and being used like a flower. The image of Gainda holding her child reminds us of the picture of the Virgin Mary holding Jesus Christ. Interestingly, Marigold flowers (Gainda) were offered to the Virgin Mary by poor peasants as a lieu of gold. Thus, Chughtai draws layers of parallels in terms of beauty, purity, and sacredness between her protagonist, Gainda, and the marigold flower. Therefore, she contributes to the understanding of human realities through the use of flower and plant imagery.

Emotional Sensitivity of the Touch-Me-Not

"Mimosa pudica", popularly known as the *Touch-Me-Not* plant, has got its unique name due to its distinguished nature of being highly sensitive. The leaves of the plant pull inward when touched, and they take a few minutes to reopen. The plant is found in many countries and is an object of curiosity for children. Although it finds a different meaning metaphorically in literature. Poets and writers use this plant as a symbol of emotional sensitivity. Chughtai has told the story of a woman and her journey through pregnancy and several miscarriages, drawing a similarity between the woman and the *Touch-Me-Not* plant. She titles the story *Chhui-Mui* in original Urdu, which translates to *Touch-Me-Not* in English. The story *Touch-Me-Not* revolves around the protagonist, narrated by her sister-in-law. She belongs to a wealthy family that has an obsessive expectation of a baby from her. Bhabhijaan is pampered and gets extra special care when she gets pregnant, as she bears the heir of the family. Unfortunately, she had a miscarriage in her first conception, disappointing the entire family.

Her delicate nature is likened to the *Touch-Me-Not* plant, *Chhui-Mui*, which recoils at the slightest touch, symbolizing her sheltered, hypersensitive life. Chughtai comments on the purpose of marriage and the objectification of women in Indian households through this story. Sensing from the behaviour of the family

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members, Bhabhijaan becomes certain that another miscarriage would mean her husband would get a ticket for a second marriage. Luckily, she conceives again. The writer ironically describes how Bhabhijaan receives care and treatment during her pregnancy. The narrative suggests, ″From the past month of pregnancy, they threw themselves into the baby project wholeheartedly, stitching diapers, etc., with such enthusiasm as though the delivery was imminent. So covered, peeped through constant application of witchcraft and charm on her." (Chughtai, 2009, p.96). Notably, Bi Mughlani, Ammi Jaan, and other people in the family don't care about Bhabhijaan's health and well-being; rather, they obsessively expect a baby and an heir from her. The narrator, a mouthpiece of Chughtai, maintains a sarcastic tone while narrating the care offered to Bhabhijaan. This critiques social expectations and society's treatment of women as mere mediums of childbirth.

To facilitate the delivery to the utmost medical attention, Ammi Jaan decides to take Bhabhijaan to Aligarh by train. In the train, an incident occurs that makes the *Touch-Me-Not* plant - Bhabhijaan coil inward and droop. In the train, another peasant woman enters who is in labour pains. The woman is the polar opposite of Bhabhijaan's temperament and serves as a foil to Bhabhijaan's character. She has no support during her childbirth, and delivers a baby in the train compartment. The narrator recalls the incident, ″I was reminded of field animals like sheep and goats who bring forth their offspring as they graze along without any fuss and not caring for the help of lady doctors, and tidy up by licking them with their tongue." (Chughtai,2009,p. 99). The raw, animal-like delivery of the woman inside the train affects Bhabhijaan emotionally. As the leaves of the *Touch-Me-Not* plant close up to a touch, the incident serves as that touch for Bhabhijaan, who could not process the rawness of that woman and got touched emotionally, so much so that it caused another miscarriage.

Notably, the story is not about miscarriages and the reason for them; rather, it critiques the mistreatments a woman like Bhabijaan receives from people with whom she shares the same house, and particularly with someone she shares the same room, her husband. Chughtai brings to light such social injustices where women find themselves on the receiving end quite openly through a narrative like the one in *Touch-Me-Not*. Her choice of the Touch-Me-Not plant to symbolise Bhabijaan's miscarriage has had an underlying reason – the leaves of the plant droop down when touched and regain their former state of normalcy within minutes (typically 30 minutes). Moreover, this phenomenon of the plant is not considered a shortcoming and is not disregarded in the plant kingdom. Contrarily, botanists believe this quality of the plant to be essential and one of its key aspects in survival mechanisms against herbivores and other dangers. Monica Gagliano and Michael Marder, in the article titled "What a plant learns. The curious case of Mimosa pudica", have mentioned these aspects of the plant, "Like all reflexes, *Mimosa*'s leaf folding trick is an evolutionary survival mechanism developed by members of the species through innumerable generations in the process of natural selection" (Marder and Monica, 2019). Thus, it is seen as an evolutionary characteristic of the plant and a scientific reality. However, Bhabijaan's sensitivity and miscarriages are not considered as her biological reality over which she has no control; rather, she has to face the consequences of something she is not guilty of. The writer attempts to highlight how women are held responsible for biological factors over which they have no control. Moreover, the story pleads with the patriarchal society to take such delicate matters of women, affirmatively realizing that certain things are not subject to being blamed but to being accepted as a scientific or biological reality. Ismat Chughtai masterfully addresses this issue with a skilful and apt comparison in the story.

Besides drawing a comparison of Bhabijaan's tenderness to the Touch-me-not plant, the narrator constantly compares her to a flower. The narrator, in the beginning of the story, pronounces that although she did not belong to a wealthy family and was not born with a silver spoon, once she came to her in-laws' house after marriage, she started looking good and "blossomed like a flower, fresh and fragrant, without any sense of life's harshness" (Chughtai 2009, 95). Later, when she faces miscarriages, her plight is described as "The blossom withered away and branches remained bare" (Chughtai,2009, p. 96). Moreover, the story ends with another miscarriage of Bhabijaan, where the narrator suggests, "My flower-like Bhabijaan felt so unnerved after witnessing the bizarre delivery in the train that she had a miscarriage once again." (Chughtai, 2009, p.96) Notably, the constant and recurring comparison of Bhabijaan to a flower, along with the repeated miscarriages she suffers, somehow evokes the ephemerality of the flower's life. Despite being beautiful and attractive, they die in a very short time. They are nurtured dearly but can't stay for long, akin to Bhabijaan's prospective babies. The narrator, being a mouthpiece of the author, has an affirmative tone in this comparison – flowers are unanimously received as a mark of beauty and positivity, and are not detested for their short span of life. Notably, Bhabijaan's frequent miscarriages shouldn't have been hated by people around her; instead, she needs to be empathised with, as a miscarriage is more of a loss to a mother than anybody in the world. It is she who conceives only to meet a fatal consequence, but instead of receiving appreciation and strength from her in-laws, she is held responsible, which makes her situation more miserable, and the author criticises this social tendency through the portrayal of Bhabijaan's helplessness and pitiable condition.

Subversive Sexuality in *Lihaaf (The Quilt)*

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Ismat Chughtai's Lihaaf takes Sappho's tradition of addressing female sexuality forward. Moreover, as Sappho has done in her lyrics, it explores the homosexuality of women. Surprisingly, the topic was still taboo in the mid-twentieth century when Chughtai wrote the story more than two thousand years after Sappho's writings. Interestingly, both writers have chosen a floral metaphor to raise the issue. *The Quilt* narrates the story of Begum Jaan, a neglected housewife of the Nawab. Her beauty and situation can be likened to a delicate flower that is subdued. Chughtai describes her barren life, where she finds herself in a loveless marriage because her husband, suggestively, a homosexual, doesn't care about her needs. Her beauty is capable of luring him despite all her efforts. He spends his time with young boys, leaving his wife to suffer in loneliness. Then, she finds a way to bloom again like a flower, cutting through all the natural difficulties to blossom and spread fragrance. The narrator notices that it is a special "massage" from her maid, Rabbu, that sprinkles water on this dying flower. Although it is narrated by an inexperienced child narrator, the reader can get from the narrative that Begum Jaan finds a solution to quench her sexual thirst with a woman, Rabbu, after being trapped in a loveless marriage where she had no other choice. Moreover, the continuous rejection of love by her homosexual husband fuels the circumstances. Her situation becomes akin to a beautiful flower in the wilderness. However, the story of *Lihaaf* is the story of a woman's resistance to psychological subjugation, and in her quest for a solution, she crosses social boundaries. Thereafter, she blooms like a flower. As the narrator states, "It was Rabbu who rescued her from the fall. Soon, her thin body began to fill out, her cheeks began to glow, and she blossomed. It was a special oil massage that brought life back to the half-dead Begum Jaan" (Chughtai, 2009,p.15). Chughtai, through this narrative, aptly connects her situation to a blooming flower after a show of resistance with the use of a floral metaphor; blossoming here symbolizes the subversion of sexual repression, and it has been skilfully woven into the realities of the Begum. The metaphor of a blooming flower to mean a different dimension of female sexuality is an assertion of the idea that the newfound dimension (homosexuality) is beautiful and fresh like a flower. Hence, it shouldn't be looked down on and tabooed; rather, it should be accepted like a flower, for it is a reality and a solution to many craving souls. Although this reference is less explicit compared to other references in *Gainda* and *Touch-Me-Not*, it tells how flowers and women hold a mirror to one another.

In the three discussed stories, we see that women are often compared to flowers. Gainda is directly compared to Marigold in its nomenclature, Bhabijaan's miscarriages are compared to the ephemerality of the flower, and Begum Jaan's rediscovery of her sexuality is viewed as a blossoming flower. The constant association of women with flowers does highlight their beauty and purity, and at the same time, it doesn't devalue their strength, courage, and resilience. This aligns with "Mary Wollstonecraft's observation in her seminal essay Vindication of the Rights of Women," when she compares women to flowers grown in overly rich soil and critiques the focus on beauty, which is subject to decay instead of strength and purpose. In her words, "…. as with flowers planted in soil that is too rich, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flamboyant leaves, after giving pleasure to viewers, fade on the stalk, disregarded, long before it was time for them to reach maturity." (Wollstonecraft, 2017, p.4). Notably, Chughtai's creation of women like Gainda, Bhabijaan and Begum Jaan and her association of them with flower certainly doesn't ignore their strength and usefulness: Gainda delivers a baby, an outcome of love despite being a widow against all odds, Bhabijaan keeps getting impregnated to meet her in-laws demand of an heir to their family, and Begum Jaan regains her sexual health in an unconventional homosexual relationship. In no circumstances can these women be termed as weak.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, flowers, plants, and other botanical aspects of nature are essential to the balance of biodiversity, and they share an intricate relationship with animals and humans, which is needed for the survival of all. Interestingly, along with that, the flowers and the plant kingdom have a cultural connection with the civilised Man. They are a part of society and an important aspect of it, highlighting its drawbacks like patriarchy and subjugation of women, as extensively discussed earlier. The participation of the plant kingdom in the functioning of a civilised human society has been represented in many serious manuscripts and literature. Literature holding a mirror to society shows us the close exchange of cultural significance between plants and people. Moreover, the development of a civilisation has many challenges and hindrances, patriarchy being one of them. And, great works show such hindrance effectively through an art that makes symbolism of flowers and plants represent it. As the writings of Ismat Chughtai have been discussed largely above, to show how she has employed botanical metaphors to throw light on the suffering of women caught in a constrained setting. Chughtai masterfully intertwines the metaphor of flowers to make the reader empathize with women's fragility, appreciate their delicate beauty, and realize their journey of struggle and resistance amidst a highly patriarchal and gender biased society. Stories such as "Gainda", as discussed above, unsettle us with their potential truth and make us aware of the shortcomings we have as civilised humans. We need to be more empathetic towards a beautiful Gainda, accepting it as a gift of God, not an object of desire or lust. Similarly, *Touch Me Not* teaches us to stop the wrong notion of objectifying married women and reducing them to mere machines whose only requirement is to give birth to a child. In *The Quilt,* we are made aware of a serious issue put under the carpet – Our lack of understanding concerning female sexuality has been exposed. With a

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serious challenge to the patriarchal thoughts, Begum Jaan's story of a loveless life and her eventual discovery of homosexuality make the readers rethink on established status quo regarding female sexuality. Chughtai, through the lives of Begum Jaan from *The Quilt* and Rani from *The Mole*, and Bhabijaan from *Touch-Me-Not,* endeavours to create a space for women in a conservative society and asks us to have a kinder perspective on the lives of women. She frequently compares women to flowers and plants, associating them with tenderness, delicacy, rawness, and the reproductive quality of nature. Therefore, the study of her stories provides a fresh perspective with a skilful amalgamation of women's lives and the world of flowers and plants.

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