

JOURNAL OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PEER REVIEWED, INDEXED & REFEREED BI-ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

ISSN 0972-8309

<https://www.jndmeerut.org>

[Vol. 38, No. 1 (Summer), 2025]

<https://doi.org/10.62047/JND.2025.06.30.15>

Queer in Heteronormative World: A Psychoanalytical Study of Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaf*

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Abstract

*The umbrella term 'Queer' embraces all - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, +(LGBTQIA+). In other words, it is attributed to the sexual orientations of all those people who lie outside of the mainstream heteronormative society. Since times immemorial, their rights and needs were seen as 'different' and invited ridicule in South Asia. The Indian Progressive woman writer, Ismat Chughtai challenged the patriarchal conventionalism of Muslim society through her revolutionary short story, *Lihaf* that brought to the forefront the sexual desires and needs of a woman ignored in her marital life. She was summoned to the court of law in Lahore on charges of obscenity for portraying homoeroticism but later acquitted. Through this paper, I intend to explore the subtle yet layered portrayal of alternate sexuality that has been humanized and provided a space to exist even if only under a quilt in the 1940s India. I shall also attempt to explore how Chughtai redefined women's desires, as they get intertwined with patriarchy, class, and gendered roles to find solace in the margins, thereby paving way for the emergence of new woman.*

Keywords

Alternate sexuality, Homoeroticism, Lesbianism, Obscenity, Repression.

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1. Introduction

Lihaf (The Quilt), is a pathbreaking short story that has been much ahead of its times as it explored issues of homosexuality and lesbianism, the much-tabooed topics of the 1940s, with a rare boldness, unseen and unheard before, coming from the pen of a woman Muslim writer. Ismat Chughtai, a Padma Shree awardee was a progressive author and film maker, who wrote extensively about the bourgeois gentility from a Marxist point of view. She wrote in times when India was going through socio-political, cultural changes, transitioning from brutalized colonial subcontinent into two independent nation-states. The unapologetically honest yet feisty woman in her strove to bring forth and expose the hypocrisies and gendered stereotypes of society around her, which earned her the reputation of being a controversial writer. She did not allow herself to be confined by any organized movement or ideology or religious conventions. Her narratives are powerful; style unconventional and colloquial; language simple, earthy, yet replete with curses, abuses, similes, and metaphors. Aware as she was from her childhood days about the differential treatment meted out to girls and boys, especially in the Muslim families, she used the power of her pen to cut even with them. "It is not necessary to be a boy, what you need is intelligence and ingenuity of a boy" (Chughtai, 2012: 12). Drawing her inspiration from the life and times around her, Chughtai weaves a powerful narrative of such muted and deviant voices trapped under dominant codes of honour and respectability and relegated to the margins. She was amply supported and guided in her endeavour by her brother, Mirza Azim Beg Chughtai who himself was an Urdu novelist of good repute and Rasheed Jahan, a highly qualified medical professional and a women's rights activist.

The publication of *Lihaf* in 1942, led to a "veritable explosion" (Chughtai, 2016: 351) and Chughtai was put down as "purveyor of sex" (*ibid*, 351). The tale did not go down well with the common masses as it centred around a much-tabooed theme of woman's sexuality and

soon became “a proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight” (*ibid*, 351). It is a poignant story about Begum Jan, who belonged to an impoverished household, but gets wedded to the affluent but ‘somewhat’ aged Nawab Sahib who has interest only in the “firm-calved, supple-waisted boys with flimsy shirts” (*ibid*, 322) whom he used to house in his haveli, leaving his newly-wedded wife to pine in loneliness. The entire story comes to us through the eyes of an innocent child, who is too young to understand the finer nuances of this relationship which is never explicitly talked about or described. The emotionally, physically, and sexually frustrated Begum Jan would have fallen off the brink into depression had she not been rescued by her maid Rabbu, who “massages” her back to a glowing health. There is nothing romantic about their relationship, it seems more transaction-based one wherein the maid is trying to offer some reprieve to her sex-deprived mistress caught in a repressive patriarchal household. The story is about imprisoning women in gilded cages, denying them freedom to pursue their pleasures, and then being judgemental about the choices made. The bold and out-of-box theme of queer desires and surrounding silences that are repressive and oppressive simultaneously have been provided a space to exist by Chughtai, who seemed to have mastered the art of suggestiveness and subversion in her delineation of characters. Her portrayal of the lesbian desires is gentle, subtle, and symbolic, rather than graphic or evocative. The nuanced relationship between the two women challenged the prevalent societal norms, and she was hauled up for obscenity but got acquittal on the grounds that there wasn’t any word or language or scene that could be termed as vulgar. In her candid conversation later with the judge, the feisty author had stated that she had only shown what she herself has seen around her, “The world is also littered with filth...If it is raked up, it becomes visible and people feel the need to clean it up” (*ibid*, 350). Her use of child narrator allowed her to maintain an underlying innocence while dealing with a burning issue of repression, also opening channels for discussions on female sexuality and queer identities in South Asian literatures. In *South Asian Review*, Asha Sen focuses on how *Lihaf* serves as a feminist ethnography of desire and resistance, challenging the cultural narratives of its time (Sen, 2007: 165-181).

1.1 Begum Jan as a Queer Figure

The very term queer has a dynamic identity as it is suggestive of movement against normative categories of sexuality and gender

(Sedgwick, 1990: xii). It is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant (Butler, 1993: 238). The obligatory marriage of convenience between a girl from an impoverished family and a wealthy Nawab who was “of ripe years” (Chughtai, 2016: 321) was a customary practice. “After marrying Begum Jan, and installing her in his house along with the furniture, the Nawab Sahib totally forgot her presence, leaving the frail beautiful Begum wasted away in anguished loneliness” (*ibid*, 322). The young woman with dreams of marital happiness in her heart finds herself abandoned by her asexual husband. Her behaviour immediately after marriage does not display any signs of queerness in her, her entry to this field is purely circumstantial, forced as she is by a loveless marriage that is for appearance only. In fact, she tried all stratagems to lure her aberrant husband but it was “like applying leeches to a stone. The Nawab did not budge an inch” (Chughtai, 2012: 118). It wouldn’t be amiss to assume that it is primarily her husband, with queer disposition, who compels her to seek solace in alternate modes of self-gratification. “Begum Jan’s need for warmth and physical closeness is met by Rabbu in a relationship that breaks away from the heterosexual norm, even if not named explicitly” (Kumar, 2002: 63). Chughtai provides a subtle critique of such marriages that are undertaken purely to keep up social pretences, foregrounding concerns of compulsory heterosexuality that leaves people in liminal spaces.

1.2 Catalyst in the Patriarchal Figure of Nawab

Nawab Sahib’s neglect of his newly-wedded wife shaped the dynamics of Begum Jan’s oncoming life and existence. His callous indifference towards her physical, emotional, and psychological needs, act as a catalyst that pushes her towards embracing an alternate existence for herself in forbidden spaces. Rabbu steps into the shoes of the absent Nawab Sahib and rescues the bride by “pulling her back from the brink” (Chughtai, 2012: 118) by providing the bond of sacred sisterhood. Nawab’s presence or rather the absence of it, plays an equally crucial role in taking the narrative forward. It not only alienates Begum Jan but Rabbu’s son too who refuses to come back from the psychological exile that gets unwittingly imposed upon him.

1.3 Homoeroticism and the Politics of the Closet

Chughtai weaves woman’s subversion through her use of literal and metaphorical quilt a.k.a. “closet” that offers space to conceal and

protect non-normative sexualities. In the introduction titled “Axiomatic” of her book, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick explores the subtleties of secrecies and revelations and highlights how “closet” serves as a central metaphor to understand the complexities of queer identity. The experiences of queer individuals are shaped by the tension between the explicit and the implicit, the known and the unknown, the open and the closeted (Sedgwick, 1990).

Lihaf, the title of the story and the imagery of it used throughout becomes extremely symbolic of the closeted, unspoken desires in a repressive world. “The quilt hides what cannot be seen, just as society hides what it refuses to acknowledge: female same-sex desire” (Vanita & Kidwai, 2002: 136). It offers a snug warm cover to keep the lesbian relationship between Begum Jan and Rabbu under wraps, while revealing what is going on under it through the child’s voyeuristic gaze. “There was a peculiar noise again. In the dark, Begum Jan’s quilt was swaying again like an elephant. ‘Allah! Ah! ...I moaned in a feeble voice. The elephant inside the quilt heaved up and then sat down...I was scared stiff...There was a sound of someone smacking her lips, as though savouring a tasty pickle...” (Chughtai, 2016: 329). The day and night erotic massages offered by Rabbu come to dominate over the child’s psyche, their moaning from under the quilt lead her to associate the presence of the literal and proverbial elephant in the room. Enamoured as she is of the Begum, the narrator gets drawn towards her and offers to massage her in Rabbu’s absence but gets petrified by the intensity of her passion. The near-sexual encounter between the two defies the social code of morality and ethics since the narrator is still a naïve child who is also entrusted in her care, thereby putting the Begum in the role of a godmother.

1.4 The Symbolic Quilt

The quilt not only provides a safer haven from the harsher elements of hostile nature but also obscures the “real” from “make-believe”. It conceals, yet reveals; protects yet suffocates, thereby transforming it into a repository of unconscious and conscious desires. Begum Jan whose life was cold and miserable, seeks the warmth and intimacy of the quilt. The petrified narrator projects her uncanny fears and traumatic anxieties on the symbolic quilt, unable to comprehend what is going on, yet is extremely curious to decode it. So deep was its impact, it “burnt itself into my memory and is to this day preserved in it like a scar from a red-hot iron” (Chughtai, 2012: 117). The unspoken has been worded with

such masterly subtlety that the narrative brings to the fore the repression and subversion that operate at all levels, the individual and the societal. It has brought out into the open the psychic eruptions which the societies and families desperately seek to repress.

2. Psychoanalytical Reading of *Lihaf*

According to Sigmund Freud (Freud, 1905) and Jacques Lacan's theories, people get constantly shaped and influenced by their unconscious, subconscious, and deep-rooted desires. In *Lihaf* too, the artless narration of a child narrator brings out the reality behind the repression experienced by Begum Jan lending itself to a psychoanalytical exploration of the text.

2.1 Repression

Repression is a central Freudian concept that pushes the socially unacceptable desires or feelings into the unconscious and keeps them bottled up. Begum Jan's natural desires are throttled by a namesake, passionless marriage on one hand and adherence to the strict moral and social codes of an upper-class Muslim household on the other, till it finds an escape in homoerotic intimacy with her maid. The repressed body of Begum Jan finds a release under the quilt, but the desires never disappear, instead they get manifested through different disguised forms (Freud, 1919/1955: 241) making quilt tremble with unspeakable meanings. The quilt throws gigantic, elephantine shapes on the wall that are terrifying and compelling simultaneously and the child fails to understand its import but senses something wrong. Unable to articulate the early sexualized experience of which she had unwittingly become a part of, the young narrator stood transfixed, "I was scared, and yet strangely curious. I couldn't stop watching, though I didn't understand what I saw" and the quilt becomes a cover between the "real" and the "symbolic" thus making this a tale of "ethnography of psychological fragmentation" for the child and "feminist ethnography of resistance" for the woman (Sen, 2007: 165-181).

2.2 Latent Trauma in the Child Narrator and Rabbu's Absent Son

The child narrator's premature exposure to adult sexuality throws her into a turmoil of emotions as she becomes extremely apprehensive of being in close proximity with Begum Jan of whom she was earlier enamoured of. Young as she is, she is unable to

process what she had seen under the quilt, “trauma is not experienced as fully known, but rather as a confrontation with an event that is not assimilated” (Caruth, 1996: 4). Her familiar space gets transformed into an alien one overnight, and the mother-figure under whose patronage she is entrusted, turns into a monstrous presence, petrifying her.

According to Sukrita Paul Kumar and Ruth Vanita, the function of the child narrator is more of a witness than of a victim as it allows Chughtai to create a narrative distance through her naivety and protect the story from charges of obscenity (Kumar, 2002: 63). “The child is not sexualized in the narrative; she is an observer caught in a moment of adult confusion and incomprehension” (Vanita, 2000: 14) but the limits of innocence have been breached undoubtedly whether the child understands it or not. From the psychoanalytical point of view, Begum Jan’s behaviour towards the young narrator can be construed as ethically and morally inappropriate especially when she tries to take advantage of the child’s naivety, cajoling her to do acts unacceptable. Her implied act of physical and sexual intimacy with the child becomes deeply unsettling, raising concerns about the child’s safety even within the domestic sphere. Unable to comprehend or process fully her encounter with the Begum, the child feels petrified, “she was pressing me as though I was a clay doll and the odour of her warm body made me want to throw up. But she was like a person possessed. I could neither scream nor cry” (Chughtai, 2016: 327). This could probably border on the child’s sexual abuse, paedophilia and though Begum Jan has been bereft of affection in her marriage, it doesn’t excuse her. Her repressed and unfulfilled desires erupt in inappropriate manner, consuming the trust and the innocence of a child.

The absence of the conventional familial bond in Nawab’s household has far-reaching repercussions not only on the life of Begum Jan but on Rabbu and her son too. The son’s refusal to have anything to do with his own mother or Begum or Nawab Sahib, under whose patronage he had spent his childhood, raises concerns about his traumatic past. The boy who was an essential inmate of this house vows never to return even to visit his mother raises a few pertinent questions as to what could have been responsible for this behaviour. Was it the Nawab’s penchant for young boys or was it the relationship that Begum Jan shared with his mother that created this disruption in his life? Did he face some sort of sexual violation in

his growing up years? Where did Rabbu fail as a mother and why? Were all her nurturing instincts consumed in providing intimate support to her mistress, Begum Jan, leaving very little for her own son? Does the child in him recognize the dynamics of their relationship and understand the social ridicule? Has the hierarchical space in the household pushed him into being a psychological recluse? Wouldn't his refusal to return be construed as a symbolic act of rejection of patriarchal structures of power or it could also be the rejection of queer relationship between his mother and Begum Jan? The emotional and psychological scars of familial neglect penetrate deeply, warping his entire existence. Since the patriarchal figurehead had failed miserably to fulfil his role of a protector and provider, it led to psychological, physical, and emotional alienation for everyone.

2.3 Postcolonial and Queer Premise

Lihaf found its way at a time of intense nationalist struggle when cultural rootedness and morality were being questioned. The tale unravels alternate sexualities and seditious selves operating within heteronormative, colonial framework and gently critiques the idealised codes of patriarchy and femineity prevalent in the society. The societal control of a woman's sexuality, limiting it to the Zenana Khana (inner quarters meant for women) to protect it from the transgressive outer world, gets transgressed in that very space as alternate gratifications emerge. "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 Jan" (*ibid*, 322).

Since heterosexual relationship was regarded as the substratum of ideal Indian family, Begum Jan's literal and figurative deviation from the straight line (Ahmed, 2006: 67) queers the domestic confines she inhabits, exposing her to derision and ridicule from other inmates. "Rabbu and Begum Jan were the subject of their gossip during their leisure hours. Someone would mention their names, and the whole group would burst into loud guffaws" (Chughtai, 2016: 322). Chughtai's text questions and undermines the Victorian as well as the Islamic morality imposed upon womenfolk as she presents Begum Jan violating all the nationalistic constructs of ideal womanhood. In *Colonial Masculinity*, Mrinalini Sinha points out that the nationalist ideals constructed Indian women as pure,

domestic, and heterosexual (Sinha, 1995). The subtext of Nawab Saheb's homosexuality disrupts the ideals of respectable heterosexual home too but gets mentioned only in a passing and continues to linger in the peripheral space.

3. Conclusion

Chughtai queers the tale both through its form and content -- through what she says it and how she says it. Her masterly delineation of the theme and content is covert, yet extremely suggestive. She does not explicitly portray that the relationship shared between Begum Jan and Rabbu is a lesbian one, she merely hints at it, which is a queer strategy. In her work, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick opines that the unsaid is central to queer discourse and that desires are coded, implied, and felt, but seldom declared (Sedgwick, 1990). It gets used in a clandestine manner whenever explicit representations of queer desires pose a challenge in the heteronormative world due to societal or legal restrictions, or censorship issues. Using coded and metaphoric language is another queer tactic within repressive domains, "Unripe grapes are sour, Begum Jan" (Chughtai, 2012: 125). This was a double-edged weapon that Chughtai used in her story for it allowed her to question heteronormativity on one hand and avoid censorship on the other. This dual-layered reading experience enabled her to initiate a debate about all those women who find themselves entangled in the web of familial and social obligations and are forced to follow the dotted line dictated by the dominant patriarchal order.

Ismat Chughtai also intertwined class dynamics in the tale by making Rabbu, a paid-maid as an agent of awakening and gratifying sexual desires in Begum Jan. Although a subaltern, Rabbu becomes a more empowered than a passive figure because she is adept in navigating her status as a marginalized class worker through her proximity and closeness with her mistress. Shohini Ghosh warns against "sanitizing" queer desire by ignoring how it intersects with power and vulnerability, and as such the impact of an early sexualized experience on the child narrator too cannot be ignored or taken lightly. "Queerness must be examined in all its complexities-not just as resistance but also where it may produce harm" (Ghosh, 2006).

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