



DEPICTION OF HOMOEROTICISM AND PATRIARCHY IN ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S "LIHAAF"

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Abstract

Ismat Chughtai writes mostly about women, and her stories often feature strong, complex female protagonists and are told from the female perspective. These take place in a strongly patriarchal Indian culture. The publication of "Lihaaf" in pre-Independent India draws attention to the topic of homosexuality and female libido. The tyranny of freedom, the separation from worldly pleasures, and the social critique of women in a sexually oppressive culture are all issues explored by Chughtai. "Lihaaf" is a short story about a brokenhearted woman Begum and her elderly homosexual husband Nawab Saheb. The short story deals with the problems a women go through in a patriarchal social setting and her suffering, this shows how social norms are so rigid and discriminatory for female, how it feels when all the desire are left incomplete, how a female is treated just like a beautiful Vass in a house, it shows women exploiting women. This text is the mirror to the pre-independent Indian patriarchal society with respect to Muslim household.

Keywords: Ismat Chughtai, women, female, desire, suppression, isolation, sexuality, society.

Urdu literary giant Ismat Chughtai penned the 1942 short story "Lihaaf" (The Quilt). The story, which appeared in the Urdu journal *Adab-i-latif*, has garnered her not only widespread attention but also a heated debate since its publication. She was held in Lahore court for two years defending herself, she won the trial when it was pointed by her lawyer that there was no vulgar or obscene word used in the text - it was just a small girl's perspective on what she was witnessing around her, she did not know obscenity, so does not this text. The story is a horrifying memory of a small girl, the unnamed narrator. Her memory pops up when she covers herself in a quilt in winters. She was not so girly, indulged in fighting and, therefore, her mother sent her to Begum Jaan. Begam Jaan was married to

Nawab, who is very old and is more inclined toward slender waisted boys than his beautiful-young wife. She is an isolated discarded object in nawabs palace and a suffocated wife without any hope of happiness and freedom left in her life. The narrator sees Rabbo (Begum's masseuse) rubbing Begum jaan all the day long, as she has some problematic itch, discomfoting her badly. The massage that Rabbo provided Begum jaan, embellish her with glow and shine on her face which she had lost. When Rabbo was not with her she got out of her element and refused to eat and sleep. She tried to sleep all night on the bed next to begum's sleeping area once, but was awakened by the sight of a massive elephant trembling violently in the *lihaaf* and the sound of a cat. Rabbo and Begum jaan's intimate physical

connection is demonstrated here. Begum finally began to define her own life after meeting Rabbo. This is a story of many themes, layers and colors, showing Indian society at its most raw form, from a child's perspective. "Lihaaf" embraces many colorful themes in it, like- homoeroticism, lesbianism, suffocation, neglect, bodily desire, identity crisis, social taboo and stigma, finding of one's self, shaping of new definition of freedom, breaking the stereotypes and lots more.

All the oral tales, narratives and stories are mirror of social realities. The story, which can be debated as a "Lesbian" text, landed Chughtai in an obscenity trial in Lahore court. Although Chughtai was encouraged to simply apologise and pay the fee, she chose to challenge the charges in court. The judge ruled in her favour because there was no evidence of sexual misconduct or a lesbian relationship in the story. Many point to the narrative as evidence that Chughtai takes a strong feminist viewpoint. Because she knew that such relationships occur behind the facade of a typical home, she decided to write about them. Ismat's intention is clear in this work that she wanted to portray the situation of a female trapped in a clutch of a judgmental patriarchal setting. She wanted her dignity and freedom but society wanted to see her shackled. With her relationship with Rabbo she feels some power and authority over someone and celebrates her newly found freedom, as now she can be loved or admired.

The stories of Chughtai have two distinct voices because they serve two purposes. On one level, it serves as a guidebook and allegory for her era, illuminating the relationship between the book's production context and the evolution of Indian intellectual thought. On a deeper level, she appeals to academics of all times and places to shed light on the actual situation of women now. She draws inspiration for her works from the sisterhood of Muslim women and strives to be as accurate as possible in her depiction of their situation. Chughtai's novels paint a bleak picture of a society torn apart by inequality and injustice, particularly the widespread exclusion of women from school and other social opportunities. She examines the relationship between identity and gender, posing

questions to her readers concerning the commonly held, monotheistic perspective of sex and gender. Ismat makes an effort to enter the canonical literature that has always protected male hegemonic ideas. She tries to speak for the half of the population that patriarchy has marginalised and suppressed. Her female protagonists defy the patriarchy and claim their independence despite being stereotyped as fragile, weak, inferior, shy, subservient, and emotional. She speaks out against women's oppression and for the establishment of social justice. It's a window into the author's complex psyche as well. By offering these ideas, Ismat appears to be challenging the norms and bonds of traditional Muslim households. One of the most surprising aspects of this story is how she portrays marriage. As a result, the authoritarian male voice or the patriarchal worldview is put on trial to interrogate and demolish gender domination. Ismat Chughtai does not promote homosexuality per se; rather, she provides the perspective of those who are often excluded from mainstream society in her writing. She does not want to lecture her reader, only make them comfortable with the unspoken fact nobody wants to face. As a result, she attempts to portray the world as it is without adding or subtracting from it based on her personal viewpoint. This short story discusses a woman's plight in various aspects and situations, say it is Begum Jaan, Rabbo or the narrator herself, everyone is the victim of clutches of patriarchy.

The story focuses on the subjugation of women in society and how marriage is viewed as a social necessity. Nawab Saheb, a wealthy and powerful old man, married a young and lovely bride. He was homosexual and knew it, but he married Begum Jaan anyhow because he wanted to be with her. This proves beyond a reasonable doubt that he weds due to the pressure of a society that has traditionally been hostile to homosexuality. To prove to the world that he is not a "deviant" but a respectable family man, he plans to publicly display his marriage and children. The dishonesty and moral guilt weigh heavily on Begum Jaan. Nawab Saheb and Begum Jaan's lives would have turned out very differently if they had been given the option to

choose a life partner who shared their sexual orientation. Chughtai, through the characterization of Begum Jaan, asks pertinent concerns about marriage as an economic venture and the subordinate status of women within it. We cannot turn a blind eye to Begum Jaan's mental and physical abuse. Patriarchy oppresses her, and she pays the price. She was a mere ornament in her husband's home, with no autonomy to bring her even a modicum of joy. Therefore, once she marries Nawab sahib who stifles her individuality and desires, she has no way to escape the grip of patriarchy and speaks out against the mistreatment she endures. Despite her best efforts, she lost him forever in this oppressive male-dominated society. Begum Jan's miserable state is brought on by her overwhelming feelings of futility. Chughtai does not, however, make her completely powerless. She is giving her freedom to pursue pleasure with a female partner. After this, when she finally found love with Rabbu, the other maids verbally abused her by calling her names and shaming her for her loose morals and bad attitude. All she got was backbiting and rude behaviour from the other ladies, and no one tried to understand her or soothe her. The author, too, has been taken advantage of by servants and even Begum Jaan. Without directly portraying the anguish and dread a victim of sexual abuse experiences, Chughtai expertly weaves and binds the reader into the victim's perspective.

When discussing the history of South Asian literature, Ismat Chughtai is still mentioned alongside the greats. She had great difficulty from her family while pursuing further education despite her openness to discussing controversial topics. She ultimately prevailed, though. As one of the first Muslim women in British India, she earned a BA degree. Chughtai said in interviews years afterwards that people just didn't talk about homosexuality back then. In Ismat Chughtai's masterwork, we see the establishment of an inverted hierarchy as Begum Jaan ascends from her status as a royal ornament to that of a powerful ruler. She destroys all the rules of society in order to fulfil her repressed wants and needs. The words 'sex', 'pleasure' and 'desire' are as tabooed in a cultural framework as a female's unpaid-housework-labor in an economic context;

both often deemed 'invisible' and 'negligible'. Ismat Chughtai was held in Lahore court for two years defending herself, for "Lihaaf", and she won the trial when it was pointed by her lawyer that there is no vulgar or obscene word used in the text, it is just a small girl's perspective on what she is witnessing around her, she doesn't know obscenity, so doesn't this text.

When considering the cultural context of the piece, it is important to keep in mind that women at the time were subject to strict gender segregation, with few or no opportunities to interact with men who were not members of their immediate family. A woman's sexual desire was considered even lower in status than she actually was because it was assumed that it did not exist. To appease their families, many men married for the wrong reasons and then enshrined their wives in the zenana. The zenana history we have (often authored by male chroniclers) is supplemented by Chughtai's insights. She demonstrates how lonely women turned to alternative forms of social interaction when they were unable to satisfy their most fundamental needs.

The story explores the complexities of same-sex attraction in Colonial India through the eyes of a little girl whose limited vocabulary belies her ignorance of the topic. The quilt's symbolism goes far beyond the gruesome events of the novel to address the broader societal problem of powerful people (like the nawab and Begum Jaan) using their positions to preserve the double standards by which they themselves live. The quilt might also represent the hypocrisy and lack of openness towards homosexuality that characterised the 20th century. Without directly addressing the issue, Chughtai attacks the widespread belief that this is a pathological condition. Chughtai imagined feminine sexuality and homoeroticism in Lihaaf, and the book's figurative language still resounds with readers today. The patchwork functions as both a cliché and a leitmotif throughout the narrative. Underneath it, the two women are in a gay relationship. Begum finds the warmth she seeks in and with Rabbu, whereas the quilt can only offer her with cold. The "itch" that won't go away is a metaphor for Begum Jaan's sexual appetite. The

narrator explains that the phantom ache Begum Jaan feels is the impetus for her decision to hire a full-time masseur. Medical personnel have examined Begum Jaan and concluded that there are no outward signs of illness; instead, they suspect that the itching is the result of an infection lying just beneath the surface. Rabbu, on the other hand, is adamant that Begum Jaan is OK, despite his apparent awareness that the "itch" she experiences is a result of a lack of sexual release on her part. Begum Jaan's thirst for orgasm is satisfied now that she has Rabbu as a masseuse and semi-secret lover. Chughtai uses elephant symbolism to convey the young girl's bewilderment. This is indicative of the difficulty of the time in comprehending same-sex desire. "The elephant inside the quilt heaved up and then sat down. I was mute. The elephant started to sway again. I was scared stiff." The elephant-shaped quilt made by Begum Jaan is the protagonist of "The Quilt" and represents unspoken realities. The winter quilt the narrator is using at the beginning of the story creates a shadow on the wall that looks like the shape of an elephant. Recalling her time as a young girl staying with Begum Jaan, the narrator describes the terrible moment she saw the powerful Muslim woman engaging in a lesbian relationship with her servant under the cover of her quilt. The young narrator has no idea what to make of the elephant-like figures he sees under the quilt as Begum Jaan and Rabbu engage in sexual activity in the same room in which he sleeps. A figurative expression, "the elephant in the room" refers to the social phenomenon of people ignoring a problem that is as evident and noticeable as a giant animal standing in the room. Chughtai employs the symbolism of the elephant quilt to emphasise how everyone in Begum Jaan's household seems to know about her relationship with Rabbu but never brings it up. The nawab's sexual relationships with young men are also kept under wraps in the nawab's household. The narrator never directly addresses the sexuality, homoeroticism, or abusive touch in the story, exemplifying the narrative's tendency to only suggestively acknowledge some facts that are immoral, hypocritical, or shameful. The narrator, constantly discusses things and feelings that are incredibly intense. Begum Jaan's quilt is like a scar

from a blacksmith's red-hot branding iron, the narrator says, establishing the motif. The narrator describes how being dragged through hot embers represents Begum Jaan's fury at her husband's secret sexual practises with young men. Begum Jaan's freeloading family are similarly annoying and "made her blood boil." Chughtai's use of scorching temperatures serves to amplify the story's underlying tension and suppressed sexual tension.

Begum Jaan's depression stems from her isolation at home and her husband's neglect. Her only visitors are visiting relatives, but according to Chughtai, they "made her blood boil." Chughtai employs a frequent idiom to highlight the pent-up rage Begum Jaan feels in the presence of her freeloading relatives, comparing the intensity of the feeling to the actual sense of one's blood growing hotter. Begum Jaan finds out that the nawab has no sex interest in her after they are married. She lives in isolation while her homosexual husband entertains a steady stream of young guys at their home and describes it as "as though hauled over burning embers". She reminds the readers an old adage goes something like this: "If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a family." These statements are totally accurate. An education is a girl's best defence against prejudice. An educated woman can make better life choices for herself and her loved ones, advance in her chosen field, and affect positive change in her community. An educated woman is a strong woman. However, due to a lack of educational options, females in rural areas are sometimes relegated to doing nothing but housework or working low-paying jobs to help support their families. If a girl does make it to school, she still runs the risk of sexual assault or harassment on the way there or while she's there, and she may suffer discrimination because of her gender.

The story's overarching goal of broadcasting the beginning of women's daring labour in a patriarchal environment is a commendable one. The old order, based on men, is overthrown, and the stage is set for the new women to take centre stage. In "Lihaaf", the protagonist, Begum Jaan, is placed inside the framework of persistent and inflexible societal rules from a feminist point of view. This

story demonstrates how women suffer and are subjugated in male-dominated communities and ideologies. The story of Begum Jan serves as an inspiration for all women to fight for what they want and to realise their full potential. Her experiences shed light on the generational effects of male dominance and the equally enduring resistance of women.

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