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Trapped in the Bell Jar, Hidden Beneath the Quilt: Female Desire and Patriarchal Control in Sylvia Plath's and Ismat Chughtai's Works

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Abstract

This paper examines the contested terrain of female sexuality, repression, and desire in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" (1942). Though separated by decades and continents, Plath in postwar America and Chughtai in pre-Partition India, both foreground the silencing of women's desires and the cultural enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality. Plath's semi-autobiographical novel follows Esther Greenwood's dislocation from normative life as she refuses the narrow expectations of purity, marriage, and motherhood. Her text also examines how psychiatric authority systemically disciplines women who deviate. Chughtai's short story, narrated through a child's eyes, unveils a covert same-sex intimacybetween Begum Jaan and her servant Rabbo, using domestic objects—most notably the quilt—as metaphors that both conceal and signal erotic life within a conservative household. By placing these texts in dialogue, the paper shows how narrative form (interior monologue versus child narration), metaphor (the bell jar; the quilt), and tone (confessional irony; satirical tenderness) all function to reveal and resist political regimes that regulate female bodies and desires. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality, Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Eve Sedgwick's account of the closet, Michel Foucault's analysis of institutional power, and Audre Lorde's reclamation of the erotic as a source of knowledge, the essay argues that both Plath and Chughtai reimagine sexual autonomy as a site of ethical and political resistance. The reception histories of the works—Plath's confessional reception and Chughtai's moral panic—further show how literary representations of female desire have been policed and later reclaimed. Ultimately, the two texts demonstrate that desire, even when concealed beneath objects or medical metaphors, persists as a claim to agency.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, Ismat Chughtai, female sexuality, patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, queer desire, feminist critique.

Introduction

The capacity to desire, to speak of desire, and to act on desire have long been contested terrains for women. Literary texts often become battlegrounds where cultural norms and personal longings meet, collide, and reconfigure. In two disparate literary traditions, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" undertake remarkably parallel projects. Each exposes the social infrastructures that police women's bodies, restrict their sexual autonomy, and naturalize heterosexuality as the only valid erotic arrangement. While Plath writes in the idiom of a confessional modern English-language novel, Chughtai writes in Urdu through a compressed, satirical short-story voice that uses a child's point of view as rhetorical strategy. Reading them together clarifies how different narrative techniques can nonetheless perform a shared political work, namely, revealing the costs of enforced heteronormativity and imagining small practices of resistance.

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Plath's novel is often read through a biographical lens, but its formal choices demand scrutiny apart from autobiography. The novel's interior monologue immerses the reader in Esther Greenwood's psychological weather and small domestic scenes accumulate into a portrait of structural constraint. The bell jar itself functions as both symptom and symbol. Esther experiences it as a transparent dome that isolates and preserves, allowing sight but disabling participation. Plath's prose turns quotidian details such as magazine assignments, model women's wardrobes, hospital corridors into instruments for dramatizing cultural enclosure. When Esther says, "The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters" (Plath 76), the sentence compresses professional aspiration with a refusal of domestic subordination. Sexual regulation is everywhere organized by double standards. Buddy Willard's respectable persona masks entitlement as he expects Esther's chastity while narrating his own sexual history freely. Esther's moral recoil reflected in her confession "I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to cook and clean and wash and sew for a man all her life" (Plath 89) attacks a normative economy in which female reproductive and domestic labor reproduce male privilege. The novel also stages how heterosexual intimacy can be violent. Marco's attempted assault and his taunt "You're all the same" during the attack (Plath 116) place desire in the register of coercion, revealing how patriarchal entitlement converts eros into force.

Plath threads non-heteronormative intimacies into the novel's interiority. Esther's experiences of closeness with women, her description of lying beside Joan, when "for the first time it felt natural to be close to someone" (Plath 208) indexes an affective shelter not organized around male desire. Doreen's sexual freedom, meanwhile, operates as a tacit model for other possible lives. These moments function as ethical and sensorial alternatives to prescriptive heterosexual roles rather than as mere plot devices. Importantly, Plath does not sensationalize homoerotic feeling; she stages it as ordinary, consolatory, and politically significant because it escapes the reproductive imperative.

The novel also maps how reproductive expectations shape psychic life. Esther's repeated aversion evident in the line "Children made me feel uneasy" (Plath 123) reads not as pathology alone but as a critique of the cultural conflation of womanhood with motherhood. Plath thus links psychiatric discourse, medical authority, and social expectation. Esther's institutionalization and electroconvulsive therapy appear as disciplinary responses intended to re-normalize a woman who resists prescribed roles. *The Bell Jar* therefore converts the clinical into the political claiming that

psychiatric practice functions as a technology that seeks to correct deviations from gendered norms.

Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt"

Chughtai's story operates by compression and implication. The child narrator supplies a rhetorical paradox—her innocence exposes adult duplicity. Begum Jaan is an aristocratic woman trapped in a marriage where appearances hide the husband's predations. Long denied intimacy, she finds solace in Rabbo, her servant. The story's central object, the quilt, performs the ambivalence of concealment and revelation. The child's image of a quilt "moving as though an elephant were trapped beneath it" renders erotic presence visible precisely through the domestic thing that conceals it.

Chughtai's prose registers tactile detail—massage, the warmth of a hand, the smell of ointment—to depict erotic care as embodied reciprocity rather than mere instrumentality. Rabbo's ministrations are described with the vocabulary of labor, but the labor becomes pleasurable for both parties; the narrative thereby refigures servile touch as a site of mutual consolation. This crossing from service to shared tenderness complicates servant–mistress hierarchies and marks the erotic as a domain capable of redrawing social boundaries.

Class inflects desire throughout the story. Begum Jaan's aristocratic position would normally guarantee authority, but social mores strip her of agency—her illicit longing is rendered invisible by etiquette. Rabbo's lower-class status makes the intimacy legible only in private spaces; yet the very crossing of class lines proves disruptive to patriarchal order. Chughtai uses the child's literalness to let the adult reader perceive both the moral hypocrisy of public decorum and the seriousness of illicit intimacies. The child narrator's inability to interpret adult motives forces adult readers to do that interpretive labor, thereby implicating them in ethical reflection.

Narrative Techniques, Voice, and the Politics of Representation

Comparing Plath and Chughtai foregrounds the political power of narrative form. Plath's interior monologue grants readers a contiguous sense of confinement and the psychic effects of enforcement; it makes psychiatric coercion and social pressure palpable because we inhabit Esther's constricted point of view. Chughtai's child voice, by contrast, produces defamiliarization. Adult hypocrisy becomes visible precisely because the narrator lacks adult vocabulary to normalize it. Both choices are political wherein one insists on the sovereign authority of subjective testimony, and the other uses detachment and suggestion to unmask social pretenses.

Both forms resist voyeuristic consumption of women's suffering. Plath's blunt depictions of institutional violence and Chughtai's oblique erotic metaphors discourage prurient reading and instead demand ethical attention. The narrative strategies thus protect interiority while offering a formal critique of institutions—family, law, psychiatry—tasked with regulating desire.

Theoretical Synthesis: Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Erotic as Power

Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality clarifies that heterosexuality is enforced as a political institution that trains women into domestic roles. Both texts dramatize this training. Judith Butler's performativity theory complements this by showing that gender norms are enacted through repeated behavior; Esther's refusal to perform domestic gestures and Begum Jaan's refusal to accept enforced solitude are performative disruptions that reveal the constructedness of gender. Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* explains why narrative indirection and metaphor function as survival strategies in contexts where naming sexuality invites sanction. Foucault's account of disciplinary power emphasizes that institutions such as

psychiatry, law, and religion mediate sexual regulation—a theme that both texts make visible through plot and form. Audre Lorde's reclamation of the erotic as a source of knowledge and empowerment recasts the erotic as an ethical resource. When Esther seeks bodily autonomy or when Begum Jaan reclaims consolation through Rabbo's touch, these acts can be read as manifestations of erotic agency that contest political subjection.

Reception, Censure, and Afterlives

The reception histories of the two works further illuminate the stakes of representation. Plath's novel was initially filtered through biographical narratives and sometimes dismissed as a private confession. Because debates foregrounded the author's mental health, critics frequently reduced Esther's experience to individual pathology. Feminist critics in later decades reclaimed *The Bell Jar* as a structural critique of gendered expectations and psychiatric coercion. Chughtai faced different pressures. The moral panic her story provoked resulted in legal scrutiny and public censure. The trial around her depiction exposed anxieties about modernity, print culture, and changing sexual mores. Chughtai's defense—that literature can and should depict social realities—was itself a political stance that helped to expand the terms of what Urdu fiction might address. Over time, both texts were rehabilitated and taught as interventions in debates about gender, sexuality, and institutional power.

Comparative Significance and Contemporary Relevance

Reading these two texts in concert shows that policing of female desire is both locally inflected and globally resonant. Both authors show how institutions bind women to roles that reproduce patriarchal orders, and both imagine small practices of refusal viz. contraception, clandestine intimacy, and the refusal to accept psychiatric correction that accumulate into political resistance. Today these texts remain instructive for discussions about reproductive autonomy, mental-health policy, and anti-censorship activism. They show how literature can make visible the micro-mechanisms by which control is exercised and how imaginative forms can prefigure social critique.

Pedagogically, the two works offer rich opportunities. Teachers can use them to discuss narrative voice, metaphor, and the intersection of gender and social institutions. Pairing primary texts with theory helps students to see how literary criticism can illuminate real-world harms and forms of endurance. Methodologically, comparative reading requires attentiveness to translation and cultural specificity. Such attention does not flatten difference but rather deepens analytic nuance.

Conclusion

Plath and Chughtai teach that desire resists neat containment. Whether enclosed beneath a bell jar or concealed under a quilt, female longing persists, asserting a claim to subjectivity and autonomy. Their literary strategies—the confessional interiority of Plath and the wry, oblique child narration of Chughtai—both demand ethical reading and invite political response. By making visible the material conditions under which desire is policed and by imagining forms of intimacy that escape those conditions, these works contribute to feminist and queer traditions that see erotic life as a site of knowledge, resistance, and hope. Comparative study thus enlarges our sense of how narrative, culture, and power interlock and how literature can offer lucid resources for imagining more just possibilities.

Moreover, the literatures studied here have implications beyond academia. They can inform public conversations about mental-health policy, sexual education, and anti-censorship advocacy. By paying attention to the specific forms through which desire is expressed and suppressed, policymakers and educators can better understand how cultural norms

translate into harmful practices. Literary study, in this register, becomes a modest form of social intervention. It cultivates empathy, sharpens diagnostic categories for injustice, and suggests practical areas like psychiatric reform, reproductive rights education, and free-expression protections. Scholars should continue to read widely and comparatively, taking seriously the political valence of quiet intimacies and the ways literature stages possibilities for freedom.

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