

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

RECLAIMING NEW SPACES OF IDENTITY : A STUDY INTO THE SUFFOCATED PSYCHE IN ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S *LIHAAF*

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ABSTRACT



Stories regarding homosexuality are generally hidden, untold and uncountable. Usually the attitude of people towards the LGBTI people is hardly good. Novels and short stories featuring homosexual themes do not find expression in public at large. Usually such themes face charges of obscenity and are controversial. In literature, many writers have written works which were longed banned and underwent censorship. Some of these works include EM Foster's *Maurice* (1971), Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002), Dr.R Raja Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2003) etc. Ismat Chughtai's short story 'Lihaaf' became disputable as soon as it was published due to its homosexual theme. Although the same sex relationship does not feature explicitly in the story yet the sexual implication of the relationship between the protagonist of the story Begam Jaan and her domestic help Rabbu can be seen. The conflicts of mind and the disturbed married life of Begam Jaan can be seen in the initial paragraphs of the story until Begam Jaan finds her love in a lesbian relationship with Rabbu. In this paper, I will analyse the 'newly found' lesbian identity of the Begum Jan –the protagonist of the story 'Lihaaf'.

Keywords : Homosexuality, Queer Studies, marriage, lesbian identity.

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INTRODUCTION

"I read through the summons but could barely make sense of it. My story Lihaaf had been accused of obscenity."

Ismat Chughtai's short story *Lihaaf* was published in 1942 in an Urdu Journal *Adab-i-Latif* for which she was summoned by Lahore High Court in 1944. Its title 'Lihaaf' is used as a metaphor to hide the homosexuality between Begam Jaan and Rabbu. The symbol of quilt is used throughout the story to express Begam Jaan's frustration in her married life with her husband and her consequent yearning for love and belongingness in homosexual love with Rabbu. Though, nowhere in the story Chughtai has called their love as homosexual. Though the eyes of

a young girl, Chughtai narrates the story and scenes of quilt. It is through the watchful eye of the girl that the series of events of the story are narrated. The story carries sexual overtones and in the closed walls of the room, Begam Jaan's sexual liberation is sought. In fact the character of Begam Jaan the plight of a contemporary woman who is caught between her roles as a wife and her individuality. However she is bold enough to follow what she desires. The story becomes important because it deals both with the married life and complex emotional life of Begam Jaan.

The story opens up with the girl describing her experience on seeing the quilt. She finds nothing romantic about it as though she realises that it is not

the love that matures in the quilt but maybe the lust and physical gratification that grooms in it. Through the small girl the reader gets to know that Begam Jaan is married to Nawab Sahib who is very well off.

The first impressions of homosexuality are seen here when the narrator describes Nawab Sahib's strange hobby of having interest in young and fair boys. It is also told to the reader that Begam Jaan was deposited in the house with other possessions. She is treated like an object in a house. The Manusmriti and Qoran have explained the role of a woman which is that they have to live in the "confines of the household". The problem of identity lies here as Begam Jaan struggles between her independent personal identity and her identity as a wife. Her quest for self and her probe into the female psyche are some of the problems she is dealing with in her life. In Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*(1980), the female protagonist also suffers from the problems of her married life. In this novel the protagonist, Sarutai puts herself as an autonomous individual, who does not care what the society thinks and she frees herself from her own fears as well. In *Lihaaf* too, Begam Jaan tries to win love of her husband by doing black magic and reading talisman and scriptures all night but she fails every time in her attempt to do so. She tries reading romantic novels too to relieve her troubled mind but nothing comforts her. She later on quenches herself when she starts loving Rabbu. Her situation can be best understood through the concept of displacement in Freudian Psychology. Displacement according to Sigmund Freud is an unconscious defense mechanism where the mind transfers emotions, wishes, thoughts for a new aim to stop the anxiety as the original wishes are dangerous or unacceptable. Begam Jaan now finds love in Rabbu.

Begam Jaan makes use of her sexuality for getting empowered. She finds her love reciprocated. The 'Quilt' becomes the site for her empowerment and also as a site of concealment of her sexual desires.

She fulfils her wishes by channelising her sexual energy in the new homosexual relationship with Rabbu.

The domestic world of Begam Jaan is similar to Urdu *rekhti* poetry of the nineteenth century. Urdu poetry was gendered genre. If the speaker's voice in the poem was masculine, the poetry was called as *Rekhta* and if the speaker's voice was feminine, then the poetry was *Rekhti*. *Rekhti* challenged the dominant *Rekhta* and the male voice, patriarchal beliefs in *Rekhta*. Also, it was the language of the womenfolk, free from male dominance. *Chaptnama* was a subgenre of *Rekhti* which consisted of long poems dealing with lesbian love. These poems subverted the traditional metaphysical love which depicted the longings of a sincere lover and instead showed sexual appetite for love in women-women relationships. In the similar vein, Chughtai's *Lihaaf* too describes the love consummation of Begam Jaan with Rabbu towards the end of the story: "In the dark Begum Jaan's quilt was once again swaying like an elephant. "Allah! Ah!..." I moaned in a feeble voice. The elephant inside the quilt heaved up and then sat down. I was mute. The elephant started to sway again". The story ends with the girl saying, "Good God" and returning to her bed beneath the quilt. 'Lihaaf' became a landmark work with uniqueness in its theme and sensual display of minutes from everyday life.

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