

Women and Sexual Spaces in Ismat Chughtai's Lihaaf

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Abstract

The birth of the Urdu short story can be traced back to the influence of Western Literature, it gave a platform to many writers to explore variety of themes. Domestic problems, sociological issues, individual and community problems were taken up in this relatively newer genre of writing in Urdu literature. Out of many short story writers, prominent names are of Ismat Chughtai, Saadat Hassan Manto, and Krishan Chand. They were pioneers of the modern Urdu short story. The paper aims to study one of these pioneer writers, Ismat Chughtai, relatively a controversial writer for taking up themes considered taboo in the Muslim community. She explored variety of themes ranging from psychological aspects of female sexuality to the societal oppression faced by women under patriarchy. This paper would focus on her most popular and controversial short story, 'Lihaaf' or 'The Quilt'. The main focus would be on two issues, Firstly, homosexuality and the importance of female sexuality. Secondly the traumatic experience of sexual abuse faced by a young child who is the narrator of the story. Ismat Chughtai daringly discussed this theme, to highlight the oppression faced by women and how important it is for them to claim their sexuality as much as it is for the men of the society.

KEYWORDS: Female sexuality, homosexuality, queer theory, child sexual abuse

“ I asked my husband,

Am I hetero

Am I lesbian

Or am I just plain frigid?”

Kamala Das (4,5)

Ismat Chughtai, the first Indian woman Urdu writer vividly depicts the situation of women in India and throws light on the issues considered inappropriate in Indian society. Through her characters Chughtai highlights the silent sufferings of women, which had not found place on the literary scene until then. Her controversial style of writing left an indelible mark on the minds of the readers. Though much before she started writing, women writers were making efforts to educate and reform the masses. Yet these women writers made efforts within specific limits and consciously remained within the marked boundaries, but Ismat Chughtai clearly broke the glass ceiling and dared to dive into the unexplored zones. In spite of being a Muslim woman writer she delved into the themes considered immoral and taboo to be discussed by a woman in public.

Ismat Chughtai was born into an orthodox Muslim family, one of the many siblings she expressed her personal experiences in her works. She writes “In my stories I’ve put down everything with objectivity. Now, if some people find them obscene let them go to hell. I believe that experiences can never be obscene if they are based on authentic realities of life.”(Quoted in Gul Chand, 3) Since childhood she was a rebel, always wanting to be like her brothers. She resisted her marriage to her cousin, and fought for education which was meant only for the boys of the family. As a young girl these experiences of oppression and inequality were deeply etched and remained with her and later got reflected in her works. She gave a plethora of works to the literary world, she wrote *Fasadi*, *Bachpan*, *Dheet*, *Gainda*, *Lihaf* to name a few and made a name for herself in Urdu Literature. She was a member of the Urdu Progressive Writers movement, her works not only portrays her characters realistically but also dwells into their psychic zones to reflect their state of minds. Her works deal with all the feminist issues but focuses on female sexuality, and its neglected attitude in patriarchal oppression. She brings to forefront the double standards practiced by the patriarchy in our society. Chughtai treats owning of the female body as an important part which is not given much importance and are considered taboo in the Muslim society. She makes an earnest attempt to bring out these issues to reform the society and to believe it to be essentially important for the woman to realize her bodily desires and accept it as natural. But the patriarchal oppression forces women to ignore their bodies and live a caged life. She wants to release the imprisoned bodies of women towards satiating their bodily needs. Her most controversial story, ‘*Lihaaf*’ (The Quilt) was met with anger and hate by the Muslim community. Its publication in 1942 shocked the entire community, and left them wondering how could a decent Muslim woman write such obscene and vulgar story. The story depicted female sexuality in a never seen before manner. Rather than being apologetic, she fought a law case for it and had the ban removed by winning the case in Lahore High Court. It is now considered to be one of her pioneer works.

This paper would focus on the patriarchal oppression faced by women, and how they would come out of it and own themselves rather being treated like an object by their male partners. The paper would also highlight the trauma faced by both the protagonist and the narrator, as a result of experiences of their past years. The sexual abuse faced by the child, who is also the narrator is an important issue that would be discussed in the paper, apart from discussing homosexuality and its status in our society. ‘*Lihaaf*’ is a story originally written in Urdu and later translated by M Asaduddin. It is a story that directly attacked the oppressive structures of our society, and gave the freedom to express sexuality in public. The narrator of the story is an unnamed girl who recalls her childhood memory. The narrator was unlike her sisters, always fighting with her brothers and getting in trouble. Once her mother had to visit Agra and on her way she leaves her with Begum Jan. Begum Jan was the narrator’s mother’s adopted sister, married to a Nawab much older than her. Nawab was a chaste man because he had never visited prostitutes ever in his life, and he was known for this virtue. Begum Jan’s father marries her with the rich Nawab because of his qualities and finances. But Begum Jan gets no love and affection from her husband, who is more interested in young boys. Nawab disguises his love for young boys under the pretense of educating them, and keeps himself busy with the school he has opened for them. He ignored Begum Jan in spite of her making all the efforts to impress him. She yearned for his attention, she tried all the remedies and everything within her reach but to no avail. The desires of a married girl never got fulfilled. She started staying lonely, the glow vanished from her face until Rabbu her masseuse saved her

with her oil massages. Begum started to live again in the company of Rabbu. Rabbu filled the vacuum in Begum's life. She became a companion of day and night for Begum. She was fulfilling everything Begum had desired for after marriage. The little girl(the narrator) found it uncomfortable to see Rabbu always massaging oil on Begum Jan, all the other maids too detested their relationship. The girl's bed was put next to Begum's bed in her room, at night she saw the Begum's quilt move vigorously and quite to her amazement she could not understand it. Obviously there were sexual implications but the child's mind could not decipher. After few days when Rabbu goes to meet her son, the Begum goes restless and becomes the same as she was before Rabbu had entered her life. Her restlessness kept growing, she then calls the little girl to rub her back. The little girl replaces Rabbu in her absence. The girl felt awkward and uncomfortable with Begum's touch. It was traumatizing for her, when Rabbu returned the girl distanced herself from Begum Jan and preferred the company of the maids. She was waiting to go back home, that night again the Begum's quilt made noises and movements, it scared the girl. She probably saw something a child of that age should not have seen. The narrator narrates her childhood memory, thus that being the reason no obscene language has been used and no where any direct implication of homosexual relationship is clearly depicted. This story brought lots of controversies for Chughtai, she discussed the theme of female sexuality that was forbidden and considered taboo. The story depicted orthodox feminine qualities of remaining silent and being obedient wives but at the same time taking charge of their actions and practicing their sexuality. It was a sensitive theme dealt with utmost spontaneity, clarity and subtlety. Therefore the story is told from a child's perspective, to forbid any vulgarity. But the readers do understand what the movements inside the quilt stand for, thus the readers are the interpreter of the true meaning of the story.

Sexuality is a sensitive issue to be taken up publicly in an orthodox society, and Chughtai through her 'Lihaaf' did exactly that, she spoke about the issues that were hushed and ignored. Sexuality is assumed to be a social construct and "female sexuality has been marginalized as insignificant, mysterious or monstrous..."(Nayar 2010,103) It is believed and assumed that everybody is a born heterosexual and anything that falls under its norms is termed as 'heteronormativity'(Nayar 2008, 158) and whereas any diversions from these fixed norms are unacceptable in the society. It is argued, "homosexuality has always been relegated to the margins using religious, medical, psychological, and legal methods."(Nayar 2008, 158) The Queer Theory on the other hand includes other sexual preferences- Gay, lesbian etc and study them in detail. It aims to look at representations of others of heterosexuality i.e lesbians and gays. Queer Theory studies "the link between sexuality-based oppression and other discriminatory forms such as patriarchy and racism"(Nayar 2010,184)

"Queering is the process of reversing heterosexuality-as-norm"(Nayar 2010, 185) It is indeed the assumed positioning of men-women relationship Chughtai breaks away from, she clearly wants to depict the marginalized man-man and woman-woman relationship. Women desire a reciprocated relationship through their lives, and value connectedness. According to Nancy Chodorow the first primary relationship of a woman is with her mother, "providing early socialization toward homosociality and creating the potential for fusion in relationships with other women."(Baber and Allen 24). There is a valid potential for the existence of relationships other than heterosexual because women do build their connectedness and confide their emotions with other women, making it even easier to start a sexual relationship on that basis. The basis of Rabbu and Begum's relationship is quiet similar. Ignored by Nawab, and

no one to treat her like a human, it leads to perversion. She finds and creates a connection with Rabbu, also breaking away with class structures of the society . Begum Jan is emotionally shattered and Rabbu is dependent on her for her finances, this highlights another reason of their relation, it is based on need of each other. Relationship is built on emotional requirement of the oppressed woman, she finds compassion and solace in Rabbu's company which was not provided by the Nawab. Nawab had never treated her as a wife,"he tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her. " (Chughtai 36) She lived her life in anguish, loneliness and as a prisoner as Nawab did not allow her to go out of the house. It is then she builds her life with Rabbu in private. She starts a life behind the veil, where she controls things. The private zone is her sexualized space and her public image meets the standards set by patriarchy. The society sidelines these existing patterns of relationships, and to reform the society Chughtai writes Lihaaf . "Homosexuality belongs to the main categories of sexual orientation where it is considered as the continuum of heterosexuality. It defines sexuality as a whole as in case of bisexuality and heterosexuality. Society gives several kinds of responses by accepting it or repressing it through law enforcements and even prescribing death penalty"(Debnath 4,5)

It is believed in India that homosexuality is a medical problem that can be cured. It is non-acceptable to accept anything that exists outside heterosexuality. The issue that this paper highlights is the situation of homosexuals in our country, and also because of the societal pressures, many lives involved get ruined. The similar case is presented in 'Lihaaf'. The Nawab is rich, virtuous and has good repute just because he has never been found with a prostitute. The parameters of deciding his chasteness are hollow,"no one had ever seen a nautch girl or prostitute in his house"(Chughtai 36) because the society assumes everyone is born to be a heterosexual, they fail to notice his unusual activities. Thus it has become a hetero-norm, and diversion from this norm is a medical condition or a curse that needs attention to be cured. The society never understood Nawab's sexuality, because of the embarrassment associated with it he was ashamed to accept it publicly. Thus to please the community, and maintain his repute, he marries Begum Jan. There are two sides of the story here, Begum Jan's father fails to look for his homosexual signs and misunderstands his distance from prostitutes as a sign of good and clean character and marries of his daughter to him. On the other hand, because there is non- acceptability of Nawab's sexual preferences, he is forced to marry a girl to remain the man he is in the eyes of the society. The reasons of their marriage are totally different, but the question that Chughtai wants the readers to think on is, did Nawab think of Begum Jan's sexuality? That is the sexual victimization and patriarchal oppression presented by her. Men fail to acknowledge female pleasure and fulfillment as a basic bodily need, thus it forces women to indulge in a " transgressive relationship with another woman"(Khanna 52)

The patriarchy fails to consider female sexuality as important to females, rather they treat them as objects without any feelings and desires. Ismat Chughtai fights back the treatment of women as objects by making them choose their paths of desire, fulfillment and happiness. Adrienne Rich feels "Women who treat each other as life-partners, co-workers, lovers and passionate comrades are suspect because lesbian existence has the potential to liberate women from male control"(mentioned in Baber and Allen 44) And precisely in the same manner, she lets Begum Jan take her sexuality in her hands. She liberates the sexuality controlled by Nawab and hands it over to Begum Jan. She was a heterosexual, married to a man believed to be virtuous,

she tries to get Nawab's attentions she tries all remedies but nothing works. Chughtai writes, "One cannot draw blood from a stone. The Nawab didn't budge an inch." (Lihaf 36,37) Nawab never felt attracted to her, but remained busy with slim slender waisted boys. Heartbroken and in pain Begum feels oppressed. Women married to gay men become invisible wives of the society, they do not speak up to preserve the hollow marriage" preserving the continuity of the marriage was more important to them than their husband's extramarital behavior." (Baber and Allen 51) Because of the social stigma attached with homosexuality, men who are gay do not reveal their sexual preferences before marriage to their wives, and wives continue to live with them because of the shame associated with it. Begum Jan is in the similar condition, she had everything except anyone to understand her situation. She is a victim of sexual exploitation. Rabbu, her servant rescues her from this exploitation and helps her understand her own sexuality. Thus, it would not be false to state that Begum gets oppressed for being married to a homosexual and then her sexuality oppresses her. Rabbu kindles the love for the same sex in Begum's body. Under bodily oppression and needs Begum turns into homosexuality. She uses her sexuality as a tool of empowerment. While following the codes of patriarchy she is being a good wife in public space but under the quilt, in her sexualized space she owns her body and desires. Thus, quilt symbolizes Begum's personal space, where she empowers herself and finds pleasures from her body. Through Begum Jan's character, Chughtai sketches a portrait of a new empowered woman," who stands in revolt against the heteronormative structure of relationships" (Khanna 52)

Thus it is true to say, homosexuals are born the way they are like the Nawab, and people also make choices to be homosexual to fulfill their needs." Sexuality, strangely, has been seen as a category that exists only in the form of the man-woman relationship." (Nayar 2010,185) Fiction writers have always focused on man-woman relationship in their texts, Chughtai breaks this norm and deals with the issue of same sex relationship, which is indeed a reality in the society, but believed to be non-existing. "by sexualizing the zenana she poses a strong challenge to the orthodox supporters of patriarchal values who suppress women's sexuality and its free expression" (khanna, 50) The marginalization of homosexual relations even in literature reflects its status all over the world. 'heterosexuality was the norm and homosexuality was the deviation/perversion that deserved medical and imprisonment.'" (Nayar 2010,185)

On the other hand, another issue that needs attention is the child sexual abuse faced by the narrator in her childhood at Begum's home. Begum sexually abuses the child, who does not understand why the quilt under which Begum slept moved vigorously making shadows like elephants on the wall. Her innocence is crushed by the events occurring in front of her eyes. She detests the sight of Rabbu touching Begum all the time, she is traumatized when in Rabbu's absence Begum loses control over her sexuality and uses little child's body for her perverted desires to be satiated. Her sexual desires go beyond control and she forgets whom she uses to satisfy her. It is important to focus on the sexual abuse the narrator faced as a minor. The issue that needs focus is how Begum Jan herself a victim, victimizes a girl child. Was it necessary to victimize another being and that too a child who does not understand sexuality.

Child sexual abuse is participation of a child in sexual activities when they are bribed with gifts or forced to take part without understanding the implications of the actions.

They might not be comfortable, and are afraid to speak up. The abuse can include physical contact and touch and can be non contactual as well. Begum Jan indulges in child abuse through physical contact by promising new gifts and toys, she asks the narrator, “What do you want? A doll that sleeps or wakes up as you want?” (Chughtai 39) and further inciting the child, “you need some more frocks...” (Chughtai 39) The innocent child fails to understand the hidden motives, she was winning her confidence. The child is unable to understand the implications but surely feels uncomfortable performing the actions asked by Begum Jan. The trauma the child faced is evident by the way she recalls this dark memory, when Begum started counting her ribs, narrator recalls, “I felt very uncomfortable” (Chughtai 39) she further adds, “I wanted to run away, but she held me tightly” (Chughtai 39). The trauma was so bad that whenever she recalls Begum’s face she feels jittery and scared. Begum Jan made her little body a space of sexual victimization,” she was pressing me as though I were a clay doll” (Chughtai 39) It is only after Rabbu returns the narrator feels relieved, and again at night the shadows of the elephant moving under the quilt started, “I tried to lie down still but the quilt began to assume such grotesque shapes that I was thoroughly shaken” (Chughtai 40) It is important to understand that at the promise of new dresses, and toys Begum violates the personal boundary and indulged in child abuse. The hardship faced by the narrator to tell or not to her mother lead to self doubt as Begum Jan was a trusted individual who loved her and no one would believe her story, “what could I have said to anyone? That I was afraid of Begum Jan? Begum Jan, who loved me so dearly?” (Chughtai 40) ,to her “she was more terrifying than all the loafers of the world” (Chughtai 40) The power patriarchy practices over women, Begum Jan practices on the child, she misuses the power and control she has over the child. Not only Begum, but also Nawab indulges into child sexual abuse, though not mentioned clearly in the story, but his dealing with young boys counts to the same. Rabbu’s son too had stayed with Nawab sahib who gifted him new clothes and other things, “but he ran away for no good reason and never came back, even to see Rabbu...” (Chughtai 38) This is another evidence of homosexuals abusing children by bribing them with gifts and money. Towards the end when the quilt is taking shapes again it rises over a foot, and the narrator is shocked to witness which she never wants to recall. She is terrified by the sight, “Good God! I gasped and plunged into my bed”. The trauma is so much that the narrator while narrating her childhood memory writes, “quilt is etched in my memory like the scar left by a blacksmith’s brand” (Chughtai 36) This incident did leave an indelible mark on the psychology of the child, she treats this memory as a scar on her mind. It must have changed her perspective to sexuality as a young girl and carries it even after growing up and understanding what had happened that night under the quilt between Begum and Rabbu.

Thus, Lihaaf not only talks about forbidden topics it also gives women the courage to empower themselves through the use of their body. The women behind the veil use their own strategies to break down the patriarchal values, and enter into transgressive relationships with same sex.

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