

# The Creative Launcher

Journal URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com/index.php/tcl>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Issue: Vol. 8 & Issue 5, (October, 2023)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on: 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2023

Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access: Yes

Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.53032/issn.2455-6580>

©The Creative Launcher (2023). This Open Access article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>, which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

For citation use the DOI. Please contact editor on: [thecreativelauncher@gmail.com](mailto:thecreativelauncher@gmail.com)

Licensing:  <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



**Article History:** Abstract Received on: 24<sup>th</sup> September 2023 | Full Article Received on: 26<sup>th</sup> September 2023 | Revision received on: 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023 | Plagiarism Checked on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2023 | Peer Review Completed on: 19<sup>th</sup> October 2023 | Article Accepted on: 20<sup>th</sup> October 2023 | First Published on: 31<sup>st</sup> October 2023

Research Article



## Rethinking Sexuality: A Reading of Ismat Chughtai's “Lihaaf”

**Sumita Kumari**

PhD Scholar,


Department of English,

School of Languages,

Central University of Himachal Pradesh,

Dharamshala, H.P., India

Email: [sumitakumari1314@gmail.com](mailto:sumitakumari1314@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9343-3760>

 <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2023.8.5.16>

Pages: 168-175

### Abstract

This research paper seeks to reinterpret sexuality keeping in mind its fictional depiction in Ismat Chughtai's phenomenal story “Lihaaf.” An attempt will be made to challenge “heterosexual normativity” à la Monique Wittig and Judith Butler to eventually clear space for alternate sexual modes of life namely homosexual and lesbian. Chughtai's courage to deal with taboo subjects such as homosexuality and lesbianism at one level offended the conservative society, and at another voiced the actual prevalence of sexual practices that are still denounced

and undermined. Several other issues about Butler's and Wittig's theorization will be examined through rigorous textual analysis of this story which is narrated from the perspective of a teenage girl who can be considered a symbol of the homophobic social and cultural milieu. The story brings to light the subject of female sexuality and the presence of repressed sexual desires of females in a heteronormative marriage which paves the way to homosexuality and breaks the patriarchal barriers of a claustrophobic society. Through the characters of Nawab Saheb and Begum Jaan, Chughtai foregrounds "the distinction between the "naturally given, normative 'self' of heterosexuality and the rejected 'other' of homosexuality" as well as dismantles the conventional notion of marriage.

**Keywords:** Sexuality, Lihaaf, Queer, Intersectionality, Gender dynamics, Social norms, Identity, Culture, Gender humanities

## Introduction

While defining the complex notion of sexuality J. Weekes aptly notes:

. . . [A]n assumption . . . [about] sexuality [that it] is the most spontaneously natural thing about us. It is the basis of our most passionate feelings and commitments. Through it, we experience ourselves as real people; it gives us our identities, our sense of self, as men and women, as heterosexual and homosexual, 'normal' or 'abnormal', 'natural' or 'unnatural.' Sex has become, as the French philosopher Michel Foucault famously put it, 'the truth of our being.' (Qtd. in "Sexuality" 85-86)

Being a prominent Indian Urdu language writer Ismat Chughtai (August 1915 - October 1991) has written much significantly about female sexuality and their struggle to acquire identity in an unequal society. She has been associated with the Progressive Writers' Association literary movement and has also been the recipient of the 1976 Padma Shri award. She has attained the title "Rebellion", for her writing audacity. Being a woman became a hurdle in her writing career as her family didn't show any interest and disfavoured her idea of expressing feminism. Even though she has encountered a lot of criticism from her parents, relatives, and society but she never stopped herself from writing. Tahira Naqvi pays tribute to her while mentioning her as, "the great dame of Urdu fiction" that "[s]he was a writer (and a good one at that) when women were discouraged from involving themselves in intellectual pursuits; she developed the markings of a feminist in the early forties when the concept of feminism was in its nascent stage, even in the West; she spoke her mind unreservedly; she was afraid of no one, nothing; she was a rebel" (37). Her first published work was a drama entitled *Fasadi (The Troublemaker)* for the Urdu magazine *Saqi* in 1939. Her first novella *Ziddi* was

published in 1941 and was later translated into English as *Wild at Heart*. She strongly affirms through her works that the issues of women's identity are not evenly and fairly considered and thought over. In a 1972 interview with Mahfil, Chughtai comments on the nature of her writing:

When I started writing, there was a trend— writing romantic things or writing like a Progressive. When I started to write, people were very shocked because I wrote very frankly. ... I didn't write what you'd call "literarily." I wrote and do write as I speak, in a very simple language, not the literary language." . . . It was not my language that gained notice. It was the way I wrote that did, the frankness I wrote with. (169)

"Lihaaf" ("The Quilt") is a 1941 Urdu short story, with its publication in the Urdu Literary journal *Adab-i-Latif*, a Lahore-based literary journal, her name came into the limelight with so-called obscenity. Chughtai here seems to stand up for "a sexless society" (Norton 1825) an idea which has been put forward by Monique Wittig posits in her essay titled "One is Not Born A Woman", where she claims that ". . . sexuality is not for women an individual and subjective expression, but a social institution of violence" (Norton 1829). It led to much controversy, and Chughtai had to defend herself in the Lahore Court against obscenity allegations. She was asked to apologize but she did not and also won the case. But this didn't affect her a bit. On the contrary, she was inspired to write more works. Her quasi-autobiographical novel *Terhi Lakeer (The Crooked Line)* was released in 1943 and was translated into English by Tahira Naqvi, who compared her literary style to that of French writer and intellectual Simone de Beauvoir.

Here in this story, Chughtai becomes the voice of belligerent women. This story unveils the most questioned subject of female sexuality and the presence of repressed sexual impulses of females in a heteronormative marriage which paves the way to homosexuality and breaks the patriarchal barriers of a claustrophobic society. The story is a terrifying memory of an unnamed precocious girl that happened during her childhood. She represents the mindset entrapped between what is right and what is wrong amid the changing thinking rationales. The echo of that event pops up whenever she takes the quilt to cover herself in the winter. When the other girls are engrossed in the effeminate games, the narrator is engaged in fighting with the opposite sex that is with her brothers and her brothers' friends. It is this disputatious behaviour of the narrator that induces her mother to leave her with her 'adopted sister' Begum Jaan for the time when she would be away on a visit to Agra. In Begum Jaan's household, there is not a single child whom the narrator can buck her confrontational penchant up, so her being sent off to Begum Jaan's house seems like a "severe punishment" (36). It is this Begum Jaan: whose quilt is etched in the narrator's memory like the scar, the beautiful wife of Nawab Saheb

who although she has all the possessions of privileged circumstances, flattering or so-called complaisant relatives, and several servants, is deprived of the sexual and emotional attention of her husband. Being newlywed, she yearns for her sexual desires and aspirations to be gratified by her husband and tries various ways to get his attention but “[t]he Nawab did not budge an inch” (37) as he is more interested in “young, fair, and slender-waisted boys” (36) which echoes the contradistinction between one “naturally female” and the other “naturally male”, as well as the conventionally assigned ‘self’ of heterosexuality and the disapproved ‘other’ of homosexuality” (Judith Butler 2373). Even though Nawab Saheb has been well aware of his sexuality but still chooses to marry Begum Jaan, and projects himself as an ideal husband but forgets his wife completely. Begum’s tension and desperation are portrayed when “he tucked her away in the house with his other possessions. . . and . . . [t]he frail, beautiful Begum wasted away in anguished loneliness” (36). It depicts that they married for the sake of society as there is no emotional, psychological, or physical contentment and compatibility in their conjugal relationship. Chughtai here seems to dismantle the notion of marriage that society holds that it is the only culmination of a woman’s life through the character of Begum Jaan as well as of a man’s life through the character of Nawab Saheb in the story. Begum Jaan’s husband and relatives depict the patriarchal mindset and an attitude of misogyny. The relatives are shown to pay little heed to Begum Jaan on the contrary make her “blood boil” (36). It also seems that while the husband is never questioned, Begum Jaan is answerable to society which aptly justifies the claims made by Beauvoir where she defines marriage as “. . . the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (“The Married Woman” 445). For the woman, “. . . marriage is her only means of support and the sole justification of her existence. . . (446) “. . . for girls marriage is the only means of integration to the community, and if they remain unwanted, they are, socially viewed, so much wastage” (447).

Begum Jaan is cornered within her house, where she is ignored because of the prohibition, created by the convention of purdah, against women’s free movement in the public sphere and she feels “like throwing all her clothes into the oven” (37). In her seminal work *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir traces the history of the role of women in society by explaining how the concept of the woman has evolved and how they are forced to be passive and regarded as inferior to men. She claims that the biological factors are not the reasons to justify the subjugation of females to males as gender dichotomy is a social construct. She says that a woman is the one who is just born normal as a human being with respective biological sex but it is the society that shapes her gender identity. They are shaped in a particular way that they are made to consciously accept to live within such parameters and to follow the criteria that describe and identify them. She aptly says that “She is defined and differentiated with

reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other” (“Introduction” 16). Out here, Chughtai problematizes the gender issues and further unravels the hypocritical and unjust society where women are not supposed to resist such a system and speak up for themselves.

At this point in the story, Chughtai undermines the patriarchal ethos that Begum has to adhere to by recognizing her sexuality and sexual desires and she searches for alternatives. She here seems to posit the insights of Adrienne Rich that “compulsory heterosexuality” (1515) is responsible for the subjugation of a woman and the superiority of a man owing to the constructed norms and ideologies. Rabbu, another repressed female identity, a masseuse, comes as alleviation for Begum Jaan’s rescue from sheer loneliness and solitary life. Rabbu has a specific oil rubbing therapy that invigorates the succumbing Begum Jaan. Massage becomes the utmost necessity of her life to overcome the emotional void imposed upon her by her husband as well and it also shows an act of resistance to the conventional norms of society. Rabbu here seems to help her re-identify her sexual identity. Massage here connotes the sexual bonding between the two. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir, “Homosexuality can be for woman a mode of flight from her situation or a way of accepting it” (426). Neither society nor the talismans, amulets, or black magic could help her gain emotional fulfillment in life. Another theorist Judith Butler challenges the patriarchal structure in which women are confined within a particular margin based on their sexuality and she subverts the identity by using “resignification” (2373) in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, and maintains that the destabilization of naturalized identities can be possible. She argues that “Identity is not something planted in us to be discovered, but something that is performatively produced by acts that “effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (2375). Begum Jaan’s demeanour to transgress the limits to reassert her sexual orientation disrupts the other identity imposed upon her by the patriarchal set-up, which is also consolidated with society and culture that acknowledges her as self-effacing, frail, and unassertive. She accepts homosexuality as a weapon to acquire her recognition and independent identity as well as to subvert patriarchal practice.

The same-sex relationship is depicted here by the memory of a narrator who is made to sleep in another bed adjacent to Begum’s. The women’s bodies are objectified for the female gaze rather than the male gaze hints at resistance on the part of women in the story. At midnight she feels that Begum Jaan’s quilt shakes vigorously as though an elephant is struggling inside, “the upshot of the tiff” (38) between Begum and Rabbu, Rabbu cries, and “the slurping sound of a cat licking a plate” (38); all these happenings make her scared at night, she surmises

that there might be a thief but on hearing Rabbu's voice tyrannically telling her to go to sleep she ducks into her quilt and in the morning Begum's quilt looks perfectly calm and innocent. At another point, the narrator recollects how "[s]ometimes [Begum's] face seemed to change shape under my gaze and looked as though it were the face of a young boy..." (37) which hints at the homosexual desires of Begum Jaan who has been reduced to an unwanted commodity through the institution of marriage. Being constantly abandoned by her husband she refuses to be oppressed and subdued anymore and occupies herself mentally, subjectively, psychologically as well as physically and objectively with Rabbu: ". . . she started living and lived her life to the full. Soon her thin body began to fill out. Her cheeks began to glow and she blossomed in beauty" (37).

The most traumatized experience and an act of powerful resistance by the narrator take place at the time when Rabbu is on a way to meet her son who has performed the Nawab Saheb's service for some time and got many gifts from him but then no one seems to know why he fled and never turned up at the house to see his mother and on the other hand Begum Jaan becomes queasy and her whole body has a pain of itching which indicates the sexual need of her but the narrator is not aware of it. She offers her helping hand to her by rubbing her back. But Begum gives the narrator a tight hug and makes an effort to satiate herself even when she tries disconsolately to get free from her clutches. The narrator says that "Begum Jaan's deep-set eyes [were] focused on me and I felt like crying. She was pressing me as though I were a clay doll..." (39). Now the feelings of admiration for Begum Jaan have been converted into disgust and fear for the narrator. That night Rabbu returns and sits massaging Begum's body but the narrator is afraid of entering her room and becomes stubborn about being sent home, despite Begum's pampering, "I want to go home" (40) was my suggestion to all her questions, at this Rabbu says, "raw mangoes are sour to taste, Begum Jaan" (40), which depicts her homosexual tendency as a butch. The "lesbian continuum" (1515) continues between Rabbu and Begum, which has been emphasized by Adrienne Rich as a tool to destabilize heterosexual norms and institutions that are antagonistic to women. But that night narrator decides to decipher the conundrum of the grotesque shapes that the quilt takes. She fosters her courage to move up from her bed and turn on the light. As soon as the light falls on the quilt, "[t]he elephant somersaulted inside the quilt which deflated immediately" (40). But while doing so, a corner of the quilt is lifted by a foot revealing that she sees something which she should not have seen, as she remarks at the end, "Good God! I gasped and plunged into my bed" (40). Through "the culturally constructed body" (Butler 2378) of Begum Jaan, the hypocritical attitude of the society having huge disparity between the sexes, has been highlighted here. The quilt represents the desire of a woman for a woman or simply female homosexuality. Chughtai

has used the image of an elephant to depict confusion in the mind of the young narrator. Besides it is also a symbolic representation of the dubiety and hesitation of the people at that time concerning queerness. Through this story she shows resistance against the patriarchal attitude, critiquing the rigid societal norms, and constructed mindsets that are not ready for same-sex relationships. It reveals that women even being oppressed, still stand exuberant and try to emerge as something which can't be controlled and resist everything that suppresses their free will.

### **Conclusion**

The idea of gender is highly argued, and it has been stated as a purely social construct. The women's struggle for their space and identity is not something new or contemporary concept but it can be sensed ages back from the time when feminism was at its peak. Virginia Woolf in her essay, "A Room of One's Own" also emphasized the necessity of a woman having a personal space. In a liberal framework, the immaturity and hence ignorance of the girl due to her age can be mapped to that of society due to its time of thought evolution in the sense that the mindset of people in the society is not yet that old to accommodate same-sex relationships and to break the patriarchal bias and prejudice. The cultural norms influence and reinforce gender expectations and the intersectionality illuminates the complex interplay of factors like gender and class in shaping an individual's experiences and identity construction. Even though the structures of masculinity and femininity affect an individual's thought process but it is also hinted through this story that the stereotypical rigorous thinking will be dissipated over time.

### **Works Cited and Consulted**

- "Ismat Chughtai: A talk with one of Urdu's most outspoken woman writers." *Mahfi*, 1972, vol. 8, no. 2/3, pp. 169-188. [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/ourdu/ismat/txt\\_ismat\\_interview\\_mahfil1972.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/ourdu/ismat/txt_ismat_interview_mahfil1972.html).
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Viva Books, 2010.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. 1949. Trans. and ed. by H.M. Parshley. Vintage, 1997.
- Bilington, Rosamund, et. al. "Sexuality." *Exploring Self and Society*. Macmillan, 1998, 85-90.
- Butler, Judith. "From Gender Trouble." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. edited by Vincent B. Leitch, Norton & Co., 2001, pp. 2372-2388.

- Chughtai, Ismat. "Lihaaf [The Quilt]." 1941. Translated by M. Asaduddin, Edited by Kishwar, Madhu and Ruth Vanita, Manohar, 1996, pp. 36-40. <https://www.scribd.com/document/358427745/9-Short-Story-Lihaaf-The-Quilt-pdf#>
- Cuddon, J. A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Penguin, 1991.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. edited by Vincent B. Leitch, Norton & Co. 2001, pp. 1898-1910.
- Lodge, David, ed. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Longman, 1988.
- Naqvi, Tahira. "Ismat Chughtai: A Tribute." *Annual of Urdu Studies*, 1993, vol. 8, pp. 37-42. <https://minds.wisconsin.edu/handle/1793/11805>.
- Rich, Adrienne. "From Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. edited by Vincent B. Leitch, Norton & Co., 2001, pp. 1513-1534.
- Robbins, Ruth. *Literary Feminisms*. PALGRAVE, 2000.
- Wittig, Monique. "One Is Not Born a Woman." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. edited by Vincent B. Leitch, Norton & Co., 2001, pp. 1821-1829.