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Lifting the Veil: A Study of Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaf"

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Abstract

'Queer' is defined as anything which is against the 'normal', 'biological', 'God-given' or 'natural'. Queer theory is a field of study within gender and sexuality that challenges normative understandings of gender, sexuality, and identity. It emerged in the late 20th century and seeks to deconstruct traditional notions of binary gender and heterosexual norms, questioning societal assumptions about sexuality and identity. Queer theory broadens the scope of its analysis to include all types of behaviors that entail "queer" forms of sexuality because it is concerned

with all kinds of sexuality which are “queer” in this regard. It rejects the notion that one’s sexuality is a fundamentalist in nature, something defined by genetics or assessed by immutable moral and truth standards, in line with feminist theory and gay/lesbian studies. The most controversial & popular work of Ismat Chughtai, “Quilt,” or “Lihaf” was authored in 1941 and released by *Adab-e-Latif*, a literary magazine sometime later in 1942 voicing a woman’s sexual desires and setting an example of liberation of women from the shackles of the society which suppresses their need to be vocal about their sexual needs. The present research article aims at evaluating Ismat Chughtai’s short story, which delves deeply into a woman’s sexual needs and focuses on female sexuality. It also goes a long way towards examining a woman’s conscious decision to choose an alternative sexuality over her naturally heterosexual behavior.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Lesbian, Identity Crisis, Marriage, Feminism, Queer theory, Sexuality, Commodification of women

Society promptly establishes an alternative category, known as “deviant”, for everything that has been established and classified as “normal.” When someone commits something that their society considers abnormal, they may suffer from humiliation or guilt, loss of their loved ones as well as their self-worth. Queer theory is ultimately introduced by gay/lesbian studies, which, like feminist studies, seek to comprehend how these divisions between normal and deviant are created, how they function, and are enforced. In essence, queer theory is a product of gay and lesbian studies. According to the dictionary, the word “queer” primarily means “peculiar”, “odd” or “out of the ordinary.” Feminist criticism influences both the fields of gender studies and queer theory, which investigate sexuality, power, marginalised groups, and the image of the “woman as other” in literature and culture. The way in which sexual orientation and gender are discussed is the main issue in gender studies as well as queer theory. It emphasizes comprehending various sexual behaviors and desires, as well as how society and culture define them. Judith Butler, Michael Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Gayle Rubin are among the influential theorists in the development of queer theory. The term ‘queer theory’ was originally used by Italian feminist and cinema theorist Teresa de Lauretis in a 1990 book titled *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities* in support of a conference she arranged at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In queer theory, the term “queer” carries certain meanings, especially in relation to notions of homosexuality. In queer theory, the term “queer” carries certain meanings, especially in relation to notions of homosexuality. It originated from the relatively new field of gay/lesbian studies, which has only been around in any formalized form since the mid-1980s. Feminist studies and philosophy gave rise to gay/lesbian studies. It has only been since around 1991 that queer theory has been recognized as a distinct field of study. It’s about how understanding relationships between individuals of the same gender—including the potential for a sexual relationship—is essential to comprehending relations between the two sexes as stated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Ismat Chughtai is considered an emblem of women's empowerment, for creating a voice for the women who were till then unvoiced and unheard. Her works are taken as great examples for women liberation. The story "Lihaf" or "Quilt" is about something which still remains one of the most controversial issues in India. Ismat desired the horrifying truths about the society's hypocrisy to be made public. The controversial story portrays homosexuality in a Muslim household in the pre independent India. The contentious story depicts homosexuality within a Muslim family during India's pre-independence era. In order to preserve his social status, Nawab Sahib married Begum Jan and kept up a façade of deceit and hypocrisy to keep people from doubting his sexuality. In this case, the "quilt" may be seen as a veil that also looked into the hard reality of life for women like Begum Jan and functioned as an excellent way to realize dreams that had been repressed. Begum Jan was desperate for love, but Nawab Sahib would not give it to her. During the time Chughtai penned this tale, homosexuality was illegal.

Begum Jaan is defined by Chughtai as a stunning, youthful, and well-built lady. She used several methods to woo her husband, Nawab Sahab, in an attempt to satiate her sexual cravings, but nothing worked, and she was left feeling alone. Begum Jaan was forced to accept her destiny since she was unable to assert her legal rights as a wife in the feudal home. She was treated like a "commodity" in the house, had her emotions repressed, and was unable to leave once she married Nawab Sahab. Though she was a prisoner in the house, Chughtai says, "Relatives, however, would come for visits and stay on for months while she remained a prisoner in the house" (Chughtai 17). Begum Jaan's portrayal exposes the commodification of women as well as marriage's role as a deal in which the woman's body is used to propel her family's upward mobility from poverty. Begum is stuck in an unpleasant marriage that she can't escape.

Begum Jaan tries in vain to seduce him, but she quickly realizes that her vitality is ebbing. Then, her lack of sexual desire causes her to be dragged towards her assigned masseuse, Rabbu. Rabbu often gives Begum Jaan massages. She is by her side all the time and sleeps next to her. Begum Jaan has a persistent itch that no doctor has ever been able to relieve. The "itch," or the desire for sexual fulfilment, can only be satiated by Rabbu. Because Begum lacked children or any other means of escaping her terrible situation, she ended up developing a lesbian relationship with her house help Rabbu. The emotional relationship that exists between Rabbu and the Begum surpasses the boundaries of sexuality. Amiran, a teenage girl, is narrating all she observed when she visited Nawab Sahab's house. When Amiran's mother had to make the trip to Agra for work, she had opted to leave her daughter, Amiran, at Begum Jaan's residence for a few days due to her enraged attitude. She observes that Rabbu's help and companionship to the Begum made up for the Nawab's lack of tenderness and care. Chughtai depicted the psycho-pathetic plight of women who are victims of circumstance and patriarchal constructs with a deep understanding of their circumstances through the protagonists Begum Jaan & Rabbu. It's also important to focus on the words she uses in this story. "And her tiny, puffy hands moved dexterously over Begum Jaan's body – now at her waist, now at her thighs, and now dashing to her ankles" (Chughtai 19), Amiran describes what she witnessed Rabbu doing. Begum Jaan is a vehicle through which Ismat Chughtai exposes the ridiculousness of marriage,

but the narrative also shows how the women use the “quilt” to denote their authority and independence in their chambers and to prevent men from invading.

In the winter, the narrator notices that whenever she would wrap herself in a quilt, the shadows it creates on the wall seem to sway like an elephant. The situation is described by the narrator as being completely dark, and Begum Jaan’s quilt is shaking wildly, as if a huge elephant was fighting inside of it. And ever since, the narrator has been worried every night when the “elephant” appears. Begum Jaan is upset that Rabbu has left as she leaves the next day to meet her young son, who had lived with Nawabs before fleeing due to an unidentified incident. Begum Jaan was uneasy the entire day. Although every joint hurt, she was unable to tolerate being touched (Chughtai 22). The poor narrator, not knowing what lay ahead for her, offered to assist Begum Jaan in getting over her “itching” in an attempt to provide some assistance to her so-called “aunt.” Begum Jaan requested she should lie down next to her after luring her to bring her new dresses and a “babua.” Given the approval, Amiran started rubbing Begum’s back. “A little harder... open the straps” (Chughtai 19) Begum Jaan said. Amiran felt strange at this behavior but in that very moment Begum again said, “Here... a little below the shoulder... that’s right... Ah! what pleasure...” (Chughtai 19) and then she expressed her satisfaction between sensuous breaths. She tried to satisfy herself by Amiran but because she was not young and mature like Rabbu she just ran away.

The narrator claims that Begum Jaan became her personal sex savior, to the extent that “I wanted to run away but she held me tightly” (Chughtai 23). Amiran’s heart ached to see her Amma. She felt that this punishment was much worse than what she deserved because she had battled her brothers for years. After that, against her will, she was made to stay in a defenseless state and help Begum Jaan. “But Begum Jaan here was more terrifying than all the loafers of the world,” she says, expressing her anguish. (Chughtai, 25)

Begum Jaan had every facility which a person desires but she was unable to fulfil her sexual fantasy and sexual needs. She was a human being who needed love, care and support of her partner. Here, lesbianism is being chosen as a substitute for oppressive heterosexuality since, if Begum Jaan had been lucky enough to have her husband provide for her needs out of married life, she would not have found comfort in Rabbu, her maidservant, or even in the young Amiran.

The story also highlights Chughtai’s strong desire to maintain the mystery and refrain from taking away the symbolic quilt to show the audience, the women in order to honor the barrier that the “quilt” erects in order to enable the women who might employ it to “come to life” once more. She attempted to depict the “silent sexual acts” since the picture causes the young girl to recall a horrific experience. The narrator expresses what she witnessed: “The elephant inside the quilt heaved up and then sat down. I was mute. The elephant started to sway again. . . . The elephant started shaking once again, it seemed as though it was trying to squat. There was the sound of someone smacking her lips, as though savoring a tasty pickle” (Chughtai 26).

The pragmatist Chughtai chose to exclude details of the sex acts as an admission of how hard it would be for the narrator to articulate what she saw given her innocence. But it is abundantly clear from the little girl’s description of the events and the embellishments she

makes what was taking place inside the quilt. “Once again, the quilt started swinging. I tried to lie still, but the quilt began to assume such grotesque shapes that I was shaken. It seemed as though a large frog was inflating itself noisily and was about to leap on to me” (Chughtai 26). The story of the adventurous activity witnessed by Amiran came to an end when the little girl concluded it by saying that she would never with anyone for what she witnessed when the quilt was raised, not even if they offer her a lakh rupee. The probable cause of not telling anyone what she saw when the quilt was lifted was probably, she did not know much about lesbianism; the fact that she could not share was really what she did not know. When Chughtai was on trial for penning pornographic writings, it was also for practical reasons that the area beneath the quilt remained unnamed, “The scene is never opened completely in front of the readers. The reader is supposed to get the meaning from the described scene. He has to imagine and analyze the situation” (Kumar, 2012).

Since it is crucial for a writer like Chughtai to offer a viewpoint on these issues, one of her audacious attempts was to portray homosexuality and sexual orientation in the current story. Faiz Ahmed Faiz mentions the perspective of the critics of other group, “See, didn’t we say Progressivism will ultimately show up its true colors? Men were already there, but these women have outdone the men. And as for “Lihaf”, have you read it – it is the logical progression of the loss of all sense of shame. What else could be expected?” (Kumar & Sadique 190). Undoubtedly, Begum Jaan’s choice demonstrates Chughtai’s candidness. Her language adoption fortifies her character and shows how courageous she is in the face of patriarchal culture. Though it also caused a flurry of criticism, the groundbreaking story “Lihaf” put her on par with the era’s most accomplished writers and set the tone and stage for the majority of her later works. As a matter of fact, she was charged with obscenity and placed on trial in Lahore at the same time as her contemporary Manto underwent trial for his fictional work “Thanda Gosht” or “Cold Meat.” During the two years of a painful trial, “Quilt” was reportedly read publicly in court word for word, but the court was unable to find any ‘obscenity’ in the story. Due to a lack of reliable evidence, the lawsuit filed against her was eventually abandoned. Chughtai believed that if fiction is grounded in the “authentic truths of life,” it cannot be dirty and vulgar, and she valiantly tried to achieve this in her works. Ismat speaks regarding her life in her autobiography *A Life in Words: Memoirs (Kaghazi Hai Pairahan)* and identifies herself as a realist:

When I wrote “Lihaaf”, there was a veritable explosion. I was torn to shreds in the literary arena. Some people also wielded their pens in my support. Since then, I have been branded an obscene writer. No one bothered about the things I had written before or after “Lihaaf”. I was put down as a purveyor of sex. It is only in the last couple of years that the younger generation has recognized that I am a realist and not an obscene writer [...] I am still labelled as the writer of “Lihaaf”. The story had brought me so much notoriety that I got sick of life. It had become the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight [...] “Lihaaf” had made my life miserable. (35)

Chughtai bravely brings attention to the issues of female sexuality and the hidden urges that women have but are socially unacceptable. In her story, she had tried her best to make

people recognize and acknowledge that women have feelings and desires too. Through the character of Rabbu, Chughtai asserts that a woman could also have sexual desires which are meant to remain behind the veil in a society because women are considered mere puppets to act upon the gestures of their husbands. Her audacious claim was a shock to a culture that valued women's subservience to men's demands alone. But as Asaduddin believes, Ismat Chughtai was the first prominent Urdu writer to courageously and convincingly depict female sexuality while acknowledging it and portraying the lives of women as she had observed them, with the intention of granting them greater autonomy and self-determination. Academicians and liberal critics from the West and Left enthusiastically hailed Chughtai's bravery in drawing attention to herself. In a nutshell, Queer theory which is applied to the story "Lihaaf" critiques power structures and social norms that marginalize LGBTQ+ individuals. It examines how societal norms perpetuate discrimination and aims to challenge and dismantle these systems of oppression.

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