

Unveiling Hidden Desires: A Feminist Analysis of Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf"

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ABSTRACT

Ismat Chughtai's iconic short story "Lihaaf" (The Quilt) has long been a subject of critical examination due to its exploration of female sexuality, power dynamics, and societal norms. This short story is a bold and provocative work that challenges the gender and sexuality norms prevalent in Indian society during the time it was written. In this article, we delve into the layers of Chughtai's narrative to highlight how multiple themes such as relations of power, gender and desire intersect each other in the shaping of norms regarding female sexuality in a patriarchal society. Employing the lens of gender theories and of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), the paper focuses on drawing out the intersections of language, power, and gender, and on their role in constituting gendered discourses of sexuality. The paper looks at how Chughtai's "Lihaaf", subverts established norms of heteronormativity, homonormativity and gender relations, and amplifies silenced voices.

KEYWORDS

Gender and Sexuality; Homosexuality; Heteronormativity; Homonormativity; Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis.

Introduction

Ismat Chughtai, a trailblazing Urdu writer, penned "Lihaaf" in 1942, a time when discussions around female sexuality were largely taboo. The story revolves around Begum Jaan, a neglected wife, and her relationship with her masseuse, Rabbu. Beneath the seemingly mundane setting of a Nawab's household lies a rich tapestry of desires, repression, and defiance. One of Chughtai's key contributions to feminist literature was her portrayal of female desire and sexuality. In a society where women's sexuality was often tabooed and repressed, Chughtai's frank and honest portrayal of women's sexual experiences challenged the dominant cultural narratives around female sexuality, promoting a vision of women as complex

and multifaceted individuals with their own desires and aspirations. Furthermore, Chughtai's work also challenged the patriarchal structures that limit women's agency and perpetuate inequality. Her characters are often depicted as challenging societal norms and expectations, highlighting the ways in which women's identities are shaped and constrained by patriarchal structures.

Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality

The paper is feminist analysis of Chughtai's portrayal of patriarchal norms of gender and sexuality and female desire in "Lihaaf". Through close reading and theoretical engagement drawn primarily from gender theorists such as Judith Butler

(1990), feminist perspectives on language and gender (Tannen 1990; Mills 1995, 2003; Wodak 1997; Talbot 1998), and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) (Lazar 2007), the paper looks at the role of language in constructing and reinforcing norms of heteronormativity and homonormativity. It also looks at how such gendered discourses of sexuality and desire emerge from junctures where gender intersects with other identity categories, such as class, caste, sexuality and ability.

Prominent theorists in language and gender have contributed significantly to our understanding of how language shapes and is shaped by gendered and sexualized meanings and practices (Tannen 1990; Mills 1995, 2003; Wodak 1997; Talbot 1998). Through their work, they have shed light on the ways in which language both reflects and reproduces power dynamics, social hierarchies, and cultural ideologies related to gender and sexuality. One of the pioneering figures in this field is Judith Butler (1990) whose concept of performativity has had a profound influence on theories of gender and sexuality. Through this lens, gender is seen as a social construct that is continually produced and reinforced through language and other social practices. The paper draws upon Butler's understanding of gender as social construct and a practice upheld in language to look at how Chughtai's story participates in constructing and deconstructing such gendered roles and practices.

The paper also borrows Butler's (2004) and Duggan's (2003) notions of heteronormativity and homonormativity to analyse Chughtai's portrayal of homosexuality in "Lihaaf". Heteronormativity enforces the supremacy of heterosexuality as the norm, homonormativity operates within this framework by privileging certain forms of queer identity and relationships that

conform to dominant societal expectations. Both concepts contribute to the reinforcement of normative ideals surrounding gender and sexuality, ultimately limiting the possibilities for diverse expressions of identity and relationship dynamics within society.

Using insights from Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), the paper looks at the power dynamics that sustain unjust gender norms and how Chughtai challenges these norms. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis aims to advance a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements. This is all the more pertinent in present times, when issues of gender, power, and ideology have become increasingly more complex and subtle. Gender as a social category intersects with other categories of social identity, including sexuality, ethnicity, age, (dis)ability, social class and position, and geographical location. Patriarchy as an ideological system also interacts in complex ways. The aim of feminist critical discourse studies, therefore, is to show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities (Lazar, 2007).

Critical Analysis of "Lihaaf"

Chughtai's story is significant for its portrayal of female sexuality, particularly lesbianism, which was considered a taboo in the Indian society at the time of its publication. However, the story also highlights the unequal power relations between men and women, and the ways in which women are oppressed and repressed in a patriarchal society. It highlights the ways in which gender and sexuality are deeply politicized and controlled by patriarchal structures.

Chughtai's "Lihaaf" boldly explores the theme of homosexuality, a topic that was taboo in the society of her time. The intimate relationship between Begum Jaan and Rabbu challenges the heteronormative expectations of their society. Their relationship, which can be interpreted as a lesbian relationship, is subtly hinted at through the narrative. This defiance of heteronormative norms is a powerful statement against the patriarchal society in which they live.

The Nawab's household outwardly adheres to heteronormative norms, where marriage is a transactional arrangement devoid of emotional connection. Begum Jaan was like a possession- a souvenir or a mask that her husband could use to mask his homosexuality- 'Having married Begum Jaan, he tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her.' (Chughtai, p. 16).

The language used in this line reflects the unequal power dynamics between Nawab Sahab and Begum Jaan within their marriage. Nawab Sahab is depicted as the active agent who 'married Begum Jaan' and then 'tucked her away in the house with his other possessions' (*ibid*). This language suggests that Begum Jaan is treated as an object or possession to be controlled and managed by Nawab, rather than as an equal partner in the marriage. She is metaphorically equated with material objects rather than being recognized as a human being with her own agency and autonomy. The phrase 'he... promptly forgot her' undermines the unequal distribution of power within the marriage, with Nawab exercising control over Begum Jaan's life and neglecting her emotional needs and desires. This neglect reflects Nawab's patriarchal privilege and entitlement, as he is able to prioritize his own interests and desires over those of his wife without facing any consequence. Also, the passive voice used to describe Nawab's actions ('he... promptly forgot her') subtly undermines his agency and responsibility

in the marriage, suggesting that his neglect of Begum Jaan is not inevitable or may be justified.

Begum Jaan was heart- broken and turned to books. But she didn't get relief. Romantic novels and sentimental verse depressed her even more. She began to pass sleepless nights yearning for a love that had never been. (Chughtai, p. 16).

This passage illustrates Begum Jaan's initial powerlessness. However, as the story progresses, she gains power through her relationship with Rabbu, challenging the patriarchal ideology that initially oppressed her.

One dresses up to impress people. Now, the Nawab didn't have a moment to spare. He was too busy chasing the gossamer shirts, nor did he allow her to go out. (Chughtai, p. 17)

The phrase 'One dresses up to impress people' implies a societal expectation or norm regarding the purpose of dressing up, suggesting that clothing choices are made with the intention of pleasing or impressing others. This also reflects traditional gender norms that often place greater emphasis on women's appearance and attire as a means of social validation or acceptance.

The fact that Nawab 'didn't have a moment to spare' and was 'too busy chasing the gossamer shirts' suggests that he prioritizes his own desires and interests over those of Begum Jaan, as it is suggested that she wanted the Nawab to notice her as well as her dresses but he was too indulged in entertaining the boys. This imbalance of power reflects patriarchal dynamics where men's needs and pursuits are prioritized while women's concerns and desires are ignored.

The use of the pronoun 'her' in the phrase 'nor did he allow her to go out' suggests that the subject of the sentence, Begum Jaan, is being restricted or

controlled by Nawab. This representation reinforces traditional gender roles where women are often subjected to paternalistic control or restrictions on their freedom of movement and autonomy with the usage of words like 'allow'.

Chughtai resorts to language that is highly symbolic to convey the Nawab's homonormative alignment – 'He kept an open house for students- young, fair and slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him.' (Chughtai, p. 16). The emphasis on physical appearance objectifies the boys and reduces them to superficial qualities that align with traditional ideals of 'female' attractiveness. The phrase 'kept an open house for students' suggests that Nawab Sahab holds a position of authority and privilege, as he is able to host gatherings for young male students. The fact that he financially supports these students further reinforces his status as a benefactor and patron.

The Nawab was not seen being questioned and policed morally for his homosexual proclivities and activities that he practiced in broad daylight. Chughtai paints an evocative picture of how Begum Jan came to realise her husband's sexual preferences, as she watched her husband from the margins of his life:

Or was it when she watched through the drawing room door the increasing number of firm-calved, supple-waisted boys and delicacies begin to come for them from the kitchen! Begum Jaan would have glimpses of them in their perfumed, flimsy shirts and feel as though she was being raked over burning embers! (Chughtai, p. 16).

Begum Jaan's role is shown as an observer here, 'watching through the drawing-room door.' Through this line Begum Jaan is showed as a passive spectator which reinforces traditional gender roles, where women are often confined to the domestic sphere and relegated to the role of passive observers

rather than active participants in public life. This line also suggests a separation between the male-dominated public sphere and the female-dominated domestic sphere. This division reflects the patriarchal power dynamics of the society, where men have greater freedom of movement and access to public spaces than women.

The language used in this line objectifies the young boys by focusing on their physical attributes, such as being 'firm-calved' and 'supple-waisted.' The use of adjectives like 'firm' and 'supple' conveys a sense of youth and vitality, further reinforcing their objectification. Also, the use of these adjectives and repetition of these phrases suggests about the sexual orientation of the Nawab, as the boys who were being invited used to be of a certain age and used to look in a certain 'feminine' way physically and their choice of dressing or presenting themselves was not 'manly' enough according to the traditional beliefs. Additionally, he wasn't indulged in any kind of intimate relations with Begum Jaan.

Begum Jaan's unfulfilled desires are palpable. Her marriage to Nawab Saheb is devoid of emotional connection, and she yearns for something more. Chughtai portrays her as a victim of patriarchal norms, silenced and marginalized within her own home. Her longing for companionship and physical touch drives her to seek solace with Rabbu. Begum Jaan, neglected by her husband, seeks solace in the companionship of Rabbu. Her unfulfilled sexual desires and her quest for satisfaction outside her marital relationship challenge the traditional notions of female sexuality. Begum Jaan's longing for Rabbu disrupts this norm, introducing homonormativity—an alternative framework where same-sex relationships are acknowledged and accepted.

Chughtai's portrayal of Begum Jaan disrupts conventional gender roles. She

defies the passive wife archetype, seeking solace in Rabbu's touch. Their intimate moments challenge heteronormative expectations, hinting at a hidden lesbian desire. Begum Jaan's quilt becomes a metaphor for the secrecy that shrouds her sexuality.

Begum Jaan's emotional vulnerability significantly impacts Rabbu in Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" confirming their intimate relationship with an emotional connect. Rabbu perceives Begum Jaan's emotional turmoil—the weight of unspoken desires, the ache of neglect. Her empathy allows her to connect with Begum Jaan beyond the physical massages. Rabbu becomes a silent witness to Begum Jaan's vulnerability. Begum Jaan's emotional vulnerability becomes a shared burden for Rabbu. As she massages Begum Jaan, she absorbs not only physical tension but also emotional distress. Rabbu's silence allows her to hold this burden without judgment. She becomes a confidante, allowing Begum Jaan to express her hidden longings. Rabbu's connection with Begum Jaan empowers her. Through touch and silence, she provides comfort and relief. Their shared moments become a form of liberation for both women. Rabbu's role extends beyond that of a masseuse; she becomes a source of emotional support. Rabbu's silent empathy challenges the norm. By connecting with Begum Jaan beyond professional duties, she defies societal expectations. Her emotional perception of Begum Jaan's vulnerability fuels this rebellion. Rabbu's quiet presence becomes an act of resistance against the oppressive environment. Rabbu's perception of Begum Jaan's emotions shapes their intimate relationship. Through touch and shared silence, Rabbu provides solace and strength, navigating their suppressed desires together. The quilt, initially a mundane household item, becomes a central motif in the story. It symbolizes both warmth and concealment- conceals

their intimacy, and becomes a symbol of Begum Jan and Rabbu's defiance. under which Begum Jan and Rabbu pursued their own sexual fulfilment. Rabbu's silence is echoed by the quilt—their shared secret—making it a powerful ally in their rebellion against societal norms. Begum Jaan's longing for physical touch and emotional connection is stifled within her marriage. The quilt, under which she seeks solace, becomes a metaphor for her hidden desires. The quilt's dual nature—comforting yet confining—mirrors Begum Jaan's internal struggle.

The quilt, symbolizing both warmth and concealment, becomes a site of resistance against heteronormative confinement. The quilt which was initially source of comfort, gradually transformed into a symbol of Begum Jaan's rebellion- a powerful symbol through which Chughtai critiques the power structures that silence women and celebrates their resilience. It enables Begum Jan to counter the Nawab's patriarchal power over her by relegating her to the margins, and reclaim her agency. The story also exposes the ways in which women's sexuality is policed and controlled by men. Begum's desire for Rabbu is seen as a rebellion against the patriarchal order and an attempt to reclaim agency and autonomy.

The recurring metaphor of the 'elephant' under the quilt is both literal and symbolic. It represents desire, suppressed sexuality, and the weight of societal norms. The dialogue between Begum Jaan and the elephant—her silent confidante—reveals her struggle to reconcile her desires with societal expectations.

The elephant started to sway again. I was scared stiff. However, I had resolved to switch on the light that night, come what may. The elephant started fluttering once again and it seemed as though it was trying to squat. There was sound of someone smacking her lips, as though

savouring a tasty pickle. (Chughtai, p. 26)

The above passage, with its suggestive imagery, hints at the physical intimacy between Begum Jaan and Rabbu. The metaphor of the 'elephant' under the quilt is a clever device used by Chughtai to depict their clandestine relationship. In another instance, Chughtai uses the metaphor of an elephant to convey the homosexual relationship between Begum Jaan and Rabbu:

The elephant started fluttering once again and it seemed as though it was trying to squat. There was sound of someone smacking her lips, as though savouring a tasty pickle. Now I understood! Begum Jaan had not eaten anything the whole day. And Rabbu, the witch, was a notorious glutton. She must be polishing off some goodies. (Chughtai, p. 26)

This passage, while seemingly innocent, employs rich imagery and subtle language to depict a scene laden with queer undertones and can be interpreted as a metaphor for Begum Jaan's unfulfilled sexual desires and her search for satisfaction with Rabbu. The phrase—'The elephant started fluttering once again and it seemed as though it was trying to squat' uses the metaphor of the 'elephant' fluttering under the quilt suggests a hidden, suppressed movement or desire that disrupts the surface of societal norms and expectations. The fluttering motion evokes a sense of restlessness or agitation, indicating the presence of unspoken tensions or desires within the characters. This imagery can be interpreted as a metaphor for the repressed queer desires of Begum Jaan and Rabbu, which are concealed beneath the fabric of patriarchal society.

The imagery continues with 'There was the sound of someone smacking her lips, as though savouring a tasty pickle' (*ibid*). Here, the auditory sensation of lip-smacking evokes a sense of pleasure and indulgence. The mention of a 'tasty pickle'

adds to the sensory experience, connoting both physical hunger and metaphorical desire. It can also be understood as a metaphor for the fulfilment of forbidden desires or appetites and can be interpreted as a subtle reference to the satisfaction derived from exploring non-normative sexualities or identities.

Further realization of the sentence, 'Now I understood! Begum Jaan had not eaten anything the whole day' (*ibid*) highlights Begum Jaan's deprivation and neglect within the household. The omission of food reflects her marginalization and lack of agency, as well as her dependence on others for sustenance. This revelation underscores the unequal power dynamics between Begum Jaan and her husband, emphasizing her vulnerability and isolation. This deprivation can be seen as symbolic marginalization and invisibility experienced by queer individuals within heteronormative societies. The absence of sustenance reflects Begum Jaan's lack of agency and autonomy, highlighting the constraints imposed upon her by patriarchal norms.

The characterization of Rabbu as 'the witch' and 'a notorious glutton' adds further layers to the queer subtext of the scene. The label of 'witch' carries connotations of otherness and mysticism, suggesting Rabbu's defiance of societal expectations and norms. Similarly, describing her as a 'glutton' implies a voracious appetite and a disregard for conventional standards of behaviour. These characteristics can be interpreted as markers of Rabbu's non-conformity and resistance to normative modes of gender and sexuality within the narrative.

Rabbu's silence is not a sign of weakness; rather, it becomes her source of agency. She communicates through actions—her massages, her presence—and her silence becomes a form of power. In a world where women's voices are often stifled, Rabbu's quiet rebellion allows her

to navigate the oppressive environment. Rabbu's silence piques her curiosity. Begum Jaan wonders about Rabbu's thoughts, desires, and emotions hidden behind her quiet demeanour. Rabbu becomes an enigma, a mystery within the confines of the women's quarters. As Begum Jaan and Rabbu spend more time together, their interactions deepen. Rabbu's massages become a form of communication beyond words. Their whispered conversations under the quilt create an emotional bond. Begum Jaan finds solace in this shared silence. Rabbu becomes more than a masseuse; she becomes a confidante. Begum Jaan's perception of Rabbu shifts from mere curiosity to empowerment. Rabbu's silence becomes a source of strength. Within the women's quarters, Rabbu's quiet rebellion allows Begum Jaan to express desires and fears that remain unspoken elsewhere. Their connection becomes Begum Jaan's lifeline.

Rabbu's silence challenges the expected behaviour for a woman of her status. She defies the patriarchal norms that silence women. Begum Jaan perceives Rabbu's silence as a form of liberation. It allows them to communicate beyond societal constraints, finding intimacy and agency within their hidden world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" stands as a seminal work, boldly

challenging the prevailing gender and sexuality norms of its time. Through a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis lens, this article has dissected the layers of Chughtai's narrative, revealing its nuanced exploration of female oppression, desire, and resistance. Chughtai's portrayal of characters like Begum Jaan and Rabbu disrupts conventional gender roles and relationships, highlighting the complexities of female sexuality and the oppressive structures of patriarchy. Moreover, this analysis has shed light on the power dynamics within the story, emphasizing the patriarchal forces that silence women and limit their agency. Furthermore, by exploring feminist perspectives such as gender subversion, sexuality and liberation, intersectionality, and agency through silence, we have uncovered the deeper layers of meaning embedded within the text. Chughtai's nuanced portrayal of Begum Jaan's intersectional identity, as shaped by her gender, sexuality, and identity, adds complexity to her character and highlights the multifaceted nature of oppression. 'Lihaaf' serves as a powerful testament to Chughtai's commitment to challenging societal norms and amplifying silenced voices. Through her frank and honest portrayal of female desire and agency, Chughtai highlights the patriarchal structures that constrain women's lives and to envision a more inclusive and equitable society.

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