

Bold Desires: Female Sexuality In Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*

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Abstract:

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, sexuality is defined as "the feeling and activities connected with a person's sexual desires" (Turnbull et al.). It is a way through which people experience and express themselves sexually. Women are frequently subjected to suppression in filial and socio-political contexts. Social norms and traditions across centuries and geographies have regulated and controlled women's expression. Women are constantly living up to social expectations of either being one who nourishes or an object of sexual gratification of men. Ismat Chughtai is a formidable voice in Urdu literature who stands as an indomitable feminist icon, her works marked by a bold, unapologetic exploration of women's issues in a patriarchal society. Her literature is a testament to her defiance against the conventional roles assigned to women, breaking away from traditional narratives to highlight the complexities and subjugation women faced. One of her most famous works, "Lihaaf" (The Quilt), published in 1942, delves into the taboo topic of female sexuality and same-sex love, subjects that were considered scandalous at the time. The story's audacity led to a legal trial for obscenity, but Chughtai's unwavering stance in defending her work underscored her commitment to exposing the unspoken realities of women's lives.

Keywords: Feminism, Sexuality, Women, Gender, Patriarchy.

The discussion around women's bodies and their sexuality has been ongoing since time immemorial. It has often served as a focal point for showcasing male dominance over women. Women are frequently perceived as weak, inferior, deviant, and inadequate compared to men. Across centuries and cultures, social norms and traditions have regulated and controlled women's expression of self, emotions, sexuality, movement, and participation in social and political arenas. This treatment has led to further oppression and a distorted concept of womanhood, equated with fragility, insecurity, and social and cognitive incompetence. Feminism challenges the patriarchal grip on society, confronting women's subordination both at home and in the workplace. Women are often expected to make sacrifices and suppress their desires and aspirations, relegated to the margins of social structures and treated as second-class citizens. Ruth Sherry, in "What is Women's Writing?", notes that "the lives, experiences, and values of women are always treated as marginal," while men's experiences are considered central to society. Shirley Lim, in "Feminist and Ethnic Theories in Asian American Literature," states that women are "commodified as sexual creatures to serve male desire." Simone de Beauvoir used the terms "Subject" and "Other" to illustrate women's position in patriarchal culture: the "Subject" is the man who controls and rules, while the "Other" is the woman, lacking her own identity and always defined in relation to the "Subject." She is not seen as an autonomous being and is primarily viewed by males as a sexual entity. In a patriarchal society, female sexuality is rarely discussed. Ismat Chughtai, however, brings attention to two critical aspects of a woman's body in her writings. First, she highlights how men use women's bodies for their own sexual satisfaction. Second, she emphasizes the irony that while men exploit women's bodies, women are not permitted to express their own sexual desires. If they do, these desires are deemed forbidden in a male-dominated society.

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Chughtai tackles this sensitive and taboo subject convincingly. She presented the suppression of women as one of the most significant realities of life, a topic that other writers avoided. While her short stories explore many facets of women's lives, female sexuality stands out as a dominant theme. Chughtai also addresses the sensitive issues of homosexuality and lesbianism, which are often ignored. She handles these topics with subtlety, yet uses bold and innovative language. Sexuality, the expression of one's bodily desires, is a deeply personal aspect of life. Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* points out that politics is not just about meetings and parties but signifies "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another." Through her writings, Chughtai challenges the enforced silence on women's desires, arguing that this silence is a form of patriarchal oppression. She gave new direction to women's issues, adding realism to her fiction and articulating women's actual needs. Chughtai revealed how these issues have long been hidden and argued they must now be addressed.

She writes against the irrational restrictions placed on women, highlighting the psychological trauma that forces them to lead suffocating and torturous lives. As a child, Chughtai overheard conversations among the elder women of her household, and these discussions stayed with her. As a writer, she brought these sensitive topics to light, portraying them as real-life scenes in a style that was at once disturbing and fascinating. Ismat Chughtai, like her contemporaries Sadat Hasan Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, and Krishna Chander, was influenced by nineteenth-century writers. This influence is evident in the themes she chose to explore. Female sexuality, previously an untouched and undervalued topic, gained prominence through the writings of the Progressive Writers' Movement. These writers addressed the confusion of youth about sex, the desires of marriageable girls, women's attitudes towards sexuality, men's handling of women's desires, and the lives of prostitutes and widows. Such topics, once unwritten and unheard of in Urdu literature, were brought to the forefront with boldness and realism. Ismat's short stories encompassed every aspect of women's experiences in a male-dominated world, with a particular focus on female sexuality, which was traditionally considered taboo. When Chughtai began writing, there was a scarcity of women writers in Urdu literature who could, like her, boldly cross societal boundaries and address taboo themes. Although there were other women writers at the time, they lacked the fiery and bold spirit abundant in Chughtai's works. It was unconventional for women to write openly, and even more so for them to write about women's issues.

Chughtai's undaunted, uninhibited, and frank manner of writing about forbidden subjects was unprecedented. She predominantly focused on women's issues, raising questions about female consciousness. She also challenged the patriarchal world and its interpretations of religion, which were often manipulated to control women and their bodies. She highlighted various aspects of female sexuality in her stories such as "The Marigold" (Gainda), "The Labyrinth" (Bhul Bhulaiya), "The Net" (Jaal), "The Younger Sister" (Choti Apa), "The Mole" (Til), "The Homemaker" (Gharwali), "A Pair of Hands" (Do Haath), "Lingering Fragrance/Scent of the Body" (Badan ki Khushboo), "One's Own Blood" (Apna Khoon), and "Neera." In several of her stories, she questioned the stereotypical societal ideologies that emphasized women's chastity and loyalty to men, openly rejecting these norms and codes of conduct. In "The Marigold" (Gainda), "The Labyrinth" (Bhul Bhulaiya), and "The Net" (Jaal), she addresses the awakening of young women's sexuality and their loss of innocence in a harsh world. This awakening is depicted not only through direct narration but also through various incidents within the stories, which are questioned and corrected by the writer's suggestions. The subtlety and expertise Chughtai employs to describe the budding desires of young girls were unprecedented in Urdu literature and cannot be categorized as obscene or abominable.

"The Quilt" (Lihaaf) is among one of the most powerful reflection on this subject. It examines the commodification of women's bodies through marriage and how women are treated as mere possessions, passed from one man to another. The institution of marriage often becomes a shield for men to do as they please, whether it involves locking their wives behind doors, torturing them, or using their bodies for their own pleasure. The protagonist, Begum Jan, is portrayed as a woman

craving attention from her husband, Nawab Sahib, and is sexually deprived. Their marriage is more of an economic dependency than a relationship of love and respect. Begum Jan's parents married her off to Nawab Sahib because they considered him a virtuous man with high financial status. The story contains semi-autobiographical elements, as Ismat herself was left with her mother's adopted sister for a few days, similar to the young narrator in the story. While any further resemblance is not proven, this stay likely inspired the story, especially the estranged relationship between Begum Jan and Nawab Sahib. Ismat sets the tone for sexual attraction immediately by showing how the young girl is mesmerized by Begum Jan's beauty, portraying her as a splendid woman. She defines Begum Jan's beauty in the following lines:

Her complexion was marble white, without a speck of ruddiness. Her hair was black and always bathed in oil. I had never been the parting of her hair crooked, nor single hair out of place. Her eyes were black and the elegantly plucked eyebrows seemed like two bows spread over the demure eyes. Her eyelids were heavy and her eyelashes dense. The most fascinating feature her face, however, was her lips- usually covered with lipstick and with a mere trace of down on her upper lip. Long hair covered her temples. (Asaduddin 15)

However, Begum Jan's condition begins to deteriorate gradually in her loveless marriage with Nawab Sahib. After marriage, she becomes little more than a mere possession to her husband. Through Begum Jan's character, the frustrations experienced by married women within this system are highlighted. Women are expected to conform to their roles as wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers, suppressing their own desires and aspirations. Begum Jan's frustrations begin immediately upon entering her husband's house, where he treats her like just another object in his household. Nawab Sahib, on the other hand, is regarded as the pinnacle of manhood in society. Nawab Sahib never gave a thought to Begum Jan's feelings or wishes, simply caring about her financial necessities in accordance with marriage customs. He handled her as if she were just another "object" that he had recently purchased but had never been given any attention. When it is apparent that Nawab Sahib is more interested in young boys than his wife, a different side of him emerges. Therefore, Chughtai emphasizes that he is always there for her, regardless of whether their relationship is just social or symbolic.

Begum Jan experiences increased maltreatment as long as the marriage lasts. A gorgeous rose that has flowered begins to wither. Living a life of depravity, loneliness, and unfulfilled love, Begum Jan progressively transforms into a person who is constantly dejected and depressed. Since her husband wasn't present to give her praise, she wanted to burn every article of clothing. As a newlywed, she desired to dress elegantly in order to catch her husband's eye and win his admiration. However, Nawab Sahib never took a break from his obsessions and never gave her the opportunity to see the outside world. Begum Jan was stranded in an unloving and unsupportive marriage. Her pain was further exacerbated by the requirement that she always wear a veil. Even her movement was limited as she was not allowed to visit her relatives though they were free to visit her.

These relatives, freeloaders all, made her blood boil. They helped themselves to rich food and got warm clothes made for them while she stiffened with cold despite the new cotton stuffed in her quilt. As she tossed and turned, her quilt made newer shapes on the wall, but none of them held any promise of life for her. Then why must one live? (Asaduddin 14-15)

Here, Chughtai portrays Begum Jan's loneliness in an unusual way. Because Begum Jan, the lonely woman, had nothing to amuse or occupy her, she found herself progressively pulled to her maid, Rabbu. Rabbu was a very other kind of woman. She is quite different from Begum Jan. Rabbu's only housekeeping chore was giving Begum Jan a massage. She was with Begum Jan the entire day, even sleeping together at night. The author then describes Begum Jan as having an itchy body. Rabbu's regular massage was insufficient to relieve the itching, and Begum Jan having to use various oils when taking a bath. However, the irritation persisted after all remedies. After failing to identify the source of the itch, the doctors and Hakims finally concluded that either nothing was on her skin or that something might be underneath it. Rabbu, however, had a different opinion and accepted Begum Jan's strange itch. She was helped by Rabbu. Chughtai's subject selection for her publications demonstrates her level of competence. A child's perspective tells the story, and as a

result, the relationship given that they are merely the child's observations, the relationship between Begum Jan and Rabbu is handled with extreme innocence. Chughtai ensures that readers may recognize Begum Jan and Rabbu's connection from an innocent perspective without any explicit images of sensuality.

The narrator discovers something s'rang' one night while everyone is asleep. "I woke up at night and was scared," she explains. Begum Jan's quilt was trembling violently in the deep darkness, as if an elephant was struggling inside (Asaduddin 17). Chughtai emphasizes how women in seclusion give their life significance by making the most of whatever is given to them through the interaction between Begum Jan and Rabbu. She uses this relationship as a means of continuing to be happy no matter what the real circumstances are. It is also clear that the connection had strong roots in physical fulfilment because Begum Jan's life gets challenging when Rabbu goes to see her son at one of her relatives' homes. Without her massages, she becomes restless and can't find any serenity. After observing Begum Jan's state, the author gives her a pat on the back and discovers that Begum Jan feels a little better. However, Begum Jan's life becomes more challenging when Rabbu fails to arrive in a single day. The narrator consoles Begum Jan with a back scratch after witnessing her aunt's desperation, and she is shocked to learn what happens next. Begum Jan places the narrator down next to her and begins to count her ribs. When the latter begs to move, Begum Jan holds her closely. Her experience is a chilling one which the narrator trembles to recount.

To this day, whenever I am reminded of her face at that moment, I feel jittery.

It was evening, and the room was getting enveloped in darkness. A strange fear overcame me. Begum Jan's deep-set eyes focused on me and I felt like crying. She was pressing me as though I were a clay doll and the odour of her warm body made me want to throw up. But she was like a person possessed. I could neither scream nor cry. After some time, she stopped and lay back exhausted. She was breathing heavily, and her face looked pale and dull. I thought she was going to die and rushed out of the room... Thank God Rabbu returned that night. (Asaduddin 20)

When Rabbu returns the following day, she discovers that Begum Jan has become increasingly interested in the narrator and that she is sitting near to her. Later, as the two were sleeping at night, the narrator was startled by the quilt's shadow once more. Thinking that this time, she would turn on the light, she manages to summon the bravery to do so. The story ends there as she experiences something unexpected when the lights turn on. Begum Jan reappears in *Kaghazi hai Parihan*, Ismat Chughtai's autobiography. Not only did this story popularize Ismat, but it also gave life to the main character: Begum Jan, a real-life heroine, who left the unloving Nawab Sahib, got married, and had a child of her own after learning that Ismat had written a story about her. When *Lihaaf* was released in 1942, it raised a lot of controversy regarding a subject that was taboo in the prudish society. The narrative sheds focus on alternative sexualities while also highlighting a woman's sexual desires. As a brilliant writer, Ismat Chughtai advanced the subject of female sexuality in a creative way without using any graphic material. She became an advocate for women's suppressed desires regarding their physical requirements in a culture where even the something like that caused a stir and a frown.

Following Chughtai's shocking revelation, society's "custodians of culture" became intolerant of a woman discussing such a sensitive topic in a book intended for general readers. Chughtai faced a lot of difficulties after penning this account of Begum Jan and Nawab Sahib. She even had to go through a trial in order to showcase Begum Jan's lesbian relationship with her maid and to give voice to female sexuality. It was considered vulgar and led to a protracted legal battle in Lahore when Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (The Quilt) was considered offensive as discussing female sexuality in public was frowned upon. Chughtai claimed that the events of *Lihaaf*'s story were drawn on real-life experiences. On being asked about the 'obscenity' in her stories in an interview, she explained:

In my stories, I've put down everything with objectivity. Now, if some people find them obscene, let them go to hell. It's my belief that experiences can never be obscene if they are based on authentic realities of life. These people think that there is nothing wrong if they can do things behind the curtains... All of them are halfwits. I wrote about a woman's loneliness who had all the worldly

comforts but who was deprived of her husband's company. I want to portray her tension and desperation. (Asaduddin xi)

Chughtai's portrayal of the true image, which upends the established hierarchies of the patriarchal establishment, is frequently striking and powerful. Her portrayal of women who defy and reject these societal expectations of modesty and chastity and who are immune to social control or judgment is constructive for a common woman who may identify with these female characters and find satisfaction in the fact that social rules are not unquestionable. Chughtai's literary style itself was a form of rebellion. She employed a colloquial, conversational tone that made her stories accessible and relatable, breaking away from the elitist literary tradition. This democratization of language allowed her to reach a broader audience, particularly women who found their experiences and voices reflected in her writings. Hence, one can conclude that Ismat Chughtai's contribution to feminist literature is profound and multifaceted. Her works not only confront and dismantle the oppressive structures of patriarchy but also celebrate the strength and complexity of women's lives. Through her fearless storytelling, Chughtai carved out a space for women's voices in a male-dominated literary world, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to inspire feminist discourse and activism.

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