
Unveiling Desire: Repression and Resistance in Chughtai's "Lihaaf"

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Abstract: Ismat Chughtai's landmark short story serves as powerful charges of patriarchal oppression and a nuanced, yet impactful, affirmation of female autonomy. Published in 1942, "Lihaaf" defied prevailing gender standards and audaciously expressed the unvoiced needs of women inside a profoundly conservative and patriarchal culture. Utilising a child's narrator, Chughtai adeptly constructs a narrative that highlights the issues of emotional abuse, sexual suppression, and the subtle defiance manifested via same-sex intimacy. Begum Jan, the protagonist, epitomises the plight of upper-class Muslim women ensnared in unfulfilling marriages. Her physical and mental seclusion highlights the inadequacy of conventional institutions to address women's comprehensive needs. Consequently, her connection with her servant Rabbo evolves into a tacit insurrection, an affirmation of bodily autonomy, and a quest for companionship that transcends the heteronormative framework.

This paper defines how Chughtai uses silence, metaphor (particularly the quilt or "Lihaaf"), and the child's perspective as literary devices to analyse social repression and simultaneously carve out a space for female resistance. The work is situated within feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks, emphasising how "Lihaaf" reclaims marginalised voices and challenges the binaries of moral versus immoral, natural versus unnatural, and visible versus veiled. In doing so, the story does not merely provoke scandal; it reimagines the contours of feminine identity, desire, and freedom in South Asian literature.

Key words: Identity, Patriarchy, Repression, Resistance, Psychoanalytic, Feminism.

Introduction: Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991) was a prominent Indian Urdu author, recognised alongside Sadat Hasan Manto and Krishan chander as one of the four foundational figures of Urdu literature. As a storyteller, she possesses exceptional skill and distinctiveness. Throughout her life, Chughtai embraced nonconformity and was one of the Muslim writers

who chose to remain in India after the country's partition. She employed her writing as a powerful tool for social critique, adopting a position that often startled and affronted the dominant conventions of modern society. She revealed the hidden aspects of society considered taboo in mainstream literature, thereby becoming a passionate champion for the marginalised. Although Chughtai is mostly acknowledged as a significant feminist, her work transcends feminist themes to explore several contemporary issues in modern India.

Chughtai reflects the voice of defiant women. This narrative reveals the most scrutinised issue of female sexuality and the existence of suppressed sexual desires in a heteronormative marriage, which facilitates the emergence of homosexuality and dismantles the patriarchal constraints of a stifling culture. The narrative recounts a harrowing recollection of an anonymous precocious girl from her infancy. She embodies the conflict between good and wrong inside the evolving frameworks of thought. The reverberation of that occurrence resurfaces every time she uses the quilt for warmth in winter. While the other girls are absorbed in feminine games, the narrator participates in combat with the male gender, specifically her brothers and their friends. The narrator's contentious attitude compels her mother to leave her with her 'adopted sister' Begum Jaan during her tour to Agra. In Begum Jaan's residence, there is not a solitary youngster whom the narrator can bolster her confrontational disposition, rendering her relocation to Begum Jaan's abode a "severe punishment" (36). As Chughtai poignantly narrates through the young girl's perspective in "Lihaaf", Begum Jaan is described as a woman:

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 the Nawab did not budge an inch. (37)

Nawab Saheb, although being cognisant of his sexuality, opts to marry Begum Jaan and presents himself as an exemplary husband, however neglects his wife entirely. Begum's anxiety and urgency are depicted 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 illustrates that they entered into matrimony for societal reasons, lacking emotional, psychological, or physical satisfaction and compatibility in their marital connection. Chughtai appears to deconstruct the societal perception of marriage as the only climax of a woman's existence through the role of Begum Jaan, as well as a man's existence through the figure of Nawab Saheb in the narrative. Begum Jaan's spouse and relatives exemplify a patriarchal mentality and a disposition of sexism. Jalil Rakhshanda in "Chughtai's "Lihaaf" Is a Powerful Indictment of Patriarchal Neglect, Highlighting the Psychological and Sexual Repression of Women in Feudal Society" defines Lihaaf as: "a searing portrayal of what happens to women who are neglected in patriarchal and feudal households women whose

emotional and sexual needs are ignored, and who are confined to roles of submission and silence” (17).

Simone de Beauvoir states, “Homosexuality can serve as a means of escape from a woman's circumstances or a method of embracing them” (426). Neither society nor talismans, amulets, or black magic could assist her in achieving emotional fulfilment in life. Judith Butler, another theorist, contests the patriarchal framework that restricts women to specific margins dictated by their sexuality. She employs the concept of “resignification” (2373) in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, asserting that the destabilisation of naturalised identities is achievable. She contends, “Identity is not an inherent trait to be uncovered, but rather a construct produced through actions that 'effectively constitute the identity they purport to express or reveal’” (2375).

The patriarchal framework, reinforced by rigid societal and cultural norms, constructs women like Begum Jaan as inherently submissive, weak, and lacking agency. However, Begum Jaan’s behaviour in “Lihaaf” directly challenges these constraints by asserting her emotional and sexual autonomy. Her quiet resistance, expressed not through open defiance but through intimate bonds beyond the heteronormative structure, exposes the limitations of patriarchal control over female identity and desire. She embraces homosexuality as a means to attain respect and establish her autonomous identity, while simultaneously undermining patriarchal norms. The same-sex connection is illustrated by the narrator's recollection of being compelled to sleep in a bed adjacent to Begum's. The women’s bodies are objectified for the female gaze rather than the masculine gaze points at resistance on the part of women in the novel. At midnight, she perceives that Begum Jaan’s quilt trembles violently, as if an elephant is thrashing within, a consequence of the altercation between Begum and Rabbu. Rabbu weeps, and the “slurping sound of a cat licking a plate” (Chughtai 38) contributes to her nocturnal fear.

The narrator's most traumatic experience and a significant act of resistance occur when Rabbu is en route to meet her son, who has served the Nawab Saheb and received numerous gifts. However, his sudden disappearance remains a mystery, as he never returns home to see his mother. Meanwhile, Begum Jaan experiences discomfort and an intense itching sensation throughout her body, signifying her sexual desire, of which the narrator is oblivious. She assists her by massaging her back. However, Begum embraces the narrator firmly and endeavours to fulfil her own needs, even while the narrator attempts to extricate herself from her grasp with evident distress. In the Foreword to “Lihaaf” and Other Stories, Saleem Kidwai highlights the revolutionary nature of Ismat Chughtai’s story:

“Lihaaf” remains one of the earliest texts in Urdu fiction that foregrounds same-sex love without moralising it. It is remarkable for its subtle portrayal of female desire, articulated in a social and literary context where such expressions were taboo. Chughtai does not sensationalize or condemn Begum Jaan’s desires. Instead, she

presents them as a response to her emotional neglect and isolation. The story resists closure, leaving interpretation open, and that is its radical strength. (134)

The concluding analysis of this excerpt emphasises the nature of Chughtai's "Lihaaf" in its treatment of female same-sex desire. By choosing not to moralize or sensationalize Begum Jaan's behaviour, Chughtai subverts the dominant heteronormative and patriarchal narratives of her time. The story portrays desire as a deeply human response to neglect, rather than a deviance to be punished. This empathetic and layered representation of queer intimacy defies the social taboos of 20th-century India and remains relevant for its quiet resistance. The open-ended conclusion of "Lihaaf" invites the reader to grapple with ambiguity making space for diverse interpretations, and allowing the text to retain its political and emotional potency across generations.

The narrator's initial feelings of admiration for Begum Jaan slowly transform into disgust and fear. When Rabbu returns and resumes massaging Begum Jaan's body, the narrator becomes increasingly uncomfortable and fearful, refusing to enter the room. Despite Begum Jaan's affectionate gestures, the narrator insists, "I want to go home" (Chughtai 40). Rabbu responds sarcastically, "Raw mangoes are sour to taste, Begum Jaan" (40), a statement that implies her possessive and butch role in the relationship. As Adrienne Rich in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" defines it, serves as a destabilising force against the compulsory heterosexual norms and institutions that often marginalise women's desires (115). Rich expands the definition of lesbianism beyond mere sexual orientation, emphasising a broad spectrum of woman-identified experiences, including emotional bonds, solidarities, and resistance to male-dominated systems. The continuum as a destabilising force, Rich challenges patriarchal norms that limit women's relational and sexual autonomy. Her theory thus provides a critical lens through which narratives like Chughtai's "Lihaaf" can be interpreted not merely as controversial depictions of same-sex love, but as bold assertions of female agency that threaten traditional gender and sexual hierarchies.

That night, determined to resolve the mysterious and grotesque movements under the quilt, the narrator musters the courage to rise from her bed and switch on the light. As the light floods the room, "the elephant somersaulted inside the quilt which deflated immediately" (Chughtai 40). A moment later, a foot lifts the quilt's corner, revealing a disturbing sight: something the narrator was never meant to witness. She reacts in shock and fear: "Good God! I gasped and plunged into my bed" (40). The imagery underscores the trauma and confusion experienced by the young narrator as she is exposed to a form of intimacy that remains socially unspoken and morally ambiguous in the cultural setting of the story. Begum Jaan illustrates the hypocritical disposition of society, characterised by significant gender inequity. The patchwork symbolises a woman's longing for another woman or, more broadly, female homosexuality. Chughtai used the imagery of an elephant to illustrate the uncertainty within the young narrator's psyche. Additionally, it serves as a symbolic reflection of the uncertainty and ambivalence of the populace regarding queerness

at that period. In this narrative, she demonstrates defiance against patriarchal attitudes, questioning the inflexible cultural conventions and entrenched mindsets that are unprepared for same-sex couples.

The innocent eyes of a young narrator, Chughtai exposes the repression, loneliness, and covert expressions of desire within the cloistered zenana of a feudal household. A psychoanalytic approach to the story offers rich insights into themes of repression, projection, sublimation, and the shaping of female identity in a patriarchal society. At the heart of the story lies Begum Jaan's unfulfilled sexual and emotional life. Her marriage to Nawab Sahib a man more invested in social prestige and clandestine relationships with young men results in a profound sense of neglect. Freud's concept of "libidinal repression" (Freud 147) becomes central here. Begum Jaan's sensual needs are systematically denied within the marriage, and this repression finds a substitute outlet in her physical and emotional relationship with her maid, Rabbu. The unconscious desire re-emerges in displaced form, satisfying itself through massages and companionship, and later in more implicitly erotic exchanges under the quilt the "Lihaaf". The quilt becomes an object of fascination and horror, dramatising the narrator's transition from childhood innocence to a dawning awareness of adult relationships.

The narrative also invites a Lacanian reading, especially through the idea of the gaze and the construction of desire. The child's gaze upon the "Lihaaf", and what lies beneath it, represents her encounter with the "Real" that which cannot be fully symbolized in language or integrated into her understanding. The shifting quilt becomes a "mirror stage" (Lacan 4) of sorts, reflecting back an incoherent, unsettling image that disrupts the narrator's sense of stable identity. Moreover, Begum Jaan's plight reveals the internalization of patriarchal norms and the failure of the symbolic order (Lacan 93). Her same-sex relationship is not a political statement but a survival mechanism, a response to systemic emotional starvation. Her identity is shaped not by freedom but by constraint, and her pursuit of pleasure lies outside the sanctioned structures of heterosexual marriage. Yet this transgression remains unspeakable, even within the narrative, which never explicitly names or moralizes the relationship. The very ellipses and silences in the text function as psychological defense mechanisms displacement, denial, and suppression.

The narrative strategy of filtering realities through the child's limited perspective in Chughtai's "Lihaaf" brilliantly exposes the disconnect between conscious understanding and unconscious recognition. The final scene, where the narrator is confronted with an unbearable truth, represents a moment of traumatic insight, one that will likely shape her unconscious associations with sexuality, power, and intimacy for life. Through the prism of psychoanalysis, "Lihaaf" becomes not only a narrative of forbidden desire but also a profound exploration of the unconscious effects of patriarchy on both women and children. Chughtai constructs a story where the unspoken, the unseen, and the repressed dominate the emotional landscape, inviting readers to question the psychological cost of social silence and

gendered repression. In doing so, “Lihaaf” transcends its setting to offer a timeless commentary on identity, trauma, and desire.

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