

# Alternative Mode of Sexuality as Means of Sustenance in a Patriarchal Society: A Study of Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt"



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## Abstract

Homosexuality has long been a topic of discussion and debate on the ethical grounds. In a society where heteronormative relationships are considered normal and natural and therefore enforced with all earnestness upon every individual, homosexuality was a crime until the celebrated 2018 verdict of the honourable Supreme Court amending the application of the Article 377 of the Indian Constitution and annexing consensual homosexual sex between adults from the list of criminal offenses. Homosexuality is often seen to be not just a means of sexual gratification, but may also be linked inextricably with one's emotional basis of life. Deprived of emotional supports from the males in the society, a woman may fall back to a lesbian relationship and find the meaning of life in it. Such relationships may bring in some meaning in her neglected existence. While the male world treats a woman with utter neglect, she can discover meaning in a lesbian relationship. This alternative way of sexuality and life has been discussed by Andrienne Rich in her famous essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". In Ismat Chughtai's controversial short story "Lihaaf", translated into English as "The Quilt", such a relationship works as the centre of events. This paper aims at analyzing this relationship in the view of Rich's theory.

**Keywords:** Lesbian, Feminism, Women, Relationship.

## Introduction

Homosexuality has been seen in an eye of derision and was considered a criminal offence until the 2018 ruling of the honourable Supreme Court of India annexed consensual homosexual sex between adults from the list of sexual offences under Article 377 of the Indian Constitution. But the normalcy of homosexual desire had been established by authors long ago. The well known book of ancient Indian sexology, Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* gives evidence of the existence of lesbian relationships in some quarters of ancient Indian society. The following extract can be forwarded as an evidence:

"Some women of the harem  
When they are amorous  
Do the acts of mouth congress  
On the yonis of one another."<sup>1</sup>

Lesbian relationship may not always be erotic in nature, but may also indicate an emotional bonding between two female individuals. In such situations, at least one of the coupling women is found to have been a victim of indifference and physical or mental torture from the males around her. In a desperate effort to cling to an emotional relationship as a means of life, she enters into lesbian relationship and would find solace, comfort and emotional support in it. Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf", translated into English as "The Quilt", a short story which brought her the title 'Urdu's wicked woman', as Raza Naeem recalls<sup>2</sup>, is a story of such a woman. Framed as a recollection of the anonymous first person narrator's one traumatic childhood experience, the story is also found to explore the unconventional means of sexual gratification as a way to deal with the injustice a woman is subjected to in a marital relationship.

## Aim of the Study

With the advent of postmodernism, the concepts of groups and classes took a new form as previously marginalized sections were paid attention and brought into the periphery of theoretical evaluation and strengthening their demand for recognition. The former classification of

gender into male and female was re-viewed to bring into light lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals who had hitherto been pushed into utter neglect and subversion. But, as in many other fields of studies, literature has been dealing with these tabooed subjects much before the emergence of postmodernism as a theoretical concept and may therefore claim the title of harbinger of the new trends in social life. From this point of view, many of Ismat Chughtai's writings were pathfinder. Dealing with a greatly controversial issue for her time, viz. lesbian relationship and feminine desire, her short story "The Quilt" would secure a reverent position in the literature of postmodern era. The present paper seeks to establish the story as a powerful statement in favour of women's emancipation by means of alternative modes of feminine sexuality.

#### Main Paper

"I am still labelled as the writer of *'Lihaaf'*. The story brought me so much notoriety that I got sick of life. It became the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight."—this is how Ismat Chughtai has put her resentment<sup>3</sup> over her being showcased merely as the writer of "The Quilt". She had become furious as she was advised to use another lesbian protagonist in her next novel *Terhi Lakeer* and felt deeply mortified as she found people reading the Begum's tale only to derive voyeuristic pleasures, just because her heroine had deviated from heteronormative relationship. In this regard, Susan Koppelman's observation becomes relevant: "I recognize these stories as stories about women loving women in the variety of romantic ways that we wouldn't even have to struggle to define if we were talking about men and women loving each other."<sup>4</sup>

The first novel in the English language recognised as having a lesbian theme is *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) by Radclyffe Hall, which a British court found obscene because it defended "unnatural practices between women". The book was banned in Britain for decades; this is in the context of the similar censorship of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which also had a theme of transgressive female sexuality, albeit heterosexual. In the United States, *The Well of Loneliness* survived legal challenges in New York and the U.S. Customs Court.

Grishma Trivedi feels, as a rule, Ismat Chughtai's writings have the power to break barriers of patriarchy and bring to light the hitherto untouched subject of female desire and sexuality and made the 'invisible' the subject of discussion<sup>5</sup>. Deviating from showcasing the women as objects for sexual pleasure, Chughtai endeavoured to establish the individuality of her female protagonists. The distinction of "The Quilt" lies in its frank handling of repressed feminine desires and sexuality for which the quilt becomes a symbol.

The narrative revolves round a childhood experience of the narrator—a young woman presumably—whose brief stay at her aunt Begum Jan's house brought her face to face with the hidden aspects of Begum's life. Begum Jan can be seen as a

sexually-deprived woman, neglected by her husband, Nawab Sahib: "After marrying Begum Jan, and installing her in his house along with the furniture, the Nawab Sahib totally forgot her presence, leaving the frail young Begum to pine in loneliness", the narrative reads. The equation of the wife with the furniture here obviously hints at the societal treatment of women as commodities. On the other hand, in the mention of Nawab Sahib's infatuation of slender-waisted and fair-faced young boys, there is suggestion of his sexual perversion. The reputation of Nawab in the public eye—"No prostitute or street woman had ever been seen in his house" and "He had gone on the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca himself and helped many others to perform this holy service"—provides glimpses at the corruption and hypocrisy of such men in the society.

The description of the physical beauty of Begum Jan had charmed the narrator's juvenile eyes: "I was quite enamored of her looks. I was happy to sit near her and look at her for hours, her dark, luxuriously oiled hair was neatly parted and so immaculately sat that not a strand of hair could be found straying. Her eyes were black and her carefully plucked eyebrows were like drawn bows. Her eyes were a little distended with heavy eyelids and thick lashes. But it was her lips, often reddened, that were the most amazingly attractive feature of her face." But despite all her feminine possessions, the complete ignorance from her husband had forced Begum to take up unconventional and unauthorized means of fulfilling her carnal desires and thereby ward off her loneliness. She found solace for her humiliated femininity in lesbian relationship with Rabbu. In contrast to the paragon of beauty stands the ugly maid servant Rabbu: "Rabbu! She was as dark as Begum Jan was fair, as purple as the other one was white. She seemed to glow like heated iron. Her face was scarred by smallpox. She was short, stocky and had a small paunch. Her hands were small but agile, her large, swollen lips were always wet. A strange, sickening stench exuded from her body." This relationship between the beautiful Begum and the ugly Rabbu reminds one of Marian Halcombe in Wilkie Collins's 1859 novel *The Woman in White*. Marian is described as masculine and unattractive, and her motivation throughout the story is her love for her half-sister, Laura Fairlie.

In her 1980 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", Adrienne Rich has suggested a lesbian relationship as a means of empowering women. But by the term 'Lesbian' she did not mean "simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman." "Lesbian Identity is the sense of self of a woman bonded primarily to women who is sexually and emotionally independent of men", she states<sup>6</sup>. Begum Jan's indulgence in a socially denied sexual activity brings out her effort at leading a life free from the dominance of men. Chughtai has made it clear how the complete negligence had pushed the Begum into a meaningless life: "As she tossed and turned, her quilt made newer shapes on the wall but none of them held promise of life for her. Then why

must one live? ...such a life as Begum Jan was destined to live." But through her relationship with Rabbu, the Begum slowly discovers a new meaning of life and regains her health: "Soon her thin body began to fill out. Her cheeks began to glow and she blossomed in beauty." Rabbu's oil massage to cure Begum Jan's persistent problem of itching all over her body became a pretext for a deeper physical intimacy under the quilt, which the narrator accidentally discovered.

In the whole narrative, the 'lihaaf' or quilt works as a metaphor of secrecy as the issue of homosexuality has traditionally been kept behind curtains. Begum Jan uses her sexuality as a means to empower herself. In the forefront, she works within patriarchal norms and adheres to the standards of a dutiful wife, while within the quilt, she acknowledges her sexual desires and does everything in her power to fulfil them and seeks solace in a non-conforming sexual relationship. She subverts the patriarchal norms that she has to adhere to by recognising her sexuality and her sexual desires. The constant reference to "the elephant" under the "quilt" which does not let the narrator sleep, also serves as a metaphor for the sexual desires and relationships that are either not spoken of or only talked about in terms of metaphors and not addressed directly. Her relationship with Rabbu is paralleled by Nawab Sahib's relationship with the young men; the bodies and their desires bridge the gap left by the heteronormative marriage.<sup>7</sup>

If lesbian relationship is classified into homosocial and homoerotic as Lois Tyson has done<sup>8</sup>, Begum Jan-Rabbu relationship could be seen as purely homoerotic in nature. There are ample hints at how, in the absence of Rabbu, the impatient Begum made attempts at physical intimacy with the child narrator. But it is no doubt the relationship with Rabbu that Begum derived the energy to live and enjoy life. Her life brings to reality the theoretical concept stated by Tyson: "The depiction of strong emotional ties between same-sex characters can create a homosocial atmosphere that may be subtly or overtly homoerotic. Whether homoerotic or not, however, the depiction of homosocial bonding foregrounds the profound importance of same-sex emotional ties in the development of human identity and community, which a human potential often devalued, marginalized, or trivialized by the homophobic anxiety of heterosexist culture."<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion

"The Quilt" not only re-presents the unspoken, but also brings to light the taboo subject of female sexuality. In her own way of satisfying her physical cravings, Begum Jan goes towards forming what Rich has called a lesbian compendium through "genital sexual experience with another woman." Following John R. Gregg<sup>10</sup>, one can say, sexual desire is not the defining characteristic in Begum-Rabbu relationship, but is a political necessity for the former to transcend her neglected, humiliated self in the absence of attention from her homosexual husband, and lead a life on her own. The story ends with the child narrator's discovery of the reality under

the quilt or behind the 'elephant', as she found it. In real life the begum could ultimately come out of her stifling marriage and had a new marriage and a son also, Chughtai came to know during her visit to Aligarh, as she states in her *Memoir*. This step, a bold one for a woman from a conservative Muslim background and living a life behind the 'purdah', was a definite manifestation of this newly attained strength. Chughtai's own words from her little-known essay "Aurat: Aadhi Aurat, Aadha Khvaab" (Woman: Half Woman, Half Dream) are worth quoting:

*"If a woman shows her womanhood at the right opportunity, it befits her. But what is this that she goes on gathering the basket of femininity in colleges, offices and departments..."*

*But Gurudev (Rabindranath Tagore) used to say, "O woman you are half woman, half dream!"*

*Had someone asked for his wife's opinion, she might have said that Gurudev himself was a total dream as well as the most beautiful interpretation of a dream too!*

*But "women are not messengers"....."women are not prophets"...."women are not spiritual".*

*Then why doesn't anyone stand up and say that "Women are not women!"<sup>11</sup>*

### Endnotes

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9. Tyson quoted in Chakraborty.
10. Sex, the Illustrated History: Through Time, Religion and Culture, Xlibris Corporation, 2016
11. Quoted by Raza Naeem "Remembering Ismat Chughtai, Urdu's Wicked Woman" from <https://thewire.in/books/remembering-ismat-chughtai-urdus-wicked-woman>  
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