



Regaining Female Sexuality Through Homoeroticism As Presented In Ismat Chughtai's: The Quilt

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ABSTRACT

"Lihaaf" is a multifaceted story that offers insights into the complexities of human relationships, the struggle for agency within a repressive society, and the subversion of societal norms. It remains a significant work in South Asian literature and continues to be studied and appreciated for its bold and thought-provoking theme of Lesbianism. The research work indicates that patriarchy is dominant in South Asian society which is repressive towards female desires specially towards their sexuality. However, female sexuality and woman's quest for achieving individuality is so strong that it devises every possible way to break the shackles of patriarchy in any possible way even if asks to venture in the spaces of homoeroticism which is still a taboo subject in the society.

Keywords: Society, Female, Venture

Introduction

Ismat Chughtai was writer known for her frankness and touching the subject with were considered as taboo even as of today's modern progressive society. Ismat Chughtai as a writer would often pick up the subject of gender identity, gender oppression, gender discrimination, and inequality of power balance in the society among the prevalent genders. Ismat in her peak period wrote extensively about female strife for regaining the lost identity, establishment of living rights, and exploration of sexuality beyond set artificial social boundaries. Ismat's this act earned her a title of trailblazer writer but also attracted numerous civil suites which she defended successfully.

One such taboo topic picked up by her was that of exploration of female sexuality beyond limits set by patriarchy. The exploration of female sexuality was not limited to a lady exploring her natural desires but also to breaking the norms of patriarchy that sets the condition that a gender should act and behave in a way set by them only.

The book 'Lifting the veil' is a collection of short stories of Chughtai. The Quilt is one of the most controversial short stories of Chughtai cited in the book. The story touches the subject of homosexuality (lesbianism) among women which is a taboo subject to date. Homosexuality is a subject which is considered as a taboo in present day Indian social setting. Elements of society are accustomed to physical and mental bonding of opposite sex. In this concept the emotional attachment of an individual towards another individual is shunned rather it is render unacceptable. These shunning mandates that if emotional attachment among individuals must take place than the individuals must be of opposite sex. This dictates the societal thought that same sex individuals are not allowed to develop feeling for each other which in future can lead to same sex physical interaction in bed. However, the shunning of homosexuality is modern societal concept as evidence from ancient Indian society suggests otherwise.

Homosexuality has a complex history in ancient India, with various texts and cultural practices reflecting diverse attitudes towards same-sex relationships. Here are some key points about homosexuality in ancient India:

1. Kamasutra: The "Kamasutra," an ancient Indian text on love and sexuality written by Vatsyayana in the 2nd century CE, includes descriptions of various sexual behaviors, including same-sex relationships. It does not condemn homosexuality but rather provides information about different sexual practices.
2. Art and Sculpture: Ancient Indian art and sculpture often depict same-sex couples in temples and other religious contexts. These depictions are seen as a reflection of the broader acceptance of diverse expressions of human sexuality.

3. Classical Indian Literature: Classical Sanskrit literature contains references to same-sex love and relationships, with some poets and authors expressing romantic and erotic sentiments between individuals of the same sex.
4. Transgender and Hijra Communities: India has a long history of transgender and hijra communities, which have their own distinct identities and roles in society. While not exclusively related to homosexuality, these communities have challenged traditional gender norms and often included same-sex relationships.
5. Changing Attitudes Over Time: Attitudes towards homosexuality in ancient India were not uniform, and they evolved over time. While some texts and cultural practices acknowledged and even celebrated same-sex love, later periods saw the influence of more conservative and puritanical views.

In modern India, homosexuality was historically criminalized under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a colonial-era law dating back to the 19th century. This law criminalized "carnal intercourse against the order of nature," effectively making consensual same-sex sexual acts illegal. For decades, this law was used to discriminate against and persecute LGBTQ+ individuals. However, there were significant legal developments in India regarding homosexuality in recent years:

1. Decriminalization (2018): In a landmark decision, the Indian Supreme Court, in September 2018, decriminalized consensual same-sex sexual activity between adults by declaring parts of Section 377 unconstitutional. This decision effectively removed the legal basis for prosecuting LGBTQ+ individuals engaging in consensual sexual acts.
2. Recognition of Rights (2018): The Supreme Court's decision was not only about decriminalization but also about recognizing the rights and dignity of LGBTQ+ individuals. The court stated that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is a violation of fundamental rights.
3. Ongoing Legal Battles: While the decriminalization was a significant step forward, the fight for LGBTQ+ rights in India was far from over. Advocates continued to push for full legal recognition and protection of LGBTQ+ rights, including marriage equality and anti-discrimination laws.
4. Societal Attitudes: Changing legal provisions were reflective of evolving societal attitudes in India. There has been a growing acceptance and visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in various sectors of society. LGBTQ+ pride parades and advocacy groups have also become more prominent.

These legal relaxations helped in striking these draconian notions of the society in present day. However, Ismat was ahead of her time. She gave a decisive blow to the draconian notions of the society which restricts the concept of human emotional attachments leading to homosexuality through her short story the quilt.

Ismat in her short story introduces three female characters as the guardian of true human emotions among individuals. However, as the story progresses the female characters appears to be more than the guardian of true human emotions among individuals. They appear as elements of social change that are ready to challenge the patriarchy by living inside the concealed spatial boundaries as set by them.

The young girl, the Begum Jan, and Rabbo are the three central characters of the short story. The young girl is the narrator of the story who is the daughter of Begum Jan's close friend. Begum Jan is the wife of Nawab, the royalty, and Rabbo is her masseuse. Begum Jan is constantly neglected by the nawab in the bed. The story describes that Begum Jan is willing to consummate the marriage, but her husband never reciprocates her desires. As a result, Begum Jan is not only unsatisfied physical but also lacks emotional attachment with her husband. Further, the Nawab has set spatial boundaries for Begum. She cannot appear in communal spaces. Therefore, she must wander in the home that to only in marked spaces. Due to these extremities Begum was about to yield however Rabbo the masseuse comes to her rescue. In the day Rabbo would massage Begum's head, hand, leg, and other bodily parts including the genitals. This would render Begum in world which she always craved to experience in the hands of her husband. However, due to constant neglect of her husband she has propelled her feelings in a space which could be considered as taboo by the patriarchal society. She started to enjoy the feelings generated in her because of a female touch. The casual encounters in the morning took an explosive turn in the night. The ladies under a sheath would enjoy themselves physically. The sexual pleasure achieved by both the ladies must be cosmically orgasmic as the narrator of the short narrated that the sheath 'Lihaaf' / 'The Quilt' under which the ladies where having physical relationship would shake as that there is a confiscating elephant underneath it. The young girl got to known about the Begum and Rabbo's lesbian relationship when she unveiled the Lihaaf under which the ladies were having quality time.

Now, with this revelation starts Ismat's quality literary work which strikes the patriarchal society. The young girl despite knowing about the lesbian relationship of Begum and Rabbo woes to never open her mouth about this, even if somebody offers one lakh Rupees for this. Further, the Begum achieved her sexuality despite the patriarchal bondage of Nawab. Even if Nawab restricted and neglected her, she devised ways to explore her sexuality without even crossing the spatial boundaries set by her patriarchal husband. In a way she achieved what she wanted in an area earmarked by her husband which he considered as a territory controlled by him only. Through this story Ismat stated that even if patriarchy tries to impose artificial restrictions on women

the intent of femininity in female desire breaks the so imposed superficial bondages to achieve what was already prevalent and accepted in the ancient society. To conclude it can be said that Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" (The Quilt) is a complex and thought-provoking short story that explores various themes and ideas. Some of the main understandings and interpretations of the story include: -

Sexuality and Desire: "Lihaaf" is known for its bold exploration of female sexuality and desire. The story presents the intimate relationship between Begum Jaan and her masseuse, Rabbo, which is expressed through the metaphor of the quilt. It challenges societal norms by openly discussing same-sex desire and the fulfillment of sexual needs.

Repression and Confinement: The story highlights the repression and confinement experienced by women in a conservative and patriarchal society. Begum Jaan's marriage is loveless and unfulfilling, leading her to seek companionship and physical satisfaction through her relationship with Rabbo.

Silent Resistance: Begum Jaan's relationship with Rabbo can be seen as a form of silent resistance against the restrictions placed on women in her society. The quilt symbolizes the secrecy and hidden desires that exist beneath the surface of a seemingly traditional and conservative household.

Power and Vulnerability: The story explores power dynamics within relationships. Begum Jaan, despite her status and wealth, finds herself vulnerable within the confines of her marriage. Her relationship with Rabbo provides her with a sense of power and agency.

Social Hypocrisy: Chughtai critiques the hypocrisy of a society that upholds traditional values and norms in public while allowing unconventional relationships and desires to flourish in private. The story sheds light on the double standards and moral contradictions of such a society.

Artistic Expression: Chughtai's use of symbolism and metaphor in "Lihaaf" showcases her skill as a writer. The quilt itself becomes a central symbol, representing the hidden aspects of human nature and the complexities of human relationships.

Controversy and Subversion: "Lihaaf" caused a significant controversy when it was first published due to its explicit content and open discussion of taboo subjects. Chughtai's work challenged societal norms and contributed to the feminist and progressive movements in Urdu literature.

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