

GENDER, SELF REPRESENTATION AND SEXUALIZED SPACES: A READING OF ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S *LIHAAF*

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ABSTRACT

Ismat Chughtai's short story *Lihaaf* became the centre of controversy as soon as it was published. Although the story does not make any reference to same-sex relationships, it gained immense notoriety for the depiction of the relationship between Begum Jaan and her maid, Rabbu with sexual overtones. The enclosed space of the zenana becomes the site on which homoerotic desires are articulated and sexual liberation is sought. The lihaaf or the quilt becomes a covering for the deviant desires of the women. By sexualizing the zenana, Chughtai gives a blow to the patriarchal ideology that a zenana is the sanctum sanctorum of the house and is, therefore, free from the invasion of any form of sexuality. The portrayal of the character of Begum Jaan is a result of Chughtai's participation in the construction of the project of modernity. Begum Jaan is the representative of the 'new woman' who constantly tried to negotiate the difficult terrain of traditionalism versus modernisation. My paper analyses the depiction of the zenana as a sexualized space which becomes the site for radical same-sex politics. I also analyse Chughtai's engagement with the project of modernity and its articulation in her work.

KEYWORDS: Female Sexuality, Zenana, Progressive Writers Association, Modernity

INTRODUCTION

"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."

-Ismat Chughtai

Ismat Chughtai's controversial short story *Lihaaf* is often revoked by critics and scholars as a bold instance of radical feminist politics. Published in an Urdu literary journal titled *Adaab-i-Latif* in 1941, the story created a huge uproar among its readers. The focal point of the entire controversy was what a pubescent girl who comes to stay with her aunt, Begum Jaan sees and hears every night:

"I woke up at night and was scared. It was pitch dark and Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously as though an elephant was struggling inside. "Begum Jaan", I could barely form the words out of fear. The elephant stopped shaking and the quilt came down. "What's it? Get back to sleep." Begum Jaan's voice seemed to come from somewhere." (Chughtai 38)

The king was quick to charge her with obscenity and a trial against her was held in the Lahore court. Chughtai recounts in her autobiography how she had laughed when the Police came up at her door with the summons from the Lahore Court: "As I read the heading—*Ismat Chughtai vs. The Crown*—I broke into laughter. "Good God, what crime have I committed that the Exalted King has brought this lawsuit against me?" (Chughtai)

Despite being advised to tender an apology and pay the fine, Chughtai decided to fight the case in the court. The final verdict went in her favour as the story does not make any explicit mention of a sexual activity or a lesbian relationship. The story is often seen by many as an exemplar of Chughtai's radical feminist stance. However, the claim is not without problems. If one reads Chughtai's autobiography and her non-fictional pieces that discuss her story, one would realize that the depiction of a sexual alliance between Begum Jaan and Rabbu was in no way intended to extend her support to alternative sexual relationships. In fact, Chughtai later on termed all such deviant desires as "vices". She notes in her autobiography that her mind was "an ordinary camera that records reality as it is". She wrote about it because she was aware that such relationships exist concealed within the four walls of the house that gave a semblance of normalcy.

Her encounter years after with the woman on whom she had modelled the character of Begum Jaan is also enlightening. She notes in her autobiography:

"We stood face to face during a dinner. I felt the ground under my feet receding. She looked at me with her big eyes that conveyed excitement and joy. Then she cruised through the crowd, leapt at me and took me in her arms. Drawing me to one side she said, "Do you know, I divorced the Nawab and married a second time? I have a pearl of a son, by God's grace."

I felt like throwing myself into someone's arms and crying my heart out. I couldn't restrain my tears though; and I was laughing loudly."

The excitement and the happiness that Chughtai experiences on being told that the woman has begun her life anew with another man again counters the claim that she was in favour of lesbian relationships.

Set within a zenana in a conservative Muslim household, the story engages with the sexual politics within the confines of women's quarters and uncovers the domestic lives of the women who inhabit it. Even though Chughtai may not be taking a strong feminist position or expressing her alignment with the supporters of lesbianism, by sexualizing the zenana she poses a strong challenge to the orthodox supporters of patriarchal values who suppress women's sexuality and its free expression. Her bold attempt at writing about a woman's body can be seen as a part of the larger project of modernity that she and several women like her were engaged with. She may only be recording what she saw but her engagement with modernity, consciously or unconsciously drew her within the realm of a radical feminist politics whose locus is the conservative zenana. The story challenges the readings of the zenana as subservient to the symbolic phallic order (Patel 6). In this paper, I would explore the zenana as a space for radical same-sex politics in Chughtai's short story. I would also examine her engagement with modernity as an educated Muslim woman writer who dwells on sexual liberation as a means of self realization and self actualization.

Chughtai was one of the most prominent writers of the Progressive Writers Association. She belonged to that generation of Muslim women writers who were able to taste the fruit of education and could make a foray into the field of literature owing to the ongoing process of transition of several middle and upper-class Muslim homes into modern familial structures. The emergence of these writers is attributed to the project of modernity. At the same time, these writers played a crucial role in constructing and contributing to the ongoing project. Their works hinged on the question: what does it mean to be modern? It is their engagement with the impulse of modernisation that gave birth to a body of literature that freely dealt with the female body, its aspirations and desires.

Just like Rashid Jahan (another female writer who was a part of PWA. She contributed a very controversial short story, *Parde Ke Peeche (Behind the Veil)* to the collection of stories titled *Angarey*) Chughtai also engages with the question of female sexuality that is repressed and curbed within the closed space of the zenana. By bringing it out in the open and by providing a frank delineation of subversive sexual desires, Chughtai not only lays a claim on her right to talk about the female body but also asserts her right to discuss the pleasure and fulfilment that the female body seeks (Gopal 67).

Zenana refers to the protected, enclosed quarters in a Muslim household which has no engagement with the outside world. It offers a private secured space to the women far from the male gaze and the incursions of male sexuality. Geeta Patel refers to Faisal Fatehali Devji who discusses the sexualisation of the zenana and the feminization of Muslim men in colonial discourses. According to Devji, before the nineteenth century, zenana was a private space in which women, characterized as sexualized beings, were confined. Their sexuality, capable of creating a chaos in the civil sphere, was a matter of concern and therefore, needed to be contained and controlled. By the nineteenth century, the colonial government privatized all religious institutions (which were a part of the public sphere and were kept apart from the home earlier) thereby leading to a collapse of the public into the domestic. Along with this, there was a crisis of the masculine identity and men came to be seen as feminized beings. In order to come to terms with the changed circumstances and also to negotiate their masculine identities, zenana became the focal point of the reformist legal discourse. Women came to be seen as carriers of religious traditions and upholders of their cultural identity and zenana was seen as untouched by the contingencies of change. Zenana was seen as an embodiment of the glorious past hinged on conservative ideologies. Women were subjected to the rhetoric of desexualisation and zenana became the space which conserved religious conservative ideas. Women confined in the zenana posed a serious challenge to the colonial critique of Muslim degradation. The situation gave rise to a battleground with two opposing forces of traditionalism and modernity. The encounter with modernity, as Leila Ahmad points out, posed a serious problem for the Muslim women who were required to choose between their Muslim identity and their new gender consciousness (Ahmed122). *Lihaaf* sexualises the zenana and challenges the image of a woman subservient to the dictates of the patriarchy.

By delineating the character of Begum Jaan, Chughtai raises important questions on marriage as a form of an economic enterprise and women as commodities playing a subservient role in their marriage. While narrating the details about the arranged alliance between the Nawab and Begum Jaan, the narrator points out that the poor parents of Begum Jaan married her off to the rich Nawab “who was of ‘ripe years’ because he was very virtuous” (Chughtai 36) who after their marriage, installed her in the house along with furniture. Chughtai highlights how the institution of marriage was seen as a business transaction where the role of women was reduced to commodities meant to be bought and then installed in the confines of the house.

The virtuosity of the Nawab is established on basis of the fact that “no one had ever seen a nautch girl or prostitute in his house” (Chughtai 36). The absence of a heterosexual relationship is construed to be a guarantor of the Nawab’s virtuosity. However, no one seems to have noticed the “strange hobby” of the Nawab which was to provide “an open house for students—young, fair and slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him” (Chughtai 36). The sexual underpinnings of this homosocial activity go unnoticed.

While on one hand, the Nawab continued his homosexual exploits under the garb of his pedagogical endeavours, Begum Jaan “wasted away in anguished loneliness” (Chughtai 36). She did all that was in her power to divert the Nawab’s

attention from the “firm-calved, supple waisted boys” (Chughtai 36) towards her: talisman, black magic and other ways for winning the love of her husband. Having failed in all her attempts, she turned to books but this increased her desolation: “Romantic novels and sentimental verse depressed her even more. She began to pass sleepless nights yearning for a love that had never been” (Chughtai 37). She pondered over the insignificance of such a life that was devoid of any love but then something happened and “she started living and lived her life to the full. Soon her thin body began to fill out. Her cheeks began to glow and she blossomed in beauty” (Chughtai 37). Begum Jaan’s desire to live made her turn towards a transgressive relationship with another woman, Rabbu. It was Rabbu who “rescued her from the fall” (Chughtai 37). Instead of withering away in desolation, Begum Jaan makes the bold choice of seeking the fulfilment of her desires in her relationship with Rabbu. Her sexual liberation can be seen as a means of self-actualization. She refuses to give in to the repressive marriage customs that define her only in terms of her relationship with her husband. Instead, she creates for herself the image of a new woman free from the shackles of patriarchy and articulating a new gendered consciousness.

Begum Jaan uses her sexuality as an instrument for her empowerment. Although outwardly she abides by the patriarchal norms and possesses all the traits necessary for a virtuous woman in a patriarchal set-up, it is within the zenana that she refuses to give up her needs and desires for sexual satisfaction even if the only way left to her is to fulfil them by resorting to a deviant way of sexual relationship. The impetus and the motivation for her homoerotic relationship with Rabbu is the male-male relationship between the Nawab and the young students.

The Zenana, then, becomes the space where radical desires for sexual liberation are articulated. It becomes a space for the expression of subversive desires under the garb of normalcy. The quilt becomes an important symbol for the concealment of the subversive activities. Geeta Patel points out, “The story discloses the dynamics of sexuality within circles of enclosures—the quilt, the veil, and the zenana—through the child’s visual description and display of Begum Jaan’s body” (Patel 8). Lihaaf is a covering both for hiding the narrator beneath it and for concealing the activities of Begum Jaan and Rabbu at night.

Chughtai does not explicitly state what goes on between the two women beneath the quilt. The shadow cast on the wall in the form of an elephant is used as a metaphor for the physical relationship between the two women: “In the dark Begum Jaan’s quilt was once again swaying like an elephant. “Allah! Ah!...” I moaned in a feeble voice. The elephant inside the quilt heaved up and then sat down. I was mute. The elephant started to sway again” (Chughtai 40). Chughtai refuses to say anything about the relationship between the two women till the very end. Towards the end of the story, when the girl resolves to peep beneath the quilt to check what goes on there every night, she exclaims, “Good God!” (Chughtai 40) and plunges into her bed beneath her quilt.

CONCLUSIONS

Lihaaf introduces a ‘new woman’ in the form of Begum Jaan who stands in revolt against the heteronormative structure of relationships. Chughtai sees female sexuality as empowering. Through the character of Begum Jaan, Chughtai presents to us a woman with a gendered consciousness. At the same time, it is important to note that Chughtai does not explicitly name the relationship between the two women. The relationship is described to us through the visual details given by the naïve and the innocent narrator. The story is an expose. It sexualizes the zenana by making it the site of the articulation of the homoerotic desires of Begum Jaan. Hence, she poses a challenge to the oppressive politics of patriarchal set-up which try to curb and restrain female sexuality by confining them within the confines of the zenana,

far from the male gaze. Chughtai highlights that the zenana can become the locus to provide contentment and fulfilment which women fail to get from their marriage. Chughtai's claim that the sole reason that she writes stories is to record what is going on around her gives us an insight into the densely layered sexual politics of the zenana which was in the process of transition when Chughtai was writing. The semblance of normalcy is juxtaposed with the clandestine activities that go on within the four walls of the sanctum sanctorum (zenana) of the house.

Her story can be situated within the larger project of modernity in which, this new generation of female writers to which Chughtai belonged, had a role to play. The work of the progressive writers is inflected with the question of what is meant to be modern. They played a significant role in the construction of modernity by asserting their right to openly talk about the female body and female sexuality. Begum Jaan's will to live leads her to negotiate the terrain where the opposite forces of traditionalism and modernity clash against each other. The zenana in *Lihaaf* is not an idealized one. Begum Jaan sexualizes the place which was traditionally supposed to be desexualised. In her attempt to come to terms with her on sexuality, she rejects her traditional role and treads the path of modernisation.

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