International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-11, Issue-3; May-Jun, 2026

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

# Silent Desires and Sacred Truths: Ismat Chughtai and the Queer Rewriting of Flesh and Spirit

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Received: 15 Apr 2026; Received in revised form: 13 May 2026; Accepted: 17 May 2026; Available online: 21 May 2026


***Abstract***— *Ismat Chughtai's fiction engages the body as a deeply political and spiritual site, where desire, silence, and moral regulation intersect. This paper examines how Chughtai represents same-sex female intimacy not as moral collapse but as an alternative form of emotional and spiritual truth. Focusing primarily on Lihaaf and selected short stories, the study explores how queer desire, though socially coded as sin, becomes a source of comfort, care, and existential survival for women confined within patriarchal and religious respectability. Drawing on Michel Foucault's understanding of sexuality as a discourse of power, the paper argues that Chughtai subtly relocates spirituality from institutional religion to lived intimacy. While heteronormative morality denies queer bodies spiritual legitimacy, Chughtai's narratives suggest that desire itself functions as a form of inward faith, a quiet commitment to emotional honesty. Spirituality, therefore, is not abandoned but transformed. Situated in the turbulent context of late-colonial India and Partition, Chughtai's writing anticipates contemporary queer literary concerns by showing how private desire becomes a refuge from social, political, and moral violence. Her restrained narrative style, marked by suggestion, irony, and silence, allows queer embodiment to exist without moral spectacle. A brief comparative reading of Ocean Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous and Akwaeke Emezi's Freshwater demonstrates how contemporary queer writers continue this redefinition of spirituality beyond religious doctrine. Read together, they reveal a queer literary tradition in which desire is not opposed to spirituality, but becomes its most honest language.*

***Keywords***— ***Corporeal Studies, Desire and Spirituality, Ismat Chughtai, Narrative Studies, Queer Embodiment.***

## I. INTRODUCTION

The space of narrative literature has long had a history of functioning as a site where the body is unrelentingly policed, where the flesh and in extension the spiritual legitimacy attached to the physical is subjected to moral authority and social discipline. The late colonial era of South Asia was a ripe site where the female body in particular was a surface charged with ideological struggle, expected to be pure, brimming with domestic virtue and upholding religious respectability, with absolutely no space for emotional autonomy, let alone the erotic. Emerging in such tumultuous terrains, Ismat Chughtai pens one of the most controversial stories in Urdu literary history, Lihaaf (The Quilt), a tale that defies the conventions of literary narrative without uttering an explicit word. Refusing sensationalism, Chughtai's story rejects even the premise of same sex as the most contested part of the narrative but instead settles on desire and its depiction as an extremely uneasy and spectral dance between flesh and spirit, between the bodily hunger that cannot be denied and the metaphysical longing that cannot be fulfilled, the yearning and the unnamed—between the private heat of intimacy and the cold, scandalizing gaze of patriarchal society—as its central preoccupation.

Written in 1942 and first published in the Urdu magazine Adab-i-Latif, the story recounts the nocturnal intimacy between Begum Jaan and her maid, Rabbo, whose secret encounters unfold beneath the eponymous quilt. The paper

argues that Lihaaf constructs female desire not as a moral collapse but as an alternative form of existential and spiritual survival. Chughtai stitches the prose with silences, ellipses and ironic understatement, through a child's perspective, where the erotic is rendered palpable without ever being named outright. Following the melancholy of Begum Jaan, a woman bound to a house and an unconsummated marriage, is a wife in name only and confined to the patriarchal walls of nawab's prison where she rots in her unmet desires. The patriarchal confinement is not overtly named or critiqued but highlighted through Begum's loneliness. Her repression generates a spiritual erosion, where the self is hollowed out under the weight of a domestic structure and the body becomes the only remaining language through which the truth can be expressed.

In an environment where the begum is not sanctioned to choose herself, her desires, and have any agency, she puts her faith in feeling, warmth and human presence where marriage, religion and aristocratic respectability have failed to provide any meaning. The paper addresses three key questions: first, how does Chughtai employ narrative silence and material symbolism (the quilt, prayer, fasting) to re-map spirituality onto queer female intimacy? Second, in what ways do Foucauldian and post-structuralist notions of sexuality as discourse illuminate the power dynamics that render such desire both forbidden and subversive? Third, how does Chughtai's treatment of queer desire anticipate contemporary South Asian queer aesthetics, as exemplified by Ocean Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous and Akwaeke Emezi's Freshwater?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Butler argues that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 33); through this lens, Begum Jaan's intimacy—enacted through domestic rituals such as the quilt, prayer, and fasting—may be read as a series of repetitive performative acts. Butler further contends that gender "ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex" (Butler 10), a formulation that allows us to read the body as the site where sexuality and spirituality are simultaneously written and erased. Foucault emphasises how these erasures operate as a form of power, challenging the "repressive hypothesis": he contends that the silence is not the absence of discourse but, "an element that functions alongside the things said" (Foucault 27). In Lihaaf, the domestic sphere operates as what Foucault calls a "privileged site of sexuality" (3), where regulation is most intense.

The narrative generates erotic knowledge through silence, the quilt's movement becomes a nonverbal utterance, aligning with Foucault's claim that sexuality is produced through dispersed practices rather than explicit articulation (94).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's Epistemology of the Closet sharpens this analysis by framing silence as structurally productive. As Foucault writes—and Sedgwick quotes at the outset of her analysis—"there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say" (Foucault, qtd. in Sedgwick 3; cf. Foucault 27). The bedroom becomes a literal and epistemic closet where desire is concealed and enacted both. Sedgwick's distinction between minoritizing and universalizing views of homosexuality allows Chughtai's text to be read not as an act of isolated deviance but as a critique of heteronormative knowledge itself.

Extending this argument, Jonathan Dollimore's Sexual Dissidence traces how "the unspeakable" becomes erotically charged through prohibition, noting that silencing often "produces a desire all the more intense for being denied representation" (Dollimore 33). This insight is borne out in Chughtai's use of ellipsis and metaphor, where the quilt's folds and nocturnal setting materialize what cannot be spoken.

This is relevant because South Asian scholarship situates Lihaaf within a longer cultural genealogy. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai document how same-sex intimacy in Indian texts has historically been articulated through devotion and affect rather than identity (xxi). Gayatri Gopinath situates Chughtai's text within a broader queer South Asian framework, arguing that both Chughtai's story and Deepa Mehta's film adaptation "powerfully disrupt dominant gender and sexual constructions of communal and national identity in South Asia, as well as dominant Euro-American narratives of an 'out,' visible 'lesbian' identity" (Gopinath 26). Although Chughtai predates the diaspora, her narrative strategies anticipate contemporary queer aesthetics.

## III. ANALYSIS

### 3.1 Silence, Desire, and the Performative Body

Chughtai represents desire as performative rather than innate; Begum Jaan's intimacy is enacted obliquely through domestic rituals rather than explicit declarations. The quilt, prayer and fasting all function as repetitive acts which highlight her desire. The intimacy is written through silence. A silence that does not erase desire but shelters it, like prayer shelters longing without naming it.

The method of restraint becomes its method of spiritual remapping, what is not spoken is what is most sacred.

Bourgeois modernity polices sexuality not through punishment but through an "injunction to silence" where sex is made to "disappear" in language (Foucault 4). Silence creates a private devotional world inside the zenana where moral surveillance can be countered and subverted.

### 3.2 The Quilt as Sacred Symbol

The quilt becomes the primary symbol through which this unspeakable intimacy gains its form. The narrator, a child who cannot interpret what she sees, only registers the quilt's movement as eerie, alive. "Begum Jan whose quilt is imprinted on my memory like a blacksmith's brand" (7). The "elephant shaped shadow" that "sways like an elephant" haunts the child narrator, visually terrorizing her. The refusal of explicit visibility is crucial in queer desire where it is presented not as a spectacle but as a mystery, much like spirituality. The quilt becomes the purdah, concealing the act while still allowing its presence to be omnipresent, occupying and larger than life itself. It functions as what Sedgwick terms the epistemological structure of the closet, where "closetedness itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence," and desire is sustained precisely through that productive concealment (Sedgwick 3).

So huge is the mystery compounded around it that the narrator confesses it alike to being possessed by evil spirits and her habitual night fears, sleep walking and sleep talking all suggest that the supernatural is a metaphor for the repressed queer desire that the household seeks to conceal.

### 3.3 Prayer, Fasting, and the Counter-Ritual of Intimacy

Chughtai sharpens the symbolism in positioning Begum Jaan's loneliness against the religious economy of fasting and prayer. Prayer operates as a shield against this very desire and also a conduit for the hidden intimacy. When the child, afraid and startled, asks Begum Jaan what is happening, she is ordered to recite the Ayatul Korsi. A protective verse that momentarily silences the imagined threat, it adds to the supernatural element of the concealed sexual act, as if it is being performed for a superior purpose, enacted like a ritual and a bystander to this ritual is asked to seek shelter in the Ayatul Korsi to protect them from this unnamed act. The Ayatul Korsi functions as a performative prayer which conceals and signals queer longing, enacting what Sedgwick describes as the way silence itself becomes "pointed and performative," its unspoken content generating the very desire it refuses to name (Sedgwick 3).

Begum Jaan is surrounded by rituals meant to purify the body but they cannot save her from emotional starvation. Her husband's piety is performative, a public masculinity which is tied to respectability rather than care. Material symbolism extends to fasting-like deprivation: Begum Jaan "stiffened with cold despite the new cotton in her quilt while relatives feast" (9), mirroring a spiritual fast that heightens bodily awareness and erotic tension.

Rabbo's intimacy is a counter-spiritual practice where it is not a sinful indulgence in a sea of abundance but is survival. "Rabbo came to her rescue just as she was starting to go under. Suddenly her emaciated body began to fill out. Her cheeks became rosy, beauty, as it were, glowed through every pore" (9). Her presence fills Begum back to life; it is not simply her body which requires the warmth but her spirit which finds an outlet in Rabbo's devotion.

Rabbo's relentless oil massages, described in vivid detail, serve as tactile prayers that replace orthodox worship, aligning the body with a private devotional practice. The text describes how "it was a special oil massage that brought life back to the half-dead Begum Jaan" (9) and how Rabbo "massaged her back… for two hours" (11), turning touch into a sustained act of devotion. The narrator describes it, "it was almost as if getting scratched for her was the fulfilment of life's essential need—in a way, more important than the basic necessities for staying alive" (10). Rabbo creates a tactile liturgy that mirrors religious prayer, offering Begum Jaan a channel through which the unquiet itch can be temporarily soothed and spiritually attuned.

Rabbo's devotion is therefore twofold, she is the witch who glows like heated iron, yet her relentless ministrations become a sacred service, a bodily liturgy that substitutes for formal worship. By dedicating herself to Begum Jaan's relief, Rabbo enacts a spiritual kinship where the body is the altar and the massage the sacrament. The relationship between Begum Jaan and Rabbo thus transcends mere servitude; it is a covert spiritual communion.

This echoes Foucault's argument that sexuality is not merely repressed but produced through "mobile, polymorphous, and contingent techniques of power" tied to the body's sensations (Foucault 107). Begum Jan's body, denied affection under the guise of marital morality, becomes the site where spirituality is relocated from mere doctrine to touch.

### 3.4 The Domestic Archive and the Ethics of Silence

The narrative silence that envelops Begum Jaan's inner world, "a picture of melancholy and despair" (9), creates a vacuum that the quilt and prayer fill, allowing intimacy to be read through objects rather than explicit dialogue. This strategy is identified by discourse critics as one that "re-inscribes desire onto domestic artifacts" (Mills 2004). Chughtai deepens this further through the child narrator who remains "innocent" yet the text constantly suggests more than it declares. The child notes that Begum Jaan's voice, "Rabbo, Rabbo," functions like a chant, blurring erotic urgency with devotional repetition. The name spoken

in desire becomes indistinguishable from a name spoken in prayer.

Chughtai's domestic space becomes the unlikely archive of queer life, one that "disrupts dominant gender and sexual constructions of communal and national identity in South Asia" while refusing a visible Euro-American "out" lesbian epistemology (Gopinath 26). The quilt does not simply conceal but archives what society refuses to record and could not be stated at a time of late colonial era as well. This alignment of domestic objects with devotional acts re-configures spirituality as a private and queer sanctuary within the patriarchal household.

The household in Lihaaf does not pose as a neutral family space but also as a micro-institution where sexuality is both forbidden and paradoxically produced. Foucault writes that sexuality became bound to "a great polymorphous injunction" to speak, classify, and manage sex (Foucault 33). In Chughtai's story, the Begum's body is precisely the kind of body Foucault describes as socially saturated with regulation, expected to represent aristocratic purity, marital fidelity, and religious decorum. But it is also worthy to note that Begum is desperate to look for relief from this desire she feels afflicted with; her need to turn towards this possession of itch is not limited to Rabbo. The child narrator is engulfed in it when she offers to scratch in replacement of Rabbo. "Begum Jan's deep dark eyes focussed on me, I started crying. She was clutching me like a clay doll… She seemed possessed" (16). Rabbo's massages only mask but do not cure the deeper need; Begum Jaan's spiritual yearning cannot be satisfied with ritual alone. This itch becomes a signifier of a yearning for transcendence, desire is rendered "forbidden" because it threatens the symbolic function her body performs within the patriarchal household.

Sedgwick argues that knowledge about sexuality is not simply divided into what is said and unsaid but actually, the unsaid structures the meaning of what is known (Sedgwick 3). Because the child narrator cannot name what she witnesses, she produces a space where the reader must decode a sacred mystery rather than observe a scandal. Post-structuralist theory also clarifies why the domestic setting is not merely a backdrop but a performative stage, where Begum Jaan's role as a respectable wife is itself a performance. Her marriage to the nawab is not the natural centre of domestic intimacy but a social arrangement which produces the illusion of heteronormativity while displacing desire elsewhere. The quilt, meant to signify privacy and modesty, becomes instead the medium through which an alternative form of embodied truth is enacted.

Importantly, this queer truth is not framed as purely erotic. It carries spiritual weight because it is produced in a world where institutional religion and patriarchal morality have failed to offer Begum Jan emotional care. The rituals of prayer and fasting in Lihaaf appear less as sources of transcendence than as disciplinary technologies that deny the body's needs. Against this denial, queer intimacy becomes a counter-ritual: a practice of warmth, repetition, and comfort that resembles devotion. Chughtai thus relocates the sacred from institutional morality to affective survival, suggesting that what society calls "sin" may, for the marginalized subject, function as the only remaining form of spiritual sustenance.

## IV. COMPARATIVE READING: VUONG AND EMEZI

Chughtai's silent narrative, which refuses confession as a privileged mode of truth and relocates meaning instead onto domestic objects and rituals, anticipates a queer aesthetic which shows silence not as a form of repression but as a form of narrative-making. This is precisely what Ocean Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous uses, fragmented epistolary lyricism where the novel written as a letter to a mother who cannot read, posits the impossibility of direct communication. Vuong writes, "I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (3). He also treats language itself as a ritual, where writing is framed as a devotional act. The novel's epigraph—"using these words as a little plot of land… I can build you a center"—though attributed to Qiu Miaojin rather than Vuong himself, nonetheless sets this devotional tone for the entire text (Vuong, epigraph). Like Chughtai's quilt, which creates a private sacred space, the language becomes a sacred enclosure allowing forbidden feelings to survive.

Akwaeke Emezi's Freshwater extends this logic further by collapsing the boundary between flesh and spirit altogether. Where Chughtai's quilt functions as a liminal threshold between bodily desire and metaphysical meaning, Emezi's narrative literalizes spiritual multiplicity within the body, refusing the Western binary that separates sexuality from sacred experience. In both writers, queer embodiment becomes a metaphysical event; the body is not merely biological but an archive of longing, trauma, and spiritual reorientation.

## V. CONCLUSION

To read Lihaaf only as a story of forbidden sexuality is to miss its more unsettling proposition, that the sacred does not always reside in sanctioned rituals, but often in what society refuses to name. Chughtai's narrative forces a confrontation with the instability of moral categories, purity and impurity,

devotion and desire, sin and survival, by locating truth in the very space that patriarchal order attempts to erase. What emerges is not a confessional narrative of queerness, but a critique of the cultural systems that demand confession in the first place. In refusing clarity, Chughtai insists that silence is not absence but presence, an ethics, a strategy, and a form of knowledge. Her work therefore opens a wider literary and theoretical horizon, where queer intimacy is not positioned against spirituality but becomes one of its most enduring, if unsettling, expressions.

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