



Beneath the Quilt: ‘Internal Drives’ – A Socio-Cultural Deliberation of Ismat Chughtai’s “Lihaaf”

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Abstract— *Ismat Chughtai’s Lihaaf (The Quilt, 1942) holds a radical place in the literary canon. Lihaaf explains beyond its description of hidden sexual desires to function as an essential linguistic and cultural text that challenges and undermines the patriarchal society and systems of its historical period while maintaining relevance for modern society. The work functions as a social artefact that showcases both the power of spoken language and the significance of silence. The combination of metaphors and social codes reveals the hidden desires and gender-based power structures present in Muslim upper-class families during the time of British rule in India. Chughtai’s deliberate choice of a child narrator, together with her use of silence codes from different cultures, enables readers to explore hidden material which transforms Lihaaf into a work that reveals and defines itself. The study examines how Chughtai’s story reveals the limitations of acceptable speech that people considered acceptable, leading to a powerful yet concealed feminine desire in a society where language functions as both a weapon and a limiting force.*



Keywords— *Ismat Chughtai, Lihaaf, Feminine Desire, Patriarchal Society, Silence and Language*

I. INTRODUCTION

The first publication of Ismat Chughtai's work *Lihaaf* occurred in 1942 at a time when Indian society faced dual challenges because colonial powers imposed their rule while complex systems of male dominance controlled social life. The narrative that Chughtai created established new boundaries that focused on how writers could create functional and fictional representations of women's physical and psychological states. The Muslim household setting in *Lihaaf* serves as the foundation for a thorough understanding of gender-based double standards, which demonstrate how societal expectations defined women's physical appearance, romantic needs and personal choices.

This story led to an obscenity trial, which became a public event that demonstrated the very matters which *Lihaaf* intended to disclose. Chughtai used her writing to show resistance against authority because she declared in her memoir that "*My pen is my own; it will not be silenced.*" The statement functions as a personal dedication which she used to develop her political resistance against attempts that wanted to force her to become a submissive follower..

Chughtai used the opportunity to assert that women's personal experiences and needs, and their emotional responses, should receive recognition as legitimate elements that should be portrayed in literature. The process enabled her to create a pathway that upcoming authors could use to display complex gender and sexual themes that exist throughout South Asian written works.

II. CULTURAL CONTEXT AND THE FEMININE SPACE

Chughtai sharpens this critique through her description of Begum Jan as “a picture of elegance and loneliness... like a discarded painting on the wall” (Chughtai, 2009, p. 6). The metaphor of the *discarded painting* is especially telling: Begum Jan is beautiful, valuable, and visibly present, yet fundamentally irrelevant to the rhythms of household life. Her elegance is rendered static, aestheticised, and ultimately inert, suggesting that patriarchal culture prefers women as decorative objects rather than desiring subjects. The *zenana* thus becomes a physical manifestation of emotional

abandonment—a place where women are kept, but not cared for.

Set within the **zenana**, the secluded women's quarters of an upper-class Muslim household, *Lihaaf* situates its critique of patriarchy in a space traditionally imagined as safe, protected, and respectable—but which Chughtai exposes as emotionally stifling and socially punitive. The zenana, ostensibly created to preserve women's honour, operates in the story as a zone of **architectural confinement**, where movement, interaction, and even desire are regulated. The Nawab's indifference intensifies this sense of entrapment. His refusal to acknowledge Begum Jan's physical or emotional needs is framed not as cruelty but as an accepted masculine privilege; his nocturnal pursuits outside the marriage raise no questions, while Begum Jan's unmet desires are treated as embarrassing, even dangerous. In this asymmetry, Chughtai reveals the **gendered double standard of desire**: male sexuality is granted freedom, mobility, even social legitimacy, whereas female sexuality is either denied or pathologised. Begum Jan's yearning becomes "monstrous" only because society cannot imagine women as autonomous beings with legitimate bodily needs.

Within this cloistered environment, Begum Jan's loneliness becomes not an incidental detail but a direct consequence of the cultural logic that keeps women hidden away while granting men near-total social mobility. It is within this tightly controlled cultural and spatial order that Begum Jan turns toward Rabbo, her masseuse and servant. Their bond is not depicted simply as a scandalous departure from heteronormative expectations, but as a **pragmatic, tender, and deeply human response** to deprivation. By locating this relationship in the shadows of the zenana, Chughtai exposes how the very architecture meant to enforce normative femininity inadvertently cultivates alternative forms of intimacy. Begum Jan's reliance on Rabbo thus becomes both an act of survival and a quiet rebellion against the structures that have denied her companionship, pleasure, and dignity.

Through this intimate yet subversive relationship, Chughtai demonstrates that desire does not vanish simply because society forbids it; rather, it reshapes itself in the spaces where women are left to negotiate their own emotional lives. The feminine space of the zenana, far from being a passive backdrop, becomes a **site where power, repression, and resistance converge**, revealing the cracks in a patriarchal system that seeks to contain women both physically and emotionally.

III. THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

This narrative technique also reveals the **linguistic limitations** that structure the child's observations. Because she has no words—socially sanctioned or otherwise—to describe the intimacy between Begum Jan and Rabbo, the narrator resorts to sensory impressions: shadows, movements, sounds. The absence of naming becomes a form of commentary: if the narrator cannot name what she sees, it is because the culture around her refuses to provide the language to do so. Thus, Chughtai uses the child's voice to expose the **semantic void** surrounding queer female desire in South Asian literary and social discourse.

The narrative voice of *Lihaaf* is deliberately entrusted to a young girl, a choice that allows Chughtai to explore taboo subjects through a linguistic register that is simultaneously innocent and deeply revealing. The child narrator's limited vocabulary and incomplete understanding become narrative strategies that allow Chughtai to describe a forbidden intimacy without ever naming it—thus evading both the moral censorship of her time and the lexical constraints of Urdu, which lacked socially acceptable terms for female same-sex desire.

The girl's confusion is vividly illustrated when she observes the strange movement of the quilt: "I was scared stiff. In the darkness, the quilt was once again swinging like an elephant" (Chughtai, 2009, p. 11). What an adult might interpret as unmistakably erotic is refracted through the child's imagination as something both fantastical and frightening. The metaphor of the "elephant" underscores her inability to comprehend the bodily actions beneath the quilt; it transforms the sexual into the surreal. Chughtai uses this gap between perception and reality to illuminate how patriarchal cultures depend on silence and euphemism to obscure women's desires, especially those that do not conform to heterosexual norms.

Furthermore, the use of a child narrator complicates the moral dynamics of the text. The narrator's innocence prevents her from imposing adult judgments; instead, she relays events with a directness that strips away socially constructed shame. As literary critic Ruth Vanita observes, "the child narrator is not naïve but serves to expose the limits of adult hypocrisy" (Vanita, 2002). The young girl inadvertently reveals more about the adults' secrecy, suppression, and contradictions than any omniscient narrator could. Her confusion highlights the absurdity of a society that polices women's desires while leaving its children to parse unspoken truths through gestures and shadows.

In this way, Chughtai transforms the child's perspective into a **linguistic mediating device**, one that reveals not only the

contours of Begum Jan and Rabbo's relationship but also the cultural structures that make such a relationship unspeakable. The narrator's innocence becomes a powerful tool: it allows Chughtai to critique gender, sexuality, and censorship precisely by showing how these forces fracture language itself.

IV. METAPHOR, SILENCE, AND THE UNSAID

Lihaaf uses its poetic development to create controlled language which establishes its meaning through indirect references that use symbols and sensory confusion. The particular way Chughtai writes her work is not just an artistic decision because it establishes her political position. Through her use of metaphor to express desire she develops a story that communicates through indirect methods while showing partial information. The quilt named lihaaf serves as the story's primary metaphorical element. The narrator uses the quilt's movements and textures and shapes to display his erotic experiences which he cannot understand or explain because of his cultural background. The narrator describes the quilt swaying movement in the first moment which leads to his shrieking when Begum Jan covers his mouth (Chughtai, 2009, p. 12). The quilt sways because it indicates hidden physical presence; however the action of Begum Jan silencing the child shows how society maintains control over women's private matters. At this moment speech becomes dangerous because it becomes impossible to speak.

Critics such as Priya Kumar have argued that "Chughtai's story articulates a queer semiotics—where touch, glance, and metaphor replace direct expression" (Kumar, 2011, p. 38). This insight underscores how *Lihaaf* operates through a language of indirection, in which meaning is generated not through explicit depiction but through the interplay of bodily gestures, shifting shadows, and the materiality of domestic objects. The quilt functions as a semiotic surface upon which forbidden desire is projected. It becomes a substitute for unsayable acts, a screen that both protects and betrays.

More than a symbol, the quilt is a *dynamic agent* within the text. Its movements mark the presence of desire that cannot be voiced, and its opacity embodies the social constraints that force women's experiences into silence. Through the quilt, Chughtai renders visible the rhythm of intimacy while still concealing its details, thereby critiquing a cultural regime that demands invisibility even as it produces the very desires it attempts to suppress. The quilt's dual role—shielding what occurs beneath it while simultaneously exposing that something is indeed occurring—captures the paradox at the heart of Chughtai's narrative: desire thrives in the spaces where language fails.

In transforming an everyday household object into a vessel of encoded sexuality, Chughtai exposes the limits of social propriety and linguistic convention. The quilt becomes a site where censorship, pleasure, and imagination converge, allowing *Lihaaf* to speak boldly from behind a veil of metaphor. It is through this careful negotiation of visibility and concealment that the story crafts its enduring critique of gender, sexuality, and the cultural politics of silence.

V. LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Chughtai's use of the Urdu language—traditionally associated with romanticism, refined sentiment, and a carefully policed moral decorum—to convey a subversive tale of queer desire is itself a linguistic rebellion. By choosing a literary register that had long been shaped by courtly love poetry and patriarchal norms, she exposes the tension between what Urdu was expected to represent and what it could, in fact, be made to reveal. Her idiomatic choices, which weave together everyday colloquialisms with moments of lyrical intensity, create a layered narrative voice that feels simultaneously intimate and disruptive. This stylistic blending not only heightens the story's emotional resonance but also enables Chughtai to cloak radical critique within seemingly innocuous, even playful, language.

Through this hybrid style, Chughtai sidesteps the limitations imposed by both literary tradition and colonial-era censorship, using Urdu's richness to gesture toward what cannot be stated outright. The text's suggestive metaphors, symbolic imagery, and strategic ambiguity become tools of resistance—ways to speak the unspeakable while exposing the hypocrisies that governed conversations about gender, sexuality, and respectability. Her linguistic maneuvers reveal how language itself can be mobilized to challenge social norms: the very cadences meant to uphold modesty become vehicles for unveiling forbidden intimacies.

The obscenity trial that followed *Lihaaf*'s publication demonstrates just how profoundly such linguistic freedom unsettled the authorities of the time. The courtroom became a stage for society's anxieties about women's voices, bodily autonomy, and sexual knowledge, and the outrage directed at Chughtai showed that it was not merely the story's implications but her audacity in *writing* them—in Urdu, no less—that provoked discomfort. Even decades later, when Chughtai reflected on the controversy, she understood the political stakes of her craft. "If writing is a crime," she asserted, "then I accept the punishment with pride" (Chughtai, 2009). With this declaration, she reaffirmed her belief in literature as an act of defiance and in language as a

space where silenced experiences could be reclaimed and made visible.

VI. CONCLUSION

Lihaaf endures not merely as a story of illicit love but as a layered socio-linguistic text that dismantles the structures that have historically muted women's voices and desires. Its power lies in how it uses narrative technique, metaphor, and cultural context to foreground the very mechanisms of silence that shape women's lives. Chughtai does not simply portray subversive desire; she demonstrates how language itself—its gaps, evasions, and coded gestures—becomes both a prison and a site of resistance for women seeking to articulate experiences deemed unspeakable.

The story's reliance on metaphor and sensory suggestion is crucial in this regard. The iconic image of the *lihaaf*, or quilt, becomes more than a coverlet obscuring bodies; it symbolizes the layers of secrecy imposed on female desire in patriarchal society. This metaphorical strategy allows Chughtai to represent queer sexuality without naming it, revealing how women often resort to symbolic or indirect expression because direct articulation is socially forbidden. The quilt's movements, shadows, and distortions become a language in themselves—a visual grammar of desire that exceeds the boundaries of permissible speech.

The child narrator further complicates this linguistic terrain. Her naïve observations expose not only the story's events but also the cultural frameworks that train women into silence. What the child cannot understand—or is not allowed to understand—mirrors what society refuses to articulate. Through this carefully chosen narrative voice, Chughtai underscores how language and knowledge are policed from childhood onward, shaping the limits of what women may see, say, or even imagine.

Culturally, the story situates itself at the intersection of domesticity, respectability, and erotic undercurrents that remain unspoken but palpable. By disrupting the genteel veneer associated with middle-class Muslim households, Chughtai forces the reader to confront the contradictions between public morality and private longing. This cultural framing shows that silence itself is ideological: it maintains patriarchal control by erasing women's autonomy and censoring expressions of non-normative sexuality.

In challenging both linguistic structures and societal norms, *Lihaaf* becomes a foundational text in feminist and queer literary discourse—not simply because it depicts queer desire, but because it interrogates the very systems that prohibit such depictions. Chughtai's narrative strategy anticipates later feminist critiques of language as a tool of power, revealing how women writers must invent new

forms of expression to articulate experiences that dominant discourse excludes. The story endures as a testament to how literature can expose, subvert, and ultimately reimagine the social and linguistic frameworks that constrain women's lives.

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