



International Research Journal of Humanities, Language and Literature

Volume 5, Issue 1, January 2018 Impact Factor 5.401 ISSN: (2394-1642)

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Unveiling the Quilt: Ismat Chughtai, Queer Identities, and Resistance in Indian Literature

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Abstract

The term 'queer' carries a distinct resonance, encompassing individuals whose sexual orientations exist beyond the conventional heterosexual norms. This umbrella term includes lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender individuals, whose presence has been historically marginalized within heteronormative societies. This article seeks to explore the evolution of queer identity, the enduring struggles faced by queer individuals across generations, culminating in the emergence of the queer movement in the late twentieth century, notably in the United States. Additionally, it emphasizes the representation of queer individuals in Indian Literature and their acceptance, with a particular focus on Ismat Chughtai's renowned short story, *Lihaaf*. The story's controversial nature stems from its portrayal of the homoerotic relationship between the female protagonist, Begum Jan, and her husband, Nawab Sahib, a fact that remains prominent throughout the narrative.

Keywords- Queer Theory, Patriarchy, Heteronormativity, Discrimination, Feminism

Introduction

Literature and society share a complex and interconnected relationship, much like two facets of a single entity. Society, as a concrete construct, is reflected in literature, which acts as a mirror for its dynamics. Literary works often capture the unfolding events in society, presenting them artistically. Like a canvas, a literary composition offers a cross-sectional portrayal of societal realities, weaving together cultural elements, myths, traditions, and ways

of life. These themes and motifs in literature not only mirror real-life events but also encapsulate a society's cultural essence. Literature provides insight into the attitudes, mental frameworks, and biases present in a society, aiding in understanding diverse cultures and societies.

Furthermore, literature has faced criticism when it incorporated elements considered morally questionable or licentious. Readers and audiences often saw this as harmful or substandard. However, these literary works merely reflected evolving cultural norms, highlighting a disconnect within society. Unethical conduct became more pervasive, challenging the established order.

Similarly, marginalized communities, including queer individuals, have struggled with societal constraints rooted in entrenched patriarchal norms. Positioned outside the mainstream, sexual minorities often encounter stigmatization and are labeled as deviant, afflicted, or absurd. Their identities and practices are seen as abnormal compared to traditional constructs of gender and sexuality. Despite their historical presence in society, they have remained marginalized. Queer individuals, like other marginalized groups, have used literature to express resilience and resistance.

Queer theory, an academic discipline, explores the socio-cultural and political implications of non-normative gender and sexual identities. Emerging in the latter part of the 20th century, it challenges the limitations of traditional approaches to gender and sexuality studies, which often adhere to binary and essentialist paradigms. Drawing from various academic fields, including literature, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, queer theory emphasizes the socially constructed nature of gender and sexuality, influenced by power dynamics and cultural norms. A key concept is 'queerness,' which encompasses any identity or expression differing from dominant gender and sexual norms. Queer theory stresses the importance of recognizing and appreciating the diversity of non-normative identities and experiences, challenging the perception of gender and sexuality as fixed and natural.

The acronym LGBTQA+ encompasses Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, and Asexual or Ally, representing a diverse community and its allies. Lesbian refers to women attracted to other women, while Gay pertains to men with similar attractions. Bisexual includes individuals attracted to both their gender and other genders. Transgender describes those with gender identities differing from their assigned sex. Queer or Questioning describes non-heterosexual individuals who may not align with specific labels. Asexual

characterizes those who lack sexual attraction, and Ally denotes supporters of the LGBTQ+ community. This acronym recognizes the spectrum of identities within the community, promoting inclusivity and acceptance.

Queer theory explores intersections between gender, sexuality, and other social dimensions, such as race, class, and ability, emphasizing 'intersectionality.' It distinguishes between 'sex' (biological attributes) and 'gender' (socially constructed roles). Gender is multifaceted, while sex is typically binary. Queer theory delves into sexual identity, a personal perception of sexual attraction and behaviour. It encompasses various orientations, challenging discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Queer theory builds on post-structuralism and deconstruction theory, challenging established norms and emphasizing fluidity and diversity in human experiences. It introduces 'performativity,' a concept by Judith Butler, to question traditional understandings of gender and sexuality prevalent in various cultures.

Ismat Chughtai, a pioneering figure in the world of Urdu literature, stands as a beacon of literary courage and progressive thought. Born on August 21, 1915, in Badayun, Uttar Pradesh, India, she emerged as a prominent writer whose works challenged societal norms and confronted deeply ingrained taboos. Ismat Chughtai's literary journey spans a period of immense transformation, encompassing the pre-independence and post-independence eras in India. Her unique storytelling style and unwavering commitment to addressing issues related to gender, sexuality, and social injustice have solidified her position as a trailblazer in South Asian literature. Her narratives resonate with a powerful feminist voice, fearlessly advocating for women's rights, self-expression, and autonomy within a predominantly conservative and patriarchal society. Throughout her illustrious career, she authored numerous short stories, novels, and essays that delved into the complex web of human relationships, shedding light on the emotional and psychological dimensions often overlooked in traditional literature. As a writer unafraid to confront societal prejudices and censorship, Ismat Chughtai's literary contributions not only challenged the status quo but also sparked important discussions on the role of women in society, the stifling effects of societal norms, and the boundaries of freedom of expression. Her seminal work, "Lihaaf" (The Quilt), brought her both acclaim and controversy, as it openly explored themes of female desire and homoeroticism, igniting debates about sexual freedom and censorship in literature. Chughtai's legacy endures as an inspiration to generations of writers and readers alike. Her writings continue to provoke thought, challenge conventions, and advocate for social change.

Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" narrates an intimate relationship between two women, a story that carries implicit autobiographical undertones as it draws from Chughtai's own life experiences. During her childhood, Chughtai encountered a similar situation, much like the young narrator in her story, where she grappled with the incomprehensible nature of such intimacy. Published in 1942, a period during which Victorian England and its colonial extensions predominantly regarded queerness as a form of perversion, the narrative reflects the prevailing societal attitudes of that era. Her portrayal of queerness in "Lihaaf" is influenced by the so-called Victorian morality, which, at the time, cast a critical eye on non-normative sexual orientations. Consequently, her stance towards queer individuals within the story may not be characterized as sympathetic, aligning with the societal norms and values of her contemporary context. However, it is essential to delve deeper into the nuances of Chughtai's narrative to gain a comprehensive understanding of her perspectives on queerness.

The narrative of "Lihaaf" centres around Begum Jan, who is married to a Nawab belonging to an aristocratic household. Their marital union is far from harmonious, primarily due to the Nawab's preoccupation with young boys to the detriment of his relationship with his wife. Within the context of the heteronormative societal norms of the time, the Nawab views Begum Jan primarily as a possession. According to these norms, his sole responsibility towards her is to ensure her material comfort, while her emotional and psychological needs remain largely unaddressed. In essence, she is left to languish in isolation, akin to his other possessions, ensnared within the intricate web of conventional matrimony. Begum Jan's life is marked by profound sorrow and subjugation, as Nawab Sahib displays minimal interest in her, reducing her to a mere societal emblem that conforms to heteronormative expectations. Over time, he appears to forget her very existence in his life. Intriguingly, Nawab introduces obstacles into Begum Jan's life when she endeavours to visit her relatives, showcasing his control within the marriage.

However, Ismat Chughtai does not depict Begum Jan as a submissive and docile character. Instead, Chughtai endows her with remarkable strength, enabling her to emancipate herself from the patriarchal constraints that bind her. Begum Jan defies the archetype of the Victorian 'angel of the house,' characterized by passivity, meekness, and helplessness. Instead, she aspires to embody the spirit of Medusa, a figure who commands her own destiny. When Nawab neglects her, Begum Jan explores her own sexual desires, finding fulfilment through Rabba's sensual massages. Unlike women trapped in the regressive customs of patriarchal institutions like marriage, where they often experience victimization, Begum Jan

transforms into a new woman who seizes her sexual liberation, capitalizing on the opportunities afforded by her isolated environment.

Nawab's indifference to visiting the place results in its symbolic sterility, despite it traditionally signifying femininity. This locale subsequently transforms into a space where Begum Jan's unfulfilled sexual desires find an outlet, converting the zenana into a queer space wherein women's suppressed desires emerge. These desires, typically forbidden for women, find their expression hidden under a veil of guilt. This guilt assumes significance as a symbol for concealing these forbidden desires, underscoring how patriarchal society restricts the expression of female sexuality. Furthermore, the government extends censorship even to queer individuals, discarding the existence of lesbian identity.

The concept of the 'quilt' metaphorically represents female homosexuality, a theme deftly employed by Chughtai. Additionally, Chughtai employs the image of an elephant to create confusion in the mind of the young narrator, symbolizing the broader societal confusion surrounding homosexuality during that era. However, this metaphorical expression of female homoeroticism had profound repercussions for Chughtai, leading her into a courtroom battle. It exemplifies how the manifestation of queer love posed a significant threat to women in a hegemonic society, overshadowing concerns related to male homosexuality.

Throughout the narrative, it becomes evident that Begum Jan's homosexual relationship with Rabba is viewed with far more concern and scrutiny than Nawab Saheb's homoerotic associations with young boys. Consequently, Nawab Saheb's homosexual interactions are strategically concealed to align with the perspective of a heteronormative society. Chughtai's narrative unravels the hypocrisy and pretentiousness that underpin the religious rituals of the bourgeois male-dominated society, which ostensibly symbolize piety but are fraught with contradictions and concealments.

Ismat Chughtai holds a pivotal role in the evolution of Urdu literature, contributing significantly to its development. Her willingness to openly address topics such as female sexuality and the emotional and psychological needs of women, often considered taboo, particularly within middle-class Muslim households, sets her apart from other writers who shy away from such subjects. As a feminist writer, Chughtai boldly delves into the themes of women's self-dependency and liberty, shedding light on the multifaceted oppressions that patriarchal society imposes upon women in her stories.

Despite her portrayal of homoerotic relationships in a somewhat heteronormative manner within the short story "Lihaaf", it emerges as a revolutionary narrative that firmly

establishes Chughtai as the most courageous, rebellious, and controversial figure in Urdu literature. Throughout her body of work, Chughtai unveils the concealed truths about women's bodies, truths that remained hidden in a male-dominated society. By vividly articulating female desires in her storytelling, Chughtai disrupts the socially constructed and civilized world of gendered behaviour, creating a tempest of thought and discourse in the process.

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