

Positioning self in the society: An analysis of Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (The Quilt)

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Abstract

Over the decades, the concept of homosexuality has amassed abundant debate but it failed to establish itself as a rigid identity. The voices of the homosexuals remained unheard until recent times. The society hesitated to embrace them and strategically camouflaged their identity by torturing them with customs or emotions. Adhering to the theme of representing the subaltern, this paper is an attempt to read in between the lines of the short story *Lihaaf* (*The Quilt*) by Ismat Chughtai and sense the blooming same sex relationship of a woman. Through the protagonist Begum Jaan, Chughtai directs towards the crucial components of life i.e. the society and the self. As the story progresses, she discovers two important facets of her life - her husband's interest in men and her in women. Often it is the society's pressure which keeps the person away from embracing his or her sexuality. Its hostility towards them and their perpetual practice of subordinating the self to please the society later influences them to trespass the social periphery. Drawing primarily on Bakhtin's "Carnavalesque" which depicts the reversal of power structure, Begum Jaan rises from the position of a mere showpiece to a powerful dominant entity. She annihilates the societal norms and satisfies her palette of trapped desires. Moreover the paper strives to substantiate Butler's theory of performativity and subversion of identity, Foucault's "Heterotopia" and Sedgwick's forwardings in her book *Epistemology of Closet* to further explore the various stigmas related to homosexuality. The paper offers to address the concept of the self in terms of a wife and a lesbian who glorifies her identity despite of living in a conventional patriarchal society. It eventually mediates the idea of reconstructing self and condemning the stereotypical identity imposed by the society. The study raises questions on the society which plays vital role in subjugating women and homosexuals by denying them basic rights.

Keywords: *Gender, Homosexuality, Identity, Self, Society*

Introduction

Ismat Chughtai is considered to be one of the most prominent personalities of the Urdu literature. Her works basically reflect her concerns with women and the Indian society. She is entitled as an iconic writer who approached women issues with ease during the pre-partition India when women hardly had any significant role to play in the society. She wisely caricatured her characters keeping the central idea in mind and seasoned them in her stories. During the initial years of her writing itself she forayed into a forbidden territory with her short story *Lihaaf* (*The Quilt*). It was published in 1942 in *Adab-i-Latif*, an Urdu Journal. The literal meaning of *Lihaaf* is a cover

or blanket but in Chughtai's context her path breaking short story underlined major tabooed issues which brews around a woman and ultimately compels her to transgress the patriarchal terrain and liberate herself. The story carried an explicit description of a same sex relationship enveloped in a sober mood which directly caused ripples of chaos in the society. As an outcome of her dare, Chughtai was charged with obscenity but her art of concealing her epistle under a thin layer of sophistication made the government dismiss the trial. Thereafter her writings came under the surveillance of the society. She garnered fame but that never equalled to a male writer. Her

writings were crisp and relatable. The richness she infuses in her writings made her a pioneer of Urdu Literature.

Objectives

- To study the undertones of homosexuality.
- To study the character of Begum Jaan and analyse her rise .
- To use literary theory to further discuss the positioning of woman in the society and the society's attitude towards homosexuality

Methodology

The short story is examined critically and a close reading of the characters is done to further analyse their agonies. The secondary sources such as books, journals, pdf have been considered for the research.

Discussion

The story introduces us to Begum Jaan the woman around whom Chughtai weaves a beautiful narrative of pain, pleasure, desire and liberation. The entire narrative is documented through the eyes of a child. Born in a poor family Begum Jaan's parents married her off to an affluent Nawab who was well known for his virtuous nature. He gave her his name but never his time. He spent most of his time lurking around young boys. The Begum sensed her husband's weakness for the same sex and slowly withdraws herself from her hopes of carnal pleasures. She moves into a state of despair. She felt her position in the house was reduced to a mere piece of showpiece lying in a dark corner of the massive house. She was losing herself when Rabbo, her masseuse appeared for her rescue. Under the quilt, they conspired a bond of desire. They were completely opposite to each other but the string of need interlaced them into delving deeper into each other's desires. The narrator even describes situations when the absence of Rabbo made Begum Jaan hysteric. As the story unfurls their romantic relationship encompasses various disciplines of life. Chughtai hints towards the pain of a married woman who longs for her husband on her bed but he never arrives to dispose her desires.

Like any other young woman, Begum Jaan's dreams of a happy married life but it shatters with the Nawab's ignorance. This points towards a completely perplexed side of a society where the woman is conditioned with the idea of submitting herself to the claws of a man. Infact the Nawab's character was embellished with phrases like "...he was very virtuous. Noone had ever seen a nautch girl or prostitute in his house. He had performed Haj and helped several others to do it" but his obsession with young boys was culminated into an umbrella term of hobby. She tries out ways to lure him but her efforts seemed to remain fruitless. He "tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her". Begum remained a prized possession in the heteronormative system. Chughtai mentions "one cannot draw blood from a stone" which denotes the Nawab's disinterest in her. Therefore, she strolled into other mediums such as books but how will a book quench her thirst for physical needs? She was neither allowed to go out nor she could speak to anyone about her agonies. Even though the Nawab had a same sex affinity his facade of the pretentious righteous man kept him above all whereas Begum Jaan had to undergo humungous amount of internal turmoil pertinent to the society. The Nawab built an invisible fence around Begum Jaan which tried to captivate her. This inequality in marriage sowed the impetus of a ventilation and with the advent of Rabbo, that wall collapsed. Rabbo replaced the Nawab in Begum's life hence satiating her taste for desire. Her lonely nights of desolation turned into passionate nights of self discoveries with Rabbo by her side. The homoerotic relationship kept her sane.

The transition of Begum Jaan from a submissive woman cocooned in a shell to a woman who crosses the boundaries laid by the society and her husband, the germination of a new woman is traced. Mikhail Bakhtin's *Carnavalesque in Rabelais and his world* posits the voice of individuals providing new perspective to things. In case of Begum Jaan, she escapes the boredom and embraces utopia. Her voice gets a platform. Her silent wails turn into orgasmic whispers. Bakhtin's proposition of carnival as a second life of the people against dominant social ideologies created a ripple of joy for the people who

condemned their repressed identity and embraced liberty. Similarly, Begum Jaan's voice as a new bride longing for her husband gets confined but with Rabbo that dead voice rises. A complete reversal of power and hierarchy can be seen. By staying within the periphery of marriage, she crosses her limits and discovers solace outside her marriage. The lesbian relationship came with a voice of rebel and justice. Discussing the various labyrinth of Begum Jaan, this paper draws parallel to the socially constructed rules which damages the existence of woman. Considering Judith Butler's theory of subversion of identity in *Gender*

Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of Identity (1990) in which she states that "gender is socially constructed rather than innate and that conventional notion of gender and sexuality serve to perpetuate the traditional domination of women by men and to justify the oppression of homosexuals and transgender persons". Drawing from this theory, Begum Jaan's woes had similar connotations she was married off not asked to marry, the perpetual marginalization of the women is particularly stated in Butler's theory of performativity where she disseminates the idea of gendered acts which gradually moulds the identity of a person. From the simple act of teaching a girl the necessity of cooking skills to serving a glass of water to a boy everything about the society is biased. The society simply refuses to bend its rules for a girl child. The phallogocentric society purposely follows the sick practices and sabotages women. Woman appears vulnerable and easily gullible for the monsters of the society. Overall the homoerotic relationship acts as a way for her to reclaim her identity. She rediscovers herself through the eyes of Rabbo. For too long she was trapped under cruel stereotypes.

The depiction of the same sex relationship entrusts a sense of liberation to the characters. Begum Jaan's claim to fame was evident in her change in mood "...Begum Jaan was oblivious to all this, cut off as she was from the world outside. Her existence was centred on herself and her itch". The itch obviously symbolises her internal urge for physical pleasure.

At a time when homosexuality was a taboo, Chughtai efficiently paints a world showing its birth in a patriarchal society. She points towards a prejudiced society which has no room to adjust a woman's woes. It is evident through the lines "...one didn't know when Begum Jaan's life began-whether it was when she committed the mistake of being born or when she came to the Nawab's house as his bride, climbed the four poster bed and started counting her days". In fact a woman is conditioned to tolerate and absorb. Begum Jaan's relationship with Rabbo to some extent is the aftermath of her tragedy. Releasing herself from the custody of the society where her voice was suppressed, her entity was marginalized and victimised she moves from the phase of being an object to subject. In *Epistemology Of The Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers ways to define "closet" which clearly implies to the gender orientation and discovery of one's own sexuality. In fact Sedgwick proposed two ways to understand them: minoritizing view and universalising view. In the former there exist a distinct group who defines them as gay and in the latter the desire is fluid.

Another important theory "heterotopia" propounded by Michel Foucault discusses the way in which the surrounding spaces of a person contribute to the reduction of one's autonomy and formation of identity. He describes the physical and non-physical spaces which encapsulate a subject's growth. Begum Jaan's condition was similar to Foucault's theory. Her spaces included her parental house, her husband's house which kept her as a prisoner. Her hopes and aspirations were diminishing under the control of her responsibilities. But the phenomenon in which she emerges as a distinct identity with her own ideology marks her as a significant personality. She successfully breaks the societal norms for her own happiness emerging as self. The self is actually important for any individual to survive.

As the story progresses, it unfolds the various facets of Begum Jaan. Her dominance over Rabbo, obsession with the narrator and tactics of deriving pleasure bring forth her latent side. Begum Jaan gets a grip of her falling life. The

cunning ways in which she entices the narrator with the promises of gifts embodies her self love. Her physical needs completely cripples her mind. Wrapped in warm words lies her hunger. Through her, Chughtai unleashes abridged woman who finds her way to combat her sorrows. She chooses to decide rather than to follow decisions. Her contentment is evident in her expressions. She exhibits the role of a rebel somewhat who disapproves the role of a destitute woman. Her audacity to relish the prohibited with a gallant smirk undoubtedly elevates her position. She needn't wait for a man to extinguish her fancies. The meek, annoyed, docile bride of the house turns into a dictator of the house where her opinions at least on her bed mattered. Her husband's authority on her diminishes faintly. She is no more a piece of sympathy. She deliberately acquires the right over her life. She became an expert in eking out love and warmth. The shift in her positions pinpoints the slight difference between acceptance and refusal. Either her blossoming love or her relationship of need compelled her to love without condition and materialism. She forged her way to escape the chaos.

Conclusion

In this study, a poignant picture of a stereotypical Indian society is established where a woman is kept devoid of the respect and position she deserves. The analysis revolves around a conservative muslim household where patriarchy is invincible. The misogynistic society usually dictates the life of a woman under the veneer of protecting her. Women are exploited and judged at every step. The literal Lihaaf here is the lihaaf of respect which the society forces a woman to wear as a protection. The social humiliations often restrain a person from accepting their blessings as well as flaws. The story narrates an intense tale of hold or go. Begum Jaan surfaces as a strong lady who withstands the pain as well as dodges it away. Her submission to desire and pleasure justifies her agonies. Like any other young bride she arrived with hopes but the dysfunctional relationship entirely swallowed her dreams. Her days became longer and her night became the longest. It was her encounters with Rabbow which

made her a new woman and compelled her to embrace her femininity. Her new found lesbian relationship becomes the epicentre of her life giving it a meaning. She positioned herself above all. She became the voice and embraced her identity. Even though her same sex relationship brewed within the four walls of her closed bedroom. It provided an isolated space for their unfulfilled desires where they both melted into each other's arms caressing each other for hours. It illuminated the bond between two women Begum Jaan and Rabbow who reconstructed their identity and definition of femininity. Therefore, the main motive of the story to telecast the establishment of the women centric collage in a patriarchal society is justified. The male centric society is challenged and their rules are annihilated finally making way for the new women to rise and shine.

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