

## CHUGHTAI'S THE QUILT: A MIRROR OF TROUBLED SEXUALITY

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### ABSTRACT

*The objectives of this article is to find out the social struggle of Ismat Chughtai writing on such topics like queer, female loneliness and degradation in such a society of the 1940s South Asia where the mental construct was so much rigid that one couldn't even think of writing about such topics. Most importantly one should note the fact that she was not only a feminist writer but also belonged to the minority class.*

*It is a qualitative study on Chughtai's *The Quilt* or *Lihaaf* where the Eastern Urdu society has been immaculately depicted. The criticisms and controversies that ballooned up visibly presents the social attitude and finicky of the few advanced decades. The focal point of study was to bring forth the struggle of her writing on 'unusual' or severely disparaged relationship in a regressive society where norms like zenana are unquestionably prevalent. Writers like her with sheer aplomb trod upon the uncharted path which often lead to peril and alienation from the mainstream.*

*In the close reading of *The Quilt*, the perspective is to portray the psychological aspect of homosexuality and convey it through the logistics of theories. The lack of recognition within oneself and the unconscious degradation and loneliness have been the crucial pylons of my whole analysis.*

Keywords: Queer, *The Quilt* or *Lihaaf*, Zenana, Unconscious Degradation.

### • INTRODUCTION

We all are familiar to the word 'continuum'. Dictionaries define the word as 'A continuous non-spatial whole or extent or succession in which no part or portion is distinct or distinguishable from adjacent parts'. Homosexuality belongs to the main categories of sexual orientation where it is considered as the continuum of heterosexuality. It defines sexuality as a whole as in case of bisexuality and heterosexuality. Society gives several kinds of responses by accepting it or repressing it

through law enforcements and even prescribing death penalty. On the other side, scientific researches tell the other side of the story. Scientists do not view it as a choice, they believe that it is caused by a complex interplay of genetic, hormonal and social factors, though there is no proper evidence which suggests parenting or early childhood experiences playing a role in it. Researches have shown that in human sexuality homosexuality is a normal and natural variation, not a source of negative psychological effect. A very important fact that has been unknown or ignored in this case is that homosexual behavior has also been documented and observed in many non-human animal species. In a detailed compilation of historical and ethnographic materials of Preindustrial Cultures, “strong disapproval of homosexuality was reported for 41% of 42 cultures; it was accepted or ignored by 21% and 12% reported no such concept. Of 70 ethnographies, 59% reported homosexuality absent or rare in frequency and 41% reported it present or not uncommon.”

- **HISTORICAL AND MYTHICAL APPROACH**

History and myths tell completely a different story:

From the Vedic period (1500BC), running through the medieval (AD 8th- AD 18th) up to modern time and the complete establishment of British rule (AD 18th- AD 19th), numerous manifestations of sexuality can be read as ‘queer’.

--Ana Garcia-Arroyo,2010

Books and researches like Giti Thadani’s research (on *Rig Veda*), Vatsyayana’s *Kamasutra*, *Panchatantra*, Zwilling and Cabezon’s research (on Indian Buddhist Tradition) or the mystic homoerotic love in Sufism and the Ghazal give prominent references of the presence of homoerotic relationships in the past. For example, Thadani argues that the dual feminine deities or Dyava – one of the earliest cosmogonies represent a feminine twin union of sisters, lovers, mothers or any other kind of kinship. In *Rig Veda* the two feminine deities act as a pair of mothers, for example, “The Waters” have engendered Agni, the god of fire. Agni is the child of the waters but paradoxically he also seems to have created them. These feminine twins act as natural forces, as parent figures who protect humans and enjoy a renewable energy revolves, transforms itself and does not contemplate the idea of binary, polar or opposing energies but views it as cyclical. The *Kamasutra* also discusses some sexual behaviour, which some people

today could consider 'queer'. Vatsyayana speaks of men who indulge in oral sex, thus he hints at homosexuality, both in men and in women: "Even young men, servants / who wear polished earrings, / indulge in oral sex / only with certain men." As for *Panchatantra*, most of the friends in the stories are unmarried. Ruth Vanita remarks on the term 'vara' which means 'lover', 'husband' or 'the chosen one', used by the tortoise to refer to his male friend the crow. The monkey and the crocodile engage in conversation and eat juicy fruits, here a crocodile eating fruit is quite rare, and however, its symbolism speaks for the passion and emotion that they profess for each other. The crocodile's denial to fulfil his wife's desire makes the jealous wife accuse her husband for having a lover is put into such words:

Besides, if you do not love her, why not kill her when I ask you? And if it is really a he-monkey, why should you love him? Enough! Unless I eat his heart, I shall starve myself to death in your house. <sup>1</sup>

These quotations of the 4th book of *Panchatantra* are exemplary of the overwhelming and passionate love of the two male friends. Although these types of manifestations has been present, these readings are merely treated as 'divine stories of the gods', bit applicable to humans. Now if we return to the researches and studies of modern world there is a statistical establishment that '10 percent of the population of the USA, which can extensively be applicable to any other countries, are homosexuals.'<sup>2</sup>

- **CHUGHTAI AND SOCIETAL ATTITUDE**

In India, before the 1980s there was no such acceptance towards homosexuality. Some works were traced before the 80s on such issue but those were very few in number and treated as a taboo or criticized immensely. It was in the 80s when sexuality as a matter of 'identity' was forefronted for the first time. For example, *The Quilt or Lihaaf*, a short story first published in Urdu in 1942 by Ismat Chughtai, which will be discussed afterwards,

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<sup>1</sup> Ryder's translation of *Panchatantra*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925

<sup>2</sup> Kinsey's *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953)

introduced such kind of new 'identity' about lesbianism. Chughtai, a representative of the 1940s Eastern society, was a famous Indian writer in Urdu, her writings grab the attention of the readers for her outspoken and controversial style, her indomitable spirit and a fierce feminist ideology. Her writings reflect the society judged through the parameters of Indian patriarchy and raises questions against these dominant cultures. She shares her statures with contemporaries like Sadat Hasan Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander and so on. This rebel was born in 1911, at Badaun in Uttar Pradesh. She belonged to a large, relaxed family with an informal atmosphere, though the freedom was for the male members of the family. Being a girl member of the family as well as the ninth child she was treated with a heartbreaking indifference.

She had to struggle immensely for the education as her parents were not ready to allow her to stay on in a hostel as they had the conception that staying in a hostel 'would lead to the corruption of her morals.' For her outspoken and abrasive nature she was so hated and disliked that there was an extent when her mother started cursing herself for giving birth to such an evil daughter. All these things were mentioned in her books like *Kaghazi hai Pairahan* (her unfinished autobiography), *Childhood or Bachpan* (her short story). In most of her stories like *Tiny's Granny*, *Kafir*, *The Wedding Suit* and so on. She presented the double standard mentality in the largely feudal and patriarchal society she lived in and did everything to expose and subvert it. She was one of the Muslim partition writers who stayed in India after the partition occurred. In her own life she struggled fiercely for her own voice as well as in her married life. She married the famous screenwriter and film director Shaheed Latif and became the mother of two daughters and became a widow in 1967. It is prominent in *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* in which she presented these events in a fragmented or jagged way. There was always an urge to raise the voice of those Muslim women whose writings or debates were also remained in 'purdah' and this brings a motto of enlightenment:

Accounts of Muslim women's resistance from behind the purdah have not been fully recognized, and their contribution to education and social reform has not been accounted for. A too easy analytical conflation of subject hood and voice runs the danger of erasing or muting other narratives agency and resistance to patriarchal structures from behind the veil or less visible spheres. (Introduction, LW, 10)

- **STYLE / TREATMENT**

She uses the canvas of her short stories as the ‘social and cultural matrix’ as well as the psychic matrix. Many of her stories portray the conviction of the importance of sex, several facets of life and human situation of which she also deals with the hypocritical sexually oppressive society through the presentation of homosexuality and lesbianism with the help of a bold and innovative style. The controversies regarding her stories reached its peak after the publication of her story *Lihaaf* (The Quilt) where there was a depiction of female sexuality in a manner which was not even attempted before in modern Indian literature. Though the story does not make any direct reference to the same-sex relationships, but indications of such kind is present through the depiction of relationship between Begum Jaan and her maid Rabbu as well as Nawab’s homosexual exploits. This story is an expose, a tight slap to the oppressive politics of patriarchal set up which try to bind and restrain female sexuality by confining them within the zenana. The charges against this short story were the charges of obscenity and for this the author was summoned by the Lahore High Court in 1944 ‘to defend her motivation in writing something so palpably aimed at attacking the traditional Indian social fabric.’ In spite of all these allegations the story struggled to survive with its combination of ‘facetious and the serious.’

- **THE QUILT (LIHAAF): A CLOSE STUDY**

When one gives a close look to Ismat Chughtai’s *The Quilt*, one feels that the story unfolds several issues from beginning till the end. In 1941, when the story was published in a journal named *Adaab-i-Latif*, it instantly faces several striking controversies.

In the beginning, the story commences with the retention of a woman or girl about an incident she had experienced several years ago. Though it is not precisely mentioned that the female was a woman or a girl, but it can be assumed through the phrase ‘the labyrinths of times past’ that the girl has now become a lady. The incident was what the pubescent girl experienced while she came to stay with her aunt Begum Jaan: “Amma left me with Begum Jaan, the same lady whose quilt is etched in my memory like the scar left by a blacksmith’s hand (Chughtai 13).” Therefore, that incident of the quilt was so terribly imprinted in the little girl’s psyche, that even today as a

lady she was not able to forget it: “IN WINTER, WHEN I put a quilt over myself, its shadows on the wall seem to sway like an elephant (Chughtai 13).” The story depicts about Begum Jaan who in her ‘ripe years’ was married to Nawab Saheb who was ‘very virtuous’.

The character of Nawab Saheb is most of the time been overlooked but it has several hints leading to gay relationships. At the beginning of the story it was depicted that ‘no one had ever seen a nautch girl or prostitute in his house. He had performed hajj and helped several others undertake the holy pilgrimage (Chughtai 13).’ Therefore the absence of any heterosexual relationships became the determining factor of Nawab’s virtuosity. But in order to notice any presence of heterosexual relationships in Nawab’s life everyone overlooked the fact of having any other possibilities in his life. No one doubted under his virtuosity about the ‘open house’ he kept for students. The students were only boys who are young, fair and have slender waist. The possibility about the presence of any homosexual relationship with the boy was remained unnoticed as the people were more focused on the presence of any heterosexual relationship. The assumption of this homosexual or gay relationship of Nawab with other boys becomes utterly prominent of the fact of bearing their all expenses and the absence of any sexual relationship with Begum Jaan. He remains in the outer house and Begum Jaan in her zenana– both busy with their own world: “The nawab didn’t budge an inch.”

As for Begum Jaan, she was from the very first day of her marriage been realized as a commodity or the unwanted. Chughtai focuses on the institution of marriage and the economic enterprise regarding it where women are bought from their parents on the basis of their face and beauty and were reduced to commodities to only confine them. Here, Begum Jaan, unable to form any physical or psychological bond with her husband withdraws herself. Being constantly neglected by her husband and unable to communicate, she feels to be the ‘submissive’ or the ‘oppressed’ and seeks release. Here, constantly being devalued and depressed she withdraws herself and refuses to be ‘oppressed’ anymore and engages herself mentally as well as physically with Rabbu: “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 (Chughtai15).”

To this particular moment of her self-actualization where she decides to fulfill her desires rather than confinement. She frees herself from the barriers of patriarchy and involved herself

in a new gendered consciousness. The act of massaging of Rabbu appears as one kind of latent sexual fetish which was nurtured between Begum Jaan and Rabbu:

Rabbu used to massage her back for hours together. It was as though the massage was one of the basic necessities of life. Rather, more important than life's necessities.

The physical involvement between Begum Jaan and Rabbu becomes exposed that night when the girl woke up in Begum Jaan's room when it was 'pitch dark': "Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously, as though an elephant was struggling inside (Chughtai 17)." It became more prominent in the experience of the girl one night after Rabbu's return:

There was that peculiar noise again... The elephant inside the quilt heaved up and then sat down... The elephant started shaking once again, and it seemed as though it was trying to squat. There was the sound of someone smacking her lips, as though savouring a tasty pickle (Chughtai 22).

The quilt is therefore used as a disguise from the outside world. It itself forms a world between the two. As Geeta Patel has already mentioned, '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).'

The image of Begum Jaan through the eyes of the child is that of grandeur. In spite of her fascinating beauty and splendor the 'manliness' in her tends to appear: "Sometimes her face seemed to change shape under my gaze and looked as though it were the face of a young boy..." May be her 'virile' features tends to come out with a vigorous, aggressive and exuberant vitality and refuses to be passive anymore.

The absence of Rabbu for a while chokes her with the fear of the return of her own passivity and submissiveness. She sought someone whom she can possess and this time the 'victim' was the child because in other form it is a child abuse:

I wanted to run away, but she held me tightly. I tried to wriggle away, and Begum Jaan began to laugh loudly. To this day, whenever I am reminded of her face at that moment, I feel jittery. Her eyelids had drooped, her upper lip showed a black shadow and tiny beads of sweat sparkled on her lips and nose despite the cold. Her hands were as cold as ice but clammy as though the skin had been stripped off. She wore a shawl, and in the fine karga kurta, her body shone like a ball of dough. The heavy gold buttons of kurta were undone.

It was evening, and the room was getting enveloped in darkness. A strange fear overcame me. Begum Jaan's deepest eyes focused on me and I felt like crying. She was pressing me as though I were a clay doll and the odour of her warm body made me want to throw up. But she was like a person possessed. I could neither scream nor cry (Chughtai 20).

As far *The Quilt* is concerned, it is Chughtai who probed into the psychological aspect of homosexuality rather than merely dismissing it as physical act with sexual drive which does not involve any emotional inclination. It is clear that the time when she wrote this story she had not read Freud but later she might have read it. After she was charged with obscenity in the Lahore court, she laughed when the summons came up at her door: "Good God, what crime have I committed that the Exalted King has brought this lawsuit against me?" As the story does not make any explicit reference to homosexuality all the charges against her were taken off. But if one gives a close look to her narration, one can notice the suggestive style in which it was written. It is exactly like when women are gossiping, they don't spill out everything but their gestures imply a lot. If those are spelled out it would just turn into a flat and somewhat dull narration. Also, another reason behind this suggestive style – law awareness of the traditional, apparently conservative Muslim society. Thus, through Chughtai's suggestive style it is the social hypocrisy which is depicted. She wanted to show the double standard of the society – everyone knows everything, talks about it, but pretends as they know nothing. If there is an explicit overtone the whole implication of hypocrisy would have been lost. She just wanted to communicate this attitude in her tongue and the cheek manner.

The upheaval of her life was expected to take place as she was far more educated than the contemporary women of the society. Such kind of education was beyond dreams especially to a woman who belongs to that Urdu society of that time. Even in Hindu society such well-educated stature in a woman is hard to find.

Maybe she wanted to present the psyche of her characters, especially Begum Jaan who was going through a lack of recognition about herself. The loneliness, the seclusion or any kind of degradation to one's soul that were implanted from the early childhood were nurtured until death. There is no such thing as woman-like. As Beauvoir points out: "...the 'real woman' is an artificial product that civilization produces the way eunuchs were produced in the past; these supposed 'instincts' of coquetry or docility are inculcated in her just as phallic pride is for man..." In spite of possessing such muse-like beauty



and grandeur -- these 'supposed 'instincts' of coquetry' failed to catch the attraction of Nawab Saheb and it is possible that this kind of continuous seclusion and loneliness – physical, mental and ofcourse societal – led her claim her own freedom by finding love in other woman like Rabbu.

Even if she has a good figure and is pretty, the woman who is involved in her own projects or who claims her freedom in general refuses to abdicate favour of another human being; she recognises herself in her acts, not in her immanent presence: male desire reducing her to the limits of her body shocks her as much as it shocks a young boy; she feels the same disgust for her submissive female companions as the virile man feels for the passive homosexual. She adopts a masculine attitude in part to repudiate any involvement with them; she disguises her clothes, her books and her language, she forms a couple with a female friend where she assumes the main role: this playacting is in fact a 'masculine protest'; but it is a secondary phenomenon; what is spontaneous is the conquering and sovereign subject's shame at the idea of changing into a carnal prey.(Beauvoire,435)

It is doubtful in case of Begum Jaan if it is her revolt against 'changing into a carnal prey' or not, but it's really surprising and often raises such a question like if the subject is really refusing the idea of changing into a carnal prey, how can she form a couple with another female as in this case the partner is also turned as the same carnal prey which she once refused to be? Here the refuser of a submissive don't think twice before indulging another of her kind to play the same role which she once disgusted. Some would find it strange or to some extent unethical if they view the whole thing from Beauvoir's perspective.

- **PERSONAL EXPERIENCES**

Later in her autobiography she talked about the woman on whom the character of Begum Jaan was modelled on:"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." The later reaction of Chughtai after hearing the story was such: "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." This implies that Chughtai herself had a soft corner for that particular woman.

Tahir Naqvi stated in a lecture of hers in Seattle (2004) that the editors of the magazine which published Chughtai's *Lihaaf* are the one who mistook the name Ismat Chughtai as a male author who is using a pseudonym. Nobody expected the fact that a woman at that time can create such kind of work where there is an implication of open lesbian relationship. It was very much expected then that the story will face several criticisms:

She depicts women in their traditional roles, through their depiction also emerge the broad contours of the New Woman on the literary terrain. This woman is resourceful, aware, confident, even aggressive. She is determined to overcome her deterministic constraints and seems to be acquiring a new identity.

-- Asauddin,2009

He also adds: "Aware of her hidden potentials, she scoffs at patriarchal prescriptions and is determined to lead life and deal with the world around her on her own terms." The construct of a so called 'reputed' Indian woman at her time was deliberately broken by Chughtai in his writing and she is indeed successful in it.

## • CONCLUSION

In this whole analysis there are several areas which are attempted to be covered. These areas include the social reception of Chughtai as a feminist writer, the societal attitude of the 40s from the reactions the story got after it was published, Chughtai's struggle as a female Urdu writer and as an outgoing personality.

Also, from the close study of *The Quilt*, the angle I tried to portray is the psychological aspect of homosexuality and studying it through the logistics of the theoreticians. The main focus is the struggle-- a struggle against one's self, the true identity, the society, the so called wrong-doings and right-doings and also with the time. Moreover, it is about that loneliness and seclusion, the marginalization that one faces. Chughtai forces us to inspect into the attitude of the society and more precisely it raises questions like is it changing towards an open and embracing egalitarianism or are we just reproaching into a cocoon? She breaks the narrow domestic shackles and transcend from local to global through her stories, the appeal takes a universal voice which reverberates across the oceans.

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