



**LIHAAF (THE QUILT) A STUDY FROM SHORT STORY TO CINEMATIC  
 APPROPRIATION: OBSCURING THE FEMALE RELATIONSHIP**

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**Abstract:**

*The concept of homosexuality has generated considerable debate over the years, but it has failed to establish itself as a rigid identity. Until recently, the voices of homosexuals remained unheard. More specifically, Ismat Chughtai was the first female author to explore lesbianism. The society hesitated to accept them and disguised their identity by tormenting them with traditions or feelings. Adhering to the theme of representing the subaltern, this paper attempts to read between the lines of Ismat Chughtai's short story Lihaaf (The Quilt) in order to discern a woman's blossoming same-sex relationship. Through the protagonist Begum Jaan, Chughtai focuses on life's essential elements: society and the individual. As the tale unfolds, she uncovers two significant aspects of her life: her husband's interest in men and her own interest in women. Frequently, societal pressure prevents an individual from embracing his or her sexuality. The paper addresses the concept of self through the lens of a wife and lesbian who celebrates her identity despite living in a traditional patriarchal society. Ultimately, it mediates the concept of self-reconstruction and condemns the stereotypical identity imposed by society. The study raises concerns about a society that plays an essential role in the subjugation of women and homosexuals by denying them fundamental rights. The fact that Lihaaf was adapted from a seminal work of feminist literature from the subcontinent lends the novel some merit. This paper also examines how the short story-to-screen adaptation rewrites Lihaaf to conceive a different queer female desire possibility. I shall discuss how the film disturbs the voyeuristic, heteronormative position of the masculine viewer. It also interprets the film as an intervention in the homosexual representational norms of mainstream Hindi film.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Traditionalism, Sexuality, Queer, Cinema, Gender, Homosexuality, Society, The QUILT

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**INTRODUCTION**

Ismat Chughtai was Urdu's most daring and controversial woman writer from 1911 until 1991. She introduced new experiences to Urdu fiction authors Rajinder Singh Bedi, Sadaat Hassan Manto, and Krishna Chander, distinguishing herself. Her work revolutionised Urdu literature and changed literary criticism.

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### **Unheard voice of 1941**

One of Ismat Chughtai's most famous works, *Lihaaf*, was also one of the abundantly contended, bringing the author to court on allegations of obscenity. Chughtai did not apologise but instead contested the accusation; the trial lasted two years in Lahore, but she ultimately prevailed. Although it garnered her a great deal of fame, she was dismayed towards the end of her life to see that none of her other works were as well appreciated. *Lihaaf*'s narrative pulls back the curtain, exploring the murky depths of same-sex attraction and illuminating the taboo subject of female sexual desire in traditional Muslim homes. Although it was written in 1941, it didn't appear in *'Adaab-E-Latif'* until 1942. Before a strong public queer movement emerged in India, the story's central issue was not just forbidden; its very presence was not recognised or spoken about in the 'nice' social context. And it went much beyond that, establishing a purposeful choice of an alternative sexuality rather than the normal heteronormative behaviours, by speaking about female sexuality and identifying a woman's sexual wants. Not only did it provide hope to sexually inhibited women living in a patriarchal society, but it was also an assault on that society, which was understandably appalled by the revelations. In 1942, when *Lihaaf* was released, the Indian independence struggle was at its height, along with many other resistances that posed a threat to the colonial heritage and the bourgeois/feudal elite in India. Though the publication of *'Lihaaf'* caused upheaval in the literary world and in the author Ismat Chughtai's life, it failed to garner the attention of historians and scholars as a significant contribution of 1942 and went unnoticed in this turbulent year. Chughtai was possibly the first woman to write about a homosexual relationship in modern India. Even Chughtai was unaware that *'Lihaaf'* was distinct from her other works. Women were the focal point of her narratives. She wrote about their intelligence, abilities, aspirations, desires, psyche, bodies, and sexuality. Women's concerns and sexuality were not taboo topics in Indian literature. However, these issues were handled by women's masculine interpreters. A woman was not expected to discuss the female (or male) body, sexuality, or desire. In her writings, Chughtai never lacked the courage to broach these taboo subjects. However, she had no intention of shocking the audience by discussing the 'mysterious' erotic relationship between two women. She desired to tell a tale. The narrator of *'Lihaaf'* is a child, and Chughtai succeeds in depicting the child's naive but sincere observation of the 'unheard of and odd' relationship between two women. The story *Lihaaf* and Ismat Chughtai's personal life are inextricably intertwined and cannot be separated. She even stated that *Lihaaf* is based on people she knew and events that occurred in her life, and that her sister-in-law recognised the characters when she read the story to her prior to publishing it in the journal. Ismat Chughtai and the adult narrator in the story share a similar perspective on homosexuals; these similarities are evident throughout the narrative.

*Lihaaf* tells the story of Begum Jaan, who is married to an old Nawab Saheb 'of ripe years', a member of a wealthy Muslim household, imprisoned in the same house by the regressive customs and patriarchal shackles of marriage imposed on a woman, condemned to a life of solitude because her husband "tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her." The Nawab's preoccupation is not articulated explicitly in the narrative told from the viewpoint of a young

girl. "Nawab Saheb had disdain for such repulsive activities. He maintained an open-door policy for students—young, fair, and slender-waisted males whose expenses he covered. Through the character of Nawab Saheb, Chughtai artfully addresses concerns of religious morality. Through the eyes of the young girl, she exposes the hypocrisy and pretension of the 'virtuous' upper-class elitist male dressed in religious rituals signifying religiosity. Strong religious illusions have translated into the morality of his social life in the eyes of the world, which is highlighted by references to his lack of sexual hedonism. Nobody had ever witnessed a skank or prostitute in his home. However, the Nawab has a "bizarre pastime." In contrast to other males of his social standing, he never participated in pigeon or cockfighting. His sole unspoken delight and desire is to host an "open house" for his male "students." On the surface, there appears to be nothing wrong with assisting young, impressionable males. However, Ismat Chughtai's artfully chosen and presented words in a tongue-in-cheek manner allude to the 'sordid' reality beneath this pious behaviour. These boys are described as fair-faced, 'slender-waisted', and wearing 'perfumed, fragile shirts', not as mischievous, argumentative, robust youths. The description itself has an unwholesome flavour. Thus, the lack of heterosexual relationships in the Nawab's life is evidence of his ostentatious virtuosity. The homosexual foundations of his social life, which are strategically concealed from heteronormative society, go unnoticed. While his so-called pedagogical activities with young boys persisted in the same household, only his wife's relationship with her housekeeper became the subject of murmured conversations. Begum Jaan, like any other young woman, dreams of a joyful married life, but her hopes are dashed by the Nawab's ignorance. This indicates an utterly perplexed aspect of a society in which women are conditioned to submit themselves to the talons of men. In fact, the Nawab's character was enriched with phrases such as "...he was extraordinarily virtuous. His home had never been visited by a nautch girl or prostitute.

He had performed Haj and assisted others in performing it, but his preoccupation with juvenile males was summed up by the encompassing term pastime. She attempts to entice him, but her efforts appear to be ineffective. He "stored her with his other belongings in the house and promptly forgot about her. "In the heteronormative system, Begum remained a prized possession. Chughtai's statement, "one cannot draw blood from a stone," signifies the Nawab's lack of interest in her. She therefore turned to other mediums such as literature, but how could a book satisfy her somatic needs? She was neither permitted to leave nor permitted to discuss her agonies with anyone. Even though the Nawab and Begum Jaan shared the same sexes, the Nawab's façade as a self-righteous hypocrite elevated him above everyone else, whereas Begum Jaan had to endure a tremendous amount of internal conflict pertaining to society. The Nawab erected an invisible barrier around Begum Jaan in an attempt to seduce her. This inequality in marriage sowed the seeds of a ventilation, and with Rabbo's arrival, that wall fell. Rabbo reintroduced the Nawab into Begum's existence, thereby satisfying her desire. With Rabbo by her side, her nights of solitude turned into nights of self-discovery and passion. The homoeroticism maintained her sanity. Tracing the transformation of Begum Jaan from a submissive woman encased in a carapace to a woman who transcends the boundaries set by society and her husband, the novel traces the germination of a new woman. Carnavalesque by Mikhail Bakhtin in Rabelais and his world asserts the voice of individuals supplying new perspective on things.

In the case of Begum Jaan, she avoids monotony and embraces utopia. Her voice receives a platform. Her mute cries transform into ecstatic sighs. Bakhtin's concept of carnival as the second life of the people in opposition to dominant social ideologies generated a wave of happiness among those who rejected their repressed identity and embraced freedom. Similarly, Begum Jaan's voice as a newlywed yearning for her spouse is entombed, whereas Rabbo's voice reawakens. One can observe a complete power and hierarchy reversal. By remaining on the outskirts of her marriage, she transcends her boundaries and uncovers solace outside of her marriage. The lesbian relationship was accompanied by a rebellious and just voice. This paper draws parallels between the numerous labyrinths of Begum Jaan and the socially constructed norms that threaten the existence of women. Regarding Judith Butler's theory of identity subversion in *Gender "Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity"* (1990), in which she asserts that "gender is socially constructed rather than innate, and that conventional notions of gender and sexuality serve to perpetuate the traditional dominance of women by men and to justify the oppression of homosexuals and transgender individuals." During an era when homosexuality was illegal, Chughtai skilfully depicts a world in which its origins may be traced back to a patriarchal culture. She is pointing the finger at a biased culture that offers no solutions to the problems women face." One didn't know when Begum Jaan's life began-whether it was when she committed the error 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," the words say. A woman is socialised to be passive and receptive. The impact of Begum Jaan's tragedy on her friendship with Rabbo, by freeing herself from the confines of the society that had previously silenced her, marginalised her, and victimised her, she is able to transition from the role of object to that of subject.

Michel Foucault's "heterotopia" is another influential theory that explains how a person's environment shapes their sense of agency and sense of self. He elaborates on the figurative and literal environments that foster development. Foucault's theory might be applied to Begum Jaan's situation. Her confinement settings encompassed both her parents' home and her husband's. The weight of her obligations was squeezing the life out of her dreams. She is a noteworthy figure because of the phenomena that has allowed her to develop as a unique character with her own ideas. To find fulfilment, she effectively deviates from conventional behaviour. Taking care of oneself is essential to a person's well-being. Her self-love is exemplified by the cunning ways in which she entices the narrator with promises of gifts. Her somatic requirements entirely impair her mental faculties. Wrapped in comforting words lies her desire. Through her, Chughtai liberates a woman who discovers a means to overcome her afflictions. She chooses to make her own decisions rather than obey others. Her expressions reflect her contentment. She displays some characteristics of a dissident who disapproves of the role of a destitute woman. Her position is unquestionably enhanced by her temerity to enjoy the forbidden with a sly sneer. She need not await a male to satisfy her desires. The modest, irritated, and submissive spouse of the house transforms into a house dictator whose opinions on her bed matter. Her husband's authority over her gradually declines. She is no longer worthy of pity. She intentionally gains control over her existence. She became an expert at eliciting love and affection. The change in her position highlights the distinction between acceptance and denial. Either her

burgeoning love or her need-based relationship compelled her to love unconditionally and materialistically. She made her way through the pandemonium to safety.

### **Cinematic adaptation and its sexual representations**

In the movie, the Begum frantically tries to erase herself from these photos. After the photos hint at male homoeroticism (although subtly), they hint at female homoeroticism (also subtly). The Begum's friend, Munia, tries to comfort her by enveloping her from behind, and for a brief but important moment, the camera focuses in on Munia's hand as it gently strokes the Begum's shoulder. The image draws attention to the gesture, suggesting there is a sexual element to this apparently "innocent" movement. The Begum's frantic efforts to locate the photos evoke the text's desire to retrieve "Lihaf" from the past. Inherent in this drive is the desire to alter the urtext by liberating the queer woman from the patriarchal system. This sequence perfectly represents the film's own treatment of "Lihaf"; it begins with a retrieval and ends with a pivotal mediation. In post-Independence India, questions about homosexuality in the public arena have often revolved around the issue of representation. There were two primary factors that galvanised popular discussion on queerness. Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1998) was the first film to bring attention to lesbianism in India; it was received with riots, threats, and efforts to prohibit it because it was perceived as an assault on Indian culture, and notably Hindu culture. In addition, there is the ongoing constitutional dispute over Indian Penal Code Section 377. The Supreme Court's decision in December 2013 to overturn the Delhi High Court's 2009 decision to decriminalise consensual homosexual activities between adults prompted widespread outrage and protest from the English-speaking national media and small pockets of urban civil society. It was less than a month after this verdict that the picture was released, and it made a significant contribution to the public discourse around LGBT sexualities. Popular Hindi cinema, also known as Bollywood, has been theorised by Indian film theorists as a site of discursive production that registers shifts in ideology and cultural sensibilities and mediates in discourses of gender, nation, class, and sexuality since the 1980s. Shohini Ghosh expands on these points in her article "Bollywood Cinema and Queer Sexualities," where she proposes seeing Bollywood films as "sites of competing discourses around sexuality" and "specifically sexual representations." (Ghosh 2010). Popular Hindi movie generally includes many visual delights in an effort to please its different viewers, as part of its commitment to the "something for everyone project" (Kasbekar, 2001). Thus, Hindi film tried to target this new emerging audience as the Indian LGBT population became prominent and vociferous in the public realm in the last decade of the twentieth century. This novel form of address, however, presented several difficulties. Commercially successful Hindi films, as Asha Kasbekar explains (290), "not only identify the desire for different kinds of pleasures amongst its socially and ethnically diverse constituencies, but also accommodates sometimes incompatible desires within the same film and make them concordant with the existing cultural and moral values of the society it circulates" (290). While yet appealing to and without upsetting its more traditional, heterosexist, mainstream consumers, Hindi film had to figure out how to tackle these new issues. Before *Fire*, mainstream Hindi films had only permitted queer viewing pleasures through a somewhat resistant reading. Gayatri Gopinath, writing about the appropriative possibilities of Hindi cinema by queer diasporic audiences, describes how the

fragmented, intermittent, and non-realist structures of its films provide numerous opportunities for queer spectatorial interventions (Gopinath 2005). However, as noted by Shohini Ghosh, representations and representational strategies of Hindi cinema changed after *Fire* (Ghosh 2010). For the first time, queerness was manifested physically. Due to globalisation and economic liberalisation, the urban mediascape underwent a fundamental transformation in the 1990s. Particularly after the violent and extensive public debate sparked by *Fire*, it became impossible to disregard queer sexualities in popular cultural production (62). In the 2000s, Hindi cinema began to develop new forms and strategies of representation to confront not only the new visibility of homosexual and lesbian sexualities, but also the profound anxieties that this visibility engendered. The majority of the Bollywood cinematic texts described previously articulated and made visible queer spectatorship positions and created pleasures for the queer gaze while taking care not to disrupt the heteronormative paradigm. Even more precarious were depictions of queer female desire, as there was always the danger of images of queer female desire becoming material for the exploitative masculine gaze. As Linda Williams has written in the context of erotic thrillers in Hollywood, lesbian sequences represent the exclusion of men from female desire and enjoyment, but men are invited to visually partake as voyeurs. (Williams 2005). Notwithstanding these ambivalences, these films played a pivotal role in fostering queer literacy among audiences. Ghosh (2010) argues that during the late 1990s and 2000s, films such as *Fire*, which portrayed queer desires, not only educated viewers about the presence of queer elements in cinema, but also encouraged them to adopt a queer perspective when engaging with film (p. 59). According to Gayatri Gopinath, Chughtai's consistent emphasis on the concept of "not knowing" should be interpreted as a deliberate tactic of disconnection. This tactic enables female homoerotic desire to evade the colonial legal system, which operates based on the principles of categorization, visibility, and enumeration (Gopinath 2005). The film utilises the silences and evasions present in "*Lihaf*" in order to steer its viewers away from a traditional heteronormative interpretation. The portrayal of the heteronormative male gaze in the film, as exemplified by the characters Khalu and Babban, as well as the camera itself, encounters numerous obstacles and is subject to significant challenges and subversions. The abundance of layered interpretations in the film, coupled with the thwarting of heterosexual expectations and desires, repeatedly frustrate the gaze. Consider, for example, the scene in "*Lihaf*" that depicts the interplay of swaying shadows.

In Chughtai's short story, the quilt beneath which the two women engage in an intimate act exhibits nocturnal movements and fluctuations, casting peculiar shadows on the wall that evoke fear within the young observer. This image serves as an introductory element in the narrative and continues to hold a significant role throughout. In the film, the two male protagonists, along with the audience, are provided with a brief depiction of the two female characters engaging in laughter and playful behaviour with one another. Following two brief instances of the female subjects being captured on camera, their direct presence is subsequently omitted from further visual representation. In contrast, our visual focus is solely directed towards Khalu observing them, while the dynamic and converging shadows of the women are projected onto the wall behind him. The male characters' gaze is effectively disempowered in the depicted scene due to their physical restraint (handcuffed). Additionally, their presumed entitlement to the women's affections is disrupted. The women's prominent shadows cast

over the wall create a visual contrast with Khalu's small figure in the lower half of the screen. This juxtaposition implies that female sexuality surpasses the limited perspective of the male gaze and remains unrepresented by it. The central focus of Chughtai's text revolves around the spatial concept of the zenana, which refers to the secluded living quarters designated for women in Muslim households where gender segregation is practised. The literary work "Lihaf" challenges the traditional understanding of the zenana as a strictly heteronormative space, revealing how the contradictions within patriarchy itself create opportunities for women to exercise agency within this context. Gayatri Gopinath highlights the prevalence of profound love and friendship between women in Hindi cinema, particularly within the framework of archetypal settings of female homosociality, including brothels, women's prisons, girls' schools, middle-class households, and the zenana (Gopinath, 103). According to Geeta Patel, the novel "Lihaf" portrays the intricacies of sexuality that take place "within circles of enclosure." In this context, queer sexualities are depicted as unfolding beneath the quilt, within the zenana, and within the confines of the hetero-patriarchal household. The author Patel suggests that queer female desire is encompassed within broader networks of male homosocial/homosexual desire. (Patel, 2001). According to Geeta Patel's analysis of "Lihaf," there is a depiction of male-male sexualized affiliation that results in women being excluded and confined to the harem, while also fostering desire and attraction between women themselves (Patel,178-179). The manifestation of women's queer desire in "Lihaf" is instigated by the Nawab's disinterest in women. In the specific historical and cultural milieu of mid-twentieth century India, it is evident that queer female desire faced significant challenges in finding expression beyond the confines of prevailing heterosexual frameworks. These limitations were particularly pronounced within spaces that were officially designated for female socialisation and were governed by established norms pertaining to sexuality and gender. This observation is supported by Gopinath, who argues that queer female desire primarily found its existence within the interstices of such sanctioned spaces of homosociality. The conclusion of the story "Lihaf" presents a situation where queer desire remains unacknowledged and undisclosed. The female characters continue to reside in the zenana, engaging in non-heteronormative and non-reproductive sexual activities.

The narrative impasse in this context highlights the challenges and complexities that arise when women resist societal gender norms. It also provides an opportunity to reconsider the significance of the zenana space. Geeta Patel makes an insightful observation that the wife's decision to not leave the zenana, run away with her masseuse-lover, or reject her wifely duties challenges the conventional narrative of a sanitised, secular heterosexual domestic space that is crucial to nationalist ideologies (Patel, 146). The conclusion of "Lihaf" highlights the covert and menacing existence of queer desires within patriarchal systems. However, it also underscores the enduring dominance of these patriarchal structures. The progression of the narrative in "Lihaf" is effectively propelled beyond its obstacles in the film.

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