

Reclaiming Agency in a Patriarchal World: Gender and Sexuality in Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*

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Abstract

Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (1942) is a pioneering work in South Asian literature that challenges patriarchal norms through its exploration of gender, sexuality, and female agency. The story follows Begum Jan, a neglected wife who forms an intimate bond with her maid, Rabbu, defying societal expectations of female submission and heterosexual conformity. Chughtai employs symbolic narration, using the quilt (*lihaaf*) as a metaphor for both concealment and rebellion, highlighting women's struggles for autonomy in a rigidly patriarchal society. This paper applies feminist, queer, and postcolonial perspectives to analyze *Lihaaf*'s critique of marriage, repression, and power dynamics. It explores how Chughtai disrupts heteronormative frameworks while addressing class and gender-based oppression. The story's controversial publication and subsequent obscenity trial underscore its cultural significance and resistance to censorship. *Lihaaf* remains a timeless critique of social norms, reclaiming marginalized voices and sparking discourse on identity, agency, and desire.

Key Words: Gender, Sexuality, Female Agency, Patriarchy, Queer Desire.

Introduction

Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (1942) stands as a landmark in South Asian literature, celebrated for its daring exploration of themes such as gender, sexuality, female agency, and rebellion against patriarchal norms. Published in an era when women's voices were largely suppressed, *Lihaaf* confronted the societal expectations of women's roles within marriage, the family, and the broader socio-cultural fabric of colonial India. Its candid portrayal of female desire and same-sex intimacy not only defied the literary conventions of its time but also sparked an obscenity trial, cementing Chughtai's legacy as a trailblazer in feminist and queer literary discourse.

Set within a rigidly patriarchal society, *Lihaaf* tells the story of Begum Jan, a neglected wife trapped in a loveless marriage with a wealthy man who shows no interest in her. Isolated and starved for affection, she forms an intimate bond with her maid, Rabbu, transforming the domestic space from a site of repression into one of resistance and personal rebellion. The narrative unfolds

through the eyes of a young, naive narrator whose innocent perspective acts as a narrative veil, subtly hinting at the forbidden relationship between Begum Jan and Rabbu.

The story's implicit depiction of female same-sex desire was revolutionary in its time. In a conservative, patriarchal society governed by strict moral codes, *Lihaaf* unapologetically explored themes considered taboo. Its publication provoked outrage, leading to Chughtai's infamous obscenity trial, where she defended her work by arguing that it contained no explicit sexual content. Despite the backlash, *Lihaaf* became a symbol of resistance against censorship and cultural repression.

This paper seeks to analyze *Lihaaf* through key thematic lenses: gender and sexuality in a patriarchal society, female agency and subjugation and queer desires and societal norms. By applying feminist, queer, and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, the paper aims to uncover how Chughtai's narrative not only critiques patriarchal oppression but also reclaims women's voices and desires from the margins. Ultimately, *Lihaaf* emerges as a timeless critique of power, identity, and resistance- one that continues to resonate in contemporary literary and cultural discourses.

Gender and Sexuality in a Patriarchal Society

Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* presents a scathing critique of the patriarchal structures that dictate gender roles and suppress female sexuality in colonial Indian society. In this patriarchal framework, men are positioned as dominant figures with economic, social, and sexual power, while women are expected to remain submissive, virtuous, and confined to domestic roles. Peter Barry exposes the mechanism of patriarchy "that is, the cultural 'mind- set' in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality" (Beginning Theory 177). *Lihaaf* disrupts these established norms by exposing the harsh realities faced by women trapped in such an oppressive system. Simone De Beauvoir states "Woman has always been men's dependant, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality" (The Second Sex 20). She says that "This world has always belonged to men" (21).

The institution of marriage in *Lihaaf* emerges as a central mechanism of patriarchal control. Begum Jan's marriage to Nawab Sahib reflects the transactional and oppressive nature of marital relationships in a patriarchal society. Nawab Sahib, despite being wealthy and influential, shows no interest in his wife. His focus is on maintaining social respectability while pursuing relationships with young male companions. Begum Jan is reduced to a symbol of status rather than a life partner, highlighting the patriarchal tendency to objectify women as possessions rather than individuals with desires and agency. "Having married Begum Jaan, he tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her. The frail, beautiful Begum wasted away in anguished loneliness" (The Quilt 36).

This portrayal critiques societal expectations of women to endure neglect, loneliness, and emotional deprivation in the name of preserving marital respectability. Chughtai uses Begum Jan's plight to expose the emotional and sexual void experienced by many women trapped in patriarchal marriages where fulfilling the husband's desires is prioritized, while the wife's needs are rendered invisible. Beauvoir says that "Man makes of woman the other" (21) for marriage also means "practically subordination to man" (31). "It projects man as the provider of seed and woman as a passive recipient who only nurtures the seed within her" (39).

Lihaaf boldly foregrounds female sexual desire- an aspect of womanhood that patriarchy seeks to suppress. Begum Jan's sexual frustration becomes the driving force of the narrative, symbolizing the broader silencing of women's desires in a patriarchal society. Her longing for affection and intimacy, dismissed by her husband, pushes her toward an unconventional relationship with her maid, Rabbu. "It was Rabbu who rescued her from the fall. Soon her thin body began to fill out. Her cheeks began to glow and she blossomed in beauty. It was a special oil massage that brought life back to the half-dead Begum Jaan" (37).

By centering female sexual agency, Chughtai challenges societal narratives that frame women's sexuality as passive and controlled by men. In *Lihaaf*, female desire exists independently of the male gaze, disrupting patriarchal notions of acceptable sexuality. Chughtai's depiction of Begum Jan's intimacy with Rabbu reclaims the space of female desire, asserting that women can seek fulfillment beyond patriarchal boundaries, even when denied traditional sources of affection.

The societal framework in *Lihaaf* reinforces control over women through rigid gender norms and moral policing. Patriarchy enforces specific roles for women, defining them as dutiful wives, obedient daughters, or devoted mothers. Women who deviate from these roles, as Begum Jan does, face social exclusion and moral condemnation.

The story subtly critiques these societal standards by illustrating how Begum Jan's legitimate emotional and physical needs are dismissed as improper and immoral. The male-dominated society in *Lihaaf* not only ignores women's inner lives but also actively punishes any attempt to assert individuality or autonomy. This aspect is reflected in the societal backlash against *Lihaaf* itself, where Chughtai was accused of promoting obscenity simply by portraying a woman's quest for intimacy and agency.

Chughtai subverts traditional gender roles by presenting Begum Jan as both a victim of patriarchy and a defiant figure who carves out a space of autonomy within the constraints of her oppressive world. Her relationship with Rabbu serves as an act of defiance against the patriarchal expectation of female submission and passivity. The reversal of roles- where Begum Jan takes charge of her desires- symbolizes a reclamation of power in a deeply unequal world.

Even the symbolic quilt (lihaaf) can be interpreted as a metaphor for covering and concealing what society refuses to acknowledge: female sexual agency, queer desires, and the inherent humanity of women denied fulfillment in patriarchal systems. Through its deliberate ambiguity, the quilt simultaneously conceals and reveals, challenging the reader to confront the limits imposed by cultural taboos.

Female Agency and Subjugation

Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* intricately explores the dual forces of female agency and subjugation within a patriarchal society. While women in colonial India were socially conditioned to occupy submissive roles within the domestic sphere, Chughtai's narrative reveals how female characters, particularly Begum Jan, navigate these restrictions to assert control over their lives. Through Begum Jan's struggles, *Lihaaf* illustrates how female agency can manifest even in oppressive circumstances, though it often comes at a personal and social cost.

Begum Jan's life reflects the systemic subjugation of women through patriarchal customs. Her marriage to Nawab Sahib epitomizes the loss of personal agency that many women experience within traditional marital frameworks. Despite her status as a wealthy woman, she is powerless in her personal life, confined to the domestic sphere while her husband indulges in relationships with young men. "She felt like throwing all her clothes into the oven. One dresses up to impress people. Now, the Nawab didn't have a moment to spare. He was too busy chasing the gossamer shirts, nor did he allow her to go out. Relatives, however, would come for visits and would stay for months while she remained a prisoner in the house" (37).

The story highlights how societal norms deprive women of agency by reducing them to symbols of honor and respectability. Begum Jan is a victim of marital neglect, living in social isolation because her husband's wealth and social status protect him from criticism while leaving her invisible and forgotten. This structural inequality underscores how economic privilege alone does not guarantee agency for women in a patriarchal society where gender roles are rigidly enforced. The discriminatory and oppressive behaviour towards members of the opposite sex shows "power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of person is controlled by another" (Millett 23). This power structure significantly functions through the patriarchal society. It leads a "relationship of dominance and subordination" (25) and arouses "the struggle of power" (Woolf X). Kate Millett observes that in the society "the male appropriates all power, and the female dispenses charity" (Sexual Politics 104).

Despite her subjugation, Begum Jan's eventual assertion of agency is central to *Lihaaf*. Abandoned and emotionally deprived, she defies societal expectations by forming a physical and emotional relationship with Rabbu, her maid. This relationship represents an unconventional assertion of

agency through self-determined intimacy- a form of resistance against patriarchal norms that demand female chastity and dependence on male partners.

Begum Jan's rebellion, however, is not overtly political but deeply personal, driven by a need for affection and survival in a world that denies her emotional fulfillment. "Rabbu used to massage her back for hours together. It was as though getting the massage was one of the basic necessities of life. Rather—more important than life's necessities" (37). Her pursuit of pleasure, though conducted in secrecy, challenges the patriarchal belief that female desire should be controlled or suppressed. Through her intimate bond with Rabbu, she reclaims her identity, at least within the confines of her private world.

While Begum Jan exercises agency through her relationship with Rabbu, Chughtai's portrayal also highlights the complexities of power and control within this dynamic. Rabbu, as a domestic servant, exists in a socially subordinate position, making the relationship inherently unequal despite its intimate nature. Rabbu's economic dependence on Begum Jan raises questions about whether her involvement is entirely consensual or driven by survival in a harsh socio-economic reality.

Chughtai skillfully intertwines themes of class and gender, showing how even in acts of rebellion, societal hierarchies persist. Rabbu's dual role as both an intimate companion and a servant complicates the narrative, reflecting how power dynamics rooted in class cannot be easily disentangled from personal relationships in a deeply stratified society.

The ambiguity surrounding Begum Jan's agency makes *Lihaaf* a richly layered narrative. On the one hand, her relationship with Rabbu can be seen as a bold assertion of female autonomy, a reclamation of power through intimacy. On the other hand, her dependence on secrecy and the symbolic "quilt" (*lihaaf*) suggests that her agency is limited by societal constraints.

The quilt becomes a metaphor for both concealment and resistance. It hides Begum Jan's desires from the judgmental gaze of society while symbolizing the unseen acts of rebellion that patriarchy refuses to acknowledge. In this sense, her agency is both liberating and constrained- asserted in private but denied recognition in public. This duality underscores the precarious nature of female empowerment in a world that polices women's bodies and desires.

Chughtai's narrative also explores the societal consequences of asserting female agency in a patriarchal society. In Begum Jan's world, the very act of desiring and pursuing emotional and physical fulfillment outside of socially sanctioned norms is transgressive. Her defiance of societal expectations would have led to public disgrace if exposed, emphasizing how patriarchal societies deploy social stigma and moral policing to suppress female autonomy.

The historical context of *Lihaaf* is significant here. The obscenity trial that followed its publication reflects the cultural anxiety surrounding female sexual agency. Chughtai herself faced moral condemnation for merely portraying a woman's attempt to reclaim her identity and desires. This societal backlash highlights how female agency is often met with resistance, both within the narrative of *Lihaaf* and in its real-world reception.

Queer Desires and Societal Norms

Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* is considered a groundbreaking literary work for its subtle yet powerful portrayal of queer desires within a deeply patriarchal and conservative society. By focusing on an intimate, same-sex relationship between Begum Jan and her maid Rabbu, Chughtai challenges the heteronormative norms governing sexuality in colonial India. At a time when non-heterosexual relationships were socially taboo and legally criminalized, *Lihaaf* became a pioneering narrative that explored queer identities, repression, and the complexities of desire, all within the confines of a domestic setting.

Begum Jan's relationship with Rabbu defies the socially imposed framework of heterosexuality that defines acceptable relationships in patriarchal societies. Deprived of affection and intimacy in her marriage, Begum Jan's queer desire becomes both a personal necessity and a quiet act of resistance. In a world where women are expected to find fulfillment solely through relationships with men, her bond with Rabbu subverts these expectations and redefines intimacy on her own terms.

Chughtai's depiction of their relationship is radical not just for its existence but also for its emotional and physical intensity. The power of *Lihaaf* lies in its refusal to sensationalize or explicitly describe this queer relationship. Instead, Chughtai uses symbolic imagery—such as the quilt (*lihaaf*) that mysteriously moves and shifts—to suggest desire and intimacy without conforming to the voyeuristic expectations of a male-dominated literary audience. In this way, the narrative asserts the legitimacy of queer love while resisting societal pressures to explain or justify it.

Colonial and post-colonial Indian society adhered to rigid norms of heteronormativity, reinforced by cultural, religious, and legal institutions. Marriage between a man and a woman was seen as the only acceptable social contract, with reproductive and familial duties at its core. By centering a same-sex relationship within the household—a space traditionally associated with heterosexual domesticity—*Lihaaf* undermines these heteronormative structures.

The societal reaction to *Lihaaf* underscores the broader repression of queer identities in patriarchal cultures. Upon its publication, *Lihaaf* faced severe backlash, culminating in a high-profile

obscenity trial against Ismat Chughtai in 1944. The trial exemplified how narratives that even hinted at non-heterosexual relationships were considered morally corrupt and dangerous. The story was labeled obscene not for explicit content, which it notably lacks, but for daring to explore female sexuality beyond heterosexual norms.

The legal and social condemnation of *Lihaaf* mirrors the real-world marginalization faced by queer individuals in South Asia. At the time, homosexuality was criminalized under colonial-era laws, which reinforced heteronormative values through legal persecution. Chughtai's defense during the trial- that *Lihaaf* contained nothing obscene and simply depicted a neglected woman's quest for love- was a bold assertion of artistic freedom and resistance against censorship.

Chughtai's portrayal of queer desire is intricately linked with broader themes of gender-based oppression. Begum Jan's queerness is not portrayed as a political identity but rather as an outcome of her circumstances- her emotional neglect, social isolation, and lack of agency within a patriarchal society. This framing reveals how societal repression of female sexuality and desire can create spaces for non-normative relationships to emerge, even if such relationships are driven by necessity rather than pure choice.

Additionally, the intersection of class and queerness complicates the narrative. Rabbu, as a lower-class servant, is economically dependent on Begum Jan, raising questions about the voluntariness of her involvement in their relationship. While their bond appears emotionally significant, its power dynamics remain unequal. This complexity underscores how queerness, like gender and class, is shaped by intersecting structures of power and subordination.

One of *Lihaaf*'s most compelling aspects is its reliance on silence and suggestion rather than explicit narration. The child narrator's limited understanding and innocence serve as a narrative device that allows Chughtai to explore queer desire while avoiding direct descriptions. This narrative ambiguity becomes a powerful tool that mirrors how queerness itself is treated in patriarchal societies- existing in secret, veiled by societal denial, yet unmistakably present.

The quilt becomes a symbol of concealment and suppression, hiding forbidden acts while hinting at their existence. This dual function reflects how queer desires are both visible and invisible, acknowledged yet denied. By allowing readers to infer the reality behind the quilt, Chughtai challenges them to confront their own prejudices and assumptions about desire and morality.

By embedding queer desire into the everyday domestic life of a Muslim household, Chughtai critiques the cultural and social institutions that enforce conformity. Her portrayal of Begum Jan's hidden world exposes the artificial boundaries that separate "moral" from "immoral" desires, public respectability from private transgression. In doing so, *Lihaaf* becomes a work of cultural

resistance, asserting the validity of marginalized identities even when society refuses to acknowledge them.

Conclusion

Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* stands as a powerful critique of patriarchal structures that dehumanize women by denying them individuality, agency, and the freedom to express desire. Through its exploration of gender, sexuality, power, and repression, the narrative dismantles societal norms that police women's bodies while exposing the deeply entrenched hypocrisies of a culture that punishes female autonomy. Chughtai's portrayal of female longing, emotional deprivation, and intimate rebellion lays bare the restrictive socio-cultural codes that silence women while harshly judging their attempts at self-determination.

By juxtaposing subjugation with resistance, *Lihaaf* masterfully illustrates the complexities of female agency in a world where societal expectations limit personal freedom. Denouncing the women who observed purdah and chose to remain behind the veil, Ismat called out women to come out and tell the world who they are, how they felt and remove the veil from the misconceptions regarding women in the society. Along similar lines in the West, French philosopher Helene Cixous urges women in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, "Women must write herself; must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal" (320). Begum Jan's journey from invisibility within her marriage to finding solace in her relationship with Rabbu reveals how even in constrained environment, women can carve out secret spaces of resistance. However, these assertions of agency remain precarious and hidden, shielded by symbols like the quilt (*lihaaf*)—a metaphor for the dual forces of concealment and defiance.

The story's treatment of queer desire is equally subversive, offering a bold critique of heteronormative and patriarchal values. By situating a same-sex relationship within the intimate space of the household, *Lihaaf* disrupts traditional notions of family, marriage, and domestic propriety. The symbolic and suggestive narrative, filtered through the innocent gaze of the young narrator, highlights how societal repression renders queer desires invisible while simultaneously exposing their undeniable presence. This duality reflects the broader marginalization of LGBTQ+ identities in conservative societies.

Lihaaf's nuanced depiction of power dynamics also extends beyond gender and sexuality, incorporating issues of class and economic dependence. The unequal relationship between Begum Jan and Rabbu underscores how intersecting systems of oppression complicate personal agency, making the story a layered exploration of hierarchical power relations within the domestic sphere.

Chughtai's narrative skillfully merges personal defiance with broader social critique, forcing readers to confront uncomfortable truths about patriarchy, desire, and repression. In the words of M. Asaduddin, "As the subcontinent's foremost feminist writer (Ismat Chughtai) was instinctively aware of the gendered double standard in the largely feudal and patriarchal structure of society she lived in and did everything to expose and subvert it" (*A Life in Words: Memoirs* ix). Her refusal to explicitly describe Begum Jan's relationship, opting instead for symbolic representation, allowed her to challenge societal taboos while evading outright censorship. However, the obscenity trial following *Lihaaf*'s publication underscores the enduring discomfort patriarchal societies have with narratives that expose suppressed female and queer identities.

Ultimately, *Lihaaf* is a timeless work that transcends its historical context, continuing to resonate with contemporary feminist, queer, and postcolonial discourses. By blending themes of gender, sexuality, power, and resistance, Chughtai reclaims marginalized voices from the periphery, offering a radical reimagination of female identity and desire. Her portrayal of Begum Jan's struggles and rebellion serves as a lasting reminder of the resilience of women who, despite societal constraints, assert their humanity and seek connection on their own terms.

As a pioneering feminist and queer text, *Lihaaf* challenges readers to reconsider normative definitions of morality, intimacy, and agency. Its enduring relevance lies in its ability to provoke thought, inspire resistance, and spark dialogue about gender and sexuality in literature and society. Through its rich thematic complexity, *Lihaaf* remains a vital literary work that continues to inspire critical engagement and new interpretations across generations.

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