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## **Suppression and Oppression in “Lihaaf” and The Emergence of Modernity**

### **Abstract**

Ismat Chughtai’s “Lihaaf” is the most controversial and well-known work. Lihaaf is based on homosexuality which is still the most disputatious subject in India. This short story brought immense notoriety to her because the subject she chose is still considered a taboo in polite society of India. It was written at that time when the subject “sex” was discussed among women only in whispers. With the help of her characters “Begum Jaan” and her maid, Rabbu homosexuality were described. The building of character like Begum Jaan is a step towards modernity. Begum Jaan is an archetype of the “new woman”. She represents those women who meekly submitted to the dominated male and also suppressed their sexual desires. Lihaaf was a frontal attack on that society which is responsible for the suppression and the pitiable position of woman in society. My paper is a humble attempt to draw attention towards the bold step taken by Chughtai to discuss the topic considered as a taboo in our society.

**Keyword: Homosexuality, Taboo, Female suppression, Modernity**

### **Introduction**

“Lihaaf” is a short story written in Urdu by Ismat Chughtai in 1941. It was published in the literary journal Adab-i-Latif. This story created a huge uproar and led to controversy. Not only this Ismat was charged with obscenity and that led to her trial in Lahore court to defend her for charges.

“Lihaaf”.

I am still labeled as the writer of Lihaaf. The story brought me so much notoriety that I got sick of life. It became the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight.

She was advised to apologize and pay the fine but she decided to fight in the court. The verdict was in her favor as the content of *Lihaaf* does not make any explicit reference of homosexuality. This story shows Chughtai's radical views on feminism. In this story she shows sexual relations between Begum Jaan and her maid Rabbu but by reading her autobiography and other pieces of her writing, we can easily depict that she is not supporting the deviant relationships. She wrote in her autobiography that her mind is a camera which records what it sees. The language used for "*Lihaaf*" is not vulgar as the narrator is a nine year old girl but its meaning at that time was considered as a vulgar. For "*Lihaaf*" she was rewarded criticism not from society only but her parents, family members were also against her. But all these criticism did not let her down to write.

### **Plot**

"*Lihaaf*" is story of Nawaab and his beautiful wife "Begum Jaan". Begum Jaan is surrounded by all the material comforts and servants but she was leading a very unhappy life. All the material comforts are nothing for her without the company of Nawaab. She was living her life as a neglected plant of a garden. She yearns for the love and attention which she deserves from the Nawaab but the result was not liked. She tried different ways to seduce the Nawaab but he was not interested in her.

Finally, she blossoms again with the help of her maid servant Rabbu. The entry of Rabbu in her life was a turning point of the life. She started massaging "Begum Jaan" and it was a great therapy that brought Begum Jaan happiness and satisfaction. Rabbu used to massage her daily for two to three hours before bath.

The story is narrated through the eyes of a nine year girl and the story is about the sexual bonding between Begum Jaan and Rabbu. Chughtai chose her narrator a young girl who sees that something is going on between Begum Jaan and Rabbu but her innocence understands nothing. The story is not only about homosexuality, it is a women-centric story that supports the emotions and feelings of a woman which she is deprived of in a patriarchal society. Through her story she wants to make people aware that such things exist and are prevalent in our society. Chughtai is one of the first writers in Urdu that talked about a woman's sexual desire and she presented it very confidently and boldly.

The theme of "*Lihaaf*" is not only homosexuality, the story also revolves around female suppression and that in turn leads to loneliness. Not only this, through her story we come to

know how Nawaabi life goes. The Nawaabi life is full of luxurious and all the material comforts are in their household. Chughtai gave details of Begum Jaan's dresses like her fine spun Hyderabadi lace kurta and the kind of oils, perfumes and lotions etc .

### **Narrative style**

The story starts with first person and initially we are not aware that the narrator is just a nine year girl. The story gave the glimpses of past experiences of the narrator which shows that the story is going to narrate the events in the flashback. The initial page also describes how the title Lihaaf plays a major role in the story. The shadows which the quilt or lihaaf makes aroused the curiosity of the narrator. This also aroused the reader's curiosity to unravel the mystery of the quilt.

Now in the second paragraph she creates suspense and tells us that the story of "Lihaaf" is frightening as the shadow which the quilt makes can still send shivers down her spine. The language used is simple and conversational. The first person narrative shows that the author is himself involved in the story and is describing her childhood memories. The young narrator in the conservative Muslim family and her tomboyish behavior makes her different from the other girls. In this story we are given a flashback of events from the child narrator's perspective and now she is a grown up woman and now she can fill the gaps between what she saw in her childhood and what is the reality of the observed facts.

### **Position of women**

Helene Cixious, the French Philosopher wrote in *The Laugh of the Medusa*:

"A woman must write herself: must write about woman and bring woman 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 gold"(320).

Helene explained in her work about the importance of woman writing and the writing about woman. Chughtai is one of the pioneer writers in urdu language who spoke boldly about woman's body and her desires. In her stories she shows how home it is a site of oppression and suppression for woman.

In our society marriage is the ultimate reality and the purpose of life for a woman. Through this story the narrator is merely describing the events which she sees and that are exposure of the status and condition of a female in our society. "Chauthikajora" is another famous story of Chughtai in which the girl unable to find a groom for herself and she is the daughter of a poor

widow. Her mother made every frantic effort she can do for her daughter which ultimately led the whole family to the brink of penury. She dies of humiliation and this was her fate. Had Nawaab present at that time for her daughter the situation would be entirely different. Kubra's mother would have definitely given her hand to Nawaab. Reading these stories we can now understand the position of women in our society. Both the stories attract our attention to patriarchal society present in our humble societies and the pitiable condition of a female in that.

#### Modernity in "Lihaaf"

Chughtai was the well-known writer of the Progressive Writers Association. She was the Muslim female writer who had the advantage of education with her. She worked in the field of literature and showed the transition in which the Muslim families were moving towards modernism. Chughtai with the help of her works discussed the modern elements present in the several upper and middle class families. Chughtai played an important role in contributing to this modernity concept. The discussion of a female body and her sexual desires were showing the impulse of modernization in her works. Rasid Jahan is also another female writer of the Progressive Writers Association who wrote *Behind the Veil*. Her work was a short story which was very controversial. So these works show the seed of modern elements in these works.

#### Implied Details

Ismat Chughtai's controversial story *Lihaaf* were often seen by critics as a bold step towards radical feminism. The focal point of controversy lies in the description that a nine year old narrator describes:

"I woke up at night and was scared. It was pitching dark and Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously as though an elephant was struggling inside. "Begum Jaan", I could barely form the words out of fear. The elephant stopped shaking and the quilt came down. "What is it? Get back to sleep." Begum Jaan's voice seemed to come from somewhere." (Chughtai 38)

Chughtai's description and the relation between two women were not explicit. She does not clearly explain what is going under the quilt. The shadow in the form of elephant on the wall is used as a metaphor to show relationship between two women.

"In the dark Begum Jaan's quilt was once again swaying like an elephant. "Allah! Ah...!" I moaned in a feeble voice. The elephant inside the quilt heaved up and then sat down. I was mute. The elephant started to sway again" (Chughtai 40).

Rabbu was the only constant companion of Begum Jaan and her job was to be always with her and massage her whole body. The child narrator was bewildered on all the kneading and rubbing done by Rabbu. As the child narrator does not understand what is going on she naively and innocently describes all the incidents. The expensive toilette used by begum Jaan also gives glimpses of her Nawaabi Lifestyle. The reference of closed doors, lighted braziers and Begum Jaan and only Rabbu inside raised our suspicion. Then we are told that there is permanent itching on Begum Jaan's body and she needs an endless massaging daily which the doctors and hakims had unable to cure.

#### Culture and the Characters

All the characters of Lihaaf were culturally roped. Begum Jaan, Rabbu and Nawaab were belonged to the same culture. Their lifestyle shows whole culture and the mindset of the different characters. For Character delineation every character is minutely described in their culture. The imagination and the description are so lively that the characters stand before us lively as real. All this is done in a simple and straightforward manner.

#### The Lihaaf used as a Metaphor a Symbol

The word Lihaaf is used very intelligently as a metaphor as well as an object. The use of Lihaaf in this story plays a major role as this Lihaaf has the peculiar quality of hiding and concealing the matter. We can easily see as the story goes the Lihaaf goes operational on different stages of the story. Nawaab's penchant for the young boys is covered by Begum Jaan in some way in the society and Begum Jaan serves the purpose of Lihaaf in this case. In the same way Lihaaf becomes a cover for Begum Jaan and Rabbu and hides their activities. Lihaaf is an obstruction for narrator to see what is going inside the Lihaaf and that makes her imagine things by herself. Through this story as a mature reader we can guess what is going on and why are these things happening. Chughtai chose a child narrator as she know that she can now discuss the forbidden topics very freely now. Lihaaf gives the factual details through the eyes of the narrator and has hints and suggestions in it so that reader can imagine and then understand. Chughtai was very much well aware that the subject she chose for her story is a taboo on our society and she cannot discuss these things openly so she went for indirect way in which things are implied.

#### Female Sexuality

This story is very suggestive and it hints at the physical desires of a female body and how such things are suppressed in our society. The story revolves around suppression and oppression which eventually leads to loneliness and then depression. Begum Jaan fulfilled her suppressed desires with Rabbu. Thus the story is about female suppression and her utter loneliness. Female sexuality, suppression and loneliness are the significant themes that are intimately connected. When we look at all these things to find an answer or when we try to find any other alternative of the problem we come to the crux of the story and that is Lesbianism. Lesbianism is another important theme of the story.

#### Conclusion:

Lihaaf is the story of a 'new woman' who stands against the established structure in our patriarchal society. Gendered consciousness is expressed through Begum Jaan's character. The sexual relationship between two women was not expressed explicitly in it and the desires and suppression of a female were shown in this. Lihaaf is a story of expose with the eyes of a nine year old narrator. Begum Jaan is a new and significant character in the modernity which openly talks about a female body and her desires. Chughtai's Lihaaf led her to negotiate between traditionalism and modernism. The job of progressive writers is to question and work on what is meant to be a modern writer. Her story can be placed within the larger sphere of modernity that talks openly and oppose traditionalism.

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