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Why Ismat Chughtai Faced Trial: An Intersectional Reading of the Reception of “Lihaaf” in Colonial India

By Mrinalini Raj¹

Abstract

In this paper, I study Ismat Chughtai’s short story “Lihaaf” (“The Quilt,” 1942) side by side with her essay “The Lihaaf Trial” (English translation, 2000). I also analyze their reception of these texts in regards to their treatment of sexuality, women, and morality in the colonial period. I engage the texts through the lens of intersectionality. Multiple aspects affected the reception of Chughtai’s “Lihaaf” because it explores the intersection of multiple axes of oppression like gender, colonialism, class, and sexuality. During the colonial period in India, the British colonizers directly influenced Indian morality through laws and emphasized British cultural superiority. One Indian response to this Western influence was a fear that Indian women, who were made to hold the onus of the cultural values and virtues, would want to break free from this role. This made the women doubly oppressed by both the colonizers and the colonized men. Partha Chatterjee also asserts that there has been a marked difference in the degree and manner of the westernization of women as distinct from that of men. Chughtai explores several social taboos, including women’s sexual desire and homosexuality, which demarcated “Lihaaf” from other works produced by women in the mid-20th century. She can be considered a writer who challenged the boundaries set for women’s writing in the colonial period, paving the way for other women writers to explore and represent social taboos.

Keywords: “Lihaaf,” Ismat Chughtai, Intersectionality, Postcolonialism, Sexuality, “The Lihaaf Trial,” Cross-class relationships

Introduction

Ismat Chughtai’s short story “Lihaaf” (“The Quilt,” 1942) was infamously charged with obscenity, and she faced a trial under Section 292² of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) in December 1944. “Lihaaf” dealt with homoerotic relations between two women which notably broke several taboos and defied the moral standards of the period in which it was published. Thus, Chughtai paved the way for many women writers after her to challenge and deal with taboos in their works (Bhatia). Nandi Bhatia states in her essay on “Lihaaf” that this work should be read “in tandem with” Chughtai’s “The Lihaaf Trial” (English translation, 2000) to address the silence of the courtroom (Bhatia 3). Bhatia argues that Chughtai’s work revealed the “entanglement of law, nationalism, and gender in British India” and how it shaped the discourse on “obscenity” (1). In this paper, I read the two texts together and seek to understand Indian society’s approach towards sexuality, women, and morality in the colonial period.

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² “[A] book, pamphlet, paper, writing, drawing, painting, representation, figure or any other object, shall be deemed to be obscene if it is lascivious or appeals to the prurient interest or if its effect, or (where it comprises two or more distinct items) the effect of any one of its items, is if taken as a whole, such as to tend to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it” (The Indian Penal Code, Section 292, 69).

“Lihaaf” introduces the character of Begum³ Jaan, an aristocrat, deposited in her husband’s house along with all his possessions and deprived of his love, both emotional and physical. All that her husband, the *Nawab*,⁴ does is to “keep an open house for students; young, fair and slim-waisted boys, whose expenses were borne entirely by him” (Chughtai, “The Quilt,” 5). This leads to her becoming a lonely woman with unfulfilled sexual desires. These desires are cured with the arrival of Rabbo, Begum Jaan’s maid, who is constantly seen massaging her. The story also refers to the sexual assault of a young child, the narrator.

After she faced the obscenity trial, Chughtai recounted her experiences in “The Lihaaf Trial,” where she describes her encounters with various people filled with criticism towards her, including her friends and family. She received several profane letters targeted toward her and her family, and tensions developed in her marital life. She elaborates on the description of the courtroom proceedings in the essay. The story is situated at the intersection of multiple aspects of oppression; it was written by a woman and dealt with issues like homosexuality, child abuse, and inter-class relationships. But what evoked a reaction more than the issues the story dealt with was that it was written by a woman and was about women. The idea of a woman writing about sexuality and female sexual pleasure unsettled people, and this issue was a focal point in the trial, as is evident in this excerpt:

“But it is highly improper for girls to collect ‘ashiqs,⁵” the witness proclaimed.

“Why?”

“Because ... because ... this is improper for respectable girls.”

“But not improper for girls who are not respectable?”

“Uh ... uh ... no.”

“My client has mentioned girls who are perhaps not respectable. And as you say, sir, non-respectable girls may collect ‘ashiqs.’”

“Yes. It’s not obscene to mention them, but for an educated woman from a respectable family to write about these girls merits condemnation!”

The witness thundered. (“The Lihaaf Trial,” 442)

The problem with analyzing a text like “Lihaaf” and its reception through the lens of an established theoretical framework like Western feminism is that it often fails to encompass and address the issues of low- to middle-income nations. Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticizes the assumption of women being “an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions” (55). She describes how, unlike Western (white, middle-class) feminism, there isn’t enough exploration of the engagement of low- to middle-income nations’ women and feminism (4). Women in Indian culture cannot be subjected to universal or generalized suppositions because of the diverse backgrounds they hail from. Their ethnicity, religion, class, and caste become crucial in analyzing their situation, thus necessitating the framework of intersectionality which Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge explain as a “way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences” (2). In the process of analyzing “Lihaaf,” the period in which it was written also becomes pertinent in determining its reception. Since the work was written in the colonial period, it faced the wrath of the readers primarily because a woman wrote it. This bias is clearly

³ A woman of high rank in the Muslim community

⁴ A man of high rank in the Muslim community

⁵ Lovers

exposed in “The Lihaaf Trial,” which refers to men writers of erotic fiction, like M. Aslam, who received different treatment. Saadat Hasan Manto faced trial around the same period for his work *Bu*, but the difference from the other male writers was that Manto’s work expressed the forbidden topic of female sexual yearning. This is understood as the judge tells Chughtai that “there’s a lot of dirt in Manto’s writing” (“Chughtai, “The Lihaaf Trial,” 442). The paper examines the various aspects of the historical and cultural context that affected the reception of “Lihaaf.”

Women in Colonial India

Being colonized added several dimensions to the suffering of the Indian women. Partha Chatterjee refers to the colonizers’ position of sympathy for “the unfree and oppressed womanhood in India, [in which] the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country” (622). The colonizers portrayed the Indian women as highly oppressed and in need of emancipation, which added to the argument of the “White Man’s Burden”⁶ referring to the colonizer’s duty to enlighten the Indian community through amending their flaws like *sati* (widow-burning) and introducing British culture as the ideal that needed to be achieved by the colonies. Lata Mani draws our attention to the representation of *sati* in colonial discourse, which became one of the most crucial colonial tools for presenting the oppression of women in India. Mani problematizes this assumption by pointing out how this colonial discourse was shaped by privileging Brahmanical scriptures (2). Uma Narayan has emphasized how *sati*, while dominant in some Brahmin communities, was not a widespread practice in all Hindu communities, nor in the whole of India as is often assumed (49). This became the epitome of how the colonizers characterized Indian culture in accordance with their convenience and agenda.

Chatterjee refers to the colonial belief which considered the traditional customs of the Indians as unworthy and compelled them to “embrace the new forms of a civilized and rational social order” (623). The colonial influence instilled a fear among Indian men of the “Western woman” who was perceived to be more sexually promiscuous and therefore threatened the traditional idea of a “normal woman”⁷ who was conversely expected to confine themselves to the home and family. Referring to the influence of colonialism on the women of low- to middle-income nations, Ranjoo Herr asserts, “Second-wave feminism elided Third World women’s multiple and complex oppressions in their various national contexts, whether in the Third World or the West, which are compounded not only by race and class but also by imperialism and colonialism” (2). Situations like Chughtai’s, which was closer to the second wave, often fail to be encompassed in Western concepts of feminism because of the intersectional nature of her work. Since the colonizers led the feminist movement, it amounted to a lack of voice for colonized women. Though India, towards the end of the nineteenth century, also looked forward to the generation of the “new woman,”⁸ this concept was in fact a new method of women’s subjugation because it created new boundaries for women on the pretext of giving women freedom. Mrinalini Sinha emphasizes this reframing of women into “new women” and mentions how this new idea moved beyond any anticolonial nationalist politics and “was also a symptom of a growing

⁶ This is the title of a poem by Rudyard Kipling.

⁷ Partha Chatterjee refers to the assumption of the “normal” woman who is different from the assumption of the “westernized” woman who is seen as irreligious, and sexually promiscuous, whereas the normal woman is not seen as a sex object and abides by the norm.

⁸ The “new woman” would have some idea of the outside world and venture into it as well but only as long as their femininity is not threatened (Chatterjee 629).

conservative indigenous backlash against challenges from various quarters in society” (44). In “The Lihaaf Trial,” Chughtai describes her encounter with M. Aslam, the writer of *Nights of Sin*, in which he accuses her work of obscenity. She emphasized this argument in the essay since Aslam’s work had an explicit description of the sexual act which she claimed was intended for titillation. Aslam’s reply to this accusation was that his case was different from hers on the grounds of gender: “I’m a man... You are an educated girl from a respectable Muslim family” (Chughtai, 436). This statement gives us a glimpse of the boundaries set for the “new woman:” she is supposed to receive education, as opposed to her female ancestors, which exposes her to the outer world, but men determine the extent of exposure. The burden of keeping a family respectable is shouldered by the woman of the family, restricting her choice and freedom and monitoring her actions while putting the onus of preserving the nation’s culture on women.

Chatterjee’s article encourages the impression that women lacked agency in the colonial period and were molded entirely according to the will of the men. Though this does stand true to a large extent, this also undermines the efforts made by women. Padma Anagol claims that the women’s movement of the colonial period challenged “patriarchal discourses on womanhood and [those women] were creating roles for themselves that often differed from male perceptions and aspirations for them” (6). Chughtai thoroughly contests the patriarchy of the colonial period. This paper examines how she defies the setting up of new norms for women by men in colonial India, using “Lihaaf” as a research tool to explore her defiance of the set norms. She unsettles every frame the society intends to fit her in; we see her exercise her agency when she talks about taboo topics like female sexuality, child abuse, and homosexuality.

Contesting Sexual Taboos

Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), claims that sex serves as a support of preaching, and the sexual sermon has “swept through our societies” chastising the old order (7). Sexuality, he argues, has faced the most subjugation in the age of the bourgeoisie, facing modification and changing its future (8). More recently, Rita Banerjee in *Sex and Power* (2008) views sexuality as a tool of self-expression that becomes a person’s identity; it “encompasses many aspects, such as gender, sexual orientation, clothing, mannerisms, facial expressions, speech, preferences, thoughts, ideas, dreams, ideals, fallibilities, unconscious habits, and interactions” (11). Since it defies the boundaries imposed on people by the institutions and trails the path of the growth of a person, she finds it synonymous with individuality because “individualities that hamper an institution’s agenda ... constantly threaten the cohesiveness of an institution by challenging its authority” (11). As it is an “anti-institution missile” it becomes crucial on the institution’s part to curb it (12). As a consequence, sex becomes a blasphemous and obscene act in most of the world’s religions today, tolerated only for “wedded procreation” (4). In “Lihaaf,” through the love and sexual relations of Begum Jaan and Rabbo, there is an opposition to the established institutions. By revealing Begum Jaan’s unhappy and dissatisfied sexual life with the *Nawab*, Chughtai offends Indian readers at several levels. She is referring to the impotence of a man of a high rank in his relations with a woman. This man hailing from the upper class of society is supposed to represent masculinity. When Chughtai attacks someone of the *Nawab*'s rank, she challenges a large section of men by referring to the possibility of them being unable to satisfy a woman sexually.

The different criteria of a sexually attractive woman have been a standard part of various narratives—both fictional and non-fictional—but a woman writing about the sexual failures of a man was uncommon, consequently irking Indian readers. The hint of homosexuality further

aggravated the outrage against the work. The standard codes of behavior in late colonial North India were arranged, monogamous, heterosexual, same-community marriages and relationships (Gupta 196). Same-sex attractions breached nationalist and religious ideas, and deviance from the norm could lead to an exclusion from the community. Gupta also talks about some women breaking away from the concept of the “civilized” (196). Women, by eloping and accepting love and sexual pleasure, challenged society’s prevalent set of norms for the normal Indian women that Chatterjee describes. The characters in Chughtai’s work, as well as she herself, contest this notion of the “normal” Indian woman. Begum Jaan, after being treated as an object by her husband, refuses to submit to her situation and explores a new realm to attain what she needs—sexual pleasure through her relationship with Rabbo. This comes out as one of the main concerns of the witness in Chughtai’s trial. The more significant concern is not only two women having homosexual relations, but that a woman of Begum Jaan’s stature has a relationship with her maid. The witness appears more concerned about respectable girls collecting *ashiqs* and accepts it as a fact that for a woman of Rabbo’s rank, doing the same should not be of concern. Still, the intersection of issues related to homosexuality, class, and gender in the story problematizes it. Kanika Batra comments, “Chughtai’s exploration of sexuality in this story and her focus on gender issues in most of her work was sometimes perceived by her fellow writers as a betrayal of their working class” (28).

Multiple Axes of Oppression

The difference in the perception of the characters of the story reveals how flawed the moral standards of society are and the binary social constructions which favor one group. The social perception of the *Nawab* is of a pious man with high moral and ethical standards: “*Nawab* Sahib was a noblesse oblige. No one had ever seen a dancing girl or a prostitute in his home” (Chughtai, “The Quilt,” 5). The story hints at the *Nawab*’s sexual interest in men parallel to the portrayal of Begum Jaan’s homosexual relations, but the more significant concern for the readers was the women’s relationship. Indrani Mitra emphasizes this difference in reception: “In contrast to the public visibility of male homoeroticism, female sexual desire must be concealed from view. Moreover, female same-sex desire is confined not only within the homosocial space of the *zenana*⁹ but also under the enveloping quilt” (316). Chughtai writes that Begum Jaan had “poor but loving parents” (“The Quilt” 5) and by marrying a class-oppressed woman, the *Nawab* concretized his status as a patron in the society, whereas his real intention was to marry a woman with no strong kinship so that he could treat her however he wished. Begum Jaan withered away helplessly in the absence of love, and the *Nawab* curbed her freedom and agency by not letting her “venture outside the home” so that she became a “prisoner of the house” (“The Quilt” 6). *Nawab*’s attempt at putting restrictions on Begum Jaan’s independence depicts the enormous power a husband, especially one of a higher social class, can exercise. The *Nawab*’s belonging to the aristocratic rank and Begum Jaan’s relations being poor makes her doubly oppressed by him in terms of her gender as well as her class.

The perception of the “common woman” in colonial times was “coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males” (Chatterjee 627). Begum Jaan being an aristocrat is supposed to break free from this understanding of a common woman and should have been the epitome of the new woman Chatterjee has referred to—moral, soft-spoken, educated, and aware of worldly affairs if they do not interfere with her family life. Begum Jaan did turn towards education, but exposure to it led

⁹ The inner apartments of a house where the women of the family live.

her to greater clarity of her wants and increased her sexual desires. Chughtai writes, “Romantic novels and sentimental poetry proved even more depressing” (“The Quilt” 6). The presence of the white *memsahibs*¹⁰ in the colonial era could have influenced the patriarchy which emerged in the colonial period. Nupur Chaudhuri describes that these women played a secondary role in the empire and had neither a legal voice nor any political or economic power. She mentions various authors who have molded the imagination of these women. In Rudyard Kipling’s widespread opinion on the white *memsahibs*, Chaudhuri says he thought them “self-centered, overbearing individuals” who flitted from bridge parties to tennis parties “in the hills” whereas their husbands slaved away “in the plains” (518). She refers to Percival Spear’s accusations of the *memsahibs* for widening the gap between the colonizer and the colonized. Such beliefs about the *memsahibs* appeared to be widespread back then which could have possibly led to the aversion in the natives. We can analyze why the widespread assumption of the *memsahibs*’ character irks the natives.

The primary purpose of women for the natives has been to look after the family as Chatterjee has referred to; they want to allow the woman freedom only as long as it benefits the family. The only amount of education imparted to women is that which helps her teach her children and should not be used to read romantic, titillating texts like Begum Jaan does. But when the priorities of women move beyond their families, it threatens patriarchy. Women have been used as the subordinate gender who serve the male community, and in return, they have been financially provided for. The *Nawab* oppressing Begum Jaan by curbing her movements to the outside world and treating her like a prisoner shows that the women have been confined to the vicinity of a household and family management. It can be understood that the *Nawab* had his insecurities which he feared only Begum Jaan had the power to threaten; her exposure to the outside world could have given her the courage to break free from him, making him the butt of jokes in society and challenging his masculinity. Treating his wife as his possession strengthened his image of a masculine, controlling husband perfectly in control of the ideal household. This treatment of women made the world easier for men with women at their service. In this scenario, if the women decide to challenge the stable patriarchy and refuse to be a mere source of assistance to men, they contest the authority of men. So, when a woman is self-centered, she breaks free from the supposition that she should have made her husband and her children her priority and kept herself at bay, curbing her desires. Women disrupt “hegemonic gendered scripts by exhibiting mastery of sexual skills, and actively engage in seeking, giving and receiving sexual pleasure” (Mudaly 45). For men, their responsibility is to provide for the family financially, but their lifestyle barely includes any necessity of curbing their desires. A woman who values herself and her desires could result in someone like Begum Jaan, who would not shut herself up in a corner but rather try every possible method, even necromancy to get what she desires. As soon as women start thinking about themselves, it will include them prioritizing their happiness, such as their sex lives, which would challenge masculinity and unsettle the idea of patriarchy. Begum Jaan can qualify as a self-centered woman as she does not fear the consequences of her homosexual relations with Rabbo for the gratification of her sexual desires. An overbearing woman challenges the masculinity of a man who should have been in control. Such a woman has a personality that is difficult to suppress, again making the men uneasy about their authority.

Further, the story deals with issues like child abuse and the ill-treatment of the wives by the feudal lords. The *Nawab*’s treatment of his wife depicts the hypocrisy of the upper class, a section that pretends to be ideal, having attained all aspects of moral goodness, but is ultimately flawed. Class hypocrisy is a crucial issue that Chughtai has contested in the story both through the

¹⁰ White foreign women of high social status living in India.

characters of the *Nawab* and Rabbo. The *Nawab* represents the upper section of society and is full of deceit; he marries a woman regardless of his sexual preference only to treat her as an object and curb her independence, intentionally marrying a poor, helpless woman whom he knows cannot act against him regardless of the treatment she receives because of her social position. On analyzing Rabbo's character, we realize that she defies the class hierarchy in her own way by falling in love with Begum Jaan. Rabbo is the "common woman" whom the new set of patriarchal regulations despised since she belonged to the lower strata of society. Irrespective of what others opine about her, she maintains her relations with Begum Jaan. By transcending the class hierarchy and having homosexual relations, Rabbo breaks multiple taboos. Another crucial aspect of the story is Begum Jaan's molestation of the child narrator. Child abuse was not a common topic dealt with in the fictional works of the colonial period in India. Acknowledging the trauma of an abusive childhood made the story ahead of its time. Even though the narrator has grown up, she can not get over the fear her stay at Begum Jaan's house instilled in her. She says that on seeing the shadow of the quilt her "mind begins a mad race into the dark crevasses of the past; memories come flooding in" (*The Quilt* 5). Despite dealing with such taboo topics, all the attention the story drew from the readers was based on the story's address of female sexuality. As Bhatia has argued, Chughtai's "record suggests that because the question of middle-class women's propriety became preeminent, the courtroom discussions relegated to invisibility other forms of violence—of class and child exploitation—which occupy an important space in her short story" (Bhatia 3).

Conclusion

The paper shows that the colonizers emphasized their superiority through new laws, which not only subjugated Indians but also led to the double oppression of Indian women by both Indian men and the colonizers. In this social setup, Chughtai dared to touch a topic that brought her much criticism; not only was her personal and social life affected but also her professional life. She was attacked by readers, who found it easier to attack her since she was a woman. However, Chughtai nevertheless challenged patriarchal boundaries set for women in the colonial period. Her work broke many stereotypes and paved the way for women writers to experiment with their writing and to write about social taboos.

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