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**FEMALE SUPPRESSION AND HOMOEROTICISM IN ISMAT CHUGTAI'S
LIHAAF**

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Abstract:

The present research paper throws light upon the untraditional and tabooed topic female sexuality and homoeroticism with special reference to the short story Lihaaf written by the popular but controversial Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai. The terms lesbianism and gay are still not openly discussed in the Indian society of contemporary 21st century. The two characters in the story Lihaaf, Begum Jan and her husband Nawab Sahib represent lesbian and gay homosexuality, respectively. They use their power and wealth to gratify their sexual desires. However, the helpless wife is forced to be homosexual since her husband ignores her. Homosexuality is still a no-go area which Ismat Chughtai discussed in the pre-independent Indian society. Begum Jan's husband Nawab Sahib seems sexually incapable and a gay which symbolizes the cruel suppression of female sexuality. However, the writer doesn't openly treat the issue of homosexuality, but she does it in implied terms. The issues are handled from the perspective of the narrator child.

Keywords: *Suppression, Oppression, Sexuality, Homosexuality, Lesbianism, Gay, Homoeroticism, Taboo, Quilt, Gratification, etc.*

Ismat Chughtai is a celebrated Indian novelist, short story writer, a humanist and film maker. She was born in 1915 in a conservative but secular Muslim family which molded her literary career. She was the 9th child of her parents and was much influenced by her elder brothers. She took her higher education which was a great achievement for a Muslim girl in the times of British India. Chughtai states that the family atmosphere was quite liberal and all the religious scriptures including Quran, Bible and Bhagavad Gita were available at her home. So, she is often referred to as a progressive Muslim writer. She deals with the tabooed issues in her literary works and she had to face a court case due to her unorthodox views. Ismat Chughtai originally wrote in Urdu language which made her a significant voice in the 20th century Urdu Literature. She penned a number of short stories, novels, novellas, children novellas and nonfiction literary works. Ismat Chughtai is the recipient of several awards including the Padmashri in 1975. She died in 1991 and instead of burial; she was cremated as per her last wish.

Her short story entitled *Lihaaf (The Quilt)* first appeared in the Urdu magazine, Adab-e-Lateef in 1942. The story explores unconventional themes such as sexual suppression of females, lesbianism and the concept of homoeroticism. For this, she was charged with obscenity and a case of filed against her in Lahore court. However, she was exonerated from the charges since the court identified no explicit obscene language in the story *Lihaaf*. However, *Lihaaf* became a very controversial work of art.



The story opens with the narrator's past memories whenever she sees the quilt. She tells the experience of her childhood. Once, her mother wanted to go to Agra and she left the quarrelling and fighting narrator with her adopted sister named Begum Jan. Begum Jan was married to an elderly, pious Nawab who completely neglected his young wife and kept her in a section of the house. Begum Jan comes to know that her husband is a homosexual and always loves the company of young boys. She tries at her best to attract him but she badly fails. Her life becomes melancholic and she spends her life in utmost dissatisfaction. The sexual desires of Begum Jan remain unfulfilled and she pines away for the experience. She is imprisoned and can't go outside. The entry of a masseuse called Rabbo gives a turn to her life. Rabbo, a dexterous masseuse, satiates Begum Jan's sexual desires in a homoerotic manner. The child narrator sees the vigorous movements of the quilt under which Begum Jan and Rabbo are sleeping implying their homosexual intercourse. Begum Jan is completely addicted to the massage and company of Rabbo. When Rabbo goes to meet her son for few days, Begum Jan becomes restless and impatient. As the narrator shares the room with Begum Jan as she is her guest, she molests the child which gives obscure experiences to the child. After Rabbo's return, the child witnesses their homosexual act which she never wants to share with anyone.

The story *Lihaaf* explores the themes such as female suppression, homosexuality and child abuse. The narrator throws light upon the suppression of females through the central character Begum Jan. She is married off to an elderly Nawab who completely neglects his young wife. Begum Jan is the representation of an oppressed female who is kept as a piece of decoration in one section of the house. The practice of an elderly husband and younger bride is still prevailing in some communities. Begum Jan is one of the victims of such practices persistent in the society. The beautiful Begum Jan craves for love from her husband who he has different interests. The Nawab enjoys the company of young boys, clearly implying his homosexuality. This affects the married life of Begum Jan who makes her life melancholic. The narrator describes the plight of Begum Jan in the following words:

Nawab Sahib kept himself aloof from these disgusting sports; all he liked to do was keep an open house for students; young, fair and slim waisted boys, whose expenses were borne entirely by him. After marrying Begum Jan, he deposited her in the house with all his other possessions and promptly forgot about her! The young delicate Begum to wilt with loneliness (Chughtai, *LIH.*,5).

The narrator describes the pathetic condition of a woman who is deprived of all her married life happiness and her imprisonment as a showpiece. The nawab who is homosexual and has no interest in heterosexual act completely pushes off the poor woman into the darkness and destroys her life. Begum Jan pines for the fulfillment of her sexual desires from husband but she fails to attract him. The narrator delineates the character of the nawab as a gay in implied terms. He fully enjoys the company of the young boys that Begum Jan notices every day. To quote the author: "Begum Jan glimpsed their slim waists, fair ankles, and gossamer shirts and felt she had been raked over the coals!" (Chughtai, *LIH.*,6) The young woman tries to divert her mind by reading romantic literature but nothing works in her favor. She gets more despaired. She is imprisoned in the house and not allowed to go outside which aggravates her plight. She has to suppress all her sexual desire since her husband seems sexually incapable to fulfill her needs. The helpless lady spends her days in utter despair and melancholy.

Living a very unhappy life, change comes all over Begum Jan with the entry of Rabbo, the masseuse. Rabbo's skillful massage changes Begum Jan physically and mentally. There is a 'perpetual itching' all over her body. No Hakim can cure her disease as they declare it no disease outside. In this



regard, Rabbo rightly discerns the cause of her perpetual itching: "May your enemies be afflicted with the skin disease! It is your hot blood that causes all the trouble!" (Chughtai, *LIH.*,7) She uses to massage her body with special oil that made a difference in Begum her life. She gets her sexual desires fulfilled in homoerotic manner. The narrator describes Rabbo's ability of massage in the following words:

Rabbo! She was as black as Begum Jan was white, like burnt iron ore! Her face was lightly marked with smallpox, her body solidly packed; small, dexterous hands, tight little paunch and full lips, slightly swollen, which were always moist. A strange and bothersome odor emanated from her body. Those puffy hands were as quick as lightning, now at her waist, now her lips, now kneading her thighs and dashing towards ankles (Chughtai, *LIH.*,8)

Begum Jan gets physical pleasure from her homosexual partner Rabbo who has no duty to perform except massage of begum Jan. The relations between them become the matter of gossiping amongst other servants of the household. They talk about the strange relations between Begum Jan and Rabbo in their free time. The narrator describes the servants' envy for Rabbo in the following words: "The witch! She ate, sat and even slept with Begum Jan!" (Chughtai, *LIH.*,8). Rabbo gives the pleasure to her lady that the Nawab can't give which becomes a topic of the source of their homosexual rumors among the household servants.

As the narrator shared room with Begum Jan, she experiences strange things about her and Rabbo. As the title of the story *The Quilt* is suggestive, the vigorously moving quilt implies the homoerotic relations of the two females which the little child doesn't understand. The movement of the quilt clearly implies the untraditional and tabooed relations between Begum Jan and Rabbo. The narrator suffers at the hands of Begum Jan when Rabbo goes on leave to meet her son for few days. Begum Jan shows her restlessness and impatience since her body is used to the massage of Rabbo. In the absence of the masseuse, Begum Jan molests the narrator. It is quite shocking for the little girl because she understands nothing about it. She is scared of the presence of Begum Jan and her room. Begum Jan promises some valuable gifts to her in return. The narrator describes her disgusting experience in the words:

Begum Jan's deep dark eyes focused on me! I started crying. She was clutching me like a clay doll. I started feeling nauseated against her warm body. She seemed possessed. What could I do? I was neither able to cry nor scream! In a while she became a limp. Her face turned pale and frightening. She started taking deep breaths. I figured she was about to die, so I ran outside (Chughtai, *LIH.*,10-11).

The narrator thinks that the company of Begum Jan as the worst punishment given by her mother. Her mother symbolizes the traditional patriarchal ideology which is made for subjugation of females. She is always scared of the involvement of the narrator with boys. Her typical mindset shows the focus on the female sexuality. While talking about her conservative mother, she says that her mother never liked her daughter playing with her brothers and their friends, to quote her words: "Mother disliked my mixing with boys, as if they were man-eaters who would swallow her believer daughter in one gulp! After all who were these ferocious males? None other than my own brothers and their puny little friends. Mother believed in a strict prison sentence for females, life behind seven padlocks!" (Chughtai, *LIH.*,11)



The narrator describes the movement of the quilt which Begum Jan and Rabbo share with each other. The child is scared by the strange scene and switches on the lights and sees the terrible picture of Begum Jan and Rabbo together in an awkward situation. The narrator can't tell what she saw: "what I saw when the quilt was lifted, I will never tell anyone, not even if they give a lakh of rupees." (Chughtai, *LIH.*,12) The child is too little to understand the homosexual relations of the couple, but she feels it something to keep a secret. She wants to escape from the house as the experience is quite complex to her. Ismat Chughtai deals with such a tabooed topic that is not discussed in the contemporary society.

The issue of homosexuality is at the center of the story. On the one side, the homosexual Nawab Sahib exploits the poor young boys using his wealth and power. He spends a lot of money on these poor boys to exploit them. He gets married to Begum Jan only for his fake social status and completely ignores her. He never thinks about the physical needs of his wife who lives a melancholic unsatiated life. On the other hand, Begum Jan too exploits her maid Rabbo for her sexual gratification. She also molests the narrator child. Begum Jan is a victim as well as a culprit who misuses her power to satisfy her desires.

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