



TRANSGRESSING GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY: RE-READING ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S THE QUILT (LIHAAF)

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‘... reality is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be.’

(1999 Preface, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler, pp. xxiii-xxiv)

Abstract

The study addresses that traditional notion of gender and sexual identity limits our understanding of the two categories as fixed and thus we are socio-culturally taught that truth or reality is absolute. Keeping this in mind, a critical study of Ismat Chughtai's globally acclaimed short story entitled *The Quilt (Lihaaf)* informs us that the writer in a very complex way oscillates between two intertwined narrative threads among others: one is the participation of some male and female characters (under the dictates of patriarchal value system) in Muslim community in disciplining or gendering the body of women while the other thread overlapped in the narrative is the silent effort of Begum Jan (central female character) to move beyond her gendered space with a view to becoming a new woman in terms of gender and sexual orientation. Her husband as the story unfolds is also a man of *strange hobby (italics mine)* despite having a strong commitment towards his religion. He is more interested in spending time with his disciples than that of enjoying his conjugal life. People around him begin to but nobody has the courage to speak anything against the mysterious way of leading his married life. The study chooses Chughtai's *The Quilt (Lihaaf)* as a textual site to examine how Begum boldly (though not loudly) foils the oppressive forces institutionalized by patriarchy. In doing so, she not only redefines the position of Muslim women of her time but also brings to the fore another possibility of their gender and sexual identity that transgresses beyond fixed categories: male/ female; masculine/feminine. The short story, if read in this direction may renew the young minds as the story telling tradition in India since time immemorial has been the carrier of moral and socio-cultural values.

Keywords: truth or reality, fixed categories, patriarchy, socio-cultural values

Introduction: Traditionally held notion of gender and/or sexual identity relies on the idea of truth and reality as eternal or unchangeable but philosophers like Husserl, Marx, and Sartre hold a different view in respect of such a notion of truth or reality. According to them, reality always experiences constant metamorphosis at a point of time. The notion that

determines traditional attitude toward gender attributes limits our understanding of the world and lures us to consider gender binaries or dichotomies as natural or as ingrained in our socio-cultural context. If any deviation in course of the performance of such fixed roles by the subject occurs due to innate sexual orientations, a male or a female is often considered as deviant or stigmatized because it is not in conformity with our expectancy. Such act or behavior on one's part invites certain imbalances in the moral and cultural fabrics of the society as well because it is not natural. The issue of not being natural or normal, according to prevalent socio-cultural codes has still been immoral or a taboo internalized by us. The study addresses how Ismat Chughtai bypasses with subtlety the traditional notions of gender and sexual identity in her globally acclaimed short story *The Quilt (Lihaaf)* through different narrative devices to reconfigure our notions of gender and sexuality. One's gender/sexual identity may not be compatible with the biological sex with which he/she was born. The findings of the study will establish that it is the inner consciousness of one or his/her subjectivity which always determines one's gender or sexuality. Though sex is biologically constructed, it does not predict if the person concerned will ever remain as male/female.

*The Quilt (Lihaaf)*¹ by Ismat Chughtai has already drawn significant critical attention of the scholars and critics due to its subtle but bold (though not loud) narration of the deviant² sexual behavior of a Muslim woman (Begum Jan) in colonial India. Born in a middle class Muslim family, Chughtai is a self made woman during her time who is highly receptive of the progressive thoughts. When the story was published in 1942, a few months before her marriage, it made an uproar in and around her society because of its implicit references to certain socio-cultural taboos. The story is revolutionary in spirit as it lays bare the hypocrisy of the moral standards of Muslim society during colonial India. The story hints at problematizing our culturally inherited notion of gender and sexual identity by directing the readers to locate it within the confines of queer writings still evolving in diverse geo-cultural spaces of our time. Re-reading the story in present context teaches us that queerness in terms of gender and/or sexual orientation evoked is not openly discussed but its presence is felt in certain situations by the silent acts and behaviors of characters: male or female. Queerness is not a novel subject in Indian myths, legends and epics. But it must be admitted that a queer text always challenges rigid gender binaries. The story shows how the "... female sexuality is highlighted in the enclosed space of traditional patriarchy which is symbolized by the day to day object of quilt" (Dutta 71). What is of paramount importance here is that the text silently challenges the culturally valid gender and sexual identity by subverting patriarchal norms. To free women from the stronghold of patriarchy, Chughtai indirectly authorizes an upper class Muslim woman³ to gratify homo erotic desires at the cost of her maid. This was quite strange during the writer's time as the Muslim society was founded on moral and religious purity. In writing the story, Chughtai as a Muslim woman writer emerges as an iconoclast. In the Indian context, *The Quilt (Lihaaf)* by Chughtai and the stories entitled *The Sandal Tree*, *Women*, *Deceit* etc by Kamala Das may be deemed as pioneers in drawing queer characters in 20th century Indian literature. But today, readers and writers welcome this type of literature but when "...noted author, Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaft* (*The Quilt*) came out, she drew widespread flake from society for her short story that depicted the idea of homosexuality" (cited in Chauhan 2019).

The story brings to surface the tragic destiny which succumbed to Begum Jan after getting married with an aristocratic husband affiliated to a religious minority group in pre-Independent India. The abiding interest in reading the story at the present time arises out of the relentless psychic struggle of a doubly colonized woman who struggles to cross the norms of a traditional Muslim society with a view to gaining control over her body and sexual desires. During pre independent India , colonized Indians in general and the extremely reserved Muslim community in particular blindly hold a claim that the notion of gender and sexuality must be grounded in age old socio-cultural tradition. But, surprisingly, Chughtai reverses that episteme cleverly by certain acts that blur the binaries like male/masculine and female/feminine for dismantling dominant discourse of the heteronormative society. The desire of Begum for a new relationship with Rabbu (another subaltern/maid of Begum) has already been looked at as a lesbian relationship which produces a new possibility of gender identity for women (Manuja 2017). The story incites a heated debate and controversy culminating in the trial of the writer in Lahore court on the ground that it implicitly allows a traditional Muslim woman to satisfy her sexual instinct, not with a person of opposite sex but with a same sex maid which was not well received by the society. This transgressive act as many scholars argue is symptomatic of same sex love leading to projection of another kind of identity essentialized by many as lesbian that further entraps women always. Therefore, Begum's behavior in the story, if studied under fresh perspectives does hint at considerable importance on a new process of becoming a woman by shocking the very foundation of patriarchy and thus this process conforms to the idea of Butler and others who propose the view that one's gender identity is a performance. The repressed sexuality of Begum, if looked at from Freudian perspective is at odds with the protocols of dominant cultural milieu during the time of writing the story . Informed by the reading experiences of queer texts at present time, readers are bound to consider her choice or courage to gratify sexual instinct with a same sex partner as a means to counter patriarchal barriers that tacitly showcase the extent to which a newly married woman in a conservative Muslim household can go for self assertion. Her husband Nawab has a strange hobby who is fond of young boys by alienating his wife in the family but there is no uproar in the household and in the community. He is at ease with homosexual desire but public and private space do not feel any disturbance. As a male/masculine, his gender and sexual orientation are secured under heteronormative norms of the male centric universe. But the questions posed in the narrative are: is the husband (Nawab) again a sexually repressed man in the male dominated society? or is he controlled by the pulls of patriarchy?. Our curiosity does not end here. One is again suspicious of the husband who seems to be entrapped by the forceful marriage with that woman as dictated by patriarchy. The expression 'forceful marriage' is used here to drive home the point that their marriage is sanctioned by the heteronormative society. Even the family of Begum Jaan seems to be selling her to an aristocratic family. As the parents of Begum expect, their daughter's life would be more secured financially in the hands of Nawab and she will be able to occupy a new social status. To the parents of Begum Jaan, she is a burden or an object for sale. The narrative in *The Quilt (Lihaaf)* is seemingly a Pandora's Box. The more we read, the more we can detect threads.

Lihaaf/The Quilt retrospectively generates a new interest in 21st century readers when there is strong visibility of movements across the globe by marginal communities

labeled as LGBT communities in East and West alike. It is the woman or a man who can illuminate with a new knowledge or consciousness to better understand his/her gender or sexual identities and hence gender binaries like other markers of identity are not stable but are in a constant flux. Nawab, a patriarch as presented in the story used to install his wife in his house like other possessions and he maintains physical and emotional distance from her. So, Begum is definitely a non entity. She is thus commoditized and a life of utter seclusion is enforced on her. She feels disappointed and begins to enjoy romantic novels and sentimental poetry to refresh her mind but it is of no use. Thereafter, she follows some traditional practices of her community: magic, necromancy to regain her husband's heart and love but still fails to bring back the lost love. While the wife gets entrapped in her domestic space, the husband is only busy with some young boys with gossamer shirts who are his disciples. She utterly loses all promises in her life.

The story takes a new turn when we are informed of the arrival of Rabbu at the house of Nawab to renew Begum's frustrated life. Certain visual descriptions by the writer make us learn that a possible relation (everybody knows but nobody has courage to speak loudly) between the two exists: "Rabbo used to sit by her side and scratch her back for hours together-it was almost as if getting scratched was for her the fulfillment of life's essential need, somehow more important than the basic necessities required for staying alive"(Chughtai 7). Rabbu gets used to 'massaging Begum Jan's head, feet or some other part of her anatomy' (ibid). The ritual continues and none but Rabbu is engaged in the activity. Begum Jan always feels a 'perpetual itch' and various oils and lotions are tried and even the doctors fail to diagnose the disease but the servant says that 'it is your hot blood that causes all the trouble!' The body of Rabbo is used and abused by her mistress and in between the two, there develops a relation of same sex love blurring the lines of class hierarchies also. But we can not but ignore that this may be the result of an act of molestation or sexual abuse or perpetrator-victim antagonism. Power relation is apparent between Nabab-Begum and Begum-Rabbu. Here colonized Begum makes a shift to be a colonizing power. The same sex love between two women can also be observed in Carrol Ann Duffy's (20th century British poetess and playwright) poem 'Warming Her Pearls (1987).' To the other servants in the household, Rabbo is a witch because she 'ate, sat and even slept with Begum Jan!'. Their relationship becomes a whisper in every gathering as it is not a socially and morally sanctioned relationship. People treat them jokingly. In the context of the present study, Begum's relationship with Rabbu, the maid is nothing but an alternative means to counter a taboo (gender as a socio-cultural construct) internalized by Indian society as a whole during British Raj. Begum's gender identity is subject to transformation and she mutely resists the power of the medical discourses that often determines whether one is male or female at the time of birth. Chughtai implies that Begum knows better to feel the state of her mind whether she is comfortable with her new sexual and gender identity.

The little narrator (a little girl) in the story is also a victim of Begum Jan's sexual instinct when she was left with her for a week and "Begum Jan was equally pleased to have me" (Chughtai 8). The narrator is sent to Begum's family so that she can be safe from the fighting she used to do when she was in her mother's home. Nawab's wife would be the genuine guide to discipline the body and mind of the little narrator who is none other than little Chughtai herself. Biographical evidences of Chughtai inform us that she is the youngest

sibling at her home. She has to grow up in the company of six brothers. Her elder sisters left home by getting married with eligible bachelors but Chughtai is something different. Being different in her family, the little narrator (Chughtai) stands independently to cross the barriers which circumscribe the life of a woman. When Begum fell asleep on her small bed, Rabbo was scratching her back. The little narrator also blames Begum as 'a filthy wench.' When Rabbo left Begum to see her son in relative's place, Begum was restless. During her absence the little girl was engaged in doing the same practice and Begum Jan often "sighed as if with immense relief" (Chughtai 9). Her life was completely controlled by the mistress at her own wish and as the little girl says "she was guiding my hand wherever she felt the itch" (Chughtai 10). Begum turns into a new woman who is fond of lesbian relationship but "... the word 'lesbianism' was not in use..." (Gopinath cited in Mitra 314) during the time when the story was written. It was not in use due to the surveillance and discipline of the hetero normative society.

Certain evidences in the story support the view that Nawab, the husband of Begum is interested in the young boys who were his disciples. But if we look at the act of his spending more time than required with his disciples through the eyes of his wife, it is apparent that he is not accepted easily by her. Readers as well as his wife are compelled to imagine that Nawab has a craving for those boys. If viewed from this angle, it is easy to believe that the incompatible couple in the story exercises powers in their own ways to fulfill their psychological needs because both belong to powerful positions. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai rightly describe: "Lihaaf as an Indian fiction that depicts the love between women, but it is with a degree of homophobia" (cited in Shinde, Pranasha et al 304-305). The story is vehemently branded as an immoral due to same sex desire between two women: Begum and Rabbu. But what is missing in contemporary scholarly interpretations is Nawab's hidden relation with those boys whom he used to preach. If lessons learnt from queer studies are to be applied, we are in a position to find that Nawab is a male transcending conventional gender norms by performing gender identity as subjective but not predetermined. He marries his wife only to get rid of the stigma of the society outwardly because he can not reveal strongly his inner mind as he is already considered as a member of the heteronormative society. He can not speak what is unspeakable. The male dominated society dictates him that he must marry a woman. Thus his gender identity is problematized in the story. Society does not allow him to talk about his inner self. Some scholars are of the view that Chughtai once confessed in her memoirs that her aim is not to write a story of lesbianism but only to widen the limits a woman is capable to cross when her husband is indifferent. But it may also be stated that there is very little focus on Nawab in the story. The writer does not focus merely on the natural inclination of a man to freely acknowledge his own gender and sexual identity. The researcher does not disagree with the writer's radical feminist concerns in the story. But under the light of queer studies, Nawab behaves in a way to transgress his own gender identity. It is true that he is just portrayed in the story as a hypocrite of that society and as a yardstick to measure moral standards of that time but his transcendence beyond our knowledge of the traditional gender norms can not be overlooked.

Review of related literature

The presence of queer existence is not a novel idea since antiquity in India. Devdutt Pattanaik (2014) in his book entitled *Shikhandi : And Other 'Queer' Tales They Don't Tell*

You explores the presence of queerness in the myths of Indian oral tradition. *Ruth Vanita and Salem Kidwai's text Same Sex love in India: Reading from Literature and History (2000)* is a detailed discussion of homoerotic love and fluid gender identity in modern and classical Indian literary tradition. A comprehensive picture of queer themes in Indian writings is present in *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity: Negotiating Diversities and Intersections of Queer Space in Indian writings (2015)* by Ashutosh Singh. More specifically, Shikha Thakur in her article *Re-defining Sexuality : From Object to Subject in Ismat Chughtai's Lihaaf (2018)* shows how female sexuality can be used as a means of rebellion by a woman against patriarchal oppressions and the same may be a source to reclaim her selfhood. The above review confirms that diverse sexual orientations and gender fluidity are present in India since ancient times and queerness is not an alien concept to Indian soil.

Research Problem: Dominant ideologies through socio-cultural norms circumscribe our understanding of the idea of gender in binary terms: male/female and masculine/feminine. Any deviation of established belief is considered unacceptable in a conservative society in general and Muslim society in particular due to the assumptions of hetero normative norms. Emerging paradigms of queer theories in present contexts interrogate such belief system as a myth because one's gender identity is a very complex phenomenon. A close reading of Chughtai in *The Quilt (Lihaaf)* may bring in a new insight with which traditional gender polarities can be subverted subtly leading to multiple possibilities.

Objectives of the Study:

- i. To examine how the writer dismantles fixed gender binaries in a traditional Muslim society
- ii. To study how the acts of transgression from fixed gender and sexual norms are integrated in the story by literary devices.

Methodology: A close reading of the story in English translation is adopted and secondary sources are used to draw the findings of the problem stated. The study analyses the characters, language etc to substantiate the standpoint of the researcher.

Results and Discussion: The society would have treated Begum Jan as a deviant if she had not followed the call of heteronormative marriage. The writer boldly states that young Begum is married to an older but wealthy husband for economic reasons. By virtue of her sexual powers she decides to silently fight against heterosexual relations which are socially or culturally sanctioned as normal. For Begum Jan, the gratification of sexual pleasures is judged by the prevailing moral standards of the time when Chughtai wrote the story. Begum's strategy to fight against the regime of patriarchy is measured by the yardstick of "...power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden" (Foucault 83). What she does, is not approved by the society as her space is limited. Very cleverly, Chughtai lets Begum to gratify sexual desires being hidden from others under the quilt as referred in the story. The writer does not openly affirm and deny the act of Begum. People understand that Begum's act is quite obscene at one level and at another level, it is desirable for her as woman in the society to go beyond the prescribed gender norms. The patriarchal power is strengthened by the power play of class and faith (both intertwined) in the story as the husband is an example.

Begum Jan's interest in same sex partner like Rabbo may be viewed as a bold step for a woman to affirm her sexual identity and she does not depend on the sanctity of hetero normative marriage. The sexual liberty she enjoys, produces a new possibility of her identity as a woman. She does not want to entrap psychologically and hence tries to embolden her mind, body and sexuality to go beyond the acceptable parameters of society. Prof. Jasbir Jain in *Indigenous Roots of Feminism ; Culture, Subjectivity and Agency* states that "women have been targeted, labeled whores, confined within their houses and punished in other ways for daring to step outside male defined space" (135). Begum rebels against her gendered space to demystify society's perception of gender identity as a fixed category. We can relate the concept of androgyny introduced by writers like Virginia Woolf, Colette among many others to read Begum Jan's rebellious act as symptomatic of gender fluidity. Chughtai in the story first annihilates patriarchy as a regime of power by "...making way for new women to rise and shine" (Saikia 920) and in redefining femininity, she directs the readers to understand the clues in the story. Like Begum , Damayanti, a Brahmin widow in Dr Mamoni Raisom Goswami's (a renowned female writer of India) short story *The Offspring* (1999) aborts the male foetus of Pitambar (a Mahajan) in her womb because Pitambar's only hope in life is to keep intact his lineage. Goswami in her own ways allows the widow to cross the gendered space because the widow is the controller of her body and mind. The person is better able to feel the true essence of his/her gender. It is also true as Adriene Rich, an American lesbian writer and feminist is of the view that there is "small wonder that lesbians are reported to be a more hidden population than homosexuality" (Rich 657) despite so many changes have taken place around us.

Historically, the dominant cultural laws direct realization of gender identity which enforces that "... certain kinds of 'identities' cannot ' exist'-that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender" (Butler 23-24). So, gender is nothing but a performative act. Unfortunately, our ordinary mind fails to perceive one's gender identity in a new way. Both Begum and Nawab in the story project their own gender identities that are similar to the play of the signifier and signified because multiple truths are possible. Surprisingly, compulsory or naturalized heterosexuality controls gender relation as polarized in a way where masculinity differs from femininity. This kind of purity in identity interrupts our attitude towards gender .Chughtai's Begum Jan tolerates everything around her as a woman but she turns rebellious when she discovers the 'strange hobby' of her husband. She does not let her husband to take control of her own body and sexuality. Thus Begum occupies an in-between space or a third space in terms of gender identity. The same also holds good to Nawab because in his case we are made clear about his gender orientation though he has been a male/masculine outwardly. It may be conjectured that the Muslim couple falls apart due to their natural but deviant sexual inclination though we are less sure of Begum Jan's alternative sexuality but she projects it to counter patriarchy.

Language used in the story makes the readers visualize certain acts and scenes. Chughtai uses certain words to indicate psycho-sexual gratification of Begum Jan in her relationship with Rabbo. Here the words do not lose auditory effect. Chughtai makes use of frequent references to 'the elephant' and 'the quilt' as euphemisms in the narrative to address homosexual desires and relationships that cannot be spoken freely or loudly. After renewing

cotton in the quilt, Begum feels new terrors in her mind. The shadows of the quilt on the walls become monsters to devour the dreams of her life. Readers find it easy to imagine what is happening under the quilt at night. Rabbu went to see her son and during her absence, Begum is restless because she does not feel any comfort with others except Rabbu. When the child narrator does the same job under instructions of Begum Jan: 'Scratch harder, open the straps,' Begum spoke, "There, below the shoulder. Ooh wonderful! (Chughtai 9). She feels a shy of relief. Choosing an unnamed young girl (a niece of the protagonist Begum Jan) as narrator in the story, the writer implies that that society is not well aware of the respective homosexual desires of Nawab and Begum Jan and it symbolically means the ignorance of India towards repressed sexuality which is natural. The story was written much ahead of its time. The quilt is not the envelop by which Begum is engaged with her act of liberation. It stands for the prohibitions or limitation of the society to recognize natural sexual or gender attributes of the humanity.

Viewed from another angle at the present context, one can opine that one's gender identity is not constructed by state of being masculine or feminine and body is not the site to determine that such identities are fixed. One is always in the process of becoming and the gender entities determined by doctors are not natural as Michael Foucault has widely discussed in *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I. Chughtai's Begum Jan introduces a counter argument in the story against Rich's statement that "there is nothing revolutionary whatsoever about the control of women's bodies by men" (Rich 155). Begum uses her own sexuality to get empowered. As a woman of extraordinary courage and sensibility, Ismat Chughtai was also a member of Progressive Writers Association to deal with women issues of her time. The socio-economic backwardness of the women draws immediate attention in her writings. She creates a new image of woman who is a voice of protests against century long oppressions perpetrated by gender norms ingrained in socio-cultural context.

Conclusion: The agency of patriarchy is kept intact in the story by two ways: Nawab's homoerotic desire is freely exercised in his drawing room but his wife's is forbidden and is made invisible to others. Begum peeps into her husband spending time with his disciples. She feels alienated from her husband but it does not mean that she is disempowered. Begum takes decision to frustrate the patriarchal structure. Thus Chughtai re-empowers Begum to take control of her body, her realization and consciousness and the sexual desire, without labelling it anything. Homosexuality (an alternative sexual identity) presented rather explicitly in case of Nawab Sahib and quite implicitly in case of Begum Jan bring to light the double standards of patriarchy. Begum Jan's attachment with lesbian relationship is a powerful weapon to fight against oppressive patriarchal mores and at the same time a big jolt to masculinity. It is quite clear that gender norms of the society in the story acquire a state of indeterminacy and such an overlapping contribute to the blurring of conventional gender binaries which results in the possibility of a new space or self identity. The third space is the blurred zone where there occurs the erasure of gender binaries. The effort to re-construct gender and sexual identities by Begum and Nawab in the story dismantles our attitude to understand reality as elusive. Like other attributes of our identity, gender and sexual orientations are not stable entities as we learn from Chughtai's narrative *The Quilt* (Lihaaf) though almost eight decades have passed since the story was written. As short story has a very long history in Indian tradition, it instills in younger generation our socio-cultural

values. Chughtai's story inaugurates that there is no fixed self. It grows and develops with multiple possibilities in different circumstances. The study does not disagree with the intention of the writer in interrogating the patriarchal values institutionalized by heteronormative society. Examining the characters, use of languages, symbols and images, it is discerned that what is unspeakable or unsayable or silence in the narrative is a strategy for liberation of self. That is why, the story undergoes rigorous reading from queer perspectives. The Indian view of the world is based on morality, and society is not in a position to accept queerness with regard to gender or sexual identity of a person. This is perhaps one reason why homophobia is all pervasive in our society. The person concerned feels that he or she is not what he or she is in appearance. Non- normative relationship is still ridiculed in our society where our myths, epics and religion trace the origin of such relationship. To wind up, it must be admitted that our society is continuing its forward journey to come out of the quilt or lihaaf (literally used) as predicted by Chughtai in her artistically rich short story The Quilt (Lihaaf).

Notes

1. *Lihaaf* is the original title of the story in Urdu by Ismat Chughtai. It was published in the Urdu literary journal Adab-i-Latif. The story created uproar when published and the writer had to face trials in Lahore court during British regime.
2. The author does not use the word 'deviant' discriminately. The negative connotation of the word is put in the context as a reference to the construct of some binaries (deviant/natural in terms of gender and sexuality viewed by the heteronormative society).
3. It may be stated that Begum Jaan after her marriage with Nawab becomes a member of the aristocratic family and thereby she feels proud of her new class status.

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