

# Portrayal of Sexuality and Women's Agency in Ismat Chughtai's Lihaaf

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## Abstract

Ismat Chughtai's short story *Lihaaf* navigates the complexities of sexuality. It is an intriguing story that unfurls a lesbian relationship, portraying the unprocessed longing of the protagonist. Despite Begum's wish for a harmonious married relationship with Nawab, his incapacitation and the conundrums of monotony within that one room led her to channel her emotions toward Rabbu. The overarching point of this study is how the author inextricably links sexuality with the experiences of these two women, portraying the impositions of societal norms. Sexuality and woman's agency is contextualized within the narrative of Chughtai's *Lihaaf*. The quilt becomes an object of resistance to the heteropatriarchal structure, while *zenana* is that gendered space where she resists societal constraints. Consequently, she was embroiled in controversy, laden with unsubstantiated accusations of presenting an exaggerated perspective on sexuality. While Chughtai dealt with accusations, she refused to go by conventional classification systems. This paper attempts to discuss how Chughtai locates female desire within the subjugation of women and roles demarcated by heterosexuality. Her authorial intention was to challenge the established norms of a male-dominated society, and to highlight the conventional binary labels and prejudices that reinforce stereotypes regarding the lesbian experience. The researcher aims to delineate the subject of female sexuality and patriarchal conventions in *Lihaaf*.

**Keywords:** sexuality, sexual desire, lesbian, women's agency, heteronormativity

## 1. Introduction

"Human sexuality is complex and diverse" (Rao & Jacob, 2012). Sexuality means the way an individual is sexually and emotionally attracted towards another person. This attraction and feeling may be directed towards female, male or both. This topic of sexuality warrants scrutiny in the contemporary setting, as this would bring to light the imbricated narratives of sexuality, sexual orientation, and sexual identities embedded within broader cultural contexts. This paper encompasses discussions on the concept of sexuality. Across changing epochs, there has been growing awareness of evolving socio-cultural paradigms, particularly within the context of sexuality and queerness. Despite this, sexual orientation minorities have historically faced long-standing exploitation and discrimination, leading to a higher prevalence of maltreatment. The journey of transformation begins by understanding sexuality in the coherent context and acknowledging LGBTQ+ and diverse gender identities within the mainstream society. Therefore, by acknowledging and exploring the spectrum of sexuality, we foster a more inclusive understanding of diverse experiences, rather than bracketing sexual minorities and women within the gender binary. "The term sexual subaltern is intended to bring together, the disparate range of sexual minorities within postcolonial India, without suggesting that it is either a homogenized or stable category" (Kapur, 2000). Considering the fact that the sexual subaltern population is vulnerable to violence, the willingness to accept them is of prime importance. As individuals embedded in a social context, we must envision a constructive relationship with society by deconstructing traditional gender roles.

"Since time, heterosexual act has remained the singular socially acceptable sexual practice and the prevailing interaction among genders in community" (Das & Rao, 2019). This traditional binary notion disproportionately impacts gender minority youth. The repercussions of heterosexual dominance, manifested through the ascribed masculine roles, may also significantly lead to the marginalization of non-heteronormative identities and reinforce social stratification. Heteronormative ideologies, which position heterosexuality as the focal point of normative sexuality, play a major role in social invisibility and disadvantaged status of sexual minorities. Within social hierarchies, challenges arise in implementing a framework that integrates disproportionately vulnerable sections into mainstream culture. The stigma arising from societal norms and preconceived notions serves as a core element of inequality. As a result, stigmatized populations face heightened risks of marginalization due to the multifaceted violence directed towards them. The unrestrained manifestation of heteronormativity might imperil the society. Therefore, developing a critical understanding of the pervasiveness of gendered heteronormativity is crucial for recognizing and addressing biases within social norms and practices.

What exacerbates the issues faced by homosexual individuals? The critical vulnerability associated with these issues stems from gender categorization, particularly masculine guardianship. Degenerative societal norms augment the issue of homophobia, which permeates all levels of society. As a prevalent paradigm, heteronormativity suppresses non-heterosexual identities, fostering the exclusion of queer

people. Fortunately, in the current scenario, there is a positive reinforcement of diverse sexualities, helping to overcome challenges arising from imposed ideologies.

Chughtai is a meticulous perfectionist whose narratives provoke deep reflection on gender roles. Through her skillful portrayal of feminine consciousness, she talks about homosexuality and sexual orientation that appear incommensurable to society. "In 1942, Ismat Chughtai, a relatively young writer, wrote 'Lihaaf', recounting a brilliant enactment of the dismantling of patriarchal control just as the nation was getting ready to take over its governance" (Marya, 2004). Lihaaf's contemporaneous pertinence, which addresses themes of sexuality, continues to hold significance today as it challenges societal norms and provoke critical discussions. This story is a groundbreaking work of Chughtai that bears testimony to female sexual desire. Besides, she was a proponent of working for women's issues, highlighting their struggles in colonial India and challenging heteronormative prescriptions. This paper attempts to discuss how Chughtai situates female desire within the framework of women's subjugation and the roles demarcated by heterosexuality.

"Chughtai's treatment of female sexuality and lesbianism, however subtle, was unprecedented in modern Indian literature" (Ayoub, 2017). **Lihaaf** was undoubtedly recognized as one of Chughtai's most unconventional stories, gaining prominence for her concerted effort to portray women's sexuality during the colonial period. In authoring **Lihaaf**, Chughtai primarily focused on the intricacies of sexuality and same-sex desire, addressing controversial topics that were ahead of her time. This story is an amalgamation of female sexuality, womanhood, and the patriarchal structure. Through her work, Chughtai differentiates her bold female characters from those of her contemporary writers. Her presentational strategy of same-sex desire and discursive approach enables a spectacular display of emotions by the characters. The overarching point of Lihaaf lies in how the author inextricably links sexuality to the experiences of the protagonists, portraying the constraints imposed by societal norms.

Chughtai's pioneering work in the context of sexuality intricately explores the reimagining of sexuality, especially for those who do not conform to traditional gender norms. Batra (2010) highlights "the notoriety she gained for her candid discussion of taboo subjects such as lesbianism, explored in a short story titled Lihaaf [The Quilt]". The sociopolitical circumstances during Chughtai's time were restrictive, yet she worked with a sense of progressive responsibility, boldly addressing taboo subjects. Her story is primarily centered around lesbian narrative, depicting how attraction towards the same gender challenges dominant ideologies and societal norms. Lihaaf presents a nuanced exploration of same-sex desire. "Set in feudal Hyderabad, it tells the story of a lesbian relationship between a Nawab's wife, Begum Jan, and her servant, Rabbu, as presented by an adult narrator who recalls the events that she witnessed as a child" (Sen, 2007). This controversial short story highlighted the diverse expressions of sexuality in post-colonial India, showcasing the protagonists' indulgence in a same-sex relationship. It unfolds as an archive of memories flooding through the narrator's mind, as she recalls, "That sets my mind racing into the labyrinth of times past" (Chughtai, 2009).

Chughtai, a paradigmatic writer, uses a narrative style that intricately captures the emotions of her characters. She skillfully employs this style to depict the action beneath the quilt, which is punctuated by silence, leaving the child in a state of utter bafflement. "The narrator does not name the act, but rather 'moan[s]': 'Allah, Ah!'" For the women, and for the narrator, desire is forbidden but known, pleasurable but hidden, and Chughtai weaves these conditions into a heady lihaaf" (Hampapura, 2022). During a time when sexual expression was associated with negative connotations, Chughtai aimed to empower women through her portrayal of female sexuality in Lihaaf. Despite her literary contributions, she was exclusively subjected to criticism for the perceived obscenity in her language. As a Muslim woman, she faced accusations of indecent representation and explicitly thematizing sexuality in Lihaaf. "Although 'Lihaaf' did not portray explicit lesbian relationship, it was severely criticized for the depiction of relationship between Begum Jaan and her maid, Rabbu with sexual overtones" (Ayoub, 2017). This reaction highlights how the cultural and historical context of the domestic Muslim household in which Chughtai wrote differed from contemporary times. Extensive descriptions of sexuality were uncommon during her era, which led to her being criticized for the perceived indecency in her representation of sexuality. "She was summoned to appear in court for a charge of 'obscenity' under Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC)" (Bhatia, 2020). She was embroiled in controversy, facing unsubstantiated accusations of presenting an exaggerated perspective on sexuality in her work. Moreover, she was accused of dishonoring the family and questioned under the pretext of obscenity. In response, Chughtai argued that cisnormative dynamics are deeply rooted in the social construction of gender, particularly contributing to the stigmatization of the sexual subaltern. Even though she never objectified women, her work was seen as a threat to patriarchal conventions. In the colonial heteropatriarchal framework, mentioning the intimate relationship between Begum and Rabbu stirred controversy over obscenity.

"The same-sex politics in Lihaaf broke the silence about the sexual needs of a woman by openly delineating her subversive desires and aspirations" (Ayoub, 2017). Since women were bound by heteropatriarchal restrictions, their sexuality was often invisibilized and any acknowledgment of their desires was suppressed. The author also faced socio-political constraints due to her deviation from conventional writing. "It marks her as a political subject who was willing to engage in a public debate about women's lives and desires, despite the repercussions in her personal and professional life" (Bhatia, 2020). Despite the odds being stacked against her due to obscenity charges, she faced a humiliating trial to prove the appropriateness of her literary representation of sexuality. Lihaaf received scholarly attention for its exploration of sexuality, enabling readers to comprehend the socio-cultural structure and background of the colonial era. "Even though she produced a lot of literature after this trial, it did shape her literary orientation and themes" (Bhatia, 2020). As a result, she altered her writing style, refraining from explicitly mentioning non-normative sexuality and pleasure, which eventually became a challenge for her.

## 2. Literature Review

This literature review examines relevant literature on Ismat Chughtai's "short story 'Lihaaf' ('The quilt'), published in the Urdu literary journal *Adab-i-Latif* in 1942" (Bagchi, 2016). The analysis examines key scholarly discussions on literary censorship, artistic autonomy of female writers, the exploration of sexuality, same-sex female relationships, and the symbolism of *Lihaaf* within Chughtai's work. The analysis explores significant scholarly perspectives on literary censorship and the obscenity trial of Chughtai's *Lihaaf*. (Bhatia, 2020), in "Censorship, "Obscenity" and Courtroom Drama: Reading Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" and "The 'Lihaaf' Trial", provides a detailed overview of the legal ramifications surrounding *Lihaaf* that led to Chughtai being tried in the Lahore High Court in 1944. The targeting of *Lihaaf* suggested that women's writings and sexuality-related matters added another level of complexity to censorship systems, turning the courtroom into a place where social norms about women's propriety were discussed. Similarly, Marya (2004) encapsulates how "Chughtai displays a catachrestic moment in *Lihaaf* that denounces patriarchal values ascribed to women and allows them to transgress the home." She further states how Chughtai was summoned by the imperial government. Bagchi (2016) in "Crooked lines: utopia, human rights and South Asian women's writing and agency" argues that *Lihaaf* is a significant text in the annals of South Asian homoerotic literature, focusing on the tensions between conventional and contemporary beliefs.

Khanna & Price (1994), in their analysis of female sexuality, mentioned how traditional perspectives often view the mature, married, heterosexual couple as the epitome of acceptable sexuality. In this context, they argue that heteronormative sexualities are considered as natural, and societal expectations often dictate that men and women assume roles and behaviors based on their biological sex. However, Sen (2007) critiques controlled narrative of Chughtai where we could only see brief representation of sexual expression between Begum and Rabbu through narrator's heterosexual perspective. In contrast, Batra (2010) emphasizes Chughtai's usage of figurative language and "artistic autonomy", arguing that "Chughtai is acclaimed as one of the first women writers to lift the metaphorical veil to highlight Muslim women's position at home and in the world." Sahana (2022) in her article "Object as subject: Material Agency in Ismat Chughtai's "The quilt" and "Chhoti apa" mentions that "Chughtai's most cited short story *The Quilt* (*Lihaaf*) explores the relationship between two women within this space allotted to them." Patel (2001) in "Marking the Quilt: Veil, Harem/Home, and the Subversion of Colonial Civility" explores the interplay of sexuality inside enclosed spaces, including the quilt, the veil, and the *zenana* narrated by the child. She also points out how the narrative discloses hidden truths while revealing multiple interconnected patterns of longing. Sahana (2022) extends this discussion by highlighting how Chughtai in her writings challenges societal norms where women lack agency and are controlled by external forces. She states how Chughtai has used the quilt as a symbol of secret desires. She further underscores Chughtai's pragmatic decision to not explicitly talk about the sexual relationship of Rabbu and Begum, "Chughtai's insistence on keeping the secret hidden and not lifting the figurative quilt to expose the women to the readership, to respect the barrier that the quilt creates for the women who are able to use it to 'come alive' again."

While existing studies have primarily explored *Lihaaf* in terms of literary censorship, the obscenity trial, artistic autonomy, and sexuality, this study adopts a feminist intersectional approach by extending its focus to bodily autonomy within a broader discourse on sexuality and lesbianism. It highlights the reality of cisnormative societal expectations, where women are subjugated and diverse sexualities are repressed within traditional gender roles. It foregrounds women's agency, lesbianism, female sexual desire, and heteropatriarchal conventions. This paper argues that Begum's bodily autonomy is not confined within *zenana*, even though she remains conventionally committed to societal norms. It delves deeper into Chughtai's presentational strategy of same-sex desire and discursive approach that enables a nuanced understanding of sexuality. Expanding on this, it further analyzes how Chughtai interweaved narratives of submerged layers of female sexuality and interprets the matrix of emotional intensity and pain experienced by women.

## 3. Materials and Methods

The researcher has used qualitative research methodology for this study. A thorough review of existing literature on *Lihaaf* was conducted to identify key themes, symbols, and motifs. The primary material for this study is Ismat Chughtai's short story *Lihaaf* (2009), which is analyzed through the lens of lesbian sexuality. The secondary sources that have been undertaken for this study are collected from research articles, review articles, critiques, relevant literature and various internet sources. Chughtai's daunting expertise in writing about agency of women and lesbian sexuality is found in *Lihaaf*. The story exemplifies the theme of sexuality in colonial time and Chughtai's exploration of the lesbian relationship between the protagonist Begum and her maid Rabbu. She uses symbolism of *Lihaaf* to portray both lesbian- homoerotic and suppressed desires of Begum, who was confined within *zenana* after her marriage with Nawab. This study employs a textual analysis method to synthesize insights from these sources and explore overarching themes of sexuality, heteropatriarchal conventions and women's agency. The article emphasizes the significance of **Lihaaf**, which becomes an object of resistance to heteronormativity for closeted women.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Portrayal of Sexuality

"Ismat Chughtai (1911–1991), a controversial Urdu writer of her times, is remembered today for a radical exploration of Muslim women's sexuality in her novels and stories" (Batra, 2010). In colonial times, characters in literature were often stereotypically portrayed, largely shaped by social conventions, and critical themes related to issues of sexuality were considered irrelevant due to prevailing presuppositions. *Lihaaf* is an intriguing short story that unfurls a lesbian relationship and unprocessed longing of the protagonist. She delves into the subject of homosexuality, addressing the complexities and culturally sanctioned roles of sexuality. Chughtai also critiques heterosexuality as a

symbol of privilege in society through the introduction of her character Nawab, whose actions reflect male dominance. In *Lihaaf*, female sexuality, sensuality, same-sex desire, and resistance are intricately intertwined. *Lihaaf* was undoubtedly recognized as one of Chughtai's most unconventional stories, gaining prominence for her concerted effort in portraying women's sexuality during the colonial period. She was blessed with artistic intelligence, and her narratives effortlessly reflected in her characters' thoughts and internal dialogue. The questioning of conventional notions of female sexuality by Chughtai was an important episode, particularly during the colonial period, which was characterized by challenging situations and limited representation of homosexuality.

The researchers place their discussion in context of non stereotypical representation of women in *Lihaaf*. "Chughtai was controversial and outspoken in her writing" (Bagchi, 2016). Through her exploration of themes of sexuality and degenerative patriarchal conventions, she harnessed her literary potential and also claimed her literary space. She strived to normalize discussions about the presuppositions surrounding female sexuality. The sanctioned role of femininity often sensationalizes the topic of female sexuality. Chughtai, however, did not adhere to traditional societal norms; rather, she emphasized the intricacies of women's desires to foster a more nuanced understanding of female sexuality.

"The targeting of *Lihaaf*, however, tells us that women's writings and issues of sexuality added another layer to censorship mechanisms through which the courtroom became a site for debating social expectations of propriety for women" (Bhatia, 2020). This was intended to assert dominance over literary scholarship. Chughtai brought to the forefront the issues of the sexual subaltern and marginalized sections of society through her fictional works and narratives. Even when female sexuality was a polarized subject, Chughtai claimed its discursive space within the heteronormative structure. Bhatia (2020) notes that the short story *Chai ki Pyali* (1942), written by male author Muhammad Hasan Askari, hinted at female homosexuality but was not labeled as obscene. Saadat Hasan Manto was a prolific author who faced similar obscenity charges for his story *Bu*. However, while he received constructive criticism, Chughtai was ridiculed for her portrayal of lesbianism in *Lihaaf*. The pressures of her court proceedings underscored the power dynamics and structural discrimination she faced.

"Sexuality has often been regarded as a source of male power and female oppression" (Khanna & Price, 1994) Chughtai, however, subverts this notion by strategically incorporating female sexuality as a means of resisting patriarchal conventions. "The story is an expose. It exposes several entangled alignments of desire" (Patel, 2001). The Begum, the protagonist of this story, is the narrator's aunt. In the second half, Chughtai uncoils the plot surrounding Rabbu and Begum's intimate encounter through the narrator's perspective, depicting the protagonist's homoerotic desire. Throughout the story, Chughtai critically examines female sexual desire and the social institution of marriage, highlighting the powerlessness the Begum feels by being sidelined in her home. She grapples with uncertainty about her future, contemplating her marital status and resenting the relationship. Begum was authoritatively placed in a room by Nawab, a situation she ritualistically followed. This emotional oppression by Nawab caused her psychological distress. Despite Nawab's callous indifference to her sentiments, Begum still wanted a healthy romantic relationship with her husband. The aesthetic room she is allotted reflects her disconnection from the outside world. Though rooms were magnificently crafted, with services conveniently provided by maids, these materialistic comforts couldn't give her the love she needed. Sequestered in the zenana and neglected by her husband, the gentle caress of Rabbu's hand on Begum's back served as a catalyst for her desire: "But then she started living and lived her life to the full. It was Rabbu who rescued her from the fall" (Chughtai, 2009). What shaped Begum and Rabbu's lesbian relationship? Abandoned in her own house, Begum felt restless, yet the sensuality of their intimacy brought her a sense of contentment. Interestingly, Chughtai portrays Rabbu massaging Begum as a form of sexual enactment, with the quilt symbolizing the unveiling of silences surrounding taboo subjects. The narrator indicates some movement and sounds under the quilt. Chughtai employs sensory imagery to possibly imply the intimate encounter between Rabbu and Begum, "Then came the slurping sound of a cat licking a plate..." (Chughtai, 2009). This figurative language simultaneously reflects suppression and expression of sexual desires. Begum's 'illicit' affair, though consensually formed, was a result of the serious rupture between her and the Nawab.

#### 4.2 Agency of Woman

"The women use the quilt in the story to assert their agency in keeping the men out of their space and use the power that they exercise inside the bedroom to do so" (Sahana, 2022). The imagery of the elephant and the quilt is projected as impressive elements in the story: "In the dark Begum Jaan's quilt was once again swaying like an elephant" (Chughtai, 2009). The quilt symbolizes female sexual desire, particularly when Begum and Rabbu passionately engage in an intimate act.

Chughtai presents *Lihaaf* as a women-centric story, exploring the bodily pleasures and sexual preferences of women, diverging from heterosexual norms. It reflects themes of homoerotic intimacy, isolation, emotional trauma, and depression within the context of heteropatriarchal dominance. Chughtai metaphorically presented female sexuality through *Lihaaf*. Begum's subordination ended when she understood her bodily autonomy and claimed her agency within zenana. "But in *Lihaaf* the Begum's zenana knows the possibility of undoing patriarchal myths connected to the discourse of the zenana as heterosexual othered space by becoming an agent of change that aspires to destabilize and give new meaning to its oppressed reality" (Marya, 2004). Through her portrayal of non-normative identity and lesbian sexual desire Chughtai transformed zenana into an influential space within Begum's household. The narrator Begum exists within a space exclusively allotted to women which later becomes a symbol of resistance to the heteropatriarchal structure. Begum longed for a harmonious marriage with Nawab, but his incapacitation and the conundrums of monotony within that one room led her to channel her emotions toward Rabbu.

Begum was sanctioned the role inside the household, and her sexual desires are a form of revolt against the confines of her oppressive domestic world and heteronormative culture. Nawab confined Begum in the zenana and pushed her into domesticity, a substantial display of male dominance and privilege in society. “This hierarchy that prevails, with the man drawing the boundaries for the women of the household, is circumvented by the child narrator, indicating the possibility of transcending the supposedly rigid boundary” (Sahana, 2022). Zenana, a space constructed for women, allows the narrator exclusive and unrestricted access, where she interestingly observes the protagonist. Fascinated by Begum’s beauty, she stays in the room, delighted to help and knowing she would be rewarded contingently after finishing the task of rubbing Begum’s back. Emphasizing the act of intimacy, Chughtai mentions the child’s fearful apprehension when she witnessed the rising quilt: “I woke up at night and was scared. It was pitch dark and Begum Jaan’s quilt was shaking vigorously as though an elephant was struggling inside” (Chughtai, 2009). The narrator feels an unsettling awkwardness upon seeing the rising Lihaaf but doesn’t fully understand it, and it is through her perspective that we know the protagonist and the other characters. The intimate relationship perpetuates the idea that societal constraints are imposed on women, even though Rabbu and Begum come from different backgrounds. Meanwhile, Begum’s decisiveness about their intimacy is continually strengthened by her recognition of their agency and desires.

Chughtai engages readers by first portraying Begum’s femininity and later providing a glimpse of her intimacy with Rabbu: “And her tiny, puffy hands moved dexterously over Begum Jaan’s body—now at her waist, now at her hips, then sliding down her thighs and dashing to her ankles” (Chughtai, 2009). “The quilt hides Begum’s resistance to norms by providing cover, and simultaneously serves as the tool used to resist” (Sahana, 2022). Moreover, implicit feminine norms assert the idea of gender-appropriate behavior, suggesting that women should restrain from their sexual desires and remain irrevocably bound to their duties as wives, daughters, and sisters. She also highlights how the Nawab’s heterosexual privilege is hugely problematic.

Altogether Begum’s subordination and quiet compliance reveal the vulnerabilities of a woman cornered by her husband. Her liminal presence in the house, seclusion, the relational rupture in her marriage, and sexual suppression lead to a detachment from others, causing her pain to elongate over time. “Chughtai’s fiction resounds with an affirmation of this relationship between women and their things; domestic, sometimes religious, “trivial” objects that are wielded by women for their own gains to fight back, to safeguard their personal space, and most importantly to survive in making use of the space that they have been allotted to resist obsequiousness” (Sahana, 2022). “The Quilt” it is the quilt that women utilize to voice their homoerotic desires” (Sahana, 2022). Therefore, the quilt, used to cover, ironically strengthens resistance to the heteropatriarchal structure, while the zenana is that gendered space that transforms into a place for the fulfillment and manifestation of her homoerotic desires.

#### *4.3 Gender Dynamics and Heteronormativity*

“Chughtai offers an account that breaks away from the homogeneity of knowledge produced on domestic life as she moves from the concept of zenana as the idealized space for women to the notion of zenana as an articulation of independence” (Marya, 2004). Expanding on this standpoint, Marya (2004) argues that “as Begum Jaan gets involved in a lesbian affair with her maid, Rabbu, the polarities that maintained difference are threatened and home/world, inside/outside proclaim the recognition of alternate agencies and categories.” Initially, she was a neglected wife facing complications in her marriage due to her husband pursuing young, fair boys, but over time, she successfully determined her place in zenana. “He kept an open house for students—young, fair and slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him” (Chughtai, 2009). It implies that Nawab was too engrossed with young boys. The reader sympathizes with Begum’s lonely existence in the first half of the story due to her melancholic and intrusive thoughts about the Nawab spending time with young boys wearing transparent shirts. “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” (Chughtai, 2009). Furthermore, the Nawab is not even questioned about his unusual behavior and peculiar habits, while Begum is sequestered in one room, simply because he is a man and has gone to Haj. “Begum Jaan would have glimpses of them in their perfumed, flimsy shirts and feel as though she was being raked over burning embers!” (Chughtai, 2009). Despite this, she wanted a compassionate husband, but waiting for Nawab was emotionally exhausting, leading to the suppression of her desires and resulting in pent-up emotions that became a traumatic episode in her life. “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” (Chughtai, 2009). Thus, the institution of marriage represents the heteropatriarchal structure, as seen in the story where Begum was recognized solely as Nawab’s wife, without any individual identity, and married off because of her poor family background. “Her poor parents agreed to marry her off to the Nawab who was of ‘ripe years’ because he was very virtuous” (Chughtai, 2009). Although Begum gained economic privilege through her marriage to a benevolent and rich husband, there was no emotional connection between them. All she genuinely desired was an affectionate relationship with her husband, but Nawab’s hostility toward her was a clear demonstration of his ignorance. The accountability a man holds as a husband to be emotionally and physically available is completely absent in the Nawab.

Chughtai incorporated female sexual desires into the story, demonstrating how the women in the story break the shackles of heteronormativity and societal oppression. However, she does not exclusively mention any sexual encounters between Nawab and those young boys. Begum gradually discovers her husband’s inclination towards slim boys, which becomes evident through subsequent indications of Nawab’s choices, leading to a strong sense of disappointment. “The Nawab didn’t budge an inch. Begum Jaan was heartbroken and turned to books. But she didn’t get relief. Romantic novels and sentimental verse depressed her even more. She began to pass sleepless nights yearning for a love that had never been” (Chughtai, 2009). Consequently, these aggravating circumstances have

psychological implications that might have made Begum susceptible to anxiety and emotional trauma. When it becomes overwhelming for people with trauma, they unconsciously start structuring their own space and avoiding others. This emotional detachment acts as a form of coping mechanism.

#### 4.4 Same-sex Desire and Lesbianism

The relationship between the Begum and Rabbu is difficult to define. Paradoxically, the room where she once felt lonely now proves advantageous for her. "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" (Chughtai, 2009). The moment of immense satisfaction she experienced while getting a massage, or scratching an itch, provided her with the sensual pleasure she craved from her husband. Characteristically, Rabbu was submissive, which might be attributable to why the Begum subconsciously leaned towards her. Begum's enigmatic personality is severely troubled by an itch that perpetuates the series of events stated throughout the story. This persistent itch was a repetitive and idiosyncratic behavior of Begum, arising from her experience of abandonment, accumulation of distress, and sexual frustration. "In fact—Begum Jaan was afflicted with a persistent itch" (Chughtai, 2009). She experienced satisfaction accruing from Rabbu's massage, which provided her with the desired arousal. "Rabbu had no other household duties. Perched on the couch she was always massaging some part of her body or the other" (Chughtai, 2009). Through this, Chughtai reveals the patterns of longing, demonstrating that Begum is in an emotional state where she yearns for Rabbu's touch, to which she has become accustomed.

Chughtai indicates that the demarcation of status and value is demonstrated by the subservient behavior of Rabbu. Whenever Begum signaled to Rabbu, she complied with her orders and was immediately ready for massage. This dynamic highlights the cornerstones of their relationship and how Begum fortified her position within zenana. Other maids were envious of the exceptional status that Rabbu was being granted, and they often commented unhesitatingly on their relationship. "What juicy stories they made up about them! Begum Jaan was oblivious to all this, cut off as she was from the world outside. Her existence was centred on herself and her itch" (Chughtai, 2009). Her itch was the propelling factor for this secretive relationship, a complicated yet intimate bond formed between Begum and Rabbu that renewed the Begum's interest in living. Sahana (2022) points out how "Chughtai shifts this paradigm to reveal how the women find ways to accommodate themselves within their circumstances when she alludes to the relationship between Rabbu and Begum."

The boundaries of the zenana, initially marked by heterosexual dominance where she was rendered invisible, later became the platform for Begum's sexual gratification, allowing her to transgress heteronormative prescriptions. The body's acknowledgment of sexual desires and romantic aspirations is essential for understanding and embracing one's sexuality, as we can see with Begum succumbing to her pleasures and desires. Chughtai illustrates the emotional vulnerability of Begum, whose temperamental attributes changed dramatically whenever Rabbu went home. The restlessness she felt was a reiterated expression of the pain and grief she experienced with the Nawab. "Begum Jan's will to live in the zanaana under the conditions of the modern become an allegory for women whose lives are folded into layers of illusionary ideals about the place of women" (Patel, 2001). Moreover, Begum's exploration of an intimate relationship with Rabbu was manifested through Begum's sexual dissatisfaction with Nawab. The juxtaposition of the two characters in *Lihaaf* reflects repression and liberation, as well as servitude and desires, embodied by the relationship between Begum and Rabbu. Particularly concerning female homosexuality, zenana can be associated with freedom of choice, where women could unapologetically fulfill their desires while simultaneously gaining bodily autonomy. Chughtai portrays Begum's emotional state, by highlighting her possessiveness towards Rabbu and anxiousness when she leaves, which stems from her loneliness and isolation she has been through.

The institution of marriage supposedly idealizes the heterosexual convention, confining women's sexual desires, as marked by the differences between Nawab's and Begum's rooms. Within this structure, Chughtai challenged the conventional construction of female desire by brilliantly portraying bodily pleasure through the movement of the quilt. This raises an important question: What are the parameters for maintaining the image of an ideal woman? The significance of womanhood is not compromised in *Lihaaf*. Sexuality is female-centered, the form of sexual gratification which Begum receives, and the intimate relationship between the two women is consensual. Chughtai carefully catalogues both her pain and pleasure, as Begum engages in self-destructive behavior by compromising due to the predominance of patriarchal conventions and later succumbing to homosexual desire.

The quilt, as the main motif throughout the narrative, personifies suppressed desires and represents the power dynamics and patriarchal attitudes within the household. Begum's growing homosexual desire is an internal act of resistance to the heterosexuality prescribed by heteropatriarchal conventions. Chughtai extensively relies on metaphorical imagery, particularly the quilt, to depict the secrecy of the relationship and intricacies of women's desires. As Sen (2007) observes, "Chughtai's use of the metaphor of the *Lihaaf* provides a useful allegory for the way in which she constructs her narrative." Chughtai's story demonstrates a skilled use of figurative expressions, and employs narrative techniques. In her work we can see the usage of literary device like allegory for the symbolic representation of the characters. The quilt and elephant have been frequently used as metaphors.

Chughtai sketches sensually drawn character, with the protagonist involved in a lesbian affair, and the *Lihaaf*, which is suggestive of her desire. "Once again the quilt started swinging. I tried to lie down still but the quilt began to assume such grotesque shapes that I was thoroughly shaken. It seemed as though a large frog was inflating itself noisily and was about to leap on me" (Chughtai, 2009). The eponymous *Lihaaf* symbolizes a welcome shift, representing the transformation of Begum Jaan into a liberated individual. Sahana (2022) highlights how Chughtai has used the quilt as a symbol of secret desires: "The agency of the objects lies in their ability to morph their meaning according to contexts, revealing the socially constructed nature of identity of humans and objects, forged by wrestling with

variables such as gender and sexuality.” Furthermore, Chughtai’s work proposes the right to bodily integrity, addresses restrained mobility of woman within the household and differing interpretations of sexual orientation identities. In the second half, Chughtai strategically prioritizes the protagonist’s desire, underlining the pleasant sensation that overpowers her emotional turmoil.

Apparently, Chughtai challenged the old regressive narrative of sexuality by addressing the preexisting prejudices rooted in patriarchal settings. Initially, Begum consistently restrains her sexual expression, but this changes when her desires are validated through her intimate association with Rabbu. The narrator hints at the secret activity taking place in pitch dark, and earlier the voice which was concealed inside the quilt is unveiled at the end. “The elephant started fluttering once again and it seemed as though it was trying to squat. There was sound of someone smacking her lips, as though savouring a tasty pickle” (Chughtai, 2009). Here, we see the creative potential of Chughtai where words like “smacking lips” and “savouring” reveals that Begum’s unsanctioned emotions were getting unburdened from the heteronormative structure. Through this, we observe the trajectory of the female character, which starts with the protagonist’s powerlessness and inner dilemma and concludes with her self-acceptance. Chughtai’s *Lihaaf* portrays the prevalent colonial mindset of the society and the traditional power structures that assign women a particular position, reinforcing their character of natural servitude, specifically within the institution of marriage. This depiction of power dynamics serves as an articulation of heterosexual dominance. Perhaps her idea of working on this theme was to remove shame, forestall the concealment of their desires, and challenge the notion of inherent subservience of women.

## 5. Conclusion

Sexuality and bodily autonomy have long been regulated by traditional gender norms. Chughtai’s *Lihaaf* portrayed the nuanced experiences of the sexual subaltern, envisioning a society that revolutionizes the position of those excluded from the canon. Despite facing accusations, she refused to go by conventional classification systems, challenging the idea of obscenity in representations of female sexuality. Her court proceedings depicted how women are buffeted between the different sections of society, due to the imposition of heteropatriarchy. The dominance of patriarchal subjugation isolates the protagonist in a room, where she emotionally struggles to establish a romantic connection with her husband. This underscores the challenges encountered by women due to oppressive heteronormative culture. This paper attempted to discuss the stigmatization associated with lesbian sexual orientation during Chughtai’s time. “Cunningly subversive, this short story stands as a major text in the history of South Asian homoerotic literature” (Bagchi, 2016). Through her narratives, Chughtai emphasized the significance of understanding these potentially complex and disconcerting issues related to sexuality. In this sense, *Lihaaf* not only challenged hegemonic power structures but was also fundamental to furthering the reinterpretation of sexuality in contemporary literature by women writers.

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## Authors’ contributions

Ms. Anvesha Singh Rathore was responsible for conducting the research and drafting the manuscript. Dr. K Jayalakshmi, the corresponding author, proofread and revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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