

Lifting Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaf* in Search of Alternative Sexuality

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Abstract:

In 1942, the Imperial Court of Lahore impounded Lihaf (The Quilt). The charge was against the theme and its treatment as being a propagator of obscenity and homosexuality in established Urdu literature. The Court wanted a supplicant Ismat but instead of entreating, she and her family opted to contest the Court. However, the judge could not pluck out any specific phrase or word from the narrative to implement the verdict against Ismat and repudiate her writing. In this paper I would concentrate only on one short story of Ismat Chughtai which ferched her less renown more controversy. Lihaf (The Quilt) began, disqualifying the proscription from the parochialists, an era of probing into the territory of taboo of feminine psychosexuality of middle-class (Muslim) Indian family. To be more specific, Ismat Chughtai remains the first writer to venture upon lesbianism.

Key Words:

Chughtai, Lihaf, Spousal Indifference, Sapphism, Indian Middle-Class Muslims, Obscenity, Progressive Writer Associations.

Abbreviations:

MIL: Modern Indian Literature

PWA: Progressive Writers' Associations

Introduction:

Ismat Khanum Chughtai (15th August 1915 - 24th 1991), the grand dame of modern Urdu literature was born in a large, educated and cultural Muslim family in Badayun; Uttar Pradesh of pre-Independent India. She was the ninth of the ten children (four sisters and six brothers) of her parents and she spent most of her early childhood days playing and fighting in the streets of the *mahalla* of Agra and Aligarh with her brothers and their friends. Her father was a deputy collector and was a man with 'progressive' outlook who let her girls to have equal percentage of facilities like freedom and education. Ismat used to get out in Sundays with her family on shooting and horse riding. She confessed that her family members were unusually frank to each other. She says,

“I never had the feeling that, being a woman, I should be shy and nervous. Because of that upbringing, I am this way. And we discussed sex freely; even in those days sex was not a taboo subject for conversation in my house. We freely discussed it.”
Mahfil interview

Apart from her father, Ismat got a friend, philosopher and literary guide in her brother Mirza Azim Beg Chughtai, the already established humorist and feminine ideologist in Urdu intelligensia. When Ismat just came into the screen, her initial writings like *Gela (Idiot)* and *Lihaf (The Quilt)* were thought to be written by her brother Azim Beg but under a pseudonym 'Ismat'. She had such maturity of her creativity and cogency of her selection of theme that she was mistaken to be a male writer at first. Whatever As for her educational background, she was an alumna of I. T. College, Isabella Thoburn College of Lucknow University and then of the prestigious Aligarh Muslim University. At time of her B.A, she joined tentatively, without knowing its farsighted impact on her, the first organized meeting of Indian Progressive Writers' Associations¹ (in connection with All India Writers' Association) with its first president Munshi Prem Chand and other famous socialist writers such as Rahsid Jehan, Ahmed Ali, Syed Sajjad Zahir and Syed Fakhruddin Balley. It was especially Rashid Jehan who got her into this movement. Ismat spoke out

loudly about her admiration of Rashid Jehan. She says, "I just wanted to copy her. She influenced me a lot; her open mindedness and free-thinking. She said that whatever you feel, you should not be ashamed of it, nor should you be ashamed of expressing it, for the heart is more sacred than the lips." (Mahfil interview) Additionally, with all theses, she came under the revolutionary ideologies, thinkers and writers, both Indian and abroad. She attended classes on Marxism, Socialism, Stalinism and Socialist Realism in her college course. She read Freud, Russian Revolution literature, Gorky, Lawrence, Dickens, Maupassant. All these shaping influences were really very much unlikely in a pre-Independent Muslim family. And she did justice to all her amenities. She is, perhaps, the first Muslim woman to get B.A. and B.Ed. Along with Jilani Bano and Wajda Tabassum who also wrote touching stories on Middle-class Muslims, Ismat Chughtai has to her credit a few excellent short stories as well as few remarkable novels. She began her writing career with short stories such as *Gela (Idiot)* and *Gainda (Marigold)* in around 1938 in magazines like *Saki* and *Adab-i-latif*. With *Lihaf* in 1942 she became an issue of hot debate and target

of bitter criticism. In 1973, she received the prestigious National Award for the story of the film *Garam Hawa*, directed by M.S. Sathyu. Her famous novel *Terhi Lakir (The Crooked Line)* came in 1943. It was a semi-autobiographical account of a fiery spirited middle class girl's story to maturity through phases of same-sex experiments. *Ziddi (The Stubborn)* came in 1940 followed by *Masooma (The Innocent Girl)* in 1964. For her outstanding contribution to modern Urdu literature, she was awarded Padma Shri, the third highest civilian award in the Republic of India. Apart from *Lihaf (The Quilt)*, *Bachchho Phoopi (Aunty Scorpion)* and *Nanhi Ki Nani (Tiny's Granny)* are her eternal characters which dealt with religious hypocrisy, female identity crisis, psychosexual-feminism, middle-class values and Muslim patriarchy.

This 'unusual' upbringing in a middle class Muslim family, later gave her plenty resources to write in a candid style and capacitated Ismat to give almost a point-blank account of juvenile psychology. She was herself a tomboyish nature in her teens ("I used to climb trees with them and used to go everywhere with them. I never felt any inferiority complex.") Like the young

narrator girl of the *Lihaf*, Chughtai got stack of eyewitness accounts of a ‘different’ world while traversing the vicinity with her comrade brothers and ‘boyfriends’, exploring a frustrated child-widow crouching to pillow or an exhausted granddame here, and sometimes a middle aged aunty searching antidote to fill spousal avoidance or teens indulging in sapphism, there. These veiled oddities seething with frustration behind the conservatism conditioned by her congenital free will gave rise to radical characters whom today’s academia lexicalizes as alternative sexuality, homosexuality, tribadism, lesbianism, domestic partner or spousal equivalent and so on.

In the interview given to Mahfil, Ismat gave her clear-cut opinion that she didn’t consider herself anyone so important to be called a pioneer or anything like that. She said (asked!!), “What do you mean by "prominent" anyway? When I started writing, there was a trend -- writing romantic things or writing like a Progressive. When I started to write, people were very shocked because I wrote very frankly.”

Lihaf (The Quilt): An Analysis

Lihaf, *Lihaaf* or *Lahaf (The Quilt)* is a story set in flashback, narrated through the consciousness of a ‘fighting and quarrelling’ young girl who happened to stay for few days in one of her mother’s close sister, Begum Jan’s home since the girl’s mother went on a visit to Agra. The girl says that in the house of that Begum Jan, she encountered a reality which she couldn’t understand at her age. For days and nights, the girl saw an ‘unusual relationship’ between Begum Jan, the wife of Nawab Sahib/Saheb and one of Begum Jan’s domestic help, Rabbu. The story has few characters. The girl, Begum Jan and Rabbu are the on stage characters. Nawab Sahib and few of his scholar boys around him are only the narrated/back stage characters. The season is winter. The story has another important inanimate thing to which, Chughtai almost gave an animated dimension. It is the quilt. And it is upon which, the story has been nominated. Chughtai has used two things brilliantly. Firstly, making a young girl the narrator of her controversial story who does not wholly know what she is narrating and, secondly,

making an inanimate object (the ‘quilt’) the centre of mystery for her story. What do Begum Jan and Rabbu ‘actually’ do under the quilt making types of succulent noises and moving shadows on the wall are totally left to the imaginative apprehensiveness of the readers. And making the young girl a point of view of her story who can just narrate vividly what she sees only nothing more, Chughtai has tactfully licensed the chances for the authorial intrusion and intention. The story is so purposefully served to the readers. Structurally, the story has a plot of two recluse women from different status thrust into a homosocial (Nawab Sahib and his day in and day out attachment with the ‘only’ male scholar) world and how are they making ‘profit’ from each other subverting the established *raison d’être* for women set up by men.

So, the story veers around the theme of spousal indifference and its demoralizing impact. What happens when an economically affluent, middle aged Begum Jan suffers from a long sexual starvation from her otherwise good, scholar and ‘pious’ but either bi- or homo- sexual husband. Begum Jan is childless. So the

chances of sublimating her physical desire into filial involvement are shut. And her childlessness also raises significant questions regarding the true sexual orientation of Nawab Sahib; whether he is a gay or bisexual. Slowly but surely, she grows psychosomatic disorders beginning with narcissism to fit, headache, itching and adult and child abusing. When the story opens, we see “Begum Jan pine in loneliness, and she felt she was rolling on a bed of live coals” (MIL 118).

Begum Jan had an unequal marriage with Nawab Sahib. He was aged, she in her teens. The *hajj* sponsoring, *Mecca* pilgrim Nawab Sahib had another ‘curious’ hobby. The hobby of patronizing ‘food and lodging’ (scholarship) to those who are only ‘young, fair-faced *boys* with slim waists’ (italics mine). The students were fed sumptuously and they remain crowding the Nawab. Things began to change gradually. The Nawab indulged in homosocial scholarship (read homosexuality) caring a fig for her youthful wife. Begum Jan primarily tried all the traditional and religious practices to bring her distracting husband back to herself. She slowly turned into voyeuristic pleasure and grew typical symptoms of

sexual perversion to frustration. As we see, “she watched from the chinks in the drawing room door and saw the boys in their translucent Kurtas, their well-formed legs in tight-fitting churidars, their willowy waists.” (MIL 118). In the M. Asaduddin’s translation of the story, the situation is more explicit. It runs, “Begum Jaan would have glimpses of them in their perfumed, flimsy shirts and feel as though she was being raked over burning embers!” Begum Jan couldn’t even find warmth in the ‘freshly stuffed’ and ‘finely teased’ lihaf. It seemed that all these remained unchanged even “All her prayers and vows, her vigils and charms failed to move the Nawab. (Chughtai trans. Syed Sirajuddin 118) Or “did it start when she gave up on amulets, talismans, black magic and other ways of retaining the love of her straying husband? She arranged for night long reading of the scripture but in vain. One cannot draw blood from a stone. The Nawab didn’t budge an inch” (Chughtai trans. Asaduddin 2). The effect was as if ‘applying leeches to a stone’. Here, Chughtai has lashed bitterly in the root of the traditional ritualistic practices of religion for the betterment of mere mundane reality.

In course of time, Begum Jan, only around forty two and is in full sway of her

instinctive desires, began to show signs of psychosomatic disorder. She got an incessant habit of scratching due to an unknown itching all over her body. Doctors were consulted. But it is only after the arrival of Rabbu and through her constant ‘scratching and care’, Begum Jan restored from the verge with her almost ‘dried up body’. Ismat gave an elaborate psychosexual feminine description of the gorgeous Begum Jan and her toilet scene.

She had thrown a purple shawl across her legs and looked as grand as a queen. I was quite enamored of her looks. I was happy to sit near her and look at her for hours. Her dark, luxuriously oiled hair was neatly parted, and so immaculately set that not a strand of hair could be found staying. Her eyes were black and her carefully plucked eyebrows were like drawn bows. Her eyes were a little distended with heavy eyelids and thick lashes. But it was her lips, often reddened, that that were the most amazingly attractive feature of her face. She had a downy upper lip with the faint suggestion of

a mustache. Her hair grew long at her temples. Sometimes watching her face you had the queer feeling that you were looking at the face of a young boy. (MIL 119)

The concluding line clearly hints the ‘instinctive bi-sexuality’ (a term coined by Adrienne Rich) of the young girl who felt unconsciously enamoured to Begum Jan’s beauty. Thus, Rabbu became a constant partner, almost a spousal surrogate to Begum Jan. Naturally; she became a *bête noire* to every body of the house hold. (‘The other maid in the house held a bitter grudge against Rabbu. The witch!’) Gradually, Begum Jan and Rabbu became a hush-hush topic to everybody of the vicinity. As we see, “She ate with Begum Jan, was her constant companion, and even slept with her! Rabbu and Begum Jan were a topic of amused conversation at social functions and gatherings. There were bursts of laughter the moment their names were mentioned. Innumerable stories had been coined about the poor lady. (MIL 120)

The young girl became a poor victim of witnessing the regular nocturnal ‘activities’ of the two women. Chughtai described few of the episodes with so

precision that the readers are lured into believing the two women to be engaged in cunnilingus. The Syed Sirajuddin translation of the text reads it as, “I felt as though a dispute between Rabbu and Begum Jan were being silently settled on the bed. I could not make out anything, nor could I tell how it was decided. I only heard Rabbu’s convulsive sobs, then noises like those of cat licking a plate, lap, lap. I was so frightened that I went back to sleep.” Thus, Begum Jan’s circuitous enjoyment with Rabbu, her maid is an epistemological shock to the established code of conduct in Indian Middle-Class Muslim.

As for her style Chughtai’s use of images and symbols are outstanding. The recollects the lihaf to be like a ‘scar on the hot iron’ and the use of animal imageries throughout her writings is a watermark to the modern Urdu writing. The shadow of the quilt is compared to the movement of an elephant can be read as such that the huge corpus of the animal sites into the elephantine secrets, desires, misuse, hypocrisy and mystery of women psychology. The sound-image of a cat licking a dish with relish, a frog about to

jump and the mouse are all the Freudian 'replacement' objects of libidinal desire.

Throughout the story, the *lihaf* stands for a troupe of irony and sarcasm. Chughtai has hit "ruthlessly at its hypocrisies, its hollow religiosity, its superstitions and ritualism, its contradictions and double standards, The unconventionality of Chughtai's themes is matched by powerful narration. Varying her tone between sympathy and irony, she manages to find a narrative style that is balanced between humour and cruelty." (MIL 116) In addition, we can say, the *lihaf* stands for i) Warmth of life, ii) Mystery of the unknown, iii) Human, especially female psychology, iv) Clandestine as well as the hole-and-corner practice of our society, v) Sensual gratification and vi) The threshold of two realities, one of the private and the public.

Conclusion:

Pricking the bubble of Victorian morality of Indian middle-class people, the group of new Urdu writers came out to deal with 'bad' characters and 'taboo' themes. With a sympathetic understanding of human psychology, these young brigade

took up characters from such a reality where inner soul negotiates with political self, where extreme private self which is beyond any corporeal labeling of 'good' or 'bad' regularly come face to face with another self fraught with socio-eco-political upheavals of the pre-Independent and pre-partitioned India.

Karl Marx said that 'art is always and every where the secret confession, and at the same time the immortal movement of its time'. We fairly know the Progressive Writers' adherence to the leftist and anti-colonial zeal. Ismat Chughtai, like her compatriot Manto, was very much disapproving of insinuation and seeing an issue from outside. Instead of peeping in, she believes in the simple way of dealing things by a face to face encounter. The success of *Lihaf* does not lie only in unveiling any singular case of ideological as well as sexual aberration. Rather, *Lihaf* becomes a trope which destabilizes the conservationists' self defense via age Victorian prudery of the old social systems. The most important aspect of the short story which most often remains unvalued by its readers and researchers is that Ismat raises questions on the delicate issues like the

necessity of consummation in married life and how far society can act towards a better and fulfilling life. She asks in the story, “Why should one live then? ... Well, one lives as long as life lasts. It was in her stars that she should be live, and live she did.” (118) Her probing into the feminine psycho-sexual desires and keeping her stories sticking to cultural, domestic and sexual demoralization of middle class Muslim family remains a path breaking phenomena in the history of women writers in pre-Modern Indian. Capturing the vainglorious of a rich ancestry, Ismat deliberately brought an epistemic shock in the established aesthetic apprehension of female writings. Chughtai tried to anticipate a female social convention defined by females, not by males, and in due time, females themselves would shape and articulate their own demand, desires, discourse and differences. As she says that *Lihaf* was an experimental writing, perhaps, first in the domain of lesbianism by a female writer from India. Ismat thought, a society which allows male to fill their need to a prostitute what does it do for the women with their instinctive desire? Nothing. So, they have grown their own world. Though, we should not forget that, Ismat’s characters are, unlike today’s

radical inborn homosexuals, given to a ‘chosen or forced (bi-) homosexuality’ resultant of the starvation from normal heterosexual consummation.

Ismat’s progressive ideology, her subtle discerning into juvenile psychology, feminism sexuality and above all her defiant attitude towards a rotten society made controversy her lifelong companion. Her liberalism was unquestionable. Her daughter and nephew got married to Hindus and her death wish, to be cremated not buried (a Muslim is to be buried when dies), also created a furor among the religious stakeholders. Though her contemporary readers were hostile to her frankness of opinion, her characters have proved that Chughtai was a genius who came much before her time.

Notes:

1. The only thing they found objectionable was that Ismat used the word *Ashique* which means ‘suitsors’ is in its English equivalent. The Court said, girls from any respectable Muslim family does not ‘seek’ her ‘suitsors’ and so that was

dishonourable, opprobrious and ignominious for any unmarried women.

2. The Progressive Writers' Association (the Urdu wing named as Anjuman Taraqqi Pasand Musannifin) was first set up in Lucknow in 1936. Its manifesto publication was *Angare (The Burning Coals)*. All of today's Urdu writers, directly or indirectly consider *Angare* to be the beginning of Modern Urdu writing.

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