

## Reforming the Canon of Gender through Ismat Chughtai's 'Lihaaf'

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### Abstract

The 'Queer Theory' has gained nationwide appeal while also causing a slew of problems in society. This theory investigates the LGBTQ+ community, which is unguarded in society and is constantly fighting to define their identity in the mainstream. Judith Butler writes in 'Gender Performativity' that 'there can be no gendered identity before the gendered acts, because the acts are continuously producing the identity' (522). Butler favors the pronouns 'they/them' to denote their identification rather than 'he/she', which made a significant addition to 'Queer' theory. The current study will look at Ismat Chughtai's 'Lihaaf,' a short narrative that follows Begum Jaan as she embarks on an unorthodox lesbian identity free of patriarchy. Chughtai's 'Lihaaf' celebrates 'freedom' over 'bondage', 'soul' over 'body', and 'Abnormality' over 'being normal'. This study will analyze 'Lihaaf' via the lens of the 'Queer' identity, which is prone to social norm violations.

**Keywords:** Vulnerability, LGBTQ+, Gender, Queer, Normal

The study of queer theory focuses on the ways in which certain gender and sexual identities are stigmatized while others are institutionalized and given legitimacy. The rise in popularity of Gay and Lesbian (also known as LGBT or Queer) Studies in academic circles led to the emergence of Queer Theory. Queer Theory challenges and addresses rigid identity categories, sexuality and gender norms, and the oppression and violence that these hegemonic norms justify. In contrast, LGBT Studies talks about LGBT people as fixed identities. Queer theory, sometimes known as the "deconstruction" of LGBT studies, allows and promotes a variety of loose readings of cultural events that subvert sexual and gender identities. It assumes that all sexual behaviors and gender expressions, as well as all notions tying such behaviors to prescribed, related identities, and their categorization into "normal" or "deviant" sexualities or gender, are socially produced and generate modalities of social meaning. Queer theory follows and expands on feminist theory by rejecting the notion that sexuality and gender identity are essentialist categories defined by biology and so empirically appraised by fixed standards of morality and "truth". The manner in which gender and sexuality are discussed is a primary concern in gender studies and queer

theory: "Effective as this work [feminism] was in changing what teachers taught and what students read, there was a sense on the part of some feminist critics that...it was still the old game that was being played, when what it needed was a new game entirely" (Butler 43). The argument advanced was that in order to combat patriarchy, it was important to "think about new texts in radically new ways" (Richter 12).

The significance of Judith Butler's term "performativity" lies not so much in the act itself as it does in the repetition of the performance. What Butler implies by the statement that gender is performative is relevant to his theory of gender as a fixed identity. Butler stated that their work had been misinterpreted several times, thus before reaching any interim conclusions, it is necessary to clear up certain prevalent misconceptions. Additionally, Butler's views in this thesis draw from her earlier and subsequent writings in addition to *Gender Trouble*. Over time, norms and beliefs about what characteristics (clothing, colors, sports, and so forth) are connected to a specific gender change. Something that was once seen as normal for a particular gender can now be regarded as atypical for the same gender. For instance, pink was once thought to be a frequent hue for males, but in more recent times, it has come to be associated with girls. Different cultures have different expectations about gender roles. For instance, it's common for two men to stroll hand in hand through public in Iran, but not in Western Europe. Numerous writers have discussed the evolution of particular gender roles.

Butler believes that it is hard to view gender apart from the 'cultural intersections' that 'produced and maintained' (7) gender since gender does not remain constant over time and fluctuates with race, class, and area. They wonder how gender is produced socially and how that construction works. Gender is constructed, but "not necessarily by people" (Butler 16). It's even possible that individuals are being constructed. According to Bettcher, Butler sees the agent "as performatively constituted by their gendered behavior" (37). Thus, Butler follows and defines the term performative and explains what it means to state that gender is performative. For Butler, the subject is: "...designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation ... The subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency" [5]. It becomes more challenging when the subject is designated as "women." Some feminists argue that the term "women" denotes and reflects the material realities of women's subjugation and place within a patriarchal system. The "subject" of "women" is in a linguistic dilemma. However, a power should be imposed on the subject; subjection is a power "assumed by the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject's becoming" [5]. As a result, it is evident that subjects require power to form, while also being exploited by power. However, power is founded on subjugation and subject development. This is the power/subject connection. Power is shaped by one's behavior towards societal change.

The current article examines queer identity and how it is portrayed in Indian English literature, placing special emphasis on Ismat Chughtai's renowned short story *Lihaaf*. The tale is a noteworthy example of queer writing from the pre-independence era that reveals the traditional attitudes of people towards LGBT community in colonial India. Due to its unconventional representation of an unnatural sexual relation between its female protagonist Begum Jan and her masseur Rabbu, this narrative is accused of blasphemy and propagating immorality. Begum Jan, the main character of *Lihaaf*, is married to a Nawab from an aristocratic family. Her husband is more focused on young boys than his wife, which makes their marriage less than ideal. Following the standards of heteronormative society, Nawab believes that his only duty to his wife is to provide for her monetary comfort, rather than her emotional and psychological needs. He views her as merely a possession. She is abandoned, much like the rest of his belongings. She is held captive by the clichéd web of marriage. But, Chughtai, rather than creating Begum Jaan as a passive and docile character, has put that strength in Begum which made her the ruler who rules and commands her own life. Instead of being a victim of the archaic tradition of a patriarchal institution like marriage, where she had a formal tie with her husband, Begum Jan takes advantage of being alone to become a new woman who is sexually liberated. Nawab doesn't bother to enter into the desirable space of Begum Jaan, thus isolating her completely. The Mahal of Nawab and the presence of Rabbu in that space become a forum for Begum Jaan to express her sexuality. *Zenana* transforms into a queer setting where dominant female demands are made clear. These desires are prohibited for women but not for males, so they are covered up. The patchwork takes on a symbolic meaning of hiding one's forbidden desires.

Instead of the concept of male homosexuality, the metaphor of female homoeroticism demonstrates how the display of queer love becomes a challenge for women in hegemonic culture. The story also demonstrates how Begum Jan's homosexual relationship with Rabbu raises questions about whether or not Nawab Saheb's homosexual relationship with the young boys is being taken seriously. Consequently, his homosexual relationships are carefully discussed from the viewpoint of heteronormative society. Chughtai exposes the pretentiousness and hypocrisy of bourgeois male-dominated religious practices that stand for piety. Rabbu's participation with Begum Jan makes the role of a healer abundantly obvious. Rabbu's oil massage for Begum turns into a life-giving potion for her. It also satisfies her desires, easing her sexual difficulties. The text reveals the historical exploitation of women's bodies and desires as well as oppression and dominance of them.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler presents their theory of the subversion of identity, which claims that "conventional ideas of gender and sexuality help to uphold the historical dominance of women by males and to legitimize the oppression of homosexuals and transgender people. Gender is socially produced rather than innate" (27). Drawing on this theory, Begum Jaan's problems were similar in that she was married off without being asked to do so. Butler's theory of performativity, which promotes the idea that gendered acts gradually shape a person's identity, makes a special point of the ongoing

marginalization of women. Everything about society is biased, even the simplest things like serving a boy a glass of water or teaching a girl how important cooking skills are. Society simply won't make an exception to the rules for a girl child. The phallogocentric society sabotages women on purpose by adopting harmful customs. For the monsters of society, women seem weak and easily deceived. She can restore her identity overall through the homoerotic partnership. Through the eyes of Rabbo, she rediscovers herself. She was imprisoned by negative stereotypes for far too long.

In an era when homosexuality was frowned upon, Chughtai skillfully depicts a universe that demonstrates how it emerged in a patriarchal culture. She makes reference to a prejudiced society that is unable to make allowances for a woman's problems. The words "Begum Jaan's life began when she committed the mistake of being born, or when she arrived at the Nawab's residence as his bride, mounted the four-poster bed, and began to count her days. It was unclear when Begum Jaan's life began" (2) make this clear. A woman is actually trained to put up with and absorb. In some ways, Begum Jaan's connection with Rabbo is a result of her tragedy. She transitions from the stage of being an object to subject by releasing herself from the control of the society where her voice was muted, her identity was marginalized, and she was victimized. Begum Jaan, a 'new lady' in Lihaaf who is gender conscious and challenges the heteronormative nature of man-woman relationships, is introduced as the 'new woman'. According to Chughtai, female sexuality can be a source of empowerment. The naive and innocent narrator provides visual details that illustrate the same-sex connection. By making the zenana the location of Begum Jaan's homosexual aspirations, the narrative sexualizes the zenana. Chughtai demonstrates how the enclosed zenana might serve as a source of sexual fulfillment for women who are unable to find it in marriage.

Begum Jaan defies her traditional role as a submissive housewife and chooses the modern route in an effort to come to terms with her sexuality. Chughtai has successfully portrayed the thoughts and acts of the afflicted and battling Begum Jan using a woman's language. Her writing is eloquent, flawless, and gorgeous. It helps readers picture the circumstances. The narrative's rhythm provides the scenario a flow and has a lasting impression on readers. She has established herself as a powerful painter of women characters that struggle in contemporary society by her intellectual and skilled use of language. "Sr-sr-phat-kitch... Begum Jan's lihaf was once more swaying like an elephant in the shadows". My voice trembled as I muttered, "My God."... I overheard sounds that sounded like someone was relishing their food: "Slop, slop." (Chughtai 4). This is how Chughtai alludes to the lesbian action taking place behind the quilt's cover. In the winter, we use a "lihaaf" — a quilt — to protect ourselves from the cold. It makes us feel warm. We simultaneously protect ourselves from our environment when we cover ourselves in a quilt. We are no longer connected to the atmosphere outside. The meaning of the word is justified by the tale "Lihaf". When the story highlights our deliberate disregard for the social ills, miseries, ignorance, etc. that are a result of our conservatism and overlooking attitudes, it depicts the essence and spirit of the 'quilt' or 'lihaaf' correctly and skillfully.

The story deals with the social ills that women in general experience, not only in rural, illiterate societies but also in the civilized societies of the cities. These social ills include exploitation and mistreatment, crushing and subjugation, oppression and suppression. Chughtai has expertly described the crucial social issue of sex and lesbianism in our society's closed-off community. However, she has properly explained why the heroine is compelled to take the desperate step of seeking sexual fulfillment in a lesbian relationship. Above all, she has given the oppressed women a signal to rebel against the social constraints placed on them by patriarchal society. In the short narrative, Begum Jaan stands out as the first woman to speak out against the oppression of women and their counterparts' despair and denial. She disregards the established rules of her religion, culture, and the etiquette of the kothi (haveli) in order to follow the road that will satiate her sexual desire and meet her needs. Begum Jan makes a valiant effort to live her life on her terms, take pleasure in life, and express her sexual cravings covertly. "Lihaaf" turns into her labyrinth, a haven for her erotic fantasies. Begum satisfies her repressed needs in the shadows beneath the quilt. Ismat Chughtai speaks out against the sufferings of women and how they are treated unfairly by men. She has spoken about topics including female homosexuality in repressed settings like the home. Because she wrote about women's need for sexual fulfillment, which was a major taboo at the time, she has to contend with criticism for her writing.

"Lihaaf," often known as "the quilt" in English, was a daring investigation of the alternative accessible to women in a sexually oppressive patriarchal culture. It was a direct hit on the world, which was justifiably shocked out of its own self-importance. Quilt has been used as an imaginative and clever method to conceal reality, hence making it operative on multiple levels. Begum Jaan becomes a "quilt" for the nawab's personal fondness for young lads. He hides his activities behind his wife. Quilt, on the other hand, becomes a cover for Begum's Jaan and Rabbu's night-time actions. It keeps the narrator from seeing what is going on within while also allowing her imagination to go wild. In other cases, "lihaaf" or "quilt" is used to describe the placid exterior surface and the hazardous undercurrents.

Chughtai uses a writing style that transforms a story that may have been melodramatic and gloomy into a strong, multifaceted account of unwavering feminine assertion and resurrected humanity. The strong female friendship between Begum Jan and Rabbu illuminates the entire narrative. Ismat Chughtai's contribution to the understanding of the evolution of complex masculinity and femininity matrices through history, tradition, and literary expositions up until contemporary feminist discourse is established by the way they reclaim and reconstruct their differentiated individuality, re-present and reassert their femininity, and seek subject and agency. As a result, the feminist perspective of the narrative adds subtle nuances to the examination of the patriarchy and strengthens the feminist reconstruction of the self, which reduces the importance of gender identity markers, eliminates the authoritative approach of male-centeredness, and eliminates gender extremism, revealing and voicing the feminine sexuality in terms of sexual fantasies and desires.

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