



Teaching Gender by Lifting the Lihaf: Chughtai for Our Times

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Received: 05 Mar 2025; Received in revised form: 27 Mar 2025; Accepted: 03 Apr 2025; Available online: 09 Apr 2025
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Abstract— This paper explores the possibility of pedagogical practices for a critical analysis of sexuality through teaching Literature. In the last twenty years there has been a sea change in the of gender and sexuality due to feminist and gay movements which has resulted in a corresponding body of academic work. It is crucial to locate this work in the pervasive patriarchy in which the classroom exists. This can only be interrogated through tools of critical inquiry. Ismat Chughtai published in 1942, is a useful text to teach through interactive discussions a spectrum of issues patriarchy, homosexuality, heteronormativity, child sexuality, and sexual abuse.



Keywords— critical inquiry, gender, pedagogy, sexuality, structural patriarchy

I. INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades perceptions of gender and sexuality have undergone a critical transformation as has academic research work in these areas. The impact of these changes, fuelled by the prevalence of social media, has influenced teaching and reception of texts in the classroom. Pedagogical practises have had difficulty keeping pace with burgeoning new studies on gender, sexuality, feminist theory and practices, gay studies, and the transgender movement. Gender and sexuality have always been volatile areas, and for this reason been taboo subjects until the 1960s and 70s when the feminist movement brought in the discourse of the politics of the body, coming roughly at the same time as the Stonewall riots and the awareness of homosexual rights. Evidence of this is the expansion of the acronym LGBT which was coined at the turn of the century to LGBTQIA+, with the clear recognition that the term will continue to evolve. Academia has responded to the need to analyze, critique, and teach issues of gender and sexuality by instituting departments of women and gender studies, as well as journals dedicated to this area. A growing confidence and a rapidly expanding body of work in material feminist studies has led to interrogating entrenched stereotypes of gender and sexuality through critical readings of texts in classrooms, but this often converts the classroom

space into a battleground between teachers and students, since the classroom and the university are gendered spaces in themselves. Before defining pedagogical practices within the classroom it is essential to evaluate the lived experience of students and faculty who inhabit a range of genders and sexuality in a settled hierarchy created by a patriarchal, heteronormative power structure. One text that offers endless insights into these intricate, multilayered issues is Ismat Chughtai's 'Lihaaf'; it is specially useful as it allows a slow unravelling of issues ranging from patriarchy to homosexuality, from female desire to child abuse. A nuanced reading of 'Lihaaf' over a period of time with students could lead to a critical (re)thinking that allows for an ongoing engagement with the evolving discourse on gender and sexuality long after the examinations are over.

II. SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND STRUCTURAL PATRIARCHY

In India, progress in discourses on gender and sexuality came along with legal changes. The Supreme Court formulated the Vishakha Guidelines (Supreme Court, Vishakha Guidelines, 1997), following which Delhi University produced an Ordinance regarding sexual harassment (Ordinance XV(D), 2004). The awareness

raised by this legal framework—indeed, mandated by it—resulted in students and faculty in colleges coming together to form Gender Forums, Gender Sensitisation Committees, etc. Extra-curricular activities started addressing themes of gender in its many avatars for debates, plays, essay writing, etc. Thus, the classroom within which texts are taught was surrounded by this complex terrain outside its walls. Students began exploring issues of gender as a social construct, questioning the negative connotations of the term ‘feminist’, reading definitions of sexual harassment, becoming aware of non-binary genders, and much more. In Delhi University the turn of the century also brought in a major rehauling of the English Literature syllabus: for the first time an optional paper on Literary Theory was introduced, including one unit on Feminism, another optional paper on Women’s Writing, and a number of texts and prose readings in other papers that dealt specifically with gender. However, pedagogical practices did not immediately change to accommodate a theoretical, critical reading of the new syllabus: that change in teaching with the appropriate tools has evolved in the last decade. To cope with the uncertain, shifting ground in teaching, several Faculty Development Programmes (FDPs) have been either devoted to gender studies or have included a few sessions on teaching gender in the classroom in the last few years.

In light of this evolving discourse on gender and sexuality in the last two decades, it is crucial to map out a pedagogy of cultural readings of gender, to analyse through feminist theory the lived experience of the body and structural patriarchy that students and faculty inhabit, and to have a body of work about what it means to teach any part of the curriculum through the lens of gender, or through a blindness towards gender. Any discussion on teaching gender in the classroom must start with the pervasive patriarchy within which the teaching and studying of gender takes place. Without considering the full implications of the widest, most entrenched system of oppression throughout the world, one that determines everything we do, it is impossible to discuss teaching practices in the classroom, as if the classroom were an insulated space for teachers and students. In tandem with this, it is imperative to look at how gender functions in the classroom and the university, using the tool of critical thinking to make students re-think and revise their received ideas. It is only after this that one can focus on the reading of literature through the language of gender and discuss pedagogical practices.

The most dominant construction of an accepted ‘truth’ across most societies globally is that of structural, systemic patriarchy. This constructed patriarchy invisibilises itself as ‘natural’. Religions declare male superiority as divinely ordained, while in the last two centuries science and other academic fields have found ‘logical’ rationality for female

inferiority. Patriarchy and its attendant misogyny are the inherent, foundational ‘truths’ on which all social, historical, economic, political, cultural, religious, and psychological knowledge is based. It is intricately networked into every aspect of social life, making it infinitely flexible so that it can mold itself to retaining its discursive leverage against any challenge to its power and authority. For example, when women joined the workforce during the two World Wars and did not return to exclusively household work when the men came back, the myth of the origin of gendered roles of women staying home to rear children while the men went out to bring food home emerged in the 1960s. When older women started challenging men in senior roles at work the myth of older menopausal women outliving their social utility and being a burden on society evolved. These narratives of ‘natural’ gendered roles governing labour have embedded themselves in capitalist societies and are difficult to dislodge. However, as Edward Said writes in *Orientalism* (Said, 1979):

There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental; it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces.” Said goes on to say, “Above all, authority can, indeed must, be analysed. (p. 20)

III. CRITICAL THINKING AS A TOOL TO ANALYZE SETTLED NOTIONS

Critical thinking, or critical analysis, is the ability to think clearly and rationally, to understand the logical connection between ideas. It involves observation, analysis, interpretation, reflection, and evaluation (Scriven & Paul, 1987). Feminism has a basic logic based on all the above—that women should be treated equally to men. Feminism is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. It is the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes. The words feminism and feminist have been in use for almost 150 years, but they continue to cause discomfort even today. John Stuart Mill, a Utilitarian, writes about the resistance to feminist ideas in his essay titled “The Subjugation of Women” (Mill, 1869):

The object of this Essay is to explain...that the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality,

admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.... The difficulty is that which exists in all cases in which there is a mass of feeling to be contended against. So long as an opinion is strongly rooted in the feelings, it gains rather than loses in stability by having a [heavy] weight of argument against it. ...And there are so many causes tending to make the feelings connected with this subject the most intense and most deeply-rooted of all those which gather round and protect old institutions and customs, that we need not wonder to find them as yet less undermined and loosened than any of the rest by the progress of the great modern spiritual and social transition; nor suppose that the *barbarisms* to which men cling longest must be less *barbarisms* than those which they earlier shake off [emphasis mine]. (p. 1)

I have quoted Mill at length to show his understanding of why logic or rationality cannot shake deeply held beliefs and prejudices, and that even in 1869 he could clearly perceive that from the rational viewpoint of the logic of women's equality, patriarchy was a "barbarism." Why is this insane barbarism of patriarchy so deeply entrenched, so unshakeable, even now in the 21st century? What pedagogical practices within the classroom can be used to create a space to interrogate patriarchy and gender constructs?

Students entering college have internalised received ideas and established accepted ideologies. Most units of society—the family, schools, religious institutions—serve to conserve what is already in place, to maintain the status quo. Terry Eagleton defines ideology as "the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power structure and power relations of the society we live in" (p. 13). This ideology creates pre-determined identities based on socially constructed gender roles, the expression of sexuality based on heteronormativity, and the subordination of male and female bodies in dressing, walking, and occupying spaces. There is a need to adopt pedagogical practices through which we can embark on the study of gender, feminism, and patriarchy to destabilize and unsettle these preconceived identities, and to start the process of interrogating received ideas through critical thinking.

In the last two decades or so, the role of critical enquiry has become crucial because of the deluge of information through social media. At present, contrasting, conflicting information seeks to negate critical thinking by convincing us that applying standards of logic, morality, ethics, or epistemology are impossible, even undesirable. This, in itself, is not new because the deep-rooted existence of

patriarchy, casteism, racism, heteronormativity and all other structural oppressions is based on the same false information and beliefs. However, the fast pace of the transmission of information on the one hand, and the defunding of humanities departments that taught and studied critical enquiry on the other, have added urgency to the issue of critical thinking.

There is an existing body of research on the benefits of teaching courses on critical thinking. I want to focus on one aspect of critical thinking that is crucial to it, and indeed must be the first step: analyzing one's own ideas, influences, biases, prejudices. This is because it is impossible to think critically about gender without first being aware of one's own complicity in the omnipresent heterosexist patriarchy that inescapably governs all our concepts, values, judgment, ideas of normativity. Antonio Gramsci writes in his "Prison Notebooks" (Gramsci 1971):

The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is and in 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. (p. 324)

To this Edward Said adds Gramsci's conclusion from his Italian text, "Therefore, it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory." (p. 25)

IV. ANALYZING GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S 'LIHAF'

How do we compile this inventory honestly and with sensitivity when it comes to gender? Feminist studies have foregrounded the politics of the body, of the lived experience. What are the traces left on us by inhabiting a woman's or a man's body, a transgender body, a body which experiences desires across a spectrum of sexuality? How does class and caste intersect with gender in our awareness of the forces with control and subordinate our bodies? And most crucial to our compiling this inventory is to introspect on the deep grooves that patriarchy has carved into us, because there is no one who is left untouched by patriarchy. Patriarchy has tainted every kind of knowledge and 'truth' that governs our beliefs.

Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaf" (The Quilt) (Chughtai, 1942) is a rich resource for teasing out the intricacies of patriarchy, sexuality, and gender constructs. A cultural-material close reading of 'Lihaf' shows how critical analysis can be used to interrogate the multi-layered complexities of gender in the classroom. Since all characters and events, fictional or otherwise, are gendered, teaching gender through literature also allows for the deconstruction of the author's politics of representation.

Chughtai's short story was introduced in the Delhi University undergraduate syllabus for English Literature in 1997 in a compulsory paper in First Year and provided a powerful entry into gender studies and destabilizing received notions of gender for students entering college. The story is not a simple one: since it is told from the perspective of a child it has shocking revelations innocently narrated, and several unanticipated twists and turns. The adult narrator recounts an incident from her childhood which she says is preserved in her memory "like the scar of a red hot iron" (p. 117). The rest of the story is told through her childhood persona, a girl just on the cusp of adolescence. In summary, the story is about Begum Jaan who is married to a Nawab (an aristocrat) who installs her in his house along with the furniture and is only interested in young boys. She withers away due to his neglect, only to be brought back to life by the maid Rabbu, who not only massages her incessantly but is also her constant companion and eats and sleeps with her. The child narrator is sent by her mother to stay with Begum Jaan, and every night she sees Begum Jaan's *lihaf* (quilt) swelling and swaying as if an elephant is somersaulting in it and hears the voices of Begum Jaan and Rabbu under it. Once when Rabbu is away for two days the child offers to massage Begum Jaan, and Begum Jaan then sexually abuses her. The child is traumatized and tries to stay away from Begum Jaan. When Rabbu comes back the *lihaf* sways again at night, and the child pulls the corner of the *lihaf* to uncover the mystery. The story ends with her saying "Allah" (oh my God) and diving back into her bed.

"Lihaf" starts with the familiar territory of patriarchy, which most students can grasp comfortably: an arranged marriage of a young, beautiful woman with a much older man, a neglected wife who is treated like an object, a husband who has hobbies that engross him while his wife pines away with unrequited love. But then the narrative has its first interesting twist, for the Nawab's hobby is not the usual one of cock fighting or visiting prostitutes, but a "mysterious" one of hosting "young, fair faced boys with slim waists" who wear translucent kurtas and tight churidars (p. 118). Chughtai introduces homosexuality into the plot along with child abuse, or pedophilia. For most young students who have the traditional, stereotypical ideas of homosexuality as being abnormal or perverse, the homosexual Nawab who preys on young boys confirms their biases. Using tools of critical analysis, an interactive discussion of homosexuality with students at this point has potential to begin to pry open their socially ingrained prejudices of homosexuality as abnormal.

The next twist in the story is more destabilizing—that of the sexually pleasurable, companionate lesbian relationship of Begum Jaan and Rabbu. This lesbian relationship

portrayed though the suspicious, yet fascinated eyes of the child hides a wealth of details that are seemingly inconspicuous, partly because they are so unobtrusively presented, and partly because students identify with the child's perspective of Rabbu "the witch" (p. 120). Students' standard response to this relationship is that Rabbu is able to satisfy Begum Jaan's sexual urge through her massages, and that if the Nawab had fulfilled his conjugal duties towards Begum Jaan then she would never have turned to Rabbu. Challenging this heteronormative reading provides an invaluable teaching moment for studying sexuality. There are two crucial issues that engender fruitful discussion here. The first is that failed heterosexuality does not lead to homosexuality, a point that most young people in a dominantly heterosexual class are able to relate to in their own lives. The second one, which a close reading of the text brings out, is that the relationship between Begum Jaan and Rabbu is not unidimensionally limited to Rabbu gratifying Begum Jaan's sexual desires. Chughtai writes of Rabbu, "She ate with Begum Jaan, was her constant companion, and even slept with her!" (p. 120). Overcoming all class hierarchies, Begum Jaan and her maid share their meals and their bed and are not just sexual partners but are "constant companion(s)". Rabbu's absence for two days makes Begum Jaan distraught, and Begum Jaan's sexual desire for the child narrator Rabbu to jealousy. The child's description of the activity under the *lihaf* leaves everything to the adult reader's imagination, but the graphic description of sounds and movement leaves no doubt that the activity under the quilt is certainly much more participatory for Begum Jaan than any sexual relationship she would have had with the Nawab. Of the sounds the child describes emerging from the *lihaf* are "Rabbu's convulsive sobs" (p. 121), through which Chughtai makes it clear that the sexual activity is pleasurable for Rabbu as well. Chughtai conceptualizes this lesbian relationship as one that offers constant companionship, mutual sexual pleasure, a sisterhood where both help each other, and thus offers a critique of the patriarchal, heterosexual marriage in which male dominance and female subordination is inbuilt. It offers a trenchant critique of the gendered constructs of romantic relationships that form the dominant ideology.

V. DISRUPTING THE NARRATIVE WITH CHILD ABUSE

Chughtai disrupts her celebratory narrative of the mutually nurturing relationship of the two women with Begum Jaan's sexual abuse of the child. Unfortunately, the insertion of child abuse at this point interrupts the interrogation of lesbianism and feminist politics because it reconfirms students' prejudices about perverse, predatory

homosexuality. It is at this point that it is imperative to look at the cultural-material location of the author, and to interrogate her politics of representation. Chughtai was born in 1915 and “Lihaf” was published in 1942. The story was mired in controversy as soon as it was published, and Chughtai was charged with obscenity by the Imperial Crown Court in 1944. In the 1940s in India there was very little discussion of female sexuality, and homosexuality was a taboo topic. Chughtai, herself a product of the early twentieth century, would very likely have been conflicted about her representing of a romantic lesbian relationship as an alternative to the established heteronormative one. The incident of child abuse could be seen as Chughtai’s discomfort with her positive portrayal of the lesbian romantic relationship, or as a ploy to deflect attention away from this dangerous territory by balancing the positive representation with a negative one.

The incident of sexual abuse is ambiguous and needs to be analysed with attention to the details Chughtai provides. One of these is the references to the young child’s own emerging sexuality, providing a multi-layered, nuanced teaching tool, allowing for a conversation about the most destabilizing aspect of this story: homoeroticism and child sexuality. How old is the child? Other girls her age were already securing admirers, so she seems on the cusp of adolescence, but displays no interest in male admirers; instead, she is a ‘tomboy’, fighting with every boy and girl who came her way. Chughtai thus establishes the child’s readiness for romantic/sexual interest by referring to other girls her age, and also explicitly writes about her disinterest in romantic relationships with boys. Moreover, Chughtai devotes two lengthy paragraphs to the child’s description of Begum Jaan, where the young narrator confesses she was “quite enamoured of her looks.” The child would “cast sneaking glances” (p. 119) at Begum Jaan’s legs when they were uncovered, signaling that she did not have the innocence of a very young child. The issue is not exactly how old the child narrator is, but the point at which she is in her journey to discovering her own sexuality, and Chughtai’s bold move to invest a girl who is seen as a child with an emerging homoerotic interest in an older woman provides an entry for students to interrogate ideas of childhood and sexuality.

It is instructive to read the child abuse incident through this lens. That it is child abuse is not to be disputed at all; there is no question of justifying Begum Jaan’s actions. But peeling back the layers offers a more nuanced reading. The first day that Rabbu is away it is the child who offers to scratch Begum Jaan’s back: “‘Shall I scratch your back, Begum Jaan’ I asked with eagerness.... Begum Jaan looked at me intently” (p. 122). The first day Begum Jaan just lies quietly and gets her back scratched. On the second day

when the young girl is once again scratching her back, feeling happy and important, Begum Jaan distracts her, involving her in a discussion of clothes and toys to grope and squeeze her. One way to read this incident would be to see Begum Jaan gauging whether the child is ready for a sexual encounter, and clearly misjudging her readiness, which Rabbu points to when she acidly remarks that unripe mangoes are sour. (p. 125) At the same time, it may be pertinent to consider how much of the encounter the child initiates, and her repugnance at her first sexual encounter. Chughtai gives enough material and ambiguity in her portrayal of this event to open it to a fruitful discussion of different interpretations in line with the increasing complexity of the discourse around sexuality.

Chughtai’s plot also conceals an ambiguity which often takes several readings to uncover. The adult narrator starts the narration thus: “Every winter when I pull the lihaf over me, and the shadow it cast on the wall sways like an elephant, with a sudden bound my mind begins to race and scour over the past” (p. 117). Halfway through the third paragraph she tells us that Begum Jaan’s lihaf has burnt itself into her memory and is preserved like the red hot scar of an iron. The child narrator ends the story by telling us that when the elephant under the lihaf did a somersault that raised its edge by a foot she exclaimed “Allah” and dived for her bed (p. 126). Without the distraction of the sexual abuse it should be clear to the reader that it is the sexual lesbian activity under the lihaf that is the cause of the scar. However, Chughtai structures the plot to culminate with the incident of child abuse; the girl fights with everyone so the mother cannot leave her alone when she travels; the mother leaves her alone with the trusted Begum Jaan who abuses her when she is frustrated; the child is scared out of her wits. This points to the red hot scar being caused by the child abuse. It requires a careful, critical reading to realise that the adult narrator has not been scarred by the incident of the abuse, but by the sexual activity of the two women under the lihaf. As an author, Chughtai has chosen to write a story celebrating a lesbian relationship in all its forms, but she has strategically masked it with the ambiguity to allow it to be (mis)read as one primarily about child abuse.

VI. CONCLUSION

In concluding a reading of ‘Lihaf’ in a classroom of Literature students it is crucial to interrogate why Chughtai disrupts the story of Begum Jaan and Rabbu with the incident of child abuse. In her autobiography *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan*, published in 1994 after her death, Chughtai writes about meeting the Begum many years after the publication of the story, and the Begum reaching out to tell her that she had freed herself from her abusive marriage, re-

married, and even had a son. Chughtai is overwhelmed at seeing the Begum's son. It is clear that Chughtai's investment in the story is the life of Begum Jaan who is trapped in an unhappy marriage. Chughtai fictionalizes the Begum's life not to have her divorce and remarry happily as she did in real life, but to find solace and sexual fulfillment in the arms of another woman. The unnecessary intrusion of child abuse into this romantic tale serves as a *lihaf*, a cover, to distract from what was considered deviant sexuality in that time period but which the author portrays as an alternative relationship. The introduction of child abuse into the narrative also begs analysis of Chughtai's own politics of representation and veils her own discomfort with her fascination with this vibrant same sex relationship.

Chughtai's 'Lihaf' written in the 1940s which explores a lesbian relationship that combines female bonding along with sexual pleasure, is striking in its boldness even in the 21st century as a text in a university classroom. It is not surprising, then, that in a far more conservative period she may have strategized to distract from the pleasures under the lihaf with the trauma of child abuse. An inclusive, complex reading of Chughtai's "Lihaf" through form and theme allows for an incisive pedagogical site for a discussion of gender and sexuality that should be interactive and interdisciplinary. With the close reading tools that a study of literature provides, combined with those of literary theories of feminism, gender studies, and deconstruction, this story written in 1941 provides a wealth of material for engaging critically with the rapidly evolving ideas of gender and sexuality. The gains made by the feminist and LGBTQ movements in the late 20th century that allowed for texts like 'Lihaf' to be introduced in classrooms is now facing a backlash. Chughtai's veiled story of Rabbu and Begum Jaan therefore becomes crucial to retain in the curriculum for a new generation of students.

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