



# Representation of queerness in Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*

Sriya Sarma

Department of English, Tezpur University, Napaam, Assam, India

Email: [shriyasarma2018@gmail.com](mailto:shriyasarma2018@gmail.com)

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**Abstract**— *The term queer carries an uncanny feeling with itself as it attributes to those people whose sexual orientations come outside of the mainstream heterosexual society. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people fall under the umbrella of queer whose existence is neglected since time immemorial in a heteronormative society. The aim of this article is to evaluate the queer identity, its growth, the struggle queer people have gone through over the ages till the emergence of queer movement in late twenties in the context of gays in United States. Besides it also prioritizes the portrayal of queer people in Indian Literature and its acceptance by giving prime importance to Ismat Chughtai's infamous short story Lihaaf. The homoerotic nature of its female protagonist Begum Jan and her husband Nawab Saheb is clearly seen throughout the story which makes the story controversial.*

**Keywords**— *Chughtai, Homosexuality, Homophobia, Lihaaf, Queer.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Queerness defines a realm of plurality which incorporates all sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual or cisgender. Generally the phrase “Queer” means something unusual or strange which stands for homosexuals. Homosexuals are those people who are attracted to the members of same sex or gender. Queer emphasizes a deeply personal identity which carries a defiant political perspective also. It acknowledges all non heteronormative sexualities that resist against the supremacy of heteronormative rules and regulations inhabited within the paradigm of patriarchal society. The term “Queer” emerged to the context of the gays in United States during 1990s where immediately it attained enormous popularity and turned into a radical movement of freedom and empowerment for LGBT community specifically colored people of United States at that time. However one of the crucial factors for queer people in many countries along with India that they had to make an arrangement with the law and order of the country as they are rigid towards the expression of queer desire. British government passed a law known as sodomy law according to which any kind of

sexuality which is against the norms of heterosexuality was responsible for legal persecution. Besides it was encompassed within the Indian penal code under section 377 that made a crime out of male homosexuality by discarding the existence of lesbian identity. So far as concerned with the socio political and religious situation is concerned it becomes a weapon to control and manipulate the desires of queer individuals. Therefore the expression of queerness becomes restrictive.

## II. QUEER PEOPLE IN INDIAN MILIEU

In Indian surroundings queer sexuality has been a matter of discussion since in the remote past. Therefore, the expression of queerness in India has been suffering Hamlet's dilemma of “*To be or not to be*” even today. India is a diversified country which is seen not only in its culture but in its religion and ethnicity also. Therefore the sexual identities of India is a product of its diversity. That's why frequently they are engaged in conflicts with each other. In western country people are more conscious about the sexual orientation of an individual. American philosopher Judith

Butler's *Gender Trouble*, French philosopher Michael Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* gave the idea that how western society frankly discuss about the sexual identities of people. Indian society doesn't give importance to the sexual orientation of an individual or the classifications of gender on the basis of their priority. But the concept of "third gender" which is also called "Hijra" who is considered neither completely male or female has powerful existence in an Indian society. Hinduism believed that these people have special power therefore they are allowed to give blessings and curses. Many of Sanskrit texts like *Narada Smriti*, *Sushruta Samhita* put forward the idea that homosexuals, bisexuals, transgenders and intersex people are associated in the archetype of "third gender". However several Vedic scriptures described the category of "Third Gender" as male who carries feminine nature. They are called homosexual men or female gendered males. Thus the gender fluidity and homosexuality is prevalent in Indian subcontinent from the ancient period. However being an integral part of Indian culture since old ages queer people still face so much hatred and disgust from people. There is a threat exist among them which creates hindrances to open up their sexuality.

Though in a conservative Indian society expression of queerness is considered as a forbidden act yet the manifestation of queer sexuality is vividly seen in Hindu mythology throughout myths, legend and folklore of the land. In Hinduism and Indian mythology in many times for different purposes deities are presented in a fusion of both male and female. For instance Ardhanarishvara, the lord whose half is a male and other half is a female. He is created by blending the avatar of Lord Shiva and Parvati or the epicene Laxmi – Narayan. Ardhanarishvara demonstrates the synthesis of masculine (Purusha) and feminine (Prakriti) energies of the whole universe. It also indicates the idea that how Shakti the feminine side of the god is inseparable from Shiva the masculine side of god. However changes of sex and cross dressing is occurred in Indian mythology. The character of Shikhandi in Mahabharata is an powerful example of it. According to most versions of the story Shikhandini is male but born female. When she changes her sex she becomes Shikhandi but is a eunuch. However Arjun chooses to be the form of Brihannala (the eunuch) during the one year of incognito living (Agyatvas) so that nobody could recognize him as he was the most famous of all the pandava brothers and also the most celebrated warrior of his age. Arjun was cursed by Urvashi to become a eunuch after he refused her proposal for sexual favors while he was learning divine weapons from Lord Indra. Arjun used to teach singing and dancing to Uttara the daughter of king Virat and mostly remained in

the chambers of the palace of king Virat where all the ladies lived.

### III. PORTRAYAL OF QUEER INDIVIDUAL IN ANCIENT INDIAN SCRIPTURES

Writing about queer sexuality is seen in Indian Literature from the ancient period. The greatest Hindu literary epic *Mahabharata* narrates the story of Amba the eldest daughter of Kashya the king of Kashi who was reborn as Shikhandi a eunuch to kill Bhishma who is responsible for her misfortune. The Tamil versions of *Mahabharata* recounts the story of lord Krishna an incarnation of Vishnu who takes Mohini avatar and marries Aravan. Indian mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi: And other Tales They Don't Tell You* (2014) is an anthology of thirty stories from Indian mythology that have queer characters, themes and undertones. *Kama Sutra* describes the practice of homosexuality in several places. It demonstrates two kinds of men, masculine and feminine types of homosexuals which in Victorian England called "eunuch" and their appearances. The masculine type has robust physique but small beards and moustaches whether feminine type dressed up like woman. Professions they are entangled with are masseurs, barbers and prostitute etc. *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* is an anthology compiled by Ashwini Sukthankar in 1999 is considered the first ever written book on queer writing in the country. It presents for the first time the richness and diversity of lesbian existence by using the genre of fiction, poetry, essays and autobiography. It reveals the hidden, forgotten, distorted and triumphant stories from all over India. The book deals with the construction of lesbian identity in Indian context. It proudly proclaims the courage, the sensuality the humor and the vulnerability of being lesbian. The book becomes a landmark work in the field of queer writing. However in modern times the reception of queerness in literature in India is not similar with its ancient period.

### IV. REPRESENTATION OF QUEERNESS IN ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S LIHAAF

The present article deals with queer identity and the representation of queerness in Indian English writing by giving prime importance to Ismat Chughtai's infamous short story *Lihaaf*. The story is a remarkable piece of queer writing in pre independent era which unveils the conventional views of people towards queer individual in colonial India. This story is accused of blasphemy and spreading immorality due to its evocative illustration of homoeroticism of its female protagonist Begum Jan and her husband Nawab Saheb. Chughtai was assembled by the

Lahore court in 1944. Instead apologizing for her literary creation, Chughtai prefers to fight against the charge and won the case.

Chughtai's *Lihaaf* tells the story of intimacy between two women. The story has autobiographical overtone as it is based on real life incidents of Ismat Chughtai. In her childhood Chughtai faced the same situation where she didn't understand what was happening like the young narrator. The story was published in the year 1942 and the people in Victorian England and its colonies viewed queerness as perversion. Chughtai is also influenced by the so called Victorian morality. That's why she isn't sympathetic towards queer people.

The story *Lihaaf* revolves around Begum Jan who is married to a Nawab of an aristocratic household. Her married life is not happiest one because her husband is more concerned with young boys than with his wife. Nawab considers her as a mere possession and by following the norms of heteronormative society he thinks that his only responsibility for his wife is to fulfill her material comfort rather than emotional and psychological needs. She is left alone like other of his possessions. She is imprisoned within the stereotypical cobweb of matrimony. Begum Jan's life is saturated with full of sorrow and subjugation. Nawab Saheb doesn't have any interest on her. For him she is nothing but a social stamp accepted by the heteronormative institution. He ultimately forgets Begum Jan's existence in his life. But interestingly Nawab creates hindrances in her life when she wanted to go out to meet her relatives. Chughtai didn't portray Begum Jan as a submissive and docile character. Rather Chughtai puts enough strength into her which enables her to come out of the web of patriarchy. Begum Jan is not like the "Victorian angel of the house" who is passive, meek, helpless damsel rather she prefers to become Medusa who has command over her own life. When Nawab ignores her, Begum Jan opens up her sexual pleasure and fulfill her need in Rabbu's sensuous oil massages in her touch. Begum Jan is not like those women who are victimized in the regressive custom of a patriarchal institution like marriage where she shared a legal relationship with her husband rather she becomes a new woman who is sexually liberated by taking the opportunity of isolated place. Nawab doesn't bother to visit the place that's why though the place signifies femininity, it remains sterile. It becomes a space where Begum Jan's sexual frustrations are come out. Zenana turns into a queer space where woman's dominated desires are revealed. These desires are forbidden for women but not for men thus they are disguised under the quilt. The quilt becomes a symbol for the covering up the forbidden desires. Patriarchal society doesn't provide freedom to express the sexuality of women. Even if it comes to queer people government also

makes censorship against gay people by discarding the presence of lesbian identity. "Quilt" is a metaphor for female homosexuality. Chughtai used the image of elephant to create confusion in the mind of its young narrator. Besides it is also a symbolic representation of the confusion of the people at that time in relation to homosexuality. However the metaphorical expression of female homoeroticism creates havoc in the life of Chughtai which took her in the court. It shows the idea that how the expression of queer love becomes a threat for women in hegemonic society rather than the idea of male homosexuality. It is also seen throughout the story that how Begum Jan's homosexual relationship with Rabbu is a matter of concern whether the Nawab Saheb's homoerotic relationship with the young boys is ignored. Therefore his homosexual relationships are covered strategically from the perspective of heteronormative society. Chughtai unfolds the hypocrisy and pretentiousness of bourgeoisie male dominated religious rituals which symbolizes piety.

However why the story is considered as the most controversial of its era is questionable because there isn't any direct revelation of physical intimacy between Rabbu and Begum Jan except scratching the back and Rabbu's constant oil massage to Begum Jan. Rabbu's involvement with Begum Jan indicates clearly the work of a healer. For Begum Jan Rabbu's oil massage becomes elixir for life. It reduces her sexual frustrations and also fulfills her needs. From this point of view the text can't be called as a queer text. The text uncovers the historical oppression, domination and exploitation made on women body and her desire.

## V. CONCLUSION

The role of Ismat Chughtai in the development of Urdu literature is significant. She frankly expressed topics like female sexuality, emotional and psychological needs that are considered as taboo, related to middle class Muslim household which other writers are afraid to do. Being a feminist writer Chughtai is talking about women's self dependency, liberty along with the intersectional oppressions done by patriarchal society upon women throughout her stories. Chughtai though in the shortstory *Lihaaf* represents homoerotic relationship in a heteronormative way yet it becomes a revolutionary story which establishes Chughtai as most courageous, rebellious and controversial writer in Urdu literature. Throughout the work Chughtai reveals the hidden truth of woman's body which remained veiled in a male dominated society. By writing about the female desire in the story vividly Chughtai causes a tempest in a socially organized civilized world of gendered behavior.

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