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Deconstruction of Gendered Spaces: A Queer reading of Ismat Chughtai's Lihaaf

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Abstract
This paper offers a queer theoretical reading of Ismat Chughtai's short story Lihaaf (The Quilt), which is considered a seminal text in South Asian feminist literature because of its intense controversy upon publication that depicts, under subtext, the intimacy for the same sex. However, the narrative of the short story does not explicitly propagate homosexuality, but it does, to some extent, portray the intimate relationship between Begum Jaan and her maid Rabbo. This paper will apply mixed methods and queer theoretical reading in particular, with a focus on the deconstruction of gendered spaces. Chugati, through Begum Jan's character, shows the liberation from the shackles of patriarchy in a time when the Zenana tradition was prevailing that confined women to the walls of the houses and their bodies as reserved assets of men. She makes the confined place a site of resistance, which helps Begum Jaan to redefine her gender and her journey towards self-actualization. The Quilt is a powerful metaphor for deviant desires that are hidden with the aid of cultural conditioning. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept, how, through the power of discourse, sexuality is produced and is imposed on women, in which they inevitably are sidelined and silenced. Moreover, this paper shows the instability of gender binarities; that is to say, Begum Jan's turn to homosexuality is not merely for sexual satisfaction; however, it is a kind of radical act of resistance on her part to reconstruct her gender in response to colonial patriarchy. This story queers the gendered spaces, destabilizes the defined gender roles, and posits challenges to the ideological patriarchal forces and offers a way to liberation.

Keywords: Gendered space, queer theory, gender Performativity, Patriarchal Repression, deconstruction of binaries.

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1. Introduction

The Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) argues in his book, The Production of Space (1991), that "the word space has a strictly geometrical meaning; the idea evoked was simply that of a space." He examines the underlying forces of society that produce space; that is to say, the cultural institutions socially construct space. The concept of 'gendered spaces' is at its core about power relations, and power structures create gendered spaces, restraining one gender while permitting the other.

In South Asian culture, home is a kind of space that is perceived as a woman's innate place, where they are expected to be submissive and obedient and carriers of family honor, and their role is of a passive nature that needs the aid of male members to assure their existence; that is to say, their identity relies on their male counterparts, and they cannot think of them as individuals with agency. Simone De Beauvoir argues that the existence of women is a relational concept. "One is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman." The underlying premise of Beauvoir is that the status of women in society is defined and prescribed by the dominant culture, which leads to segregation of spaces where women are limited to houses and are expected to lead their lives according to defined gender roles.

Begum Jann's status in Lihaaf resonates with gendered space, and the core driving force of her suffering comes from the imposed patriarchy that restricts and defines her relation to men, confining her to domestic space (zenana) and robbing her of any autonomous agency. In response, she takes asylum in a relationship with Rabbu, which acts as both defense and resistance at the same time.

In patriarchal societies, the home is often associated with a haven for women. Ironically, it is the very site where they are being traumatized under the pretense of protection; they are being exploited emotionally and psychologically. At the same time, the kitchen is socially constructed as a woman's rightful place; these stereotypes are part of male dominance in South Asia.

The roots of patriarchy can be traced back to colonization. After the decolonization and withdrawal of British officials from South Asia, national elites inherited the power, and women remained colonized as they were before; only the master was changed. Frantz Fanon argues that decolonization is not merely the withdrawal of an army, but true liberation is the decolonization of the mind. Gayatri Spivak rightly calls women subalterns in her work, ***Can Subaltern Speak?*** They are denied any agency and are at the periphery.

Ismat Chughtai's 'The Quilt' takes place in an aristocratic Muslim household, where Begum Jann is forcefully married to Nawab, which is typical of South Asian culture. Begum Jaan takes it upon herself that she will mold her husband with her love and care and will lead her life with contentment. This resonates with Janie, who goes on to get married on Nanny's insistence with the hope of finding love in Their Eyes Were Watching God. The Nawab, on the contrary, is deeply absorbed in slender-shaped boys and occasionally visits the house. Begum Jann is being neglected; he shows not a bit of interest in Begum, leaving her in a state of silent suffering. In patriarchal marriages, they are considered more like a ritual that men feel entitled to perform, and after, they leave women in the four walls of the house, not considering them as individuals with agency and minds. In response to his cold behavior, Begum Jaan asserts her gender and finds a way of liberating herself from ignorance, where her existence is blurred to a more vivid image of herself, and redefining gender roles. She

deviates from heterosexuality, which is considered a norm, and forms a new relationship with her maid, Rabbo, which is seen as resistance on her part.

1.1. Background

Gender construction is a product of cultural forces; it plays an important role in shaping literary narratives, particularly fiction writing. Literature not only reflects the societal norms but also the challenges and contradictions, redefining them. Feminist theorist Beauvoir, in The Second Sex, argue that women have been historically presented as "the other." Men are considered the 'norm,' and women are considered 'abnormal.' This study examines a literary text to examine how gender is constructed and resisted by applying critical and discursive analysis to the short story.

1.2. Gender and Discourse

This study analyzes gender as socially constructed, that is, shaped by language and power relations. Critical discourse analysis helps in uncovering the embedded problems. Feminist CDA is grounded in intersectionality; it shows how discourse, language, marginalizes women through typical stereotypes and traditional roles in literature. Thus, it becomes a tool that helps in deconstructing ideologies in society.

1.3. Statement of the problem

In recent years there is much evidence of a growing body of feminist and queer criticism on South Asian literature; however, there remain significant areas that are not explored to that extent, that is to say, how gendered spaces, particularly 'Zenana,' act as a site for oppression. In Ismat Chugtai's Lihaaf, a traditionally viewed submissive woman shows transgressive queer desire and silent resistance to patriarchy. The problem this research addresses is how gender identities and desires are constructed within patriarchal and colonial frameworks and how Chughtai's narrative challenges the traditional gender roles and deviates through

metaphorical subversions. There is a dire need to interrogate these complex problems using mixed theoretical frameworks such as queer theory, critical discourse analysis, and feminist spatial criticism for a deeper understanding of the intersection of power and culture and gendered spaces.

1.4. Objectives of the study

This research aims to examine how gendered spaces are constructed in Ismat Chughtai's Lihaaf, with particular focus on the zenana as a place of both oppression and resistance and liberation. This study investigates how patriarchal and colonial ideologies construct gender roles and restrict women in confined places physically and mentally. This research applies Queer Theory and CDA to show how Chughtai portrays suppressed and separate desire and queer intimacy under the metaphor of the quilt, which propagates concealed agency of women. This study also analyzes the linguistic strategies through normative gender roles and poses challenges to the cultural myth of home as a safe space for women. This study contributes to the feminist discourse by showing how Lihaaf gives voice to the subaltern woman and an opportunity of liberation from patriarchy.

1.5. Research Questions

1) How are gendered spaces, particularly the zenana, constructed and represented in Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*?
2) In what ways does *Lihaaf* challenge patriarchal and colonial power structures through the portrayal of female intimacy and queer desire?
3) How does the writer use a metaphor of a quilt as a symbolic device to represent repressed sexuality and a way to liberation?

1.6. Research Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research design that aims for cultural analysis and employs a mixed-methods approach. The primary method of investigation is textual analysis, which involves close reading of the story to examine how

gendered spaces are constructed and deconstructed within the story. The mixed method comprises of 'The Queer Theory,' Feminist criticism, and Critical discourse analysis. Queer theory allows the interpretation that gender is not fixed but is of a fluid nature that evolves with time and actions. Gender is not what humans are born with, but what they do defines the gender, and it also shows how Begum Jann deviates from heteronormative gender roles. Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "the other" helps in analyzing the construction of female identity. Michel Foucault's concept of discourse as a power and how those in power use it to construct gender roles, which eventually send women to the periphery. This research also applies Henri Lefebvre's theory of socially produced space to understand the concept of zennana. Furthermore, Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to show the linguistic strategies used by Chughtai to critique the patriarchy in general and gender roles specifically. This research will focus on narrative structures and the employment of metaphorical language. Particularly 'The Quilt.

1.7. Significance of Study

This study is significant for several reasons, as it contributes to feminist discourse, particularly in the context of South Asian literature. Examining the story through queer theory and a couple of other methods highlights how gendered spaces function in South Asian culture. This research offers a deeper understanding of how literature serves as a site for contesting dominant and prevailing ideologies. This research holds valuable significance for scholars interested in gender studies, postcolonialism, queer literature, and South Asian culture, as it offers an intersectional analysis that integrates the cultural history and power relations.

2. Literature Review

This research comprises an interdisciplinary body of scholarship that aims to explore the intersection of language, gender, sexuality, and power relations

among genders through feminist and queer theory. Existing literature has focused on gender representation, and there remains a critical gap in examining how queer identities are constructed. South Asian Fiction.

2.1. Evolution of Feminism into gender Studies

The paradigm shift from feminism to gender studies underscores the development of an analytical framework from the focus on women's issues towards inclusivity the study of gender and sexuality. This evolution is the result of many factors, and key theoretical frameworks were at play. Among other key factors, Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality holds prominent importance, which proved to be the turning point from the bubble of feminism towards the interdisciplinary nature of gender studies, introduced in the 1980s. Intersectionality examines how different factors such as social identities, race, culture, class, and sexuality intersect and create a system of oppression and privilege, that is to say, in which one gender is receiving the oppression while the other uses power to exploit the periphery. (Crenshaw, 2010; Crenshaw, 2013). This shift was a response to white feminism, which presupposes that the world shares the same feminist concerns that they propagate. Intersectionality emphasizes the need for multifaceted factors in understanding gendered experiences. The intersection of gender and discourse emerged as an important area of study in the 1970s with groundbreaking texts such as Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* and Thorne and Henley's *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, which at their core pose challenges to the naturalization of male norms and patriarchal norms of gender (Kendall & Tannen, 2015). It was these texts that laid the foundations of the concept that gender is not a biological but a sociocultural construct that can be constructed and deconstructed through the power of discourse. This shift led to the expansion of feminist studies into broader gender studies driven by concepts such as **Kimberlé**

Crenshaw's intersectionality, which foregrounds the interlocking nature of race, gender, class, and sexuality in shaping oppression and identity (Crenshaw, 2010, 2013).

Queer theory emerged in the early 1990s, further contributing to this field by offering a way of deconstructing binaries of gender and sexuality. **Judith Butler's** work, *Gender Trouble* (1990), introduced the idea of **gender performativity**, which argues that gender is not innate but rather performed through repeated behaviors and cultural norms. Queer theory challenges heteronormativity and fixed identity, providing a critical lens through which to understand subversive expressions of desire, such as those found in *Lihaaf,* that resist dominant social scripts (Butler, 2004a, 2015).

A number of research studies have been done on the short story 'The Quilt ' around the globe. The women writers of South Asia have always remained a source of attraction for researchers.

Tanvi Khanna (2014) examined the Lihaaf, which was published in 1941 in Adbe-e-latif, a famous literary journal. She writes that Lihaaf is a vivid image of the Zenana space. A confining place for women where they are expected to lead their lives and die peacefully. She argues in her paper *GENDER, SELF REPRESENTATION AND SEXUALIZED SPACES: A READING OF ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S LIHAAF,* that the short story exposes the oppression inside the walls of the house. Khanna writes, "Lihaaf sexualizes the zenana and challenges the image of a woman subservient to the dictates of patriarchy." Khanna also explores how Chugatai was advocating sexual liberation, which leads to self-realization. Lihaaf then stands as a defiant voice against the patriarchy.

Aabha Sharma, Purnima, and Satyam Kumar (2024) examine how patriarchal cultures construct and maintain rigid gender divisions between public and private spaces, particularly in South Asian literature. Applying Henri

Lefebvre's theory that space is socially constructed, they argue that feminine spaces such as the kitchen and home are not neutral but are products of historical and cultural power structures that restrict female agency. This research aligns with Lihaaf, in which Chughtai talks about this same zenana space where women become targets of oppression and are molested, and she transforms that space into a site of resistance and a way to liberate themselves from patriarchal oppression. In their critical study, Sonika and Kishor Kunal Kashyap (2024) examine *Lihaaf* through the lens of both literary narrative and cinematic adaptation; their research shows Chughtai's work challenges patriarchal norms by introducing female sexuality and queer desire to manifest new relationships as Begum Jaan's relation with Rabbo deviates from heterosexuality. The authors argue that Begum Jann's repressed identity goes through transformational change, where she finds her agency through a homoerotic relationship with Rabbo. They apply **Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity** and **Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia;** the study shows how domestic space, often coded as safe and sacred, becomes a site of both resistance and liberation. The paper also emphasizes that Nawab's homosexuality is culturally overlooked, while Begum Jann's intimacy is a point for criticism.

Another research was conducted by Pranasha Shinde and Dhananjay Shrikant Shinde (2020), which presents a controversial reading of Lihaaf. In their article *'Ismat Chughtai's Depiction of Homophobia Through the Story 'Lihaaf,' they* argue that the writer, without being aware, reinforces the homophobic stereotypes while addressing the taboo subjects. They suggest that the depiction of Begum Jann's queer relationship is the result of heterosexual failure, and this queer relationship was a kind of situational response on her part.

In their feminist reading of Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* and *The Wedding Suit*, Somaa Singh and Rashi Srivastava (2024) show Chughtai's revolutionary

depiction of female sexuality, agency, and emotional repression within a patriarchal world. The authors argue that Lihaaf deviates from conventional morality by discussing taboo subjects such as lesbian desire and emotional neglect through Begum Jann's suffering. The intimacy that she seeks with her maid is a reference to the absence of marital fulfillment, a right of women. The Quilt acts as a metaphorical conceit that embodies female desire and, at the same time, the burden of societal norms, that is to say, women have to go under disguise to satisfy their desire, which is their right, and patriarchal-like Nawab ignores and sidelines women as if they do not exist at all. The central focus of their study is on how domestic place, which is typically considered a site of oppression, can take the shape of resistance.

3. Discussion and Textual Analysis

3.1. Patriarchal Control, Gendered Spaces, and Subjugation

The story opens with the marriage of Begum Jann to a wealthy Nawab; it encapsulates class-based patriarchy in South Asian culture, where young ladies are married off to the person of ripe years to attain social security, and this happens in this story as well. Jann's parents ate very poorly. As the narrator notes, *"Her poor parents agreed to marry her off to the Nawab, who was of 'ripe years,' because he was very virtuous. No one had ever seen a nautch girl or prostitute in his house"* (Chughtai, 1942/1996, trans. Asaduddin, p. 36). The romantic glorification of Nawab's character is ironical in nature, as he indulges in all forms of vices, yet he is successful in maintaining a positive image in society. Under his apparent innocence lies a queerness, as the story will unfold that he is fond of young boys, and they can be found all the time in his house. This underscores that power can reconstruct the discourse as it suits those who are in power, as Nawab's masculine authority constructs a fiction that justifies his exploitation of women and boys.

As the story progresses, it highlights another important concern of feminism, that is to say objectification of women. Chughtai writes, *"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, 1942/1996, trans. Asaduddin, p. 36). This description depicts the complete erasure of women's agency, and it suggests that women do not exist as an equal counterpart but rather as a thing of desire for men, and they can be discarded as some other objects. The image is very powerful here; she is being forgotten as another possession. So women in South Asian culture are perceived as the possession of their male counterpart, not as an individual with will and agency. The status of Begum Jann resonates with the notion of **Simone de Beauvoir,** as she argues that women are "the other." Whose existence is of a parasite, and it needs a male counterpart to ensure that they exist same as a parasite can not exist without a host.

Chughata presents the metaphorical premise that women in South Asian culture are inevitably doomed; she goes to the extent of saying that being born is their biggest crime, as they cannot run away from the shackles of patriarchy. Begum Jaan's trauma continues as the narrator reflects, "One *did not know when Begum Jaan's life began—whether it was when she committed the mistake of being born or when she came to the Nawab's house as his bride... she watched... supple-waisted boys... and felt as though she was being raked over burning embers!"* (Chughtai, 1942/1996, trans. Asaduddin, p. 37). This suggests that the existence of women is hardly visible, as Begum Jaan is sidelined after marriage and replaced by boys.

Begum Jann goes through the period of isolation and trauma; she feels isolated, even when she is surrounded by people. Her isolation is the result of ignorance of her agency. She had a hope, as typical women of South Asian culture

harbor a hope in their hearts that they will find love with the husbands their parents have chosen for them, and they dream of making their home paradise with a false hope that their husbands will listen to them and everything will be sorted out. Nothing of that sort happens in the life of Begum Jann; her husband ignores her, and she is yearning for his company, but he cannot spare a moment for her. *"The Nawab didn't budge an inch. Begum Jaan was heartbroken and turned to books... Romantic novels and sentimental verse depressed her even more"* (Chughtai, 1942/1996, trans. Asaduddin, p. 37). She tries to find asylum in other things to escape loneliness; however, those attempts are all in vain because they bring up the same topic that she wants to escape. When she could not find love with her husband, she turned to books, and books were romantic in their subjects, and this suggests that Begum Jann's desires are ignored, and she is left to suffer in isolation.

The writer goes on to present the challenge to Zenana tradition, where women are considered to live and spend their lives, and it is considered a safe space for women; however, it is the very place of their trauma. They are imprisoned in their own houses. Begum Jann finds herself in the same situation, as she is not allowed to go outside, similar to the idea of a doll—that is to say, women are expected to sit home and not argue or ask for anything; otherwise, their revolt will be met with grave punishment. Chughtai later writes, *"The Nawab didn't have a moment to spare... nor did he allow her to go out... she remained a prisoner in the house"* (Chughtai, 1942/1996, trans. Asaduddin, p. 38). This underscores the idea of gendered spaces that powerful institutions in society construct gendered spaces where one gender is given priority to enjoy all the joys of life and independence, while on the other hand, women are kept as prisoners, and they can escape or fight against the phallocentric world around them.

3.2. Emergence of Queer Desire: Liberating Through Intimacy

Begum Jann's nature was of a defiant kind; she was not one of them to succumb before the patriarchy; rather, she started to search for a way of liberating herself from the imprisonment, and she deconstructs the gendered spaces and redefines her gender as performative, not fixed. A transformation takes place in her when she finds emotional and physical companionship with her maid, Rabbu. The narrator observes, "Soon *her thin body began to fill out. Her cheeks began to glow, and she blossomed in beauty. It was a special oil massage that brought life back to the half-dead Begum Jaan"* (Chughtai, 1942/1996, trans. Asaduddin, p. 39). This description shows the resistance and Begum Jann's response to repressive patriarchy; it is a kind of protest on her part, not wholly a physical intimacy but an alternative way of meeting her desires and asserting her agency and assurance of her existence. Begum Jann's relation with Rabbu deviates from heteronormative expectations, and it resonates with **Judith Butler's concept of gender performance**. This can also be viewed from the perspective of queer theory, in that she shows radical protest to the norm and is creating a world of her own, where she can assert herself, and it is like a little microcosm where no one else exists. Moreover, the writer suggests how a site of oppression can become a way of liberating oneself. Begum, who at first was feeling lonely and left out, is blossoming. This attempt helps her to avoid the internalization of patriarchy, where women finally accept their fate and lead their lives according to the wishes of their husbands for the rest of their lives without knowing and asserting themselves.

Both partners indulge in non-normative relations, yet Nawab's relation with boys went unseen because he is the representation of patriarchy, and therefore nothing can be held against him; rather, everything will be considered justified. On the contrary, Begum Jann's relation with Rabbo becomes the subject of

criticism. This is a vivid example of power relations: the one in power can escape any accountability. The narrator remarks, "The *other maids were jealous of Rabbu. The witch! She ate, sat, and even slept with Begum Jaan! Rabbu and Begum Jaan were the subject of their gossip... What juicy stories they made up about them!"* (Chughtai, 1942/1996, trans. Asaduddin, p. 40).

3.3. The Quilt as Metaphor

The Quilt is central to attention, and it acts as the strongest symbol to represent the queer desire of Begum Jann. It suggests that as women cannot assert themselves openly in a patriarchal world, they need to create a space hidden from all others as a metaphor of a quilt to execute their lives according to their own philosophy. The narrator observes, "There *was a peculiar noise again. In the dark, Begum Jaan's quilt was once again swaying like an elephant... The elephant started fluttering once again, and it seemed as though it was trying to squat... There was the sound of someone smacking her lips, as though savoring a tasty pickle"* (Chughtai, 1942/1996, trans. Asaduddin, p. 41). This is a vivid image of the kind of relationship Begum Jann and Rabbu were having, and the description suggests that this intimacy was a response to the ignorance of her husband; nothing of this sort would have happened if Begum Jann had been heard by her husband. She was compelled to choose this path as a way of liberating herself.

4. Conclusion

Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* challenges patriarchal norms by depicting how gendered spaces like the zenana become a site of oppression. This research shows with aid of Queer theory how Begum Jann is trapped into societal control that robs her of female agency. In response to the oppression, she develops a relationship with Rabbu to fight back with all her might and protest heteronormative gender roles. The quilt serves as a metaphor for the microcosm world of Begum Jann, where she can act independently.

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