Published by

British Journal of Contemporary Research

BEXFORD PUBLISHING

Panopticizing the Sensual Representations of Homoeroticism in Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf"

Original Research Article | Volume 1 | Issue 6 | 2026 | Article Number: 083

Accepted: 05 November 2026 | Published: 10 November 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)

Crossref : **https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-ZYS6THDX**

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Abstract

The most perilous thing about desire is not being seen, but refusing to disappear when unseen. Ismat Chughtai's Lihaaf constructs precisely such a paradox: a world in which desire remains unnamed, yet its shadows become impossible to ignore. The research paper reads the story as an inquiry into the philosophical relationship between seeing and knowing, secrecy and visibility, power and desire. Foucault's notion of panopticism provides the principal framework for examining how the social gaze becomes internalized, transforming surveillance into a condition of existence. Within this framework, the quilt assumes an ontological significance. It is neither simply a covering nor merely a symbol; it becomes a threshold between what society permits to exist and what it compels to remain unsaid. Begum Jaan's neglected body finds expression through Rabbu, exposing the gendered logic of patriarchal morality. The child narrator sees without fully knowing, placing the reader in the fragile space between visibility and interpretation. The paper argues that Lihaaf derives its radical force not from naming forbidden desire but from making its silence speak. Chughtai thus transforms the unseen into a philosophical challenge to the authority of the social gaze.

Keywords: Sexual Politics, Epistemology of Desire, Social Surveillance, Patriarchal Morality, Embodied Agency, Visibility and Invisibility

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> "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will."
>
> -*Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte

Ismat Chugtai, the Blacksheep, and her "Lihaaf"

How often people question world's conformist social constructs through their manner of conduct? It does happen all the times, but not adequately popular and applauded. Ismat Chugtai, the black sheep of her times, did the unpopular deed challenging the forced communal inequities. She wrote, critiqued, and debated the outlandish landscape of gender sexuality and its subsequent outcomes affecting other aspects of life. To witness her works as a silent and watchful sightseer reveals that they are the historic landmarks of unspoken insurgence, often overshadowed by the prevailing biased perceptions. Thus was her short story, "Lihaaf—The Quilt."

The Urdu Literary Journal *Adab-i-Latif* published "Lihaaf" in 1942, intending to engage in discussions and debates surrounding the subteleties of Hedonism and homosexuality. It inevitably caused the perceptible uproar, and the Crown quickly accused her of obscenity. She was perplexed by the allegation and admitted in her memoir *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan*, "I read through the summons but could barely make sense of it. My story 'Lihaaf' had been accused of obscenity" (78). Therefore, to 'panopticize' "Lihaaf" expansively, it is essential to first examine Chughtai's writings on the inexorable court trial. Her memoir *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* and the essay "The Lihaaf Trial" should be evaluated with fervent interest; as they thoroughly discuss the labelled 'obscenity' trial followed by ensuing difficulties.

Ismat Chughtai, often cast as the *enfant terrible* of Urdu literature, refused to conform to social or judicial expectations when summoned before the Lahore High Court in the infamous *Lihaaf* trial. While she was advised to apologise and thereby avoid penal repercussions, Ismat instead chose to contest the charge head-on, turning the courtroom into a site of resistance. The prosecuting lawyer relentlessly interrogated her in an attempt to unearth explicit obscenity within the text, yet their efforts proved futile. Lacking textual evidence, the prosecution retreated to a cultural and moralistic argument, claiming that "respectable women" (Hasan 49) would not even broach such subjects in literary discourse. Chughtai's own reflections in *The Lihaaf Trial* reveal her paradoxical state of mind, more fascinated by Lahore's cultural vibrancy than intimidated by the judicial machinery arrayed against her. She wryly admitted in her memoir, "I began to look forward eagerly to the second hearing. I did not even care if the verdict was that I be hanged. If it occurred in Lahore, I would certainly achieve the status of a martyr. The people of Lahore would give me a befitting funeral" (82). This ironic embrace of martyrdom can be read through a Foucauldian lens as a challenge to the disciplinary apparatus of state and society, where the courtroom becomes not merely a site of judgment but also a stage for the production of counter-discourses.

The verdict was in favour of Ismat, who was found to not be culpable of vulgarity; thus, the objectionable elements of "Lihaaf" did not amount to an actual crime. The entire pathetic construct of obscenity trial demonstrates the psychological tension between 'morality' and 'legality,' as well in between 'cultural taboo' and the 'juridical proof.' Certainly, the events in "Lihaaf" is highly layered and certainly not indicative of blatant representation of lesbianism/homosexuality, but its subliminal intriguing imagery and engaging hedonism pointing towards homoerotic longing. Her writings foresee the same silenced forms of female intimacy that what later feminist and queer theorists discusses, such as Adrienne Rich does in her notion of the "lesbian continuum" (Rich 648) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her exploration of *Epistemology of the Closet*. Ultimately, Ismat's sarcastic acceptance of 'a woman being floozy for having any sensual longing' made the flagbearers of cultural morality in the court to conclude the trial. The scandalous courtroom arguement, well-kept in the trial documents, captures the duplicity and double standards of patriarchal morality:

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Witness: This phrase 'drawing lovers' is obscene.

Lawyer (Defense lawyer): Which word is obscene, 'draw' or 'lover'?

Witness: "Lover"

Lawyer: My lord, the word 'lover' has been used by great poets most liberally….

Witness: But it's objectionable for girls to draw lovers to themselves.

Lawyer: Why?

Witness: Because because it's objectionable for good girls to do so.

Lawyer: And if the girls are not good, then it is not objectionable?

Witness: Mmm, no.

Lawyer: My client must have referred to the girls who were not good. Yes madam, do you mean here that bad girls draw lovers?

Ismat: Yes.

Witness: Well, this may not be obscene. But it is reprehensible for an educated lady from a decent family to write about them.

Lawyer: Censure it as much as you want. But it does not come within the purview of law (85).

The aforesaid words affirm what Gayatri Spivak might describe as the intersection of gender and class in the "politics of respectability," wherein "respectable" women are denied discursive agency while marginalised women can only be represented as objects, but never as subjects of desire (83). It becomes an evidential try of Ismat to repetitively prove 'lesbianism' to be Bryan A. Garner's 'skunked' word. As with a stinking skunk (a mammal), whose presence cannot be ignored, the "skunked term" is one whose usage becomes so contentious that it cannot be employed without raising a stink. (502).

Ismat's memoir, later translated as *A Life in Words*, revisits "Lihaaf" within the chapter "In the Name of Those Married Women." She resconstructs the story not as the product of an "indecent female imagination" (102) but as a social commentary on male passivity and the patriarchal refusal to acknowledge women's sexual needs. What Judith Butler terms the "heterosexual matrix" (194) is evident here: female sexuality is either erased or tolerated only when subsumed under male desire. Ismat disrupts this by foregrounding women's erotic agency, even in suggestive, allegorical terms. Thus, *Lihaaf* operates at the intersection of literature, law, and philosophy, raising fundamental questions about morality, censorship, and the politics of voice. It embodies what James C. Scott calls "everyday forms of resistance" (34) in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, referencing to cultural practices such as writing, which become subtle but potent acts of insurrection against structures of domination. In Rahat Kazmi's 2019 adaptation, *Lihaaf*: *The Quilt,* the adult Ismat defends herself against obscenity charges declaring, "Sharm, haya aur ghutan mein giraftar ek aurat ki bagawat ka afsana hai Lihaaf."

Panopticon, Panopticism, Panopticization

Is Panopticism a mechanical construct or an idealogical concept? Do we feel the presence of a 'watcher' around us or do we manifest it out of our vulnerable fears and insecurities? The concept of panopticism concrentize the presence of an omnipresent gaze of authority around us. It is a mode of power that functions not through direct coercion but via the internalization of surveillance amongst the mass population. Jeremy Bentham had notably formulated "the model of a Panopticon" (40) in *The Panopticon Writings*. Accordingly, it is an architectural design consisting an elevated central tower from which every

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prisoner can be possibly observed, though the viewer remains concealed. The model's *enfoque* lies not in the act of watching, but in the perpetual uncertainty. It creates a chaotic paradox; the 'subject' of observation notices everything in surrounding, because s/he feels being wached all the time. Ultimately, it impacts their manner of decisions and actions as well. The Panopticon thus transforms 'visibility' into a 'trap;' it becomes a mechanism of discipline that regulates behavior of mass populace by instilling self-surveillance.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Michel Foucault expands this architectural metaphor into a broader political technology, where panopticism no longer belongs merely to prison walls but infiltrates schools, hospitals, military barracks, and eventually the everyday structures of modern society (195). For Foucault, power operates less by punishing infractions and more by normalising behaviour through surveillance. To 'panopticize,' therefore, is to cultivate a conscientious anticipation of observation, shaping oneself in accordance with an omnipresent but invisible authority. In this sense, panopticism is not only a system of control but also a psychological condition that precedes, and even exceeds, institutional authority. Within this framework, "Lihaaf" can be re-read as a narrative that dramatizes how women's desires and bodies are disciplined through both external surveillance and internalised restraint, making the quilt a metaphorical screen that conceals rebellion even as it silently exposes the limits of patriarchal control. Ismat, acutely aware of the panoptic scrutiny of both colonial and indigenous patriarchy, appears to have already 'panopticized' the setbacks she would inevitably endure for narrating female homoerotic desire. "Lihaaf" stages this conflict of 'visibility' and 'concealment. The 'quilt' (36) in the story itself becomes a symbolic panopticon, both hiding and hinting at what lies beneath, drawing the gaze while deflecting full disclosure.

The narrative discloses a bold yet subtle exploration of homoerotic desire through a distinctive writing style; it unapologetically drew reader's attention, and unsettled the norms of Ismat's contemporary time. The critics considered the style a bit clichéd, whereas the subject remained argumentative, shushed, and largely overlooked by the contemporary audience. Ismat's remark that she wrote like "an ordinary camera that records reality as it is" (249) highlights her negation to romanticize the reality; if lesbianism is the reality of her surroundings, she felt compelled to inscribe them. Whereas, in *Ismat Chughtai: A Fearless Voice,* Sabahat Raza's repetitive references to "vices" have often been inferred as suggestive of narrator's internalised homophobia.

"Lihaaf" itself stages a homoerotic bond between Begum Jan, a refined Muslim aristocrat neglected by her husband, who treats her as though he has merely "tucked her away in the house with his other possessions" (36), and Rabbu, her devoted maid. Their intimacy, impounded within the *zenana* and concealed beneath the titular quilt, is witnessed unknowingly by Begum Jan's young niece who narrates the events retrospectively. The narrator refers to Begum Jan as her 'adopted aunt,' a strategic narrative choice that distances the kinship tie. By choosing adoption rather than blood relation, Ismat renders the narrative more palatable for her audience, allowing readers to contemplate the reality she depicts without collapsing into outright scandal.

Begum Jan's marital plight uncovers the unfathomable hypocrisies rooted within patriarchal propriety. The Nawab is celebrated as virtuous because "no one has seen any girl or prostitute in his house" (36), yet in reality, this absence is not the indicator of fidelity but of his homosexual liaisons. The extramarital affairs with young boys were one of his many hobbies, like extravagant dinners; his choice of actions was shielded by invisibility and spared the gossip that could taint his reputation. But, contradictorily for no surprise, Begum Jan's affair with Rabbu is stamped sinful, gossiped and inexorably scrutinized. Hence, the narrative portrays veracities around 'watching' and social double standards. Male transgressions are overlooked regardless of hedonistic dimensions, while female desire is regarded as a scandal, even more so when it is homosexual. Also, it is quite shocking and claustrophobic to see Nawab's manners of hypocrisy

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expand. He forbids Begum Jan to leave the house, while himself fondles young boys on a frequent basis. It was part of an anxious attempt to maintain the facade of heterosexual domesticity, and unequivocally show the efficiency of traditional marriage.

Begum Jan's femininity is lavishly illustrated, with her noble elegance and cultured charm, while Rabbu is described as plain and ugly. This puts desire in a position of greater significance than beauty or caste. Under duress of bodily need, beauty, complexion, and caste diminish in importance. What remains is the raw force of hedonism itself; Begum Jan desperately wanted not an idealised partner but liberation from abandonment. Thus, the quilt becomes both 'concealment' and 'revelation;' it is a covering for what society claims must remain secreted, yet also the locus where the hedonistic vitalities of female desire flare up subverting patriarchal assertions of social virtue and morality. The narrator undoubtedly act as Ismat's proxy, exhibiting both the necessity of 'disclosure' and the compulsion to hide under the quilt.

The Quilt: A Tapestry of Curiosity

The quilt in "Lihaaf" functions as a central leitmotif across the entire narrative, romance, childhood fantasy, sexual awakening, and self-discovery, while also functioning as an elusive site of 'observation' and 'tension.' The narrative unfolds through the gaze of a young narrator, whose later reflections suggest a deeper engagement with desire and identity. At one moment, she refers to "my own quilt" (36), subtly referencing questions of selfhood and sexuality. The narrator, often seen as a proxy for Ismat herself, reflects the tension between curiosity, fear, and growing self-awareness, navigating the fragile balance between hiding and revealing.

Chughtai contrasts the quilt with the "blanket" (36). Unlike the quilt, the blanket casts no shadows and remains largely unnoticed, suggesting a quieter but less controversial form of homosexual desire. In contrast, the quilt sways visibly on the wall, its shifting shapes drawing attention, comment, and moral scrutiny; it reflects the societal gaze that magnifies female desire while leaving male desires relatively invisible.

The quilt's constantly changing forms dramatize Begum Jan's restless pursuit of fulfillment. Sexual desire, frustrated by marital neglect, experiments through extramarital encounters, solitary satisfaction, and imaginative diversions, yet none satisfy Begum Jan until Rabbu appears. Rabbu, plain in appearance yet profoundly present, embodies the revelation of Begum Jan's latent homosexual orientation representing the desire that had previously remained unexpressed. The quilt, in its mutable forms, mirrors the multiplicity of Begum's longing and her exploration of ways to satisfy it.

The quilt appears innocent, safe, and ordinary by the morning, a quiet object free from any sexual activity. But by end of the story, it alters into "a large frog" (40), that is impossible to ignore. The metamorphosis dramatizes societal anxieties surrounding female same-sex desire, rendering it simultaneously threatening and conspicuous, while signaling the disruptive, hedonistic power of desire against normative expectations. The quilt's nocturnal shadows reveal desire without fully articulating it, inviting the reader into the interpretive space and compelling recognition of hidden dynamics.

Thus, the quilt emerges as both a 'literal' and 'symbolic' medium of desire, concealment, and negotiation. It protects while exposing, conceals while revealing, and mediates longing under societal scrutiny. In its folds, Ismat stages an interpretative contest: the observer and the observed, the hidden and the revealed, intertwining in a subtle choreography of desire, agency, and resistance. Like the characters it envelops, the quilt enacts a delicate balance between visibility and secrecy, embodying desire's capacity to resist prescriptive constraints while remaining legible to the world.

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The Casting of Narrator

Should one undertake a critical reading of "Lihaaf", a primary focus must be Ismat's strategic selection of narrative voice and perspective. The story is presented through the perspective of a young narrator, a "small girl" (36), who both mediates and legitimizes the conversation surrounding socially stigmatized content. The child's perspective represents early cognitive development processes, demonstrating how initial encounters with adult behavior shape interpretation and moral sensibilities about those actions. Though these experiences do not fully determine the narrator's identity, they certainly inform her perceptual and emotional responses. Ismat's use of a child narrator therefore serves dual purposes. It operates as a protective narrative tool, allowing the author to discuss controversial sexualities without immediate social backlash.Secondly, it also serves to position power, desire, and observation as naturally internalized practices learned early on.

The narrative use of the past-tense reinforces its relationship to observation rather than fantasy; it's as if Chughtai is recounting something she might have seen happening in her own lived experience. The narrator's comment on "putting the quilt over myself" serves as a complicated metaphor for concealment, suggesting a kind of negotiation of socially uncomfortable realities, specifically the "elephant in the room" of female same-sex desire. Likewise, reflections about "my own quilt" (36), add a self-reflexive dimension wherein Ismat is grappling with her own sexual identity, and the anxiety that accompanies the beginning of that recognition. As such, the text emphasizes the processes of observation and self-reflection, positioning the narrator as both engaged witness and observer of socially censured desire.

Through these narrative techniques, the text explores the complexities of power, desire, and vulnerability. Begum Jaan's physical embodiment, her relationship with Rabbu, and the adolescent narrator's observations provide a nuanced engagement with the relationship between pleasure, that pleasure's exploitation, and social inscription. The quilt itself acts as a liminal space: it hides socially forbidden acts and makes them visible, captures the tension between visibility and secrecy, and reveals the experience of desire as something both privately felt and socially surveilled.

In the end, Ismat's blend of youthful narrativity, reflective temporality, and emblematic motifs viz. quilt allows for a sophisticated exploration of female same-sex desire, the negotiation of power, and the ethics of representation. These narratorial and emblematic strategies turn "Lihaaf" into a text that simply does not document socially monitored realities, but also asks the reader to actively contemplate the constraints placed upon desire and representation.

The Elephant in the Room!

The image of the "elephant" (38) in the beginning of "Lihaaf" recalls the youthful narrator's initial experience in Begum Jaan's home because it symbolizes an ambiguous mixture of fears, curiosity, and baffling emotions provoked by Begum Jaan's physical closeness. The metaphor operates on multiple levels: it structures the nocturnal intimacies enacted beneath the lihaaf while simultaneously representing the proverbial 'elephant in the room,' a conspicuous reality that society deliberately avoids acknowledging. As defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, this idiom refers to an issue so evident that it is ignored, often linked to discomfort or taboo. Within Chughtai's socio-historical context, women's desires and their persistent "itch" (38) and yearnings, remained socially invisible. Begum Jaan's "infection…must be under the skin" (37), a metaphor for her persistent corporeal and emotional longing, signals the physiological and psychological dimensions of desire, which could only be relieved through Rabbu's ministrations, the "massage" (37) serving as both necessity and momentary reprieve. The initiation of this relationship marked the beginning of Begum Jaan's act of 'starting to live her life,' reclaiming agency within the confines imposed by her husband and patriarchal society.

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The story invites a critical theoretical interrogation of forced and situational sexuality. Begum Jaan's desires, constrained and catalyzed by the Nawab's neglect, may be read as circumstantial, arising not from purely instinctual orientation but from the structural limitations imposed on women within a patriarchal household. Rabbu, too, participates not entirely out of volition; she is compelled by Begum Jaan's dependency for sexual and emotional fulfillment. This dynamic goes even deeper: Begum Jaan's son is implicated, even if passively, in the experience of homosexuality, recruited into a made-up circumstance, since the family constraints and demands on Rabbu allow for only one kind of availability. It reveals how patriarchal control reconfigures intimacy into coercion. Not even the young narrator is excluded; Begum Jaan's direction, "a little harder... open the straps... here... a little below the shoulder... that''s right" (39), is not anyway directed by the required consent but about extending her desire into the niece's 'personal space,' and coercively instigating her sensuality.

This web of coerced or situational sexualities raises profound queries about the nature of desire in forcibly enclosed conditions. While most contemporary studies of gender and sexuality may be inclined to argue that homosexuality is a deep-seated characteristic, Chughtai's story helps us to see how an array of sexualities can develop from social and domestic considerations that the subjects of the story cannot escape or manage. If taken in Foucauldian terms, sexuality here is both a product and a point of resistance in the relations of power; it is being constricted, supervised, and mandated.

Seen from the lens of Indian feministic approaches, these relationships echo Vina Mazumdar's insistence on contextualizing women's issues within socio-cultural realities, and illuminate how Begum Jaan's limited agency reflects familial aspects of Indian patriarchal realities. Uma Narayan's idea of dislocating cultures offers a frame to read the sexualities of Begum Jaan and Rabbu as complex locations of negotiation and desire, power, and social expectation, rather than fixed categories of meaning. Dalit feminist issues highlight how Rabbu's subordinate social location intersects with the oppression of women due, in part, to the structural exploitation of women's bodies and labor in domestic communities.

The nocturnal tableau witnessing the quilt/lihaaf "rocking as though an elephant were caught in it," becomes a performative site where desire, coercion, and observation converge. The "elephant in the room started swaying again" (40) signs the existence of a despotic reality that must be recognized, yet remains tacitly unacknowledged as a result of socio-ethical policing of values; it produces ethical and interpretive co-conspiracy not only with the narrator but also with the reader too. While the Nawab's homosexuality is persistently noted as such, Begum Jaan's same-sex desire is ended in as conceptually pathological, pointing to the gendered asymmetry of social and moral policing. Ismat is inquiring into how sexual desire, coercion, and power each shape, suggesting that even actions cast as intimate or pleasurable remain situated within boundaries laid by social, domestic, and patriarchal situations.

"Lihaaf" on the Screen

The film adaptation *Lihaaf* (dir. Rahat Kazmi, 2019) undertakes the formidable task of reconstructing Ismat Chughtai's seminal short story for the screen, but its interpretive strategies both clarify certain themes and oversimplify others. By interweaving the dramatization of Begum Jaan's repressed desires with the reconstruction of Chughtai's obscenity trial, the film situates itself at the intersection of literature, law, and cultural politics. The adaptation falters in sustaining the subtle ambiguity of Chughtai's writing, which derives its critical force from suggestion, silence, and the mediated gaze of the child narrator.

One of the most striking departures from the original text is the introduction of direct exchanges between the Nawab and Begum Jaan. In Chughtai's narrative, the Nawab's neglect is articulated through absence, what Gayatri Spivak has described as the "politics of respectability," where patriarchal power is exercised most forcefully through what remains unspoken. The film, however, stages repeated dinner invitations in

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which Begum is paraded as a dutiful wife transforming absence into spectacle. This makes the suffocation of marital patriarchy more decipherable but simultaneously erases the haunted violence of absence. Similarly, the film gives away the protective ambiguity of the child's gaze by directly positioning Ismat herself as narrator. While this choice strengthens the courtroom subplot, but it weakens the interpretive indefinity that sustains desire suspended between visibility and secrecy.

The portrayal of Rabbu experiences the most significant transposition. In the short story, Rabbu is marked by passivity, dependence, and coercion; her intimacy with Begum Jaan is shaped by material subordination and the situational constraints of patriarchal neglect. By contrast, the film recasts her as sharp, demanding, and even domineering, thereby shifting the balance of agency and rendering Begum more fragile. This inversion is amplified in a cinematic invention where Rabbu orders Begum Jaan to apologize to the Nawab, prompting him to remark that Rabbu appears to wield greater authority in the household than himself. No such interaction occurs in Chughtai's text, and its inclusion may be read as an attempt to dramatize female influence within the domestic sphere, while also visualizing male anxieties around disrupted hierarchies. Yet, in so doing, the adaptation oversimplifies Chughtai's nuanced interrogation of coercion, subordination, and situational sexuality. What Michel Foucault terms the "productive power of constraint" (1977), the ways in which sexuality is constituted through asymmetrical relations of domination, is thus crushed into clearer binaries of power and agency for cinematic clarity.

Equally significant is the treatment of the central metaphor of the quilt. In Chughtai's text, the quilt functions as a panoptic device of concealment and revelation, dramatizing what Adrienne Rich has theorized as the "lesbian continuum" of silenced female intimacies. Its movements, witnessed obliquely by the child narrator, compel readers to confront the "elephant in the room" of female desire without ever naming it. The film, however, literalizes the metaphor by visually rendering the quilt's restlessness, thereby foreclosing interpretive openness. As Judith Butler's notion of the "heterosexual matrix" suggests, desire that resists normative legibility is most disruptive when it is unspeakable and indeterminate. By overarticulating what Chughtai left suspended in ambiguity, the adaptation unintentionally domesticates her radical interrogation of gender and sexuality.

Thus, Kazmi's *Lihaaf* focuses on the cultural scandal of Chughtai's story and situates it within a discourse of censorship and resistance, but in its effort to render subtext explicit, it diminishes the text's critical power. Where Chughtai unsettles by compelling readers to inhabit silences, negotiate absences, and confront the unspoken dynamics of female desire, the film risks converting rebellion into spectacle. The adaptation thus demonstrates both the promise and the peril of translating revolutionary literature to screen; it preserves the scandal but diminishes the subtlety of resistance.

Conclusion

"Lihaaf" stands as a revolutionary work in the landscape of Indian literature, not merely for its exploration of female same-sex desire but for the sophisticated way it interrogates power, desire, and societal surveillance. Through Begum Jaan's constrained existence within the Zenana, Ismat Chughtai foregrounds the tension between oppression and bodily autonomy, creating a narrative in which sexuality becomes both a site of survival and a subtle form of resistance. Begum Jaan's persistent 'itch' and the massages that alleviate it are not mere indulgences; they function as necessary acts of bodily reclamation, a pursuit of hedonistic satisfaction that defies patriarchal neglect (131). In this sense, pleasure is not frivolous. It is essential, and acts as a response to the deprivation imposed by the Nawab, whose sexual and emotional neglect renders Begum Jaan's desires both urgent and unavoidable.

The narrative's careful layering also illuminates the social politics of desire. The narrative navigates a spectrum of enforced and situational sexualities, seen closely in the case of Rabbu, Begum Jaan, and even

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the young niece. Begum's orientation arises from situations established by the Nawab, whereas Rabbu's complicity is shaped through her economic and social dependence. Even the niece's presence is couched in eroticized power relations, as the narrator observes; and also participates in the intimate negotiations, captured by a sense of innocence and social conditioning by desire being a form of socialization. The implications run afoul of definitions of consent and agency, wherein even sexual expression is emplaced with structural power as well as material limitations. The narrative complicates normative definitions of homosexuality, indicating that desire is natural, situational, and cultivated. This is a spectrum that escapes simple cataloguing.

The quilt exemplifies the center of the narrative metaphorically, providing a panoptic apparatus for concealment, revelation and the construction of visibility. It's fluttering at night expresses the fervor of female desire while protecting it from overt and public visibility. While curiously moving about, the 'elephant in the room,' unnamed, and as socially disordered lesbian desire, the skunk of female eroticism is visible but also remains masked within formal discourse. Further, the relationship between the quilt and harmless blanket illustrates the politics of visibility. Latent or subdued desire may be acceptable in socially accountable forms; however, when desire comes to manifest, it threatens the norms and standards of society, simultaneously becoming a display to generate moral panic. By situating desire in such a controlled yet revealing space, Chughtai compels the reader to confront the ethical and philosophical questions surrounding pleasure, secrecy, and social judgment.

From a feminist and postcolonial perspective, "Lihaaf" critiques heteronormative patriarchy while highlighting the ways in which women negotiate their autonomy within constrained domestic spaces. Chughtai's narrative resonates with the insights of Indian feminist theorists such as Uma Chakravarti, who emphasize the intersection of caste, gender, and sexual regulation; and Nivedita Menon, who interrogates the social construction of female desire and the political economy of pleasure (204). Begum Jaan's pursuit of sexual fulfillment is not simply an erotic act but a philosophical statement. It is a reclamation of one's body and agency in a space where patriarchal authority dictates the terms of existence.

Furthermore, the narrative challenges the duality between moral disapproval and aesthetic representation. Chughtai's own ambivalence toward female same-sex desire, her depiction of Begum Jaan and Rabbu as simultaneously alluring and morally suspect, reflects both personal and societal negotiation of sexuality. It exemplifies the panoptic pressure under which she wrote; the author internalizes anticipated social censure, yet transforms it into a narrative of nuanced critique. The text therefore occupies a liminal space, bridging autobiography, social commentary, and literary experimentation.

"Lihaaf" is the study of the politics of visibility, desire, and pleasure. It exposes the organizational discriminations of patriarchal structures, accounts the beginning of hedonistic actions within limitation, and reframes the discourse on female sexuality and lesbian desire in Indian literature. Chughtai invites both historical and contemporary readers to re-evaluate the expectations around morality, eroticism, and autonomy, by placing the body, desire, and the gaze at the center of the narrative. The narrative evolves from being an allegedly scandalous anecdote to an intense and thoughtful examination of the human condition, rendering the invisibles, like the skunk of lesbians or the silenced desires of women, an important site of reflection, critique, and understanding.

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