

Aesthetics of Homosexuality And Lesbianism As A Choice: A Reading of “Lihaaf” By Ismat Chughtai

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Abstract

Lihaaf was written by Ismat Chughtai that was published in 1941, which was long before our independence. A journal named *Adaab-i-Latif* published it. Ismat exposed a bold issue of female sexual desires that brought immediate obloquy to her. Apart from challenging the decent societal norms, the story moves one step ahead in disclosing a harsh reality of life that homosexuality and lesbianism can be an option for a woman under extreme conditions of stress, isolation and alienation which people thought could never be possible. The story reveals a courageous attempt by Ismat to unveil the alternative homosexual choices of women who were oppressed and suppressed by patriarchal society. This paper highlights the social and environmental factors that forced a normal woman to opt homosexuality as a choice to fulfill her sexual desires after her marriage. Further, this desire intensifies to an extent that the protagonist resolves to molest her niece towards the end of the story. It also discusses the problems faced by women in a male dominated society.

Keywords: Indian Muslim woman, homosexuality, lesbianism, patriarchal, sexual desires

Introduction

The story of “Lihaaf” as already mentioned was controversial. For such a bold plot, Ismat was summoned to Lahore court on charges of obscenity that became a source of torment for her. The case was extended for two years in the court. After two years’ trial, Ismat was exonerated though it was considered as “ill-fated”. She said, “*I was sick with life. It had become the proverbial stick*

to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight. Shahid and I had so many fights that life had become a battlefield.” In India, particularly before independence, raising issues such as female sexuality was considered as a taboo the reason being the traditional and the culture prevalent in the country. Ismat, with her liberal dealing of the issue has followed the footsteps of scholars of the west to expose bold topics in her literary texts. She was highly influenced by Tolstoy, Zola, Gorky, Chekhov, Oscar Wilde, Balzac and many more.

Begum Jaan is the protagonist in the story, who is portrayed as a pitied young woman who gets no love and affection from her husband, who is a rich and wealthy Nawab. She is a young beautiful woman who like other girls had many dreams and aspirations associated with her marriage. But to her disappointment, Nawab Sahab had no interest in her because of the fact that he was a gay. People were unaware of this fact and considered him pious, ethical, virtuous and irreproachable who was not interested in prostitutes. Here, the writer uses Nawab’s exemplary and angelic image as a veil to hide his homosexuality. The foundation of their marriage seems to be more like an economic contract between their families rather than love and trust.

“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.”

The story talks about a time when women were nothing but a trading commodity for men and exploited in the name of marriage. The Nawab used his marriage to Begum Jaan as a tool to continue his ‘disguised’ actions. He was often seen with the young slim-waisted men, but the patriarchal male in him didn’t allow his wife for an outing or talk to her relatives and relieve her pain and loneliness. It was obvious for Begum Jaan to feel isolated and alienated after marriage. She becomes destined to lead a lonely life and all the comforts and luxury in the house could not help her to relieve her pain. It seems as if her husband forgets about her after “installing her in the house” along with other possessions. Begum Jaan belonged to a financially weak family. The fixing of marriage to the rich and wealthy Nawab was a beneficial financial consideration for her family, and hence their age differences were not an issue of concern for her parents. Again the writer emphasizes upon the Indian social tradition of considering unmarried girl as a financial

burden for the family and we get an insight into the tradition of mismatched marriage that took place due to poverty. Chughtai points out the irrefutable commitment and responsibility in society to get married. Thus, Begum Jaan got married to a Nawab of “ripe age” though he had strange habits of spending time with fair complexioned, slim young boys in “translucent kurtas” and “fitting churidars” instead of his newly wedded wife. Begum’s life was nothing but a confinement and subjugation.

‘Lihaaf’ is creatively used both as an object as well as a metaphor in the story by Ismat. It hides and conceals the reality. The important thing to note is that Begum Jaan purposely did not opt for a homosexual relationship. She tried her level best to attract Nawab towards herself. All her prayers and vows to the Almighty proved to be in vain and her self esteem was destroyed to an extent that she stopped dressing up wearing fine clothes adorning herself as she knew that there was no one to look at her and appreciate. She no longer took interest in royal privileges. She ended up having traumatic sleepless nights and lost her peace of mind. She craves for her husband’s love. She tries to find solace in literature books but it only increased her romantic dreams that she very well knew would never come true. This pushed her into despair, discouragement and hopelessness.

It was her maidservant Rabbu, who rescued her by giving her life a new meaning. Her lesbian orgasmic pleasure with Rabbu elated and enlivened her back to life again, “soon her thin body began to fill out. Her cheeks began to glow and she blossomed in beauty. Rabbu was the personal masseuse to her. It was a special oil massage that brought life back to the half-dead Begum Jaan” (Chughtai 37). Rabbu uses “magic oils” to give Begum Jaan enough satisfaction. The use of oil for massage shows the intimacy of Begum Jaan and Rabbu.

According to psychological study, homosexuality can be non genetic as well. Research has found that positive attitudes toward homosexuality are associated with the belief that its origins are biological, whereas negative attitudes are associated with the view that its origin is personal choice (Jayaratne, 2002; PEW Research Center, 2003; Schneider & Lewis, 1984; Whitley,

1990; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004). Because beliefs about the origins of homosexuality are strongly related to attitudes, it is likely that such beliefs will ultimately relate to social policy and behaviors. Psychologically and sociologically-based studies investigate the roles of individual choice and decision-making, identity development, societal hierarchies, gender role stereotypes, role expectations and conformity in the etiology of homosexuality (Bem, 1996; Cass, 1979; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Peplau & Cochran, 1990; Troiden, 1984). Begum Jaan is thus forced into such indulgences under the above mentioned situations. It is very obvious for a young woman, even after marriage, is deprived of love and affection. She is deeply hurt to the extent that she makes an ugly maidservant adjust unnaturally into her sexual life. Just as other needs of a human, sexual desires occupy an important position, the deprivation of which leads to serious consequences. On the other hand, there is a typical male character of Nawab who himself is a homosexual and has inclination towards young boys which is not out of any social exploitation. Rather he uses his wife as a means to hide his sexuality which seems to be genetic unlike Begum Jaan's. "No one had ever seen a nautch girl or a prostitute in his house." He has no interest in pigeon and cock fights like other Nawabs instead he has provided an open house for male students. Thus, the conspicuous expertise of Nawab Sahab is established from the lack of natural hetero-sexual relation with his wife.

The Second Sex (1949) is an essay written by Simon de Beauvoir, illustrates how women are treated as the 'other' in patriarchal society and on the basis of sex, woman is considered weak, submissive, emotional, vulnerable, and dependent, and is consequently, deprived of her rights. Begum Jaan as a woman rethinks about the cause of her miseries, loneliness and dejection making her question "whether it was when she committed the mistake of being born or when she came to the Nawab's house as his bride" (36 Chughtai). Being a woman she was marginalized socially, treated as a burden by her family members, rejected by her husband after her marriage somewhere became a few reasons for making a sexual relationship with Rabbu willingly. Begum Jaan was victimized on ground of her sex not only by Nawab but also by the relatives who visited the place, "she remained a prisoner in the house. These relatives, free-loaders all, made

her blood boil. They helped themselves to rich food and got warm stuff made for themselves while she stiffened with cold” (Chughtai 37).

'Lihaaf' not only depicts the prevalence of sexual desires in a woman, or portrays a subsequent sense of loneliness arising out of its repression, but offers an exploration of an alternative sexuality to a woman in a sexually repressive patriarchal world. Ismat points out the fact that like males, even females have sexual desires and it should be accepted by the society as well. In a way it talks about the situations under which a normal woman has to indulge into homosexuality to find meaning and satisfaction in her life which was like a hell to her. She could not understand the reason behind the punishment she had to bear. Lihaaf gives a voice and questions the desires of women from a perspective of considering her just a woman and not assigning her any gender role. Every woman is a human being first and needs love and attention as in case of males. Since she is also a social creature, deprivation of her sexual needs forces her to find solace in unnatural relationship with a female that became a matter of whispered conversation in the society. The point is who is responsible for this? Is this the society, the Nawab or people like Rabbu-the answer is yet to be found. Had Nawab given her all his attention, love and care, she would have lived a better life.

When Rabbu goes out to meet her son, Begum Jaan is distressed and dejected. She as usual is troubled with a mysterious “itch”. The narrator out of innocence offers to scratch her back. What happens next is something awry. Begum Jaan hugs the narrator and squeezes her body like a toy, leaving the narrator feels like an estranged animal that could neither scream nor escape. This behavior of Begum Jaan was absolutely unexpected. Initially, the readers develop pity and sympathy for the injustice towards her, but slowly in the story we find her transform into a monstrous, strangely diabolic woman from an innocent, glaring and bright woman. We see a psychological disorder applied to child sexual abuse.

According to psychologists, it is a well defined fact that emotional instability, immaturity or self-victimization can be a cause of homosexuality. Unlike the Nawab, Begum Jaan's homosexuality

is not genetic. The story clearly highlights the fact how because of one person sexual negligence towards the other, the other person gets affected unnaturally.

Conclusion

Begum Jaan had created her own world with Rabbu in *zenana*, to rejuvenate her tedious and monotonous life that somewhere resembled “the drawing-room door” that the Nawab had opened for the “firm-calved, supple-waisted boys”. They are two different places but the purpose the served was the same. Begum Jaan’s relation with Rabbu was the hottest gossip and was mocked at contrary to Nawab’s who was considered to be reputed and pious man for his generosity towards young boys though the readers are very well acquainted with the reality behind his generosity. Begum Jaan simply falls into prey to the patriarchal social norms of those times. A closer inspection of her behavior reveals that it was the exploitation; isolation and alienation from all sides that made her choose the quilt to veil her sexual desires which was obvious for a person from psychological point of view and also has been supported by various homosexual theories that was put forward long after the text was written. From this point of view, Begum Jaan is justified for her unnatural behavior conquering human anguish.

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