

Conflict of Desire, Ethics and Plight in Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf"

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Abstract. Ismat Chughtai, who though born in British India, was much ahead of her times as she wrote extensively on femininity and female sexuality, on the conflict of desires and the so-called “ethics” and on the plight of women and men embodying institution of marriage. We live in a society where women are expected to display conventional feminine qualities of obedience, abstinence, and modesty; a society where even the nursery rhymes may end up portraying the lop-sidedness of a culture, where men and women have been segregated – this forms the basis of a patriarchal attitude, which has been reinforcing discrimination, against the females since ages. It is this society she attacks on. Ismat Chughtai’s “Lihaaf” is a text that explores into the deep conscience of an individual who is deplored and into a quest for identity. The work foreshadows the idea of exploitations of another corporal body to fulfil one’s desires. An ambiguous representation of a child’s sexual abuse is also illustrated as the child seemed incapable to comprehend the manipulation of her body for someone else’s desire. ‘Lihaaf’ epitomizes the excessive degree of suppression that one undergoes. It aptly suggests how the life of a woman by training is confined to her body; how one’s desires are manipulated and how one swings between hopes and ethics. Chughtai also focusses on channelizing her will and motivation to influence the psyche of a society that treats women as mere objects that are installed in the house of their male counterparts. The story received attention and approbation and this paper attempts to depict the insulated and suffocating life of married women in our feudalistic society.

Keywords : Femininity; female sexuality; segregation; exploitation; child's sexual abuse; ethics.

The story begins with a flashback from a child narrator, who tries to recollect the experiences she had as a child. It talks about how as a young married woman Begum Jaan faced sheer loneliness. As a strict guardian would do, the narrator’s mother, left her with one of her adoptive sister thinking of disciplining her girl child :

She knew that these were no one in the house, not even a mouse, with whom could get into a fight. It was a severe punishment for me (*Lifting the Veil*, 13)

But little did she know, that the lady’s quilt would be so etched in the narrator’s memory like a scar. The story moves on and we find the narrator living with Begum Jaan, who was married to a Nawab only because he was virtuous and one could never find a prostitute or nautch girl in his house.

"The Quilt" or "Lihaaf" is a profound comment by Chughtai on the terrible plight of women under patriarchal society, that subjects the female race to discrimination and oppression :

Having married Begum Jaan, he tucked her away
in the house with his other possessions and
promptly forgot her. The frail, beautiful Begum
Jaan washed away in anguished loneliness (14)

These lines gear a manifesto towards asserting women's identity; arising public opinion of channelizing will and motivation to influence the conscience of society that treats women as mere objects installed in the homes of their male counterparts. A woman is married not for the sake of fortune, but for her own happiness and joy, but after marrying Nawab Sahab, Begum Jaan felt left out, as Nawab Sahab promptly forgot her. The Nawab, who was always busy in his "mysterious activity" paid no heed to the needs and desire of Begum Jaan. She would just be there aimlessly in the house; perhaps having forgotten her own identity. She had helplessly turned into a prisoner in the house; as neither was she allowed to go out, nor did much relatives come to meet her. And the relatives, if any they came would keep themselves with rich food and got warm clothes made for themselves, but Begum Jaan, "stiffened with cold despite the new cotton stuffed in her quilt." (14)

"Lihaaf" unveils the torments of a married woman who yearns for the love she always dreamt of - kind of care, the affection a wife ought to deserve; but all she could get after marrying Nawab Sahab was a bundle of despondence and a never ending loneliness. The Nawab would never pay any amount of attraction to Begum Jaan - no attention to know how she looked or what she wore. All he cared was about "strange hobby" with the young boys, while, "Begum Jaan would have glimpses of them in their perfumed, flimsy shirts and feel as though she was hauled over burning embers!" (14)

Chughtai also raises questions on marriage as an economic and social enterprise, a socially constructed subordinate role of women in marriage, her sexual fantasies and frustration and her subsequent sense of loneliness is depicted very well in these lines :

Or did it start when she gave up on amulets,
talismans, black magic and other ways of retaining
her love of a straying husband? She arranged for
night-long reading from *the Quran*, but in vain;
Begum Jaan was heart-broken and turned to books.
Romantic novels and sentimental verse depressed
her even more. (14)

The Nawab, "installed her into the house along with furniture," highlights how the institution of marriage, makes women commodities and reduces her to an object of mere business transaction - you give her food and clothes, and she'll be there.

Men actually face some of the most intense societal pressures. They are expected to be financially stable, successful, and strong- emotionally, mentally as well as physically. Our fundamental ideology of masculinity is much flawed. The marriage between Nawab Sahab and Begum Jaan presents the social taboo of having un-married woman or man in the house. Even Nawab Sahab, irrespective of his immense power and affirm position he holds in the society, has to marry, although the opposite gender had no appeal to him owing to his "mysterious hobby". In the process of maintaining his marriage, he "imprisons" Begum Jaan to the regressive customs in which society forced a women to stay indoors. Had there been a considerable freedom to accept different notions of sexuality, there wouldn't be this plight in the lives of Begum Jaan and Nawab Sahab, who too is twirled in the nuptial vows. Nevertheless, it is only indicated and not stated, that Nawab Sahab might have continued his homosexual exploits, Begum Jaan is condemned to live the life of confinement and subjugation. She hence suffers from silent humiliation.

"Lihaaf" also reveals a discourse on self-consciousness about a woman's search for the self. It brings out the fact how a woman's sexuality is so overlooked - her needs, her desires are not acknowledged, before or even after marriage. Begum Jaan was heart-broken and her self-esteem was destroyed; gripped by a sense of failure, she becomes a "bundle of regrets and dependence". Begum Jaan is in complete desolation and it is here that her maid servant, Rabbu comes to her rescue. It is then indicated Begum Jaan is deriving pleasure from her female companion. It is here that Begum Jaan discovers 'miracle of touch'. Rather than just being a representative text that describes homosexuality, it is an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the suffering of married life. 'Lihaaf' rather than being a means for women to find an escape from social repressions, creates an alternative world of their own. :

Rabbu needs to massage her back for hours together. It was as though the massage was one of the basic necessities of life. Rather, more important than life's necessities. (15)

Here as stated it was the necessity of togetherness and of companionship that Begum Jaan longed for the most. She and Rabbu had an alternative world of their own, so much so that once, when Rabbu was not there, "Begum Jaan didn't eat anything and moped in the bed all day". (18)

Finally in this conflict of desire, of self, ethics and plight of a married life, it is a child narrator that almost suffers a sexual exploitation when she isn't

able to differentiate between a good touch and a bad touch or when she fails to raise her voice against the uncomfortable situations that she undergoes :

I woke up at night and was scared. It was pitch dark and Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking, as though an elephant was struggling inside. (17)

Also, when Begum Jaan intentionally wanted to be caressed by the child narrator in the lines :

How skinny you are... your ribs are showing. She began counting my ribs. I tried to protest. (19)

'I tried to protest', in the above lines is indicative of the degree of dislike and discomfort that the narrator felt with that unnecessary touch of Begum Jaan, but as a child he was unable to raise a voice and protest :

I wanted to run away, but she held me tightly. I tried to wriggle away and Begum Jaan began to laugh loudly. To this day, whenever I am reminded of her face at that moment I feel jittery. (20)

These lines gear up the agenda of the mental and emotional scar that these kind of abuses leave on a child. It raises the question of how well, how safely we nurture our children? In a personal experience of sensuousness, Begum Jaan helplessly and quite intentionally physically abuses a child and depends on the narrator for the needs of her soul. It is these parallels that this paper presents - the internal complexities and disagreement between the ethical side and that of desires of an individual, the discordance of values and realities.

To conclude, "Lihaaf" by Chughtai is a text that throws light not only on the manifesto of objectification and subjugation of women and men in the institution of marriage, but also illuminates the agenda of child abuse in one's own homely environment - the voicelessness of one's plight over the croaking of one's desires. It is a text of a woman's quest for identity, a child's failure to raise a voice against her abuse. It also depicts the silence of a woman in the socio - cultural context.

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