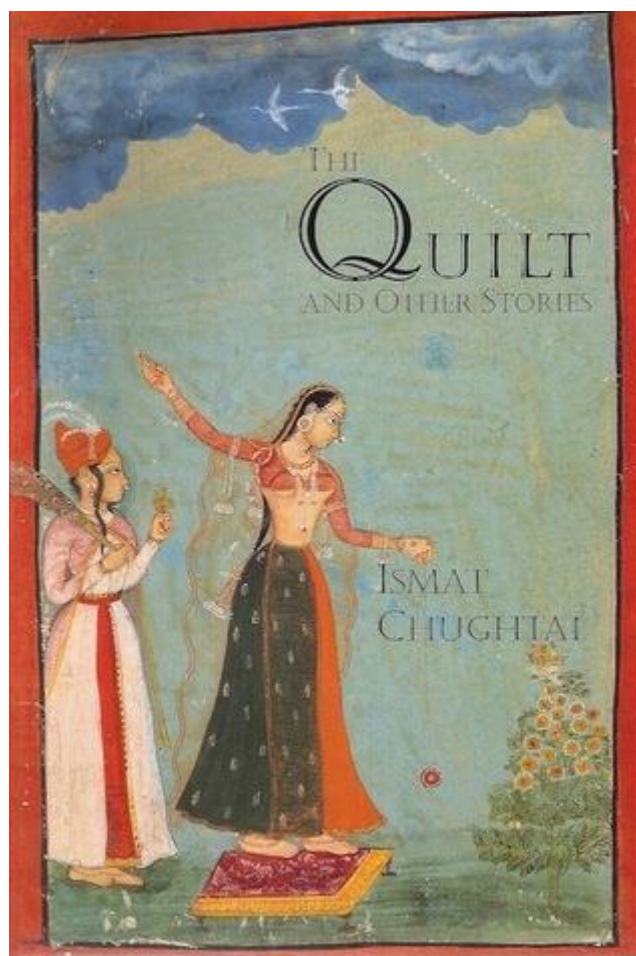


## Re-defining Sexuality: From Object to Subject in Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*

Shikha Thakur

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Courtesy: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/21842264-lihaaf?rating=4>

### Abstract

This paper demonstrates the imposed sexuality of women in patriarchal society, by collating varied renowned feminist writers' views to uncover the female sexuality. The paper not just challenges the conventionally patriarchal institution of marriage but also explores multiple cultural

and psychological problems underwent by women post marriage. Through protagonist of the story, Begum Jan, Chughtai, aims to voice the unvoiced and unleash the leashed. The paper primarily represents the sexuality of women as a means to re-define her identity, by challenging the traditional sexuality conferred to her, that in turn makes her grow from an object of despondence to the subject of agency.

paper portrays the intricate relationship between the agency of gender and culture by marking Begum Jan's journey with stigmatization, commoditization and double marginalization in the institution of marriage; which in turn results in robust subversion of the culturally gendered patriarchal ideology. Henceforth, , Judith Butler's 'Resignification', Mikhail Bakhtin's 'carnavalesque' and Michel Foucault's 'heterotopia' aptly substantiate Begum Jan's gradual movement from object of victim to subject of power. Her imposed debilitating femininity, and negation of humanity, eventually results in transgression of the patriarchal protocols, thereby, vindicating the fact, greater the oppression stronger the rebellion.

## Introduction



**Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991)**

Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ismat\\_Chughtai](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ismat_Chughtai)

Ismat Chughtai, a pioneer of Urdu writings, known worldwide for her landmark short story named, *Lihaaf* (The Quilt) 1942, was levelled against the charge of obscenity, for having written a story from the perspective of a six-year-old girl, unveiling the same-sex desires. Her indomitable

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spirit and a fierce feminist ideology made her explore feminine sexuality in multiple offshoots, terming her a revolutionary feminist in twentieth century Urdu literature.

*Lihaaf*, published in the Urdu literary journal *Adab-i-Latif*, translated from Urdu to English by M. Asaduddin, is a story about a woman's erotic relationship with the same sex, exploring a unique narrative that reflects on a realistic aspect of woman, who declines to follow the master narrative. The story gruffly posits the objectification of wife in the feudal society who in turn resorts to lesbian relationship-female bonding as a core weapon to combat patriarchy and staunch masculinity. For this reason, Ismat Chughtai in one of her interviews states, that *Lihaaf* "brought me so much notoriety that I got sick in life. It became the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight"

### **Begum Jan**

Begum Jan, a Muslim woman, at a tender age, gets married to a rich, much-aged Nawab who was virtuous for not having entertained "nautch girl or prostitute in his house" (Chughtai 36). Post wedding Begum Jan figured out that she was nothing more than an object in the house full of luxury, as "he tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her" (Chughtai 36) and relegated her to margins. Simon de Beauvoir, in her essay *The Second Sex* (1949), illustrates how women are rendered the 'other' in patriarchal discourse and on the basis of sex, woman is considered weak, submissive, emotional, vulnerable, and dependent, and is consequently, deprived of her rights. The male-dominant ideology thus legalizes the victimization and marginalization of women by men on biological grounds, which deprives women of their selfhood and make them an object rather than the subject. This thrust Begum Jan to the arena of solitude and despondence, 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). The post marriage events in Begum Jan's life baffled her to an extent that she started questioning her existence and identity. She was nothing more than furniture in her house and was permanently silenced. All her sexual desires culminated on seeing Nawab's disinterest in her and massive interest in "young, fair and slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him" (36 Chughtai). Begum Jan was victimized on ground of her sex by not just 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).

## Forced into Active Decision-Making

Begum Jan catalyses from passivity to active decision-making after spending endless traumatic sleepless nights and dejected days in isolation. She then decided to give wings to her sexuality, when Rabbu rescued her giving her a new meaning orgasmic pleasure, with the reins of her life squarely in her hands and till the very end she fights to keep them there. Learning from the early lessons of victimization, and objectification, she thinks deeply and crafts a strategy to turn her life around and start afresh. Every day with Rabbu was an invigorated self-discovery with lesbian orgasmic pleasure, for “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 37). Thwarted by chance and malice repeatedly, she fights to live her dream and responds to the challenges with quick wittedness and confidence. Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque, as developed in *Rabelais and His World* (1965) helps “to subvert and interrogate the established / institutionalized authority over meaning” (Nayar 23).

## Subversion

In *Lihaaf*, subversion can be understood primarily through the theoretical application of Judith Butler’s concept of subversion of identity, as laid out in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), in which she challenges the patriarchal stance of confining women within a particular framework on the grounds of their sexuality. Butler does so by using resignification and states that the meanings and categories by which we understand and live our daily existence can be changed because the seemingly “natural” is actually socially constructed and contingent. Begum Jan’s transgression of boundaries for the reclamation of her sexual orientation subverts the other identity imposed upon her by patriarchy, which is conflated with society/culture that identifies her as sacrificial, feeble, and acquiescent. She redefines homosexuality as a weapon for acquiring a subject from a treaty of object. To reclaim her autonomous identity, Begum Jan uses her sexuality to assert her uniqueness and to subvert patriarchy. This in turn, aids her to affirm herself as an individual and also to redefine her personhood, vis-a-vis her gender role, social space, and relationships

## Grows in Strength

Begum Jan thus rapidly grows in strength, cunning, and doggedness in the course of action. Deprived of autonomy since long, Begum Jan learns from her lived experiences and begins to live life on her terms. Well substantiated using ‘heterotopia’, the concept propounded by Michel

Foucault, where he questions how the given space around the object, can define the object's autonomy and identity. As in Begum Jan's case, the imposed societal space offered to her was curbing her desires and dreams, for Nawab "was too busy chasing the gossamer shirts, nor did he allow her to go out" (Chughtai 37), plausibly, this made her lose her self-worth and ruined her to isolation, as "the frail, beautiful Begum wasted away in anguished loneliness" (Chughtai 36).

### **Silencing Begum Jan**

However, *Lihaaf*' mimics and parodies the othering theories and practices repeatedly to completely subvert and debunk their validity, for all women subjected to "those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power' [and] are written into our very psyches as well as into the dominant institutions of political and social life" (Butler 2485). Objectification of Begum Jan is silenced as she knows that there is none who can come for her runaway, but there are ample instances that prove her assertiveness. As long as she is in the custody of societal/cultural norms, she is marginalized, silenced, victimized, and deprived of agency by Nawab, but when she steps out of enslavement she begins to move to the centre from the periphery and to reclaim her subjectivity and agency. Chughtai's use of Bakhtin's carnival and the ultimate other are clearly discernible when Begum Jan was objectified in the marriage institution, nevertheless, fiercely resists any attempt at further objectification by the patriarchal society and eventually liberates her sexuality in company of women, primarily with Rabbu and the narrator, when she responds orgasmically "Ah! what pleasure..." She expressed her satisfaction between sensuous breaths" (Chughtai 39). Ostensibly, Ismat Chughtai deconstructs the patriarchal metanarrative and builds the architecture of her narratives to give female agency a clear and valid voice. The narratology develops the central character as gradually energized to challenge the imposed inequalities and to subvert the same.

### **Conclusion**

In this study I have made an attempt to analyze feminine sexuality by subverting the conventional patriarchal society that refuses to recognize feminine desires and fantasies. The feminist perspective in *Lihaaf*' by Ismat Chughtai situates her protagonist Begum Jan—in the historical and temporal contexts of extant societal processes. The story delineates the disadvantageousness and subjugation of women in male dominated societies and their discourses. The discovery of sexuality is studied through the protagonist's violent encounters with male-centred society. She experiences stigmatization and double marginalization, imposed debilitating femininity,

to which she responds through her acts of transgression and subversion of the patriarchal oppressors to assert her selfhood and recognize her sexuality. Begum Jan's story in *Lihaaf* is a clarion call for all women to seek a better life and pursue their dreams and potential. Begum Jan's story simultaneously reveals the deep rootedness of masculine oppression and the equally long resistance by women through successive generations. Chughtai adopts a style of writing in *Lihaaf* which turns a potentially maudlin and gothic story into a powerful multilayered narrative of uncompromising female assertion and rejuvenated humanity. The story is illuminated throughout by the effulgent female-bond of Begum Jan and Rabbu,. They reclaim and reconstruct their differentiated individuality, re-present and reassert their femininity, and seek subject and agency which establishes Ismat Chughtai's contribution to the understanding of the development of complex matrixes of masculinity and femininity through history, tradition, and literary expositions till the contemporary feminist discourse. Thus, the feminist stance of the story brings in fine nuances in the interrogation of the patriarchy and fortifies the feminist reconstruction of the self, in which gender identity markers are diminished, the authoritative approach of male-centeredness is annihilated and gender extremism is eviscerated, thereby unveiling and voicing the feminine sexuality in terms of sexual desires and dreams.

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