



THE PERVERSION OF DESIRE AND THE INSTITUTION OF
MARRIAGE IN THE SUBCONTINENT:
A RE-READING OF HOMOEROTICISM IN *THE QUILT* BY
ISMAT CHUGHTAI

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Abstract

Homoeroticism or same-sex relationship though considered impious and abhorred publicly has existed in the Subcontinent of India in almost all sections and genders of society from the elite to the most downtrodden. Though male homosexuality has been a subject of both public discourse and academic writings, women's same-sex relationship, however, is largely viewed as taboo and hence is discreetly referred to. This paper drawing upon Judith Butler's criticism of normative gender with psychoanalytic commentary from Freudian sources investigates the queer characterizations and sexuality in the context of colonial India. Thus, this paper aims to explore and discuss the effects of the homoerotic practices of men and women, especially within the institution of marriage by employing textual analysis of Ismat Chughtai's short story *The Quilt*. The story portrays a woman whose desire for her husband is thwarted because of his being homoerotic. This suppressed desire finds its way into her actual and attempted coerced sexual relationships with the other women around her. Homoeroticism, thus, results in gender oppression, economic exploitation, and worst of all paedophilia, all of which remain muffled and silenced because of their association with homoeroticism.

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Introduction

The Quilt a short story, originally written by Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991) in 1942 in Urdu under the title of *Lihaf* was published in the *Aadab-e Lateef*, an Urdu language monthly literary magazine (Chughtai 1942). This magazine soon emerged as an organ of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) and published writings that exposed social evils and encouraged anti-colonial struggles (Akhtar and Zaidi 2006; Hussain 2012). *The Quilt*, since the time of its publication, has produced a growing number of studies, analyzing its contents, meanings, and controversies, particularly solving the enigma of human desire. Scholars have earned their PhDs on Ismat Chughtai's work, with special emphasis on *The Quilt*. The story often appears in the reading lists of a variety of courses taught around the world.

The Quilt soon shot into fame or infamy, was censored by the colonial government of British India on charges of obscenity under Section 292, of the Indian Penal Code, and ended up in a short-lived court trial against Chughtai (Bhatia 2020). In this trial, the blatant dichotomies and contradictions that control women's lives were reflected pungently at their best in two ways. On one hand, in the public furore and agitation against *The Quilt* which Chughtai later commented were, "filled with such inventive and convoluted obscenities that had they been uttered before a corpse, it would have got up and run for cover" (Asaduddin, 2012, 25). On the other hand, the trial-court judge's daring appreciation of Chughtai in a conversation with Chughtai, immediately after the acquittal of obscenity charges in his antechamber "I've read most of your stories. They aren't obscene. Neither is *Lihaf*," (Asaduddin, 2012, 37; Naqvi and Chughtai 2000) represents the dichotomy of society.

The acquittal by the Lahore Court, however, did not stop Chughtai's brutal trial by the patriarchal public. "The story brought me so much notoriety that I got sick of life. It became the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight" Chughtai comments (Asaduddin, 2012, 40). This exploitation, verging on harassment, of women in *The Quilt* and its woman author continues beyond time and space as even today, male-created codes of morality charge women and absolve men for the same transgression of social norms.

Before proceeding further, it is significant to note that the annual issue of the Urdu journal, *Adab-e-Lateef* which published Chughtai's *Lihaf*, in its editorial preface observed that "literature cannot be separated from life ... a piece of writing is a painting of social life and is an expression of his self and his observations" (*Adab-e Lateef*, 1942,4-5). In the estimation

of the *Adab-e-Lateef*, the *Lihaf* was a reality of social life and not an obscene text. Perhaps it is because of this definition of what the *Adab-e-Lateef* thought of progressive writings that scores of angry letters addressed to the editors of the *Adab-e-Latif* were withheld and not shared with Chughtai for several years (Gopal, 1905, 67).

This paper is a textual analysis of the major characters of *The Quilt* to understand through them the symbolic and contextual meanings of the events and happenings of the story and to connect them with the bigger picture of the society in which they lived. In doing so, the performative aspect of gender as iterated by Judith Butler added more meaning to it. This essentially means that gender is seen as a performative act while individuals who cannot adhere to the socially accepted heterosexual gender roles are scrutinized (Kaplan, 1992, 843). Moreover, marriage is viewed as a social construct that legally binds a woman to a man and vice versa. In terms of psychoanalytic commentary, Freudian focus on sexuality and paedophilia was also helpful. (Freud, 1961, 236).

The Story of *The Quilt*

The Quilt mirrors the lives of women behind the high walls of the decaying respected (*sharif*) middle-class, landowning, and pleasure-seeking Muslim households of 1940s India. The story takes place in the city of Agra in the 1920s whose repute as the capital of the Mughals was fading by the time the events of *The Quilt* took place, and gained notoriety for the abundance of prostitutes who thronged there because it was now a British cantonment city (Iftikhar 2018; Levine 2013) and their male clients. Despite the availability of female prostitutes, adult males were also involved in paedophilia. The story revolves around two major characters, a man identified by his title Nawab and his wife, Begum Jan. Nawab Sahib, a man of inherited fortunes, known to be a man of virtues, had been on pilgrimage (Hajj) and has financed Hajj of the needy and the poor. He married the comely-looking young Begum Jan, described by Chughtai as a woman with a delicate body, “when he was much past his prime” (Chughtai, 1994, 5). Though not directly said, the story subtly tells that the marriage was a transaction to heal the poverty of Begum Jan’s parents and to shield Nawab Sahib’s other interests and indulgences - other than the marital comforts of a normal marriage. This indulgence was his ‘strange hobby’ to keep an open house’ for ‘young, fair and slim-waisted boys whose expenses were borne entirely by him’ ((Chughtai, 1994, 5). The Nawab Sahib after marrying Begum Jan ‘deposited her in the house with all his other possessions and promptly forgot about her! The young delicate Begum began to wilt with loneliness’ ((Chughtai, 1994, 5)). The rest of the story narrates what Begum Jan did not to wilt but to live her life and resort to the available option, a female servant named Rabbo, who helps her satiate her sexual desires. Begum Jan is satisfied with her new sexual partner but is distraught by Rabbo’s departure as she leaves to meet her son.

With Rabbo gone, Begum Jan was completely distraught. She was restless. At this point of the story, one hears the voice of a helpless child about to be sexually preyed upon. This first-person account of a child's experience of trauma which is not much critiqued and overlooked in studies on Chughtai's writings warrants attention. Chughtai recalls the child's nerve-shattering experience.

To this day whenever I think of what she [Begum Jan] looked like at that moment, I get nervous. Her eyelids had become heavy, her upper lip darkened and, despite the cold, her nose and eyes were covered with tiny beads of perspiration. Her hands were stiff and cold ... The dusk had plunged her room into claustrophobic darkness, and I felt gripped by an unknown terror. Begum Jan's deep dark eyes focused on me! I started crying. She was clutching me like a clay doll (Chughtai, 1994, 10).

The child resists and is let go, but it leaves her traumatized. Once Rabbo returns, Begum Jan is happy again and the short story ends. The sexual perversion in *The Quilt* is not just Begum Jan and Rabbo satiating their same-sex desires but Nawab's exploitation of the institution of marriage partner and Nawab's and Begum's "normalized pedophilia" exercised by both Begum and Nawab (Kansteiner, 2002, 180). The story powerfully spurs the imagination of its readers to see what is not written in it. This silence or the untold element of the story was selectively read by the self-appointed guards of morality who, in hushed words, condemned the story as an obscene lesbian story and dismissed the Nawab's paedophilia.

To an ordinary reader, even today, depending on his/her sexual orientation and religious views, the story is about the perverted sexuality of women and not of the sexual transgressions of men. This blatant neglect of the female desire by the adult male readers and their silence over male illicit acts for satisfying their desire transforms the short story of *The Quilt* into evidence against the repression of female desires within the legal marital bonds. This dichotomy brought in the charges of obscenity against *The Quilt* and hence the fame or the notoriety of the story and its writer.

Reading carefully and between the lines, *The Quilt*, is not the story of sinful women or men within the concealed and well-guarded houses of the powerful and the wealthy; it is also the story of the poor, the vulnerable children, and the public with myopic vision, unable to see the larger picture. Thus, *The Quilt* represents the voices of the people of the cross-section of South Asian society, strangled by repressive thinking, aversion for women, and disregard for children and the weak. Within this larger backdrop of repressive subjugation of the people, Ismat Chughtai's eye catches with precision, not even possible by the lens of a most sophisticated camera, an image which she had never seen before and which remained etched not only in her memory but remains an unforgettable one in public memory till today.

Later, Chughtai revisits her mother's adopted sister's house in Agra (UP, India) and inscribes these childhood horrifying memories with unparalleled precision. The story when published led to its public censure which found the story and its author obscene and filthy. Subsequently, the court of law summoned the author, the publisher and even the copyist of the text to the court on charges of obscenity (Chughtai 2012).

Major Themes of the Study

This paper examines the repression of the powerless by the powerholders which paves way for the double colonisation of women and the poor, suppressing their legitimate desires. This analysis is structured around the institution of forced marriage which is a tool to subjugate women and throw them into a hell-like existence. It, then, proceeds to an understanding of perversion of desire, and homoeroticism, with the help of the original story of *Lihaf* in Urdu and its English translation under the title *The Quilt* by Syeda Hameed (Chughtai, 1994, 5-12). I seek briefly to examine these interwoven themes in the context of time and space which primarily motivated the creation of this iconic story which continues as a catalyst for many a roadblock in women's everyday lives not only in South Asia but in several global social geographies.

Perversion of Desire

Desire, the first theme as depicted in the title of this paper, is a simple and inherent feeling and emotion in all human beings, across all gender binaries. This desire, however, quickly transforms into perversion when the means to attain it are not socially approved and ethically sanctioned. Desire and its fulfilment are understood and explained in a variety of ways, Some argue that desire and perversion are the same, while others argue that sexual desire plays a significant role in shaping human behaviour and relationships (Torres 1991; Dess 2018; Celenza 2020; Gregory 2021).

These debates throw desire, a personal feeling, into the public arena, allocating to the public the power to decide which is a bad desire and which is a good desire, which one is licit and which is illicit. Amongst all human emotions and needs, the most socially and ethically controlled and confined is sexual desire. Thus, the desire to have sex remains the most strongly fortified of all human emotions, and even a little move to cross the set boundaries stirs society at large. Amongst all human beings, women, including female children, are born to remain confined within the pre-set walled enclosures of desire. These walled enclosures are bastions of male authority, guarded by the male ego. The nature of women's desire and the fulfilment of all their bodily and spiritual needs, remains historically the core of all male thinking, causing the horror of facing a disobedient woman. Philosophical male-led discourses have spurred conceptual, ontological, moral, even

political, and legal debates and dichotomies over this issue (Landers and Gruskin 2010; Woodward 2018). Some queries that keep gaining momentum, despite codes of morality and ethics are: What is sexual desire and how it is fulfilled, and whether it should be within the legal marital vows and between opposite or same-sex partners? Thus, the selection of partners, exploitation, sexual perversion, paedophilia, sexual orientation, and concealment decide the nature of the ways of the fulfilment of human desire. While sexual desire and its fulfilment are a symbol of male perfection, for women, on the contrary, any expression of the presence of this desire, within or without matrimony, ends up in labelling her as a bad woman, a woman of ill-reputation and a perverted woman. Thus, the writing of *The Quilt* by Chughtai and later the obscenity trial of *The Quilt*, are rooted in the patriarchal structure of desire, and therefore, require to be read in the backdrop of these patriarchal norms that suffocate human voices and demean women, children, and the poor as a conduit for the gratification of the desires by the powerful (Castro et al., 2019). Expanding this perspective of *The Quilt* further, Srinivasan, applying a feminist lens and in the context of women's desires, comments that the story "becomes the blueprint for a feminist vision of literary justice illuminating the literary truths that seek to fill what law does not accommodate" (Srinivasan, 2018, 108). Gopinath's exposition of the core theme of *The Quilt* comes closer to Chughtai's depiction of desire. Based on Ismat Chughtai's 1993 interview in which she equivocally denied being familiar with the word lesbianism as it was not in use when she wrote the story, argues that "The Quilt" must be understood not as a representative "lesbian" narrative but through the very structures set up by the story itself; these demand that female homoeroticism be located as simply one form of desire within a web of multiple, competing desires that are in turn embedded in different economies of work and pleasure" (Gopinath, 2018, 145).

In light of the above explanation, the male readers' agitation against the imagined contents of *The Quilt*, was less to obscenity and more to their fear of exposure to the exploitation of the poor, helpless women, and children, within the cloistered space of the homes. The objection was not raised, either by the readers or by the colonial government, against pedophobia which is also mentioned in the story and which indeed was the sole cause of Begum Jan's loneliness which led her to other means of satisfying her needs – perverted or otherwise. One should keep in mind that in the early 1940s India had a strong group of Muslim religious leaders as well as informed Muslim public, sensitive to stopping the protection of Islam against Muslim women's growing apostasy caused by abusive husbands. Hence, a few years preceding the publication of *The Quilt*, Muslim scholars, headed by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi, caused the colonial government to pass the Dissolution of Marriage Act of 1939 (Masud 1996). The same scholars, however, remained dismissive of Muslim men's known but not openly admitted vice of paedophilia despite its condemnation by the orthodox interpretation of the Qur'an. Similarly, Chughtai's trial by the law court of the colonial government of India which in its very nature thrived on an ever-expanding web

of exploitation “demonstrates how legal conduct is tied with state control and regulation of sexuality” (Srinivasan, 2018, 107).

At this point, it is pertinent to consider Vanita and Kidwai’s interpretation and undersigning of same-sex relationships neither as a myth, disease or an abnormality; it has existed historically in India. They vehemently reject lesbianism as “situational—caused by lack of [of women] access to men” (Vanita and Kidwai, 2001, xxiv, 203). In another study, Vanita, citing selections from the nineteenth-century Urdu genre of the *Rekhti* poetry shows that female-female romantic sexual relations existed (Vanita 2004). This concept of woman-to-woman relationship when applied to the Chughtai’s *Lihaf* compels a reader to go deeper in understanding the psyche of Begum Jan and Rabbo. The difference in the understanding and acceptance of such relations, however, becomes problematic and a point of concern when it is based on exploitative relationships as in the case of Begum Jan and Rabbo.

Thus, the readers’ accusation and the summon served to Chughtai, both used the umbrella term obscenity and avoided identifying it as same-sex relationships between all genders, although Urdu, the language of the story, has specific words for both male and female sex relationships (Asi1927; Saiyyid Ahmad 1917; Petievich 2002; Vanita 2002). Chughtai remembered all the details of what she saw, heard, and felt as a young girl in Begum Jan’s house and could recall these impressions even after more than two decades, and yet she refuses to name what she saw under the quilt. By not naming the desire which led Begum Jan to do what she did under the quilt, even the fearless Chughtai who at the time of writing this story was a married woman with a daughter and known as one who had torn herself away from the old-cultural norms turning women into submissiveness, camouflaging the trauma she experienced at Begum Jan’s house though memories of Begum Jan and her quilt, in her words remained imprinted on her memory “like a black smith’s brand” (Chughtai, 1994, 5). The adult Chughtai refrains, for some unexplained reasons, to describe what she saw when the quilt was lifted and concludes by declaring “I will never tell anyone, nor even if they give me a lakh of rupees” (Chughtai, 1994, 12). When encountered regarding this sentence by none other than Manto, her friend and short-story writer and who along with her was also charged with obscenity for his short-story *Bu* [Odour] (also spelt as Boo) by the Lahore court, Chughtai just quipped, “What is wrong with this sentence?” and abruptly ended the discussion, though, as Manto writes, he wanted to have a detailed discussion with her on *Lihaf*. What Manto’s sharp gaze, however, noticed was a kind of embarrassment that “overwhelms common, homely girls when they hear something unspeakable” (Asaduddin, 2001, 226). At the same time, the strongest defence for Ismat Chughtai comes from Manto who declared Ismat Chughtai’s short stories, including the *Lihaf*, “portray different facets of a women’s neat and transparent, purged of all artifice” and that all those who accuse her as “a bad woman and a witch ... should be made to stand before a cannon and shot through the head” (Asaduddin, 2001, 228).

This obvious vagueness or hesitancy, which sounds like a denial of stating the reality, has been a subject of much speculation among Chughtai readers and critics. As Gopal points out that *Lihaf* “makes no *explicit*³ reference either to sexual activity, indeed, to lesbian relationship,” however, there are in the story “some of the most suggestive and sensual representations of homoeroticism in modern Indian fiction” (Gopal, 1005, 65). Chughtai says that what she wrote was “based on authentic realities of life ... I wrote about a woman’s loneliness who had all the worldly comforts but who was deprived of her husband’s company. I wanted to portray her tensions and desperation” (quoted in Giri, 2018, 82). Probably, she knew well that identification of the activity by naming it would create a storm in society. However, at the same time, her critical sensibility as a writer who could sense the social ills corroding society combined with her feminine sensibility to reject and fight to liberate women from sexually repressive lives led her to expose the inner secrets that went unchecked by the male gaze.

Chughtai is known for her articulation of women’s lives, and their power to negotiate with challenges. Her writings, as she described them were ‘as photography rather than painting’ and her plots were taken ‘directly from real life with minimal changes’ (Asaduddin, 2012, xv). In a conversation, in Lahore during her trial for obscenity charges, commenting on her style of writing, Chughtai said, ‘perhaps my mind is not an artist’s brush like Abdur Rahman Chughtai’s but an ordinary camera that records reality as it is. The pen becomes helpless in my hand because my mind overwhelms it. Nothing can interfere with this traffic between the mind and the pen’ (Asaduddin, 2012, 30).

Indeed, in this unique process, “Ismat Chughtai was writing silences, recording the suppressed voices of women from different strata of society” comments Asaduddin summing up Chughtai’s contribution to the sparse representation of women in the written words (2012, xviii). This sparse representation, Srinivasan says is a product of the ‘social boundaries of women’s articulation’ which are sites of the embedded masculinity’ (Srinivasan, 2018, 102).

Discussion

Before moving further, it is pertinent to acknowledge that same-sex relationships or homosexuality are known to have existed in South Asia. There are several historic references of men and women, even royal men and courtiers, indulging in cloistered environments practising homosexuality (Lal, 2001, 59 Penrose 2006 Natif 2015). Paradoxically, the Persian language and poetry saw the metaphors of gay love between men as symbolic of the love

³ The emphasis in the original quote.

between a man and God, while the sexual connotations were largely ignored (Lal, 2001, 56). However, condemned as an act of sin, there were dire punishments including burning, stoning, or throwing one off a minaret for sodomy (Natif, 2015, 62). Islam and Hinduism, the two major religions in South Asia, however, detested homosexuality as the most sacrilegious act. Society at large continues to condemn it and ostracizes those who indulge in it.

Returning to the story of *The Quilt*, Chughtai's description of the Nawab's arrangement that he made for the young boys in his house – “He kept an open house for students—young, fair and slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him” (Chughtai, 1994, 5)— should be read in the context of this fear of punishment and social ostracization. As in Muslim societies, patronage of the education of the young is considered a meritorious act, therefore, this acted as a shield for the covert and clandestine desire of the Nawabs for pubescent boys. Chughtai goes a step ahead by describing the physical attributes of these boys, she also shows the privilege that the Nawab had because of his wealth, in selecting his boys, as one would do in buying an article of choice, for certain skin colour and physique. This tendency of selecting a particular type of sexual partner is confirmed by several scholarly studies' understandings of paedophilia in which the propagators would always have a certain preference (Stava 1984; Finkelhor and Araj, 1986; Hammer, 1954). In *The Quilt*, the Nawab was a paedophile who pried on young males, possibly teenagers. The age is not given but the description of the physique vividly suggests the age of the victims. Since the Nawab's job was to be their mental, physical, and spiritual groomer, one can imagine what lies and bigotry, he must have concocted to groom the victimized children for sex. The niche lies in exploring Chughtai's *The Quilt* for its sexual content rather than the plot, to reveal sexual frustrations and violence perpetrated upon women within the institution of marriage.

Analysis of the Story

Begum Jan is viewed as a material possession by the Nawab. Soon she “began to wilt with loneliness” as the Nawab had locked her up inside his mansion “with his other possessions” (Chughtai, 1994, 5). This context is relevant to contemporary lower-class Pakistani households, where the woman is brought into a house as a monetary exchange. This may have happened with Begum Jan as she had “poor parents” (Chughtai, 1994, 5). Her value is as much as the material objects in the house, rich in their construction but withering away. This also means that the Nawab had strategically planned to bring a woman into the house so that people will not question his morality. He has preserved his identity as a man, to buy a relationship by marrying a woman, so that he could continue his homosexual practices under the cover of his heterosexual moral relationship. This further adds to the idea that morality is defined by the male and female consummation of marriage in the Subcontinent, and anything outside of this setting will be condemned and trialled. Butler has further

extended this debate and explains it as a failure of heterosexual communion, where subjects start to experience “performative melancholia” when they are unable to fit into the gender roles assigned to them by society (Marshall, 2009, 318). Such feelings lead to different forms of exploitation including sexual violence. *The Quilt* talks about this adultery and sexual exploitation of those who forced by their circumstances succumbed to the overtures which they knew were not socially abhorred and morally codified as sinful. Sahana, drawing parallels between adultery committed by the Nawab and Begum Jan, comments that while the first one took place ‘brazenly in the open public forum’ showing a husband’s supremacy and controlling power, the other took place secretly in the darkness of night and under the folds of the quilt; both serve as the barrier between the two worlds – the men’s world and the women’s world – the open spaces and the guarded spaces (Sahana 2022).

Begum Jan, however, is saved by an unlikely saviour Rabbo, a female masseuse who massages Begum Jan’s body (Chughtai, 1994, 6). Begum, previously, in desperation, wanted to “throw her clothes in the oven” as she was done with life, however, “getting her body massaged” by Rabbo brought her back to life and revived her spirits (Chughtai, 1994, 7). This setting is similar to Deepa Mehta’s Bollywood film *Fire* (1996) in which Sarita and Radha are stuck with their loveless husbands, one husband prefers religious celibacy while the other is unfaithful (Badruddoja, 2008, 158). These two females rescue each other by intimately getting close to one another. Similarly, in an African tale *Unconfessed* (1996) two females meet in prison. The story Sila and Lys is the story where they do not find the same bonding elsewhere and fall in love with one another (Murray, 2012, 93). This multiplicity of meaning and intertextuality leads to an interesting analogy that love, with the feelings and sensations attached, is queer. It goes beyond gender, sexuality, and continents. These women could have chosen other men to save them but instead, they chose women to bond with sexually and emotionally, which points towards a queer understanding of love and desire.

As Begum Jan, desires her husband but cannot touch him due to his sexual differences, she begins to enjoy her time with Rabbo. As described by the protagonist, Rabbo rubs her body with a massaging oil that cannot be bought via magazine advertisements. Here a hint is made towards bodily fluids that help males and females to reach orgasm, the epitome of sexual satisfaction. Sexual imagery, in this short story, predates the sexual intellect of its time. Begum was “fair, tall and has smooth skin” (Chughtai, 1994, 7). Her physical features were symmetrical and poised, her black hair was always “bathed in oil” and she never had any hair strands which were out of place. The child protagonist then describes a particular feature of Begum that she “looked like a boy” (Chughtai, 1994, 7).

Pre-development psychology determines that pre-pubescent and pubescent children do not have any set ideals related to gender, they make the connections from their social experiences. While describing Begum Jan’s womanly characteristics, the child describes all

her “womanly features” like long hair and clothing which were “Hyderabadi kurtas or saris” (Chughtai, 1994, 8). Though her lips “smeared with red lipstick” made her look like a little boy, according to the child (Chughtai, 1994, 8). What the child is referring to, is an ambivalent correlation between physical features and sexuality. In the child’s schema, the preliminary understanding of gender and sexuality’s correlation has started to emerge (Murray, 2012, 93) She is relating feminine characteristics with a prepubescent male or boy, this means, in the beginning, children connect gender and sexuality arbitrarily until society starts to label them or they feel inclined to fit under a label.

Findings

As the story progresses, we find Begum Jan afflicted by “a perpetual itch” (Chughtai, 1994, 7). This itch has various sexual connotations. This itch could mean Begum Jan wants sexual gratification. It could also indicate that her desires were not being fulfilled. This means Begum Jan and Rabbo were moving away from transgressive cultural ideals of normative femininity and embracing “performative melancholia” (Distiller, 2005, 46). This also adds to the sexual desires shared between women of opposite social backgrounds and physical appearances. Begum Jan was fair, had smooth skin, her body was without any trace of scar or embellishment and had a fragrance due to all the oiling sessions she had. Rabbo on the other hand was her opposite, she was short, her skin was scarred due to smallpox, her body was bulky and she “had an inexpiable odor” (Chughtai, 1994, 7-8). While Begum Jan was the wife of a rich man, Rabbo was a poor widow. One was a master and the other a servant. Rabbo was not only socially inferior but her sexual appeal was lesser than that of Begum Jan.

When Rabbo had to depart to meet her son, Begum Jan was devastated. The son “who had enjoyed the riches of the Nawab and Begum had given him enough money to open a shop” (Chughtai, 1994, 8). But he had fled after spending the money. Rabbo, due to her parental bond with him, had to meet him. Begum Jan argued but saw Rabbo’s helplessness and let her go. Rabbo was certain of her sexual power over Begum, rather she was doing everything from monetary exchange to taking care of her family, fearing the lack of sexual gratification. Here Begum and Nawab’s distorted marriage without children, also adds to their inability to empathize with and treat children morally. After this instance, the child protagonist iterates a sinister chain of events that led her to fear “the elephant in the room” (Chughtai, 1994, 7). This symbol demystifies the sexual encounter between Rabbo and Begum witnessed by the child protagonist. Two sexually aroused women under a blanket are the elephant, according to her, as the animal is large and sometimes dangerous.

The string of events is eye-opening and gruesome but it holds the power to reveal the evils of a hidden side of human nature (Wessel, et.al., 2001, 411). The child narrator lacks the language to describe the exact degree of her trauma. When Rabbo did not return

on her said date, Begum felt withdrawn from her sexual pursuits. She tried to lure in the child by offering to buy her gifts and female dolls to play with, when the child said that she is not interested in dolls or sweets, begum offered to buy her a “*babua*”, a male doll (Chughtai, 1994, 10). In the description of the sexual molestation of the child, she tells a vivid series of events. Begum began to “touch her body” and “count her ribs”, which adds to the description of the child being forced to get nude (Chughtai, 1994, 10). Then “she pressed her body and her weight was overwhelming” as the child had lesser weight than the Begum (Chughtai, 1994, 10).

Begum Jan stopped when “she became limp” is the end of this traumatic scene (Chughtai, 1994, 10). Analyzing the sinister side of Begum’s sexual withdrawal, she molested her niece while the child lacked the language to describe the exact nature of the sexual assault inflicted on her. As Freud emphasizes, the horrors of child abuse are deadly and demeaning as the child suffers a traumatic incident for which they have no language or cognitive capability to understand (Angelides, 2004, 81). Their sexual awareness is limited at prepubescent and pubescent ages; thus, the child became quiet and ran away whenever Begum tried to talk to her. From this series of events, one can conclude that Begum did not question her husband’s immoral ways also because she was involved in similar activities.

Begum Jan started mimicking his immoral acts. Just like he molested young boys, she also tried to molest an underage girl. Her husband’s homosexuality drove her towards performative melancholia where she began to question her sexuality and wanted instant gratification. Instant gratification can drive people towards immoral ways of getting what they want as their desperation exceeds their ego: the line between right and wrong is blurred (Wilkinson, 2010, 24). Begum was acting on the deviancy principle where, instead of, questioning the behaviour of her husband, she began to do the same. She became a part of phallogocentric immorality which sees human beings as objects of desire to be used and discarded. She showed no signs of remorse when the child turned away from her and “ignored her” but remained concerned about her maid’s return (Chughtai, 1994, 11). Rabbo got jealous of the child in Begum’s company and she also played an active part in sexualizing the child. She did so by referring to the anatomy of the young girl and made a sickening remark that “raw mangoes are sour” (Chughtai, 1994, 12). Both the women had their sexual frustrations to satiate, and in the process of it, they had to let go of their boundaries of morality versus criminal behaviour and thus the boundary between moral/immoral, and pleasure/molestation was blurred.

After a lapse of forty-two years in 1983 since the writing of *The Quilt*, in an interview with *Manushi*, a women’s magazine, Chughtai, defending herself against obscenity charges, commented:

The obscenity law prohibited the use of four-letter words. *Lihaf* does not contain any such words. In those days the word “lesbianism” was not in use. I did not know exactly what it was. The story is a child’s description of something which she cannot fully understand, I knew no more at that time than the child knew (Quoted in Gopinath, 2005, 151).

Conclusion

The Nawab is Begum Jan’s husband only on paper. Though not said in words, however, one may surmise, this marriage was never consummated. He got married to cover his paedophilic secrets. Fear of dire consequences under the Sharia Law coupled with public shaming, he, therefore, used heterosexual marriage as a ploy. This fear is termed homonormative anxiety in Butlerian terms which often leads to countless attempts to “turn subjects” through “conversion therapy” (Andermahr, 2000, 11) Luckily for the Nawab, heterosexuality saved him. He became the spiritual, moral, and religious mentor of young boys, whom he sexually abused but the protagonist is unaware of the exact nature of his crimes as she was not allowed to enter the all-male area of the house due to strict gender-segregated spaces. The worst part of Nawab’s life is his sexual perversity rested in the fact that he gave in to his internalized homophobia and began destroying the lives of powerless children, instead of finding a homosexual partner of his age much like Vladimir’s Lolita, the fifteen-year-old girl, the narrator followed and idealized his sexual fantasies (Burgess, Hartman and Clements 1995). Though, in this case, Nawab entered into a marriage in which he did not intend consummate, and thus negated the rights of a wife; at the same time, he sexually assaulted and abused male children under his patronage. In both instances, he abused his power and position.

As for Begum Jan, his wife on paper, she got married to him to help minimize the poverty of her parents. Her value is that of material possession in a patriarchal household. To satiate her “itch” she falls for one of her servants Rabbo, who rouses her. Their desire for each other reveals that gender as a sexual transgression can change its course behind closed doors given the monetary reach of the people involved. As their communion progresses, both of them look out for each other and try to keep one another close. Begum does this by providing monetarily for Rabbo and her family while she does it by bathing her madam with oils every day. Here the definition of mistress, with its Victorian connotations, where a man has a sexual liaison outside of marriage is subverted. Here perhaps, the terms madam and mistress can be employed to describe the relationship between Begum and Rabbo (Bremner, 2003, 63). They have both bisexual and homosocial ties where they are each other’s companions and bedmates.

In the story, Begum Jan and her lover Rabbo are heterosexual women. Rabbo has children in a marital setting. Her poverty forces her to please Begum Jan. Begum Jan yearned for her husband, but could not do anything about it as he was gay. They explored this side of their sexuality behind closed doors instead of openly confessing their desires, mainly because of a fear of getting punished for their act of transgression, of having a sexual union outside of a heteronormative setting. Begum is the wife in a supposedly heterosexual marriage. However, the institution of marriage only adds more to her exploitation at the hands of her husband. Chughtai also shields the behind the closed doors indulgences least exposing them, as Asaduddin hints, would “jeopardize the safety of women like Begum Jan who, instead of peeking through the door cracks, started looking inwards into the space that was mapped out for her to derive pleasure from” (2012, xviii).

Thus, what is lacking in the literary, critical, and theoretical debate in a South Asian context where the position of females as individuals mapping their way across the gender positions is defined for them by society. Rather than seeing them as practitioners of deviant sexualities, they may be read as cases of oppression within the institution of marriage. Though they deviate from the norms of gender constructs that they are expected to perform, they are doing this because they are denied the right to fulfilling their desires. Marriage, thus, acts as a cover for the homoerotic practices by both the gender representations in this story, giving way to other perverted practices and forms of exploitation.

Chughtai filled the gap of information provided to us about the *Zenana* which is usually written by male authors. She showed us how women could not fulfil their basic innate desires. It implies that Begum Jan just took Rabbo as a lover because she was rejected by her husband. It illustrates the spirit of Chughtai, who herself is one of the most progressive authors of her time. Another morose point that needs to be considered is that the story is one of the few pieces which actively discuss and describe alternative sexual practices, but in this case, it fails to describe the individuals of the community as people with values. This is closely related to the following observations on paedophilia. Chughtai is skilled at weaving and binding horror and fear felt by victims of sexual harassment without describing it explicitly.

The narrator proved to be too young to understand why she was victimized, when Begum Jan, in desperation, at the cost of breaching the trust that her friend, left her daughter, the little girl, under her care, attempted to seduce her on the premise of giving her a massage. The narrator remembers how caught up in that situation, she even cursed her mother for leaving her under the care of that loathsome woman – Begum Jan. While Chughtai has been, and must be praised for her ability to bring up the topic of homosexuality, sexual exploitation, and sexual violence, one must reflect also at the need to bind both of them together. In the era of its publication, *The Quilt* might have been the first

time a reader was exposed to the double themes of homosexuality and paedophilia. Binding them together could influence the opinion of the majority of sexual minorities that have been oppressed and change a commonly held perspective that homosexual individuals must be paedophiles and sexual predators. If both of them were separated, this story would get more benefits from today's perspective. One element that must be praised is how Chughtai describes ignorance and social attitudes towards homosexuality in *The Quilt*. Apart from the many instructions and satire described by the chemistry and dialogue of Rabbo and Begum Jan, the narrator remains alien to the nature of their relationship. Some concessions can be given because of the young age of the protagonist, but readers may question the concealment by the adult author.

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