



Closeted Desires and Midlife Self-Discovery: Women, Heteronormativity, and Secret Intimacies in *Lihaaf* and *A Married Woman*

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Abstract: The study will analyse the ordeals of Indian women, particularly those with non-heterosexual love interests, examining their struggle and concealment against social orders that normalise heterosexuality. The argument focuses on how the same-sex interest is triggered after finding themselves in midlife boredom despite being in a heterosexual marriage. In doing so, the study endeavours to analyse the lives of such female characters from Ismat Chughtai's bold and controversial short fiction *Lihaaf* (1942) and Manju Kapoor's novel *A Married Woman*. The sexuality of three women, the Begum from "*Lihaaf*", Astha, and Pipeelika from *A Married Woman*, is primarily discussed to understand the nature of their struggle. A seminal feminist critic, Adrienne Rich, has famously criticised compulsory heterosexuality in her essay. Taking her theories as a lens, the challenges of such characters can be realised. The study will also explore how these women seek a secret space for themselves, trying to live away from judgmental eyes.

Keywords- Compulsory Heterosexuality, Homosexuality, LGBTQ, Ismat Chughtai, Manju Kapoor, Patriarchy

Introduction

Adrienne Rich, in her influential feminist essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", argues that heterosexuality is not a natural phenomenon; it is imposed on women through political, social, and economic institutions that are predominantly patriarchal. She uses the term "compulsory heterosexuality" to explain how the social system is constructed against women in such a way that they think heterosexuality is the only legitimate and natural sexual preference, and there is no other alternative. In her essay, she writes, "Heterosexuality has been both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women. Yet everywhere women have resisted it, often at the cost of physical torture, imprisonment, psychosurgery, social ostracism, and extreme poverty." (Rich 30). In such a reality forged by the patriarchal system, one born with non-heterosexual sexuality, such as LGBT persons, have to fight against the established system. The life of such non-heterosexual individuals is full of challenges. Apart from a constrained social reality, they fight within. The self-identification of their sexuality is not as straightforward as it seems. Therefore, identifying and managing it in a conservative social system of India becomes challenging. One of many literary representations of the lives of such people, particularly of a woman, is Ismat Chughtai's "*Lihaaf*" (The Quilt), which was



published in 1942. Ismat Chughtai (1911-1992) is one of the earliest writers in the South Asian literary canon to talk about female sexuality openly and to oppose rooted patriarchal norms through her works. The study will explore the realities of female characters in “Lihaaf” and Manju Kapoor’s novel *A Married Woman* (2002). These works represent the lives and challenges of non-heterosexual women. The study will argue that the same-sex desire of the female characters in the mentioned texts emerges as a product of compulsory heterosexual marriage during a midlife crisis. It also shows how these women seek a secret place of lovemaking due to the unbreakable constraints.

Heteronormativity, Compulsory Marriage, and Female Sexual Self-Discovery

Self-discovery of homosexuals is a prolonged exercise: A sea of contradictory feelings tussle with each other as the inner callings battle with the prevailing notion of heteronormativity. Overpowering the inner urges requires continuous, tiny experimentation and exploration, leading towards a forbidden world of social reality. Their attainment of strange results, as they don’t feel attracted to the other genders, makes it difficult to stand strong against the wind of the ideals of heterosexuality. The higher the inner callings sprout their heads, the more estranged one feels amidst the social narrative of ‘normal individuals’. This journey of self-identification is long for male homosexuals(gays) and even more arduous for female homosexuals(lesbians) due to their cursed fate of being doubly marginalised. The journey through anxiety, guilt, and frustration for an individual makes them farther from the rest of the world. It shapes their character differently with a blend of isolation, detachment, and a tormenting feeling of being different/strange.

The heteronormative world finds it hard to accept and acknowledge a different interest regarding the relationships of any individual. Patriarchal beliefs go hand in hand with the notion that normalises heterosexuality. As a result, all other sexual orientations are deemed unusual and seen from ‘queer’ perspectives. The male-male relationship also suffers at the hands of patriarchy and heteronormativity. Thus, the lesbian relationship becomes further tabooed against the wall of a patriarchal society that is protected by another layer of a giant wall, heteronormativity. The scenario further complicates the lives of lesbian individuals. And, looking at all these realities in the social fabric of India, makes the situation tighter and more depressing for such women. Hence, at the end of the identification of sexual orientation, they prefer not to identify themselves as “lesbians” completely but rather endeavour to pursue their love interests covered with a plating of heterosexuality. Apart from social conditioning, the process of self-identification of their sexuality in an extremely conservative social set-up puts Indian women in a situation where they grapple with the tension between their true identities and societal expectations.

The heteronormative structure of Indian society keeps most of the women with non-heterosexual feelings away from self-recognition of their queerness. Sometimes, self-identification requires a compulsive situation for the inner calling to raise its voice. Ismat Chughtai’s ‘The Quilt’ and Manju Kapoor’s ‘*A Married Woman*’ narrate stories of women who rediscover their true interests, not before being a part of compulsory heterosexual marriage. However, when the marriage becomes oppressive, they begin to explore their identities, ultimately discovering their true selves, including their romantic interests in other women.

Secret Intimacies in *Lihaaf* and *A Married Woman*

In ‘The Quilt’, a child narrator tells the story of Begum Jaan, who is cursed into a barren marriage with the wealthy Nawab Sahib. The Begum's beauty and youth are put aside by her husband, who turns out to be gay. This is implied in his strange involvement with young males, which the narrator describes: “He kept an open house for students- young, fair, slender-



waisted boys whose expenses were born by him” (Chughtai 14). The Begum tries all possible means to bring the Nawab close to her and address the bodily needs a wife expects from her husband, but all her efforts prove to be futile. Eventually, the desperate woman finds a solution in her maid, Rabbu. The naïve child narrator sees that it is the magical “massage” of Rabbu that quenches the thirst of her body. At first, the child can't understand what happens inside the quilt between Begum Jaan and Rabbu: “I woke up at night and was scared. It was pitch dark, and Begum Jaan’s quilt was shaking vigorously, as though an elephant was struggling inside” (Chughtai 17). Ismat Chughtai draws an invisible line between the secret world of the Begum and the usual world by letting a child narrator tell the story, who is inexperienced in the hidden matters of the visible world. The story concludes with the narrator’s discovery of the Begum’s love-making with Rabbu under the quilt, which is described as:

The quilt crept into my brain and began to grow larger. I stretched my leg nervously to the other side of the bed, groped for the switch and turned the light on. The elephant somersaulted inside the quilt, which deflated immediately. During the somersault, a corner of the quilt rose by almost a foot... (Chughtai 22)

Notably, Begum’s husband, the Nawab, is a homosexual who pursues his love interests in young students in the guise of sports, as implied in the narrative cited above, which reflects the social orders of the time and place regarding acceptance of male homosexuality. It is clear that, regardless of gender, one with a non-heterosexual sexual orientation has to remain disguised as heterosexual because the world will consider them as sociable and normal. That’s explain why the wealthy Nawab has to marry Begum despite not having a natural attraction towards women and why he secretively addresses his sexual needs with young students. The Nawab is one of the homosexual people with unconventional love interests and is a victim of heteronormativity.

For the Begum, the challenges double. Analysing the text closely, it can be concluded that the Begum is bisexual (one who is attracted sexually to both genders) in her sexual orientation. The actions of the Begum suggest so. Initially, the Begum is described as making various efforts to get the Nawab’s love for her, and later, after being lonely and helpless, she develops a homosexual relationship with Rabbu. She has to fight two battles at the same time, one against the heteronormative world and the other against her reality after marriage. And, in doing so, she creates a secret world under the quilt, which is more secretive than the disguised love pursuit of the Nawab. Interestingly, both the Nawab and his wife, with non-heterosexual temperament, are the victims of a society that sees such persons as abnormal. Understandably, the Begum's situation is more complex than the Nawab's. The latter is not a victim of the patriarchy, but for the Begum, concealing an unusual love affair is harder. Yet, they both travel in the same boat, waging a subtle fight against the heteronormative world and at the same time pursuing their love interest. To do so, they have to create a safe world secretly, like one inside the quilt of the Begum. In the article “The Invisible Work of Closeting: A Qualitative Study About Strategies Used by Lesbian and Gay Persons to Conceal Their Sexual Orientation”, Kirsti Malterud and Mari Bjorkman, after studying the lives of various gay and lesbian persons, find that these people tend to conceal their unusual relationship by employing different strategies such as lying, avoidance, and even getting along with the opposite gender with the mere idea that they will not come under scrutiny of a stigmatised society. Furthermore, the article reasons that persons with unusual sexual orientation conceal from the world outside because they fear social scrutiny, and more so to escape being adjudged as unusual. The article says, “The participants in the present study indicated that it is not always a question about



potential threats or danger, but may as well represent a wish to avoid standing out as different.” (Malterud and Bjorkman 18)

Self-realisation of one's romantic and sexual attraction is challenging for a non-heterosexual person because, breathing amidst a strongly patriarchal and heteronormative society, they often get confused regarding their true identity. In most cases in India, self-identification of one's queerness doesn't lead to the acceptance of sexual orientation being openly acknowledged before society. After getting to the point of self-discovery, women in India don't want to be termed as 'lesbians'. Contrary to the notion held by the progressive lesbian community, they are less likely to openly accept their sexual orientation and express it with a challenging spirit, going against the heteronormative waves; rather, they secretly deal with it owing to a system of rigid social orders. Most of the literary representations of love between women in the Indian setup approve of the dejection of open acceptance and narrate their choice of continuing love in a secret realm. In Ismat Chughtai's short story 'The Quilt', Begum Jaan makes love with Rabbu under the quilt, in a strictly confidential world. Chughtai brilliantly draws a separation between Begum's world and society through the symbolic presentation of the quilt. It serves as a carapace for her. In another classic love story between a pair of women in Manju Kapoor's novel *A Married Woman*, the creation of a hidden world for lovemaking can be seen. The novel follows the adulthood and womanhood of its protagonist, Astha, who is the only daughter of a father who is determined to provide her with higher education. Initially, her mother discovers her teenage infatuation with a boy named Bunt, which she deals with and puts an end to. Then, in college, Astha again falls in love with a teacher who doesn't want to marry her, after which her mother insists on settling her in an arranged marriage to a suitable boy, which they do, and Astha is married to Hemant, who has returned from America and is designated to be a settled man in society. Thus, her parents think him to be a perfect candidate for Astha. She gets married and, in a few years, gives birth to two kids. Soon she falls into the middle-aged boredom with a monotonous lifestyle with her husband. Despite getting caught in familial responsibilities, she diverts her mind to painting and social activities. One day, her already weak relationship with Hemant gets worse when she discovers a condom in his pocket that makes her suspect an extramarital affair. However, she meets the most interesting character of her life, Pipeelika, a young widow, during this period of emotional turbulence. With Pipeelika, she develops a love affair. At this point in the story, we witness two women who were married and had a heterosexual relationship, finding themselves lonely at a certain point in life, and discover a potentially different/unusual sexual orientation. After the death of Aizaz, Pipeelika has become lonely, and Astha serves as a perfect companion to her. They find solace in one another's arms, seek a secret place, and explore each other's bodies in great love and passion. With Pipeelika, Astha gets more emotional and bodily satisfaction than she does with her husband. In one of the occasions of lovemaking, the narrator says, "In between they talked, the talk of discovery and attraction, of the history of a three-month relationship, the teasing and pleasure of an intimacy that was complete and absolute, expressed through minds as much as bodies" (Kapoor).

Astha's discovery of her new sexual interest is a surprise and mystery to the reader as much as it is to herself. In a critical moment in her life, she finds a good friend in Pipeelika, but why is she sexually attracted to another woman? She hardly understands whatever is going through her life, but feels good about it and chooses to trust it and go for it. The narrator comments, "From time to time she brooded about her own sexual nature, but her desire for Pipee was so linked to the particular person that she failed to draw any general conclusions." (Kapoor). It is interesting to note that this sexual interest is not discovered until she reaches



middle age and meets Pipeelika. The same can be said of Pipeelika, who is addictively attracted to Astha in the second half of her life, being lonely after the death of her husband. The article, "The Unfolding of LGBT Lives: Key Events Associated With Health and Well-being in Later Life", studies the lives of many LGBT persons and investigates the discovery of their sexual identities at different age groups. It also attempts to identify the reasons that trigger the discovery of one's sexuality. The article notes, "...the "Midlife Bloomers," reported becoming aware of and first disclosing their LGBT identity in their mid-40s, with most (80.3%) having been in an opposite-sex marriage earlier in their lives. Approximately half of individuals in this cluster were currently partnered or married, and about three quarters had children; they had a relatively low likelihood of having experienced the death of a partner (12.9%)." (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 22). This reflects why Astha, Pipeelika, and Begum (as discussed earlier) find their true sexuality after a certain point in life, and after being put in a certain circumstance.

Negotiating Bisexual Desire and Midlife Sexual Identity

Women such as the Begum, Astha, and Pipeelika are not pure lesbians (persons with attraction to women only, not attracted to the opposite gender), but rather, they show bisexual tendencies. However, their situation is different from persons who are attracted to both genders from birth. They discover their potential to love the same gender at a later stage. The Begum is put in a helpless situation after marrying a homosexual, and as a product of a compulsive atmosphere, discovers herself. For Astha, it seems that it is her partner, Pipeelika, more than her circumstances, that triggers her self-discovery. She seems to have found what is lacking in her life and in her 'self' when she meets Pipee. Nonetheless, they both discover a missing part of themselves, not from birth but from circumstances. Likewise, Vijay Tendulkar's groundbreaking play, *A Friend's Story*, which largely contributes to the understanding of the psychology of homosexuals, witnesses Sumitra, the protagonist, building a private space of lovemaking in the room of her confidante, and tries hard to keep it intact and safe from others. Interestingly, Sumitra and Pipeelika, from the two stories, are projected as bold, aggressive, and progressive personalities. However, they choose to keep their strange love interest/sexual orientation under the carpet. This is partly a product of their awareness of the potential opposition of heteronormative social structure and partly because of the lack of cooperation and coherence within the queer community. The society presented in the discussed stories is regressive enough to not allow women who are homosexual to accept and declare their sexual orientation freely.

A study by Rashmi Patel on the lives of LGBT individuals titled *Being LGBT in India: Some home truths* confirms the misery of lesbians in India. "In urban India, where social media and corporate initiatives have created increasing awareness of LGBT rights, the scenario looks more upbeat for gay men than for transgender people or lesbian women." (Patel) For Indian women, identifying as lesbian would mean profound emotional challenges, especially within a heteronormative world. It impacts personal relationships, which presumably include even their husbands. The unintentional challenge brings inevitable problems, driving Indian women into a space of uncertainty, guilt, and fear. However, their intrinsic identities often surpass the anxieties, insecurities, and fears imposed by societal expectations, setting them up for a fight, direct or indirect, against traditional thought processes involving sexuality, love, affection, and gender specificity. Begum Jaan's situation from the classic story of Chughtai, 'The Quilt', describes the subtle conflict of a woman who becomes a lesbian after finding her husband a homosexual/gay. Her rebellion is as much against her helpless condition as it is against an oppressive traditional system. As discussed above, certain social and psychological factors limit Indian women like Begum from having a direct fight against existing social



behaviours. Moreover, the fear of getting caught as someone with unusual interests keeps them away from any kind of dialogue and open confrontation. The meaning of women like Begum Jaan's rebellion is an endeavour to answer their inner instinct after succeeding in overcoming inner conflict and having a clear understanding of their own sexuality/ Sexual orientation. The same can be said and felt more explicitly in Manju Kapoor's *A Married Woman*, with the emotional journey of Astha.

In the article, *International Perspective on Lesbian Psychology*, Hagai and Starr claim that bisexual women are more susceptible to mental disorders and anxiety than lesbians in some countries, and lesbians are more likely to develop mental imbalances than heterosexuals. This scenario is true to the socio-political reality of India, primarily because the psychological understanding of Indians is too conservative to allow non-heterosexuals to breathe in a hospitable environment. The life of Astha from *A Married Woman* can be studied thoroughly to understand the reason behind bisexual women being more depressed in a conservative society. Astha is a married woman with kids who falls in love with Pipeelika. She finds herself in a troubled psychological state due to uncertainty about her sexual orientation to a certain degree. Moreover, bisexuals find themselves caught in more social responsibility than lesbians, as the latter have more clarity about their love interests and are lonelier with fewer social responsibilities. However, it is understandable that heterosexuals have the best psychological balance compared to the other two.

Conclusion

To conclude, normalisation of heterosexuality has been a reality and serves as a serious threat to persons who don't absolutely belong to this enforced identity. The social system of India has not yet evolved to accept LG persons' love interests openly. Therefore, even male homosexuality, like the Nawab's, has to be put under a blanket, and he does so as discussed above. Moreover, things have to get tougher for female homosexuals/bisexuals against a system created by heteronormals and patriarchs. This forces them to operate their seemingly unusual love affair in a private place like Ismat Chughtai's metaphorical quilt. Heterosexual marriages and monotonous relationships with discussed women's husbands in middle age work well in finding their hidden same-sex love interest, as we see in Manju Kapoor's "A Married Woman" through the struggle of Astha and her eventual love affair with Pipeelika, another woman with a similar fate. Adrienne Rich's theoretical claims can be realised while studying the sexual reality of the Begum, Astha, and Pipeelika. However, there might be women with exception of possessing an open temperament, who can challenge the norms openly. Their lives need to be examined as well.

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