

## **Child Sexual Abuse in Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaff" (The Quilt)**

**C. Susila**

Research Scholar (FT)

Department of English

Bharathidasan University

Tiruchirappalli-620024

### **Abstract**

One of the most rampant threats in today's world is the safety of women and children. Violence has been carried out by the powerful over the weak in multiple forms such as harassment, molestation and rape. The short story "Lihaff" by Ismat Chughtai, though deals with the theme of female sexuality, this paper proposes to analyse the sexual abuse done to the child narrator by the neighbourhood woman Begum Jaan. The story presents how Begum Jan, who became lonely after marrying Nawab, is consoled by Raboo, her maid. When Raboo was absent, the child narrator is replaced functionally. Hence, the paper also explores the power hierarchies between the child narrator and Begum Jaan.

**Keywords-** Child Abuse, Agency, Victim, Radical feminism

### **Introduction**

Considered as one of the most courageous and outspoken voices in Urdu literature, Ismat Chughtai, in her writings, deals with concepts that are considered taboo in Muslim community. Ninth out of ten children in her family, from her childhood, she was rebellious as she was brought up in the midst of her brothers. Unlike her sisters, she did not want to learn the domestic things such as cooking, sewing, etc. She wanted to climb the trees. She did not withdraw from anything because she is a girl. She always wants to be equal to them in each and every way. Her sharp language and her anxiety to know everything persist her to be different in her family as well as in the society. She refuses to believe anything until it is proved to be true and authentic.

There's something in me that militates against putting faith in anyone uncritically, however great an individual he may be. I would first look for loopholes in his theory. One should examine all points of disagreements before coming to a consensus. I cannot believe in anything suddenly or take it at its face value. I think, the first word articulated by me after my birth was\_why? (Chughtai xvi)

She was influenced by the thoughts of Rhaseed Jahan, a leader and political revolutionary at that time. When she published her work 'Angarey', it caused an uproar as it was considered obscene. Ismat's themes revolve around middle class Muslim families and the prevailing female oppression in Muslim community.

"Lihaff" (The Quilt), short story by Ismat Chughtai was written in 1941. It was first published in the Urdu literary journal *Adab-i-Latif* in 1942. The story became controversial and a case was filed against her and was summoned to appear at the court of Lahore in 1944. She was asked to apologize but she refused to do that and finally won the case. A detailed account of the trial has been recorded in her memoir's (*A Life in Words: Memoir*) second chapter named "In Those Name of Married Woman." Through this story, Chughtai reiterates the need for women's active agency in their sexual desires and fulfillment of it. But in her time, she was branded as an obscene writer. Chughtai wrote in her *A Life in Words Memoir* as "Since then I have been branded an obscene writer. No one bothered about what I had written before and after 'Lihaff.' I was put down as a purveyor of sex. It is only in the last couple of years that the younger generation has recognized me that I am a realist and not an obscene writer" (39-40)

In retrospect, Chughtai has been hailed as a visionary a feminist writer challenging the patriarchal sexual dominance. From that being branded as obscene writer, Chughtai has been reimagined as a feminist writer. Nevertheless the passive participant of this particular story is the child and the experience of the child is one that of abuse, trauma and harassment. Hence this paper focuses on the point of view of the child who has been harassed.

Child sexual abuse can be defined as a kind of maltreatment on children in an informal way on the child by a known or unknown person. Surveys present that many children have been suffering from this problem. *The Encyclopedia of Child Abuse* defines child sexual abuse as "a form of maltreatment that refers to the involvement of a child in sexual activity with an adult that provides psychological, sexual and /or financial benefit to the perpetrator" (233). A recent survey has shown that 60 % of females and 35% of male children have been abused sexually in their childhood. Moreover, the harassment often happens by the familiar person of the child. The post- traumatic experiences are worse, and the children could neither tell anyone nor actively participate in anything. Surveys show that some children even try to commit suicide.

Child sexual abuse does not always refer to intercourse but usually includes sexual touch, the Encyclopedia refers. As the Encyclopedia defines, child abuse can be viewed as a power hierarchy. "Sexual abuse may also be committed by a person who under the age of 18 when that person is either significantly older than the victim or when the perpetrator is in a position to control over another child" (233).

As in her other writings, Chughtai has portrayed the power hierarchies in this story too consciously or unconsciously. The child narrator in this story is around ten years old and she is left by her mother during her visit to Agra at the care of Begum Jaan, her adopted sister. Begum Jaan is portrayed as an embodiment of beauty and she entered into the marital life with hopeful dreams. But when her hopes were shattered by her husband, Nawab, who never paid attention to her, she sought a kind of pleasure from another woman, Raboo, her maid. Though this was against nature, she never feels guilty and when Raboo is absent, she tried to replace the child narrator in place of Raboo functionally. This is the interplay of power among the following three.

Nawab      → Begum Jaan      → The Child Narrator

Begum Jaan, a victim in Nawab's hands, becomes a self-conscious agent in her life and made the child narrator as her victim. According to Begum Jaan, her will urges her to use the child for her pleasure. "Referring usually to human agency, the term 'agency' typically conveys the volitional, purposive, and the intentional aspects of human activity as opposed to its more constrained and determined behaviour". (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*) This concept of agency was interrelated to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Western thoughts particularly Enlightenment thinkers like Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant. The Enlightenment thinkers associated agency with freedom and, individual autonomy. In this story, Begum Jaan is the agent of her will and is very determined about her purpose.

The victim Begum Jaan longs for love and when she fails to obtain it from her husband, she became melancholic because her healthy desires have been thwarted and it was considered obscene for a woman to express her sexual desires. Bell Hooks also asserted the same view in her book *Feminism is for Everybody* where she tells that "Before feminist movement, before sexual liberation, most women found it difficult to assert healthy sexual agency.... and it has been made clear that the domain of sexual desire and sexual pleasure was always only by male, that only a female of little or no virtue would lay claim to sexual need or sexual hunger." (85) This has become 'a problem that has no name' and women cannot be an active agent in sexual pleasure.

The advent of Raboo, Begum Jaan's maid has changed the atmosphere in the house. The skin problem for Begum Jaan became heavy and the only remedy for that, Begum thought, was the scratching and massaging by Raboo's hands. She does not allow anybody to touch her except Raboo. The child narrator was confused at seeing this, thought that "Someone other than Begum Jaan receiving such a quantity of human touching, what would the consequences be? Speaking for myself, I can say that if someone touched me continuously like this, I would certainly rot." (3) As a child, she is unaware of the relationship between Begum Jaan and Raboo, and does not foresee that she would be the victim for Begum's desires.

The child loved Begum Jaan very much and when she was left at the care of Begum Jaan, the child is excited and wants to be beside her always. During nights, she finds unusual shapes of shadows under Begum's quilt and was scared thinking that might be a thief. When Raboo is absent, the pain for Begum was much and the child came to help her. But here, Begum Jaan as an elder woman than the child, uses her physical power to make the child a victim for her own happiness. The child, unable to do anything, does not understand the reason behind this but she wants to escape from that disgusting act.

Begum Jaan, once powerless at the hands of Nawab, becomes powerful both physically and mentally and she becomes the perpetrator and exploits the child. The helpless situation of the child is expressed by herself as follows: "I wanted to run away, but she held me closer. I struggled to get away. Begum Jaan started laughing," which echoes the post- humanistic critique of agency, where humans are motivated by their "will to power" to act that are self- interested, as proposed by Nietzsche and others. Hence, the will power of Begum Jaan operates her to make use of the child a victim.

The idea of getting new dresses for the child by Begum Jaan illustrates the hierarchical power with which the powerful people consoles and exploits the powerless. The powerful always overpower the weak and are not punished due to their power. Similarly, Begum Jaan, consoled the child to get new dresses and dolls after her exploitation over the child. The child was scared and sobbed for a long time as she was helpless. She had conflicting traumas in her mind. Became victim at the hands of Begum Jaan, she wants to go home. She could not express her pain and agony to anyone as she could not know that clearly.

Thus, Begum has played double role as a victim and the perpetrator and powerless and powerful as the story proceeds. Though Ismat Chughtai has been hailed as a feminist, in this story, she forgot to analyse the problems of the child narrator as a victim. But she has portrayed a verbal picture of power hierarchies that prevails in the society through "Lihaff" as in other stories. This paper, thus, concludes that how hegemony of the powerful operates over the powerless and how the child has become the victim of harassment.

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