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Obscenity, Perversity or A Woman's New Sense of Self: Treatment of Lesbianism in Chughtai's *The Quilt*

-Nivedita Maitra

Ismat Chughtai is one of the most outspoken writers of the twentieth century India. Driven to the court on charges of obscenity and perversity, Chughtai, in her short stories and novels, undauntedly initiated discussions on such issues which have remained heavily laden with conventionality and few have dared to challenge them.

The present paper analyses the short story 'Lihaaf' translated into English by Professor M. Asaduddin as 'The Quilt', a story which brought Chughtai to lime light. Chughtai's commitment to her art placed her among writers like Dr. Rashid Jahan, Rajender Singh Bedi, Saadat Hasan Manto who not only changed the trend of Urdu Literature but also shook the society off its complacency and made it more vibrant and rational. Known for her frankness and fearlessness Chughtai's stories particularly 'Lihaaf' dared to overturn the established social modes of thought and to a great extent give her woman the space she rightfully deserved. She presented the women's world not only from a woman's perspective but also discussed the issues which deeply affected women's lives and needed to be brought into public discussion. In her hands the rationale of homosexuality takes a more humanistic view as she shows the women the ways to regain their self esteem and re-establish their position in the game of power politics within their own private spheres and discover a new sense of self. The paper is an analysis of the women's world caught in the quagmire of traditions and common human desires- their struggles, their sufferings and their triumphs.

Born on 15th of August in 1915 into a well-to-do Muslim family of Badayun with just a little less than a dozen siblings, Ismat Chughtai's upbringing was unconventional. Being the ninth of the ten children of her parents, Chughtai hardly got to see her mother and was often left in the care of her elder sisters but their marriages left her erring for the mother's warmth which she almost never got. As she grew up most of her time was spent with her brothers, playing their games and fighting with them. In her memoirs she writes of a childhood incident where she madly ran after her brother who was riding a horse, crying for being allowed to ride it too. Her father happened to cross from there and seeing her crying bitterly asked the servant the reason. When told about her wish to ride the horse and her mother's strict orders of not allowing her to do so, as it was unbecoming of a girl, her father immediately overruled the imposed restriction and allowed her to ride the horse. She recounts that blissful moment, that first taste of freedom which she experienced that very step of her life she broke the conventions which were unwarranted bondages for her. She became the first Indian Muslim woman to graduate and attain a teacher's training certificate. She was appointed Principal of a Girl's college, and later in Bombay,