



Research Paper

Decoding Female Sexuality in Popular Culture: The Case of 'Lihaaf' (1942) and Ismat Chughtai

Kangkana Shivam

MA (Sociology), Jawaharlal Nehru University

ABSTRACT: A woman has always been socially constructed as an object of lust and desire. Not only she is deemed universally with a subordinate status of 'second sex' but also at times get symbolically associated with nature; perhaps for her inherent emotional stability and ability to reproduce and socialise children. This role-identity of a 'nurturer' often strategically ignores the 'sexual being' within her; more so often with rigid norms and prescribed behaviours. In this article an attempt will be made on to how female sexuality get repressed/constructed in public as well as private spheres over years yet at the same time are also popularly resisted by deconstructing those myths. One such bold voices was Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991) through her penning of 'Lihaaf', which quintessentially talked about sexual fluidity & bodily desires; perhaps an act of revolution itself in a pre- Independent India.

KEYWORDS: socially constructed, object of lust, role identity, female sexuality, sexual fluidity

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE SUBTLE ACT OF 'OBJECTIFICATION'

"Rano, who had brought up Mangla as her own son, giving him her breasts to suck when at the birth of her daughter the little boy too had insisted on being fed, is initially averse to the idea of this marriage... she dimly senses that in the impending violence Mangla will beat her like a husband and she will fight back like a wife, finally establishing a conjugal relationship... In the preceding encounter, her body has ceased to be an object of avoidance" (Kakar 1990: 9-10)

Fictional work, oral tales, narrations and other forms of popular culture are often the mirror of social realities which otherwise remains intentionally veiled. The cited work of Kakar (1990) too is a symbolic representation of a patriarchal society as well as a replica of an unbalanced power dynamic often 'normalised' through primary socialization. However the duality remains that although woman don't have a say and are viewed inferior but are held responsible for male sexuality, which is thought to be more aggressive and often uncontrollable (Khanna & Price 1994). Leela Dube (2001) in her symbolic depiction of sexuality through 'seed' and 'earth' emphasises on how the seed (semen of the male) has to be sown on the earth (sexual organs of a female) solely for procreation purpose even though it requires rigorous digging and ploughing upon the same. She "needs" to take the pain as a dutiful wife with no questions on pleasure. The words 'sex' and 'pleasure' are as tabooed in a cultural framework as a female's unpaid-housework-labour in an economic context; both often deemed 'invisible' and 'negligible'.

From a particular strand, the feminine grace are *idolised as an object of the privileged gaze* of the male patron and his friends (Berger 1972) but from another perspective they are categorised as a 'sex symbol'; *the reason for arousal & rape culture*. Women thus tend to function as insignia of the wealth, status, power and virility of the men who possess them and of the desires of those who would want to possess them and in due course they subtly and surely become *commodified* themselves (Uberoi 1990). No choice left, they had begun to get exchanged for a 'price'. And with the further advent of all- male supremacy, the 'other' gender sooner or later, slowly started getting 'ghettoised' even in public spaces although they already were in private domain. Prem Chowdhry (2014) writes:

"In rural North India, there are thriving and exclusive all male-spaces in the villages which play an important role in constructing gender identities... circulating ideals of gendered separateness, they make the presence of males and the absence of females seem natural. This masculinisation of spaces goes totally unacknowledged and unchallenged even by those most affected" (Chowdhry 2014:41)

II. LIHAAF: PROBLEMATIC MUCH?

In a pre- Independent India, the feminine identity ascribed with the attributes of *purity, timidity, humbleness, silence, soft-spoken*, etc. were desirable and placed at the topmost scale of hierarchical social orderings. In many genres of representation, however, women are not only visible: they are *prominent objects of attention- even of admiration and of worship-* and one can hardly complain of their *invisibility and neglect* (Uberoi 1990). In such a context, Ismat Chughtai's 'Lihaaf' (1942) grabbed a lot of attention and necessarily brought uproar among the middle class male gentry. No wonder, Chughtai herself got *slut- shammed and summoned* for the same.

With a societal presence of already institutionalised 'role performance' and 'gender stereotyping', can Lihaaf be considered as a *rebellious ploy* towards individualistic sexual freedom or a black hole in a tabooed society? Chughtai's un-conventional depiction through the character of 'Begum Jan' invoked a lot of extra attention solely because of the reader's curiosity of knowing what actually happens beneath the 'quilt'. She writes:

'In the middle of the night I woke up with a start. It was pitch dark. Begum Jan's quilt was shaking vigorously, as if an elephant was struggling beneath it' (Chughtai 1942, trans. 1994:8)

Was Begum Jan really exploring her sexuality/ agonising desires (with her masseuse Rabbo) out of 'choice' or was it lack of intimacy in her marriage with the Nawab that forced her into it? If it's the latter who will talk about the ignorance/ negligence/ frustration she received on behalf? Perhaps, it gets more evident through the lines *'Sleepless nights became a daily routine. Begum Jan slowly let go and consequently became a picture of melancholy and despair' (Chughtai 1942, trans. 1994:5-6)*. Further as the storyline proceeds it was stated citing Nawab Sahib *'After marrying Begum Jan, he deposited her in the house with all his other possessions and promptly forgot about her! The young delicate Begum began to wilt with loneliness' (ibid)*. The *objectification of women* in those genres where they are the prominent objects of attention is read as something problematic in itself, in particular as an indication that women have become objects or things to be appropriated, possessed and exchanged in the social relations of cooperation and competition among men (Uberoi 1990). In such masculine races, women are often 'bargained' and later taken for granted. Lihaaf's certain paragraphs too glimpses its readers the *suffocation and helplessness* of a young, radiant bride within the four walls of the panopticon (palace), although later Rabbo's entry into her life was quite a ray of hope/ excitement and what can get more beautiful than that? With such insidious back- drops can Lihaaf actually be tagged as 'problematic' or should the mind-sets need some serious re-considerations?

III. CONCLUSION

Female sexuality has often been regarded as a source of male power and female oppression (Khanna & Price 1994). The discourse on female sexuality has faced a lot of hardships, challenging the universal *"all-submissive"* persona wherein they were perceived always as the "receivers" across cultures. At the same time, the acceptable and 'natural' face of sexuality is represented by the adult, preferably married, able-bodied, heterosexual couple in which man and woman have different roles and modes of behaviour which are predetermined by their biological sex (Khanna & Price 1994). But Lihaaf being exception in its time dared talking on a rather *'distorted' version of homo-sexuality*; the form of sexuality that don't fit the norm (male homosexuality, lesbianism and assertive female sexuality) (ibid).

However, the real problem arises when societal forces pressurise an 'identity' (*accompanied by varied stigmas upon non-acceptance*) often in an urge to *control female sexualities*. And in retrospect many alternative narratives/ real- life experiences were bound to born. Amidst all the sexual tensions, the best part of these literatures remains they 'speak' for many, reflects upon the biases unapologetic. Lihaaf being just one of its kinds, there are many other hidden gems that need exposure; that would blatantly roar in pleasure yelling *'It is your hot blood that causes all the trouble'* (Chughtai 1942, trans. 1994:7) and nothing to be guilty or answerable for. Strategically in the post-colonial era, the notion of female sexuality came to be viewed as pleasurable yet dangerous with elements of desire and sexual satisfaction, intertwined with possibility of infection, sickness, risk and death (Gordon and Kanstrup 1992).

Whatever may be the globalised additions, Lihaaf through the lenses of Chughtai in a pre- Independent India is essentially a living example of how women have resisted and have struggled to redefine sexuality, *to exert control over their bodies and recognise their intrinsic strengths*, both individually and collectively (Khanna & Price 1994). Only when the prejudices/notions around sexuality gets deconstructed and the 'deviances' are normalised, the societal space will turn into a less problematic and more equitable abode for humankind.

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