

Chapter 23

Reading Ishmat Chughtai's “Lihaaf” From the Perspective of Alternative Sexuality

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ABSTRACT

*Gender binary is a concept that is deeply entrenched into the Indian way of thought throughout generations. Analyzing Indian life and relationships through history, we would arrive at an understanding that heterosexuality has come down to become the preferred sexual orientation, and heterosexual relations are seen as not only the traditional way of life, but at the same time is considered the only normative way. In the Indian context, the idea of sexuality has been framed over a period of eras, out of traditions and a belief structure of society that has come into contact with forces like modernization, colonization, and globalization. This chapter attempts to raise queries about the nature of sexuality in relation to portrayal of queer relationship and traces the individual's search for alternative sexuality in Ishmat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*, which is a pioneering work in representation of homosexuality. The chapter also deals with questions raised in relation to sexual orientation, gender crisis, and desired sex.*

INTRODUCTION

The discourses based on the assumption that gender is binary has been challenged by changing concepts of sex and gender with time that in turn has as its base the major theoretically established conception of sex as biological and gender as

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socially constructed. In Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, she calls performativity as 'doing gender' as it is the roles that are assigned by society that ultimately defines a gender. Beyond the binary gender order of male and female there has emerged further categories which have made way for sexual diversity studies or which is now commonly known as Queer studies or LGBTQIA studies which focuses on issues relating to the gender identity and sexual orientation of lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, intersex people and cultures. Queer studies as a field of study emerged in the 1990s and set about to challenge fixed notions of gender and defined identity categories. Queer theory hopes to destroy the binaries and in turn disrupt inequality and further differences.

"The institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged" (Berlant and Warner, 1998, p. 548) Looking at opposite-sex relationship as the only normative way entails the fact the heterosexuality is a hegemonic practice which seeks to keep other sexual preferences under its shadow by exerting both power and control over them. It would not be wrong to say that the Queer (non-heterosexual and non-cisgender) is positioned on the periphery of Indian society as they fall outside the approved territory of heteronormative binary pattern which in itself speak volumes about the homophobia that grasps Indian society at large. The heteronormative Indian society time and again attempt to brush the queer under the carpet by calling homosexuality a sin or crime or labelling it as a mental disorder that needs to be cured. While heterosexuality is presumed, for the Indian minds, to accept the fact that there is more to sexual relationships than that between a man and a woman is virtually impossible as homosexuality and homoeroticism is deemed abnormal and against the will of nature. Further reasons could be that belief system of Indian culture looks at marriage and conjugal relationships as necessary for reproduction and continuation of the family line so the kind of sexual relationships that would not lead to reproduction are thought of as unnatural. The existence of queer individuals is brushed under the carpet and people who are engaged in such activities are openly denounced or termed mentally unfit and in need of medical help. The entire concept of queer identity is considered a subject of taboo, something that genteel society finds hard to discuss in the open. Sexuality in itself is a loaded term and concept. From a long time, there has been apprehensions about labelling sexuality as natural or biological but seldom socially constructed and whether it could be influenced by a person's experiences or situations was debatable. Is sexuality something that is intrinsic of character or is subject to change in time and space and the circumstances that a person is in are certain questions that arise while having discussions on the topic.

In the year 1942, the Urdu writer Ishmat Chughtai was charged by the Lahore High Court for the portrayal of lesbian desire in her short story *Lihaaf*. To explain using

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