



Review paper

## Exploring the Zenana: Ismat Chughtai and the Vision of Feminist Utopia

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### ABSTRACT

The conventional interpretation of a zenana often symbolizes male dominance over women. However, Ismat Chughtai's work, particularly her story "Lihaaf," challenges this prevailing notion and offers a different perspective. Chughtai seeks to disrupt the association of a zenana with male control and aims to provide it with a transformed meaning. While conventional views perceive a zenana as a space designed to isolate women from the outside world, Chughtai, in "Lihaaf," employs it as a microcosm that represents her own reality. This paper aims to demonstrate how Chughtai subverts the gendered nature of this space and establishes a feminist utopia within it. It explores the notion that patriarchy's inherent disparities unintentionally create opportunities for agency and generate spaces for a feminist utopia to emerge.

### 1. Introduction

Literature serves a significant social function by acting as a reservoir of the prevailing culture and influencing our understanding of how to respond to or challenge cultural norms. It is a validated medium through which social change can be advocated and evaluated, often considered a form of intellectual activism. Unlike the aim of activists who strive to dismantle oppressive institutions of power, literature presents alternate realities through utopian and dystopian imaginaries that reflect human fears and aspirations. However, reality itself is subjective and shaped by cultural codes (Chughtai et al., 1972; Gopal, 2005).

Feminist utopian literature has frequently envisioned a culture without men, exploring what a world free from patriarchy might look like. However, the idea of completely eliminating men from society is not considered practical. In "Mothers of Mayadip," Suniti Namjoshi presents a vision of a society that functions as a parallel to the current social framework, where the dystopian undertone involves the slaughter of male children as a substitute for female infanticide. Ursula K. Le Guin's utopian world in "The Left Hand of Darkness" features gender-neutral inhabitants, embodying her concept of a new species with seasonal gender changes.



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## 2. Literature Review

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein's depiction of the zenana differed significantly from that of her contemporaries. In "Sultana's Dream," she envisions an ideal society where men and women coexist, but with a reversed power dynamic. Her desire is to confine men behind the zenana walls, stating, "Only catch them (men) and put them in the zenana." Her version of Utopia, called "Ladyland," seeks to dismantle power structures. To achieve equality and power, she presents an alternative, differently gendered version of the zenana, aiming to deconstruct men's egotistical superiority (Batra, 2010).

The zenana is typically seen as a symbol of male power over women, a regulated area utilised by males in positions of authority to isolate women. Women who were intelligent and successful were valued in the Mughal zenana, yet they were constrained and unable to fly and reach their full potential. Ismat Chughtai gives a different interpretation of the zenana in her short fiction "Lihaaf," challenging this widely held belief. She challenges the perception that the zenana represents male dominance and instead shows it as a miniature version of her own reality. By exposing the paradoxes in patriarchy, Chughtai paves the ground for a female utopia inside the zenana and gives agency a place in society (Patel, 2001).

The character Begum Jaan is portrayed as a beautiful woman with fair skin, black hair, and captivating eyes. However, her beauty is never acknowledged or validated by male recognition. She is married off to a Nawab, a Muslim nobleman, who confines her to a corner of his house with his other possessions, forgetting her existence. The text does not clarify whether their marriage was consummated or not (Rae, 2020). Deprived of patriarchal validation, Begum Jaan suffers from a lack of self-worth, rendering her vulnerable.

Superficially, Begum Jaan possesses everything a woman desires, but on a deeper level, she grapples with an identity crisis. Unable to win her husband's attention away from "slender-waisted boys," she experiences intense sexual despair. Her unfulfilled heterosexual desires eventually manifest in homosexuality and, over time, develop into predatory behavior. Her sexual orientation deviates from societal norms (Chughtai, 2014).

## 3. Current Perspectives and Way Forward

Throughout history, there has been a tendency to view the female body as raw material, akin to nature, while men, like culture, shape and mold them. This dominant perception asserts that women are meant to serve and obey men rather than rule or command them. This hegemonic belief often becomes the sole determinant of a woman's worth. When Begum Jaan experiences physical decline and indifference from her husband, she desperately seeks acceptance and struggles to connect with her own material body. However, she cannot find a sense of self either through her own desires or external stimuli. This vulnerability plants the seeds of homosexuality in her subconscious mind (Khanna, 2020).

In order to find sexual acceptance and break free from social boundaries, Begum Jaan engages in a homosexual relationship, primarily with her maid and later with a child who holds an inferior social position (Eagleton, 2003). Interestingly, Chughtai's reimagining of the zenana fails to destabilize the hierarchical patterns. Mobilizing her class power, Begum Jaan gratifies her libidinal desires and subverts normative heterosexuality, shaping her own sexual identity. Sexuality, in this context, becomes a tool for her empowerment. As she rebuilds her identity, her companion Rabbo faithfully guards her secrets. Begum Jaan's presence liberates her from the confines of the household, but in her attempt to rescue Begum Jaan from physical decline, her own body becomes fragmented (Priyadarshini, 2021; Indira, 2007).

According to the Qur'an, deep human relationships are built upon the foundation of sexual union, which aims to create lasting communities. According to Asma Barlas' feminist interpretation of the Qur'an, sex is neither stigmatised nor does the Qur'an discriminate against women based on sex or gender (Mookerjee-Leonard, 2017). Instead, it views sexual activity as natural and beneficial for both sexes within the constraints imposed by God (Butler, 1990). The Qur'an, in contrast to other monotheistic faiths, sees sex as pleasurable and healthy in and of itself, apart from its reproductive function. Love, which arises from sexual fulfillment, is emphasized. However, homosexuality is not viewed positively in the Qur'an as it does not contribute to reproduction (De Beauvoir, 1984; Firestone, 1970).

Michel Foucault, in his "History of Sexuality," discusses four strategic unities and sexual objects that emerge due to the development of power and knowledge mechanisms. The first two strategies involve the

medicalization of women's bodies and the educational control over children's sexuality (Hutt and James, 1993). The latter two strategies address the socialization of procreation and the psychiatrization of perverse pleasure. The female body is treated and normalized as a highly sexualized body that must be situated within the context of a family to maintain normalcy (Hossain, 2005). However, Chughtai's "Lihaaf" destabilizes this notion. The story revolves around the theme of female desires and does not place them within external contexts. Desire, in her stories, exists for its own sake and is presented as a necessity (Foucault, 1990; Handler, 1995a,b).

Children are described as "preliminary sexual beings," and adults must be cautious of their potentially dangerous sexuality (Jussawalla, 2000). However, in "Lihaaf," an adult attempts to seduce a child. It's important to note that the entire story is narrated from the perspective of a child narrator whose appearance resembles that of a male boy, indicating an awakening sexuality. Gayatri Gopinath argues that the repeated emphasis on "not knowing" can be interpreted as a strategy of disarticulation, allowing female homoerotic desire to elude a colonial legal apparatus that operates within the logic of categorization, visibility, and enumeration. This emphasis may serve as camouflage to conceal the narrator's own latent desires (Jain, 2011).

#### 4. Conclusion

It is indeed important to note that Chughtai does not directly depict the homosexual relationship in "Lihaaf." The details of what transpires between the two women under the quilt are left to the reader's interpretation. Chughtai provides subtle indications through the shadows cast on the wall, symbolized by an elephant. Some critics view these elements as extensions of the child narrator's imagination.

Begum Jaan's zenana becomes a space where desires find expression, representing a form of empowerment within a feudal system. She does not challenge the moral codes of the patriarchal society by involving other men. Instead, she manipulates and exploits a child to find her own sanity and sustenance. In doing so, she does not break free from the shackles of patriarchy but rather replicates the colonial structure of patriarchal agencies for her own benefit. Consequently, Chughtai's reimagining of the zenana's four walls cannot be considered a true feminist utopia. It remains a sanctum sanctorum where the phallic order may change, but the colonial power dynamics persist.

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