

## **The Child's Eyes in "The Quilt": Seeing and Hiding Queer Love**

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### **Abstract**

Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" (1942) is a bold story about a hidden love between Begum Jaan, a lonely wife, and her maid Rabbu, seen through a young girl's eyes. This paper looks at how the girl's simple words hide and show their queer love in 1940s India, where such love was not allowed. The girl says things like "elephant under the quilt," thinking it's scary, which keeps the love secret from people who might get mad. But her curious looks, like seeing shadows or hearing whispers, tell readers the truth about their love. The paper uses easy ideas from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick about keeping queer love hidden and Gérard Genette about telling a story through one person's eyes. The quilt, shadows, and dark room make the love feel big and mysterious to the girl. Her liking Begum Jaan at first but feeling scared later shows how queer love seems nice but strange to her. The girl's view fights the idea that only men and women should love, showing women can love each other. This makes "The Quilt" a special story in South Asian writing. The paper shows how Chughtai uses the girl's eyes to talk about love safely.

**Keywords:** Young Girl, Hidden Love, Quilt Symbol, Ismat Chughtai, Women's Love

### **Introduction**

Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" ("Lihaaf" in Urdu) is a brave story published in 1942 in the Urdu journal *Adab-i-Latif*. It was later part of the collection *Choten* and translated into English by M. Asaduddin in *The Quilt and Other Stories* (Kali for Women, 1996). The story shows a lesbian relationship between Begum Jaan, a lonely wife, and her maid Rabbu, told through a young girl's innocent eyes. In 1944, Chughtai faced a court case for obscenity because the story talked about women's hidden desires, which shocked 1940s India. Society didn't accept it due to laws against same-sex love and because women's desires, especially by a woman writer,

were taboo. Chughtai boldly showed female desire as natural, challenging the idea that women only serve men. Over time, readers loved “The Quilt” for its smart storytelling, especially after India allowed same-sex love in 2018. The story is special because it uses a child’s voice and symbols like the quilt to hide and show queer love, keeping it safe but powerful.

This paper looks at how the young girl’s eyes hide and show Begum Jaan and Rabbu’s lesbian love. It studies how her words, like “elephant under the quilt,” keep the love secret but reveal it to readers. It uses simple queer and storytelling ideas to show Chughtai’s clever way of talking about forbidden love.

### **Story Outline**

“The Quilt” is told by a young girl who stays with her aunt, Begum Jaan, while her mother is away. Begum Jaan is beautiful but very sad because her husband, the Nawab, ignores her. He spends his time with young boys, inviting them for talks and meals, leaving Begum Jaan alone in their big, quiet house. She feels trapped and unloved, like she’s fading away. At first, Begum Jaan tries to forget her loneliness by reading books, sewing clothes, praying a lot, arranging flowers, and cleaning her room. But these don’t help; her beauty fades, and she looks weak and tired, like a flower wilting. Everything changes when Rabbu, a strong, dark-skinned maid, comes to live with her. Rabbu gives Begum Jaan long massages, rubbing her back and legs, and the girl sees them always together, like best friends. Begum Jaan smiles again, her beauty returning, making her look happy and alive. At night, the girl sleeps in Begum Jaan’s room and sees the quilt on the bed moving strangely, “like an elephant was wriggling inside.” She feels scared and confused but doesn’t understand it. When Rabbu leaves for a few days, Begum Jaan gets upset and restless, like she’s lost her joy. She asks the girl to massage her, saying, “Come here, child, rub my back,” but the touch feels wrong, and the girl cries and runs away. The girl’s curiosity grows, and one night, she lifts the quilt’s edge and shines a flashlight under it. She screams, saying, “What I saw when the quilt was lifted, I will never tell anyone,” but the story doesn’t say what she saw. After this, the girl wants to go back to her brothers and sisters, where life feels simple and safe, even if they fight.

### **Analysis: The Child’s Eyes Hiding and Showing Queer Love**

This section looks at how the young girl telling “The Quilt” hides and shows the lesbian love between Begum Jaan and Rabbu. Her innocent eyes keep the love secret to stay safe but show it to readers through her words, feelings, and symbols like the quilt and shadows. New ideas explore how the child’s view exposes unfair rules, her senses make the love feel real, gaps in her story spark imagination, and her grown-up memory adds depth.

### **Hiding Love with Innocent Eyes**

The girl is young and doesn't understand grown-up love, so her words keep the story safe. In 1940s India, lesbian love was against the law, and talking about it could get Chughtai in trouble. She uses the child to tell the story without saying too much. For example, the girl sees the quilt moving at night and says, "It was as if an elephant was wriggling inside." She thinks it's scary, like a monster, but doesn't know it's Begum Jaan and Rabbu being close. This hides the love from people who might get angry, like a secret in a "closet," an idea from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick says queer love is often hidden to stay safe, and the child's confusion does this (Sedgwick, 1990). The girl says, "I could never understand it," showing she doesn't know the love is romantic, keeping it secret. Her innocent voice makes the story seem like a simple memory, not a fight against society's rules.

### **Showing Love with Curious Eyes**

Even though the girl is young, her words let readers see Begum Jaan and Rabbu's love. She notices small things that show their closeness. For example, she says, "Rabbu would rub her back for hours" and "Begum Jaan looked so happy." These details show a special bond, even if the girl doesn't understand. She also sees them at night, saying, "The quilt moved and made shadows on the wall." The moving quilt and shadows tell readers about their love, even if the girl thinks it's an elephant. This is called "focalization," an idea by Gérard Genette, where the story comes through one person's eyes (Genette, 1980). The girl's eyes show both her not knowing and the truth, making the queer love clear. Her curiosity leads her to shine a flashlight under the quilt, and she screams, saying, "What I saw when the quilt was lifted, I will never tell anyone." This shows she saw something big—likely their love—making it real for readers.

### **The Quilt as a Living Symbol**

The girl's view makes the quilt seem alive, like it holds Begum Jaan and Rabbu's secret love. She calls it an "elephant wriggling inside" and hears it "giggling" at night. To her, the quilt is like a creature hiding something scary but exciting. This makes the queer love feel big and alive, even if she doesn't get it. The quilt hides their love from the world but shows it to readers through the girl's imagination. It's also a safe place for Begum Jaan, where she can be happy with Rabbu, away from the Nawab's coldness. The girl's idea of an elephant makes the love seem mysterious and strong, like a secret that wants to come out.

### **Shadows, Whispers, and Darkness**

The girl sees "shadows on the wall" when the quilt moves, like a symbol of hidden love. The shadows are big but blurry, showing the love is there but hard for her to see

clearly. She also hears Begum Jaan and Rabbu talking in “low voices,” like they’re sharing secrets. These whispers make the girl feel left out, but they tell readers about the private love. The dark room where the quilt moves feels scary to the girl, like a place full of secrets. These symbols-shadows, whispers, darkness-show how the girl is close to the truth but doesn’t fully understand, making the queer love both hidden and clear.

### **Exposing Unfair Rules**

The girl’s simple view shows how society’s rules are unfair. She sees the Nawab spending time with young boys, always with them, and no one stops him. But Begum Jaan’s love with Rabbu must hide under the quilt. The child doesn’t judge, but her noticing this difference shows the Nawab can have his desires openly, while Begum Jaan cannot. This unfairness, or double standard, makes the queer love seem even more special because it fights against society’s rules. The girl’s innocent eyes make this clear without her knowing, showing how Chughtai uses her to point out what’s wrong in the world around her (Patel, 2004).

### **The Child’s Senses Make Love Real**

The girl’s senses, like touch and sound, make the queer love feel strong to her and readers. When Begum Jaan asks her to massage her, saying, “Come here, child, rub my back,” the touch feels “wrong” to the girl, and she cries. This touch makes Begum Jaan’s loneliness real but scares the girl, showing how close she is to the grown-up love. She also hears the quilt’s “giggling” and “rustling” sounds at night, which keep her awake, like a strange song. These sounds make the love seem alive and close, even if she thinks it’s a monster. Her senses pull readers into the story, making the queer love feel like something you can hear and touch, not just see (Vanita, 2004).

### **Gaps That Spark Imagination**

The girl’s story has gaps that make readers think about the queer love. When she shines the flashlight and screams, she says, “What I saw when the quilt was lifted, I will never tell anyone.” She doesn’t tell us what she saw, leaving a big gap. Sedgwick calls this an “open secret,” where everyone knows but doesn’t say (Sedgwick, 1990). Readers imagine Begum Jaan and Rabbu’s love, making it more powerful because it’s not said out loud. The girl’s silence invites us to see the love ourselves, like we’re lifting the quilt too. This gap makes the story strong because it lets readers join the child in discovering the secret (Gopinath, 2005).

### **The Child’s Grown-Up Memory**

The girl tells the story as a grown-up looking back, which adds more to the queer love. Genette says stories can mix past and present times (Genette, 1980). The girl says, “Even now when I think of it, I tremble,” showing she still feels scared but

knows more now. Her grown-up voice keeps the love hidden by not explaining it fully, but her child's eyes from the past show it clearly through things like the quilt and shadows. This mix of young and old makes the story deeper, as the adult knows it's love but lets the child's simple words tell it. This makes Chughtai's storytelling even smarter, showing the queer love through two times at once.

### **The Child's Admiration, Fear, and Loss**

The girl loves Begum Jaan's beauty at first, saying, "She was so beautiful." Her awe shows she sees her aunt as special, but this changes when she sees the quilt moving or feels Begum Jaan's touch. When Rabbu is away, Begum Jaan asks, "Come here, child, rub my back," but the girl feels it's wrong and says, "I started crying and ran away." This shows Begum Jaan's loneliness but scares the girl, who doesn't like grown-up touch. The girl's happy moments, like when Begum Jaan tickles her and laughs, make the love seem normal at first. But her fear grows, and the quilt's noises keep her awake, like a bad dream. When she sees under the quilt, her scream shows she's lost her simple view of Begum Jaan. She says, "I wanted to run away... to my brothers who fought but were simple," showing she wants a safe, familiar world because the queer love feels too big and scary.

### **Why the Child's View Matters**

The child's mix of not knowing, noticing things, and feeling scared lets Chughtai talk about lesbian love in a smart way. Her innocent voice makes the story seem like a memory, not a fight against society. Her words, like "elephant," "shadows," and "giggling," show the love clearly. Her admiration, fear, and feeling left out show how queer love is beautiful but scary in a world that doesn't accept it. The child's view shows the Nawab can have his desires, but Begum Jaan's love is hidden, which isn't fair. This challenges the idea that only men and women should love each other, showing women can love women too.

### **Conclusion**

"The Quilt" by Ismat Chughtai uses a young girl's eyes to hide and show the queer love between Begum Jaan and Rabbu. The child's simple words, like "elephant under the quilt," keep the love secret to stay safe in 1940s India, where such love was not allowed. But her curious looks at things like massages, shadows, whispers, and the dark room show readers the truth. Her senses and silence make the love feel real and strong, pulling readers into the secret. Her grown-up memory adds depth, mixing young confusion with adult understanding. This makes the story a bold challenge to society's rules that only allow love between men and women. The girl's fear, when she cries during the massage or screams under the quilt, shows how queer love seemed scary then. Her wish to go home to her simple brothers and sisters shows she

lost her innocent view of Begum Jaan's world, making the story sad but powerful. Chughtai's smart storytelling makes "The Quilt" a key story in South Asian queer writing, like works by Saadat Hasan Manto or Intizar Husain that use simple voices to show big truths. It shows how one small voice can fight big rules and give hope for a world that accepts all love.

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