

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

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Abstract:

Introduction:

Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" ("Lihaaf" in Urdu) is a bold story published in 1942 in the Urdu journal *Adab-i-Latif*. It was later included in the collection *Choten* and translated into English by M. Asaduddin in *The Quilt and Other Stories* (Kali for Women, 1996). The story depicts a lesbian relationship between Begum Jaan, a lonely wife, and her maid Rabbu, narrated through the innocent eyes of a young girl. In 1944, Chughtai faced an obscenity trial because the story addressed women's hidden desires, which shocked 1940s India. Society rejected it due to laws against same-sex love and the taboo of women's desires, especially when expressed by a female writer. Chughtai boldly portrayed female desire as natural, challenging the notion that women exist solely to serve men. Over time, readers embraced "The Quilt" for its clever storytelling, particularly after India decriminalized same-sex love in 2018. The story is remarkable for using a child's voice and symbols like the quilt to conceal and reveal queer love, keeping it safe yet powerful.

This paper examines how the young girl's perspective conceals and reveals Begum Jaan and Rabbu's lesbian love. It analyzes how her descriptions, such as "elephant under the quilt," obscure the love while making it evident to readers. It employs basic queer theory and narrative techniques to highlight Chughtai's ingenious approach to addressing forbidden love.

Story Outline

"The Quilt" is narrated by a young girl who stays with her aunt, Begum Jaan, while her mother is away. Begum Jaan is beautiful but deeply unhappy because her husband, the Nawab, neglects her. He spends his time with young boys, inviting them for conversations and meals, leaving Begum Jaan isolated in their large, quiet house. She feels trapped and unloved, as if she is fading away. Initially, Begum Jaan tries to cope with her loneliness and desires by reading books, sewing clothes, praying frequently, arranging flowers, and cleaning her room. However, these activities fail to alleviate her despair; her beauty fades, and she appears weak and tired, like a wilting flower. Everything changes when Rabbu, a strong, dark-skinned maid, enters her life. Rabbu provides long massages, rubbing Begum Jaan's back and legs, and the

girl observes their constant companionship, like best friends. Begum Jaan begins to smile again, her beauty returning, making her appear happy and vibrant. At night, the girl sleeps in Begum Jaan's room and notices the quilt on the bed moving strangely, "like an elephant was wriggling inside." She feels scared and confused but does not understand what she sees. When Rabbu leaves for a few days, Begum Jaan becomes distressed and restless, as if she has lost her joy. She asks the girl to massage her, saying, "Come here, child, rub my back," but the touch feels uncomfortable, and the girl cries and runs away. The girl's curiosity intensifies, and one night, she lifts the quilt's edge and shines a flashlight underneath. She screams, declaring, "What I saw when the quilt was lifted, I will never tell anyone," but the story does not reveal what she saw. After this, the girl longs to return to her brothers and sisters, where life feels simple and safe, even if they fight.

Analysis

Hiding Love with Innocent Eyes

The girl's youth and lack of understanding of adult love allow her narrative to keep the story safe. In 1940s India, lesbian love was illegal, and openly discussing it could have led to legal repercussions for Chughtai. She uses the child's perspective to describe events without revealing too much. For instance, the girl observes the quilt moving at night and describes it as, "It was as if an elephant was wriggling inside." She perceives it as frightening, like a monster, unaware that it signifies Begum Jaan and Rabbu's intimacy. This conceals the love from those who might react with hostility, akin to a secret kept in a "closet," a concept from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick argues that queer love is often hidden for safety, and the child's confusion achieves this. The girl states, "I could never understand it," indicating her lack of awareness that the love is romantic, thus keeping it discreet. Her innocent voice frames the story as a simple childhood memory, not a challenge to societal norms.

Showing Love with Curious Eyes

Despite her youth, the girl's observations allow readers to perceive Begum Jaan and Rabbu's love. She notices subtle details that reveal their closeness. For example, she remarks, "Rabbu would rub her back for hours" and "Begum Jaan looked so happy." These observations suggest a profound bond, even if the girl does not comprehend its nature. She also notices nighttime activities, stating, "The quilt moved and made shadows on the wall." The moving quilt and shadows convey the presence of their love to readers, even as the girl interprets it as an elephant. This technique aligns with Gérard Genette's concept of "focalization," where the narrative is filtered through a character's perspective. The girl's viewpoint simultaneously reflects her ignorance and reveals the truth, making the queer love evident. Her curiosity culminates when she shines a flashlight under the quilt, and her scream, coupled with her statement, "What I saw when the quilt was lifted, I will never tell anyone," suggests she witnessed their intimacy, rendering it tangible for readers.

The Quilt as a Living Symbol

The girl's perspective imbues the quilt with a sense of vitality, as if it harbors Begum Jaan and Rabbu's secret love. She describes it as an "elephant wriggling

inside” and hears it “giggling” at night. To her, the quilt seems like a creature concealing something both frightening and intriguing. This portrayal makes the queer love feel significant and dynamic, even if the girl does not grasp its nature. The quilt shields their love from the world while revealing it to readers through the girl’s imagination. It also serves as a safe haven for Begum Jaan, where she can find happiness with Rabbu, away from the Nawab’s indifference. The girl’s imagery of an elephant renders the love mysterious and potent, like a secret yearning to be unveiled.

Shadows, Whispers, and Darkness

The girl observes “shadows on the wall” when the quilt moves, symbolizing hidden love. The shadows are large but indistinct, indicating that the love is present but difficult for her to discern clearly. She also hears Begum Jaan and Rabbu conversing in “low voices,” as if sharing secrets. These whispers make the girl feel excluded, but they signal to readers the private nature of their love. The darkened room where the quilt moves feels eerie to the girl, like a realm of secrets. These symbols—shadows, whispers, and darkness—illustrate how the girl is proximate to the truth yet does not fully comprehend it, rendering the queer love both concealed and apparent.

The Child’s Admiration, Fear, and Loss

Initially, the girl admires Begum Jaan’s beauty, stating, “She was so beautiful.” Her awe reflects her view of her aunt as exceptional, but this shifts when she witnesses the quilt moving or experiences Begum Jaan’s touch. When Rabbu is absent, Begum Jaan requests, “Come here, child, rub my back,” but the girl finds the touch unsettling and says, “I started crying and ran away.” This reveals Begum Jaan’s loneliness but frightens the girl, who is uncomfortable with adult physicality. The girl’s joyful moments, such as when Begum Jaan tickles her and laughs, initially normalize the love. However, her fear intensifies, and the quilt’s noises keep her awake, like a nightmare. When she peers under the quilt, her scream indicates a loss of her innocent perception of Begum Jaan. She expresses, “I wanted to run away... to my brothers who fought but were simple,” indicating a desire for a familiar, safe world, as the queer love feels overwhelming and frightening.

Why the Child’s View Matters

The child’s blend of ignorance, observation, and fear enables Chughtai to address lesbian love ingeniously. Her innocent voice presents the story as a childhood recollection, not a societal confrontation. Her descriptions, such as “elephant,” “shadows,” and “giggling,” vividly convey the love. Her admiration, fear, and sense of exclusion highlight the beauty and terror of queer love in an unaccepting society. The child’s perspective reveals the disparity that the Nawab can pursue his desires openly, while Begum Jaan’s love must remain hidden, underscoring societal inequity. This challenges the notion that love should only exist between men and women, affirming that women can love women too.

Conclusion

Ismat Chughtai’s “The Quilt” employs a young girl’s perspective to conceal and reveal the lesbian love between Begum Jaan and Rabbu. The child’s innocent

descriptions, such as “elephant under the quilt,” safeguard the love in an era when such relationships were illegal. Yet, her curious observations, like Rabbu’s massages, shadows, and whispers, unveil the truth to readers. This approach makes the story a potent challenge to societal norms that restrict love to heterosexual relationships. The girl’s fear, evident when she cries during the massage or screams upon looking under the quilt, reflects the apprehension surrounding queer love in 1940s India. Her longing to return to her simple siblings signifies the loss of her innocent view of Begum Jaan’s world. Chughtai’s skillful storytelling addresses forbidden love discreetly, establishing “The Quilt” as a significant work in South Asian queer literature. The child’s eyes demonstrate that love can be free, even when society seeks to suppress it.

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