

WOMEN AGAINST SOCIO-CULTURAL PATRIARCHY AS PRESENTED IN 'LIHAAF' AND 'THAT LONG SILENCE'

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Abstract

Over the decades, the concept of Feminism has amassed debate, disagreements and after a lot of failed attempts came to establish for itself a rigid identity. The voices of women remained unheard until recent times. The society is accustomed to seeing things one way and thus they strategically camouflage identities as per their convenience. The patriarchy has throughout propagated that women should submit themselves to men and depend on them. But bold women writers such as Ismat Chughtai and Shashi Deshpande are mouthpieces to the assigned role and first choice (or the only choice) of women. In their stories Lihaaf and That Long Silence respectively the writers have tried to direct towards the pivotal components of life i.e. the society and the self.

Society's pressure hasn't allowed women to be treated at par with many in any sphere of human activity. Society's hostility towards women also leads to the perpetual practice of subordinating the self in both cases. Thus, in pleasing the society the latter effect comes as trespassing the social periphery. The protagonists of both these stories have been presented as victims struggling against social taboos and attempting to assert their identity and individuality. Both the protagonists are victims of ignorance and non-fulfilment at the hands of their husbands, but what stands different is the way in which they resort to these setbacks.

This paper is an attempt to present how the women protagonists annihilate the societal norms and the language used by writers plays an important part in displaying the struggles of one gender. Also, this study is an attempt to see how these women address the concept of the self in terms of wives who glorify their identity despite of living in a conventional patriarchal society. The study questions the society that plays a crucial role in oppressing women by denying them their fundamental rights.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, Feminism, Ignorance, Non-Fulfilment, Patriarchy, Silence, Identity, Individuality.

In Indian literature, feminist writings are often concerned with the plight of women in male-dominated societies generally, and families in particular. Harmony in the family must be established before social harmony can be established. It is imperative that gender-based discrimination against women ends. No gender is superior in this world. Achieving gender development relies on gender equity, justice, and equality in order to have peace, harmony, and love in the family.

Ismat Chughtai and Shashi Deshpande employ a nuanced literary craft to unravel the systemic subjugation of women within patriarchal frameworks. Their narratives do more than simply document oppression; they function as powerful sites of resistance where the silenced voices of women find articulation. Both writers foreground the idea that a woman is not merely an adjunct to male authority but a subject in her own right, possessing the undeniable claim to selfhood, autonomy, and agency. By emphasizing the right of women to live with dignity, cultivate their talents, make independent choices, and assume control over the trajectory of their lives, their works challenge the deeply embedded socio-cultural practices that seek to confine female identity. Within an ecofeminist lens, these stories may also be read as an attempt to reclaim the interconnectedness between the feminine self and the natural world—both historically marginalized, controlled, and commodified by patriarchal systems. Thus, Chughtai and Deshpande not only expose gendered injustices but also offer a radical vision of liberation where women reassert their voices, identities, and destinies against the hegemonic currents of patriarchy. *Lihaaf* by Ismat Chughtai and Deshpande's *That Long Silence* both the narratives are reflection of the pathetic conditions of women in the dogmatic social milieu, i.e., family. From the seemingly ordinary act of teaching a girl that cooking skills are essential to expecting her to serve even a simple glass of water to a boy, the pervasive bias of society is evident. Social structures remain rigid and unyielding, refusing to alter their rules or expectations for the girl child. The phallogocentric order deliberately sustains regressive practices that demean and suppress women, reinforcing cycles of subjugation. Within such a framework, women are cast as vulnerable and easily exploited, becoming prey to the predatory forces of a male-dominated world. The texts further highlight how women endure profound suffering, often forced into silent compliance while bearing the trauma of molestation and abuse. Despite their relentless sacrifices, women rarely receive recognition or acknowledgment in a society that continues to valorize male dominance and diminish female contributions.

A beautiful narrative of pain, pleasure, desire, and liberation is woven around Begum Jaan in Chughtai's story. It's almost as if the child documents the entire narrative. As the child of poor parents, Begum Jaan was married off to an affluent, virtuous Nawab. But her marriage turned out to be a sham. What she received from Nawab was only his name and never his time.

Soon, Begum Jaan noticed Nawab's habit of lurking around young boys and it was then she realized her husband's interest in the same sex. After this, she withdraws herself from the hopes of carnal pleasures and this leads to her despair. It was almost as if she were a showpiece lying in one corner of the house never to be moved or discerned by anyone. She tries out ways to lure him into loving her but nothing seemed to work. The narrator describes the way Nawab treated her, He "tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her".

Likewise in *That Long Silence* the protagonist Jaya, as an intelligent female writer and columnist with a degree in English, she had a successful career. Unfortunately, in the eyes of her husband Mohan, who was socialized in a traditional environment, none of these attributes would provide her with a respectable position. He compared his wife to the idealized figures of Seeta, Savitri, and Draupadi. Within his household, both Mohan's mother and his sister Vimala were entirely submissive to his father, unquestioningly complying with his authority. All significant decisions, whether related to family or finances, were reserved for the male members of the household. Having grown up in such an environment, Mohan naturally desired

in his own marriage what he had always witnessed - a wife who remained obedient and submissive.

Both Jaya and Begum Jaan had no freedom regarding the selection of life partner or for that matter even marriage. As goes in *That Long Silence* when Jaya thinks; “....As we grew into young women, we realized it was not love, but marriage that was the destiny waiting for us and so, with young man, there was the excitement of thinking will this man be my husband?It had been our parents who had taken vague desires of ours and translated them into hard facts. It was like the game we had played as children on our buttons tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor....” (*That Long Silence*: 19).

Similarly, Chughtai points out the agony of a woman who is married off without the consideration if she will be loved by her husband. Begum Jaan longs for her husband’s love who unfortunately never arrives to dispose her desires. Her hopes for a joyful married life are shattered by the Nawab’s indifference. This becomes a mirror of a society that confines women to the rigid expectation of unquestioned submission to men. It is clearly hinted in the overstatement given to Nawab’s character like “...he was very virtuous. No one had ever seen a girl or prostitute in his house. He had performed Haj and helped several others to do it” (*Lihaaf*), even his obsession with young boys is termed a hobby.

Likewise, Jaya’s parents and relatives could only tell her that a husband is similar to a tree that offers you shelter. For women to feel safe and protected, they must rely on their male family members. Though the hidden words state that women are inferior to men. Women have always been undermined, discarding the fact that they are equal to men in all the spheres of life. This is rightly mentioned by Deshpande as;

“....A sheltering tree. Without the tree you’re dangerously unprotected and vulnerable. This... followed logically; and so you have keep the tree alive and flourishing even if you have to water it with deceit and lies” (*That Long Silence*: 32).

While analyzing sex roles, society is compared to a bird with two wings, as Prabhati Mukherjee (1978:01) observes, “... represent two sexes, the balanced and smooth functioning of which are absolutely necessary to both these cases. The two wings, to continue to simile, are very ill-proportioned in India, which prevents Indian society from progressing smoothly.”

To Nawab, Begum Jaan was a mere prized possession in the heteronormative society. As the line in the text goes, “one cannot draw blood from a stone” directly exhibits Nawab’s disinterest.

With no other option left, Begum Jaan engages into other mediums like reading books but the physical desire were no near to be quenched neither by the husband nor by the books. And then came Rabbo, Begum’s masseuse to rescue Begum Jaan from losing herself.

The wall that Nawab had built for Begum Jaan in his house and heart was suffocating but soon with the advent of Rabbo this wall collapsed; Rabbo became the replacement of Nawab. Begum Jaan satiated her desires, all her lonely nights of desolation turned into nights of passions and self-discoveries. This homoerotic relationship was what kept her sane. Begum Jaan’s transformation to a new woman can be traced in her breaking the cocooned shell that society germinates.

While Begum Jaan did not get any sexual pleasures from her husband, Jaya on the other hand also felt suppressed in the artificial love she shared with Mohan, her husband. Mohan and Jaya’s marital relation was not about love. Though they had a physical relationship as any other

married couple she never felt love either before or after marriage. She felt devoid of freedom to speak with Mohan about anything. Her feelings of love and sex are suppressed as she says; “In any case, whatever my feelings had been then, I had never spoken of them to him. In fact, we had never spoken of sex at all. It had been as if the experience was erased each time after it happened, it never existed in words. The only words between us had been his question, ‘Did I hurt you?’ and my answer, ‘No’” (That Long Silence: 95)

The similarity in these narratives does not restrict to both being devoid of love and physical pleasures but both the protagonists found escape in other people. These people become empowering elements in the life of protagonists. As Rabbo was for Begum Jaan, Kamat, Jaya’s neighbor became the source of regaining her self-confidence.

Kamat always motivated Jaya to be true to herself and get serious for her career as a writer. It was his support that Jaya could regain her self-confidence. Moreover, Kamat makes her feel comfortable which is why she could speak with him frankly about sex. And to her surprise she had never been this way with Mohan, its not like she didn’t want to but she could not. Thus, Kamat empowers her to break the ‘long silence’. Jaya now resolves to assert her individuality by giving voice to her suppressed self-writing down the unspoken desires she had buried throughout her seventeen years of silence.

“This man... it had been a revelation to me that two people a man and woman could talk this way. With this man I had not been a woman. I had been just myself—Jaya. There had been ease in our relationship; I had never known in any other. There had been nothing I could not say to him.” (That Long Silence: 153)

Embracing utopia, Begum Jaan also escapes boredom. Orgasmic whispers replace her silent wails. She feels heard! The voice that had been confined up by her husband rises when Begum Jaan finds Rabbo. Though it was under the quilt that they conspired a bond of desire, Begum Jaan still had come afar from the boundaries of society. Begum Jaan’s and Rabbo’s need for each other interlaced them, besides the fact that they were completely opposite to each other. It was the desire that brought and then kept them together. As the story develops, their romantic relationship encompasses various disciplines of life. A complete inversion of authority and hierarchy becomes evident. While remaining within the framework of marriage, she simultaneously transgresses its boundaries and discovers solace beyond it. The lesbian relationship emerges as a voice of rebellion and a pursuit of justice.

Judith Butler’s theory of the subversion of identity, articulated in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), argues that... “gender is socially constructed rather than innate and that conventional notion of gender and sexuality serve to perpetuate the traditional domination of women by men and to justify the oppression of homosexuals and transgender persons”. Begum Jaan woes correlate to this theory. The similar connotations come down to her being ‘married off’ and not being asked to marry.

Chughtai efficiently paints a world of homoerotic relationships. She gives birth to this narrative in a patriarchal society where homosexuality was a taboo. She pinpoints the prejudiced society that is not ready to adjust to a woman’s woes. It is apparent through the lines “...one didn’t know when Begum Jaan's life began-whether it was when she committed the mistake of being born or when she came to the Nawab’s house as his bride, climbed the four-poster bed and started counting her days”. Chughtai’s remarkable writing skills also come out in Begum Jaan’s rediscovery of herself through the eyes of Rabbo. The liberation from cruel stereotypes is

entrusted in the depiction of the same sex relationship. "...Begum Jaan was oblivious to all this, cut off as she was from the world outside. Her existence was centered on herself and her itch". The itch obviously symbolises her internal urge for physical pleasure.

Begum Jaan's condition can be linked to Michel Foucault's theory "heterotopia," which discusses the way in which the surrounding spaces of a person contribute to the reduction of one's autonomy and formation of identity. He describes the subject's growth is encapsulated in the physical and non-physical spaces. In case of Begum Jaan, she was a prisoner both in her parental and her husband's house. But the phenomenon that helps her emerge as a distinct identity marks the significance of her personality.

The progression in story, unfolds various facets of Begum Jaan. Her dominance and obsession over Rabbo as well as ways to lure the narrator for pleasure brings forth her latent side. Begum Jaan gets a grasp of her dwindling life. She elevates her position with the audacity to relish the prohibited with a gallant smirk. She needn't and didn't wait for a man to extinguish her fancies. The transformation from a meek, annoyed and docile bride to a lady whose opinions at least on the bed mattered is the lihaaf that she tears. The literal Lihaaf here is the Lihaaf/cover of respect which the society forces a woman to wear as a protection. It is also a metaphor to secrecy and concealment but in a paradoxical sense because this lihaaf is what gave Begum Jaan the sense of liberation.

In *That Long Silence* the companionship of Jaya and Kamat was what made Jaya an individual. Though she could still not challenge the traditional system of patricentric society. She decided to stick with her present setup even when she had lost all faith in her husband. Her opinion was that change is never easy and rebellion is not the solution to her problem. She wanted to give a chance to the husband-wife relation because like all, she too was made to believe that human happiness is in the opposites of life harmonizing together.

As the novel comes to its end, Jaya's husband not only loses his job as an engineer but also his confidence. The proud, urban and global society male thus becomes the victim of corruption. All those 17 years of their marriage Jaya is never asked for any opinion but when an inquiry is held against Mohan, he asks for her support both for him and his family. It is when he recognizes the importance of her career as a writer. But Jaya's silence at this point is a kind of protest, and it is here that her strength is reflected.

Thus, the social humiliations often restrains a person from accepting their blessings as well as flaws. Therefore, the main motive of the stories to telecast the establishment of the women centric collage in a patriarchal society is justified. The male centric society is challenged and their rules are annihilated finally making way for the new women to rise and shine.

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