

GENDER, SELF REPRESENTATION AND SEXUALIZED SPACES: A READING OF ISMAT CHUGHTAI'S *LIHAAF*

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ABSTRACT

Ismat Chughtai's short story *Lihaaf* became the centre of controversy as soon as it was published. Although the story does not make any reference to same-sex relationships, it gained immense notoriety for the depiction of the relationship between Begum Jaan and her maid, Rabbu with sexual overtones. The enclosed space of the zenana becomes the site on which homoerotic desires are articulated and sexual liberation is sought. The lihaaf or the quilt becomes a covering for the deviant desires of the women. By sexualizing the zenana, Chughtai gives a blow to the patriarchal ideology that a zenana is the sanctum sanctorum of the house and is, therefore, free from the invasion of any form of sexuality. The portrayal of the character of Begum Jaan is a result of Chughtai's participation in the construction of the project of modernity. Begum Jaan is the representative of the 'new woman' who constantly tried to negotiate the difficult terrain of traditionalism versus modernisation. My paper analyses the depiction of the zenana as a sexualized space which becomes the site for radical same-sex politics. I also analyse Chughtai's engagement with the project of modernity and its articulation in her work.

KEYWORDS: Female Sexuality, Zenana, Progressive Writers Association, Modernity