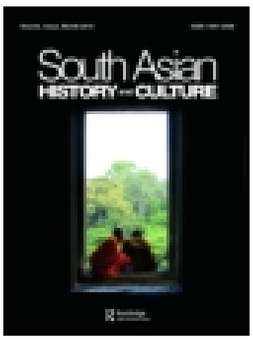

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'No one heard me!': sexual self-fashioning and the child in 'Lihāf'

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ABSTRACT

'Lihāf' by Ismat Chughtai is widely read as a tale of feminist and queer rebellion but it also narrates a complex account of a young girl's initiation into sexuality as a result of her molestation by a much older woman. In this narratological study that also draws upon the historical context of the Urdu world of letters which framed Chughtai's own self-fashioning as a writer and intellectual, I argue that the case for a feminist and queer-positive reading of 'Lihāf' often misses or downplays the sexual molestation of the narrator as a child and remains inattentive to the ways in which Chughtai constructs conflict and tension between the two voices that narrate the story: that of the adult narrator, a Muslim woman, who opens the tale and then, deploying the voice and perspective of a child, recalls and reconstructs the memory of the fateful events of her childhood. Central to my reading is the point of view of the child whose movement in and through the female-dominated *zenānā* re-presents the case for viewing 'a women's utopia' in dystopic ways. By splitting the female perspective into two overlapping realms – those of the adult and the child – Chughtai rewrites desire as experienced by the 'New Woman,' a historical figure of feminist emancipation often identified in established literary and critical readings with Begum Jān. Such an identification, I argue, is, in fact, unidimensional and is trenchantly undermined in the story by the brutal and intersecting logic of patriarchal domination and class exploitation, a logic at whose fulcrum is the figure of the child as the dark Other of the New Woman.

KEYWORDS

History; India; narratology; women's writings; queer; literature

I.

Among the most canonized short stories in Indian Literature, 'Lihāf' (1942) by Ismat Chughtai (1915–1991) needs no introduction to English reading publics.[1] In its own time, 'Lihāf' went through (and emerged victorious from) an obscenity trial against its writer, who has written elsewhere[2] about the experience as cementing her friendship with Sadat Hasan Manto whose own story 'Bū' ('Stench') had also been brought to court on a similar charge. Over time, critical interpretations of the story have been shaped and reshaped by radical feminist and queer theorizing, thanks in large part to the story's popularity in English translation and, consequently, its flourishing within departments of English, Cultural Studies, and Anglophone South Asian Studies, creating the kind of space within which 'Lihāf' is often read as an early, outstanding work of queer, feminist rebellion. Central to such readings of the short story is also the autobiographical tale of Chughtai's victimization following the publication of 'Lihāf' at the hands of those who saw the story as obscene and uncultured. The subsequent long-drawn court-case regarding the charge of obscenity is evocatively documented in her and Manto's writings, which show Chughtai becoming increasingly fearless in her convictions regarding her right to write what she

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wanted to. But as I will show, the argument that Chughtai 'introduces a "new woman" in the form of Begum Jaan who stands in revolt against the heteronormative structure of relationships … [and] rejects her traditional role and treads the path of modernization'[3] provides only a *partial* reading of the multilayered story and its perspective on the enduring effects of patriarchal segregation and the marginalization of women.

One of the central tensions of the story is fuelled by its representation of the changes sweeping over pre-Independence India,[4] especially in an upper-class, still feudal household where the lord of the house is a Nawab and his wife, the Begum. Not only are we looking at the politically tumultuous decades of the early twentieth century, both globally and in British India, but there was also great excitement in Urdu writings of the time with the publication of *Angāre* (in 1932), and the tremendous energies of the All India Progressive Writers' Association (of which Chughtai was a member) form the rich, efflorescent context in which one must read 'Lihāf.' The tendency to see the story as an isolated, exceptional example misses how intimately 'Lihāf' is tied to its own moment and milieu. Chughtai was, in fact, very much one face of an autochthonous ferment in the Urdu world of letters, a fact that drew her often to dissident literary and political movements of the time, although, as she outlines in her memoir, she remained a reluctant joiner.

Much in the story proceeds by way of competing frames of narration, an aspect of Chughtai's writing that deserves more attention than it has received in the critical literature on her works. In adaptation as well as in multiple commentaries, the narrativization of the short story's complicated sexual politics has tended to become flattened for the purposes of ideologized readings. Take the example of Rohan Sonawane's short film 'Lihāf' which he made in 2009 where he completely does away with the adult narrator, telling the entire story only from the perspective of the child. This ends up converting the story into a moral parable centred on the narration of a rite of passage.[5] But, indeed, the film is an adaptation, so it is possible to make such creative revisions. However, a whole slew of critical articles on the short story has also shown the tendency to de-emphasize or sideline the adult narrator (in favour of a reading centred on the figures of Begum Jān and Rabbu). Anamika Priyadarshini writes, "Lihāf" is a story narrated by a child who is visiting … '[6] and M. Asaduddin, otherwise a sensitive translator of Chughtai, notes only of the 'wonder and horror of the child-narrator' in his critical essay.[7] Ashley Tellis' otherwise insightful piece on the problematics of the representation of lesbian desire (where I am in concert with his critical reluctance to term 'lesbian' what Chughtai crafts in the story) also blithely overlooks the adult narrator: 'The story is narrated by a pubescent girl … recalling her first encounter with and initiation into the world of sexuality.'[8] Such oversight does the great disservice of ignoring Chughtai's experimentation in telling and ultimately, it is up to readers to see how, across different language registers, media, translations, and exegetical pieces, the short story has been shaped by the (identity) politics of reception and the logic of the literary marketplace which raise some issues but at the cost of a critical close-reading in which narratives can be read as both building and subverting polemical positions.

In 'Lihāf,' the opening voice is of an *adult* narrator, whose self-characterization as 'I' encourages the reader to assume an authorial identification, one that Chughtai in her autobiography fully endorses when she writes that Begum Jān was drawn from a real-life acquaintance in Aligarh.[9] And yet, I would argue that we keep up the standard critical practice of separating narrative voice from authorial voice(–over) and continue to engage with the narrative frame/s in 'Lihāf' as explorations of persona/e. The adult narrative voice remains profoundly oral: in the Urdu original as well as the Hindi transliteration, the phrases *m'āf kijiyegā* ('pardon me, please') and *hān to* ('and so') recur, giving the storytelling an oral quality and a chatty, conversational style that does not render the first narrative voice as omniscient, but in fact, points to her embeddedness within the milieu that she describes. *Adab* (refinement) and *tehzīb* (etiquette) characterize the aristocratic upper middle class of the Nawab and Begum, a social tier to whose aspirational ambit also belongs the adult narrator, although we glean that she is from a financially straitened family background.[10] Such a speech style marks the narrator as part of the household and its ambient culture, rather than as one who can provide the reader an objective or omniscient view of it.

The story soon shifts its focalization because the adult narrator states that her tale emerges from out of the fog of memory[11] and is centred on an event that happened to her when she was a child. This *second* narratorial voice – a patent construction of perspective *within* the main story – is an important tactic in the unfolding of the tale itself. For one, the perspective of the child allows the adult narrator to create a shifting orbit of comprehension, one that the reader becomes embroiled in and must struggle with: for instance, what did the child *think* she saw? Indeed, what did the child *see*? The adult narrator, one might assume, knows the answer to both questions, but the recourse to a foggy memory as well as the continued use of the constructed voice (and hence, perspective) of a child, allow the adult narrator to, in fact, *not* clarify or expose explicitly what she saw and what she thought about the things she saw. This kind of countermeasure (to *hide* the truth and not to reveal it) is best implemented in the transformation of a child's skeletal but realistic description of the unfolding events into the adult narrator's richly allusive lexicon of euphemism and periphrasis, best seen in the story in its use of animal imagery, especially the image of the swaying elephant, a point I will discuss further anon.

The turn from realistic telling to allegorical concealment is key to the ways in which the two voices – that of the adult narrator and her constructed child's voice – create a competing field of representation/s within the story. It is from this point of narratological inquiry that the use of the image of the moving elephant, thrown as a shadow on the wall, is at once the child's *literal* apprehension of what is happening under the *lihāf and* a symbolic device deployed by the adult narrator, who provides no gloss or further commentary upon the image, but re-purposes it to tell a story within a story, making it, in short, an allegory. The result is, indeed, a linguistic slipperiness that was no doubt central to why the prosecution in the obscenity trial against Chughtai could not pinpoint what was obscene in the story and had to finally settle upon a line[12] that led to the case being dismissed by the judge.

In this essay, then, I will employ tools of narratology to explore the ways in which Chughtai builds a sophisticated *récit* for her telling of the story, one in which multiple diegetic voices are enmeshed, requiring the reader to be constantly vigilant of the manner in which 'facts' are told and interpreted. The focus in feminist and queer-positive readings should take into account, I argue, the experiment in narrative voice that Chughtai embarks upon in the story, an experiment that was tied to her anxious membership in the Progressive Writers' Association that was spearheading modernism in Urdu literature of the time through a stringent commitment to a literature of social reform, a commitment that Chughtai herself was not always in accord with.

II.

'Lihāf' has been widely read in the Anglophone scholarship on the story as a feminist tale. The propensity to see Begum Jān as a victim of patriarchal Muslim values is key to most feminist readings, which see her as an embodiment of the New Woman, a figure that has a complex genealogy emerging from literary texts and sociopolitical tracts of nineteenth-century America, Britain, and other parts of *fin-de-siècle* Europe. The figure gained widespread appeal in colonial India, especially in the meliorist discourses of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal where the contrast between two kinds of femininity, *prāchīnā* or old-fashioned women and *nabīnā* or modern 'new women,' as Bankimchandra Chatterjee put it, marked an important moment in the nascence of a feminist consciousness that was to be differentially influential across all sections of the incipient nation, including in the field of Urdu writing.[13] The Begum's recourse to 'a homoerotics of desire'[14] in Chughtai's story has been popularly read as an exemplarily feminist manifestation of 'her revolt against the heteronormative structure of relationships' and as evidence of her 'self-empowerment' and 'agency' in the face of the cruel seclusion imposed upon her by her unloving husband, the Nawab.[15] Such a reading is, to my mind, unidimensional and flies against the face of a more insidious turn that is latent in the story: the transformation of Begum Jān from a lonely, depressed wife who is denied her sexual privileges in marriage into a sexual predator who then remakes the *zenānā* into a space of domination and exploitation. In the reading I suggest, the Nawab and his Begum are not polar opposites trapped in a binarized patriarchal relationship, but

occupy two chiral points on a Möbius band of desire and power, as it were, where one is but a homeomorphic extension of the other. To read the two characters in this manner is to also see the dynamics of class and social hierarchy (a theme often missing in many feminist interpretations) as working powerfully alongside those of gender and sexuality within a still-feudal Muslim household in twentieth century British India.[16]

Early on in the story, we learn of the Nawab's dereliction of conjugal duties: '[a]fter marrying Begum Jān, and installing her in his house along with the furniture, the Nawab Sahib totally forgot her presence, leaving the frail young Begum to pine in loneliness.'[17] We read of the ways in which the Begum initially fights such marginalization: first, by 'prayers and vows, … [then] vigils and charms … '[18] She turns to books ('Romantic novels and sentimental poetry') and works on her looks and clothes, but to no avail. 'What's the use of applying leeches to a stone?',[19] the diegetic voice ventriloquizes Begum Jān's pitiable state in a masterly instance of the narratological technique of free indirect speech. Begum Jān's claustrophobia in the *zenānā* and the lack of sexual and affectional satisfaction, however, lead to invention and innovation. We learn that the Begum developed an undiagnosable and incurable 'permanent itch,' which could only be satisfied by 'the endless kneading rubbing' of Rabbu, her masseuse, who, the narrator tells us, 'pulled [the Begum] back from the brink.'[20] And then in no time, Begum Jān's dried-up body began to fill, her cheeks glowed, her beauty burst into bloom.'[21]

In these couple of pages of narration, the description takes on a breathless quality, as the reader is drawn into the child narrator's first encounter with Begum Jān, an attraction that is built on the Begum's agential self-fashioning from a victimized wife in isolation to a dominant figure who converts the *zenānā* from a space of segregation into a dominion of her power. In such moments, the reader's view of the world of 'Lihāf,' mediated by the voice of the child narrator, coalesces with the Begum's, creating a powerful compact of empathy and identification with the figure of woman as victim; a compact that is, however, soon ruptured. Indeed, Chughtai's careful construction of ground for empathy with the Begum is an important point to register because it allows the reader to appreciate one half of the transformation that Chughtai effects upon the Begum; but this is still only one half. Feminist and empowered as this makeover appears to be, the story, however, continues to effect *another* transformation: from a self-empowered figure who manipulates the patriarchal system of circumscription and isolation to her benefit, the Begum becomes a sexual predator, not unlike (we might speculate) how she perceives her own husband, the Nawab, to be, as a man who surrounds himself with young men and, under the cover of philanthropy and patronage, such as is afforded to rich men in a patriarchal culture, conducts homosexual affairs. Indeed, the telling indicates that the Begum turns to Rabbu only out of marital neglect and isolation from the disports of the Nawab, as she grows increasingly voyeuristic and envious of her husband's ephebes: 'From the chinks in the drawing-room doors, Begum Jān glimpsed their slim waists, fair ankles, and gossamer shirts and felt she had been raked over coals!'[22] To understand the full extent of the self-transformation of Begum Jān, one must factor in her utilitarian conversion of the *zenānā* into a space not of isolation and segregation but of power and domination: over the servants, over her visitors, over other women – and a child.

The feminist argument that focuses overwhelmingly on the figure of Begum Jān would do well also to re-consider the position of Rabbu whose role in the relation with the Begum is not envoiced in any agential manner. Indeed, in what way can we call their relation 'lesbian' (based as it is primarily in economics) is an important question, as Tellis rightly notes,[23] since the story provides little evidence of *love* between the women, focusing instead largely on Rabbu's 'services' as masseuse and provider of sexual gratification to the Begum. In the narrative itself, little can be gleaned of the degree of Rabbu's own *volition* as a participant in the sexual relationship with the Begum and, as Indrani Mitra notes, '[p]erhaps the most troubling aspect of this representation of same-sex desire is that it is constituted entirely in terms of physicality.'[24] While we learn little of what Rabbu *wants*, what is established are contributing *circumstantial* factors for the relation, such as the Begum's aid in helping Rabbu's son settle into a small business and Rabbu's increasing influence within the

zenānā amidst the other servant-folk, who become envious of her position. Here, as well, things are not what they seem: Begum Jān's 'help' follows the fact that Rabbu's son had '[f]or a time . . . [taken] up the service of the Nawab Sahib and received many gifts of clothes from him, but then, no one knew why, he fled and never turned up at the house even to see his mother.'[25] The implicit suggestion is that the boy had fled from the Nawab's sexually adventurous ways and the Begum had had to 'settle him in a village'[26] by setting up a shop for him as a way to buy his silence as well as to ensure Rabbu's continued presence in the *zenānā*. Indeed, like the Nawab's philanthropy and gift-giving, which form a front for his homosexual indulgences, the Begum tries to *buy* silence and compliance from the child narrator by offering her new clothes and dolls, a tactic that the child instinctively repudiates after she has been molested.[27] In being able to exercise their class privilege transactionally, as a form of control over those socially and economically weaker, the Nawab and the Begum are rendered, in Chughtai's skilful depiction, as beneficiaries of a power structure that binds them together into one marital unit of social dominance and authority.

Inside the marital unit they comprise, the Nawab and the Begum hold differential positions, as class envelops gender structures and provides a frame for viewing them as singular agents *and* as a couple. In turn, the precariat, of which Rabbu is a part, has its own set of limitations and possibilities necessitated by *its* class positioning. As Gayatri Gopinath has argued, Rabbu's 'spatial, sexual, and social mobility'[28] is in ironic counterpoint to the Begum's confinement, a fact that allows her a degree of power within the highly stratified *zenānā* – and a fact that also brings her envy and anxiety as the child narrator repeatedly refers to her as 'witch.'[29] That said, the child narrator's description of Rabbu is revealing in terms of its fragmentation and dehumanization: in a brief section describing Rabbu's body, the child focuses thrice on her hands: 'small, dexterous hands,' 'puffy hands,' 'roving hands.'[30] Rabbu's looks are also counterpointed to the Begum's, her odour is 'strange and bothersome,'[31] and in all ways, she is, to the child narrator, a contrast to the Begum, making their intimate relationship all the more bewildering to the child. A close attention, then, to Rabbu's polyvalent position in the *zenānā* highlights Chughtai's eagle-eyed approach to the intersections between class and gender as a vital determinant in the structural construction of womanhood in terms of being female *and* working-class.

It is, therefore, crucial to see Begum Jān's self-empowerment in tandem with her class and sexual domination over Rabbu as well as to understand that this transformation is central to why the Begum becomes a figure of such fascination for the child narrator, who had been, thus far, privy only to a world in which the dichotomous roles of men and women are sharply etched, so sharply, in fact, that her own blurring of them – as seen in her aggressive and intense skirmishes with her young brothers and their male friends – is the reason why the child's mother decides on punitively sending the child away for re-lessoning at the Begum's *zenānā*. And indeed, life in the Begum's *zenānā* is a virtual assault on the senses of the child narrator, who realizes that the space exists for the luxury of the Begum. The story becomes atmospheric with the sensuous details of sights, sounds, scents, and touch that mark the child narrator's intimate introduction to the Begum's life. Begum Jān is surrounded by fine clothes, delicious foods, various oils, *attars*, sandalwood, henna, and other scents, and her toilette is an elaborate several hour-long ritual that involves many people and much secrecy, and draws the child narrator into a ritualistically exotic world of adult indolence and luxury.

From the outset, the child narrator's attraction towards Begum Jān is revealing in its eschewal of a stereotypical femininity and the child's embracing of the Begum's androgynous looks:

> But it was her lips, often reddened, that were the most amazingly attractive feature of her face. She had a downy upper lip with the faint suggestion of a moustache. Her hair grew long at her temples. Sometimes watching her face you had the queer feeling that you were looking at the face of a young boy.[32]

Indeed, the page and a half long description of Begum Jān by the child narrator is an instance of the patriarchal gaze, as internalized by a child, and builds, early on in the story, an implicitly homoerotic *triangle* whose scopophiliac energy lies in the polarizations the narration draws between the

needy Begum, the resourceful Rabbu, and the ever-vigilant child soaking in all the sensory impressions around her: 'As for me, I used to watch [Rabbu's] hands whenever I sat near Begum Jān, intent on seeing where they were and what they were doing.'[33] As the child integrates herself in the *zenānā* ('[Begum Jān] loved the winter months. I loved staying with her in winter'),[34] the inherent *inequality* of the sensuous triangle of desire being built by the narrative becomes evident: not only are the Begum and Rabbu *not* involved in a relationship of mutuality or reciprocity, but also the narrator *as a child* is a misfit in this adult, appetitive world, a point underscored by Rabbu who rebukes Begum Jān 'acidly' when she realizes that in her absence, the Begum had begun to groom the child: 'Unripe mangoes are sour, Begum Jān.'[35] Rabbu's rebuke marks a moment of rupture that sends the Begum into a dramatic, petulant fit and the child running from the room, breaking open the idyll and rendering public, in a flash, a private act of intimacy that the child neither had the power to give consent to nor the maturity to grasp the ramifications of. Through it all, the child's recall of vivid sensory details of life in the *zenānā* endows the story with an infectious energy and buoyancy, haloing her naïveté and innocence, even as it underscores the incongruity of her tender presence in a world of intricate adult arrangements.

One might argue that the rupture in the eroticized triangle occurs much earlier when the Begum forces the child narrator into sexual exploitation (at the point of *occurrence* rather than at its recognition/articulation by Rabbu in front of the Begum with the child present). When Rabbu goes away to be with her son and takes a while returning, Begum Jān, who has become increasingly a slave to her sexual needs, turns to the child narrator. It is a chilling moment in the narrative, as the usually adulatory gaze of the child transforms into a distressing half-acknowledgement of what occurs:

> . . . Even now when I think of how she looked that day, I feel quite *distraught*. Her heavy eyelids had grown *heavier*, the down on her upper lip *darker*, and in spite of the *chilly* weather, tiny drops of sweat glistened on her lips and nose. Her hands were *cold as ice* but so soft that it felt *as though the skin on them had been peeled off*. She had taken off her shawl, and in her thin kurta her body gleamed like dough . . . *An unknown dread* took hold of me. *I felt bewildered . . . . I began to weep inwardly. She hugged and squeezed me like a plaything.* The warmth of her body drove me to *distraction*. But she paid no attention, she was like one possessed. *And I could neither scream nor cry.*
>
> After a while she lay back exhausted. Her face grew dull and unattractive. She started taking long breaths. She is dying, I thought, and jumping up, took to my heels.[36]

The moment of sexual exploitation constitutes a *volta* in the narrative, after which everything changes. If we think of 'Lihāf' as a coming-of-age story in the tradition of the modernist short story, we see Chughtai's peculiar riff on the familiar trope of sexual awakening, a paradigmatic example of which might be James Joyce's 'Araby' (1914). From adulation to revulsion, the child narrator betrays all the classic signs of a child responding to forced sexual molestation: she cannot sleep anymore and 'lay awake for hours,' avoids Begum Jān's company, choosing instead to spend 'the whole day with servants,' and goes through, what one might call, a moral panic:

> The mere thought of setting foot in [Begum Jān's] room was enough to drive me out of my wits. There was no one I could speak my mind to. And what could I say, after all? That I was scared of Begum Jān, the Begum Jān who, everybody knew, was so fond of me? . . . Whenever Begum Jān called me to her when her back was being rubbed, I would go, but keep my face averted and run back at the first chance. Now when she began changing in my presence, the gorge rose in me . . .[37]

In such description, we encounter as readers a *tonal* contradiction between the depiction of an emotionally traumatic moment as encountered by the child, on the one hand, and the adult narrator's attempt, on the other, to overwrite that testimonial with a tongue-in-cheek rendering of the subversive activities in the Begum's *zenānā*, activities that, in light of the child's molestation, take on problematic dimensions. For the reader, it is difficult, if not impossible, to ignore the many clear details of traumatic repression and (self-)silencing of child abuse that the story presents and underscores as deeply troubling.

III.

That 'Lihāf' is a coming-of-age tale is accentuated by *four* different descriptions of what is happening under the quilt, all four descriptions punctuating altered moments in the child narrator's apprehension of her world and thus, marking out separate time-points in the narration. It is important to map these changed descriptions because each tells us something of the way in which Chughtai incrementally extends the narrative's horizon of interpretation of the child's sexual molestation by the Begum, the one radical and traumatizing act that has far-reaching consequences upon multiple lives. The differences (and similarities) in the four descriptions also constitute the slipperiness and the allegorical circumlocution that allowed 'Lihāf' to present a scene of cunnilingus in the 1940s and still escape the charges of obscenity when the author was dragged to court over the story.

Let us look at the first time the reader encounters the *lihāf* – this is the very first sentence of the story:

> Every winter when I pull the *lihāf* over me, and the shadow it casts on the wall sways *like an elephant*, with a sudden bound my mind begins to race and scour over the *past*. What *memories* revive in me![38]

The voice, we realize, is of an adult first-person protagonist who begins the tale by way of memories, indeed, of a particular memory of the past ('My story dates from the days when I was very young . . . ').[39] Because the story splits its frame of telling right away between the narrator as an adult and as a child, the reader must train quickly to follow this split through the telling, engaging in a kind of constant narrative decoding of the voice of the teller. When the adult narrator conveys the movement of the *lihāf* as the swaying of an elephant, the reader must decipher if the phrase is the figurative colour employed by an adult writer/narrator, or an act of ventriloquism by which the adult channels her memory of her first impressions, *as a child*, of the moving *lihāf*. This *play of voice* – between the adult and child narrators – is a constituent feature of the narrative technique employed by Chughtai throughout the story. The oscillation between reliability and unreliability, racy humour and shocking trauma, laughter and games, on the one hand, and shocking sexual abuse, on the other, is the result of precisely such a technique and the emergent *sleights in meaning*, at once this and that, comprise the story's most remarkable narrative feature.

As the story proceeds, the reader can see a pattern emerging that distinguishes the voice of the child narrator from that of the adult. The child emerges as a somewhat unreliable narrator who responds to the world of the *zenānā* through *sensory* impressions and is often not clear about motivations and adult customs:

> I thought of my school hygiene. Very *confused* thinking.[40]
> I could *not* make out anything . . .[41]
> I [had] a *strange kind of dread* . . . I was so *frightened* . . .[42]

In general, we realize that the child narrator is marked by her half-comprehending and uncomprehending ways, a feature of her limited, *witness-like* telling that the adult narrator who *reconstructs that voice via memory* does nothing further to explain or justify. Indeed, the adult often continues with the skeletal, impressionistic style of the child's telling, a tactic that frustrates by way of euphemism and circumlocution but succeeds in achieving two things: one, to keep up the immediacy with which the reader encounters the events of the story *from the perspective of a child*; and two, to counterpoint such immediacy with the readerly expectation of a more settled, more omniscient, and thus, more credible, telling of the adult narrator who is ultimately the *creator* of the child narrator and the *reconstructor* of the child's limited perspective. This kind of 'complex seeing' (to borrow a Brechtian phrase) pushes the reader to *simultaneously* occupy two different moments of time (those belonging to the child and the adult) and see them coalesced and *performed as one*. As I have been arguing, nowhere is such coalescing more impactful than in the descriptions of what it *is* that the Begum and Rabbu are doing under the *lihāf*. Chughtai masterfully employs *sound and image* to create a layered representation, one in which irony and *double entendre* convert the child's testimonial-like record of what she sees and hears to adult fact. In so doing, Chughtai

skilfully pits an adult reader's understanding of lesbian sexuality against the delayed decoding of the child, creating a tonal gap in the horizons of understanding/interpretation, a gap that skilfully yields comic effects but only up until that tragic, traumatic point when the Begum coerces the child into sexual play.

After that opening description, the child recounts – *for the first time* for the child but for the *second* time for the reader – that '. . . in the darkness, Begum Jān's *lihāf* was rocking as though an elephant were caught in it.'[43] It is at this point in re/telling that the reader must realize that both narrative voices come together, for the opening description by the adult voice is of a piece with the child's first impressions, and the animal imagery belongs to *both* the child and adult narrators but yields different narrative effects. The result of such coalescing is that while the child records her 'fright' and 'dread' in terms of a large creature not expected in the domestic and safe space of a household or a bedroom, the adult narrator *continues* with the image of a swaying elephant throwing shadows on the wall, deploying the slippery metaphorical connotations of the image to indicate paronomastically the adult relationship between the Begum and Rabbu, yielding a helical narrative effect that traverses the comic and the tragic or what Asaddudin calls, 'the facetious and the serious'[44] *simultaneously for the reader*. And yet, it is precisely this deft mix that soon turns ominous as female self-empowerment turns to child sexual abuse.

It is important to note that Chughtai refuses to dichotomize the child as irrational and the adult as rational, a move that might have *defused* the tense, double-helix telling of the tale in favour of the adult voice, as is so often the case with narratives that employ child narrators as unreliable. Instead, the child in 'Lihāf' is shown as capable of rational and logical thought, although she constantly battles the extraordinary circumstances she finds herself placed in. For instance, when she hears the whispering of two voices, the child conjectures whether a thief has entered the room, and when Rabbu unexpectedly speaks up from under Begum Jān's *lihāf* and sharply reprimands the child, the latter pulls her *lihāf* over herself and goes to sleep right away.[45] In stark contrast, the adult narrator often finds herself overcome by wintry memories of the *lihāf*, suggesting that some of her childhood apprehensions may have well continued into her adult life. Once the reader learns of the child's sexual molestation, such a *continuum* of fears begins to make sense, for as the narrator says 'I've always been of an apprehensive nature. When I was a child, I had nightmares.'[46]

In 'Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse on the Psychosocial Functioning of Adults,' Herbert S. Strean writes: 'That sexually abused victims suffer to adulthood has been well documented in the literature. In a comprehensive review of existing studies, Fisher noted that many victims as adults have difficulty forming interpersonal relationships . . . . Flashbacks, extremely distorted self-images, and even multiple personalities are not unknown. Nightmares are common . . . Many adult victims have not confronted the roots of their sexual traumas because they have repressed the meaning of their abuse . . . '[47] It is tempting to take a Lacanian or broadly psychoanalytic reading of the story to map the ways in which the story instantiates a series of revelations regarding the nature and after-effects of childhood sexual abuse.[48] However, in this essay, I would like to keep the discussion narratological and focused on the story's *embedded* diegesis which operates, through the creation of two voices at play, two versions of telling, at both the diegetic and metadiegetic levels (to borrow Gerard Genette's formulations). The diegetic or intradiegetic level is, according to Genette, the level of the characters, their thoughts, and actions. At this level, the reader encounters such writing where one dominant voice *channels* others, often explicitly using quotation marks or deploying free indirect speech:

> . . . although somewhat *'advanced'* in age, the Nawab was a very pious man.[49]

> . . . and she felt she was rolling on a bed of live coals as she watched from the chinks in the drawing room door and saw the boys in their translucent kurtas, their well-formed legs in tight-fitting churidars, their willowy waists . . . *What is the use of applying leeches to a stone?*[50]

> *To hell with all those clothes!*[51]

> One day, Rabbu went off to see her son, *a perverse lad*.[52]

But the story also operates at the metadiegetic level, a part of the diegesis that is embedded in another voice and unfolds *allegorically*, as when a diegetic narrator himself/herself tells a story. This is the level that constructs the final two mentions of the swaying elephant image as simultaneously embedded within the child's imagination – where it is first generated, but not first *told* – and in the reconstructed retelling by the adult narrator – where the reader first encounters the image in the opening sentence of the story. After Rabbu's sharp rebuke to the Begum ('Unripe mangoes . . . '), the two make up and the child is witness once more to a night-time reconciliation:

> In the darkness, Begum Jān's *lihāf* was swaying again like an elephant. 'My God,' I murmured, my voice faint with fear. The elephant leapt inside the *lihāf*, and then lay still. I was quiet. But the elephant was on a rampage again . . . .The elephant rose, agitated. It seemed to be trying to sit on its legs.[53]

The child narrator, once more using what logic she has at her disposal, wonders whether 'something delicious was being gulped down under the *lihāf*' by the 'greedy glutton' Rabbu and the Begum, who, the child recalls, had not eaten all day.[54] It is a theory that the adult narrator does not justify or explain further, leaving the *double entendre* and word play for an adult reading public *embedded*. The final paragraph of 'Lihāf' brings the reader's last view of the swaying *lihāf*, which transforms for the child into

> a huge, bloated frog inflating itself . . . and *the lihāf entered my skull and began to swell there*. Hesitatingly, I brought my legs down on the other side of the bed, groped for the switch and pressed the button. Under the *lihāf*, the *elephant turned* a violentsomersault and collapsed. But the somersault had lifted the corner of the *lihāf* by afoot – 'Allah!' I dived for my bed![55]

All four descriptions of the swaying elephant as an image for women's same-sex lovemaking under the *lihāf* rely a great deal on the reader's ability to negotiate the *different* perspectives, voices, and horizons of understanding of the story's *two* narrators: the adult and the child. What makes such interpretive decoding even more complex is our awareness of the child's precocious, but *naturally limited*, point of view as well as what we, as readers, steadily realize is the adult narrator's own psychologically fraught and deeply subjective perspective upon the events that she narrates. Right at the outset, the adult narrator declares that Begum Jān's quilt is 'still etched in my mind like a brand burned in by hot iron.'[56] Elsewhere, the memory of the lihāf is called 'terrifying.' How are we to understand such description – is it a figurative use of hyperbole that is aimed at humour or an expression of enduring trauma, or both, with the borders between the two effects *not* blurred, but, in fact, rendered scrupulously visible? While the gap between these horizons of decoding generates a kind of situational humour, Chughtai also indicates, by way of such doubly conflicted telling, the limits of narrative because, ultimately, both her constructed voices remain psychically and psychologically impaired by the memory of a childhood event of sexual abuse, and the retelling bears the scars of both imperfect recall (of the child) and repressed processing (by the adult).

Another way of following the split narrative telling and what that means in terms of the compromised status of the main narrator is to focus on the 'noises' under the *lihāf*, what I termed earlier as the *sounds* of the text: here too, it is helpful to enumerate the instances. The first night the child narrator witnesses the goings-on between the Begum and Rabbu, there is no mention of her hearing anything. The visual dominates the description of the child narrator's first night in the Begum's bedroom. The second night's description, however, is almost entirely based on sound:

> When I awoke on the second night, I felt as though a dispute between Rabbu and Begum Jān was being settled on the bed. I could not make out anything, nor could I tell how it was decided. I only heard Rabbu's convulsive *sobs*, *the noises like those of a cat licking a plate, lap, lap*.[57]

Between this night and the next encounter between Rabbu and Begum Jān occurs the child's molestation at the hands of the Begum, and the effects of that moment of forced intimacy remain initially ambiguous to the child narrator. On the night that Rabbu and Begum Jān reconcile (after

Rabbu has rebuked the Begum 'acidly' regarding the latter's training her sights on the child narrator), the child hears them:

> *Sr – sr—phat – kitch* . . . Surely something delicious was being *gulped down* under the *lihāf*.[58]

The onomatopoeic sounds italicized above combine the registering ear of the child narrator (who hears them as witness) with the adult understanding of the older narrator who refuses, however, to supply an explanatory gloss, relying instead on the powers of *double entendre* and euphemism to convey what was going on under the *lihāf*. The layered *récit* itself relies upon the reader's ability to remain attuned to the play of voices in the story and to understand the separation between what is being described and what is being concealed. The adult narrator is caught between articulating (and thus, coming to terms with) a traumatic childhood memory and maintaining strictly the social registers of *adab* and *tehzīb* which mandate the concealment of 'deviant desire,' generating a tension that shows up in the fraught telling of the tale. As a consequence, the telling but barely balances the traumatized expression of a child's memory of sexual exploitation, by someone she trusted and admired, with the wit and situational humour of the adult's retelling that itself represses the trauma by way of euphemism and hyperbole.

One might argue that at the *authorial* level, Chughtai did not *know* of lesbianism in order to name it as such in the story[59] – a move that Gayatri Gopinath has called a 'strategy of disarticulation,' one that allowed the story to trump the obscenity charges in the colonial court and that made possible for 'female homoerotic desire to elude a colonial legal apparatus that functions squarely within the logic of categorization, visibility, and enumeration.'[60] However, at the *narrative* level (itself split, as I have shown, between the diegetic and metadiegetic), disarticulation or *partial articulation* also characterizes the paedophilia of Begum Jān (as well as possibly of her partner, the Nawab, whose favourite boys remain entirely outside the pale of the story as voices we never get to hear), which, as readers, we must factor into how we read the gaps and silences in the story. The sequestering of women's same-sex desire is paralleled by the silencing of the child/children in the story, a move that casts its long shadow upon the narrator as an adult, as she draws from the 'dark crevasses of the past' the incident that 'imprinted on [her] memory like a blacksmith's brand.'[61] Indeed, the adult narrator's 'disarticulate' descriptions of 'the sinister scene' between the Begum and Rabbu are *qualitatively different* from the ways in which she alludes to the Begum and the bedroom and what she herself feels *after* she has been sexually molested: 'claustrophobic darkness,' 'a terrifying entity,' 'gripped by an unknown terror,' 'feeling nauseated.'[62] As the child narrator learns to encode in secrecy and shame the moment of her sexual abuse, the adult narrator haltingly, diaphanously connects the dots of her life: 'I have always been the superstitious one in my family. Night fears, sleep-talking, sleep-walking were regular occurrences during my childhood. People often said that I seemed to be haunted by evil spirits. Consequently, I blotted out the incident from my memory . . . '[63] These lines occur prior to the scene of molestation in the story, but if we understand this to be the voice of the adult narrator, we also begin to make sense of the kind of traumatic repression that has marked the narrator *her entire life* and that forms a *continuum* with the very first thoughts of anguish and nausea that the narrator as a child feels after the Begum has victimized her: '"Amma!" My heart cried in anguish . . . Mother believed in a strict prison sentence for females; life behind seven padlocks! Begum Jān's "patronage," however, proved more terrifying than the fear of the world's worst goons!'[64]

IV.

As I have argued, the play between two voices comprises an important feature of 'Lihāf,' one that indicates that Chughtai was well aware of the ramifications of narrative experimentation that was the hallmark of modernist writing of the time. In the close readings I make above, I signal the ways in which the *lihāf* becomes, for the child narrator, a symbol for sexuality and its transgressive powers, a symbolic connection that, as I have suggested, the narrator *represses* as an adult and is unable/refuses to fully articulate. The story is explicit, indeed assiduous, in its rendering of the

terror and trauma of the child at the hands of an adult woman she almost venerates, and it would be a dereliction of our critical imagination if we allow the story's humour and wit to overwrite/override its grim exposé of sexual exploitation of multiple kinds, told from the perspective of more than one victim. While I am in fellowship with feminist and queer-positive readings (of especially women's writings) that seek to mine literature for radical, exemplary 'sheroes,' one must be careful of the ways in which deterministic methodologies can blindside us to what is, in fact, polyvalent, non-formulaic, and therefore, truly interesting about (literary) self-fashioning. If Begum Jān's emancipatory praxis is undermined by her own transformation into a sexual predator, Chughtai's story is no less outstanding for crafting a tale about the ways in which female sexualities and sensibilities are both shaped and warped by social structures. And in this final section, I want to explore some renewed ways in which to understand how Chughtai's writing – and especially 'Lihāf' – is imbricated within the larger discourse of modernity as it was unfolding in variegated ways in British India of the 1940s.

Much has been written by way of a critical commentary upon Chughtai's affinities with and distance from the Progressive Writers' Association[65] and their fierce commitment to the literature of social reform, a commitment that Chughtai was not always philosophically aligned with:

> I have never seriously taken it to be my mission to reform society and eliminate the problems of humanity; but I was greatly influenced by the slogans of the communist party as they matched my own independent, unbridled, and revolutionary style of thinking. . .What wonderful get-togethers, arguments, and scuffle of words we had![66]

Geeta Patel argues in her important work on the poet Miraji (1912–1949), who remained on the fringes of the PWA on account of his dissident writings, that, especially in the 1930s, the PWA instituted many limits on the kind of literature it championed among its ranks. Patel's comments on Miraji can also help us understand the distance Chughtai felt from the PWA, especially after the controversy over 'Lihāf' when she received neither condemnation nor support from the PWA, marking a strange kind of limbo that drove home for her precisely what she was doing in that organization.[67] Patel writes:

> [o]ne breach in the PWA was between the "political" (*siyāsīl taraqqi pasand*) and "creative" (*jadīdiyāt*) writers, which carried with it other oppositions that ordered the taxonomies weaving through the rhetorical strategies of the PWA during this period – between public, social, historical, material on the one hand and private, individual, psychological/mystical on the other. The first set of categories came to be associated with a valorized politicized literary stance (socialist realist, *haqīqat parast*), and the second set with a devalued "depoliticized" (modernist, *jadīdiyāt*) one . . . . [P]olitical engagement, as it was defined by the Progressives, excluded a self-reflexive focus on language in use and expressly embargoed the domain of desire (turned it over to the private as self-indulgent) . . . '[68]

Indeed, modernity in Chughtai's writings rarely provides the stage for the revelation of a grand historical narrative, which in 1940s India, convulsing with all manner of anticolonial agitations, it might well have been, but as Priyamvada Gopal has argued, modernity features in Chughtai's stories in 'the fraught interstices . . . [of] lived experience . . . defined by a multiplicity of intersecting, often conflicting, frameworks and narratives' that continually generate 'dissonances.'[69]

One may, thus, infer how Chughtai's stories that tended to be profoundly individualized and self-reflexive built upon a complex use of such narrative devices as flashbacks and double narrators, and often explicitly centred on the themes of sexual desire that transgressed social boundaries, would not have been seen as fitting the Progressive vision that saw literature as committed primarily to an ethic of social criticism and action.[70] As Patel argues, Miraji, Manto, and Chughtai were, in fact, 'persecuted' by the PWA for their writings and for the social uproar that their writings raised among readers: '[t]he harassment constituted a systematic exclusion and marginalization by the organization of particular kinds of writings . . . '[71] Manto's friendship was a vital source of support for Chughtai, especially in the months following the publication of 'Lihāf' and the tumult it generated, and Chughtai found in the iconoclastic Manto a kindred spirit. The experience of

attending the obscenity trials in Lahore together reinforced their friendship and Manto's role, particularly in inflecting the ending of 'Lihāf,' is crucial and needs to be revisited.

When 'Lihāf' first appeared in 1942 in *Adab-e-latif*, its final line, as Manto recounts in his essay titled 'Ismat Chughtai,' was: 'Even if someone gives me a lakh of rupees I won't tell anyone what I saw when the quilt was lifted by an inch.'[72] Manto thought that 'the last line betrays a lack of craft.'[73] But if we consider this line as, indeed, Chughtai's final word in the story, then we can glean a refusal to articulate *even as an adult* what the narrator saw as a child, thus indicating the lasting effects of childhood trauma upon the adult narrator. At the authorial level, the line may well indicate Chughtai's own homophobia and her unwillingness to engage with female same-sex desire on its own terms. If that line is removed (as it is in the majority of the English translations and in subsequent Hindi and Urdu editions), it causes the story to end on the purely descriptive: 'Allah! I dived for my bed!' What gets *elided* is the adult narrator's inability/refusal to articulate how the memory of the swaying quilt is intimately tied to a traumatic moment of sexual molestation—*she* will *not* speak up!

Read this way, we see that Begum Jān's feminist self-empowerment extracts a high cost and the (self-)silencing at the end re-enacts how one woman's agency fails another's. The difference between the two endings is also revealing of the narratologically complex *récit* that Chughtai constructs for telling a tale that was radical in so many ways (and in ways that Chughtai the writer was not perhaps fully in control or awareness of): it spoke of 'gynocentric desire' (Patel 'Marking' 179), if only as a social outcome of Muslim women's circumscriptions, even as it touched upon the ways in which deeply segregationist societies become structured on the basis of multiple marginalizations – of women by men; of children by women and men; of servants by masters, and even, psychologically, of a fractured, private self where one learns to peripheralize/silence one's innermost anxieties and desires. It is for all these reasons that Manto's patronizing critique of Chughtai's 'lack of craft' must be seen itself as that great male writer's inability to separate gender from his view of writerly excellence. Manto writes of Chughtai's original ending and it is worth quoting at some length:

> 'What's wrong with that sentence?' Ismat had retorted. I was going to say something but then I looked at her face. There I saw the kind of embarrassment that overwhelms common, homely girls when they hear something unspeakable. I felt greatly disappointed because I wanted to have a detailed discussion with her about every aspect of 'Lihāf.' As she left I told myself, 'The wretch turned out to be a mere woman after all!'
>
> After a long time, when I reflected seriously on my extreme reaction, I felt strongly that to create something enduring in art it is imperative that one stay within one's *natural limits* . . . I reflected: let the women fight head and shoulders with men on the battlefields, let them excavate mountains, let them become story-writers like Ismat Chughtai, but their palms should be adorned with henna. Bangles should tinkle on their wrists. I regret having made that remark about Ismat Chughtai at the time. If she had not been 'a mere woman, after all!' then we would not have found such fine and sensitive stories like 'Bhulbhulaiyan,' 'Til,' 'Lihāf' and 'Gainda' in her collections. They portray different facets of a woman—*neat and transparent*, *purged of all artifice*. These are not flirtations or coquetry designed to conquer men. They have nothing to do with the *coarse gestures of the body*. The objective of these *spiritual gestures* is man's conscience which encompasses the unknown and unintelligible but *tender nature of a woman*.[74]

Manto's praise of Chughtai's 'neatness' and 'transparency' in writing as virtues 'natural' to her gender (in contrast to overly sentimental or romantic writing that he found artificial) is as problematic as the binary he draws between 'coarse gestures of the body' and 'spiritual gestures' (204). Indeed, one might oppose such praise with a counter-view of the actually sophisticated telling of 'Lihāf' and its challenging construction of a complex examination of women's sexual and social choices. In Chughtai's hands, the story could have been a fairly straightforward exploration of a Muslim woman's fettering that ends in a revanchist fantasy of her finding fulfilment by turning patriarchal strictures on their head. The triumphalist thrill of such writing would have been trenchantly feminist as well. But Chughtai takes the more difficult route and devises a tale that rehearses the ways in which women too can become manifestations of unequal systems of power and in Begum Jān's transformation from an agential subject to a predatory and

exploitative master herself, Chughtai transcends an *only*-feminist horizon, thereby converting the story into a critique of the workings of class privilege and dominance. In this short story, desire has no regenerative potential and creates no beings in love – indeed, *love* is not the central event, in the Badiouian sense, in the story; that 'event' is the child's molestation by Begum Jān after which everything must be viewed from the prism of the child's sense of incalculable loss. As desire becomes the platform upon which social interrelationships enact a macabre play of the asymmetries of power and hierarchicalism, even a fairly innocuous tale of a child's rite-of-passage turns into a terrifying account of lapsarian trauma. Furthermore, the use of the split narrator scatters the story into multiple diegetic levels, creating a *skaz*-like effect that is central to Chughtai's peculiar style of writing Urdu, a style that was distinct, unconventional, and exceptional in a woman writer of the time. In this respect, Manto, one might aver, simply underreads the *art* behind Chughtai's 'artifice.'

In her essay 'Ismat Chughtai,' Sukrita Paul Kumar has called this style of writing, *begumātizubān*: '[or] the distinctive language of the ladies of the house, excelling in its proverbial idiom, metaphor and racy diction [that] found place in Urdu fiction for the first time through Ismat's writings.'[75] *Begumātizubān* provides a rich, sedimented palimpsest for the kind of Urdu Chughtai employs, weaving into the story a *soundscape* that whether or not it was mimetic or naturalistic, was, in effect, *formally* and *rhetorically* a magnificent experiment in narrative representation. In a piece where she lauds Chughtai for her 'literary voyeurism,' Rakhshanda Jalil argues that Chughtai's 'homely and colourfully idiomatic language' is central to the 'literary impropriety' that marked the latter's writing. Indeed, in 'Lihāf,' the sheer exuberance and plenitude of the telling, its colloquial raciness and prolixity are features that characterize Chughtai's style as unique for her time.[76] However, where Manto assumed such language to be 'natural' to Chughtai as a woman, it is important to understand how she was, in fact, recording and transmuting the sweeping changes coming upon the very sanctorums of householderly lives in British India, going beyond the horizons of just 'literary impropriety' to explore excesses of other kinds. From this perspective, the representation of same-sex desire itself may not have appeared as a modern or colonial aftereffect, one reason why the word 'homosexual' (or 'lesbian') never emerges in the Lahore trial documents. In any case, Chughtai's homophobia can be inferred not so much from any explicitly discriminatory or bigoted portrayal of same-sex desire (itself not an unknown theme in Progressive writings), as much as it can be gleaned from her inability to see such behaviour as subversive of patriarchy and not 'a perversion' or 'deviant,'[77] which, as Gopal also notes,[78] is how Chughtai saw it then.

Akhil Katyal glosses a conversation between Chughtai and writer M. Aslam in Lahore where she explains her motivations behind the story in interesting terms:

> Actually Aslam *Sahab*, I was never told by anyone that I should not write on this particular subject of 'Lihāf.' Neither did I read in any book that one should not write about this . . . *illness [marz]* . . . or . . . *addiction [lat]*. Maybe my mind is not the brush of Abdurrahman Chughtai [the well-known Pakistani painter], it is instead a cheap sort of camera, whatever it sees, it clicks, and my pen becomes helpless in my hand.[79]

Clearly, between illness (*marz*) and addiction (*lat*), Chughtai struggled with a *frame* or a *form* to convey same-sex desire as legitimate. However, it is also important to remember that the kind of desire she portrays in 'Lihāf' is not allocated a space to become reciprocal or fulfiling: it remains trapped in the bonds of patriarchal segregation where it emerges as a result only of the Begum's need for sexual gratification and not desire for some kind of alternative relationship based on affectional or romantic attachment. In the story, Chughtai is unwilling/unable to supply more room to the economic, purely opportunistic relation between the Begum and Rabbu for it to mature into love and caring. Instead, in the ominous turn to paedophilia and the sexual molestation of the child, we see the dangerous involutions of a desire that mimics and rehearses structures of power without ever challenging them or pushing past their repressive boundaries. Although the comic/satiric spirit of the story, based in Begum Jān's inventive sexual adventures, has rightly received wide critical appreciation, it is also vital

to read 'Lihāf' as a moving portrayal of the loss of innocence and the betrayal of a child's trust by a caregiver, a theme that, as Gopal notes, resonates across many of Chughtai's child-centric stories.[80]

Conclusion

As I have suggested, the case for feminist and queer-positive readings of 'Lihāf' needs to factor in both Chughtai's refreshingly iconoclastic focus on the domestic lives of Muslim women at a time of tremendous political and social change in undivided India as well as her fairly inchoate politics towards same-sex desire as a legitimately subversive alternative to women's circumscriptions within patriarchal norms. Stylistically, as well, *begumātizubān* allows Chughtai to approach the question of women's desire (both same-sex and opposite-sex) in unexpected and oblique ways, and, for the reader, the conflicted interplay between the two narrative voices encapsulates the kinds of trauma attendant upon a range of dissident female sexualities. Ultimately, the story instantiates a social pedagogy of desire wherein power constructs itself concentrically around a centre – in this case, the dominant Nawab, the arch patriarch – whose sexually nonconformist ways (re)produce epiphenomenal effects that radially spread out and mark the lives of all the women in the story. It is, then, not in the character of Begum Jān that we ought to look for a redemptive figure of modernity ('the new woman,' as it were) but in the stripling, fragile figure of the child narrator who, in defiance of her own mother's parenting, can think of an egalitarian, open relationship with her brothers and their male friends (instead of only 'collecting *aashiqs*') and who, even at her most terrified, gathers courage and speaks up ('I spoke with courage, but no one heard me!')[81]

In her own life, Chughtai spiritedly embraced her self-fashioning as an assertive, argumentative girl growing up in a largely liberal, but also always gendered, family.[82] She made her own educational choices, had many male friends, eventually marrying for love (rather than by family injunction), and continued with Manto a long, enduring friendship based on equality and mutual admiration (one that did not preclude confrontation and frequent arguments), exhibiting a kind of modernity that was vibrant, full-bodied, and profoundly creative. In 'Lihāf,' as Chughtai anatomizes the ways in which desire exerts its dark power – unequally, hierarchically, even traumatically – upon women and children, we are made privy to a formative historical moment in colonial time and space, when/where the narrative of identity formation (in which Begum Jān is often read as the story's figure of feminist emancipation) is also undermined by its embeddedness in the brutal and intersecting battleground of patriarchal domination and class exploitation, one in which Begum Jān is both a victim and an actant. The unnamed adult narrator is, in significant structural ways, Begum Jān's converse, and as we read *her* memory-laden tale, her charged rendition of a traumatic moment of child sexual abuse at the hands of a woman she had come to trust and admire (that is also a pivotal moment in her own fraught self-fashioning) sits uneasily with Begum Jān's expropriating agency, whose libidinal force swamps questions of consent and reciprocity and ultimately attenuates what is 'feminist' about the epistemology of her *lihāf*, as it were. In the final analysis, the dreaded swaying of the elephant that haunts the narrator every time she thinks of a *lihāf* is the dance not of the liberated modern woman but of her shadowy, agonistic other.

Notes

1. For this essay, I consulted four English translations of 'Lihāf' and each in-text quotation has an endnote that provides the name of the translator and relevant page number. The use of multiple translations alerts us to the ways in which translational choices steer interpretation and make possible certain kinds of readings while closing others.
2. See "Autobiographical Fragments," (trans. from Urdu by M. Asaduddin) excerpted from Chughtai's autobiography *Kāghazi hai Pairāhan* (2004) where she dramatizes how the news of the obscenity trial reached her and how she and Manto handled the courtroom visits with humour and aplomb.
3. Khanna, "Gender, Self-representation and Sexualized Spaces," 52–3.

4. See Lambert-Hurley, "To Write of the Conjugal Act," 158–161 for a concise discussion of 'female sexual expression' in Muslim women's autobiographical writings at the beginning of the twentieth century – a socioliterary background pivotal to understanding the writings of Chughtai. See also Qureshi's excellent survey piece 'Twentieth-century Urdu Literature' where he traces the many literary and socialist movements that radically shaped the face of Urdu writings in the twentieth century (329–62).
5. A 2019 film adaptation of *Lihāf* by Indian filmmaker Rahat Kazmi, which debuted at Cannes Film Festival, is another example of how Chughtai's story has been re-made in ways that highlight its appeal for LGBTQ audiences but denude it of its trenchant class critique. See Zoovia Hamiduddin, 'Misunderstanding *Lihaaf*' for an eloquent critique of the film's poster.
6. Priyadarshini, "Lihaaf," 68.
7. Asaduddin, "Alone on Slippery Terrain," 85.
8. Tellis, "The Corporeal Aesthetic," 135.
9. Chughtai writes: 'I went to Aligarh after a long time passed. The thought of the Begum who was the subject of my story made my hair stand on end. She had already been told that "Lihāf" was based on her life. We stood face to face during a dinner. I felt the ground under my feet receding. She looked at me from her big eyes that conveyed excitement and joy. Then she cruised through the crowd, leaped at me and took me in her arms. Drawing me to one side, she said, "Do you know I divorced the Nawab and married a second time? I've got a pearl of a son, by God's grace." I felt like throwing myself into someone's arms and crying my heart out. I couldn't restrain my tears though, in fact, I was laughing loudly. She invited me to a fabulous dinner. I felt fully rewarded when I saw her flower-like boy. *I felt he was mine as well. A part of my mind, a living product of my brain. An offspring of my pen.*' ('Autobiographical Fragments', 35; my italics).
10. See Metcalf, "Islamic Reform," 194–5 and Deutsch, *Muslim Women*, 19–31 for a wider understanding of *adab* as an integral part of the discourse surrounding the familial culture and the spiritual training of a 'good' Muslim.
11. The opening description alluding to an unreliable memory of times past – *bītī huī duniyā ke pardon mein* – ('Lihāf', *Pratinidhi Kahāniyān*, 81) is rendered thus by different translators: 'the dark crevasses of the past' (Hameed 5); 'the veiled world of the past' (Dulai and Coppola 195); 'the labyrinth of times past' (Asaduddin 36).
12. Chughtai writes: 'They were not able to put their finger on any word in the story that would prove their point [of obscenity]. After a good deal of reflection, one of them said: 'This phrase . . . "drawing lovers" is obscene.' 'Which word is obscene, "draw" or "lover"?' The lawyer asked. 'Lover,' the witness replied a little hesitantly. 'My lord, the word "lover" has been used by great poets most liberally. It is also used in *naats*, poems written in praise of the Prophet . . . ' ('Autobiographical Fragments' 34).
13. See Tanika Sarkar 190–91 for 'the new woman' in colonial Bengal. See also Tharu and Lalita 144–5 for a definition of 'the new woman' in the context of Urdu writing as summing up the figures of Rashid Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, and Razia Sajjad Zaheer in the Progressive movement who 'questioned social restrictions and began to assert [themselves] in a male world' (144).
14. Srinivasan, "Reading literary justice," 108.
15. Khanna, "Gender, Self-representation and Sexualized Spaces," 51.
16. I have written elsewhere of Chughtai's sensitivity to the issue of class-based exploitation: in her memoirs, *Kāghazī hai Pairāhan*, she wrote: 'When I had to deal with the wider, bigger world, I realized that upper-lower caste, religions and races are all a form of hypocrisy; the reality is the class, the rich and the poor' (qtd. in Mohan).
17. Sirajuddin, "Lihāf," 118.
18. Ibid., 118.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 120.
22. Hameed, "Lihāf," 6.
23. Tellis "The Corporeal Aesthetic," 135.
24. Mitra, ''There is No Sin in Our love," 317.
25. Sirajuddin, "Lihāf", 122.
26. Ibid., 122.
27. Hameed, "Lihāf", 10–11.
28. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 149.
29. Hameed, "Lihāf", 8.
30. Ibid., 7–8.
31. Ibid.
32. Sirajuddin, "Lihāf", 119.
33. Ibid., 120.
34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., 125.
36. Ibid., 123–4; my italics.
37. Ibid., 124.
38. Ibid., 117; my italics.
39. Ibid.
40. Hameed, "Lihāf", 10.
41. Sirajuddin, "Lihāf", 121.
42. Ibid., 122.
43. Ibid., 121.
44. Asaduddin, "The Quilt", 85.
45. Sirajuddin, "Lihāf", 121.
46. Ibid., 121.
47. Strean, "Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse," 465.
48. Chughtai had read Freud but remained wary: 'I could not bring complete faith to it. There is some fraud in Freud. My mind always has a nagging doubt. No matter how great an intellectual it is, I am never fond of giving blind trust. I don't know what sort of habit it is that first I always search for loopholes in their work. Before compatibility, we should always take stock of all the incompatibilities . . . maybe the first word my mouth ever uttered was "why", although this "why" has landed me in a lot of trouble.' (qtd. in Katyal).
49. Sirajuddin, "Lihāf," 117; my italics.
50. Ibid., 118; my italics.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 122; my italics.
53. Ibid., 125.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 126; my italics.
56. Dulai and Coppola, 'The Quilt', 195.
57. Sirajuddin, 'Lihāf' 121; my italics.
58. Ibid., 125; my italics.
59. In an interview for *Mahfil* in 1972, Chughtai says: 'You know, when I first wrote "Lihāf," this thing [lesbianism] was not discussed openly. We girls used to talk about it and we knew there was *something like it, but we didn't know the whole truth* . . . When I wrote on this subject, I thought – how stupid of me! - that this was something only women did. I thought that men always went to prostitutes, but because girls can't go to prostitutes, they do this. Really, I was very stupid at the time. *I didn't know about it because no one ever discussed it*. They might discuss sex, but not this aspect of it, *perversion*' ('*Mahfil* interviews Chughtai', 170–1; my italics). See also Gopal, *Literary Radicalism*, 66–7.
60. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 151.
61. Hameed, 'Lihāf', 5.
62. Ibid., 8–9.
63. Ibid., 9.
64. Ibid., 11.
65. The All India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA or PWA, for short) was formed in 1936 and held its first meeting in Lucknow, which Chughtai attended (she was doing her B.A. at the time). The PWA manifesto described the Association's aims in this way: 'It is the duty of Indian writers to give expression to the changes in Indian life and to assist the spirit of progress in the country by introducing scientific rationalism in literature. They should undertake to develop an attitude of literary criticism which will discourage the general reactionary and revivalist tendencies on questions like family, religion, sex, war, and society' (qtd. in Malik 651). Chughtai turned away from the programmaticism of PWA's ideology, proclaiming instead 'I have never written on hearsay, never according to any set rules, and never have I followed the orders of any party or the Anjuman [Association]. Independent thinking has always been my nature and still is' (qtd in Gopal 69).
66. Qtd. in Jalil, 'Literary voyeurism'.
67. See '*Mahfil* interviews Chughtai' where Chughtai recounts the names of some members of the PWA who supported her during the 'Lihāf' court controversy, while many others stayed silent or condemned her (172–3).
68. Patel, *Lyrical Movements*, 115.
69. Gopal, *Literary Radicalism*, 68; 74.
70. See Gopal, *Literary Radicalism*, 88 for a discussion of Chughtai's 'exasperated and forceful critique' of the Progressive critic, Ebadat Barelvi, on the question of the provenance of 'literary socialism' as separate from that of working-class socialism.
71. Patel, *Lyrical Movements*, 74.
72. Between the four English translations I use, the last line as Chughtai originally wrote it is kept in only one – the one by Hameed; it is not there in the translations by Asaduddin, Sirajuddin, and Dulai and Coppola. In *Urdu*

Ke Bihtarin Afsane, the Urdu edition printed by Indian Academy as well as in the Hindi version *Pratinidhi Kahaniyan* published in 1988, this line, in accordance with Manto's criticism, is absent. Sirajuddin provides a gloss in the preface to his translation of the story that Hameed's version alone so far is faithful to 'how the story ended when it first appeared in 1942, in *Adab-e-Latif* and in a collection of Chughtai short stories' and that subsequent to Manto's critique, the story has always appeared without the last sentence about the one lakh rupees (128).

73. Manto, "Ismat Chughtai", 204.
74. Ibid., 204–5; my italics.
75. Kumar, "Chughtai,"
76. Jalil, 'Literary voyeurism'.
77. "*Mahfil* Interviews Chughtai," 170.
78. Gopal *Literary Radicalism*, 66.
79. Katyal; my italics.
80. Gopal, *Literary Radicalism*, 72.
81. Hameed, "Lihāf," 12.
82. Gopal, *Literary Radicalism*, 68.

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