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Queer Writing in Indian Literature: An Analysis of Ismat Chughtai Works

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Abstract:

The term *queer* evokes a sense of unease as it refers to individuals whose sexual orientations fall outside the dominant heterosexual framework. This includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, who have historically faced exclusion and invisibility within heteronormative societies. This paper seeks to explore queer identity, its evolution, and the struggles faced by queer individuals throughout history, culminating in the queer movement's emergence in the late 20th century, particularly in the context of gay rights in the United States. Additionally, the paper also highlights the representation of queer individuals in Indian literature, focusing on Ismat Chughtai's notable works like the short story *Lihaaf and the novel The Crooked Line*. These works prominently portray the homoerotic tendencies of their central characters, Begum Jan and her husband Nawab Saheb in *Lihaaf* and Samman and Ronnie Taylor in *The Crooked Line.*

Keywords: Homosexuality, Ismat Chughtai, Lihaaf, Lesbianism.

Introduction: -

The queer theory emerged in the early 1990s, pioneered by writers and activists as a response to studies addressing the discrimination and representation of women in literature alongside issues of queer sexuality. This theoretical framework delves into topics such as sexuality, the marginalisation of women and other underrepresented groups, and the dynamics of power inequality within society and culture. Since the 1970s, various authors have utilised deconstructionist criticism to examine issues related to sexual identity, mainly focusing on heteronormativity. This approach aims to challenge and dismantle the deeply entrenched beliefs and norms that privilege heterosexuality as the natural standard in society. Additionally,

it seeks to reconceptualise non-heteronormative sexualities as natural and legitimate expressions of human experience. The goal of queer theory is to challenge and transform the monolithic beliefs, taxonomies, and social norms surrounding sexuality, including an examination of the origins and development of these norms within society.

The term "queer" has historically been used as an umbrella term to describe sexual minorities who do not identify as heterosexual. Initially, it was employed in a negative context to label these individuals as abnormal or strange, reflecting societal discomfort and prejudice toward same-gender relationships. Its use began to shift in the late 20th century when activists and scholars reclaimed the term, reappropriating it as a symbol of inclusivity and resistance against heteronormativity. This redefinition allowed "queer" to encompass a broad range of sexual and gender identities, challenging conventional categories and promoting a more fluid understanding of identity. Some queer theorists define "queer" as something that defies societal norms, crosses boundaries, and resists being confined within the categories established by the majority. These theorists critique the politics and rules that maintain these boundaries, classify identities, and impose new norms, arguing that such structures limit and exclude diverse expressions of sexuality and gender. The concept of queer sexuality is relatively recent. It is used to describe behaviours or identities that do not fit neatly into the existing categories of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. The term began to be adopted as a self-identifier in the 1990s, with the "Q" for queerness or queer identity becoming part of the acronym LGBT in 1996.

Scholars and activists began using the term "queer" in the late 1980s to foster unity within the community and create a distinct identity. This label was embraced by those who did not want to conform to the gender identities and sexual orientations dictated by society, opting for "queer" as a more inclusive and ambiguous alternative to the traditional LGBT categories. However, queer theorists acknowledge that the term "queer" cannot always be fully aligned with its theoretical definition. While it is used to signify individual identity shaped by the interaction of psychological processes and cultural influences, the theory itself may not be fully grasped or applied in practice. This recognition highlights the complexity and fluidity of queer theory, which resists a single, unified interpretation and allows for continuous evolution in understanding. In the introduction to *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities* by Teresa de Lauretis, the term "queer" is recognised as having an advantage over the term "gay" when referring to minority gender and sexual identities. Unlike "gay," which is often associated with the experiences of white men, "queer" avoids such limiting associations and provides a broader, more inclusive framework. For many individuals within bisexual and transgender

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communities, "queer" offers a more promising identity compared to the categories of "gay," "lesbian," or "homosexual," which may not fully capture their experiences of isolation and alienation. These traditional labels can fall short when it comes to addressing the complexities and intersections of sexuality and gender norms. "Queer" thus serves as a more flexible and encompassing term that can better represent diverse identities and the challenges faced by those who do not conform to mainstream categorisations.

Epistemology of the Closet, published by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in 1990, served as a foundational text that laid the groundwork for the development of queer theory. Although Sedgwick did not use the term "queer" explicitly in her work, she provided a critical framework for understanding how queer theory would evolve and operate, particularly about minority sexual and gender identities. Sedgwick argued that a key interpretative approach to understanding Western culture is examining how identities within the LGBT community are managed—specifically, through the dynamics of disclosure and concealment. This exploration of the "closet" as both a metaphor and a social reality highlighted how the tension between visibility and invisibility shapes individual experiences and broader cultural norms and power structures. This insight was crucial in establishing a new way of thinking about identity, sexuality, and the social constructs that support or suppress them, ultimately contributing to the emergence of queer theory as a critical field. In 1993, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick published *Tendencies*, which included the influential essay "Queer and Now." In that article, Sedgwick argues that "queer" represents a type of failure to conform to conventional identity elements and practices of gender and sexuality. These practices are often seen as naturally aligned with a person's sexual anatomy, suggesting that queerness is defined by its resistance to these norms and its deviation from what is considered inevitable or "natural."

Additionally, Sedgwick posits that "queer" is a performative term, emphasising that it depends on an individual's choice and actions to be recognised as an expression of queerness. This notion echoes Judith Butler's ideas in *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which she defines gender as performative. According to Butler, gender identity is not an innate or fixed attribute but constructed through repeated actions and choices. Sedgwick's interpretation aligns with this view by framing queer identity as an active, performative assertion that challenges established norms and emphasises the fluid, choice-based nature of identity.

According to Sedgwick, queer transcends established boundaries and does not fit into the categories traditionally associated with sexuality or other socially accepted identity classifications. It cannot be regarded as synonymous with "gay" or "lesbian" terms, as queer encompasses a broader, more fluid understanding of identity that resists conventional labels.

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This perspective emphasises that queer is not just an identity but a mode of understanding that challenges and deconstructs fixed categories, highlighting how identities are socially constructed and maintained.

The emergence of queer theory can be traced back to its connections with gay and lesbian studies, as it explores concepts related to those fields. What is significant about this development is the relatively recent emergence of these studies themselves. Gay and lesbian studies gained traction in the mid-1980s, driven by the broader cultural and academic movements advocating for the recognition and examination of marginalised sexual identities. The roots of these studies lie in feminist theory, which provided a framework for challenging traditional gender roles and examining power dynamics. Feminism laid the groundwork for questioning normative structures and exploring the intersections of gender, sexuality, and identity—paving the way for queer theory to expand the conversation and address the limitations of existing labels and categories. Queer theory primarily explores the distinctions and relationships between gender, sex, and desire. While the term "queerness" is often associated with bisexuality, as well as gay and lesbian identities, it also extends to the analysis of a broader range of topics. These include intersex bodies and identities, cross-dressing, gender ambiguity, and gender-affirming surgeries. By examining these subjects, queer theory seeks to challenge conventional understandings of gender and sexuality and highlight the complexities and fluidity of identity. It also questions the social norms and categories that shape and restrict people's experiences and expressions of gender and sexual diversity.

A significant part of queer theory's development was rooted in observing and critiquing the limitations and weaknesses of traditional identity politics, which often focused on self-identity as a fixed and coherent category. Rather than solely defining specific identities, queer theory takes a critical approach that aligns with the concept of "geotechnics" in technical studies—an approach that emphasises the interconnections, systems, and dynamics that influence identity and culture rather than focusing on isolated or static categories.

Queer theory, as defined by theorists, is a redefined term used to study non-compliance with established standards, norms, and perceived or accepted ways of doing things. In the context of sexuality, "queer" refers to behaviours that do not conform to societal and political norms and includes the populations of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Queer theory serves as a tool for exploring ways to create an identity for the LGBT community, which has long been marginalised and excluded by mainstream society and cultural norms. Queer theorists critique social practices and essentialist beliefs that reinforce traditional identities and aim to integrate oppressed groups into the broader social fabric. By collaborating

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with writers, activists, and other advocates, queer theorists seek to bring recognition and create opportunities for the queer community. Their overarching goal is to foster an environment where individuals can express their identities freely and live according to their terms.

Queerness represents a diverse spectrum encompassing all sexual and gender minorities who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender. Traditionally, the term "queer" has been associated with something unusual or unconventional, often referring to homosexuality. Homosexuals are individuals attracted to people of the same sex or gender. Queer identity not only highlights deeply personal experiences but also carries a bold political stance, challenging the dominance of heteronormative values embedded within patriarchal societies. The term "queer" gained prominence in the United States during the 1990s, emerging as a rallying point for the gay community. It quickly became a powerful movement advocating for freedom and empowerment, especially for LGBT individuals of colour. However, in many countries, including India, queer individuals have had to navigate legal and societal barriers that restrict the expression of their desires. Under British rule, laws such as the sodomy law criminalised any sexuality deviating from heterosexual norms, leading to legal persecution. This was codified in India under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalised male homosexuality while neglecting lesbian identities. In socio-political and religious contexts, such laws became tools to control and suppress queer desires, making the open expression of queerness highly restrictive.

Queerness in Indian Literature: -

In India, queer sexuality has been a topic of discussion since ancient times, yet its expression today continues to face a dilemma akin to Hamlet's "To be or not to be." India's diversity, encompassing culture, religion, and ethnicity, significantly shapes its varied sexual identities. This diversity often results in conflicts and complexities surrounding sexuality and gender. Unlike Western societies, where discussions about sexual orientation and identity are more open and structured—thanks to contributions from thinkers like Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*), Michel Foucault (*History of Sexuality*), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Epistemology of the Closet*)—Indian society generally gives less importance to an individual's sexual orientation or gender classification.

However, India has a longstanding recognition of the "third gender," known as *Hijra*, who are considered neither entirely male nor female. Hinduism ascribes unique spiritual powers to *Hijras*, granting them the ability to bestow blessings or curses. Ancient texts such as the *Narada Smriti* and *Sushruta Samhita* describe homosexuals, bisexuals, transgender, and

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intersex individuals as part of this "third gender." While some Vedic scriptures characterise them as men with feminine qualities, often equating them to homosexual men or gender-fluid individuals, the concept of gender fluidity and non-heteronormative identities has been integral to Indian culture since ancient times.

Despite this historical acknowledgement, queer people in India continue to face significant stigma and hostility. Fear of social rejection often prevents them from openly expressing their sexuality. Nonetheless, queerness finds deep roots in Hindu mythology, where narratives of gender fluidity and alternative sexualities are prevalent. Mythological figures like *Ardhanarishvara*, a composite deity merging Shiva (male) and Parvati (female), symbolise the union of masculine (*Purusha*) and feminine (*Prakriti*) energies, emphasising their inseparability. Similarly, *Lakshmi-Narayan* is another representation of this fusion.

Gender transformation and cross-dressing also appear in Indian epics like the "*Mahabharata*". For example, Shikhandi is born female but later transforms into a male eunuch to fulfil their destiny. Another example is Arjuna, who temporarily assumes the form of "*Brihannala"*, a eunuch, during his incognito year (*Agyatvas*) to remain unrecognised. This transformation occurred after the celestial nymph Urvashi cursed him for rejecting her advances. During this period, Arjuna taught music and dance to Princess Uttara, illustrating how queerness has been embedded in Indian mythology, albeit often concealed under layers of symbolism. While such myths and legends reflect India's cultural acceptance of fluid identities in the past, the conservative fabric of modern Indian society continues to stigmatise queer expression, creating barriers to open acceptance and freedom. Queer sexuality has been a recurring theme in Indian literature since ancient times. One of the most prominent examples comes from the *Mahabharata*, which tells the story of Amba, the eldest daughter of the king of Kashi. After being wronged by Bhishma, she is reborn as Shikhandi, a eunuch, to seek revenge and ultimately bring about Bhishma's downfall. Similarly, Tamil versions of the *Mahabharata* recount the story of Lord Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, who assumes the form of Mohini and marries Aravan.

In modern retellings, Indian mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik's "*Shikhandi: And Other Tales, They Don't Tell You"* (2014) compiles thirty stories from Indian mythology that highlight queer characters, themes, and narratives. Additionally, the "*Kama Sutra"*—an ancient treatise on love and relationships—describes homosexual practices, categorising men into masculine and feminine types of homosexuals. These masculine types are described as having robust physiques but small beards and Mustaches, while the feminine types are depicted as dressing

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like women. Historically, these individuals often took up professions such as masseurs, barbers, or prostitutes.

In contemporary Indian literature, queer voices have found expression in works like Ashwini Sukthankar's "*Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India", published in* 1999. This anthology, the first of its kind in the country, explores the richness and diversity of lesbian experiences through fiction, poetry, essays, and autobiographies. It sheds light on the hidden, suppressed, and triumphant stories of lesbians across India. The anthology addresses the construction of lesbian identity within the Indian context, celebrating the courage, sensuality, humour, and vulnerability of being lesbian. It stands as a landmark in the field of queer literature in India. However, the reception of queerness in modern Indian literature differs significantly from its depiction in ancient texts. While ancient literature often integrated queer themes as part of mythology and cultural narratives, contemporary literature still faces challenges in achieving widespread acceptance, reflecting the ongoing societal struggle to embrace queer identities.

Representation of Queerness in Ismat Chughtai Works

The present paper delves into queer identity and its representation in Indian English literature, focusing on Ismat Chughtai's notable works. Ismat Chughtai belongs to modern Urdu literature. She has played a dynamic role in Urdu short story and fiction writing. She was born in Utter Pradesh in 1911. After receiving primary and secondary education in her hometown, she moved to Aligarh to pursue higher education. Where she graduated and started her career as a school inspector. During her stay in Aligarh, she met with Rashid Jahan, a professional doctor associated with the Progressive Writers Movement. She motivated Chughtai and forced her to associate with the movement and write on progressive themes. Ismat also attended the first Progressive Writers Organisation conference in Lucknow in 1936. She distinguished herself as a prominent writer of marginalised, disenfranchised, and downtrodden. Chughtai always used to write on taboo subjects like class discrimination and the exploitation of women under patriarchal institutions. With all these candid impressions about feminine responsiveness, she is well-recognised as a fearless writer.

Her works mainly deal with patriarchy, femineity and other social issues. Her story, *Lihaaf*, also depicts the same dilemma. The protagonist of the story also suffers due to these unfavourable obstacles. It challenges conventional attitudes towards queer individuals during colonial times. Its depiction of the homoerotic relationship between Begum Jan and her servant, Rabbu, sparked outrage and accusations of blasphemy and immorality. Chughtai was

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summoned to the Lahore court in 1944, but instead of apologising, she defended her work and ultimately won the case.

The Quilt explores the intimate dynamics between two women within a repressive marital structure. Drawing from Chughtai's childhood experiences, the story mirrors the young narrator's confusion about the events she witnessed. Published in 1942, the text emerged at a time when queerness was regarded as perverse in both Victorian England and its colonies. Influenced by prevailing moral norms, Chughtai's portrayal lacks overt sympathy for queer characters but subtly critiques societal hypocrisy. The narrative centres on Begum Jan, trapped in an emotionally barren marriage to Nawab Saheb, an aristocrat more interested in young men than his wife. For Nawab, Begum Jan is merely a status symbol, confined to a life devoid of emotional or physical fulfilment. While he neglects her completely, he still imposes restrictions on her mobility and autonomy, ensuring her isolation within the zenana (women's quarters). However, Begum Jan is no submissive victim. Chughtai presents her as a strong, rebellious figure who rejects the patriarchal expectations of passivity and docility.

Denied affection by her husband, Begum Jan finds solace and liberation in Rabbu's sensuous massages. These acts, though never explicitly sexual in the text, suggest an intimate bond between the two women. The zenana, traditionally a symbol of femininity, becomes a space of resistance where Begum Jan explores her suppressed desires. This transformation of the zenana into a queer space challenge the heteronormative and patriarchal confines of marriage. The Quilt (*lihaaf*), under which Begum Jan and Rabbu's relationship is concealed, serves as a metaphor for suppressing female desires. It symbolises the societal need to obscure and deny female sexuality, especially queer sexuality, which was deemed taboo. While Nawab Saheb's homoerotic interests are tolerated and overlooked by society, Begum Jan's relationship with Rabbu becomes a subject of scandal, exposing the hypocrisy of patriarchal norms.

Chughtai's subtle narrative avoids explicit descriptions of physical intimacy, instead employing metaphorical imagery, such as the Quilt and the elephant, to convey Begum Jan's desires. The young narrator's confusion reflects broader societal discomfort and ignorance regarding homosexuality. This restrained depiction, while sparking controversy, also critiques the double standards applied to male and female homosexuality. Though *Lihaaf* has often been categorised as a queer text, its focus extends beyond sexuality to highlight the systemic oppression of women's bodies and desires within patriarchal structures. Rabbu's role as a healer for Begum Jan underscores the story's nuanced portrayal of female solidarity and emotional fulfilment rather than an overtly queer narrative. Ultimately, *Lihaaf* challenges societal norms

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by exposing the inequalities faced by women and the selective morality imposed by hegemonic systems.

Chughtai's most famous and semi-autobiographical novel, *Teerhi Lakeer* (The Crooked Line), depicts the complexities of a young girl named Shamman in her life. The incidents with the protagonist were the same as those of author Ismat Chughtai, who also suffered through these obstacles in her life. The novel *Teerhi Lakeer*, translated into English as "The Crooked Line" by Tahira Naqvi, reflects on the growth and development in the life of a young and energetic girl, whose life experiences depict the socio-cultural and psycho-sexual determinants that administrate the development of female understanding. The novel portrays the emotional and physical detachments of the traditional household against which the main character of the novel, Shamman, feels suffocated. Chughtai very skilfully depicts how sexuality is experienced but never explained. It asserts the fact that women are oppressed by other women. Shaman was the most progressive character of Ismat Chughtai, exhibiting the role of new middle-class Indian women.

Chughtai used to review Shamman's psyche and her relations with her family and society. Chughtai, from the beginning of the novel, introduces Shamman to her readers as the most unwanted child born in a family. Though she is a neglected child, she is very brilliant and willing to surpass all the bondage set by society for women. Through her respective characters, Chughtai questioned the Progressive Writers' writing and confused the divisions between inconsistent terms like Homosexualism and Lesbianism. The difference exists that lesbianism does not always exist in same-sex genital intercourse. At the same time, queer is more wide-ranging in its sense, proclaiming conventional sexual normativity that includes unusual behavioural activities in society. Shamman's sexual and romantic attractions occur instinctively, which are not actually gender specific but the continuity of her empathy.

Shaman's silly longing for her wet nurse Una, whose feeding breast developed into a sensory object of nourishment, bound her to become an allured seducer of this substitute mother. As the novel develops further, we imagine a straining of same-sex preference, witnessing the love triangle that develops between Najma, Shamman and Saadat. So, gender is not an issue until much later, when Najma has left, and Shaman's relationship with Saadat has dissolved. Later on, Shamman exposed an interest towards her elder sister Manjhu, longing for her caress and making her humiliate by blatant into her bathroom. It is a true reflection of human behaviour in terms of sexual relationships. Chughtai always places female sexuality and their bodies at the epicentre of the domestic and political ground. This thinking about gender arrangement must have disturbed her, but she courageously fought for equality. This

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rebelliousness pushes her and leads her to enter in the same- sex love relations. Almost all three phases of the novel showed the apprehensions about the social and cultural constructions of gender, raising Shamans in the four-wall fence. Ismat's portrayal of Shamman is the exploration of early childhood experiences and the conditioning of the womanist psyche and a female's relationship with her body. She depicts that Women's psyche develops not through some instinctive return to the body but through social, political and financial challenges. The novel itself exhibits how Shamman Begum is herself a Tehri Lakeer, an ungendered contented who, from the unsolicited moment of her birth, counters to be straightforward into an unproblematic psycho-sexual subjectivity.

Ismat Chughtai, through this novel, depicts the emotional and physical aspects of a girl or woman who is suppressed in an orthodox society. Being a magnum opus and semi-autobiographical novel. It has some personal experiences as well as the condition of women in general in pre-independence India. Shaman, the novel's central character and protagonist, remains unstable throughout his journey. Finally, the novel ends with an open ending note, like Jane Eyre's.

Ismat Chughtai's contribution to the development of Urdu literature is profound and transformative. She boldly addressed subjects such as female sexuality and the emotional and psychological needs of women, themes considered taboo in her time, particularly within the context of middle-class Muslim households. As a feminist writer, Chughtai championed women's self-reliance and liberty while exposing the intersectional oppressions imposed by patriarchal structures in her stories. In her short story *Lihaaf*, Chughtai presents a homoerotic relationship within the constraints of a heteronormative framework. Despite this, the story is revolutionary, cementing her reputation as one of Urdu literature's most courageous, rebellious, and controversial writers. Through *Lihaaf*, Chughtai uncovers the hidden realities of women's bodies and desires, which patriarchal society seeks to suppress.

Conclusion:

In a nutshell, the primary purpose of queer literature is to explore sexual orientation about natural development, societal rules, and essentialist beliefs. It emerged alongside and was influenced by the radical gay politics of groups like Outrage and ACT UP, which sought to reclaim "queer" as a non-assimilationist label, one that emphasised resistance to mainstream acceptance and conformity. Queer theorists aimed to challenge and destabilise these traditional identity labels by reinforcing "queer" as an overarching term that could hold together different identities without being confined by them. By vividly portraying female desire, the story

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Lihaaf and the novel *Threei Lakeer* disrupted the socially constructed norms of gendered behaviour, challenging the male-dominated literary and cultural landscape. These works candid exploration of themes long silenced in "civilised" society sparked widespread outrage but also marked a pivotal moment in Urdu literature, where women's voices and experiences began to emerge unapologetically.

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