

Caste under the quilt

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A Dalit-Queer critique of *Lihaf* recovers a world of meaning lost in its translation, reminding us that desirability is shaped by caste.

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CRITIQUE

Ismat Chughtai's Urdu short story *Lihaf* (1942) is firmly part of the queer canon. Considered a seminal 20th century text about same-sex desire in South Asia, it is widely anthologised and makes a regular appearance in the English academy in university course modules such as 'Queer Literature', 'Gender and Writing,' and 'Literature and Sexuality'. Here, it has been read by generations of students and faculty, almost always only in the English translation, rather than in a comparative framework in both languages.

Set in late colonial north India, the story uses a first-person narratorial voice to describe the relationship between two women—Begum Jan and her household worker, Rabbu—through the eyes of a young girl. Begum Jan, the middle-aged, wasting wife of a Nawab who pays no attention to her despite all her efforts, eventually finds comfort and recourse in the *maalish*, the massage, from the hands of Rabbu. The young girl is a side-spectator to all this. What she actually sees happening between the two women behind the eponymous *lihaf*, the quilt, is never quite told but is richly breathed into the story's texture with a slew of indirections. The story ushered a storm when it was first published in the early 1940s in the Urdu literary journal *Adab-i-Latif* and has remained known for that early notoriety.

Of course many more have heard of the story than have read it. It is popular as a *queer story*, a scandalous one at that. Opinions such as the scholar Priyamvada Gopal's, when she writes that *Lihaf* "contains some of the most suggestive and sensual representations of homoeroticism in modern Indian fiction" (2005) is staple of the claims made for the story. Its queerness seems to be its *raison d'être* both in the way it is read and studied in the English academy and in the popular imagination, evidenced even when it is adapted cinematically, such as in Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), Abhishek Chaubey's *Dedh Ishqiya* (2014) and Rahat Kazmi's *Lihaf* (2019).

However, like most popular narratives, this one too has its unsaid secret. When we celebrate it as a queer story, it relies on a systematic forgetting of what the backbone of the story is — the everydayness of caste respectability. Caste respectability implies a world in which the perceived status of individuals and the social or cultural authority that they carry and practice is determined largely by their caste position.

Lihaf is a story *about* caste respectability and how it functions as a criterion about who is desirable and how. Desirability is not only arranged across the binary of gender—same-sex or opposite—but also, across the projected lines and rhetorics of caste. This has remained largely forgotten because the English translations of *Lihaf* over the years systematically mute the caste ecology of the text. They deliberately skip the caste slurs embedded in the text which provide the social locus of some of the key utterances and acts of worldbuilding in the text. If this were not the case, the proximity between Begum Jan and Rabbu would have been read as a difficult mixture of affection and touch on the one hand but also caste-based labour and servitude on the other. However, most readings ignore the latter.

In one instance of such a translation, when Begum Jan is seducing the child narrator of the text, she makes promises of gifts in an attempt to lure the child. It is in this instance that a crucial caste marker is visible in the Urdu original and systematically eroded from view in the English translations. Compare the original Urdu text (here reproduced in English transliteration) with its two popular translations, first, by M. Asaduddin and second, by Tahira Naqvi and Syeda S. Hameed, and note how the caste invective is explicitly invisibilized by all the three translators:

“Sunon to tumhari firakein kam ho gayi hain. Kal darzi ko de dunggi ki nayi see laaye. Tumhari amma kapde de gayi hain.”

“Vo lal kapde ki nahin banwaungi chamaron jaisi hai.” [*I won't get it done in that red cloth like those chamars.*] Main bakwas kar rahi thi aur mera haath na jaane kahan se kahan pahuncha. Baaton-baaton mein mujhe maalum bhi na hua. Begum Jan toh chitt leti theen arrey maine jaldi se haath kheench liya.” (italics ours)

Translation by Tahira Naqvi and Syeda S. Hameed, 1990, (italics ours)

“Listen, you don't have enough clothes. Tomorrow I will ask the tailor to make you a new frock. Your mother has left some material with me.”

“I don't want that cheap red material. It looks tacky.” I was talking nonsense while my hand roved the entire territory. I did not realise it but by now Begum Jan was flat on her back! Oh God! I quickly withdrew my hand.”

Translation by M. Asaduddin, 1999, (italics ours)

“Listen... you need some more frocks. I'll send for the tailor tomorrow and ask him to make new ones for you. Your mother has left some dress material.”

“I don't want that red material... It looks so cheap,” I was chattering, oblivious of where my hands traveled. Begum Jaan lay still... Oh God! I jerked my hand away.”

The translators eclipse the caste slur. They do not let the English readers encounter it and navigate the explicit caste economy of the text in which the associations of *cheapness* and *tackiness* are routed through and thought to be embodied in the caste figure of the *chamar*. This makes the English text peculiarly immune to a caste-based scrutiny by silencing its explicit caste evocation as abuse. This systematic forgetting of the caste ecology of the text allows an easy celebration of the story as a queer story, as if same-sex desire is the only force which animates its characters. It minimises its social resonances and lets caste remain the indirect sub-text of the story rather than its principal ordering device, concretized in a slur, distributing what counts as desirable and undesirable — “not the red clothes like those of the chamars.”

In one more instance, another caste slur has been deliberately silenced by the translators. The child narrator's disgust for Rabbu, which is spread throughout the story, is made evident when she calls her “*bhangan kahin ki...*” [*oh that bhangan!*] which Asaduddin translates as “Ugly woman!” and Naqvi and Hameed translate as “Filthy wench”. The child narrator cannot stomach the influence Rabbu has on Begum Jan and the proximity that she enjoys with her. The narrator's world reserves a special distaste for

Rabbu, who has been given the descriptors of being dark, carrying smallpox marks and a bad smell, having swollen nostrils, all of which also converge in another invective directed at her—a *chudail*, a witch.

What is lost when a translator translates “*bhangan*” as “ugly woman” or a “filthy wench”? Why invisibilize the active caste content of the phrase? Why take the caste sting out from the slur? When the name of a particular caste community—*bhangi*—is employed to carry vitriolic associations such as that of ugliness, filthiness, and allegedly having lax sexual morals (one of the archaic meanings of “wench”, apart from “a young woman,” is “a prostitute”), is it not important for the reader to read these associations through caste? When the caste content of the text is deliberately silenced, we allow it to occupy a socially rarefied texture in which associations of gender and sexuality can be made as if in a vacuum without other foundational social factors being actively considered. There is caste under this quilt and we would do well to underscore it, as the Urdu text does, despite years of incomplete, sanitised and erroneous translation, and teaching.

It is important to understand the larger social life that the text has acquired. When *Lihaf* reached the colonial courts under an obscenity case in the mid-1940s, the terms transacted in the courts were also those of caste respectability. The difficulty for those opposed to the story was to prove which particular word or phrase was obscene. When no such word could be definitively relied on—“*aashiq jama kar rahi theen*” [they were collecting lovers] was rejected because the word *aashiq* had an illustrious place in the Urdu *ghazal* and other religious verse. The final reasoning given by the prosecution was that it is not so much that particular words are obscene but for an educated woman from a decent household—“*sharif khandan ki taleemyafta aurat*”—to write about such things is condemnable, “*kabile-malamat*”. We are back to the social codings of caste. *Sharif khandan* is a dog whistle for an upper caste household. A caste-agnostic or caste-invisibilizing translation cannot help us get to the thickly socially-stratified world of the story.

The short story’s role as a mascot for queer or women’s writing, its easy iconicity in these realms, is dependent on unseeing the caste-reading of the story. It appears to be a story only of queer desire when the caste factor is systematically invisibilized from our view. A messier queerness would have begged a more grounded reading, taking into account the centrality of caste in the story. Instead, it has come to represent a sexual scandal in some circles and an easy caste-less queer curricular choice in others. Such an error of limited reading needs to be urgently corrected. A Dalit-Queer critique urges for this renewed reading of Chughtai’s text.

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