
Representing Marginalized Female Desire Through Narrative Strategies

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Abstract

The study aims to investigate how female sexuality and desire are socially constructed as “evil” and how women navigate patriarchal constraints to express their instincts in Urdu short story *Lihaf* by Ismat Chughtai. It examines the societal expectations placed on women and the consequences of deviating from these norms. This article applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to *Lihaf* by Ismat Chughtai, a work that explores the suppressed sexual desire of women and its expression within a male-dominated society. The research emphasizes the strategic use of figurative language and narrative techniques to both reveal and obscure female desire. Using Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework—textual, discursive practice, and social practice—the study analyses how linguistic choices and narrative strategies construct gendered power relations in the pre-partition South Asian context. The findings reveal that *Lihaf* foregrounds the exploitation and marginalization of women, offering critical insights into the relationship between language, power, and gender ideology. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how literary discourse negotiates female desire within patriarchal societies.

Keywords: Female Desire, Marginalized, Narrative Strategy, Discourse, Pakistani Literature

1.1 Introduction

Literature is a source by which social values and practices are explained, examined, and kept alive for coming generations. CDA, a three-dimensional framework developed by Norman Fairclough, provides an effective way of examining how a text discloses the relationship between power, ideology, and identity. If we conduct a deep study of the text *Lihaf*, we would gain complete knowledge of how language performs while ideologies are being formed.

In Urdu literature, *Lihaf* occupies a bold but controversial position as it talks openly about female sexuality, which is not normally addressed in a male-dominant society. With the publication of the story, intense outrage was provoked as it challenged the prevailing norms related to dominant gender in society. A child was deliberately made to tell the story because, being unaware of the things going on under the *Lihaf*, it becomes a complete text. It relies on metaphor, imagery, and signs so that the intensity of the allegations made could be minimized and accepted.

This study argues that by applying CDA, it becomes clear that Ismat Chughtai became successful not only in challenging the prevailing norms but also in touching the boundaries left untouched by writers in a patriarchal society.

1.2 Research Question

This study seeks to investigate the following question:

- How do narrative strategies in *Lihaf* shape the representation of female desire and power relations?

The research aims to explore the ways in which language, narrative strategies, and discourse contribute to the construction, negotiation, and resistance of patriarchal ideologies, particularly in the depiction of marginalized female desire.

2. Female Desire in Urdu Literature

Classic Urdu literature had women voices either muted or represented indirectly through metaphors and allegorical conventions. However, with the rise of the Progressive Writers' Association or Anjuman Tarraqi Pasand Mussanafin-e-Hind in 1930s, literature began addressing issues of class, gender, and inequality. Within this movement, the representation of female desire underwent a significant transformation. Ismat Chughtai is considered a central figure in articulating female desire with unprecedented cadour. Her work is known for bringing taboo subjects like female sexuality into public discourse.

Her short story *Lihaaf* (1942) is widely regarded as a landmark in Urdu literature for its portrayal of same-sex desire and the psychological dimensions of female sexuality. As the story centred around female experience and desire, Chughtai subverted heteronormative assumptions and patriarchal control over women's bodies (Jalal, 2014).

In South Asian literature, *Lihaf* is often perceived as controversial in a male-dominated society, where women are expected to remain pure and chaste regardless of their natural desires. Critics have primarily focused on the story's depiction of female sexuality, its confrontation with patriarchal norms, and the social outrage it provoked. According to Tahira Naqvi (2001), Chughtai's narrative talks boldly about the emotional and sexual deprivation of women within upper-class Muslim households, further explaining how desire may emerge in such a conservative environment. Naqvi further argues that the text's symbolism and indirect references may strengthen this view. From a feminist critical perspective, Asiya Siddiqui (2018) also highlights that female sexuality in Urdu fiction is often made acceptable through metaphors and euphemism, reflecting cultural drawbacks around explicit representation. Her analysis further shows that such narrative strategies are not only stylistic but also work as a protective shield that allows writers to address taboo themes without direct confrontation.

Feminist critics view *Lihaf* as a narrative about a woman deprived of her physical and emotional needs. When denied socially acceptable outlets, a woman may turn to means deemed morally transgressive, highlighting themes of repression, loneliness, and the politics of respectability. Such interpretations underscore the story's feminist impulse and its critique of patriarchal constraints. Scholars have noticed that Chughtai's narratives do not merely depict desire but also critique the social structures that suppress it. Her characters often navigate restrictive domestic environments where desire emerges as both a form of resistance and a source of conflict (Hashmi, 2006).

Critics have also explored Chughtai's narrative strategies, particularly the use of a child narrator. This technique, effective within a conservative sociocultural context, employs irony, silence, and indirect action as key narrative devices. Yet, much of this scholarship remains confined to literary stylistics rather than connecting with broader socio-discursive concerns.

Within CDA scholarship, Fairclough's three-dimensional model has been extensively applied to media discourse, political speeches, and institutional texts to reveal the interplay of language, power, and ideology. Although CDA has been employed in literary studies, its application to Urdu fiction—and *Lihaf* in particular—remains limited. Existing CDA-oriented analyses in the South Asian context tend to focus on overtly political texts, leaving literary texts largely underexplored. CDA demonstrates how literary language can negotiate censorship and social norms. Nevertheless, a comprehensive Faircloughian analysis that integrates textual, discursive, and social dimensions of *Lihaf* is still lacking.

3. Research Design and Analytical Framework

The study employs qualitative textual analysis. *Lihaf* was selected through purposive sampling due to its

controversial status in Urdu literature, particularly for its candid engagement with female sexuality. The analysis emphasizes themes of silence, desire, power, and social control. Relatively few scholars have analyzed the text through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), therefore by employing Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, this study addresses a methodological gap in existing scholarship. The present study contributes to this gap by offering a systematic CDA-based reading of *Lihaf*. By combining feminist insights with discourse analysis, it demonstrates that narrative strategies function not only as literary devices but also as discursive mechanisms that simultaneously reproduce and resist dominant gender ideologies.

The text was read multiple times to identify recurring linguistic patterns and discursive strategies. A gap between textual features and sociocultural norms was observed, demonstrating how *Lihaf* functions as a layered discourse concealing and revealing female desire.

4. Data analysis

The analysis is structured around Fairclough's three interrelated dimensions. At the micro-level, the study examines lexical choices, sentence structures, and Urdu expressions (e.g., ہاتھی کی پرچھائیں, رومان انگیز, جوتام, گرم لوہا, ہزار, گرم لوہا) that convey layered meanings. Metaphors such as ہاتھی کی پرچھائیں, گرم لوہا, گوری گورے, پتلی کمر, پتھر میں, کچی امنیہ کھٹی, پتھر میں جونک لگنا, نس سے مس نہ ہونا, شبلمی کرتوتیں, لحاف, معصوم نظر آنا, چرچر رکابی چاٹنے, allow covert communication of socially taboo subjects. For instance, the word "itching" is repeatedly mentioned and functions both as a euphemism and a metaphor. It refers to physical irritation, but contextually it symbolizes sexual desire. The phrase "moving lihaaf" is also used, which, although it appears normal, is further explained through "banti bigadti shaklein," suggesting activities taking place under the quilt. Furthermore, "kachhi amiya khatti" is used metaphorically; while its literal meaning refers to taste, it covertly suggests the fulfillment of sexual desire in a way that appears disturbing. The phrase "chirchir rakabi chaatne ki awaaz" refers to sounds heard at night, which actually indicate the activities occurring between Begum Jaan and Rabbu. The phrase "patli kamar" is also used in the text and indicates physical attraction. It represents bodily beauty and, in context, suggests physical desirability associated with a slim waist or a sexually desirable body figure.

Narrative strategies, including the child narrator, mediate the production and reception of the text. This perspective creates ambiguity and mitigates potential backlash in a patriarchal society. Cultural references, such as mismatched marriages and unfulfilled spousal needs, further reflect social constraints on female desire.

At the macro-level, the study situates the narrative within pre-partition South Asian society, examining norms regulating female sexuality and the social consequences of transgression. Gender power asymmetries and societal debates on morality and censorship have been analyzed to contextualize the story's representation of female desire. Symbolic objects such as the *lihaf*, moving shadows, and patterns in sentences convey intimacy between characters metaphorically. Phrases like "I thought" and "it seemed" reflect the child narrator's limited understanding.

The narrative strategy, particularly the child narrator, allows sensitive themes to be conveyed indirectly. Socially taboo relationships and unfulfilled desires are implied rather than explicitly described. The story critiques societal norms by showing emotional neglect in marriage, limited outlets for female desire, and the negotiation of socially constrained spaces.

The analysis reveals that *Lihaf* relies on euphemism, metaphors, and semantic ambiguity to depict female desire. The child narrator functions as a protective lens. Key metaphorical expressions in *Lihaf* serve to subtly expose suppressed realities and power dynamics within the narrative. پتھر میں جونک لگتی ہے، لیکن حاجی, صاحب تیس سے مس نہ ہوئے, metaphorically suggests that even an impossible or extraordinary event may occur, yet Haji Sahib remains completely unmoved and indifferent toward Begum Jaan, highlighting his emotional and physical detachment. Similarly, کچی امنیاں کٹی ہوتی ہیں, functions as an indirect warning to Begum Jaan,

implying that seeking fulfillment through immature or inexperienced partners will ultimately lead to disappointment. The expression *شب‌نمی کرتوتیں* carries a suggestive undertone, referring to the questionable activities associated with the young boys in Haji Sahib's madrassa, thereby hinting at the reasons behind his prolonged absence from home. Furthermore, the phrase *لحاف کا معصوم نظارہ* presents a striking contrast between day and night: during the day, the quilt appears harmless and innocent, while at night it transforms into a site of ambiguity, producing shifting shadows and suggestive shapes. This duality symbolizes hidden desires and the covert expression of female sexuality, which remains concealed under the veil of social respectability.

Discussion

The analysis of *Lihaf* reveals that language is used as a powerful tool that portrays the actual picture of society, particularly in relation to female desire and women's position. Through the application of the framework, it becomes clear that this text performs on all three levels—textual, discursive, and social—to both cover and discuss harsh realities.

At the textual level, the use of metaphor, euphemism, and ambiguity plays a major role, while *Lihaf* itself is used symbolically. It hides the relationship between Begum Jan and Rabbu. This indirect explanation reflects the boundaries set by society. Not only is the story told covertly, but the relationship is also hidden, following the norms and values of a male-dominant society. At the discursive practice level, we see an innocent child who witnesses and narrates the story. This is deliberately done by the writer to lessen the impact of the truth. This narrative choice makes it less questionable in society. The narrator lacks complete understanding of the events, so readers are allowed to make meaning according to their own understanding. At the social practice level, the story reflects the structure of a patriarchal society where women were expected to remain pure, no matter what cost they had to pay. Begum Jan, being neglected by her husband both physically and emotionally, results in the relationship between her and Rabbu. Her relationship shows how she copes with the challenges she faces as a woman.

Thus, we can say that the text represents the suppressed female voice, and the strategies show that linguistic and discursive choices systematically construct this representation. The text occupies a position where it challenges societal norms without making them clear and overt in a male-dominant society.

Conclusion

This study explores the representation of female desire and power relations in *Lihaf* by Ismat Chughtai through the lens of Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The use of metaphor, euphemism, and narrative strategies highlights themes that are conveyed in an ambiguous manner. Female desire is not openly expressed; for instance, Begum Jan's desire is symbolized through a persistent itching that can only be relieved by massage, which is performed exclusively by Rabbi. In this way, socially restricted themes—whether related to female desire or male negligence are discussed indirectly.

The study highlights the role of metaphors, lexical choices, settings, and the use of a child narrator in conveying female desire indirectly yet powerfully. Lexical selection, euphemism, and narrative positioning further shape the expression of suppressed sexuality. The research situates the text within its cultural, social, and historical constraints to explore broader gender ideologies. The use of a child narrator further minimizes the impact of these sensitive topics. *Lihaf* can thus be seen as a text that examines issues of gender, power, and representation. The application of CDA provides a deeper understanding of how language functions to both conceal and question prevailing societal norms.

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