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Behind the Quilt: Child Sexual Grooming, Silence, and the Child Narrator in Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt"

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Abstract

Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" is usually read through female desire, patriarchal neglect, and same-sex intimacy within the enclosed world of the zenana. These readings remain necessary, but they often leave the child narrator at the edge of the discussion. Her experience deserves closer attention than it has so far received. Building on child-centred readings of Lihāf, it argues that Chughtai does not present the child's violation as a sudden, isolated event. The story traces a slower movement: the child is placed inside Begum Jaan's domestic world, drawn into affection and admiration, exposed to adult sexuality, involved in bodily boundary-crossing, and then left with fear she cannot name. Using child sexual grooming as a literary-critical lens, the article reads the quilt as a figure that both conceals and exposes harm. Begum Jaan is not reduced to a simple villain; she remains a woman wounded by patriarchy, even as she becomes implicated in the child's violation. The article argues for a trauma-aware reading of "The Quilt" that can hold its feminist, queer, and child-centred dimensions together.

Keywords: Ismat Chughtai; *Lihāf*; The Quilt; child sexual grooming; child sexual abuse; child narrator; Begum Jaan; silence; domestic space; female perpetrator; trauma; Indian literature; queer reading; patriarchal neglect; literary criticism

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1. Introduction: Re-reading the Child Behind the Quilt

Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" holds a major place in modern Indian literary history because of the risk it takes with female desire, patriarchal neglect, and same -sex intimacy inside the zenana. First published in 1942, the story belongs to a wider moment of Urdu literary radicalism, when writers were pressing hard against inherited ideas of gender, domesticity, modernity, and social reform. Priyamvada Gopal places Chughtai within this larger progressive context, where gender was central to debates on nation, modernity, and literary change in late colonial India (Gopal). In "The Quilt," Begum Jaan is neglected by a Nawab who has little interest in her as a wife. Her loneliness and bodily deprivation have therefore made her a powerful figure in feminist readings of the story. The quilt itself has often been read as a sign of concealed female desire and queer intimacy. Geeta Patel puts this directly when she writes that "LiHaaf sexualizes the zenana," turning the enclosed women's quarters into a charged site of desire, secrecy, and subversion (Patel 174). Aqdas Aftab also reads the obscenity surrounding *Lihāf* in relation to sexuality, social taboo, and the difficulty of naming female same-sex desire in colonial and postcolonial literary culture (Aftab 29).

These readings matter, but they do not account for everything the story does. "The Quilt" is not narrated by Begum Jaan. It comes to us through the memory of a woman recalling what she saw and felt as a child. That child is not just an innocent observer of adult secrets. She is left in Begum Jaan's care and slowly drawn into a world of intimacy, luxury, fear, and bodily confusion. The adult narrator's memory of the quilt as something "imprinted" on her mind "like a blacksmith's brand" suggests that the incident has not passed away as a childish misunderstanding (Chughtai 7). It remains a wound carried into adulthood. What makes this wound significant for literary criticism is not only its presence but the narrative strategy through which Chughtai renders it: not through accusation or overt disclosure, but through the layered, hesitant texture of a child's remembered experience.

This article does not deny Begum Jaan's suffering. Chughtai shows her as a woman trapped in a loveless marriage, denied affection, companionship, and sexual fulfilment. Yet Begum Jaan's suffering cannot be allowed to absorb the children. When her unmet desire turns toward the narrator, the story moves into a more troubling ethical space. Desire is no longer only a question of repression or resistance; it becomes tied to power, age, dependence, and consent.

Much of the scholarship on "The Quilt" has focused on lesbian desire, queer symbolism, patriarchal hypocrisy, and feminist resistance. The grooming pattern in Begum Jaan's relationship with the narrator has received less sustained attention. Anupama Mohan's "'No One Heard Me!': Sexual Self-Fashioning and the Child in 'Lihāf'" is an important exception, since it foregrounds the child narrator's molestation and studies Chughtai's movement between adult memory and child perception (Mohan 467). Where Mohan illuminates the fact of the child's violation, there is still room to trace the narrative architecture through which that violation is

prepared and concealed. This article builds on Mohan's child-centred reading but shifts the emphasis from the fact of molestation to the process through which the story stages the child's vulnerability. Drawing on Winters, Kaylor, and Jeglic's work on child sexual grooming, it reads "The Quilt" through the linked movements of access, isolation, trust-building, desensitisation, boundary-crossing, and silence. Chughtai does not simply depict a disturbing incident involving the child narrator. She shows how harm takes shape gradually, under the cover of domestic intimacy, affection, luxury, and cultural silence.

2. Grooming as an Interpretive Framework

Child sexual grooming offers a productive framework for reading the relationship between Begum Jaan and the child narrator in "The Quilt". "Compared to children with exclusively aggressive problem behaviour, children with sexual problem behaviour come more often from incomplete families with no male parent, have experienced more psychological and physical violence and have been more often victims of sexual abuse" (Elsner et al. 222). Winters, Kaylor, and Jeglic define sexual grooming as "the deceptive process used by sexual abusers to facilitate sexual contact with a minor while simultaneously avoiding detection" (932). Their model includes several movements that may appear separately or together: selecting a vulnerable child, gaining access, isolating the child, building trust, desensitising the child to sexual content or physical contact, and preventing disclosure after abuse has occurred (Winters, Kaylor, and Jeglic 928, 932). Chughtai's story lends itself to such a reading because the harm experienced by the narrator is never stated in plain terms. It appears through fear, bodily unease, silence, memory, and the child's partial understanding of adult intimacy.

The terms used in this article need some care. Grooming refers here to the slow process through which a child's vulnerability is created, noticed, and exploited.

> Child sexual abuse is common within the family context but often underreported, especially in same-sex incestuous cases. The delay in disclosure is in part due to the sexual grooming strategies, which have been explored in many studies. However, sexual grooming is difficult to identify in the context of intra-familial sexual abuse, and its effects on victims need to be thoroughly researched. (Brodar Kaplja 1006)

It is different from the final act of abuse. Boundary-crossing marks the earlier movement beyond appropriate emotional or physical limits, especially when affection, care, or play begins to turn invasive. Violation or molestation refers to the more direct harm done to the child's bodily autonomy. Trauma is used more narrowly, for the psychic afterlife of the incident: the way the quilt returns in memory, long after the child has left Begum Jaan's room.

Applying this framework does not mean treating the story as a clinical diagnosis of Begum Jaan. Nor does it suggest that she follows a fully conscious, pre-planned strategy from the beginning. Winters, Kaylor, and Jeglic caution that grooming is difficult to identify partly because many behaviours may look ordinary

on the surface; their significance lies in pattern, purpose, and accumulation rather than in a single act alone (927). They also note that grooming need not always be entirely conscious or carefully orchestrated (930). That caution is important for "The Quilt," a story built on indirection, memory, and the child narrator's limited comprehension.

The five-part structure can be interpreted as a set of reading coordinates, not a rigid checklist. The analysis follows the child's movement into Begum Jaan's enclosed domestic world, her growing emotional dependence, her exposure to adult sexualised scenes, the crossing of bodily boundaries, and the fear and silence that follow. Grooming, understood this way, makes visible how Chughtai stages harm gradually rather than as a sudden rupture. The child is not simply present at the edge of Begum Jaan's desire. She becomes vulnerable inside a world of affection, luxury, secrecy, and adult authority.

3. The Grooming Arc in "The Quilt"

3.1 Access and Isolation

The child narrator's vulnerability begins with a change of place. She is taken out of her familiar childhood world and left inside Begum Jaan's house. At first, the arrangement seems practical. Her mother, tired of her quarrelsome behaviour, leaves her with Begum Jaan while travelling to Agra. The child recalls that her mother "decided to drop me with an adopted sister of hers when she went to Agra," because there was "not even a mouse" in that house with whom she could fight (Chughtai 7). The irony lies in the mother's confidence. The house is chosen because it appears quiet, respectable, and safe. It seems to offer discipline and protection.

Chughtai turns that safety into risk. Begum Jaan's house is not a lively family space where the child can move among siblings or companions. It is an enclosed zenana, ordered by adult authority, secrecy, class difference, and bodily intimacy. The absence of other children, which reassures the mother, also isolates the narrator. She is moved from the rough equality of childhood fights into a world where adults control space, speech, and access. The home becomes dangerous not because it looks threatening, but because it is private and protected from outside scrutiny. In this regard, the zenana functions as both a social institution and a spatial trap. Its very respectability the high walls, the gendered order, the deference to Begum Jaan as mistress of the household is what makes the child's situation so difficult to question or escape.

Begum Jaan does not need to force access to the child; the family grants it. The mother's trust places the narrator under Begum Jaan's authority and makes her dependent on the rhythms of that household. Mohan similarly notes that the child is sent to Begum Jaan's zenana for a kind of "re-lessoning," only to enter a space dense with adult arrangements and sensory excess (471). The child's vulnerability begins there: in displacement, dependence, and the deceptive safety of a respectable home.

3.2 Trust and Emotional Dependence

Once inside Begum Jaan's world, the narrator is not drawn first by fear. She is drawn by looking. Begum Jaan appears to her as a figure of "dignity and grandeur," reclining while Rabbu massages her waist (Chughtai 10). The child's description lingers over her body: the "fair" skin, "heavy" eyelids, "thick" eyelashes, and lips, which she remembers as "the most amazing and attractive part of her face" (Chughtai 10). This is not a neutral description. It shows a child fascinated by beauty, authority, leisure, and bodily presence before she has any language for the adult world she is entering.

That fascination soon becomes attachment. The narrator admits, "I was very young at that time and quite enamoured of Begum Jan," and adds that Begum Jaan "was fond of me" (Chughtai 12). The phrasing is simple, but its effect is unsettling. The child feels chosen. In an unfamiliar house, Begum Jaan's affection gives her a place. Mohan also observes that the child's entry into the zenana is marked by sensory attraction to Begum Jaan's body, surroundings, and life, making the space seductive before it becomes frightening (471).

Begum Jaan deepens this closeness through indulgence. She offers the child new frocks, a doll, and old clothes with which to dress it (Chughtai 14–15). Nothing in these gestures appears threatening by itself. That is the point. Affection, attention, and gifts create a bond that the child experiences as warmth and favour. Only later does this closeness become harder to separate from fear. The adult who frightens her is also the adult she has admired, trusted, and wanted to please. Winters, Kaylor, and Jeglic note that gift-giving is a common feature of the trust-building phase of grooming, functioning to manufacture indebtedness and emotional loyalty in the child (929). Chughtai's rendering of this pattern is quiet but precise: the frocks and the doll are not simply signs of generosity but instruments through which a relationship of asymmetric dependence is consolidated.

3.3 Desensitisation to Adult Sexuality

Before Begum Jaan crosses the child's bodily boundaries, the narrator is made to see and hear more than she can understand. Chughtai does not treat sensuality or female pleasure as abusive in itself. The danger lies elsewhere: in the child's repeated exposure to adult sexual scenes without protection, explanation, or language.

The household has already trained desire to hide behind respectability. The Nawab is described as pious and upright, yet he keeps "an open house for students," especially "young, fair, slim-waisted boys," whose expenses he bears (Chughtai 8). Desire does not appear directly in this world. It travels under the cover of patronage, refinement, and domestic order. Begum Jaan's zenana repeats that pattern more intimately. The narrator watches Rabbu's massages with fascination and unease, her eyes fixed on Rabbu's "roving hands" (Chughtai 12). What she sees is not explained. It reaches her as touch, smell, movement, and discomfort.

Mohan's phrase, "a virtual assault on the senses," is helpful here because the child's experience of the zenana is intensely sensory: oils, clothes, food, skin, scents, and secretive bodily rituals crowd the scene (471). The servants' "dirty jokes" about Begum Jaan and Rabbu show that sexual knowledge circulates in the household, but only through innuendo (Chughtai 12). The child hears enough to be unsettled, not enough to understand.

The quilt becomes her visual grammar for this hidden world. When she sees it "shaking vigorously as if an elephant were struggling beneath it," the image records both perception and incomprehension (Chughtai 13). The quilt hides the adult act, but it also gives the child a frightening shape through which to register it. She sees movement, shadow, and force. She cannot decode them. Desensitisation in the story works through this repeated exposure without interpretation: the child is made to absorb the presence of adult desire before she has the maturity or safety to make sense of it.

3.4 Boundary-crossing and Physical Violation

The most disturbing shift occurs when the child is no longer only watching. In Rabbu's absence, Begum Jaan asks her to scratch her back, and a seemingly ordinary request quickly becomes invasive. "Scratch harder. Open the straps," Begum Jaan says, turning the child's hand into part of an adult scene of bodily pleasure (Chughtai 14). What might have remained a domestic gesture is charged by command, proximity, and the child's dependence.

Begum Jaan distracts the narrator while directing her body. She speaks of new frocks, a tailor, and gifts, keeping the child's imagination occupied while her hand is guided into intimate contact (Chughtai 14). The narrator's own words register the confusion: she becomes "oblivious of where my hands travelled" (Chughtai 15). The line matters because it does not show knowing participation. It shows a child caught between obedience, curiosity, distraction, and adult control.

The violation intensifies when Begum Jaan pulls the child closer. The narrator tries to move away, but Begum Jaan holds her and laughs, turning resistance into something like play (Chughtai 15). That laughter is chilling. It refuses to take the child's discomfort seriously. The narrator's body, however, has already understood the danger. She feels an "unknown fear," wants to cry, and is pressed against Begum Jaan's warm body, but she is "neither able to cry nor scream" (Chughtai 16–17).

This is the point at which affection, gifts, bodily access, and adult authority converge into violation. Mohan identifies the scene as a turning point after which the child's adoration of Begum Jaan becomes revulsion and fear (472). Chughtai does not need explicit description to make the damage visible. She gives us the child's recoil, her broken comprehension, and her inability to speak.

3.5 Secrecy, Fear, and Post-abuse Silence

After the encounter, the narrator does not accuse Begum Jaan. She withdraws. Chughtai presents this silence through the gap between what the child feels and what she can say. The child has no language for abuse; she registers it through fear, nausea, avoidance, and bodily recoil. She remembers being "so terrified of Begum Jan" that she spent the day with the servants and avoided entering Begum Jaan's room (Chughtai 17). Her body responds before her mind can explain. The child's retreat to the servants' quarters is significant: it marks a search for a social space where adult authority is diffused rather than concentrated, where no single figure commands her body or her obedience. Still and all, even there, she cannot fully escape. The servants know the codes of the zenana; their ribald jokes about Begum Jaan and Rabbu suggest that the household's sexual arrangements are an open secret, one that the child has been left to encounter without preparation or protection.

The child also senses that her fear will not be believed. "What could I have said to anyone? That I was scared of Begum Jan, Begum Jan, who loved me so dearly?" she asks (Chughtai 17). The question exposes her trap. Social language has already named Begum Jaan's behaviour as affection. The child's terror has no place to go. It remains suspended between experience and testimony.

Even though children/juveniles cannot be a sexual object, the sexual approach to them is continuously occurring, and especially, the online grooming has not been improved despite many institutional strategies. Realistically, the children/juveniles who find their only pleasure in online exchanges in the middle of entrance-examination-centered life can be organically combined with some distorted sexual desires using the online anonymity, which should be perceived as a social problem (Kim 153).

The adult narrator's retrospective voice shows that silence is not the same as forgetting. The quilt returns at the beginning of the story as a memory "imprinted" on her mind "like a blacksmith's brand" (Chughtai 7). The simile makes memory bodily: a burn, a mark, something private and permanent. Mohan reads this post-event shift as the movement from adoration to revulsion, with the child's sleeplessness and avoidance registering the traumatic force of the encounter (472). Even as an adult, the narrator approaches the event through shadow, metaphor, and indirection. Childhood fear survives into adult memory, but it still struggles to speak plainly.

4. Re-reading Begum Jaan: Victimhood Without Exoneration

Begum Jaan's suffering is one of the first wounds Chughtai asks the reader to notice. She enters marriage as a woman placed inside the Nawab's household and then abandoned there. The narrator says that after marrying her and "putting her in the house with all his other possessions," the Nawab "promptly forgot about her" (Chughtai 8). The phrasing is brutal in its casualness. Begum Jaan is not simply neglected; she is absorbed into the household as property. At the same time, the

Nawab's own desires remain protected by social respectability. He keeps "an open house for students," especially "young, fair, slim-waisted boys," while retaining his public image of piety and refinement (Chughtai 8). His indifference leaves Begum Jaan emotionally starved, bodily diminished, and trapped in a marriage where her needs cannot be named without shame.

Her relationship with Rabbu emerges from this deprivation. Rabbu's presence restores her body and vitality; the woman who had been wasting away begins to live again. The zenana, usually imagined as a space of confinement, becomes a space where Begum Jaan finds pleasure outside the structure that has erased her. Patel's reading is useful here because she places the story's female same-sex desire inside the zenana itself, arguing that *Lihāf* is about a sexual relationship between two women living in that enclosed domestic space (Patel 179). The quilt, in this reading, covers a desire that the household cannot openly admit, yet cannot fully suppress either.

But Chughtai does not allow Begum Jaan's deprivation to settle into innocence. Her suffering explains the hunger that shapes her, but it does not absolve what happens when that hunger turns toward the child. Once Rabbu is absent, Begum Jaan's need begins to seek another body available within the room. The child is dependent, admiring, and unable to understand the adult world into which she has been drawn. What begins as affection and indulgence moves toward bodily control and violation (Chughtai 14–17). The problem, then, is not Begum Jaan's desire for Rabbu. The problem is the use of adult authority and intimacy against a child who cannot consent.

Mohan's reading helps clarify why Begum Jaan cannot be preserved only as a figure of feminist or queer resistance. The child's presence disrupts any simple celebration of Begum Jaan as an emancipatory "New Woman," because the zenana also becomes a space of domination and exploitation (Mohan 467, 469). Chughtai's story asks for a harder reading: Begum Jaan is damaged by patriarchy, and she also damages the child. Holding both together does not weaken feminist or queer readings of "The Quilt." It makes them more accountable to the vulnerable body at the centre of the narrative.

5. Cultural Silence and the Problem of Naming Abuse

The child's silence in "The Quilt" is not only personal. It belongs to the world around her. Sexuality, domestic respectability, childhood obedience, class hierarchy, and female desire all operate through codes of concealment. Shah and Singh describe childhood sexual abuse in the Asian subcontinent as having been "shrouded by collective denial and a conspiracy of silence" (179). They also note that sexuality is often treated as a taboo subject in Asian culture, a taboo that "hinders child's ability to inform adults and adults' initiative to report to authorities" (188). The zenana compounds this silence further. As a space defined by the separation of women from public life, it already operates as an enclosure within which certain things happen that cannot be spoken of outside. The child narrator enters this

double silence: the cultural silence around childhood sexuality, and the domestic silence of the zenana itself. Neither gives her a language; both ensure that what she carries out of the house remains, as the adult narrator's opening image suggests, a mark rather than a story. Chughtai's story does not turn this into social commentary. It makes the problem literary: the child sees and feels what her world has given her no language to say.

After the encounter with Begum Jaan, the narrator knows that something is wrong, but fear cannot become testimony. Her question is painfully simple: "What could I have said to anyone? That I was scared of Begum Jan, Begum Jan, who loved me so dearly?" (Chughtai 17). The trap lies in that last phrase. Begum Jaan's affection is already accepted as the public meaning of the relationship. The child's fear has to compete against that meaning, and it cannot. The adult appears loving; the child appears confused. Care itself becomes the cover under which harm disappears.

Rabbu's response shows that silence is not always ignorance. When she says, "Raw mangoes are sour, Begum Jan," she appears to recognise that Begum Jaan's attention has moved toward the child (Chughtai 18). Yet the warning comes as metaphor, not accusation. Rabbu knows the codes of the zenana because she is inside them: servant, masseuse, intimate companion, and dependent woman. She can see more than others can, but she cannot speak as someone free of the household's power. Her line is sharp because it reveals knowledge forced into indirection.

The adult narrator's telling follows the same pattern. She remembers the quilt as a mark "like a blacksmith's brand," but the story still returns to the event through shadow, sound, humour, hesitation, and metaphor (Chughtai 7). The quilt hides and reveals at once. It conceals queer desire, yet its movement makes secrecy visible. It also covers the child's violation, while leaving behind the image through which she remembers it. Chughtai's achievement is not that she names everything. It is that she lets the covered thing move, disturb the room, and remain in the narrator's mind long after the story ends.

6. Conclusion

This article has read "The Quilt" by bringing the child narrator out of the margins of the critical discussion. The story has rightly been valued for its treatment of female desire, patriarchal neglect, and queer intimacy, but the child's memory changes the ethical shape of that reading. Her experience is not confined to one disturbing scene. Chughtai shows how vulnerability is formed gradually: through the child's placement in Begum Jaan's house, her fascination with the Begum, her exposure to adult desire, the crossing of bodily limits, and the fear that follows.

Grooming, as a reading framework, earns its place precisely at this juncture. It does not replace feminist or queer readings of the story. It asks what those readings may miss when Begum Jaan's deprivation becomes the only centre of sympathy. Begum Jaan remains a woman injured by patriarchy, but her injury does not remove

the harm done to the child. Chughtai keeps both truths in view, refusing the comfort of a simple victim-villain structure.

The quilt holds this difficulty. It covers female desire, but it also gives shape to what the child cannot name. Its shadow, movement, and return in memory make secrecy visible without making it fully speakable. When the adult narrator recalls the quilt as a mark "like a blacksmith's brand," the image suggests that childhood fear has survived as a bodily memory, not as a resolved story (Chughtai 7).

A trauma-aware reading of Indian literary texts should be able to stay with such discomfort. It need not flatten ambiguity into accusation, nor protect literary complexity by ignoring vulnerable figures. In "The Quilt," Chughtai leaves the reader with a covered scene that still moves. That movement is the story's disturbance, and its demand. More broadly, the reading offered here suggests that Urdu literature of the Progressive era carries ethical dimensions that have not always been fully acknowledged. The child's body is not incidental to the political and sexual radicalism of these texts; it is often the site on which the limits of that radicalism become visible. Reading Chughtai with care for her most vulnerable figures is not a correction to literary criticism but a deepening of it.

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