June 2001

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Geeta Patel

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Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 37, no.2, June 2001, p.174-188
Marking the Quilt: Veil, Harem/Home, and the Subversion of Colonial Civility

By GEETA PATEL

IN 1941 ISMAT CHUGHTAI, a women writer, published a story, “LiHaaf” (The Quilt) in dab-i latiif (Belles Letters). Written three months before Chughtai’s marriage, “LiHaaf” is a narrative of the zenana, told by a member of it, and ensconced within it.1 “LiHaaf” sexualizes the zenana. In this paper I position the story in the spaces produced between “postcolonial” (extraterrestrial) discussions of gender and sexuality and localized, “indigenous” colonial discussions of gender and sexuality.2 Using the zenana as a mediated site, I hope to reveal some of the tensions between its appearance, appearances, and disappearances.3

A few years after “LiHaaf’s” publication, Ismat Chughtai was charged with obscenity.4 Her story was cited for infractions of the civilized ordinari-ness that was at the time supposed to texture the civil sphere or public sphere. As the tale fought for its proprieties in court, it was clear that neither obscenity nor “LiHaaf’s” violations could be adequately described or shown to be present. The court’s inability to materialize “LiHaaf’s” civil infractions or even the nature of obscenity, had not stopped it from sending out summons based on a kind of commonsensical notion that—“It’s about—I know it when I see it, but I know what I know.” This then, is the tautological terrain in which I finally locate the ghostliness of “LiHaaf” and the zenana.5

1. Zanaanah is a Persian word, derived from the plural, zanaan or women. Zenana is a word that along with women’s apartments also means feminine, an effeminate person or womanly. F. Steingass (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1992), 623. First edition published in 1892.
2. I use “postcolonial” and colonial here as terms that historically site/cite discussions about gender. These terms have been subjected to a prolonged critique. Although I am uncomfortable with the particular demarcations implied by them, in this paper they serve as areas whose traces I mark so that I can engage in a discussion about them. This paper has been transformed by various people, Anindyo Roy, Kevin Kopelson, Kath Weston, Carla Petievich, Kumkum Sangari, C. M. Nairn, and all my interlocutors who attended its recent presentation at the University of Kentucky Women’s Studies conference, “Gendered Violence: Epistemologies and Practices.”
3. In the case of this story, the court seemed to have an idea of what they were looking for, but even as this idea seemed to take shape in the form of a summons it disappeared. The story too assumes shape, but if it assumes shape through the various forms of translation that might give it a body, like through harem or through postcolonial literature, the shapes it assumes dematerialize the Urdu in curious and necessary ways.
5. In the story, the sexuality of women is encoded in the explicit display of one woman’s body. For Urdu readers, that same body would be one “under the veil,” whose public appearance outside the closed space of the zenana would take a covered, desexualized form; its nakedness in the story/zenana plays against its public effacement.
Quilting: Peeking under a Postcolonial Pastiche

“LiHaaf” is an valuable literary event for me. Writing about it has value and can be assigned value, because it takes up and takes on aporias or differentials in the enumerations of gender/subalternity/sexuality situated in an Indian colonial setting. The zenana, is itself, as I will go on to show, a transacted and translated word and site. In feminist texts often circulated in the North American academy, the colonial residents of the zenana are situated through epistemic violence enacted at the end of the blind alley between Indian women as desexualized satis and Islamic/Middle Eastern women as sexualized harem residents. The South Asian zenana disappears in the former kinds of discussions and leaves traces when it is translated as harem in the latter.

The “Urdu” textures of both the title of the story, LiHaaf, and the story’s site, the zenana, set against the travels of their corresponding translations, carry the double resonance of ghostly sightings. Both “LiHaaf” and zenana appear in the corners of an eye that gazes directly at the translations. They are almost like an aftertaste. Tasted on the tongue like movements of air glimpsed askance, they are reminders that somewhere in the same house might live ghosts waiting in the wings to take shape as corporeal. The Urdu zenana, itself translated locally, appears even as it constantly evaporates in the diasporic, colonized circulation of harem.

When either LiHaaf or zenana is translated into English, the first as “quilt,” the second as “harem,” they are transferred into circles of signification and repeated literary production at odds with, while simultaneously also continuous with, the Urdu. Both LiHaaf and zenana become the ghostly aftereffects of quilt and harem.

Quilt and quilting evoke patches, a pastiche sewn by women working singly or together; it is part of a woman’s domain. LiHaaf, on the other hand, made out of cotton or silk fiber and fabric, is one piece, often made by male tailors. Once made, it is incorporated into the accoutrements of a woman’s domestic terrain. A LiHaaf is also something given to women in marriage as a piece of property.


7. See Lisa Lowe’s reading of Lady Mary Montague’s Turkish Embassy Letters (1717-1718) in Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991). Lowe understands Lady Montague’s letters as working out of orientalizing knowledges. Lady Montague’s writing performs in contradictory ways. On one hand it is complicit with the class-specific racialization of Turkish men, from colonial narratives that justify colonial rule, which construes them as incomplete, barbaric, vulgar, and beastlike. On the other hand, the letters figure Turkish women as specifically different from colonial renditions of women, even as these renditions participate in some of the tropes of harem literature. Turning to an early European feminist discourse, Montague sees these women as objects of her desiring gaze, as “the only free people in the empire.” (Lowe, 41). Montague uses the poetics of love lyrics from writers like Milton and Petrarch to display the registers of her homoerotic gaze. At the same time she quite explicitly undoes the links between erotized women as subjugated women who serve as the signs of Turkish barbarity (indicators that Turks do not participate in the civilities offered women by civilized worlds). See also Emily Apter’s chapter “Harem” in Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999), 99-112. See Leila Ahmed, “Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem,” Feminist Studies 8.3 (Fall 1982).

Zenana and harem both suggest enclosure, but both are exchanged in slightly overlapping but differentiated literary circulatory systems. The valence of zenana moves toward the domestic—the local use of women’s spaces within particular indigenous communities.

The word “zanaanah,” which comes into Urdu, is a transformation of the Persian word for women, zan, whose plural is zanaan. The place women occupy in a household is called a zanaanah. Zanaanah is also an adjective that means effeminate, womanly, feminine. So zanaanah, the place that houses the zan, is almost like something that turns women into space. It is both home, and an abstraction, the sense of enclosure where women are kept. The word zanaanah, taken as an adjective, suggests the feminine, not as a natural quality that women have, and that identifies them, but as a quality that produces the effect of womanliness, femininity. Taken this way it can qualify women, men, or other things, bring them, through how they seem, into the purview of the feminine. The word itself has no immediate moral resonance; it suggests no allegiances to civility, morality, or propriety. These, when they begin to texture zanaanah, change its shapes and colors under the pressure of social and historical conditions.

Harem, on the other hand, has long been colonized, used as a traveling trope that collapses into odd folds in the localities from which it ostensibly comes. *Haram* is an Arabic word, also used in Persian and in Urdu. It is a word that holds the tension of contrary meanings. It is the word for both unlawful as well as sacred, and the word for women’s quarters as well as a word that designates women in family relationships—as wife, daughter, and ward.

I will continue to use both sets of terms, zenana and harem, in this piece because I want to familiarize readers with local words for women’s spaces. I also want to maintain the tension between zenana as a term, which, because it is in not common currency, becomes “exotic” for certain readers and harem as a designation for the “exotic.” I also want to keep the pressure of the conflict between haram as a word that carries moral valences and zanaanah as a word that does not. The two words travel alongside quilt and LiHaaf.

The story, “LiHaaf,” offers another glimpse into the conventional portrayals of the Indian woman as the archetypal sati/victimal/subaltern clothed in the fabric of postcolonial questions—of whether or not she as the finally
silenced/silent subaltern can speak through the cloth of colonial representations, whether or not her muffled voice can be heard. Because “LiHaaf” is about same sex desire, and the satisfaction of it, the story makes visible the default mechanisms/assumptions of heterosexuality within Indian postcolonial theorizing.

A certain kind of Indian postcolonial theorizing that circulates in the United States, and produces Indian women as abject exotics to be salvaged, deals with the issue of gender, reifies (incorporates as a ghost) the position of and space occupied by a sati, as a desexualized but implicitly heterosexed burnt bride. The sati becomes exemplary and emblematic as a site transacted between several different but interwoven strands of masculinized discourse. The rhetorical question, articulated by Gayatri Spivak, then becomes, can a figure, whose contesting representations (as saved by white men/state/religious arbiters/missionaries, and spoken of by conservative indigenous reformers, as well as saved by indigenous male reformers) tell us more about the display of a contest, than about the concerns of women in this situation (however problematic the assumption of unmated “access” to their concerns might be)? These concerns carry over into current feminist questions about interventions practiced on the behalf of and in the name of colonial women, in this case those who live in India. They also carry over into the reception of “LiHaaf.”

Although these issues that engage women are necessary to the complexity of the discussions about colonial/postcolonial women in India, the inadvertent privileging of the sati in the discussions obscures the extent to which the constructions of and use of sati as paradigm participate in particular neocolonial productions of Indian history and society as Hindu. In the United States

12. Siting the zanaan/zenana here makes explicit the multiple disappearances of women’s bodies when they are exchanged on this terrain—the literal burning of sati’s bodies, which disappear when they are deployed in colonial discussions about sati, and which in turn provide the impetus for the disappearance of bodies enclosed within the zenana.

13. See the final section of this paper for a discussion on desexualization of women within the zenana. The construction of the sati as desexualized does not have the same forms as similar moves performed on Muslim women. But some of the same discursive imperatives—gendering women to fit into a neo-Victorian companionate marriage, which also calls for their desexualization—affect satis and the zanaan. This desexualization continues to infect current discussions—literary and otherwise—of Indian women.


the work of Gayatri Spivak, Lata Mani, and Rajeshwari Sundari Rajan, which explicitly speaks to the production of Indian/Hindu tradition as part of the discursive apparatus through which the sati takes shape, begins to clarify the terms of this production. Necessary too are the writings by feminists in South Asia who took on the glorification of the sati after Roop Kanwar’s death.¹⁶ Hinduizing India renders ghostly other sites, like the zenana, over which battles about masculine-community-religious identity were also fought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The subsequent geographical demarcation of types of victims (harem women are Middle Eastern, burnt brides are Indian) is complicit with the systemic and systematic silencing that control over representational possibilities brings with it. In other words, precisely because the discourse on women continues to limit the representation of them to patterns that are complicit with colonial reconstructions of a particular culture, this discourse depends on the silence of women for its power.

If one situates “LiHaaf” in discussions of the harem, the story challenges readings of the zenana/harem as a space completely subservient to a phallic symbolic order. Emily Apter’s chapter, “Harem,” like other such readings of the harem, deal with its sexualization.¹⁷ Even if these readings sexualize the harem as a space in which sexual alignments are between women (gynocentric desire), they situate it either within a space that begins with the heterosexed, or one in which male-male desire runs parallel to the gynocentric. In “LiHaaf,” male-male (or more specifically male-boy) social affiliations that shade into desire are the circles that enclose a gynocentric space within which gynocentric desire is actualized. In LiHaaf male-male sexualized affiliations marked by a turning away from women, directs women back into the harem.


¹⁷. Emily Apter, “Harem,” in Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects (Chicago: U of Chicago P. 1999), 99-112. Apter’s readings are subtle and complex. She opens with a statement about the “haremization effect,” a femnocentric libidinal economy that challenges the phallocentric paradigm that lies at the heart of the sultan/seraglio portrait. Apter reads the orientalist productions of harem, phantasm of Europe which archive exotic and erotic otherness. While teasing apart the poetics of clausturation, layers of density that are barriers to seeing what goes on in the harem, Apter begins to construe the harem as a masquerade of the phallus, and as the phallus. The harem offers a series of tropologies and narrative turns that simultaneously mimic colonialism and allude in veiled ways to the violent practices that texture colonial encounters. Algerian nationalist reconfigurations of the harem pick up on these to draw women into the harem, veiled women as the embodiments of a nation-to-be. The artifice said to be practiced by women of the harem and the theatricality of the harem serve as a camouflage for Sapphic desire (sex between women disguised and behind the appearance of a sultan’s harem). French women such as Isabelle Eberhardt, Myriam Harry, and L. M. Enfry, writing from 1900-1920, play with the feminization of the Arabic word “maktuub,” which they leave untranslated, to elaborate a desiring poetics that is anterior to notions of maktuub as the armature of Koranic law with the sultan who assures submission to God’s will at its center. Enfry, the culminating example in Apter’s journey through the history of the harem, turns maktuub into desire between women that replaces the older harem trope. These registers of maktuub, says Apter, give a counter narrative of female jouissance: a femnocentric libidinal economy deflates colonial mastery and the phallic order, and names the lexicon of psychoanalysis otherwise. However salutary and necessary this project, it still relies on a primary libidinal economy that turns women toward men, and specifically toward one man, the sultan, the ruler of the harem.
keeps them there, and turns them toward each other as desiring "subjects." As a particular articulation of female-female sexuality and desire, where a biography of a lesbian (proto or otherwise) cannot be used as a reading frame, the story offers an alternative narrative of same sex desire.18

The story challenges historical and culturally contingent discussions of sexual alignments that have been mediated through the normalizations practiced in sexual identity politics movements in two ways. The first problematic it implicitly challenges is the conflation of authors' sexualities with their work, and vice versa, and the concomitant slip from biography into critical reading frames. "LiHaaf’s" "author" as a married woman, who has provided no biographical narratives of gynocentric desire, at the very least calls into question this slippage. The second challenge the story offers to the theorization of sexuality is that gynocentric desire is located within a very "traditional" Muslim heterosexed household. By "traditional" I mean a nonnuclear, extended family, sexually segregated household, which evolved as a result of a quotidian arranged marriage between two ostensibly "straight" parties.

To read the responses "LiHaaf" evoked, and even see the conventions and civilities Chughtai violated through her story, it is necessary to situate it within the time in which it was written. It is also essential to understand the significance of the site of its location, the zenana, for and in this particular period.19

Quilted into the Zenana: Disclosures within Enclosures

"LiHaaf" is about a sexual relationship between two women living in a zenana, a bahu (wife) called Begum Jan (Begum Life) and her masseur-companion, Rubbu. Rubbu is called into the zenana to provide Begum Jan solace, when it is quite clear that the hobby of the man Begum Jan recently married was keeping boys, like "other men kept pigeons." The story is told in a flashback by a child who was a witness to and participant in the relationship between the two women. The child is sent by her mother, one of Begum Jan’s friends, to stay with Begum Jan. On her visit to the Begum’s house the young girl meets Rubbu for the first time. She is put into the Begum Jan’s bedroom to sleep, and thus given intimate access to the bedroom the women share, and thus brought into the relationship between them. The child is an ambivalent spectator who unwittingly, and uncomprehendingly, enters the circle of Begum Jan’s desire, and for a short time becomes the focus of it. Her reaction to Begum Jan plays out her ambivalence. Begum Jan—her sexuality drawn


19. See Katherine Mayo, _Mother India_ , ed. (and introduced by) Mrinalini Sinha (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000). See Mayo and Mrs. Meer Hasan Ali for the zenana as a site that called for reform, not from the various sexual proclivities of its inhabitants, but for particular ways in which women who were confined to the space were oppressed. Mayo constructed Muslim women as not quite as oppressed as their Hindu sisters. So, she too, for certain political ends, elaborated by Mrinalini Sinha, participates in the division of India into predominantly Hindu and fractionally Muslim. Rashid Jahan, Ismat Chughtai’s mentor, a member of the PWA and a Muslim woman doctor, like many other Muslim women reformers from the turn of the century on, depicted the _zenana_ similarly. This description stands in contrast to Malek Alloul'a's _The Colonial Harem_, trans. Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986) and its sexualization of the "harem."
and positioned between young male preadolescence and the white smooth voluptuousness of a mature sensuous woman—is an object of the child’s fascinated gaze. “I used to wish that I could just sit and look at her for hours…. The most captivating feature of her face was her lips. They were usually tinted red, a light down over the upper one. Long hair tousled at the temples. Sometimes her face would take on a strange look, like that of an immature boy” (196). But once the child enters Begum Jan’s bedroom, the quilt (phallus undercover) under which Begum Jan writhes, takes on the attributes of the sinister, and embodies the child’s fearful, apprehensive violating incursion into sexuality. The story discloses the dynamics of sexuality within circles of enclosures—the quilt, the veil, and the zenana—through the child’s visual description and display of Begum Jan’s body.

Within the text, the sexual encounters are mediated, narrated by the child. The story opens with the quilt. The first image is of the shadows of a quilt, a LiHaaf, thrown on a wall at night. The shadows, that “sway like an elephant” foreshadow the realm that the child will take a reader to—behind the parda (or veil) back in time and on a journey so that we reread the quilt, from elephant through its resignification and sexualization over the course of the tale. The opening paragraph explicitly makes the temporal and spatial leaps. “At once, my mind begins to leap back and forth, jump in and out of the parda of the past.”

_Parda_ (veil, curtain), and LiHaaf, the two covers that open the sentence, can be read in different directions. _Parda_, the veil that is slid aside with the opening paragraph so that a reader can enter the story, is the enclosing, concealing covering worn by women who live in the zenana, when they leave it. _Parda_ is also the word for curtain, which is drawn aside to reveal the theatre of the zenana and its activities, its sexuality. LiHaaf, the quilt that protects against winter cold, becomes, in this story, both a covering under which the girl can hide, and the covering shared by Begum Jan and Rubbu that conceals the activities of two women at night in bed. The story closes with the girl peeking under the quilt draping both women. The readers of the story, carried with the child up to this point, are denied a description of what she sees. The story ends for them with the girl’s exclamation when the quilt reveals its contents to her, and her leap back into the safety of her own quilt.

The story is an expose. It exposes several entangled alignments of desire. But at the same time as it brings certain dimensions of the desire between women to view, by concealing the activities under the quilt from readers’ gazes, the story refuses to expose these desires to the explicit explicating gestures of naming.

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20. Mystery tale—the mystery that opens the story is the unexplained shadow of the quilt. This sentence is translated somewhat differently in Tahira Naqvi’s _The Quilt and Other Stories_ (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990), 7: “My mind begins a mad race into the dark crevasses of the past; memories come flooding in.” The Urdu reads, “aur ek dam se meraa dimaaG biiitii hu’ii duniyaa ke pardon meN Duane bhaagne lagtaa hai.” “LiHaaf,” in Ismat Chughtai, _coTeN_ (Wounds) (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 1982), 11.
The story also reveals the configurations of social pedagogy, socialization into the civilities of gender, and recodes them within narratives of desire. LiHaaf speaks both to desire between women and to male desire for boys. The impetus for the desire between women is in fact desire between men, or more explicitly, desire of a man for boys.

The narrator begins the story of her encounter and engagement with Begum Jan with a prelude, the story of Begum Jan’s marriage. Begum Jan’s parents arranged a marriage for her with someone who, despite his status as an unmarried older man, was considered virtuous and civil by his community. Their construction of him as “naturally” virtuous was based on their reading, or misreading of his activities, as well as what he didn’t do. He was a “haaji,” had made a pilgrimage to Mecca, and had helped others to make the pilgrimage. As a pilgrim he was immediately sanctified. Also, no randiyaaN or prostitutes had been seen going to his house. This emptying of heterosexual activity was read as a signifier of purity. Since they read him as asexual, what Begum Jan’s parents did not choose to look at more closely was his other activity that seemed deceptively innocuous—keeping and paying for young male students. This activity, which the narrator describes as his obsession, analogous to keeping pigeons or an obsession with quail or cockfights, appeared to be a charitable one. It seemed to be part of the “normal” production of a homosocial network, a Nawab’s pedagogical endeavor, his encouragement of young men in the process of socialization. What Begum Jan’s family did not see in this homosocial activity was its homosexual underpinnings. The Nawab’s desire for the boys would not become explicit to an observer (especially one who saw him as a desexualized haaji) unless the observer’s needs were in contention with the Nawab’s desire for boys.

When Begum Jan married the Nawab and entered his zenana she confronted the implications of the seeming ordinariness of his coterie of boys. The Nawab, who was already keeping another zenana (feminized space) replete with objects of his desire, confined Begum Jan to her zenana and left her in it to her own devices. Through the trellised walls of her zenana, Begum Jan watched an alignment of desire, by a man toward his own gender, which turned away from her and left her on its outskirts. In mapping homosexual desire onto homosocial networks, the narrative makes explicit the implications of homosocial/homosexual male affiliations for women—they have no place in them.

Begum Jan, incarcerated by the Nawab in her zenana, makes a bid to live. Her name is jaan, or life, and her need to live and desire turn on her attempts not to die. The child narrator’s description of Begum Jan wasting away in the isolation she is placed in by her husband plays on traditional poetic

21. These arrangements, though they look “clean,” untainted by desire, are shown to be riddled by, perhaps even given impetus by desire, and in this case, motivated by same sex desire.

22. The story also makes clear the meaning of the exchange of women between family and a husband. Once the transaction had been concluded, and she enters the world that a husband controls, there is still no place for her.

23. Does the Begum’s eventual turn towards Rubbu signify her filling of a lack, the lack of the physical engagement with a man?
descriptions of jilted lovers. Her attempts not to die transform into a transgressive attempt to live through her fulfillment with another lover. “Life! It was certainly Begam Jan’s life. Living was written in her fate. So, she began to live and how!” Enclosed within her zenana, Begum Jan turns toward someone who was allowed into a zenana, another woman. “Rubbu rescued her as she fell. Begum Jan’s withered body (the sign of her abandonment) began to fill out.”

In the story Begum Jan becomes the nexus of female desire, a catalyst, an object of desire for both the child and for Rubbu her masseuse. An ambient longing for Begum Jan entices the child into Begum Jan’s zenana. This desire keeps pulling the child into the zenana. The child is sent to visit Begum Jan by her mother, when she went on trips to visit relatives. The mother’s ostensible reason for sending the child to stay with Begum Jan is to socialize her as a female child. She, unlike her sisters who accumulate male admirers, and thus behave in accordance with their gender, has not been domesticated, has not been civilized into domesticity. “I was engaged in pitched battles, throwing shoes at boys and girls, both from my family and neighboring households.” The reason the child is sent to Begum Jan’s zenana to recover female propriety, is because like the Nawab’s obsession with boys, the zenana looks deceptively innocuous to an outside observer. Begum Jan’s household appears to be a completely conventional, almost retrograde, zenana. The story’s subversive possibilities lie in the ways in which the semblance of normalcy at home is juxtaposed against the activities performed by the inhabitants of the home.

Sexuality is displayed through the display of bodies—first the bodies of the boys kept by the Nawab and then the display of Begum Jan’s body by the child telling the story. As readers we are shown Begum Jan’s body as the child looks at her. The child describes the body voluptuously, beginning with Begum Jan’s face and traveling down to her calves. The descriptions are coordinated with various ablutions that Begum Jan performs. “When she used to stretch her legs to bathe her calves I would silently watch their sheen.” As the child’s description becomes more and more explicit, it echoes the delicate details of lovers singing lyric verse to the women they want and cannot have.

In the first third of the story, looking and touching are portioned between the child and Rubbu. The child gazes at Begum Jan as Rubbu touches her, strokes her, massages her, and oils her. As long as this division of the labor that produces yearning is maintained, the child’s sexualized viewing seems almost quotidian. It remains one thread in the story of this house. As the story progresses, however, the child is pulled closer and closer in, and at last touches Begum Jan. At this point, when the child’s desire turns physical, it becomes terrifying to her. She is then caught uncomprehending in the incomprehensible fear that wells up in her when her desire is embodied.24

BY THE 1940s, when the story was written, a zenana was understood to be the sanctum sanctorum of the house, the spatial equivalent of the veil. It designated home, the house, the protected, the sacrosanct place in the belly of the house, its innermost reaches. The zanaan, the women who live in the zenana, are pardanashin (those who sit behind the curtain). Parda, veil, curtain, screen, cover, secrecy, modesty, seclusion, concealment, is the garment and the state, worn by those women who live within the zenana. The parda concealed women when they ventured out of the zenana. Both parda and zenana were understood as desexualized, places not available to a wandering male gaze, to the rampant incursions of male sexuality. So, when male sexuality, specially violent and violating desire, in the form of rape ripped open their environs, it desecrated the social identity/significations of the zenana. It violated the civility accorded to women who were under parda and who lived in the zenana.

The zanaan/zenana also stood as signifiers at the conjunction of several responses to implied colonial critiques of an archaic Muslim lifestyle. Faisal Fatehali Devji, one of the few South Asian critics who discusses the zenana as a sexualized space, touches on both the feminization of Muslim men in colonial discourse and male Muslim reformers’ response to one colonial critique of Muslim society as a critique of the treatment of women. These responses, taken together, had a profound effect on the zenana and the inhabitants of it.

According to Devji, prior to the nineteenth century, the zenana was an area that had, at least in Indian Muslim legal tracts, been left alone. It had been left alone ostensibly because it was treated as a private, domestic space in which women, characterized as sexualized and therefore chaotic/pagan, were confined in order to contain their potential for chaos in the civil sphere. In the nineteenth century, theretofore-public institutions like religious institutions (areas that had been kept apart from the home) were privatized by the British and collapsed into the domestic. Along with this men began to be viewed as feminized. The pressures of renegotiating public male Muslim identity, that of the sharafat, the good men, brought the zenana into the center of legal reformist discourse (making it visible), while also construing it as a space abstracted from the contingencies of change. In order to deal with the gender conflict, the zenana and its occupants were subjected to a rhetoric of desexualization. They were civilized into respectability. So the zenana and the zanaan became paradoxically configured as the areas through which change was figured, as well as areas that maintained and retained conservative religious ideologies. The zenana came to symbolize a return to the past, a glorious past, with the women/zanaan contained within it playing out the roles assigned to them of exemplary representatives of a culture.

Contained within the zenana, their veil, the zanaan protected a “culture” from a colonial critique of Muslim degradation. In this narrative, women, the
women in purdah, enacted a deferred male social honor. In this particular scenario under colonialism male honor, some of the social status and the respect, which gave status its form, began to rely on the comportment of women behind the veil. The purdah then became a code of conduct applied to women which, if violated, had repercussions on the women, partially because it affected the way the men associated with the women were perceived and treated socially.

These then were the terms under which “LiHaaf” was read. As a story that sexualized the zenana/zanaan it violated the ways in which the space was to be used. It disrupted the civilities that were demanded of the women in the zenana. When it was published it created an uproar. Chughtai was assaulted by barrages of threatening letters, mainly from men. Some letters went directly to Chughtai and some were deflected by the journal where the story was published, held by the journal until Chughtai was married. LiHaaf and Chughthai were cited for obscenity in two fora.

In 1944 Chughtai was charged with obscenity by the Lahore government. Lahore, now in Pakistan, was at the time one of the largest urban areas on the Indian subcontinent. In an interview in Manushi, the women’s journal published out of Delhi, Chughtai described the situation: “A summons arrived: ‘George the Sixth versus Ismat Chughtai.’ I had a good laugh at the idea that the king had read my story. So we went to Lahore to fight the case.... The obscenity law prohibited the use of four letter words. LiHaaf does not contain any such words. In those days the word ‘lesbianism’ was not in use. I did not know exactly what it was. The story is a child’s description of something which she cannot fully understand. It was based on my own experience as a child. I knew no more at that time than the child knew. My lawyer argued that the story could be understood only by those who already had some knowledge (fear). I won the case.... Actually it is not reference to sex that these men object to, but the exposure of their attitudes.”

Chughtai was also tried for obscenity in another court, at a meeting of the main literary association of the time—The Urdu Progressive Writers Association. In Hyderabad, October 1945, at one of the meetings of the Association, Dr. Abdul Alim proposed a resolution against obscenity in literature. Ismat Chughtai was the target of his attack, but two male writers, Miraji and Saadat Hasan Manto, were also similarly charged. The motion was defeated because of the opposition of several renowned literary figures—Hasrat Mohani and Qazi Abdul Ghaffar—to it. But despite the formal vindication of the three writers, they continued to deal with public harassment based on those charges.

Both the citations, in court and in a literary association, were battles waged on similar terrains. It is evident from even a superficial perusal of either case that Ismat Chughtai was being tried for a discursive activity. Both struggles, in other words, were battles for the textual production of gender, battles over controls on the representation of gender/sexuality. That the story called for both a literary and legal response is a marker of the extent to which it transgressed representative/representational civilities, and the extent to which it had an impact on the purview of the merely literary. In this case, representations were material and materially significant.

This was not the first time in the history of the Progressive Writers Association that writing had called upon itself legal as well as literary sanctions. About ten years before the publication of “LiHaaf,” a collection of short stories called aNgaare (Coals) had provoked an equally virulent retaliation. aNgaare was a grouping of stories by four young writers (one was a woman), involved with the inception of the Progressive Writers Association, that critiqued social/religious institutions of Indo-Islamic communities. The response at the time was directed at both the writers as well as at the movement they represented. The writers, lampooned in newspapers as Westernized, transgressed the positions allocated to reformers. Their short stories secularized the language of reform and moved it into a discourse of modernity and change that paralleled British critiques of Indian-Islamic society. The writers of aNgaare challenged the discursive production of the term “reformer” with its concomitant/attendant terms, that is, modernity and change from within the community. This confrontation had implications for community/gender identifications that were disturbing precisely because it was situated within a foreign, colonial regime and was conveyed by members of the community identified with that regime.

The Islamic community, manifested partly in some of the members of the Progressive Writers Association, went to a colonial court for one resolution of this dilemma. The charges, like those brought against Chughtai, were charges of “obscenity.” The book was targeted for the explicit sexuality of two of its stories. The language used against the collection and the Association, and the forms that the response took, presaged the high moral ground and almost religious fervor of the words and practices of exclusion used by the Association in later years when its members wanted to condemn and expel writers like Chughtai and Miraji. The movement's own strategies of exclusion came to resemble the format of the response to aNgaare, the first major collection of writing attributed to the movement.

“Sexuality,” for both the critics of aNgaare and the later theoreticians of the Progressive Writers Association, was a problem area. It was an area hedged in by controls around which literary proscriptions were written and...
prescriptions enacted. Naming a literary piece “sexual” was a way of deval­
orizing it (condemning it as a literary work, reducing its literary value) as well as of labeling it “deviant.”

Not all the writers condemned during meetings of the Progressive Writers Association were taken to court like Chughtai. The Association treated Chughtai’s representation of sexuality, although it was perhaps more troubling than those of the two men who were condemned with her, on a par with their texts. But of the three, only Chughtai and Manto were charged in a public venue (and at the same time). Both were effectively accused of disturbing the conventions through which religion was folded into domesticity and through which propriety and civility were represented. In both instances, Muslim communities, incensed at the contraventions of honor and the breach of the limits that demarcated the civil and the uncivil, asked a colonial court to intervene to establish the proper, the civil, civilized regularities. Chughtai wrote “LiHaaf” and Manto wrote a story “kaali salvaar” whose protagonist, a prostitute, wanted a black salvar for Muharram, a religious holiday. Sex was for prostitutes, not housewives, and religiosity was for housewives not prostitutes.

The battle over “LiHaaf,” the reason “LiHaaf” was a problem, was precisely the reason why Chughtai won her case in court. Chughtai’s lawyer defended her on the basis of her not having named the relationship she described in her story. The story was an instance of resignification of a structure/zenana and the women within it without a change in the nominalizing signifiers. The argument was over reading, ways in which divergent readings of a particular space occurred, the accessibility of these readings, and the issue of colonial classification systems.

As long as the zenana was not renamed, the only people who could read the relationships in Chughtai’s story as different were those who already knew about this kind of difference. An alternative reading was not available to readers not already “in the know.” “Obscenity” needed to be named in order to be classified and also to be publicly available as obscene. Chughtai’s story was troubling precisely because its spaces, structures and relationships were not named. It rewrote the zenana, a private, protected space, without renaming it. It was transgressive, subversive, and troubling because it did not allow for a reclassification of the space it reinscribed.

Chughtai’s story was not the first representation of female-female sexual­ity in Urdu literature. There was a precedent for it in rekhti, a form of poetry in which women, sometimes fairly explicitly, spoke of desire for other women. Rekhti, however, which was performed by men in drag for an audience of men, was produced by men for the titillation of other men. Poetry in “lesbian” drag, rekhti was a socially sanctioned, not quite, but almost civi­lized form of transgressive sexuality.  

made this clear. Its performances took place outside the home and outside the other koTHi (house) of a tawaa‘if (courtesan). As a performance it was closed, self-contained, and private (part of a men’s club) and can perhaps be understood as a form of cross-dressed vaudeville. But “LiHaaf” was undercover, a covert incursion into the home by a woman writer rather than in an acceptable public display of sexual/gender bending by a man, and so it called into question not only the ways in which the home/zenana had been produced but also the acceptable alternative representations of sexuality. It refused the registers of public civility given to women.

Quilted Repetitions

Reading “LiHaaf” within the registers of multiple circulations offers several sight lines into formations of civil spheres. Translating Haram into harem, and harem through zanaanah, gives form to the concept-metaphor (from Gayatri Spivak) “harem,” turning it into its ghostly corporeal form. This form is the form the word harem takes as it produces debates around women’s rights in postcolonial feminist public spheres, both inside and outside South Asia. As this form of harem circulates, it carries with it and takes shape within the violent epistemes of a colonial historical lineage that sexualizes it in certain ways.

Zanaanah follows this spectral form as a trace (as the quilt follows the LiHaaf). The questions accruing in the public spaces of women’s studies in the United States about how women’s rights in South Asia are constituted (phantasmic questions) either evade this trace or bend the zanaanah into something harem-like, targeting it as the place where women are to be rescued from brown men, or turning it into a form of home from which sexuality has been bled out of existence. This form of epistemic violence is precisely that against which Ismat Chughtai’s story intervenes. Unlike forms of the harem that continue to circulate as corporeal and static-sites removed from history, Chughtai’s story historicizes the zanaanah. “LiHaaf” refuses simple notions of rescue. Begum Jan is the mistress of her life. The residents of Chughtai’s story are not just sexualized, improper (Haram) women, women subjected to the uncivilized desires of a male. Neither are they proper, civilized (Haram) women denuded entirely of sexuality, and thought of as such in some continuous form from the past. They do not simply accede to colonial or nationalist or feminist productions of good and bad womanliness, zanaanah, and civilized or uncivil women, all excluded from public spheres.

“LiHaaf” orders the questions of the sexual subjectivity of women through what women come to expect from modernity, the phantasm of companionate marriage with a good man (whose other is the sultan and his harem). It takes on this production of modernity through Begum Jan’s will to live. Her will to live is a response to the seen and not quite seen registers of masculinity turned toward itself. Begum Jan’s will to live in the zanaanah under the conditions of the modern become an allegory for women whose lives are folded into layers of illusionary ideals about the place of women. These ideals seem
to rely on a masculinity (colonial, nationalist, postcolonial, perhaps even feminist) whose focus appears to be the zanaan, but whose desire is really about itself.

“LiHaaf” intervenes in discourses about the zenana/zanaanah/harem by considering socialization into civility and the kinds of failures of vision embodied in these forms of socialization, whether they be those of the Begum’s family who could not see the Nawab for who he was, or the child’s mother who could not see the zanaanah for what it was. “LiHaaf” produces the poetics of socialization by playing with the ways in which civility is what must be seen.

When “LiHaaf” is called to court, accused of obscenity, it is precisely these failures of vision that allow the story to win its case. The community that condemned Chughtai’s story is one who cannot bear to see their home rendered as it is in “LiHaaf.” The home in “LiHaaf” is uncanny, disturbing, not quite like an idealized home where women protect the traditional from the violations of modernity and colonialism. Begum Jan is bound to what she sees as the traditional as well as the modern. But in her desire for life, she brings to both a sexuality that they must not possess, a sexuality that registers outside of the civil or civilized. But not entirely outside.

Begum Jan has a name, and her name is life. What she does is in the name of life, her life, and in concordance with her name. The court wants another kind of naming, one that would bring the begum and her body, the child narrator and her visual pleasure, Rubbu and her touch, into the sphere of the civil. This demand is another failure of vision. “LiHaaf” takes you behind a curtain, through the shadows of a quilt, but never gives names up. In this it practices a kind of moving pedagogy that cannot be catalogued. And through its ambivalences it gifts ways of seeing that travel along with the harem in its various circulations and never sediment into a complete picture.