The (Male) Gaze of Shadows : The Inner Lives of Women in Works of Ismat Chughtai and Amrita Sher-Gil

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Abstract

In the 1930s-40s, the rhetoric of the colonialists and the Indian nationalists sounded similar, as each group's modernizing mission viewed women as objects of desire and protection. How did Ismat Chughtai's Urdu short stories and Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings respond to this dominant patriarchal discourse? Critics have often read their overlapping explorations of women's inner lives as 'subverting' the 'male gaze.' But considering the realist locations of their works are spaces of hetero-patriarchal imagination, where does the audience's gaze turn? Is the subversion successful? This article analyzes Chughtai's 'Lihaaf' and Sher-Gil's paintings, 'Women Resting on a Charpoy' and 'Self-Portrait as a Tahitian,' focusing on the domestic sphere. They reveal the oppressiveness of these spaces while compelling the audience to confront how its inhabitants assert their desires and selfhood. Foucault's 'heterotopia,' closed spaces to contain disruptive 'Others,' is a useful lens to understand the patriarchal design of the domestic sphere. By reading the visual and literary imagery of shadows in these works, this article examines the tension between the perpetuation of the male gaze and its internalization by women to argue that Chughtai and Sher-Gil do not wholly subvert the male gaze but bring the audience to a place of uneasy acknowledgement.

Keywords: Male Gaze; Ismat Chughtai; Amrita Sher-Gil; Heterotopia; Colonial Modernity

Introduction

At the pinnacle of nationalistic consciousness that challenged the colonial experiences of modernity, Indian society of the 1930s and 1940s was 'in-transit' toward modernity and 'in-transition' toward a nation-state. What was the position of Indian women in this modernizing nation?

To address this question, I will first contextualize the historical positioning of women in the Indian subcontinent before examining 'the women question' under colonial rule. In ancient Brahmanical societies, women were relegated to subordinate roles that restricted their mobility and sexuality. Uma Chakravarti, who theorizes on Brahmanical patriarchy in early India, argues that female sexuality was regulated through a rigid reproductive structure to uphold caste purity and patrilineal succession. With the expansion of agrarian economies and the increasing ownership of *dasis* (enslaved women) by Aryan clans, elite Aryan women's labor was further shifted from food production and confined to domestic and reproductive labour within the household (Chakravarti 581). In the early modern Islamic societies of the subcontinent, elite Muslim women were secluded in gender-segregated quarters known as the *zenana*, in accordance with patriarchal Islamic family structures. Eventually, these practices of veiling and seclusion became prevalent in Muslim, Sikh, and even elite upper-caste Hindu communities, entrenching women's confinement to the domestic sphere.

Political philosopher Kanchana Mahadevan turns to a critical tension regarding Indian womanhood under colonial modernity. One aspect of the modernizing idea of India that subsumed the societies of the Indian subcontinent was the emergence of the public/private divide, restructuring social life into civic and domestic spheres. Indian women continued to occupy a marginal presence in the civil sphere under colonial modernity, even though both colonialists and Indian Hindu reformers as nationalists appealed to the very modern notion of nation as "the telos of womanhood" (Mahadevan 202). Although Indian womanhood occupied a symbolic stage in the imagination of a modern India, both colonialists and nationalists viewed Indian women not as autonomous political subjects with different social realities across caste, class, and sexuality. They were considered what Mahadevan calls 'abstract citizens,' who are divorced from their social realities and used as cultural representations by both colonialists and nationalists to legitimize their respective modernizing missions.

These constructions of cultural representations of womanhood by colonialists and nationalists constitute a dual 'male gaze.' In her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," feminist visual theorist Laura Mulvey

coined the term 'male gaze' to examine the nature of media created by and for men. Her study uses a psychoanalytic framework to study how cinema fosters a scopophilic instinct, that is, the pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object. By analyzing the depictions of women as sexualized figures presented in Hollywood cinema to be gazed at by the male creator and spectator, Mulvey puts forth the concept of the 'male gaze.' She asserts that media of visual art, such as cinema, present and represent women as passive objects, thus perpetuating the real-world patriarchal power hierarchies ordered by sexual imbalance. Women are made to be looked at for the pleasure of the heterosexual male spectator. The male spectator remains an active subject in his act of gazing, projecting his fantasies of desire onto the female figure. Similarly, in the modernity rhetoric of colonialists and nationalists, the dual male gaze reduced Indian womanhood to passive objects of desire and protection.

On the one hand, white colonizers appealed to Indian women as 'objects of protection' to justify their colonial rule. They promoted the so-called White Man's burden to 'civilize' the 'backwardness' of Indian culture by reforming Indian womanhood from oppressive traditional practices and beliefs. Simultaneously, as art historian Gianna Carotenuto argues, colonialists also conflated the *zenana* with the *harem*, superimposing the Orientalist trope of *harems* onto colonial pictorial representations of the *zenana* to further objectify Indian women. Carotenuto observes that in British colonial society, the *zenana*, women's quarters within the family home, was used interchangeably with the *harem* (6). *Harem* is a term that defines Ottoman imperial cultures of polygynous royal households, which were considered a symbol of Oriental decadence by European colonialists. She identifies that this conflation introduced an "erotic aesthetic" into colonial portrayals of the *zenana* (Carotenuto 10). I believe that the exoticisation of the *zenana* as a forbidden and erotic space legitimised the colonisers' appeal to Indian women as 'objects of desire.' This dual objectification framed Indian society as both sexually transgressive and morally backwards, allowing colonizers to pathologize and eroticise Indian womanhood at once.

On the other hand, nationalists invoked women's identity in cultural representations as the 'preservers of the Indian motherland,' effectively domesticating Indian womanhood. Hindu nationalists venerated the idea of an

independent Indian nation to a sacred maternal figure by conflating women's identities with the imaginaries of the free homeland. They idealised Indian womanhood as epitome of purity, sacrifice, and spiritual strength—all the qualities they deemed essential for the modern Indian nation. By tying women's selfhood to their social positions as mothers, wives, and caretakers within the household, they made the domestic sphere a site of protection and national preservation. These imaginaries enabled nationalists to justify their subordination of women by confining them within the domestic sphere. Rai further observes that the Hindu nationalists' modernizing mission rationalized practices such as purdah and gender segregation by "invoking the presence of a society full of lustful and lecherous male gaze" (55). In this context, the rhetoric of nationalists simultaneously casts women as objects of male desire who require protection, not only from colonial oppressors but also from Indian men. These essentialist, androcentric constructions of womanhood undermine women as free subjects in both public and private spheres, framing them as objects of desire and parochial protection.

In this androcentric milieu of transitioning India, the oeuvres of Ismat Chughtai, an Urdu novelist and short story writer, and Amrita Sher-Gil, a Hungarian Indian avant-garde painter and a pioneer of modern Indian art, converge in their focus on women's lives. This article explores their works concerning the narratives and representations of women's lives within the continually contested public and private spheres of colonial and nationalist modernities. Through close reading of the visual language in Chughtai's short story and Sher-Gil's paintings, I explore the inner lives of women within the domestic sphere where the male gaze was ever-present.

Beginning her writing career in the 1930s, Ismat Chughtai (1915–1991) became a canonical figure in Urdu literature of the 20th century due to her compelling narratives on the everyday issues that grappled with the lives of Indians, specifically women. Literary realism characterizes her writing, encompassing a range of diverse themes such as, marriage, childbirth, feudal and sexual politics, colonial surveillance, class conflict, middle-class gentility (specifically Muslims), and various rural and urban issues. Chughtai's portrayal of selfhood, an autonomous state of being an individual, in her realistic and diverse characters presents insights into women's sexuality and psyche. Her

typical first-person narratives, infused with wit, grief, and colloquial diction, sketch out how women's psyches are formed via socio-cultural, political, and economic conflicts. Chughtai explores the inner lives of her female characters in the changing milieu of colonial and nationalistic modernities. Her writing illustrates the complex roles of women in navigating the boundaries of the colonial and nationalistic gaze of femininity and their selfhood. Beyond her fiction, Chughtai challenged the closed, androcentric literary circles by representing women's selfhood, inspiring Urdu women writers to seize their own literary space through their identity.

Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–41), who also began her career in the 1930s, challenged European androcentric art circles and traditional Indian art. Sher-Gil, born to a Hungarian mother and a Sikh father, was trained in Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts at age sixteen. As a result, her early oil paintings and self-portraits drew inspiration from European painters such as Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh. Leaving Europe in 1934, her extensive travels in India transformed her European perspectives, resulting in what art critics call her 'artistic awakening.' Influenced by miniature Mughal paintings, the Pahari School of paintings, Ajanta cave sculptures, landscapes of Saraya, Shimla, and other rural dwellings, Sher-Gil's Indian paintings "in oils recorded an ambivalent balance in the feudal/feminine world within the terms of a modernizing consciousness" (Rana 38). Depicting women's agency and subjectivity in feudal and domestic landscapes, Sher-Gil carved out a modernization that was neither colonial nor nationalist. Sher-Gil established a counter-discourse of Indian modernity, challenging nationalist and colonialist conceptions of women as objects by visually representing women as fundamental subjects in modernizing India.

When juxtaposed, Chughtai and Sher-Gil's works share overlapping themes of women's interiority and selfhood. In their literary and artistic practices, they re-worlded the subjectivity of women by delving into their psyche, desire, sexuality, and agency. To examine their treatment of women's interiority, I will analyze Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (1942), a short story told through the eyes of a nine-year-old girl, about a sexually frustrated housewife who suffers from a lonely marriage and engages sexually with her servant, Rabbu, under the *lihaaf* or quilt. I will also comparatively examine the visual language in Sher-Gil's

paintings *Women Resting on a Charpoy* (1940) and *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian* (1934). Given the realistic location of their work, in the short story and paintings, is the space of hetero-patriarchal imagination, how do their works engage with the male gaze?

This article explores the inner lives of women in the domestic sphere through the comparative works of Ismat Chughtai and Amrita Sher-Gil. I establish the nature of domestic spaces inhabited by these women under colonial modernity using Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia.' Through a comparative study of their works, I propose that both Chughtai's and Sher-Gil's exploration of women's lives within the domestic environment confronts the dual male gaze of colonialists and nationalists.

The Domestic Space as Heterotopia

The works of Ismat Chughtai and Amrita Sher-Gil represent Indian womanhood within the domestic sphere. They capture how women navigated identity, desire, and lived experience at a time when the boundaries between tradition and colonial modernity were increasingly blurred. Under both colonial and nationalist modernities, Indian women were confined to the private realm, cast as 'objects of protection' or 'objects of desire' to exclude them from civic life. One way to understand the establishment of these domestic spaces fraught with the entangled gendered relations of tradition and colonial modernity is through Michel Foucault's 'heterotopia.'

In his 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces," Foucault argues that the spaces we inhabit are heterogeneous because they are produced through discourses of power. Each space is organized and made meaningful by its relations with other spaces. This heterogeneity strips away the neutrality of spaces. Spaces are governed by rules of the social order, which enable or restrain ways of being and belonging. Who may enter these spaces? What behaviours are permitted? What symbolic functions do they serve—order, leisure, sanctity, or profanity? For instance, we recognize the prison as a space of punishment due to its contrast from normative spaces that are organized around freedom, rehabilitation and routine. The prison as an 'other' space is defined not in isolation, but in its power difference from normative spaces that exist in tension with the social order.

According to the translation of the lecture by Miskowiec, Foucault is drawn to these 'other' spaces that have "the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (Foucault 3). He calls these 'other' spaces 'heterotopias. 'Norwegian artist and scholar Knut Åsdam explains that heterotopias exist "outside of the society which produced [them], while at the same time carrying a relation to all the other remaining, 'external' spaces" (Åsdam 1). As such, heterotopic spaces exist within society yet are set apart from the dominant regulatory social order. They are produced in relation to normative spaces, but at the same time, they reflect and also challenge the rules that govern these normative spaces. Foucault identifies that the modern heterotopia is the heterotopia of deviation: "those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (Foucault 5). These heterotopic spaces localize society's 'other' behaviour to maintain social order or allow people to act contrary to this order. For example, asylums, prisons, elderly homes, brothels, and even amusement parks contain people who act in manners contrary to the social order.

In my view, Foucault's modern notion of heterotopia offers a useful lens to understand the domestic spaces depicted in the works of Ismat Chughtai and Amrita Sher-Gil. Their representations open a portal into the interior worlds of women. Following Foucault, the domestic sphere in their works can be read as heterotopias—closed spaces designed to contain 'deviant' Others, that simultaneously reflect and resist the patriarchal social order. Their narratives highlight the hetero-patriarchal systems that construct these spaces to discipline and regulate female desire, mobility, and autonomy. However, in their contradictory position as heterotopias, these spaces provide an interiority that enables inadvertent forms of resistance. Women's agency in such environments is never absolute; rather, it depends on where they fall within patriarchal hierarchies of caste, class, and social status.

Chughtai and Sher-Gil both move beyond viewing the *zenana* as purely oppressive, instead presenting it as a fraught but intimate space with uncharted freedom where women cultivated their inner lives. Inside the *zenana* of Chughtai's *Lihaaf*, Begum Jan freely expresses her estrangement and sexual

frustration in a home where "neither Nawab Sahib [found] a spare moment from his preoccupation with the gossamer shirts nor allow[ed] her to venture outside the home" (Tr. Hameed 10). Although Nawab Sahib was a closeted homosexual drawn to his young male students and their gossamer shirts, his disinterest in his marriage to the much younger Begum Jan did not diminish his exercise of patriarchal control over her. Cast as 'other' and isolated by the patriarchal head, Begum Jan remains a prisoner of the *zenana*, a space structured by the gendered orthodoxies that trapped Indian women within honour codes of respectability to uphold traditional androcentric ideals. By traditional, I refer not only to the non-nuclear, extended family structure and sexually segregated households representative of quotidian arranged marriages between two ostensibly 'straight' individuals but also to the ideological work this configuration performs. For nationalists, a household is a microcosm of the nation where patriarchal control and heteronormativity are naturalized under the guise of cultural continuity into modernity. Women are portrayed as passive sacred objects of cultural purity, protected within domestic interiors for the symbolic desires of the nation and the erotic desires of their husbands. Despite her husband's lack of sexual interest in her, Begum Jan remains marked as a deviant body, desiring and thus dangerous. Her confinement reveals the paradox of the *zenana*: it exists to protect women from the public male gaze by detaining their selfhood in the domestic sphere. In this context, the *zenana* functions as a heterotopia of deviation, meant to contain those who defy normative social roles in patriarchal systems. As I hope to show, the heterotopic contradictions of the *zenana* in *Lihaaf* expose how the domestic space becomes a site of quiet transgression where desire is both disavowed and dangerously present. Within this heterotopic interiority, Begum Jan asserts her desires and reclaims a silenced selfhood that both reflects and challenges the very structures meant to mute her deviant voice in dominant discourse.

Lihaaf inhabits the contradictions of the *zenana's* heterotopic design. Estranged from her husband, Begum Jan yearns to live fully for her desires, in concordance with her name that signifies life itself. As the literary scholar who writes about *Lihaaf*, Geeta Patel, notes, "*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*)" ("Marking the Quilt" 14). Patel critiques how colonial discourses conflated the *zenana* with the Orientalist *harem* to justify intervention in the name of 'civilizing' the subcontinent colonies. The heterosexual, companionate marriage was imagined as a modern solution to 'emancipate' Indian women, in stark contrast to the imagined decadence of the sultan and his *harem*. Whether framed as liberal reform or cultural preservation, both colonial and nationalist projects used marriage to naturalize women's subordination under patriarchal control. But Begum Jan's husband is not the figure of a 'good man' because he is neither emotionally nor sexually available. The dream of modern marriage becomes a new form of abandonment to oppress Begum Jan further in the walls of the *zenana*.

In rebellion, Begum Jan seeks emotional and physical fulfillment with her servant Rabbu. What begins as daily massages for her 'undernourished' body evolves into a clandestine affair beneath the quilt. Though confined as a domestic figure, Begum Jan's desires transgress the roles imposed upon her as a wife and as a 'respectable' woman. The narrative unfolds through the first-person perspective of a child, whose adult recollection shows the psycho-sexual forces and socio-cultural conflicts that govern female subjectivities within the *zenana* (Naqvi xii). The child, as a reluctant spectator of the affair, enters the orbit of Begum Jan's longing and becomes a predatory focus of her desire. These intimacies within the *zenana* lay bare the fraught power imbalances of coercion and agency within a patriarchal order where the boundaries between desire and domination blur. As an elite, adult woman, Begum Jan occupies a position that affords her power over her servant Rabbu, and disturbingly, over the child narrator. Chughtai refuses the comfort of moral resolution, instead confronting the reader with the unsettling reality that female subjectivity can emerge within and be complicit in the same structures that oppress. The unresolved dynamics of power and intimacy in *Lihaaf's zenana* arise from its heterotopic nature, a space teeming with contradictory meanings of protection and imprisonment, repression and resistance, desire and violence. The heterotopic structure of the *zenana* functions as a marginalized space acting on gendered subjugation, yet it simultaneously reproduces patriarchal hierarchies that are fraught with other intersecting identities of caste, class, age, and social status. This heterotopia both maintains yet contests the patriarchal

social order, compelling readers to confront how women's desire and selfhood are mediated within the interiors of the heterotopic *zenana*.

The comparative analysis of Chughtai and Sher-Gil's works demonstrates the tension between women as both subjects and objects within domestic spaces. In *Woman Resting on a Charpoy* (1940) (Figure 1), Amrita Sher-Gil portrays a woman not as a passive object of androcentric desire, but as a subject marked by deviation and defiance of patriarchal norms. This painting of Sher-Gil can be read as a pictorial representation of Begum Jan's loneliness. It features a young woman in a flamboyant red Punjabi dress, adorning *sindoor*, symbolic of her marital status. She lounges on a cot with half-closed eyes and legs positioned at an angle that typically accentuates sensuality and eroticism in visual art. The bodily enactment of loneliness starkly contrasts with the colour red, an emblem of desire. The predominant red hues dramatize the room as Sher-Gil heightens the tension by exhibiting the intimate yearning of the woman's psyche in the outer manifestation of the domestic space. Much like the metaphor of the quilt in Chughtai's *Lihaaf* that both conceals and discloses repressed desire, the reclining female body on the charpoy mirrors the body under the quilt; it is rendered still, yet suggestive of unspoken desires. Both evoke the repetitive rhythms and quiet disobedience of women who are not passive residents of these heterotopic spaces.

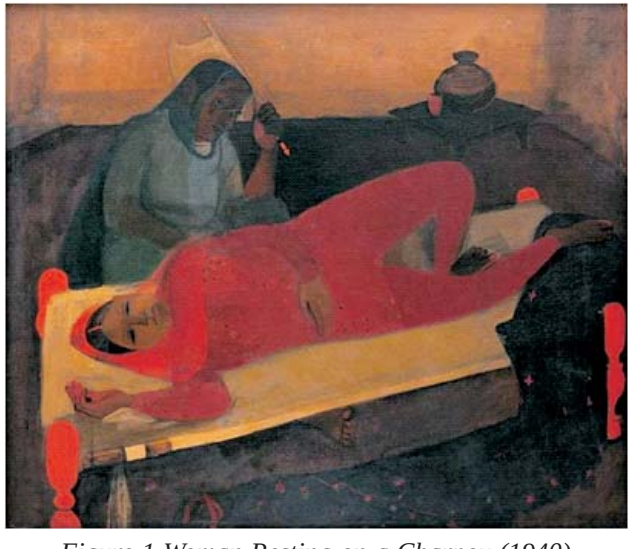

Figure 1 Woman Resting on a Charpoy (1940)

The presence of a servant fanning the reclining woman materializes a tableau of disproportionate intimacy within the heterotopic domestic space. The fanning gesture, like the act of massaging in *Lihaaf*, becomes an embodied performance that oscillates between desire and servitude, care, and control. These tactile interactions stem from a gendered and classed economy of care, where the bodies of working-class women are instrumentalized to soothe the psychic and erotic alienation of elite women. In this heterotopic interior, Sher-Gil builds up a scene of inequitable intimacy, where the affect of unfulfilled desires flows unevenly through relations of servitude and power. The domestic sphere is reframed as a site of quiet disobedience, longing, and the reconfiguration of feminine subjectivity. Sher-Gil's painting, from her 'Red Period,' is a visual meditation on the heterotopic dichotomy of the domestic space. The central figure is both a passive object of male desire within the patriarchal household and an active subject of unfulfilled desire, who in turn objectifies another woman of a lower ranking in this patriarchal hierarchy for her own needs. The painting captures the intensity of suspended female subjectivities, where autonomy emerges not through overt rebellion, but through charged and ambiguous intimacies cultivated in the power dynamics of these enclosed yet expansive domestic worlds.

Visualizing the Domestic Heterotopia: Gaze of Color and Language

When comparing the oeuvres of Ismat Chughtai and Amrita Sher-Gil, a striking resonance emerges in their use of visual and literary imagery to conceptualize women's agency and autonomy within heterotopic spaces. Both artist and writer disrupt colonial and nationalist inscriptions of the male gaze that exoticized and eroticized women as 'objects of desire.' Sher-Gil's early works bore traces of Western orientalist aesthetics, but her return to India sparked a decisive transformation. Disillusioned by European romanticization of India, she developed a radical visual vocabulary during her 'Red Period.' In this phase, bold, saturated reds and muted earth tones transgressed her earlier orientalist palettes, marking a conscious break from colonial visual language. As Rana Subir observes, Sher-Gil's 'Red Period' reflects the inner psyche and ontology of (sexual) desire of Indian women confined within feudal domestic structures (Rana 51). Devoting these years to representing women through form and

colour, Sher-Gil's work draws on themes from her travels. Using her aesthetic philosophy of red as a formal strategy, she evokes women's interiority—their imaginations, desires, hopes, fears, and dreams—within confined feudal and domestic spaces. Red is traditionally associated with erotic charge and domestic entrapment, symbolised by *sindoor* to signify women as 'objects of protection.' But the red that saturates the spaces in Sher-Gil's paintings manifests a heterotopic tension between repression and expression within the domestic sphere. Through form and colour, Sher-Gil's modernist compositions abstract not only the female body but also the textures of their lived experiences. These domestic representations challenge modernizing discourses that frame women as 'objects of protection,' underlining them instead as subjects negotiating autonomy in spaces designed to contain them.

In the trajectory of modern Indian art and Urdu literature, Sher-Gil's 'Red Period' and Chughtai's *Lihaaf* obscenity trial remain landmark interventions for how they render women's subjectivities within patriarchal domestic milieus. In *Lihaaf*, Chughtai visualizes the heterotopic domestic sphere through her figurative and often tactile language. Her prose draws from the tonality of *begmati* Urdu yet remains strikingly colloquial. In a 1972 interview, Chughtai remarked, "[w]hen I started to write, people were very shocked because I wrote ... and do write as I speak, in a very simple language, not the literary language" (Coppola). According to Patel, the idioms and dialects she uses produces a physical presence through sound that have often been described as "tactile word pictures" ("An Uncivil Woman" 349), This sonic immediacy often found in her first-person narratives "almost unceremoniously dump[ed] you into a present which you as a reader suddenly begin to inhabit" ("An Uncivil Woman" 347). These tactile word pictures disrupt linear narrative time, weaving together resonant moments and memories that animate the closed, gendered spaces of the *zenana* with psychological intensity.

Chughtai's familiar storytelling uses metaphors (the quilt in *Lihaaf*) to probe into the unfamiliar, intimate thoughts, and lives of her female subjects. These subjects are formed by identities of violation, loss, longing, and identities that do not blend into society—defining her leitmotif of "repeated traumatic fiction." Patel claims that Chughtai's characterizations are a thematic reiteration of loss, longing, and stifled resistance that define the lives of Indian women in

this androcentric milieu of India ("An Uncivil Woman" 352). We see this in *Lihaaf*, where the use of metaphors helps convey the child narrator's fragmented perceptions and Begum Jan's veiled desires and grief. Chughtai creates a poetics of interiority that ricochets a constant tension between being a woman on the periphery of society and being a woman in the interiority of their mind. This tension brings women's subjectivities to the forefront.

Together, Sher-Gil's scarlet sensuality and Chughtai's figurative tactility reimagine the domestic not as a passive setting of patriarchal hierarchies but as a heterotopic space where women cope with the constraints of their desire, subjectivity, and autonomy. In both cases, visual and verbal imagery attempt to reposition women from the peripheries assigned to them by showcasing them as complex subjects in the affective atmosphere inside the domestic sphere.

Confrontation, Not Subversion of Male Gaze

A comparative analysis of Chughtai and Sher-Gil's visual language is incomplete without addressing the symbolism of shadows. I argue that their use of shadows confronts, rather than fully subverts, the pervasive male gaze within patriarchal domestic spaces. Scholarship on *Lihaaf* often interprets the shadows beneath the quilt as female desire existing independently of the male gaze, interpreting Begum Jan's intimacy with Rabbu as evidence that women seek fulfilment beyond patriarchal boundaries (Gautam 55). Similarly, Sher-Gil's self-portraits are often read as acts of subversion. One such example is *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian* (1934) (Figure 2), a three-quarter profile of a bare-chested Sher-Gil lost in a reverie with an ambiguous manlike shadow in the background. Reading this painting, art critic Saloni Mathur suggests that Sher-Gil's self remains unharmed by the male shadow because she revels in her self-sufficiency, using Tahitian and Indian elements to express her intercultural and gender identities (521). Yet, given that these domestic spaces are heterotopic imaginations shaped by heteropatriarchal power relations under colonial and nationalist discourses, this article argues that the subjects of Chughtai and Sher-Gil can never fully escape the male gaze. Their shadows haunt an ongoing internal negotiation of women's identity with this inescapable gaze.

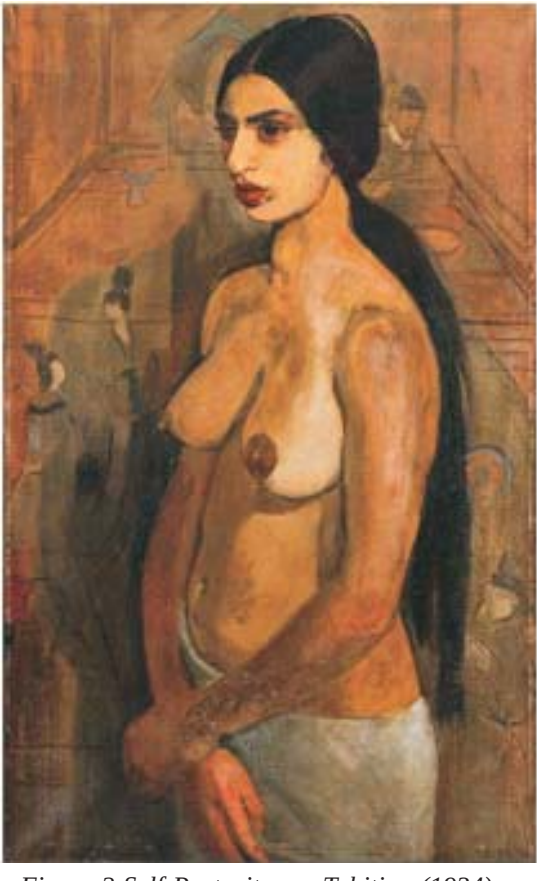

Figure 2 Self-Portrait as a Tahitian (1934)

I contend that these shadows embody suppressed desires persisting under the unrelenting male gaze. In Sher-Gil's *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian*, I distinguish between self-perception and self-objectification as these concepts are often conflated in readings of the painting. While I challenge Mathur's view of subversion here, I agree with her critique that Sher-Gil's work has been overly reduced to Gauguin's primitivist exoticism. She importantly notes Sher-Gil's connection to van Gogh's radical ideas, which offered an alternative model for solidarity with India's marginalized (519). Thus, the painting can be seen as an expression of empathy toward women stifled under the dual male gaze of colonialism and nationalism. It challenges Gaugin's colonial gaze and the androcentric nationalistic gaze that marginalised Indian women. By recognizing women's internalisation of this dual gaze, which implicates them in their subjugation, I reimagine the shadow in this painting. I evoke Margaret Atwood's poignant quote from *The Robber Bride* about the 'male fantasy': "Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? ...You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur" (442). The gaze of 'male fantasy' implies that women's self-perception becomes objectified, making them voyeurs of themselves. The manlike shadow in *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian* acknowledges the inevitability of self-objectification within patriarchal structures.

The shadows in Chughtai's *Lihaaf* symbolise the friction between women's repressed desires and the male gaze in inequitable domestic spaces. Inside the *zenana*, the shadows on the wall personify Begum Jan's sexual repression and loneliness. Shivering from prolonged isolation, "[Begum Jan's] quilt assumed ferocious shapes that appeared like shadowy monsters on the wall … [but] not one of the shadows carried any promise of life" (Tr. Hameed 10). These shadows, cloaked by the quilt, are not figments of women's forbidden longing for desires in a space where they are treated as objects of desire and protection. Begum Jan started 'living' when the maidservant Rabbu fulfilled her sexual desires. The child narrator expresses the sexual intimacy of Begum Jan and Rabbu as shadows under the quilt that "sway like an elephant" (Tr. Hameed 13). This forbidden, shadowed homoerotic bond signals a negotiation of female agency in pursuing desire. But within a heterotopia designed by patriarchal structures, their homoerotic bond is marked by oppression, circumscribed by class and power imbalances. "Rabbu's dependency on Begum Jan as a servant makes her vulnerable to sexual exploitation, as Begum Jan snatches away her agency and makes her an object of her desire within the *zenana*. As remarked by *Lihaaf*'s ending, "it was pitch dark, Begum Jan's quilt was shaking vigorously as if an elephant was struggling beneath it" (Tr. Hameed 13). The shadow of the elephant is the 'elephant in the room,' suggestive of Rabbu's lack of agency as her identity 'struggles' as an androcentric object of desire despite being in a domestic space meant to represent women's selfhood. The shadows in *Lihaaf* crystallize that the *zenana* is a heterotopia and not a feminist utopia. The class hierarchy, a consequence of patriarchal structures, leads to the inevitability of women's objectification, even by other women.

Conclusion

A comparative study of Chughtai's short story and Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings demonstrates how their works of the 1930s and 1940s intersect inside the domestic. Their narratives explore the inner lives of women who struggle to confront the dual male gaze. The male gaze here refers to the modernizing discourses of colonialists and nationalists that reduced women to 'objects of protection' and 'object of desire' under colonial modernity. The domestic

sphere in modernizing India is a heterotopic space that regulates the visibility and mobility of women as the 'Othered' gender. Women embodying the heterotopic contradictions of the domestic space simultaneously resist and reproduce the patriarchal social order.

A closer examination of Chughtai and Sher-Gil's works through colour, language, and shadows helps interpret the inner worlds of women. Together, Sher-Gil and Chughtai use shadows not to subvert but to confront the male gaze. They shed light on the inescapability of the male gaze within patriarchal domestic spaces, exposing the fraught tensions between repression and expression, self-objectification and self-perception. By emphasizing confrontation over subversion, I argue that these artists reject any idealization of the domestic as a feminist utopia. Instead, the domestic is ultimately a contested terrain of heterotopia constructed by authorized patriarchal structures. In this heterotopia, women have also internalized patriarchal norms, such as class conflicts and self-objectification of the prevalent male gaze, thus limiting their agency and autonomy. My comparative analysis aims to show that the representations of women in Chughtai and Sher-Gil's works resist simplistic narratives of victimhood or empowerment that act as a subversion of the male gaze. Rather, they bring their audiences to an uneasy acknowledgement of the male gaze in hetero-patriarchal structures.

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