

Desire, Surveillance, and the Grotesque Body: A Comparative Study of “*The Lesbian Cow*”, “*Lihaaf*”, and “*The Yellow Wallpaper*”

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Abstract: Literature across cultures has long explored women’s desire as a point of tension between personal agency and social norms. This article examines how Indu Menon’s “*The Lesbian Cow*”, Ismat Chughtai’s “*Lihaaf*”, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “*The Yellow Wallpaper*” construct the female body as a contested space through the intersection of queer desire, domestic imprisonment, and medical surveillance. Although the narratives emerge from disparate temporal and cultural contexts such as postmodern Indian healthcare, colonial Muslim aristocracy, and nineteenth-century American psychiatry— they converge in their representation of women whose emotional, sexual, and psychological needs are pathologized. Drawing on feminist and queer theoretical frameworks, this paper argues that all three protagonists resist heteropatriarchal power structures not through overt rebellion but through metaphorical self-reconstitution: the cow-woman hybrid in “*The Lesbian Cow*”, the gloomy world of “*Lihaaf*”, and the imagined woman trapped in “*The Yellow Wallpaper*.” These metaphorical transformations expose how institutions—marriage, medicine, and domesticity—become technologies of discipline that attempt to normalize women’s bodies and desires. Ultimately, the article contends that women’s “madness”, queerness, or monstrosity is not an inherent condition but a defensive space created in response to structural erasure.

Keywords: queer desire, Patriarchy, female body, surveillance, destruction, male gaze, societal attitude, literary analysis

1. Introduction

Indu Menon’s “*The Lesbian Cow*” (2012), Ismat Chughtai’s “*Lihaaf*” (1942), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “*The Yellow Wallpaper*” (1892) each depict women whose emotional and sexual needs violate dominant social norms.

Indu Menon’s “**The Lesbian Cow**” is about a nurse whose colleagues and community ostracize her over rumours that she desires women. As workplace harassment intensifies, she begins identifying psychologically with a dairy cow— a creature both exploited and bodily valuable but never respected. The cow becomes a metaphor for queer objectification, and the protagonist’s hybrid self-image emerges as a coping mechanism against systemic humiliation and surveillance.

“**Lihaaf**” by Ismat Chughtai is set in an upper-class Muslim household in colonial India, the story recounts events through the perspective of a young girl observing her aunt (Begum Jan), who is neglected sexually and emotionally by her aristocratic husband. Begum Jan develops a secret intimate relationship with her maid, Rabbo. Their queer desire appears only indirectly— through shadows, movement beneath a quilt, and sensory suggestions— illustrating how sexuality becomes a hidden refuge in a patriarchal domestic prison.

In “**The Yellow Wallpaper**”, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s narrative takes the form of a postpartum woman’s diary as she undergoes the “rest cure” prescribed by her physician-husband. Confined to a bedroom and denied intellectual stimulation, she descends into psychosis, hallucinating a woman trapped behind the wallpaper’s pattern. Her breakdown becomes an act of rebellion, symbolically freeing the imagined woman — and herself — from patriarchal medical authority.

These three narratives, across vastly different historical and cultural contexts—contemporary India, colonial British India, and 19th-century America— converge in portraying societies that police, shame, and punish women who defy acceptable models of the female body and sexuality. Though their protagonists differ in class, setting, and psychological condition, each narrative argues that emotional deprivation and institutional power structures produce psychological breakdown. Collectively, the stories expose the consequences of denying women the right to own their bodies, articulate their desires, and be treated with dignity.

Queer Desire and Social Censure:

Both “*The Lesbian Cow*” and “*Lihaaf*” foreground queer female desire, but they differ in tone and power dynamics. In “*The Lesbian Cow*”, the nurse’s attraction toward a young female patient emerges from loneliness rather than predation. A single moment of kindness—a smile—becomes the emotional anchor of her fantasies. The nurse imagines the patient’s hand held in hers long after work hours, turning ordinary politeness into a dream of intimacy. The tragedy arises not from queer desire itself but from society’s refusal to see queer love as legitimate. The workplace is a site of surveillance and humiliation; the nurse cannot confess her attraction nor exist openly as a queer woman. Her sexuality is not suppressed through law or physical violence, but through the relentless mockery that dehumanizes her body. Queerness is criminalized through insult rather than law.

By contrast, “*Lihaaf*” presents queer desire not as unfulfilled fantasy but as an alternative to heterosexual disappointment. Begum Jan, trapped in a loveless marriage with a husband who ignores her, redirects her desire toward a female companion, Rabbo. Where the nurse in Menon’s story remains isolated and ashamed, Begum Jan finds solace. Her desire is secret but reciprocated, turning her domestic imprisonment into a private world of erotic refuge. Society

would condemn her if the affair were discovered, but within the boundaries of the zenana, she temporarily escapes judgment. Unlike the tragic nurse of *“The Lesbian Cow”*, Begum Jan experiences empowerment- at least until the patriarchal gaze threatens intrusion.

Gilman’s *“The Yellow Wallpaper”* differs from both Indian narratives by centering heterosexual marriage rather than queer desire. Yet, like Menon and Chughtai, Gilman shows how society polices women’s emotional and sexual lives. The unnamed narrator suffers postpartum depression but is imprisoned in a room under the “rest cure” prescribed by her husband. She is forbidden from reading, writing, or expressing her emotions; even the possibility of desire is erased. While *“The Lesbian Cow”* and *“Lihaaf”* depict women who seek queer intimacy, Gilman portrays a woman who is denied any sexual or emotional agency. Her desperation turns inward, which slowly turns into hallucinations in which a trapped woman behind the wallpaper becomes a metaphor for her own imprisonment.

Thus, while *“The Lesbian Cow”* and *“Lihaaf”* explore queer longing, and *“The Yellow Wallpaper”* explores heterosexual repression, all three works portray societies that constrain women’s sexuality by controlling the body and the imagination.

The Body as a Site of Punishment

The protagonists of all three stories experience their bodies as spaces of surveillance and shame;

In *“The Lesbian Cow”*, the nurse’s body becomes the target of ridicule. Colleagues tell each other that she is mocked as walking like a cow portraying her movements as hoof-like and animalistic. She comes to believe she smells like cattle even after repeated washing. This grotesque self-image is not inherent- it is social. Her body becomes a public object; society speaks about her more than she speaks for herself. The motif of animalization reinforces that the abuse is not about physical appearance, but about the cultural power to assign humiliation.

In *“Lihaaf”*, the female body is also policed, though differently. Begum Jan is sexually ignored by her husband, who prefers the company of younger men. She is condemned not for ugliness but for the “wrong kind” of beauty—beauty that fails to serve male heterosexual pleasure. Her body becomes purposeless in the eyes of patriarchy. The emotional coldness she endures mirrors the nurse’s social exclusion: both women are denied affection because they do not embody the ideal of femininity their societies demand. But where the nurse internalizes shame, Begum Jan creates resistance: she reclaims erotic fulfilment on her own terms.

Gilman’s narrator, in contrast, experiences the body as a medical battlefield. Her husband and doctor insist on

confinement, diet control, and physical inactivity. These interventions are framed as “for her own good”, masking coercion as care. The narrator’s physical deterioration parallels her psychological decline, as she becomes convinced that her body is useless. Like the nurse, she learns to see her body through the eyes of others; like Begum Jan, she seeks escape through fantasy.

In each text, the body is the arena where social power is enforced. Punishment is enacted through:

- **dehumanizing language** (*“The Lesbian Cow”*)
- **sexual neglect** (*“Lihaaf”*)
- **medical paternalism** (*“The Yellow Wallpaper”*)

Though the mechanisms differ, the outcome is shared: women lose sovereignty over their bodies.

Isolation, Fantasy, and Psychological Collapse

Loneliness plays a central role in all three narratives, but its consequences vary.

In *“The Lesbian Cow”*, isolation becomes pathological. Because no one has ever treated her with tenderness, the nurse clings desperately to the memory of a patient’s smile. The fantasy of love replaces reality; she begins to walk the route she imagines the patient takes home, convinced this distance equates to connection. Her fantasies are not escapist but psychological survival. Eventually, her delusion consumes her, leading toward tragedy. Her downfall stems from **emotional starvation turned obsession**.

In *“Lihaaf”*, fantasy becomes a protective shield rather than a descent into madness. Begum Jan’s affair initially preserves her mental health, reversing the depression caused by neglect. Although secrecy surrounds her love, the act of intimacy restores her vitality. However, the story is told from the perspective of a child, not Begum Jan herself, leaving ambiguity about the psychological consequences. Unlike the doomed nurse, Begum Jan avoids collapse- but only precariously. If her secret were exposed, her emotional recovery would likely unravel.

In *“The Yellow Wallpaper”*, fantasy overtakes reason in a way reminiscent of Menon’s protagonist. The narrator, forbidden from emotional and creative expression, projects her desperation onto the wallpaper, imagining a woman trapped behind it. Eventually, she believes she herself has become that woman and tears the wallpaper apart. Whereas the nurse builds fantasy around love, Gilman’s protagonist builds fantasy around escape. The breakdown functions as both tragedy and protest- she finds liberation only when sanity is gone.

Thus, in the three texts each protagonist undergoes a kind of isolation that leads to their traumatic condition;

Character	Type of Isolation	Fantasy Function	Outcome
Nurse - <i>“The Lesbian Cow”</i>	Social and emotional	Simulated romantic bond	Destruction
Begum Jan- <i>“Lihaaf”</i>	Domestic and marital	Erotic identity and empowerment	Temporary survival
Narrator- <i>“The Yellow Wallpaper”</i>	Medical and marital	Psychological escape	Madness and rebellion

Surveillance and the Social Gaze

The gaze- who watches, who is watched, and under what power- governs all three narratives.

- In “*The Lesbian Cow*”, the gaze is **mocking and oppressive**. The nurse is always visible and never protected. Every room is a stage of humiliation. Her tragedy results from **over-exposure**.
- In “*Lihaaf*”, the gaze is **absent by day and threatening by night**. Begum Jan enjoys intimacy only when unobserved. Her survival relies on **partial invisibility**.
- In “*The Yellow Wallpaper*”, the gaze is **disguised as protection**. The husband insists he knows what is best and monitors the heroine constantly. The narrator’s tragedy arises from **benevolent surveillance** that denies autonomy.

Each story shows how being watched, or hidden, influences how women navigate control and vulnerability.

Endings and Systems of Power

The stories end differently, revealing their distinct political messages.

- “*The Lesbian Cow*” ends in tragedy. The nurse dies (literally or symbolically). This is not the failure of an individual, but of a society that destroys people by denying them dignity.
- “*Lihaaf*” ends in ambiguity. Begum Jan’s secret is suspected but not exposed. The conclusion asks whether survival under patriarchy requires secrecy rather than revolution.
- “*The Yellow Wallpaper*” ends in psychological collapse that doubles as rebellion. The narrator’s madness is a form of escape from her husband’s control.

The three endings can be mapped across a spectrum of surrender and survival revolt

Each is shaped by socio-cultural context:

- Kerala’s contemporary pressures on beauty, queerness, and body politics
- Colonial India’s gender and class oppression
- 19th-century American medical patriarchy

Despite differences, the message is unified: **systems that deny women autonomy over their bodies and emotions produce psychological violence.**

2. Conclusion

“*The Lesbian Cow*”, “*Lihaaf*”, and “*The Yellow Wallpaper*” are separated by culture, century, and circumstance, yet they echo one another in striking ways. Each story shows a woman whose desire- romantic, erotic, or emotional—defies social expectation. Each uses the female body as a metaphorical battleground on which society enforces obedience. And each demonstrates that isolation and surveillance transform longing into psychological danger.

Yet their divergences matter. Menon’s protagonist is crushed by humiliation, Chughtai’s heroine resists through secrecy and reciprocal intimacy, and Gilman’s narrator rebels through madness. Together, these works reveal not one universal female condition but a spectrum of outcomes shaped by the

degree of social tolerance, privacy, and emotional companionship available to women.

If there is a shared thesis across all three writers, it is this:

When society denies women agency over their bodies and desires, it does not protect them- it destroys them.

The stories urge readers to question how beauty standards, marriage roles and medical authority shape systems of beauty, marriage, medicine, and morality not as neutral structures but as forces capable of inflicting violence. In their different ways, Menon, Chughtai, and Gilman warn that dignity, love, and autonomy are not luxuries. They are necessities without which the self cannot survive.

By reading “*The Lesbian Cow*”, “*Lihaaf*”, and “*The Yellow Wallpaper*” together, this article reframes female “madness”, queerness, and monstrosity as socially produced conditions rather than individual failures. These narratives demand a critical re-evaluation of how literature records resistance — not always through revolution, but through quiet, unsettling transformations that expose the violence of normalcy.

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