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## Shields of Invisibility: Metaphor, Silence, and Lesbian Desire in Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" (*The Quilt*) and Suniti Namjoshi's *The Conversations of Cow*

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**Abstract:** Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" (*The Quilt*, 1942) and Suniti Namjoshi's *The Conversations of Cow* (1985) interrogate the continuum of lesbian desire through contrasting literary strategies, revealing how invisibility operates as a deliberate and adaptive mechanism for articulating lesbian subjectivity in South Asian literature. Reading these texts in dialogue, this paper examines how metaphor, spatial dynamics, narrative tone, and stylistic choices differently shape the representation of lesbianism across historical and cultural contexts. In "Lihaaf" (*The Quilt*) intimacy emerges within a confined domestic setting mediated through a child narrator. The quilt functions as both physical cover and symbolic screen, while suggestion and narrative silence render desire invisible yet affectively charged, producing a domestic gothic atmosphere marked by secrecy and subtle transgression. In contrast, Namjoshi's novel adopts a playful and satirical mode, using the figure of the cow, associated with purity and obedience as a site of both concealment and expression. Here, invisibility becomes a strategic and liberatory device that enables resistance within a broader ideological and spatial framework. By juxtaposing these works, the paper demonstrates that invisibility is not merely concealment but a strategy of survival and subversion in the representation of lesbian desire.

**Keywords:** *Lesbian desire, domestic gothic, invisibility, fluidity, South Asian literature*

## Introduction

This paper undertakes a comparative reading of “Lihaaf” (The Quilt) by Ismat Chughtai and *The Conversations of Cow* by Suniti Namjoshi in order to examine how lesbian desire is articulated through the intertwined registers of invisibility, silence, and indirection. Written in sharply different historical and cultural moments, Chughtai’s pre-independence, upper-class Muslim domestic milieu and Namjoshi’s late twentieth-century diasporic queer landscape, the two texts offer contrasting yet connected modes of representing non-heteronormative desire. While “Lihaaf” (The Quilt)” employs the domestic interior, the child narrator, and the metaphor of the quilt to stage a covert, gothic economy of concealment, *The Conversations of Cow* mobilizes allegory, metamorphosis, and queer fabulism to imagine identity as fluid, performative, and self-fashioned. Bringing these texts into dialogue allows the paper to trace how invisibility operates both as a structure of repression within heteronormative domesticity and as a strategic, generative space within queer diasporic imagination. Through this comparison, the paper argues that lesbian subjectivity in South Asian writing moves from enforced opacity toward self-conscious re-articulation, revealing the shifting literary strategies through which lesbian challenges silence, visibility, and the politics of desire.

### The concept of lesbian invisibility

The invisibility of lesbian desire within literary and cultural representation has long been structured through processes of erasure, distortion, and controlled visibility. The concept of the invisibility of lesbian existence is not merely an incidental absence within cultural and literary representation but a historically produced and structurally maintained condition shaped by the intersecting operations of sexism and homophobia. Amy Gall, in her essay “Out There: The Lesbian in Literature” in *Mapping Queer Space(s) of Praxis and Pedagogy*, conceptualises invisibility not as a singular absence but as a multi-layered and historically produced structure of visibility management. Gall demonstrates that lesbian subjectivity is regulated through a series of overlapping representational logics that determine not only whether lesbian desire appears but how, where, and under what conditions it can be seen, narrated, or recognised.

At the most fundamental level, she identifies a persistent narrative invisibility, wherein lesbian characters are relegated to the margins of plot and denied narrative centrality, interiority, and developmental continuity. Their desires often emerge as fleeting interruptions within otherwise heterosexual or male-centred storylines, rendering lesbian presence structurally unstable and narratively unsustainable (Gall 131). Gall further highlights a paradoxical regime of controlled or fetishized visibility, in which lesbian intimacy is permitted to appear only as spectacle, fantasy, or titillation, most often mediated through the heterosexual male gaze. In such instances, lesbian desire

becomes hyper-visible yet depoliticised—circulated as an object of consumption rather than recognised as an autonomous relational or affective structure.

A third dimension of invisibility that Gall traces is discursive or linguistic invisibility, wherein lesbian desire is displaced into euphemism, silence, metaphor, or indirection. Within such frameworks, lesbian subjectivity exists in a state of semi-articulation—present but not fully speakable—perceptible only through implication, gesture, or symbolic substitution. This discursive displacement ensures that lesbian desire remains legible only to those willing to read against the grain, producing a stratified field of recognition in which queer meaning circulates through coded forms (Gall 130). Her reading of *Dhalgren* illustrates that narratives foregrounding sexual fluidity may nevertheless reproduce representational hierarchies in which lesbian subjectivity remains peripheral or narratively subordinated (Gall 131).

This aligns with the broader argument articulated in *Discussing Lesbian In/Visibility: A Scoping Review*, which demonstrates that lesbian existence has long been marginalised within both academic discourse and socio-political frameworks, often subsumed under broader LGBTQ+ narratives or treated as an appendage to male homosexuality. This erasure is sustained by what Adrienne Rich terms “compulsory heterosexuality,” a system that naturalises heterosexuality as the default condition of womanhood while delegitimising lesbian identities and relations. Within such a framework, invisibility often emerges as a survival strategy, enabling women to navigate discrimination, social non-recognition, and institutional exclusion by strategically managing the disclosure of their identities.

At the same time, dominant activist discourses have historically foregrounded visibility—through “coming out” and public representation—as the primary route to recognition and rights. However, as Soares et al. demonstrate, the binary of visibility and invisibility is deeply inadequate: both are overlapping, ambivalent, and shaped by factors such as homonormativity, neoliberal respectability, and socio-cultural location. Consequently, spaces of invisibility may also function as sites of subversive agency, negotiation, and resistance, particularly for subjects located outside Western or dominant queer frameworks (Soares et al. 2047). This reconceptualisation of invisibility as both constraint and strategy provides a crucial lens through which literary representations of lesbian desire can be re-examined.

Within the Indian and broader South Asian context, the invisibility of lesbian existence operates as a deeply entrenched socio-cultural and political condition shaped by patriarchy, nationalism, and heteronormative reproductive ideologies. As Apeksha Pareek argues in *The Invisible Lives of the Indian Lesbians: An Overview of Literature*, lesbian identities are frequently rendered unintelligible within dominant social frameworks that imagine sexual agency as exclusively male and fail to recognise lesbian desire as a legitimate category of existence (Pareek 58). This structural erasure is

closely tied to nationalist discourse, wherein women are constructed as biological reproducers of the nation and custodians of cultural honour.

Within such a framework, lesbians emerge as what Paola Bacchetta terms “internal Others”—figures who disrupt the heteronormative and reproductive logic of the nation by refusing participation in its gendered mandates (Bacchetta 108–09). Consequently, lesbian subjectivities are not merely marginalised but actively rendered invisible, excluded from both legal recognition and cultural representation. Even within queer discourse in South Asia, as Pareek notes, lesbian experience often remains peripheral, revealing a persistent gendered hierarchy within LGBTQ+ narratives.

This layered invisibility does not simply signify absence; rather, it points to a complex terrain in which silence, concealment, and coded expression become necessary modes of survival and negotiation. It is within this socio-cultural matrix of enforced invisibility and strategic concealment that literary representations of lesbian desire in texts such as “Lihaaf” (The Quilt) and *The Conversations of Cow* must be read.

Cultural production, particularly film and television, plays a crucial role in mediating the visibility of lesbian identities in contemporary India. As Brinda Bose observes, creative cultures remain “directly in conversation with the political and social climate of a land,” and shifts in political awareness are often reflected through new modes of representation (Bose 499). In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in lesbian representation in Indian media; however, such visibility often remains constrained by stereotypes, tokenism, and conservative moral frameworks.

Sohini Ghosh’s *Fire: A Queer Film Classic* provides a powerful lens through which to understand this tension. The film’s portrayal of lesbian relationships was perceived by conservative groups as an affront to Indian culture and Hindu values (Ghosh 19). The censor board’s demand to change the character’s name from “Sita” to “Nita” exemplifies symbolic erasure, disallowing queer identities from inhabiting culturally revered figures (Ghosh 22). Such acts reveal how visibility is regulated through cultural gatekeeping.

Furthermore, lesbian visibility has often been met with conditional acceptance. Public assertions of lesbian identity have been resisted not only by right-wing groups but also, at times, by feminist and leftist circles that view them as politically inconvenient or “sensational.” The vandalism of the set of *Water* and the halting of its production demonstrate how queer and feminist narratives are actively prevented from entering public discourse. Invisibility, therefore, is not merely a passive condition but one actively produced through institutional force and organised moral panic (Ghosh 29).

These frameworks of invisibility enable a deeper understanding of how lesbian desire has been historically suppressed, monitored, and regulated through moral policing and heteronormative surveillance. It is through this lens that the following analysis turns to “Lihaaf” (The Quilt) and *The Conversations of Cow*, examining how each text questions and reconfigures lesbian desire through strategies of concealment, metaphor, and narrative indirection.

### “Lihaaf” (The Quilt)

Ismat Chughtai’s “Lihaaf” (The Quilt) stands as one of the most daring early representations of female same-sex desire in South Asian literature, yet its power lies precisely in its strategy of indirection. Written within a deeply patriarchal and heteronormative milieu, the story encodes lesbian desire within the domestic interior through metaphor, silence, and narrative suggestion rather than explicit declaration. “Lihaaf” (The Quilt) was originally written in Urdu and later translated by M. Asaduddin. It directly challenges oppressive social structures and creates a space—however fraught—for articulating female sexuality (Baidwan 264). Sexuality, particularly in orthodox societies, is a sensitive issue rarely addressed publicly, and Chughtai, through “Lihaaf” (The Quilt), brings into discourse what is typically silenced or ignored.

Heterosexuality is often assumed to be the natural and universal condition of human identity, an assumption that underpins what is termed “heteronormativity,” the ideological framework that positions heterosexual relations as the only legitimate and socially acceptable form of desire (Nayar 158). In this context, Nayar foregrounds the process of “queering,” defined as the destabilization or reversal of heterosexuality as the normative standard (Nayar 185). It is precisely this presumed centrality of the man–woman relationship that Chughtai disrupts in “Lihaaf” (The Quilt), where she foregrounds marginalized forms of intimacy, including woman–woman desire (Baidwan 265). By doing so, she not only exposes the silencing of such relationships but also gestures toward alternative forms of affective connection.

The narrative unfolds through the perspective of a child narrator whose partial understanding mediates what can be seen and what can be known, allowing desire to surface only through shadows, gestures, and sensory traces. At the centre of this narrative is the image of the quilt, which functions simultaneously as a material cover and a symbolic screen, concealing and revealing the movements beneath it. In this way, “Lihaaf” (The Quilt) transforms invisibility into a narrative strategy, where what cannot be spoken is instead registered affectively and imaginatively.

Reading the text through the framework of lesbian invisibility allows us to see how concealment operates not only as repression but as a mode of articulation shaped by social constraint and cultural surveillance. It is important to note that several scholars have argued that the narrative strategy of “Lihaaf” (The Quilt) is deeply embedded in the historical unrepresentability of women’s queerness

within both legal and socio-cultural discourse. Aqdas Aftab observes that the story's reliance on a child narrator and suggestive imagery produces a form of narrative entrapment, wherein the reader is compelled to recognise the erotic encounter between Begum Jaan and Rabbu even as the narrator remains unable to articulate it. This gap between perception and articulation reflects a broader epistemic condition in which lesbian desire exists as an "unsayable" and "unknowable" presence, lacking both social legitimacy and legal language.

Indeed, as Aftab notes, the obscenity trial surrounding "Lihaaf" (The Quilt) revealed a paradox: while the court was unsettled by the suggestion of female same-sex desire, it simultaneously refused to name or describe it, since women's sexuality was not imagined to possess agency within the legal framework of Section 377. In this sense, invisibility is not merely imposed silence but a structural condition that enables queer female desire to exist without being formally recognised or criminalised (Aftab 38). The text strategically mobilises this invisibility: by never naming the relationship it depicts, "Lihaaf" (The Quilt) both evades legal censorship and exposes the anxieties of nationalist respectability that seek to regulate women's bodies and desires within the domestic sphere.

The concept of the domestic gothic provides a powerful critical framework for reading the spatial and emotional textures of "Lihaaf" (The Quilt). Unlike conventional gothic narratives that situate horror in distant castles or supernatural landscapes, the domestic gothic relocates terror within the intimate, feminized space of the home, transforming it into a site of repression, secrecy, and unarticulated desire. Feminist critics have shown how the domestic interior, rather than functioning as a safe haven, often conceals structures of patriarchal control, sexual regulation, and affective isolation.

This aligns with feminist spatial theory, which portrays the home as a socially constructed site of discipline, where architecture and layout regulate women's movement, privacy, and authority. In patriarchal societies, it functions as a "moral machine," confining women to "proper" roles and limiting their autonomy. This containment extends to everyday rhythms, translating ideology into physical and psychological restriction (Kumar 516). Thus, the home cannot be read as a neutral backdrop; rather, it actively produces and shapes female subjectivity, with spatial regulation functioning as a subtle but continuous mechanism of control (Kumar 515).

The narrative opens with the seemingly innocuous image of the "quilt," a domestic object associated with warmth, protection, and modesty. In Chughtai's hands, however, it becomes a charged metaphor for concealed sexuality and unarticulated desire. The introduction of Begum Jaan further exposes the commodification of women within patriarchal marriage structures. Her marriage at "ripe years" invokes an economic logic in which a woman's worth is tied to age, fertility, and desirability, revealing the transactional valuation of the female body (Chughtai 36).

Chughtai's narrative also underscores the asymmetry of domestic power. While Begum Jaan is confined and surveilled, Nawab enjoys autonomy, performing heteronormativity publicly while privately pursuing relationships with young boys. This contrast reveals how the home operates as a gendered structure that renders women's sexuality invisible while enabling male sexual freedom (Chughtai 36).

Within this framework, invisibility is reinforced through institutions such as marriage. As Samuel A. Chambers argues, heteronormativity operates as a social order that renders non-normative identities invisible while naturalizing heterosexuality (Chambers 657). Nawab's strategic performance of heterosexuality exemplifies this dynamic. In contrast, Begum Jaan turns to Rabbu, and their relationship—encoded through the metaphor of the quilt—signals both concealment and resistance.

The narrator's description of the quilt "shaking vigorously as though an elephant was struggling inside" (Chughtai 38) marks the emergence of desire within this confined space. The child's perspective maintains ambiguity, allowing the lesbian relationship to remain suggested rather than explicitly stated. The quilt thus becomes both a device of concealment and a medium through which desire is indirectly expressed.

However, Chughtai complicates any romanticization of same-sex intimacy. The narrative raises the unsettling question of why same-sex abuse often remains invisible within domestic spaces. The child narrator's violation occurs precisely because protection is structured through heteronormative assumptions that fail to recognise women as potential agents of harm. Begum Jaan, herself a victim of patriarchal neglect, becomes a figure of power within the domestic sphere, illustrating how spaces of repression can also produce forms of subversive agency.

This moment exemplifies the domestic gothic: the home transforms from a site of safety into one of ambiguity, transgression, and latent violence. Invisibility here functions not only as erasure but also as a condition that enables the negotiation and exercise of power. The narrative thus destabilizes simplistic binaries of victim and perpetrator, revealing how desire, power, and vulnerability intersect within constrained domestic spaces.

### ***The Conversations of Cow (1985)***

While Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" (The Quilt) situates lesbian desire within the claustrophobic interiors of the domestic sphere, Suniti Namjoshi's *The Conversations of Cow* relocates queer desire into a fluid, allegorical, and transgressive landscape. Here, invisibility does not function solely as repression or silence but becomes a mobile and strategic mode of survival, enabling queer subjects to evade, reconfigure, and resist normative structures of power.

Suniti Namjoshi is an Indian lesbian-feminist writer whose work explores the complex tensions that arise from inhabiting intersecting subject positions of gender, sexuality, and cultural identity. Her characters, whether implicitly or explicitly, demonstrate that identity is not an ontological given but a dynamic, kaleidoscopic construct continually produced and reconfigured through the intersection of socio-cultural, historical, and political forces, alongside the subject's own conscious processes of self-fashioning (Palekar 3).

Suniti Namjoshi's *The Conversations of Cow* is a richly layered and multifaceted novel that explores subjectivity, difference, and forms of "otherness," including those of colour, gender, sexuality, and modes of being across multiple intersecting levels. Set in 1980s Canada, the narrative centres on Suniti, an Indian lesbian-feminist subject whose positionality is shaped by diasporic displacement as well as by the intersecting pressures of race, gender, and sexuality (Palekar 10).

Both Bhadravati and Suniti occupy intersecting positions of marginality as non-white, lesbian, immigrant women in Canada, sharing a social location shaped by multiple forms of exclusion. Bhadravati introduces Suniti to a self-sustained community of lesbian cows, opening up an alternative imaginative and social space where normative structures of gender and sexuality can be questioned. The narrative unfolds as Suniti's quest to come to terms with her identity as a lesbian subject within a heteronormative and patriarchal order. In this journey, Bhadravati functions as a guide—both as a mentor within a Western allegorical quest and as a guru within an Indic philosophical framework—helping Suniti navigate the multiple identities imposed upon her (Singh 6).

Crucially, Namjoshi reframes invisibility not merely as erasure but as a space of possibility. Through the fluid transformations of Bhadravati into figures such as the female "Baddy" and the white male "Bud," the text foregrounds the instability of fixed identity categories and exposes the performative nature of gender roles (Namjoshi 125). Within this shifting terrain, invisibility becomes a strategic withdrawal from dominant visibility regimes that seek to regulate and categorize queer bodies.

The cow, an already overdetermined symbol of purity, obedience, and cultural sanctity, becomes an unexpected site of subversion, allowing lesbian desire to circulate obliquely, humorously, and without direct surveillance. Suniti's refusal to fully inhabit either male or female normative roles reflects a resistance to legibility within heteronormative frameworks. In this sense, her partial invisibility within dominant social scripts becomes a liberatory condition, enabling her to imagine and inhabit modes of being that exceed rigid binaries.

In the novella, Bhadravati the cow is figured as a lesbian subject, thereby subverting the culturally sanctified image of the cow as a passive, maternal emblem of idealized womanhood. Through this reworking, Namjoshi appropriates the mythic figure of the sacred cow to carve out an alternative imaginative space for lesbian identity. The text reconfigures the divinity associated with the Hindu

mythological cow Kamdhenu, aligning “cowness” with forms of otherness—lesbian, female, and outsider identities—rather than with purity and reproductive femininity alone. By endowing Bhadravati with fluid identities and multiple possibilities of being, Namjoshi critiques gender hierarchies and the regime of compulsory heterosexuality, suggesting instead a spectrum of choices and self-fashionings that exceed fixed heteronormative roles (Singh 8).

This reconfiguration of identity in *The Conversations of Cow* can be read through the lens of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not an innate or natural essence but rather the effect of repeated social performances shaped by cultural norms. As she famously asserts, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 34).

Across the course of the novella, Suniti experiments with a series of provisional identities, imagining herself as a bisexual snail, a poodle, a sheep, or even a goldfish, before ultimately choosing to inhabit the position of a lover. This playful yet searching movement across forms signals a refusal of stable, essentialist identity and instead affirms a lesbian subjectivity grounded in transformation, contingency, and plurality. Such a trajectory resists the rigid binaries and fixed categories that structure heteronormative thought, suggesting that identity is something continually made and remade rather than discovered as a pre-existing truth.

Through this restless exploration, Namjoshi advances a complex understanding of subjectivity as fluid and relational (Pareek and Sharma 3). This is reinforced through the text’s fabulist and metafictional mode, which allows Namjoshi to reimagine the self beyond the limits of realist representation. By foregrounding artifice, transformation, and narrative play, she constructs a literary space in which a diasporic Indian lesbian identity can be articulated outside the constraints of normative visibility.

Suniti Namjoshi reconceptualizes invisibility not as erasure but as a tactical mode of survival and affiliation that enables a distinctly Rich’s “lesbian continuum”. Suniti and Bhadravati occupy positions that are socially unrecognized or misread; yet this very invisibility becomes a space of freedom from surveillance.

I have chosen to use the terms lesbian existence and lesbian continuum because the word lesbianism has a clinical and limiting ring. Lesbian existence suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range-through each woman’s life and throughout history-of woman-identified experience.; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman (Rich 648).

Namjoshi mobilizes invisibility as a deliberate literary and political strategy to expose the entrenched sexual politics and misogyny embedded in traditional fables and mythic narratives. In *The Conversations of Cow*, she reworks inherited narrative structures so that their heterosexual imperatives and patriarchal closures are unsettled and undone. By refusing stable genres and fixed moral resolutions, she creates alternative textual spaces where lesbian subjectivity, dissent, and fluid identities can be articulated without being contained by normative frameworks.

Yet, crucially, Suniti Namjoshi does not romanticize this space as an uncomplicated realm of solidarity; she remains attentive to the fractures, hierarchies, and exclusions that may also inhabit communities of women. Her critique of an unqualified or idealized notion of “sisterhood” thus complicates the lesbian continuum she gestures toward, emphasizing that resistance must remain self-reflexive (Palekar 15).

Bhadravati’s capacity to transform herself into a woman becomes central to the formation of a lesbian continuum in *The Conversations of Cow*, yet Namjoshi renders this continuum as ambivalent rather than seamless. When Bhadravati assumes a female form, Suniti is simultaneously drawn toward and unsettled by the erotic and affective possibilities that emerge: “I enter the room. I don’t want to deal with this. Why did B have to change into a woman?” (Namjoshi 51). The moment registers both desire and resistance, revealing how lesbian subjectivity is negotiated through hesitation, fantasy, and self-surveillance.

The tension intensifies as Suniti observes Bhadravati’s confident femininity: “I dreamed,” she says, smiling at me full in the face. “Her beauty gives her so much assurance. I hope that none of this shows on my face” (Namjoshi 52). This scene exposes the instability of identification and the vulnerability of desire within queer self-fashioning. Through these episodes, Namjoshi shows that the lesbian continuum is not a stable or fully coherent space of belonging, but a shifting, performative field in which attraction, discomfort, and self-recognition coexist.

Suniti realises that she and Bhadravati share a fundamental affinity—their lesbian identity—which immediately places them on the margins of the social order. Because lesbian existence refuses to fit within dominant expectations, it is rendered illegible and often unwelcome within society. In such a framework, the subject is pressured to conform to rigid, pre-existing binaries—masculine or feminine, male or female—what Namjoshi frames as fixed classificatory categories (Singh 10).

As Singh suggests, within Namjoshi’s schema, it becomes evident that “Class A” aligns with the masculine/male position and “Class B” with the feminine/female one; any identities that fall outside this binary—lesbian, gay, queer—are rendered socially unintelligible or, as the text suggests, they “do not count” (10). The subject is thus compelled to occupy one of these two sanctioned roles in order to be granted even minimal legitimacy within society. What appears as “visibility” is, in fact, a form of regulation—an entry into society that demands compliance with heteronormative aesthetics and

behaviour. Namjoshi therefore critiques the politics of recognition itself, showing that visibility, when dictated by dominant norms, can become another mechanism of control.

“What it is you really want. The sort of thing you’re always moaning about.” B is mumbling into the pillow. “But, B, I’m thoroughly muddled about who I am; and as for what I want, I really don’t know...” (Namjoshi 69). Namjoshi crystallises how invisibility becomes a productive space for self-exploration rather than a sign of lack. Suniti’s admission does not simply register confusion; it marks a refusal to prematurely stabilise identity within the rigid categories offered by heteronormative society.

Her uncertainty signals a deliberate suspension of fixed meaning, where the self is not yet captured by socially legible labels. In this sense, Suniti’s “invisibility”—her not being clearly readable as either Class A or Class B, male or female, heterosexual or otherwise—becomes a necessary interval of becoming (Namjoshi 24). It is within this indeterminate space that she can experiment, imagine alternative embodiments, and test the possibilities of desire without the immediate pressure of normative recognition.

Namjoshi thus reconfigures invisibility as an enabling condition rather than an erasure of the subject. Suniti’s declaration, “I would like to be a Lover,” marks the culmination of her movement through an indeterminate, invisible space of becoming into a self-fashioned identity grounded in desire rather than prescription (Namjoshi 73). The figure of the “lover” functions metaphorically as a refusal of classificatory regimes. It is a figure of fluid subjectivity, one that resists the disciplinary grammar of heteronormativity and opens up a lesbian continuum based on chosen intimacy rather than socially mandated roles.

Her subsequent reflection—“Cultural context... It’s a way, you know, of humiliating women”—extends this metaphorical framework into a critique of the structures that produce invisibility in the first place (74). Here, “cultural context” becomes a metonym for patriarchal discourse—a network of customs, myths, and norms that render women’s bodies legible only within subordinating frameworks. By naming this humiliation, Suniti exposes how visibility within such a system is itself a trap: to be seen as a “proper woman” is to be confined within codes of passivity, decorum, and heterosexual availability.

“That night B and I become lovers. The birds wake us up the next morning. They’re hunting for food. They are very noisy. They are celebrating the fact . . . well, they are celebrating the world” (Namjoshi 86). This union is not merely a private erotic encounter but a symbolic breakthrough into a newly articulated relationality that resonates with Adrienne Rich’s concept of the lesbian continuum (Rich 648).

This natural imagery functions as a counter-discourse to heteronormative shame, suggesting that their union is not aberrant but part of a larger, organic order. The birds' celebration metaphorically affirms a world in which queer desire can exist without surveillance or punishment, transforming what was previously hidden into a space of affirmative visibility grounded in mutual recognition.

At the same time, this scene retains traces of the earlier strategy of invisibility: their union unfolds in a liminal, almost allegorical space removed from rigid social scrutiny. Thus, Namjoshi reimagines invisibility not as silence but as a protective threshold from which new forms of lesbian relationality can emerge, flourish, and finally claim a place within the symbolic order of the world—where the intimacy between Suniti and Bhadravati is framed not through secrecy or guilt but through an almost pastoral awakening.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has argued that invisibility in lesbian narratives cannot be read solely as erasure or absence; rather, it functions as a complex, ambivalent condition that both suppresses and enables the articulation of lesbian desire. A comparative reading of “Lihaaf” (The Quilt) and *The Conversations of Cow* reveals how invisibility operates through radically different narrative, spatial, and affective registers, producing divergent possibilities for lesbian existence and expression.

In “Lihaaf” (The Quilt), invisibility emerges as a form of coercive concealment produced by heteronormative domesticity and patriarchal surveillance. The domestic interior, structured through *purdah*, marriage, and moral regulation, becomes a site of what may be termed a domestic gothic, where desire can only surface through indirection, metaphor, and silence. The quilt functions simultaneously as shield and screen, concealing acts that cannot be named within the language of respectability. Within this claustrophobic space, Begum Jaan's sexuality is not liberated but forced into secrecy, shaped by abandonment, repression, and the violence of heteronormative arrangements. Invisibility here is thus a condition imposed from outside—one that renders lesbian desire unspeakable and legible only through shadows, gestures, and narrative gaps.

In contrast, *The Conversations of Cow* reworks invisibility as a strategic and potentially generative space. Situated within diasporic dislocation and multiple marginalities, Namjoshi's text refuses fixity, using fabulism, transformation, and allegory to reimagine identity beyond rigid binaries. Here, invisibility becomes a space of experimentation—one that allows Suniti to question, inhabit, and discard multiple identities before arriving at a self-fashioned lesbian subjectivity. The figure of Bhadravati and the lesbian continuum she enables reconfigure invisibility as a chosen opacity that resists categorization and opens up alternative relationalities. In this context, invisibility becomes a language of becoming—fluid, contingent, and self-reflexive.

Both texts demonstrate that invisibility in queer women's writing is neither monolithic nor uniformly oppressive. It may function as enforced silence within patriarchal domestic regimes, as in "Lihaaf" (The Quilt), or as a mode of resistance and self-fashioning within diasporic and experimental queer imaginaries, as in *The Conversations of Cow*. This shift from "coercive invisibility" to "strategic invisibility" marks an important trajectory in lesbian literary expression—from being spoken about through metaphor and repression to speaking oneself through fluidity, transformation, and self-authored desire. Ultimately, both texts insist that what is unseen is not necessarily absent. Rather, invisibility becomes a charged aesthetic and political field through which lesbian desire survives, circulates, and ultimately redefines itself.

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