



## STIGMATIZATION OF LESBIAN SEXUALITY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF RITA MAE BROWN'S *RUBYFRUIT JUNGLE*

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### Abstract

Lesbian sexuality has been treated as sexual deviance despite its removal from pathology and psychiatry. Notwithstanding the fact that it has attained the social status of sexuality minority, lesbian sexual orientation continues to be stigmatized. The stigma attached to lesbian sexuality is that it is unnatural and an immoral behaviour. Mainstream heterosexual society perceives it as a mental illness and lesbians as sick individuals. This stigmatization furthermore, results in prejudice, discrimination, social exclusion, and violence from society. The loathing and condemnation of same-sex behaviours, activities, and relationships is the outcome of the unreasonable fear and hatred termed as "homophobia," prevalent in the heterosexual world. This research paper delves into the dimensions of stigmatization that are perpetrated against lesbians. It analyses the character of Molly Bolt in Rita Mae Brown's novel *Rubyfruit Jungle*. The present research paper sheds light on the established conventional notions of gender and sex employed to stigmatize lesbians. The novel describes how women perceive lesbians as deviants. Drawing upon the theories of Erving Goffman and Edwin M. Schur, on stigma and deviance, the researcher seeks to delve into the determinants of stigmatization of homosexuality in a heterosexual as well as homosexual setting. It focuses on the experiences they undergo and the strategies they adopt to respond towards their stigmatized sexuality and identity.

**Key words:** Stigmatization, lesbian identity, deviance, homosexuality, homophobia, and heterosexuality.

### Introduction

Stigma, in common parlance, refers to the mark of disgrace to an individual's character flaw. When an individual is marked as stigmatized, it creates a devalued social status of

the individual. He/she is then, perceived as a potential threat to the established societal norms of the mainstream society. In his work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), Erving Goffman, classifies stigma into three

categories. The first is physical or bodily deformities, the second is blemish of individual character which include mental disorder, alcoholism, and homosexuality, and the third is tribal stigma related to race, nation, and religion. These stigma traits in an individual and groups create a differentness which distinguishes them from the so-called 'normal.' Society creates and implements norms and mores and members are expected to conform to the same collectively. When these expectations are violated, they are categorized as stigmatized. The stigmatized status granted to them further results in stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. Since they are considered stigmatized, they are treated as lesser human beings. While defining a stigmatized individual, Goffman says, "By definition...we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human" (14). The attribution of stigma reduces the individual to an inferior sub-human being.

Mainstream society approves stereotyping and prejudice against stigmatized individuals and groups. Since these people fail to live up to the expectations of society, they are assumed as abnormal. They are kept under surveillance to prevent any further violation of societal norms. When stigmatized persons begin to internalize the stereotyping and prejudice, they are liable to be ashamed of their identity. Goffman postulates that "Shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself as not possessing" (17). When shame overpowers him or her, that individual is likely to compromise with his/her reality. He/she may either choose to live by the actual identity or develop a virtual identity for himself/herself.

Internalization of the stigma adversely affects the psychological well-being of the individual. It inhibits the growth of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural faculties of the individual. This inhibition further leads to an inferiority complex and insecurity. The

stigmatized individual then suffers from fear, shame, and guilt. They are always in dilemma of acceptance and rejection in the society. Response to stigma varies according to individuals. Some may be submissive while others may be audacious. When they present themselves submissively, they may draw the sympathy of the normal, but patronizingly. However, they will still be treated as abnormal. Hence he/she is likely to feel cut off from not only the mainstream society but also from himself/herself. All these features present the stigmatized identity as a spoiled social identity that is unwanted.

However, some stigmatized individuals celebrate their stigma boldly. They audaciously do not conform to the norms and standards of the society. These people challenge the attitude of mainstream society towards their stigmatized condition. They see themselves as normal individuals. This category of individuals and groups becomes more vulnerable to victimization. They devise various strategies to cope with their stigmatized identity. Developing coping responses is an integral part of their daily lives. They seek out other stigmatized persons and eventually form groups. This group formation encourages solidarity which, in turn, becomes a support system for one another. Both individual and collective action is a significant manoeuvre in overcoming the stigma attached to their identity and community.

Lesbian sexuality is considered a stigma because it is labeled as social deviance. Deviance refers to the act of deviating from established and acceptable norms, principles, mores, rules, and regulations of society. People who engage in deviance are called deviants. Lesbianism or lesbian sexuality deviates from the conventional romantic and sexual relationship. Since the conventional notion of sexual relationship is confined to members between the opposite sexes, lesbian sexual relationship violates this notion of sexual relationship. Homosexual behaviour and relationships have been loathed

and despised since the twelfth century with the inception of sodomy laws. Sodomy laws criminalized same-sex activities and relationships. Religiously, they have been considered immoral and sinful. Discourse on same-sex activities began in the mid-nineteenth century. Before this period, same-sex activities were loathed but this deviance was seen only as an activity. It was during the late nineteenth century that same-sex behaviour or homosexuality was attributed as a personality. Homosexuality came to be regarded as not just an activity. It acquired an identity.

Stigma and deviance are two sides of the coin. An identity or behaviour may be stigmatized because it is a deviance. Since a stigma is attributed to same-sex activities, any form of behaviour about it, is perceived as a sexual deviance. Furthermore, people involved in same-sex relationships are stigmatized because of their deviant nature. Both stigma and deviance are the result of the interaction between members of society. They are the product of society and they do not occur in isolation. American sociologist Howard Becker propounds that:

...social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying these rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender" (9).

So, deviance is not just the behaviour or action of the individual, but it involves the response and reaction of the members of the larger society. In addition, Edwin M. Schur in his work *Labeling Women Deviant* (1984), postulates that deviance is not just the function of an individual's problematic behaviour. It is rather defined by how other people respond and react to the behaviour and action, as problematic. It is to be noted that deviance is created by those in power or those in the higher

hierarchical social order. Since homosexuals form a minority sexual community, they are liable to suffer from the ideologies of mainstream society. Lesbians are perceived not only to violate the sexual norms but also the established gender hierarchy. Therefore, they are prone to stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and even violence from the mainstream heterosexual world.

This research paper aims to discuss the parameters of stigma attached to lesbian sexuality and identity in Rita Mae Brown's novel, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973). It seeks to analyse the character of "Molly" through the lens of the women themselves. The paper uses the theories of Erving Goffman and Edwin M. Schur on stigma and deviance to delve into the lives of lesbians in general and "Molly" in particular.

### Methodology

This research employs a close reading technique to analyse both the primary text and the secondary sources. Both sources are employed to examine the stigmatization of lesbian sexuality and how various facets of mainstream society utilize the established norms and morals to stigmatize them. Critical theories of stigma, deviance, and homosexuality as well as instances and quotations from the primary texts are used to delve into the analysis of lesbian sexual identity. Erving Goffman's theory of stigma deals with the management of stigma and Edwin M. Schur's theory of deviance is an endeavour to study the process of labeling women which includes both heterosexual and lesbian women.

### Stigmatization of Lesbian Sexuality:

Rita Mae Brown's novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) depicts the life of a lesbian named Molly. It depicts the lives of lesbians in a working-class society imbued with conventional notions of sex and gender roles. Brown herself was a lesbian and this novel too, has a semi-autobiographical tone that portrays the life of Brown herself. She portrays Molly as a prodigious girl, who discovers her sexual orientation at the initial

stage of her life. Her family is well aware of her rebellious nature and begin to suspect her stigmatized sexuality. This fear compels her mother, Carrie, to threaten her to straighten up. Molly's unfeminine behaviour becomes the reason for estrangement between the two. Through the novel, Brown highlights the plight of lesbians in a heterosexual environment where straight women themselves are stigmatized because they are put in the lower gender order. Women are stereotyped to be weak, emotional, submissive, dependent, and bound for household chores. Molly tries to rise above all these stereotypes and prejudices of the patriarchal society. However, she is rebuked and reprimanded for violating all these gender behaviours and roles at home.

The first instance of the stigmatization is evident when Molly pushes her classmate, Cheryl Spiegelglass off the stage while performing a play. As a punishment, Carrie puts her under house confinement. Molly says, "She's gonna make a lady out of me that summer, a crash program. She was going to keep me in the house to teach me to act right, cook, clean, and sew and that scared me" (28). Carrie's conventional perceptions about female roles horrify her and she adopts punitive measures whenever Molly violates those accepted roles. Schur says that "...those 'deviances' in which the offender acts in an aggressive or highly committed way...may be seen as 'male'" (65). As Carrie is suspicious of the deviant behaviour of Molly, she decides to rectify her behaviour by confining her to household activities, which would have been different for a male child.

Stigma not only affects the stigmatized individual but also the family members and those around him or her. This is known as "stigma by association." Stigma by association is, "the process by which a person is stigmatised by virtue of association with another stigmatised individual has been referred to as 'courtesy' or 'associative' stigma" (Ostman and Kjellin, 494). Parents with conventional mindset

are consumed with fear and shame when they discover that their child is a stigmatized individual, especially a sexual deviant. Therefore, when Molly is rusticated from the college, her mother throws her out of her home. Ostracization from home and family occurs because the family fears being stigmatized, although they do not belong to the deviant category. The family fears that they would be alienated from society for harbouring a deviant. Protecting the reputation family becomes more important than protecting the deviant. In the novel, Carrie, instead of protecting her, asks her to leave her home and live on her own without any means. When Molly tells her that she is the only family that she has, Carrie replies, "That's your problem, smart-pants. You'll have no friends and you got no family" (119). The estrangement of familial relationships is prevalent in a traditional and orthodox society that fosters gender binaries. When a member deviates from the norms, the family is confused about the situation and undertakes drastic steps that become disastrous for both the stigmatized and the non-stigmatized family members.

Although homophobia is said to be the unreasonable fear and hatred towards homosexuality by the heterosexual majority, it also connotes the fear and shame that homosexuals have towards their own homosexual identity. This is the reason that all of Molly's sexual partners abandon her and their relationships fail due to the internalization of homophobia. Lesbians too, are stigmatized by their ingroup members. This category of individuals does not consider themselves as lesbians despite their involvement in such relationships. They live in constant denial to evade victimization. Theorists and Clinicians during the mid-twentieth believed that same-sex behaviours and tendencies are transient developmental phenomena. They opined that same-sex behaviour was an indication of sexual identity confusion which in due course of time, would attain maturity. Just as an identity crisis is inevitable during the adolescent period, same-



sex attraction too is considered to be a sexual identity crisis and would eventually fade.

Lesbians possess physical features that are not entirely masculine and not entirely feminine. However, some lesbians are endowed with physical traits that are dominantly feminine. Those who have feminine qualities and features have the advantage of concealing their stigmatized sexual identity in adverse situations. Carolyn's denial of being a lesbian is evident in this. Molly and Carolyn are involved in a same-sex relationship. However, when Molly tells Connie that they are lesbians, Carolyn refrains from being labeled as a lesbian. She says, "We are not queer. How can you say that? I'm very feminine, how can you call me a queer?" (93). Carolyn also maintains that lesbians look like men and are ugly. Her perception towards lesbians can be observed to be a temporary sexual attraction.

To escape from stigmatization, those whose stigma is inconspicuous tend to select situations and persons to reveal their sexual identities. These individuals choose to 'pass' as normal to evade atrocities and social sanctions. However, this can be detrimental to themselves. Goffman maintains, "The phenomenon of passing has always raised issues regarding the psychic state of the passer...it is assumed that he must necessarily pay a greater psychological price, a very high level of anxiety, in living a life that can collapse at any moment" (107-108). This "passing" phenomenon is observed through the characters of Carolyn and Polina. Carolyn chooses to "pass" as a straight woman when she is in the presence of Connie. Likewise, Polina does not reveal her lesbian sexual orientation to others except Molly.

Internalization of homophobia ends the relationship between Molly and Polina. The latter is scandalized when the former takes her to a lesbian bar and reveals that she is a bona fide lesbian. This revelation petrifies Polina. She thinks that lesbianism attracts and frightens every woman because every woman could be a

lesbian. She makes several visits to her psychiatrist and comes into a truce with lesbianism and Molly. Although they go out together for lunch and dinner parties, Polina does not introduce Molly to her friends at these parties. Their relationship eventually ends when Molly begins an affair with Polina's daughter Alice.

Research reveals that a myth against homosexuality is that it is an immature sexual desire. This notion compels other lesbian characters in the novel to end their relationship with Molly. Lack of support from family and the ingroup members reduces the chances of life for most of them. Schur says, "Faced with ostracism and derision, homosexuals were described as likely to become defensive, withdrawn, and even self-hating" (125). The betrayal Molly experiences from other lesbians compels her to despise both heterosexuals and homosexuals. She is outrageous about how women perceive themselves. The general perception is that a woman's identity is known by her association with men. Being a radical, Brown, through the character of Molly defies this perception. Therefore, Molly thwarts the concept of marriage, where the identity of the woman is dependent on their relationship with the man. She also begins to hate men, whom she says, are boring.

Despite lesbian sexuality attaining a sexual minority status, it was and is, often used as a derogatory term to label women as deviants. Women label fellow women as lesbians when the latter act beyond the limits prescribed by mainstream society. Women envy other women who break the boundaries of household responsibilities to work in firms along with men. The novel written in 1973, portrays how women taking the responsibilities like men were considered deviants. Independent and strong-minded women were perceived to be deviating from the established gender role and identity and disrupting the gender hierarchy. Ample instances in the novel are manifestations of this. For instance, the

quarrels between Carrie and Molly erupt because of the latter's desire for education and seeking economic independence. Another instance is Molly's election as the president of the student council. When she becomes the president of the student's council, her aunt Florence considers that she is a traitor to her sex. The prejudice at that time was that politics was dirty and that they should leave it up to the men. Again, women are expected to garner qualities such as warmth, nurturance, and supportiveness. When they do express these qualities they are regarded as cold, manipulative, and masculine. Therefore, when Molly does not cry at the death of her father, Florence says, "That girl of yours is crazy. She don't cry over her father's death, but she sits here and cries over some dern book" (85).

Homosexuals are stigmatized not only in the family but also at the institutional level where government rules and policies are created to restrict and prevent stigmatized behaviours. Government and private institutional policies are made in such a way that they restrict the participation of homosexuals in administrative and civil affairs. When homosexuals were emerging as a community in the United States during the 1960s, government and social agencies began to curb homosexual movements. Severe punitive measures were adopted which resulted in the incarceration of a large number of homosexuals. With the intervention of medical institutions and psychiatry, homosexual behaviours and activities were pathologized. Various correction clinics were introduced to rectify homosexuality. In the novel, Brown shows the existence of correction facilities in educational institutions. When Molly and Faye are discovered to be lesbian couples, they are summoned by the university authorities and put under the supervision of psychiatrists. The university also revokes Molly's scholarship on moral grounds despite her academic excellence. She further loses membership in the Tri-Delta sorority and eventually leaves the university.

When an individual is stigmatized, he or she is compelled to live in isolation. At this juncture, they adopt stern coping strategies that worsen their situation. In order to relieve herself from loneliness, Molly engages herself in heterosexual relationships with men. However, her relationship with men turns out to be boring for her. These unhealthy relationships depict the frustration and loathing over one's stigmatized sexuality. This brings to the question whether, Molly, like other lesbians, is unwilling to accept her own identity. Her ideologies at times falter. The hypocrisy is observed when she hates men but also seeks their company.

Lesbians are often assumed to be desiring to be men because some of them possess physical masculine traits and are equally talented as men. Schur says, "...lesbian women may actually surpass heterosexual women with respect to certain psychological resources" (122). Although this proposition cannot be generalized since Brown portrays other lesbian characters as straight women, it is applicable in the case of Molly. Her athletic physique and prodigious intellect both draw praise and disapproval from the women around her. For instance, when Carolyn says, "You know lesbians are boyish and athletic. I mean Molly's pretty and all that but she's a better athlete than most of the boys that go to this school, and besides she doesn't act like a girl, you know?" (93), she likes Molly as a person but does not approve her of being a lesbian.

All these instances describe how Molly is labeled as a stigmatized individual from her community. The ambivalence and disapproval of one's sexual orientation causes estrangement of relationships, which, otherwise are supposed to strengthen their association. Societal pressures impel them to perceive themselves as deviants, thereby they make coercive adjustments to heterosexual life.

### Conclusion

Rita Mae Brown's novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* depicts the life of lesbians in both heterosexual

and homosexual environments in mid-twentieth-century American society. As a stigma, lesbian sexuality is vulnerable to the wrath of mainstream society. They undergo atrocities from both men and women. Brown portrays how homophobia inhibits the life of a homosexual, where he or she is deprived of the facilities and opportunities that are requisite for healthy psychological growth. Through the life of Molly, she shows how lesbians suffer because of stigma. Molly's perceived deviant identity supersedes all her other positive qualities. Her stigmatized sexuality becomes the master status, eclipsing all other statuses that she possesses. Her mother, Carrie, from the very beginning of the novel, fails to see the potential in her. Molly is the victim of societal prejudice and stereotyping against lesbians. Her sexual orientation is perceived as harmful to other family members and therefore, she is ostracized from her home. The novel shows the prevalent stereotyping and prejudice attributed to lesbian sexual orientation which leads to other forms of negative treatment perpetrated towards them. They are obstructed at every step of life in a heterosexual setting. Coming out of the closet is both beneficial and detrimental. When stigmatized individuals decide to conceal their perceived deviant identity, it may prevent discrimination and violence externally. However, they have to deal with the psychic state that constantly troubles them from the fear of being discovered and the consequences that would follow. Coming out of the closet at the initial stage can be disastrous but it can free him or her from the psychological pressure of concealment. Molly, in the novel, is proud of her sexual orientation. Once she begins to accept herself as a lesbian, she feels ready to overcome all the obstacles to establish herself as an independent woman. She breaks the barriers of gender roles and behaviour of conventional society to which women must adhere. It is to be noted, however, that Brown portrays Molly as a radical and revolutionary character, who is indifferent to the people around her. Molly is hostile to both male and female characters

whenever her interests and wants seem to get compromised. The novel also reflects the ideologies of radical feminist movements that were prevalent at that time. One notion of the movement was that the dependence of women on men was socially constructed and designed by men. Therefore, Brown seeks to dismantle this dependent notion by refusing the institution of marriage. Stigmatization cannot be wiped out entirely, but it can be mitigated through social bonding between both the stigmatized and the non-stigmatized. Self-acceptance of one's stigmatized identity can be instrumental for the social and psychological well-being of both the individual and the ingroup.

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