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Breaking the Socio-Cultural Norms: Gender and Identity in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and Rita Mae Brown's *Ruby Fruit Jungle*

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Abstract

In 1990 Judith Butler asserted in her path breaking work, *Gender Trouble* that sex is biological and gender is a performative, and an illusionary social construct. Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and Rita Mae Brown's *Ruby Fruit Jungle* are canonical works of lesbian fiction known for their unconventional protagonists who stand in opposition to the gender binaries.

The Well of Loneliness was published in 1928, and led to much outrage and criticism because it dealt with non-normative sexuality. *Ruby fruit Jungle* was published in 1973, soon after the 1969 Gay rights Movement. Theorists like Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adrienne Rich wrote about breaking of the hegemonies of sexual identity and gender in the late twentieth century. The protagonists of these novels stand strong against these rigid structures of the society. Through characters the writers boldly portray 'Sexual Inversion', a term for homosexuality used by the sexologists of the late 19th and early 20th century like Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Havelock Ellis. The precocious and independent character of Moly Bolt from Brown's novel stands in contrast to the anguish of Stephen Gordon, a lesbian and one of the first 'invert' characters in the history of lesbian fiction. The duration of forty five years between the publication of the works would help track the progression in the social construction of lesbian identity.

This study "Breaking the Socio-Cultural Norms: Gender and Identity in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and Rita Mae Brown's *Ruby Fruit Jungle*", aims to discuss the struggles and subjugation that lesbians encounter in the persisting heterosexist milieu. Hall and Brown through their semi-autobiographical works urge the readers to deviate from binary thinking. The paper is a comparative study of the novels with emphasis on the evolution of the queer culture and the changes in attitudes that permeated the society in the twentieth century.

Keywords: Queer culture, Lesbian Fiction, Hegemony, Identity, Gender

*I endeavour to unravel the riddle of my existence,
In my pursuit for Home I came a long distance,
Uncertain I am,
Uncertain if the light awaits,
And if my Queer Queerness, will be embraced.*

Post Structural theories broke the preconceived notions regarding gender disparities observed between men and women. The beginning of the twentieth century was a time of struggle in the area of sexuality. In the 1920s the sex reform movement propagated the importance of a heterosexual relation in order to maintain male supremacy. It asserted that male sexuality was innately dominant and female sexuality was passive. They termed a passionate female relationship as lesbian because this sexual anomaly did not fit in the heterosexual structure, predefined by them. Heterosexuality was considered normal and any deviation to it was not socially, legally and morally acceptable. These hegemonic structures related to sex and gender left little room for sexual minorities in the society.

The 1969 Stonewall uprising led to a new political movement by bringing together the closeted homosexuals living a solitary life. Despite several efforts for the emancipation of the queer community, the 1980s AIDs crisis created an extremely homophobic environment. Queer theory emerged in 1990s. The works of Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and many others played an influential role in the development of the theory. Butler in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* asserted the difference between gender and sex. She clearly states that sex is biological and gender is a social construction. Her notion of gender being performative that is “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame”, results in constituting one’s identity.

The attitude of the society regarding same sex relationships varies over time and place. The works of each period reflect the contemporary social stance, the evolution in the language and the struggles of the queer community to fit in the society. Over the years various terms have been used to describe the queer community. Terms like invert, unnaturalists, and homosexual were used in the eighteenth century to describe same sex desires. Medical sexology describes an invert as a man in a woman’s body. This account of a masculine force in a female is identical to the present understanding of the term ‘transgender’ which was not a separate concept in early years. Sexual inversion was used by the sexologists of the nineteenth and twentieth century which referred to innate reversal of gender traits. Female sexual inversion is described by Richard von Krafft-Ebing as “the masculine soul, heaving in the female bosom”. Representation of sex was forbidden in literature and art in the early nineties of the post Victorian age. Sexologists appeared keen to explore the ideas of gender and sexuality by studying the psychology of those who failed to identify themselves within the normative structures. Having lived in this era Radclyffe Hall, an English poet and author was aware of the divided life that was offered to people like her.

Marguerite Antonia Radclyffe-Hall was an ‘out’ militant lesbian in the times when gender roles played a vital role. She was born in a wealthy family in Bournemouth, Hampshire on August 12, 1880. Her first novel was *The Unit lamp* published in 1924 and was followed by *The Forge*. However, it was the year 1928 that marked the turning point or “the shipwreck” of her established career with the publishing of her controversial book *The Well of Loneliness*. It became one of the earliest and ground breaking work in lesbian fiction that presented female homosexuality in an uncompromising form. Hall said it was her deliberate effort to confront the forbidden topic of lesbianism openly. She described herself as a ‘congenital invert’, a term extracted from the works of well-known sexologists Havelock Ellis and Richard Von Krafft Ebbing. *The Well of Loneliness* is a part of the cultural history of lesbianism and a forerunner in the lesbian cannon of works.

In 1928 many other authors took the theme of same sex love in their novels. Writers like Virginia woolf (*Orlando*), Elizabeth Bowen (*The Hotel*) dealt with similar issues but it was only Hall’s novel that presented homosexuality as something as natural as heterosexuality. It was banned in England on account of being obscene and explicit about a topic that was considered immoral and unnatural. James Douglas, the editor of the *Sunday Times* wrote about the novel “I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel.” Through her work, Hall wanted to bring a change in the way the queer community was perceived in the society. The term queer is used to describe something that is odd or bizarre, but it was used pejoratively in the twentieth century for effeminate men. In the beginning of the twentieth century writers like Radclyffe Hall used the identity of an invert as an alternative which later shifted to a homophile identity. It was in the 1970s that the gay identity was accepted. The term ‘queer’ later included transgenders and other gender deviants.

The Well of Loneliness is a semi-autobiographical novel about a butch lesbian described as an invert by the author; the word lesbian not being recognised by English etymology until the late nineteenth century. ‘Mannish lesbian’ was a

term used by the people in those days. This term later evolved into the term 'butch'. Radclyffe Hall revived the concept of sexual inversion and explicitly took a stand for the controversial issue of female homosexuality. She endeavoured to justify it with by taking references from the works of Havelock Ellis who argued that it is not the circumstances or the gender roles that that decide the sexual orientation of a person. By using the term "congenital inversion" Ellis asserted that the condition of inversion is god given. In his work "Three Essays on the theory of Homosexuality" (1905) Sigmund Freud had already interpreted gender in terms of sexual desires. He explained the presence of innate bisexuality in humans and the need to channel the unruly drive of sexuality in the right direction. Radclyffe Hall wanted to reach out to the society through her protagonist by exposing her readers to the struggles and distresses of the people who do not relate to the normative standards of gender and sex.

The story revolves around Stephan Gordon who was born in a wealthy home. Right from an early age she is aware of her 'queer' character and longs to be like a man, "I must be a boy, 'cause I feel exactly like one, I feel like young Nelson in the picture upstairs," she says (Hall 1928, 12). At various occasions during the course of the novel, even the people who live with her observe that she is more of a male than a female. Stephan's governess Collins in one of her conversations with Mrs Wilson talks about her appearance "Doesn't Miss Stephan look exactly like a boy? I believe she must be a boy with them shoulders, them funny gawky legs she has got on her!" (12).

Stephan was born to Sir Philip and Lady Anna Gordon, a happy couple who pre-named the child Stephan being sure of their new-born being a boy. Stephan was born a girl who was "narrow hipped, wide shouldered, little tadpole of a baby, that yelled and yelled for three hours without ceasing, as though outraged to find itself ejected into life" (5). The resentment of lady Anna towards her 'queer' child is apparent throughout the novel. Stephen was only seven years old when her mother "hated the way Stephan moved or stood still, hated a certain largeness about her, a certain crude lack of grace in her movements, a certain unconscious defiance." (8). It was at such tender age when Stephan developed an intense strange admiration for her governess Collins. "Collins looked up and suddenly smiled, then all in a moment Stephan knew she loved her – A staggering revelation!" (9).

The word queer was accepted in the LGBT terminology in the late twenties but Hall has used it very often during the course of the narrative to describe Stephen Gordon's unconventional lifestyle "Collins became more affectionate after the incident of the house-maid's knee; she could not but feel a new interest in the child whom she and the cook had now labelled as 'queer'."

The *Well of Loneliness* as the title suggests is about a life of an invert represented through Stephan Gordon's unnatural relation with the world, the feeling of not belonging, and her internal battle with God for having made her an outcast for the rest of her life. Written much before Butler proposed her notion of performativity in her 1990s work *Gender trouble*, Hall demonstrates in the novel that one's identity comprises of gendered activities performed repeatedly by an individual. It pictures that how 'performativity' begins at a very early age and predefines gender roles laid for a man and a woman. Hall in an effective way sheds light on the ways gender regulates our behaviour by indirectly reinforcing itself in our lives. Stephan is forced to play with dolls as a little girl, she is condemned and resented for her inclination towards hunting and riding.

, 'Violet was already full of feminine poses; she loved dolls, but not quite so much as she pretended. People said: 'Look at Violet, she's like a little mother; it's so touching to see that instinct in a child!' Then Violet would become still more touching.' (44).

Stephan was detested almost everywhere for being the unconventional image of a woman who liked to fence and dress up like a man. Her queerness was even unacceptable to her mother who claimed to have felt "strange with the child." It was only Sir Philip who understood and acknowledged their unusual daughter, he turned to the works of psychological writers of the time looking for a solution to his qualms and anxieties regarding Stephan. "He knows that I'm not just a rag doll, like Violet; he knows that I'm different to her!" (38).

He wanted his daughter to seek the best education which was a rarity in the times the novel has been framed. He taught her hunting and self-sufficiency, foreknowing the life of remoteness that she would have to lead. Women were expected to be delicate, soft-spoken, and proficient in the household skills. Hall's protagonist stands in stark contrast of all the other women in the novel. Lady Anna is described as a perfect specimen of a feminine woman, "the archetype of the very perfect women" (3). Through the character of Violet, Hall gives an insight of what was expected of the girls in the early twentieth century. Women were considered subordinate to men and were taught from an early age the skills to maintain a perfect household and that they can only be happy, content and complete in a heterosexual relationship.

At the age of seventeen Stephen meets and become very close friends with a young man, Martin Hallam. Lady Anna well approves of the relation thinking that this would be a chance for Stephan to live a normal and a more socially acceptable life. But Stephan moved away from him when Martin misinterprets the relation and declares his love for her. Sir Philip never discloses the fact regarding Stephan to anyone and the secret to their queer daughter died with him leaving her grief-stricken and lonesome. After the sudden demise of her father Stephen met Angela Crossby, who

was a married woman. Falling in love with Angela made Stephan aware of her inadequacies and the fact that she would never be able to have the security and social respect as compared to a couple in a heterosexual relationship. Angela used her as an "anodyne against boredom", and later betrayed her for Stephan's childhood enemy Roger Antrim. Hall through the character of Stephen describes the agony of someone who fails to fit in the norms laid for man and a woman. Hall takes her readers on an intense emotional journey and makes them closely encounter the sufferings and internal longing of the queers.

Forlorn and dejected she moves to London where she flourishes as a writer after the success of her first novel, 'The Furrow'. The new city makes her aware that there is more of her kind and this realization opens her to new opportunities. She befriends another invert playwright Jonathan Brockett. Stephan's second novel does not reach the expected success and on Brockett's suggestion she decides to travel Paris with the aim of improving her writings which would come with the fuller experience of life.

Paris has a history of queer culture which dates back to the middle ages. As recorded, its artists were convicted for engaging in sodomy and same sex activities frequently. The historical evidence of the presence of lesbian relationships amongst the aristocratic women of that century is verified by many historians. With the dawn of the French revolution, sodomy was decriminalised in Paris and that made it the melting point of queer communities from around the world in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. Lesbians, bisexuals travelled in huge numbers to the city in the sphere of Art and literature as well. Gay night life and drag balls flourished during the jazz age of 1920s.

It was during these years that Hall travelled to Paris with partner Una Troubridge and observed the culture and queer life in an unrestricted milieu. It was her account of these experiences that she chronicled in the novel.

Stephan's wealth allows her to travel to Paris and like Radclyffe Hall she gets her first experience with the urban queer culture.

"And then she, Stephan was no longer a child to be frightened and humbled by this situation. There were many like her in this city, in every city: and they did not all live out crucified lives, denying their bodies, stultifying their brains, becoming the victims of their own frustrations ... on the contrary, they lived natural lives- lives that to them were perfectly natural."
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She comes across Valérie Seymour, a lesbian who is a saloon hostess, meeting her made her realise that they were more like her in the world. She joined the French army ambulance as a driver to transport soldiers from the front line and earned the French *Croix de guerre*, which was an esteemed award bestowed upon those soldiers for heroic deeds. She became close to the young fellow driver, a Welsh girl named Mary Llewellyn and despite a lot of resistance considering her past bitter experiences later falls in love with her. Together they make a home and are happy at first but as Stephan gets steadily involved in her writing, Mary starts feeling lost and lonely. Stephan realises that she will never be able to provide Mary a complete life. They explore the Parisian night life and befriend another lesbian couple from the village in highlands, Jamie and Barbara. Unfortunately, the couple meets ill-fate, Barbara dies due to pneumonia and not being able to bear this loss, Jamie too kills herself.

The sudden death of the couple leaves a negative impact on Mary's mind. At this time Martin Hallam returns to Stephen's life but falls in love with Mary. Stephen over a period of time realises that she will never be able to give Mary happiness and a complete life and resolves to end the relationship. She pretends to be in an affair with Valérie Seymour so that Mary can go with Martin. The novel ends with a plea by the protagonist who speaks for the entire queer community, for the misfits that "Give us also the right to our existence!" (484).

Born in Hanover, Pennsylvania on November 28, 1944, Rita Mae Brown is an American writer, activist, and feminist. Her first novel *Ruby Fruit Jungle* was published in 1973 and is noteworthy for its explicit representation of lesbianism. It also reflects semi autobiographical elements as it vividly describes the character of Molly Bolt, the prejudice of the society towards homosexuals. This attitude restricted Brown's own personal and professional growth as a lesbian herself. Like the protagonist in the novel, Brown was adopted and her father died while she in High School. Initially it was rejected by many publishers on account of the subject matter of the novel and the views were highly controversial. In 1973, a small feminist publishing house by the name of the Daughter's Press agreed to print it.

Ruby Fruit Jungle is about a woman's journey in finding herself, her struggles in asserting herself in the male dominating society, and it is about being a homosexual in the ideal heterosexist world. It is a story of a bold mid-twentieth century lesbian Molly Bolt. She is introduced to the readers a seven year old girl who lives with her adoptive parents in the rural Coffee Hollow, Pennsylvania. Molly is described as intelligent, attractive and bright by the author who successfully makes money with her friend Broccoli Detwiler until one other of their classmates, Earl Stambach tattles on them to their teacher.

Carrie is Molly's adoptive mother; both of them do not share a loving bond. It is Carrie who tells Molly that she was born a 'bastard' to a slut by the name of Ruby Drollinger. Dark featured, athletic and being aware of herself as different from others, she spends most of her time with cousin Leroy during her childhood days. The gender roles play

a vital part in constituting one's identity and the implication of these roles start at a very early stage. In one of the incidents while Molly and Leroy were playing with their friend Cheryl Spiegelglass, she forthrightly kept her view that being a girl or a boy has nothing to do with the career you choose and that subordinate gender roles were just not meant for women. She told Cheryl, who insisted on girls playing the role of a nurse during a pretend play session that,

“A nurse, I wasn't gonna be no nurse. If I was gonna be something I was gonna be the doctor and give orders. I tore off my napkin, and told Cheryl I was the new doctor in town. Her face corroded. “You can't be a doctor. Only boys can be doctors. Leroy's got to be the doctor.”(Brown 1973, 28)

Molly's unconventional approach and her confidence gives a glimpse of the fact that women can and should fight back. Molly's mother wants her to be feminine in her attitude but she on the other-hand likes to run with boys. Her first homosexual encounter is when she is in sixth grade with Leota B. Bisland. Molly unlike Leroy becomes popular amongst the rich kids of her class because of her sense of humour and intelligence. She later gets into her first heterosexual relationship with Leroy who confides into Molly about his sexual experiences with an older man name Craig. The character of Molly is in contrast with the conventional image of a woman preconceived by the society. She is portrayed as confident, smart, and sure about how she wants to lead her life.

Later she gets into an affair with Carolyn, the captain of the cheer leading team and also one amongst the two best friends along with Connie. In one of the incidents Carolyn accuses her for being physically close to Connie. They are also however, apprehensive of themselves being tagged as “Lesbians”. In the 1960s, at the time of the Gay Liberation movement, the term gay was used to promote both male and female homosexuality. Later the term lesbian was used by women with deviant sexuality to maintain a separate visible identity. At the time the novel was published the term had become popular. Rita Mae Brown has used the contemporary language to reflect the queer culture and lifestyle of the mid and late twentieth century.

“I hate to lie too, but people will say we're lesbians.

Aren't we?

No, we just love each other, that's all. Lesbians look like men and are ugly. We're not like that.

We don't look like men, but when women make love it's commonly labelled lesbianism so you'd better learn not to cringe when you hear the word.” (92).

Molly was capable enough to receive a full scholarship at the University of Florida where she befriends a rich freshman, Faye Raider. They get intimately involved midway through the first semester. When the other girls complained to Dean Marne on grounds of morality, the matter is taken seriously. Molly's problem is looked at as a neurological disorder.

“Well dear, I have arranged for you to see one of our psychiatrists here three times a week and of course, you will see me once a week. I want you to know I'm in there rooting for you to get through this phase you're in. I want you to know that I'm your friend.” (113)

Molly, who is not afraid to speak about her sexual orientation rather accuses Dean Marne of being a “closet fairy.” Consequentially her letter of scholarship gets annulled for moral reasons. Not being able to attend school and not wanting to go back to Carrie, Molly take a hitch hike to New York City. Here she gets familiar with the American gay culture through Calvin, a young black gay. She finds a waitress job at a Burger Joint where she meets Holly, a black lesbian, who exposes her to the glamour world of lesbian New York.

Holly works as a “kept woman”, and suggests that Molly to do the same. Molly being intelligent and ambitious, works hard to get through the scholarship for the New York University. Later she finds a job at the silver publishing company where again she falls in a relationship with Polina Bellontoni, a middle aged writer and later she gets into a secret relationship with Polina's daughter Alice, thereby ending her relationship with them on a bitter note. Dejected by her experiences in America when she goes to her home town where she meets Leota again. Leota is rough with her and calls her mentally sick to have taken it too far. “Leota took breath in sharply. You ought to have your head examined, girl. They put people like you away. You need help.” (198)

Resentful Molly leaves for New York and decides to go to Florida to film a documentary on Carrie's life. It is now that Carrie accepts her as daughter for who she is and tells her about her biological parents and finally makes peace with her. The documentary was not appreciated much because of her being a woman and Molly has a lot of trouble finding a job. The novel ends with Molly filled with courage, despite beaten down over and over again by the societal forces and the structures. She is aware that her journey towards finding her own identity and bringing a change in society will not be easy, but the writer suggests that she is ready to combat the world alone and resolves to continue striving.

The Well of Loneliness and *Ruby Fruit Jungle* were published forty five years apart. The time covered by the Radclyffe Hall is from the end of nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century and the time period covered by Rita Mae Brown is from the mid of the twentieth century. The setting of both the novels is different from each other as well as there is a striking contrast in both the protagonists. Radclyffe Hall's Stephen is a refined, aristocratic, well read 'Invert' while Rita Mae Brown's Molly Bolt is an American girl who is intelligent, impoverished and comes from a broken family. The language used in both the novels is also different and suggests how the language and the terminology in the queer fiction has evolved. From the subtle use of the words relating to sexuality in the Well to the more outright approach in language of the protagonist by Brown. The time lapse in the publishing of both the novels helps to get better understanding of the contemporary social attitudes towards the queer community.

The novel *The Well of Loneliness* ends with the protagonist's forlorn and dejected heartfelt plea to the world asking for a respectable place amongst them. Stephan represents the turmoil and agony of people with deviant sexual preferences during a time when lack of understanding, intolerance and the inability to accept the needs of those different from the norm, lead to their social isolation. Hall asserts that the gender binaries of the society leave no space for the acceptance of any deviancy. Where Violet and Roger play the caricatures of peerless femininity and masculinity respectively, Stephan's female masculinity stands anomalous and inexplicable. The grounding of the text in the medical discourse by taking references from the works Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft Ebbing, has been a creative attempt by Hall to impart a serious message. A message that implies that the breaking of the socio cultural norms is imperative for a better future which would give everyone the right to exist. The novel ends on an unhappy note when Stephan Gordon surrenders to heteronormativity and lets Mary Llewellyn go with Martin Hallam believing that only a male and a female relation can sustain in a world which takes pride in its hegemonic structures. In contrast, the novel, *Ruby Fruit Jungle* depicts a more independent, confident, and assertive woman in the character of Molly Bolt. The change in social attitudes towards sexuality is evident due to awareness regarding the queer culture. *The Well of Loneliness* propagates heteronormativity through Stephan who is being represented as butch lesbian. *Ruby Fruit Jungle* through the character of Molly Bolt clearly and boldly rejects the concept of a masculine femininity. She says

"What's the point of being a lesbian if a woman is going to look and act like an imitation of a man? Hell, if I want a man, I'll get the real thing not one of these chippies. I mean, Calvin, the whole point of being gay is because you love women. You don't like men that look like women, do you?" (132)

The novel ends on a positive note where though the protagonist has lost yet another battle with the society but she has not lost courage and hope. She refuses to compromise and resolves to combat whatever comes in her way of finding her own self. Both the novels give us insight into the change in the socio cultural attitudes before and after the 1969 Gay Rights movement. Perhaps we are moving towards a time when as Stephan Gordon says, the world must give to each one the right to exist. As Stuart Hall opines, though in a different context,

"Identities are never unified and in late modern times increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiplied, constructed across different often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to radical historicization and are constantly in the process of change and transformation" (Hall 1990, 4).

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