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Portrayal Of Queer Lives In Language And Literature: A Critical Study Of Sarah Schulman's Novel Rat Bohemia

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Abstract

As literature is a reflection of life, it captures the hardships of queer people in the difficult context of contemporary changes. The term “queer” is used to refer to non-heterosexual sexual and gender minorities. Author of Rat Bohemia, Sarah Schulman, uses her writing to highlight the difficulties queer people face and to advance their cause of being accepted as normal. Using the spectacle of literary analysis, this article challenges the reader to deconstruct the dominant culture’s constructed thinking pattern in order to reconstruct a world view of equilibrium by accepting the undeniable truth of queerness in order to expose the suffocation and suffering of queer lives under the guise of hegemonic ‘normalcy’. It focuses on the meaning, beginning, and helplessness of queer people. Hegemonic dominance, labelling and lack of democratic principle of acceptance are traced as reasons for the marginalisation of queer lives. Homelessness, isolation, public disgrace, lack of authentic representation, the struggle for survival and hiding the reality are the major challenges queer lives face. Resistance to the dominance, growth in the coming out process, reciprocal understanding of queer people and mutual support are positive rays of hope that one can see in the horizon of life in fraternity. In this research, Sarah Schulman’s literary work, Rat Bohemia, is used to examine the tangled lives of queer people.

Key words: Heteronormativity, Normalcy, Queer Lives, Out of the Ordinary, Categorisation.

Introduction

Literature is a forum where both expressible and inexpressible lives find its expression in words and pages. Authors like Sarah Schulman employs words as swords in their literary works to fight for the right of equity and equality for the lives of queers labelled as inexpressible, marginalised and non-normal in a society where hegemonic heterosexuality reigns. David M. Halperin states that “queer by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (62).

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The current conundrum is how to say something weird or queer. The odd and queer find its expression in literature. So, Sarah Schulman's use of her literary works to refer to queer lives is noteworthy and praiseworthy. The general definition of gender is that it refers to the distinct social expectations that society has of males and females, which are determined by socio-cultural circumstances. Simone De Beauvoir aptly observed it in her book *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301). Only the two genders of male and female are accepted in gender-based division. The issues faced by these acceptable genders are addressed in 'normal' language, but the issues encountered by those who identify as non-conforming to the norm are expressed in queer literature since society perceives them as such. Presenting the beginning of queer theory, helplessness in being queer, familial, social and cultural challenges of queer people, resistance and survival aspect of queer lives and the everlasting existence of queerness by diving into Sarah Schulman's novel *Rat Bohemia* is informative and educational. Sexual and gender minorities are replaced in this study by queer, which is an umbrella term encompassing sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual.

Queer theory has only been identified as a field of study or theoretical conjecture since roughly 1991. It evolved from gay and lesbian studies, which are a very recent field that have only been organised in any way since the middle of the 1980s. Schulman presents the beginning of Queer theory analogically by mentioning that it is in 1980's that "she started to see rats scampering regularly in the playgrounds of central park" (Schulman, 15). The focal location of so-called heterosexual people's lives is the central park playground. The 1980s saw a marginalisation of queerness. Queer individuals started to go through the streets where heteronormativity was present. Queer theory was born from gender studies, a feminism offspring. It was Teresa De Lauretis who introduced the term "queer" and wrote it for the first time in the pages of *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* in 1991. The fixed (normative) gender and sexual identities are being shattered by queer theory. It started to expand its wings.

Being queer is an existential situation rather than a choice that a person makes. queer people are queer in themselves. There are several references in the novel *Rat Bohemia* which indicate the helplessness of queers in being queer. Whom to blame for this? "Vat am I to do? Cahnt help it" (Schulman 32). The watchword is "We are here, we are queer, get used to it" (Schulman 114). We did not do anything wrong. "We do exist. We can mourn. We do have a language" (Schulman 160). They do speak a language, and that language is written and encoded in the body. The reality is to accept queerness. Identity uncertainty is viewed as a deviation, yet in reality, identity is flexible and ever-changing. That is why Schulman clarifies it by stating that one cannot comprehend his or her categorization. "I can't figure out what category I am in" (37). Aaron looks at the explicit distinctions between the terms for boy and girl made by gender preconceptions that are enforced by family and society. In *Rat Bohemia*, the narrator says that She prays to the Jewish God...sitting up there deciding things...reason enough. "I don't care to know what the reason is that I am gay" (20).

People prefer to view God as a judge who punishes them. But in the New Testament, We observe a God who is not exclusive but inclusive. Nobody was excluded from God's kingdom of love. The creator must take responsibility if a creature is viewed as mean. Is it not erroneous to believe that God will create something that will reflect poorly on Him? But tradition keeps us stuck in conventional ways of thinking and prevents us from thinking creatively. We always live inside the confines of tradition without realising that there is a universe of logic outside the confines. Symbolically speaking, tradition tells us to hunt down the odd, but reason makes us think that they have a right to exist because Scripture says that everything that is created is good. Butler's *Gender trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993) challenge sexuality and identity theories that centre on the erroneous notion that heterosexuality is stable. The heterosexual

mentality rejects the presence of queerness on its grounds. Schulman pinpoints it in Rat Bohemia by writing that “heterosexual dominance within every community does not aid or facilitate queer visibility or autonomy” (9). Queer persons are pursued by heterosexual people because they are terrified of their visibility and independence. In actuality, it is acknowledged that there is queerness within every personality, but it is actively suppressed. Most of the queer people wear the title of male or female gender to avoid the atrocities they have to encounter once they come out openly.

Heterosexuality dominates queer lives. Labelling is for dominance. There exists no Labelling in the animal kingdom. Men began to rule over women once humanity was divided into men and women. “In Marxian analysis, Bourgeois dominated working class. So for them, justice means abolition of classification – classless society” (Barry 150). People were classified based on colour – white and black and then the white started to dominate black. “Black and white never socialised together” (Schulman 17). But both are human beings. According to history, white has always dominated black people, accusing them of being cursed. The same tactic is used by heterosexuals over homosexuals. Rat Bohemia is clear as it asserts that they are Bohemians. Bohemians are queer individuals. They lack the values of the prevailing culture. “Bohemians are not grouped by clothes or sex or age. Nowadays, it is just a state of mind. Anyone with a different idea is IN” (Schulman 38).

If one adheres to democratic principles, there should be space for everyone, not only those who meet the accepted norms of the prevailing ideology. If they wanted to live a ‘normal’ life, queer persons had to stay ‘closeted’. Above all, The house in which the gay people reside presents them with a variety of challenges. For queer individuals, home turns into a gas chamber of suffering and suffocation. In Rat Bohemia, “Father tossed the queer child out for the fifteenth time” (Schulman 29). “Some parents don’t even speak to their queer children. Some parents won’t even let them in the house” (100). “There is nothing on earth that could kill a child more efficiently than parental indifference” (Schulman 93). “The child’s parents have always hated the child for being queer” (Schulman 92). A youngster must first and foremost be understood and appreciated by his or her family. Family Members chase them like untouchables. They are pursued and expelled from the hegemonic “normal” channels because they are perceived as obstacles in the way of the “normal”. Hegemonic normality is pleased when queerness is eradicated and a heteronormativity mask is worn. What is the criterion of considering someone unique? Is it heterosexuality? There is an element of uniqueness in every queer.

People, who identify as queer, are increasingly being forced out of their homes, which puts a strain on their capacity to make ends meet. When the queer children are forced out of the households, they lose their livelihood and resort to stealing and breaking into other people’s property in order to earn their daily bread. This financial instability drives them to become prostitutes, drug traffickers, and bar dancers, among other things. Are we going to look down on them because of the fact that they are bar dancers, drug dealers, and prostitutes? Instead, we are going to have to look for the underlying reason why they are the way that they are, and when we do that, we will feel ashamed of ourselves because we were the ones who created all of the conditions that led to their being the way that they are. To put things in their proper order, we need to position the axe so that it strikes the root of the problem, not the branches that have spread out.

The sense of being alone is the most debilitating experience that one may have in their lifetime. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons, on the other hand, are more likely to suffer from feelings of loneliness to a greater degree. They are cut off from their own families, as well as from the schools, communities, and peer groups that they would normally interact with. Schulman refers to it in Rat Bohemia by the following dialogues – “How they have abandoned queer people and

so they remain isolated" (125). "I did not do anything wrong, even though I was deeply punished. My father should have been overjoyed that someone loved me and that I loved them" (Schulman 180). At least, the family has to accept the reality so that they get out of the worst feeling of isolation by holding the hands of another queer who excludes their isolation.

Queer individuals are shamed in public. When there is a public gathering or event, persons who identify as queer are looked down upon by those who identify as straight. There have been numerous instances of same-sex couples being shamed in front of heterosexuals and in public. The same sex pair is expelled on the grounds that their presence violates public decorum and prevents 'normal' individuals from attending such events. Though they are charged of everything just like others, their freedom is monitored and curtailed. Each person possesses aspects of queerness. Human beings present an acceptable false self while concealing their true selves. The importance of queer lives is diminished by their lack of historical representation. Queer people have not been favourably represented throughout history. "Outdated definition of history is passing down of anecdotes from one set of friends to another" (Schulman 59). Queers have played a crucial role in world history. Feminists defended the idea that history only contained 'his' narrative and fought to get 'her' story included. Now, neither his nor her tale is the story of queer people. Where will we write story of fluidity of identity? Because everyone is queer, if we write it, it won't be 'her' tale or 'his' story; rather, it will be 'our' narrative.

Hard bites are necessary for the hardness of hegemonic rigidity to recognise the queer life's request for acceptance of their presence. The fight to change the legislation in favour of queer people has been successful to an extent. It is unfair to consider every protest a danger rather than a struggle for existence. The survival of the fittest hypothesis, put out by Charles Darwin, fits this situation well. The queer people become accustomed to the poisons and traps, which causes them to forge a defence and survival mechanism. Queerness is being expressed explicitly. Many queers are courageous enough to go through the coming out process. In order to breathe the freedom-inspiring air and experience the joy of living their authentic lives, queer people rip off the false masks of male and female gender that have been keeping them trapped in a life of suffocation. In this contemporary period, queerness is more expressed. Every person has some degree of queerness, but in this century, acceptance and outward manifestation have grown quickly. When we eradicate homosexuality in one person, many more emerge. As a result, eliminating queerness is impossible.

Being queer in a world that pursues people for their heterosexuality is difficult. The most prudent course of action is to conceal one's homosexuality. To identify as Bohemian or queer in today's world requires a significant task. Therefore, individuals attempt to cover up their homosexuality and live a life of deceit. "The more you hide the safer you are" (Schulman 116). "We are despicable" (Schulman 169). "We will never get rid of homophobia in this country" (Schulman 184). "My first confrontation between my homosexuality and the world – I lied from the beginning. I know to this day that I was treated better that way I know lying was the only thing that could do" (Schulman 187). People who identify as queer either voluntarily create a world of falsehoods or are coerced into doing so by members of the dominant community. Who is responsible for the scripting of the so-called cultural values? They were written by the hegemonic concept of normalcy.

The person who can understand a queer person better is another queer individual. If you want to understand a man's suffering, talk to another man, and if you want to understand a woman's suffering, talk to another woman. It is also true in the case of those who identify as queer. "We are so intimate that we can act out all of our pain in front of each other. We can tell each other the truth" (Schulman 81). "Your touch works on my flesh like a respiratory, like Vick's Vaporub" (Schulman

134). “It smelled like something really awful for your lungs that just made everyone want to run away. But we all stayed and got infected by it” (Schulman 155). There is always a difference between experience and knowledge. “When the historian knows more than the victim, there is an isolation from the original experience” (Schulman 200). The body language and vocal communication of gay individuals is better understood by queer people themselves. Because of this, they do indeed maintain their own affiliations.

Despite the fact that queerness exists in the world, we do not anticipate it to be obvious. We do not welcome any persons that identify as queer in our home. Parents typically anticipate that their offspring will be either a boy or a girl. Even though there are queer children in the world, parents who are heterosexual don’t want them living in their homes. The expectations of society are not meant to be realised, and society does not want this to happen. It’s possible that our expectations won’t match up with the truth. “I was a constant source of tension. I was not the way they had intended for me to be” (Schulman 73). “You will meet people in your life whose beliefs you despise but they will be really nice and then there will be people whose beliefs you embrace but they will be awful” (Schulman 83). We expect normal people to be nice but in reality it may not be so and even it may be vice versa.

Conclusion

There were queer lives then, there are queer lives today, and there will be queer lives tomorrow. Schulman makes it clear in her literary work *Rat Bohemia*. Bohemia is a physical location that is susceptible to obliteration, but queer people are living creatures that have the power to transform Bohemian culture while maintaining their own existence. Everyone has a little bit of queerness hiding away inside of them. There will always be people who identify as queer. Queerness will disappear only when the humankind vanish. Queer theory seeks to question the hegemonic forces of heterosexual norms. As a result of the above stated insights, one is prompted to engage in rational and critical thought on the reconstruction of socially formed beliefs around fixed gender and sexual identities. The dominant heteronormativity poses a continual danger to the queer community. We still have standards in place that either create or necessitate the humiliation of others. Is it not time to start formulating an ethics that does not hold the other person in contempt for being who they are?

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