

Images of Queer in Rosa Cuthbert Guy's *Ruby*

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Abstract

Gender is an umbrella term rooted in our society and culture. It makes the difference between male and female in terms of roles, relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values and power given by the society. Identity stabilizes the gender and its development. It is the time of adolescence where every individual changes its self and identity. Change is the intriguing area of inquiry in the life of every individual. Amid, period of adolescence is crucial and transitional, involving physical and psychological changes in the growth and development of every individual. In this regard, the research paper manifested the queer identity of an eighteen year young adult Ruby Cathy, the protagonist of the novel *Ruby*. It was written by Rosa Cuthbert Guy, a young adult fiction writer of Black literature. Queer identity is a strange identity that Ruby Cathy experience due to her alienation and obsession. It doesn't create the misconception towards gender identity rather it expresses the uniqueness of the development of the two young adults. Though it talks about different ethnicity, race, class and gender, it encounters the love relationship of same gender. The major conflict of the novel is the common need of love, care and affection. Rosa Cuthbert Guy as a social conscience writer explores the growing need of young adults in a non-familial relationship. Thus this research paper explicitly shows the image of young queers in the novel *Ruby*.

Key Words: Alienation, non- familial relationship, queer identity, obsession

Some social factors like the annulment of bondage, the picking up of suffrage rights for black men and women's activist development drove African American ladies to be a fundamental piece of America work after the civil war. They requested equality in their open and private lives. Because of the organization of slavery, women needed to work nearby men. Black female writers, for example, Anna Julia Cooper, Pauline Hopkins and B. Wells Barnett handled the

role of women in the American culture. The time of Harlem Renaissance is the Golden Age of African American writing, "It is a development in music, craftsmanship, writing and legislative issues from the mid 1900's to 1940's, accentuated the significance of opportunity political, economic, social and imaginative for African Americans" (Smith and Jones 163).

Between the year 1954 and 1965, the Civil Rights Movement started to be acknowledged. It included marches, protest boycotts and beatings. These years were the beginning stage of black voting rights. They speak to the brave time of the Civil Rights development. This movement helped African American to beat racism. African American women's voices started to be heard because of the women's movement and Civil Right Movement. Music was another method for Blacks to convey what they need, especially Rap music. It concentrated on realities, drug abuse, teenage and violence. In the start of 1980, the most conspicuous writers were Du Bois, Charles Chesnutt, Pauline Hopkins, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Sutton Griggs and James Weldon Johnson. Generally black writers signify as poets, short story writers, play wrights and novelist. They started utilizing distinctive structures from slave stories to fiction. They are spoken in American literary movements including authenticity, naturalism and innovation. One among them was Rosa Cuthebert Guy whose writings created fiction for young adults. Rosa Guy's work has received The New York Times Outstanding Book of the Year citation for *The Friends* in 1973, the Coretta Scott King Award and the American Library Association's Best Book for Young Adults Award.

Rosa Cuthbert Guy is the Trinidadian born American author of young adults. Due to unemployment in the early 1900's, the residents of Trinidad immigrated to New York. Guy's parents were one among the thousands immigrated to New York to find work during the years of World War I.

Economic, political and Great depression of New York swelled the newcomers'. The Whites convinced the Blacks for low wages and excluded them from white residential areas. The Blacks created a ghetto in large and named it as Harlem. Reform movements like Garvey movement, Civil Rights Movement and Harlem Writers Guild are formed to speak the silence of the Blacks. Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde, Langston Hughes, Douglas Turner Ward, Lonnie Elder, Rosa Cuthbert Guy and Maya Angelou are the profound reformists and writers of black literature. They experienced their life as one of the poor urbane of Blacks. Among this, Rosa Cuthbert Guy, an independent artist stressed the growth and development of black young adults of Harlem.

As a factory worker Rosa Guy challenged herself to act and write to the choice of hers. At sixteen, she was wife and worker. Even after getting married, she continued to work in the factory. She expressed herself by writing and sharing her insights of the life she saw around her. She entered the Harlem Writers Guild in joining with John Killens, by the influence of Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes. She wrote novels for young adults. Guy herself said that, "I do believe that I'm trying to say that we live in one World and it's a damn small World and we have to care for each other. We have to be concerned about the World" (Norris 24). *Bird at My Window* is her first novel. *The Carnival* is a short story derived the experiences of Guy as factory worker. *Children of Longing*, *The Friends*, *Ruby*, *Edith Jackson* and *The Disappearance* are the novels published in the succeeding

years. In spite of this, she had many friends and acquaintances in both the arts and the African diplomatic communities. Her words about the young adults in an interview are as follows:

young people, strong in their beliefs, came out in numbers to follow Martin Luther King , Jr. they marched, sang, professed unity, a dedication to justice and human dignity for all. Black and White students understanding the dehumanizing effect of poverty, shouted slogans, “Black Power,” Black is Beautiful” into the Black communities to arouse the youth to their potential. (Norris 15)

Guy is a writer of Black children, youth, women and men. Her trilogy intensely focused the growth and self – development of young women. Race, sex and class in the lives of young girls are the ultimate theme of her works. She painted young adult characters as black coloured powerless to show the abuse cause to disrupt the self-discovery, self- development and identity in the transition period. Young adults strive hard to search their identity and self. In the regard, Rosa Guy attempts to study the mind of young adults’ growing need, identity and self. The present paper also undertakes an attempt to analyses the self-development, need and identity of young adults present in the novel called *Ruby*. It is a coming of age novel. It shows the problem arises out of the ages of the protagonists and the unique personality traits of young black women.

The novel *Ruby* is named after the protagonist Ruby of eighteen years. Her mother died because of cancer. She didn’t find anyone in the place of her mother. As a

young adult she feels responsible to take care of her sister and father. At the same time she needs a companion to share her feelings and loneliness. The young adults are forced to live under her father’s stern, unyielding rule after their mother’s death. The narrator showed Calvin as:

Calvin Cathy, with his stern, nonsense attitude, his rigidity, his old-fashioned notions, inevitably clashed with Phyllisia, her languid laziness. Neither had any intention of changing – Calvin, because he felt righteous, and Phyllisia, because she kept her distance from him in the pages of books. (*Ruby* 10)

Motherless daughters became desperate and lonely in Harlem. Their physical and mental transformation in the period of growth and development stipulated their self to find their identity. The novel *Ruby* mainly explored Ruby’s turbulent imitation into the sphere of courtship and love. She was exacerbated by the loneliness because of her mother’s sudden death. Calvin’s tyrannical attitude and the cultural difference in the New York highly disrupted the development of Ruby. Phyllisia Cathy always busied herself writing letters to her friend Edith about her loneliness in the new land. The narrator of the novel overemphasized Ruby by saying that, “to find herself, a likeness to herself, a response to her needs, her age, an answer to her loneliness” (*Ruby* 47). In the school the Cathy sisters were treated as outsiders. In the later days, Ruby happened to meet Daphne Duprey who was cool, calm, cultured, sophisticated and refined. Their friendship is observed as, “Ruby and Daphne build a relationship that gives each

young woman a new understanding of strength, friendship and love” (Blurb).

The other young adult found in the novel is Daphne Duprey. She is a classmate of Ruby. Ruby liked her very much because she was proud and self-directed which is not Ruby. Ruby visited Daphne’s home and asks herself that, “Why did I come? What will I say? What do I want from her? I don’t know ... I don’t know...” (Ruby 42). But Daphne, the girl of same age is also obsessive and intellect to control her instincts. She says Ruby that,

“Look Ruby, there is so much about me that you don’t know- probably will never know. There is a hell of a lot about myself that throws me, so I don’t expect you to be a Daphne Dupreyian overnight. But one thing you must know about me, I insist! That is, I cannot stand stupidity. It drives me mad! Do you understand? Mad”. (Ruby 61)

For Ruby, Daphne is special, a new existence outside of the family sphere. Ruby’s words to Daphne are, “I am blank, Daphne. Nothing is written on me until I feel for someone like I feel for you. When you leave I become blank again” (Ruby 118). Daphne’s entry becomes an answer to her loneliness. Generally young adults host by physical, mental and social complications because of their physical appearance. In respect of black children and young adults, physical, mental and sexual problems are rapid problems they face in and out of their community. In the book *Contemporary African American Young Adult Novel* the author stated that “Young people of color

are often not validated or acknowledged in the dominant culture of the United States” (Rountree 9). At the same time black girls often face a unique set of problems and challenges. In this aspect, Ruby Cathy found herself happy in the relationship of Daphne. When Ruby met Daphne, a beautiful, strong-willed classmate of exceptional intelligence, her love for the outgoing young woman became a hopeful source of liberation.

Ruby in the house of Daphne, she says that “she had found herself, a likeness to herself, a response to her need, her age and an answer to her loneliness” (Ruby 155). Ruby insists Daphne to call her in the name of Bronzie by saying that, “my private name for you” (Ruby 155) to develop the intricate relationship with her. Ruby’s identity found to be strange. In the feministic approach the oppression of females helps to identify the self and identity of women. It talks more often the equal rights and independency of women through different waves of feminism. In that aspect, queer theory is an extension of feminism. It is not that men are allowed to be women instead it relies on the self-determination of the individual.

Among many feminists, Rosa Cuthbert Guy as a social conscience writer her novel Ruby depicted the lesbian affair directly. Sally J. Scholz, an American professor of Philosophy, focused his research on feminist theory said that, “Queer is an unusual, unexpected and unpredictable identification” (*Feminism* 119). Since norms and identities are a mark of dominant culture, queer theory is used to destabilize all kinds of norms, identities, race, class and nationality. In a theoretical concept, queer identifies the biological sex of the birth in different forms

and locations. It deals the subject of sex, gender and sexuality in an unlimited way. It also argues for radical freedom. It challenges sex, gender dichotomies and identity ascriptions. At the same time it rejects the politics created by identity. Lesbian and gay identity is different from queer identity. But queer theory entails the complete rejection of an independent identity. Peter Barry in his *Beginning Theory* says that “queer theory is rather than being ‘women centered’ (Barry 143).

Mrs. Dupre, Daphne’s mother confronts the situation effectively by expressing her disapproval of the relationship and limits of the girls. Her words challenge Ruby to be honest in the relationship. She says, “If Ruby feels like putting up with [the situation] that is her business. She’s old enough to make her own decisions. What makes you the great know it all? What makes you the one who must think for us all? To decide for us all? (*Ruby* 145)”. By the natural course of events the relationship ends when the school closes at the end of the year. Daphne finds college and plans her future as she desires. At the end of the relationship, she says to Ruby as, “we have had our time...we have been good friends. We enjoyed each other. It is over. I want to live,

and there is no life in clinging, pretending (*Ruby* 178)”. Ruby feels that, “Daphne was so important to me...my life...yet she said I was selfish...selfish...selfish (*Ruby* 182)”.

At the end of the novel, Ruby attempts to commit suicide rather to face the end of the relationship. Juliet Mitchell, the feminist commented that, “If one had to sum up Guy’s attitude toward homosexuality from this story, one would conclude from the internal evidence that she believes the need to love and be loved is paramount. To assuage that hunger, young people may fall in love within or outside their own gender. What determines the success or failure of the relationships may have more to do with personality than with being male or female? (Norris 32). Ruby wants to be true in the relationship.

The development of young girls starts from family dynamics, cultural background and personality traits. In the novel *Ruby*, Guy explored the development of young adults by identifying their identity and need. Her vision re-created the complexities of the lives of young adults who grow up in the inner city of a universe. Her characters struggled to satisfy their needs and aspirations. Thus the novel explored the emotional truth of contemporary young adults.

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