

# HOMOPHOBIA AND STEREOTYPING LESBIAN IN PULP FICTION

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## Abstract

This paper is a scholarly examination of Ann Bannon's *Beebo Brinker Series* and Rita Mae Brown's semi-autobiographical novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* that includes investigating their production details and historical background, as well as providing a close reading of their unique lesbian narrative techniques and effects. Interestingly, men comprised the primary readership of this genre of fiction, and the men around the protagonists are shown to have had crucial influence in the development of their sexuality, and yet male characters are often neglected in academic studies on lesbian pulp fiction. My research is aimed at a critical analysis of the male characters (father, cousin, brother and gay friends of the protagonist) in this genre of fiction and their relationship with the lesbian protagonist. My research proposes to be different from existing research on lesbian pulp fiction on the following counts. First, I focus on the male characters in lesbian pulp fiction, which has hardly been done so far; second, I also bring into focus Rita Mae Brown's works along with Ann Bannon's – thus bringing in, under the rubric of one study the two stalwarts of the genre, which is also lacking in existing research in this area. I have done a close textual reading of the *Beebo Brinker Series* and *Rubyfruit Jungle* with an emphasis on the male characters and their influence on the protagonists. The idea has been to read the male characters as well as the novels subversively, keeping in mind the social and historical background of their production. The major hypothesis of my study is to reveal the concealed messages delivered through the male characters sketched for analyzing the predicament, action and behaviour of the lesbian characters in Bannon's and Brown's fiction. However, this is not to strip them off their lesbian identity, which is central to lesbian print culture.

## Introduction

*Cut the endings. Revise the script. The man of her dreams is a girl.*

Julie Anne Peters, *Keeping You a Secret*

In this research paper I shall be discussing the general popular attitude of the US society in the sixties towards homosexuality. The media, medical papers, psychoanalytic theories, the law-books and the popular fiction of the time, reveal an inherent strain of homophobia. The central argument of the paper deals with popular representation of lesbianism as a "problem", and also traces the ways lesbians were constructed as stereotypes

of failed heterosexuality within mainstream culture in the works of Ann Bannon and Rita Mae Brown. It is absolutely necessary to locate these two writers in their intellectual milieu, so that we may have a better understanding of their works and their respective responses to their immediate environs.

In *Beebo Brinker Series* “homophobia” and the stereotyping of lesbianism as “failed heterosexuality” are persistently present, and they play a significant role in the life of the characters. I will explore the limitations and possibilities of a lesbian’s cultural production and representation in the respective texts. Therefore familiarizing oneself with the context becomes necessary in order to comprehend the novel sequence and the socio-economic background of its production.

What was homophobia when homosexuals were not even acknowledged as a social category during the mid-twentieth century? And how do we define homophobia? According to Michael S. Kimmel, “Homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood. Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of gay men, more than the fear that we might be perceived as gay”<sup>1</sup>. It is out of this fear that the figures of the lesbian writer, the lesbian character, and the lesbian actor have historically been both productions of mainstream culture and also the lived experiences of lesbians within dominant, heterosexual culture in order to represent lesbianism as a “problem”.

It is against this background of homophobic mainstream cultural representation of the lesbian that I am going to fashion the first chapter tracing the issue from the *Beebo Brinker Series*. This section will trace the ways Bannon has constructed lesbian characters as stereotypes of failed femininity within heterosexual mainstream culture, and also how the lesbian fictional figures in the novels have fashioned lesbian identities, which are homophobic as well as emancipating. In the light of Bannon’s work I will try to draw from Rita Mae Brown’s autobiographical novel, *Rubyfruit Jungle* the issues of homophobia and the problematic representation of lesbians within dominant heterosexual culture.

The *Beebo Brinker Chronicle* comprises Five novels; *Odd Girl Out*, *I Am a Woman*, *Women in The Shadows*, *Journey to a Woman* and *Beebo Brinker*, a prequel to the first four novels. The principal issues and formulaic patterns in these five novels can be enlisted as follows –

1. Laura loves Beth. Laura disappears. Beth and Charlie win the narrative to hetero-normative success.
2. Underground gay bars of the 1950’s.
3. Gay marriage.
4. Lunatic lesbians with guns.
5. Voyeurism.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia”, *Reconstructing Gender A Multicultural Anthology*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003) 103

Among all these issues, homophobia and lesbianism as stereotypes of failed heterosexuality can be easily traced, and though these two issues are not explored in all the novels, there undertone pervades all of them in one way or the other.

The first novel of the series, *Odd Girl Out*, brings forth the first sign of homosexuality in the protagonist, Laura, in the form of her same-sex attraction for her sorority sister Beth. The story unfolds on a collage campus, predominately in the sorority house Alpha Beta. Laura Landon, comes across as a naïve character; recently her parents had divorced, making her vulnerable and lonely, looking for someone to fill the void. At the sorority house she meets her new roommates Beth and Emmy. Laura is appalled by Emmy's wild, outgoing attitude but is intimidated by Beth's commanding presence, and soon they become close friends. Within a few weeks, they are aware of a magnetic, intense attraction between them and by the end of the first semester, Beth and Laura are lovers.

As the novel progresses, Laura's homosexual nature surfaces to our attention. Though *Odd Girl Out* is enlisted as pro-lesbian pulp by scholars, an explicit homophobic Cold War theme of spying, paranoia and fear underlies the novel. For instance when Laura learns that Beth never joins Emmy for "Saturdays", she becomes paranoid and expresses her fear; "she's so popular and everything. I just naturally thought – well–If a girl didn't date was there anything wrong with her"<sup>2</sup>? Undoubtedly Laura is homophobic. She is judging Beth by categorizing her to the standards of patriarchal norms. For Laura, Beth's lack of interest in dating is problematic. Laura fears that there is something wrong with Beth, because for her dating is "normal" and not-dating equals to something terribly "wrong" with the person.

In the social conventions of 50's college life, man-dating-woman is hetero-normative and being "popular" is another issue which needs our attention here. Popularity as a social phenomenon dictates who or what is best liked. Since Laura is judging Beth's popularity in a social context, she expects more of Beth and tries to have access to her. Laura tries to spy on Beth and it is from Emmy she learns:

"She'd find somebody she liked," Emmy went on, "and they'd go together for a couple of months, and just when it seemed as if everything was going to be terrific, it was all over. I mean, Beth just called it off. She always did that," she said musingly, "just when we all thought she was really falling in love. All of a sudden she'd call it quits". (OGO 15)

Beth here is the female equivalent of "the big man on campus" most folks know her, like her and admire her. Beth is experienced socially with men particularly, but feels a void in her life. She doesn't understand how the other girls are so fulfilled by the men in their lives, despite having tried to have her own affairs with men. Every time she allows herself to be intimate with one, she breaks it off out of disappointment. Unlikely it is the

<sup>2</sup> Ann Bannon, *Odd Girl Out*. (New York: Fawcett Gold Medal, 1957, Tallahassee: Naiad, 1983) 14. Hereafter abbreviated at OGO, with the page numbers for quotations is given in parentheses.

passive Laura who is spying on Beth. Laura who is more feminine and meek becomes “hungry for any crumb of information about Beth”. And thus her curiosity brings her closer to Beth.

The erotic tension in the early stages of Laura and Beth’s relationship is quite well articulated by Bannon. Here we can trace an inversion of role playing. Laura takes the active role and acts as the seducer. She finally seduces the masculine Beth by kissing her “like a wild, hungry child, starved for each kiss, pausing only to murmur, Beth, Beth, Beth...” (OGO 47) Perhaps this is Bannon’s way of saving Beth (representing masculinity) from the moral police by giving her the passive role, who is just another victim of homoerotic lust. It becomes quite clear that Bannon’s awareness of the censorship and tension of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century voyeuristic environment reflects in the novel, which connects to the Cold War era of “fear of being watched by the government”. However Bannon nailed the excitement and terror of delirious young love by depicting a subtle romance, which readers must have enjoyed. Bannon’s prose may not strike a very powerful note, the novel’s charm lies in its unflinching depiction of homoerotic attraction and burgeoning lesbian identity in the heavily surveilled atmosphere of a 1950’s college social scene.

Of course Bannon had to abide by the publisher’s rule book insisting on a distinct lack of happy endings to discourage a homosexual agenda. Eventually the lesbian affair is ruined by making Beth fall for the so-called superior charms of a man. Charlie Ayers, the son of a family friend of Laura’s, woos Beth and at the end Charlie and Beth win the narrative heteronormative success.

The homophobic tone of the book seems to jump back and forth between a naïve curiosity concerning homosexuality and an attitude that does not seem to take it seriously. Although the story may not necessarily reflect Bannon’s opinions, the characters within the book seem to have varying thoughts about being gay. One example that occurs in the beginning of the book is when Laura starts to have her first thoughts regarding her feelings towards Beth. Laura “knew that there were some men who loved men and some women who loved women, and she thought it was a shame that they couldn’t be like other people. The men were great sissies and the women wore pants”.(OGO 16)

However, when Laura declares her joy in her love for Beth in *Odd Girl Out* while simultaneously questioning if it is right, Loewenstein states “one hears quite clearly the voice of Ann Bannon, questioning her own right to happiness”<sup>3</sup>. Questioning her attraction throughout the story, Laura is uneasy at first about her feelings, but is so drawn to Beth that she cannot control her inclination towards her. Although this may be said in the book to show the general naivety of Laura’s character, it does not show homosexuality in a particularly positive light. Later in the book, after Emmy realizes that Laura and Beth are in love, she is said to give an “involuntary shudder”. This attitude the characters have towards homosexuality does not display an absolute disapproval of it, but they certainly are not comfortable with the idea either. The tone is really set, however, when the characters starts treating homosexuality as a sort of phase, a process that people go through when they are children and grow out of

<sup>3</sup>in “Ann Bannon”, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ann\\_Bannon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ann_Bannon)

it when they realize that they are making a mistake. For example, in a confrontation scene between Beth and Laura, Beth says: “You can’t love a girl all your life, Laura. You can’t be in love with a girl all your life. Sooner or later you have to grow up”. (OGO 93) A similar attitude for same-sex love is expressed further by Charlie, who says:

This is child stuff, Beth, this thing between you and Laura. You’re deceiving yourself, denying yourself. You’re a woman, honey—a grown up woman. An intelligent, beautiful girl with a good life ahead of you. And that life has a man in it and kids and a college degree. May be it can’t be that way for Laura. But it’s got to be that way for you”. (OGO 139)

Thus Bannon has articulated through Charlie’s observation, what men think and approves of women’s sexuality. How men in general try to control the morality and modesty of a woman. And thus Beth feels terribly troubled, as she wants Laura when she is with her, but feels as though she finally found the love she has been waiting for in Charlie. Perhaps the tragic flaw here is the “indecisiveness” of Beth, who is a slave of patriarchal ideologies.

The subplot is quite illuminating projecting the homophobic culture and military control of post-secondary institutions of the fifties over sexuality of female students. It involves Beth’s friend Emmy, who is kicked out of college for wearing a revealing costume that “accidentally” showed a bit too much skin at a party and then having pre-marital sex with her boyfriend whom the college forbade her from seeing. After Emmy is forced to leave school, her boyfriend Bud promises to marry her, but Bannon leaves a distinct amount of doubt as to whether Bud is really going to do anything of that sort. Bannon makes it clear that Bud is privileged, able to continue school and to pursue his career as a musician, while Emmy is sent home and punished. Emmy is caught in a double blind: she is thrown out of school for her relationship with a man, but then her only hope for redemption is marriage. So, Bannon is actually pointing out the flaws of heterosexual patriarchy, the very thing that Beth so happily accepts at the end of the novel. However no explicit link is drawn between Beth and Emmy’s situations. Bannon’s intention in epitomizing Charlie as “one of those few good men left in the world” is also ambiguous. It leaves us wondering whether Bannon not really slyly critiquing the ways that patriarchal societies, on the one hand, teach women to depend only on men and to use their sexuality to secure one, and, on the other, punish women for experiencing their sexualities outside wedlock.

In the end, the lesbian Laura is the only female character free of these restraints. All throughout the story Laura expresses strong insecurity and clinging to Beth; however, at the end, Laura tells Beth, “But you need a man, you always did. Emmy was right, she understood. If I’d only listened. I was the one who was wrong, about you and her. But I’m not wrong about myself, not any more. And not about you, either”. (OGO 141) Laura confesses she will never feel that way towards a man, and that Beth has helped her come to terms with this. In the end Beth goes back to Charlie and Laura with the self-acceptance of who she is and the ability to live the rest of her life honest with herself heads off to Greenwich Village.

The popular trend of lesbian formula pulp of the 50's often gave the message that true lesbians are butch (masculine) and must suffer, femme (feminine) lesbians are simply confused and can be saved from the curse of homosexuality. Unlike her contemporaries, Bannon went off the formulaic track. Thus a similar situation concludes Bannon's *Odd Girl Out*, although with an interesting twist. The semi-butch Beth is redeemed by Charlie Ayers and Laura the femme, must suffer the loss of her love and run away to a new life. It is quite surprising to see Beth ending up with a man, and not Laura, because Beth is more masculine. This allows the more feminine Laura to embrace her queerness— as much as that is possible in 1957 —would have been revolutionary and unexpected for the time.

The second novel is entitled *I Am a Woman*.<sup>4</sup> This novel is a sequel to *Odd Girl Out*, which explores the, underground gay bars of the 1950's in Greenwich Village through the characters of Jack Mann, Beebo Brinker and Laura Landon. *I Am a Woman* provides a sensitive study of the Greenwich Village homosexual community of the late 1950's. Bannon is particularly good at portraying how Laura manages to move from a heterosexual environment, such as the office where she works, to the lesbian bars where she meets Beebo and Jack Mann. However this chapter is not limited to Laura's homosexuality, it also deals with lesbian bars as sites of heterosexual tourism and heterosexual male viewpoint of lesbianism.

The main character of *Odd Girl Out*, Laura Landon, a year after she has left college, exhausted by living with her harsh judging father, leaves home in the middle of the night and goes to New York City. Laura gets a job as a secretary in a medical office and rents an apartment in Greenwich Village with a roommate – Marcie. Marcie's ex-husband Burr frequently dates her, and in between they fight and sleep together. Laura realizes that she is attracted to Marcie and intensely dislikes Burr. Burr brings along a friend, Jack Mann, and they double date one evening. Later that evening Jack takes them to a gay bar in Greenwich Village and from here the book acts as a travelogue of lesbian and gay social life and bar cultures of the fifties as sites of heterosexual tourism.

Kelly Hankin has rightly pointed out that lesbian bars as sites of heterosexual tourism are prevalent within the narrative of both “virile adventure” and “pro-lesbian pulp”, two genres of lesbian pulp identified by Yvonne Keller. Virile adventures were often titillating, aimed at a male readership, but pro-lesbian pulps were most often written by lesbians and are characterized by more positive lesbian representation. However, agreeing with Keller's observation, Hankin also notes that these authors of the pro-lesbian pulps were limited in their attempts to create positive representations of lesbians by the industry's strict parameters for pulp narrative conventions. One such convention, according to Hankin, was male passage through and command of lesbian bar space: “Representations of the lesbian bar...[are] standard in lesbian pulps. In most lesbian pulp novels, heterosexual looks control [this] space, which is typically figured as one of heterosexual tourism”<sup>5</sup>. Thus, Hankin points out that even in Ann Bannon's pro-lesbian pulp, *I Am a Woman*, lesbian bars are crowded with male pimps, tourists, and voyeurs, and

<sup>4</sup> Ann Bannon, *I Am A Woman*. (New York: Fawcett Gold Medal, 1959, Tallahassee: Naiad, 1983), hereafter abbreviated as IW, with page numbers given in parentheses for references.

<sup>5</sup> Kelly Hankin, *The Girls in the Back Room: Looking at the Lesbian Bar*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2002) 17-18

their consumption of bar space is often narratively sanctioned. For example in the novel the narrator acts as a tour guide when describing the bar:

The Cellar was quite dark, with the only light placed over the bar and glowing a faint pinky orange. There were candles on the tables, and people crowded together from one end of the room to the other... there were checkered table cloths, fish nets on the wall, a lot of people—all rather young—at the tables and bar. The juke box was going and somebody was trying to pick up a few bucks doing pencil portraits, but no one seemed very interested. The customers looked like students. There were girls in cotton pants, young men in sweaters and open-collared shirts. “They all look like students”...(IW 22)

In this novel, Burr, a heterosexual man, acts as a tour guide of Greenwich lesbian bars. At one point along the tour, Burr confidently offers an indignant Laura, a closeted lesbian unfamiliar with lesbian public space, his theories about lesbians: “All... [lesbians] need is a real man”; “A man who knows the first thing about women could lay any one of these dames—even a butch—and make her like it”; and “Any girl who doesn’t like men is either virgin or else some bastard scared the hell out of her”. (IW 22) Despite the fact that Bannon’s novels are “unique among lesbian pulp fiction for not heterosexualizing her characters at the narrative’s closure, *I Am a Woman* nonetheless confirms Burr’s heterosexual male viewpoint of lesbianism by suggesting that Laura’s lesbianism is the result of her sexually and physically abusive father”.<sup>6</sup>

Again, it is not just heterosexual men who can rescue lesbians from homosexuality, but it is also the heterosexual women whom lesbians supposedly desire. Later in *I Am a Woman*, when Marcie tells Laura that a butch lesbian was staring at her, she barely conceals her own desire for lesbian affection, categorically stating, “Yes, but she stared at me too. That’s the awful thing about Lesbians, they have no discrimination”. Indeed, in Bannon’s novels, lesbians are often falling in love with women they presume to be straight. In *Odd Girl Out*, Laura falls for Beth, who later turns out straight by marrying Charlie. In *I Am a Woman*, Laura again falls for her straight roommate Marcie who continues to date her ex-husband Burr. In *Women in the Shadows*, Laura is attracted to Tris, a straight African American who tries to pass as an Asian from New Delhi.

Though in *I Am a Woman* Laura has accepted her sexuality, she is still a closeted lesbian. She seems homophobic as soon as she enters the bar. Her face turns “scarlet”, when she hears Burr saying “they’re all queer” and feels “an awful tide of anger and fear come up in her at the word. She felt trapped, almost frantic...”(IW 21)The word “queer” irks her to think of the runaround she received in her past life with Beth. Laura becomes angry at Jack for referring the gay crowd as “Tonight’s Collection!” and bitterly remarks “you talk about them as if they were a bunch of animals”. At this point Laura overcomes her fear and becomes defensive. She says, “We have no right to sit here and laugh at them for something they can’t help”. (IW 22)Laura was totally an “outsider” when she first entered the bar, however gradually she identified with the gay crowd and felt protective of her “kind” with an urge to defend “them”. Thus the bar is not only a site of

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 17

heterosexual male tourism but also acts as a homosexual space which gives Laura freedom, to express her fear and anxiety and also makes her empathetic towards the homosexual crowd around her. By proclaiming respect for “them”, Laura is trying to defend her own sexuality. It is quite clear that Laura fears to be categorized as the deviant and stereotypes of failed heterosexuality and thus tries to reason in support of same-sex desire.

Thus Bannon has masterfully projected not only the budding lesbian psyche but also the homophobic patriarchal mindset of the 50’s. We can easily trace a hint of lesbian self loathing and “masochism in fifties homosexual discourse” running through Bannon’s “fiction’s stream of consciousness”. Again it is the gay bar which brings Laura, Jack and Beebo together and subsequently the self-destructive flaws of their characters. According to Elizabeth Wheeler:

Two main characters, Beebo Brinker and Jack Mann, are raging alcoholics; another, Laura Landon, seems to suffer from borderline personality disorder. Bannon’s text confuses these two illnesses with that peculiar postwar disease gay melancholy. Bannon litters the narrative with phrases like “imprisoned in her homosexuality,” “the whole discouraging mess of homosexual life,” and “the heartbreak of the homosexual world”. Ultimately, however, Bannon uses the discourse of shame, heartbreak, and imprisonment to move beyond them. Through melodrama, she stage-manages her characters into natural and open lives.<sup>7</sup>

Wheeler asserts that “Free pleasure contests fatalism in Bannon’s fiction”. And Lillian Faderman explains this contest by referencing to the “U.S. government’s Cold War censorship of lesbian writing. To be punished, lesbian writers had to disguise lesbian community within homophobic morality plays. Lesbians read between the lines. It wasn’t ideal, but it was some form of community”.<sup>8</sup> Thus Bannon had no access to a separate language for emancipating lesbians. She wisely used the homophobic discourse of shame, heartbreak and imprisonment to implicitly empower and give a life free of social convention to the homosexual characters.

The third novel, *Women in the Shadows*, deals with an unusual theme of gay marriage (lesbian and gay) and the politics of marriage. Bannon’s exploration of the misery associated with lesbian relationship and problems that plague relationship, in this case, lesbian relationship in particular, has a homophobic tone. In the introduction to the Cleis press edition of *Women in the Shadows* Bannon writes: “This book is dark – despite my dislike for the negative connotations, the title is apt – and there are things in it difficult to read, as you will know when you’ve finished it”<sup>9</sup>. Thus the novel begins with Laura’s diary entries questioning herself why they all drink and fall into relationships they know will be ruined. The book opens with an unhappy Laura praying:

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth A. Wheeler, *Uncontained: Urban Fiction in Postwar America*. (U.S.A: Rutgers University Press, 2001) 225

<sup>8</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)146-147

<sup>9</sup> Ann Bannon, “Introduction”, *Women in the Shadows*. (United States: Cleis Press Edition, 2002). [www.annbannon.com/books-intro-womenshadows.html](http://www.annbannon.com/books-intro-womenshadows.html)



God help me. God help me to stand it. Today was our second anniversary. If I have to go on living with her I'll go crazy. But if I leave her—? I'm afraid to think what will happen. Sometimes she's not rational. But what can I do? Where can I turn?<sup>10</sup>

Laura has been living with her lover, a tough and strikingly handsome butch Beebo Brinker, for two years. Their relationship has turned bitter and both are frustrated. It is during their anniversary party that both Laura and Beebo reveal their frustration and insecurity in their unhappy relationship. Beebo too remarks that hardly any couple makes it together for as long as they have. The charm of their relationship is lost after Beebo turns into a violent and self destructive alcoholic. Laura, who is fed up of Beebo's overprotective and over-possessive nature, now is attracted to other women and has affairs outside her commitment. Their mutual friend Jack Mann watches as Beebo descends into alcoholism and Laura becomes interested in another woman. The conflict in Beebo and Laura's relationship in *Women in the Shadows* runs parallel with Bannon's real life complications. In an interview Bannon reveals;

And when I wrote that book I think I was acknowledging to myself a lot of difficult truths, the most difficult of which was that I had locked myself, or so I thought, into a life's partnership with a kind and well-meaning human being whom I would never be comfortable or happy with—that it was an inappropriate union, and that however, as I saw it, I was economically and socially locked into it. And a lot of rage and sorrow came out in that book—which I dumped on poor Beebo.<sup>11</sup>

Thus Laura echoes Bannon's anxiety and frustration of an unhappy relationship, where one partner feels trapped and the other desperate to hold onto the relation turns violent. Further in the interview Bannon discloses the reason behind Beebo's violent and abusive nature:

But I thought, "Beebo can take it". And she could. And it was exactly what happens in my fantasies when I'm terribly stressed. Beebo takes the heat because she's survivor. She's a heller, and in a way it drives you nuts. People like that can be exasperating, but they're towers of strength when you need them. I unloaded my sorrow on her. That's why she did that terrible things which, left to her own devices, she would never do.<sup>12</sup>

Thus Beebo is the pressure valve through which Bannon releases her bottled up emotions. Fed up with Beebo's aggressive nature, Laura considers Jack's proposal of marrying her and giving her emotional and social security. Thus in *Women in the Shadows* Bannon provides a compelling way of thinking about revising restrictive social and legal conventions regarding marriage. Perhaps Bannon tries to explore how gay men and lesbians could sustain their homosexuality even as they participated in the social norms of marriage. Jack's reason behind marrying Laura

<sup>10</sup> Ann Bannon, *Women in the Shadows*, (New York: Fawcett Gold Medal, 1959, Tallahassee: Naiad 1983) 1. Hereafter abbreviated as WS, with page numbers for quotations given in parentheses.

<sup>11</sup> Interview: "Ann Bannon: A Writer of Lost Lesbian Fiction Finds Herself and Her Public", *Off Our Back*, Vol. 13, No. 11, Women Writers (December 1983) 12, 15

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

echoes the heterosexual conventions of society. For Jack their marriage will afford them social and emotional stability while they can still have their sexual relationships on the side. Jack tries to convince Laura:

Goddamn it, Laura, do you want to grow old here in the Village?...Have you seen the pitiful old women in their men's oxfords and chopped off hair, stumping around like lost souls, wandering from bar to bar and staring at the pretty kids and weeping because they can't have them anymore? Or living together, two of them, ugly and fat and wrinkled, with nothing to do and nothing to care about but the good old days that are no more? Is that what you want? Because if you stay here, that's what you'll get. (WS 64)

Jack is clearly homophobic in his observation of the limitations of gay life. In the novel Jack is in his forties and leads an unstable homosexual life. Though his present life gives him a hedonistic pleasure yet he yearns for stability and wants to improve it by following the heterosexual norms. Thus Jack finally decides that he needs to find a woman to marry to protect him against continuing to fall for young pretty boys who don't stay with him, who is in his mid forties now. He finally convinces Laura to marry him. However the idea is that they will both continue their homosexual affairs, but every night they will come home and eat together, and sleep together for the night(not sexually), and start the day together in the morning.

According to Julian Carter, 'gay marriages' in Bannon's novels appear as a kind of representational shorthand for a happy resolution, to the common midcentury gay dilemma of how to be both erotically and emotionally deviant, and socially conventional. Bannon depicts Jack and Laura's dilemma as a painful suspension between simultaneous disidentifications with heterosexuality and queer abrasiveness to dominant cultural norms.<sup>13</sup>The marriage between gay Jack and lesbian Laura is what Bannon calls "gay marriage", perhaps the only happy marriage. As Carter has rightly pointed out, for some readers the marriage between Jack Mann and Laura Landon may not look as 'gay marriage' because, in our present cultural moment, that term describes a single-sex union between two women or two men. Thus the marriage begets skepticism, owing to the fact that if both partners in the marriage are gay but of 'opposite sex', it would seem logical that the marriage must be for show, a bow to convention that holds little meaning for the people involved. It is more like a contract marriage, a compromise between two individuals asexually involved. However Carter attempts to rescue Bannon, and tries to see the lesbian and gay marriage in a more positive light:

Yet Bannon does not depict her characters' marriage as superficial or insincere. On the contrary, Bannon paints gay marriage in highly idealistic terms. Her lesbian wife and gay husband flourish together: their marriage provides them with emotional stability, material comfort, domestic calm, and access to social respect, all without requiring them to submit to the heterosexual mandate. For her, the

<sup>13</sup> Julian Carter, "Gay Marriage and Pulp Fiction: Homonormativity, Disidentification, and Affect in Ann Bannon's Lesbian Novels", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 15, no. 4 (2009) 587

fact that most observers read this couple as straight negates neither its partners' homosexuality nor the sincerity of their commitments to one another.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the society in which we live has certain set of rules to follow. And anyone going against them or seen defying them is usually frowned upon or shunned. Especially when it comes to marriage, family and kids these norms become even more rigid. However, there are some who prefer to live their life their own way and challenge the norms without caring about what society says or does. As Hendrik Hertzberg has quite rightly said, "Marriage should be between a spouse and a spouse, not a gender and a gender".<sup>15</sup> Thus we can say that Bannon's farsighted idea on turning a healthy friendship into a "gay marriage" is very modern indeed. Throughout the novel Laura finds comfort in Jack and Jack too seeks Laura's company. And Bannon has very rightly chosen Laura for Jack, and not Beebo or Beth, for that matter. Laura and Jack spend a lot of time together in the novel and are apt for the ideal happy couple who will be compatible in near and distant future securing emotional stability for each other. Thus Laura and Jack get married in a City Hall and start the most unusual relationship.

The fourth novel, *Journey to a Woman* is the chronological end to the series, and a kind of survey and summation of lesbian life in Greenwich Village; and it is the only book in the series that features all three lesbian characters: Laura, Beth and Beebo. According to Monica Nolan this is a "modern coming out story, nested inside a pulp explosion. Bannon touches on alcoholism, suicide, incest, bad sex, rough sex, glorious sex, infidelity, one night stands, torn slips, mysterious bruises, mental institutions, abandoned children, bad housekeeping, butches, femmes, private detectives, girls who pass, girls who marry, insane girls with guns—in all, the most complete grocery list of lesbian pulp topics a housewife ever compiled".<sup>16</sup>

*Journey to a Woman* tells the story of tormented Beth, who turned away from her female lover, Laura, when the two of them were in college together. Beth chose instead to marry Charlie and lead a "normal heterosexual life". Now Beth, unsuited to the life of wife and mother of two young children, feels the misery of her choice. She begins to dream of Laura and longs to have a woman in her life. In her quest for lesbian love she becomes involved with Vega Purvis, a beautiful, sophisticated, many times married woman. Vega is a closeted lesbian and deeply homophobic. At a café Vega expresses her contempt and hatred for a bunch of girls, who happen to be lesbians. "They're disgusting" Vega said. "I can't bear to look at them"<sup>17</sup>. She is so outraged at them that she could put the lesbians in jail ten times over or even kill them. Later in the novel it is Vega who turns out to be the lunatic lesbian and the "insane girl with gun" who threatens and captivates Beth, finally shooting herself with the gun.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid. 588

<sup>15</sup>in [www.goodreads.com/quotes/495235](http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/495235)

<sup>16</sup>Monica Nolan, [www.monicanolan.com/pulpprep/2013/12/11/journey-to-ann-bannon/](http://www.monicanolan.com/pulpprep/2013/12/11/journey-to-ann-bannon/)

<sup>17</sup>Ann Bannon, *Journey to a Woman*. (New York: Fawcett Gold Medal, 1960, Tallahassee: Naiad, 1983)24. Hereafter abbreviated as JW with references for quotes given in parentheses.

According to Catherine Stimpson, “the stigma of homosexuality is tolerable as long as the erotic desire that distinguishes it remains repressed...a released eros will provoke the destructive potential of the stigma...that links sex and death”.<sup>18</sup> After Vega was provoked by Beth and left alone, she turned into a self destructive, homophobic lesbian left to choose between sex and death. As Walters has rightfully pointed out, for Bannon, being a lesbian is only about sex. That is, the difference manifested in the desire for a woman makes one a lesbian. Walters also asserts that in Bannon’s world, it is the lesbians who repress their desire, who suffer from what we would now call “internalized homophobia” that bear the greatest burden.<sup>19</sup> Here Vega’s deviancy is caused by her mother’s homophobia which her brother Cleve explains to Beth:

All she has is Mother, and Mother has run her life since it began. Vega adores her as much as she hates her, and that’s a lot she can’t get away from her, even though she wants to. In her heart, in her secret thoughts—I don’t know—maybe she has some idea she’s gay. But Mother hates the queers, she’s always poured contempt on them. How can Vega admit, even to herself, that she’s the kind of creature Mother despises? (JW 34)

Thus, the character Vega Purvis, who tries to repress her same-sex desire by scorning at the local lesbians, has developed internalized homophobia due to a mother who hates homosexuality. According to Walters, “Vega is actually visibly scarred from her own self-hatred”. In this case the cause of Vega’s deviance is a domineering, homophobic mother who is clearly to blame for her daughter’s twisted lusts.

The last book in the series, *Beebo Brinker*, is a prequel to the series. Bannon in this book returns to the character Beebo she fantasized about the most. The book follows Beebo around Greenwich Village ten years prior to her meeting Laura in *I Am a Woman*, as Beebo literally gets off the bus from her rural hometown into New York City to find a waiting friend in Jack Mann, and discovers her own queerness and overcomes her fear and self loathing. In this book Beebo begins an affair with a famous and fading movie star Venus Bogardus, and follows her to California, only to return to be more honest about what she wants in her life.

The character Beebo Brinker happens to embody the description of a thoroughly butch lesbian. Beebo is smart, handsome, chivalrous, and virile. Once again based on what Bannon knew, Beebo was nearly six feet tall with a husky voice and a formidable physique. The personality however, Bannon says, was drawn out of her sheer need for Beebo to exist. After spending time in Greenwich Village and not finding anyone like her, Bannon instead created her.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Stimpson. “Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novels in English.” *Writing and Sexual Differences*. Ed. Elizabeth Abel. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). 250

<sup>19</sup> Suzanna Danuta Walters. “As Her Hand Crept Slowly up Her Thigh: Ann Bannon and the Politics of Pulp.” *SocialText*, No.3 (Autumn-Winter, 1989) 88,89

However in *Beebo Brinker*, Bannon defies the expectations of the readers (especially heterosexual males) for whom the novel was marketed and clearly reflects the Cold War theme of voyeurism in a prime scene where Jack tends to a drunken Beebo in his bedroom:

He made her rinse her mouth and then dragged her back to bed, where he washed her unconscious face and hands. He sat and gazed at her before he turned out the light, speculating about her. Asleep, she looked younger, adolescent: still a child, with a child's purity; soon an adult, with adult desires...He smoothed the hair off her forehead, admiring her features and her flawless skin without the least faint of physicality. He felt sorry for her, and scoffed at himself for wishing she were the boy she resembled at that moment. Then he lay down beside her and went to sleep.<sup>20</sup>

According to Michele Barale, Bannon's literary devices in *Beebo Brinker* defy the expectations of the audience for whom the novel was specially marketed; heterosexual males. Bannon chooses the first character, an "everyman" named – significantly – Jack Mann, with whom the male audience identifies, only to divulge that he is gay and has maternal instincts. His interest turns to Beebo, whom he finds "handsome" and lost, and he takes her home, gets her drunk, and becomes asexually intimate with her. Barale has rightly pointed out that Bannon manipulates male readers to become interested in the story, then turns them into voyeurs and imposes homosexual desires upon them, though eventually she places them in a safe position to understand a gay story from a heterosexual point of view.<sup>21</sup>

However the problems Bannon's heroines faced were generated themselves by the heroine's own acceptance of the terms not only of the sex they had with men but of the personalities they assumed. The heroines, in short, misunderstood themselves. The homophobia in Laura, Beth and Beebo was due to the fact that they had replaced their own desires with a set of heterosexist messages that identified what they should want.

All five books of *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles* depict characters trying to come to terms with their ostracism from heterosexual society. Christopher Nealon adds that the characters are also trying to "understand the relationship between their bodies and their desires"; the continuing appeal of the novels, Nealon states, is due to the characters being "beautifully misembodied".<sup>22</sup> In *Odd Girl Out*, Laura Landon's resistance to the idea that she may be homosexual lies in her own concept of failed femininity rather than any revulsion for loving women. In *I Am a Woman*, Beebo's butch appearance alternately terrify and attract Laura, leading to a very erotic physical relationship. However, when Laura lashes out at Beebo in a moment of self-pity, it is her masculinity that Laura attacks, invalidating Beebo's uniqueness and the core of her desirability violently. *Women in the Shadows* exhibits the most self-destruction in the series, where Laura expresses shame when accompanying Beebo outside of Greenwich Village, fearing Beebo will be arrested and jailed. Facing the end of

<sup>20</sup> Ann Bannon, *Beebo Brinker*. (New York: Fawcett Gold Medal, 1962, Tallahassee: Naiad, 1983)23

<sup>21</sup> Michele Aina Barale. "When Jack Blinks: Si(gh)ting Gay Desire in Ann Bannon's 'Beebo Brinker'", *Feminist Studies*, 18:3 (Autumn 1992) 534

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Nealon. *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall*, Duke University Press 2001

their relationship, Beebo expresses the desire to be a man, if only to be able to marry Laura to give her a normal life. And the final book *Beebo Brinker* takes place when Beebo is eighteen years old, and it focuses on her realization not only that she is gay but that she is also a masculine woman.

However since their release they have been the subject of analyses that offer different opinions of Bannon's books as a reflection of the moral standards of the decades, a subtle defiance of those morals, or a combination of both. According to Andrea Loewenstein, Bannon's use of cliché, suggests that it reflects her own belief in the culturally repressive ideas of the 1950's. Contrarily, Jeff Weinstein remarks that Bannon's "potboilers" are an expression of freedom because they address issues mainstream fiction did not in the 1950's.<sup>23</sup> However a homophobic tone can be traced throughout the novels, within the characters and of course in Bannon's voice too. Though the lesbian characters did not voice their opinion on homosexual emancipation however they did not walk away from embracing their sexuality either. Thus Bannon's work is an achievement in itself. *The Beebo Brinker Series* in a way is quite revolutionary because it dared to represent lesbian social life in a more positive light during the pre-Stonewall era.

It sounds outrageously funny in today's time that people were arrested just for being a lesbian or prosecuted for writing a lesbian emancipating story during the mid twentieth century. However things started changing after the Stonewall riot. And if we want to get a sense of the views and attitudes that permeated lesbian life soon after the gay rights movement, Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* is the book we are searching for. *Rubyfruit Jungle* is Brown's first semi-autobiographical novel and also a post-Stonewall, lesbian fiction published in 1973. My research is the first attempt to critically analyze the homophobic tone and lesbian identity in *Rubyfruit Jungle* as there is practically nothing scholarly written on Brown's oeuvre. In this dissertation my aim is to introduce Brown to scholarship on lesbian literature, which has neglected her for some unknown reason.

The novel is set in the 1950's and 60's. The story follows the early life of Molly Bolt, who is unapologetic for being a lesbian and hardly acknowledges the traditional gender roles of that time. The book draws our attention to social injustices that Molly endures like the disadvantage she faces growing up poor, the homophobia she experiences for being an out lesbian and the sexism she wades through for being a progressive female during a conservative time.

However Molly in *Rubyfruit Jungle*, despite being an outright rebel, has to face homophobia, at home, school and even in New York City. Brown's novel explores how homophobia seeped into otherwise progressive individuals. In the novel when Molly's best friend Connie learns that Molly is a lesbian despite having a boyfriend, she is surprised by her own horrified reactions. "All this time I thought I was this progressive thinker...now I find out I'm as shot through with prejudices as the next asshole".<sup>24</sup> Thus Connie is voicing the age-old anxiety non-

<sup>23</sup>in "Wikipedia by Wikipedians" <http://www.annbannon.com/bp/womenshadowstext.html>.annbannon.com. 388

<sup>24</sup> Rita Mae Brown. *Rubyfruit Jungle*, (New York: Bantam Books 1973) 107-108. Hereafter abbreviated as RJ, with references for quotes given in parentheses.

heterosexuals provoke in heterosexuals: “I don’t know if I can be your friend anymore. I’ll think about it every time I see you. I’ll be nervous and wonder if you’re going to rape me or something” (RJ 108). When Molly tells her she is simply wrong, Connie’s stunning response highlights Brown’s view of homophobia as a painful social disease that separates otherwise reasonable people: “I know that, but it’s in my head. It’s me, not you. I’m sorry. I really am sorry” (RJ 108). Now that Connie has known about Molly’s sexuality, she disregards the perfectly normal friendship they have. Her irrational fear that Molly may try to rape her displays how even an individual as intelligent as Connie accepts the premise that Molly’s lesbian status entails her actions towards all women.

According to Jane Gerhard, on the one hand, Brown crafted Molly to show heterosexuals the problems, conscious and unconscious, of homophobia; on the other hand, she offered a supremely self-confident Molly, whose native intelligence and spunk made any prejudice against her seem outrageously ignorant, as an affirmation for her lesbian readers.<sup>25</sup> After Connie expresses her irrational fear, Molly out-smarts her and says:

Why does everyone have to put you in a box and nail the lid on it? I don’t know what I am—polymorphous and perverse. Shit. I don’t even know if I’m white. I’m me. That’s all I am and all I want to be. Do I have to be something? (RJ 107)

To Molly, Connie’s homophobia lays bare the conventional, small minded thinking that threatens to break down relationships and communication between people. Unlike Bannon’s Laura, Molly is a Post-Stonewall, lesbian heroine who exposes and rebels against society’s needs to define and compartmentalize rigidly all aspects of life. The other friend Carolyn, with whom Molly has been sleeping, shrieks with disgust when Connie categorized them as “queer”. Carolyn upset with being called a lesbian, says Molly is the real lesbian because she isn’t feminine. Carolyn is a closeted lesbian and deeply homophobic and tries to defend her normalcy. “We are not queer. How can you say that? I’m very feminine, how can you call me a queer?” (RJ 106) For Carolyn, being “very feminine” is like abiding by the parameters of heterosexuality. Further Carolyn thinks that maybe Molly is queer; “after all she plays tennis and can throw a football as far as Clark, but not me”. (RJ 106) Carolyn’s ignorance is yet another example of the ideologies of a heterosexual society which stereotypes lesbianism as “failed femininity”. Carolyn relentlessly reasons Molly’s queerness: “You know, lesbians are boyish and athletic. I mean Molly is pretty and all that but she’s a better athlete than most boys that go to this school, and beside she doesn’t act like a girl, you know? I’m not like that at all. I just love Molly. That doesn’t make me a queer”. (RJ 106) Carolyn in defense of her femininity and heterosexuality rests her case in front of Connie. As per the reason given, Connie feels that she is not guilty and thus not queer.

In the novel Molly has to face other homophobic characters. While attending the University of Florida, Molly begins an affair with her roommate Faye Raider, midway through the first semester. They ignore their social obligations in favour of spending time together in bed. When the dean of female students, Dean Marne offers to

<sup>25</sup> Jane Gerhard. *Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of Twentieth-Century American Sexual Thought 1920 to 1982*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 138

help Molly with her problem, Molly accuses her of hypocrisy and calls her a “closet fairy”. Angered by Molly’s insolence, Dean Marne sends Molly to a sanitarium for few days to “straighten” her up and also revokes her scholarship for “moral” reasons. Thus Brown has effortlessly portrayed the homophobic culture of the education system which does not miss a single opportunity to punish female students for acting against the norms of society. Not only that, Carrie disowns Molly after she learns about her sexuality and throws her out of the house. Molly has to embrace her solitude and marginality, as a punishment for being a lesbian. According to Gerhard, neither Molly’s poverty nor her biracial heritage shaped her sense of self to the degree that her desire and homophobia did.

Other secondary characters in the novel, like Leota and Leroy, express internalized homophobia and how they later turn away from their same-sex orientation into the adult patterns of “mature” heterosexuality. Leota, Molly’s sixth grade lover, wrestled for a brief time with her “instinct” or desire to touch and kiss other girls. Leota provides Molly with her first homosexual experience in their sixth grade. Leota, married and a mother of two children, firmly renounces her affinity for Molly and stubbornly believes she has not time for thinking and no opportunity for improving her own life. Similarly Leroy (Laura’s cousin) wondered how he could reconcile his feelings about certain male friends with his adamant desire to be simply heterosexual. He found sex with women to be confusing and wondered about alternatives. As an adolescent, Leroy confides to Molly that he has had a homosexual experience. However, even as he considers the possibility that he is gay, he clings to the dictum of society as his irrational fear of social deviance shines through when he says, “I may be queer but I ain’t kissing no man” (RJ 66). Thus he falls into the modes of behaviour prescribed by society. Not surprisingly, later in the novel when Leroy marries and has children, he remains unfulfilled, having made everyone happy but himself.

Thus Brown’s novel offers a self-righteous and self-sufficient lesbian heroine who tries hard to survive in a homophobic society, whereas Bannon’s lesbian heroines, with their internalized homophobia, gradually embrace their sexuality and follow the path of lesbian emancipation. According to Gerhard, Brown’s novel made women’s sexual freedom inseparable from dismantling obligatory, homophobic, and patriarchal heterosexuality. Brown critiques “compulsory heterosexuality” and Bannon analyses women’s sexual and psychological dependency on men in a heterosexual society.

Thus men have majorly contributed in the evolution and development of not only lesbian characters in pulp fiction but also lesbian print culture in general. As I have already mentioned in my thesis statement, men comprised the primary readership of this genre of pulp fiction, and the men around the lesbian protagonists are shown to have crucial influence in the development of their sexuality. Thus in the next chapter I shall be exploring the concept of “incest”, “father-daughter relationship” and the concealed message delivered through the male characters sketched for analyzing the predicament, action and behaviour of the lesbian heroines in Bannon’s and Brown’s works.



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