
**INTERSECTING QUEER LIVES: GENDER,
SEXUALITY AND SELFHOOD IN RITA MAE
BROWN AND OCEAN VUONG**

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ABSTRACT	
<p>Key Words: Butch, femme, queer, bisexual, transgender</p>	<p>Lesbian and gay identity discourses are common in today's literary landscape. These studies centre on romantic desire between individuals of the same sex. Such relationships were once viewed as abnormal and were therefore treated with disdain. However, newer research shows a drift. To some extent, society has come to terms with the so-called abnormal partnerships. This is made clear by the homonormative mindset that has led to the legalisation of gay and lesbian marriages. The increased interest in the gay and lesbian studies has resulted in coinage of a number of terms to describe the people belonging to these communities. The initialism LGBT for example was introduced in the mid 1980's to describe the broader perspectives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. The terms 'Butch' and 'Femme' were also such coinages in the lesbian communities in the 20th century. The word 'Butch' comes from 'butcher' that refers to masculine qualities and 'Femme' refers to feminine qualities. The article examines the works of American authors Rita Mae Brown and Ocean Vuong, respectively, in <i>Rubyfruit Jungle</i> and <i>On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous</i>. The "butch" and "femme" depictions of the characters in the chosen works are the main focus of the present study. The 1973 novel <i>Rubyfruit Jungle</i></p>

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and the 2019 novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* provide a framework for examining recent advancements in the treatment of LGBT issues.

Malayalam cinema has historically reflected Kerala's social fabric, engaging with themes that resonate deeply with audiences. However, queer representation in Malayalam films has often been marked by prejudice, stereotyping, and marginalization. One such film, *Sookshmadarshini*, starkly portrays the cultural perspective of same-sex love within a homophobic society. This article explores how social and familial homophobia manifests in *Sookshmadarshini*, analyzing key scenes that illustrate this issue and demonstrating how intolerance ultimately leads to tragic consequences for the film's characters.

Rita Mae Brown is an acclaimed American author. Being a feminist writer, she is also actively involved in the LGBT rights and lesbian movement. She was noted for her debut novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* accounting to the autobiographical and coming-of-age aspects it exposed. She is viewed as a radical and it is her own sufferings being a lesbian writer that is evident in her writings. *Rubyfruit Jungle* actually exposes Mae's own endeavour in reaching her goals. The protagonist of the novel Molly Bolt is a manifestation of Rita Mae herself, revealing her struggles in being a homosexual and dealing with the scuffles in emerging as a writer.

Ruby fruit Jungle is considered as a bildungsroman. A bildungsroman work focuses on the formative years of its protagonist from being a child to adult. The novel being narrated by Molly Bolt herself, gives the reader an unmediated experience, focusing on her quest for the self, identity crisis and the issues of being a homosexual. Molly Bolt is introduced in the novel as a 7-year-old girl, and very soon the reader is made known the

fact that she was adopted by her parents. Her adopted mother always showers words of insults upon Molly, calling her a ‘bastard’. Molly is hated by Carrie because of her more like ‘tomboy’ character. Though we know the fact that Molly is a homosexual, she is attracted to both boys and girls and she has relationships with partners of both the sexes including her cousin Leroy. In school Molly has her first crush upon Leota Bisland a female classmate. Molly forces Leota in having a relationship, which is rejected by Leota at first, but she later reconsiders it. Molly has to leave Leota as their family is moving to Florida, but before parting, they make love. In Florida Molly confronts many male and female partners. Years later, Molly returns to find Leota married to a man leading her life with their children. This shocks Molly and the more pain striking moment for her is when Leota feels ashamed of and rejects the relationship that she had with Molly. Struggling to get over her problems, somehow Molly manages to achieve her goal in her life.

The eminent Vietnamese – American writer, Ocean Vuong, is noted for his poems, essays and novels. The present novel for study, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* was his first novel and as *Ruby fruit Jungle*, this work too was autobiographical in nature. It is an epistolary novel, written as letters to the protagonist’s illiterate mother. He was a refugee and the troubles of dislocation, being confronted with a new language and the so is given much importance in the novel. This novel also can be read as a bildungsroman, but still the reader gets baffled with its non-linear structure. The first-person narrative helps in an authentic portrayal of the character’s psyche.

The novel says the story of Little Dog, an outsider and a homosexual, and the struggles that he faced in becoming an accepted writer. As in Vuong’s real life, Little Dog’s mother Rose too is illiterate. He is more a ‘femme’ character being humble and delicate. In the novel we often come across

other boys teasing Little Dog as ‘freak, fairy fag’. Later in Connecticut, when Little Dog was 14 years old, he befriends a boy named Trevor, who is older to him. Soon they get into a relationship and becomes closely attached. Soon Little Dog finds Trevor’s addiction to OxyContin and cocaine. It is a violent love that Trevor makes to Little Dog. They name their modified relation as “fake fucking”. Little Dog and Trevor breaks up and no sooner, Trevor is found dead due to an overdosing. The thoughts of Trevor haunt Little Dog in his life and he always dreams of Trevor.

Both the novels *Rubyfruit Jungle* and *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* give autobiographical elements of a lesbian and a gay writer respectively. Being written in the 1973, the protagonist Molly Bolt suffers lot when compared to that of Little Dog, a character representing the 21st century. It can be understood from the fact that such homosexual relationships were viewed in a very negative manner in the late 20th century, but a shift has been made in the approaching such characters in the 21st century.

Our focus of study was more concerned with the ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ representations in the selected novels of study. The character Molly Bolt showcases a ‘butch’ characteristic, more than a tomboy. Whereas, Leota, Molly’s female partner is more a ‘femme’ being ashamed of their relationship and refusing the fact that she is one. In *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Little Dog is a typical ‘femme’ and always showing female traits that are evident, which makes him a subject of mockery within his friend circle. Meanwhile Trevor is a quintessential ‘butch’. The way he prefers to take male roles in their love making makes it evident that he is a representation of the ‘butch’ in their relationship. Molly is a very daring personality, who never bothers any of the insults that she receives even from her adopted mother Carrie, calling her a bastard. We can see how bold she is while taking decisions in her life. The superiority that she takes when she indulges in a relationship are all evidences to her

‘butch’ personality. Whereas Little Dog is very humble and we can see him crying at night near his mother’s bed in pain of the death of Trevor. We can analyse it as his effort to go to the ‘Semiotic’ which is more a ‘femme’ attribute.

Ruby fruit Jungle and On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous were breakthroughs in the carriers of Rita Mae Brown and Ocean Vuong. Apart from the studies made in this paper, focus can be given to other major characters who depict such ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ characteristics. Other than the issues of dislocation, there are lot more aspects with respect to language, acculturation and the like that can be put into focus.

Works Cited

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