

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Oppression toward women has been a recurring pattern throughout history. From the beginning of time until now, women have consistently been objects of oppression by the patriarchal system, which seeks to suppress women's sexuality. Feminists argue that the suppression of female sexuality is a tool used by men to maintain patriarchal control and societal power (Travis & White, 2020, in Luberti, Francesca et al., 2023). It can be traced back to medieval times, when the Christian church heavily influenced views on sexuality. Women, as the descendants of Eve, one thought to be carnal and deeply connected to desire and thus, frequently constructed as temptresses. Periods are assumed to be redundant and toxic. They also believed that women acquire more strength the more they engage in intercourse, instilling fear between men, which results in the attempt to control women's sexuality (Lemay, 1992).

The witch trials that happened in the early modern period across Europe cannot be disregarded, either, where many of the accused were sexually autonomous women and those who challenged traditional gender roles, especially widows and unmarried women. This stems from misogynistic roots that were attributed to a great extent during that period of time. Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, male doctors were convinced that women had no sexual desire, so when they exhibit this sexual interest, even in a small amount, a drastic

measure needed to be taken (Barker-Benfield, 1972, in Degler, 1974). The presence of sexual appetite in women is perceived as a disease by doctors. Not a few women underwent the excision of their sexual organs.

Even now, the intentions of controlling women's sexuality are still deeply rooted in our society. Women who confidently express their sexuality are often shamed, whether because of their non-conforming sexual orientation, gender identity, clothing choices, sexual lifestyles, or non-conforming sexual practices. One of the patriarchal aims to restrict women's sexuality is through compulsory heterosexuality. Women are not allowed to explore their sexual orientation. They are only taught how to be good mothers and wives. Marrying a man is considered a mandatory step.

If women attempt to resist this obligation, they will face various negative consequences like family rejection, humiliation, discrimination, stereotypes, and violence. Women whose sexuality does not conform to societal norms (especially lesbians or women who have a female partner) are labeled as deviant (Khanna & Price, 1994). Meanwhile, women who are sexually interested in men (heterosexual), but they choose not to marry, often face something ridiculous from others. Compulsory heterosexuality affects all women, regardless of their sexual orientation. This framework has severely impacted the sexual freedom of women, carried out by male dominance.

Women's bonds are one way to oppose heteropatriarchy. When patriarchal society attempts to convince people that men are the only source for emotional, physical, and financial dependence, female solidarity appears as the primary

resistance that asserts how women can depend on each other. It challenges the basic premise of compulsory heterosexuality, whose goal is to direct all of women's energy into serving men, whether it is their creativity, care, domestic skills, or sexuality. By creating strong and sustaining bonds with other women (emotionally, sexually, or politically), they divert their energy toward their own community. They deny giving labor to the patriarchal system by collaborating, nurturing, and loving other women.

This framework is what Rich has referred to as the lesbian continuum. The lesbian continuum is the spectrum of women-identified experiences (Rich, 1980). It is the range of relationships between women that extend beyond sexual desire, including friendship, emotional support, political alliances, and so on. A woman does not have to be lesbian to be part of the lesbian continuum, where she can move in and out of this continuum. All she has to do is to build a genuine, enduring bond with other women, whether it is through shared experiences, intellectual pursuits, emotional connections, or political interests.

The representation of women's bonds does not only appear in real life. It also can be found in many literary works. There is extensive literature on the relationships between women in various degrees, such as female friendships, communal bonds, acquaintances, and romantic partners, particularly in novels. One of those novels is *Roses, in the Mouth of a Lion* (2022) by Bushra Rehman. It is an endearing coming-of-age story about female friendship and lesbian love experienced by a young Muslim-Pakistani girl who lived among the immigrant community in Corona, Queens, throughout the 80s.

Apprised in a linear plot and a slow pace, this novel invites us to take a peek at the life of Razia, whose life is pervaded with strict conservative Islamic teachings and cultural norms planted by her immigrant parents. Among the namaz, the Quran readings, the Ramadan, the salwar kameez, and the prohibited things her parents impose, she is still able to explore the joy of life with her best friend, Taslima, by doing little acts of rebellion here and there, like dancing in the bedroom, listening to forbidden music, going to the thrift store, wearing clothes that are showing skins, and having fun adventures.

However, this exploration reaches a perilous point when Razia is accepted into a prestigious high school in the city. She meets an enchanting girl named Angela, who soon becomes the only focus of her world. Razia skips classes—something that she never did before—to either go exploring New York State with her, or to spend time in Angela's house. Their bonds grow deeper, and without Razia realizing it, she begins to develop romantic attraction toward this girl. This newfound mutual infatuation creates a double life for Nora, where she is torn between the need to be a good child in front of her parents and the desire to fully embrace her true identity, which unfortunately violates religious and social norms.

The phenomenon that exists in this novel has some correlation with things that are happening in real life. To understand it more in a deeper sense, the writer aims to analyze the portrayal of compulsory heterosexuality upon women's identities using a lesbian feminist approach. The writer also seeks to delve deeper into the female bonds experienced by the protagonist, which encompass the realms of friendship, romantic partnerships, and communal bonds, thereby

depicting Adrienne Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum. This thesis aims to understand how these relationships between/among women challenge the patriarchal structure and compulsory heterosexuality in the novel.

1.2 Research Problems

1. How is compulsory heterosexuality depicted in Bushra Rahman's *Roses, in the Mouth of a Lion*?
2. How are women-identified experiences depicted in Bushra Rahman's *Roses, in the Mouth of a Lion*?
3. How do women-identified experiences act as resistance to compulsory heterosexuality in Bushra Rahman's *Roses, in the Mouth of a Lion*?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1. To identify how compulsory heterosexuality is depicted in Bushra Rahman's *Roses, in the Mouth of a Lion*.
2. To identify how women-identified experiences are depicted in Bushra Rahman's *Roses, in the Mouth of a Lion*.
3. To analyze how women-identified experiences act as resistance to compulsory heterosexuality in Bushra Rahman's *Roses, in the Mouth of a Lion*.

1.4 Previous Studies

There is no previous study that used Bushra Rahman's *Roses, in the Mouth of a Lion* as their object of research. However, if research that utilized similar concepts is being the focus, several studies are worth noting. The first one is a journal article titled *Lesbian Continuum as An Alternative Strategy in Negotiating Heteronormativity in Sarah Waters' Fingersmith* (2015) by Mega H. Erwanti. This article seeks to identify the way the lesbian continuum is depicted in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* and how it is used to negotiate compulsory heterosexuality that is imposed by patriarchal systems. Erwanti also delves into the double life endured by female characters to survive heteronormative controls.

Another research the writer needs to mention is a bachelor's thesis by Emelie-Isabelle E. Hjältman titled *Readers, there is a lesbian in my book: An exploration of the lesbian literature mediating possibilities of BookTube* (2022). This thesis intends to acknowledge the way BookTube contributes to lesbian literature and how it correlates with lesbian identity and communities in the reading space. Hjältman utilized Adrienne's concepts of lesbian continuum and compulsory heterosexuality when pointing out the content of the videos to connect the theme with the theme of lesbianism.

Grillo (2020), in their thesis *Compulsory heterosexuality in the 'coming out' novel: a study of Sarah Waters' 'Tipping the velvet' and Jeanette Winterson's 'Oranges are not the only fruit'*, inspects how homosexual repression crossed with social factors like wealth, gender, and social class, and how those factors limit women's freedom of speech and power. Grillo examines the depiction of

compulsory heterosexuality in the twentieth century through analyzing Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are not the only fruit* and the same-sex relationship in Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, where it had been repressed through denied experience and silence, as well as how people who could not adhere to compulsory heterosexuality will face negative consequences, like being stripped of their subjectivity.

A master's thesis written by Raphael A. De Boer (2008) titled *Representations of Women in the Movies The Color Purple and Monster: Questions about Sexuality and Identity* examines the representation of identity and sexuality from the characters of both movies. This thesis focused on the homoerotic relationship that occurs between the main couples of the movies *The Color Purple*, Celie and Shug, and *Monster*, Aileen and Shelby. Raphael used Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum to investigate women-identified experiences between these women.

And last but not least, Ronald Paul (2014) published a journal article titled "*Loved with an L...*": The Lesbian Continuum in Three Works by Sylvia Townsend Warner that argues how three works of Sylvia T. Warner—*Opus 7*, *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, and *Summer Will Show*—portray a progressive delineation of lesbian continuum through lesbian voices and the individual female. He also emphasized Sylvia Warner as a radical lesbian writer, both personally and politically, during the important period of the 1930s.

From the list above, not a single research uses Bushra Rehman's *Roses, in the Mouth of a Lion* as the object of the study. Hence, it is a good opportunity for

the writer to explore Adrienne Rich's concepts of compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian continuum in an unexamined territory.

1.5 Scope of the Studies

This thesis investigates the compulsory heterosexuality imposed upon women by patriarchal structures, and how women-identified experiences serve as a form of resistance to compulsory heterosexuality in Bushra Rehman's *Roses, in the Mouth of a Lion*. The analysis will be based on Adrienne Rich's concepts of compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian continuum as proposed in her essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. The writer limits this research by examining the extrinsic elements, specifically how compulsory heterosexuality and women's bonds are portrayed in Bushra Rehman's *Roses, in the Mouth of a Lion*, as well as the intrinsic elements of the novel, including characters and characterization, settings, and conflicts.