

UNVEILING THE SHADOWS: ANALYSING SOCIAL STIGMA IN GILLIAN FLYNN'S *DARK PLACES*

M R Ancilin, Dr P J Giftlin

Reg. No.: 20223114012030, Research Scholar, Department of English and Research Centre, Nesamony Memorial Christian College, Marthandam, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India

Assistant Professor, Department of English and Research Centre, Nesamony Memorial Christian College, Marthandam, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Social stigma remains a pervasive force in society, manifesting in discrimination based on various factors such as culture, gender, race, socioeconomic class, and health. This paper delves into the psychological and sociological ramifications of social stigma on individuals, drawing insights from Gillian Flynn's novel "Dark Places," which vividly portrays the repercussions of social discrimination within the context of a struggling family in Kansas City. The paper begins by defining social stigma as the systematic devaluation and discrimination against individuals or groups based on perceived differences. It explores how victims of stigmatization often experience a negative transformation in their identity, leading to a sense of alienation and a "spoiled" identity. Additionally, it examines the phenomenon of identity threat, wherein stigmatized individuals may attempt to align themselves with the discriminating group as a coping mechanism. A critical aspect of social stigma is its transmission across generations and its capacity to permeate societal norms and beliefs. Recognizing the various forms of stigma is essential for dismantling its pervasive influence on individuals and communities. Drawing from Flynn's narrative, the paper highlights how economic hardships and social discrimination contribute to the unraveling of familial bonds and individual psyches. Through a research-oriented lens, this paper aims to analyze the psychological and sociological dimensions of social stigma, emphasizing its profound impact on individual well-being and societal dynamics. By examining real-world implications through the lens of literature, it seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between stigma, identity, and societal structures.

Keywords: stigma, identity, discrimination, culture, society, race, gender, poverty

The term "stigma" traces its roots back to ancient Greece, originating from the Greek word meaning "to expose the unusual." In historical contexts, individuals, particularly slaves, would bear physical marks such as cuts or burns to publicly identify and stigmatize them. This practice served to expose their status and subject them to societal discrimination and marginalization.

In contemporary society, the concept of stigma has evolved, encompassing the categorization of individuals based on certain assumptions and subsequently discrediting them. Erving Goffman, an influential American sociologist known for his work in micro-sociology,

provided a seminal definition of stigma. He described it as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting," emphasizing the need to view stigma within the framework of social relationships rather than mere attributes (Goffman, 1963).

The relationship between attributes and stereotypes is intrinsic to the phenomenon of stigma. Attributes perceived as deviating from societal norms or expectations often become the basis for stereotypes, leading to the stigmatization of individuals or groups. These stereotypes reinforce negative perceptions and contribute to the perpetuation of stigma within society.

Moreover, stigma possesses a transgenerational quality, capable of enduring across generations and permeating societal structures. Its insidious nature can contaminate societal attitudes and behaviors, perpetuating discriminatory practices and marginalization. Therefore, it becomes imperative to acknowledge and address the various forms of stigma to eradicate its harmful effects from society.

By recognizing and challenging stigma, societies can foster inclusivity, empathy, and understanding, ultimately promoting social cohesion and justice. Efforts to dismantle stigma require multifaceted approaches, including education, advocacy, and policy interventions aimed at fostering acceptance and embracing diversity. Only through collective action can societies effectively confront and overcome the barriers imposed by stigma, paving the way for a more equitable and compassionate world.

Gillian Schieber Flynn is an American writer known for her psychological novels which expose the realities of modern American culture and society. *Dark Places* is a bone-chilling novel by Gillian Flynn, published in 2009. The novel mainly focuses on class and gender discrimination, intense poverty, and the Satan worship that afflicted the United States in the 1980s. The study focuses on the various forms of social stigma, its psychological and sociological impact on individuals, and the consequences through the novel *Dark Places*.

Day's family is the victim of various stigmas that prevailed in rural America. Patty Day is a single mother of thirty-two years and lives with her four children: Ben Day, Michelle Day, Debby Day, and Libby Day. Patty's husband Runner left the family in debt, years ago. Runner married Patty in the hope of being successful by making use of the farmland gifted to Patty by her ancestors. The land gives them a high yield initially, and the people around them felt jealous of their progress. But unfortunately, as days pass, the land gives them poor yield. Runner, a spendthrift rushes toward banks for loans to have a showy life. Patty often warns Runner of his doings but he shouts at her back and adds that it hurts him when she doesn't believe him. Finally, Runner left the family in debt by announcing this kind of life is not for him. As a single mother, Patty faces a lot of challenges in raising her children despite the stigma that prevailed in the society. Erving Goffman categorizes stigmatizing attributes into physical deformities, blemishes of individual character, and tribal stigma. The stigma theory functions under assumptions of various discriminations by highlighting the inferiorities of people in the weaker section. The Day's family is highly stigmatised based on race, gender, and poverty.

Gender stigma has a long history since the world begins. Historically and culturally the status of women is defined from the perspective of men. The inequality between males and females emphasizes gender labels that affect the actual ability of women. Being a single mother

in a gender-stereotyped society is a significant challenge. Though Runner is solely responsible for the debts and disintegration of the family, society blames Patty for everything. Day's family almost lost its respect and identity after Runner's exit. There is a thought that considers women are incompetent for labour-intensive work. To meet the cost of living and the children's educational expenses, Patty manages to work on the farmland. But Patty was ridiculed by the neighbours around her. Vern Evelee, Day's neighbour who often pays a visit to Day's farm when they were prospered, produces ridiculing and shaming sounds at Patty when they fall in debt. Traditionally, women are meant for household chores and men are meant for manual tasks. Patty is mocked by the people around her for doing manual work. In addition, most working women are facing sexual harassment in the workplace. Patty was harassed by the moneylender Len for money. He exploits Patty by giving disgusting offers for her debt. Patty tolerates everything for her children as she has no way to fix this problem other than money.

Stigma attributes women as sensitive and emotional while men as superficial and indifferent. Ben, a victim of social stigma spoiled his identity by trying to be rude and unemotional. As Ben is solely brought up by his mother Patty, he grows gentle and delicate. Because of his tenderness, he has been ridiculed since his childhood. The role of a father in a child's life is matchless. Ben never had a chance to learn anything from his dad as he left the family in debt. When Runner, Ben's father came back in the summer to steal Patty's possessions in the guise of a reunion, Ben hopes Runner will teach him something. But Runner did all the mechanical stuff for himself and drives away Ben by saying, "that's men's work," (DP 57). He mocks Ben for not being manly. Society expects men to be unemotional so they are tamed to hide and control their emotions from the birth itself. These social stereotypes have a huge impact on individuals that affects their humanity. They may begin to hide their emotions and react poorly to situations. Ben was often mocked by his friends for being emotive and expressive. As Ben was mocked by his father and his friends, he experienced confusion and panic about his role.

According to Erik Homburger Erikson, Danish-German-American developmental psychologist, assess that social factor can affect the formation of an individual's identity. His Psychosocial development theory has eight stages of human development starting from birth. The fifth stage of this theory is Adolescence (12 to 18 years). During this age, adolescents seek a sense of self and individual identity through an intensive exploration of their interests, and values. Their exploration covers who they are, what they want to be, and what others expect of them. These social stereotypes have a huge impact on individuals that affects their humanity. They may begin to hide their emotions and react poorly to situations. As Ben was ridiculed by the people around him, he gets confused about his identity. So, he locked his true self and disguise his individuality for social acceptance. To overcome this stigma, Ben often hurts himself by dashing himself against stones to exhibit his masculinity to his friends. He befriended spoiled young people like Trey and Diondra, who taught him Satan worship. He doesn't like to smoke cigarettes and kill animals but he does all this stuff to satisfy the expectations of his friends and to prove his masculinity.

Social stigma toward poverty becomes more prevalent everywhere. Poverty stigma creates discrimination between poor and rich which may cause socioeconomic inequalities and

shame. It stimulates mixed feelings among people of being both compassionate and repulsive. They often feel ashamed of their condition in a wealthy society. Poverty not only affects the socio-economic condition of the individual but also affects the individual's mental health, self-esteem and self-confidence. The Day's family is highly stigmatized by poverty. They are easily targeted and accused of all crimes happening around them. The people in Kinnakee, Kansas, where the Day's family belongs, stereotype the poor people as corrupt and never had sympathy for them. The poor farmers were often blamed for the dreadful events happening around them. For instance, A farmer from Ark City, near Kansas, drowned in 4000 pounds of wheat and died. The people of Kansas were grief-stricken about this accident till they found the farmer was a poor man.

Everyone in the Day's family is gravely in need of money. Due to poverty the Day's family often experience prejudice and discrimination. Their deprived situation depicts them as immoral and unethical. Ben was easily get accused of molesting Krissi Cates, an eleven-year-old girl even without proper evidence. Everyone believed that Ben is doing sexual abuse as an offering to Satan. In Ben's case, justice was driven by stereotyping not by reason. As society believes poor people are malicious, Ben is easily suspected of molesting Krissi Kates. When Patty heard that Ben was accused of molesting Krissi Cates, she attempts to speak with Krissi's mother for Ben. As Patty is aware of poverty stigmatisation, she put on better clothes and exchanged her gold studs for a pair of imitation pearl earrings and a matching necklace. Krissi's family behaved well toward Patty till they find about Patty's economic condition. Krissi's mother said, "We've heard about you," "You've got four kids at home," she continued, her voice tight, her eyes wet. "You can't afford a one of them. Their daddy's a drunk" (*DP* 231).

As Patty required money, to save her children from starving, to save her farm, and to hire a lawyer for her son, she pays a contract killer to kill her so her children will get the money from life insurance. But unfortunately, the killer killed Debby who witnessed the murder. Ben brought Diondra to his house in search of money. This leads Michelle to know about Diondra's pregnancy with Ben and Diondra killed Michelle for fear of being exposed. Even after Patty is killed, she isn't adored like others instead she was detested. Libby questions, "After my mother's head was blown off, her body axed nearly in two, people in Kinnakee wondered whether she'd been a whore" (*DP* 84). People accuse Patty as a slut and wonder what a terrible woman Patty would be to raise such a molester.

Race becomes a more important part of an individual's social identity when the individual is not personally known to the observer. America is often said to be a nation of immigrants and a land of opportunity. Many immigrant groups like the Irish, the Chinese, and the Jews were settled in America at different times and profoundly stigmatized and dishonoured in the name of their race. The Day's family is stigmatized for their race. Patty is questioned about her red hair throughout the novel. Len questions Patty; "The red come from Irish? You all Irish?" "German. My maiden name was Krause" (*DP* 82). Ben and Libby dyed their hair black in an attempt to change their identity. They hate their identity and their family because of the discrimination they experienced from society. According to Glenn C. Loury, Professor of Economics, Brown University views racial stigma as: "Entrenched racial disparity in

developmental opportunities is, however, an intractable, often neglected moral problem that gives rise to unavoidable conflicts between cherished values and challenges settled intuitions about social justice” (4).

The stigmas that prevailed in the society around Day’s family affect them both sociologically and psychologically. As Patty required money to save her children from starving, save her farm, and hire a lawyer for her son, she pays a contract killer to kill her so her children will get the money from life insurance. But unfortunately, the killer killed Debby who witnessed the murder. Ben brought Diondra to his house in search of money. When Diondra came to know that Michelle, Ben’s sister discovers Diondra’s pregnancy with Ben and Diondra killed Michelle for fear of being exposed. Ben is falsely accused and arrested for murdering her mother and her two sisters. It is evident that, in Ben’s case, justice was driven by stereotyping not by reason. Even after Patty is killed, she isn’t adored like other people. People accuse Patty as a slut and wonder what a terrible woman Patty would be to raise such a molester and a murderer.

The powerful individuals who have sufficient economic, social and political resources, effectively label, stereotype and discriminate against other powerless individuals in the society. Recognising the various forms of stigma can help us to challenge prejudice and discrimination across the various institutional, social and personal levels. It is obvious that the awareness about eliminating gender, poverty and racial stigmatisation is widespread everywhere. Uprooting the various stigmas in culture by knowing their cause will help the overall development of society.

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