

Teen Friendship in Rosa Cuthbert Guy's *The Friends*

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Abstract

Friendships define us. At certain stages, friendships are everything and the most important strength in everyone's lives. It grows and changes as people come and grow. It is incredibly important. It is a two way street of give and take and built on trust, loyalty and empathy. It needs friends like water and soil to grow healthy and strong. Friends help to celebrate good times and provide support during bad times. They prevent loneliness and give chance to offer needed companionship too. Friendship thus becomes an important element in fulfilling one's survival and growth needs. Relationships are like elevators. Like any other relationships, friendship also falls into rut sometimes lack of trust and sharing. Friendship occurs from childhood and develops only at young adulthood. Many young adult fiction writers of coming age novels have talked the theme of friendship among teenagers to analyse the combination of developmental changes and sex differences. African American literature has been remarked its stamp in tracing the juvenile fiction during 1960's and 1970's. It was an era of youth movement in America. Majority of black writers including race, class, gender and ethnicity, also wrote about the social conscience. Countee Cullen, Audre Lorde, Rosa Guy, Hamilton, Tony Morrison are some of the writers bravely touched the inner life of youths at Harlem. Rosa Guy is widely considered one of the most distinguished writers for young adults. Guy's novels present a comprehensive picture of the diverse youth population in the beginning of the new millennium. She addressed subjects that had remained largely unexplored in fiction for teenagers. Her common themes included race, class, poverty, sexuality and simmering tensions between American blacks and Afro-Caribbean immigrants

in the United States. In her novels, Guy captures the fleeting inner world of black adolescents and exposes the obstacles they confront at the very blooming façade of their lives.

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Friendship is the level of highest trust. It plays a key role to emotional growth and mental health. It is an essential component for survival. It provides a way for expression and satisfaction in one's emotions and desires. It involves commitment and responsibility where the friends facilitate each other's growth and development. The rapid changes happening in the virtual world has changed the culture and nature of traditional friendships. At present, the pattern of friendship is centered on the benefits associated with them. Friends with benefits are a relation similar to the hook up culture which is now becoming common among youths. Friendships seen in the young age provide a unique developmental context to learn about conflict, negotiation, compromise, develop perspective-taking skills, empathy and social needs. Aristotle in his *Ethics*, "for without friends no one would choose to live" (46 Epstein). Beyond the adolescent years, friends function as important extra-familial sources of social and emotional support that help individuals navigate life challenges and stressors. Friends help to maintain and restore happiness to alleviate the suffering and unhappy moments.

The paper entitled *Teen Friendship* investigates the gamut of friendship among black youths in Rosa Cuthbert Guy's work. She is a prominent Caribbean American writer of the twentieth century. Widely considered as one of the most distinguished writers for young adults, Guy's novels present a comprehensive picture of the diverse youth population in the beginning of the new millennium. She addressed subjects that had remained largely

unexplored in fiction for teenagers. Her common themes include race, class, poverty, sexuality and simmering tensions between American blacks and Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the United States. In her novels, the fleeting inner world of black adolescents and the obstacles they confront at the very blooming façade of their lives is investigated to know the pulse of friendship.

The paper aims to systematically analyze the concept of friendship to embrace and enhance the positivity, connectivity, consistency and vulnerability of friendship. The objective of the paper is to identify the stumbling blocks that trip up the path to friendship. Friendship is a predictor of happiness. It is a robust and consistent correlation of happiness. It correlates with happiness to highlight the importance of human relationship. It is a precious and cherished relationship for young adults. Teenage is the age where youngsters are reliable to correlate the happiness. It develops a comprehensive understanding of the friendship-happiness link. McGinnis quoted Ben Jonson's sayings as "True happiness consists not in the multitude of friends, but in the worth and choice" (20). The associations of indices of friendship with happiness are small to moderate in size, but consistent across gender, ethnic, and cultural groups.

In *The Friends*, Guy portrays a rich portrait of friendship among two young adults of immigrants in Harlem. Besides, the theme of friendship, the story portrays the interconnected relationship between two families—the Cathys and the Jacksons. The story is told from the point of view of an island girl Caribbean immigrant Phyllisia Cathy. Phyll and her sister Ruby travel to America in order to rejoin their parents in Harlem where their father owns a

restaurant. But she is often insulted and bullied at school until she encounters the ragtag Edith Jackson who rises as the protector and pal of Phyll.

Culture, class and language separate the girls like the ocean that separates the places of their birth. Derrida affirms that “ we should not forget that we are speaking first of all from within the tradition of a certain concept of friendship, within a given culture...Now, this tradition is not homogeneous, nor is the determination of friendship within it” (10 Konstan). Phylissia Cathy and Edith Jackson are the friends of the title of the novel. The two teenagers share a strong friendship after a particular stormy beginning. Fifteen year old Edith Jackson is Harlem born and bred. She is scruffy, bold, all but parentless, and poor. By contrast, fourteen year old island born Phylissia, the protagonist, is bright, proud and well cared for, but struggling to survive her new home in Harlem, her oppressive West Indian father, and her status as an outsider. Each is in need of a friend, but family, class and Phylissia’s insecurities dictate against it. The reason behind her aversion towards Edith is “her clothes unpressed, her stockings bagging about her legs with big holes” (3 *The Friends*).

The theme of friendship is played out in the realm of the novel *The Friends*. At the beginning, Phylissia becomes the target of ongoing abuses by her classmates led by the “ big –breasted” (11) Beulah who despises her because she is different: prim, proper, West Indian, and academically prepared. Phyllisia complains her stout classmate Beulah, who dislikes the intelligence of Phyllisia in the class as, “Then with her thick, strong hands she spun me around punching her fist against my nose. “ Don’t push me,” she yelled at the same time.” (13). She is rebuffed by her neighbor Marian and other children of Harlem’s doctors and lawyers, who find neither her academic strengths nor her reserved behavior compensation for the fact that she talks funny, plain and apparently is not as well off as they. But she is

befriended by Edith, the shabbiest student in the class – one of the “ragamuffins”(15) with whom her father has forbidden her to associate, below even Phylissia in Harlem’s pecking order.

Phylissia initially rejects Edith’s offer of friendship because of Edith’s very evident poverty. This sham friendship began in the spring and develops over the course of the summer. But it is not an idyllic summer. Because Edith’s father disappears and Phylissia’s mother becomes ill and the two girls share their hardships, secrets, and good times. The experiences forge a special bond between them. Edith has become Phylissia’s secret friend, her best and only friend, although Phylissia continuous to scorn Edith privately for her ragamuffin status. Her words are seen as, “We rode a long time making noises and giggling and suddenly I found that I was really having fun. I liked Edith, I really liked her” (47). Though Phylissia has camouflaged her ambivalent attitude towards her friend Edith, her friendship taught a lesson of the need of friendship.

Disaster results when Phylissia’s mother felt sick. She developed a sense of herself alone when her mother’s illness worsens and she dies. Her relationship with her father always deteriorates further with guilt and grief. Phyllisia and Edith created intimacy with each other by sharing her sister Ruby Cathy’s glamorous, father’s dominance, restaurant and her mother’s bright mood. Besides, Edith shared her sisters’ innocence, Randy’s moodiness, old father’s inability, and responsibility on her siblings. Whenever she roamed with Edith, Phyllisia never bothered seriously about the father Calvin Cathy. She said, “Gone was all fear of Calvin seeing me. I didn’t even think of Calvin. It was just the most beautiful thing to have a really and truly best friend a friend that you could enjoy. And I enjoyed Edith. I

described Ruby to Edith and told her how glamorous Ruby was – but how she thought she was so much, and we talked ceaselessly about Miss. Lass” (48).

Friendship is a relationship that speaks about the need of trust. Edith trusted Phyllisia more than any one in her family. Not only Phyllisia, her mother Ramona Cathy talks more about the need of friends. Ramona believes that Phyllisia has friends in the school. Ramona says Phyllisia, “You with your secrets. So you have a friend- a best friend?” (72). Also, Ramona Cathy insisted Phyllisia to have friends because she never had a chance to build friendship when she was young.

Ramona was bed ridden due to breast cancer and longs for support and care. Her languish is observed, “No, I was a very lonely child. I never could think or act or be a part of any group. Be careful that you don’t have the worst faults of your parents” (73). Before Ramona dies, she stressed the truth of life to her younger daughter as “Life seems so much better if one is surrounded by friends” (73). Gibson Winter writes that intimacy is the “relationship in which people know one another, support one another, share their lives and identify their interests with one another (7 Winter). Friends act as important confidants to solve the problems. It provides emotional support and care. Phyllisia need the help and counsel of Edith at the time of Ramona’s seriousness. Phyllisia came to know that Edith was dropped out of the school. Edith had gone to work to support her siblings. Phyllisia left alone, “Edith dropped out of school that year. I missed her but there was so much to take up my time that it was not easy to think of depressing things” (83 *The Friends*). When the seriousness of her mother’s illness compels her to seek Edith’s help and counsel, her traitorous thoughts reveal her true feelings:

I found that as much as I appreciated her, was glad to see her,

I was still uncomfortable sitting next to her on the bus...

I had forgotten how shabby she looked. I kept telling myself that perhaps it was because I was dressed so much differently-but then of course the reason I had never invited Edith home was because she was so “shabby”. (100 TF)

In the later part, that is in winter there is a silent struggle in the heart of Phylissia. She struggles with her stubborn father. Fear of him has kept her from going to her friend during the long dark months of that winter. But she has also discovered that he is fallible. He has unjustly humiliated Ruby, frightening away the young man she is interested in because of a harmless good-knight kiss. Since that time the girls have been all but imprisoned in the apartment.

At the end of the novel, Phylissia's sense grows than her father's power and dominance. The fragile self –image which she has measured against his yardstick, and her sense of her own place in the world have come unanchored. Her body becomes deceptive and change. It is observed as:

I had seen things the way I wanted them to be. I had wanted to be an unhappy princess with a cruel king of a father. I had wanted to be the daughter of the owner of a big restaurant. Perhaps it was because the kids in school had been so hard on me. I didn't know. But I had wanted to be rich, to live in luxury, so that I could feel superior to them –to people like Edith...I was the fraud. (173)

Thus the intimacy of Phyllisia and Edith increase the strength and power of friendship which has changed the attitude of Phyll's father. Possessing friends with similar characteristics have a recurrent association of communication, likelihood of sharing common goals, and levels of cooperation. However, in domains in which possessing friends with

different characteristics have high recurrent association with greater fitness and natural. It favours the greater level of psychological adaptation. It concludes that the friendship is trusting completely rather sharing. It does not start but develops out of love and understanding. It is one of the relationships where two people feel really seen in a way of satisfaction and safe.

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