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Stigma and Social Structures: A Goffmanian Analysis of Identity Formation in Almond

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ABSTRACT

This research reinterprets Sohn Won-Pyung's Almond (2020) through Erving Goffman's stigma theory, as outlined in Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (1963), and employs Alan McKee's textual analysis methodology from Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide (2003) to challenge the clinical pathologization of neurodivergence in literary criticism. Stigma, in Goffman's formulation, is a social construct produced when society imposes normative expectations that discredit individuals failing to conform to dominant virtual identities. This analysis reveals how societal institutions, instead of individual deficits, lead to the generation of spoiled identities by enforcing rigid emotional norms. Through Goffman's lens, the characters' marginalization reveals systemic mechanisms of exclusion: Yunjae's bonds with Gon, Dora, and Dr. Shim, alongside Gon's affiliations with violent peers, constitute strategic back places: spaces where conventional stigma is suspended, allowing resistance to emerge through collective identity. Crucially, the novel's ethical intervention crystallizes in Dr. Shim's non-corrective approach, which diverges radically from maternal attempts to fix Yunjae's neurodivergence. This distinction proves instrumental to Yunjae's post-trauma development, catalyzing his capacity for curiosity and emotional resonance where corrective efforts failed. This research contributes to literary stigma studies and Sustainable Development Goal 10 by shifting focus from individual deficit to social structure, challenging pathologizing interpretations of neurodivergence and demonstrating how Almond illuminates systemic stigma mechanisms and resistance potential within alternative relational spaces.

Introduction

Sohn Won-Pyung's novel *Almond,* translated by Sandy Joosun Lee, opens with the protagonist, Yunjae, who is neurologically incapable of feeling fear, anger, or grief due to underdeveloped amygdalae, clinically termed alexithymia. Yunjae's self-identification: "I have almonds inside me. So do you" (Sohn, p. 9), sets the stage for the novel where the almonds symbolize Yunjae's underdeveloped amygdalae. To assimilate in society, he attempts to learn emotions as one might learn a second language, which is through rote memorization and performative repetition.

Despite a recent increase in representation of neurodivergence, clinical frameworks dominate, diverting attention from the cultural and institutional contexts that sustain exclusion and reinforce marginalization. This study intervenes by applying Erving Goffman's seminal treatise, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), to argue that Yunjae and Gon's marginalization originates not in intrinsic pathology but in society's active construction of their identities as deviant.

Goffman defines stigma as a relational rupture arising from a "special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity" (1963, p. 3). Virtual social identity refers to the assumptions and expectations society holds about how a particular type of person should behave, often only recognized when those expectations are unmet. In contrast, actual social identity consists of the attributes that an individual truly possesses. These attributes become stigmatizing when they conflict with the virtual identity assumed by society, which renders the individual "reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one." (Goffman, p. 3). This research seeks to scrutinize how, in *Almond,* Yunjae's alexithymia is categorized under Goffman's "blemishes of individual character" (p. 4), as it triggers pervasive societal discrediting when classmates ostracize him, rumours circulate about his weirdness, and adults express discomfort. Similarly, Gon is categorized as a "gangster" due to his aggression, which leads to his spoiled identity being based on perceived moral failure (Sohn, 2020, p. 88). Therefore, this paper argues that the discrepancy between societal expectations of emotional responsiveness for Yunjae and behavioural conformity for Gon and their actual identities drives the novel's central conflicts.

Goffman's theorization further suggests that individuals facing a discredited or discreditable status adopt strategies to manage the stigma. Goffman identifies passing, concealing the stigmatizing attribute and seeking refuge in back places, spaces where normative judgment is suspended, as key responses (1963, pp. 80, 82). *Almond* depicts both. Yunjae's mother rigorously trains him in passing, she drills him using emotion flashcards and laminated rules for normative behaviour, aiming to mask his difference and avoid discreditation. Conversely, Dr. Shim's bakery functions as a quintessential Goffmanian back place. Within this space, Yunjae's alexithymia is not corrected but accepted. Dr. Shim's neutrality suspends societal judgment, which allows Yunjae a reprieve from the constant performance demanded elsewhere. This environment fosters Yunjae's tentative questions and curiosity, contrasting sharply with the performative compliance achieved through his mother's methods. On the other hand, Gon is discredited by his known violence, and he also seeks solidarity, albeit destructively, aligning with figures like Steel Wire, whom he perceives as similar outcasts.

Applying Alan McKee's (2003) textual analysis methodology, this paper aims to dissect how familial, educational, and societal apparatuses enforce virtual identities that stigmatize Yunjae and Gon. This paper scrutinizes the formation of stigmatized bonds as a form of resistance and interrogates why non-corrective spaces, such as Dr. Shim's bakery, uniquely enable agency. By recentring society as the architect of spoiled identities, this research creates a necessary societal turn in literary stigma studies. It demonstrates how *Almond*, through Goffman's lens, transcends

individual pathology to expose the machinery of exclusion and the redemptive potential of solidarity forged in the margins.

Significance

This study makes a direct contribution to Sustainable Development Goal 10: Reduced Inequality by interrogating structural barriers to social inclusion through literary analysis. Focusing on Targets 10.2 of promoting universal social inclusion and 10.3 of ensuring equal opportunity, the paper employs Erving Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma to reveal how Sohn Won-pyung's *Almond* illustrates systemic exclusion. The novel shifts the critique from individual deficits to institutional mechanisms by portraying Yunjae's isolation, linked to alexithymia, and Gon's marginalization as a delinquent as forms of deviance legitimized by societal norms. This paper concretely demonstrates how stigma operates across educational and social domains and ultimately aligns with SDG Target 10.2's emphasis on inclusion and Target 10.3's focus on equitable access. Notably, Sohn's (2020) narrative positions literature as a tool for diagnosing deep-rooted stigmatization that obstructs participation and advocates for structural reform over superficial accommodation. By bridging textual analysis and policy discourse, the research highlights the capacity of narrative fiction to both critique exclusionary practices and envision alternatives, thereby advancing cultural strategies for equity (Goal 10: Reduced inequalities).

Research Objectives

- To examine societal institutions' imposition of Goffmanian virtual social identities that stigmatize Yunjae's alexithymia and Gon's behaviour.
- To analyse stigmatized bonds as back places enabling resistance and non-corrective development.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Won-Pyung's Almond shows a focus on the protagonist's neurodivergence, yet the analyses largely remain within clinical, moral, or allegorical frameworks. However, a critical gap remains in applying a sociological lens to interrogate the mechanisms through which Yunjae and Gon's difference is constructed as deviance. Meanwhile, this review synthesizes the current literature, contrasting its predominant approaches with the theoretical potential of Erving Goffman's stigma theory to argue that a systematic examination of the social construction of Yunjae's spoiled identity is not merely absent but necessary for a complete understanding of the novel.

A significant portion of the scholarship approaches *Almond* through a diagnostic or ethical lens, effectively accepting the pathologization of Yunjae's condition as a starting point for analysis. Amran et al. (2022), for instance, utilize Howard Brody's model of "sickness dimensions" to contrast Yunjae's "nonneglect subtype" of alexithymia with Gon's "neglect subtype" (p. 850). While their work rightly highlights societal "ignorance, stigma, and misinterpretation", its analytical foundation is inherently clinical (2022, p. 852). It examines differential family responses to an assumed medical disorder, thereby operating within the very paradigm of pathology that this current study seeks to challenge. The focus remains on the individual's condition and its management, not on the social processes that render that condition stigmatizing.

In contrast, Aulia, Prima Danti, and Simanjuntak, Marudut Bernadtua (2022) shift the focus towards extracting moral instruction from the novel. They contend that *Almond* offers powerful lessons about accepting difference and avoiding superficial judgment, positioning Yunjae's journey as a vehicle for ethical reflection: "Humans ... have various different traits and characters that are often wrong in their behaviour" (2022, pp. 9, 10). The analysis identifies key moral values in the

story, such as a belief in the possibility of unexpected positive change, referred to as "miracles," and the view that sincerity over time plays an important role in personal growth, particularly in Gon's development (2022, p. 9). However, this perspective risks framing the solution to societal prejudice as a matter of individual ethical choice, potentially overlooking the societal forces that pathologize Yunjae's difference.

Moving beyond clinical and moralistic readings, other scholars have applied frameworks that highlight nonconformity but still sidestep a specific analysis of stigma. Angeline and Mulatsih (2022) examine Sohn Won-Pyung's *Almond* through Andrew Copson's humanistic framework. Their qualitative analysis applies humanism classifications encompassing "understanding reality, understanding ourselves, the good life and the whole person, and morality" to demonstrate how Yunjae's neurodivergence intersects with broader questions of human dignity (2022, p. 49). The researchers argue that despite his emotional processing differences, Yunjae fulfils multiple humanistic dimensions, particularly through his capacity for "valuing truth" regarding his medical condition and his development of meaningful connections with marginalized peers like Gon and Dora (2022, p. 49). Their analysis traces his evolution from social isolation to authentic relationship-building, suggesting that his experience of bullying paradoxically strengthens rather than diminishes his humanistic capacities. Their observation that Yunjae evolves from performative compliance to genuine moral development is compelling. However, their humanistic approach remains focused on individual character resilience and the universal capacity for dignity. It does not fully theorize the social machinery of exclusion that necessitates such resilience in the first place, leaving the mechanisms of spoliation unexamined.

In a more radical departure, Thomas, Blessy Anna (2023) introduces a radically different framework through an intertextual queer reading, juxtaposing *Almond* with Herman Hesse's *Demian*. Thomas argues that the central male friendships between Yunjae and Gon, and Sinclair and Demian, represent "queer friendships" that "challenge heteronormative conceptions of relationality, sexuality, and desire." (2023, p. 86). She posits that the characters' designation as "monsters" signifies outsiderness intersecting with coded queerness, analysing how hypermasculinity and the pursuit of masculine-presenting women like Dora and Frau Eva function as potential masks for repressed homosexual desires within a heteropatriarchal society. Thomas further interprets narrative elements, such as Gon's violent testing of Yunjae and the symbolic use of seasons culminating in spring, as suggestive of a "romantic union" resisting normative expectations (Thomas, 2023, p. 86). This lens highlights nonconformity but focuses primarily on sexuality rather than the specific mechanisms of emotional stigma.

The critical need for a sociological lens is further highlighted by scholarship that confirms the enduring utility and modern evolution of Goffman's work. Gibbons and Birks (2016) provide a critical examination of Erving Goffman's seminal stigma theory, positing that while its foundational principles remain relevant, the phenomenon has evolved into a more "complex and subtly corrosive" construct than originally foreseen (2016, p. 260). The authors acknowledge Goffman's lasting influence, noting his definition of stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" is still "highly respected and dominant" in contemporary discourse (Gibbons & Birks, 2016, p. 260). Central to their analysis is the continued applicability of Goffman's typology, distinguishing between discredited (visible) and discreditable (concealable) stigmas, which effectively frames the different social management strategies required for each. However, the article argues that modern research has significantly elaborated upon Goffman's initial framework. The authors highlight subsequent conceptualizations, such as Link and Phelan's model, which incorporates elements of "labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination" within a "power situation," arguing this offers a more nuanced understanding applicable to current nursing practice (Gibbons & Birks, 2016, p. 260). Furthermore, they detail how later scholarship

has delineated Goffman's ideas into three distinct manifestations: anticipated, enacted, and internalized stigma. Their attention to how concealment strategies can be "detrimental to the individuals care" by compromising therapeutic relationships demonstrates the double-bind faced by stigmatized individuals within institutional contexts (Gibbons & Birks, 2016, p. 261). This evolution further emphasizes the necessity of applying such a nuanced, power-aware sociological framework to literary texts to understand the full complexity of character marginalization.

Further supporting this approach is research like that of Wilson and McGuire (2021), which demonstrates the modern application of Goffman's concepts. Wilson and McGuire (2021) examine how working-class mothers navigate educational institutions, finding that these parents perceive teachers as having "already made their minds up" about them before meaningful interaction occurs, leading to feelings of being viewed "as being lesser in some way" based on attributes such as single parenthood or unemployment (2021, pp. 8, 9). The research reveals how stigma operates as "a tool of class oppression" exerted by institutions, causing parents to internalize negative stereotypes and accept assumptions that they are "ill equipped to effectively support their children's education" (pp. 4, 5). The study demonstrates that school systems themselves create institutional barriers through perceived "separation between home and school" that marginalizes working-class parents and excludes them from necessary cultural capital (p. 4). This empirical application of stigma theory provides methodological precedent for examining how institutional mechanisms create systematic exclusion through coordinated enforcement of normative expectations. Wilson and McGuire's identification of intersectional stigmatization and strategic withdrawal as responses to institutional judgment offers conceptual tools for analysing similar processes within literary representations.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate the critical engagement with *Almond* but leave a decisive analytical void. The clinical, moral, humanistic, and queer readings all acknowledge societal mistreatment but lack the specific theoretical tools to dissect the social construction of deviance. None systematically employs Goffman's sociological framework to analyse how Yunjae's emotional unintelligibility is manufactured into a spoiled identity demanding correction, particularly within the intensified social crucible of childhood, where norms are most aggressively policed. This gap is not merely thematic but methodological. The existing literature has not leveraged Goffman's concepts of virtual versus actual social identity to diagnose the precise moment of relational rupture, nor has it analysed the characters' relationships as strategic back places for resistance, nor contrasted the mother's corrective passing with Dr. Shim's non-corrective acceptance as divergent stigma management strategies. Therefore, this study intervenes by arguing that Goffman's theory is the essential missing lens. It will synthesize the novel's narrative with Goffman's sociology to move beyond individual pathology and expose the societal machinery of exclusion, thereby answering the call for a more structurally aware literary criticism that the existing scholarship has yet to fulfil.

Research Method

This study employs textual analysis as a methodological framework, drawing specifically on the principles articulated by Alan McKee in *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide* (2003). This approach is fundamentally concerned with culture and sense-making, treating the literary text not as a vessel for a single, authorial truth but as a site where meanings are generated through interaction with a reader's cultural knowledge. McKee posits that the method's primary function is to gather information "about how other human beings make sense of the world" and is a process for researchers who want "to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are" (p. 1). The analyst's task is therefore forensic and interpretative, requiring them to make an "educated guess at some of the most likely

interpretations" that a text affords, working from the empirical evidence of the text itself, which McKee, following Hartley, describes as "literally, forensic evidence" and "the material traces that are left of the practice of sense-making" (p. 15). This aligns with the present study's aim to investigate how societal sense-making practices, as delineated by Goffman's theory of stigma, are enacted and potentially resisted within the narrative world of Sohn Won-Pyung's *Almond*.

McKee's method demands that we do not judge the representations in *Almond* for their accuracy in depicting neurodivergence but instead seek "to understand how these forms of representation take place, the assumptions behind them and the kinds of sense-making about the world that they reveal" (p. 17). The analytical procedure begins, as McKee emphatically advises, not with the text itself but with a guiding research question. The central inquiry here is how *Almond* dramatizes the social construction and management of stigma, and how it represents spaces of resistance to normative judgment. The text of the novel serves as the primary empirical evidence for this investigation. The analysis itself involves making an educated guess about the likely interpretations of key narrative elements, an act that is constrained by what is deemed "reasonable" within a given cultural context. Following McKee's directive that analysis need not be exhaustive but should focus on "the most interesting and relevant parts of a text" in relation to the research question (p. 77), this study will conduct a close reading of selected narrative strategies and relational dynamics in *Almond*.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of Sohn Won-Pyung's *Almond* necessitates a theoretical lens that moves beyond the clinical and moralistic pathologization of its central characters, Yunjae and Gon. To argue that societal institutions, rather than individual pathology, are the primary architects of their marginalization, this study is grounded in the seminal work of Erving Goffman, specifically his treatise *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). This research posits that Goffman's theory of stigma is not merely an interpretive tool but the very key to unlocking the novel's central critique: that monsters are made, not born, forged in the crucible of societal expectations and institutional enforcement. At the core of Goffman's formulation is the relational and socially constructed nature of stigma. He originates the term from the Greek practice of marking the body to signify a "blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided" (p. 1). However, he immediately modernizes this concept, arguing that in contemporary society, the focus shifts "more to the disgrace itself than to the bodily evidence of it" (pp. 1, 2). Stigma, therefore, is not an inherent property of an individual but a product of social interaction. It arises from a "special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity" (p. 3). Goffman defines this crucial dichotomy as: "Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories." This set of assumptions constitutes the virtual social identity. In contrast, the actual social identity consists of "the category and attributes [an individual] could in fact be proved to possess" (p. 2). When a perceived attribute is "deeply discrediting," it creates a rupture between who a person is and who society expects them to be, reducing them "in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (p. 3). This theoretical premise is the bedrock of the present analysis, framing Yunjae's alexithymia and Gon's trauma-induced aggression not as intrinsic deficits but as attributes that become stigmatizing only through their dissonance with a socially enforced regime of emotional normativity. Goffman further systematizes the types of stigmas, providing a taxonomy for the characters' specific predicaments. He identifies three gross types: "abominations of the body," "blemishes of individual character," and "the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion" (p. 4). Those around him systematically process Yunjae's condition as a blemish of individual character, inferred from his perceived emotional deficit and inability to perform socially legible grief. Gon, conversely, is burdened by a dual stigma: his violent behaviour is read as a

blemish of character, while his identity as the son of a notorious criminal aligns with a tribal stigma, one that "can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family" (p. 4). This theoretical categorization allows for a precise diagnosis of the mechanisms of their disqualification, moving the analytical focus from what they are to how they are perceived within a specific social order. Crucially, Goffman's theory extends beyond the act of stigmatization to the individual's response to it, a dynamic central to Almond's narrative arc. He details a repertoire of "stigma management" strategies that the discredited or discreditable individual must employ. Key among these are passing: the attempt to conceal the stigmatizing attribute and covering: the effort to minimize a known stigma's obtrusiveness (pp. 80, 82).

Yunjae's entire upbringing, orchestrated by his mother, is a masterclass in passing. This aligns perfectly with Goffman's observation that such efforts often involve "tortured performance," a compliance with normative demands. (p. 10). However, the most critical Goffmanian concept for this analysis is the formation of stigmatized bonds and the creation of what he terms back places. Goffman argues that stigmatized individuals often find solace and validation not among "normals" but with fellow sufferers. These alliances form out of a shared experience of rejection and create spaces where the stigma is suspended. He describes these as situations where "the stigmatized individual is a person who can be approached by strangers at will, providing only that they are sympathetic to the plight of persons of his kind" (p. 16). These are the back places where "persons of the individual's kind stand exposed and find they need not try to conceal their stigma, nor be overly concerned with cooperatively trying to disattend it" (p. 81).

Results and Discussion

Erving Goffman's theory of stigma is employed to deconstruct the processes through which societal institutions in Sohn Won-Pyung's *Almond* manufacture spoiled identities for Yunjae and Gon. The central argument holds that stigma is not inherent but a social construct arising from the discrepancy between societal expectations of emotional normativity and the characters' actual identities. This stigmatization, in turn, catalyzes the formation of bonds among those similarly discredited, creating Goffmanian "back places" where conventional judgment is suspended. The analysis is structured around three core claims: the role of societal institutions in enforcing stigmatizing virtual identities; the strategic formation of stigmatized bonds as a response to this enforcement; and the critical distinction between corrective and non-corrective approaches to neurodivergence, with the latter enabling agency and development.

Goffman's framework posits that stigma originates in a "special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity" (1963, p. 3). Virtual social identity consists of the assumptions society holds about how a category of person should be, while actual social identity comprises the attributes an individual truly possesses. Stigma arises when a trait is deemed "incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be." (1963, p. 3). In Almond, Yunjae's alexithymia and Gon's aggression become stigmatizing precisely because they violate enforced expectations of emotional responsiveness and behavioral conformity for adolescents.

Societal institutions, especially familial, educational, and medical, are the primary agents enforcing these virtual identities. The medical establishment pathologizes Yunjae immediately, reducing him to a specimen for clinical observation. After diagnosis, doctors coldly frame him, "as an interesting specimen rather than a human being" (Sohn, p. 26), offering multiple long-term research projects. This act frames his neurodivergence as a physiological defect. This categorization aligns with Goffman's "blemishes of individual character," inferred from a perceived "record" of impairment (1963, p. 4). The educational system further polices this virtual identity. After his family's tragedy, Yunjae's homeroom teacher probes him for a performative display of grief, a demand for emotional legibility he cannot fulfill. Her frustrated reaction when he robotically states, "I'm fine,"

which prompts an unusual response, “Her lips stretched thin and her eyebrows raised slightly, as if that wasn’t what she had wanted to hear” (Sohn, p. 70). This response exemplifies the “righteously presented demands” of normals (Goffman, 1963, p. 2). His failure to conform leads to ostracization, as classmates, fueled by gossip, conclude, “that boy. Well, he looks normal” (Sohn, p. 73), yet treat him as a fascinating outlier, reducing him to a “tainted, discounted one” (1963, p. 3). When classmates encounter his emotional flatness, they immediately construct explanatory frameworks that position him as fundamentally other: “So the rumours are true, something is weird about you” (Sohn, p. 17). Goffman argues that normals instinctively develop stigma-theories to rationalize their discomfort with difference, often imputing “a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one” (1963, p. 5). The circulation of rumours about Yunjae's weirdness exemplifies this process, transforming his specific neurological condition into a generalized marker of deviance that justifies social exclusion.

Gon’s stigma is similarly constructed but categorized differently. His violent behavior is read as a “blemish of individual character,” signifying “weak will” and “domineering or unnatural passions” (1963, p. 4). However, his identity is also burdened by a “tribal stigma,” which “can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family” (1963, p. 4). He is perpetually known as the son of a notorious academic, Professor Yun, and his actions are interpreted through this lens. When class funds are stolen, the immediate assumption is, “It was Gon who did it. Everyone said so” (Sohn, p. 171), demonstrating how a known record, real or imagined, triggers a pervasive “stigma-theory” to rationalize his inferiority (1963, p. 5). Professor Yun's response of making an immediate payment of restitution, despite Gon's innocence, demonstrates what Goffman describes as the “protective circle” attempting to minimize social damage through pre-emptive compliance (1963, p. 97). However, this protective gesture simultaneously confirms Gon's guilt in the institutional record, creating a documented history that will compound his future stigmatization. His father exacerbates Gon’s inferiority by enforcing respectability through violence as well, when he publicly slaps him for bullying Yunjae, which is a futile attempt to align Gon’s actual identity with a virtual one of academic progeny, thus participating in the very stigmatizing system that disqualifies his son. The core of their marginalization, therefore, lies not in their intrinsic attributes but in the societal refusal to accommodate difference. Yunjae reflects on his mother’s insight that “every social community needs a scapegoat” (Sohn, p. 73), a realization that underscores the systemic nature of his exclusion. Society’s enforcement of emotional normativity creates the conditions of their stigmatization, rendering them “not quite human” (1963, p. 5) in the eyes of normals.

Confronted with pervasive stigmatization, both Yunjae and Gon adopt Goffmanian management strategies, primarily passing and seeking back places. Their eventual bond, alongside Yunjae’s connections with Dora and Dr. Shim, and Gon’s with Steel Wire, functions as a strategic response to societal rejection, creating spaces where their stigmatized identities are not merely tolerated but understood. Yunjae’s primary strategy, instilled by his mother, is “passing”, the concerted effort to “conceal information about his real social identity” (Goffman, 1963, p. 42). Her training is exhaustive: laminated rules dictate normative reactions, “When cars come too close to you → Dodge or run away” (Sohn, p. 28), and the “human emotion game” drills him in performative compliance, “You don’t need to get into the details, just nail the basics” (Sohn, p. 32). This “tortured learning” (1963, p. 10) is a direct response to the discredibility of his condition; he must manage information to avoid the “invasions of privacy” (1963, p. 16) and constant scrutiny faced by the discredited. However, this performance is isolating and unsustainable, demanding a vigilance that alienates him from his own experiences. Meanwhile, Gon, already discredited, cannot pass. Instead, he engages in covering, attempting to minimize the obtrusiveness of his stigma through hypermasculine performance. His aggression is a facade, a tactic to preempt

rejection by embodying the "gangster" (Sohn, 2020, p. 88) identity projected onto him. He articulates this strategy himself: "I'd choose to be the one hurting rather than getting hurt" (Sohn, p. 145). This aligns with Goffman's observation that the stigmatized may adopt hostile bravado, but this can "induce from others its own set of troublesome reciprocations" (1963, p. 18), perpetuating the cycle of his marginalization.

Their shared experience of stigma creates the foundation for their bond. They are mutually recognized as monsters, a term first used affectionately by Yunjae's grandmother but which comes to signify their shared deviation from normative expectations. Their connection is not based on conventional affection but on a Goffmanian mutual recognition of spoiled identity. This is crystallized in a moment of shared grief when Yunjae describes the warmth of Gon's mother's final embrace: "His body was shaking, his head sunk down against his chest. There was no sound, but I knew he was crying" (Sohn, p. 137). In this encounter, the usual stigma dynamics are suspended; they are not normals and stigmatized but two individuals whose relational discrepancy from virtual social identity allows for a raw, unperformative connection.

The Yunjae-Dora connection operates through different mechanisms but follows similar structural patterns. Dora's own alienation from parental expectations because of her rejection of their demand that she abandons running for more practical pursuits positions her within Goffman's framework as someone managing a discreditable identity. Her declaration that "I think I'm just living up to my name. They named me Dora, so I guess I just have to be a dorai, a 'freak'" demonstrates her conscious embrace of stigmatized identity as a form of resistance to familial pressure (Sohn, p. 153). This self-labelling as "freak" aligns with Goffman's concept of identity transformation, wherein the stigmatized individual reclaims the language of their devaluation. Dora's bookstore visits create what Goffman would recognize as a back place where conventional social expectations are suspended. Her direct questioning about Yunjae's condition, "Is it true that you don't feel anything?" establishes a communication pattern based on curiosity rather than judgment (Sohn, p. 155). When she apologizes for her bluntness, saying "Oh, sorry... I shouldn't have said it this way," and Yunjae responds, "That's okay, I don't mind," their exchange demonstrates the different rules governing interaction within stigmatized spaces (Sohn, p. 155). Here, directness about difference becomes acceptable because both parties recognize their mutual exclusion from mainstream social expectations. The most significant aspect of the Yunjae-Dora relationship is its role in catalysing Yunjae's first experiences of physical attraction and emotional response. When her hair touches his face during their autumn encounter, Yunjae experiences what he describes as "an unpleasant weight" and "a heavy rock dropped down in my heart" (Sohn, p. 158). Goffman's framework helps explain how the safety of stigmatized relationships can enable previously suppressed aspects of identity to emerge. Because Dora accepts his difference without demanding correction, Yunjae can experience genuine emotional responses without the pressure to perform normative feelings.

These stigmatized bonds constitute Goffmanian "back places," situations where "persons of the individual's kind stand exposed and find they need not try to conceal their stigma" (Goffman, 1963, p. 81). Dr. Shim's bakery is a quintessential back place for Yunjae. Unlike the school or the public street, the bakery imposes no demand for emotional performance. Dr. Shim's neutrality, like his refusal to pathologize or correct, allows Yunjae to exist without managing information. It is here that Yunjae feels safe to voice his existential doubts, asking, "Will I live like this my entire life, feeling nothing at all?" (Sohn, p. 130). Yunjae's confession that "I'd like to pack up the bookstore, downsize my belongings, and move to a room in a shared house" represents a level of self-advocacy that emerges only within the safety of non-judgmental space (Sohn, p. 151). Dr. Shim's response was silence followed by a simple nod, which demonstrates the kind of acceptance that allows stigmatized individuals to make autonomous decisions about their lives without

external pressure to conform to others' expectations. Similarly, Gon seeks a back place, albeit a destructive one, with Steel Wire and his gang. He is drawn to them because “at least they don’t judge me the way other people do” (Sohn, p. 166) Steel Wire's philosophy that “this country should legalize guns like in the U.S. and Norway so that we can have shooting sprees sometimes” represents what Goffman might describe as a “militant” response to stigmatization, wherein the rejected individual embraces their outsider status as justification for attacking the society that excluded them (Sohn, p. 192). Gon's attraction to this worldview, “I wanna be like that,” reveals how stigmatized individuals may seek belonging through identification with those who externalize their rage rather than internalize their shame. The Steel Wire relationship illustrates Goffman's observation that not all stigmatized bonds serve constructive purposes. When Steel Wire forces Gon to attack Yunjae as a loyalty test, the scene demonstrates how some forms of stigmatized communities require the sacrifice of other marginalized individuals to maintain group cohesion. Yunjae’s observation about Steel Wire's declaration that “they need such stories or tokens to be accepted into their gangs” reveals the ritualistic violence that can emerge when stigmatized groups adopt the same exclusionary logic that marginalized them initially (Sohn, p. 193). While this affiliation is toxic, it fulfills the same function: providing a respite from the constant discrimination of the normal world, a place where his tribal stigma is a badge of belonging rather than disgrace. The formation of these bonds is, therefore, not accidental but a strategic response to societal exclusion. As Goffman argues, stigmatized individuals often find solace and validation with fellow sufferers, creating alliances out of a shared experience of rejection. Yunjae, Gon, Dora, and Dr. Shim form a counter-community where the stigma imposed by the outside world is neutralized, allowing for identities to be constructed on their own terms.

A pivotal distinction in the novel, and for Goffmanian analysis, is the difference between corrective strategies aimed at enforcing normative virtual identities and non-corrective acceptance that validates actual social identity. Yunjae’s mother and Dr. Shim represent these two approaches. The mother’s methods, though loving, are fundamentally corrective, designed to facilitate passing. In contrast, Dr. Shim’s non-stigmatizing acceptance creates the conditions for genuine curiosity and emotional development, demonstrating that growth stems from the suspension of normative demands, not compliance with them. Yunjae’s mother operates within a framework of stigma management. Her entire pedagogical project is designed to help him pass as normal, to minimize the discrepancy between his actual and virtual social identity. Her flashcards, rules, and games are tools for “information control” (Goffman, 1963, p. 42). She explicitly instructs him, “Don’t stand out. That’s all you need to do” (Sohn, p. 29). This approach achieves a superficial compliance; he learns to mimic appropriate responses, but it is a “tortured performance” (Goffman, 1963, p. 10) that fosters no internal understanding or agency. It requires him to be constantly “on,” calculating the impression he is making in areas where normals act unthinkingly (1963, p. 14). This is extremely limiting and it teaches him to conceal his self rather than to explore it.

Dr. Shim offers a radical alternative. His bakery is a space free from the corrective impulse. He does not dismiss Yunjae’s condition, but he refuses to treat it as a failing requiring correction. When Yunjae confesses his anxiety about the wind triggering new sensations, Dr. Shim’s response is not clinical but celebratory: “Congratulations! You're growing!” (Sohn, p. 160). This reaction reframes Yunjae’s experience not as a symptom to be managed but as a natural process of development. By accepting Yunjae’s actual social identity without imposing a virtual one, Dr. Shim eliminates the need for passing. This safety is what allows Yunjae to begin asking questions, the first step toward agency. His introspection, “I had more questions, but I didn’t feel like sharing all of them with Dr. Shim as I had before” (Sohn, p. 161), signals a movement from external compliance to internal inquiry. Dr. Shim's own grief management by continuing to bake for his deceased wife provides Yunjae with a model for processing loss that does not require conventional

emotional expression. When Yunjae reflects that talking to his comatose mother "wasn't so pointless after all. Maybe it was similar to how Dr. Shim baked for his dead wife," he demonstrates the kind of understanding that emerges when difference is accepted rather than pathologized (Sohn, p. 164). This parallel suggests that Dr. Shim's bakery functions as a space where alternative forms of human connection and meaning making become possible. Dr. Shim's own history as a medical professional who abandoned his career following his wife's death positions him as someone who understands the limitations of clinical approaches to human difference. The bakery environment enables what Goffman identifies as the development of authentic self-knowledge that becomes impossible within mainstream institutional settings. This non-corrective environment is the prerequisite for Yunjae's ultimate emotional awakening. His capacity to feel, when it finally emerges, is not a triumph of his mother's training but a consequence of finding spaces where his identity was not constantly stigmatized. His sacrificial act for Gon and the subsequent emotional breakthrough, triggered by Gon's tear falling on his face, "Whether it was grief, happiness, loneliness, pain, fear, or joy, I did not know. I just knew I felt something" (Sohn, p. 201), occur outside the realm of corrective logic. It is a raw, unscripted human response born from a bond forged in mutual stigma, not a learned performance. Dr. Shim later re-evaluates his diagnosis, suggesting Yunjae's development was "a little different from how other people grow", thus fundamentally challenging the pathologizing framework itself. Growth is redefined as change on one's own terms, "for better or for worse", not progression toward a normative ideal. (Sohn, p. 204).

Gon's trajectory offers a tragic counterpoint. Lacking a consistently non-corrective relationship, his only available backup places are destructive. His father's violence is purely corrective, and his alliance with Steel Wire, while providing a sense of belonging, only deepens his internalized stigma and self-loathing. His letter to Yunjae, "Sorry. Thanks. Truly." (Sohn, p. 205) is an acknowledgment of the redemptive potential of a bond that, however fraught, was based on a form of acceptance Yunjae offered him, however imperfectly. The novel suggests that without access to non-stigmatizing spaces, the management of stigma can only lead to further isolation or destructive adaptations.

The author's note, which reveals the novel's origin in questions about unconditional parental love, connects the narrative's exploration of stigma to broader questions about social inclusion: "If they were my children, could I love them? That's how Yunjae and Gon were born" (Sohn, p. 208). This framing suggests that the novel's critique extends beyond individual relationships to challenge societal systems that make certain children unlovable through the imposition of normalizing expectations. The final observation that "love is what makes a person human, as well as what makes a monster" provides a theoretical synthesis that aligns with Goffman's insights about the social construction of deviance (Sohn, p. 209). This formulation suggests that the difference between humanity and monstrosity lies not in individual characteristics but in the quality of relationships available to developing persons. Those who receive love develop a human capacity for connection, while those subjected to stigmatization may develop destructive responses to their exclusion.

A Goffmanian analysis, hence, reveals that the central conflict in Almond is not within Yunjae or Gon but between them and a society that insists on emotional and behavioral normativity. Their stigmatization is a social product, manufactured by institutional demands for conformity. Their response, the formation of bonds with fellow stigmatized individuals, is a strategic creation of back places where this pressure is alleviated. Crucially, the novel argues that development and agency are not achieved through corrective measures that enforce passing but through non-stigmatizing acceptance that validates difference. Yunjae's journey demonstrates that curiosity and emotional capacity flourish not when the discrepant self is concealed, but when it is permitted to exist

without sanction. The novel, therefore, moves beyond a narrative of individual pathology to a critique of societal structures, illustrating Goffman's premise that stigma is a "pervasive two-role social process" (1963, p. 138) in which we all participate, and whose damaging effects are a function of social organization, not personal failing.

Conclusion

This research has systematically reinterpreted Sohn Won-Pyung's *Almond* through the theoretical lens of Erving Goffman's stigma theory, demonstrating that the marginalization of Yunjae and Gon is not an inevitable outcome of their intrinsic traits but a product of societal mechanisms that construct and enforce rigid norms of emotional and behavioral conformity. Yunjae's mother's well-intentioned but corrective training in passing and covering, and the educational system's enforcement of performative grief, exemplify the oppressive weight of normative expectations. In contrast, the bonds Yunjae forms with Gon, Dora, and, crucially, Dr. Shim function as strategic back places. These relationships, forged in mutual recognition of stigmatized identity, suspend societal judgment and become sites of resistance and authentic development. Dr. Shim's bakery, as a non-corrective space, proves instrumental in catalyzing Yunjae's agency and emotional curiosity, highlighting a radical alternative to the coercive normalization attempted by other institutions. The novel's ethical intervention lies in this distinction: development and humanity are achieved not through assimilation but through acceptance and solidarity within the margins. Ultimately, *Almond* utilizes its narrative to perform a Goffmanian diagnosis of society itself, exposing the machinery of exclusion and arguing that "monsters" are not born but made by a system intolerant of difference. This analysis acknowledges the inherent complexity of applying Goffman's mid-twentieth-century framework to contemporary neurodivergent narratives, particularly the productive tension between recognizing neurological conditions as medically valid while simultaneously critiquing their social stigmatization. Rather than diminishing the analytical value of this study, these nuances illuminate how *Almond* itself grapples with the irreducible complexity of neurodivergent experience within social contexts that remain simultaneously constraining and enabling.

Delimitation and Study Forward

This research is delimited to exploring the construction and management of stigma within the theoretical boundaries set by Erving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) and focuses exclusively on Sohn Won-Pyung's novel *Almond* (2020). The study specifically engages with Goffman's core concepts of virtual and actual social identity, spoiled identity, passing, covering, and back places, thus excluding other sociological frameworks and broader comparative literary analyses. Future research can expand on this work by applying Goffman's theory to a wider corpus of neurodivergent narratives in global literature, particularly from non-Western contexts to further challenge universalizing pathological models. Additionally, scholars are encouraged to incorporate intersectional analyses that examine how stigma compounds across axes of neurodivergence, race, class, and gender. A productive avenue would be to explore the applicability of more recent stigma models, such as Link and Phelan's conceptualization, which incorporates elements of power, labelling, and discrimination, to literary texts to further nuance our understanding of systemic exclusion.

Conflict of Interest and Ethical Standards

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any financial, professional, or personal organization related to the research or its findings presented in this paper. Furthermore, no unethical practices, including plagiarism, data fabrication, or misrepresentation of sources, were involved during this study. All research was conducted in adherence to the highest academic

ethical standards. All ideas and quotations from the works of Erving Goffman, Alan McKee, and other scholars have been properly cited and attributed.

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Authors' Contribution

Mahpara, as the first author, was primarily responsible for the conceptualization, literature review, theoretical framework, and original drafting of the manuscript.

Sobia Sikander, as the second author, provided supervision, feedback, and suggestions for revisions throughout the research process.

Yasra Sani, as the third author, reviewed the manuscript and suggested minor changes to enhance the overall clarity and coherence.

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