The Human Behind the Bipolar Diagnosis: Stigma and Identity in Lisa Genova's *More or Less Maddy*

M. Manju
Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Puducherry Technological University, Puducherry

Dr. K. Guejalatchoumy
Associate Professor & HOD, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Puducherry Technological University, Puducherry

Abstract
This research paper attempts to explore the interconnection between the stigmatisation of mental illness and its impact on an individual's identity. With reference to Lisa Genova's insightful text More or Less Maddy (2025), the paper aims to analyse the lived experience of the protagonist who is struggling with bipolar disorder. Based on Erving Goffman's stigma theory, the paper examines how stigma manifests in Maddy's relationships, illness experiences and self-perception. Genova's intuitive knowledge in neuroscience eventually resulted in portraying a bipolar brain. Maddy's internal and external stigma, which collapses her social identity and erodes her self-esteem. The paper addresses that fighting stigma is as important as treating symptoms and highlights how it influences and spoils one's identity. Further, this study claims that More or Less Maddy not only humanises mental illness, but also provides deeper insights to understand the emotional complexities and the invisible barriers faced by individuals with bipolar disorder.
Keywords: Stigma, Identity, Bipolar Disorder, Theory of Stigma

Medical humanities offer multidimensional interpretations of illness; literature constantly registers the hardships of physicians, the inexplicable pain of patients, and healthcare workers of all ages. A comprehensive study of the varied dimensions of illness portrayed in literature is certainly required for healthcare workers to extend their services with a distinctive approach. Despite the medical advancements and awareness, mental illness remains a perplexing issue in the contemporary world. For example, bipolar disorder is often misunderstood and eventualized in stigmatization, which affects the individual socially and personally. According to the World Health Organisation, "bipolar disorder is a mental health condition characterised by significant fluctuations in mood, energy, activity levels, and thought processes. These fluctuations include episodes of mania (or hypomania) and depression" (WHO).

The research paper examines the types of stigma using the key points such as public stigma, self-stigma, structural stigma and estimated stigma as theorised by Patrick Corrigan and Erving Goffman's perspectives on stigma. The paper highlights the broader social and psychological implications of living with bipolar disorder through the representation of Maddy's experiences of her access to care. The paper attempts to throw

light on More or Less Maddy, which reflects the realities of bipolar disorder and challenges the readers to reconsider their assumptions about mental health disorders and the responsibilities of the people who are around the ill.

Literature Review

American neuroscientist and novelist Lisa Genova is an exemplar in portraying mental illness, and her masterpiece More or Less Maddy (2025) traces the intricate life of a woman who grapples with bipolar disorder. Genova explores the complex relationship between mental illness and societal response and reveals how stigma affects the protagonist, Maddy Banks. Many novels have mental illness themes, but this text helps people to understand particular conditions like bipolar disorder. Earlier, characters with bipolar disorder were often shown as eccentric and also very unstable and dangerous. These portrayals added to the stigma of misunderstanding people with bipolar disorder, and tried to show bipolar disorder more realistically and compassionately. Lisa Genova, a neuroscientist and writer, helps readers understand how mental and neurological conditions affect the lives of patients.

Research Methodology

Theories by Erving Goffman and Patrick Corrigan propose how stigma works and especially how characters feel shame, face judgment, and are treated unfairly by society and institutions. Genova's More or Less Maddy offers considerable scope for scholarly analysis, so the research paper attempts to use the stigma theory to explore the challenges of living with bipolar disorder. This study uses the ideas of Erving Goffman and Patrick Corrigan to understand how stigma affects people with mental illness.

Goffman states that stigma happens when someone is seen as "different" in a way negatively perceived. This leads to a "spoiled identity," where the person feels ashamed or treated unfairly. Patrick Corrigan's four main types of stigma, which include public stigma, self-stigma, structural stigma, and anticipated stigma, in which public stigma arises when society holds negative views about mental illness and tries to impose on the individual. Self-stigma ascends when the individual with mental illness start to believe those negative views about themselves. Structural stigma is found in the workplaces and organisational structures that create barriers for those with mental health conditions. Anticipated stigma is the expected fear of being judged or rejected, even if it hasn't happened yet. These ideas are collectively used to interpret the protagonist's stigma experiences and how they affect her identity, relationships, and access to care.

Public Stigma: Social Perception and External Judgement

In More or Less Maddy, one of the best examples of public stigma is clearly evident through the way people around Maddy respond to her diagnosis. Even though she is doing her work like everyone else, once others got to know that she has bipolar disorder, they begin to see her differently. Some colleagues treat her as if she is unstable at work, and their reactions reflect the society's negative views about mental illness, especially the belief that people with bipolar disorder are dangerous or unpredictable. This judgment makes it harder for Maddy to be accepted for who she is, and she is trying to hide her condition just to be treated equally. These moments in the text show how public stigma can deeply affect when others see a person with mental illness and how hard it becomes for the sufferers to feel normal in everyday life.

Public stigma can be identified when Maddy's colleagues find out she has bipolar disorder after some unexpected emotional episodes at work. Maddy has always been seen as a competent and dedicated worker. Still, her coworkers begin to distance themselves from her when she struggles to handle her emotional imbalance, and they question her ability to work. One of her colleagues even suggests she should take leave, not because of her performance, but because they believe she might become a "liability." This reaction shows that public stigma and its assumptions, rather than facts, unfairly judged Maddy not by her skills or actions but by a label. These reactions from others reflect the broader societal belief that mental illness makes

someone unfit for professional responsibility, even when there is no real evidence of risk. This illustrates that public stigma can isolate individuals and take away opportunities, emphasising negative stereotypes about mental illness, including bipolar disorder.

Self-Stigma: Internalised Shame and Identity Conflict

Self-stigma is shown in the novel through Maddy's own thoughts and feelings after she is diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and even though she is aware of and knows the clinical facts about bipolar disorder, Maddy begins to question her own worth. She starts to believe that she is "broken" or "not normal," and fears that others will never trust her again. Once she witnessed her own mother refusing to believe Maddy, she felt embarrassed and said to herself, "Maybe they're right. Maybe I'm too much to handle." This moment reflects how Maddy internalises the negative views of others and the gradual impact of stigma makes Maddy to see herself as instead of someone managing a medical condition, as flawed or unlovable. This kind of self-stigma can be very damaging, because it lowers her self-esteem and makes her doubt her abilities, even though she is still the same intelligent and caring person. Genova uses Maddy's inner emotions to show how deeply stigma can affect someone's identity from the inside.

Anticipated Stigma: Fear of Disclosure and Social Consequences

Anticipated stigma plays a significant role in shaping Maddy's behaviour and choices throughout More or Less Maddy. Anticipated stigma refers to the expectation of discrimination or judgment based on one's mental health condition, even in the absence of direct experiences. After her diagnosis, Maddy becomes increasingly cautious about disclosing her condition, fearing that others, especially her clients and colleagues, will view her as unstable or unfit for her professional role. This fear leads her to withhold the truth from people in her personal and professional life, contributing to a growing sense of isolation. For instance, despite experiencing symptoms that interfere with her daily routine, she hesitates to discuss them openly with her workplace, anticipating that she might lose her reputation or be viewed as incompetent. Genova uses this internal conflict to illustrate how the possibility of stigma can have real psychological consequences, limiting Maddy's ability to seek support and reinforcing her emotional vulnerability. Corrigan's theory states the same, that anticipated stigma can restrict individuals' participation in society by influencing decisions about disclosure, treatment, and relationships.

Structural Stigma: Institutional Barriers and Marginalisation

Structural stigma is evident in More or Less Maddy through the systemic barriers that limit Maddy's access to equitable support, particularly within the healthcare and professional settings. Structural stigma refers to policies, institutional practices, and cultural norms that disadvantage individuals with mental illness, often in ways that are less visible but deeply impactful. In More or Less Maddy, Maddy's initial attempts to seek psychiatric care are met with long wait times, a lack of continuity in care, and an impersonal treatment process that prioritises medication over understanding her individual experience. Maddy struggles to find a supportive healthcare provider who acknowledges the emotional and relational complexities of living with bipolar disorder.

Additionally, her professional environment lacks clear mental health accommodations, and there are no supportive structures in place to protect employees dealing with psychiatric conditions. These institutional failures become a part of her growing distress and sense of alienation. Genova subtly critiques these systemic gaps, suggesting that, beyond individual prejudice, deeply embedded structural issues play a crucial role in perpetuating stigma and marginalisation for those living with mental illness.

The stigma surrounding Maddy's bipolar disorder profoundly shapes her sense of identity and affects her interpersonal relationships. Collectively, both external and internal stigma affects Maddy and she begins to question her self-worth, professional competence. Her identity becomes fragmented, caught between her

former self-image and to new stigmatised label called bipolar. Genova highlights how stigma can erode mutual trust, damage intimacy, and alter the way individuals relate to each other. The text illustrates that the impact of stigma goes beyond public attitudes; it seeps into private spaces, influencing how people live, love, and understand themselves.

Understanding Stigma in More or Less Maddy

In More or Less Maddy, Lisa Genova presents a layered portrayal of stigma by illustrating how the various forms, such as public, self, anticipated, and structural, intersect and collectively shape the lived experience of bipolar disorder. Public stigma is portrayed through the shifting attitudes of Maddy's colleagues, who begin to view her as emotionally unstable and professionally unreliable following her diagnosis, despite her proven competence. This external judgment not only isolates Maddy socially but also triggers self-stigma, as she begins to internalise these negative perceptions and views herself as "broken" and unworthy of trust. Genova delves into Maddy's inner conflict, revealing how internalised shame undermines her confidence and self-identity. Anticipated stigma compounds this effect, and Maddy often conceals her condition out of fear that disclosure will lead to rejection or diminished credibility, particularly in her workplace. This fear limits her openness and intensifies her emotional burden.

Additionally, structural stigma is evident in the institutional and systemic barriers Maddy faces, such as inadequate mental health support, bureaucratic delays in treatment access, and a lack of workplace policies accommodating psychiatric conditions. These forms of stigma do not operate in isolation but reinforce each other, creating a complex web that constrains Maddy's ability to maintain her identity, relationships, and career. Through Maddy's story, Genova showcases not only individuals' prejudice but also broader social and institutional failures that perpetuate stigma and hinder recovery.

Discredited and Discreditable Identity

Erving Goffman's theory of stigma provides a concrete framework for understanding how Maddy's identity is shaped and disrupted by her mental illness diagnosis. Goffman describes stigma as an attribute that deeply discredits an individual, reducing them from a whole person to a "tainted" one in the eyes of society. This process leads to what he terms "spoiled identity." In More or Less Maddy, Maddy's identity as a student and daughter is gradually destabilised as her bipolar disorder becomes more visible to those around her.

Goffman distinguishes between "discredited" and "discreditable" identities, stigmatising attributes are known versus those that can conceal them. Maddy initially occupies a 'discreditable' position, choosing to hide her diagnosis to maintain her social and professional roles. But, when her symptoms become publicly noticeable, such as her emotional breakdown at work, she transitions into a 'discredited' state, where the stigma becomes socially formed and her identity is immediately reframed by others through the lens of bipolar.

This shift affects not only how others treat her but also how she sees herself. Maddy begins to internalise this spoiled identity, which corresponds to Goffman's idea that stigma can damage the self-concept by forcing individuals to constantly manage impressions and social distance. Through this lens, Genova's portrayal of Maddy demonstrates that stigma is not just an external judgment but a social process that deeply impacts one's sense of self, belonging, and legitimacy.

Conclusion

To conclude, More or Less Maddy offers a powerful and nuanced exploration of the different forms of stigma that individuals with bipolar disorder experience, and how stigma deeply affects their identity, relationships, and access to care. Through Maddy's personal and professional struggles, Lisa Genova demonstrates that stigma is not a singular experience but a layered and pervasive force that operates at

social, personal, and institutional levels. Using Erving Goffman's concept of "spoiled identity" and Patrick Corrigan's categories of public, self, anticipated, and structural stigma, this paper has attempted to show how Maddy's sense of self is continually challenged not only by others' perceptions of her but also by how she begins to perceive herself.

The analysis highlights the emotional cost of navigating a discredited identity, the fear of anticipated judgment, and the institutional neglect that reinforces marginalisation. Eventually, Genova's portrayal compels readers to confront the real-life consequences of mental health stigma and to reflect on the importance of empathy, structural reform, and broader societal change. By humanising the lived experience of bipolar disorder, More or Less Maddy contributes meaningfully to contemporary insights around mental health and the necessity to dismantle stigma at every level.

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