

INTERSECTIONALITY IN BLACK WOMEN'S LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to women, especially black women, such concepts as race, class, and gender matter inevitably. The works of black women writers appear as a proper reflection of the various intersectionalities that emerge with social oppression. Black women can emerge not only because they are black and female, but also as individuals whose gender, race, class, and various roles overlap. Their understanding and experiences in these different roles bring them together with the concept of intersectionality. Black women writers also convey their various desires, experiences as well as struggles in their works. Seemingly they do not have a single identity but have complex intertwined roles.

Black women have historically played a significant role in influencing literature, offering rich narratives that shed light on the varied and complex experiences of their communities. From the early days of African American literature to the present, Black women writers have defied societal constraints, challenging stereotypes and providing a unique perspective on the intersections of race, gender, and identity. Black women's lives are extensively explored in the works of authors including Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde whose merit is of significance in terms of literary influence. Through their words, these authors have not only crafted captivating stories but also

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championed social justice, offering a lens into the triumphs, struggles, and resilience of Black women. This exploration of black women in literature unveils a tapestry of voices that have been instrumental in reshaping literary canons and fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in the black female experience. Deep traces of events and a legacy from their past are found in their works.

In black literature, the concept of intersectionality serves as a critical lens through which the complexities of identity, power dynamics, and social structures are examined. Intersectionality acknowledges that people can encounter overlapping types of oppression and discrimination depending on several facets of their identity, including race, gender, class, and more. Regarding women, intersectionality highlights how racism, ableism, and homophobia, among other types of discrimination, intersect with gender discrimination to create particular experiences and difficulties for women who belong to several marginalized groups. To achieve social justice and gender equality for all women, it is critical to acknowledge and confront these intersecting forms of oppression. Black literature has been a powerful tool in expressing realities of black identity, especially black female identity.

In literary works, the term “women and intersectionality” refers to the examination of gender identity, experiences, and disparities about other intersecting social categories, including ability, sexuality, class, and race. It entails looking at how many facets of an individual’s identity interact and influence their experiences. Writing on these subjects frequently offers a variety of viewpoints, dispels myths, and emphasizes hardships and achievements of women from many walks of life. It promotes a more inclusive view of gender and identity and provides a forum for underrepresented voices. Intersectionality in black women’s literature acknowledges that a person’s experience is shaped by multiple factors at once and gives authors a means to explore and depict the complexities of identity. Black women’s literature captures these complex and multifaceted experiences, which can involve intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression.

When talking about intersectionality and black women, it’s important to recognize the particular difficulties and prejudice that these women may encounter because of the junction of their gender and race. This viewpoint aids in illuminating the different structural injustice that may impact African American women in work, healthcare, education, and social justice.

1. UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality as a context originated in critical race theory but has since evolved to encompass a broader understanding of social identities and their interconnectedness. In the past, women's problems were seen as problems of white women only, and especially black women or women of different ethnic origins were not given the same rights given to white women. Black women could not get the rights of white women due to their colour and were oppressed by black men because they were women. While white women received some social rights, black women did not have any. They were considered inferior both by white women and men of their race. They started to create awareness by making their voices heard in the mid-1970s. They critiqued feminism as well as racism in their writings and theories, sometimes overtly and subtly. Of such theorems, intersectionality, one of the important theories for black women, emerged for this purpose. By examining the cases of black women in American courts, Crenshaw coins the term in her work, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Gender: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*. In this work, Crenshaw introduces and explores the concept of intersectionality, which has since become a central framework in critical race theory and feminist scholarship. The central claim made by Crenshaw is that black women endure overlapping and intersecting forms of discrimination based on both gender and race and that these experiences are not sufficiently addressed by the legal and feminist frameworks that are now in place.

Intersectionality recognizes that people's experiences of privilege and oppression are influenced by the intersections of several social categories, including race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and more, rather than by a single element. According to Crenshaw, society deals with racial discrimination through black men and gender discrimination through white women. In this case, the oppression of black women and their secondary person status should be explained differently. Thus, the term that best describes this complexity has emerged. Kimberlé Crenshaw tried to address the limitations of existing frameworks for comprehending the experiences of black women. "Black feminist and critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the progenitor of the term, described intersectionality as "a method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytical tool" (Runyan, 2018:4). Although Crenshaw used the term intersectionality critically in the field of race law in the late 1980s, this term is based on the thinking and

experiences of black women and feminists over the years. Conventional feminist and anti-racist movements sometimes fail the particular difficulties encountered by those who identify with more than one minority group. Intersectionality seeks to dismantle the oversimplified approach of viewing each social category in isolation and instead encourages a holistic understanding of individuals and their complex identities.

...Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. (Crenshaw, 1989:149).

Crenshaw likens this traffic chaos to a black woman jeopardised at an intersection. Because this situation, which intersects in many ways, resembles the characteristics of black women that intersect in many ways. This causes black women to be injured by society. With the traffic pandemonium she recounts, Crenshaw effectively shows how black women engage with the concepts of ethnicity, sexuality, and identity. According to her, the black woman is subjected to double oppression, both by those of her sex and by those of her race. The person who expresses the discrimination experienced in the context of intersectionality in another way is Patricia Hill Collins. In her book *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), she comments on the experiences of black American women. Intersectionality is a way of thinking about and comprehending individuals who have different experiences, and lives, and are oppressed in different ways. Collins argues that the only way for Black women to escape from the oppression they experience is to escape economic and social injustice; “*Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice*” (2000:9). According to Collins, black women who take control of their economic rights can prove themselves to society in a better way. She thinks that by having a say in society, they can escape this complex situation and intersection of identities and find it easier to accept themselves in society.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXTS EXAMINE BLACK WOMEN’S LITERATURE

Examining Black women’s literature within the framework of intersectionality involves considering the historical contexts that have

shaped the experiences and expressions of black women. This term emphasizes the connections between social categories. Black women's literature, therefore, provides a rich tapestry of narratives that reflect the complex ways these intersecting identities influence their lives. In the 1980s, black women writers tried to convey their past silence to society through writing. Black women writers began to be included in American literature with the Civil War and the Harlem Renaissance. By the 1960s, they tried to make their voices heard with both the civil rights movement and the women's movement. Their works appealed to a wider audience in the 20th and early 21st centuries. The writings they produced to be heard—particularly the autobiographical pieces—came to the forefront. They featured the autobiographical novel *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* by Harriet E. Wilson and short stories by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Incidents in the *Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, published in 1861, was the first autobiography written by a former slave woman. Since autobiographical works share the author's experiences, they are valuable in the literary canon.

African Americans migrated from the rural South to the North in the early 20th century in search of better living conditions as well as to avoid prejudice and violence. They settled in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City; here they launched the Harlem Renaissance, showcasing cultural advancement in fields such as music, drama, and painting. Writers could publish through the Harlem Renaissance. Works began to be written with the Harlem Renaissance. Black writers and artists incorporated elements from their own lives, experiences, and cultural heritage into their works during the Harlem Renaissance. One of them is Zora Neale Hurston, who comes to the fore with her short stories. Although she published her first short stories, she became famous with her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. With the black women's movement and the increase in literary works, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and her works *Sula* and *Song of The Solomon* began to be published successively in the 1970s. In addition to authors such as Morrison, Alice Walker, who received the National Book Award, began to inspire young black women writers.

3. GENRE AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The idea of intersectionality can be observed in many literary genres. Different genres (novel, poetry, short story, essay, and theatre) must be

examined to analyze how intersectionality manifests uniquely in each of the following.

3.1 Novels

Novels often allow for in-depth exploration of characters and their intersecting identities. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s “Half of a Yellow Sun” is an example where the Nigerian Civil War intersects with the characters’ struggles, emphasizing how historical, ethnic, and gender factors shape their experiences. In this genre, authors can employ narrative techniques, multiple perspectives, and intricate plotlines to highlight the multifaceted nature of intersectionality. At the same time, in Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*, it is seen that the main character suffers from various intersectionality as well as gender factors. With this character, intersectionality with both the black race and the gender factor is clearly expressed. “Pauline felt uncomfortable with the few black women she met. They were amused by her because she did not straighten her hair. When she tried to make up her face as they did, it came off rather badly” (Morrison, 2007:118).

Another black author, Adichie, also incorporated the idea of intersectionality into her writings. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a well-known Nigerian author known for tackling complex issues related to identity, gender, and race in her works. Though she doesn’t use the word “intersectionality” specifically in her writing, she frequently examines in her works how different social categories are interconnected and how their intersections impact people’s experiences. One of her major works, *Purple Hibiscus*, explores the intersections of race, class, and gender in post-colonial Nigeria. The characters struggle with political and religious pressures, as well as the influence of the patriarchal structure in their society. It is possible to find examples of intersectionality in the characters and their experiences in “Purple Hibiscus”. A notable example is the character of Kambili, who faces multiple layers of pressure. Kambili is a young Nigerian girl from a wealthy but abusive family. Their experiences reflect the intersectionality of gender, class, and religion in the post-colonial Nigerian context.

In Adichie’s critically acclaimed novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, set against the background of the Nigerian Civil War, the intersection of political and social identities such as race, gender, and ethnicity is mentioned. The intricate network of identities that surrounds the characters and the historical background of the Biafran War both influence their experiences. A recent

writer, Adichie indirectly engages with the concept of intersectionality through her nuanced storytelling and exploration of characters in different contexts. Her work sheds light on the interconnectedness of social identities and how they affect individuals' lives and social structures.

3.2 Poetry

Poetry provides a condensed and expressive form for exploring intersectionality. Audre Lorde's poetry, such as "The Black Unicorn," eloquently captures the intersections of being a black woman, addressing race, gender, and sexuality. Through vivid imagery and evocative language, poets can convey the emotional and psychological dimensions of navigating multiple identities in a succinct yet powerful manner. Lorde enabled black women through her own life experiences to understand how race, class, and gender intersect in their lives and society.

The Black Unicorn explores Lorde's relationship with womanhood as she provides insight on the interwoven nature of oppression, sexism, African culture, sexual and spiritual awakening, and race, affirming that feminism necessitates a focus on each element (Nemeth, 2015: 1)

Additionally, Audre Lorde also discussed intersectionality in her work "Sister Outsider" published in 1984 (Thomas, 7). It is possible to see poems on both gender roles and racial ideas in the works of another black female poet, Nikki Giovanni. She describes the difficulties in the daily lives of black women in her poems. In her poem *Nikki-Rosa*, she also emphasizes that in the social context, the black community intersects issues related to race, class, and identity.

3.3 Short Stories

Intersectionality in short stories explores the complex and interconnected aspects of identity, such as race, gender, class, and more. The notion, which recognizes that people can be under different forms of privilege or oppression simultaneously, has been a major theme in the writings of many black women writers. In short stories, authors often weave together various aspects of a character's identity to depict a more nuanced and authentic representation of black women's experiences. These stories may delve into the intersections of race and gender, exploring how societal expectations, stereotypes, and systemic inequalities impact the lives of Black women in unique ways. Intersectionality allows for a richer exploration of characters and their struggles, offering readers a more comprehensive

understanding of the challenges faced by Black women. It also highlights the resilience, strength, and diversity within the Black female experience. By incorporating intersectionality, short stories become powerful tools for storytelling and advocacy, providing a platform for marginalized voices and fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity. In her short story “Recitatif,” Toni Morrison examines the friendship between two girls—one Black and the other White—while pressuring readers to examine their preconceived notions about race. The narrative explores the nuances of racial identity as well as how friendships are affected by social expectations. “Recitatif” highlights issues connected to the main characters’ differences in the intersection of race and class” (Helin, 2023:17). Morrison concentrated on analyzing the characters’ intersectionality in her short story Recitatif. The identities and gender markers of the characters in this short story are visible.

3.4 Essays

In essays exploring intersectionality in Black women’s literature, scholars often delve into how these writers address and dismantle overlapping systems of oppression. Essays provide a platform for more direct and analytical discussions of intersectionality. In her essay collection *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde addresses the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and embracing differences within feminist discourse. Essayists can employ argumentative techniques, personal anecdotes, and historical analysis to delve into the complexities of intersecting identities. Authors often utilize literary techniques such as symbolism, metaphor, allegory, and character development to bring intersectionality to life. By intertwining these elements, they create narratives that reflect the intricate ways in which women experience the world. In all genres, the key is to acknowledge the unique challenges and privileges that come with various intersections and to amplify voices that have been historically marginalized. As readers, engaging with these diverse works helps foster a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in women’s lives and contributes to a more inclusive literary landscape. In *Sister Outsider*, Lorde discusses how various aspects of her identity, including being a black woman and a lesbian, intersect to create unique and complex experiences. Intersectional women writers often face a unique set of challenges that stem from the intersections of their gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and other aspects of their identity. Addressing

these challenges requires acknowledging the various layers of oppression and privilege that these writers may experience.

4. ASPECTS OF INTERSECTIONALITY IN BLACK WOMEN'S LITERATURE

4.1 Race and Gender Intersectionality in Black Women's Literature

The intersectionality of race and gender plays a significant role in black women's literature. Crenshaw's term, prominent in literature, emphasizes how different aspects of identities intersect and interact in a unique and complex way in society. In black women's literature, authors explore the multifaceted dimensions of their identities and address issues of ethnicity and sexuality. Black female writers frequently face the difficulty of accurately capturing the many of black women's experiences. They investigate how race and gender intersect to mold their identities and affect societal perceptions of them. Black women's literature often explores the unique challenges and experiences related to being black. This includes historical aspects such as slavery, segregation, and systemic racism. Novels like *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison delve into the complexities of race and its intersection with gender. Black women's literature also addresses gender-specific issues such as sexism, misogyny, and the struggle for gender equality. For instance, bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman?* critiques the historical exclusion of black women from mainstream feminist movements, highlighting the intersection of racism and sexism. To give another example, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison: Morrison's novel examines the impact of racism and societal beauty standards on a young Black girl named Pecola Breedlove. The story explores the intersectionality of ethnicity and sexuality, shedding light on the internalized oppression experienced by Black females. "Pauline felt uncomfortable with the few black women she met. They were amused by her because she did not straighten her hair. When she tried to make up her face as they did, it came off rather badly" (Morrison, 2007:118).

In her book *The Bluest Eye*, black woman author Toni Morrison—who shares the same society and encounters the same obstacles and intersections—described these in terms reminiscent of her heroes. These are just a few examples. Black women's literature reflects the richness and complexity of their experiences by addressing the intersectionality of race and gender. These studies add to our knowledge of the various struggles

Black females encounter and emphasize how critical it is to recognize and eliminate interconnected oppressive structures.

4.2 Class and Economic Intersectionality in Black Women Literature

When examining the intersectionality of class and economic factors within the context of black women's literature, several themes and examples emerge. In black women's literature, the intersectionality of class and economic factors adds layers of complexity to their narratives, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges and triumphs within diverse black female experiences. It is possible to see the intersectionality between classes as follows in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In addition to white-black intersectionality, the prejudice that black people cannot be economically strong is always accepted by society. "You're not white": Don't be too ambitious, you're only black, so you shouldn't have so much" (Hurston, 18). This illustrates how literature, by expressing experiences, becomes the language of ideas about society. Hurston best reflects the economic intersectionality between black and white in her book *They Were Watching God*. This intersectionality can be observed in the writings of numerous black female authors. One of today's black writers, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, also addressed class or economic intersectionality in *Purple Hibiscus*, one of her significant works. The characters in *Purple Hibiscus* have racial, gendered, and social and economic backgrounds that interact with one another within the framework of intersectionality and black women's literature. The novel presents a stark contrast between the privileged lifestyle of Kambili's family, led by her father Eugene, and the less affluent circumstances of characters like Auntie Ifeoma, Eugene's sister. Auntie Ifeoma represents a different class, and her experiences as an educated and independent woman provide a counterpoint to the more traditional and oppressive patriarchal structure seen in Kambili's family. Adichie's book offers a sophisticated examination of these topics in the context of Nigerian culture, illuminating the intricacies of social institutions and identity.

CONCLUSION

The portrayal of Black women in literature serves as a powerful testament to the resilience, strength, and diversity within this demography. From historical works that shed light on the struggles of the past to contemporary narratives that celebrate the multifaceted experiences of

black women today, literature has been a crucial platform for amplifying their voices. Through the lens of literature, society witnesses the evolution of black women characters from stereotypical portrayals to more nuanced and authentic representations. Authors have skillfully navigated the intersections of race, gender, and identity, offering readers a deeper understanding of the complexities that shape the lives of black women. Black female writers have become powerful voices in the literary world, making substantial contributions. In addition to questioning social conventions, their works offer a forum for empowerment and self-expression. Black women's experiences, the various identities that society has given them, and how oppression and hardships affect their lives are best conveyed via literature.

In conclusion, black women's literature intricately weaves together narratives that illuminate the profound intersectionality of their experiences. Through the lens of race, gender, and often class, these literary works provide a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted challenges and triumphs faced by black women. The contemporary voices of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, black women authors have fearlessly confronted societal norms, dismantled stereotypes, and celebrated the resilience of their communities. Black women's writing is a monument to the complexity of identity, showing how different facets of a person's social positioning interact and cross to create their lived reality. Intersectionality functions as a powerful tool for dismantling oppressive systems and fostering understanding. These narratives compel readers to recognize the interconnectedness of different forms of discrimination and privilege, encouraging a more inclusive and empathetic society. Moreover, black women's literature not only critiques the intersecting structures of oppression but also offers a vision of empowerment and self-affirmation. Through their storytelling, Black women authors reclaim agency, redefine beauty standards, and challenge prevailing ideologies. The literature in question is a continuous dialogue, a dynamic discourse that changes with every new generation of writers who add to the patchwork of experiences faced by black women. The examination of intersectionality in black women's literature is essentially a call to action, imploring readers to critically consider the complexities of social institutions and identities.

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