



Oppressing Intersections: A Critique of Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad and The Intuitionist

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ABSTRACT

Intersectionality, a concept proposed by American Civil Rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw, holds that the identity of individuals are determined by various factors like race, sex, age, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, nationality, etc. These categories are framed by power structures for social grouping of humans, which ultimately results in the marginalization of certain groups. This research article utilizes intersectionality, a primarily sociological tool, for literary analysis of the novels of Colson Whitehead. Through his portrayal of Black female protagonists, Cora and Lila Mae, in *The Underground Railroad* and *The Intuitionist* respectively, the triple oppression faced by African American women is elucidated. The behavioural attitudes of Cora and Lila Mae are conditioned by external social factors that are vital elements of intersectionality. Even though the characters resist the oppression, they couldn't execute it to the fullest as they are unconscious victims of intersectionality. The interconnectedness of identity by race, class and gender shape the trajectory of both Black men and women. This study presents the resistance exercised by the protagonists, who in spite of being multiply subjugated show admirable traits to overcome adversities. The paper further analyzes how the novel challenges the remnant notions of womanhood and chastity, which were historically imposed upon white middle class women by early feminist movements. By performing an intersectional analysis instead of adopting a single-axis approach that focuses on either race or gender or class at a time, the paper attempts a faithful representation of the true extent of oppression. The study concludes with the solutions that are discovered in the chosen texts by Whitehead to eradicate the systematic inequalities and promote social justice.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Black women, Triple Oppression, Marginalization, Resistance

Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 in her article titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex". It was primarily concerned with the shortcomings of US laws. Her insights on feminism and racism proved helpful in sociological studies. Many scholars have adopted it to perform literary analysis as well. When Crenshaw first coined it, she was mostly preoccupied with the intersection of race and gender in oppressing a black woman's life. She underscored the issues "of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (Crenshaw 139). She further expanded the concept to focus on "those who are multiply-burdened' by different types of oppression" (Crenshaw 140). Intersectionality is now a theory that is not limited to race and gender alone as it additionally takes into account how multiple factors like class, age, disability, ethnicity, etc. crisscross to form a person's identity, which plays a major part in bending the trajectory of their life. This thought process is not new by any means. Different people have expressed the same notion in various times. Nevertheless, the most notable is Sojourner Truth's speech, which was delivered in 1851 at a women's rights conference in Ohio. The 19th Century saw a redefining of femininity. Qualities of womanhood like chastity, fragility, purity were attributed to white middle class

women. Such traditional notions of womanhood created by patriarchal societies did not apply to black women because the capitalistic system ensured the commodification of black bodies. Therefore, they were only seen as properties that can be bought and sold at will for profit. As Whitehead writes, "Every name an asset, breathing capital, profit made flesh" (Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* 198). Early feminism by putting the concerns of white middle class women in the center, marginalized working class women and all women of color. Moreover, men and whites were the only ones who occupied the center position for a larger part of history. Derrida elucidated on the function of this center. He stated, it was "above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the freeplay of the structure" (Derrida 278). The very act of positioning men and whites in the center ensured the marginalization of woman and blacks in the society via racial and sexual identities. The first recorded voice of dissention came from Truth's speech in which she boldly asked,

Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? (11)

The horrible conditions of slavery under which black people lived did not assign specific roles to black men and black women. Instead, they both had to work with what they got. Like men, black women were also forced to work in the fields. Slavery blurred the line between gender roles that differentiated black women from men. Hence, their problems were never addressed by the early feminist movements or by any group for that matter until the intersecting oppressions were named. Therefore, until that either the marginalized groups problems were completely ignored or only partly addressed by a single-axis approach that focused on only one identity, for instance race or gender at a time. The problem with single-axis approach is that it does not present a full picture of human experience because a person could be black, woman, American, Muslim, disabled, lesbian and poor simultaneously. As Patricia Hill Collins states power relations between all the terms of social divisions are "intertwined and mutually constructing" (Collins and Bilge 7).

Therefore, an analysis that only focuses on one aspect is inadvertently blinded to the other factors and thereby limits itself from acknowledging the true extent of subjugation. Several activists have tried to come up with a theory that would resolve the cracks in single-axis approaches. Triple oppression also known as Jane Crow or Double Jeopardy is a theory formulated by Claudia Jones, a prominent figure in Black socialist movements. She put a spotlight predominantly on three aspects, that is, race, gender and class. Because "Black women were generally caught in a threefold bond of oppression" (Davis 165). However, a more comprehensive theory was needed that would truly bring to light the multifaceted nature of identity and thereby bringing attention to how identities merge to multiply oppression. Intersectionality is such a concept that emerged in Critical race theory and extended its roots to identity politics. The social grouping of humans by power structures result in the construction of many identities, which are then propagated as natural and fixed. Nevertheless, identity is not something static. It is manufactured according to the interest of those in power positions. As Stuart Hall points out, "we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall 222). Intersectional analysis "allows a more complex and dynamic understanding" of human experience that is foregrounded on "the intersections of different axis of differentiation", states Brah (as qtd in Francisco and Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina 142). By utilizing the framework aforementioned, this study attempts to perform an intersectional analysis of two novels by Colson Whitehead. Bell Hooks defines feminism as "the struggle to end sexist oppression" economically, politically, socially that is, in all its forms (Hooks 26). The present study by adopting the intersectional approach aims to do the same. The goal of this activity is to facilitate the inclusion of marginalized women of color for whom it can be said: "When they enter, we all enter" (Crenshaw 167).

Colson Whitehead is an acclaimed African American writer of the contemporary era. He has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction twice. *The Underground Railroad* and *The Intuitionist* are the two novels analyzed in this paper. Both are relevant to this research as they deal with the theme of identities overlapping to multiply oppression. Therefore, failing to analyze the characters from an intersectional feminist perspective limits the understanding of their experience with all its complexities. To execute an intersectional analysis, one must ask, as suggested by Mary Matsuda the 'other question'. She states, When I see something that looks racist, I ask, "Where is the patriarchy in this?" When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, "Where is the heterosexism in this?" When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, "Where are the class interests in this?" (1189)

The Underground Railroad is set in the antebellum era. It spins the tale of Cora, a black enslaved women living in a slave plantation. The plantation owner, Randall and the Irish overseer both exploit black women to satisfy their sexual urges. The law permitted such atrocities because during those times blacks were not given human status. They were considered as "subhuman beings of an inferior order" (Higginbotham 45). Thus, the rape of black women by whites was and still is an act of racial domination and sexual violence. As Angela Davis

explained in *Women, Race, and Class*, “If the most violent punishments of men consisted in floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped” (Davis 7). Moreover, blacks were relegated to the level of chattel by law and traded as property. This economic system incentivized the rape of black women by white masters because the resulting offspring will also be enslaved and therefore black women were seen as a superior investment in comparison to the black men. This incident exemplifies how class intersects with both race and sex to produce a unique form of oppression. In another incident, Cora confronts some young slaves because they wanted to occupy her space. Later, those young boys take revenge by gang raping her. Although such an act was carried out by people of same racial identity, Cora would not have been subjected to such a position if were a male or a white women. This shows how she is doubly oppressed because of her racial and sexual identity.

After Cora escapes to South Carolina, she works as a housekeeper in a white woman’s home. The housekeeping job alludes to the stereotype present in most whites. They see black women and they automatically assume ‘servants’ because that’s where they have been placed historically. Davis shares her experience of talking to a white woman who revealed such an illogical bias in her thought. The woman said that she hired black women “because they look more like servants” (as qtd in Davis 94). In South Carolina, She lives in a dorm. One day while returning from work, Cora notices a black women shouting, “My babies, they’re taking away my babies!” (Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* 102). The warden brushes it off as mere mental disorder. However, the actual reason is more sinister. Cora realizes it when the warden asks her to consider sterilization. She is given a choice but the blacks who have taken much “damage to their personalities wrought by slavery” were not given any (Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* 100). This illustration clearly showcases how multiple social identities like race, sex, disability, class all intersect in subjugating the formerly enslaved African American women. It must be noted that one form of prejudice and discrimination should not be prioritized over the other, as all such practices are oppressive to humanity. Interestingly enough, the white women under whom Cora works also shows signs of mental illness. She frequently throws tantrums and shouts at her children. Despite manifesting the same symptoms, the doctor merely advises her to spend more time outside the home. If it had been a black woman, she would have been forced to undergo the sterilization process in no time. As Angela Davis points out birth control was viewed as a “moral obligation to restrict the size of” poor, black and immigrant families (as qtd in Davis 210). “What was demanded as a ‘right’ for the privileged came to be interpreted as a ‘duty’ for the poor” (Davis 210).

As the novel progresses, Cora moves to North Carolina. There, she is confined to an attic. Her only connection to the world outside is a small hole in the attic. Because in North Carolina, “the negro race did not exist except at the ends of ropes” (Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* 147). The people of North Carolina lynch any black person they come in contact with. A meeting of the town elders reveal the reason behind such severe protocols. They are afraid of black people mixing with whites and contaminating their supposed purity. The practice of lynching is inextricably linked to the black racist myth and the stereotype that black women are morally degenerate and always sexually available. An ideal woman’s identity is constructed from a man’s point of view. Therefore, it is a product of patriarchal thinking. Likewise, those who have internalized white supremacist thinking construct the racial identity. These sexist and racist notions merged together to label black women as inferior ‘other’ and promiscuous, forming the rationale for their unjustifiable lynchings. Another reason for the lynching of black men is revealed in a conversation between a doctor and Sam. The doctor talked about performing “adjustments to the niggers’ breeding patterns” to reduce or eliminate the sexual urges of black men to safeguard white women (Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* 117). From these incidents, it can be understood that the intersection of sexual identity with racial identity affects both black men and women in different ways.

In the next novel, *The Intuitionist*, Colson Whitehead portrays how various social identities merge to cause oppression in mid-20th Century New York City. The plot revolves around Lila Mae, the first black female elevator inspector. Complex situations like how she negotiates fully male dominated white spaces and how she meticulously handles racist and sexist insults are depicted by Colson Whitehead. In O’Connors, a bar where all elevator inspectors gather, Lila Mae feels out of place and “fears for her life” as an “unexpected scrape of a chair across the floor or a voice’s sudden intensity contains the potentiality of a fight” (Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* 27). The narrator explains how vulnerable Lila Mae feels in male dominated white establishments. A moment of flashback, takes readers to Lila Mae’s time as a student in the institute of vertical transport. The white professors addressed her using the previous black male student’s name. They did not care to recognize her nor gave her the respect she deserves as a human.

Another incident from the novel shows the intersection of race and sex. The annual banquet of elevator inspectors is called Funicular Follies. There, a racist minstrel show is staged arrogantly in front of black people. Lila Mae chose to be indifferent because being the only black female inspector and all, she did not want to cause trouble and reverse the progress. It is similar to a situation that Crenshaw faced in real life. When Crenshaw accompanied her black male friend to a white prestigious club, she was asked to take the back door as she was a woman. Crenshaw was conflicted whether to resist immediately or use discretion to ease the situation because

such resistance might jeopardize their position as the club's first Black guests. The experience of these women resonate with Audre Lorde's statement: "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (Lorde 91).

Neither Cora nor Lila Mae stay merely silent and submit themselves to their fate. Through their actions, they engage in resistance whenever an opportunity is presented. Despite being multiply oppressed by various axis of differentiation, both the female protagonists show unwavering resilience and resistance in the face of adversities. Cora by enduring the hellish existence typical of a slave plantation and still continuing her unrelenting quest for freedom breaks the traditional notions of patriarchy which stereotyped women as fragile, weak and therefore inferior to men. Davis asserted that black women who underwent the slave experience led them to pass on "a legacy of hard work, perseverance and self-reliance, a legacy of tenacity, resistance and insistence on sexual equality—in short, a legacy spelling out standards for a new womanhood", which was in contrast to the patriarchal notions of womanhood" (Davis 40). On the other hand, there is Lila Mae who in spite of being the only black female in the institute and experiencing all sorts of racist and sexist remarks, Lila Mae still thrives. Both the characters exemplify the new standards of womanhood specified by Davis. Colson Whitehead, through the portrayal of these two strong female characters, has challenged the center and tried to bring freeplay within the structure. The themes in the specified works make a call for an intersectional analysis that will bring about social justice that leaves no one behind. Through this present study, the researcher has attempted to bring such a change.

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