

Understanding Intersectionality through Racism, Sexism, Class and Mainstream Feminism

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Abstract—*The main aim of this study is to scrutinize intersectionality in the context of racism, sexism and class biasness. The discriminations faced by Black women of United States in context of abortion policy, rape, rights of reproduction are discoursed in a comprehensive manner. Renowned critique Kimberle Crenshaw challenges both feminist and anti-racist theory and through the concept of intersectionality she tries to address multiple failures. Intersectionality is not solely associated with racism and sexism but it deals with various kinds of discernments, which tend to overlap and construct different kinds of encumbrance for women. She also clarifies that intersectionality does not only revolves around identity but focuses on how structures make identities. One of the dimensions of this paper is the issue of white women representing all women and black men symbolizing entire black community leaving no representation for black women. It highlights the issue that feminism as a movement, which was started for the improvement of womankind, have failed to acknowledge Black women's problems. The Black women were deprived of their rights and their difficulties were never considered earnestly by anyone. In addition, how institutional structures play role in contributing the exclusion of marginalised people has been discussed here.*

Keywords: *Intersectionality, Feminism, Racism, Sexism, Black Women.*

1. INTRODUCTION

No one ever questioned that why is an elusive slave, a sizzling declaimer, a political futurist, an eradicator has always been represented as a black man. It is indeed a matter of concern that how does the gallant expression and heroic appearance of a black woman got crushed in a culture that hinged on on her bravery for its existence. [1]

There has always been an intersectional crisis which unfolds the contemporary scenario particularly in the context of the number of battles that are going on today and these are mostly the problems that grow out of intersectional failures of yesterday. This concept helps to find some of those failures and to create a basis for a far broader and deeper collusion towards the kind of world which have been built by its inhabitants.

The historical view of slavery and racial apartheid has clearly shown how women from time to time have been subjects of oppression and repression. A movement which just

emphases on sexism cannot express for all women in United States. A woman's identity can only get liberated if it deals with the problem of racism, sexism, homosexuality, old-aged women, young women, women who are fat or disabled and many more. Black women have always been considered as part of a deprived and working class labour, so it is very vital to discuss about both race and class. The feminist movement carried forward by white women of United States have never considered the racial issue as a serious agenda.

1.1. Significance of Intersectionality

The term 'Intersectionality' was first used by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. [2]

Intersectionality does not mean some particular type of repression or subjugation, but this term fathoms all kinds of defeat experienced by women. If analysed further black women do not fit in any one classification of racism or sexism. On one hand sexism is a term which has been used to describe the discriminations antagonized by all types of women be it black, white or lesbian. And on the other hand racism is a term which has been associated with beleaguered black male members of the society. This kind of legal definitions formed by the society clearly demonstrates that black women had no self-identity and they were literally considered as something which is invisible and obscure.

Crenshaw pursues to challenge both feminist and anti-racist theory and practice that negligence precisely reflect the connection of race and gender. She has claimed that the intersectional experience is much bigger than the sum of racism and sexism, any investigation that does not take intersectionality into justification cannot sufficiently discourse the specific manner in which Black women are subordinated. [3]

When the term intersectionality was introduced, it was to address multiple failures not only in law, but also rhetorical failures and political catastrophes within feminism and anti-racism. Intersectionality was a metaphor to say that Black women have got race discrimination coming from one direction and they have got gender discrimination coming from the other way. These two issues have always collided in

their lives which has not really been anticipated and understood by many. So intersectionality is basically meant to help people think about that discrimination which did not happen on the basis of several different factors at the same time. One needs to have a language which will give the ability to see it in order to address it. Intersectionality is the framework which was used to pay attention to the way in which racism, sexism and other forms of cases of discrimination overlapped and created a unique and distinct kind of burden for those women who were subjects to both or more forms of discrimination.

1. 2. Intersectionality in Context of Racism

There has always been a huge difference between a white middle class woman and a black woman. Authors like Kate Chopin and Audrey Lorde are appropriate examples here. White middle class women have always been portrayed as delicate and overtly emotional creatures whereas black women have always been subject of condemnation. Where on one hand white middle class women were talking and demanding about their right of voting, inheritance, right for their own room and space for art and creativity. While on the other hand, black women were not even treated as human beings. Authors like Virginia Woolf, Kate Chopin could raise their voice and demand their rights for property, their own planetary. But a black lesbian author had no self- identity of her own.

Sappho Clark had to bring her stenography work home during the commencement of *Contending Forces* as blacks were not allowed in office. Lola Leroy was discharged from her job twice when her co-workers learned about her race. Educated women like Helga Crane had to seek work at a domestic atmosphere in Chicago because black women were banded from the professions of clerical work. Maud Martha was not exempted from this discrimination and had to find work as a domestic where she comes across the vicious arrogance of her white employers. [4]

In the context of employment discrimination, intersectionality was meant to draw attention to the many ways that black women were being excluded from their employment in industrial plants and elsewhere that were segregated by both gender and race. Specifically black jobs were available to blacks who were men and women's jobs were available to women who were white. Black women who were not men and women who were not white were not able to find a decent job anywhere. Most of the places were not ready to hire them as they did not fit to the kind of women or the kind of black that was looked for by the employer. Beyond the inter-section discrimination there was the combination of race and gender policy for hiring people. This became a massive structured intersectional form of discernment.

1960 was the period when the humungous difference between the white middle class and black oppressive women came in forefront. White middle class women were considered delicate, they were well-thought as full of

etiquettes and epitomes of ethnicity, while black women mothers who had no other option, were forced to work hard day and night outside their home and were accused of social mischief's and financial independence. Men were being seen as victims here as they had to suffer because of the social and economic independence of their significant other.

1.3. Intersectionality in Context of Sexism

It is quite absurd to see how the feminist readings have been treated where the mother figure has been portrayed as object rather than a subject of depiction, in this process feminism as a daughterly sermon obstructs the painful possibilities of maternal intervention.

Zora Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was claimed by Richard Wright to be a novel that had no subject, memorandum or thought. Wright dominated for not less than thirty years over the black literary works and during these years many eminent novels written by Hurston were given no significance. [5]

Many Harlem Renaissance writers like Nella Larsen was also out of print for several years and was not considered a renowned author. Authors like Ann Petry was scrutinized as a discipline of Wright's school of communal protest fiction, and works of Dorothy West were never taken seriously. Though *Maud Martha*, written by Brooks was a perfect articulation based on race estrangement of the 1950s, but was totally obscured by Ellison's *Invisible Man* and was never measured as a dynamic part of the Afro-American standard. [6]

It is very important to comprehend that racism and sexism alone cannot solve the problem of black women. The concept of intersectionality is very essential to analyse and explain the complications and problems of black women facing around the globe.

"Throughout the twentieth century- Black women regularly condemned their sexual misappropriation. By positioning their voices as weapons in the wars against white sovereignty, whether in the church, the courtroom, or in congressional hearings, African American women loudly resisted what Martin Luther King, Jr., called the 'thingification' of their humanity. Decades before radical feminists in the women's movement urged rape survivors to 'speak out', African American women's public protests stimulated local, national, and even international barbarity and sparked larger crusades for racial justice and human dignity." [7]

The Black women faced discrimination in the courts as most of their cases could not go forward. Black women had to combine two causes of action, in order for the court to see that they were differentiated and subjugated compared to other men and women. According to the perspective of a court or any legal organization, on one hand all women were not being excluded and on the other hand all blacks were not being debarred from their rights. Thus these Black female plaintive did not have any cause to make. Moreover the authorial

institutions thought that if they were to allow the anti-discrimination law to broaden itself and permit the women of colour to make a race claim and a gender claim at the same time, then these Black women would be given preferential treatment. Another way of framing it is that black men did not have to combine the two causes of action for their case to be understood and white women did not have to conglomerate two classes of exploitation for their discrimination to be understood. So to give Black women the ability to do so were to give them two steps ahead compared to others and ironically that was unfair to everyone else.

“There is, apparently, no distinct reason why a society in which males dominate in family relationships is to be favoured as matriarchal procedure. However, it is clearly a struggle for the marginal group to function on one principle. While the great mainstream of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the current condition of the Negro. Ours is a civilization which believes in male leadership in private and public affairs. The provisions of society enable such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct hindrance.”[8]

1.4. Intersectionality in Context of Class

“If women are supposedly passive and delicate, then why are Black women treated as ‘mules’ and allotted heavy cleaning tasks? If good mothers are supposed to stay at home with their children, then why are US Black Women on public assist forced to find jobs and leave their children in day care? If women’s highest calling is to become mothers, then why are Black teen mothers forced to use Norplant and Depo Provera? In the absenteeism of a viable Black feminism that examines how intersecting persecutions of race, gender, and class foster these inconsistency, the angle of vision created by being deemed undervalued workers and failed mothers could easily be turned inward, leading to internalized oppression. But the legacy of brawl among US Black women recommends that a collectively shared Black women’s oppositional knowledge has long existed. This collective wisdom in turn has encouraged US Black women to generate a more dedicated knowledge, namely, Black feminist thought as critical social theory.”[9]

Apparently these issues pave the way for us to think that for a Black woman it was very essential to examine the intertwining relationship of race, gender and class. All these problems associated with race, class and gender played a massive role in a Black woman’s life which was not taken into consideration by the white middle class feminists. A black woman’s problematic situation was not just about racism and sexism but class also had an enormous role to play in it. And thus it was way too different from a white middle class woman’s mainstream feministic movement. Thus it was extremely important to talk and discuss about intersectionality.

1950s and 1960s were the period when there was a humungous difference between the two races in US. Inter-

racial marriage was not a part of legal constitution in more than sixteen states during 1967. During the mid to late sixties the urban black ghettos had no other option but to rebel due to which they were brutally charged by the officials of the country. The Kerner Commission also known as the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders was recognised in 1967. The main aim of this organization was to scrutinize the origin of urban revolts. A report was being supplied by the Commission in 1968 which had the prosecution of racism and discrimination in US society. The report says

“Our country is moving toward two civilisations, one black and one white which are separate and not equal. Apartheid and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a damaging environment totally unknown to most white Americans. The contradiction between the white American and the Negro was that the white Americans could never fully understand a Negro’s misery. White institutions created these discriminations and maintained it.”[10]

A large number of organizations and administrations started emerging because of the extreme racism and sexism that the Black women faced during 1960s. There has always been a racial and class ignorance between women. In *Feminine Mystique* published in 1963, Betty Friedan tried to put forward the frustration of middle class white women who were trapped and bound to their household works, motherly and family duties. This book gained huge popularity among the masses in no time. But the most significant thing to note here was that authors like Friedan and Kate Chopin though they succeeded in publishing some enormous works towards white middle class women, but the ‘other’, the black women were always marginalized. A black woman had no name of her own, she had no voice of her own, she had no self-distinctiveness and individuality. The whole issue of race and class were absent from the works of these kind of well renowned female authors. Sympathy was shown towards the white middle class women who were caged in the walls of their houses, forced to perform the motherly figure, and were destined to be a good wife be it against their willpower. But there was no empathy shown for the Negro women who were kept as nursemaids and housekeepers by the white women. These women who were treated as slaves used to work hard day and night and after their duty they had to go home and fulfil their responsibilities towards their family and children. But they were always an ‘invisible other’ whose situation has never been considered as a major problematic issue.

Lerner notes that “working women, especially Negro women, labour not only under the difficulties enforced by the feminine mystique, but under the more pressing disadvantages of economic discrimination.”[11]

2. RAPE IN BLACK SOCIETY

Discussing racism in a more elaborative manner it is important to understand that it is not just revolving around women’s movement. One of the most animalistic and horrendous way

of oppressing women was and still is rape by either black or white men. Susan Brownmiller in her book *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, which was published in 1975 discussed about this physical capability of man to rape a woman:

“When men learned that they could rape, they progressed to do it. Man’s discovery that his genitalia could assist as a weapon to produce fear must rank as one of the most vital discoveries of ancient times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From primordial times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function.” On this foundation, Brownmiller concludes that men use rape to implement and enforce their supremacy over females. It is nothing more and nothing less than a conscious process by which all men keeps women in a state of fear.[12]

Talking about rape or physical domination and supremacy of man over a woman is a world-wide problem. But in United States starting from the time of slavery the black women have been victims of rape by both black men and their white masters. Thus rape was one the most venomous racial element, which facilitated the white to sustain their control and authority over the black women.

Davis claims that rape is “an essential dimension of the social relations between slave master and slave,” including the continuous rape of Black slave women by their white masters.[13]

Davis describes rape as “a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women’s will to resist and, in the process, to demoralize their men.”[14]

The customary rape of Black women endured the abolition of slavery and took on its contemporary form: “Group rape, perpetuated by Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist organizations of the post-Civil War period, became an uncamouflaged political weapon in the drive to thwart the movement for Black equality.”[15]

With this Brownmiller discloses another case where a fourteen year old Negro boy, Emmett Till; while he was visiting his clan in midsummer, he committed a crime by whistling and hooting at a married white woman namely Carolyn Bryant. Due to this act, he was tortured vehemently and was shot dead. After this, his young body was thrown away mercilessly in the Tallahatchie River.

“Despite Till’s execution, Brownmiller defines Till and his murderer as sharing authority and power over a white woman, using stereotypes that Black activist and scholar Angela Davis called the restoration of the old racist myth of the Black rapist.”[16]

Brownmiller further elaborates David’s view and says: “Rarely has one single case exposed so clearly as Till’s the underlying group male antagonisms over access to women, for what began in Bryant’s store should not be misconstrued

as an innocent flirtation. Emmett Till was going to show his black buddies that he, and by implication, they could get a white woman and Carolyn Bryant was the nearest appropriate object. In tangible terms, the accessibility of all white women was on review.”[17]

Brownmiller further illustrates that: “And what of the wolf whistle, Till’s gesture of teenage bravado? The whistle was so small tweet of hubba-hubba or harmonious approval for a well turned ankle. It was a premeditated insult just sort of corporeal attack, a last reminder to Carolyn Bryant that this black boy, Till, has in mind to possess her.”[18]

There were many people who came up and raised their voice against this bias support of Brownmiller. Many people even criticized that Brownmiller was her herself succumbing to racism. Alice Walker one of the most renowned Black feminist author said, “Emmet Till was not a rapist. He was not even a man. He was child who did not understand that whistling at a white woman could cost him his life.”[19]

Davis too responded that “In choosing to take sides with white women, irrespective of conditions, Brownmiller herself surrenders to racism. Her failure to alert white women about the earnestness of combining a ferocious challenge to racism with the essential battle against sexism is an imperative plus for the forces of racism today.”[20]

Gloria Joseph who was a Black Marxist-feminist observed the collective experience of racism among Black women and men and made the following comment: “The slave experience of racism among Black in the United States made an ironic influence to male-female equality. Labouring in the fields or in the homes’ men and women were equally desensitized and assaulted.” In the contemporary period she concludes by saying that, “The rape of Black women and and castration of Black men are equally heinous in their nature.”[21]

Many critics have argued that the character of Black men and women have further been intentionally tarnished and dishonoured due to accusation of rape many a times. Davis argues that, “The imaginary appearance of Black men as rapist has always reinforced its inseparable companion: the image of Black woman as chronically immoral...Viewed as ‘loose women’ and whores, Black women’s cried of rape would necessarily lack sincerity.”[22]

Lerner similarly describes that, “The myth of the Black rapist of white women is the twin of the myth of bad Black woman-both intended to express regret for and facilitate the continued corruption of Black men and women.”[23]

There were many well-known writers and critiques who failed to challenge the racist conventions about rape. Majority of the mainstream white feminists of 1970s ignored the concept of racism which was very much involved in raping and molesting Black women. Davis criticizes them and says, “During the modern anti-rape movement, few feminist

theorists scrutinized the special environments surrounding the Black woman as rape victim. The historical -knot binding Black women- systematically battered and desecrated by white men- to Black men- mutilated and killed because of the racist manipulation of the rape charge- has just begun to be recognised to any noteworthy extent.”[24]

3. EVOLVING BLACK FEMINISM AND OTHER CONCERNS ASSOCIATED WITH WOMEN OF COLOUR

The whole nation at that time was largely dominated by the white politicians, reporters, authors and reader. The Time magazine in the year 1976 praised Susan Brownmiller as one of its “women of the year”. Her book was acknowledged by the superior class of the society and was said as “the most demanding and challenging piece of scholarship that has yet materialized from the feminist movement.”[25]

It is very significant to notice that all those crucial arguments raised by eminent people like Alice Walker and Davis were ignored and marginalised. Their opinions were not even observed by the mainstreams.

Barbara Smith argued that, “The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of colour, working class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-glorification.”[26]

Feminism was a movement which was started by women for their right, as they wanted equality. But later during the years 1970s and 1980s most of the colour women denied to support the mainstream feminist movement which were carried forward by white middle class women. The black women were deprived of their rights and their problems were never considered earnestly by anyone. This was the main reason they step back to support the feminist movement. This led to many Black feminist political parties which emerged at that time. ‘Black Panther Party’ was one among them, most of these Black feminist parties vetoed that the persecution and subjugation of women was above racism, and vice versa. The problem of racism was very much associated with poverty in bourgeois capitalist society. So it was very much important for these emerging Black feminist movements to reject the notion of middle class white feminists who never considered the significance of class in deprived and working class women’s lives.

During 1960s and 1970s when legal right of abortion was given to the US women, it was a victory for the mainstream white middle class feminists. They were free from their forceful duties of bearing children and from the chains of being associated to only household kit and caboodle. Perhaps they never understood that according to the racist policies

women of colour were never allowed to bear and raise as many children they wanted.

This particular issue in case of the mainstream white feminists who failed to acknowledge the problem of Black women have been well versed by Angela Davis a Black feminist writer, who wrote a book about Women, Race and Class. She has connected Marxism and the struggle of Black women in the context of slavery and modern bourgeois capitalists. She has discussed very vital issues like how there was a huge difference between middle class white women and women of colour in terms of right for reproduction and rape. Davis points out that women of colour and Black women have always been the target of sterilization and physical abuse. Analysing the issue historically it is apparently visible that this racist sterilization deprived the women of colour and Black women of their basic rights of humanity.

Margaret Sanger one of the twentieth century birth control pioneer was part of the eugenics movement. Sanger’s slogan was “More children from the fit, less from the unfit.” This racist approach to population control was being carried by the eugenics movement amenably and without any ignominy and fear. For the eugenicists the people who were unfit were the people who were mentally and physically disabled, the one who were criminals and prisoners, women of colour and black women, who were unfortunately not white.

Davis states that: “By 1932, the Eugenics society could boast that at least twenty-six states had passed compulsory sterilization laws, and that thousands of ‘unfit’ persons had been surgically prevented from reproducing. .” When the “Negro Project” was established in 1939, Sanger’s American Birth Control League claimed that, “The mass of Negroes, particularly in the South, still breed carelessly and disastrously.” Sanger personally said that, “We do not want word to get out that we want to annihilate the Negro population and the minister is the man who can flatten out that idea if it ever occurs to their more insubordinate members.”[27]

This population control policy which was purely racist sterilized huge number of Black women, Latinas, and Native American women against their wills, and thus made them incapable to reproduce. The Alabama Court surveyed in the year 1974, that, between 100,000 and 150,000 poor Black teenagers were sterilized each year in Alabama.

The 1960s and 1970s observed a rampant increase in sterilization abuse and other forms of compulsion and intimidation aimed at Black, Native American, and Latina women- alongside a strident rise in struggles against this exploitation and ill-treatment. A 1970 study showed that 25 per-cent of Native American women had been sterilized, and the Black and Latina married women had been sterilized in much greater magnitudes than married women in the population in large. By 1968, one-third of women of

motherhood age in Puerto Rico- still a US colony- had been perpetually sterilized.[28, 29]

Though all these mistreatment and coercive racist policies which were going and were completely unethical and inhuman, the mainstream white middle class feminist never acknowledged these issues and considered them as part of feminist movement. On the contrary there were many who even embraced these population control methods based on racism.

“That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over trenches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever supports me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or give me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I could have cultivated and embedded, 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? I have born thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?” [30]

In the year 1972, the condition of Native Americans and other women of colour were pitiful and they were hostile and struggling for their right of reproduction. It was the period when they were against the forcible adoption policy which besieged exclusively their community. Ms. Magazine asked its primarily white and middle-class audience, “What do you do if you’re a conscientious citizen, concerned about the population explosion and ecological problems, love children, want to see what one of your own would look like, and want more than one?” To this, she offered as an explanation: “Have One, Adopt One.” The majority of the children who were offered for adoption were Native American, Black, Latino and Asian. [31]

To be sure, the authorization of abortion in the US Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* verdict was of utmost prominence to all women and the straight effect of proletarian struggle. When the abortion was not legal, as the social and economic conditions were not good, black women, Latinas and other women of colour agonized in a large number and most of their lives were jeopardized. Before abortion was made permissible in New York City in 1970, for instance, Black women made up 50 percent of all women who died after an unlawful abortion, while Puerto Rican women were 44 percent. [32]

In 1978, the federation government permitted to demand by Native American, Black, and Latina activists by finally forming procedures for sterilization. These comprised mandatory waiting periods and agreement forms in similar language by the women approving to be sterilized. [33]

Davis stated that women of colour “were far more familiar than their white sisters with the murderously clumsy scalpels of inept abortionists seeking profit in illegality. Yet

were practically absent from abortion rights movements. She further said that, “The abortion rights activists of the early 1970s should have examined the history of their movement. Had they done so, they might have understood why so many of their Black sisters adopted a posture of suspicion toward their causes.”[34]

4. SAY HER NAME

One of the dimensions of all the issue discussed in this paper is the question of white women representing all Black women and black men symbolising all black people. This was a representational scheme that allowed white women and black men to characterize everybody regardless of their particular way of experiencing discrimination.

So, intersectionality was meant to draw attention to the way that black women experience differentiation. Most of the time the distinct experience of gender discrimination by Black women was buried and suppressed under the experiences of white women. And similarly the distinct experience of racism experienced by Black women most of the time used to get suppressed under the experiences of black men.

For most of the people intersectionality is only about multiple identities and the identity question goes on. Sometimes based on a number of personalities, an individual faces discrimination. But intersectionality according to Crenshaw is not primarily about identity. Instead it is about how structures make certain identities. How the institutional structures play role in contributing the exclusion of some people.

The failure to interrogate patriarchy and anti-racism, the failure to interrogate racism and feminism has undermined Black women’s collective capacity. It is very important for girls and women of colour to narrate their stories about how they have been subjugated by race and gender disempowerment. They should raise their voice so that their communities and their families have an understanding and an image of them. It is important for them to have a story in order to acknowledge what racism looks like for women and what sexism looks like for blacks.

Expanding the notion of what gender and race based violence looks like is the real challenge. This issue is not confined to only United States. If one goes across the boundaries, then one can find other women who died or were subjugated or still are suffering. In this process other women’s name can emerge who were marginalised and were never known. One can find other circumstances where women are subject to private and public violence. It will help one to understand that women of colour have been vanquished by both private and communal vehemence. So the question one needs to probe is what can be done about it? The first thing that can be done about this matter is to say her name. One should not allow her death to happen in silence. Their children and their loved ones should not be allowed to grieve in

quietness. This belief should not be affirmed that their lives are insignificant and of no value. If one can simply begin to say her name, the invisibility that shrouds their loss will no longer legitimise to what happened to them. This will be the first step of the movement when one can simply say her name.

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