

Intersectionality of Discriminations

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Abstract

Intersectionality means the overlapping and crosscutting nature of discriminations that a person is subject to. We may extend the application of the term to interdisciplinary approaches that critical theories and methodologies take today. Discriminations are of many kinds – gender, race, class, and caste. Earlier separate evaluation of all these discriminations offered little to explicate and alleviate the condition of the discriminated sections. Since the 1980s, through the publication of Kimberle Crenshaw's seminal works on intersectionality discriminations were evaluated by the thinkers in an interlocking manner. Now, it is much convenient to locate one section in an environment of interrelated discriminations. In this paper I intend to define intersectionality, explain how and why this idea came into being, and how there are more spaces of intersectionality in the structure of the society.

Keywords: Black feminism, gender, identity, Intersectionality, race, etc.

Introduction

Our existence in this world is made of multiple identities and complicated representations; one single identity cannot fully explain the nature of our historical as well as daily ordinary lives; one's identity is mediated and overlapped by many other identities. We cannot introduce ourselves as excluding other possible identities, and the way we perceive ourselves is very complex and multifaceted. If this pluralist and multifaceted identity is overlooked or negated injustice is a possible consequence. As the identity is pluralist so is the mechanism of domination or oppression. Today's world is a complex phenomenon; tensions and upheavals on racial, ethnic, cultural, communal, national and linguistic levels have brought our world to the point of tearing apart, and everywhere fanaticism and ultranationalism are gaining popularity. It is evident that simplistic attitude to the eradication of all these tensed phenomena is not going to be effective; we must scrutinize how one kind of oppression or domination is linked to another. In past attempts were made by the thinkers and theoreticians to understand the interconnectedness of all these events, but those attempts were quite diffuse in absence of a structured critical inquiry and praxis. 'Intersectionality' has offered us a platform to understand that the intersected identities create unique levels of discrimination.

Research questions:

This paper intends to present two specific questions:

1. How does the theory of intersectionality help us to understand race-and-gender discrimination in society and labour market?
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2. How is black feminist criticism more useful to understand the condition of black female writers?

Research Objectives:

I wish to state that there are specifically three objectives of my study:

1. explanation of the theory of intersectionality in such a way that the interlocking nature of discriminations in the racial and sexual structures of the society is clearly explained;
2. evaluation of the necessity of black feminist criticism that would address the literature of the black women;
3. exploration of possible application of intersectional theory in other areas of the society and economy.

Research Methodology:

Research methodology applied in this paper is 'qualitative' in nature. I have used ethnography and phenomenology to explicate the condition of the marginalized sections of the society and understand how they are treated and marginalized in both society and literature. In order to do so I have applied the theory of intersectionality in the emergence of black feminist criticism. I have interpreted primary sources and used secondary sources.

Theory of Intersectionality:

In the year 1982 Kimberle Crenshaw published a radical revision of the relation of gender with race, discriminatory mechanism and feminist theory in the form of an essay 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist theory and Antiracist Politics' in the collection *The Feminist Press*. In the very beginning she said that contemporary feminist theories failed to address the issues of the Black women and there was a need to develop Black Feminist Criticism. She says, '... my efforts to develop a Black Feminist Criticism because it sets forth a problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis' (139). She had studied US laws and found that the tendency that race and gender were independent categories was unfounded and helped in a compromised way to prolong the machinery of discrimination. In this paper she stated her objective thus: '... I want to examine how this tendency is perpetuated by a single-axis framework that is dominant in antidiscrimination law and that is also reflected in feminist theory and antiracist policies' (ibid). Her examination of the intersection of racism and sexism has helped us to understand how traditional critical theories, like racism and sexism, separately, failed to understand intersected forms of discrimination.

It is now theoretically established that 'gender' is not something that is biologically given; it is rather a cultural construct. We are *gendered* because of the characteristics that originated in socio-cultural reality; these characteristics are stereotyping and differentiating. 'Race' has also historically developed as a denominator; it is a social construct that has changed according to the changes in history and society. Both gender and race are sites of power and political contestations; here, arbitrarily one gender and one race dominate other genders and other races. As we are culturally gendered and happen to be one of the races, intersection of the two is a truthful event. One cannot be one of the genders without any racial identity, as one cannot be a member of a race without being one of the genders. Judith Butler has also pointed to the intersectionality of race and gender when she denies that a woman can ever be exclusively *a woman*; her identity intersects with her racial identity: 'gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained' (6).

Crenshaw had pointed to the value of understanding the intersectionality of gender and race through two very important essays: one was the 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex' and another was 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color'. By 'intersectionality' she meant the overlapping and crosscutting nature of discriminations that a person is subject to in daily life. She identified three types of intersectionality: structural intersectionality (discriminations with intersecting identities created by social and institutional structures); political intersectionality (discriminations and disadvantages created by the general political structures); and representational intersectionality (environment of discrimination created by cultural representations) (unitedwaynca.org).

We may extend the application of the term to interdisciplinary approaches that critical theories and methodologies take today. The theory originated through Crenshaw's intervention in the Civil Rights movements in the USA in the 1980s. She introduced the concept when she realized the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the oppressions that ordinary citizens had to undergo in their ordinary lives. She believed that proper understanding of the oppressions was not possible until interconnections of these problems were not understood. She explained the concept in the following way: 'These days, I start with what it's not, because there has been distortion. It's not identity politics on steroids. It is not a mechanism to turn white men into the new pariahs. It's basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts' (quoted in White12).

Even in the two decades following the Second Wave of Feminism theoreticians and feminists did not understand that race and gender were inseparable. Those feminists and anti-racism thinkers believed that gender oppression needed not address racial oppression. Crenshaw believed that the Black women were the most potential victims of gender and racial discriminations. Being a woman was a condition for marginalization, but being a black woman was a condition for greater marginalization. It is like a 'double marginalization': first a woman is already second and weaker in sexual relations, and then she becomes further weaker if she is black. Feminist theories of the 1980s failed to grasp the interconnection between the two. She referred to the suit *DeGraffenreid v/s General Motors*, where a group of African American women complained of facing discrimination and lack of employment opportunities in General Motors. Their argument was that in contrast to white women they were not given any official job opportunities. However, their case was dismissed as the court did not see the connection between gender and race: the court found that black men were already in employment in the company and white women were also in official positions; therefore, neither the racial nor the sexual discrimination at the working place was proved in the eyes of the law. Crenshaw clearly stated the problem that the court faced while considering the subject at hand: 'The court's refusal in *DeGraffenreid* to acknowledge that Black women encounter combined race and sex discrimination implies that the boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by white women's and Black men's experiences' (Crenshaw 143). This was the example that placed the intersectionality of race and gender at the centre place of feminist discourse. Only black feminism was capable to address those issues.

Discrimination in payment of labour wages is a common feature of gender-based and ethnicity-based market. More or less local markets and corporate, both suffer from gender

and racial discriminations. Often personal characteristics, like merit or qualifications take back seat, and gender or race comes to the front. In a developed country, like the USA, outsourcing cuts out job opportunities for the domicile, because these foreign, mostly third world professionals, are hired on lower pay grades than the natives; while, in third world countries, like India, foreign professional are remunerated much higher than the native Indians. In such working places, and especially in rural markets, women are often paid less than men, and in some cases, women work for their male family members without any wages at all. However, separation of race and gender in these circumstances makes any attempt to alleviate the condition of the women folk very difficult. DeGraffenreid failed to make the USA court understand that the condition of the black female employees was to be judged from the perspective of *intersectionality of race and gender*. In a significant study on the discrimination at working places in American labour market, Roger White detailed through Blinder-Oaxaca decompositions how black men and women received less wages than the white labourers. He noticed ‘variation in in the returns to education and in the returns to experience across worker groups, with returns being greater for white workers than for black workers’ (62). His study does not show that the differences in wages were due to any personal or professional attribute; they speak of racial and gender factors too. He finds, ‘Looking at the coefficients of the experience and experience-squared variables, we see that the related returns of white male workers are (i) considerably higher than the returns of white female workers, (ii) nearly twice the level of returns for black male workers, and (iii) more than twice the returns realized by black female workers. This is found for both estimations’ (ibid.).

Black Feminist Criticism & Intersectionality

The major difference between mainstream feminism and black feminism is the *the black feminist literature* that the latter insists and the former lacked. In the Western feminism white female writers and critics had always enjoyed an exclusive place. The black female writers and critics were significantly absent. In the 1960s European feminists called for a re-evaluation of the place of women in the culture of the West; they often used philosophical and methodological tools available in contemporary philosophical analyses of culture. But the experience of the black people was not weighed in those analyses. But on the other side of the continent, Civil Rights Movement created a focus at the experience of the Black African American people. W.E.B. Du Bois, an African American sociologist and a major voice in his community, emphasized upon the intersection of race, class, and culture that was instrumental in the formation of the experiences of the black people in America. Later, in the 1970s, some black lesbian socialist feminists formed a group called Combahee River Collective. They explicitly stated their belief that more than black men, black women faced ‘interlocking oppressions’, as they were subject to discriminations that were at the same time racial and sexual. Barbara Smith pointed to the lack of any comprehensive and dedicated study of the condition of black women; she said that neither any political movement gave attention to the black female folk, nor black politicians ever spoke of their condition. There was an ‘invisibility’ (1) of writing about them. She advocated *black feminist criticism* that would do away with the contemporary tendency of analysing the books of Black women in the context of Black literature; white feminists were not properly equipped for understanding the experiences of the black women. Hence, the urgency to develop a Black feminist literature: ‘A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity. Until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not

even know what these writers mean. The citations from a variety of critics which follow prove that without a Black feminist critical perspective not only are books by Black women misunderstood, they are destroyed in the process' (3). Smith also points to the intersectional or interlocking of politics of race and politics of sex.

One major characteristic of the intersectional theory is the view that it holds about the intersection of oppressive mechanism; it believes that all these oppressive mechanisms are mutually constitutive, or shaped by one another. The proponents of intersectionality state that oppressive mechanisms are already connected as the dominant forces of oppressions are spread across all layers of social-and-cultural existence. In mainstream feminist criticism the white middle class heterosexual women who take the upper hand in the analysis of the condition of women. When the issues are about the Dalits or many other marginalized communities it is the men who again come to the front and present a biased report of the condition of women in all these communities; these women do not have any say in these analyses. The consequence of these compromised analyses is the exclusion of women, black and marginalized, and equally erasure from feminist discourses. Only by considering the pluralist identities of the marginalized women it is possible to salvage the voices of the women who are poised at the intersections of oppressions. Crenshaw states in a later article: 'I should say at the outset that intersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of totality. Nor do I mean to suggest violence against women of color can be explained only through the specific frameworks of race and gender considered here. Indeed, factors I address only in part or not at all, such as class or sexuality, are often as critical in shaping the experiences of women in color. My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is considered' (1245).

Conclusion:

In our country women supply a great portion of labour in agriculture and tea industry. During COVID-19, agriculture was one of the sectors that gave positive return. Yet in farm lands women are more marginalised than men in the poor peasant class. Tea industry in one of the most labour-intensive industries in the country. In West Bengal, apart from timber and tourism, tea has been a major contributor in state revenue. Since beginning women have been almost 80% of the total labour, because they were cheaper than men. Tea plantation was initiated by the British; the labour and payment structure still carries the British legacy. The colonial government set up the gardens in remote underdeveloped areas. All these gardens were separated from one another, and existed as miniature colonies. In every garden the owner and the manager enjoyed quasi-magisterial influence over the plantation workers who lived in labour lines and were employed in plantation generation after generation. The legacy of the colonial structure is still carried by today's waning tea industry to some extent. Wages to the workers were very low, as the workers were uneducated and completely dependent upon their employers (Sarkar). 1948 Minimum Wages Act ensured fixed payment to the workers, but disruptions happened quite often. In West Bengal wages to the tea garden workers have always been a matter of bargaining between the stakeholders, though in Kerala it is much more regulated. Under these circumstances, female workers are greater victims of wages discrimination than male workers, even after the enactment of Equal Remuneration Act in 1976. Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar has observed, '... within this context of prevailing wages, gender discrimination is being perpetuated in the sense that definition of dependents is different for male and female workers. For male workers, non-working wife and parents are considered as dependents. For female workers, non-working husband and her parents are not

considered as dependents. Since total compensation is an aggregate of cash and non-cash components, lower non-cash components for female workers implies that other things remaining constant, compensation for a female worker is lower than that of male worker' (viii). Unregulated wages for the poor and hilly people, who were mostly tribals, are interlocked with the lower wages of the female workers.

Thus, intersectionality offers us comprehensive and detailed perspective of every kind of discrimination. It is much helpful in analysing the individuals of marginalizing groups while chartering social work and community organizing. Insights into multifaceted experiences of the downtrodden and women help create alleviative measures. In school curriculum and pedagogy intersectional theory is also helpful: teachers and paper setters are aware of the different backgrounds of the students and they will also know how students may experience lacks and sufferings are located at the cross section of oppressive mechanisms. Even in healthcare the theory of intersectionality can help the medical staff to understand and locate the health issues of the patients are mediated by multiple sectional existences.

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