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Opposing Hegemony, Fueling Resistance: Intersectional Feminism and Zadie Smith's Narratives of the Margins

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Abstract

The black British author Zadie Smith, bases her novel *White Teeth* and her short story "Two Men Arrive in a Village," on the themes of physical abuse, sexual exploitation, indoctrination, and mental dominance, directed at female protagonists from formerly colonized regions, particularly the black female character. These instances of racial-gendered injustice meted out by white male colonizer figures are viewed in the present article parallel to the black feminist theorist bell hooks's recountal of the historical details surrounding black slave women's treatment during the transatlantic slave trade period. The identities of the victimized female subjects within Smith's narratives are examined in relation to their constituent identity characteristics within the conception of intersectionality. In addition, the specific forms of discrimination suffered by protagonists are analyzed, based on the overlapping categories of marginal identity applicable to them. In conclusion, possibilities for countering gender injustice are located by viewing Smith's selected fictional texts against the theory of intersectionality and bell hooks's theorization of black feminism, finally emphasizing the socio-political margins as a source of impetus for opposing injustice.

Keywords: Black feminism; Counter-hegemony; Gender injustice; Intersectionality; Marginal identity.

Introduction

Contrary to the concept of 'white feminism,' 'intersectional feminism' is a branch of theory and practice that takes into consideration the varied socio-political identity categorizations or marginal identities that affect the

ways in which women experience discrimination (Hawk, "Intersectional"). Further, "'White feminism' is a term that is used to describe a type of feminism that overshadows the struggles women of color, . . . and women of other minority groups face" (Hawk). The American black feminist theorist and activist bell hooks's theoretical contribution and activism are indispensable to the development of black feminism, while foreshadowing the development of intersectional feminism (Doppalapudi, "bell hooks"). hooks raises feminist questions in her written works such as *Ain't I a Woman?* (1981), *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* **(1984),** *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* **(1989), and** *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), creating grounds for a stronger formulation of the theory and practice of intersectionality, particularly in relation to gender equity.

Although the term 'intersectionality' owes its origin to the American civil rights scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, bell hooks's earlier works are considered as a part of the discourse on intersectional feminism. In fact, Baldwin asserts that beginning with hooks's *Ain't I a Woman*, "hooks sought to incorporate the differences between women into feminist practices, . . . effectively paving the way for intersectional feminist thought" (Baldwin, "bell hooks"). Kimberle Crenshaw's theorization of black women's discrimination is closely connected with the work of hooks. The concept of 'intersectionality,' was first put forth by Crenshaw in 1989 in her seminal article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," published in the *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. In her article, Crenshaw, a scholar of contemporary Black feminist legal theory and race studies, draws out an analogy between the prejudicial experiences of black women, and an accident occurring at a traffic intersection.

According to Crenshaw, just as an accident at a traffic intersection can take place due to vehicles moving towards it from one or more directions, black female oppression arises from a varying combination of detrimental factors (qtd. In Smith, "Black Feminism"). Crenshaw elucidates her analogy in the following manner:

> 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 . . . [or] 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. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing" 149)

Crenshaw's definition focuses on the omission or "conceptual limitations" within legal cases that tend to overlook the specific form of discrimination suffered by black women following from the overlap of black racial and feminine gender characteristics (Coaston, "The intersectionality"). In addition, Rogers et al. also view intersectionality, not as involving independent forms of bias, but as an approach which foregrounds "forms of discrimination centred on race, gender, class, . . . and other forms of identity," thus interacting to generate "particularized forms of social oppression" (Rogers et al., "intersectionality"). Crenshaw's term 'intersectionality' delineates "the interconnected aspects of an individual's or group's identity" (School, "The Black"). These may take into consideration forms of bias such as racism, classism, and sexism built around socio-political characteristics such as race, class, and gender respectively (School). The notion of intersectionality brings into view the distinction between "a Black woman's experiences" and "a Black man's or a white woman's," based on the combination of racism and sexism impacting them (School).

Furthermore, even though the works of Crenshaw and hooks have originated and gained popularity in recent decades, they address the problems of black women and women-of-colour that may be traced back to politico-historical contexts situated as far back as the African slave trade period and various eras of colonization – forming periods of grave turmoil for women native to the 'Third World.' The black feminist movement may also be viewed as having a historical basis and parallel in literatures around the world representing stories of the struggles of women existing at the intersection of two or more kinds of socio-political prejudice. More specifically, it is important to note that fictional works in English by notable woman authors of colour such as Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and more recently Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Bernardine Evaristo, Buchi Emecheta, and Zadie Smith have exemplified in-depth, the intricate intersectional challenges of belonging to multiple minority categories.

The author Zadie Smith deliberates in her narratives on the sufferings and victimizations of marginal women characters, while depicting their grit and perseverance when placed within oppressive gendered or racial binaries in their immediate or larger environments. Smith develops her novel *White Teeth* (2000) and the short story "Two Men Arrive in a Village" (2016), by outlining geographically and temporally varied scenarios of the poignant subalternity and the exploitation of women. She foregrounds within each of these narratives, the resilience of women whose dignity and welfare have been threatened by acts of gender injustice and violence. In both the above mentioned works, Smith develops the persecution of

women characters belonging to minority socio-political categories, and the subsequent resistance-attempts made by them aimed at survival or rehabilitation.

Colonization, Exploitation, and Resistance in *White Teeth*

The title of Smith's novel *White Teeth*, bears significance in relation to the experiences of the black female protagonist Clara Bowden, who is third in the lineage of the Bowden women characters in the novel, and a first-generation Jamaican immigrant in London. Clara, who is "gangly, buck-toothed" (Smith, *White Teeth* 24) to begin with, loses all of her top teeth in a mishap during a scooter ride with her boyfriend, the white male character Ryan Topps, who in turn retains his teeth (Wildrick, "Teeth"). Wildrick deduces that, "When Clara loses her teeth, Smith shows that Clara has had a part of her roots taken from her," unlike the white male Ryan Topps who retains his teeth symbolising that "he has strong roots deeply embedded within English patriarchal society" ("Teeth"). Further, Smith employs Ryan in the position that causes Clara to lose her teeth, and hence 'roots,' thus accentuating the attempts on part of "the colonizing world. . . to eradicate and marginalize" the racial 'other' (Wildrick).

The middle-aged white Englishman Archie marries the teenaged Clara for her beauty and womanly charm, while the latter enters into marriage as a step away from the dogma and indoctrination characteristic of her earlier life. However, Clara is disillusioned by Archie's sexism and neglect, realising that the man she married is "No white knight . . . a dull man" (Smith, *White Teeth* 48). The black female character Clara's eventual attempts at gaining agency and autonomy in the inter-racial relationship with the white male Archie are exemplified in her attempts to take up work and educate herself. During the course of the narrative, Clara works part-time as a supervisor for a Kilburn youth group (73), and reads the feminist works Germaine Greer's *Female Eunuch*, Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (78), also enrolling for a course at a university (458). More specifically, these measures signify Clara's attempts to gain mental autonomy, overcoming the religious indoctrination of her earlier life, as well as the objectification and patriarchy within her inter-racial marriage with Archie Jones.

The lineage of the Jamaican Bowden women represents the formation of the strong-willed black female subject spanning the twentieth century, and across colonial Jamaica to postcolonial multicultural London. In addition to Clara, who is married to the white Englishman Archie, Smith's

portrayal of the Bowden women includes Clara's daughter Irie Jones, a second-generation immigrant, and a mixed-race English-Jamaican girl; and Hortense, a first-generation British immigrant, who is the daughter of the Jamaican Ambrosia Bowden and the white English Captain Durham.

Ambrosia Bowden, a young Jamaican woman character in *White Teeth* is exploited sexually by white British colonial officers, while being immersed by them in western education and religion, well in contrast to the cultural background of her own origin. Born and raised in the beginning of the twentieth century in the British colony of Jamaica, Ambrosia becomes the object of manipulation, indoctrination, and sexual exploitation by a white British colonial officer named Captain Durham and his colonial compatriots. The intent and wrongdoings of the white male colonial protagonist Durham are summarized by the narrator incisively by stating, "it had not been enough for Captain Charlie Durham recently posted to Jamaica to impregnate his landlady's adolescent daughter one drunken evening in the Bowden larder, May 1906. He was not satisfied with simply taking her maidenhood. He had to teach her something as well" (Smith, *White Teeth* 356). Ambrosia's maltreatment in *White Teeth* mirrors the physical and psychological oppression of colonial and exploitative urges of white Euro-American men towards black women, delineated by bell hooks in the treatise *Ain't I a Woman?* The intersectional marginalities affecting the Caribbean character Ambrosia in the capacity of a 'black woman' and as a native of a colonized region in the early 1900s, may be equated with hooks's observations made in relation to the white male colonizer's racism, sexism, and classism towards enslaved African women.

Still a young girl, the black Jamaican Ambrosia is manipulated physically and mentally by the English Captain Durham. Subsequently, Durham's fellow colonist Mr. Glenard harasses Ambrosia, who is then pregnant with Durham's child. Discussing the history, practice, and complexities of the maltreatment of the enslaved black female, hooks states, "Black female slaves moving freely about the decks were a ready target for any white male who might choose to physically abuse and torment them" (hooks, *Ain't I* 18). Smith's protagonists such as Clara and Ambrosia bear in common to the enslaved black women that form the subject of bell hooks's treatise, a lack of autonomy and agency regarding their own bodies, choices, or circumstances, thus being limited to the socio-political margins as their sphere of influence. In the same manner, the identity characteristics of the protagonist Ambrosia which include racial, gender, class, education status and other socio-political features may also be examined in the context of Crenshaw's theorization of 'intersectionality.'

Smith's character Ambrosia, may be perceived as inhabiting the intersectional margins of race (black), gender (woman), and nation (colonized). Therefore, she finds herself subjected to discrimination by way of physical oppression, religious indoctrination, and immersion in western dogma through authoritative male colonizer figures. However, Ambrosia claims agency by rejecting these forms of influence. Captain Durham, who has deserted Ambrosia – an expecting mother – earlier in the narrative, returns subsequently with an offer to rescue her from the disintegrating colonized land of Jamaica, as an "an 'educated Negress' he wished to marry" (Smith, *White Teeth* 363). However, Ambrosia rejects Durham, making her reply with a sentence from the bible stating "*I will fetch my knowledge from afar*," reiterated in her own daughter Hortense's affirmation "from that day forth no Bowden woman took lessons from anyone but the Lord" (Smith, *White Teeth* 363).

Ambrosia's choice in resisting Durham's offer, is indicative of choosing autonomy, while Hortense's assertion of resisting 'anyone but the Lord' by Bowden women, is more specifically a resistance of western patriarchy. Furthermore, Ambrosia withstands religious indoctrination as instructed by the white Englishmen Captain Durham and Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard based on the norms of the "English Anglican Church" and the "Jamaican Methodist Church" respectively (Smith, *White Teeth* 359). Instead, she chooses to become an ardent Jehovah's Witness, a religion she comes to know of through the female character Mrs. Brenton, "a fiery Scottish spinster" (Smith, *White Teeth* 359). Ultimately, the story of Ambrosia within *White Teeth*, forming an important subplot in Smith's novel, delineates her efforts towards claiming her spiritual emancipation through unwavering persistence, thus reinventing herself in pursuit of a more resolute persona.

When Durham leave Kingston abruptly, he hands over the responsibility of Ambrosia's "continued education . . . to his good friend Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, who was, like Durham, of the opinion that the natives required instruction, Christian faith and moral guidance" (Smith, *White Teeth* 358). Subsequently, it is Mrs. Brenton, a driven unmarried Scottish woman, specializing "in lost souls," who introduces Ambrosia to the religious movement known as Jehovah's Witness (Smith, *White Teeth* 359), and not the domineering white male colonizer figures Durham and Glenard. The character Ambrosia may be seen as occupying the intersection of several marginal identity domains, on account of her gender, Caribbean nationality, as well as racial and class characteristics, leading to overlapping experiences of oppression. Furthermore, it may be seen that the na-

ture of prejudice that Ambrosia is subjected to, lies at the unique intersectional convergence of several specific forms of discrimination.

Ambrosia suffers these forms of prejudice on account of being a woman, belonging to a colonized region, being a person of color, and being a 'black woman.' Even though Ambrosia is viewed by the English Captain Durham as a candidate for instruction in western knowledge, as well as for conversion to Christian religious faith, she claims her selfhood and autonomy by rejecting his exploitive and domineering influence, and subsequent attempts at indoctrination in mainstream Christian religion, choosing instead to be a devout Jehovah's Witness. The lives of the Bowden women Ambrosia and Clara, in colonial as well as postcolonial settings reveal the binary polarities of 'colonizer versus colonized,' 'patriarchal male versus subordinated woman,' and 'white master versus black racial minority.' Individuals belonging to the socio-political group signified by the first term of each of the polarities are seen to be in dominance to those belonging to the latter category, exerting oppressive power on them through deeply entrenched systems and mechanisms.

bell hooks's problematization of the specific marginalities of black women, central to the thesis of black feminism, involves the struggles and resistance by women on the fringes of the race, gender, and class domains at several politico-historical moments. hooks dismantles the workings of bias and ill-treatment towards racially, economically, or societally marginalized women perpetrated by Euro-American, Imperial, or patriarchal forces, locating causes within colonial history. Presenting a retrospective theorization of the immediate and long-term physical and psychological impacts of the global slavery on the black female, hooks avers,

> . . . sexism looms as large as racism as an oppressive force in the lives of black women. Institutionalized sexism – that is, patriarchy – formed the base of the American social structure along with racial imperialism. Sexism was an integral part of the social and political order white colonizers brought with them from their European homelands, and it was to have a grave impact on the fate of enslaved black women. (hooks *Ain't I*, 15)

Persecution, Community, and Resisting Abuse: "Two Men Arrive in a Village"

In her short story titled "Two Men Arrive in a Village," first published in *The New Yorker* in 2016 and later included in the collection *Grand Union:*

Stories (2019), Smith explores the themes of oppression, physical and sexual abuse meted out to an entire community of women by two patriarchal persecutor-figures who trespass on the village land, subsequently invading the village and violating its people. The story, set in an ambiguous place and time, details the gross violence – physical, verbal, and sexual – perpetrated by male invaders towards the female residents of a village in the 'Third World' or a formerly colonized region. These victimized residents respond by carrying out a poignant yet hopeful and cohesive attempt at resisting gender injustice and violence. Resonant of the collective valor of the village's women, the feminist scholar and activist bell hooks emphasizes the need for stressing the margin – an intersectional domain – as "a central location for the production of a counter-hegemon[y]" (hooks, "Choosing the Margin" 19, 20).

The village that forms the setting of Smith's story may be seen as comprising of inhabitants who are residing in developing regions of the formerly colonized world. The villagers dread the ominous arrival and mal-intent of the titular 'two men' at the time of sunset as indicated by the narrator's focalisation of the former people's state of mind "we understood what they meant by coming at this time . . . in such darkness you cannot be exactly sure whose ankle it is you have hold of: a crone, a wife, or a girl in the first flush of youth" (Smith, "Two Men"). Zadie Smith's depiction of women's abuse and the subversive opposition of maltreatment by the victimized protagonists in the present short story aligns itself with hooks' theorization of the history of black women's oppression and strategies envisaged for opposing injustice.

The 'two men' carry out their dealings and demands in the village through propagating a culture of fear, threatening the village dwellers by flashing their weapons, stealing things, asking for food to be prepared, occupying private family rooms and spaces, while ultimately ill-treating the women of the village. Watching television in one of the village homes as young girls serve food, the two men laugh, physically abusing and touching inappropriately the village girls and older women, "in a supposedly comradely manner but a little too tightly," causing them distress and even making them weep (Smith, "Two Men"). Finally, as the men of the village take refuge in drinking and weeping, having given up on hoping for the safety of their women, it is the village women who in a desperate act of courage and cohesion, form a human chain around their girls, protecting them with their own bodies. Simultaneously hooks puts forth self-actualization for women of color, as a significant goal of feminist struggle.

The narrator's description of the women's protective gesture of self-sacrificing motherhood as displaying "pointless courage" (Smith, "Two Men"), in the face of armed invaders culminates however, in the ironic tragedy of the denouement of Smith's narrative as follows,

> How proud we are, in retrospect, of our women, who stood in formation, arms linked the one to the next, in a ring around our girls . . . there was something especially moving about the pointless courage of our women at that moment . . . there came that brief moment when the tall, dim [man] seemed cowed and unsure, as if the woman now spitting at him were his own mother, which passed soon enough when the short, sly [man] kicked the spitting woman . . . and the formation broke and bloody chaos found no more obstruction to its usual plans. (Smith, "Two Men")

The consolidated act of selfless fortitude by the older women of the village community in Smith's short story, thus putting themselves in a perilous situation, is an instance of organized opposition to women's subjugation which may be viewed as being reminiscent of bell hooks's notion of black women's resistance to hegemony rooted in their double minority status of being female and women of colour. The anonymous yet brave women of Smith's fictional village, who would be perceived as being excluded as subjects from the domain of early western feminist theoretical thought, find representation in black feminism and the recent feminist criticism of emerging theorists who are women-of-colour themselves. Noteworthy among the same category, bell hooks in her essay "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," (1989) identifies marginality as "the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" naming it as "a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse" (hooks, "Choosing" 20).

The women of Smith's fictional village possess identity traits that are twice marginal on account of occupying minority gender and race, as they belong to a Third World village and as underprivileged women-of-color. hooks refers not to "a marginality one wishes to lose – to give up or surrender as part of moving into the centre – but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even because it nourishes one's capacity to resist" (hooks, "Choosing" 20). In her analysis of hooks's essay "Choosing the Margin," Mitra views hooks's classification of marginality as being akin to occupying "a space of recovery and resurrection" (Mitra, "Analysing bell"). This is so, as in hooks's formulation, the margin is a space which when occupied, "nourishes one's capacity to resist" (hooks, "Choosing" 20).

Conclusion

The present article has applied the intersectionality theory of Crenshaw, the conceptualization of marginality and intersectional feminism as theorized by bell hooks to interpret the representation of oppression and resistance in the lives of marginal, black women characters in Zadie Smith's selected fictional narratives. bell hooks views marginality as a driving force for greater autonomy and the assertion of rights that even out the injustices of gender inequality, racism, classism, and other prejudices that emerge from intersectional identities. In the novel *White Teeth*, Clara Bowden's foray into work and learning, as well as Ambrosia Bowden's declaration of agency and opposition to the white colonizer male figure, may be viewed as exemplifications of resistance to hegemony carried out by marginalized characters.

Additionally, Ambrosia's eventual refusal to leave Jamaica married to Durham as "an educated Negress" is her rejection of his authority and a final claim to self-determination for herself and her child. Furthermore, the heroic act by the women of the village in the short story "Two Men Arrive in a Village," drawing strength from their very victimization, is a lesson in community and courage. Constructing scenarios that elicit at times righteous anger and at other times hope, Zadie Smith represents the glaring absence of an equitable socio-political framework surrounding the 'black woman,' the woman-of-color, or varied categorizations of the 'marginalized' woman across chronologically diverse settings. The plights of the novel *White Teeth*'s black Caribbean women Clara and Ambrosia located in the beginning of the twentieth century, and those of the unnamed women of the village in Smith's short story emphasize questions and debates surrounding gender inequity, black feminism, and intersectionality – making a significant contribution to a growing body of the fiction of feminist struggle by contemporary black women authors.

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