



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 13. Issue 2. 2026 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

Black Feminism and Intersectionality in Contemporary Literature

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[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.13.2.206](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.13.2.206)



Article information

Article Received:16/05/2026
Article Accepted:13/06/2026
Published online:23/06/2026

Abstract

This paper argues that Black feminism, emerging in the 19th century, addresses the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class that Black women face. It developed in response to neglect by mainstream feminist and black liberation movements. This perspective is powerfully represented by writers such as Toni Morrison, Bell Hooks, Maya Angelou, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Audre Lorde. By prioritising intersectionality, contemporary Black women's literature exposes interconnected barriers. It also creates space for resistance, healing, and identity reconstruction.

Key Words: Oppression, Suppression, Intersectionality, Racism, Colour Segregation, Abolition Movement.

Introduction

Mainstream feminism ignored race. Anti-racist movements ignored gender oppression. Black feminists argued that Black women face multiple systems of oppression. All women struggle under patriarchy, but Black women also confront white supremacy and racialised class oppression. This led to the concept that people experience discrimination and privilege based on various intersecting identities. Black women face both race and gender discrimination. These forms of discrimination cannot be separated.

Black legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term Intersectionality in her insightful essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex- A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." The concept of Intersectionality is not an abstract notion. Rather, it describes how multiple forms of oppression are experienced. Crenshaw uses the following analogy, referring to a concept of Intersection, to make it concrete:

Consider an analogy to traffic at an intersection, with cars coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens at an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions, sometimes 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..... But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid

marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm.

Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, refers to how forms of discrimination such as race, gender, and class overlap, creating unique and compounded experiences of marginalisation. It offers a crucial framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of women's rights and how social identities shape women's experiences.

Crenshaw argues that black women are discriminated against in ways that often do not fit neatly within the legal categories of either "racism" or "sexism" - but as a combination of both racism and sexism. Yet the legal system has generally defined sexism as based upon unspoken reference to the injustice confronted by all (including white) women, while defining racism as referring to those faced by all (including male) blacks and other people of colour.

Crenshaw describes several employment discrimination-based lawsuits to illustrate how black women's complaints often fall between the cracks precisely because they are discriminated against both as women and as blacks. The concept of Intersectionality was widely adopted because it managed to encompass, in a single word, the concurrent experiences of the multiple oppressions faced by black women, but it was a new concept. Since the times of slavery, black women have eloquently described the multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender, referring to the concept as "interlocking oppressions" , "contemporaneous oppressions," "double jeopardy," "triple jeopardy," or any number of descriptive terms.

Black feminism created a distinct identity in the history of global thought. There is stratification among the black women on the basis of nation, ethnicity, class, and so on. Therefore, the history of black women is unique due to their plural experiences. It would be interesting to look at the different forms of activity of black women, as well as the history of black women activists and their collective assertions. For instance, Sojourner Truth (Isabella Baumfree), born in New York State (1797-1883), was a slave and travelling preacher. She delivered powerful lectures on the abolition of race and on suffrage. She emphasised the plight of black women and also challenged the stereotypes about black women. In one of her pioneering speeches, "*Ain't I a Woman?*" , she argues that she is from a different nation, "the country of the slave." This expression shows her understanding of her sidelined existence as a slave and woman. She contends that black women are equal to black men in the context of their rights.

Like most other black feminists, Kimberle Crenshaw emphasises the importance of Sojourner Truth's famous "*Ain't I a Woman?*" speech delivered to the 1851 women's convention in Ohio:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into a carriage, or over mud puddles, or gives me the best place! And *Ain't I a Woman?* Look at me! Look at my arm! I could 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! *Ain't I a woman?* I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And Ain't I a woman?

Truth's words vividly contrast the character of oppression faced by white and Black women. While white middle-class women have traditionally been treated as delicate and overly emotional, destined to subordinate themselves to white men, Black women have been denigrated and subject to the racist abuse that is a foundational element in society. Crenshaw draws a parallel between Truth's experience with the white suffrage movement and Black women's experience with modern feminism, arguing, "When Feminist Theory and Politics that came to reflect women's experiences and women's aspirations do not include or speak to Black women, Black women must ask, 'Ain't we women?'"

Like Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins uses the concept of Intersectionality to analyse how “oppressions (such as ‘race and gender’ or ‘sexuality and nation’) work together in producing injustice”. But Collins adds the concept “matrix of dominations” to this formulation: “In contrast, the matrix of dominations refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organised. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppressions”.

Black women participated in the major activities of the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) from 1909 to 1945. Black female teachers were present in the New Orleans branch. Abolitionist leaders such as Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Tubman, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper talked about race and gender. Angela Davis and Kathleen Cleaver were active in the Black Panther Movement in the 1960s. According to Carol Moselay Braun, the civil rights activism was one track, and the electoral process was the other. She was the first black woman to serve in the U.S. Senate. A hybrid identity based on the intersection of black and woman formed through the advent of black women into the political arena. In the next section, you will learn about the various dimensions related to solidarity and the critique of Black feminist discourse.

Methodology

The present research article applied a comparative literary approach and a qualitative method. The comparative analysis of three selected novels: Zora Neal Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, selected for the study. Through comparative analysis, the study examines how black women characters experience and resist multiple oppressions across different historical and cultural contexts. And also analysed Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality. And how multiple forms of inequality and disadvantage combine and create unique experiences of oppression.

Literature Review

Zora Neale Hurston, a brilliant figure and a renowned American author known for her contribution to African American literature. She raises her voice for Black communities. She exemplifies in her incredible work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the story of an innocent girl, Janie Crawford, who comes across intersectional forms of oppression as a Black woman and thereafter her journey toward the search for freedom, self-discovery, and independence in the white American social and cultural environment.

Doris Grumbach 1987 proclaims that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is “the finest Black narrative of its time and one of the finest of all time”. (p.23). Hurston’s narrative incorporates elements of rich prose, vibrant dialogues, and exploration of the concepts of love, gender, and identity, making her a dominant figure in African American and American literary history. Hurston’s richness of ideas and authenticity give way to innovative use of African American dialect, allowing her characters to voice their experiences, affirming the importance of Black voices in American literature through her writing. Hurston touches upon the problem of gender, race, and class, dealing with the subject matter of enslaved Black women during the 20th century in the United States.

The number of classical models consists of the writers who are listed in the ranking of Forbes, such are Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, W E B Dubios, James Baldwin, August Wilson and Fredric Douglass, who was one of the most important advocates for the abolition of the slavery in the 20th century and a tireless defender of the rights of all African Americans after the Civil War (Cook and Tatum,2013)

The existence of the critical scholarship on *Beloved* indicates that the novel addresses the issue of trauma, memory, identity formation, and the long-term impact of slavery on the lives of African Americans. Despite the fact that the work by Morrison has attracted a lot of commentary, the connection

between identity and resistance is one area that can be further synthesised. As Beaulieu 2003 observes, this has been a consistent theme in the fiction of Toni Morrison to disrupt the historical narratives of domination by preempting the voices that have been marginalised by the collective memory, especially the voices of Black women. The chapter is a review of the important scholarly discourse in the area of trauma, memory, black feminist criticism, and resistance that proves useful in deciphering the convoluted identity negotiations in *Beloved*.

An understanding of the concept of intersectionality underpins how complex identity formation is in “Americanah” through the investigation of race, gender, class, and nationality. Adichie shows how identity aspects interlock and do not exist in a vacuum, but describe the way an individual experiences life and the world around them. Ifemelu’s narrative sets a backdrop against which a common theme can be universalised: struggles of the self whose identity is composed of many, often conflicting, social categories. Drawing on these interests, Adichie challenges her readers to think about how different structures of oppression and privilege intersect to form identities (Bragg 126-127).

Aside from this, “Americanah” indicates an order that further impoverishes inequality and marginalisation. Through the many trials and tribulations of Ifemelu, Adichie reveals how a single-axis model of identity usually falls short of adequately capturing the complex dimensions of lived experiences. Accordingly, the novel presents a view of identity that goes beyond the old singular modes to one that recognises intersectionality as what is relevant in shaping individual and collective experience (Landry 134).

Intersectionality: Shared experience and Diverse Realities in the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie:

Overlapping forms of expression experienced by Black women because of race, gender, class, and social expectations. The selected novels of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie portray women who face trauma, racial discrimination, patriarchy, migration, memory, and identity crises, making intersectionality an effective analytical framework.

Janie, one of the major characters and the protagonist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is shown as a radical and stereotypical element. Being a Black female, she suffers from the oppression of an intersecting form of gender, race, and class throughout her life. Afterwards, these significant intersections also help her to shape personal experiences, limiting her agency, and demonstrating how these varied perspectives create unique challenges for her. Janie goes through multiple forms of oppression, including gender norms, racial discrimination, economic dependence, and social expectations that affect her status in society. One of the main points of the novel is concerned with household clashes and the difficulties they produce. This can be analysed through the experiences of African American women in the United States during the 1930’s. This novel also examines the destructive impacts of masculine dominance, white ethnic control, both in Africa and America, and favouritism among the Black group of people.

Toni Morrison seems to reflect a consciousness that revolutionised literary space. Morrison maps this zone through the articulation of the female anatomy. Analysing *Beloved* paves the way to a revolutionary understanding of otherness in which gender is not separable from racial identity. From a position where gender and race intersect, the argument manifests in liberation from gender oppression; both gender and race are celebrated as liberating points. Toni Morrison complicates the construction of such identity and celebrates otherness through reviving African-American history. She acknowledges the horrifying effect of death as the law of the self that sums up everything. Toni Morrison projects into the novel is not her fear of the laws of the future only, but the loss of the past.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie constructs a plurality of Black women (and men) with different roles, beliefs, and desires: Ifemelu, a woman who does not want to depend on men, is portrayed

alongside Kosi, Obinze's wife, a more traditional woman who wants to get married. Adichie's aim is to disrupt stereotypes that affect Black communities and especially Black women and to provide a fair representation of what it means to be Black in contemporary society. Intersectional feminist theory draws on literature because literature has the power to disrupt stereotypes, bring previously ignored subjects to the centre, engage a broad readership, and shape new social and cultural representations.

In *Americanha*, the pathologising of black women's bodies is narratively enmeshed with the devaluation of blackness. Adichie writes in her novel, takes a stab at the entangle character of the access of stratification and oppression (race, gender, and class) in body discourse. *Americanha* is a portrayal of identity formation against the background of a globalised world. It contains a rich narrative that looks at race, gender, class, and nationality. One can therefore draw from the novel a very visible idea of intersectionality: that searches identities are not really separate or insulated but deeply intertwined, each influencing and shaping the other. Ifemelu's trajectory- from the experiences of a Nigerian immigrant in the United States back to her country, Nigeria- presents a strong case study into how identity has been constituted, deconstructed, and reconstituted according to the changing social and cultural landscapes (Shymchyshyn 136).

Sethe, the main character in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, fights historical slavery. Janie Crawford from *There Eyes Were Watching God*, fights against patriarchal silencing. And Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Ifemelu Character from *Americanah* fights against modern racial identity politics. The selected novels of these Black feminists reveal that Black women's experiences cannot be understood through gender or race alone. Through gender or race alone. Through slavery, migration, memory, and Hurston demonstrates the continuing relevance of Black feminism and intersectionality in understanding contemporary literature and society.

The aim of intersectionality within the Black feminist tradition has been toward building a stronger movement for women's liberation that represents the intersections of all women. Barbara Smith decribed her own vision of feminism in 1984: "I have often wished I could spread the world that a movement committed to fighting sexual, racial, economic, and heterosexist oppression, notto mention one which opposes imperialism, anti-Semitism, the oppressions visited upon the phisical disabled, the old and the young, at the same time that it challenges imminent nuclear destruction is very opposite of narrow.

At the same time, intersectionality cannot replace Marxism, and Black feminists have never attempted to do so. Intersectionality is a concept for understanding oppression, not exploitation. Even the commonly used term "classism" describes an aspect of class oppression. Most Black feminists acknowledge the systematic roots of racism and sexism, but place far less emphasis than Marxism on the connection between the system of exploitation and oppression.

Conclusion

Black feminism coheres around black womens socio-historical legacy of the struggle to servive simultaneously in both complementary and contradictory worlds defined by white supremacy and patriarchy, it has generated enthusiastic association and vivacious contributions from both black women intellectuals and non intellectuals. Black women's legacy of struggle, according to Kimberle Crenshaw's Intersectional theory, assumes a negligible intersectional character, that black women writers and intellectuals are much more inclined to decipher disparities and address neglected stratifications, whether it directly concerns us or not, even as we continue to give our work to facilitate important conversations and address our problematic erasure and negation.

Black American writers write from a singular, individuated consciousness, black American women writers are producing literature that makes visible the multiple African, to express a new black consciousness. They continuously maintained critical spaces of intersectional analysis and contributed

to mainstream feminism thinking. Black American feminist theorists like Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, Bell Hooks, Barbar Smith, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have explored black women's issues towards self-determination and social problems in ways that are very intersectional. Black feminism, which interrogates power structures and “valorises the knowledge production and lived experiences of different black women”.

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