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Intersectional Oppression in Ntozake Shange's Novel *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*

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Abstract

Oppression is a term that describes the exercise of authority or power in a cruel, unjust, or tyrannical manner to suppress or control a particular group, individual, or community. Black feminism's distinctive perspective sees oppression as an intersection of factors. The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights how the experience of Black women is not just the sum of racism and sexism but rather a unique form of discrimination that arises from the intersection of these two identities. The specific challenges faced by Black women are often overlooked in discussions of both race and gender. This article aims to elaborate Black feminist perspective toward women's oppression by focusing on the intersectional oppression of black protagonists in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* written by Ntozake Shange. The African-American novelist integrates the black women marginalized by society and by the men within their community.

Keywords

Oppression, Black feminist, Intersectionality, Marginalized, Society

INTRODUCTION

Oppression is a concept frequently discussed in the context of social justice and human rights, and it is an important topic in fields such as sociology, political science, and philosophy. Oppression involves the systematic and sustained mistreatment, subjugation, or discrimination of a group of people based on various characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, or other factors. Oppression can manifest in various forms, including but not limited to political, economic, social, or cultural oppression. Key elements of oppression often include the unequal distribution of resources, rights, and opportunities, as well as the denial of basic human rights and dignity to the oppressed group. Oppression can be institutional or systemic, where discriminatory practices are embedded in the policies and structures of society or organizations, making it challenging for individuals to escape or challenge the oppression. It can also be interpersonal, where individuals or groups exert oppressive behaviours on a more personal level.

The superiority of one's group possibly restricts another recessive group in their access or relation to society. Women's oppression is one of many kinds of oppression. The distinctive biological and physical features between men and women determine women's roles, value and trigger the standard of appropriate expressions for both women and men where men are active and women are passive (Collins, pg. 83). According to Collins, Black feminism is a distinctive perspective that views oppression due to intersecting factors such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and nationality (2000, pg. 137-140). To respond to the reality of Black women, Black feminists create theories which meet the needs of Black women by helping them to mobilize around issues that they perceive to have a direct impact on the overall quality of life (Humm, 1990, p. 19). Black feminism's perspective values African American women's experiences as the center of knowledge to interpret Black women's reality and define their objectives without comparing to the White Eurocentric ideas (Taylor, pg. 54-55). This means that Black feminism is the most appropriate perspective to examine African women's lives than the Western feminist perspectives.

Intersectional oppression is a concept rooted in critical theory and feminist scholarship. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a prominent scholar it was first discussed in the context of the lives of African American women who struggled with what is known as a "double bind," which described their positionality as being discriminated against based on both gender and race. It highlights how various forms of oppression, discrimination, and disadvantage can intersect or overlap, creating unique and compounded experiences of injustice for individuals who belong to multiple marginalized

groups. Intersectionality has become an increasingly popular term and is a useful lens for understanding oppression and privilege in our society. The idea of intersectionality recognizes that people don't experience discrimination or privilege in isolation. Instead, they may face multiple systems of oppression simultaneously based on various aspects of their identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, disability, class, and more. For example, a Black woman may face distinct challenges and discrimination that differ from those faced by Black men or white women. Because black men suffer only from racism and white women from sexism, they often analyze oppression within a “single-axis frame” and ignore the multiple forms of black women’s oppression (Crenshaw, pg. 139). Intersectional oppression acknowledges that systems of power and privilege operate in complex ways, and individuals who are at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities may experience a unique and more severe form of discrimination and oppression. It emphasizes the need to consider these intersecting factors when analyzing and addressing social inequalities and injustices. This concept has been influential in various fields, including social justice activism, feminism, and critical race theory, as it underscores the importance of taking an inclusive and intersectional approach to address systemic inequalities and promote social justice. This article will analyze Ntozake Shange’s novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* to find the different forms of oppression because of intersectionality, experienced by the significant protagonists.

Ntozake Shange was an American playwright and poet known for her activism through art. Her best-known work is entitled, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1975), it is a combination of dance, poetry, and drama. As a Black feminist, she addressed race and power issues in much of her work. Ntozake’s style of writing entails both magic realism and surrealism. In an interview that appears in Claudia Tate’s *Black Women Writers at Work*, novelist, poet, and dramatist Ntozake Shange states that “if there is an audience for whom I write, it’s the little girls who are coming of age. I want them to know that they are not alone and that we adult women thought and continue to think about them” (Jones, pg. 162). *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* is a 1982 novel written by Ntozake Shange and first published by St. Martin's Press. It is the story of three Black sisters, whose names give the book its title, and their mother Hilda Effania. The three sisters and their mother explore the intersections of so many things: the arts, racism, sexuality, and feminism to name a few. The novel is set against the historical background of the tumultuous 1960s and early 1970s when the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements not only shook the foundations of white supremacy in the United States but advanced the anticolonial black struggles throughout the Americas and other parts of the globe. Shange’s novel is a search and exploration of what it means to be a part of the African diaspora as a Black woman living in America. The family is based in Charleston, South Carolina, home to the Gullah culture. Gullah culture represents a unique community of African-descendant Americans; since slaves of various African ethnic groups were brought to the region and their trade is to spin, weave, and dye cloths as passed on by their ancestors who were slaves.

The novel explores the lives and relationships of three sisters, Sassafrass, Cyprus, and Indigo, and the complexity of their bonds with each other and with the world around them as they figure out who they are and what they want, against a backdrop of the racism, civil rights, misogyny, and oppression. They embark on their respective journeys toward fulfilment and empowerment. The three sisters differ from each other in terms of personalities and life choices. Sassafrass is a free-spirited and talented weaver in a romantic relationship with a fledgling and volatile saxophone player named Mitch. Cyprus, the middle daughter is a strong and ambitious woman who pursues her dream to become a dancer and struggles to find her niche in the dancing world. Indigo, the youngest is a rebellious and passionate activist. She is a music enthusiast and loves to play the violin, but she has her style which sounds like strumming in the first place. Her exclusivity in playing music is symbolic of her unique lifestyle. Their differing personalities and life paths create both tension and love within the sisterhood. The sisters' connections with friends and community members add layers of complexity to the story. Each sister has her own set of friends and allies who provide support, influence, and sometimes conflict.

METHODOLOGY

This study is intended to analyze intersectional oppression experienced by the black protagonists in the novel. The study is based on a qualitative method of research. The primary source of the research paper is from the novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*, and the secondary source comprises library resources and internet resources.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The oppression of Black women, often referred to as intersectional oppression, is a complex and multifaceted issue. It arises from the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization, including racism and sexism. Black women face unique and compounded challenges due to their gender and race. Some key aspects of oppression that Black women often experience in their lives are explicitly described in the novel in the form of oppression undergone by the female characters with a focus on the three sisters.

Racial Discrimination

Black women experience racism, which includes prejudice, discrimination, and bias, due to their Black or African descent. This can manifest in various areas of life, such as education, employment, healthcare, and criminal justice. The novel explores the lives and experiences of three African-American sisters—Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo as they navigate their identities, relationships, and creative pursuits. The novel illustrates how the three sisters encounter racial discrimination in various aspects of their lives, including education, work, and personal relationships. These experiences

serve as a backdrop for the characters' personal growth and artistic expression. The discrimination they face is not just limited to overt acts of racism but also includes more subtle and systemic forms of racial bias. Black women must navigate in such a society. Lamia Khalil Hammad explains Shange's Afro-American male characters are both victims of a racialized social system and villains in the context of their heterosexual relationships: "While rightfully acknowledging the black male's victimization by a system of racial, social, economic, and political inequality, one cannot fail to make the men responsible for their own abusive behavior" (Hammad 2011, pg. 261-262).

Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo is known for its exploration of the intersections of race, gender, culture, and creativity in the lives of its protagonists. It is a rich and layered work that provides insights into the complexities of racial discrimination and the resilience of individuals who navigate it while celebrating their identities and artistic talents. Racism is very evident in the novels as the daughters experience it in the school's first. Hilda is concerned for the youngest daughter who wants to explore the outside world. She unwittingly replicates the ideological framework that conflicts with Indigo's passionate desire for "the South". There is always a conflict between them regarding this. Hilda also reinforces the notion of a traumatized black woman: "This is Charlseton, South Carolina. Stars don't fall from little colored girl's legs...White men roam these parts with evil in their blood, and every single thought they have about colored woman is dangerous" (Shange, pg. 22). Racism is experienced by black people in almost everywhere in society. Leroy, long-term partner of Cypress and a black musician is not pleased with the way white folks tell him what to do and what not to do in music.

Black women's voices and perspectives are often marginalized within movements for racial and gender justice, making it crucial to recognize and address their specific concerns. Through the novel's unabashed look at how different women of colour have widely varying views on their intersectionality and their roles in certain social movements, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* divulges that support was a priority among doubly marginalized Black women. This support is most evident between the daughters and their mother, Hilda Effania. Hilda is away from her daughters but keeps on writing letters to show her support and concern for her children while they are living far from home.

Gender Discrimination and marginalization

Black women experience gender-based discrimination which includes issues related to unequal pay, limited representation in leadership positions, and gender-based violence. In *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* gender discrimination is a significant theme alongside racial discrimination. The novel delves into the experiences of three African-American sisters—Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo—and their struggles and triumphs as women. Gender discrimination is depicted through the challenges and limitations that the sisters face as women in a society that often devalues and oppresses them. The novel explores various aspects of gender discrimination. The sisters encounter gender bias in the workplace, where they may be paid less than their male counterparts or have limited opportunities for advancement. This mirrors the real-world struggles of many women, particularly women of colour. The novel also delves into the complexities of romantic relationships and how societal expectations and gender norms can impact the sisters' interactions with men. Ntozake Shange's work is known for its intersectional approach, considering not only race but also gender as factors that shape the experiences of her characters. The novel portrays how the sisters navigate the complexities of being both African American and women in a society that marginalizes and discriminates against them based on these intersecting identities. The sisters use art and creative expression as a means of coping with and resisting the gender discrimination they face. Their artistic pursuits also challenge traditional gender roles.

Gender discrimination which tops men over women and lets men treat women like property results in physical violence toward women. Cypress experiences sexual aggression from male members of the dance group she works for Fed up with gender discrimination and aggression she joins a radical feminist dance company called Azure Bosom. Sassafrass experiences physical violence from boyfriend Mitch. He treats her and the way he intends to change her. He strikes her mercilessly and this behaviour compels her to leave him. Mitch's violent actions remind Sassafrass of pictures of slave auctions: "Sassafrass ran to pick it up, and Mitch shoved her to the side. Once he had the tube in his hands again, he twirled it-and struck again, again, and again. Mitch, have you gone crazy...stop, stop, stop...I can't stand it, you're hurting me...stop it, Mitch you are hurting me" (Shange, pg. 80).

Stereotyping

Black women encounter stereotypes that are rooted in historical and cultural biases, such as "violent and angry black women", stereotypes or hyper-sexualization, which can affect their interactions and opportunities. In one interview Shange stated, "There was also a never-openly-acknowledged fear of inadequacy; fear that maybe the stereotypes of black women were so ubiquitous because there was some truth to them. It seemed that while everyone else claimed their freedom and right to be, black women were again being told: "You are to be who we say you are" by black men and white women" (CLA Journal, pg. 169). All three sisters in the novel are creators and struggle to break the stereotype linked to being from the black community. Cypress struggles with the body norms of the white ballet world. Cypress is passionate about dancing and moves to New York to be trained for dancing though her mother does not let her be a dancer, since she thinks dance is for white people: "You've been standing round that ballet class, haven't you? Ballet is for white girls; can't you understand your ass is too big and your legs are too short, and you can't afford all those shoes and special clothes..." (Shange, pg. 107). Cypress began her dancing career as a ballerina but found that the world of ballet was biased and considered black women's bodies unqualified for it. Cypress was always concerned with her body, its fitness,

elegance, and movements. She tried very hard to fit into the criteria of a ballet dancer. It is evident from the novel: “On the other hand, Cypress was too thin round her waist. It was as if she was rejecting the body the Lord gave her. There is nothing that can be done with a colored behind. Hilda knew Cypress was so determined to be a ballet dancer she’d starve, but never lose that backside. Indigo was making every effort to be in on the big girl’s talk” (Shange, pg. 48-49). Unable to change the norms created by society based on a person’s origin, Cypress abandons ballet out of frustration with its rigid rules and cultural insignificance. Rejecting what she sees as alien aesthetic standards, Cypress joins an African-American dance troupe called The Kushites Returned. Cypress initially fights against her own body in ballet classes that suffocate and stifle her later, she finds the courage to rebel against the white canon: “Cypress clung to her body, the body of a dancer; the chart of her recklessness, her last weapon, her perimeters: blood, muscle, and the will to simply change the world” (Shange, pg. 208). Her body aptly becomes an effective instrument to express herself and channel her frustrations, dreams and the terrible nightmares that plague her in the form of her parents’ sufferings at the hands of white savagery and inhumanity. It becomes a means of representation of the way to reconcile with the past and its traumas while regaining the indispensable strength to reconnect to her rich cultural heritage. It took a long journey full of pain, anger, and frustration to reconcile with the inner conflicts. She was remarked for something that was not under her control, her coloured physique, her heavy bottoms, and her short legs. Her dancing expresses a renewed sense of the self after years of self-denial and frustration in shallow ballet dances where her body is repeatedly condemned as inappropriate, objected to because of not being normative: “Your ass is too big and your legs are too short” (Shange, pg. 134).

Black women are also expected to be submissive and stereotyped as “mamma”. The misconception that a black woman is sexually fragile is the most tragic and traumatic aspect that should render a woman feel disgraced and disrobed. She is always viewed as a commodity, a ‘body’ to satiate the bodily desires of men. Shange depicts the eldest daughter Sassafrass, to be obedient as she pursues her family legacy of weaving. She is madly in love with Mitch without realizing initially that she is in a toxic and abusive relationship because her boyfriend expected her to be submissive. She experiences weaving as an expression of herself. Mitch, accepts her weavings, which glorify male “heroes,” like Marcus Garvey and Malcom X, but does not want an erotic hanging representing Josephine Baker, as “it wasn’t proper for a new Afrikan woman to make things of such sexual nature” (Shange, 1982: 69). She does not like the way her boyfriend thinks of her as a black girl who must be always prepared for sex. She once shouts: “I am not about to sit heah and listen to a bunch of no account niggahs talk about black women; me and my sisters: like we was the same bought and sold at slave auction” (Shange, pg. 73). He takes her for granted and demeans Sassafrass publicly, in front of his friends, boasting that he owns her sexuality, i.e., she is objectified: “I brought y’all a copy of my new book, *Ebony Cunt* ... I autographed it special, Mitch; see here...” for Sassafrass ... / I Know yours is good. Sassafrass’ face nearly hit the floor. She glanced at Mitch to see where he was at, and he was enjoying his clout with the fellas, because he announced: ‘Sassafrass got some of the best pussy west of the Rockies, man, and I don’t care who knows it, ‘cause it’s mine!’” (Shange, pg. 76-77). When Sassafrass’ boyfriend and his friend are talking about her body, her sexual organs, and other women that they sleep with. They regard the female body as a means for their joy.

CONCLUSION

The novel explores intersectional oppression highlighting the challenges and joys the three sisters experience in their struggle to fulfill their ambitions and dreams. Their experiences as Black women in a society marked by racial discrimination and social upheaval further complicate their relationships with each other and the world. Shange navigates the complex racial and cultural dynamics of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States Each sister goes through personal growth and transformation throughout the novel, leading to shifts in their relationships with each other and with the outside world. Their evolving identities and aspirations contribute to the complexity of their interactions. Shange depicts the efforts to combat the oppression of Black women involve advocating for social, economic, and political equity, addressing systemic and structural racism, and promoting gender equality. Recognizing the unique challenges faced by Black women and including their voices and perspectives in discussions about social justice and policy reform are important steps toward addressing their oppression as Kimerle Crenshaw asserts: “Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us” An intersectional approach calls attention to the fact that we as a society cannot simply view an issue as one of race or gender but must recognize that it is a problem that needs to take into account all parts of an individual’s identity. By only focusing on one identity marker (e.g. race or gender), we fail to both understand and resolve the problem completely. Overall, “Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo” is a powerful exploration of the intersection of race and gender and how these intersecting forms of discrimination affect the lives of the three sisters, highlighting their resilience and strength in the face of societal challenges. Arlene Elder conveys: “Shange’s women ultimately return to South, in harmony with each other, with their mother, with their artistry, and, most significantly for their development, with their African and slave forebears” (Elder, pg. 99).

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