

Intersectionality in Terry McMillan's *Mama*: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Objectives: This research aims to analyze Terry McMillan's *Mama*, paying close attention to the concept of intersectionality. It also aims to analyze the multiple components of identity that cause suffering to women of color.

Methods: This research uses close reading to analyze Terry McMillan's *Mama* as a case study.

Results: This research argues that intersectionality has a lot of dangerous effects on families and communities such as domestic violence, unemployment among women, and depriving women of their basic social and political rights. As a result, identity components such as gender, race, ethnicity, educational background, and social status work together as a source of suffering for women. Accordingly, the intersectionality that prevents women from enjoying their rights should be discarded.

Conclusions: The research concludes that intersectionality seriously harms women and has ever-lasting effects not only on their families but also on the whole community. The research, therefore, recommends that victimized women need to support themselves with a strong will, self-confidence, solidarity, and education to better the social and financial levels of their lives.

Keywords: Intersectionality, sexism, racism, classism, domestic violence, Terry McMillan's *Mama*.

التقاطعية في رواية تيري ماكميلان "ماما": تحليل نقدي

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ملخص

الأهداف: تهدف الدراسة إلى تقديم قراءة دقيقة لرواية "ماما" للكاتبة تيري ماكميلان وذلك لتسليط الضوء على مخاطر ظاهرة التقاطعية. كما تهدف إلى تحليل مكونات الهوية المتنوعة التي تسبب معاناة النساء ذوات البشرة الداكنة. المنهجية: يعتمد هذا البحث على قراءة تحليلية دقيقة لرواية "ماما" للكاتبة تيري ماكميلان كدراسة حالة. النتائج: تثبت الدراسة أن للتقاطعية العديد من الآثار الخطيرة على الأسر والمجتمعات كالعنف المنزلي والبطالة بين النساء وحرمان المرأة من حقوقها الاجتماعية والسياسية. وبناءً عليه، فإن مكونات الهوية المتنوعة كالجنس والسلالة والعرق والمستوى الاجتماعي والتعليمي، تشكل السبب الرئيس لمعاناة النساء. لذلك يجب التخلص من التقاطعية التي تمنع النساء من التمتع بحقوقهن الإنسانية.

الخلاصة: تخلص الدراسة إلى أن التقاطعية تؤدي النساء بشدة ولها آثار دائمة على عائلاتهن وعلى المجتمع. وبذلك توصي الدراسة بأن التسلح بقوة الإرادة والثقة بالنفس والتكافل والتنوير بالعلم يعد من أهم الوسائل لقهر التقاطعية ولتحسين المستويات الاجتماعية والمالية للنساء الضحايا.

الكلمات الدالة: التقاطعية، التمييز على أساس الجنس، العنصرية، العنف المنزلي، رواية - تيري ماكميلان.

1. Introduction

The novel revolves around the life of the African American woman, Mildred Peacock, who lives in a black community that is segregated and discriminated against in America. Additionally, Mildred belongs to a low working class, and she is persecuted by her aggressive and alcoholic husband, who cannot keep a job. In fact, Mildred's unconditional love and dedication to her five children – Freda, Money, Bootsey, Doll, and Angel – keep her from divorcing her husband at an early stage of her life. Freda, Mildred's eldest daughter, appreciates and supports her mother; the loyal daughter understands her mother's suffering, and she works hard to improve her family's situation.

Essentially, in narrating the events of *Mama*, the author draws on her personal story in so many places in the novel. Accordingly, *Mama* can be considered a semibiographical novel; therefore, it can be read as the author's personal statement. The character that corresponds to the writer's life and personality is Freda, the eldest daughter of a divorced and single mother, Mildred. The following excerpt shows the matching points between Terry McMillan's and Freda's lives in many aspects like the place of birth, being the eldest daughter, and having an abusive father and a struggling perseverant mother:

Terry McMillan was born on 18 October 1951, in Port Huron, Michigan, to Madeline Washington Tilman and Edward McMillan. She was the first of five children. Her father was a sanitation worker and an abusive drunk. Her parents divorced when McMillan was thirteen; her father died three years later. Her mother worked at a variety of jobs, including as an auto worker and a pickle factory employee. She was responsible for teaching McMillan and her siblings how to be strong and resilient, and how to take risks (Konkol & Ossei, 1997, p. 1).

After ten-year marriage, Mildred decides to leave her husband, Crook, due to molestation and infidelity. To her dismay, Mildred launches a long and arduous journey of continuous struggle after her divorce. Mildred finds herself enforced to take low-wage jobs to support her family. As a single mother and the sole carer of her family, Mildred has to compensate her children for the missing love and care of their father. In fact, she grapples with a series of mishaps as she is trying to discipline her children. For example, Mildred's only son, Money, who never really had a father figure in his life, turns to a life of crime and drugs. Additionally, one of Mildred's daughters turns to robbery. Nevertheless, she does not surrender, and she makes plans to enter a community college and start a career for herself at forty-eight.

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 as she critiqued the "US antidiscrimination law and its failure to acknowledge black women's unique experiences of racism and sexism as simultaneous and inseparable" (Evans & Williams, 2013, p. 1). She adds that the legislations, based on this law, fall short in protecting black women (Evans & Williams, 2013, p. 2). Gender discrimination has its roots in women's banishment from occupying powerful job positions and their relegation from the political arena. Crenshaw proposes that in order to reform this kind of inequality, women should participate in public life. However, feminism has fought to offer better opportunities to white middle and upper-class women not taking into account black women's stark situations. Black women are left with only one option, that is, to take on low-paid jobs with laborious works. Hence, instead of empowering them, the place of their labor, similar to the place of their settlement, becomes another source of their subjugation (Evans & Williams, 2013, p. 4).

Like feminism, intersectionality mainly tackles the issue of domestic violence that many women suffer from in different parts of the world. As Heather Duerre Humann puts it in her *Domestic Abuse in the Novels of African American Women: A Critical Study* (2014), women suffer from various forms of domestic abuse that range from small insulting words to horrendous battering (p. 10). Mainly, domestic abuse is one of the important reasons for Mildred's suffering that ends her marriage. However, the protagonist's divorce can be considered another stage in Mildred's life that encompasses different forms of strife.

Accordingly, Mildred's identity has several components that intersectionality tackles. Based on these components, Mildred suffers and strives a lot in her existence. Therefore, this research aims at analyzing the novel, *Mama*, from the perspective of intersectionality in order to highlight the various identity components of women's lives like gender, race, physical appearance, ethnicity, and social status that are the roots of women's oppression and marginalization in their society. By highlighting these components, I aim at raising women's awareness and consciousness about their importance and value in life irrespective of their different identity components. Furthermore, my research also aims at emphasizing the

vital role women play in their homes and their society at large.

Essentially, visible identity markers like race, gender, age, and physical appearance are important calibers on which people are sometimes judged. Yet, the main bulk of any person's story cannot be assumed by merely looking at them. In the words of Jamila Osman, these identity markers result in women's victimization. Osman, thus, defines intersectionality as "the idea that social categorizations like race, class, and gender create interconnected systems of oppression and discrimination (Osman, 2018, pp. 9-10). It is worth mentioning that the abolition of slavery has no significance as long as black women are objectified by men (Osman, 2018, p. 22). Thence, black women are doubly oppressed since they fight against racial discrimination with their male allies in addition to the strife against sexism they experience in their patriarchal society (Osman, 2018, p. 24).

From this standpoint, the main argument of this research focuses on the concept of intersectionality where women of color are enforced to suffer on multiple levels in their lives. Black women's suffering is mainly based on their race, class, and gender. This research is significant since it tackles and examines a serious issue that a large sector of black women suffers from. As mentioned earlier, the research sheds light on the various aspects from which these women suffer by applying an intersectional study on Terry McMillan's *Mama*. In fact, Terry McMillan explores, tackles, and reflects on the concept of intersectionality in her novel sincerely.

2. Review of Literature

In her article "Human Rights of Women: Intersectionality and the CEDAW" (2022), Buthaina Mohammed Alkuwari states that not all women are subjugated in the same way, and these differences in women's treatment emanate from many intersecting dimensions in their identities (p. 226). Accordingly, non-white women are marginalized on multiple levels especially if they belong to a "low socioeconomic status" (Alkuwari, 2022, p. 227). Alkuwari acknowledges that discrimination against women varies according to their different identity aspects. Alkuwari adds that dark-skinned women's marginalization intensifies if they belong to a lowly uneducated sector of society. However, this research differs from Alkuwari's article in that I conduct an intersectional analysis on Terry McMillan's novel to highlight how damaging and harmful intersectionality is rather than merely discussing intersectionality as a problem in general.

In his article "Reunion with Self in Terry McMillan's *I Almost Forgot About You*" (2021), Pradip Nathuram Pawar concludes that the majority of Terry McMillan's women of color are disappointed with their men, and they miss males' love and support in their domestic life. The female characters, particularly the protagonists, are constantly in search of self the thing that exposes them to various mishaps. Through their journey of self-assertion, these women exhibit "psychological strength" in facing financial, familial, and social problems. However, they experience shattering feelings of loneliness because of the "absence of someone who understands their emotions and provides mental support to them" (Pawar, 2021, p. 91). Theirs is an unfriendly world that weakens and depresses the anxious women. Nonetheless, they never surrender the fight for self-fulfillment. Moreover, Terry's women grapple with racial discrimination in many aspects of their life.

On the other hand, my research focuses on Mildred's character in particular rather than all of McMillan's protagonists. This is because the central character in *Mama*, Mildred, is victimized by intersectionality which constitutes the main argument of this research. What Pawar does in his article is to discuss the marginalizing position of Terry McMillan's female characters in general while in this research I pay special attention to only one of McMillan's novels, i.e. *Mama*. In addition, I analyze *Mama* from an intersectional point of view which Pawar does not tackle in his article.

In their article "Self-Assertion of Women in Terry McMillan's *Mama*" (2020), Tejashri Shivaji Patil and N. P. Khavare explain that physical and emotional violence is pervasive in the novel, *Mama*. On the other hand, it celebrates the maternal relationship between the protagonist, Mildred, and her offspring. As Patil and Khavare put it "Terry McMillan in her novel *Mama* glorifies the notion of single parenthood" (p. 254). Mildred proves herself courageous enough to stand up in the face of all the hardships she experiences as she is raising her children alone. Despite all the challenges Mildred comes across, she insists on educating her children, and she takes different jobs to offer them quality education (Patil & Khavare, 2020, p. 255). The protagonist is represented as an unconventional woman who has massive enthusiasm to take charge of her

family. Further, she rebels against the moody character of her husband, and she seizes any available opportunity to assert her identity (Patil & Khavare, 2020, p. 253).

Although Patil and Khavare discuss in their article two important aspects of the protagonist's life; that is, her physical and psychological torment on one hand and her fortitude and perseverance in raising her five children alone on the other, my research focuses on a very different angle. My main focus in this research is the many components of Mildred's identity that intersect and result in her marginalization.

In their article "Embodying Inequality: Using Ethnographic Data to Teach Intersectionality" (2020), Jeffrey A. Gardner and Ashleigh E. McKinzie argue that intersectionality creates different forms of inequalities, and it results in privileging some classes and subjugating others. They add that women are susceptible to intense persecution on the basis of their gender, and this persecution multiplies if they were black. However, my research is significant in that it does not tackle intersectionality in isolation, but it also applies an intersectional study on a literary work, MacMillan's *Mama*, in order to direct attention toward black women's suffering in multiple aspects of their lives.

In their article "Exploration of Self in Terry McMillan's Semi-Autobiographical Novel *Mama*" (2018), Pradip N. Pawar and Rajendra R. Thorat explain that the main female characters in McMillan's *Mama* – Mildred and Freda – struggle to explore their identities. It is particularly after her husband deserts her for another woman, Mildred develops a concern for education, and she decides to join community college in an attempt to find her 'self' and connect better with the external world. Nevertheless, while Pawar and Thorat focus their attention in their article on the importance of education in asserting women's identity, my research tackles the novel, *Mama*, from an intersectional point of view paying particular attention to the intersecting identity markers of women's suffering like their race, gender, and social status.

In their article "Voices from the Gap" (1997), Alison Konkol and Mina Ossei point out that McMillan's *Mama* has received positive comments and critiques about the realistic elements and compelling characterization of the central character, Mildred Peacock. The critics praise the protagonist's vitality and love of life. Nevertheless, other critics criticize that the author did not identify precisely her audience as she was writing her novel. Additionally, some critics censure the novel for its lack of focus and lucid point of view.

In her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989), Kimberle Crenshaw discusses that women of color are stigmatized and discriminated against "on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability" (151). She adds that black women were dehumanized and not considered complete humans or women. As a consequence, 19th-century black feminists not only challenged patriarchy but also white feminism that does not represent black women's needs and problems. Crenshaw adds in her article that black women receive biased and belittling treatment on the basis of many aspects of their identity, especially their race and ethnicity. As Crenshaw puts it, black women have to resist not only patriarchy but also other institutions of oppression.

As my review of the literature discloses, there are many pertinent articles and studies done on the topic under study; however, these studies' main focus is either the concept of intersectionality as a problem or one of the aspects of women's suffering. My research, on the other hand, analyzes the different aspects of black women's suffering under the umbrella of intersectionality by applying it to Terry McMillan's *Mama*. Thus, my research analyzes how the personal markers of a dark-skinned woman impact her life drastically. Basically, my analysis revolves around the central female character, Mildred, who comes across various mishaps in her life because of her gender, race, and social status.

3. Discussion and Analysis

Mama revolves around the challenges and obstacles that the protagonist, Mildred, encounters in her journey of self-assertion. She is married to an abusive alcoholic man, Crook, and she is unable to divorce him since she has five children to support. Mildred knows that her husband cheats on her and has a child out of wedlock with another woman. To add, Crook does not fulfill his role as a dutiful and respectful husband and father neither emotionally nor financially. As a result, in the later course of the novel, Mildred decides to divorce her husband and shoulder the whole responsibility of raising her

children alone.

From the very beginning of the novel, the narrator depicts Mildred's suffering from multiple forms of domestic abuse; her husband, Crook, beats and doubts her. On one occasion as Mildred is talking to a friend in a bar, Crook pulls her from her arm out of the place, and he injures her left foot by running on it with his car. Then the drunk husband slaps her face repeatedly to get in the car. The narrator continues in dramatizing the subjugated woman's molestation as follows, "Crook had smacked her so hard outside the Red Shingle that she had forgotten her name for a minute or two" (McMillan, 2005, p. 2). The next day, Mildred's foot was swollen, and she experienced "the combination of this pain and the crisscrossing of her thoughts" (McMillan, 2005, p. 2). The intimidated wife lives in constant fear as she knows that her husband may take her by surprise at any time and hit her head with his fist or "hurl her against a wall until her brains rattle." He might also flog her with his leather belt as he usually does (McMillan, 2005, p. 9).

Domestic violence in black households is attributed to the patriarchal traditions and beliefs instilled in black men from a very young age. Bell Hooks explains that "black male children learn that they have a privileged status in the world based on their having been born male; they learn that this status is superior to that of women. ... When women do not affirm their masculine status by assuming a subordinate role, they express the contempt and hostility they have been taught to feel toward non-submissive women" (2015, p. 141). Furthermore, Hooks elaborates further by mentioning that patriarchal society "believed black liberation could only be achieved by the formation of a strong black patriarchy" (2015, p. 244). From this standpoint, Mildred's community clings to traditional patriarchal norms and beliefs. As proved above, Mildred suffers from domestic violence; she is beaten and doubted by her husband. She longs for stability and peace in her life. In fact, this instability, I believe, is a very dangerous phenomenon when it prevails in a society because family is the building block of any society. Thus, the subjugation of women may result in a cracked and troubled society. In this context, Heather Humann condemns in her book *Domestic Abuse in the Novels of African American Women: A Critical Study* (2014), the normalization of domestic violence. Human expounds that as long as black women are imprisoned within the confines of abuse and deprivation, they will never be able to attain their dreams (p. 15).

As for Mildred, she realizes the continuous danger of living with an abusive and impulsive man, especially with the presence of five children in the same house. She also knows that this danger is exacerbated because of the drinking habits of her husband. Thus, I agree with the population-based study of Campbell et al. (2008) who acknowledge that drinking problems are directly related to domestic abuse (p. 289). In their study, Campbell et al. warn against living with alcohol or drug addicts. They add that black women who live with addicted intimate partners are in great danger. The study states that there are "fewer women who were problem drinkers compared to partners (2.6% vs. 32.3%). However, slightly more of the problem-drinking men had sought treatment for alcohol problems compared to women (21% vs. 17.2%)." Terry McMillan proves this study true in depicting the everyday danger Mildred and her children are subjected to by her alcohol-addict spouse who beats her violently at the slightest provocation making his family's life unbearable.

Terry McMillan illustrates the electrical and unhealthy atmosphere Mildred and her children experience every day. The children are helpless towards their mother who is being beaten frequently. All they can do is to listen to their mother's cries and freeze in place. For example, in one of Mildred's fights with her husband, Mildred finds herself cornered unable to move and begging her husband not to beat her: "Crook, please, don't. I'm sorry." She knows she is trapped, and there is no one she can call for help. She does not want to scare her kids any more than they already are. Mildred knows that her children are shaking like baby birds in a nest. All she can do is to hope that her husband "wouldn't take this any further ... to the point where he might just kill her this time" (McMillan, 2005, p. 10). In the meantime, the children are listening from behind the door of their room praying "that they could all finally go to sleep" (McMillan, 2005, p. 12). Even in the hardest and most intense moments, the warm-hearted mother cannot but worry about her children. In fact, Mildred's awareness of her children's turbulent and sorrowful state multiplies her agony and complicates her situation.

Commenting on the above quotation, David L. Albright and others explain rightfully that black women who suffer from "neglect, lack of information, disrespect, condescension, and microaggressions" are unable to create a peaceful and healthy atmosphere in their home to raise up their children. However, if these women receive better treatment and more care, their

upbringing methods will be more fruitful and productive (Albright et al., 2021, p. 1350). To this effect, intersectionality, I assert, is a dangerous disease that not only harms women physically and spiritually but also it has many detrimental effects on all aspects of children's life. It destroys the overall "healthcare system from within". Notwithstanding, different from many rare diseases, intersectionality can be eliminated (Alani, 2022, p. 1). Mildred is an applicable example of a black woman who suffers from the aforementioned familial problems the thing that results in her inability to raise her children normally and smoothly.

To illustrate, the narrator explains that Mildred always feels in danger, and she tries to be ready at all times to defend herself against any sudden attack from her husband. She hides an "ax beneath the mattress of the cot in the dining room" and she sharpens the knives. The narrator informs that Mildred has no intention to kill her husband, she just wants to scare him (McMillan, 2005, p.1).

Definitely, continuous domestic violence has ever-lasting effects on Mildred and her children. Mildred resorts to nerve pills as a means of escape, and her children go astray amidst the battle between their parents. Some of the symptoms Mildred's only son, Money, suffers from is his loss of control over his bladder. With the passage of time, Money retreats to introversion, and he resorts to drugs in order to escape his harsh reality. Moreover, Money and his sister, Bootsey, "become the biggest rogues in South Park, stealing from the Rexall Drug Store" (McMillan, 2005, p. 113). The distressed mother, Mildred, is alarmed and embarrassed by her children's deteriorated state. As a single mother and woman of color, Mildred's mission of securing a decent and peaceful life for her family is beset with a lot of frustrations and hardships. Nevertheless, as the narrator puts it: "Mildred felt she had to be strong at all times and all costs" (McMillan, 2005, p. 51). In this respect, I would like to comment that positive qualities like willpower and resilience can be used as weapons by women of color to overcome intersectionality.

The second female character that plays a prominent role in the novel is Mildred's eldest daughter, Freda. She is endowed with the same characteristics as her mother. That is to say, Freda is a dutiful and responsible daughter who, after the divorce of her mother, does her best to lift some of the heavy burdens laid on her mother's shoulders. Therefore, she plans to buy some fabric to "make all of our clothes!" (McMillan, 2005, p. 48). Being the eldest child, Freda has a high sense of responsibility towards her family; from a very young age, Freda is accustomed to taking care of her siblings during her mother's absence. Undeniably, Freda is another woman of color that suffers from intersectionality in the novel. As a young girl, she witnessed her mother's torture at the hands of her father, and this wounded her spiritually. Further, the late divorce of her parents lays a heavy burden over her shoulders that forces her to dispense with young-age joys.

In a similar context, many black women consider motherhood a source of power since it is a way of forming solidarity (Collins 2002, p. 170). In essence, this solidarity adorns and colors the strong relationship between Mildred and her daughter, Freda. Freda emerges as very helpful and understanding of her mother; she is quick in serving her mother's requirements especially when in need. To put it simply, the mother-daughter relationship between Mildred and Freda is quite strong in that they successfully cooperate and collaborate against all the odds they come across in their life. When Mildred falls sick and goes to her father's house, Freda takes over, especially that she is working at a public library. Freda manages to pay a few bills on time and to keep the refrigerator relatively full. In a later course of her life, Freda invites her mother to California where she pursues her studies; the narrator acknowledges that "Freda had worked overtime for the past three months so she could pay for Mildred's trip" (McMillan, 2005, p. 175). As such, Freda grows into a strong woman who challenges the destructive forces of intersectionality. She continues her studies, and she manages to support her family financially.

Mildred's unconditional love and dedication to her five children increase her capacity to endure her subjugation at the hands of her husband, Crook. Considering the idea of leaving her husband "with five growing kids to clothe and feed" fills Mildred with a lot of worries and fears. In the words of the narrator, Mildred's "teeth felt like chalk and she scraped them together so hard that they slipped and she bit her tongue" (McMillan, 2005, p. 8). Actually, Mildred's love and devotion to her children is expressed as she tells her husband: "They mine. Maybe they got your blood, but they mine." The narrator concludes that: "Motherhood meant everything to Mildred." (McMillan, 2005, p. 17). Additionally, Mildred sees her future

in her children. To compensate for feelings of loss and insecurity, Mildred, I insist, dedicates herself to her children. Her children “made her feel important and gave her a feeling of place, of movement” (McMillan, 2005, p. 18).

To elaborate further on black women’s emotional, familial, and marital problems Pradip Nathuram Pawar states that many:

of the Terry’s African American women do not receive consistent male support in their familial life and experience disappointment in their relations with men. Though Terry’s women show psychological strength in different crises like financial, familial, and social; they are found suffering from internal isolation. There is absence of someone who understands their emotions and provides mental support to them. The world around is a hostile place for them that leads them to anxiety, helplessness and depression (Pawar, 2021, p.89).

Actually, I agree with Pawar concerning McMillan’s protagonists’ disappointment and the lack of love and assistance from the side of their men. This is because the central character, Mildred, suffers from the same problems in the novel under study, *Mama*. Further, what Pawar states about the characters’ loneliness applies to Mildred’s state, especially after her divorce. We see her in the novel ventures through two other unsuccessful marriages in search of care and company. Moreover, she is overwhelmed with her search for the self-amidst devastating challenges in her life. All of a sudden, she finds herself alone and in need to support five children in an unfriendly world that does not tolerate black and poor women. At some points in her life, Mildred was stricken by intense depression – as Pawar mentions in the above quotation – that leads her at one stage of her life to take nerve pills and drink alcohol.

In this context, Collins comments on some black women’s disappointment and their inability to find supportive and devoted black male partners. Accordingly, their disappointment is replaced by dedication to motherhood which is already part of their beliefs (2002, p. 161). This frustration affects every aspect of Mildred’s life; she laments that her husband promised her that he “would take care of [her] and the kids like a husband are supposed to do. Told me I wouldn’t have to worry no more about everything or work so damn hard” (McMillan, 2005, p. 19). In fact, Bell Hooks agrees that many colored women “regarded the black male who could not free them from the labor force with hostility, anger, and contempt. Even in some homes where black men worked but did not earn enough money to be the sole provider, black wives were bitter about having to enter the workforce” (Hooks, 2015, p. 128). Thus, a lot of tension and pressure have stricken black marriages and other male-female relationships. Actually, Crook has been a source of frustration and pain in many stages of Mildred’s life; every time he promises to save her from the exhausting and lowly jobs, he lets her down. He has never assumed the position of the man in his house nor the father of his children. He does not even fix anything in his house. To add salt to injury, Mildred knows that her husband has “an affair with Ernestine Jackson off and on for the past twelve years” (McMillan, 2005, p. 3). As a result, Mildred is depicted in the novel as a heart-wrenched mother and a confused wife because of her useless husband. She is grappling with her inner conflict regarding the divorce and the massive responsibility of her big family.

In the same context, Audre Lorde postulates that oppression, which is based on sexist discrimination, is aggravated by racism and fragility (1982, p. 120). These are, as I acknowledged above, the main identity components of intersectionality that overpower black women and silence them. What black women yearn for, Patricia Collins argues, is the love and support of black men, yet this desire proves to be very difficult to achieve. Since black men are part of black women’s community, they become the main target of blame and criticism about black women’s daily suffering that “permeates the entire culture” (Collins, 2002, p. 160). In *Mama*, Terry McMillan makes it clear that abusive men constitute the foundation of black women’s anguish in life. In a heartbreaking scene when Mildred and her husband enter their house, they resume a fight that they started outside. However, what preoccupies the mother’s mind is her children’s fear over their parents’ quarrel.

Kimberle Crenshaw states in her book *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color* (1991) that in addition to domestic abuse, oppression enacted upon women stems from their multidimensional identities like their social class and racial ethnicity (p. 1242). In this respect, Nina Lykke states that “sociocultural categorizations such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, age/ generation, dis/ability, nationality, mother tongue and so on, interact, and in so doing produce different kinds of societal inequalities and unjust social relations”

(Lykke, 2010, p. 50). Yet, these categorizations cannot be studied and examined in isolation but rather “should be analyzed as mutual and intertwined processes of transformation” (2010, p. 51). As such, Crenshaw foregrounds black women’s suffering in their society by the white and in their homes by their male partners who abuse them (1991, p. 1243).

Additionally, women of color, who are most likely to suffer domestic violence, are either jobless or low-paid workers. They are weighed down by many responsibilities such as taking care of their homes and raising their children (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245) like in the case of Mildred. Accordingly, Crenshaw stresses that the aforementioned women are pushed to the margins “physically and culturally” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1250). Thus, black women suffer from multiple layers of victimization as they “experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). This is true for the case of Mildred who faces myriad challenges in her existence in addition to struggling with her domestic life, she also struggles with her inability to find a suitable job in a racist society.

In light of the above, racism is one of the prominent factors that violates black women’s human rights. As Bell Hooks informs:

Throughout woman’s history as a paid laborer, white women workers have been able to enter the workforce much later than black women yet advance at a much more rapid pace. Even though all women were denied access to many jobs because of sexist discrimination, racism ensured that the lot of the white women would always be better than that of the black female worker (Hooks, 2015, p. 199).

Despite the overarching number of the black working class in America, it is pushed to the margins and exploited. Ultimately, women form the majority of the black sector that receives intense assault (Collins 2000, p. 61). In a similar context, Patricia Hill Collins explains in her article “Gender, Black Feminism, and Black Political Economy” (2000) that black women are confined “to a small segment of low-paying jobs” which participate in raising the percentage of poverty in America (p. 45). Furthermore, Collins acknowledges that although racial segregation has ostensibly dissipated in the United States, African American women are exposed to some discriminated behaviors in their society (2002, p. 23).

To comment on the previous quotations, Mildred exemplifies the African American women who are othered and devalued in their society. As a result, the aforementioned menial jobs are Mildred’s only available options for survival after divorcing her husband. In the novel, *Mama*, Mildred changes multiple odd jobs like “scrubbing white folks’ floors, waiting on people in a bar, cooking hamburgers and French fries, taking care of dying old people, or winding spools of wire from three-thirty to eleven-thirty at night” (McMillan, 2005, p. 113). The burdened woman has to shoulder the whole responsibility of the house and children alone. All of a sudden, she finds herself overwhelmed with the financial, emotional, and physical duties of a large family, and she has to tend to her children who got sick shortly after her divorce. Mildred has to work hard day and night to finance all the requirements of her family “cleaning the Hales’, Grahams’, and Callingtons’ houses” (McMillan, 2005, p. 31). Although Mildred hates working as a maid, it is the only available option for a black female in a racially patriarchal society.

In “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” (1991), Crenshaw postulates that there is a direct relation between domestic abuse and the racial discrimination black men suffer from in white societies where their masculinity is subdued. Thus, physical aggression against their women is the only available outlet for their anger and resentment (P. 1257). In my opinion, this can be applied in McMillan’s *Mama* where the narrator draws the readers’ attention to the apartheid that black people in Mildred’s community are experiencing (McMillan, 2005, P. 26). Similarly, Crenshaw agrees that the community where black people live is subjugated by their race and cultural background. Accordingly, she concludes that under patriarchal domination, black women suffer multilayered oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, P. 162; Lutz et al., 2011, p. 37). Thus, Terry McMillan’s main character, Mildred, is portrayed as suffering from many layers of oppression in her country. It is noteworthy to mention that Mildred’s suffering is grounded on her intersecting identity components like gender, race, and social status.

It should be noted that one of the prominent signs of apartheid that pervades Mildred’s community is the late and slow development and civilization they receive from the government. The narrator points out that it is not until recently “the first

side street in the black neighborhood to be paved and get streetlights” (McMillan, 2005, p. 27). No doubt that apartheid wounds Crook’s masculinity and fills him with anger the thing that participates in pushing him into the world of confusion and addiction. In essence, these negative feelings are projected on the victimized wife, Mildred, along with her children.

In various instances, the author sheds light on the racial discrimination which Mildred’s community suffers from; for example, Mildred tells Freda that white people “don’t like to see niggahs getting ahead and when they feel like it, they can stop you and make it just that much harder” (McMillan, 2005, p. 37). Racial segregation, as I mentioned earlier, wounds the condemned men leading some of them to victimize their women in order to assert their weakened masculinity. The narrator indicates that the blacks of the neighborhood “hung out at the Red Shingle because it was the only place blacks were welcome” (McMillan, 2005, p. 26). To add insult to injury, the majority “of the black men couldn’t find jobs”. They are, accordingly, “bored with themselves, or pissed off about everything because life turned out to be such a disappointment, their dissatisfaction would burst open or their rage would explode. ... [I]t was often their wives ... who felt the fallout” (McMillan, 2005, p. 26). One of these subdued wives is Mildred who receives oppressive treatment from her husband. Crook spends most of his time hanging out in a local pub leaving his wife to bear the responsibilities of their family all by herself.

The intense discrimination demonizes black women to the extent that some courts consider these women unchaste; therefore, they are placed outside the realm of the court’s protection (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 157). Racial discrimination, in my opinion, can be considered one of the important reasons why the 14-year-old young girl, Freda, decides to keep it to herself when she is raped by a family friend named Deadman (McMillan, 2005, p. 95). Even when Mildred knows about the incident of her daughter’s rape, she decides to wreak revenge on her own terms; the following quotation depicts Mildred’s hysterical state after her knowledge of the attacker of her daughter: “[Mildred] reached under her mattress for the .38. She made sure it was still loaded, marched back to the kitchen, pointed it at Deadman. ... And fired four shots at him” (McMillan, 2005, p. 129). Knowing that they have no equal rights with white citizens of their country, Mildred and her daughter avoid complaining publicly about the rape incident. Even though black women are silenced by the norms of their society, rage, and grudge push Mildred forward to wreak revenge on her daughter’s rapist.

The novel conveys a clear message about the hardships and challenges single black mothers face in their discriminatory white society. In the words of Collins: “The situation of African American single mothers highlights the convergence of these components of how gender affects income. Such women are likely to be disadvantaged in the labor market, and without partners, they lack access to both men’s unpaid household labor as well as adequate child support from their children’s fathers” (Collins, 2000, p. 46).

In light of the above quotation, the situation of single black mothers is more intense than that of married mothers because they do not have partners to take part in the household expenditures. Therefore, single mothers find it extremely hard to secure the basic needs of their children. Undeniably, the novel’s protagonist, Mildred, faces similar financial problems. Despite the fact that Mildred works hard and assumes multiple serving jobs, she is barely able to cover the requirements of her family like paying for the gas and buying coals. However, to Mildred’s misfortune, she falls short in financing many other aspects of her children’s life such as her inability to buy all her kids’ needs for Christmas. As her kids grow older and life necessities become more expensive, Mildred sinks deeper into debt. At one point in her life, Mildred decides to marry merely to get some financial support. She justifies one of her marriages by stating her need for someone to pay her bills. Her prospective husband, Mildred explains to her children, “can help me pay these bills” (McMillan, 2005, p. 97). In this stage of her life, Mildred is in dire need of a real man who is willing to offer her what she missed in Crook, that is, love and support. However, she fails in finding her quest; instead, she finds solace in the help and support of her eldest daughter, Freda.

Moreover, in patriarchal societies, families headed by single black mothers are stigmatized and belittled (Collins, 2000, p. 48). In the novel, Mildred suffers from the derogatory view of her society. As a result, the readers find Mildred overburdened and overwhelmed at some stages of her life; sometimes she feels lost in a world where she has to provide alone for a relatively large family, namely, to feed them, pay the bills, and secure many other necessities.

Freda identifies with her mother especially since she starts to experience intersectionality in her society as she is growing up. Every now and then, she speculates and touches on the suffering of her mother. The dutiful daughter tries to rationalize her mother's state: "[W]hat it [feels] like to have had five kids, three unsuccessful marriages, and have nothing to do now but sit around and watch your children grow up and leave you one by one" (McMillan, 2005, p. 181). Therefore, Freda does her best to support her mother and siblings financially and emotionally whenever possible.

It is important to note, however, that black families who are headed by women are derogatorily labeled as "matriarchs". Despite the fact that they finance their families independently, the condescending view of their society towards them eradicates much of their self-trust and capability to resist injustice. Essentially, these women experience a double-edged weapon; they are pressured to be docile mothers in their society on one side and condemned "as matriarchs for being strong figures in their own homes" on the other (Collins, 2002, p. 78). The character of Mildred, whose community chatters a lot about single mothers like her, conveys these views as she is a single impoverished mother. She insists on assuring her children not to worry about financial issues: "I don't care if I have to beg, borrow, or steal, every last one of y'all got good sense, and I'ma make sure you stretch it to the fullest" (McMillan, 2005, p. 36). Collins prides herself on informing that black women have inherited from their ancestral mothers self-reliance and resourcefulness as personal traits that are celebrated and valued. Independence, I agree, is cherished and revered as a form of challenge to the pervasive stereotype of submissive African American women (2002, p. 116). Likewise, Mildred "had always prided herself on being self-sufficient and self-reliant" (McMillan, 2005, p. 47).

Another empowering factor, as McMillan proves in her novel, is education acquisition. In the words of Patricia Collins: "Acquiring a focused education demonstrates the significance of self, change, and empowerment for Black women" (Collins, 2002, p. 216). To be honest, I support seeking knowledge and higher degrees of education since they are of tremendous importance to attain improvement and progression in the lives of women in general and women of color in particular. Education enhances their self-confidence and independence; further, education makes their voice heard.

I personally believe in the power of education and seeking knowledge. Education has the magic to better the weakened peoples' situation. Education enlightens minds and broadens horizons. Fully aware of this fact, Mildred supports her children emotionally and financially to pursue their studies, and Freda manages to graduate from Stanford University. Moreover, the novel ends with Mildred planning for her future "I'm going back to school" (McMillan, 2005, p. 340). She will join a program for middle-aged people so that she can assume a respectable job. Mildred also considers opening a daycare center. Actually, in addition to the positive personal traits that Mildred has like patience, fortitude, and perseverance, I highly admire her appreciation of the value of education. Even though Mildred is not an educated woman, she is fully aware of the essentiality of education in life; therefore, she works hard to educate her children. Needless to say that academic success leads to "career advancement which helps women to assert their individuality" (Patil & Khavare, 2020, p. 255).

To comment further on the importance of seeking education as means of asserting women's identities and making their voices heard, Patil and Khavare point out that "Terry presents Freda as the representative of African American women who are quite aware of the opportunities in life that are made available to them through the means of education. Freda swears to become rich and famous and this attitude towards life signifies a great change in African American women" (2020, p. 255). As mentioned in the previous quotation, Freda represents broad-minded African American women. These women are conscious of the necessity of education for assuming better opportunities in life. It is worth mentioning that Freda has a vigilant mind to the pervasive discrimination in her community, and she hates seeing her family, especially her mother, suffer from biased injustices. Therefore, the ambitious girl plans to deconstruct the racial barriers, and she decides to complete her studies to assume a higher position in a different society hoping that she might be able to save her mother and siblings from their unmerciful existence.

Freda tells her mother "I'ma be rich when I grow up and I'ma buy us a better and bigger house" (McMillan, 2005, p. 35). Freda extends her dreams to plan her life after college: "I'ma do something that's gon' make me rich, maybe even famous" (McMillan, 2005, p. 145). She also plans to buy her family "a real house so y'all can get out of this dump"

(McMillan, 2005, p. 146). In her quest to achieve her dreams, the university student works “part-time as a keypunch operator at the phone company” which enables her to save three hundred dollars, an amount she has never had before (McMillan, 2005, p. 152). In the later course of her life, Freda manages to assume a secretary job at a famous insurance company. Thus, Terry McMillan makes it clear that by determination, resilience, steadfastness, perseverance, and seeking knowledge black women can pave the way for themselves to assert their identities and articulate their desires and ambitions. Herein, intersectionality encompasses various forms of intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and nation. Taken together, these forms result in women’s deprivation of their human rights. As a matter of fact, I agree with Collins that intersectionality incorporates many personal aspects of women’s lives that cause their oppression. However, my research is different in that it analyses these aspects by applying them to Terry MacMillan’s *Mama*. My research tackles the issue of intersectional feminism via the character of Mildred who suffers from sexist, classist, and racial discrimination in her life which, as I believe and agree with Collins, leads her to strengthen and solidify the relationship with her children. Further, this multidimensional oppression teaches Mildred many resisting techniques such as courage and steadfastness.

4. Conclusion

Terry McMillan’s Novel, *Mama*, tackles the issue of intersectionality represented in the central character, Mildred, who suffers on various levels in her patriarchal society. In essence, Mildred represents black women who struggle with intersectionality in their existence. Ultimately, intersectionality results in othering and dehumanizing women of color. The dehumanization, as what happens with Mildred, intensifies if these women belong to a low social class. Mildred experiences domestic violence at the hands of her abusive and alcoholic husband in addition to the racial discrimination that is pervasive in her country. Thus, Mildred suffers from domestic abuse, racial segregation, and dire poverty. Moreover, the all-black society, where Mildred lives, is discriminated against and segregated by the white community of America. Bearing this bitter conviction in mind, Mildred is aware of her subjugation on the private level – as a wife – by her husband and on the public level – as a woman of color – by her patriarchal society. In addition to racism and sexism, Mildred suffers from classism as she belongs to a low working class.

This research also discusses the damaging long-lasting effects of intersectionality that harm not only women of color but also their families. After a long and painful time of grappling with inner conflict, Mildred decides to divorce her husband and shoulder the responsibility of supporting five children alone. The consecutive pressures and burdens inflicted on Mildred, whether before or after her divorce, create a turbulent and utterly unhealthy atmosphere in her house. Nevertheless, in a later part of the novel, Mildred manages to retrieve her wits and willpower, and she holds on to take care again of the well-being of her family supported by her eldest daughter, Freda. As Pawar puts it: black women “sometimes remain submissive and tolerant but they never give up attempts of sustaining their individuality and don’t compromise with their identity” (Pawar, 2021, p. 91). In light of this quotation, Mildred does not surrender to the challenges she comes across in her life no matter how tough they are. Armed with love for her children, determination, and steadfastness, the persistent mother manages to hold on and continue her journey of independence and self-assertion.

Furthermore, this research argues that seeking knowledge and pursuing education can help in fighting against intersectionality. In fact, the importance of education is highlighted in Mildred’s awareness and understanding of its real value. Not only does Mildred appreciate education, but also she works hard to implant it in the minds of her children. Thus, Mildred’s eldest daughter, Freda, manages to complete her college education, and gradually she improves the social and financial status of her family. In my opinion, Mildred’s resistance to patriarchy is represented in her divorce from her abusive husband, and her resistance to the unfair treatment she receives from her society is expressed in her seeking to complete her education.

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