
Feminist Analysis of *Drinking from a Bitter Cup* by Angela Jackson Brown

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ABSTRACT

This article is the feminist analysis of the novel *Drinking from a Bitter Cup* by Angela Jackson Brown. Researcher has used the theoretical lens of “intersectionality” by Patricia Hill Collins. In this article, researcher has explored different systems of oppression in the life of Sylvia Butler. The interconnection between those different systems of oppression is analyzed according to the analytical frame work of intersectionality. This study also shows the transformation of the character, Sylvia Butler, despite her difficult circumstances.

KEYWORDS

Black Feminism, intersectionality, gender, oppression, harassmen, sexism, ageism

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism is the advocacy of female rights on the basis of gender equality. Throughout the history, women have been exploited by men. At some point they started to stand up for themselves and fight for their rights. Feminism however does not refers to first female who stood up for herself, rather it refers towards first female thinker, who decided to speak up for rights and her efforts were also political in nature. Feminism started in west. Few of very early feminist activists are Elizabeth Blackwell, Jane Addams, and Dorothy Day. It is important to notice that most of the early feminists were white women. In the beginning, the basic purpose of this movement was to win right to vote for women; after achieving that feminists started fighting for different sorts of legal, personal and workplace rights. The political movement of feminism achieved many of its objectives and went through different stages. One thing, however remained constant that mainstream feminism always talked about the rights of white women. Black women were always marginalized in mainstream feminism. In the second half of 20th century, Black women grew feminist consciousness and they developed a separate kind of feminism for themselves known as Black Feminism. “Black feminism is a school of thought stating that sexism, class oppression, gender identity and racism are inextricably bound together” (Collins). The interrelationship of these concepts is called intersectionality, a term first coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. “Intersectionality represents an analytic framework that attempts to identify how interlocking systems of power impact those who are most marginalized in society” (Cooper). This study is an attempt to trace examples of intersectionality in the life of protagonist of the novel *Drinking from a Bitter Cup*. The protagonist of the novel is a Black girl who is often hated because of her race and exploited due to her gender, this study tries to show how these two forms of oppression interlink with each other. It also highlights the ways protagonist gains empowerment to combat different kind of oppressions in her life.

2. BACKGROUND AND CONCEPT

History has seen oppression with black women since the times of slavery. They did not receive enough attention in anti-slavery, anti-racism and feminist movements. During the second half of 20th century, some black Feminists raised their voice for their own rights and they criticized white feminists because of their focus only on gender oppression. They presented their thought that black women face class distinction, gender oppression and racism all at once. One of the early black feminists was Sojourner Truth; she gave the speech “Ain’t I a woman” in a convention in 1851. She pointed out the fact that status of black women is much less than that of white women; a black women has to work like men but she is not treated equal and she does not enjoy the respect and social protocols that a white woman does. Organized Black feminist movement came into light in 1970s. It aimed towards developing a feminist

theory which could easily explain the way race, gender and class are interconnected in the lives of black women. The theory also highlights that if a Black female wants to be truly free, she has fights at multiple fronts of racial prejudice, class distinction and gender discrimination.

There were two waves in Black feminism, in first wave black women grew a feminist conscious but they did not enjoy the same status as white women did. The second wave of black woman's rights is associated with the Civil Rights Movement in which black ladies took part for the freedom of black individuals. However they were never given essential positions when contrasted with Black men. The pre-third (1976-1990) wave Black feminists believe in intersectionality, which draws our focus towards the interconnection of different forms of oppression. For the first time the word intersectionality with respect to women's rights was used by Kimberlé Crenshaw. In her work Crenshaw explores two types of male violence against women: domestic violence and rape.

Through her examination of these two types of male brutality against ladies, Crenshaw says that the experiences of Black women comprise of a convergence of both racism and sexism. In her work, Crenshaw distinguishes three parts of intersectionality as influencing the marginalization of Black women: structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality means how ladies of black race face abusive behavior at home and assault in different manner than white ladies. Political intersectionality looks at how feminists and anti-racists laws diminishes the perceivability of brutality against black women. Finally, representational intersectionality shows how pop culture portrayals of women of color can cast a shadow over the real experiences of women of color. After Crenshaw, a black feminist by the name of Patricia Hill Collins wrote about intersectionality in her writings on Black feminism. Much like Crenshaw, Collins argued that cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity.

The novel *Drinking from a Bitter Cup* is the story of a young Black girl who faces physical abuse by her step mother and uncle Charles, after she loses her parents at a very young age. In this case both the oppressors happen to be white. At first, as she is a child, she tends to lay on others for help but eventually she recognizes to rely on herself. At first due to unfavorable circumstances and fear of her oppressors, she tends to accept the brutal realities of her life but eventually she learns to speak up. When she finally speaks up she faces severe physical abuse from her suppressor but eventually she finds her light through the dark clouds.

3. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are:

- 1: To analyze different systems of oppression in the life of Sylvia Butler.
- 2: To explore the interconnection of different systems of oppression, in the life of Sylvia Butler.
- 3: To explore the ways in which Black female character, Sylvia Butler, transforms in spite of all difficulties.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) What are different systems of oppression of Sylvia Butler faces in this novel?
- 2) What are the examples of intersectionality in this novel?
- 3) What are the ways of empowerment suggested for Black women in this novel?

5. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Black women are oppressed for ages due to their race, gender and class. Often these oppressions are interlinked and the theory that attempts to explain this interconnection between different forms of oppression is called intersectionality. This study is an attempt to find and explain the concept of intersectionality in the life of Sylvia Butler in the novel *Drinking from a Bitter cup*. This study attempts to highlights how she is oppressed due to her gender, age and race. It will also focus on the effects of those oppressions and her struggle towards her empowerment.

6. DELIMITATION

This study is limited to the character Sylvia Butler, different forms of oppression she faces, interconnection of those form of oppression and the way she gets empowerment in the novel *Drinking from a Bitter cup*.

7. SIGNIFICANCE

This study will enhance awareness about rights of black women. This research will help to bring forth a different and comparatively new perspective of black women. After reading this study, reader will be able to identify and analyze different forms of oppression in a better way. This study will also help the reader to find the connection between different forms of oppression in the novel *Drinking from a Bitter cup*. It will also emphasize on the importance of inner conscience and realization of internal dignity in order to find empowerment.

8. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section indicates that different people have talked about black feminism in different ways.

Maria W. Stewart is the first African American women intellectual, who talked about women rights, abolition of slavery, and the need for educational insight, in a lecture delivered at Franklin Hall on 21st September 1832. She saw that activism lies in knowledge and education, thus, advised Black women to “turn [their] attention to knowledge and improvement; for knowledge is power” (Richardson 41). Black Intellectuals like Stewart emphasize that, black women need to develop self-definition for survival, as the Whites will not help them attain empowerment; rather, they themselves have to stand up, and become strong and fearless.

Similarly, the most important black feminist text, “An Argument for Black Women’s Liberation as a Revolutionary Force” by Mary Anne Weathers, also highlights that black women need to realize, that they are the most degraded minority not only in America, but in the entire world. Weathers emphasizes in “An Argument” that “All women suffer oppression, even white women, particularly poor white women, and especially Indian, Mexican, Puerto Rican, oriental and Black American women whose oppression is tripled by any of the above mentioned” (Weathers, “An Argument”). Therefore, they must put their efforts to reclaim their place and honor in the world. Her work also highlight a fact that was previously ignored by other black feminists that women themselves are, to some extent responsible for lowering their value and respect in front of men, as they often act as sex objects. Hence, the need for self-definition and self-respect is emphasized by a number of black female intellectuals. (Siddique)

Contemporary black feminist believe in intersectionality which means that oppression based on gender and race is interwoven as Gillman says that: Race and gender are defined as mutually constituted and inseparable systems of relationships rather than as fixed or discrete categories. These systems are catalyzed within historicized and dialectically related processes of cultural representation, social interactions and social structures. Moreover, within such processes, hegemonic meanings of race/gender are transmitted and contested. (Gillman 120)

An online critic by the name of Hanni wrote about the novel on her website, she has talked about the struggle and bravery of Sylvia and brutalities that nature brought on her. She recognizes that protagonist goes through multiple forms oppression during the course of her life described in the novel. “Ms. Jackson-Brown does a solid job developing all the characters including the two main villains of Mother Viv and Uncle Charles. While they are horrible people, one more so than the other, they aren’t not written as one-dimensional. It’s hard to empathize with them and they are the kind of people you’d like to scream at for being cruel to a child” (Hanni). This shows that there are basically two major characters who exploit protagonist of the novel. She is exploited due to her age, gender and race.

Another critic, Rachel Harper has also talked about this novel, she has talked about the courage of heroin and how she kept her dignity by surviving multiple oppressions and assaults. “There are many lessons to be found in this powerful book, perhaps none as profound as the one our heroine learns over the course of her journey: that the ultimate form of love is survival, which she does with dignity and grace. This story of heartache, longing, loss, and faith is a wonderful novel”(Harper) .This shows the strength of the character of protagonist as she survives in the toughest circumstances. She finds her true strength in her inner conscience. According to Harper this novel is basically a survival story.

This research will focus on black feminism: intersectionality in the novel *Drinking from a Bitter Cup* by Angela Jackson-Brown. It will try to elaborate how oppression based on gender, race and age is interconnected; it will also elaborate how protagonist fights her way out of her miseries.

9. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is carried out through the qualitative design.

10. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical framework is the backbone of the whole topic and it shows how entire research would be carried out. The study uses Black feminist theory as explained by Patricia Hill Collins in her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Second Edition). She is one of those feminists who believe that American Black women's experience of oppression is different than American white ladies. She has faith in the idea of intersectionality, she says "If intersecting oppressions did not exist, Black feminist thought and similar oppositional knowledge would be unnecessary" (Collins). She explains that instead of debating which form of oppression is worse Black feminist thought focuses on how these forms of oppression are interlinked in a person's life. She says that "although all African-American encounter institutionalized racism, social class differences among African-American women influence patterns of racism in housing, education, and employment" (*Black Feminist Thought* 27).

She has also tried to explain that every individual has a very unique life made up of concrete experiences, value and emotions. So it challenges the ideas of those feminists who refuse to listen to the women with different experiences of oppression, thus fearing that they may cause a change in the way they define feminism. According to her each person obtains different amount of privileges and penalties from different systems of oppression. For example white women may be oppressed because of their gender, but are privileged by their race. She argues that African American women live in a very different world than those who are not black and female. The point of black feminist theory is to give voice to Black women's ideas and experiences who were previously thought of unable to define their self and existence. ("Toward a New Vision" 26)

Collins particularly highlights importance of self-definition, as "by insisting on self-definition, Black women questions not only what has been said about African-American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*). Thus keeping in view the above theory this study will critically analyze the lead female character in the novel *Drinking from a Bitter Cup*.

11. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The novel is based on the tragic story of an African American girl, by the name of Sylvia Butler. She was simultaneously oppressed because of her race, gender and her age. Her life is true depiction of intersectionality of several different types of oppression.

After Sylvia's mother killed herself around her tenth birthday, she was sent to live with her father who was unaware of her existence before he received a call on the death of Sylvia's mother. Her father was a kind, loving and rich black man. Sadly, same cannot be said about her stepmother. She was white woman who was not so happy about the arrival of her Black stepdaughter at her house. She is one of the main oppressors of Sylvia. At the very first moment when she laid her eyes on her she made a comment about her skin color. She said, "She is a dark one all right" (Brown 61). She seemed to be irritated by child's curly hair, which is an essential physical feature of black people. First thing she wanted to do was to straighten them out with chemicals, against the will of the girl. Sylvia was slapped by her stepmother when she tried to resist the use of hair straightening chemicals. From that moment the fight for dominance and personal freedom got started. Here we see a white woman is trying to oppress a Black girl. She also made Sylvia work in her own beauty salon. It is important to note that Sylvia was just a child and the work she did was unpaid. She would even take the tips Sylvia used to get from different clients. Sylvia says, "The woman loved it so much, she tipped me twenty dollars. Of course Mother Viv took it from me. It got to the point when people wanted to tip me I just told them to give it to Mother Viv" (Brown 209). This shows that Sylvia was indulged in child labor as well as she was not paid for the work she did.

Sylvia was also domestically abused by her stepmother. She used to spank her in the absence of her husband. "She had make me pull down my pants and she had spank me with one of daddy's thick, black belts..." (Brown 123). Her prejudice against the child reached its peak when they had a heated argument in the middle of night. They were at their beach house. Sylvia was going out to the beach, to pour the ashes of her late uncle Ray. Unfortunately she caught the eye of Mother viv. She thought it was absurd that Sylvia was going out on the beach with the ashes of a dead man so she tried to snatch the urn from her hand. Sylvia tried to defend herself and the urn but she fell and got knocked out. "My head crushed against the side of the coffee table, and the urn flew out of my hands. Then, things went dark" (Brown 125). This incident explains the prejudice mother Viv had against the child. Sylvia just wanted to pour down the ashes in the water of Panama City Beach but mother Viv could not let her do that. She asked her to throw them in trash. It shows her dark desire to dominate over the child. Mother Viv oppresses her because Sylvia belongs to black race and because she is a child. Oppression based on race and age is depicted from these incidents.

Sylvia's second and worst oppressor is her uncle Charles. He is an ex-marine and brother of mother Viv. He has lost his one leg in an army camp and because of that army has now retired him. He is heartbroken. All his life, he has been trained to kill and hunt. Now, suddenly he is sent to live in a normal society. Failing to cope with his new circumstances, he starts excessive drinking. He also makes Sylvia the subject of his brutality. He rapes her whenever he finds her vulnerable. First time he raped her on the night when her father had a heart attack and she and Charles were alone in the house. She was just eleven years old. In legal terms it was child rape. She tried to resist but she was physically overpowered by him. "I continued to squirm and try to get away. I tried to use all of my strength to get out of his grip, but he held me too tight"(Brown 183). Aftermaths of this sad incident were extremely traumatic in nature. She says "I tried to scream. Like when you are in the middle of a terrible, humble nightmare and you are trying to make words come out of your mouth but they won't. No sound came out"(Brown 184).

He raped her again and again and Sylvia remained silent about it because "I figured no one would believe me. Uncle Charles was the golden boy. Even with all of his drinking, no one would believe for a moment he came to my room and raped me. This I knew for certain"(Brown 196). Here she is oppressed due to her gender and she is failing to stand up against this brutal crime because of her age and race. Other than those two, third person was Mother Viv in the house and she herself was an oppressor of Sylvia, she could not care less about her. "I knew it did not matter if she had heard him coming into my room. She would have turned a blind eye"(Brown 196). Here we see intersection of different forms of oppression. She is being raped by her uncle and she cannot tell anyone because she is scared of her step mother. This helpless situation started to suffocate her soul and she started to think about suicide. "While Uncle Charles rubbed against me, grunting and panting. I made up limericks. Mainly about me dying in some way or another. Some part of me made plans to die. The how and when were still up in the air. I just knew something had to give. I was too weighted down to keep living"(Brown 199).

She was a black girl in a white family, due to her race she always felt like an outsider. It was difficult for her to connect and share her heart with someone. Her cousin Jean was her best friend but she did not feel comfortable telling her about Uncle Charles. "There were time I tempted to confide in her, but like everyone else, I feared she would not believe me. I would have been too hurt to have her call me a liar, so I stuffed my horrible secret as far inside of me as I could"(Brown 207). It is clear from the text quoted above that she had to make a choice if she was to tell anyone about her rape, she would lose whatever little social acceptance she has. She is suffering at multiple fronts, on one hand she is being raped, on the other she is unable to talk to anyone. This is one the most prominent example of intersectionality in the novel. Here protagonist is suffering from both sexism and racism at the same time.

After Sylvia was completely doomed in the darkness. She had accepted her the fact that her Uncle's night visits are only one more thing she had to bear after the death of her parents. She was suffering from severe depression. Every now and then she thought about killing her own self. But then she found the light of hope when she had her first period. The night when Charles came into her room, she told him that she had her first period that day and surprisingly he did not touch her that night, instead he went out of her room silently. This incident made her feel empowered. She would sometimes lie to him about periods and he would leave her alone. This made her proud of herself and her body. From this moment a spark was ignited within her. She realized that it was she herself who can set her free.

Sylvia's boyfriend is another source of light in her life. They both love each other and when Sylvia is with him she forgets all her worries. After being his girlfriend, she wanted to be loyal to him. She wanted to be free. One day when she made love to her boyfriend she realized the difference between love making and being raped. She says, "I began to understand what happened between Uncle Charles and I had been dirty and nasty. Even though I had convinced myself I did not mind what he and I did together, I did mind. I also realized I was a victim. I did not have a choice but to do things he made me do" (Brown 231). In her mind, she was clear that she wanted to be free of Uncle Charles. On that day latter when she was alone with him, she asked him the permission to go on a dance with her boyfriend. He denied the permission by saying that she was too young and she was not allowed to date till the age of sixteen. To this she responded, "three years ago, I was just eleven. If what you did to me then was all right, then it should be alright for me to go to prom now"(Brown 235). This was very brave moment for Sylvia. She was confronting her oppressor face to face. She demanded her freedom back. She said, "I want to go to the dance and I want to be free"(Brown 235). Filled with anger, she confronted him about the rape. "You raped me, I said, staring straight at him, not even blinking. Since I was eleven, you have raped me over and over and I want you to stop"(Brown 236). After hearing this, he got furious and slapped her, he claimed that he had always made love to Sylvia and had never raped her. Then he got up and took complete control over Sylvia and yelled, "You little bitch. Let me show you what it feels like to get raped" (Brown). The writer describes the scene in the following manner.

Tears were flowing in layers. One layer after another. He slapped me and then moved off me, evil oozing from his gaze. Before I could react, he pushed me off the couch. My head hit the coffee table I knew a lump was going to pop up. The dizziness almost threatened to overtake me, but I forced myself to remain conscious. I could not imagine doing what he said. I tried to get on my hunches and crawl away. He reached down and grabbed me by my leg and pulled me back. He grabbed me up by my hair and pulled me so close to his thing I almost touched it. It looked unnatural. Scary. I gaged. He slapped me again. "You better not". Somehow my brain understood he meant I better not throw up on him. "Do it" he ordered. "Do it or I will find out who this boyfriend of yours is and kill his ass. Hell, I will probably kill him anyway". (Brown 238)

Although she was being raped by the same man for the last three years but this was her worst experience so far. She was beaten severely and forced into oral sex. As traumatic as this whole event was, it also had a bright side to it. Sylvia decided to cut her hair and leave the house forever. It was the best and most empowering decision she ever made. She called an old friendly neighbor, Miss Cora and left the house for the bus station. Miss Cora had sent her nephew Leon who picked Sylvia and brought her back to Louisville where she used to live with her mother and other black people. When Sylvia reached there, her face was all swollen due to the beating, Charles gave her. She could barely see. She was welcomed and comforted by Miss Cora. She eventually got better and started a new life there. She started cutting hair of fellow girls and because she was so amazing at her job, she became famous among girls pretty fast. The best part about this new life was she got to keep all her money to herself. She says, "Miss Cora tried to make me keep the money I made from doing hair, but it made me feel good to contribute. I opened a bank account for myself and for the first time in a long time, my life seemed pretty normal"(Brown 266). This statement highlights the difference between a guardian and an oppressor. On the one hand, Mother Viv used to make her work beyond her will and never paid her, she even went to the extent of taking tips from her; on the other hand Miss Cora not only allowed but insisted that she should keep her hard earned money to herself.

After the course of previous events Sylvia became a confident girl who could fight for her rights and freedom. At the end of the novel, when Charles came to Louisville to claim her, to force himself on her once again, she did not remain passive, she fought back.

So I fought back. I hit and clawed at Uncle Charles, taking hi completely by surprise, allowing me to bloody his face with scratches and marks. In a moment of extreme clarity, I bit down hard in his arm holding the gun. If I would have had the power, I would have snapped his arm in two with my mouth, my desire to live was so strong.(Brown 275)

In this last fight with Charles, she got multiple gun shots but luckily survived and Charles was shot dead by police at that very moment he opened fire on Sylvia. The most important thing to note is that Sylvia fought back, she did not just lay there and accept her fate. In the end, she is happy and hopeful as she is about to give birth to a baby. It does not matter to her who is the father of the baby, she wants to provide a peaceful and natural environment for her child to take birth and grow. At the end she is happy with her circumstances. "I lay down in mama's bed and stroke my belly. I don't believe in happily ever after. But I do believe in happy right now. And right now I am happy. But more than my being happy I am not frightened anymore" (Brown 289).

12. CONCLUSION

First question presented by the researcher was about different systems of oppression that protagonist faced in the novel *Drinking from a Bitter Cup*. It has been found that protagonist, Sylvia Butler suffers from racism, sexism and ageism in this novel. She was hated by her step mother because she belonged to the race of African Americans. When she saw her for the first time she made a comment about her body color and hair, she always tried to change her curly hair into straight hair which made Sylvia look more like her white cousins. She never really accepted the child rather always tried to make her life difficult. She forced her to work at her beauty shop, on top of that it was unpaid work. When Sylvia was just eleven, she was raped by her uncle Charles. It was for one time rather she was continuously raped again and again over the period of three years.

The lens of intersectionality explains this novel elaborately as protagonist was oppressed at multiple levels and those different systems of oppression had a combined effect on her. She was oppressed by her step mother and her uncle due to her race, her gender and her age; she failed to tell anyone because she was a child and could not get her head around the fear of losing whatever social acceptance she had in that white family.

She found her way out of her misery because of herself and her boyfriend, when she became fourteen and had new experiences, she realized the wrong-doings which was done to her by Charles. She started to speak up for herself and

then fought for her freedom. In the beginning, events did take some turns for the worse as she was beaten, raped and shot but eventually she fought her way through the dark shadow of Charles. She had help of a friendly neighbor and police to get rid of Charles but it was she herself who decided to stand against the odds and empower herself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rana Muhammad Usama holds a bachelor degree (16 years of education) in English Literature from National University of Modern Languages Islamabad. He is currently working on his collection of short-stories and he has also written some Urdu poems which are also published online. His research area is centered around the marginalized status of African American women. It explored how black women were neglected in mainstream feminism and civil rights movements.

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