

Transgression of Race, Gender, and Class: Reading Mary Ann Shadd's *A Plea for Emigration*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore Mary Ann Shadd's transgression of race, gender, and class boundaries by employing a close reading of the text, *A Plea for Emigration*. I will explore the triangular relationship between race, class, and gender seen in the text from intersectional feminist perspectives. My contention is that, through her activism by pen, especially in *A Plea for Emigration*, Shadd exposes the feminist voice that enables her to protest against racism, slavery, gender stratification, and marginalization based on class hierarchy. In other words, I claim that Shadd's transgression of the borders of race, gender, and class lies in her activism and ideology as a woman, black, and marginalized. This paper will, therefore, show that Mary Ann Shadd strongly transgresses the borders of race, gender, and class as the first black woman who owned and edited a newspaper, inspired American blacks towards freedom, confronted her contemporary male leaders, exposed the female gaze during a period of history when the male gaze was predominant and authoritative, became a public speaker making the world listen to her while working with the so-called socially aesthetic people despite being a "negro".

Keywords: transgression, race, gender, class, Mary Ann Shadd, *A Plea for Emigration*

Mary Ann Shadd (1823-1893) transgresses the boundaries of race, gender, and class through her activism and thus emerges as a feminist who speaks not only against discrimination based on gender, but also takes action against racial and class-based oppression; so, her feminist voice, as exposed in *A Plea for Emigration*, can be identified as an intersectional one. The available literature on Shadd shows that she was an activist all through her life and did not limit her activism to just as a black woman or as a marginalized class. On the contrary, she paid attention to each identity individually. We can explore and analyze her works and performances, which she undertook and accomplished, to evaluate her activism. So it is not irrelevant to introduce Shadd concerning the scholarship that this paper intends to explore. Who is Shadd, then? She is a woman, a Black woman who was born in 1823 in Wilmington, Delaware and "grew up in a family of free blacks in the slave state of Delaware" though freedom was a relative term [in her birthplace] even for the free blacks because they were subject to "widespread persecution during this era" (Shadd 7). She was the first black woman who founded and edited the *Provincial Freeman* advocating for the freedom and emancipation of black people in Canada. At sixteen, she established a school for black children in Wilmington. Also, she founded an integrated school in



Canada financed by her family first and then by the American Missionary Association (AMA), an abolitionist-leaning white organization.

Shadd was a cautious and concerned voice on the question of slavery and racial discrimination. Being concerned about the rights of black people, particularly about the free black people who were under the threat of enslavement due to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, she advocated for anti-slavery by persuading both the slaves and the free black people to escape and to emigrate to Canada, a potential place of accomplishing freedom both racially and financially. In 1849, she attempted her first venture into publishing by writing a twelve-page pamphlet titled *Hints to the Colored People of the North* to disseminate her political ideologies. However, her success as a writer and an abolitionist became widespread after the publication of *A Plea for Emigration* in 1852. Mary Ann Shadd was also a schoolteacher, a public lecturer, an educator, a lawyer, and a reformer; all these identities allowed her to work on the abolishment of slavery, elevate the status of women, and emancipate black people from poverty and marginalization. She also worked as a recruiting officer in Washington where she recruited black people as soldiers for the Civil War. This activity exposes her agency both as a black person and as a woman because, by doing so, she ultimately helped her community to become emancipated financially and hold authority. We see that there are diversities in her works, though *A Plea for Emigration* is often called a microcosm in which there is a glimpse of all her performances. Hence, this paper seeks to explore Shadd's transgression of race, gender, and class boundaries by employing a close reading of the text, *A Plea for Emigration*. I will explore the triangular relationship among race, class, and gender from intersectional feminist perspectives. My contention is that, through her writerly activism, especially in *A Plea*, Mary Ann Shadd exposes her intersectional feminist voice. She advocates for the emigration of black people from the United States to Canada through her intersectional feminism which is considered to be "the flip side of white feminism" and thus challenges the dominant discourse of essentialist feminism (Nash 13). In other words, her notion of racism is inter-woven into sexism. We cannot think of the former without thinking of the latter or vice versa, at least in the context of black people and, more specifically, black women.

Before moving to the main discussion of the paper, I find it significant to address the term 'intersectionality' at this juncture. The term intersectionality refers to an interaction of "multiple, converging, ... [and] interwoven systems" (Carastathis 304). In other words, it is an interlocking system of oppression. In feminist theory, intersectionality denotes "the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege" (304). Kimberle Crenshaw uses the term as a metaphor. To her, "intersectionality is best able to challenge all forms of discrimination" because "intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (Crenshaw 139, 140). Intersectional feminism considers "intersectionality as a synonym for oppression, without specifying what, in particular, is intersecting, or how" (Carastathis 305). For Chandra Talpade Mohanty, intersectionality is a network that incorporates "gender, race, class, and sexual paradigms" (1). She believes that the position of women is interlinked to the "relations of ruling which posits multiple intersections

of structures of power and emphasizes the process or form of ruling” (56). For her, it specifies “the relations between the organization and experience of sexual politics and the concrete historical and political forms of colonialism, imperialism, racism, and capitalism” (Mohanty 56). Anna Carastathis says that “intersectionality can act as a corrective against white solipsism, heteronormativity, elitism, and ableism of dominant power and hegemonic feminist theory by making social locations and experiences visible that are occluded in essentialist and exclusionary constructions of the category women” (309). Hence, taking intersectional feminism as the theoretical framework, my paper focuses on the interrelations of the oppression between race, gender, and class. The interrelation is significant for the marginalized, erased, excluded, and neglected groups who can get a voice through it. White feminism, which is “mostly unidimensional in that its ideology focuses solely on the equality of the sexes” neglects the discrimination and oppression of women of color by essentializing the sufferings and experiences of all women (Marcus 1). Essentialist white feminism considers the experience of white women as the experience of all other women, and that what is appropriate for white women will be appropriate for black women. Due to the distinct cultural and social experiences of black and white women, their means of emancipation will also be different, but white feminism does not acknowledge this. Hence, intersectional feminism which seeks the interwoven relations between race, class, and gender “has resulted in more critical attention being paid to white feminism” (Evans and Bussey-Chamberlain 361).

In *A Plea for Emigration*, Mary Ann Shadd advocates for her abolitionist activism by persuading not only the free black people to emigrate to Canada, but also the enslaved to escape slavery and to move to a place where they can find their freedom and rights. The main reason for writing this pamphlet is that the Fugitive Slave Law made the life of American black people dangerous. She thought Canada as an ideal place to start a new life because not only has it such “climate, soil, timber, clearing lands, grains, potatoes, fruits, vines, berries, domestic animals and game, lands, labors, trades, churches, schools, settlements, political roots, and election laws,” but it also has a “just society in which a black person could expect to be treated equally” (Calloway-Thomas 1; Smith 6). This advocacy is her exposure to racial consciousness and her agency as a woman. It is because, during her time, a black woman was considered the “weaker sex” and expected to “establish high morals and virtue through domestic activities ... like childbearing” but Shadd did not conform to the expected gender norms (Rhodes 348). On the contrary, it might have been her mission to transgress gender normativism by employing several strategies which helped her defy her male counterparts. Shirley J. Yee aptly comments on Shadd when she writes:

Shadd’s appearance ... reflects the strength of her presence among a predominantly male leadership. She challenged nineteenth-century gender conventions by openly debating with black male leaders about how best to build community and alleviate poverty among Canadian blacks. Through her constant attempts to insert herself into the male world of political leadership, which either did not recognize or rejected the idea of sexual equality, she identified “integration” as a gendered and racialized notion. (2)

By integration, Shadd focuses on the necessity of including the racially and sexually marginalized groups who are kept outside the mainstream American society. In this context, both the people of color and the doubly marginalized women of color have been referred to, for the term women used by white feminists does not cover all women. Shadd persuades African Americans to emigrate to Canada because she feels that the total freedom of these people is not possible in the United States due to the deeply entrenched racism and discrimination.

Shadd's contrastive outlook with her male counterparts shows her unique standpoint on the question of abolitionism and the emigration of free American black people. As an abolitionist, Shadd had to work with other people, both black and white, whose mission was also to abolish slavery in the US. However, Shadd often found that their outlook and approach towards the anti-slavery movement were different from hers, so she had a confrontation with many of them including Henry Bibb and Frederick Douglass, who were in favor of segregation, whereas Shadd wanted integration. Rodger Streitmatter comments about the conflicting relationship between Shadd and Bibb. He says: "her nemesis became Henry Bibb, a fugitive from slavery who published the newspaper *Voice of the Fugitive*" (Streitmatter 27-28). Bibb favored segregated schools; Shadd insisted that schools be integrated. Bibb considered Canada a temporary haven; Shadd a permanent home. Bibb supervised the Refugee Home Society; Shadd criticized the society for buying property and then reselling it to black people at a higher price. These differences escalated into a bitter feud between Bibb and Shadd. In 1852, for example, the *Voice of the Fugitive* stated: "Miss Shadd has said and written many things which we think will add nothing to her credit as a lady" (Streitmatter 28). In this context, the word "lady" deserves our attention. It denotes a particular social status or class associated with certain expectations of behavior and decorum including modesty, obedience, and refinement. Hence, when Shadd is not accepted as a "lady," it refers to her ideas and actions being inappropriate or unacceptable according to societal norms. She speaks against the categorizers, thus challenging the issues faced by women of color. She wants to navigate gender and racial expectations and limitations.

Shadd's authentic outlook towards abolitionism and the prospect of free black people distinguishes her from her male counterparts. Though they were powerful and authoritative, she never conformed to them. On the contrary, she uplifted her individualism by exposing her unique ideology contrastive with that of the male world. In the mid-nineteenth century, when women, especially black women, had very little scope to speak publicly, Shadd became an outrageous voice by going against all her critics. Nothing could stop her despite several metaphorical attacks on her. For example, her criticism of the Refugee Home Society and American Missionary Association (AMA) stopped them from funding her school to be established in Canada West. Shadd used to maintain her livelihood with her little salary from the school; so, the AMA's refusal to fund her school was a show of their alliance with the powerful men rather than a powerless woman (at least in the eyes of society). However, she did not retreat from her path; rather she became a travelling teacher, which helped her to spread her views to a wider audience. Thus, she shows the world how to fight back and exercise rights, even though she was marginalized in many ways.

In *A Plea for Emigration*, Shadd addresses Bibb and his associates as the “very ignorant people, who think differently . . . , are in favor of the distinctive churches and schools,” and as “the demagogues . . . to make the way of missionary a path of thorns” (9, 51). Even though both Shadd and Frederick Douglass were against “exclusivity,” she opposed his view concerning the passenger traffic on the underground railroad (Shadd 12). Whereas Shadd urged black Americans to escape and get back their freedom by emigrating to Canada via the Underground Railroad, Douglass wanted them to stay in America and fight against slavery and for their equal rights. Shadd found that American societies are deeply ingrained in racism, gender violence, and discrimination, so it was almost impossible for people of color to have complete freedom. Again, black people were being murdered brutally by white supremacist slaveowners, so remaining within the country was a life threat that Douglass did not want to acknowledge. This is why Shadd contradicted him though both were abolitionists. Shadd did not keep any stone unturned to let her voice be heard by the patriarchal male world and dominant white supremacists. Thus, she emerges as a reactionary and revolutionary voice. Jason H. Silverman says that by opposing the advocates of segregation and by “[v]iewing all segregated institutions with nothing less than contempt, Shadd openly condemned those blacks who willingly subjected themselves to that kind of second-class citizenship” (105). For Shadd, people of color cannot even reach equality by segregating themselves from the white, let alone equity, because this separation identifies them as special. Shadd did not want to see the black community that has different rights and responsibilities from the white. On the contrary, she wanted to see a community, a society in which both black and white, rich and poor, and men and women live in harmony and peace without harming each other.

Shadd believed in the equality of gender, and the way she protests gender stratification represents her transgression of gender roles appropriated by society. Her mission of saving black people, especially black women instigated her to put the foundation of a newspaper named the *Provincial Freeman*, a voice against dominant political parties and religious leaders, which allowed her to disguise her identity as a female author, and to embark on the law as her career. The mentioned works represent her as a social non-conformist and a voice of anti-establishment. It is her mission of representing the voice of the voiceless, the black people and more specifically the black women who are marginalized by both patriarchy and essentialist white feminism. Referring to Barbara Smith and Adrienne Rich, Leema Sen Gupta's comments in response to black women's erasure in the white supremacist literature and the patriarchal literature is significant. In her essay “Intersectionality in Adrienne Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* and Barbara Smith's *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*,” Gupta says:

Black women writers . . . are almost completely ignored in the world of literature and . . . Black women writers face two overlapping oppressions which necessarily intersect one another. Black woman writers are oppressed, in the first place, for being women in a wholly male-dominated (both white and black) society, and secondly, for being black under the structure of white supremacy. All segments of the literary world – whether establishment, progressive, Black . . . [or] female – do

not know, or at least act as if they do not know that Black women writers ... exist.
(60)

As a black woman writer and activist, Shadd was also a victim of the same kind of discrimination both as black and as a woman. Her *Provincial Freeman* was in trouble due to the people's resistance to the female editorship; so she listed Samuel Ringgold Ward and Reverent Alexander MacArthur as the editors of the paper. This indicates her noble mission which is to devote the newspaper "to the elevation of the colored people" (Streitmatter 29). She wanted the *Provincial* to be published, and thus she wanted her voice to be heard by other people, especially by free American black people. Thus, through her complicated strategies, she "used 'the Provincial Freeman' to present herself and her ideas" to the world (Steadman 119). Rinaldo Walcott says that for a "Black woman [*sic*] the restriction is in many ways more severe ... and yet Shadd Cary was able to continue to act within the contexts of white, masculinist restrictions" (142). Thus, her continuation of the act is a challenge to the male world as well as the transgression of gender normativism. At the eleventh Colored National Conference in Philadelphia, Shadd was pushed to another challenge by the male world. Her male counterparts claimed that she had to win a debate with the male convention leaders if she wanted to be allowed to speak publicly. She won the competition and became a public speaker, and thus got the opportunity to share "the speaker's platform with such noted orators as Lucretia Mott, Robert Purvis, and Frances Ellen Watkins" (Streitmatter 29). She travelled from place to place and state to state to take part in public speaking and spread her message to the people. This path was quite weary, for she had to overcome all the obstacles as a black woman in the white supremacist patriarchal world. This is how she "defies prohibition against women's public participation ... [and exposes her gender] transgressive behavior" (Steadman 119). What we see is even though Shadd does not talk much about the rights, freedom, and equality of black women in her *A Plea for Emigration*, her genderless activism expresses her very gender identity which intersects with her racial identity and her marginalized self. Hence, her gender transgression and her gendered voice are within the very notion of gender neutrality.

Shadd's *A Plea for Emigration* can be called a pristine document of her quest for black liberty. Throughout the text, she emphasizes the emancipation of black people. Her text can also be called a constitution that guides the colored people on how to get rid of their enslavement and accomplish freedom – racially, socially, and economically. For Robert Nowatzki, "Shadd was one of the first 'race women' who fought for the rights of the African Americans and worked hard to set an example to whites and blacks of what an African American could accomplish" (222). Though there are many writers who advocate for emigration, *A Plea by Shadd* is different from most other works addressed to potential emigrants. What we see is "whereas most such works were addressed to potential white emigrants to North America from Britain or continental Europe, ... Shadd's work is explicitly intended for the information of colored immigrants" (Shadd 10). Her voice against the Fugitive Slave Act in *A Plea* manifests how much she wants to save her fellow community from the shackles of not only slavery but also class-based and gender-based oppression.

The particular reason Shadd motivated people of color to emigrate to Canada West stemmed from her desire for people of color to live in a place where they would not face discrimination based on their complexion. She acknowledged that inequality based on birth and social position is a common phenomenon in every country of the world. Though she did not say whether racial discrimination is the worst one or not, she wanted her people not to be treated unequally based on their color. She says in *A Plea* that in Canada West, “[b]uilders, and other tradesmen, of different complexions, work together on the same building and in the same shop, with perfect harmony, and often the proprietor of an establishment is colored, and the majority or all of the men employed are white” (Shadd 32). She again puts her views saying “prejudice of color has no existence” in Canada, rather “new fields of enterprise will be opened to them, and consequently new motive to honorable effort” because colored men can do any business in this country if their qualifications fit them (Shadd 33). Hence, she wants to destroy racial discrimination through her advocacy of emigrants of color. Though she often confronts the boundaries of race and gender, the desired end is mostly racial elevation.

In *A Plea for Emigration*, Mary Ann Shadd argues for non-segregated education and non-segregated churches, and she also wants to put an end to white charity because, to her, it is disgraceful in a sense that the free black people who receive the white charity are just like “public beggars” (50). Her focus is on the churches in which “all classes and complexions worship, and no ‘negro pew’ or other seat for colored persons especially” (Shadd 34). For her, all the blacks “are members and visitors, and as such have their pews according to their inclination, near the door, or remote, or central, as best suits them” (Shadd 34). Her emphasis on integration represents her sense of equality. She believed in freedom for black people and freedom for all. Her voice regarding racial freedom is very straightforward. She might want to see a society in which all people irrespective of race, class, caste, and gender live in harmony without discrimination. She says:

We are free men, say they who advocate independent effort, we, as other subjects, are amenable to British laws; we wish to observe and appropriate to ourselves, whatever of good there is in the society around us, and by our individual efforts, to attain to a respectable position, as do the many foreigners who land on the Canada shores, as poor in purse as we were, and we do not want agents to beg for us. (42)

Here, the word “agents” may be understood as “brokers,” “middlemen,” “intermediaries,” “contact men,” and so on. On every occasion, we need to realize that this is a derogatory term by which the author hints at somebody who is working for the betterment of the powerful, dominant class and thus they push the powerless, the black people, especially in this context, towards misery and vulnerability. Therefore, the author wants these people not to make American black people dependent on the white people’s charity. This is how Shadd’s “quest for black liberation – freedom from slavery and its debilitating legacy – dominated the very fabric of her political and personal being.” (Rhodes 346)

Although Shadd’s consciousness as a woman, black, and a middle-class social being are intersecting with each other, and her aspiration for economic emancipation of the

underprivileged class of society is evident in her performance as a writer-activist. The minute details regarding the facilities that an emigrant can enjoy in Canada West represent her deeper inclination for the economic emancipation of her people. She focuses on creating a safe home for black people, but her sense of safety is interwoven with her sense of class and gender. In *A Plea for Emigration*, she prioritizes Canada as a potential emigrant country rather than South America, Mexico, West Indies, and Africa because the government of Canada does not approve of any law advocating discrimination based on race, class, and gender. In addition, geopolitical aspects cannot be ignored. For her, it is Canada that can make a balance of power by providing each class of people with freedom of thought and action. There are several occasions when the writer puts her emphasis on the economic emancipation of Canadian black people as financial security or solvency is one of the rudimentary aspects of a life with status in society. Shadd firmly believed that a “man who is willing to work need not suffer, and unless a man supports himself [*sic*] he will neither be independent nor respectable in any country” (Shadd 50). In fact, she suggests that financial freedom and/or class mobility is a prerequisite for the now marginalized people to uphold their social position, express their views, and thus gain ownership in society.

To recapitulate, Shadd’s transgression of the borders of race, gender, and class lies in her activism and ideology as a woman, a black, and as a middle-class social being. Being the first black woman to own and edit a newspaper, to drive the American black people towards freedom, to confront her contemporary male leaders, to expose the female gaze during a period of history when the male gaze was predominant and authoritative, to be a public speaker as well as to make the world listen to her and to work with the so-called socially aesthetic people while grappling with her intersecting identities strongly imprint the transgression of race, sex, and class of “this neglected foremother” (Steadman 119). In my opinion, writing and publishing such a groundbreaking text like *A Plea for Emigration* is itself a kind of transgression of the time and space set for a black woman during the nineteenth century. Hence, Shadd incorporated multiple identities like race, gender, and class and her quest for each and all together, and her voice against each and all kinds of oppression made her feminist voice an intersectional one even though she was not beyond limitations as an intersectional voice. One of the limitations is her sole focus on black people and black women. Even when she was talking about women’s rights, she primarily focused on the rights of black women without equally considering the crisis of other women. Again, her approach to emigration to Canada for freedom and emancipation was controversial as many black people including Frederick Douglass did not support her means of accomplishing freedom. However, a voice like Shadd’s must be celebrated in the context of the intersectional feminist voice because she is a pioneering woman to fight against all forms of oppression and injustice done to black people. W.E.B. Dubois’ evaluation of Shadd and her activism in relation to her race, gender, and class is worth citing here:

She [Shadd] threw herself single-handed into the great Canadian pilgrimage. ... She became teacher, editor, and lecturer; tramping afoot through winter snows,

pushing without blot or blemish through crowd and turmoil. (qtd. in Streitmatter 36)

Streitmatter also quotes Frederick Douglass' praise of Shadd: "She displayed industry, financial capacity, and literary ability of a high order. . . . She is a pioneer among colored women, and every colored lady in the country has a right to feel proud of her." (36)

The quoted extracts show how Shadd devoted her whole life to speaking for the women of color and their social, economic, cultural, and political emancipation. Shadd shows the women of color how to fight for their rights, so the black literary renaissance was paved the way for the contribution of the black women writers and activists like Shadd. Agreeing with Streitmatter, we can, therefore, conclude that Shadd challenged all intersectional barriers of her time and paved the way for future generations of black women to follow in her footsteps.

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