

Intersectionality in Adrienne Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* and Barbara Smith's *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*

Leema Sen Gupta

Graduate Student, Department of English, University of North Dakota, United States

Abstract

Adrienne Rich in her *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* focuses on the tension between imposed heterosexuality and choice of sexual orientation, whereas Barbara Smith in *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* deals with the gap of identity politics between white women and women of color. Both writings can be examined through the lens of intersectionality. Both Rich and Smith argue that women, in general, are oppressed and have been subject to domination in the patriarchal society. However, they differ in their argument of how the social and institutional forces contribute to the politics of gender, race, and sexuality and how women's racial and sexual orientation have been exploited to make them vulnerable. Rich, in her writing, shows lesbian women as marginalized not only for being lesbian but also for being women. In Rich's writing, gender and sexuality intersect with one another, whereas in Smith's writing, race, gender, and sexuality intersect because she argues that both Black women and Black lesbian women are marginalized simultaneously. This paper will examine how intersectionality has been used by Rich and Smith to understand the differences in their arguments when they are both advocates for the voice of marginalized people in society.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Feminism, Race, Gender, Heterosexuality, Lesbianism

The term "intersectionality" was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to refer mainly to women of color, but this paper will discuss how race, gender, and sexual orientation of women, in general, intersect with one another and how this influences the lives of marginalized groups in both Adrienne Rich and Barbara Smith's writing. Rich, in her writing, mainly discusses the identity politics of heterosexual and lesbian women. When she talks about "woman," she refers to the woman in general irrespective of race, unlike Smith, who primarily deals with the intersectionality between women of color and white women.

In Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, intersectionality appears in intra-group tensions between heterosexual and lesbian women. Under the broad umbrella of feminism, heterosexual and lesbian women's identity politics intersect with one another, and lesbian women's existence and voices are marginalized under the heterosexual structure of intersectionality. Rich argues in her writing that the political and social power structure of the patriarchal society imposes heterosexuality, especially on women. What is notable here is that when Rich talks about imposed heterosexuality, she specifically mentions about heterosexuality imposed only on the women, not on the men. This led to the idea of the patriarchal power structure of the society where the female sex, in general, is marginalized and where lesbian women's existence is under threat of erasure. Thus, gender and sexual orientation intersect with one another and make the voice of the lesbian woman marginalized. Rich says that her essay is written "in part to challenge the erasure of lesbian existence from so much of scholarly feminist literature, an erasure which I felt (and feel) to be not just anti-lesbian but anti-feminist in its consequences, and to distort the experience of heterosexual women as well" (1515-1516). Rich focuses on the use of sexuality as a weapon by the patriarchal

society to keep women subjugated. It is the institutional forces which compel women to choose their sexual partners according to the demand of the society. Forced heterosexuality has been legalized by religion and law. She argues that “the lesbian, unless in disguise, faces discrimination in hiring, and harassment and violence in the street. Even within feminist-inspired institutions such as battered-women’s shelters and Women’s Studies programs, open lesbians are fired, and others warned to stay in the closet” (Rich 1516). The hierarchical and social structure of the power system keeps the voice of lesbian women marginalized and subjugated. Crenshaw in her *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color* also talks about the marginalization of the people who are different in the established power system: “The embrace of identity politics, however, has been in tension with dominant conceptions of social justice. Race, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination – that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different” (1245).

Rich argues that lesbian women are being tortured not only because of their sexual identity but also because of their gender. Here the two identities are not mutually exclusive. “But,” as Rich says, “I continue to think that heterosexual feminists will draw potential strength for change from taking a critical stance toward the ideology which demands heterosexuality and that lesbians cannot assume that we are untouched by that ideology and the institution founded upon it” (1517).

Crenshaw’s idea of both structural intersectionality and political intersectionality can be applied in explaining Rich’s argument in her writing. Structural intersectionality is seen when Rich mentions the physical violence against women by males. Rich lists about eight characteristics of male domination over women where sexuality and gender intersect one another. The hierarchical social structure which is male-dominated perpetuates the oppression of women. Rich refers to Kathleen Gough who categorizes male domination over women: “men’s ability to deny women sexuality or to force it upon them; to command or exploit their labor to control their produce; to control or rob them of their children; to confine them physically or prevent their movements; to use them as objects as male transections to cramp their creativeness; or to withhold from them large areas of the society’s knowledge and cultural attainments” (qtd. in Rich 1518) shows that intersectionality shapes women’s roles and voices in the society. All these characteristics of violence show that women are oppressed not only for being lesbian or heterosexual but also for being merely female.

This structural intersectionality necessarily leads towards political intersectionality where compulsory heterosexuality is used as a tool to keep woman marginalized. Rich refers to Catharine A. Mackinnon when she shows “the intersection of compulsory heterosexuality and economic position of woman which eventually leads to political intersectionality. “Under capitalism, women are horizontally segregated by gender and occupy a structurally inferior position in the workplace” (Rich 1521). She also argues why male employers are reluctant to hire qualified female employees. It is a kind of psychological game where the aim of this system is to give the message that power evolves around the males and which leads woman to a kind of economic enslavement. She also refers to the social structure where woman needs to use heterosexuality as a shield to save their job whereas their sexual preference could be lesbian. “The fact is that the workplace, among other

social institutions, is a place where women have learned to accept male violation of their physic and physical boundaries as the price of survival;” (Rich 1522). Rich here refers to the intersectionality between gender, sexuality and economic labor market where women of all sexual identities are marginalized. MacKinnon also argues about the structure of the labor market where women are kept intentionally at the bottom of the hierarchy: “Sexual harassment perpetuates the interlocked structure by which women have been kept sexually in thrall to men at the bottom of the labor market. Two forces of American society converge: men’s control over women sexuality and capital control over employees’ work lives.” Thus, this intersectionality between gender, sexuality and economic labor market results in the intersection of power and politics.

Moreover, using sexual violence, such as enforcing heterosexuality could be interpreted through the lens of political and racial intersectionality as well. Crenshaw argues how heterosexuality has been used as a tool to keep women suppressed: “Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment” (Crenshaw). The female vulnerability has been created by the society by imposing heterosexuality so that male orientated power structure could be perpetuated. The institutional forces play a great role in making woman vulnerable or at least create the impression that women are by nature vulnerable. If one asks the reason behind creating such an impression, it would refer to the ultimate power structure which is patriarchal in nature and which would necessarily want to perpetuate male domination. Rich, in her writing, shows how race, gender, economic force and sexuality intersect one another and how through the heterosexual pressure all the woman are kept marginalized. “... it seems more probable that men really fear not that they will have woman’s sexual appetites forced on them or that woman want to smoother or devour them, but that woman could be indifferent to them altogether, that men could be allowed sexual and emotional- therefore economic access to women only on women’s term, otherwise being left on the periphery of matrix” (Rich 1523). So, it could be argued that gaining economic and social power is the main reason for males to impose heterosexuality. Rich refers to Kathleen Berry in her writing arguing that “she [Berry] documents extensive and appalling evidence for the existence on a very large scale, of international female slavery, the institution once known as ‘white slavery’ but which in fact has involved, and at this very moment involves, woman of every race and class” (Rich 1523).

Rich chooses to use the *lesbian continuum* rather than lesbianism because it has been denied by saying that it is a kind of disease or something which is not intrinsic (Rich 1528). Rich does not mean the term “lesbianism” in its literal meaning. Lesbianism here has a different connotation in her writing: “I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range through each woman’s life and throughout history. To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to erase female reality once again” (Rich 1528). Therefore, in Rich’s *lesbian continuum*, lesbianism intersects all the race, gender and sexual differences. It includes the multiplicity of all the identities. Like Rich, Rosenblum also argues the same in her writing: “The queer continuum unites a broad range of disempowered communities, surpassing the ‘lesbian and gay’ community’s relatively limited political reach. By including occasionally subversive people and people who face intersectional discrimination, the queer continuum defines broad resistance to compulsory heterosexuality” (92).

Therefore, what Rich is arguing in her writing is that by enforcing heterosexuality and erasing lesbianism, not only the lesbian women are being marginalized, but the women in general are being marginalized both economically and politically. Here women are oppressed in a two-fold way. Women are oppressed for their sexual preferences – for being a lesbian, and for their gender – for being a woman.

However, if we think about Barbara Smith's argument in *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*, and if we want to analyze her argument through the lens of Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality, we see a gap in her argument of gender violence, race, and sexuality. Compared to Smith's attitude towards intersectionality, it could be said that Rich's argument is much broader in relation to the intersection of gender and sexuality.

Barbara Smith primarily deals with the structural intersectionality in her writing. In her essay, she argues that Black women writers and Black lesbian women writers are almost completely ignored in the world of literature and in her writing, she shows how 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, female or lesbian – do not know, or at least act as if they do not know that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist" (Smith 2223).

Though Smith mentions Black lesbian women writers, she talks mainly about the Black woman in general. She ignores in her writing that Black lesbian women writers face multilayered overlapping of oppression – for being lesbian, for being black, and for being woman. In the case of Black lesbian women writers, race, gender and sexuality intersect one another and make Black lesbian women writers more marginalized compared to Black women writers.

Smith refers to the politics of racism and institutional structure as a driving force to make Black women more vulnerable. If we want to find the reason of Black women's vulnerability and the denial of their existence in any field of literary, social and political aspects, it is important to look back at the history of the Black movement. Smith figures out one of the core reasons why black women are denied their basic rights: "Any discussion of Afro-American writers can rightfully begin with the fact that for most of the time we have been in this country we have been categorically denied not only literacy but the most minimal possibility of a decent human life" (Smith 2224). Smith here refers to the political intersectionality as well, where Black people are marginalized for being Black. However, Smith is cautious enough in her writing showing that intersectionality does not work in the same way for black men as it works for Black women. Smith shows how black women's writings and white women's writings are dealt with in different ways and how black women's writings have always been the subject of discrimination: "When Black women's book are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of Black literature, which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics. When white women look at Black women's works, they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics. A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex, as well as, the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in

the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity” (Smith 2225). What Smith argues here is that race and gender, Blackness and feminism are not mutually exclusive. Smith’s argument refers back to Crenshaw’s idea of intersectionality that both being a woman and being black intersect one another and in order to understand the experiences and challenges a Black woman faces, it is imperative to take into account how these two identities intersect and reinforce one another. “My objective there was to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the women race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (Crenshaw).

Smith points out to the political marginalization of the Black woman writers also. She attacks the misogynist writer Ishmael Reed for his comments about Afro-American women writers. Reed’s comment shows the political intersectionality of race and gender and how that intersectionality makes Black women writers a marginalized group. “Neither Reed nor his white male interviewer has the slightest compunction about attacking Black women in print. They need not fear widespread public denunciation since Reed’s statement is in perfect agreement with the values of the society that hates Black People, Women, and Black Women” (Smith 2228). By mentioning the race and gender of the interviewer, Smith makes it clear for her reader to understand how race and gender are interlocked.

Smith mentions the erasure of the existence of Black lesbian women and their writing, but what I find problematic in the argument of Barbara Smith’s reaction towards racial and sexual discrimination is that she presents both Black women and Black lesbian women’s identity under the umbrella of Black women identity in general. Thus, to some extent she ignores the intra-group difference. Adrienne Rich and Barbara Smith, both deal with the issues of race, gender and sexuality in their writing and show how they intersect one another and ultimately make one group vulnerable and marginalized. However, if their argument is analyzed through the lens of intersectionality, both Rich and Smith differ in their point of view. Rich shows how gender and sexual intersectionality makes woman in general vulnerable by enforcing heterosexuality, whereas, Smith shows how race and gender intersect one another and makes Black women in general vulnerable and marginalized.

Works Cited

- Crenshaw, K. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, 1241-1299.
- MacKinnon, Catharine A. *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sexual Discrimination*. Yale UP, 1979.
- Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch. 3rd ed. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 1515-1533.
- Rosenblum, Darren. “Queer Intersectionality and the Failure of Recent Lesbian and Gay ‘Victories.’” *4 Law & Sexuality*, vol. 83, 1994, 84-122.
- Smith, Barbara. “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch. 2nd ed. Norton & Company, 2010, pp. 2223-2236.