

# ARTICULATION OF WOMEN THROUGH THE LENS OF INTERSECTIONALITY AND ITS DIMENSIONS IN ‘ONE PART WOMAN’ AND ‘SINGAREVVA AND THE PALACE’

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## Abstract

**Purpose of the Study:** This paper aims to articulate women through the lens of intersectionality and its dimensions in ‘One Part Woman’ and ‘Singarevva and the Palace’. The research addresses the issues faced by ideologically, culturally, and materially deprived women of the society.

**Methodology:** In order to achieve the purpose of the study, two novels, namely, ‘One Part Woman’ (by Perumal Murugan) and ‘Singarevva and the Palace’ (by Chandrasekhar Kambar), were critically analyzed.

**Results:** It is inferred that the two novels helped to understand the nature and variety of community, class, and gender. It is found that there is a difference in the community attitude towards the barrenness of women. In the case of ‘One Part Woman’, the community permits her to go to the chariot festival and choose any stranger to attain motherhood, whereas in the case of ‘Singarevva and the Palace’, the community does not allow her to attain motherhood outside her marriage. It is found that the gender of women is the cause of various oppressions due to which women’s rights are denied. It is inferred that Ponna and Singarevva transcend their marital relationships to attain motherhood. It is seen that female sexuality is meant only for motherhood and for the benefit of the progeny. Thus, women’s sexuality is also oppressed.

**Implications:** Women face distressful situations, agony, and pain arising out of patriarchal ties, such as caste, class, community, religion, sexuality, and gender. Women play the role of a mother, daughter, wife, sister, friend, etc. She deserves a better position and status in the society. The oppressions faced by women form hurdles in their lives. They are the care takers of the family and they need to be respected and given a good rank in the society.

**Keywords:** *Intersectionality, Caste, Class, Community, Gender, Sexuality, Oppressions.*

## INTRODUCTION

When we talk about ‘intersectionality’, the first name which flashes to our mind is Kimberle Crenshaw. The intersectionality theory was first developed in 1989 by Black feminist scholar Kimberle Crenshaw of UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) School of Law and Columbia Law School. She was an American civil rights lawyer specializing in race and gender issues. Kimberle [Crenshaw in 1989](#) stated intersectionality as: “The view of oppression that women experience in varying configurations and varying degrees of intensity. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of the society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity.”

According to Kimberle Crenshaw, “intersectionality” represents an analytical framework that attempts to identify how interlocking systems of power impact the most marginalized in the society. Intersectionality considers various forms of social stratification, such as class, race, sexual orientation, age, religion, creed, disability, and gender, which are not separate from one another, but woven together. The credit of introducing ‘intersectionality’ into academia goes to Crenshaw. She conducted a research with respect to black women’s employment experiences wherein she compared and contrasted the concepts, such as structural, political, and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality is about the ways in which black women have to deal with ‘multi-layered and routinized forms of domination’ such as those associated with housing inequalities or employment practices. Political intersectionality focuses on the ways in which black women belong to at least two marginalized groups and hence have to often engage with different political agendas. Representational intersectionality focuses on how images of women of color – and debates about these – tend to overlook the intersectional interests of such women ([Crenshaw 1991](#)).

[Smiet \(2017\)](#) interprets intersectionality in this way:

“An intersectional feminist perspective insists that gender cannot and should not be studied in isolation from race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, or other structures of power because they do not exist in isolation from one another, but instead always intersect”.

Intersectionality emerged as an amalgamation of aspects of women’s studies and race and ethnic studies. Its foundations are in the scholarly tradition that began in the 19th century with black women, such as Sojourner Truth, Maria, and Anna, and men like W.E.B. DuBois.

In feminist theory, intersectionality has become the predominant way of conceptualizing the relationship between systems of oppression that construct the multiple identities and the social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege (Carastathis, 2014). Intersectionality is a theory pertaining to feminism. The theory is based on the assumption that individuals concurrently belong to many communities that have emerged from social structures and they would face oppression and privileges both at the same time. The social status of an individual depends not only on gender but also on other factors, such as caste, religion, heritage, socioeconomic class, and geographic location (Symington, 2004). Intersectionality theory has been celebrated as the most important contribution that women’s studies have made so far (McCall, 1771). When one applies intersectionality as theory and practice in the context of India, women’s experience and her articulation are not only multilayered but also interconnected. Women’s intersectional experience is in the layers of her gender, community, caste, class, and religion.

This paper aims to show the articulation of women through the lens of intersectionality and its dimensions in ‘One Part Woman’ by Perumal Murugan and ‘Singarevva and the Palace’ by Chandrasekhar Kambar. The current research infers the objective of intersectionality.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Do the novels ‘One Part Woman’ and ‘Singarevva and the Palace’ examine the articulation of women through the lens of intersectionality and its dimensions?
- Do the novels ‘One Part Woman’ and ‘Singarevva and the Palace’ provide inference of a comparative nature to help understand the nature and variety of community, class, and gender?

### Narrative outline of the story – ‘One Part Woman’

In this novel, the author has narrated the life style of the Gounder community. The author has thrown light on the social and religious culture of this community highlighting their struggle, sufferings, customs, and beliefs. Childlessness is strongly disparaged in this community. The Gounder male adult is incomplete and his life has no meaning if he does not have a son to inherit the property. Thus, childlessness is a big sin in the Gounder’s community. It is ridiculous that women are blamed for childlessness.

In this story, Kali and Ponna, the married couple, love each other. The couple remains childless for more than 12 years after marriage. The text captures the multitude suffering of Kali and Ponna due to their childlessness. Kali, the male protagonist refuses to get married again as his impotency will come to limelight and he does not send his wife to the chariot festival (a festival partially meant to impregnate barren women and the man/stranger who does this is seen as a God). The desire to attain motherhood and give fatherhood to her husband drives Ponna to the chariot festival. Eventually, the readers are left with the bleak image of Kali committing suicide. Thus, One Part Woman is a great discovery of a happy married life destroyed by the expectations of others and also the rigid rules of caste and tradition that restrain the couple from enjoying their married life. It also portrays that how the status of the couple in the world depends on the offspring. It portrays that how infertility has an impact on marital relationship.

### Narrative outline of the story – Singarevva and the Palace

The similarity of the storyline can be seen in the novel ‘Singarevva and the Palace’, where the female protagonist Singarevva is deprived of her sexual pleasure and motherhood by her impotent husband Sargam Desai. Singarevva dissuades her husband from meeting the women performers in Bayalata (folk-drama) which he used as a pretext to forget his impotency and also to hide his reality from his wife. Desai disobeys his wife’s advice and this acts as a catalyst in triggering Singarevva to transcend her marital life. Singarevva seeks her sexual pleasure and attains motherhood by consummating with a Dalit man who was a servant in her house and had affections for her. Very significantly, this happens out of her choice. The novel ends with her husband’s suicide when he knows about her motherhood.

According to Weber, “Intersectional systems of society, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality are interrelated systems at the macro institutional level—they are created, maintained, and transformed simultaneously and in relation to one

another. Therefore, they cannot be understood independently of one another” (Weber, 2001). Collins (2000) in her book titled ‘Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment’ argues that African American women face an intersection of multiple oppressions arising out of gender, class, and race. Their status is marginalized. She says out of her experience that she is made to be an outsider in the academic world where the norm is a white man.

Intersectional systems of society that affect and oppress women in varying configurations and intensity are community, class, caste, sexuality, and gender. These systems are interconnected and have its impacts in various ways. These systems are discussed below:

### **Community**

One can see in both the novels that the female protagonists transcend their marital lives and attain motherhood. The articulation of women, which happens in the form of motherhood, is persuaded by the community to which they belong. In ‘One Part Woman’ Ponna’s hegemonic milieu and inherently male society valorizes and venerates motherhood more than chastity. The community allows her to go to the chariot festival and choose any stranger of her choice to attain motherhood.

In contrast to this, Singarevva’s Desai community does not give her the privilege to attain motherhood outside her marriage, but ridicules and insinuates her for her barren identity and sees her as an obstacle for Desai’s progeny. The milieu’s expectations and rigid restrictions frustrate her to transcend her marital life to attain motherhood.

In this context, the Gounder community and the Desai community criticize and oppress women who possess a barren identity. While one community gives the social approval for a momentary transgression in the marital relationship to beget a child, the other does not. Thus, one finds a difference in the communities’ attitude towards the barrenness of women.

### **Class**

The term ‘class’ refers to the position of an individual on the basis of criteria, such as distribution of wealth and resources, income and poverty, and distribution of power and authority. Individuals are categorized into upper class, upper middle class, lower middle class, working class, and poor. The women in both novels hail from the upper middle class society and are pressurized to give birth to children for inheritance. In fact, Ponna has sexual intercourse with a stranger not only to give a social standing to her husband but also to stop people from broaching the topic on the lack of inheritance for her family’s property and futility of having plantations, agricultural lands, and cattle. Similarly, Singarevva poses a challenge to her father that she will attain motherhood and have an heir to inherit property, when he makes an attempt to appropriate her husband’s property. Apart from her desire to become a mother, she is also pressurized by her class of people to create progeny. In addition to this, the villagers’ covetous nature of usurping Desai’s estate and property makes this female protagonist even more adamant in giving birth to a child. Hence, the class to which women belong suppresses and oppresses them if there is no progeny. The gender of women makes them obligated to give birth and if they are from the upper class, then they are perceived to be solely accountable for the lack of progeny.

### **Caste**

The caste system in India is divided into four groups called as ‘varnas’ and these are further divided into sub categories (Dumont, 1980). Individuals were initially classified on the basis of their occupation, like Brahmans (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants and farmers), and Sudras (scavengers) (Gupta, 2006). Indians residing in urban areas are predominantly classified on the basis of their wealth, and caste is not considered as a major hindrance with respect to opportunities of advancement. However, in rural areas the opportunities for advancement, such as access to education and basic necessities of life, depend upon the caste of an individual (Baker, 2006). A person’s social status depends on the caste. Individuals hailing from the low caste are vulnerable to multiple sufferings or oppressions. For example, Dalit women face multiple forms of atrocities owing to their status of being at the bottom of the caste and class hierarchies.

Ponna and Singarevva transcend their marital relationship to attain motherhood. The suicide of both husbands is not with regard to their wives’ adultery, but the assumption that their wives might have had intercourse with an untouchable, which aggravates the problem and leads to their suicide. The culture’s pressure to attain motherhood and choosing a man from another culture as a sexual partner shatters the hegemony of men. In both stories, the husbands are not in a position to digest that their women were touched by men from the lower caste. To quote the lines of Kali, “More than half the

young men roaming about town are from the “untouchable” castes. If anyone of them gets to be with Ponna, I simply cannot touch her after that.” To quote the lines of Desai when he gets to know about his wife’s pregnancy, “You had sought the company of the mindless Holey” and asks her to abort the child. Women’s crossing of the caste boundary multiplies their sufferings and oppresses them in a larger way.

## Gender

The term gender has been defined by many feminists. It is the concept which revolves around the reproductive differences of individuals who shape societal relationships, identities, and meanings (Connell, 1989). Gender-based discrimination is a common civil rights violation, which includes sexual harassment, unequal pay, and pregnancy discrimination. Though the participation of women is a major driver of programs and policies for global development, gender-based discrimination is one of the critical issues which have to be addressed across the sphere (Singh, 2010). Gender as a reality is shaped by various factors as mentioned above. The feminine gender does not give a woman the free space to articulate her desires whether it is inside the marriage or outside the marriage. The female sexuality becomes invisible as it is ruled and dominated by the elements of intersectionality. Very significantly, both these texts show marriage as the representation of intersectional elements where class, caste, gender, and community converge and accentuate women’s sufferings in their marital lives. Intersectional systems, from which the women emerge, do not let them exercise their abilities and potential because these elements act as a deterrent and do not let them materialize their power and abilities at one or the other point.

Singarevva and Ponna are not given the space as women to assert and articulate their desires for motherhood. Ponna has a chance to experience her sexuality, but Singarevva is even devoid of it. Moreover, in a patriarchal society, men have used women to conceal their impotencies and there is no grain of thinking that emanates from these men with regard to women’s craving and desires. Therefore, the gender of women also adds to their oppressions and deprives them of all rightful pleasures. The notion of articulation of women through the lens of intersectionality reveals different forms of oppression in varying configurations and varying intensities. Women’s lives are inevitably bounded by suppressions as they emerge from intersectional systems that are part of their identities.

The above intersectional elements in both the texts have crippled women’s identity and ability at one point or the other. Besides this, it has suppressed women in multilayered forms rather than empowering them holistically.

Before I conclude, let me throw some light on female sexuality. Female sexuality as a discourse is less spoken about, less written about, less appreciated, and made invisible. Irrespective of any intersectional context that a woman emerges from, female sexuality is always oppressed and suppressed as one gets to see the predicaments of Singarevva and Ponna in their marital lives with regard to their sexualities. One can infer from the female protagonists that female sexuality is meant only for motherhood and for the benefit of the progeny. The position of female sexuality as a form of self-knowledge and as a space for creativity and pleasure is never emphasized at any point in her lifetime. Hence, women’s sexuality is also oppressed.

## CONCLUSION

Apart from being known as mother, daughter, sister, wife, etc., women have been rebellious to create an identity for themselves in a male dominated society (Razvi & Roth, 2010). In order to empower women, we really need to address social and cultural issues. Laws and policies pertaining to intersectional discrimination have to be modified. In addition to this, modified laws have to be implemented strictly. Access to education and social awareness will go a long way in addressing these issues. It is not only gender but also other factors, such as caste, religion, class, sexual orientation, ancestry, and geographic location, which influence the social position of an individual. As a result, some women have gone through various forms of discrimination arising out of multiple identities. The policies of the government and the initiatives taken by social reformers and academicians have solved the problem to a small extent, but still there is a long way to go to overcome the oppressions (Symington, 2004). We need to empower women and help them to have accessibility to their basic rights and create awareness about formal and informal employment opportunities. This will go a long way in solving the problems of oppression and violence against women (Symington, 2004).

Oppressions against women have a great impact on all the segments of the society. Use of intersectional framework will go a long way in understanding how such oppression against women affects the individuals and communities on the basis of their social locations and experiences. Such a framework acts as a motivational tool to policymakers and social change leaders to discover the ways in which race, class, gender, etc., influence public policies. It helps to study multiple

discriminations faced by individuals on the basis of caste, creed, color, class, gender, etc., and also address such issues. It will also help in ensuring equality and justice to the oppressed members of the society.

Thus, intersectionality as an analytical approach makes us fathom that oppression is complicated by various social categories, such as community, caste, class, gender, etc. These social categories intersect and impact different forms of oppression and shape the views of the world. Besides this, intersectionality offers and depicts a variety of privileges or oppressions that an individual may encounter and experience on the basis of his/her intersectionality. The other important aspect that one must always remember with regard to the privileges of intersectionality is that privilege and oppression go hand in hand at any point of life.

Thus, intersectionality offers multidimensional perspectives of women to convey that the articulation of 'woman' cannot be spoken without talking about other forms of expressions, such as community, class, religion, gender, etc. Seeing a woman through an intersectional lens reveals and captures most of the varied nuances of her experiences. Intersectional experience will try to entail and see every woman's experience as unique and varied without homogenizing it.

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