

# INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM IN THE SELECTED POEMS FROM THE JIM CROW, HARLEM RENAISSANCE, AND CONTEMPORARY ERAS BY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN POETS

Feminisme Interseksional Dalam Puisi-Puisi Pilihan Dari Era Jim Crow, Harlem Renaissance, Dan Kontemporer Karya Penyair Perempuan Afrika Amerika

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**Abstract:** *This study aims to analyze the theme of intersectional in poetry written during three important periods: the Jim Crow Era, Harlem Renaissance, and Contemporary Era. Using close reading, this research explores how racism, sexism, and social class are intertwined and reflected in the works of poets, particularly women of color. The analysis is conducted by paying attention to the use of diction, symbolism, and poetic structure, as well as the social and historical context in which the poems were written. The results show that intersectional is a central element that shapes the experience of oppression in poetry from each era. In the Jim Crow Era, poets express racial and gender violence through strong and straightforward language, emphasizing the brutal reality of segregation and misogyny. In the Harlem Renaissance, there is an attempt to celebrate cultural identity while still considering the complexities of gendered oppression, with poets combining pride in Black identity with critiques of patriarchy. In the Contemporary Era, the complexities of intersectional identities are increasingly explored, reflecting the challenges faced by women of color in modern society, including issues of sexuality, queerness, and class dynamics. This research confirms that despite advances in social awareness, issues of racism and gender oppression remain enduring legacies, with poetry serving as both a reflection of these struggles and a form of resistance against them. Through this exploration, the study underscores the vital role of intersectional feminism in understanding the evolving experiences of African American women across time.*

**Keywords:** *intersectionality, poetry, Jim Crow Era, Harlem Renaissance, feminism, racism*

**Abstrak:** *Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis tema interseksional dalam puisi yang ditulis selama tiga periode penting: Era Jim Crow, Renaisans Harlem, dan Era Kontemporer. Dengan menerapkan metode pembacaan yang cermat dan kualitatif, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana rasisme, seksisme, dan kelas sosial saling terkait dan tercermin dalam karya-karya penyair perempuan kulit berwarna. Analisis difokuskan pada penggunaan diksi, simbolisme, dan struktur puisi, serta konteks sosial dan historis saat puisi-puisi tersebut ditulis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa interseksionalitas merupakan elemen utama yang membentuk pengalaman penindasan dalam puisi-puisi di setiap era. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa meskipun terdapat kemajuan dalam kesadaran sosial, isu-isu rasisme dan penindasan gender tetap menjadi warisan yang bertahan lama. Puisi menjadi cerminan perjuangan ini serta bentuk perlawanan terhadapnya. Melalui eksplorasi ini, penelitian ini menggarisbawahi peran penting feminisme interseksional dalam memahami pengalaman perempuan Afrika-Amerika yang*



*terus berkembang dari waktu ke waktu, menunjukkan bahwa suara mereka tidak hanya diakui tetapi juga dihargai dalam diskursus sastra kontemporer.*

**Kata kunci:** *interseksionalitas, puisi, Era Jim Crow, Renaisans Harlem, feminisme, rasisme*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Gender is complex and is always linked to other identity differences. Gender is linked to race, religion, and other identities. Therefore, perspectives in gender studies are not singular. For instance, American women of color do not have the same fate as white American women. In fact, American men of color may not necessarily have a better fate than white women in America or in a region that applies apartheid. This understanding shows the intersection between gender and race.

Race and Racism in the United States have been shaped by centuries of conflict between white dominance and resistance from people of color. The history of racism in America dates to the colonial period when Europeans established the transatlantic slave trade in the 15th to 19th centuries which had a significant impact on the social structure and racial dynamics of the country.

Racism has been entrenched in the history of colonialism in the United States. When English immigrants first landed in this country in 1600, they immediately faced one racial "problem" in the Indians. A few years later, they triggered another problem when, in 1619, immigrant ships arrived in Virginia carrying Africans who were made slaves. The occurrence of slavery in America at that time was due to one of the black workers who wanted to escape from his work, this caused him to be sanctioned as a slave. Meanwhile, white people who tried to escape were only subject to an additional three years of hard labor for the colony. This then started the legal differences between whites and blacks.

People of color experienced segregation called Jim Crow which occurred in the 19th century until 1960. Jim Crow was a law created to justify white supremacy or segregation. People of color experienced radical racism at that time, white southern people did various things to African Americans. Black people were associated with being very primitive and backward by white people. The legacy of slavery and the belief in the uncivilized nature of Africans created the white supremacist myth that Black people were a backward race, incapable of integrating into the modern world as an efficient and productive nation (Omi & Winant, 2014)

The women of color and women laborers always worked hard in the fields and factories and received worse salaries and treated worse. Black women were also victimized by sexual harassment, white men casually raped Black women. It was not unusual for Black men to rape Black women. This is because Black people of color are considered sub-human and therefore should not be granted any human and legal rights at all.

In the early twentieth century, the struggle for the right to vote intensified. The right to vote for women was not only considered a major step towards equal legal status, but also a non-negotiable prerequisite for achieving social reform, on the basis that there should be no legal distinction between men and women and thus the feminist movement emerged. However, this was not enough to secure the

rights of women, and eventually many people regarded feminism as an irrelevant ideal.

In the twentieth century the number of women who were employed as manual laborers continued to increase. Women who were married and chose to work were taking work away from a male breadwinner. This is different if it happens to middle-class white women, it is because middle-class white women are only considered to violate social status and prevalent cultural attitudes, but it is quite different if this happens to black women, if black women who practice this are considered unusual (Taylor, 1998). Because of this, black women are not very demanding of the feminist movement, particularly lower-middle-class black women. They think that fighting for racial rights is more important, since black women are in the last position, after white men, white women and black men.

According to (Smith, 1978), race is an important issue to consider in feminist analysis, as the experiences of women of color are often overlooked or ignored by feminist movements dominated by white women. Smith argues that racism is an integral part of the social structure of the United States and cannot be separated from the experiences of Black women. She highlights how racism is interconnected with sexism and other systems of oppression, and how racism can affect the lived experiences and opportunities for individuals from the Black community.

Smith highlights forms of racial discrimination experienced by American people of color such as Discrimination in the Justice System: Emphasis on the injustices of the justice system that tend to discriminate against individuals based on their race, including racial profiling by police, disproportionate arrests, and harsher sentences for Black individuals, Discrimination in Education: A discussion of inequities in the education system, where black children often face limited access to the same educational resources as their white peers, Discrimination in the Workplace: A look at racial discrimination in the workplace, where Black individuals often face difficulties in securing gainful employment and are treated unfairly in terms of pay, promotions, and working conditions, Discrimination in Housing: A discussion of discriminatory practices in housing, such as housing seclusion based on race, limited access for Black individuals to adequate housing, and discrimination in mortgage lending, Stigma and Stereotypes: Emphasis on how Black individuals often face stigma, negative stereotypes, and racial prejudice in society, which can affect their experiences in various aspects of life (Smith, 1978)

As explained above, racism has been recorded in history with its pervasive occurrence and adverse experiences for people of color, especially women of color. Women of color experience the intersection of race and gender, they experience double discrimination. This gave rise to the theory of intersectionality.

Kimberle Crenshaw first revealed the theory of intersectionality argues that due to intersectional identities as women and people of color in discourses shaped in response to either of the two, women of color are marginalized in both.

According to Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1995), the black woman's position of oppression is analogous to traveling at an intersection that allows her to come and go from four directions. Discrimination is like an intersection that flows from

one direction to another. If there is an accident at that intersection, it will affect vehicles from many directions. Same with the black woman: because she is at the intersection, she has an accident and will be injured because of sex and race discrimination coming from four directions. The essence of intersectionality is to recognize the interaction between gender and other forms of discrimination, such as race, age, class, socioeconomic status, physical or mental ability, gender or sexual identity, religion, or ethnicity.

Intersectionality is defined as the theoretical approach and political critique that aim at making visible the identities and interests of women of color who have been marginalized (Lépinard, 2020) In line with that quote, the theory of intersectionality emerges to voice the voices of marginalized women of color. Intersectionality is essential to recognizing and addressing the unique struggles faced by marginalized communities.

According to (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) Intersectionality is a combination of sources of oppression such as race, gender, class, and others that the dominant party plays in various settings. As the quote suggests, this intersectionality means a combination of intersecting forms of oppression and is done with the consciousness of the dominated to increase oppression.

Intersectionality is a study within the realm of feminism that is devoted to exploring and deepening discrimination against women. The study expanded to be used to analyze literature related to feminism (Mustaqim, 2018)

Intersectionality's core insight: namely, that in each society at a given time, power relations of race, class, and gender, for example, are not discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but rather build on each other and work together (Collins, 2020). In line with this quote, in certain social lives and times, the power relations of race, gender and class build on each other and work together. This happened during the Jim Crow era, the Harlem Renaissance, and the contemporary era.

Literary works reflect what happens in the social life of society. What is written in literature is a picture of what happens in society. literature is a "social document" or a "mirror of society" and, by examining it, an accurate and objective knowledge of social relations can be acquired (Ahmadi, 2021)

Literary works are written from the author's concerns about what is happening in society. Through prose, drama, or poetry, thoughts and feelings are conveyed uniquely based on the elements of each literary work.

Poetry is a one of medium of expressing and resisting the racism and intersectionality faced by people of color. The themes written in poetry are often based on the experiences, feelings or concerns of the poet. Many poets have raised the theme of intersectionality in their poetry. The intersectionality approach is used by poets in writing their poems to describe how the image of women in society intersects with race, and various other discrimination and oppression that occur in women's lives. Many writers use the experience of discrimination as an object in their work due to various conditions that arise in society.

Poetry is a literary genre with a different form of writing from other literary genres, and in terms of meaning, poetry has a deep meaning. Poetry is unique among the arts, for the sensuous medium of poetry is language, the

natural vehicle of thought (Hutchison, 1907) This means that poetry is unique, with language strung together in such a way that feelings and thoughts are written.

According to (Perrine, 2018), Poetry is the most condensed and concentrated form of literature, saying most in the fewest number of words. Based on the quote, through the dense and concentrated language formed in the writing of the poem, the reader can understand one theme of the poem.

From the Jim Crow era, the Harlem Renaissance to the contemporary era, many writers have written down what happened in their social life into a work of literature. It gives voice to their experiences, raises awareness, and fights for social change that is more inclusive and equitable.

In the Jim Crow era, many African American women poets experienced double discrimination and through poetry, these experiences were voiced. As explained above, the Jim Crow era was an era when people of color experienced racial segregation and it became a legal racial segregation law in the South of America.

The racial violence that occurred under Jim Crow laws encouraged African Americans in the South to move north (Great migration). They fled in the hope of finding better social and economic conditions. New York City, especially Harlem, became one of the main destinations of this migration, resulting in the Harlem renaissance. In this era, many African American women poets wrote poetry to voice their experiences.

Racism still occurs today, one of the causes is the legacy of history. The racism structured in American history, including slavery, racial segregation, and Jim Crow laws, has left a deep imprint and continues to affect society. The discriminatory systems and policies of the past have long-lasting effects that are difficult to erase completely. And to this day, African American women of color still experience double discrimination. In this contemporary era, many African American women poets voice their experiences through poetry.

In this study, researchers analyzed literary works by choosing poetry as the object of analysis. The poems that the researcher analyzed were poems from the Jim Crow era, Harlem Renaissance and Contemporary. These poems are selected poems by African American women. The poems are poems written in the span of the 19th century to the contemporary period.

This research uses Barbara Smith's intersectionality theory. This research focuses on the intersections between gender and race in *The Selected Poems from The Nineteenth to Twenty-First Centuries: Jim Crow, Harlem Renaissance, and Contemporary Eras by African American Women Poets*.

Smith's thoughts led to the concept of intersectionality, which refers to the ways in which different forms of inequality and discrimination (such as sexism, racism, social class, etc.) are intertwined and interact in individual experiences. She argues that racism is an important part of the overall system of inequality,

and that understanding intersectionality is key to understanding the experiences of individuals in societies structured by such inequalities.

The theory of intersectionality developed by Barbara Smith highlights the importance of struggling for gender equality while considering the influence of racism and other systems of oppression. It underscores that racial oppression cannot be separated from gender oppression, and these two issues must be fought for together.

This research was inspired by several previous studies. This study has some similarities with some previous studies that discuss similar topics. The first previous researcher is a study entitled "Monstrous 'Others': The Legacy of Race, Hybridity, and Intersectionality in the Nineteenth-Century Novel" by Valerie Beth Oualline, her research discusses the concept of 'Others', how this concept manifests in various contexts of gender, class, and race. That there was intersectionality that occurred in European society in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The second previous study is "*Intersectionality in Zadie Smith's fiction: Race, gender and class*" by Sercan Hamza in the journal *Critical Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities*. This article discusses intersectionality in Zadie Smith's fiction using a textual approach.

The last previous research is "*Tracing Intersectionality, Individual and Familial Struggle in Morrison's Novels: A Digital Humanities Study*" by Zafar Ullah et al. This research discusses the intersectionality contained in Morrison's novels using hermeneutic theory and this research uses mixed method techniques because the data has qualitative, statistical, and visual characteristics.

This study has similarities with the three previous studies above in terms of the object of study, namely intersectionality. However, this thesis has a difference in the subject of analysis used. This research uses the selected poems from *The Nineteenth To Twenty-First Centuries: Jim Crow, Harlem Renaissance, And Contemporary Eras By African American Women Poets* as the object of analysis. This research focuses on the intersection of gender, race and other identities experienced by women of color from 3 selected poems, consisting of 1 selected poems of the Jim Crow era, 1 poems of the renaissance era, and 1 poems of the contemporary era.

Based on the explanation that the researcher has expressed above, the researcher chose the title *Intersectional Feminism in The Selected Poems from The Nineteenth to Twenty-First Centuries: Jim Crow, Harlem Renaissance, And Contemporary Eras by African American Women Poets*, because this title already represents the researcher's research.

## **METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative method with a close reading analysis method of poems selected from three historical periods: Jim Crow Era, Harlem Renaissance, and contemporary era. The sample poems were selected based on their relevance

to the themes of intersectionality and social oppression. The analysis was conducted by examining the use of diction, symbolism, poetic structure, and the social and historical context of each poem.

The source of data in this study are divided into two, namely primary data and secondary data. The primary data sources in this research are poems by African American women from three eras: Jim Crow, Harlem Renaissance, and contemporary era. Poems were selected from the Jim Crow, Harlem Renaissance, and contemporary eras. These poems were selected based on their relevance to the theme of intersectionality and its influence in the representation of African American women. Meanwhile, secondary data sources include literature that provides additional context and analysis of the poems and relevant historical periods. This secondary data provides sources on social background, history, and literary criticism. Secondary data includes books, articles, and journals that discuss the history of poetry, intersectionality analysis, and relevant theories. Historical documents include books, articles, journals and newspapers from the Jim Crow and Harlem Renaissance periods that provide contextual background.

The data was analyzed using an in-depth qualitative approach, combining close reading techniques to understand the themes of intersectionality in the poems and narrative analysis to interpret the social and cultural context. Technique of analyzing data is carried out by close reading. Close reading is an analytical technique that involves an in-depth examination of the poetry text to understand the important elements and meanings contained therein. This method emphasizes the significance of textual elements in understanding how a work communicates its themes and messages. The process of close reading involves analyzing the language, structure and meaning of the text. This method helps reveal the nuances and complexities of the text, allowing for a deeper understanding of its themes and context. By focusing on language and form, the researcher can interpret how literary elements contribute to the overall message of selected poems from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries: Jim Crow, Harlem Renaissance, and contemporary eras by African American women poets that the researcher collects.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Selected Poems in The Jim Crow Era: The Slave Mother by Frances E.W Harper**

#### ***Historical and Social Context***

Frances E.W. Harper wrote *The Slave Mother* in the mid-19th century, a period in which slavery was still legal in the United States. The system of slavery itself was rooted in racial oppression, which did not end after the freeing of slaves through the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the 13th Amendment in 1865. After slavery was abolished, discrimination against black people continued in new forms, especially during the Jim Crow era (late 19th century to mid-20th century), when racial segregation laws were enforced in the United States, especially in Southern states.

### ***Analysis of Diction and Symbolism***

In "The Slave Mother", Harper uses emotive diction to describe the suffering of a slave mother separated from her child. Words such as "cry", "tear", "agony", and "despair" are used to create an atmosphere of deep sorrow and pain. The main symbols in this poem are mother and child, which symbolize love and an unbreakable relationship, yet brutally separated by slavery. Harper uses the mother-child relationship as a symbol of the inhumanity of the slavery system, which not only enslaves the body, but also destroys emotional and family bonds.

### ***Structure and Poetic Devices***

The poem is written in stanza form with consistent rhyme, which reinforces the emotional intensity of the story being told. Harper uses various literary devices such as metaphors and similes to describe the emotional suffering of the mother who lost her child. Personification is also present as Harper describes the pain and suffering as alive, almost like a character in its own right in the poem's narrative. In addition, the repetition of certain words such as "child" or "cry" emphasizes the central theme of mother and child.

## **Analysis of Intersectionality in The Poem The Slave Mother by Frances E.W Harper**

### **Lines 1-4**

*Heard you that shriek? It rose  
So wildly on the air,  
It seem'd as if a burden'd heart  
Was breaking in despair.*

The central subject in this poem is a mother. Harper's title suggests that the character in this poem is a mother, 'The Slave'.

Harper uses the word 'Shriek' to describe a sound full of sadness and despair. Harper describes a deep sadness with a shriek as the first stanza of the poem, Harper describes a heart that is burdened and full of brokenness and despair. The word 'Shriek' here is a form of imagery that Harper writes to strengthen her expression of sadness. The word 'Shriek' in her poem is an auditory imagery that creates a sound image for the reader. This auditory imagery greatly strengthens the depiction of sadness, desolation and hopelessness that Harper writes about. In these lines, Harper describes her gender status as a mother who is experiencing deep emotional pain, there is a clear gender identity here.

### **Lines 13-15**

*She is a mother pale with fear,  
Her boy clings to her side,  
And in her kyrrtle vainly tries*



*His trembling form to hide*

The phrase *pale with fear* is a symbol that represents how depressed the mother is so that her condition is very pale because she is full of fear. In the phrase *clings to her side* Harper shows the emotional closeness between the mother and her son. In this stanza Harper describes a very alarming condition where a mother tries to protect her son from danger, the mother in the poem although pale because of fear, still tries to protect her son who is trembling with fear too.

**Lines 17-20**

*He is not hers, though she bore*

*For him a mother's pains;*

*He is not hers, though her blood*

*Is coursing through his veins!*

This stanza places motherhood at the center of suffering. In the era of Jim Crow, women were treated as property. According to Smith, toward a Black Feminist Criticism, another equally powerful and persistent form of exploitation is the use of Black women's bodies, sexual labor, as property that can be used and abused. In the lines *He is not hers, although she bore him and for him a mother's pains;* Harper describes that the mother's son in the poem does not belong to his mother even though it is his mother who has given birth and is in pain.

This shows that the gendered experience of enslaved women in the United States not only concerns their bodies being exploited for physical labor, but also for reproduction, where their children are not their own legally and emotionally. This is gender-based oppression, as Black women face violence directly related to their biological role as mothers. The lines *He is not hers, though her blood and is coursing through his veins!* shows that even a biological relationship cannot claim that the mother's son does not belong to the mother. This stanza clearly illustrates the intersectionality between gender and race, where black women are treated as property whose bodies are exploited for physical labor and reproduction.

**Lines 21-24**

*He is not hers, for cruel hands*

*May rudely tear apart*

*The only wreath of household love*

*That binds her breaking heart.*

Racism underlies the entire poem. Black women in slavery faced violence rooted in the view that they were property. In the slave system, race determined the fate of a child and a mother. In these lines Harper describes the condition where the slavery system separates a child from his mother. The phrase *Cruel hands* is a symbol that represents the hands of white people who take children from their mothers, indicating that their racial status eliminates the rights of mothers. Smith

reveals Under slavery, the condition of the child followed that of the mother, meaning that the reproductive capacity of black women was exploited for the economic benefit of their white owners. This system ensured that black women's children would be born into slavery, perpetuating their dehumanization and commodification across generations. It was not only their labor, but their very ability to give life that was controlled and owned.

This clearly shows the Intersectionality experienced by mothers, a discrimination between and among genders. Because of her gender status as a mother and her racial status as a black woman, mothers experience double discrimination.

**Lines 33-36**

*They tear him from her circling arms,*

*Her last and fond embrace.*

*Oh! never more may her sad eyes*

*Gaze on his mournful face.*

Racism has a psychological impact on black women. In this poem, Harper describes the suffering of a mother who had to lose her son because he was taken away by his master. This is not just a personal trauma, but a collective trauma experienced by many black women living under the slavery system.

In the phrases *Oh! never more may her sad eyes* and *Gaze on his mournful face*, Harper uses visual imagery to show the deep and abiding sadness that later forms trauma. Harper shows how the loss of a child is not only an emotionally damaging event, but also a symbol of the structural oppression that black women continue to experience in slavery. This is in line with Smith's that the psychological trauma experienced by Black women is shaped by the compounded oppressions of racism and sexism. The legacy of slavery, the constant threat of violence, and the continued marginalization of our voices contribute to a profound sense of alienation and invisibility. This trauma is not only personal but collective, passed down through generations because of systemic dehumanization.

The poem clearly shows the intersectionality experienced by Black women. This trauma is formed from various forms of oppression, namely race, gender and social class. The systemic and continuous oppression perpetrated by white people bequeaths deep psychological trauma to generation after generation of black people.

The collective psychological trauma described in this poem is not only personal but also representative of the experiences of many enslaved black women. Harper uses one mother's experience as a symbol of the widespread trauma felt by communities of black women due to family separation and systemic violence in slavery, influenced by their gender, race and class.

In this poem, Harper depicts the double oppression experienced by the slave mother-she is not only oppressed because of her race as a black person, but

also because of her gender as a woman. The experience of the mother losing her child in slavery is symbolic of the powerlessness of black women who are deprived of basic rights as human beings and mothers. This reflects Barbara Smith's concept that oppression based on gender and race cannot be separated, but rather intertwine and reinforce each other in individual experiences.

Furthermore, the depiction of slave mothers forced to succumb to the power of the slave system is also relevant to the legacy of oppression that continues into the Jim Crow era and even into the contemporary era. Smith emphasizes the importance of viewing history in a broad context, where intersectionality is not only a product of the present, but also formed from historical systems of oppression such as slavery and racial segregation.

## **Selected Poems in The Harlem Renaissance Era: Lady, lady by Anne Spencer**

### ***Historical and Social Context***

Anne Spencer wrote during the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural and artistic movement in the early 20th century centered on the creative expression of African Americans, primarily in Harlem, New York. This period marked the rise of social, political, and cultural consciousness among the black American community. Spencer was one of the few women poets involved in this movement, and her poems reflect themes that are often overlooked, such as the black female experience and the intersectionality between race and gender. In *"Lady, Lady"*, Spencer explores black female identity, incorporating themes of beauty and female power in the context of oppression. Spencer's involvement in the Harlem Renaissance amplified black women's voices in this cultural movement, where most prominent public figures were men.

### ***Diction and Language: Poetic Exploration of Race and Gender***

In *"Lady, Lady"*, Anne Spencer uses rich and symbolic diction to describe black women. Through elegant word choices, Spencer emphasizes the majesty and nobility of these women, even though they live in a world filled with discrimination and oppression. Words that connote beauty and majesty, such as "crown", suggest that despite being under systemic oppression, black women still possess dignity and inner strength. The language of the poem also illustrates the duality of black women's experiences, namely their strength and vulnerability in the face of racism and sexism. Spencer utilizes powerful symbolism to paint women as the center of a culture and history that is oppressed but remains majestic and strong in its struggle.

### ***Structure and Poetic Form***

The poem *"Lady, Lady"* uses a neat and consistent structure, which reinforces the elegant and emotional feel of Anne Spencer's work. The poem is written in regular stanzas with a specific rhyme pattern, which gives a sense of harmony amidst the anguished theme. Spencer's rhyme structure often follows traditional rhyme and meter, but with a flexibility that allows emotions to flow naturally. The rhyming

pattern not only creates aesthetic regularity, but also emphasizes the contraction between external beauty and the harsh reality experienced by black women.

This pattern of structure and rhythm helps convey a profound message. Spencer uses alliteration and repetition to emphasize key moments in the poem, such as the emphasis on the grief experienced by black women due to social and political oppression. Through this structure, Spencer creates a formal beauty that parallels the emotional complexity of the subjects she describes.

### **Analysis of Intersectionality in The Poem *Lady, Lady* by Anne Spencer**

#### **Lines 1-2**

*Lady, Lady, I saw your face,  
Dark as night withholding a star*

In line 1 and 2 of *Lady, Lady, I saw your face, and Dark as night withholding a star*, Spencer describes the face of a black woman symbolized by the darkness of night. This represents oppression and potential held back by racial and gender structures. The phrase *withholding a star* is a symbol of the oppression of black women whose potential in everything is held back by their gender and racial status.

#### **Lines 2-4**

*The chisel fell, or it might have been  
You had borne so long the yoke of men.*

Spencer uses the phrase *the chisel fell* to represent that the woman has borne the burden for too long, the burden here is a social burden to the point of exhaustion and heartbreak for the woman, like a chisel that falls after a long period of heavy work. This symbolizes the emotional burden experienced by women due to unfair power structures. Followed by the verse *You had borne so long the yoke of men*, The phrase *yoke of men* is a symbol that represents the burden or pressure felt by women due to the patriarchal social system, where men control and organize the lives of black women. According to oxford dictionary *yoke* is a long piece of wood that is fastened across the necks of two animals, especially oxen, so that they can pull heavy loads, this yoke symbolizes women always bearing heavy loads without autonomy. Black women experience racial oppression as well as facing patriarchy where in this position men are in control and Black women bear the burden of patriarchy.

#### **Lines 5-6**

*Lady, Lady, I saw your hands,  
Twisted, awry, like crumpled roots,*

These lines describe how black women's hands continue to work until they look twisted like crumpled roots. The phrase *Twisted, awry, like crumpled roots* describes hands that are already very tired from forced labor. It is a powerful symbol of hard work and class oppression. The *twisted* and *awry* hands show the

damaged and exhausted physical condition of intense and continuous forced labor. The imagery of *crumpled roots* refers to tangled and damaged roots, reinforcing the image of physical exhaustion suffered by black women in manual and domestic labor, demonstrating the oppression between race, gender and class experienced by black women. In the social structure, they are not only devalued because of their skin color, but also because of their gender, and economic status that keeps them trapped in hard labor without reward or justice.

### **Lines 7-8**

*Bleached poor white in a sudsy tub,*

*Wrinkled and drawn from your rub-a-dub.*

The phrase *Bleached poor white in a sudsy tub* symbolizes the domestic work done by black women where they do constant washing which results in their hands turning white due to constant exposure to soap, but the phrase *bleached poor white* not only describes the physical changes that occur to their hands due to constant washing of clothes and working with harsh soaps, but also reflects how this domestic work erodes their body and soul. This symbol represents the economic oppression faced by black women, where they are forced to do lowly, invisible work such as housework. Although these jobs are essential for survival, they remain at the bottom of society and are not properly recognized or rewarded. The allusion to whitened hands from soap bleaching can also be seen as ironic, as this work strips them of their identity-physically, socially, and economically-as they serve white households. Thus, this symbol depicts the experience of black women at the intersection of race, gender, and class, where they are not only victims of racism and sexism, but also economically exploited in a social system that places them in a subordinate position.

### **Lines 9-10**

*Lady, Lady, I saw your heart,*

*And altared there in its darksome place*

The phrase *I saw your heart*, highlights that although the woman's body is suffering and distressed, there is something deeper within her heart. This heart symbolizes the spirituality and inner strength that remains despite her patriarchal, racial, and economic oppression. The woman's spirituality is the source of strength that enables her to endure all forms of injustice. This emotional and mental resilience is at the core of the symbol of the heart, which is described as the center of inner strength and hope. This poem not only describes the oppression experienced by white women but also voices emotional and mental resilience in line with James Weldon Johnson's statement that The Harlem Renaissance brought forth a wave of poetry that not only explored the realities of oppression but also emphasized the resilience, strength, and emotional endurance of Black people.

The poem "Lady, Lady" reflects the concept of intersectionality, particularly in relation to race and gender. In this poem, Anne Spencer highlights

how black women face multiple forms of oppression: they are not only oppressed because of the color of their skin, but also because of their gender as women.

Anne Spencer, through the portrayal of black women in this poem, gives voice to the experiences of black women who are often ignored, both in the civil rights movement and in the wider society. Through this poem, she shows that black women's identities cannot be separated between race and gender—they overlap and reinforce the oppression they experience.

This concept of intersectionality aligns with Barbara Smith's theory, which states that black women experience different oppressions due to the combination of their race and gender. “Lady, Lady” becomes a representation of how black women have to face unique social burdens, with themes of beauty, resilience, and suffering attached to their identity. This analysis shows how Spencer uses poetry as a medium to reveal the complex experiences of black women in an era where racial and gender oppression was dominant.

## **Selected Poems in The Harlem Renaissance Era: Lady, lady by Anne Spencer**

### ***Historical and Social Context***

June Jordan is a poet, essayist, and activist who is widely recognized for her powerful voice against social injustice, especially in the context of race and gender. Born in 1936 in Harlem, Jordan grew up in an environment that led her to understand the challenges faced by black people in America. She was active in various civil rights and feminist movements, making her one of the leading voices in contemporary literature focusing on issues of injustice and oppression.

In the poem “An Angry Black Woman on the Subject of the Angry White Man”, Jordan explores important themes such as racism and sexism. She focuses on how black women experience multiple oppressions from a patriarchal power structure dominated by white men.

As a contemporary poet, Jordan portrays anger as a source of power, challenging stereotypes and norms. Her political voice in the poems is often expressed in a sharp and critical tone, inviting readers to consider the realities of black women's lives.

Through her poetry, Jordan not only denounces injustice, but also offers deep reflections on how racial and gender power work to control black women's lives. Her voice becomes an empowering tool, making space for the experiences of black women who are often marginalized in both the mainstream feminist movement and the historical narrative of civil rights.

### ***Diction and poetic devices***

In this poem, June Jordan uses irony and satire as tools to challenge existing stereotypes about black women and their anger. Irony arises when Jordan creates a contrast between society's expectations of black women and the reality they face. For example, black women's anger is often dismissed as “unreasonable

anger” by the wider society, when in fact it is a legitimate response to systemic oppression.

Satire is also used to illustrate the absurdity of racial and gender injustice. Jordan cleverly explores how white men, who often perceive themselves as the oppressed, are part of an oppressive power structure. By expressing such outrage through a satirical lens, Jordan not only criticizes the behavior of white men but also exposes the hollowness of their arguments that often ignore the experiences of black women.

Symbolism also plays an important role in this poem. For example, symbols associated with power and injustice help to highlight the harsh realities faced by black women. Jordan often uses symbols related to nature and everyday life to contrast beauty and resilience with the violence experienced. This creates an additional dimension to the poem, where the reader not only understands the anger, but also the beauty and resilience that lies within.

By effectively utilizing imagery and symbolism, Jordan can convey complex messages about race and gender, and the black female experience. This creates a deep emotional resonance, allowing the reader to feel and understand the struggles faced by black women in a social and political context.

## **Analysis of intersectionality in poem ‘Lady, lady’ by Anne Spencer**

### **Lines 1-3**

*We didn't always need affirmative action  
When we broke this crazy land into farms  
when we planted and harvested the crops*

The poem begins with the first *We didn't always need affirmative action*, which is an ironic tone that Jordan writes in opposition to policies that aim to provide more equal opportunities to marginalized groups, especially based on race and gender. Affirmative action is often used to correct historical injustices that have denied blacks or other minorities access to education, employment and civil rights. However, in this line Jordan strongly rejects affirmative action. Jordan points out that during slavery, black women did not need policies like affirmative action, as they were forced to work without pay, building farms, mansions, and taking care of white children. This imagery of hard work shows the burden that black women experienced economically and physically in an oppressive system. In the lines *When we broke this crazy land into farms* and *when we planted and harvested the crops* Jordan describes how black women exploited their bodies for labor. Jordan chose the diction broke to describe how hard they work. Barbara Smith's theory reveals that black women experience multiple oppressions based on race, gender, and class. In this stanza, black women are positioned as laborers who must face economic injustice (class) under the

structure of slavery governed by white supremacy (race). In addition, their role as domestic workers also shows a form of oppression related to gender. In this line, Jordan describes all types of work performed by Black women.

#### **Lines 4-7**

*when we dug into the earth for water  
when we carried that water into the  
big house kitchens and bedrooms*

*when we built that big house*

In lines 4 to 7 Jordan describes all types of work done by black women in the phrase *when we dug into the earth for water, when we carried that water into the big house kitchens and bedrooms, when we built that big house, when we fed and clothed other people's*, this describes the heavy work done by black women and done continuously. This stanza discusses the exploitation of Black women's slavery that once took place in America. Although Jordan is a contemporary African American poet, in this poem Jordan refers back to the history of slavery as a way to touch on issues of racial injustice and sexism that continue to be relevant. Many of the issues that Jordan confronts such as racism and oppression, have roots in the history of slavery. She uses these experiences to show how their impact is still felt by the generation.

#### **Line 16**

*Purchased by blood profits from our daily forced laborings*

In line 16, the phrase *purchased by blood profits from our daily forced laborings* represents the exploitation done to black women. Black women are forced to work without being paid and the results of the black women's work benefit the white people in power. The phrase *blood profits* is a symbol that represents the profits generated from forced labor accompanied by violence and physical suffering.

#### **Lines 17-18**

*when we lived under the whip*

*And in between the coffle and chains*

The phrase *When we lived under the whip and in between the coffle and chains* describes life under extreme and systemic physical violence during slavery. The “whip” and “coffle” chains used to bind slaves symbolize the physical control experienced by African American female slaves. It also underscores their inhumanity, where they were regarded not as human beings but as property that could be bound, whipped and controlled.



### **Lines 19-20**

*when we watched our babies sold away  
from us, when we lost our men to anybody's highest bidder*

In these lines, *When we watched our babies sold away from us, when we lost our men to anybody's highest bidder*, Jordan highlights the emotional trauma of slavery, where black families were separated by the slave trade. Black women were often forced to watch their children and husbands being sold, exposing the complete loss of control over their personal and family lives. The sale of children and men created deep emotional wounds and inter-generational trauma.

### **Line 21**

*When slavery defined our days and our prayers and our nighttimes of no rest*

The line *When slavery defined our days and our prayers and our nighttimes of no rest* here emphasizes that slavery governed every aspect of slaves' lives, including their times of prayer and rest. There was no freedom or rest, not even in spirituality or in supposedly restful moments like the night. This shows the totality of slavery's control over their daily lives, including their thoughts and feelings. The phrase *no rest* sets a tone of despair, exhaustion, and emotional weariness, highlighting the relentless suffering experienced by enslaved people. This diction provides strengthening imagery to the overall tone of the poem, which carries a mixture of anger, sadness, and resistance.

### **Line 22**

*Then we did not need affirmative action*

Jordan wrote this phrase back in line 22, where it reflects a rejection of the idea that affirmative action is the sole solution to systemic injustice. Jordan reminds us that before modern policies like affirmative action, Black people, especially Black women, experienced much deeper and crueler oppression during the era of slavery. They did not need affirmative action back then because what they needed was freedom, human rights, and a revolution against the oppressive system of slavery.

Through Barbara Smith's intersectionality perspective, this piece reveals how black women's experiences during slavery were not only based on race, but also gender and class. They were women who experienced physical and mental exploitation, while they were also deprived of reproductive rights, motherhood rights, and autonomy over their bodies. Female slaves are forced to work, under the threat of violence, while also having to deal with the trauma of families destroyed by the human trafficking system. This is a clear example of intersectionality, where Black women have to endure overlapping racial, economic, and patriarchal injustices.

### **Lines 23-26**

*Like two-legged livestock we cost the  
bossman three hundred and fifteen dollars  
or six hundred and seventy-five dollars  
so he provided for our keep*

In lines 23 to 26, *Like two-legged livestock we cost the bossman three hundred and fifteen dollars or six hundred and seventy-five dollars so he provided for our keep*. Jordan describes how enslaved black people with the diction 'two-legged livestock' are treated like cattle or two-legged animals that have monetary value to the "bossman" (slave owner). They were regarded not as human beings, but as goods that could be traded for a set price. Jordan clearly emphasizes the dehumanization that enslaved people experience, where their existence is solely judged by the financial value they bring to their owners.

Through the lens of Barbara Smith's theory, this couplet reflects race- and class-based economic injustice, where black people are seen as economic commodities, with black women experiencing more exploitation due to their gender role in the structure of slavery.

### **Lines 28-29**

*penned into the parched periphery of very grand plantation life*

In lines 28 and 29, *penned into the parched periphery of very grand plantation life*, Jordan describes the lives of black people on the periphery of lavish plantation wealth. "Periphery" suggests that they live outside of power and prosperity, while white people enjoy the fruits of their labor. The comparison between the drought in the periphery and the magnificent life in the center of the plantation shows the inequality of wealth and luxury between the ruling class and the slaves. This phrase illustrates the double marginalization of black people, where they are socially and economically excluded from resources, while being trapped in race- and class-based injustice.

### **Lines 30-32**

*NO! We needed freedom: We needed overthrow,  
revolution and a holy fire to purify the air.*

Lines 30 to 32, *We did not need affirmative action. NO! We needed freedom: We needed overthrow, revolution and a holy fire to purify the air*, Jordan rewrites the phrase *we did not need affirmative action* which is a rejection of the concept of affirmative action by stating that what is really needed is complete freedom and revolutionary change. This stanza expresses anger and demands for a more radical resistance than just reform or affirmative action. The freedom desired is not simply equal opportunity, but a complete break from systems of oppression. In Barbara Smith's theory, black women are not just seeking small improvements

through affirmative action, but they need complete freedom from the race, gender and class-based oppression they face. This phrase connects black women's struggles to the revolutionary ideal of breaking down the multi-layered structures of oppression.

### **Lines 33-37**

*But for two hundred years this crazy  
land the law and the bullets behind the law  
continued to affirm the gospel of  
God-given White supremacy*

Lines 33-37 But for two hundred years this crazy land the law and the bullets behind the law continued to affirm the gospel of God-given White supremacy, Jordan asserts that for two hundred years, American law and the violence symbolized by the word 'bullets' have supported and affirmed the doctrine of God-given White supremacy. This reveals that slavery and racial injustice were not only supported by laws, but also by the power of guns and religious beliefs that facilitated the oppression of black people.

In terms of intersectionality, this stanza reflects how law and religion are used to justify race- and gender-based oppression. For Black women, this means that their oppression is legitimized by the power of the state and a patriarchal society that supports white supremacy. Jordan describes how black women live in a society where all layers of power come together to oppress them.

### **CONCLUSION**

The three poems-*The Slave Mother* by Frances E.W. Harper, *Lady Lady* by Anne Spencer, and *An Angry Black Woman on the Subject of the Angry White Man* by June Jordan-convey powerful messages about black women's experiences in racial and gender contexts. Each poem highlights the challenges faced by black women, and illustrates their anger, resilience, and struggle.

In *The Slave Mother*, Harper highlights the pain and loss experienced by black women during the era of slavery, using profound imagery to create an emotional picture of a mother's suffering and love. The poem reflects the impact of the slavery system, which defied social norms and created awareness of the suffering experienced by black women.

Spencer's *Lady,Lady* depicts the awakening of black female identity amidst social challenges. Through symbolism and metaphor, Spencer creates a space for reflection and liberation, affirming the power of women in the face of challenges. The poem serves as a manifestation of the Harlem Renaissance, where African American identity and experience began to be explored and celebrated.

Meanwhile, *An Angry Black Woman on the Subject of the Angry White Man* by Jordan expresses anger as a form of resistance against injustice. By using satire and metaphor, Jordan challenges the negative stereotypes often labeled on black

women and directly criticizes the dominating patriarchal power structure. This poem not only depicts anger, but also depicts a desire for justice and recognition.

Taken together, these three poems complement each other and show that black women's experiences cannot be separated from the larger historical context, from the Jim Crow era to contemporary times. Intersectionality as a concept has been around for a long time, seen in these three poems, where the challenges faced by black women are not only related to race, but also gender and social class. This shows that racism and gender intersectionality have always existed in history, it was only a matter of time before these issues were recognized and discussed in more depth in a social context. Through these works, the poets manage to give voice to marginalized experiences and encourage readers to reflect on the power dynamics that exist in society.

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