

## RACE, GENDER, AND RESISTANCE: CRENSHAW'S INTERSECTIONALITY ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

The representation of Black women in historical films has become an important subject in contemporary literary and cultural studies, particularly in understanding how race and gender intersect within systems of oppression. This study examines the intersectionality of racial and gender discrimination experienced by Harriet Tubman and other Black women as portrayed in *Harriet* (2019), directed by Kasi Lemmons. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach within an interpretative film analysis framework to explore how intersecting identities are constructed and represented through the film's narrative, dialogues, and visual elements. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, the analysis focuses on selected scenes that illustrate structural, political, and representational intersectionality, as well as the responses developed by Harriet Tubman in confronting discrimination. The findings reveal that the film portrays racial and gender discrimination as interconnected systems embedded in slavery, discriminatory legal institutions, and historical representation. The analysis also demonstrates that Harriet Tubman confronts these intersecting forms of oppression through resistance, agency, and solidarity, transforming personal survival into collective action for the liberation of others. Overall, the study shows that *Harriet* not only reconstructs the historical experiences of Black women under slavery but also highlights their resilience, leadership, and contribution to the abolitionist movement. By presenting Harriet Tubman as an active historical agent rather than merely a victim of oppression, the film serves as a meaningful cinematic representation that reclaims Black women's place in history through an intersectional perspective.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Racial and Gender Discrimination, Black Women, *Harriet* (2019), Harriet Tubman

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender refers to the socially constructed behavior, roles, activities, and attributes that a particular society considers appropriate for women and men while gender discrimination refers to the prejudicial treatment of an individual or group due to gender (Shastri, A, 2014). Black women have been experiencing racial and gender discrimination as social problems. Racial and gender discrimination are forms of inequality that often interact and reinforce one another. Racial discrimination refers to unequal treatment based on race, while gender discrimination is an unequal power relationship between genders (Omi & Winant, 2015; Beauvoir, 2011). Even though these forms of discrimination are different, they cannot always be understood separately. According to Crenshaw (1989), individuals such as Black women who belong to multiple marginalized groups, experience overlapping systems of oppression that are distinct from those experienced by either men of the same race or women of the dominant race. This intersection creates a unique form of discrimination that is shaped by both racial and gender hierarchies (Collins, 2000). The forms of inequality such as stereotypes, power imbalances and restricted access to social, political, and economic opportunities are not separate phenomena; rather they are produced through historically constructed power relations shaped by patriarchy, institutional dominance, and racism (Crenshaw, 2016; Collins & Bilge, 2020).

The representation of racial and gender discrimination against women, particularly those from marginalized communities has been analyzed in many cultural studies and films. They show that the functions of cinema not only as a site of representation but also as a medium which exposes and critiques structural social inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991; Hayward, 2018). Films present stories of women's lives where power becomes manifest through hopes, dreams, action, decisions, and relationships. In addition, women's lives were bounded culturally and structurally in ways that made it more or less possible for women to act powerfully on their own behalf for others (Sutherland, J.A., & Feltey, K.M., 2017). To analyze the forms of discrimination represented in the film, this study employs an intersectional theory. Intersectionality is a framework to analyze social differences and sameness and the multiple ways in which discriminations affect subjects along the axes of race, gender, sexuality, social class, socio-economic status, geographical position, nationality, and other lines of difference (Losleben, K., & Musubika, S. (2023). By applying an intersectional lens, this study captures the structural oppression and the politics of liberation of Black womanhood in *Harriet* (2019).

The film *Harriet* (2019) provides a rich narrative context for applying intersectionality. *Harriet's* journey is shaped by her identity as an enslaved Black woman, a social position that exposes her to racialized violence, patriarchal domination, economic exploitation, and legal disenfranchisement. At the same time, the film illustrates her agency and resistance, showing how she navigates and challenges intersecting structures of oppression. Her leadership within the Underground Railroad, her spiritual conviction, and her defiance of both white supremacy and patriarchal expectations underscore the importance of intersectionality in understanding the dynamics of freedom, identity, and resistance.

Although some previous studies have analyzed *Harriet* (2019), none has specifically analyzed an intersectionality theory of Kimberlé Crenshaw as a main framework to analyze this film. Many studies focus on scenes, dialogues, and race such as, *Resistance of Racism Representation in Harriet* (2019), analyzes how the film constructs resistance to racism through scenes and dialogues using Amy Villarejo's cinematic approach and Stuart Hall's concept of representation. Second, *Racial Discrimination in Harriet* (2019), identifies three types of racial discrimination experienced by Tubman and other Black characters: explicit intentional discrimination, subtle unaware discrimination, and statistical discrimination. The focus is on race alone, particularly on how whiteness oppresses Black people and it does not develop intersectional categories such as Black womanhood or class-based subordination. By addressing

this gap, the present study centers on intersectionality such as race, gender, and class using Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study adopted a qualitative approach using interpretative textual analysis to examine the representation of racial and gender discrimination in *Harriet* (2019). The analysis was guided by Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which provides a framework for understanding how multiple forms of oppression operate simultaneously through social structures, political systems, and cultural representation.

The primary data consisted of selected scenes, dialogues, character interactions, and visual representations taken from the film. To enrich the analysis, the researcher also consulted books, journal articles, and other scholarly sources related to intersectionality, race, gender, and film studies.

Data were collected through repeated viewing of the film, followed by careful observation and documentation of scenes relevant to the research objectives. The selected data were organized and classified according to the three dimensions of intersectionality proposed by Crenshaw: structural, political, and representational intersectionality.

The analysis followed the principles of qualitative content analysis. Each selected scene was coded, interpreted, and examined in relation to the theoretical framework to identify how intersecting forms of racial and gender discrimination were portrayed throughout the narrative. The interpretation also explored Harriet Tubman's responses to oppression, particularly through acts of resistance, agency, and solidarity, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the film's representation of Black women's experiences.

## **DISCUSSION**

The analysis reveals that *Harriet* (2019) portrays racial and gender discrimination as interconnected systems rather than separate forms of oppression. Consistent with Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, Harriet Tubman's experiences demonstrate that race and gender operate simultaneously within slavery, shaping unequal access to freedom, legal protection, and social recognition. Instead of presenting discrimination as a series of isolated incidents, the film illustrates how institutional structures, political authority, and cultural representation reinforce one another in maintaining the subordination of Black women.

The findings indicate that structural intersectionality forms the foundation of oppression throughout the film. Harriet's experiences are shaped by slavery as an institutional system that regulates the lives of enslaved Black women through legal restrictions, economic exploitation, and patriarchal control. Several scenes depict the denial of legal freedom, forced family separation, and the absence of autonomy, illustrating that Black women are marginalized not only because of race or gender individually, but because these identities intersect within the institution of slavery. These findings support Crenshaw's (1991) argument that structural inequality emerges from institutional arrangements rather than individual prejudice alone. They also correspond with Collins' (2000) view that racism and patriarchy function together to sustain unequal social relations.

The film further demonstrates that oppression is reinforced through political and legal institutions. Harriet's escape, participation in the Underground Railroad, and leadership in rescue missions are portrayed as responses to laws that criminalized freedom while protecting the interests of slave owners. Rather than depicting Harriet merely as a survivor, the film presents her as a political actor who actively challenges institutional injustice. This finding expands Crenshaw's concept of political intersectionality by illustrating how Black women negotiate systems of power through collective action and organized resistance rather than individual survival alone.

Another significant finding concerns the reconstruction of Harriet Tubman's historical identity. The film challenges conventional representations that often portray Black women as passive victims by presenting Harriet as a strategist, leader, and symbol of liberation. Through its narrative and visual representation, Harriet restores the historical visibility of Black women whose contributions have frequently been marginalized within dominant historical narratives. This finding supports representational intersectionality by demonstrating that cultural representation plays an important role in shaping public understanding of race, gender, and historical memory.

Besides portraying oppression, the film emphasizes how Black women respond to intersecting forms of discrimination through resistance, agency, and solidarity. These responses illustrate that marginalized individuals are not merely subjects of oppression but active participants in transforming their social conditions.

Harriet's decision to escape slavery represents the earliest and most direct form of resistance portrayed in the film. Her actions reject the legitimacy of slavery and challenge the institutional system that seeks to control her body, movement, and identity. Resistance therefore functions not only as personal survival but also as a rejection of intersecting racial and gender oppression.

The findings also demonstrate Harriet's agency through her independent decision-making and leadership. Rather than waiting to be rescued, Harriet determines her own course of action, plans rescue missions, and accepts responsibility for the freedom of others. Her agency contradicts stereotypical portrayals of Black women as dependent or powerless and instead presents them as capable of influencing historical change despite structural constraints.

Finally, the film highlights solidarity as an essential response to oppression. Harriet's collaboration with formerly enslaved people, abolitionists, and members of the Underground Railroad illustrates that freedom is achieved through collective commitment rather than individual effort alone. Solidarity therefore complements resistance and agency by demonstrating that collective action strengthens the struggle against intersecting systems of discrimination.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Harriet represents intersectionality as a dynamic relationship between oppression and resistance. Structural, political, and representational forms of discrimination operate simultaneously throughout the narrative, while Harriet's responses demonstrate that resistance, agency, and solidarity emerge from the same intersecting conditions. This supports Crenshaw's proposition that the experiences of Black women cannot be adequately understood through race or gender as separate analytical categories. Instead, the film illustrates that intersecting identities produce unique experiences of marginalization while also shaping distinctive forms of resilience and collective action.

Furthermore, the findings extend previous studies that primarily examined racial discrimination or historical representation by showing how Harriet integrates institutional oppression with Black women's active resistance. Rather than portraying Harriet Tubman solely as a historical heroine, the film positions her as a representation of Black women's enduring struggle against interconnected systems of race, gender, and power. In doing so, Harriet contributes to a broader understanding of intersectionality by demonstrating that liberation is achieved not only through individual courage but also through collective action and historical recognition.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This study examined the representation of intersectionality in *Harriet* (2019) by applying Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. The analysis focused on two research questions: (1) how the film represents the intersection of racial and gender discrimination

experienced by Harriet Tubman and other Black women, and (2) how Harriet Tubman and Black women respond to those intersecting forms of discrimination.

Regarding the first research question, the findings demonstrate that Harriet represents intersectional discrimination through three interconnected dimensions: structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality is reflected in the institutional organization of slavery, which systematically denies Black women legal recognition, personal autonomy, family integrity, and equal access to justice. The film portrays slavery not merely as a historical practice of forced labour but as a social structure that normalizes racial and gender inequality through legal, economic, and patriarchal institutions.

Second, the results show that the women's responses to discrimination are characterized by resilience, solidarity, and agency. The characters do not remain passive when confronted with oppression. Instead, they support one another, maintain discipline, and prove their ability through excellent performance. Their unity becomes a form of resistance against both institutional racism and patriarchal structures. Harriet Tubman and other women in the plantation demonstrate that Black women hold the capacity to lead, endure, and challenge injustice despite systemic barriers.

Political intersectionality is represented through the interaction between discriminatory legal systems and organized resistance against those systems. The narrative illustrates how laws protecting slavery simultaneously exclude Black women from equal citizenship while criminalizing their pursuit of freedom. At the same time, the film highlights Harriet Tubman's involvement in the Underground Railroad and her later contribution to the Union Army, demonstrating that Black women were active participants in political struggles rather than passive observers of historical change.

Representational intersectionality appears in the film's reconstruction of Harriet Tubman's historical identity. Rather than portraying her primarily as a victim of slavery, the narrative presents Harriet as a courageous leader, strategist, and moral agent whose contributions have frequently been marginalized within dominant historical narratives. By placing Harriet at the centre of the story, the film challenges stereotypical representations of Black women and contributes to a more inclusive understanding of American history.

To the second research question, the findings indicate that Harriet Tubman and other Black women respond to intersectional discrimination through resistance, agency, and solidarity. Harriet's initial decision to escape slavery represents a refusal to accept institutional injustice as inevitable. As the narrative progresses, she demonstrates personal agency by making independent decisions, leading rescue missions, and assuming responsibility for the safety of others. These individual responses eventually develop into solidarity through cooperation with formerly enslaved communities and abolitionist networks, illustrating that collective action plays a crucial role in confronting systemic oppression.

This study also demonstrates that Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality provides an effective analytical framework for understanding the complexity of Harriet Tubman's experiences. Through this perspective, the film reveals that racial and gender discrimination operate simultaneously and shape not only the forms of oppression experienced by Black women but also the ways they resist, negotiate, and transform those conditions. Therefore, intersectionality offers a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between identity, power, and social inequality as represented in the film.

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions are proposed for future research. First, future researchers may examine Harriet (2019) using theoretical perspectives other than intersectionality to obtain different interpretations of the film.

Second, future studies may expand the scope of analysis by comparing Harriet with other historical or biographical films portraying Black women's experiences. Comparative research may reveal similarities and differences in the representation of intersectional discrimination across different historical contexts, narrative strategies, or cinematic traditions.

Third, researchers may investigate audience reception to explore how contemporary viewers interpret Harriet Tubman's character and the film's representation of race and gender. Such studies could contribute to understanding how historical films influence public perceptions of social justice, equality, and collective memory.

Finally, this study is expected to contribute to the development of literary and film studies, particularly in the field of intersectionality, by demonstrating the relevance of Kimberlé Crenshaw's theoretical framework in analysing cinematic representations of race and gender. It is also hoped that the findings encourage readers to develop a deeper awareness of the complexity of discrimination and the importance of recognizing Black women's historical contributions to struggles for equality and human rights.

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