

Intersectional Study of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Humanities

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Abstract

Intersectionality has emerged as a critical framework within contemporary humanities, critiquing unitary analyses of identity and oppression. Coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, intersectionality emphasizes the overlapping nature of social identities and how they structure unequal power dynamics. In the Indian context, the study of gender and sexuality cannot be separated from caste hierarchies, religious orthodoxy, class divisions, and regional specificities. This paper explores how intersectional analysis enriches humanities discourse by drawing on Indian authors and texts that foreground multiple axes of identity. Works of prominent Indian writers including Bama, Meena Alexander, Mahasweta Devi, and others reveal how gender and sexuality intersect with caste, class, religion, and language politics. Through literary criticism, cultural theory, and contemporary socio-political examples, the study demonstrates the indispensability of intersectionality for inclusive humanities scholarship in India.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Gender, Sexuality, Indian Literature, Dalit Feminism, Queer Studies, Cultural Humanities, Caste, Class

Introduction

Contemporary humanities investigate human experience through literature, culture, history, and social analysis. Traditional humanistic inquiries into gender and sexuality often focused on singular categories. For example, “women” as a homogeneous group, or “heterosexual normativity” as a universal problem. However, such approaches risk erasing the layered and differentiated lived realities of individuals shaped by caste, class, religion, region, disability, and language. An intersectional approach complicates these earlier models by insisting that identity is never experienced in isolation. A Dalit woman in rural India, for instance, negotiates gender through the structures of caste and economic marginalization, while an upper-caste urban woman may experience patriarchy in ways that are mediated by

privilege. Similarly, queer identities are shaped by linguistic, religious, and regional contexts that influence visibility, safety, and social belonging.

Kimberle Crenshaw introduced intersectionality as a way to move beyond single-axis thinking about discrimination. She showed that Black women's experiences could not be understood by looking at race or gender in isolation. Instead, these systems of power interact, shaping forms of disadvantage that are specific and structurally produced. By naming this overlap, she challenged legal and academic frameworks that treated identities as separate and unrelated categories.

This insight has far-reaching implications for humanities scholarship. It pushes researchers to question simplified narratives and to examine how literature, history, philosophy, and cultural production reflect layered systems of power. In literary studies, for example, intersectionality encourages close attention to how characters are shaped not only by gender but also by race, class, and sexuality. In historical research, it calls for a re-examination of whose voices have been preserved and whose have been marginalized. Rather than adding categories onto existing frameworks, intersectionality asks scholars to rethink the structure of analysis itself. Intersectionality reshapes how we interpret cultural meaning. It highlights how identities are constructed within social hierarchies and how representation can both challenge and reinforce inequality. By centering complexity, the framework strengthens humanities scholarship, making it more attentive to lived realities and more responsive to social justice concerns.

In India, thinking about gender and sexuality inevitably involves other axes of identity. The experience of upper-caste urban women differs radically from that of Dalit or tribal women. Similarly, the lives of urban, middle-class queer individuals cannot represent the diverse experiences of non-normative sexualities among rural or economically marginalized communities.

This paper explores how an intersectional approach is particularly grounded in Indian literary and cultural texts. It is an analysis of the gender and sexuality in contemporary humanities. It examines how writers and thinkers from the Indian subcontinent articulate the interplay of identity categories and reveal structural injustices often overlooked by non-intersectional perspectives.

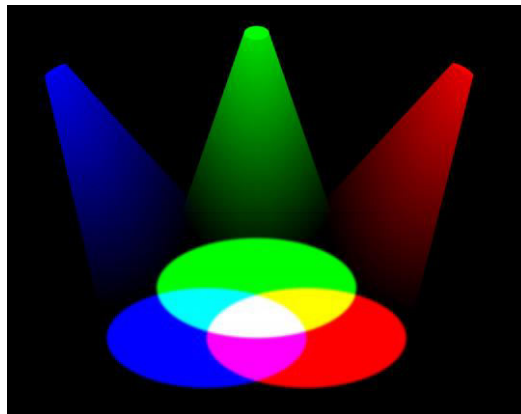
Intersectionality is not simply about "adding more categories," but about understanding how systems of power interlock. It insists that social identities are interdependent and caste cannot be separated from gender, just as class cannot be separated from sexuality. Indian scholar Uma Chakravarti observes that in the Indian social hierarchy, caste and gender are mutually reinforcing. For example, caste codes often regulate women's sexuality and mobility, shaping autonomy differently across caste groups.

While Crenshaw's work remains foundational, Indian theorists and activists have expanded its contours to accommodate caste, gender and sexuality dynamics that are distinct from Western contexts. Intersectionality in the Indian humanities must therefore engage with

localized forms of domination such as caste patriarchy, religious exclusion, and linguistic hierarchy.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality was articulated by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw in 1991, the concept of intersectionality identifies a mode of analysis integral to women, gender, sexuality studies. Within intersectional frameworks, race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and other aspects of identity are considered mutually constitutive; that is, people experience these multiple aspects of identity simultaneously and the meanings of different aspects of identity are shaped by one another. In other words, notions of gender and the way a person's gender is interpreted by others are always impacted by notions of race and the way that person's race is interpreted. For example, a person is never received as just a woman, but how that person is racialized impacts how the person is received as a woman. So, notions of blackness, brownness, and whiteness always influence gendered experience, and there is no experience of gender that is outside of an experience of race. In addition to race, gendered experience is also shaped by age, sexuality, class, and ability; likewise, the experience of race is impacted by gender, age, class, sexuality, and ability.



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Understanding intersectionality requires a particular way of thinking. It is different than how many people imagine identities operate. An intersectional analysis of identity is distinct from single-determinant identity models and additive models of identity. A single determinant model of identity presumes that one aspect of identity, say, gender, dictates one's access to or disenfranchisement from power. An example of this idea is the concept of "global sisterhood," or the idea that all women across the globe share some basic common political interests, concerns, and needs (Morgan 1996). If women in different locations did share common interests, it would make sense for them to unite on the basis of gender to fight for social changes on a global scale. Unfortunately, if the analysis of social problems stops at gender, what is missed is an attention to how various cultural contexts shaped by race, religion, and access to resources may actually place some women's needs at cross-purposes

to other women's needs. Therefore, this approach obscures the fact that women in different social and geographic locations face different problems. Although many white, middle-class women activists of the mid-20th century US fought for freedom to work and legal parity with men, this was not the major problem for women of color or working-class white women who had already been actively participating in the US labor market as domestic workers, factory workers, and slave laborers since early US colonial settlement. Campaigns for women's equal legal rights and access to the labor market at the international level are shaped by the experience and concerns of white American women, while women of the global south, in particular, may have more pressing concerns: access to clean water, access to adequate health care, and safety from the physical and psychological harms of living in tyrannical, war-torn, or economically impoverished nations.



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In contrast to the single-determinant identity model, the additive model of identity simply adds together privileged and disadvantaged identities for a slightly more complex picture. For instance, a Black man may experience some advantages based on his gender, but has limited access to power based on his race. This kind of analysis is exemplified in how race and gender wage gaps are portrayed in statistical studies and popular news reports. Below, you can see a median wage gap table from the Institute for Women's Policy Research compiled in 2009. In reading the table, it can be seen that the gender wage gap is such that in 2009, overall, women earned 77% of what men did in the US. The table breaks down the information further to show that earnings varied not only by gender but by race as well. Thus, Hispanic or Latino women earned only 52.9% of what white men did while white women made 75%. This is certainly more descriptive than a single gender wage gap figure or a single race wage gap figure. The table is useful at pointing to potential structural explanations that may make earnings differ between groups. For instance, looking at the chart, you may immediately wonder why these gaps exist; is it a general difference of education levels, occupations, regions of residence or skill levels between groups, or is it something else, such as discrimination in hiring and promotion? What it is not useful for is predicting people's incomes by plugging in their gender plus their race, even though it may be our instinct to do so. Individual experiences differ vastly and for a variety of reasons; there are outliers in every group. Most importantly, even if this chart helps in understanding structural reasons why incomes differ, it doesn't provide all the answers.

Average Annual Earnings for Year-Round Full-Time Workers age 15 Years and Older by Race and Ethnicity

Table 1: Average Annual Earnings for Year-Round Full-Time Workers age 15 Years and Older by Race and Ethnicity, 2015

Racial/Ethnic Background*	Men (\$)	Women (\$)	Women's Earnings as % of White Male Earnings
All Racial/Ethnic Groups	51,212	40,742	—
White	57,204	43,063	75.3%
Black	41,094	36,212	63.3%
Asian American	61,672	48,313	84.5%
Hispanic or Latino	35,673	31,109	54.4%

*White alone, not Hispanic; Black alone or in combination (may include Hispanic); Asian American alone or in combination (may include Hispanic); and Hispanic/Latina/o (may be of any race).

Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research. Compilation of U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2016. "Historical Income Tables: Table P-38. Full-Time, Year Round Workers by Median Earnings and Sex: 1987 to 2015." <<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/incomepoverty/historical-income-people.html>>

The additive model does not take into account how our shared cultural ideas of gender are racialized and our ideas of race are gendered and that these ideas structure access to resources and power—material, political, interpersonal. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2005) has developed a strong intersectional framework through her discussion of race, gender, and sexuality in her historical analysis of representations of Black sexuality in the US. Hill Collins shows how contemporary white American culture exoticizes Black men and women and she points to a history of enslavement and treatment as chattel as the origin and motivator for the use of these images. In order to justify slavery, African-Americans were thought of and treated as less than human. Sexual reproduction was often forced among slaves for the financial benefit of plantation owners, but owners reframed this coercion and rape as evidence of the “natural” and uncontrollable sexuality of people from the African continent. Images of Black men and women were not completely the same, as Black men were constructed as hypersexual “bucks” with little interest in continued relationships whereas Black women were framed as hypersexual “Jezebels” that became the “matriarchs” of their families. Again, it is important to note how the context, where enslaved families were often forcefully dismantled, is often left unacknowledged and contemporary racialized constructions are assumed and framed as individual choices or traits. It is shockingly easy to see how these images are still present in contemporary media, culture, and politics, for instance, in discussions of American welfare programs. This analysis reveals how race, gender, and sexuality intersect. We cannot simply pull these identities apart because they are interconnected and mutually enforcing.

Although the framework of intersectional has contributed important insights to feminist analyses, there are problems. Intersectionality refers to the mutually co-constitutive nature of multiple aspects of identity, yet in practice this term is typically used to signify the specific difference of “women of color,” which effectively produces women of color (and in particular, Black women) as Other and again centers white women (Puar 2012). In addition,

the framework of intersectionality was created in the context of the United States; therefore, the use of the framework reproduces the United States as the dominant site of feminist inquiry and women's studies' Euro-American bias (Puar 2012). Another failing of intersectionality is its premise of fixed categories of identity, where descriptors like race, gender, class, and sexuality are assumed to be stable. In contrast, the notion of **assemblage** considers categories events, actions, and encounters between bodies, rather than simply attributes (Puar 2012). Assemblage refers to a collage or collection of things, or the act of assembling. An assemblage perspective emphasizes how relations, patterns, and connections between concepts give concepts meaning (Puar 2012). Although assemblage has been framed against intersectionality, identity categories' mutual co-constitution is accounted for in both intersectionality and assemblage.

"Gender" is too often used simply and erroneously to mean "white women," while "race" too often connotes "Black men." An intersectional perspective examines how identities are related to each other in our own experiences and how the social structures of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and ability intersect for everyone. As opposed to single-determinant and additive models of identity, an intersectional approach develops a more sophisticated understanding of the world and how individuals in differently situated social groups experience differential access to both material and symbolic resources.

Queer Theory and Indian Sexualities

Queer theory, influenced by global scholars, critiques binary oppositions and heteronormativity. In India, queer studies have gained momentum since the landmark *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* judgment (2018) that decriminalized consensual same-sex relations under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Indian queer theorists like Devdutt Pattanaik and activists such as Arsham Parsi have foregrounded queer identities within cultural, mythological, and social narratives.

Intersectional queer studies in India must wrestle with region, caste, religion, and class. It is not solely sexual orientation. Intersectional queer analysis highlights that the privileges available to urban, upper caste queer individuals do not extend to queer Dalit, tribal, or economically marginalized communities. Literature has been a fertile site for examining how multiple social identities shape experience. Indian literature, in particular, reflects socio-cultural complexities rooted in caste, religion, class, gender, and sexuality. Below we examine key Indian writers whose works articulate intersectional realities.

Dalit Feminist Expression

Bama, in her autobiographical novel *Karukku*, delineates the lived realities of Dalit women caught at the crossroads of caste and patriarchy. Bama's narrative does not treat caste and gender as separate domains of oppression — instead, it shows how Dalit women's subordination is produced through their caste status as much as their gender. Her writing

reveals how Dalit women face exploitation both within the caste hierarchy and within their own communities. Dalit feminist literary scholarship, such as the works of Gail Omvedt, emphasizes that caste hierarchies shape women's bodily autonomy, mobility, and access to education in ways unrecognizable in mainstream Indian feminist narratives. Bama's work thus exemplifies intersectional humanities in practice.

Meena Alexander captures migrant subjectivities that intersect gender with displacement, race, and diaspora. In poems such as *Birthplace with Buried Stones*, Alexander complicates normative understandings of belonging and identity. Her intersectional vision considers how gendered experiences in India intersect with racialized identities abroad, demonstrating that sexuality, gender, and belonging are mediated by global structures of power.

Mahasweta Devi is known for her stories that foreground marginalized tribal and Dalit characters in India. In texts like *Draupadi*, Devi explores how tribal women suffer at the intersection of state violence, caste dominance, and gender oppression. The protagonist Draupadi embodies resistance to state power and patriarchal violence. Mahasweta Devi's work therefore illustrates how literary narratives can illuminate intersectional injustices that statutory frameworks overlook.

Intersectionality and Gender in Culture

Indian cinema that popularly known as Bollywood is often perpetuates normative constructions of gender and sexuality. Gender roles are frequently constrained to romanticized binaries, and queer representation has traditionally been stereotypical. Although recent films challenge these norms (e.g., *Aligarh*, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*), intersectional analysis reveals that most Hindi cinema narratives center upper-caste, urban experiences, rendering intersecting forms of marginalization invisible. For instance, films that depict queer narratives tend to foreground middle-class contexts and rarely explore how caste, religion, or language shape queer experiences in smaller towns and rural areas. Intersectionality compels cultural critics to ask: whose stories are told, and whose remain unheard?

The rise of digital platforms and blogs, social media and online magazines has diversified narratives about gender and sexuality. Platforms like *Feminism in India* and *The Ladies Finger* provide spaces for voices that challenge dominant paradigms. In digital public humanities, activists and writers negotiate complex identities online, offering intersectional reflections on caste violence, queer desire, and gendered oppression. However, access to digital spaces is uneven. Socio-economic disparities, digital literacy gaps, and linguistic barriers limit participation for many. This illustrates the continued importance of intersectional analysis even in digital humanities.

Intersectionality, Law, and Social Justice in India

Indian law has undergone significant reform regarding women's rights and queer rights. The decriminalization of Section 377 and the recognition of transgender persons under the *Nalsa v. Union of India* judgment (2014) marked constitutional progress. Yet these reforms must be interpreted through intersectional lenses. Urban upper-caste queer individuals can often access social privileges that remain unavailable to queer individuals from marginalized caste groups. Similarly, women's reservation policies in local governance aim to enhance political representation but may not translate into substantive empowerment for Dalit and tribal women unless deeper structural inequalities are addressed.

Movements such as *Dalit Panthers*, *Bhagat Singh Collective*, and *Queer Azaadi Marches* reflect intersectional resistances. These movements reveal that struggles related to caste justice, gender equality, and sexual freedom are interwoven. Intersectional analysis helps map how movements respond to systemic domination that transcends singular identity categories.

Challenges and Critiques of Intersectional Approaches

Intersectionality as a framework also faces challenges:

- **Complexity and Overreach:** Bringing multiple identities into analysis can complicate research design and interpretation. Scholars must avoid reducing individuals to "lists of identities" without attending to how those identities interact in context.
- **Institutional Resistance:** Academia still privileges disciplinary boundaries. Interdisciplinary intersectional work frequently struggles for recognition and institutional support.
- **Representation Dilemmas:** Scholars must be vigilant about speaking for marginalized communities rather than facilitating their voices. Ethical research practices require reflexivity regarding positionality.

Conclusion

An intersectional study of gender and sexuality enriches contemporary humanities by foregrounding the multiplicity of lived experiences. In the Indian context, where caste hierarchies, religious identities, class divisions, and linguistic politics shape social life, intersectionality becomes an indispensable analytical tool. Through Indian literary texts, including the writings of Bama, Mahasweta Devi, and Meena Alexander. This paper demonstrates how gender and sexuality intersect with caste, class, and power. Intersectional analysis in cultural studies, legal discourse, media representation, and digital humanities expands the scope of contemporary humanities, making it more inclusive and social. As Indian society continues to grapple with inequality, humanities scholarship must embrace

intersectionality not just as a methodology but as a moral commitment to justice and representation.

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