



Contemporary English Fiction and Intersectional Feminism: A Study of Intimacy, Power, and Identity

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Abstract

This paper discusses intersectional feminism in modern English fiction in the context of reconfiguration of intimacy, power, and identity. It discusses how the novels of the twenty-first century transcend the conventional gender systems to depict identity as dynamic, multi-faceted and influenced by various intersecting factors such as race, class, caste, sexuality and nationality. The study points out that intimacy is no longer a strictly individual or emotional domain in contemporary literature but is highly dependent on social and political systems of power. It also demonstrates how modern stories problematize the traditional ideas of subjectivity through the depiction of divided and hybrid identities that are created due to migration, trauma, and cultural hybridity. An intersectional feminist approach to the study shows that modern English fiction is proactive and does not passively accept dominant ideology; it is also redefining the notion of representation, including the voices of the marginalized and various experiences. Finally, it postulates that contemporary literature assumes a transformative role of redefining the concept of identity, relations and power in the modern world.

Keywords: Intersectional Feminism, Contemporary English Fiction, Intimacy, Power Relations, Identity Formation, Gender Fluidity

Introduction

Twenty-first century English fiction has been a major change in the manner literature addresses issues of identity, power, intimacy and representation. Unlike in the previous literary traditions where gender and social roles were usually presented in rigid and hierarchical manner, contemporary narratives are becoming more fluid, fragmented and intersectional in their approach to understanding human experience. In this dynamic literary approach, intersectional feminism has become a crucial critical methodology that allows reading texts more comprehensively by considering the various and overlapping power systems that influence individual lives. Instead of considering gender as a single category, intersectional feminism focuses on the interplay between race, class, caste, sexuality, nationality, and cultural placement to create complex identities. Modern English fiction, particularly in writing since the 2000s, is imbued with these theoretical developments, as it shows the ways of life of characters that are determined by both the intertwining privilege and marginalization structures. Intimacy as a concept in modern literature has also been

radically transformed. Historically, intimacy was perceived as an intimate and emotional space, not connected with greater socio-political frameworks. Nevertheless, feminist literary criticism has shown to an ever-growing extent that intimate relations are highly entrenched into power structures. Modern English fiction discloses the impact of gender expectations, economic inequalities, historical trauma, and cultural norms on love, desire, family, and friendship. Intimacy is not depicted as a non-political and strictly personal phenomenon but as a disputable area where the emotional connections are formed, controlled, and even interrupted through the influence of some external factors. This redefinition permits authors to reveal the concealed power relations in relations, emphasizing the ways emotional work, dependency, and vulnerability are frequently imbalanced along gender and social lines. Reconstruction of subjectivity is another important aspect of modern fiction. In contrast to the earlier traditions of realism, where identity is often illustrated as consistent and fixed, contemporary narratives tend to show the subjectivity as dynamic, broken and in a constant state of flux. Contemporary literature is shaped by poststructuralist and

feminist theorists like Judith Butler, Kimberle Crenshaw, bell hooks and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and preempts essentialist conceptualizations of self, instead foreshadowing the constructedness of the self. In such stories, the characters tend to move between different identities at the same time influenced by cultural hybridity, migration, trauma, and social mobility. This plurality is a reflection of the fact of a globalized world, where people live in the conditions of a changing cultural, ideological environment that is redefining their identity on a regular basis.

Moreover, the modern English fiction is significant in terms of redefining the politics of representations. The growing presence of marginal voices, especially the voices of women, LGBTQ communities, racial minorities, and diasporic groups, has broadened the boundaries of literary expression. Not only do these texts express various forms of identities, but they also confront hegemonic narratives that have traditionally omitted or misrepresented those experiences. Contemporary writers establish the literary space that is not marked by one interpretation and is characterized by ambiguity through experimental narrative structures, fragmentation of the storytelling, and multiple perspectives. This formal innovation represents the intricacy of intersectional identities and highlights the constriction of conventional narrative forms in order to reflect the multiplicity of lived experience.

In this regard, intersectional feminism offers a strong analytical tool of engaging with the problems of power, intimacy, and identity in modern English fiction. It provides an opportunity of further investigation of how structural inequalities are maintained and opposed in personal relationships and social contexts. Using this framework in the analysis of chosen literary texts, one can both find out the way narratives mirror larger socio-political reality and challenge it and reform it in specific ways. Finally, the modern English fiction is not only a reflection of personal experience, but it is part of the creation of meaning, which provides the critical commentary on the changing nature of human relationships and identity construction in the twenty-first century.

Reconfiguring Intimacy and Power in Contemporary Fiction

A Little Life

The book ostensibly narrates the tale of four friends residing in New York: Willem, JB, Malcolm, and Jude. Yanagihara presents protagonists in their twenties who confront many financial, emotional, mental, and social adversities. Nonetheless, one figure stays enigmatic until later in the narrative – Jude. As readers go through the narrative as characters develop, they get more insights about Jude, an exceptionally intelligent young man pursuing a legal career, who grapples with physical impairments, including a limp, dermatological disorders that predispose him to infections, and episodes of debilitating pain that hinder his mobility. Nonetheless, this is not the only facet of Jude that readers uncover, as they increasingly learn about his harrowing history, replete with years of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. Consequently, Jude's life may be delineated

into two segments: his past, initially undisclosed but rife with abuse revealed via varying focalization and flashbacks as the narrative unfolds, and his present, profoundly influenced by the experiences of his childhood and adolescence. According to Joshua Pederson, Jude demonstrates remarkable maturity and stability, offering multifaceted support to his pals; nonetheless, this does not imply that "the pains of his adolescence do not pursue him into his adulthood," as they often emerge physically (2020: 227).

Robert Eaglestone asserts that the book raises the issue of whether "trauma can be healed and if there is a 'little life' remaining" (2020: 292). As the book advances, it becomes apparent that the story centers on "the emotional, embodied, and social ramifications of childhood trauma" (Meretoja 2020: 26). Haunted by his past and unable to escape its relentless resurgence, Jude embodies the perpetual conflict between trauma and survival. Cathy Caruth asserts in *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Trauma - Introduction* that for those experiencing trauma, "it is not only the moment of the event, but the aftermath that is traumatic; survival itself, in other words, can constitute a crisis" (1991: 9). Jude, always immersed in this predicament, struggles to articulate his history, prompting readers to get insights into his character via various focalizing viewpoints presented by different individuals in the narrative. This aligns with Ruth Leys' assertion that since the inception of trauma studies, trauma has been seen as an event that "immersed the victim in the traumatic scene so profoundly that it precluded the kind of specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge of what had happened" (2000: 9). This "cognitive knowledge" escapes Jude throughout his childhood and adolescence; it takes many years before he is prepared to acknowledge his experiences as traumatic.

NW

NW by Zadie Smith is a modern book that examines the intricacies of urban existence, social mobility, racism, camaraderie, and identity in twenty-first-century London. The book, located in the north-west parts of the city, chronicles the intertwined lives of four main characters—Leah, Natalie, Felix, and Nathan—who are raised on the same council estate but pursue markedly divergent paths as they transition into adulthood. The book employs a fragmented narrative framework that varies in style, viewpoint, and shape, mirroring the disjointed essence of contemporary urban life and the emotional detachment often associated with social mobility. At its essence, *NW* analyzes how the quest for achievement, economic progress, and social esteem transforms human connections, generating conflict between past and current identities. Smith depicts London as a cosmopolitan but profoundly inequitable environment where class disparities, racial identity, and economic constraints affect many facets of life, including companionship, matrimony, and self-image. The work intertwines social realism with experimental narrative techniques, encapsulating the worries of modern existence and illustrating the challenges people have in preserving meaningful relationships within a swiftly evolving metropolitan landscape.

Gender Fluidity and The Disruption of Binary Identities Middlesex

Middlesex is a seminal work of modern literature that examines the interconnected themes of identity, gender, migration, memory, and belonging via a broad, intergenerational story. Published in 2002 and recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the work chronicles the life of Calliope Stephanides, who subsequently transitions to Cal, an intersex protagonist whose individual narrative parallels the significant historical developments of the twentieth century. The tale spans countries and decades, beginning in Asia Minor with the displacement of Greek refugees and continuing through Detroit's industrial ascent, racial strife, and suburban metamorphosis. The book integrates family tale, historical fiction, and coming-of-age narrative, positioning individual identity within broader cultural, scientific, and historical contexts, indicating that the self is influenced by a multifaceted interaction of biology, history, and social experience. The narrative first challenges the idea that identity can be simply classified, portraying the self as a construct of migration, memory, and ancestral legacies.

A notable feature of the work is its exploration of gender and the fluidity of binary identity. The narrative, conveyed via Cal's retroactive lens, examines the experience of growing intersex in a culture that enforces strict dichotomies of male and female. The story challenges essentialist notions of gender by illustrating that identity is influenced not just by biology, but also by medical discourse, cultural expectations, and social standards. Cal's transition from Calliope to Cal serves as a compelling tale of self-awareness and metamorphosis, demonstrating how the classifications that delineate the body are profoundly ingrained in institutional frameworks such as medical, family, and school. The story depicts gender not as a static reality to be uncovered, but as a dynamic negotiation influenced by language, societal constraints, and individual activity. The tale reveals the constraints of binary thinking and encourages readers to reevaluate the connection between body and identity.

The book emphasizes the influence of familial history and migration on the formation of identity. The narrative of the Stephanides family starts with the anguish of displacement during the Greco-Turkish war and follows their migration to the United States, where they strive to establish new lives while bearing the burden of their history. This transgenerational tale underscores the notion that identity is both inherited and constructed, connecting Cal's individual experience to a wider historical context of diaspora and cultural adaptation. The book posits that the experience of migration engenders a feeling of liminality that aligns with the protagonist's gender identity, establishing a correlation between national and corporeal boundaries. The essay broadens the notion of identity beyond the individual, depicting it as a communal and historical phenomenon influenced by mobility, memory, and cultural hybridity.

The narrative equally examines science, medicine, and the authority of categorization. The tale often addresses genetic discourse, medical nomenclature, and scientific authority, illustrating how institutions strive to classify and control bodies that deviate from normative standards. The book analyzes medical operations and diagnostic methods as loci of power, highlighting how scientific knowledge can both

enlighten and limit human experience. Cal's interaction with medical experts underscores the conflict between individual identity and institutional power, emphasizing the emotional and psychological ramifications of being seen as a case study rather than as a human being. This analysis highlights the overarching topic of the novel: the endeavor to assert self-identity within a society governed by inflexible classifications and conventional beliefs.

The work utilizes a retrospective first-person narrative that incorporates comedy, sarcasm, and contemplation. Cal's tale is characterized by a tone oscillating between intimacy and historical detachment, enabling the exploration of human experience within wider cultural and historical frameworks. This narrative technique bolsters the novel's primary assertion that identity is perpetually shaped via storytelling. Through the retelling of familial history in conjunction with personal metamorphosis, the narrator illustrates how the process of storytelling serves as a vehicle for self-comprehension and self-formation. The book employs storytelling as both a theme element and a structural concept, indicating that identity is inextricably linked to the narratives we construct about ourselves and our history.

The work serves as a profound examination of fluid identity in modern literature. By interlacing themes of gender, migration, familial heritage, and institutional authority, it compels readers to reevaluate the parameters that delineate the self. The story rejects simplistic conclusions, instead embracing ambiguity and complexity as fundamental elements of human experience. The book provides a deeper exploration of living beyond rigid classifications and embracing identity as an ongoing process of transformation via its broad breadth and intimate voice.

The objective of the study is to examine gender problems in *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides using Butler's theory of performativity. It examines the protagonist's issues about the notion of permanent gender identities. It examines how Eugenides employs distinctive narrative styles, vocabulary, and character development tactics to alter the protagonist's gender identification. The study examines the social construction of gender in *Middlesex* through the lens of Butler's theory of performativity, focusing on aspects such as gender as performance, social resistance, and intersectionality.

Detransition, Baby

Detransition, Baby is considered a seminal piece of twenty-first-century literature that redefines the portrayal of gender, intimacy, and family in the framework of modern metropolitan existence. The book emerges at a time when gender identity questions are prominently included in public conversation, occupying a significant literary position by centering complicated transgender and detransition experiences within mainstream narratives. Instead of portraying gender identity as a solitary or heroic quest for self-actualization, the book contextualizes it within the ordinary but profoundly significant facts of daily existence—professional interactions, romantic affiliations, social circles, and the enduring need for acceptance. The work dismisses sensationalized depictions of gender transition, asserting that gender diversity is integral to everyday social experience, therefore transforming modern fiction's approach to identity and embodiment.

The tale centers on an uncommon relationship triangle between Reese, Ames, and Katrina, whose interconnected lives evolve via an unforeseen pregnancy that presents the opportunity to establish a nontraditional family. This narrative concept serves as the basis for a comprehensive examination of desire, familial bonds, emotional susceptibility, and societal validation. The book examines entrenched societal beliefs around the definition of family, challenging the supremacy of heteronormative and monogamous domestic norms. Parenthood is shown not as a permanent or universally attainable institution, but as a contentious and emotionally laden ambition influenced by social acknowledgment and cultural standards. This approach highlights the emotional significance of reproductive desire and exposes the uneven distribution of access to motherhood across different gender identities.

The novel's notable contribution is in its examination of detransition, a topic generally overlooked in conventional literary tales. The character Ames, formerly known as Amy, confronts the prevalent societal assumption that gender change adheres to a straight, irreversible path toward authenticity. Detransition is shown as a multifaceted and contextually nuanced choice shaped by economic instability, societal constraints, love disillusionments, and emotional exhaustion. This representation undermines reductive narratives of gender identity by illustrating that authenticity cannot be comprehended apart from the material and institutional contexts that influence daily existence. By emphasizing these complications, the book reconceptualizes gender identity as a continuous process of negotiation rather than a definitive endpoint.

The novel's exploration of neoliberal urban existence and the socio-economic factors influencing human identity is equally important. The protagonists traverse corporate environments, negotiate technology-mediated dating cultures, and tackle the challenges of housing instability and social mobility. These contexts underscore the material conditions that shape the opportunities accessible to people, especially those whose identities diverge from prevailing standards. By integrating gender into economic and institutional frameworks, the book reveals the discrepancy between progressive discourse and actual reality, demonstrating how power structures persist in defining the limits of recognition and acceptance.

The narrative technique enhances the novel's subject issues by integrating humor, irony, and emotional sincerity. The varying viewpoints of the main characters establish a multiperspectival narrative framework that undermines moral certainty and rejects a single authoritative stance. This formal style reflects the volatility and fluidity of identity, highlighting the multitude of needs, concerns, and emotional investments that influence human interactions. The novel's rejection of tidy conclusions illustrates the persistent and unresolved nature of the societal and personal issues it presents, underscoring its dedication to depicting identity as a fluid and developing phenomenon.

Intersectionality and the Multiplicity of Identity **Girl, Woman, Other**

Feminism concerns the societal reformation of gender dynamics and the manner in which society structures, prioritizes, and embraces new standards. It integrates

philosophy and practice to confront victimization and tackle systemic inequities associated with race and gender. In the environment of globalization, individualism, and uncertainty, micro-level techniques are used to promote social change, empowering underprivileged groups, particularly women, to express their voices. Equitable access to education is a fundamental means for women to engage and contest dominant narratives. Cultures include features that both empower and disenfranchise women; it is crucial to identify and preserve cultural qualities that elevate women. Gender functions as an analytical framework for comprehending women's experiences concerning education, activism, violence, identity, sexuality, and poverty. Literature and poetry enhance the visibility and acknowledgment of women's voices and achievements, promoting recognition and inclusion.

The story of *Girl, Woman, Other* is composed of twelve unique but interconnected tales, each centered on a female protagonist. The characters include a Ugandan professor and her Somali-born spouse, an independent Frenchwoman promoting diversity in theater, a Black activist disillusioned with her movement's position on the Bashir dictatorship, a working-class mother committed to education, and a feminist poet exploring her identity. This spectrum includes a diverse range of ethnicities, sexual orientations, ages, generations, and phases of femininity, so reflecting the complexity of women's lives. The work, presented polyphonically, intensifies the immediacy of individual male subjugation and underscores feminism's persistent disruptive power. Evaristo's contribution to this diverse discussion advances a feminist narrative that repudiates essentialism and promotes diversity.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Arundhati Roy's writing style is characterized by its lyrical and poetic nature, using a diverse array of characters, each with distinct narratives and origins, to illustrate the multifaceted nature of India. The work serves as a potent critique of the nation's socio-political environment, exploring themes such as the Kashmir war, transgender struggles, and the experiences of marginalized populations. The book cleverly intertwines various tales and varied views, providing a deep reflection on the complex character of Indian civilization. The narrative has two main plots: one focuses on Anjum, a transgender woman, and the other is on Tilo, a South Indian lady with enigmatic traits. Roy's evocative prose and a diverse array of characters from various segments of Indian society explore the challenges encountered by marginalized communities in India, tackling intricate issues such as gender identity, religious diversity, caste dynamics, patriarchy, and communal strife. Roy aims to illustrate how power dynamics, whether political or social, significantly affect the daily lives of ordinary people and how disadvantaged populations endeavor to attain social justice.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness distinguishes itself from Roy's first book, *The God of Small Things*. The narrative largely centers on the experiences of three female characters - Rahel, Ammu, and Baby Kochamma - as they traverse a patriarchal culture in Kerala. It depicts the subjugation and limitations placed upon women and the repercussions they encounter while defying conventional conventions.

Conversely, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* incorporates a wider array of characters and viewpoints, including transgender and intersex persons. Roy imbues the characters in this tale with more agency and voice. Women and transgender individuals are becoming active in demanding their rights and identities. Society conditions people according to their biological sex from birth. Females are instructed to conform to certain behaviors, attire, and duties considered suitable for women, whilst males are socialized to exhibit their masculinity, often repressing their feelings. Anjum is the first character in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* who exemplifies solidarity with the woman she aspires to become. Anjum, born intersex but first assigned male by her mother, was referred to as Aftab throughout infancy. This choice was taken not due to her being assigned male at birth, but because her mother, Jahanara, felt that disclosing Aftab's authentic intersex status would result in stigmatization like to that experienced by other hijras. Transgender lady Anjum encounters several sorts of discrimination and persecution. Her identify as a hijra places her in a socially stigmatized and marginalized position. Her gender identification, social situation, and decision to live in a cemetery further marginalize her. Anjum embodies a subaltern figure through whom Arundhati Roy examines the concept of subalternity, providing a viewpoint often marginalized in dominant narratives. Anjum's character undergoes many transformations, experiencing significant fluctuations in her life that propel her towards self-discovery and perseverance, so challenging conventional perceptions about subalternity.

Gudiya once attempted to convey that Hijras have a unique position of affection and reverence in Hindu mythology. She recounted to Kulsoom Bi the narrative of how, when Lord Ram, his wife Sita, and his younger brother Laxman were exiled for fourteen years from their kingdom, the populace, who adored their ruler, responded. Upon arriving to the periphery of Ayodhya, where the forest started, Ram addressed his followers, stating, 'I want all of you, including men and women, to return home and await my return.' The soldiers and ladies, unable to defy their ruler, went home. Only the Hijras awaited him diligently at the forest's edge for the whole fourteen years, since he had neglected to mention them. Are we therefore remembered as the neglected individuals? Ustad Kulsoom Bi said. Wah! Wah! (Roy 51).

Kulsoom Bi's response to Gudiya's narrative illustrates the irony and intricacy of the Hijra community's circumstances. Although the Hijras' allegiance and devotion to Lord Rama are praiseworthy, their omission suggests societal marginalization or neglect. If scripture does not accommodate transgender individuals, how can we anticipate societal tolerance for them? The status of transgender individuals has remained unchanged from the inception of the civilization in which Anjum lives. She must confront the same prejudice experienced by other marginalized populations. However, her resolve to alter conventional practices. She was not the kind to ignore injustice or avert her gaze to avoid conflict. She exhibited fearlessness from the first. She is the quintessential

embodiment of Roy's New Woman. Anjum made a distasteful remark about the spelling of her name. In her discourse, she also addressed the inequitable perceptions of society. She stated:

It is inconsequential. I am all of them; I am Roni and Juli, as well as Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who asserts that my name is Anjum? I am not Anjum; I am Anjuman. I am a gathering; I am a mehfil. Of everything and none, of all things and nothingness. Would you wish to extend the invitation to anybody else? All are welcome (Roy 4).

Anjum refutes the idea that their identity is limited to a certain gender. She resonates with both masculine and female personalities from literature and history, highlighting the flux of gender. Anjum's self-identification as 'Mujna' indicates a non-binary identity, hence challenging the binary notion of gender. This questions the traditional perception of gender as exclusively male or female. The second character, Tilo, short for Tilottama, is shown as an autonomous and tenacious lady. Her will to live according to her own principles and her readiness to confront conventional conventions make her a captivating figure. Roy's introduction of Tilo suggests a character who would maintain a subaltern attitude and behavior; but, Roy also imbues Tilo with a growing quality. Roy's portrayal of Tilo's persona delineates her place and status:

Her mother was her biological parent, although first abandoned her before subsequently adopting her. A controversy involving a romantic liaison occurred in a tiny town. The man, belonging to a 'Untouchable' caste (a 'Paraya,' Mammen P. Mammen murmured, as if uttering it aloud would taint him), had been dismissed in the manner high-caste families in India-specifically, Syrian Christians from Kerala-typically eliminate such inconveniences. Tilo's mother was sent away until the birth of the baby, who was thereafter put in a Christian orphanage. After many months, she revisited the orphanage and adopted a kid. Her family repudiated her, and she stayed single. To sustain herself, she established a modest kindergarten, which subsequently evolved into a prosperous high school over the years. She never publicly acknowledged – sensibly – that she was the biological mother (Roy 155).

In conventional Indian culture, the romantic relationship between an upper-caste lady and an untouchable guy is seen as a scandal. Tilo's mother originally forsook her owing to societal pressures and stigmas linked to her association with the untouchable guy. During his youth, Tilo was situated in a Christian orphanage, indicating that social expectations supersede maternal affection. Tilo's mother was estranged from her family and, in conformity with traditional expectations, chose to stay unmarried. Tilo's character originates from a subaltern background and has experienced life in a state of subalternity; yet, her rebellious disposition prevented her from conforming to societal expectations or conventions. Tilo's choice to adopt Miss Zeebeen off the steps of Jantar Mantar exemplifies her inclination to confront adversity and provide refuge for the forsaken. Her

choice to marry Naga immediately after Musa's death illustrates her decision-making nature. Her marriage to Naga does not imply desire; rather, it was a need to traverse a harsh environment and seek refuge, since societal expectations would have otherwise prevailed. This scenario illustrates how people often confront challenging decisions due to social expectations.

Conclusion

This paper on intersectional feminism and reconstitution of intimacy, power, and identity in modern English fiction shows the tremendous change that the twenty first century literature has gone through in terms of its depiction of human relations and subjectivity. With an intersectional view, it is clear that modern English novels transcend the traditional and unitary interpretation of gender to examine the shaping of identities that is complex in race, class, caste, sexuality, nationality, and cultural location. The chosen works, in general, reveal that identity is not a definite or necessary, but flowing, developing, and being built up by social, historical, and psychological forces. Here intimacy is not enacted as a solely personal or emotionalized area; instead it becomes a highly political and socially situated area in which power relations are continually negotiated, sustained or contested. Current fiction exposes the influence of inequality, trauma and migration on the emotional relationships of love, friendship and family to demonstrate the concealed figment of domination in the daily existence. Simultaneously, such stories also leave open spaces of resistance, when people strive to redefine relationships and assert agency in the structures of constraint. In addition, the research indicates that subjectivity in contemporary literature is becoming more and more fragmented, hybrid and multiple, and it is these realities of the globalized world that are characterized by mobility and cultural hybridity. Following the feminist and poststructuralist mode, modern fiction undermines the strict divisions of gender and identity, and offers in its place a dynamic becoming instead of being. Finally, this study concludes that modern-day English fiction is not merely a reflection of social reality but a place of critique and change, and intersectional feminist views are instrumental in changing the perceptions of intimacy, identity, and power in the contemporary world.

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