



Intersectionality Narratives: Exploring Class and Gender Dynamics in Chandani Lokugé's *Turtle Nest*

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Abstract

Intersectionality seeks to address the interplay between various axes of social inequality, including but not limited to gender, race, class and sexuality. The paper argues that understanding the identities and lived experiences of woman of color requires simultaneous consideration of race, gender, class, sexuality and other factors as singular focus on gender is insufficient in understanding the structural inequalities and multifaceted nature of oppression faced by marginalized women. In Global South where caste, class, religion and gender are closely linked, intersectionality theory becomes indispensable for literary analysis of South Asian literature. This paper attempts to analyse the intersectional experience of fisherfolks in Sri Lanka, especially women's experience. Chandani Lokugé's *Turtle Nest* renders the ordinary, complex and harsh aspects of their lives in an authentic manner. The novel depicts how these subaltern people are socially, politically and economically marginalized. This novel is quite crucial in understanding the lives of the communities of inferior ranks, particularly the women population as their identities and experiences are shaped by the intersections of multiple layers of oppressions. Different disadvantages operate to marginalize these women and render them even more invisible. All female characters in *Turtle Nest* are exposed to multiple layers of oppression resulting from the intertwinement of class, gender, cultural disparity, community pressure, etc. A close reading, text-based analysis and an intersectional framework have been adopted to uncover the complex and often obscured narratives of the people pushed to the margin by multiple axes which intricately impacts their life experiences.

Keywords: intersectionality, gender, class, oppression, subaltern, marginalization.

Introduction

The term Intersectionality is a concept pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her acclaimed 1989 legal essay, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics'. It critiques the efficacy of singular framework in expounding complex power dynamics of dominance and oppression. Crenshaw argues that Black women are often marginalized within both anti-racism and feminist movements, which prioritize the experiences of Black men and White women respectively. Intersectionality seeks to address the interplay between various axes of social inequality, including but not limited to gender, race, class and sexuality. This approach acknowledges the fluctuating and contextual nature of identities, which are shaped by intersecting systems of power and oppression.

The Black women is characterized by heterogeneity, marked by intersecting divisions of global location, race, class, and gender, with experiences shaped by distinct colonial and postcolonial contexts, thereby underscoring the importance of contextual specificity in understanding the identities and lived experiences of woman of color. As Crenshaw observes,

"Because of their intersectional identity as both women and people of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, the interests and experiences of women of color are frequently marginalized within both." (Crenshaw 1241)

Crenshaw's intersectionality framework vies discriminations as complex and layered hence, requiring simultaneous consideration of race, gender, class, sexuality and other factors. All these systems of power interweave and create unique experience of oppression. Accordingly, a singular focus on gender is insufficient in understanding the

structural inequalities and multifaceted nature of oppression faced by marginalized women, instead the complex interplay of axes of social divisions must be understood to address these disparities effectively. In Global South where caste, class, religion and gender are closely linked, intersectionality theory becomes indispensable for literary analysis of South Asian literature. This paper attempts to analyse the intersectional experience of fisherfolks in Sri Lanka, especially women's experience.

These days literature and films are increasingly used to portray the lives of fisherfolk realistically and accurately. Chandani Lokugé's *Turtle Nest* can be regarded as a novel giving voice to the fisherfolk's experiences. The novel renders the ordinary, complex and harsh aspects of their lives in an authentic manner. Fishing communities are often studied as well as depicted as subalterns. The novel foregrounds the deplorable lives of this subaltern class, the fisher families which belong to the low-ranking social groups.

Discussion

In the novel *Turtle Nest*, the characters – Jamis, Asilin, Mala, Priya – belongs to Guha's 'subaltern'. They belong to a fisher family in a fisher village in Sri Lanka. The novel depicts how these subaltern people are socially, politically and economically marginalized. Scanty traces of the lives of other 'subaltern' groups such as beggars, beach boys and beach women living off the tourist are also depicted. These subaltern class or population are oppressed groups. In Sri Lanka, fisher communities are positioned in the lower strata of the social hierarchy. This position significantly shapes their social and economic life. It leads to complexities in their life apart from exclusion and conflict with other hierarchically placed groups. The novel highlights the power imbalances that prevail in the society, within the fisher community and also within the fisher family.

The fisher families are systematically excluded from the dominant structures of the society. They lack voices in contrast to the dominant communities. In the novel *Turtle Nest*, Lokugé attempts in voicing and making their lives heard and visible. They are displaced to the margins. This novel is quite crucial in understanding the lives of the communities of inferior ranks, particularly the women population as their identities and experiences are shaped by the intersections of multiple layers of oppressions. Different disadvantages operate to marginalize these women and render them even more invisible. In the words of Spivak: "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." (285) The tragedy for women is "The women are doubly in shadow." (Spivak 286)

In the novel, the daily hardships of the fisherfolks, discrimination and neglect faced by Jamis, Asilin, Mala and Priya can be taken as an accurate representation of the subaltern class. Jamis comes close to a stereotypical patriarch. The female characters, Asilin and Mala represent gendered exploitations, embodying the shore's deceptive sensuality trapped between survival and erasure. Their experiences are shaped by coastal poverty, patriarchal control and neo-colonial tourist economy. Lokugé portrays how power dynamics reinforce patriarchal oppression. Vulnerability of Mala and Asilin as member of fishing folk is not reducible to gender alone but emerges from the intersection of gender and power dynamics. Exploitation and oppression of Mala and Asilin are intensified by poverty. Poverty is not just a setting; it is a critical factor that dictates whether their voices are heard or ignored.

All female characters in *Turtle Nest* are exposed to multiple layers of oppression resulting from the intertwining of class, gender, cultural disparity, community pressure, etc. Gender is not only the cause of oppression but different social categories and factors overlap and shape the experiences of these

women. The novel centers on the lives of a fisher family in Sri Lanka. Patriarchal family structure is depicted in Jamis' family. Jamis is the head of the family. He is a controlling spouse. He controls the lives of his family members. Jamis and Asilin have four children – Mala, twin girls and Priya. The ingrained patriarchal set up affects the women's opportunities and voices in this family. The womenfolk in this family have to navigate a harder life due to their gender. Like the other fisher families, Jamis' family lives in a meagre hut – which can be seen right through from the front door – front room, kitchen, out of the back door, and across the small patch of yard – into the hut behind.

Jamis' family experiences social and economic marginalization, they live in poverty and are exploited by individuals like the mudalali. Their livelihood is disrupted by several factors including natural forces and terrorism. Jamis's trade as a fisherman declines. He tries to switch his profession. Jamis, out of workforce due to the structural economics becomes irresponsible. Like other fisherwomen, Asilin faces hardships in the presence as well as absence of Jamis. Jamis becomes 'a no-good drunk' (Lokugé 144), while Asilin tries to meet ends. The burden of running the family falls mostly on Asilin after the failure of Jamis' trade. At one point of time, the maintenance of the family fell solely on her shoulders. Jamis squandered his earnings leaving barely enough to survive.

Asilin bore more responsibilities than her husband on her shoulders. In her efforts to meet ends, she had no time to keep her eyes on her children. They are neglected. Hence, Mala and Priya grew up like stray dogs. Mala becomes waywardly. In a low strata class like the fisher community, the womenfolk like Asilin suffers more. They are marginalized as women because of their gender as well as of being born as women in a low class. In these communities, the duties of women are not restricted to household chores – they also have to contribute to make both ends meet by earning in possible

ways. Asilin strives hard to make ends meet. Asilin sells fish, help cut turtle meat. While people like Jamis are exploited within the fisher community for the benefit of people like the mudalali. Power dynamics prevail within the fisher class as Gramsci asserts that Subaltern groups often face "the hegemonic group or the other subaltern groups". (53) Hegemony prevails in the same fisher community. People like mudalali preys on smaller fisherfolks like Jamis. They siphon away their hard-earned profits. Eventually leaving the fisher families trapped in a cycle of poverty. The mudalali was a shark that: "... lived not only off his fishermen but off their wives and daughter as well, when he got the chance." (Lokugé 64)

Sorrow creeps into Jamis's household as Mala grows up. As a member of the fishing family, her impoverished social class determines her access to resources, education and mobility, while her gender restricts her autonomy and exposes her to sexual and economic exploitations. Lokugé uses Mala's story to critique the ways in which multiple factors intersect to create layered forms of oppressions and discriminations. Mala struggles between poverty and patriarchal expectations, unable to fully claim agency or voice. *Turtle Nest* brings out Mala's distinct experience. As Mala grows so also her sexual desires. Her sexuality becomes one cause of her exploitations. Mala's lack of concern for outcomes compels her to actions that leads to a stream of negative turns in her life. Tragedies inadvertently perpetuate in their lives. Tragedy strikes Asilin, Mala, Priya and subsequently Aruni's life.

Societal expectations from women influenced by patriarchal beliefs as well as cultural norms persistently pressurize women on the ideal role to be played by them in society. The expectations on them combined with the responsibilities entrusted on them pose difficulties in their private as well as public life. Mala transgresses the expectations of her patriarchal society. Far from being ideal, she is

judged as a rule-breaker in her community. As she comes into adolescence, her interest in sexuality grows. Her sexuality makes her an easy victim of men's sexual desire. Men including her father, start prying on her beauty: "She imagined them narrowing and glowing in the dark, as she'd seen her father's eyes when he regarded her in a drunken mood." (Lokugé 59,60) Subsequently, Mala starts reciprocating: ". . . Mala would lean backwards on her arms and smile languidly. It seemed to Priya that she smiled differently then, like their father did after a swig of toddy." (Lokugé 70)

Mala starts exploring her sexuality with multiple partners. Mala's sexual promiscuity leads to men's assumption of her availability for all. They sexually exploit her. In no time she is stigmatized for her transgressive relationships. She is taken as "a free-for-all - a basketball that could be shoved from hand to hand." (Lokugé 90) her irresponsible sexuality compounds her marginalization. Her involvements with White men provoke insults and indecent remarks. Streams of insults are hurled at her by men of her own community: "Go back to the white men, vesi, you won't find what you want among the likes of us anymore." (Lokugé 98,99)

Harassment intensifies as Mala becomes pregnant. Her sexual affairs and pregnancy out of wedlock are perceived as a punitive action. As a retribution, Mala is beaten and thrown out of her house by her father Jamis. Mala is ostracized within her family by her father. She is ostracized by her community. The birth of the illegitimate child - a half-caste boy, aggravates her marginalization. She is pushed to a precarious situation. She abandons her first-born at home and leaves. Jamis sells Mala's first-born to the beggars. Both Asilin and Mala are deprived of motherhood. Mala is forced to neglect her child while Asilin who shoulders more burden in the family has no power to secure her daughter. Both women are deprived of their maternal rights. Asilin is an utterly helpless mother who could not even allow her daughter to deliver her baby at home. Mala's

ordeal recurs when she gets pregnant the second time. She grapples with extreme labour pain during her second childbirth. It takes toll on Mala physically and emotionally. Mala refuses to return home again.

Discrimination and unequal treatment of women like Asilin and Mala stem from class and gender constraints. Their class intersects with their gender and exacerbate their vulnerability. For Mala, her sexuality becomes an agent for further oppression and marginalization. Poverty drives her into prostitution with Western tourists, fuelled by aspiration for better life. Mala falls victim to sexual double standards of male dominant society. The double standards of a patriarchal society are reflected in the gender-based expectation regarding female sexuality. Men like Jamis has sexual affairs with multiple partners without restraints. He feels no guilt. But when women like Mala transgresses the societal expectations, punitive measures are taken up. Mala is punished mercilessly by Jamis who himself had affairs. Male control of female sexuality is depicted in Jamis' treatment of Mala. Mala's promiscuity is shamed. Jamis and Mohan, equally culpable goes unpunished reflecting the power imbalance in the society and in the family. Mohan is another character who exhibits male's hypocrisy and sexual double standards. He responds indifferently and unbothered, "Send the family some money and forget about it. . ." (Lokugé 171) When it was he who impregnated Mala, an indirect sexual harassment. No punitive action is taken up against Mohan. Men like Jamis and Mohan make all the rules and norms of society to facilitate themselves. When Jamis discovers Mala's pregnancy he uses his authority over the females in his family. He turns his back on Mala. Jamis physically assaults Mala. He lunged at her and pummelled her. He flung and kicked her: "Go and have your pariah somewhere else, don't litter this house with it, you bitch, you daughter of a bitch,' he shouted." (Lokugé 102) Mala is driven out of her home. The constant

conflict with her father pushes her to the brink – she never comes back after her second delivery.

Crenshaw in 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' states:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. (149)

Asilin and Mala's life is analogous to accident caused by cars coming from different directions. Chaste as well as unchaste both suffers. Mala's suffering is compounded by her female body.

The readers almost sympathize with Mala during her horrifying experience of childbirth. Lokugé's description of Mala's second delivery is horrifying. Mala's pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum period exhibit peak of injustice and suffering faced by women of low socio-economic strata. Mala gave birth to her first child when she was only fifteen years old – all alone in a Girls Home. Mala faces problem during her postpartum period. Postpartum period is a recovery stage for women after childbirth. It is a period that requires physical healing and profound emotional adjustments – with support, rest, nutrition and medical checkups. Mala was made to work in Neela's place during her postpartum period, a particular period where women need to be taken care of physical and mental health. Mala is separated from her new born. As she could not feed her child at nights:

. . . , her breasts were so swollen and heavy. In the loneliest moments, Mala squeezed them, biting the pillow to stifle the pain, as if to force out the hardened milk. (Lokugé 152)

In utter despondency, she hoped, “. . . the half-caste would die. Fatherless, motherless, and foodless, . . .” (Lokugé 153, 154) Mala’s second delivery is even more traumatic than her first delivery. Even before fully recovering from postpartum of her first-born, she goes through the hardships of another normal delivery. This time all by herself in a deserted devalé. She undergoes such excruciating pain that:

She clutched the walls and they scoured and bled her fingers. She pulled at the rosary, clenching it in her mouth to stifle the screams. It snapped and a few beads fell on the floor and rolled away . . . (Lokugé 194)

Post- delivery Mala never returns.

Asilin’s heart bled finding her daughter Mala missing after delivery of her second child. Asilin remains powerless in the face of patriarchal morals unable to shield her daughter from gendered predation. Her failure to protect Mala from early sexualization and pregnancies reflects resigned maternal roles under economic struggles, transmitting cycles of gendered oppression across generations. Mala’s personal relationships shape her into a skeptic. Arundhati’s observation, “. . . that you can’t trust anybody. Mother, father brother, husband, bestfriend. Nobody,” (Roy 83) holds true for Mala. Mala gets no family’s support during her two deliveries including her mother’s. In other words, Mala is disposed. Asilin also suffers, but in a different context. The expectations of society and husband influence her function as a mother. Community pressure becomes one intersecting force victimizing female characters like Asilin. Her voice is stifled. She cannot bring back Mala home nor prevent her twin daughters from being bounded in the shackles of slavery. Both Asilin and Mala are dehumanized.

In fact, all female characters in this novel are trapped in the patriarchal dominion. Each of them bears abuse, cruelty and exploitation but differently in different context. Neela and Aruni are two other female characters

who faces injustice and oppression. Unlike other women characters, Neela’s suffering is mostly psychological. Unlike Asilin and Mala, Neela hails from rich abundant household. In Asilin’s household, Mala and Priya were never fed full while in Neela’s house people had too much. Community pressures and her gender coalesce and generate a never-ending psychological trauma. Neela, a mother grieving the premature death of her child Kumari is perpetually tortured by the memory of her husband’s betrayal. She is unable to embrace Aruni as her daughter. Neela becomes aggressive born of despair. Mohan’s infidelity affects their life: “The chasm was too wide, too deep, to be crossed.” (Lokugé 205) Neela could never evolve from the infidelity of her husband. She felt herself: “. . . locked in this house, isolated as in a high tower that let in no air. Life was ever deepening silence.” (Lokugé 210) When women like Mala transgress societal boundaries, she suffers. But when men like Mohan transgress societal boundaries, his wife Neela suffers. On both sides women suffer.

Aruni, the illegitimate child of Mala and Mohan is also one character who experiences multiple layers of oppression. Her gender vulnerability intersects with adoptive class privilege and ethnic inbetweenness and molds an experience different from other characters in the novel. Birth of Aruni and abandonment by her mother Mala is compared to the abandonment of Moses by his mother to save his life. Perhaps her sense of protectiveness compelled Mala to abandon Aruni, a girl child. Mala did not care much of her first-born boy but is concerned for the safety of the girl-child. She wanted to save the girl child from the imminent dangers of extreme poverty and its cycle of hardships – where even a boy like his brother, Priya is not spared. Priya is sexually exploited. He encounters racialized pedophilic predation from a male White tourist. After the disappearance of Mala, his emotional support Priya falls into a stupor.

Neela's and Mohan's adoption of Aruni gave her class stability. But right from childhood she felt an emptiness in her existence. Her mother Mala's past infringes her life. It intersects with her racial inbetweenness and exposes her to vulnerability and discrimination of a discrete kind, she felt excluded at home. Neela's indifference towards her reinforces her "otherness" despite her father Mohan's class stability driving her quest back to Sri Lanka. For Aruni coming to Sri Lanka is a healing process – a step to reconstruct her life: ". . . it was what a caterpillar did. When it got to the end of one leaf, it stretched out and moved onto another one." (Lokugé 223) But the very people to whom Aruni wanted much to belong, betrays her. The very people whom she wanted much to feel protected violates her.

Aruni's femaleness made her sexually vulnerable compounded by her inbetween identity. The beach boys' assumption of Aruni's sexual promiscuity results in a crime. Aruni is tricked to be caught in a dangerous situation, an intentional set up by Premasiri and the beach boys. The beach boys raped her. Her body is torn and stripped. She falls victim of male power over female sexuality fueled by her disadvantaged position as an immigrant. By the end of the novel, like newly hatched turtles, Aruni drags herself towards the sea. Aruni's cloth that was washed ashore was too soiled even to be sold to the poor local folk. It was just fit for the local beach dogs – that dragged around anything that faintly smell of blood.

Conclusion

To sum up, the paper emphasizes the novel's exploration of how class and gender intersect to shape the lives and fate of its characters, especially reflecting complex interplay of social identities and power dynamics. The experiences of the characters in the novel collectively critique how tourism also aggravate already existing intersections: global wealth disparities resulting to exploitation of beach community, local hierarchies in the

fishing enforcing class dynamics and gender norms, and poverty amplifies them all. Unlike male beach boys who gain illusory agency through prostitution, female folk face compounded stigmas and violence underscoring intersectionality. A close reading, text-based analysis and an intersectional framework have been adopted to uncover the complex and often obscured narratives of the people pushed to the margin by multiple axes such as class, gender, sexuality, community pressure, racial inbetweenness, etc. which intricately impacts their life experiences. At the end of reading the novel, readers are compelled to reflect on the plight of the marginalized communities. And emancipation and empowerment of individuals like Asilin, Mala and Priya become questionable.

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