

Validating Intersectionality for Literary Reading Through René Girard

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The names of George Floyd (25 May 2020) and Daunte Wright (11 April 2021) have been carved in the history of blacks in the US, proclaiming to the world that Black Lives Matter (BLM) is still valid and the days of cotton field slavery has only taken different colours but has not changed. Because what happened to the Black people by the state apparatus police is the emblematic failure. It is here, at this juncture we people in India and Sri Lanka became aware of the identity politics in the Northern worlds which are rooted in the politics of colour at the surface level but in reality its roots go as far as ethnicity, plunging into the greater destructive diabolic syndrome known as racism. Most of us in the Southern Worlds are superficially aware of the first black star Paul Robeson (1898-1976) a legend who played multiple roles even to the level of trying to sought out the cold war disparities between the USA and USSR—who was even brought before the House Committee in 1956 and was tried to put to silence. Or the legendary Harry Belafonte (1927-) who has been struggling since his birth until today who was an activist, who became an artist. Or the present Peruvian American hip hop musician Felipe Andres Coronel (1978-), better known as Immortal Technique, whose songs focus on issues of African Americans in the background of global politics,

racism, poverty, and etc. But at the same time we should be aware that most of the things dealt by them have not been our concern. For example, many of us as Roman Catholics are ignorant of Pope Gelasius I, and the politics of the Roman Catholic church for he was an African by birth who was unsuccessfully tried to be attributed to a Roman birth. Or the creation of Latinos through exterminating Taino and raping the black and Indian women are some of the things that are hidden from our main stream history. Even though Blacks have been on top positions in American politics they are seen by some to have been used by the white supremacy. For example, the comparison between Condoleeza Rice and Sally Hemmings by Felipe Andres Coronel brings out this masked truth.

Therefore, this paper on Intersectionality is of great importance since it takes one into further perspectives in Critical Race Theory. But one should understand that Critical Race Theory is not a literary theory rather it is a praxis, an action, for if one takes the exponents of Critical Race Theory, one could easily see that most of them are people working in the legal or judicial system. Therefore, to make it more applicable to literature, it is useful to decipher intersectionality using the theories of René Girard, whose interpretation of violence through mimetic

desire, mimetic rivalry, scapegoating, mimetic crisis, ritual sacrifice in order to attain peace or statuesque is profitable in analysing any literature because he uses various types of literatures starting from myth to classical drama then on to modern cultural studies in order to explain the modus operandi of violence through narratives rather than referring to particular modern incidents —i.e., thereby making it more universal. Another advantage in combining the theories of René Girard with the Critical Race Theory or Feminism or Feminism of Colour would be to give Critical Race Theory, a universality so as to decipher violence i.e., direct violence, indirect violence, and structural violence in order to address it with strong theoretical backing, since a student of literature is bound by the four corners of the text at hand i.e., the boundaries, and cannot imagine things that would have taken place outside the written text, since a text is a construct. Even though New Historicism licences a critic in reading a literary text in parallel to other non-literary texts, with regard to deciphering fiction to prove its documentary worthiness, one cannot negate that this excavation kills the text in the process of doing so (which is very much evident with the criticism done on Dalit Writings). The most important aspect is the aesthetic value of a text and the possible dialogues that the text articulates when lensed through critical theories, for these would preserve the aesthetic value and moreover prompt further readings rendering universality to the text at hand. Therefore, in order to deconstruct and reconstruct the construct so as to read the modus operandi of the projected violence by the text, René Girard becomes a useful tool whose thoughts have influenced various disciplines, aiding in deciphering the role of violence within the functioning ideology.

As a Tamilian, we are first of all called to understand the difference between the word 'race' and 'ethnicity' for both these words mean the same

i.e., 'dk;' in Tamil language, where language becomes the factor of differentiation and in a greater sense the larger language family becomes the macro grouping, as Dravidian. But we should understand that 'race' is basically based on phenotypic characteristics such as skin colour or distinctive physical traits; whereas 'ethnicity' is at macro level when compared to 'race' which is at micro level. Dictionary defines 'ethnicity' as a broader term which encompasses nationality, being a member to a particular tribe or religion or a language and traditions of a particular group. So someone can say their race is Black and their ethnicity is Spanish, or someone can say their race is White and their ethnicity is Norwegian. Maybe the non-availability of difference between 'race' and 'ethnicity' in Tamil is because Tamils are an ethnic group and not a race because Tamils are a mixture of various races such as Caucasoid (Mediterranean / Armenoid), Veddoid (Australoid), Austro-Asiatic (Munda), Negrito and many other groups. May be the non-availability of difference is one of the road blocks in understanding and emotively experiencing the problems that are alien to our soil. But nevertheless, identity politics are not new to us, which are age old as the Vedas and its Varna Shastra and the recent struggles against it by most eminent people like Thiruvartuprakasa Vallalar Chidambaram Ramalingam, K. Kamaraj, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar make it more relevant to our lifeworld. Even the recent transformation of Shanar to Nadar with regard to the caste system remind us that identity politics is not alien to our soil. But when it gets to the Black Americans, identity politics has lots of traps and moreover the White Liberals use identity politics since it functions by reducing the Other to a particular identity (cf. Slavoj Zizek). According to Slavoj Zizek, identity politics presupposes that identity exists but David Bailey and Stuart Hall

“opposes the notion that a person is born with a fixed identity—that all black people, for example, have an essential underlying black identity which is the same and unchanging. It suggests instead that identities are floating, that meaning is not fixed and universally true at all times for all people, and that the subject is constructed through the unconscious in desire, fantasy and memory” (qtd in Kenan Malik 113). However, taking the present times, one can conclude that identities do not exist for example with regard to the LGBTQ+, they still accept that there are gender identities but they just want to expand the traditional binaries of masculine and feminine into bi-sexual, multi-sexual, asexual, etc., and the plus symbol denotes that still all identities have not been identified and therefore it is to keep an open mind, i.e., transgenderism. In addition, when one talks about change through working with the already existing system to achieve it, there is a problem in always being a conformist since when one tries to change the system from within, it is not the one who changes the system; but eventually it is the system that will change the person. Therefore, working on identity politics, a tool used by the White Liberals for oppressing the Other is taken by the oppressed in order to attain emancipation is like opening the Pandora’s box because not only racism but classism also becomes a real issue.

Critical Race Theory is the study of law and how it has been part of the infra structure from slavery to emancipation to segregation to today upon which racial inequalities have been based. Intersectionality was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 “to address multiple failures not only in law but also rhetorical failures, political failures, within feminism and anti-racism”. Kimberle Crenshaw states that “intersectionality is a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and they create

obstacles that often are not understood within conventional ways of thinking about antiracism or feminism or whatever social justice advocacy structures we have” (Kimberle Crenshaw What is Intersectionality?). Therefore, it can be summed up that intersectionality deciphers the *modus operandi* of various forces in social relations in the lifeworld of its actors that causes turmoil through discrimination.

Now comes the hardest part for the student of literature. When we tend to take a non-literary theory to understand and interpret a text (be it a poem, short story, essay, or a novel), we must identify strong methodological or theoretical backing. Since Critical Race Theory is the study of law with special reference to America which can be extended to Europe in some sense, it cannot hold valid where laws differ from the American or European judiciary systems. And moreover, the understanding and interpretation of law in Critical Race Theory is done for real life events and not for fictional narratives. Since the interpreter cannot step outside the narrative to find out the other forces or power structures that are not described within the narrative to decipher the text at hand, and since the four corners of the text are the only available space where the world projected becomes the liminal space, the students of literature need to combine other forms interpretation to understand the text at hand.

In Feminism of Colour, we already have phrases such as ‘double consciousness’ or ‘double stigma’ which exemplifies the oppression of an individual as a women belonging to an ethnic minority, i.e., the experience derived from the interactions based on intension versus the image imposed by the racism of the Other (cf. Rohan Savarimuttu) wherein themes like antisemitism can be also included. And intersectionality can be seen as an extension of this where the binary equation is replaced with LGBTQ+ which also includes women, but also in a sense, the

removal or replacement of 'women' denotes the fact that when the black women join the main stream, they will be left out or the black women are already on the path to join the main stream.

With these things in mind, let us be realistic. What do most of our feministic readings of text look like? To answer this question, it is almost retelling the narrative in a paraphrase with combining a little bit of New Historicism when non-literary texts are also available on the same matter at hand with a little pinch of pepper and salt taken from Liberal Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Psychoanalytic Feminism, Eco-Feminism, Radical Feminism, Socialist Feminism, and Feminism of Colour. This is a naïve way of interpretation. It is only at this juncture René Girard becomes of great value to a student of literature. First of all, we should understand that all forms of inequality, discrimination, and disadvantages is violence. And René Girard's understanding about the modus operandi of violence is a key to decipher literary text at hand and will be more useful to validate the Feminism of Colour in a greater way. At the schools of literature, we have been negating René Girard thinking that he belongs to somewhere that does not belong to literature. But in fact, he was working as a Professor of French Language, Literature, and Civilization and all his writings are soaked with examples and illustrations from literature and religious texts. René Girard has authored nearly thirty books and it will be a herculean task to summaries his arguments. Therefore, this paper will brief on his major thesis without any reference to literary or religious examples which he uses as a mechanism to decipher the workings of violence.

According to René Girard human development initially occurs through a process of mimicry, i.e. an infant mimics adult behaviour whereby it forms its identity. Thereby the child learns to desire what

others possess. When what others possess is not easily available there arises a conflict of interest creating competition among similar members who possess the same desire culminating in rivalry amongst themselves. Therefore, desire by itself is mimetic culminating in mimetic rivalry creating a conflict and in order to solve or defuse the conflict, the blame is shifted onto someone or something which is termed as 'scape goat' mechanism. The phrase 'scapegoat mechanism' was already used by the American literary theorist, poet, essayist, and novelist Kenneth Burke, in *Permanence and Change* (1935) and *A Grammar of Motives* (1940). However, Girard developed this concept more comprehensively as an interpretation of theories in the background of various praxis.

René Girard states that desire is not natural and it is born out of the action of someone else who is desiring and designates the on looker that the object that is being desired as something that is desirable. He insists that the structure of desire is a triangular relationship between the object, the model, and the subject are all the same in whatever context. The imitative nature of desire leads to conflict. The structure of desire as propagated by René Girard also brings out the influence of Edmund Husserl's Phenomenological analysis on René Girard where truth is begotten out of the derived experiences that are shaped through the intentions in the interactions between the subject and the object. The only addition that has been added to this deciphering of Edmund Husserl is that even intentions are being mimicked.

But taking this major idea alone into reading the text written by Black Feminists or Black Women will again be a naïve reading if we do not read some of the most important writings by René Girard and see how he analysis stories after stories, incidents after incidents, in order to bring out the underling theory

with regard to the perpetuation of violence. Such an effort in applying René Girard to the writings of Black Feminists or Black Women will throw more light than trying to interpret literary texts using the American law and its judicial system that are not only alien to our soil but also irrelevant. Moreover, when René Girard is thus transformed as a tool to understand and interpret disharmony, inequality, disadvantages, violence, and etc., it will be easy for the researcher to embark on suggestions rather than questions for promoting a better life-furtherance. In addition, the use of René Girard in analysing Black women or feminist texts will also help the analyst to analyse the local narratives and the lifeworld in and around oneself.

Intersectionality is designated by Kimberle Crenshaw as an approach to literary analysis that invites students to consider how a range of identity factors, such as gender, race, nationality, class, sexuality, age, physical ability, corporeality, role, or setting, interact to shape character. But one should remember, that this definition of intersectionality is a naïve one, since it does not analyse the same content that 'intersectionality' per se means in legal terminology, and when this happens, one should be aware that we are misrepresenting 'intersectionality'. One must be aware of this deviation, where 'intersectionality' is not character formation, but the convergence of various factors that create violence such as inequality, disadvantages, and discriminations. Therefore, only the theory of René Girard could be employed to validate the claims of intersectionality within literary studies in order to bring out how a literary narrative projects structural, political, and representational intersectionality.

Over time perspectives on intersectionality have been changing and even there have been criticisms that it is too a broad term that can be employed in any way as one pleases. But those who criticise as

such should also remember that only when universal applicability is evolved 'intersectionality' will turn out to be a tool to analyse praxis and theories.

There are accusations that 'intersectionality' as a framework is ambiguous lacking defined goals based on a standpoint theory, focusing on subjective experiences of individuals' personal knowledge and perspectives. If 'intersectionality' is not redeemed from these accusations which are very serious, it will automatically not stand the test of time due to its clique driven subjectivities; for people who do not belong to the 'intersectionality' will be handicapped due to the lack of the same subjective experience similar to the author of the discourse in producing a text whereby making black feminist literature more clique driven. In order to redeem and make it a universal application on discrimination and violence, the theories of René Girard have to be taken into account in deciphering the narrative, whereby intersectionality can be used even to analyse a Dalit feminist narrative where there are many disadvantages such as literacy, caste, skin tone, religion, tradition, culture, gender, politics, age, language, expression, and lesbian or asexual or heterosexual, and etc., orientations that come into play in the life of an Indian or a Sri Lankan to experience discrimination as a form of violence.

To conclude, one should remember the words of Kimberle Crenshaw that talking about race will not start a race riot, but keeping silent on these issues and repressing them as if nothing happened or pretending racial issues never happened will be the cause for race riots.

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