

**“EXTERNAL DIRECTIVES”:
AN INTERSECTIONAL STUDY OF
*NAPPILY EVER AFTER***

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Black women have always fought for self-determination through the challenging of narratives that have always denied them their agency. Audre Lorde calls these narratives “external directives” in her powerful essay, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” published in her 1984 book, *Sister Outsider*. These “external directives” works in contradiction to human needs and identities and thereby manifests itself through homogeneity. There is an absolute denial of space for anything that defies its prescription, which makes intersectionality an indispensable way of conceptualizing experience and identities in feminist and antiracist theories. Based on standpoint theory, which focuses on subjective experiences, the framework of intersectionality is adept in recognizing the overlapping spectrum of social identities that can be empowering or oppressing.

Coined by black feminist scholar, Kimberly Crenshaw in 1989, as a term for the exploration of oppression of women of colour, “intersectionality” includes multi-layered systems like gender, race, class, ability, sexual identity, education, age and so on working simultaneously to generate experiences and identities. To quote Patricia Collins and Sirma Bilge:

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually

influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves (*Intersectionality* 9).

The ineptitude of the first and second waves of feminism to recognize heterogeneity in identity and experience is directly responsible for the emergence of intersectionality as a methodological paradigm, to describe and define Black female experiences. Hence intersectionality has a long legacy rooted in Black feminism and has been widely used to acknowledge and express the complexity of Black experience and identity.

Audre Lorde's "external directives" are determined by the capitalist, white patriarchal notions that inhibits Black female identities. Black aesthetics have always striven towards the visibility of their identities and experiences and have been critical of popular culture for minting out derogatory stereotypes as a part of this capitalist white patriarchal agenda. There is a long legacy of Black presence in popular culture, fighting against these dogmas. Many movies have been acclaimed as an expression of Black identity especially focusing on the slave experiences or Black female experiences. Movies like *Black Panther*, *Moonlight*, *Love & Basketball*, *Brown Sugar* are but a few in the long legacy of Black expressions. However, all these movies are intersectional in nature, as they portray not a single system of power dynamics, but a congregation of systems that align to influence experience and identity.

Nappily Ever After is a 2018 movie directed by Haifaa Al-

Mansour and starring Sanaa Lathan. The movie revolves around Violet Jones, an advertising executive who has a perfect life in terms of career, romance and even her hair which is tended to with obsessive care. The movie is not simply about the lifestyle choices of a Black woman, but is a classic example on intersectional study of a Black woman's experiences in a racist and sexist corporate world. The movie is quintessentially about a Black woman's journey to embracing her wholesomeness primarily through her hair. The labels of being a Black woman with natural hair, is seen as a disadvantage in a society largely driven by white capitalist patriarchy. As a Black woman caught in a white capitalist sexist society, Violet has her work cut out, in order to survive and succeed. As an adult, Violet is shown as someone well indoctrinated into the white sexist notions of acceptance since she is constantly judged through the yardsticks of the many systems at play. An intersectional study of these constructions reveals the real predicament of a Black woman to survive in a white world. Intersectionality, thus prompts a reimagining of the Black identity from a multi focal point of view, wherein experiences are an amalgamation of different intersecting labels. Black hair is irrevocably linked to political spaces that determine the Black identity. This explains why during the days of slavery, Black hair was brutally shaved off by the European colonizers as an attempt to destroy Black identity. Working as slaves in plantations, Blacks had to hide or shave off their hair, as it displeased their white masters. Hence, assimilation meant survival for the Blacks, right from the slave days itself, because the wrath of the white masters could also mean death for the slave. Thus slave women straightened out their kinky hair, so as to survive. Hair remains a major preoccupation for Black women, even spurring up movements like Natural Hair Movement. It is also a significant part in discourses related to Black identity. Writers like Chimamanda

Ngozi Adichie, Bell Hooks, Alice Walker have written about black hair and its racial and sexist connotations. The title of the movie in itself is a revolt against the dominant notions on hair politics. “Nappy” is a derogatory term for black kinky hair and as a part of the Natural Hair Movement, this term has been adopted to represent black kinky hair, with pride. Hence, as suggested by the title, the movie is divided into hair themed motifs that charts Violet's journey. Throughout the movie, hair becomes a marker of Violet's power, despair, value and self-control.

Violet sees her Black self as a demerit to her success, a notion that was driven into her by her mother, right from her childhood. Violet's mother was always obsessed with bringing up her daughter in a manner expected from white mothers. Hence, Violet has imbibed the white notions of acceptability and spends a part of her adult years just practising her mother's lessons. A huge part of this indoctrination revolves around taming her black kinky hair. Black women have a difficult time negotiating against the power systems that drive them into fraught relationships with their own body. Hair becomes a turbulent part of this existence, due to the negative association that it bears to incivility. The depth of Violet's obsession with her hair is portrayed through her constant awareness of it, like being scared of rain or dodging her boyfriend's hand when they are making love. Her desperation for perfection is alarming and it starts taking a toll on her for the worse, when she gets her hair accidentally hosed down, hours before her birthday party. Self-policing is something that is imbibed by the Blacks right from their childhood. It follows them into adulthood and this becomes a complex network of patriarchal constraints and white capitalist ideologies. Violet is plagued by sexism and racism, which prompts a reimagining of Black identity through her experiences. Violet's mother re-enforces Black

patriarchal oppression onto her as a means of earning respect from society. This is revealed in the first scene of the movie where a ten year old Violet, with pressed hair is seen at a pool party. Unable to control her excitement, she jumps into the pool much to her mother's horror. Being the only black child in the party, she is isolated all the more when her pressed hair becomes a coiled mess and everyone starts making fun of her. To Violet's disappointment, her own mother rebukes her in front of her teasers. This instance has a long standing effect on Violet and years later she is found wondering what would have happened to her that day, had her mother simply hugged her and told her that she is beautiful, no matter what.

The movie portrays multiple systems intersecting simultaneously. Sexism is rampant in a patriarchal society, affecting both white and coloured women. But Black women are caught at the intersection of sexism and racism, which mutates their experiences of discrimination into a complex one. Hence, Violet is found confidently striding into her office turning glances and yet her façade becomes undone when her hair gets hosed down. Her damaged hair and breaking-up with her boyfriend kick start an unravelling process within her. Consequently, she shaves off her hair and even though she is scared and shocked at the realization of what she has done. But she also gets the feel of redeeming herself from an obsessive and self-torturing routine of hair care. Women cutting off their hair have always been a pivotal moment in movies and literatures since female hair is at once personal and political. Violet's shaving off her hair, is also both a personal and political statement as the act represents the unleashing of her natural hair and self.

Audre Lorde speaks of the suppression of the erotic through the “external directives” and urges women to free themselves from these debilitating systems. Thus suppression of Black women

becomes a suppression of their erotic nature. Lorde's "external directives" become the determining factors which engage women in complex negotiations with their body and their identity, often leading to a loss of their wholesomeness. *Nappily Ever After* delivers an efficient view into the workings of these "external directives" which inflicts the Black female psyche with deep trauma.

Works Cited

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