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**INTERSECTIONALITY OF RACE, GENDER, AND FRIENDSHIP
IN ANGELA FLOURNOY'S THE WILDERNESS: A
CRENSHAWIAN ANALYSIS**



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Abstract

*Using transactional theory and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, this study explores Angela Flournoy's (2025) *The Wilderness*. The study examines how multiple identities – race, gender, class, and social location – affect the experience of five black women over a 20-year period. In this paper, this is done by applying Crenshaw's framework of overlapping systemic structures of oppression to create complex types of marginalization that shape character/ways of being, emotional paths and interpersonal dynamics. More specifically, the study looks for ways in which friendship is a key support and a place that also helps to negotiate, reinforce, and sometimes resist intersecting inequalities. The method used in this research is a qualitative textual analysis, in the sense that certain moments in the plot are chosen as key moments in which identity conflict, social pressure, and emotional labor are intertwined. The results show that the protagonists have multiple subjective experiences of race and gender re-negotiate expectations of how they fit in and into themselves. In conclusion this research paper proposes that *The Wilderness* has the potential to be an essential tool for writing a literary history of the even larger social systems that create intersectional oppression, making Flournoy's fiction an important addition to contemporary African American women's fiction.*

Keywords: *Intersectionality, Black womanhood, friendship, identity, Angela Flournoy, The Wilderness*

1. INTRODUCTION

International research on literature increasingly focuses on the nature of identity as being negotiated through multiple power relations instead of through discrete identities. Intersectionality theory, in turn, adapted by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is a useful frame for analyzing the ways in which race/color, gender, privilege, oppression, social class, and other social categories work together to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) was conceived to combat the lack of recognition of the lived experiences of Black women in both feminist and anti-racist provisions and created to argue that social identities should be understood in their multiplicities.

The Wilderness (2025) by Angela Flournoy can be considered an intersectional analysis literary case study. The novel tells the story of the lives of the five black women, Desiree, Danielle, October, Monique, and Lauren, above 20 years in which shows their friendships, ambitions, and emotional changes in their lives. The story emphasizes the constant negotiation of multiple subordination—racial, gender and economic—that continually refashion their identities. Flournoy does not merely see identity as fixed but sees her characters as socially situated beings whose life decisions and emotional lives have been highly shaped by - what she terms - 'social inequality'.

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Friendliness is a cornerstone factor in constructs of identity and emotional sustainability in *The Wilderness*. However, these connections are not unique to idealization; they are separated, misunderstood, and stressed by the complexity of the relationships that occurs when crossing identities in today's society. In addition to oppressive circumstances, networks of care and resistance manifest within these circumstances that yet shape Black women's experiences (Patricia Hill Collins, 2000). This study focuses on the intersections of race, gender and social positioning in the novel text, using Crenshaw's theory to look at how friendship exists at both a level of solidarity and conflict.

1.1 Problem Statement

A focus on disruptions and on facilitating the construction of identity as a complex phenomenon that links to interlocking systems of power, Angela Flournoy's *Wilderness* (2025) has played a prominent role in contemporary Black women's literature and further work and critical engagements with this text are underway but still in rough drafts. This literature tends to be concerned either with the focus on friendship or individuals' identity and both do not take account of the social constructions of these two focus without connecting them with each other through social inequalities. Consequently, the novel has to be read within the framework of Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of the intersectionality theory and the interaction between several identities, as well as how they influence the lives of black women in the contemporary period.

1.2 Research Objectives

- 1 To analyze *The Wilderness* through the theoretical framework of Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory.
- 2 To explore how intersecting identities of race, gender, and class shape the lived experiences and life trajectories of the female characters.
- 3 To examine the role of friendship as both a supportive and conflictual space for identity negotiation.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This is in line with a growing collection of studies of Angela Flournoy as this paper is an intersectional examination of *The Wilderness*. With this lens of Crenshaw, the research highlights a multimodal, paradoxical interplay between social identity and systematic inequalities that extends further understanding of the relation between race, gender and class. Further, the work carries over some of the concepts of feminist literary criticism, which examines the effect of friendship on the negotiation of identity and emotional work. The lessons learned are applicable for black feminist academics, cultural studies scholars as well as modern American novelists.

2.0 Literature Review

Intersectionality represents a key aspect of modern feminist theory. The introduction of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), it rose up as a critique to "one-dimensional frameworks" that conceptualized race and gender as distinct categories. Crenshaw contended that the intersectionality of multiple systems of oppression is important because of the compounded experience of oppression of Black women. Black feminist theory has continued to extend and deepen with Patricia Hill Collins (2000) who approached these experiences through a "matrix of domination" as

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race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect at structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal levels. Anna Julia Cooper (1892/2017) argued that the lives of black women must practice as central to any discussion on oppression, and bell hooks (1984, 2000) highlighted the links between racism, sexism, and classism in patriarchy capitalism.

The idea of “mapping the margins,” however, was the concept invented by Crenshaw (1991), which is especially relevant in the context of literary analysis because it illustrates how the cultural systems often fail to pay tribute to the ones living along the margins of many identities. In addition, intersectionality has been further explored as a methodological approach, as it was done by Sirma Bilge (2013) and Leslie McCall (2005); the latter recognized the intra-categorical and inter-categorical complexity of intersectionality, which is helpful in the case of analyzing how individual experiences in *The Wilderness* correlate to systemic patterns.

However, the importance of affect, intimacy and relationality in intersectional analysis have been noted by recent scholars such as Jennifer Nash (2017). This echoes the main emotional line of the novel – the idea of friendship. In literary criticism, Deborah McDowell (1995) and Barbara Christian (1987) accentuate that the personal dimensions and connections associated with relational identity frequently stand out as the mark of discontinuity between mainstream traditions and the stories of Black women. Further, Roxane Gay (2014) discusses some of the paradoxes in modern black womanhood that align with Flournoy's professional and social stresses.

Although *The Wilderness* (2025) has already been the focus of the first attention regarding friendship, this study aims to help close this gap by presenting a thorough intersectional study of the emotional and social journeys of the film's characters.

3. Research Methodology

The methodology of this study was a qualitative research approach and used an interpretative textual analysis of *The Wilderness* by Angela Flournoy (2025). Literary studies are well suited to the qualitative approach for meaning making and the analysis of social nuances as well as numerical data (Creswell, 2014).

3.1 Research Design

This study was designed as a descriptive qualitative research to investigate the social meanings that are contained in a primary text. The research process was centered around text selection and for this text, it was decided to focus on the Black women's friendships and identity formation in *The Wilderness*. The Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory was chosen as the main analysis framework as presented in the theoretical grounding that follow afterwards. Evidence related to characterization interaction, dialogue, and descriptions was collected from the careful reading of texts for Data Collection involved. In last data analysis the collected extracted data was analysed in the light of intersectional categories to uncover the interaction of overlapping systems of power regarding character development.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The study draws from the theoretical framework of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991), on intersectionality. Social identities are seen as multi-constitutive, and thus, race, gender, and class cannot be divorced from the analysis of lived experienced. A way to view how entangled systems

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of power may produce certain kinds of disadvantage is the idea of “mapping the margins” developed by Crenshaw.

This is complemented with Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) "matrix of domination", which looks at the various power relations. Moreover, as Jennifer Nash (2017) implies, with the focus on affect and relationality it is possible to further delve into the emotional work and relationships displayed in the Flournoy novel. As a whole, these theories have formed a strong base to analyse the characters' experiences as a whole rather than as isolated events rather than constructive social phenomena.

4.0 Data Analysis

In *The Wilderness* (2025), Flournoy builds the lives of black women into a complex system of racism, gender, class, and emotional work. When studied inter-sectionally, experiences of isolation, grief, guilt and other emotions are not only psychological reactions, but produced social conditions of systemic inequality.

4.1 Normalized Isolation and Systemic Resilience

“At this juncture, perhaps it was foolish to live without it, she'd built a life around it and”. (Flournoy, 2025). The isolation gives a sense of this being her reality. Grown a life around it means adapting to the absence of emotions. At an intersectional understanding, this is a reflection of how the emotional neglect of a black woman's internalization is what comes from living under the strains and constraints of gendered expectations and racialized resilience. The intersection of these structures produces an identity, and no longer “isolation,” but a situation that is socially conditioned and not “fault of the reader” as Crenshaw (1991) suggests.

4.2 The Cyclical Nature of Grief and Relational Instability

The recurring theme of emotional trauma is portrays how Loss was Loss is Loss (p. 83). The phrase “loss was loss was loss” will emphasize the fluid and fractal of grief. This separation is influenced by the expectations of both maintaining relations across gender and sustaining emotional endurance across race. These intertwined systems further reinforce emotional disintegration and emphasize the social nature of grief. This is consistent with intra-categorical complexity (McCall 2005), which accounts for the difference in individual experience of oppression due to the shared structure of oppression.

4.3 Guilt as a Mechanism of Structural Control

In the novel, guilt sometimes, even often, serves as a disciplinary emotion: “Guilt in itself is a disciplinary emotion, sometimes, even usually feeling that one has wronged when he or she hasn't (p. 201). It's a representation of the social norms placed on women to be always available emotionally in relation to others. Through a combination of norms of care, this guilt is structurally created (Crenshaw 1991). The result is a warped perception – ‘sense offense’ – which points towards the impact of intersectional pressure on the cognitive and emotional processes, making the mechanism of guilt into a mechanism of contained structural control within the self.

4.4 Precarity and the "Uncovered Self"

Afraid of what would happen if everything she's built falls apart, “(...) there were nights she felt like every edifice she'd propped up... could crumble, and she'd have nothing but her own uncovered

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self..." (Flournoy, 2025). Metaphor of the "edifice" speaks to the stability that is maintained through ongoing emotional work in the world of career and family. The 'uncovered self' represents the removal of these roles to expose a vulnerable self brought on by structural inequities. This speaks to a double burden of living the entire lived experience of multiple identities; manifesting life's insecurities is directly tied to its structural insecurities.

4.5 Intergenerational Continuity and Inherited Inequality

The term "My granddaughter here" (p. 299) is an expression of intergenerational continuity. This implies a relational perspective, but an intersectional lens uncovers that this continuity is not neutral, but rather rooted and influenced in inherited racial, gendered and classed inequalities. Family then is a place of emotional relations and a place where structural conditions are transferred across generations.

5.0 Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to explore how race, gender, and class cross over in Angela Flournoy's *The Wilderness*, examining this aspect in women's friendship. The emotional condition of the characters shows not just that they are in a state of mind, but that there exists a massive sociological web which gives rise to it, like, for example, when the characters feel isolated, or their sense of loss or guilt is accentuated, or they are feeling vulnerable.

The findings are consistent with the women characters in the novel who are subjected to various forms of marginalisation – their identities are being constantly constructed-and-constructed based on notions associated with the racially structured expectations and gender loaded responsibilities. This becomes a space of friendship in which community and conflict, many facets of communality, exist and are complexed, since sustaining community in an unequal social space is a complex issue. As a whole, *The Wilderness* is an important piece of contemporary black American literature for its depiction of how individual issues are interwoven into larger systems of power. Further ideas that can be explored in future studies are initiated by Patricia Hill Collins' theories of the focus of resistance and community or Blacks women's novels written around the time period of the novel or through the analysis of emotional loss and estrangement as trauma and its impact on character growth in the novel.

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