



Trauma and Recovery: An Intersectional Examination of Arabella in *I May Destroy You*

Chen Liang

Department of Comparative Literature, King's College London, London, UK.

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***Corresponding author:** Chen Liang, Department of Comparative Literature, King's College London, London, UK.

Abstract

The BBC & HBO series *I May Destroy You* brings to attention current attitudes surrounding sexual violence from both a racial and gender perspective and explores the boundaries of sexual freedom of black characters in London, whose dimensions are expanded by the intervention of social media effects, race, gender and sexual orientation. Intersectionality is evident in the series *I May Destroy You*, and the stories are closely related to the Millennials. This paper focuses on the trauma and recovery journey of the main character Arabella who has intersecting identities. She is black, working-class, creative, a woman and a survivor. Based on Jennifer C. Nash's understanding of intersectionality, this paper applies the intersectional lens to analyze *I May Destroy You* specifically to show how this research paradigm can be used to evaluate Arabella's multiple oppression because of her black female identity, such as being exploited by a white-led campaign and sexually assaulted by racially diverse men.

Keywords

Intersectionality, Trauma, Recovery

1. Introduction

Intersectionality is a conceptual framework for understanding how different components of a person's social and political identities interact. In 1989, Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) coined the term via her critique of feminist theory's single-axis framework. Intersectionality describes those people standing at a 'crossroads', at an intersection of marginalized or oppressed identities. Patricia Collins (2000, p. 299) also defines intersectionality as an 'analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape Black women's experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women.' These scholars focus on the oppression suffered by immigrants and poor women of colour. Intersectionality theory has been further developed today. In 2014, Jennifer C. Nash published her first book focused on the pleasure figure of black women. In 2019, she developed her arguments for an inclusive view of intersectionality associated with 'Generation Z' (Strongman, 2020, p.464). As a way of 'feeling' encouraged by Nash (2019, p. 3), the series also shows Arabella's long recovery journey, including contacting the police, aligning with ethnically diverse women and relying on social media exposure. In this process, she is helped and, at the same time, caught up in questioning her identity. To this effect, this paper seeks to analyze how Arabella recovered from three fulfilment fantasies in the end. Thus, this paper focuses on black women's reinvention of self-identity after traumatic experiences. This paper hopes to increase discourse on the applications of intersectionality in black British TV as a practice for better understanding the openness of black feminism and the diversity of its potential expressions.

2. Trauma Formation Process

Arabella is dynamic and energetic before she gets sexual violence. She is welcomed by her book *Chronicles of a Fed-Up Millennial* on the internet. She moves from Italy to London, enjoys a new life as a writer, and is invited to publish her second book. But her identity changes when a white man first rapes Arabella. The process is as follows: Arabella turns back to London from an Italian writing retreat. At night, she goes out for a drink with Terry. However, when Bella returns to the workplace the following day, wondering what happened to her after abruptly blacking out at the pub. A gash on her forehead, a damaged mobile phone, and a mental memory of a white man looming over her in a crimson toilet stall are the only indications that something did happen. This sexual assault causes her to have a very strong stress reaction as she is treated very roughly. It makes her feel insulted not only because of her female identity but also because of her black identity. This makes her try to find her rapist by any means possible. Her case breaks the conventional gender-based stereotypes that are oppressive to women. According to Collins (2000, p. 147), 'Violence is socially constructed in a race- and gender-specific manner'. Thus Black women, Black men, and white women experience distinctive forms of sexual violence. Arabella's experience is different from black men and white women. According to Crenshaw (1991, p. 121), she experiences 'interracial rape'. It is the combination of sexual violence and racial oppression. As when considering the interracial rape, people will connect Black male rapist and the white female victims because people form the stereotype of black man's promiscuity and white female's purity. 'Black signals the wild, out-of-control hyperheterosexuality of excessive sexual appetite' (Collins, 2000, p. 129). Due to gender and racial discrimination against black women, black victims and white rapists are often excluded from this discourse. Arabella's experience, however, proves that black women are also victimized by such problems and face the intersectional issues of gender and racism. As Williamson (2020, p. 525) said, 'we are still living at a moment when violence against black women often fails to register as a pressing social justice issue'. At first, Arabella hopes to find the rapist herself. She tries to find witnesses, but those at the bar that night chose to cover for the rapist, leaving Bella with no way of knowing who raped her. She lacks attention from others and injures. An unpunished rapist leaves her in a traumatic state. Arabella has suffered, causing the image of the rapist to flashback in her mind. She is unable to concentrate on her work and finish her draft. But with a first draft due soon, she does not choose to address the issue wholeheartedly but approaches Zain through her publisher to guide her through the writing process.

This triggered the second rape because, in the middle of their intercourse, he removes the condom without telling Bella. Zain is an Indian writer living in London but graduated from Cambridge, and friends from the upper class surround him. Arabella feels inferior about her identity in front of Zain because when Zain asks about her background, she naturally thinks of herself as Ghanaian and shows her discomfort. She could not contain her surprise when she heard that Zain had graduated from Cambridge University with a degree in creative writing. So when Zain rapes Arabella by removing condoms without her consent, she is surprised and disappointed. She thinks that Zain does not respect her because of her class and gender. Considering classicism, Nash (2019) agrees with Deborah King's view that class inequality compounds the oppressions of race and gender. Combining these two rapes, Arabella is subjected to intersectional oppression of gender, race and class. Such trauma leads Arabella's career to a standstill, and she begins having doubts and a strong insecurity about her identity. For example, she reads a passage for her agent about her thoughts on femininity: 'Prior to being raped, I never took much notice of being a woman. I was busy being black and poor' (Episode 7). Arabella's two traumatic experiences can be understood under Collins's view of the 'matrix of domination' as it refers to the organizations of all these oppressions. According to her, 'structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression' (Collins, 2000, p. 18). In Arabella, these intersections of power take the form of sexual assault. And no one actively observed any changes in her after these traumatic events. White rapists are still allowed to continue to seek out rape victims in bars, and Zain, a writer and highly educated and successful man, continues to enjoy the privilege of hurting other women in the same way. As the trauma of rape is not limited to the physical attack (Campbell et al., 2001), Arabella's renewed hope for a better life is dashed again. She feels her marginalised status in society. Therefore, she needs help from communities.

3. Trauma Healing Process

Arabella uses different ways to heal the traumas she has suffered, but the most effective way is to reconnect with her past. But the process is tortuous, as rape is not the only issue. What she faces makes the intersection of gender,

class and race a problem. Coming to grips with her intersectional identity is akin to uncovering the scars of her past. According to Collins (2000), black women are unwilling to report their rapes to social institutions and are less likely to seek therapy and other forms of assistance. Black women do not trust these social institutions because their experiences of intersectionality are not treated in a memorable and friendly way. Laws only deal with race or gender-based violence (Crenshaw, 1989). This single-axis framework makes it impossible for cases to be dealt with fairly.

But for millennials, society's treatment of these cases has changed as justice has improved and black feminist studies have intensified. Intersectionality is gradually evolving from an area that needs to be looked at to a buzzword. Nash (2008) is represented by scholars concerned with balancing black women's multiple identities. At the same time, black women are no longer portrayed as cowering. They are vibrant and brave. Nash (2008, p. 8) describes black women as 'creative' even in the patriarchal white-dominated society. Arabella's courageous journey to seek help and heal herself embodies a new generation of black women. Besides, the change in society's attitude towards black women can be seen in the case of Arabella. For example, she fills in the blanks in her chronology by speaking with people in the club that night. She retraces her steps using Uber and A.T.M. receipts. After collecting this evidence, she goes to the police office with Terry and Kwame (Benson-Allott, 2020, Para.2 of 21). The police are sympathetic to her experience and took her case seriously in accordance with the judicial process even though her case had to be terminated due to the substantiation of the evidence. But the attention of the judicial authorities gives Arabella some hope and inspires her companion, Kwame, to report his case.

In response to the known suspect Zain, Arabella decides to use public opinion to fight back when she hears from the publisher that he had used the same methods against other girls. In episode 5, on the stage, she announces that Zain is a rapist, not 'rape-adjacent' or 'rapey'. The audience in attendance records Zain with their phones and uploads him to Twitter. In real life, Zain and Arabella belong to different classes, but they are equal in the environment of freedom of expression on the internet. According to Bakhtin's (1984, p. 122) 'carnavalesque' theory, carnival frequently brought together the most unlikely of people and the removal of barriers between individuals allowed free contact and individual expression. The internet is now seen as a field of countless contradictions, disagreements, conflicts and debates and as an alternative public space where people in a state of domination compete for the right to speak and form a resistance to the hegemonic power. Here, the public is no longer a passive audience but an alternative communicator and producer of creative culture. Thus, Arabella uses the effect of public opinion to oppose the hegemonic oppression of her. But the internet is also a double-edged sword for Arabella, as she gains more supporters and is also hurt by it. On the one hand, some netizens make discriminatory remarks because of her status as a black woman, and they use their words to deepen Arabella's trauma once again. On the other hand, other groups have used Arabella's popularity to their advantage. For instance, in the episode Happy Animals, the company Happy Animals, organized by white people, asks Arabella to shoot a campaign for them to promote veganism with double payment. However, their aim is not to help the black female community, giving them more opportunities to work and promote the idea of equality, but to use their identity to draw attention to themselves as a voice for the white community. White people's efforts usually only depend on profiting off of black people. Such behaviour deepens the racial divide. Besides, Arabella is ecstatic when she learns that her publisher, Susy Henny, who is also black and hopes she can help her. Unfortunately, Henny takes advantage of their friendship to persuade Bella to write about her sexual assault. She encourages Arabella to restructure her novel around rape but then refuses to give her an advance or an extension to make that work viable (Benson-Allott, 2020). According to Collins, the rehabilitation of rape victims is victimized twice, firstly by the rape itself and then by the residents and institutions (Collins, 1990). Arabella does not get out of the situation after all the help she seeks from the outside world. She is like a warrior woman, but inside she is scarred.

Coel offers Arabella the power and authority to select from a range of endings, even if they contradict one another, without ever putting Arabella's rape into doubt (Mcfarland, 2020). The three fulfilment fantasies in the last episode provide a cathartic way to deal with Arabella's traumatic experiences. According to Herman (2020, Para.12 of 13), 'Ego Death' presents three different versions of the same encounter at the bar. In the first fantasy, Arabella and her two friends, Terry and Theo, drug and brutally beat the rapist David to death. After that, Bella takes the corpse back to her apartment and hides him under the bed. The clock then resets, and the night begins anew. In the second version, Bella takes her rapist back to her flat, listens to his tearful explanation of his coercion and sees him dragged out by the police. In the final fantasy, Arabella has a consensual affair with David, where she lies in a dominant position, and David assumes a submissive stance. These three fantasies can be analyzed through Freud's Id

Ego and Superego theories. The first fantasy shows the id of Arabella. According to Simon Boag's (2019) understanding, Id is driven by the 'pleasure principle'. It is both disruptive and socially unacceptable. Arabella wants to use violence to take out all the violence and aggression she feels towards racial and gender discrimination. Besides, according to Freud, the ego develops from the id and ensures that the impulses but present it in an acceptable way (Pulcu, 2014). At this time, Arabella is using her sanity to control her violent behaviour. She hopes to ease the intersectional oppressions on herself by listening to the pain of being a rapist. Freud's superego contains idealism. Arabella enjoys the privilege of being a white man. It is a moment when she is no longer burdened with the pressures of being a black woman and a victim of violent sexual assault. Bella is asserting a form of authorial control. This moment is healing with the soft sunshine that Arabella frees herself of the psychological baggage and trauma under her bed. She accepted herself and decided to face life positively.

Different from other black women images who are treated as a unitary and monolithic entity (Nash, 2008, p. 8). Arabella's healing process for trauma is not static or prescriptive. It is dynamic and complete. Nash encourages us to 'embrace the possibility of other ways to be and feel black feminist' (Nash, 2019, p. 58). Arabella represents not just herself but many black women in the millennial generation. They are not figures bound to a theory. Each one of them is unique in her experience. Their intersectional oppression is not a tool to limit their development but a window for more people to discover their creativity. Like any other white man and woman, Arabella can be the author of her life. After experiencing such traumatic things, she could also have the right to rewrite them. According to Wing (1990), black women are featured by the multiplicity of strength, love, joy, and transcendence that flourishes despite adversity. Regarding the ending, Arabella not only returns to her identity as a writer but also builds a richer identity.

4. Conclusion

This paper uses intersectionality theory to analyse the main character Arabella's trauma and recovery journey in *I May Destroy You*. She has also undergone a process of identity change. Although a member of Generation Z and living in London, Arabella still stands at the intersection crossroads in society as a black woman. Men of different social statuses raped her for different reasons, first by a white man in the club and then by an upper class who is Indian. Using Collins's theory of "matrix of domination", through these two rapes, this essay concludes the intersectional oppressions suffered by Arabella. At the same time, as an emerging woman, Arabella takes a different approach to trauma than traditional black women, actively seeking help from outside forces. This paper summarises the main tools and analyses the effects of these forces on Arabella's life. Judicial means have worked to some extent but had to be stopped because there was no valid evidence.

Furthermore, the analysis in this paper, using the carnivalesque theory, shows that online opinion has become an effective tool against the class. But on the other hand, online violence has also caused some harm to Arabella. At the same time, despite the influence of public opinion, people have remained aloof, and even white companies and black bosses have used Arabella's influence to make money. When none of these approaches worked, Arabella chooses to come to terms with and confront the trauma on the advice of her psychotherapist. This series uses three hypothetical scenarios to help Arabella through this process. The paper uses Freudian personality theory to analyse these three cascading hypotheses to conclude that neither violence nor empathic rapists can solve the problem. Only by accepting the past and confronting these intersectional pressures of race, class and gender in a positive light can the victim move beyond the past. At the same time, the paper highlights that, unlike previous depictions of black women under intersectional oppression, this series is more comprehensive and rich in its presentation of black women. These groundbreaking works in feminist media and culture studies are not just a product of the 'golden age' of feminist intersectionality. They have provided new ways to deal with these problems and become agencies for black women (Patrick et al., 2022). This responds to Nash's suggestion for a modern study of intersectionality from a more three-dimensional perspective on black women's identities and experiences.

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