



GENDER, RACE AND IDENTITY: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF ELHILLO'S *HOME IS NOT A COUNTRY*

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Abstract

This research critically explores the composite features of race, identity, class and gender that are netted through Crenshaw's (1989) perspective in Elhillo's 'Home is not a country'. Based on the emphasis placed on the main character's path towards finding their self, the study concerns itself with how the main character fully engages in the process of both personal development and identity formation. Furthermore, the analysis provides deeper insight into the experiences of oppression faced by the protagonist in 'Home is not a Country' focuses on how race, gender, and other forms of immigration and financial barriers construct the hero's subjectivity. Two predominantly narrative themes stand out in the novel; the issue of belonging and Islamophobia. The researcher examines these themes, as well as how they are portrayed and how they influence the process of identity construction of the protagonist. Thus, the researchers uncover the nuances of intersectionality in Elhillo's 'Home is not a Country' and provide readers with better understanding of the diverse problems of cultural representation and identity both in the text and in the contemporary society. Lastly, the conclusion of this scholarly work elucidates the importance of intersectionality based on Elhillo's selected novel. It does not only propel academic literature but also raises awareness and understanding among the general public about the significance of intersectionality in the construction of cultural selves and coping with the complexities of varied racial and identity crises.

1. Introduction

Intersectionality is a way of thinking about how people experience different forms of discrimination and oppression. Some people think it's too vague and doesn't have much evidence to support it. Some of the ways people experience discrimination and oppression overlap. And some people think the way intersectionality is used in feminist analysis is questionable (Davis 2008, p. 68). Some people believe that it should only be used to understand individual experiences, while others believe it should be used to understand identity and the ways that different parts of someone's identity intersect. The researchers believe that the ambiguity and open-endedness of intersectionality, which makes it a good feminist theory, is what makes it possible for it to be applied to other aspects of marginalization. Researchers agree with Zack (2005) that women are marginalized, and that this marginalization affects their experiences in different ways. However, researcher take up intersectionality as a way of looking at all the different ways that people are affected by social locations.

This present research study stares at the different perspectives on difference that are often overlooked in non-credit settings. In particular, this research has shown that there is a lot of complexity within feminist educators' social locations, and that this complexity needs to be taken into account when analyzing data from this group of educators.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Gender, race and identity forms a diverse social construct which poses a challenge to most

marginalized groups in today's society. Elhillo's *Home is not a country* (2021), share stories and personal experience about the relation between race, culture and religion through the lens of Crenshaw's intersectionality. The present research study probes into the different aspects of race, identity, class and gender which Crenshaw refers to in her text. It examines how a young person struggles to find their identity, and the process of self-acceptance that they go through.

1.2 Objectives of the research

1. To discuss the aspects of the protagonist's marginalization.
2. To perceptively consider race, gender and immigration and economic barriers shape the identity.
3. To analyze the issues of isolation and hatred based on hatred of Islam.

1.3 Significance of the study

This research will be useful for the further researches to understand how gender, identity, and race define the individual's life and how the person was able to cope with these problems and exist in society. It is also beneficial that how a person could protest for his rights and for own existence. This research is further helpful that how person survive with these issues. This research seeks to meet this gap by providing an intersectional analysis of the novel under consideration by Elhillo with a view of showing how gender and race work in the construction of the character of the protagonist. Specifically, the research will assess how Elhillo unmasks patriarchal norms of race and gender and their impact on the main character's relationship with her mother, her society as well as her place of belonging.

2. Literature Review

Many feminist scholars believe that women and men are different based on things like class, ethnicity, age, and other factors. They believe that women experience varying degrees of gender-based discrimination simply because they are women in a patriarchal world. Discrimination can take different forms depending on someone's position in different social structures, like race, class, caste, etc. However, inequalities are rarely the result of just one factor, and often result from the interaction of different social locations, power relations, and experiences. (Hankivsky, 2014). Stereotypes can make it harder to see the different things that people have to offer. This can make it harder to understand and connect with people who are different from us (Demetriades & Esplen, 2008). There are two different kinds of people- those who are male and those who are female. People who are male are usually the ones who do things like work and take care of things, while people who are female usually do things like relax and have fun.

Intersectionality is a way of looking at the way different aspects of a person's life can influence their ability to be successful. It's based on the work of feminist scholars who have shown that focusing on one thing, like gender, can be incomplete. But we still don't really know how to take intersectionality into account, and it's important to consider the different ways different identities can affect people's lives. Crenshaw's (1989) thoughts regarding power are connected with the capacity to control the way of behaving of others or the heading of occasions. For instance, power can be utilized to coordinate individuals' activities or redirect occasions. It can likewise be utilized to control one's own life. Power is basic to the chance of association something that will overall be dismissed while thinking about the presences of people for instance women, the defenseless. Nash (2008) appears to excuse diversity from one viewpoint calling it a 'popular expression', however at that point describes it as "the 'highest quality level' multidisciplinary approach for breaking down subjects' encounters of both character and mistreatment" (Nash, 2008).

Throughout the course of recent many years, the idea of Intersectionality has become generally

utilized in humanism. Comprehensively, interconnection is a structure and insightful device to grasp the effects of covering frameworks of mistreatment like prejudice, sexism, inequity, and different types of imbalance (Crenshaw 1989). The need for a comprehensive exploration of how the intersectionality of gender and race influences the formation and negotiation of identity in Elhillo's work. Existing research may have focused on individual aspects of identity, but a holistic examination of the interplay between genders, race, and identity within the specific literary context of Elhillo's *Home is not a country* (2021) remains unexplored, calling for further investigation.

3. Research Methodology

The researchers have therefore identified the text from the point of intersectionality that asserts that issues of discrimination and inequalities affect different people in different ways. Then, the researchers have used a textual analysis method to find patterns in the text. In the present study, sample of the study is Elhillo's *Home is not a country* (2021) as a primary source and the secondary source are books, research, articles, internet and journals.

3.1 Critical Theory/ Framework

The concept of intersectionality refers to a way of thinking that examines how various forms of discrimination interact with one another to produce new and distinct challenges. For instance, if a Muslim woman chooses to cover her head with a hijab, she may experience discrimination on the basis of both her gender and her religious identity. Because of this, it is difficult to determine which aspects of her identity are responsible for the discrimination that she has experienced. There is a connection between the various types of discrimination, and it is necessary to tackle them all at the same time in order to stop them from reinforcing one another. It is likely that the situation will become even more difficult for Muslim women if, for instance, an attempt is made to close the gender pay gap without also addressing other factors such as race, socio-economic status, and immigration status. Intersectionality is a way to see how different parts of our lives are connected, and how different groups of people are treated differently. It's also a way to work on changing things that are unfair in the world, like discrimination against women and people who don't fit into traditional gender roles. But even though "women" and "men" can mean different things, we don't think they're fixed or unchanging.

Main tenets of Intersectional framework for the current research work are as under;

1. Racial/ethnic discrimination can be a very persistent stressor and can lead to more severe problems with sleep, including more nights of insomnia.
2. Black people are more likely to be in poverty and have lower incomes than other groups.
3. Sexual orientation is one aspect of someone's identity that is related to various other things, like race, ethnicity, and social class. Scientists are still learning a lot about this topic, but it is clear that many different aspects of our identities interact and impact each other.
4. Insomnia can be a risk factor for a number of health problems, but it can also be easily corrected. If insomnia is resolved, it could help reduce health disparities between groups of people.
5. Adolescents can experience different degrees of privilege and oppression in different parts of their lives.
6. People develop in different ways because of the unique things about them and the surrounding environment.
7. Identity prominence refers to how important one's social identities are in different

situations.

4. Textual Analysis

Nima is the main character of the novel, and the novel is told in her first person perspective. Nima is a 15-year-old Muslim girl of color living in the United States. Her mother, Aisha, is a recent immigrant from Khartoum, Sudan. They live in an apartment together, but the building also includes other people from Aisha's homeland. Nima has one best friend through most of the novel - Haitham - who has a mother and grandmother who also live in the apartment building. Nima attends American school in English during the week, and on the weekends goes to Arabic school with Haitham and others in the community. Nima and her mother, Haitham, and the others experience severe racism, xenophobia, and islamophobia in America - resulting in both emotional and physical assault. Elhillo uses the symbol of sandwiches to bookend the novel and show how difficult it is for Nima to define her identity. Nima explains in the prologue how she used to throw away her mother's lunches, and how the smell of them alone would fill the entire bus. She started making her own "dejected sandwiches" with white bread and American cheese. This shows Nima's awareness of her otherness, and her attempt to fit in among her peers. At the end of the novel, after Nima has returned from the old country and under the mini- chapter title of her mother makes her a lunch of feta, fuel, and tomato. Nima's mother says she can't "keep imagining (Nima) eating that plastic" at school.

In this book, 14-year-old Nima is searching for a place to belong. She feels like an outsider in the American suburbs where she lives and an outsider to a homeland she's never seen. Even with her Arabic classes and best friend Haitham, she still longs to be a different girl, one who is less shy and whose father is still alive. Nima wants to be Yasmeen, the name her parents intended to give her, and the girl she believes she can be, if she only makes herself smaller. What seems like typical teenage angst and identity struggles transforms into a fight against a malevolent, self-created monster and a chilling look into the past. Now, Nima must fight to keep the life she once hated, or risk becoming a phantom of her former self. Nima's shallow understanding of what it means to belong causes most of the conflict in the novel. To her, belonging means either blending in with her American classmates, or speaking perfect Arabic and becoming a master of Sudanese culture. Nothing in between satisfies her, and her mind drifts to an unattainable, perfect version of herself. Elhillo weaves elegantly disruptive lyrics into the novel against the backdrop of 9/11 – when our beloved main characters' lives are torn into by malicious, angry strangers. Elhillo's verse slowly unravels the trauma that led Nima's mother to the US. The damage is seemingly too great for Nima, who flickers in and out of her body as she learns more of her past. After a terrible accident harms a close friend, Nima sinks further into despair and obsession with a version of herself that does not exist. Her mother, a shell of her former self, struggles to maintain a job for them in an increasingly Islamophobic country. Nima's personality is more like a flickering candle, which makes her very easy to victimize by the novel's antagonist. Elhillo does a great job exploring the mother's traumatic experiences and other side characters without forgetting about Nima's character arc - which is a difficult task, considering Nima's personality doesn't really blossom until midway through the novel.

Elhillo's story is cohesive and easy to follow, even if some poems diverge from the main plotline. Elhillo's *Home is not a Country* (2021) reminds me of Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses*, nostalgia and wishful thinking make for compelling reflections on identity and character. The most significant drawbacks of this book are the awkward formatting and peculiar stylistic choices that it contains. Even after reading the book several times, I was still unable to comprehend the

reasoning behind the formatting choices that were made. After some time, I got used to it, but picking up the book again after being away from it for a while made it difficult for me to get back into the flow of the story. The frequent use of ampersands was distracting (even if it was clever) for the first few poems that it was featured in. The spacing between some of the poems was also distracting. On the other hand, those insignificant and distracting particulars are inconsequential in light of the extensive range of feelings that Elhillo is able to portray.

Part Two of Elhillo's *Home is not a Country* (2021) takes a turn away from magical realism and into time-traveling adventures, where Nima has the chance to see firsthand the life her mother and Khaltu Hala (her mother's best friend) seemingly deprived her of. The images, and subsequent poems about her and Yasmeen observing (and perhaps interfering) with the past were provocative and eloquent. The second half of the novel was the strongest bunch of poems in the lot. "The Coward" and "Hala" were two of my favorites for their emotional impact and brilliant writing. Dialogue is often written in italics throughout the poems, and even the way each character speaks manages to be different in each poem. Elhillo has a strong sense of character motivations, and of the lengths they were willing to go to make their ideal lives for themselves. Nima's fascination with figuring out who she is led to her becoming very attached to her home, but it also caused her to make some mistakes. Elhillo's *Home is not a country* (2021) is a great story that talks about the dangers of getting too attached to a place, and how it can sometimes lead to problems. Nima's father was shot and killed by Sudanese police before she was born. Her mother was able to immigrate to America, and Nima was born and raised here. She loves America and all of its wonderful things, but she misses her parents and their culture very much. Through Sudanese music and old photos, Nima learns about her parents' culture and how colorful it was. Nima says:

“I miss the country that I’ve never seen
the cousins/ & aunts & grandparents
i miss the help/ they could have offered

the secrets they knew/ that i never learned”. (Elhillo, 2021, p. 64)

Thank goodness for Haitham, who arrived at the same time as Nima's mother? Nima's mother "makes us tea/ boiled in milk poured into mismatched mugs/ & hands us packs of captain majid cookies she gets/ from the bigala that Haitham & I call ethnic wal- mart/where we buy everything from bleeding legs of lamb/ to patterned pillow covers & cassettes/ covered in a layer of dust". Nima's grandmother, Fatheya, says that in their culture, people value things from the past more than things from the present. Nima loves the old songs and rhythms from her homeland, but she feels lonely and isolated at school because she can't share in the fun of her friends like she used to. Haitham is a friendly, popular boy, and Nima looks to him for support. Haitham doesn't defend her when a group of white boys harass her. This makes Nima furious, and their fight seems hopeless.

Haitham is attacked, he is in a coma and his life is in danger. Nima is very upset and feels like she doesn't belong in this country. She has a strange experience where she suddenly goes into her parents' old photo and sees Yasmeen, her own alter-ego from Sudan. Yasmeen is with her parents and they are having a happy life. Nima wonders if Yasmeen is a jinn, a supernatural creature, or if she made her up. In a magical realism story, Nima takes us to Sudan and to her parents' happy courtship. We see how Haitham's mother, Khaltu Hala, was pregnant and unmarried in Islamic Sudan, and we learn about a secret that Nima's father has been keeping. She returns to her actual life in America with new appreciation and love for her mother and their

present life together. Not only does the beautiful language, insights of living between two cultures, and innovative formatting open our eyes, but the plot makes the reader turn pages. Nima has moments where she wishes she could change identities. But until she is no longer able to, the only place she can go is to Haitham.

When Nima's ground falls out from under her, she has to fight against the ghost of a life she never chose. That other life is called Yasmeen, and it seems more real to her than the life she has now. Nima will need to fight hard to achieve what she wants, because she doesn't know what she's capable of. Furthermore, there are exact quotations which indicate the presence of identity and intertextuality;

"verily everything that is lost will be given a name & will not come back but will live forever" (Elhillo, 2021, p. 69)

These lines are also representing the theme of identity loss and identity crises for the young female protagonist.

"I want him to know I am not lonely, I have ghosts, I have my illnesses, I have a mouthful of half-languages, & blood thick with medications, doctors line up to hear my crooked heart" (Elhillo, 2021, p. 69)

Taking the worldly non-human things as friends and close relations is a symbol of identity loss and identity crises.

"it was easier to just be something else" (Elhillo, 2021, p. 101)

In "Talking with an Accent about Home (Second Take)," Sofia writes, "It was easier to just be something else." This shows how hard it can be for people to fit in, even if they want to. Sofia's poems are full of words that can't always say the things they want to. Instead, she uses Arabic words to create her own interpretation. In "Bride Piece," she says, "We all outlive our beauty, it's the currency we trade with men for their names." This shows how vulnerable women can be in relationships with men. Sofia's poems are full of language that can be difficult to understand. However, if you are familiar with Arabic, you will be able to understand her poems just fine. In addition, Sofia incorporates Arabic words into her poems, creating an interpretation that is based on her own experiences. Some of the lines in Sofia's poems stayed with me, such as "We all outlive our beauty. It's the currency we use to trade for the love of men." And in "Talking With An Accent About Home (Second Take)," she writes, "It was easier to just be something else." Each stanza reveals the challenges people of different backgrounds face, whether it's women, men, or children.

"burdened by the shadow of an accent that i cannot manage to make charming" (Elhillo, 2021, p.109)

Some of the most interesting poems are the ones in which she imagines conversations with a character named Nima. It's not clear who that person is, many people found his death and suicide interesting. Nima is struggling with her identity. She thinks she could have been a better person if she had been given different name. Her family, community, language, and physical features all conflict with each other. Nima learns about her name's origins and how it has affected her life. Nima, is confused about her identity. These markers, like her name and where she comes from, are a source of disdain for her. But in the last two parts, Elhillo introduces mystical and fantastical elements to the story, which help Nima explore her history and come to terms with what her name is, where she comes from, and the sacrifices of those around her. The last two parts of the novel are the real standouts. The author creates a metaphor for searching for your history and

learning about your past in an unexpected way that really elevates the novel. As the story is written in verse, the pace moves quickly and the reader follows Nima as she enters into her hole of self-doubt and dwindling self-worth. At first, the poems feel like a collection, but as the novel moves along, the poems start to feel more like a continuous story.

Nima is from a Muslim and Sudanese background, and her family is shown to be of that background throughout the novel. Arabic script is used in the text, and other characters comment in italics and ampersands. 9/11 has heightened awareness of Islamophobia, and Nima notices that her mother tries to avoid violence and discrimination by wearing hijab. Her childhood friend is brutally attacked, and in these moments, readers are given a contextual and historic representation of what it was like to be visibly Muslim at that time. These two points of friction--Nima's internal struggle and the outside discrimination--flow in tandem with each other and at times, overlap. They also play into the possibilities and feelings of loss in the could-have-beens often felt by those removed from their heritage countries, and for Nima's place and time.

5. Findings and Conclusion

Nima considers herself to be a sorry excuse for the young lady "she might have been," if by some stroke of good luck she was given the name Yasmeen rather than Nima. Elhillo explores the exacting and magical force of a name and the impact it has on an individual's character, developing the story from this insufficiency felt by Nima. Nima's family, local area, language and actual characteristics likewise become a wellspring of contention for her, expanding upon this thought of personality, addressing having a place, and being one's own greatest foe. There is culture, religion, history, and injury behind Nima's name, and perusers follow her process in finding out about its starting point. In the initial two parts of the novel particularly, these personality markers are a wellspring of disarray and some of the time scorn for the fundamental person. As this contention stirs things up around town of its limit, Elhillo acquaints otherworldly and fantastical components with the story, one in which Nima further investigates her set of experiences and finds a sense of peace with what her name is, where she comes from, and the penances of people around her that she assumed she knew. The last two pieces of this novel are the genuine champions: the fanciful notion, the startling development, the remarkable and expressive utilization of language as we track with the story.

Nima and her family's Muslim and Sudanese foundation is alluded to all through the novel, and there is Arabic content utilized in the text. Discourse and critique from different characters are in italics and ampersands are utilized instead of "and." Set against the background of 9/11, Nima and her little local area's religion, earthy colored skin, and expected strangeness, make them an objective of Islamophobia. Nima sees how this uplifted familiarity with developing threats push her mom to change how she notices hijab as an approach to keeping away from viciousness and separation. Her cherished, lifelong companion, likewise a Sudanese American Muslim, is mercilessly gone after. At these times, so normal to the story, perusers are given a context oriented and noteworthy portrayal of what being noticeably Muslim at that time was like. These two marks of grating Nima's unseen conflict and the external separation, stream pair with one another, and on occasion, cross-over as points of contention. They likewise play into the conceivable outcomes and sensations of misfortune in the might have-beens frequently felt by those eliminated from their legacy nations, and for Nima's place and time.

Elhillo makes a story that thinks an about this obscure area and gives youthful grown-up perusers a second to consider how their own generational narratives might hold more disclosure than they know about. Home Isn't a Country itself is an intriguing delivering of mystical authenticity. You follow this young lady, Nima, living at the crossing point of such countless

encounters. She is a Muslim American young lady. She's as well "ethnic" to find a place with the white children who menace her in the days not long after 9/11. She's additionally too American, not knowing how to move like her mom, or communicate in the language. There is the duality of her needing to have a place in two spots where she doesn't genuinely feel acknowledged in one or the other spot. This book was about home not being a spot, yet individuals. Yet, there is additionally duality of encountering solace and love, yet additionally culpability and difficulty. Furthermore, this is where the ethereal Yasmeeen comes in. Yasmeeen is a steady indication of Nima's deficiencies and a sign of all that she could be.

The intersectionality of gender and race plays a pivotal role in shaping the characters' experiences of displacement and their search for identity. The novel highlights how Nima's gender and racial background intersect, influencing her sense of self and her struggle to navigate multiple cultural and societal expectations. The present research study underscores the fluidity and complexity of identity construction, challenging essentialist notions of identity tied solely to nationality or geography. Nima's journey reflects the intricate negotiations individuals undertake to reconcile various aspects of their identity in a multicultural world. The researchers' sheds light on the transformative power of storytelling as a means of reclaiming and reconstructing identity. Nima's exploration of her family's history, cultural heritage, and personal narratives provides a framework for understanding and embracing her multifaceted identity. These findings highlight the importance of an intersectional analysis in unraveling the intricate dynamics of gender, race, and identity in Elhillo's *Home is not a country* (2021), offering valuable insights into broader discussions on identity formation and belonging in contemporary literature.

5.1 Recommendations

This research is very beneficial to numerous scholars in the future for understanding how gender, identity, and race influence the life of the individual and how the person can prevent these problems and stay alive in society. It is also worthy to know how person could defend the rights and how he could survive. Such issues that a person suffers from imposes in the society especially for immigrants which destroy their personality. Person's struggle for self-identity and they have ruthless experience in their life but at the end came to know that family and community matter most rather than country. At least, they should build a better place for themselves. The present research is convenient to know how a person manage with these matters. Despite the limitations, researcher has made every effort to compile or identify elements regarding the characteristics of gender, race or identity discrimination. They state that at the end of the whole research processes, there may be some dimensions unduly missed deliberately. It opened up a fresh path to other researchers of the same compartmentalization of identity and intersectionality so they can take a closer look at this piece of fiction as well as bury themselves with it in another perspective.

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