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Intersectional Feminism and Diverse Perspectives in Contemporary Romance

The lack of intersectional feminism and diverse perspectives has long been a critique of the literary canon as well as general literature. While there has been a definite shift toward more progressive representation in recent decades, there are still some genres that are treated as undeserving of intellectual engagement in spite of their unique approach to these specific issues. The contemporary romance genre often embodies the very intersectional feminism that the traditional literary canon lacks, yet it is often viewed as “trashy chick lit” and negatively stereotyped. While contemporary romance is rooted in the traditional literary canon through Shakespeare’s comedies as well as novels such as Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, more recent evolutions in the genre have discounted its merit in the eyes of scholars. In recent years, many authors in the contemporary romance genre have tackled complex issues involving intersectional feminism and diverse representation, often from own-voice perspectives. Contemporary romance successfully engages with intersectional feminism and diverse perspectives, but does not receive recognition due to the stigma that has long been held by the Academy and general society alike.

While romance novels today are viewed as mere genre fiction, there is a long history behind the tradition of the romantic comedy, also known as the rom com. Contemporary romance is rooted in Shakespearean comedy, which established some of the most common character types and plot tropes in the genre. While the plots of Shakespeare’s comedies varied,

they involved recognizable storylines and always ended with a wedding. Additionally, eighteenth and nineteenth century literature played a key role in influencing the romance genre. Novels such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* significantly impacted romance as it is known today. While contemporary romance has certainly evolved greatly in the years since, it is worth acknowledging the valid foundations of the genre. In more recent years, the popularity of the rom com in film speaks to the consistent evolution and continued popularity of contemporary romance over time. Some of the most popular rom com films are modern reincarnations of the genre's foundational texts. *Bridget Jones's Diary*, for example, is a highly successful novel and film based on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The history of the romance genre spans centuries, and while the early influence is still present, contemporary romance explores new ways to examine the intersection of feminism, diversity and romantic love through storytelling.

Contemporary romance is traditionally rooted in classic literature, but it has significantly changed overtime. Most notably, perhaps, is the progressive shift toward diversity. This authentic representation of diverse perspectives in female driven stories highlights the consistent inclusion of intersectional feminism in the contemporary romance genre. Intersectional feminism focuses on the ways various facets of a person's identity overlap and can transform the way they experience oppression, stereotypes and inequality. This ideological framework contextualizes the previously overlooked nuances of feminism as it recognizes how race, sexuality, disabilities, religion, political identity and more can shape both individual and collective experiences. Modern contemporary romance novels often approach these perspectives by presenting the reader with counter-normative character types and trope combinations in order to spark conversation surrounding intersectional feminism. University of Texas history PhD candidate

Jessica Luther says contemporary romance authors frequently make this point by subverting traditional depictions of relationships and reversing well-worn tropes to shift the dynamic between genders: “Feminist romance authors often embrace the problems in romance fiction and then write plots that actively do the opposite of what readers expect. This subversion of audience expectations is often jarring because, as a reader, you are bound to notice actions and emotions that are not what you assumed would happen” (Luther). Despite romance authors’ unique approach to engaging with these issues, the genre continues to be disregarded and critically dismissed even by feminist critics. Regardless of the bias contemporary romance consistently faces, authors of the genre continue to pursue creative avenues to intellectually engage with their readers about these complex topics. Intersectional feminism is a crucial, and often overlooked, aspect of the contemporary romance genre, and it is necessary to explore the many ways these novels engage with such progressive diversity to understand their full scope and impact.

Contemporary romance novels are generally set during the time they are written and focus on the context, issues and cultural phenomenon of that time. Despite being stigmatized as frivolous chick lit, the genre reflects the priority shift surrounding the need for diversity in literature that is often the center of discussion in higher education. This stigma reflects a sense of elitism that unfairly discounts the merit of own-voice perspectives, diverse representation and intersectional feminism in an entire genre. Contemporary romance novels such as *The Kiss Quotient* by Helen Hoang, *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* by Talia Hibbert and *The Bromance Book Club* by Lyssa Kay Adams all incorporate diverse perspectives and epitomize intersectional feminism. These novels explore sexual identity, race, neurotypical ableism and a plethora of other perspectives that are severely underrepresented in both general and academic literature. Regardless of the shift in canon in recent decades, there is still a sense of intellectual gatekeeping

that designates the romance genre as inferior despite the many ways it realizes intersectionality. Contemporary romance deserves the overdue recognition that it is a valid format to explore and realize the intersectional and feminist perspectives that have long been underrepresented in the Academy and in general literature.

Contemporary romance works as an unlikely vehicle to explore many facets of diversity, and Helen Hoang's novel *The Kiss Quotient* demonstrates various types of perspectives at work. The novel follows the Korean hero Michael and the heroine Stella, who is on the autistic spectrum. As an Asian woman on the autistic spectrum, Hoang's own-voice perspective informs her characters and brings powerful, authentic representation to the novel. Throughout the story, Stella feels the need to "overcome" her autism in order to be desirable and worthy of love. Stella experiences discomfort from physical touch, which is significant in the context of a genre that usually portrays a desire for physical connection as a key aspect of the relationship and plot. Stella initially hires Michael as an escort to help her learn to overcome her sensory difficulties, and this reverse *Pretty Woman* setup acts to contradict the traditional power imbalance in male/female relationships while also exploring the nuances of both Stella and Michael's identities. While Stella gradually learns her own boundaries and the types of physical intimacy she is comfortable with, she also grapples with other aspects of her autism that make her feel as if she is difficult to love. However, by the end of the novel she realizes that she does not need to conform to societal standards of normal in order to be desirable and worthy of love. Hoang uses a seemingly lighthearted romance to subtly investigate the ways that ableism, race and other factors influence the way we interpret and enforce traditional standards of normalcy in regular life and in relationships. Stella's and Michael's refusal to view autism as a flaw demonstrates the progressive mindset of the novel and reinforces Hoang's social commentary that neurotypicality

is not the only valid form of normalcy: “This crusade to fix herself was ending right now. She wasn’t broken. She saw and interacted with the world in a different way, but that was *her*. She could change her actions, change her words, change her appearance, but she couldn’t change the root of herself. At her core, she would always be autistic. People called it a disorder, but it didn’t *feel* like one. To her, it was simply the way she was” (Hoang 287). Hoang confronts ableism and refuses to compromise Stella’s identity to conform to traditional standards of “desirable” women. Rather than using Michael as a motivator for Stella to accommodate ableist mindsets and “overcome” her autism in order to deserve the hero, Hoang demonstrates that love is not exclusive to neurotypical experiences.

As an Asian woman on the autistic spectrum, Hoang provides a valuable own-voice perspective on these issues and themes. Hoang highlights the importance and value of inclusive literature that is written from authentic experience and perspective: “As I pursued and eventually attained a diagnosis (at age thirty-four), Stella, my autistic heroine, was born on the page. It has never been so easy to write a character. I knew her intimately. She came from my heart. I didn’t have to filter my thoughts to make her socially acceptable, something I’d been unconsciously doing for ages. And this freedom allowed me to find my voice” (Hoang 316-317). *The Kiss Quotient* exemplifies the ways contemporary romance has shifted toward diverse and inclusive character types as well as the immense value of own-voice authors providing authentic representation. A majority of literature throughout history excludes experiences and perspectives like Hoang’s, so it is both significant and essential that contemporary romance demonstrates a progressive shift to include diverse perspectives regarding both the characters represented and the authors themselves.

The Kiss Quotient embodies intersectional feminism as it focuses on a female-driven storyline that explores ableism, race and gender norms. These issues are often discussed in academia, but it is not always put into practice via the literature being taught. While contemporary romance is not intended to be academic, it often acts as a successful vehicle for putting these concepts and theories into action. Hoang's novel *The Kiss Quotient* successfully incorporates intersectional feminism by focusing on a dimensional heroine grappling with the complexities of ableism, race and gender norms despite the fact that it is not "high brow" literature. Contemporary romance's tendency to include a focus on sex and romantic love may exclude it from literary study, but it has serious merit on the grounds of its active engagement with intersectional feminism, diverse representation and frequently own-voice perspectives.

Talia Hibbert's *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* is another strong example of intersectional feminism in an own-voice contemporary romance. Dani Brown is a Black, bisexual woman who practices the Wicca faith and struggles with emotional intimacy. The hero, Zafir Ansari, is a Muslim man with general anxiety disorder and a love for romance novels. What makes Hibbert's novels unique is the way she plays with conventional tropes of the genre and twists them to shed light on the various complexities of real people and relationships outside of the previously narrow sphere of the romance genre. Just as Hoang reverses more traditionally gendered power dynamics in *The Kiss Quotient*, Hibbert chooses to explore intersectional feminism and healthy masculinity by changing traditional romance character types. In regards to interpersonal relationships, Dani prefers a mutual lack of commitment whereas Zafir is interested in an established relationship. This is a clear reversal of the typical trope combination that pairs shy, virginal women and bold, promiscuous men. Additionally, it rejects the notion that women are expected to shoulder the burden of emotional labor in a relationship. Hibbert, in part,

accomplishes this by reversing the cliché through Zafir's intersecting passions for athletics and mental health. Zafir runs a nonprofit rugby program called *Tackle It* that is "designed to teach boys that mental health struggles didn't make them less masculine, and that there was nothing wrong with being less masculine, anyway" (Hibbert 173). Hibbert's emphasis on healthy masculinity as an approach to conversations and coping mechanisms surrounding mental health rejects the outdated idea that men lack both the ability and the responsibility to shoulder an equal share of emotional labor in a relationship. By reversing the traditionally gendered approach to communication, mental health and emotional intelligence, Hibbert is able to simultaneously explore different expressions of femininity and healthy masculinity.

In addition to Zafir's progressive character type in the novel, Hibbert also uses Dani's character to highlight that women do not have to choose love over their career or other goals. Dani is a literature PhD candidate, and Hibbert consistently portrays her passion and commitment as something independent of her love life. None of Dani's success is attributed to her relationship, and, just as importantly, she does not sacrifice any of her aspirations in order to find love. British sociologist and cultural theorist Rosalind Gill addresses some second-wave feminist critiques of the genre that viewed romance novels as a way to subtly reinforce gendered power dynamics that undermined female autonomy both in the home and in the workforce:

In the 1960s and 1970s romance novels were seen variously as a seductive trap which justified women's subordination to men and rendered women complicit in that subordination (Jackson 1995); as a kind of false consciousness— 'a cultural tool of male power to keep women from knowing their real conditions' (Firestone 1971, p. 139); or as a distraction which diverted women's energies from more worthwhile pursuits. (Rosalind and Herdieckerhoff)

Hibbert crafts a compelling romance without sacrificing the personal goals or achievements of either character. While it may seem subtle in the book, Hibbert's ability to simultaneously explore healthy masculinity and feminism while incorporating intersectional perspectives exemplifies what contemporary romance is capable of achieving. *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* demonstrates the various complexities of interpersonal relationships by engaging with intersectional feminism as a lens to contextualize the various aspects of diversity in the novel without ever depicting love and professional aspirations as mutually exclusive. *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* is one example of the ways contemporary romance novels are able to actualize the academic discussion surrounding these concepts, however unlikely it may appear.

These new novels in the genre reflect the shift in romance where women are seen as complex, dimensional characters and are not defined by their relationship to men. Lyssa Kay Adams' novel *The Bromance Book Club* investigates the need for feminism and healthy masculinity, and often accomplishes this by forcing the reader to confront outdated stereotypes about relationships and gender. Adams frames this concept by featuring men reading romance novels as a way to simultaneously acknowledge the various merits of the genre while also successfully helping the reader to engage with romance from a fresh perspective: "Romance novels are primarily written by women for women, and they're entirely about how they want to be treated and what they want out of life and in a relationship. We read them to be more comfortable expressing ourselves and to look at things from their perspective" (Adams 34). While this seems simple, the shift in perspective manages to force the reader to question outdated stereotypes that are rooted in sexism. Often, the quiet brilliance of contemporary romance novels comes from the author's ability to use traditional conceptions of the genre to confront the reader with uniquely progressive insight that has long been overdue.

While Adams' approach to dissecting sexist and outdated conceptions of gender and romance is unique, society at large has a long history of minimizing traditionally female interests and artforms. In Virginia Woolf's landmark first-wave feminist text *A Room of One's Own*, she examines the lack of fiction written by women for women. She emphasizes that while there are countless books about women, nearly all of them at the time were written by men: "Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?" (Woolf 30). Woolf was highlighting the need for own-voice perspectives – stories about women, by women, for women. While it may be unexpected, the romance genre significantly contributed to meeting this need, and intersectionality also became central to the goals of the genre as feminism progressed over the decades. Not only does the contemporary romance genre fulfill the very void that Virginia Woolf spoke of, but it goes a step further and meets the need for increased diversity. The intersectional feminism, diverse representation and frequent own-voice perspectives in the romance genre speak to its progressive evolution over time and the ways the genre has shifted from filling the void Woolf spoke of to also engaging with the needs of underrepresented and marginalized groups.

Own-voice perspectives in contemporary romance are particularly important because the genre primarily uses current culture and issues for context. This offers unique insight into the experiences and perspectives of a wide range of women with a sense of immediate relevance. This is a significant shift in fiction, as Virginia Woolf noted that there was a lack of own-voice female writing. In her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," prominent American scholar, poet and critic Adrienne Rich noted that nearly fifty years after Virginia

Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* was published, there was still much progress to be made when considering women and writing:

No male writer has written primarily or even largely for women, or with the sense of women's criticism as a consideration when he chooses his materials, his theme, his language. But to a lesser or greater extent, every woman writer has written for men even when, like Virginia Woolf, she was supposed to be addressing women. If we have come to the point when this balance might begin to change, when women can stop being haunted, not only by 'convention and propriety' but by internalized fears of being and saying themselves, then it is an extraordinary moment for the woman writer – and reader. (Rich 37-38)

Contemporary romance signifies this shift not only because it is largely written by and for women, but because it does not concern itself with convention and propriety. Instead, it embraces the genre's unconventional approach to these issues in spite of the societal and academic backlash. Both female writers and readers benefit from this unconventional approach, because the genre would lose a large portion of what sets it apart as uniquely progressive if it were to conform to strictly traditional standards of "worthy" literature.

Rich further emphasizes that while feminism is important, it is crucial to reject traditionally white, heteronormative standards and instead embrace the complex diversity of intersectional feminism. Rather than contemplate the role of feminism in literature as an isolated concept, Rich demonstrates the need to engage with diverse perspectives when considering any type of feminist work:

Like Virginia Woolf, I am aware of the women who are not with us here because they are washing the dishes and looking after the children. Nearly fifty years after she spoke, that

fact remains largely unchanged. And I am thinking also of women whom she left out of the picture altogether – women who are washing other people’s dishes and caring for other people’s children, not to mention women who went on the streets last night in order to feed their children. We seem to be special women here, we have liked to think of ourselves as special, and we have known that men would tolerate, even romanticize us as special, as long as our words and actions didn’t threaten their privilege of tolerating or rejecting us and our work according to *their* ideas of what a special woman ought to be. (Rich 38)

In recent years, the contemporary romance genre has shown a strong ability to actionably engage with these varied perspectives. The consistent presence of intersectional feminism, diverse representation and own-voice perspectives reflect Woolf’s early call for action as well as the later and further advanced critiques of scholars like Rich. Novels like *The Kiss Quotient* and *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* engage with ableism, race, gender, sexuality and more, demonstrating that the romance genre does not simply have the potential to exemplify intersectional feminism and diverse perspectives, but that it actively does so successfully. Despite the fact that the contemporary romance genre has moved beyond mere potential and has actualized its ability to engage with the perspectives of underrepresented and marginalized groups of people, this predominantly female artform is perpetually dismissed by the continually narrow focus of institutional education systems.

While the literary canon is historically dominated by straight, white men, there has been a recent shift in what is considered valid or worthy of study. Science fiction, for example, was initially not regarded as high brow enough for serious study, but is now increasingly common in college literature courses. Regardless of the gradual shift in college syllabi and the canon at

large, the Academy refuses to so much as acknowledge the merits of the romance genre. While contemporary romance novels may not consistently fulfill the particular thematic content, difficulty level or other literary attributes sought after in traditionally academic material, this does not mean that the genre is void of insight, nuance or relevant social commentary. There is still value in literature whether it is on a college literature syllabus or not, and neither the romance genre nor its readers deserve the dismissal they receive for not conforming to traditional, and perhaps outdated, standards of serious literature. It is hypocritical for general readers and academics alike to call for further diversity and intersectional feminism in literature while simultaneously rejecting an entire genre that achieves it simply because of preconceived notions that are rooted in prejudice. In the end of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf ends with a call to action – encouraging all women to write anything and everything. She invites women to write fiction as well as history, poetry, science and more:

I am by no means confining you to fiction. If you would please me – and there are thousands like me – you would write books of travel and adventure, and research and scholarship, and history and biography, and criticism and philosophy and science. By doing so you will certainly profit the art of fiction. For books have a way of influencing each other. Fiction will be much the better for standing cheek by jowl with poetry and philosophy. (Woolf 126)

Why, then, do academics esteem Woolf but disregard her call to action? Women answered the call, and while many did write poetry and history, many also wrote romance novels. Regardless of genre, all female authors have built upon Woolf's desired legacy, and it is hypocritical to designate some as worthy and others as too feminine to be taken seriously. Contemporary romance goes beyond fulfilling the need Woolf spoke to and continues to meet the needs of

marginalized and underrepresented groups through its clever and actionable inclusion of intersectional feminism and diverse perspectives. Despite its remarkable and historic progress, it still suffers from stigma that is rooted in the misogynistic rejection of overtly feminine interests and artforms.

This rejection of the romance genre relates to discourse in Adams' novel *The Bromance Book Club*. Specifically, she explores the double standards and sexist judgment women face for even the most trivial of things: "toxic masculinity permeates even the most mundane things in life. If masses of women like something, our society automatically begins to mock them. Just like romance novels. If women like them, they must be a joke, right?" (Adams 54). This commonplace treatment of women's interests and talents undermines the value and merit of the women themselves as well as their work. Despite the fact that romance is a best selling genre, these novels are not taken seriously because they involve love, sex, emotional intelligence and happy endings. However, happy endings and valuable insight are not mutually exclusive. Romance novels can, and do, manage to tackle complex and relevant issues while also successfully telling an engaging story based in love and relationships. Additionally, many well respected novels are similarly character driven and relationship focused, but the manner in which it is portrayed conforms to more traditional standards of literature, unlike the often cheeky, humorous and sexual nature of many contemporary romance novels. Interests, emotions and experiences that are associated with traditional conceptions of femininity are frequently discredited and viewed as reason to invalidate the possible merits of the genre. Despite its unconventional approach to writing about such issues, the contemporary romance genre often embodies the very intersectional feminism, diverse representation and own-voice perspectives both general readers and academics praise. The contemporary romance genre may not be

traditional enough to be taught in a classroom, but that should not negate its unique perspective and approach to these complex facets of literature.

The stigma against romance can be partly traced to some second-wave feminist analysis of the function of love and gender. Stevi Jackson, professor and director of Women's Studies at the University of York, England, examines the ways second-wave feminists analyzed love as an anti-feminist social tool:

Love and its discontents were on the agenda of second-wave feminism in its early years as an aspect of wider debates about the politics of sexuality. Love was seen as an ideology which justified our exploitation by men and simultaneously ensnared us into oppressive relationships with them. As the slogan put it: 'It starts when you sink into his arms and ends with your arms in his sink.' (Jackson 39)

This type of analysis contributed in part to the general rejection of romance novels. Not only were they seen as frivolous, but they were viewed as anti-feminist as well. While this may be true of early chick lit, current contemporary romance novels transcend this second-wave feminist analysis of love by demonstrating the ways that relationships are not central to a woman's personhood but can still be a valuable aspect of life as a whole. Contemporary romance rejects the idea that love is an anti-feminist social tool used to get women to comply to men's wishes, and actually demonstrates the ways that healthy relationships can be a valid facet of strong, independent women's lives if they so choose. Just as Elizabeth Bennet's rejection of Mr. Darcy's first proposal in *Pride and Prejudice* spoke to feminist ideals, her eventual acceptance is not a sign of defeat but rather an intentional choice made without sacrificing her morals or self-respect. Contemporary romance novels accomplish this same sense of a satisfying, romantic conclusion without defining women by their relationship to a man or compromising the heroine's

independence or values. Contemporary romance demonstrates, just as Jane Austen did so long ago, that feminism and love are not mutually exclusive concepts or experiences, but rather that they can exist simultaneously and flourish.

Contemporary romance demonstrates that love and feminism can, and do, coincide, but that it is also important to consider the layered dimensions of these ideas and concepts. While Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* opened the floor for discussion about the need for female writers, critics and authors such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde furthered the conversation by highlighting the need for diverse representation, intersectionality and own-voice perspectives. The contemporary romance genre is in conversation with both first-wave and second-wave feminism, and it demonstrates these layered calls for change regardless of its unconventional approach. Contemporary romance does not deserve belittlement simply because it is not found in college classrooms, and it is clearly worthy of critical analysis given the many ways it grapples with the complexities and nuances of intersectionality and diverse perspectives. In her essay titled "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," feminist author Audre Lorde highlights this need for feminism to embody inclusive intersectionality:

But our future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality. As women, we must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change. Now we must recognize differences among women who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each others' difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles. (Lorde 113)

While contemporary romance may seem a small way to approach such big issues, the work that these authors accomplish is not without immense, if underappreciated, value. Woolf called for

more female writers and Lorde highlighted the need for an intersectional approach to such work, and contemporary romance answers both demands with an intelligent and intentional awareness.

While romance has drastically evolved since its canonical origins in novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*, its overall value has not diminished despite the consistently negative treatment it receives from general readers and academics alike. Contemporary romance defies the unfair notion that it is frivolous and anti-feminist, managing to incorporate intersectional feminism, diverse representation and frequent own-voice perspectives. Novels such as Helen Hoang's *The Kiss Quotient*, Talia Hibbert's *Take a Hint*, Dani Brown and Lyssa Kay Adams' *The Bromance Book Club* are examples of the ways the contemporary romance genre actualizes these values through an engaging storyline. Landmark feminist authors such as Virginia Woolf, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich and several other scholars have made crucial contributions to the evolution of feminism, intersectionality, and literature, and contemporary romance continues their legacy of progressive change with remarkable success in spite of its consistent dismissal. If readers are to seriously put the demand for intersectional feminism, diverse representation and own-voice perspectives in female authored literature into action, it is necessary to destigmatize contemporary romance and grant it the long overdue credit it deserves.

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