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Intersectionality: American Honey

Intersectionality of race, gender, and socioeconomic class can be analyzed as imminent problems of form in the movie *American Honey.* This film calls attention to poverty in America, and the social implications of being female and black. The mixing of these identities then creates a multifaceted level of discrimination and oppression, which can be examined through internal and external relationships of characters.

Star is the main character of the movie who lives in poverty with scarce resources and a grim reality. She lives with two young children that she is to take care of, and a man who is referred to as her dad that sexually abuses her. One day, Star meets a group of young adults that travel around the country selling magazines. She flees to join them on their drug, alcohol, and sex filled transient lifestyle in hopes of making money and escaping poverty. The film is a cinematic account of everyday life for Star and the group to represent the hardships associated with Star’s social group identities. These hardships are products of discrimination which can be defined as “when an individual has prejudice and power and uses that power to unfairly deny access to or limit someone’s ability to obtain resources because of that person’s identity” (Killerman) Through this, everyday hardships, broad spectrum problems, and the difficulties associated with getting out of the cycle of oppression are addressed. This cycle of oppression is the cyclical nature of oppression, or “discrimination on an institutional or societal level” (Killerman).

Being a female in this film produced negative external relationships for Star. These experiences primary stem from unwanted interactions with men in a sexual nature. For example, when she first meets Jake, another main character, in the parking lot he immediately tries to kiss her upon first meeting her. Later, Star has an explicit first experience with a group member of the magazine team named Corey. He approaches Star and says “Hey, what’s up? Are you new? You should let me be the first one to fuck you.” Then he follows up this statement with pulling down his pants to show her his genitals. This is a recurring action throughout the film. The immediate sexualization of Star in the film is what produces her negative relationships. Her being female somehow allows for people in the film to interact with her in explicit ways when she tries to make connections and relationships with other characters. This leads to a feeling of extreme discomfort and violation. Also, the father figure that Star is living with in the beginning of the film is a man who sexually assaults her. When interacting with her, he made sexual advances and then showed the beginning scene of what alluded to the man raping Star.

Another identity that Star holds that causes discrimination and overlaps with other identities that she holds, is being black. In the film, she is the only black character of all of the characters. This includes group members and her family members. Her race is never explicitly mentioned in dialogue between any characters, but it is alluded to in many situations. For example, in the bus when the magazine group and Star are traveling from place to place they play rap music loudly and rap along with it. While rapping and in normal conversation the entire crew uses the “n word.” Star is the only member of the crew who does not say it. Although one could argue that the crew members are not using it in a way meant to harm Star, this is never the case with this word. Her negative external relationships with others is reinforced because of this derogatory word. No matter the context and intentions, these white crew members should never say it. Another way that her race is externally oppressed is through the use of confederate flags. When confederate flags appear, they are direct references to being offensive and racist and signaling when Star is in trouble in the movie. The flag appears when Star is in trouble with Crystal, the leader of the group, and has to confront her. Crystal creates a heavy power dynamic in this scene by wearing a confederate flag bikini, having Star’s crush rub her with fake tan lotion, and by being intimidating. Also, the confederate flag is shown in the background during the scene where her father rapes her. Both of these occurrences show the discrimination and oppression that Star faces due to her race.

Finally, Star faces discrimination and oppression caused by external relationships due to her socioeconomic status. Throughout the film there is a rigid class difference between those who buy magazines, and those who sell magazines. Crew members use their poverty as a means to convince the rich to buy their magazines from them. On Star’s first sales mission, she grows very angry at a rich woman who laughs at another crew member's proposal that he would like to study political science in college. The woman's reaction to the thought was a discriminatory scoff that ultimately stems from inequity. Social group equity is defined as “members of all social groups… experience impartial access to societal resources,” therefore inequity is the lack of access this particular group has to resources (Killerman). Throughout the film this concept of inequity is addressed for this group of individuals that encompass disheartening effects of inequity in America. External relationships with other people in the film reinforce these effects and alienate the crew by doing so. A study in 2016 showed that the richest five percent of Americans owned two thirds of the wealth in the US (“Wealth Inequality”). Meaning that the alienation of these characters to believe that they are the minority if false in that wealthy people are not the majority in the US.

Although discrimination can be analyzed across each of these separate identities, the mixing of these creates intersectionality. For example, being a black female in a scene where she is raped in the presence of a confederate flag mixes these concepts. This occurs in the same way that she prostitutes herself in efforts to escape her socioeconomic class, or when a woman perceives her race to be causation of her low socioeconomic class. These conditions can all be evaluated in that they stem from different things like stereotypes, differences, and privilege, but what they ultimately produce is this concept of intersectional discrimination. External and internal relationships drive intersectionality in that external influences cause discrimination and oppression, but the result of these external influences is a poor internal relationship that Star has with herself. This leads to the sad reality of internalized oppression, or “when members of a target group are socialized into supporting and believing the oppressive beliefs” (Killerman).

The intersectional nature of the oppression in American Honey can contribute to an understanding of the concept. This is done through identifying and analyzing how oppressive behaviors manifest in the film, and then applying this to find connections and overlapping factors that produce such intersectional oppression. Although this can further be analyzed through any framework, the context of relationships helps guide the logical thought process to understand causation of the intersectionality. Therefore, the intersectionality doubles in on itself as overlapping identities that cause oppression, and of overlapping internal and external oppression.

Works Cited

Killermann, Sam. *A Guide to Gender: the Social Justice Advocates Handbook*. Impetus Books, 2017.

“Wealth Inequality in the United States.” *Inequality.org*, Institute for Policy Studies, inequality.org/facts/wealth-inequality/.