

## Navigating Layers of Oppression: An Intersectional Reading of Sujata Massey's *The Murder on Malabar Hill*

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### Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the 2018 legal mystery novel, *The Murder on Malabar Hill*, authored by the American novelist Sujata Massey, through an intersectional feminist lens. For this, the theory of intersectional feminism by the American academic and critic Kimberle Williams Crenshaw has been utilised to study how multiple factors like gender, caste, religion, culture, class, profession, etc., coincide and function together in the work of Massey. *The Murder on Malabar Hill* is the first mystery of the series set in colonial India by Massey, which introduces the character of Perveen Mistry, the first woman solicitor of India. Her character is inspired by the real-life First Indian Woman lawyer, Cornelia Sorabji, who was also the first woman to study law at the University of Oxford.

**Keywords:** *Crime fiction, Intersectionality, Feminism, Colonialism, Systems of oppression, Power Structure*

### Introduction

The Theory of Intersectionality is a feminist approach that examines how various factors of one's identity intersect and interact, leading to multiple forms of oppression and privilege, respectively. The term 'Intersectionality' was coined by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, an American scholar and civil rights activist, in her essay, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (1989), originally aiming to advocate for African-American women. Even though the concept of Intersectional Feminism had been in existence previously, Crenshaw made it widely recognisable. The given theory states that a person does not have one but multiple socio-political identities which overlap to influence their experiences as a human being.

Perveen was inspired by India's first woman solicitor, Cornelia Sorabji. I learned the name from an Indian media article I'd read around 2009, talking about this remarkable woman who remained unmarried her whole life and had a challenging law career from the 1890s through the 1930s. I printed out the article and saved it in a file where I kept biographical articles about significant women in 19th and 20th-century history. (Massey 3)

The given novel is a newer piece of literature, which provides a great scope for evaluating the text from multiple points of view. Feminist critics were quick to notice how the story encapsulates the struggles of young women of minority communities during the British Raj. Gupta (2021) explains how, despite all the education and professional legal training, Perveen still suffers from horrid discrimination and suppression everywhere she goes. People tend to undervalue her as a professional as well as a human being, just because she is a woman in a male-dominated world.

The novel has been greatly appreciated for the detailed and nuanced portrayal of gender discriminatory issues and how skillfully the backstory of Perveen's personal life as a young academic and marriage to Cyrus is woven with a murder mystery. Rao (2020) from the Indian Review of Literature, however, has criticised

that the story often struggles to present the meticulous complexities of the colonial era, especially when it comes to the legal and judicial systems.

Secluded communities of women are a concern. Some unfair and possibly illegal things happen that the government never knows about because the women don't come out to tell. (Massey 321)

This research paper will employ a qualitative research approach broadly through close reading of the primary text and evaluation of the various instances that demonstrate the systems that work together to fuel the oppression and discrimination based on socio-political factors.

For this, the theory of intersectionality given by American scholar and civil rights activist, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, in her essay *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (1989) will be utilised. After evaluating the factors which contribute to the multiple identities of women in the British Raj, conclusions will be drawn on how the novel shows the various facets of discrimination and oppression based on gender, caste, religion, class, profession, ethnicity and colonialisation.

Perveen Mistry, the protagonist of Massey's legal mystery series, is a young Parsi woman who goes on to become the first woman solicitor in British India. Her identity is formed through the overlapping of various socio-political factors, which shape her experiences as a young woman living in the British Raj. This paper will analyse all of those factors which, together, either prove advantageous or discriminatory for the most part, in her life and identity.

Based on the life of the real first woman solicitor of India, Cornelia Sorabji, Perveen, an Oxford University graduate, joined her father's firm as a lawyer in Bombay. She finds herself in the middle of a case of the mysterious death of Omar Farid, the patriarch of a Muslim family, who had left behind three grieving widows at Malabar Hill. Being a firm supporter of justice and women's rights, she decided to investigate the case despite the dangers that come with it for a young woman of colonial India.

Along with being a murder mystery, the story artfully demonstrates the personal struggles and experiences that Perveen faces in her daily life. Along with diving deep into the interplay of greed, oppression, power struggles and betrayal, the story also describes Perveen's past very poignantly. Perveen had been in a deeply scarring and abusive marriage with a man named Cyrus, and her marital experience made her daring and strongly devoted to justice and women's rights.

Along with the investigation of the murder and the narrative of Perveen's personal life. The story poignantly sheds light on the experiences of women during the 1900s in India and the challenges faced concerning their gender, caste, ethnicity, religion, education, colour and so forth. Along with Perveen, a part of the minority, her wealthy white friend Alice finds herself bereft and disappointed by the oppression and patriarchy around her, highlighting how women's experiences are unique and personal.

The novel brings to life not only a captivating mystery but also a heartfelt portrayal of Perveen Mistry's struggles to balance her personal trauma and professional ambitions in a society that discriminates against women. (Better Reading Review)

The first and essential factor of Perveen is her identity as a female. This alone poses the greatest problem in her life. Perveen is a young, educated and ambitious woman who graduated from Oxford University. But this does not prove enough for her to have a life as a scholar and professional. She lives in a time and among a community where "...the idea of a woman solicitor was a shock to many." (Massey 1)

Perveen has everything that it takes to be a qualified, professional legal contractor and solicitor. She is meticulously observant, as is highlighted on the very first page of the novel. She is fuelled by a passion for

justice and doing right by those who cannot fight for themselves. There are multiple mentions of how it is quite a taxing job for Perveen to attract clients as the prejudiced society does not believe in a woman's solicitor and her professional skills, let alone approving one in their society.

The people around her, and at times even her own family, are sceptical of her potential as the legal profession is completely dominated by men and a young woman like her would not stand a chance. It is worth mentioning that Perveen only looks after the paperwork of her father's cases and does not operate in the court or speak on behalf of others, as women were not allowed to do so. This is a great restriction on her professional career and limits her growth as a lawyer. Every step that she takes is to assist and please her father.

This emphasises how big a figure her father is in her professional life. She takes every action with her father's advice and severely reprimands herself at times when she fails to do so. The initial chapters are repetitive of the fact that from the elders to the family butler, every member keeps on reminding Perveen that she is a young lady and how dangerous it is for her to leave the house or go after a stranger and investigate matters.

She is a victim of cruel bullying at her college just because she is the only woman there to study law. When she handed her essay to a row of students to be passed on to the professor, the professor never received the essay. She later received a phone call that the upcoming week's classes had been cancelled.

Almost all the people in the novel Perveen scoff at her decision to be a lawyer. Her explanation, never one of irritation, always remains the same: that she is a solicitor and not a lawyer. (Karkare 4)

Being the wise girl that she is, Perveen was sceptical and decided to go to college anyway and found out that the class test papers were being handed out to the students in her class. Her male classmates see her as an insult to the institute and welcome her with tamarind chutney on the chair assigned to her. She is humiliated and surrounded by smirks and snickers from her batchmates.

Boys would hiss cruel and hateful words, telling her how undeserving she is and that she certainly does not belong there, distracting her from her work. She was suggested by her friend to pick up literature like the other women of the college, as it was the most female-friendly subject and did not require as much brain as science or law. When she failed to write her examination and decided to keep the blank page in her bag, she was accused of stealing and violating the examination code. She was mocked by the lecturer, saying she would have simply completed the examination at home with her father's help.

Let alone the boys of the class, the lecturers raised their eyebrows and reprimanded Perveen at every chance they had, as she was unfit for the class and the subject. They would call her entitled and undeserving. This epitomises how the oppression around her became a threat to her growth as a professional and her identity as a solicitor. When she meets Faizal Mukhri, the representative of the Farid household and women, he looks down upon her, yells at her, and even comes as close as to hit her despite her being the legal professional appointed to the case.

However, simultaneously with the biases, discrimination and bullying Perveen has to face in order to acquire her legal education, she is also privileged enough to get an opportunity to study at Oxford University because of her privileged and wealthy Parsee status. This was made possible when fewer Indians were allowed to become scholars at Oxford University. Her father is a financially sound, progressive and educated man who supported her daughter's career and ambitions, which was not the case for very young women of her time. She belongs to a family which has been known among the respected communities for years.

This allows her access to places and situations as well as networks which a lower-class woman may not have. His family's respectability and well-established status allow her to venture into the professional spaces freely in comparison to other women. This helps create the other side of her professional identity.

But again, this has a flip side where she faces aggressive responses and micro prejudices in personal, legal and professional interactions. The story is set in colonial India, which naturally had a coexistence of British systems and Indian traditions. Alice's mother looks down upon her and does not wish for her daughter to spend much time with Perveen. The male police force does not pay heed to what she has to say and is dismissive of her ideas and suggestions. The British officials treat her condescendingly as a hindrance to their job.

Perveen is a Parsee woman. She is a woman, hence she is allowed to investigate the matter of the Muslim ladies who speak freely of purdah. However, she is still not fully welcomed by them due to her Parsee identity. This gender-religion conflict places her in a unique space where she faces both restrictions and flexibility. This shows that her caste and ethnicity provide her with both advantages and disadvantages, discrimination and privilege. Her identity as a Parsee exempts her from certain quandaries, but it cannot save her from broader systemic stereotypes and discrimination.

As Perveen grew up and met Cyrus, she went on her way to acquire the identity of a wife and a family woman, which turned out to be a nightmare. Initially, Cyrus's family did not like the idea of marrying their son to a Parsi girl as they were Zoroastrians. This religious divide played a recurring role from the beginning to the end of their marriage. Once she had married, she was forced to leave her college, her education and her career. When she met Cyrus, he seemed to be the most empathetic, understanding and encouraging man she could have imagined. But soon after they married, he turned into a different person altogether. He became a controlling, assertive and dictating man who simply wanted Perveen to perform all her duties as a wife.

This reflects how abuse and control are masked under the facade of marital wellbeing and harmony, and the only right thing to do for a married woman is to worship all the evils of her husband and adapt to all the demands and needs accordingly. Cyrus forbids her to contact her family or her mother, leaving her in complete isolation during hard times. She is forced to spend day and night in a secluded room during the time of her menses, as she is considered impure and evil. Her in-laws should have known better, as their own daughter gave her life in the same room, as she was left sick and unattended for days until her last breath.

This patriarchal control left Perveen completely dependent on Cyrus and made her more alone and vulnerable than she ever had been. Each time she is treated with cruelty by her mother-in-law, Cyrus appears to approve and does nothing about it. Perveen and Cyrus failed to start a family, and all the blame fell on Perveen as she must be the problem. Nobody would ever bat an eye at the possibility that Cyrus could be unfit to procreate, too. Cyrus left her with a sexually transmitted disease, condemning her to a life of societal judgment as a single woman. When she caught him drunk with other women, he attacked him, badly injuring her head, face and body.

...Cyrus's face was flushed a deep red, and his words were menacing. 'You should have kept your mouth shut'... Too late, she would have said, but she was knocked backwards with a blow from Cyrus. He had bashed her across the nose and the cheekbones. Perveen staggered back a few paces. But there was no time to recover; in the next moment, Cyrus leant in and punched her in the eye. Pain exploded in her brow, and he collapsed against the bookcase, which rocked hard. The display bottles began falling and she felt them crashing into her back like rocks as she lay on the floor, the sharpness of breaking glass followed by the cool of the spilt alcohol.

As she shielded her face with her arm from the tumbling bottles, she was dimly aware of shouting and the sounds of a scuffle. (Massey 212)

When she reached home bleeding, her mother-in-law's first instinct was not to help her injured daughter-in-law but to cast her off and suspect exploitation. This exemplifies how marital oppression and systematic inequality are reinforced by societal structures. By the time she reaches the end of her marriage with Cyrus, she is scarred by domestic violence, menstrual seclusion and gender discrimination, which have shaped her personality. She developed a fear of unknown men and small places after her time in that dingy room of seclusion. However, she also resolved to never let another woman be punished for a crime she did not commit. Even after the death of their marriage, Cyrus and his family would not stop bugging her and her family for financial greed.

After gaining freedom, she finally decides to go back to the dream she left behind and pursue her career as a solicitor, and that is when she comes across the case of Omar Fareed and fights for the justice of the widows who survived him.

### Conclusion:

All in all, Massey's *Murder on the Malabar Hill* (2018) is an exquisite blend of an enticing murder mystery and a profound exploration of the socio-political, cultural complexities, religious and societal norms of 1920s Bombay under the British Raj. Through the character of Perveen, Massey presents a meticulously nuanced critique of the intersecting systems of oppression, like patriarchy, religion, caste, class and patriarchy, which take away a woman's freedom at both personal and colonial levels.

There is a vivid portrayal of Intersectionality in Perveen's identity with her gender, her caste, and her religion as a member of a Parsee minority group and as a highly educated, ambitious woman. She makes her path amid a patriarchal society, unveiling social evils, all the fighting her demons. The text poignantly describes and comments on the hardships faced in the public and private spheres of life. This is how the intersectional identities of a woman of her time make them susceptible to multiple advantages and disadvantages.

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