

Representations: feminism, race and intersectionality

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Analysing Michaela Coel's drama series, *I May Destroy You*

I May Destroy You, the critically acclaimed black comedy-drama created by Michaela Coel, has been described as “dark-skinned Black women reclaiming the Me Too movement.” (Àbíké-íyímídé, 2020) The Primetime Emmy Award and BAFTA award-winning series first aired in June 2020 and explores how the protagonist, Arabella, navigates her way through her healing journey after being spiked and sexually assaulted by a white man after a night out with friends. Its core themes of race, sexuality, gender and how they all intersect tackle key issues addressed by black feminist theory.

This essay will assess how sexual assault is portrayed and addressed in the series’ plot by using black feminist theory as a tool for analysis. In doing so, it aims to determine the following: how intersectionality on and off screen challenges current power hierarchies, how the liberation of black women from gender-based oppression necessitates the destruction of oppression faced by every other societal group, and how black feminist thought has influenced contemporary culture and activism

In her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, scholar Patricia Collins explains the significance of black feminist theory in critical analyses as offering a “fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think” by recognising gender, race and class as “interlocking systems of oppression.” In doing so, it “addresses ongoing epistemological debates in feminism theory.” (Collins, 1990, pp. 221-238)

Black feminist theory was born in response to the exclusion of black women’s oppression as a priority in previous progressive movements, and black women’s experiences of racial, sexual and class oppression that occurred simultaneously. (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 5) While the movement includes black men in their fight against racism, it also advocates for the fight against sexism from men of all races. The idea of black feminism is that you cannot effectively fight systems of oppression without prioritising issues faced by the most marginalised societal groups (i.e sex workers, the disabled, LGBTQIA+, dark skinned, or poor individuals.)

Before its release, Coel revealed that there was an “exploitation occurring” when pitching *I May Destroy You*. She was offered and turned down a \$1 million contract to create the series with Netflix as it stipulated that she would have to give up all percentage of the copyright. (Coel, 2020)

When viewed in isolation, stripping Coel of her copyright percentages can be attributed to a standard business practice, however, Netflix has previously been accused of lowballing black creators. In a lawsuit filed by stand-up comedian Mo’Nique, she accused Netflix of gender and race bias.

Mo’Nique stated that Netflix offered her \$500 000 for a comedy special, refusing to negotiate pay, but negotiated multimillion-dollar deals for comedians Amy Schumer, Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle. (Mo’Nique, 2018) The lawsuit accused Netflix of having a “company tendency” to underpay black women while willingly negotiating deals with non-black women. (Hicks v. Netflix, Inc, 2019)

The following year, Wanda Sykes stated that Netflix lowballed her as well. (Sykes, 2019) The background of this media text encapsulates the need for black feminism and gives an instance where, even when bringing forward and being celebrated for a body of work that addresses feminist issues, one may be faced with the same issues.

The plot of I May Destroy You is centred around the main character Arabella (played by Coel), a young aspiring writer born to Ghanaian parents. Raised in East London public housing and being a dark skinned woman, she falls into one of the most disadvantaged societal groups. The main theme throughout the series is the link between sexual assault victimhood, gender, sexuality, and race.

Its pilot directly addresses rape – after Arabella’s drink gets spiked and she is sexually assaulted, she holds a hazy recollection of the assault and cannot remember any details at first. This episode follows her piecing together the events of the night and brings to life statistics from the 2020 Office for National Statistics report that showed mixed race and black or black British adults in the UK were more likely to experience sexual assault than their white counterparts. (Office for National Statistics, 2020)

Author Bell Hooks argues that “Black women have always been seen by the white public as sexually permissive, as available and eager for the sexual assaults of any man, black or white.” (Hooks, 1987, p. 52) Civil rights activist Kimberlee Crenshaw supports this argument, further explaining that as a result of racial and gender discrimination intersecting, women of colour are

faced with systemic obstacles that make them more vulnerable to sexual assault. (Crenshaw, 1991)

Coel's representation of this challenges what the typical sexual assault survivor looks like in the media. Some content produced by rape crisis organisations inadvertently exclusively uses photographs/videos of white people. For example, the organisation Male Survivor Partnership's [Instagram page](#) almost solely features white men, and British comedy-drama Sex Education, albeit gracefully, sheds light on sexual assault through the lens of a white character. This does not reflect the ethnic demographic of sexual assault survivors in the country.

In the second episode, while trying to recollect what occurred, she enquires with Alissa – her friend Simon's lover who she was with that night. Arabella insinuates that Simon may have been involved in the spiking and is met with an angry rebuttal by Alissa as she shouts that "Simon doesn't have a criminal bone in his body." The inclusion of this dialogue echoes the long-standing feminist issue of people dismissing sexual assault allegations made against those close to them or those who they admire.

A contemporary example of this is Johnny Depp receiving unwavering support from fans throughout his defamation trial (The Independent, 2022) although judgement in an earlier lawsuit ruled that 12 of the 14 alleged incidents of domestic violence against Amber Heard had occurred. (BBC, 2020)

Episode 4 sheds light on sexual assault against black men, as Kwame – Arabella's close friend – gets assaulted. Kwame is a black, homosexual man and the assault happens directly after consensual sex. Although black feminism directly addresses issues black women face, one of its core tenets is that "if black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression." (Combahee River Collective, 1977) Justice through black feminism arises from understanding patterns of discrimination in relation to markers of identity, including sexual orientation. (Simien, 2004, p. 86)

In tandem with this is episode 5, where Kwame files a police report for his assault. Throughout his meeting with the police officer, he is met with unsupportive, dismissive responses, with the officer going as far as saying, "You know there are other ways you could have reported this?"

Kwame's experience starkly contrasts Arabella's – as although she, too, did not know her perpetrator's name, she was met with reassurance and support. This episode illustrates the lack of support men receive in regard to sexual violence and how black women are not the only ones who may benefit from dismantling the current power hierarchies that imply only women can be victims of sexual assault.

Episode 5 additionally sees Arabella reveal to her publisher that she has been raped. The publisher's response, commodifies her assault by encouraging her to write a book about it, saying "I want to see that story." Even in recent years, black women and blackness are still seen as a commodity in the entertainment industry, where their stories and livelihood can be exploited for the benefit of others.

This is seen again when her publisher asks her to speak at a writing summit and Arabella asks if a friend can speak on her behalf. When asked if the friend is white and she replies with no, the publisher excitedly agrees. This scene again draws on blackness as a commodity in modern day and acts as an observation of the media industry's exploitation of black women, as Arabella is used treated as the token diversity hire.

In the same episode, Arabella publicly outs fellow writer Zain as a rapist. Previously, he took off the condom while the two were having sex. This is done at a writing summit in front of a large crowd and the scene addresses the same issue of the disproportionate rate of sexual assault against black women as well what can happen when societal systems seemingly give perpetrators of sexual violence little to no repercussions for their actions.

A lack of trust in not only the police but the judicial system may lead to victims protecting themselves by publicly outing others. For example, comedian Louis C.K was publicly outed as a sexual predator by 5 women through a New York Times article (Ryzik, et al., 2017) before admitting to doing so.

At the end of this episode, Arabella reveals that she was raped to her on-again, off-again boyfriend Biagio. He proceeds to berate her for not watching her drink and states "If you watched your drink, you wouldn't have been raped." This is a direct address to victim blaming and rape myths stemming from Victorian beliefs that women should avoid certain behaviours to

reduce the chance of getting assaulted. Anything seen as a non-respectable way of acting can be used as justification for sexual assault. (Stevenson, 2000)

In episode 6, Arabella is seen to internalise the victim blaming she received from Biagio during group therapy by stating, “Maybe it was my fault.” In the same episode, flashbacks are seen of Theo – an old schoolmate of Arabella’s – accusing another, named Ryan, of raping her at knifepoint. Theo weaponises her whiteness against a black boy in a revenge plot after he non-consensually took photos of her as they were having sex. Both parties in this instance were victims of one another’s societal power. As a man, Ryan knew he could take advantage of Theo in her most vulnerable state.

This scene addresses both the issues of rape culture addressed by all feminist theories and the villainisation of black men. Black men have historically been depicted as sexually aggressive, with white women depicted as victims of black men’s sexual brutality. (The Rape Documentary Study Guide, n.d)

The scene also highlights the black feminist argument that black people are more susceptible to rape myths as they “carry the stigma of promiscuity” (Collins, 2004) In the same episode, a young Arabella complains that the school would not have believed her if she reported the same crime as Theo. This touches on the issue of sex and gender hierarchies where inequalities of race are sexualised, meaning different races get afforded different levels of respect when it comes to sexuality. (Collins, 1990, p. 165) It uses black feminism to challenge the systemic belief that gender-based and sexual oppression occurs dominantly towards white women from black men.

Although the scene occurs in the 90s, it reflects recent instances. In 2019, actor Liam Neeson revealed that after finding out his friend was raped by a black man, he went “up and down areas with a cosh” hoping to be approached by any “black bastard” for a week with the hopes of murdering the hypothetical man. (Neeson, 2019)

Theo assumed that as she was a white girl, people would be inclined to believe her, and they were. On the other hand, Neeson responding to sexual assault with overt racism shows the intersectionality of problems addressed by black feminism.

In episode 8, Arabella gives a speech on the connection between men’s fear and disdain of social movements such as #MeToo and their tendency to push the boundaries of sexual consent in a

way that would not get them 'called out.' There are more nods to the movement in the series – such as in episodes 5 and 9 where Arabella is flooded with Tweets from other women sharing similar stories to hers after she outs Zain at the writing summit.

This interaction can be analysed as how the Me Too movement, created by black feminist Tarana Burke and originally focusing on black women and women of colour (Ohlheiser, 2017), has influenced activism and the way in which it is perceived today. Although the Me Too movement was co-opted by other feminist movements, its influence cannot be understated. Countless perpetrators of assault were outed and subsequently prosecuted, including film producer Harvey Weinstein and former Olympic medical physician Larry Nassar.

Additionally, Me Too's movement, as with other standpoints of black feminism, has been routinely met with accusations of overcorrection or overreaction from men. For example, actor Matt Damon commented, "The clearer signal to men and to younger people is, deny it. Because if you take responsibility for what you did, your life's going to get ruined." (Damon, 2017)

The final episode of the series interrogates what things would look like if societal power dynamics shifted. Coel depicts several scenarios where Arabella confronts her first rapist, each of which she is in control of the situation.

The first scenario shows Arabella seeking revenge by spiking him the same way he did her, perpetuating a cycle of violence and degradation created by gender violence. The second sees her identifying him in a bar and preparing to report him to the police until she is reminded that she has unsubstantial evidence to support the claim.

This is a reminder of how race, gender and sex intersect as issues, as the likelihood of an assault case brought forward by a black woman against a white man being taken seriously by the police is reportedly low. A study showed that for every black woman who reports rape, roughly 15 black women do not report it (The National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community, 2013) for a variety of reasons including racism and historical institutional failure to believe black women.

This also draws on the young Arabella saying if she alleged the same false rape allegation Theo did, her white teachers would not have believed her.

The third scenario sees Arabella again seeking revenge. She is confronted by her rapist who dismisses her assault as “making a big old drama because some bloke slipped a pill in [her] drink.” This scene shows how black women’s social issues are often overlooked although they face a unique combination of sexism and racism, and is what black feminist thought aims to challenge. This can be seen as a result of “intersectional invisibility” in feminist and race movements that sometimes contribute to black women’s marginalisation. (Coles & Pasek, 2020, p. 2)

In the final scenario, Arabella has consensual sex with her rapist. Shortly after, he states, “I’m not going to go unless you tell me to,” and when she does, all the other ‘hims’ from previous scenarios leave the room with him. Modern day patriarchy sees white, heterosexual men as having primary societal power, but in these sequences, a black woman is. It can be analysed that if power hierarchies were disrupted to give marginalised groups a form of equality, systems of oppression would be destroyed as well.

Holistically, I May Destroy You provides a space in media where a diverse range of audience members can identify with black characters. Black consumers have argued that routinely when black characters are included in media texts, they are depicted in such a way that non-black audiences are not expected to identify with them. (James, 2022) Popular black stories in the film and television industry such as The Help and The Vampire Diaries provide one-dimensional black characters or reduce black characters to stereotypes such as the comic relief or black best friend, the slave, the extravagant gay man and so on.

The series develops black characters beyond their race although their race, in conjunction with their gender and sexuality, affects how they navigate through life. The rapists in the plot benefit from systems of patriarchy and white supremacy while the black women feel the effects of combined sexism and racism.

Coel effectively utilises I May Destroy You to reflect the black feminist issues occurring in the current day with social commentary on sexual assault on black women and black gay men, the weaponisation of whiteness and the commodification of blackness throughout the series. Although class is not discussed, Coel recognises race, sexuality, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression by simultaneously weaving them into each character’s storyline.

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