



RESEARCH PAPER

Intersection of Power and Gender in O'Farrell's *The Marriage Portrait*

¹Muhammad Rashid and ²Dr. Sadia Akram

1. M. Phil Scholar, Department of English Literature, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English Literature, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

***Corresponding Author:** sadia_akram1@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intersection of power and gender in Maggie O'Farrell's (2022) novel *The Marriage Portrait*, with a focus on how these two forces shape the individual's experiences in a patriarchal and politically charged society. By applying Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) intersectional theory, the research explores how gender, class, and power dynamics converge to limit or to define, and shape the female agency. Despite having a noble birth, and the privileges, the status of the protagonist as a woman relegates her to a subjugated position, where political alliances and societal expectations direct the course of her life. Through the intersectional lens, the study analyzes how identity is not merely shaped by gender, but is profoundly impacted by class, familial obligations, and the political structures of the time. By examining the ways in which protagonist's struggle for autonomy is constrained by intersecting power and gender. Therefore, this research aims to interpret the complex relationship between identity, agency, and power for the construction of identity. Further, the study argues that O'Farrell's portrayal of female protagonist challenges the conventional historical fiction and its standards by offering a nuanced perspective on women's roles in the Renaissance society, ultimately shedding light on the ongoing relevance of gendered power dynamics in the contemporary interpretations about women and their autonomy.

KEYWORDS Power, Gender, Intersectionality, Agency, Patriarchy, Autonomy, Historical Fiction

Introduction

Understanding the intersection of power dynamics and gender issues in literature is indispensable for grasping how the literary narratives reflect and shape the societal norms. This paper aims to explore the intersectional link of power and gender through Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality, in O'Farrell's (2022) *The Marriage Portrait*. The intersectional approaches are needed to understand the complex social issues. The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw describes how the social identities overlap to create forms of compound discrimination (p.149). Through a comprehensive analysis of discrimination through intersectionality considers that people experience different forms of inequality due to multi dimensionality of their intersectional identities and experiences (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). The intersection of power and gender is analyzed on a foundation of defining power and gender within social and literary contexts. In this context, Foucault (1978) said that "Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (p. 93). By viewing power as a fluid, strategical situation rather than a fixed attribute, it becomes necessary to examine how literary characters negotiate these dynamics alongside their gendered identities. Consequently, this study questions that in what ways do character's

experiences of power, gender, and identity challenge or reinforce single-axis feminist understandings of agency and oppression?

Historically, literary works have been a mirror to the prevailing power structures and gender roles of their times. For instance, in the Victorian epoch, Bronte's (1847) *Jane Eyre* examined the notion of female autonomy and the fight against the patriarchal limitations. Bronte argues that her protagonist's struggle for independence is in fact a critique of the narrow field of opportunities available to women, as shown in the moment when Jane Eyre declares that "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will" (p. 338).

Feminist literary analysis started with pioneers such as Woolf (1929) and de Beauvoir (1949). Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, argues that women need both financial and physical independence to produce literary work; it makes clear that women face systemic walls to enter into the literary field (p. 4). As de Beauvoir (1949) in the *Second Sex* illustrates that women's role as the 'Other' in literature and in society which historically promote gender inequality. De Beauvoir also asserts that "the body is not a thing, it is a situation" (p. 46); "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 283); highlighting the notion that gender is not an inherent trait but a social construct.

In the last few decades, there has been a resurgence of feminist movements and a lot of discussion about the gender inequality focused on sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination. There are movements that have brought global attention to these subjects such as #MeToo and Time's Up (Gill & Orgad, 2018, p. 1317). Throughout these movements, we take the opportunity to stand in resistance to the fact that gender inequality is rampant and we need to continue to advocate. Power and gender are reflected and informed by literature. Therefore, the contemporary authors tend to write about themes of empowerment, and challenge oppressive norms.

O'Farrell's (2022) *The Marriage Portrait*, is a groundbreaking piece of historical fiction in Renaissance Italy thus provides a compelling case study for an intersectional analysis. The protagonist, Lucrezia de' Medici, is known as the probable subject of Robert Browning's dramatic monologue, "My Last Duchess" and the likely victim of uxoricide at the hands of her husband, Alfonso II d'Este. The currency of these facts means that Lucrezia risks losing any sense of ownership over her own story, becoming, to borrow a phrase from Virginia Woolf, merely "the person to whom things happened" (Woolf, 1985, p. 65). O'Farrell's novel can be read as a direct representative of the conflicting nature of power and gender, despite critical interpretations of the narrative structure and character development. The present study is essential to examine that how the text restores Lucrezia's agency and identity as a female. To fully understand the complexities of her identity and the forces of society at play, a deeper analysis of the intersection of power and gender is necessary. Further, it is suggested that the existing literary assessments have not fully explored by focusing on the historical and artistic context of the novel in terms of power and gender dynamic from an intersectional point of view.

This article contributes to the academic knowledge about the intersectionality in the literary world. The study addresses a gap in literary analysis, especially by providing a framework for how intersectional analysis can enhance the development of individuals and their issues in the context of power and gender. This study proposes a less linear method of literary criticism, in which the researchers can consider several interacting identities. On a socio-cultural scale, it highlights power and gender in the narrative, thus reminding the readers of the reality of social justice problems in the world. This study

also illustrates how literary analysis can be inspirational as well as transformative to society through the application of literature as a social analysis tool. This study relies on the feminist literary criticism and introduces the intersectional view that is shaking the current analyses that can only work in single axis framework. In this way, this research conforms to the evolving nature of the feminist theory that tries to represent the multi-faceted nature of identity and the inter-relationship of all forms of oppression. This interdisciplinary approach makes this contribution to understand the meaning of the text and sets a precedent to further works that can examine the literature from other theoretical perspectives. It continues the progressive and significant academic research in the service of contemporary social problems.

In *The Marriage Portrait*, it is evident to see that Lucrezia is portrayed as a woman, who negotiates the intricacies of the social entrapment of her gender and noble position in Renaissance Italy as a stress that makes her powerful. The identity brew exposes the experience of Lucrezia as a woman, as a member of an elite showing the multidimensional nature of her autonomy and constriction. The expectations that are put on her are a very strong way of illustrating this duality. Her womanhood is not the only role, which she fulfills, but also her ducal status, which is stated in the letter of her mother. Her mother also tells to focus on her primary duty by reminding that her "position at court, which will only be truly assured by the birth of an heir" (O'Farrell, 2022, p. 370). All these expectations combine to highlight the intersection of gender and class in her agency and can be seen as complementary to the point made by Crenshaw (1991) in her argument that multiple categories of analysis are necessary to effectively tackle the multi-faceted aspects of oppression (p. 1245). The intersectionality gives us a tool to cut across the social forces that are interwoven in the story and the reason why we should use this intersectional theoretical approach.

The Marriage Portrait can be taken as a reflective tool of the existing problems of power disparity and gender inequality. Nonetheless, it is set in the Renaissance and even though both battles are enacted in the Renaissance society, but remain essentially applicable to this day to support the autonomy of the women. Specifically, the continued urgency of these themes underscores a need to test historical narratives against their existence in the present time in order to develop strategies for addressing inequalities in the present day (Beaumont, 2020, p. 15). The study reflects modern day social difficulties through victimization of women and their attempts to possess some kind of self-control. The experience of Lucrezia touches on the suffocation of a woman's potential by fixed gender roles, a limitation articulated directly by her husband, Alfonso, when he dismisses her concerns about his duties, he says and instructs that "fall within the role of a wife" (O'Farrell, 2022, p. 221). This obvious separation of her sphere is consistent with contemporary discussions of women's rights and gender discrimination. The research contextualizes the key to power and gender issues historically, which guides the readers to see and analyze the gendered power issues through intersectional perspective.

Despite the rich thematic complexity in O'Farrell's (2022) *The Marriage Portrait* and its compelling portrayal of gender and power, the current study is limited in its application of intersectionality. Most critical works tend to focus on the accuracy of history or on feminist interpretations of history based on gender as a primary axis of analysis. Although gender has been explored but through the intersectional analysis of Lucrezia's identity where gender, class and political power intersect. The lack of consideration of the connection and the nature of Lucrezia's experiences and problems are not related to a female in a patriarchal society, but are of a noblewoman, whose privilege and lack thereof are a source of her oppression as well as of freedom at the same

time. The lack of intersectionality in current literature leaves a large gap in the understanding of the complexity of female identity and how the intersection of the different social forces form female agency or subjugate her in the society.

Literature Review

The Interlink between Power and Gender

This literature review explores the relationship between power and gender in literature, focusing on O'Farrell's (2022) *The Marriage Portrait* and its portrayal of Renaissance Italy. The aim is to examine how gender and power intersect in literary works and how these themes shape individuals and their experiences. The key ideas in the context of feminist literary criticism, post-structuralist theories of power, and intersectional theory are reviewed. The intersectional theory has not been applied in this section to establish the integration of gender, class, and historical setting as a means of creating the life of an individual especially a female. The current review has observed that existing research is more inclined to dissociate the two variables of gender and class and do not look at how these two variables interplay. As Thurston (2022) states that "Intersectionality is crucial to understanding how women will move through the world, as they will face prejudice, discrimination and barriers that go beyond their gender" (para. 8). In interpreting *The Marriage Portrait* in terms of the intersectional theory proposed by Crenshaw (1989), this study provides a deeper insight into the female protagonist, Lucrezia de' Medici and the overall issues of power, agency, and identity in the historical fiction.

The last century has seen an enormous literary growth in terms of power and gender relationship. The feminist theory, post-structuralism and intersectionality are only some of the areas of critical interest that have led to the literary research. These theoretical paradigms have shaped our understanding of how gender roles have been depicted to understand power dynamic and multiple sides of identity in literature. The feminist literary criticism, especially through the works of de Beauvoir (1949) and Woolf (1929) has attacked the way gender roles are socially constructed and enforced through literature. This thought is developed further by Black feminist scholars, especially Collins (2000), who argues that by "embracing a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, Black feminist thought reconceptualizes the social relations of domination and resistance" (p. 18). Such frameworks are especially valuable in analyzing the relation between power and gender in the context of power dynamics especially in Renaissance Italy.

Womanhood As a Social Construction

Womanhood is seen considered to be a social construction, as Walker (1990) suggests that the important shift initiated by de Beauvoir (1949) was to analyze womanhood as a social construction, not as a natural inferiority. This was the formal step that enabled the grand project of feminist literary criticism to be accomplished namely the recognition and criticism of the many forms in which literature is both a reflection and a reproduction of systemic gender repression. The next progressive contribution to the area of feminist literary criticism was *A Room of One's own* by Woolf (1929), who wrote about the material and cultural constraints that women encounter in the world of literature. Woolf claims that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write" (p. 4). She recognizes the material and physical limitations that a patriarchal society places on female creativity. Beyond these physical barriers, Woolf faced the

literary history, completely dominated by male voices, asking why in the past it seemed that "no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet" (p. 41). This deep lack caused Woolf to insist on a new literary tradition, one that would take the experiences of women and enable them to, as she put it famously, "think back through our mothers" (p. 76).

Renaissance and Gender Roles

Renaissance has frequently been hailed as a time of intellectual and artistic progress and also a time of strict gender roles and power structures that had a huge effect on the lives of women. Renaissance was marked by an impressive blossoming of culture in which women were often confined to the expectations and roles of society, which denied them so many social, political and intellectual liberties. Women of noble families had more access to education than their counterparts of the lower classes, who were still restricted by the societal norms which defined their roles as wives and mothers. As Tinagli (1997) argues that women in Renaissance Italy, especially those of elite families, were depicted in art and literature as symbols of familial honor and political alliances, and not as autonomous agents (p. 45). This is reflected in *The Marriage Portrait*, in which Lucrezia, despite her education and her status, is still relegated to a role which is defined by the political needs of her family.

The recent criticism on *The Marriage Portrait* has been rightly concerned with its feminist project of restoring Lucrezia's agency. The critics like Struzziero (2024) analyzes the strategy of filling the gaps in history to critique the silencing of women within patriarchal structures in the novel. On the same note, Demir (2024) emphasizes the ability of O'Farrell to re-write the past by portraying Lucrezia as an active and multi-dimensional female and liberating her of the passive depictions. Although these interpretations are very strong to bring out the feminist theme by means of using the lens of agency and voice, it is still more contextual to the struggle of Lucrezia in the one-dimensional axis of gender. This paper develops a background by stating that the feeling of powerlessness of Lucrezia cannot be complete without the intersectional approach that will consider her noble status as one of the sources of her privilege and unique factor of her oppression.

This study is also a part of the bigger academic debate of intersectionality as a tool in the field of historical fiction. This intersectional lens has found increased application by literary critics in unveiling how characters of the historical setting in the novel workaround compounded forms of marginalization. The aim is to transcend the recognition of oppression and to analyse how identities interact in a complex way with each other to create the reality in which an individual lives and develops by comprehending the nature of power and gender.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on intersectional feminism that is a paradigm first conceptualized by Crenshaw (1989, 1991). Intersectionality significantly reshaped feminist discourse by introducing a multifaceted framework for examining the convergence of diverse social identities. Crenshaw (1991) challenged traditional ways in which the issue of marginalization was separated into various categories of race, gender, or class. She pointed out that feminist and anti-racist movements often moved "as though the issues and experiences ... occur on mutually exclusive terrains" (p. 1242). The intersectional approach by contrast involves the need

to analyze social identities in conjunction with each other, considering that different individuals have fundamentally different realities depending on the convergence of their social categories.

As Crenshaw (1989) states in her seminal essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," that the experience of marginalized people cannot be adequately understood if scholars do not recognize that "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (p. 140). Literary studies make good use of intersectionality because it allows one to interpret textual contents in detail by perceiving them under various social dimensions. Literature expresses both the conformist and conflicting opinions towards the traditional standards of society, thus they act as basic places to study the intersectional relationships in a deep manner.

This study utilizes intersectionality to critically analyse O'Farrell's (2022) novel, *The Marriage Portrait*. The study shows the interaction of gendered expectations and power structures and class identities. Through the lens of intersectionality, this research examines Lucrezia de' Medici's journey through patriarchy and restricted social norms. The role of Lucrezia as a noblewoman is central to this analysis, in providing the reader a space to witness how she is both a subject to class privileges and also a subject to horribly gender-based oppression. This is a dynamic that helps to show one of the key issues that intersectionality solves, the single-axis analysis tends to erase the unique experiences of individuals, who are privileged in one dimension of their identity, but are marginalized in another (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

Crenshaw (1989) developed the theoretical methods of intersectional feminism to describe the diverse difficulties faced by people experiencing multiple forms of discrimination. Initially coined in her influential essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989), intersectionality emerged from critical race theory and feminist legal thought. According to it, the attempt is to critique the reductionist ways in which discrimination was legally and socially conceptualized, particularly how legal systems failed to acknowledge the specific challenges of individuals, whose identities intersect across race and gender. As Crenshaw argued, "Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender" (p. 140).

Through employment of discrimination cases, Crenshaw demonstrated how analyzing discrimination through a single axis such as race or gender alone distorts reality. She famously stated that "Any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). This foundational claim expanded feminist theory by showing that a singular focus on gender inequality is inadequate without also considering its intersections with race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity. Crenshaw further developed the concept in her essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991), in which she created three interrelated concepts to describe women's experiences of subordination. First, the structural intersectionality that points to the compounded barriers faced by women of color including poverty, immigration laws, and language which have made women of color's experiences of violence different from that of white women. Second, the political intersectionality that highlights how feminist movements tended to focus on white women while antiracist movements focused on men of color, which leaves women of color marginalized in both movements. Finally, the representational intersectionality that

critiques the cultural and media portrayals that erase or stereotype women of color, reinforcing distorted narratives that ignore their unique realities. Crenshaw (1991) illustrates in her analysis that how domestic violence shelters did not understand the diversity of the women of color's needs. She writes: "Intersectional subordination does not have to be deliberately created; in fact, it is often the result of the imposition of one burden that interacts with existing vulnerabilities to produce yet another dimension of disempowerment" (p. 1249).

The practical use of intersectionality as a tool for literary analysis calls for a systematic approach that will maximize the analytical force of the theory. As articulated by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), this approach offers the most powerful framework for analysis of literary representations. In this context, the analysis of O'Farrell's (2022) *The Marriage Portrait* calls for the identification and interpretation of the simultaneous functioning of gender, class, and power dynamics in the text. This study uses a systematic procedure based on Crenshaw to ensure not only clarity but analytical rigor. The analytical procedure is composed of several distinct stages, which are directly taken from her framework.

First Stage

The first methodological stage is the identification of how a single-axis framework one that looks at gender alone fails to capture the individual's full experiences by implicitly centering the most privileged. Crenshaw (1989) contends that this narrow focus develops a distorted picture in which those with compound identities are eliminated. She states: "This emphasis on the most privileged members of groups results in the marginalization of those who are multiply burdened, and obfuscation of claims that cannot be understood as the result of discrete sources of discrimination" (p. 140). The application of the above discussed concept to the analysis does not consider Lucrezia's experience as the representative of all "women" in the Renaissance. Instead, it is concerned with the way her particular, "multiply burdened" status as a high-status noble (a privilege) and young wife (a vulnerability) generates a particular kind of marginalization. This approach enables us to explore the exact ways in which her power is both granted and limited, a complexity which is hidden in a non-intersectional reading.

Second Stage

The second step is the analytical examination of the experiences of Lucrezia according to the three interconnected aspects of intersectionality which Crenshaw introduces in the article "Mapping the Margins" (1991). This discussion appraises the power relations behind Renaissance Italy such as patriarchal family structures, political marriage attentions and constraining societal conventions that shape the life of Lucrezia. The focus lies in how overlapping power structures produce specific forms of marginalization, intensified by her noble position.

The intersectional analysis of *The Marriage Portrait* demands the knowledge of the historical and cultural context of the Renaissance Italy. Intersectionality insists on the context-specific analysis, as Collins and Bilge (2016) stress that the intersecting identities cannot be fully understood without understanding the specific historical and cultural contexts in which they are taking place (p. 25). This study is about the social structure of the Renaissance Italy that demonstrates how gender, power and class operated during this period to lay the foundation for the modern feminist analysis of the novel. Throughout the 14th to the 17th century Renaissance era people commonly recognized

an intellectual and cultural revival, which featured artistic progress along with humanistic ideas and intellectual development. However, underlying this veneer of cultural enlightenment is the rigid patriarchal and hierarchical structures which have a profound effect on the lives, autonomy and agency of women.

The famous historian Kelly-Gadol, in her (1977) influential essay "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" argues that the advances of the period did not reach women. In fact, she goes so far as to make the provocative statement that the opposite was true: "precisely these developments affected women adversely, so much so that there was no renaissance for women at least, not during the Renaissance" (p. 176). She further states that "All the advances of Renaissance Italy, its protocapitalist economy, its states, its humanistic culture, worked to mold the noblewoman into an aesthetic object: decorous, chaste, and doubly dependent on her husband as well as the prince" (p. 197).

The noble families, especially the Medicis, operated in the tense intersection between class privilege and gender-based oppression. O'Farrell's (2022) historical accuracy in *The Marriage Portrait* reflects Lucrezia's experience in the context of Renaissance Florence and Ferrara and the conflicting nature of her elite position as a woman of the Medici as well as the marginalization she faced under patriarchal systems. This is an obvious example of what Crenshaw (1991) calls structural intersectionality. Lucrezia is caught between the power of her lineage and the constraints of her gender.

The intersectional feminism helps us to understand the interaction of several social categories very well in O'Farrell's (2022) *The Marriage Portrait*. In the view of intersectionality as suggested by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), we must examine literary texts in terms of their various ways of identity and cultural influences in a particular manner. The novel unveils itself as progressive identity analysis since O'Farrell develops intricate tests of power structures and identity politics based on the fundamental feminist theory of intersectionality. The intersectional analysis starts with the close analysis of the protagonist and the unusual social status of Lucrezia de' Medici. The Renaissance period places Lucrezia in a double position in the Italian society; she has noble blood, so she has great privilege, and she is also a victim of gender-based discrimination, which makes her helpless. The study eloquently illustrates the main point of Crenshaw that when one is at a crossroads, it is neither the combination of their identities but a different kind of subordination.

Results and Discussion

This article examines the patriarchal power structures of Renaissance Italy by depicting the way a teenage girl is used as a pawn in dynastic politics and is then entrapped in a dangerous marriage. O'Farrell's (2022) *The Marriage Portrait* is a richly crafted historical novel that re-imagines the life of Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici, a 16th century Italian Duchess, whose short marriage to Alfonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, is used as a prism to examine the life through the lens of power and gender. Inspired by the legend immortalized in Browning's poem "My Last Duchess" O'Farrell gives voice to a young woman believed to have been silenced - possibly even murdered - by her husband. In doing so, the novel defies the type of historical flattening the poet Ted Hughes (1989) argued against when he said that "I hope each of us owns the facts of his or her own life" (p. 19). The analysis examines dynamics of gender and power by considering the framework of intersectional feminism, which is the foundation on which Crenshaw (1989, 1991) built her work. The paper explores the complexity of Lucrezia's gender as it intersects with other aspects of her identity specifically her age, class, and

family status to shape her unique experiences of both privilege and oppression. Intersectionality as a term provides the vital lens for this analysis of literary texts. The concept of intersectionality arose from the Black Feminist Movement of the 1970s (Smith, 2013). Nearly 30 years later in 2017, Crenshaw (2017) expanded upon her theory by explaining that, "Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects". (p. 140). She famously used the analogy of a traffic intersection to explain this concept, where an injury can be caused by cars travelling from multiple directions; similarly, social subordination can emerge from the convergence of multiple identity categories (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149).

Patriarchal Power and Structural Intersectionality

The patriarchal world of *The Marriage Portrait* exemplifies a clear case of structural intersectionality, where male-dominated systems of power control Lucrezia's destiny. From birth, Lucrezia has been subject to a social order in which daughters are bargaining chips for alliances. Her value is defined not by her personal desires, but by her utility as a political asset. As Mandel (2000) argues that Renaissance marriages of the aristocratic classes "were about wealth, lineage, and political cachet, not romantic love" (p. 720). As O'Farrell (2022) contends:

Her father would have found her an advantageous match because that is, after all, what she has been brought up for: to be married, to be used as a link in his chains of power, to produce heirs for men like Alfonso. (p. 282)

The above excerpt emphasizes the intersection between gender and class that gains Lucrezia's experience of power and subjugation. It is reflective of her value being defined not by her personal desires or identity but by her ability to be a political asset. The analysis presents a realistic picture of Lucrezia's replacement of her dead older sister Maria as a bride when the wedding date is near as the political leaders made a political treaty-like agreement. At 13 years of age, the girl discovers that she has been betrothed to Alfonso d'Este, the future Duke of Ferrara, for the purpose of cementing an alliance between two ducal families. In this marriage contract, Lucrezia's "rank and nobility" gives her no agency as a person, rather those qualities make her a desirable pawn. Indeed, Langdon (2006) stresses that daughters played an important part in Cosimo's dynastic ambitions, as "political alliances through marriage could be a means of cementing Medici power" (p. 98). The question arises: "Should she wear a dress that was made for her sister Maria, when Maria died, isn't it bad enough that she has to marry Maria's fiance, must she really wear her dress as well?" (O'Farrell, 2022, p. 14). This internal conflict underscores the extent of Lucrezia's subjugation to the dynastic and political obligations imposed upon her.

According to the power system, Lucrezia exists only to carry out alliances and births, which serve as political tools that strengthen the bonds between Florence and Ferrara. In the context of this scenario, Grand Duke Cosimo de' Medici demonstrates complete patriarchal control as Lucrezia's father. The duke uses his daughter's marriage to establish political alliances with Alfonso's father as he goes back and forth about conditions and dowry amounts. During that time Cosimo pays an unbelievable dowry of 200,000 scudi, which amounts to approximately £50 million today because women were treated as financial assets. Cosimo de' Medici rules the family with absolute authority so that even his wife Duchess Eleonora must accept his final words regarding their children's destinies. The study shows Lucrezia confronting Cosimo in his private study during a heated moment, when she tries to talk about marriage. Lucrezia tells her

father, "I do not wish to marry this man. I am sorry if this disappoints you but..." (O'Farrell, 2022, p. 52). This plea is an extraordinary breach of protocol, a daughter directly challenging her father's will. At first Cosimo uses his hand to silence his daughter as he finishes reviewing documents before speaking to her. This gesture demonstrates that he finds her interruption inappropriate. He brings her near after he finishes his business before using a soft voice to speak with determination. Cosimo approaches his daughter with the care of someone comforting a scared child and speaks:

I understand. Marriage is a big step for a young woman. It's a daunting prospect, no? I know this, I see this. But you must not worry. Your mother will prepare you fittingly for every aspect. And I? I would only ever choose the best type of man for you. How else could I ever part with you? (O'Farrell, 2022, p. 52)

O'Farrell (2022) demonstrates patriarchy in two ways through the official details of contracts and letters in addition to the personal family interactions of the main characters. Cosimo represents as Lucrezia's father and ruler both because he considers her marriage as a personal as well as a political matter. The political matters take complete precedence over personal matters which include both a girl's future and her marriage-related sentiments. Lucrezia belongs to both the group of females, who must obey men and the category of underage children who lack legal power. Therefore, she faces no possibility of resisting her family's patriarchal culture. As Lucrezia moves to Ferrara after her marriage, the power differences between her and her husband become more evident. The d'Este court views Lucrezia solely through her reproductive value because her main purpose is to produce a male heir for the dynasty.

Reinforcing Gender Roles and Representational Intersectionality

The study reveals that the traditional gender roles are reinforced by societal expectations that is a process understood through representational intersectionality. For Lucrezia, the role of a daughter, a wife, and a duchess is based on rigid cultural scripts that she must perform. She was "never permitted to wander at will," but instead was "kept under attentive watch, in a limited number of rooms, until marriage" (O'Farrell, 2022, p. 178). Her childhood wildness, which earned her the label of "untameable," is systematically erased. This transformation is symbolized by her wedding dress, that is a "fortress of silk" (p. 123) with a bone supporting the strain and squeal, a physical cage that mirrors her new social confinement.

The enforcement of gender roles culminates on her wedding night. As O'Farrell (2022) writes: "He arrives at the bed and, without the slightest hesitation, sits down upon it, as if it belongs to him. Which, Lucrezia is able to reflect, it does" (p. 168). As a well-educated lady brought up to maintain modesty and purity Lucrezia fears the wedding night, but understands it is required both by their marriage agreement and by moral standards. Alfonso attempts a show of gentle reassurance. As O'Farrell (2022) writes:

He says again that he will not hurt her, she must not be scared, he will not hurt her, he will not, he promises, the words whispered in his new rasping voice. And then he hurts her anyway. The pain is startling, and curious in its specificity. It tunnels a scalded route into a most private space in her, a place of which she had previously only the dimmest sense. She has never felt discomfort like it: burning, invading, unwelcome, overfull. (p. 190)

The disturbing scene of marital intimacy shows how social roles in a society force the women into sexual submission through physical force. Alfonso is given authority to dominate her body because he is married so he has the right according to the societal and religious standards. The language used "he has done what he came to do, she has done what was required" (O'Farrell, 2022, p. 190). This highlights the fact that sex, for him, is not about mutual pleasure or intimacy, but about duty and power. The personal violation is a social requirement because the marriage consummation made them a family.

Subversion and Resistance: Political Intersectionality

Despite all the female limitations, Lucrezia mounts several forms of resistance, which can be understood in the framework of political intersectionality. Her acts are small ways of being political to reclaim her identity in a dynastic world that attempts to control her. Her primary method is her art. She makes a secret painting of two lovers, a direct defiance of the loveless reality of her marriage. Terrified of the discovery about the lover's painting, she paints over it: "she smothers the image with darkness, erasing the lovers, trapping them in a tomb of paint" (O'Farrell, 2022, p. 157). This cycle of creation and erasure mirrors Lucrezia's existence, asserting agency only to mask her true self behind a public facade.

Her rebellious spirit is also shown in her emotional attachment to the animals, especially to a captive tigress in her father's menagerie. She develops an emphatic connection with the creature, seeing in its loneliness and the loss of freedom that is parallel to her own lot. When she learns that her husband intends to kill her for failing to produce an heir, she defies him instead of being passively murdered, and stages a clever escape, leaving a decoy in her bed while fleeing the fortress. The analysis of ending of the novel presents an image of Lucrezia "running, running, with all her strength, towards the merciful canopy of trees" (p. 432), a moment of reclaimed agency that subverts the historical record.

Intersectionality and Lucrezia's Lived Experience

An intersectional feminist analysis of Lucrezia's story reveals how different dimensions of her identity and social position combine to affect both her moments of power and her moments of powerlessness. Crenshaw's (1989) analytical structure requires analysis beyond gender because it demands examination of gender relationships in the background of class, age, family relationships and societal structures in the literary narrative. The story of Lucrezia demonstrates that privileges and disempowerment coexist for people based on different aspects of identity to evaluate how these aspects affect one another. As a noblewoman, Lucrezia possesses advantages in social status, which give her benefits as compared to other women of that period. She enjoys a privileged life at the palace because she receives education and luxury as well as great prestige. As a daughter of the ruling family, Lucrezia gets advantages that peasant or merchant-class women lack because she never fears starvation and learns to read and has access to art materials and benefits from the deference that comes with royal blood.

The growing status of Lucrezia creates protection and value for her yet these advantages bring forth specific obligations. Her usefulness acts as a primary reason for her protection because her father treats assets as a valuable property. Our understanding of how her father handles her brothers differs from how he handles her as a daughter. He plans for Pietro to marry a cousin for family heritage while he expects Lucrezia to

wed outside of her family to build alliances. The combination of her Medici status and her female gender means that Lucrezia becomes too valuable to receive freedom. Gender and political power intersect as essential elements in the analysis. As a female in this political system, Lucrezia faces restricted power because men alone have authority. The ruler of Tuscany is her father, while her husband takes the position of Duke of Ferrara. She stands near those in positions of authority without ever exercising power herself in both of her domains.

The intersectional feminist view helps us learn to see the marginalized opinions that are ignored by society. The analysis of Lucrezia brings out the central issues as well as it presents contrasting experiences of other women. The Spanish-born Duchess Eleonora had a better situation than servants because she was a Grand Duchess, but she lost personal freedom by marrying an unknown man and transferring to a foreign country to dedicate herself to bearing children. The servants Sofia (the old nurse) and Emilia (Lucrezia's maid) have weak speaking roles but retain knowledge and strength that Lucrezia relies on (Sofia gives Eleonora parenting advice while Emilia provides information to Lucrezia). These women do not have the kind of Lucrezia's privilege but they are interestingly less constrained by court etiquette.

The fictional story of Lucrezia de' Medici in *The Marriage Portrait* goes beyond the period of Renaissance Italy. The central ideas of power inequalities between genders and prescribed roles within society and multi-layered oppression are both of a past historical reality and a present-day reality. The contrast between the life of Lucrezia and historical trends as well as current societal developments shows how far social advancement has happened and yet certain patriarchal structures remain in place. The modern world witnesses a similar pattern of intimate partner violence and femicide which parallels the situation in the life of Lucrezia. She lives in a constant fear that her husband would end her life, which eventually materializes when he tries to do so. The study shows that women face dangerous murders at the hands of their partners too frequently in present-day society. According to UN Women (2024), one woman or girl is killed every 10 minutes by their intimate partner or family member. The latest report on femicides reveals that 60 percent of all female homicides are committed by an intimate partner or a family member (UN Women, 2024). This statistic lays bare the ongoing reality of what some call the "last duchess" syndrome men exerting ultimate lethal control, when women do not behave as desired or attempt to leave men.

Conclusion

This paper has examined O'Farrell's (2022) *The Marriage Portrait* through the lens of Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) intersectional theory, demonstrating that how the protagonist's identity is shaped by the confluence of gender, class, and political power in Renaissance Italy. The analysis shows that Lucrezia de' Medici's life cannot be determined by one axis of gender or class only. Her noble status grants her privilege but at the same time serves as a source of her subjugation and converts her from an individual into an instrument of politics. The most valuable asset for her as a female is her reproductive capacity for the continuation of the dynasty. Her struggle is a product of the intersecting identities, which both allow and limit her agency. Although the story is set in the 16th century, but many of the problems raised in the novel are relevant to the struggle of women's autonomy today. The analysis demonstrates that how history can be used to understand ongoing power structures between men and women. This research is a contribution to the literature on feminist literary criticism because it takes the intersectional approach to historical fiction and lets us have a more precise picture of

the phenomenon of oppression and demonstrates that multifaceted analysis could be very instrumental in comprehending the complicated interplay between identity, gender and power. To conclude, this paper establishes that how the historical plight of Lucrezia is relevant in the on-going battle between gender and power in the contemporary world. Her life serves as a great reminder of other forces in the system that continue to impact the autonomy of women across the ages. The study suggests that the future research can adopt this intersectional perspective for other historical fictions that reclaim the lost voices of silenced women to further find out how the contemporary authors are rewriting the patriarchal narratives of the past.

References

Beaumont, P. (2020). The persistent patriarchy: Gender inequality and literature. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 29(1), 10–20.

Brontë, C. (1847). *Jane Eyre*. Smith, Elder & Co.

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Polity Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), Article 8.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.

Crenshaw, K. W. (2017). *On intersectionality: Essential writings*. The New Press.

De Beauvoir, S. (2010). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Alfred A. Knopf. (Original work published 1949).

Gill, R., & Orgad, S. (2018). The shifting terrain of sex and power: From the 'sexualization of culture' to #MeToo. *Sexualities*, 21(8), 1313–1324.

Kelly-Gadol, J. (1977). Did women have a renaissance? In R. Bridenthal & C. Koonz (Eds.), *Becoming visible: Women in European history* (pp. 137–164). Houghton Mifflin.

Langdon, G. (2006). *Medici women: Portraits of power, love, and betrayal*. University of Toronto Press.

Mandel, C. (2000). Santi di Tito's creation of amber in Francesco I's scrittoio: A swan song for Lucrezia de' Medici. *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 31(3), 719–752.

O'Farrell, M. (2022). *The Marriage Portrait*. Tinder Press.

Smith, S. (2013). Black feminism and intersectionality. *International Socialist Review*, 91(11), 1-16.

Struzziero, M. A. (2024). "The Underpainting and the Overpainting": Layers of Power and Powerlessness in Maggie O'Farrell's The Marriage Portrait. *Humanities Bulletin*, 7(1), 119-134.

Demir, M. T. (2024). Book review: *The Marriage Portrait* by Maggie O'Farrell. *Overtones: Ege Journal of English Studies*, 3, 51–53.

Thurston, I. (2022, January 29). *Intersectionality: Why it is important & its value in the feminist movement*. The Indigenous Foundation.

Tinagli, P. (1997). *Women in Italian renaissance art: gender, representation and identity*. Manchester University Press.

UN Women. (2024, November 25). *One woman or girl is killed every 10 minutes by their intimate partner or family member*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

Walker, C. (1990). Feminist literary criticism and the author. *Critical Inquiry*, 16(3), 551-571.

Woolf, V. (1929). *A room of one's own*. Hogarth Press.

Woolf, V. (1985). A sketch of the past. In J. Schulkind (Ed.), *Moments of being* (2nd ed., pp. 61-160). Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.