

**Intersectionality & Kyriarchy: A New Framework of Feminism?**

**A Philosophical Perspective on Contemporary Feminism**

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## **Abstract**

This philosophical paper investigates the question of the most appropriate conceptual approach for contemporary feminism. The author illustrates an overview of the different strains of feminism that developed over time. Black Feminism and Postmodern Feminism significantly impacted the creation of new conceptual frameworks - Intersectionality and Kyriarchy - that deal with the intersections of multiple forms of oppression. The author argues in favour of the less known framework of Kyriarchy, which originated within theological feminism. The concept determines power structures based on a pyramidal hierarchical system of oppression and privilege. It goes above a focus on patriarchy and adds to the well-known Intersectionality theory. Kyriarchy can bridge the different approaches among the feminist strains since it allows for shifting the primary focus between systems. Lastly, the relevance of Kyriarchy in contemporary feminism is due to. This essay fills a gap within feminist theory by arguing for Kyriarchy as the main conceptual approach to contemporary feminist theories.

*Keywords:* Kyriarchy, Intersectionality, Feminism, Oppression, Structural Injustice, Identity Politics

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## **Positionality**

This section will highlight my positionality as the author of this essay. While this is not common within philosophy but more within other social sciences, I believe it is critical to recognise positionality as it can "shift and influence how and which narratives are and can be produced" (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012, p.574). As an author, I argue that it is necessary to reflect on my positionality. The following section shares how it influences my understanding and stance concerning the essay topic.

I am a cis-gendered white European woman born and raised in Germany in my mid-twenties. I am part of the LGBTQ community and place myself as bisexual. I come from a privileged background, my parents being from the middle class, and I grew up in a safe, mostly White surrounding. During my education, I was privileged enough to attend a boarding school in the United Kingdom and was, as such, located in the Global North all my life. Even though brought up within and surrounded by the Christian culture, I have the freedom not to follow a religion and consider myself an atheist. Previous to my higher education, I worked as a flight attendant, allowing me to travel to different places and gain insight into other cultures from my privileged position. Working closely with different nationalities and cultures has allowed me to experience the differences within our society and how individuals' identities, group membership, and cultural settings define an individual's social standing. Currently, I have the advantage of following a higher education at a university in the Netherlands, studying "Global Responsibility and Leadership", which particularly emphasises critical thinking and interdisciplinarity covering global challenges. My chosen major is in Humanities and Politics, granting me the opportunity to be critical of the local and global systems we engage with. My main focus has been on gender and feminist-related topics during my studies, explaining my motivation to write my dissertation

on this topic. As a bisexual woman, I have experienced discrimination or oppression in some forms within the kyriarchal social system. In contrast, my class, skin colour and straight-passing have allowed me to carry certain privileges and have, potentially, perpetuated other forms of oppression. Of course, there are more forms of oppression and privilege besides the most prominent ones I just mentioned, which I aim to include within the essay.

## Introduction

Feminism is often understood for its critique of the patriarchal system and the oppression of women within. The patriarchy is at the centre of feminist debates focusing on the divide between women and men. The term originates from the Greek translation of the "rule of the father" and focuses on men's domination of women and other social groups (Montro, 2010). However, there are certain differences between the analysis of the strains of Feminism. Historically, discussions around Feminism have been seen to focus mainly on the experience of white middle-class women and leave out other forms of discrimination and suppression based on class, race, ethnicity, religion, and more. Due to the multiple applications and theories within Feminism, the most general feminist approach is often used as an example by the public, not acknowledging the multitude and depth behind this field of thought. Such mono-focused activism and rhetoric overlook the efforts and ideas of multiple feminist thinkers who tell the different axes of oppression (Harquail, 2019). As Montro (2010) states, feminism theory can be more seen as a patchwork quilting of taking women's lived reality and experiences by adding them to create an understanding.

In this paper, I will explore the philosophical question surrounding the different feminist concepts to provide a clear overview of the existing literature on the topic. In this dissertation, I argue that Kyriarchy is the most appropriate conceptual approach to Feminism in contemporary times. The less known concept can add a new dimension to feminist theory and creates a holistic understanding of oppression and privilege. I follow a methodology of conceptual analysis by comparing the different concepts within contemporary Feminism to previous forms of feminist thought. The scope of this paper only includes the main relevant strains of Feminism with a focus on mostly western and US thinkers and theories. This might bias and affect the argument

of this essay. Furthermore, due to the nature of philosophy and discrimination within this field, certain female perceptions and experiences might not have been available as either hidden, ignored or forgotten (Monro, 2010).

This essay is divided into three chapters, followed by a concluding section. In chapter 1, I will illustrate the various forms of Feminism and their link to discussions within the Feminist arena. I create an overview of the different theories within the field to relate them to contemporary Feminism. The different approaches to oppression will be touched upon to create the basis for investigating Intersectionality and Kyriarchy. In chapter 2, I will examine both conceptual frameworks' evolution and origin. Intersectionality has a more known historical connection to Feminism, often linked to the critique of women from the black feminism movement, and was originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991). Kyriarchy originated within theological Feminism, introduced by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and focuses on the different systematic oppression (Osborne, 2015). In Chapter 3, I will argue why Kyriarchy is most appropriate as a conceptual approach in contemporary times. I will conclude this essay by summarising the key notion of the philosophical argument that Kyriarchy is best suited to analyse power dynamics in contemporary feminist discourse.

## **Chapter 1 - Different Forms of Feminism**

As aforementioned, feminist theory is often seen as a concept whose mission is to combat gender inequality. However, not all feminist thinkers have one shared understanding of what this translates to and how this translates to the oppression of women within society. Differences

within the strains of Feminism can be observed through different periods, geographical relations, and various philosophical thoughts. There is much more diversity within the field of feminist theory than just the overall fight against gender inequality, which is spotlighted in the public discourse. The following chapter of this essay highlights the complexity and breadth of feminist thought to show further that it is not a monolithic ideology in which all feminists share the same thinking (Tong, 2008, p. 1). Currently, feminist labels such as 'Intersectional Feminism', 'Postcolonial Feminism' or 'Global Feminism' are often broadcasted; however, for this essay, the main strains and so-called "waves" of feminist thought will be introduced since they show the history and development of the feminist thought and explain the origin of contemporary feminism. In the first chapter, the first wave of Feminism, focusing on the suffrage movement and analyses of womanhood, will be highlighted. Secondly, the main frameworks of Feminism, namely liberal, radical, and socialist/Marxist Feminism, will be investigated. Furthermore, Black Feminism, and Postmodern Feminism making up the most dominant forms during the third wave of feminism, will be discussed.

### **First Wave Feminism**

A key thought within the first wave of Feminism was about suffrage and the inclusion of women in society in the U.S. The reasoning and motivation of the early feminist writers have trends of liberal feminists, which will be highlighted in the next section. Most feminists at that time aimed to become equal to men, which they believed would be achieved by gaining the right to vote. By being involved in the political happenings of the time, they believed women would gain a less oppressed position within society. Some influential thinkers of that time were John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, who advocated for equal citizenship and political rights. Their vision and argument were that political and economic opportunities for women would be ensured



through women's suffrage and their inclusion in the public domain (Tong, 2007, 2008, p. 21; Whelehan, 2022a). This thought was also visible in the activist field, as seen within the National Woman Suffrage Association, which eventually had its single aim of pushing for women's suffrage rather than focusing on debates around sex, reproduction, or religion. In 1920 the goal of a women's right to vote was passed, achieving the set mission of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminists (Tong, 2007; 2008, p. 23).

However, the feminist thought of that time did not solely revolve around the right to vote, but similarly, the question of "womanhood" and the debate around classification like rationality. As such, Mill and Taylor also focused on gaining rights for women in terms of freedom around the institution of marriage to overcome the dependency on men, as they did see men and women as equally capable of intellectual and moral thought. Another crucial thinker of the time was Mary Wollstonecraft, who saw the autonomy and freedom of women in their capacity to be rationally equipped through education. She saw the main notion of humans in their ability to be rational. She disagreed with philosophers before her time who argued that women did not hold the capacity for rationality and morality and that it was, on the other hand, at the centre of the essence<sup>1</sup> of men. Therefore, Mary Wollstonecraft argues that equal citizenship could be ensured to equal access to education. She stressed the ability of women to hold capabilities for rationality and morality and argued that if equal education opportunities were given to women, they would be equally developed as men. Wollstonecraft did not favour the suffrage movement, as she saw women staying in the private realm and disagreed with the whole legal and political institution. Wollstonecraft saw the importance of women gaining their personhood, and, in contrast to Hill

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<sup>1</sup> The thoughts around essentialism will be introduced and discussed further in the essay for its great influence on the third wave of feminism with regard to discussions around sex and gender. See Stone (2004): "Philosophically, essentialism is the belief that things have essential properties, properties that are necessary to those things being what they are. Recontextualized within feminism, essentialism becomes the view that there are properties essential to women, in that any woman must necessarily have those properties to be a woman at all."

and Taylor's argument, this could also be done from the domestic domain. Further, Wollstonecraft argued that the way femininity was treated could be equated to a condition similar to slavery. Furthermore, a woman is not merely an object or toy for the entertainment and service of men in oppressive roles but should be allowed self-determination in which they can faithfully fulfil their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers (Tong, 2008, pp. 14-16; Whelehan, 2022a).

The first wave was mostly dominated by discussions about the rights of white women and how to overcome the oppressive situation they were held in. However, this period also had influential black women who argued for their inclusion in the discussions about the right to vote and equal liberty. One famous example was Sojourner Truth, well-known for her speech in 1851 at a women's rights convention named "Ain't I a Woman" (Harquail, 2019; Tong, 2008, p. 22). In her speech, she challenges the notion of rights for women and how, in the controversy by men towards the women's movement, black women were being excluded. The contradictions of men toward women gaining a right to vote were solely based on the classification of white women. She highlighted how she, as a black woman, is working, acting and speaking just like a man. Furthermore, Truth questioned as such whether her "female nature" was not enough to be considered under the same "womanhood" as white women (Tong, 2008, p. 22).

The main goal of the first wave of Feminism was equal citizenship and the right to vote. However, debates around the meaning of "womanhood", access to education, and the discussion around women within public and private spheres already impacted this period. Those debates were mostly focused on the white woman and her struggle. Nevertheless, even after the successful amendment of the vote for women, the reality of the twentieth century showed that the oppression of women within societies' systems, structures, and attitudes was not overcome, resulting in other forms of Feminism within the second wave of the movement (Tong, 2007).

## Liberal Feminism

As aforementioned, the earlier developments of feminist thinkers already had liberal implications; however, during the second wave of Feminism, clear distinctions were visible. One field of thought and action followed the study of liberal thinking. Liberal Feminists focused their standpoint on reaching the same rights and opportunities as men to overcome gender inequality with a focus on liberty, rights, and legal equality (Whelehan, 2022a). The understanding of the subordination of women in society was based on the justification that women's identities and roles belong in the private sphere and not within the public sphere (Jones, 1990, pp. 782– 90)<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the main idea for liberal feminists was to open the public domain to women rather than change the system. As such, they can be seen as revisionists or, as I would argue, reformists since their aim is not to dismantle the patriarchal system but rather to unlock it for women (Tong, 2007). Their thinking of understanding gender inequality is related to social and cultural attitudes rather than an acknowledgement of the systemic nature of the oppression of women (Stone, 2004).

In general, the origin of liberal thought has been seen as linked to the rise of capitalism. Therefore, the focus on autonomy and self-improvement was often a focus by the middle class, who carried the capacities of reasoning and the ability to perceive themselves as unique identities. Therefore, liberal Feminism has followed a similar approach and wanted to join the natural state that men enjoyed (Whelehan, 2022a). A popular thinker of liberal feminist thought is Betty Friedan. Her writing of the "Feminine Mystique" in 1963 not just started the discussion

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<sup>2</sup> According to the classic social-reproduction theory, females are weak and passive agents, which leads to their belonging in the private sphere, such as a household of a family. On the contrary, males are seen as the embodiment of participation in public culture. This subordination, therefore, depends on the thought that a man's family, consisting of a wife and children, would live its life in the private sphere, reifying the hierarchical relationship between woman and man.

surrounding the topic of opening the public sphere, but also criticised known gender roles. Friedan focussed on white middle-class housewives and the "problem that has no name". She emphasised the societal myth that women seek safety and fulfilment in the feminine behaviour of their private life, which causes them not to enter the work field and the public. She raised awareness of housewives' malaise and alienation at that time, and that women aimed to achieve more than just the myth of satisfaction through marriage and motherhood. Women were getting bored and unsatisfied with the expectation of staying at home by giving up higher education and a career. Betty Friedan illustrated the myth believed in society that even though new opportunities for entering the public domain through higher education and new rewarding career options, women were thought to prefer still the reality of staying at home in the private sphere. As such, she focuses on the individual woman rather than the general system, and she blames the women for not leaving the private and succeeding in the public sphere (Munro, 2013; Stoljar, 1995; Tong, 2008, p. 42; Whelehan, 2022a). However, critique towards Friedan, as well as other liberal thinkers, is that their theories only suggested how to bring women into the public domain while still not bringing men into the domestic domain. As such, almost the idea of a "superwoman" was created who would have to combine marriage, motherhood and a career (Tong, 2008, p. 42-43; Whelehan, 2022a).

### **Radical Feminism**

Another form of Feminism is the radical feminist movement. Tong (2008, p.49) noted that different approaches are present within this movement. For the sake of this essay, it will be summarised as radical Feminism, yet, it should be acknowledged that there is more complexity to the topic. The focus of radical Feminism lies in the systematic oppression of women by men under the patriarchy. This is in contrast to liberal Feminism, which followed the understanding of

sameness by wanting to reach the same opportunities as men. Radical feminists, on the other hand, follow the idea of difference and see the behaviour of men not as appealing but rather as the main flaw within society and resulting oppressions. The essentialist approach to recognising the difference between what it means to be a man and a woman is one of radical Feminism's core essences. Therefore, the debate around radical Feminism lies within the relation between power and sex and the systematic domination of women. The main argument coins men as responsible for the exploitation of women until the point of profiting from it. As a result, radical feminists argue that women were, as such, the first group to be oppressed, and the centre of any other oppression lies within the oppression under the patriarchy. As such, women's oppression is the most difficult type to eliminate and can not be eradicated through social changes such as abolishing class society. This was seen in how men constrain women within society by withholding the freedom of their sexuality and reproduction freedom. For every struggle faced within social arrangements, especially in the private domain, radical feminists see the fault and blame within the patriarchal society (Bruns, 2010; Soman, 2009; Tong, 2008, p. 51).

Radical feminists argued that women's equality would not be ensured unless they had control over their reproductive power and sexual pleasure, putting the focus on the discussion around abortion rights, pornography, and freedom of sexuality (Bruns, 2010; Soman, 2009; Tong, 2008, pp. 66-71). The known phrase "the personal is political" emerged in this strain of feminist thinking during the second wave of Feminism, highlighting that there is more to women's oppression than the exclusion of the public domain. The sexuality of women should be included in the discussions about gender inequality and political debates. Furthermore, they saw women's oppression as a collective fight rather than an individual issue, which they acted out through the practice of consciousness-raising. Women would meet in small groups to share their experiences,

recognising similarities and teaching them that sexual oppression was not unique to just individual women. The focus was not to create unique solutions but to develop a common understanding of the social basis of problems to learn how to change the system (Bruns, 2010; Tong, 2008, pp. 48-50).

Radical Feminism does not consider other forms of oppression, since it sees the patriarchy at the centre of all types of oppression. Therefore, forms of injustice such as racism or class discrimination are secondary to sexual oppression. This meant that the focus was mostly on white middle-class women, which resulted in the exclusion of women oppressed by several systems and created a more homogenous understanding of what falls under the "women" group. This led to the development of other strands of Feminism, such as socialist Feminism and Black Feminism. Furthermore, radical Feminism has been criticised for falling into the traps of essentialism and for using such a language that perpetuates the understanding of women and men being different (Tong, 2008, pp. 90-91).

### **Socialist/Marxist Feminism**

Socialist/Marxist Feminism is another strand of feminist thought. Even though there are some differences, they follow the same way of argumentation. Tong (2008, pp. 96-97) further notes that the distinction falls more under a matter of emphasis than substance. Therefore, for the sake of this essay, I will combine the two schools of thought. Socialist/Marxist feminists focus on the capitalist system and how women's labour is exploited (Stone, 2004; Tong, 2008, pp. 98-100). Therefore, they see systematic oppression as a result of capitalism rather than patriarchy. The class division generated under the economic system differentiates people into "haves" and "have-nots". Due to the nature and reinforcement of capitalism and patriarchy,

women fall more often into the positions of have-nots, meaning they are less privileged and subordinated. Socialist feminists see the problem of women's oppression as a "two-headed beast" perpetuated by capitalist patriarchy or patriarchal capitalism (Tong, 2008, p. 118). However, by the other strands of feminist thoughts, socialist/Marxist Feminism was criticised for some shortcomings. These included excluding other factors, such as race, sexuality or culture. Focusing on economic injustice and class did not sufficiently explain gender inequality and women's subordination.

Therefore, a thinker known for her renewed contribution to this field of thought is Juliet Mitchell. She acknowledged that women's oppression is not only due to their lower social status because of their function within capitalism, but also that patriarchal oppression simultaneously plays within the issue. Therefore, Mitchell simultaneously prioritises the class-based approach to women's oppression but acknowledges the sex-based one (Tong, 2007). Other socialist thinkers tried to combine the capitalist and patriarchal oppression more interactive. For this, Iris Marion Young argues that a sexual division-of-labour analysis is better suited to understand the question of oppression rather than a sole class focus. The focus lies on the issues related to women's unpaid, underpaid and disvalued work and the feminist relation to gender inequality. To Young, the need was for one socialist feminist theory rather than two separate ones (Tong, 2008, pp. 115-117).

### **Postmodern Feminism**

Another strand of thought within the feminist movement is postmodern Feminism. At the centre of this thinking is the rejection of a thought created through the male perspective, as well as a single theory to explain the position of women within society. They claim that women can

be fragmented into different groups and reject the notion of singular ideas. The reality of women's oppression can not be tackled through a list of suggestions on retrieving liberty and equal rights. Postmodern feminists have a focus on reflecting on one's process of feminist thought and knowledge to avoid one overarching explanation of women's issues but acknowledge the plurality, multiplicity and difference in the nature of Feminism (Tong, 2008, p. 270)

Thinkers such as Linda Nicholson analysed in their work how postmodernism and Feminism can contribute to each other's development. Especially concerning essentialism, postmodernism helps deconstruct dualistic concepts around sex and gender (Harquail, 2019; Nicholson, 1992; Nicholson & Seidman, 1995; Stone, 2004). One important contributor to this type of thought is Simone de Beauvoir. Her deconstruction and questioning of what it means to be a woman have inspired several thinkers after her time. In her work "The Second Sex" (2011), the phrase "one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman" can be seen as an early understanding of the social construction of gender (Andrew, 2003; Bergoffen, 2003). Judith Butler has further influenced the work of postmodern feminists<sup>3</sup> with her approach to gender as performative during the third wave of Feminism. For Butler, the biological sex, so the chromosomes and genital, does not equate to a woman having to follow the female gender, feminine traits, and heterosexual orientation. In her work "Gender Trouble" (1999), Butler claims that there is no connection between an individual's sex and gender and rejects the essentialist idea. (Andrew, 2003). Instead, she argues that sexual and gender identities are created through social norms and the continuous repetition of a performed action (Tong, 2008, pp. 280-283).

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<sup>3</sup> Butler states, that she does not like to be included within the postmodern umbrella due to the influence of other philosophers' thoughts on her theories, yet, I will follow Tong's (2008) approach and include her in this section.



Furthermore, the understanding of a woman to what femininity includes is dependent on their social position in terms of power relations and context (Stone, 2004).

The public and more activist side of the feminist movement rejects postmodern feminist thought as a form of "feminism for academics". The reality of the feminist movement, in marches and campaigning, is too far away from the vast and undefined nature of postmodern feminist theory, which ultimately makes it irrelevant to them (Tong, 2008, p. 283). Especially the idea of replacing the concept of "woman" with the concept of "gender" was off-putting to feminist activists (Tong, 2007). However, following Nietzsche's thought, it is still possible to create a social group of women without the need for the essentialist notion or one shared social position and experience. Rather, recognising past and future cultural norms, in which an individual will try to position themselves, can be seen as a way to identify one's gender (Stone, 2004).

### **Black Feminism**

As already mentioned in the previous paragraphs, many feminist theories focus mainly on the struggles of white middle-class women. Black women were barely at the centre of the aforementioned forms of feminism, as gender was often seen as a synonym for white women (Dawthorne, 2019). As such, during the second wave of feminism, black feminist scholars started to appear. Nevertheless, black feminist thought is not only linked to one wave of the feminist movement but is in contrast to other forms of feminism, clearly found within all periods (Springer, 2002). Since the essentialist notion of white feminists categorically excluded black women from "women" and "black people" (Carastathis, 2014), the argument of black feminists is that gender oppression can not be separated from race oppression and that oppression should

be analysed at its intersections. A very influential woman with her work in this field is bell hooks. Her books on “Ain’t I a Woman?” (hooks, 1983) and “Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center” (hooks, 1988) could be interpreted as early work on Intersectionality. In her work, hooks criticise the focus on the most privileged woman in the centre of society, which shapes the work of feminist theories. Therefore, she acknowledges a gap in the experience of women who do not belong to the elite class and establishes the racist domination within the patriarchy. In this, she further criticises the lack of a clear definition of “feminism”. She illustrates how this creates an opening for the other exploitations to occur even within this debate. She uses her experience as a black woman to demonstrate that she is neither at the forefront of gender debates nor race debates, and that the experience of black women is lacking or even silenced within the white-dominated feminist arena. Therefore, white women lead the conversation about gender oppression, and black men lead the discussion on anti-racism (Carastathis, 2014; Levine-Rasky, 2011; Mehta, 1987, p. 198; Osborne, 2015; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Especially black female authors have claimed to be suited for describing oppression since they both know the position of being oppressed and the position of being privileged within the academy (Paulsson, 2012). As such, black feminist thinkers are developing new conceptual frameworks that do not only focus on sex-based women’s oppression. In her work “Black Feminist Thought” (1991), Patricia Hill Collins introduced the idea of certain groups experiencing different forms of oppression, which act on various axes that intersect. This creates a macro-system of oppression, which she called the “Matrix of Domination”. The axes of oppression function simultaneously and have a shared centre where they intersect. On the opposite side of oppression lies the side of unearned privilege that the dominating group holds (Harquail, 2019). Another influential thinker of the black feminist movement is Kimberlé

Crenshaw (1991), who acknowledged the exclusion of non-white women and coined the concept of Intersectionality. I will include more about Crenshaw in chapter 2 of this essay.

## **Chapter 2 – Intersectionality and Kyriarchy**

Especially in the early 1990s, the third wave of feminism, the misconception of defining and grouping women solely by discrete classifications rather than looking into the interlinked intersections was gaining attention (Curtis & Cardo, 2018). For some feminist thought, the reality of identities and identity politics is at the centre of their theories. However, the critique of some feminists was that the focus on only gender as an identity for women left out other identities that shape the reality of women. For instance, Spelman (1988) illustrated in her work “Inessential woman: problems of exclusion in feminist thought” the risk of not taking into account other forms of discrimination or oppression women of colour or working-class women might face (Young, 1990). She follows the diversity argument others have used before her, in which she rejects the idea of “common identities” among women. The other identities a woman has, do not take away her being a woman (Stoljar, 1995). As Paulsson (2012) highlights, there is a certain risk with identity politics only adding specific categories together in an additive way rather than looking at the intersections between them, as authors of the black feminist movement had illustrated. Within other forms of feminist thought, individuals' identities were reflected upon as not simply being about gender. However, individuals face different forms of oppression while having various forms of privilege at once. Through their work, feminists of colour have highlighted that a singular and exclusive emphasis on women’s oppression replicates colonial discourses that silence the marginal (Dawthorne, 2019). Postmodern feminism and black feminism, as such, highlighted the notion of belonging to several group identities and the complexity it adds to oppression and privilege. Besides discrimination on an individual level,

oppression can also be in the form of institutional discrimination or subordination. Especially when several forms of the belonging meet, evaluating the origin of systematic oppression becomes more difficult. Both Intersectionality and Kyriarchy are frameworks resulting from the critique of previous feminist strains, which focused on only one form or system of oppression.

### **Intersectionality - A Rise of a New Concept**

As stated in one of her speeches in her work “Sister Outsider: Essay and Speeches” (2007), Audre Lorde illustrates that the reality for individuals can not be broken down into one issue and influenced intersectional thought. As a black lesbian feminist, she argues for using the differences between certain groups within the feminist movement to see them as a driver rather than just acknowledging their existence. Her quote, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” (Lorde, 1982), further shows that indeed there is a need to recognise the multiple oppression one individual might face and to address those differences with respect (Lorde, 2007).

Crenshaw, like other black feminists before her, saw the need for a concept that would allow combining the oppression black women faced. Intersectionality originally started within the legal domain and has gained more popularity since its introduction. The concept resulted from unfair procedures for black women in employment lawsuits, and Crenshaw first mentioned it as a metaphor and later as a “provisional concept” (Carastathis, 2014). As a black feminist legal scholar, Crenshaw has observed the intersecting categories of discrimination within the legal institution. To her, the separation of different systems of oppression and simultaneous focus on one form of oppression did not portray the reality faced by all groups of women within our society. She voiced that race and gender are not mutually exclusive categories and that

oppression is a production of the interaction of “multiple, decentered and co-constitutive axes” (Carasthathis, 2014) rather than the single-axis framework often found within antiracist and feminist discussion (Nash, 2008). As a response to the lack of representation of the voices of marginalised groups within certain social groups, Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality. In her work on violence towards women, she differentiates it further between three crucial forms of intersectional analysis, namely the structural, political, and representational intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). She analysed how in the domestic violence and rape of black women, the intersection of racism and patriarchy differentiated in a structural form from white women. An especially important part of the public debate and activism surrounding feminism was her understanding of Political Intersectionality. She sees this as a form in which feminist and antiracist politics have excluded the other side of oppression. Through not recognising the faced reality as one falling under each category, both fields have worked in tandem on further marginalising the violence and discrimination against women of colour. In the representational intersectionality, Crenshaw analyses the cultural construction of how the intersection of simultaneous racial and gender stereotypes about black women further perpetuates oppression against this group and keeps discrimination alive in how it is represented within society (Puar, 2012). Even though it originated from a legal background, Intersectionality is being used as a framework within academia, policy, workplaces, and society nowadays. Carathathis (2014) shows that Intersectionality has been separated from the original political aim to illustrate the invisibility of black women in law and social movement debates but has entered a mainstream feminist debate around representation.

## **Kyriarchy - A New Social Hierarchical System**

Within a different branch of feminism, another female scholar has seen the need to derive a new form of illustrating the intersection of oppression and power. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, from the feminist theology field, had introduced a new hermeneutical<sup>4</sup> concept of Kyriarchy. Coined by Schüssler Fiorenza, the concept aims to reflect on systems of oppression and privilege from a focus on different structural systems. This framework also acknowledged that oppression and privilege should not be viewed from a binary gender perspective alone (Osborne, 2015). Kyriarchy not only recognises patriarchal oppression, but looks into a tool that enables an understanding of the complexity of oppression (Dawthorne, 2019). Kyriarchy comes from Greek, and its literal translation is “rule of the lord” (Hunt, 2000; Tuohy, 2005). Schüssler Fiorenza intended the concept to be used in a non-literal way, since she saw a need to reflect on Western Christianity and the exploitation of women under it. She saw Kyriarchy more as an analytical category to create a systematic analysis of the domination and oppression of women and to locate these within the political matrix of a broad range of various oppressions (Tuohy, 2005). Even though it originated within theology, the concept is also being used outside of theology, as Schüssler Fiorenza saw the need for the term to name exploitative power within the context of the bible and theology but also broader within contemporary politics and society (Taylor, 2009; Tuohy, 2005). It is further used in research on colonial dynamics and the concept of “thinness”, or mental health research on the dynamic within the institution of psychiatry. Boochani further employs a kyriarchal lens in his analysis of the Australian refugee imprisonment (Giannacopoulos, 2020).

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<sup>4</sup> There might be differences within hermeneutics itself, however, it is known as the “art of interpretation”. The focus often lies on how language shapes understanding and knowledge, and the aim of hermeneutics is to interpret hidden meanings. In philosophical hermetics, the author often reflects further on the own position in the world simultaneously to the process of interpretation (Dowling, 2004).

Elisabeth acknowledged in her work that knowledge and how it is expressed in language shape conversations around oppression. She sees how language can influence exclusion and marginalisation and disagrees with the previous categorisation of women (van Wyk, 2015). Therefore, she uses the term *wo/men* instead, which breaks down the singularity of “woman” and allows us to step away from binary thinking of woman/man. This allows for transgender and non-binary forms of gender to be included. Furthermore, it includes men within the notion of *wo/men*. Lastly, it destabilises that the concept of “woman” is not a singular group but is fragmented in terms of race, class, religion, colonialism, age, and sexuality (Kim & Whitehead, 2009; Taylor, 2009). She sees limits within the classic sex/gender identification and recognises more complex dynamics between different groups of women and individual women. In regard to her understanding of oppression, she sees that not all men have oppressed all women but that some women have benefited from the oppression of others, illustrating the complex power dimension of differences among *wo/men* (Kim & Whitehead, 2009). Elisabeth aims to put women and other marginalised people at the centre of examinations of oppression and marginalisation in historical contexts to create a new understanding of this often male-dominated analysis (Pui-lan, 2009). In her analysis of biblical texts, she aims not only to interpret the meaning but to undo certain kyriarchal discriminations. She follows the approach of analysing current kyriarchal practices and looks back on how theology and biblical interpretation have shaped those (Kim & Whitehead, 2009). As Hunt (2000) shows, Elisabeth’s use of Kyriarchy highlights that religion and Christianity are part of the problem of oppression they so often aim to resolve. She especially investigated the role of women in religion, such as when she analyses the meaning of Jesus and gender (Kraemer, 1985). Therefore, Kyriarchy illustrates that there is more to oppression than the patriarchal system, but religion and democracy play a role in overcoming oppressive systems

(van Wyk, 2015). An example of how a more male-dominated system has shaped the understanding is the origin of female celibacy under the church, which originated as a movement by women. Still, it is often portrayed as living under the church's jurisdiction (Thompson, 2016).

### **Differences Between the Concepts**

Besides the different origins of the two concepts, there is further a clear difference between the two. Osborne (2015) has also highlighted the notion of privilege in her analysis. Kyriarchy makes use of both the idea of oppression, but also the idea of privilege. In the complex system of oppression, women might be oppressed due to gender roles but carry privilege for the same thing in another situation. Kyriarchy acknowledges that an individual is neither always oppressed nor always privileged. (Dwathorne, 2019). But further, even in marginalised spaces, other forms of identity or structures can exert power, such as within Queer scenes, white men are the most privileged group (Osborne, 2015). Even though in history, we have often seen men in the position of power, Elisabeth establishes that the oppressor within a kyriarchal system does not have to be determined by their gender (Caufield, 2015). Several other layers are added to this analytical tool, including class, race, religion, and culture (van Wyk, 2015). Kyriarchy further includes submission forms since women can wield oppressive power and be complicit or even collaborative in their oppression, as Thompson (2016) notes.

Compared to Intersectionality, which views oppression as intersecting axes (Puar, 2012), Kyriarchy is seen as a structural reality which can shift through small changes in power differences between groups or individuals (Monro, 2010). Kyriarchy views oppression and privilege in a pyramidal hierarchy (van Wyk, 2015). This shows that the biggest group of people are at the bottom with little privilege but facing the most oppression (Monro, 2010). The focus of



oppression within a Kyriarchy, for Schüssler Fiorenza, is on the people at the lowest level of the kyriarchal pyramid (Taylor, 2009). Intersectionality, on the other hand, focuses not on a hierarchy but the example of traffic intersections or crossroads (Kaschak, 2010; Puar, 2012). Intersectionality theory acknowledges that the different forms of oppression meet at a certain point. Still, the analysis does not go into how this was generated but focuses on the intersecting itself within a patriarchal system (Puar, 2012).

### **Chapter 3 - Contemporary Feminist Approach**

So far, I have illustrated the history and origin of feminist thought and its branches, as well as the rise of the two conceptual frameworks aimed at explaining multiple oppressions women face. In this next section, I want to argue why Kyriarchy is the most appropriate conceptual approach to feminism in contemporary times. I will divide this section into three subsections, providing my argument and potential objections.

#### **Kyriarchy or Intersectionality?**

As provided in the previous sections, power and oppression often arise not as a single issue, but more complexity towards the topic. Sexism is not the only form women nowadays face, and as such, contemporary feminism should not only focus on this system of oppression. I want to agree with Bruns (2010), who questioned whether gender should still be the main focus of analyses. I believe that even though patriarchy might have been an appropriate system explaining certain types of discrimination during earlier stages of the first or second wave, the later developments of feminism have shown that oppression is not just a road map. On the other hand, it is far more complicated, and different systems of oppression fall under a different hierarchy, creating not a unique experience for one woman. Furthermore, by focusing on the

structural and systematic approach of Kyriarchy, the analysis does not solely relate to the moment several forms of oppression meet. Still, it acknowledges it already in its origin and at its core. Systematic hierarchy under Kyriarchy can recognise that oppression is linked to context and may shift for each individual or group. However, Kyriarchy also focuses on the intersections of power and builds on Intersectionality. In her first publication, Crenshaw mentioned that the concept should act as a provision concept. As such, I argue that because it leaves out the actual systematic spheres of where power struggles happen, Kyriarchy is a better-suited concept to explain oppression and privilege. Within Intersectionality theories, the main focus often lies on gender, race, and class and therefore leaves out other systems of oppression, as Carathatis (2014) noted. I want to add to this claim, since I believe there are other forms of oppression and privilege besides those three main ones. In certain settings, individuals might be discriminated against due to their religion, looks, or abilities in social hierarchies. Another form of oppression might be discrimination against people living with disability that I will use this example to make my argument. A woman living with a disability might be discriminated against at the intersection of both her disability and her gender and would be seen at the lowest part of the pyramid. I believe Intersectionality would not illustrate the deeper sitting issue of where the oppression originates. It further does not demonstrate how the oppression faced by a man living with a disability who might be in the middle of the pyramid might tell us something about the systematic issue and how it relates to those below him in the system. However, the man might be discriminated against for his gender in a different setting, shifting the hierarchy.

Certain objections against my claim might conclude that Intersectionality as a concept highlights the reality of oppression enough. Yet, this somewhat moves toward mainstreaming “diversity” within intersectionality, showing how it removes the focus of power relations and

domination (Salem, 2018). I want to argue that this is due to the nature of Intersectionality, and its lack to consider the structure. Even though it originated from the legal theory, applications in contemporary society often focus more on the focus of individuals and groups' diversity, as Salem illustrated. Furthermore, Intersectionality might differ from person or group; however, it does not create an understanding of the sifting of bigger structural dimensions. Such as how the hierarchical notion of power might differ in another time or location. Hierarchies are flowing and changing and not symmetrically; therefore, the pyramid represents it better where the reality can shift for each culture, context or person. Thus, structural change can be set as a goal by considering more of a system rather than just the intersection of identities. In line with what McArdle (2021) states, I believe that, indeed, Kyriarchy can be used to explain the power structure Intersectionality creates. However, Intersectionality alone is not equipped to fully illustrate how each individual or group can hold a set of privileges and how those interactions between privilege and oppression are based on systematic hierarchies.

### **Connecting the Different Forms of Feminism**

Another reason why I see Kyriarchy as the most appropriate conceptual approach to contemporary feminism is that it allows us to connect the different forms of feminism. In line with what Bruns (2010) argues on how the kyriarchal approach can bridge the generational differences of experiences and beliefs, I believe that Kyriarchy allows for both difference and sameness feminists to meet. Since there is such a misunderstanding of what is at the cause of feminist thought, as demonstrated in my summary of the different feminist forms, Kyriarchy allows for a common understanding, namely the one of oppression. I disagree with radical feminists who see all oppression originate within the patriarchy. However, I want to add that Kyriarchy allows for the field of radical feminism to put the system of patriarchy as their primary

focus. At the same time, socialist feminists can put the capitalist system as their main focal point within Kyriarchy. This is due to the nature that capitalism and patriarchy are part of the Kyriarchy.

I argue that this way of thinking combines different understandings and will include all types of feminists in this fight against oppression and systematic injustice. In line with several other anti-essentialist and more following the postmodern feminist approach, I say defining a group is not as simple. A group is never fully just homogeneous, but I argue that members can choose certain identity factors as their primary choice. By focusing on Kyriarchy, individuals do not have to consider which form of oppression under which system is their primary concern but can acknowledge all several axes that make up their being. Therefore, as I mentioned earlier, Kim & Whitehead (2009) have shown that Kyriarchy allows individuals who identify as non-binary or do not want to classify themselves to be included in debates around oppression. Within Kyriarchy, women can focus on what their main focus is. Would it be the oppression they face in the workplace, more in line with liberal feminists, or their aim for reproductive rights, like radical feminists. Within the Kyriarchical system, it gets acknowledged that all those work together. Lastly, certain concepts of feminist thinking are more relevant in different cultures, societies or regions. Women in the Global South might not have labour oppression as their main focus, but more their freedom of reproductive rights. Therefore, creating a more conceptual approach that includes all systematic forms of privilege and oppression creates a platform to learn from each other. I argue that this makes a way to move away from comparing approaches, but acknowledge that they move and shift according to the relevant context.

The use of a Kyriarchical approach to feminism could get criticised for its application to activism and collective action. It could be said that the shift away from one primary system like

patriarchy would take away the possibility to collectively meet and drive for change. However, by including Kyriarchy as the main systematic concept of oppression, it does not exclude all the subsystems that play into this. As I argued before, Patriarchy is still a part of Kyriarchy, whereas Kyriarchy can not be translated onto a patriarchal level. In line with Young (2006) I believe that structural injustice should be the focus of global injustice rather than a blame on individual agents. I believe that feminist conversations should rather focus on the systematic struggle and how to overcome those. By including Kyriarchy the focus lies more on systems rather than just the individual groups of oppressors versus oppressed. Consequently, with the overcoming global forms of power and oppression it is not enough to just focus on one form of oppression but to focus simultaneously on different forms of oppression. Thereby the most privileged should listen and follow the lead of more oppressed groups and acknowledge the systematic struggles they face. This way a form of allyship can be created, which allows for collective action with a focus on taking down the overall system of oppression through the fight of individual systems. A gay man as such might join the collective action against gender issues, since he recognises the interconnectness of all the systems and follows the lead of the group at the bottom of this pyramidal hierarchy, namely woman. As explained in the section on postmodern feminism, transsexual and non-binary women were often excluded from the understanding of womanhood. Kyriarchy allows for the inclusion of these groups and is therefore opening the possibilities for collective movements.

### **Why now?**

Lastly, I highlight why I argue for Kyriarchy in contemporary times. Why should we use this approach now and not during the first wave of Feminism? Hunt (2001) argues that the patriarchal lens on gender oppression is too one-dimensional. I agree with this argument and

relate it to the fast living of contemporary times. Furthermore, even though we have learned from previous generations, some still do not believe in feminist concepts since it does not apply to them. I personally have experienced the reaction of “oh, it is just this men hating movement” since the focus is on patriarchy. On the other hand, Kyriarchy would allow to include those people since they might find themselves in some oppressing system or realise how their position within the system relates to the bigger picture. The understanding of privilege becomes more complicated with “white-passing” and “straight-passing” ideas. Kyriarchy generates a ground to recognise concepts outside the binary and essentialist approach and, as such, includes struggles that might not be of the majority of a group. I argue that Kyriarchy is relevant in current feminist practices since the context of the systems is important for tackling and deconstructing power dynamics and forms of oppression and privilege. The new capitalist exploitation of certain parts of the world, as Pui-Lan (2009) highlights, further perpetuates violence and oppression of women. I want to use further the example of the oppression of gay men. This might look different in the Global North, where it could have forms of street harassment, then in the Middle East, where it might face legal consequences. This example highlights the interplay of other systems such as religion or politics on the question of oppression.

However, since Kyriarchy is not well known within and outside of feminist theory, critics could argue that it would create more confusion and complication for Feminism. I disagree since, as Chapter 1 illustrated, there have always been different terminologies within Feminist thought. However, some are more prominent and could be used in several contexts. Furthermore, since Feminism is not only a gender-related issue anymore, it is important to include a more modern form of analysing several systems of oppression. Especially within social media, the concept of Intersectionality has been most apparent within the so-called “fourth wave” of feminists

(Zimmerman, 2017). I argue that this shows that with the fast living exchange of information, the concept of Kyriarchy could be implemented and shared quickly within different areas of the feminist movement. It is important to create a common understanding of the discussion around oppression and privilege, not to give rise to certain oppressor groups who misuse certain concepts or slogans for themselves. This can be seen within the race debate, in which the rise of “black lives matter” illustrate the discrimination against black people. However, simultaneously, the phrase “all lives matter” arose to showcase that the conversation should be about discrimination against all people, rather than just one group. I argue that this is the wrong approach to the question of oppression and that, therefore, Kyriarchy would allow us to see that race is just one of the systems of oppression and that not all white people or all men are at fault.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has focussed on the question of contemporary feminism and sought to illustrate the most appropriate conceptual approach. I first created an overview of the dominant forms of feminist theory that shaped and impacted contemporary feminism. The different approaches in these strains of feminism are relevant for understanding developments in current feminist debates. Black feminism was especially relevant regarding the creation of newer conceptual approaches to analyse the multiple oppressions women face. Intersectionality, which originated from legal theory, is most known and focuses on the crossroads of intersecting oppressions. On the other hand, Kyriarchy, introduced in theology, focuses on oppression and privilege in forms of intersecting systems. I argued in this dissertation that Kyriarchy, as a hierarchical intersectional concept of oppression and privilege, best describes the current conversations and debates around feminism. Despite its origin from theology, Kyriarchy can be

applied outside theological feminism, and I argue that it would be useful to apply this understanding as well as other hermeneutical reflections from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, like her idea of wo/man, to other feminist fields. Kyriarchy allows viewing the different intersectionalities both individuals and groups hold while creating analyses from a structural and systematic perspective. I reasoned that due to its addition to Intersectionality theory, Kyriarchy is a better-suited conceptual approach. Furthermore, it combines different strains of feminist thinking in a collective fight against gender inequality and other forms of oppression. Especially in contemporary times, where globalisation and non-essentialism are more prominent, Kyriarchy allows for analysing privilege and oppression. The focus on privilege allows a more holistic analysis of power structures, since a person might be oppressed under one system but be part of the privileged group in another.

A modern example of how Kyriarchy can be used is the “kicking the Kyriarchy” podcast, in which its white, mostly privileged female hosts use the space to talk about different forms of oppression, discrimination and identity (Verdier, 2017). I want to conclude that Kyriarchy is best suited to analyse contemporary feminist questions. Future research should analyse struggles, oppression and power from a systemic approach under this pyramidal concept. Feminism, in my opinion, has moved past the approach of a mere gender-related lens and should recognise the multiple working intersecting forms of power. This way, feminists worldwide and from different generations can learn from each other in a kyriarchal framework. I suggest that it would be especially interesting to analyse standing debates often portrayed under an intersectionality lens in a new light under Kyriarchy. I believe this would produce new interesting understandings of our world, especially regarding feminism.



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