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To my mother Nadia BELAID

To my father Abdelkrim

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Declaration

The methodology courses taken in my class during the academic year 2021–2022 are followed in the following dissertation. As a result, it exhibits some differences in terms of form from other Master's dissertations that were previously carried out in our department. In fact, it does not use the Chicago style but rather adheres to the guidelines established by the American Psychological Association (APA).

Abstract

The following research paper has examined the characters' experiences as well as the plot of Harris's novel, *The other black girl* (2022). The dissertation has explored the extent to which Black women experience oppression in their working environment. In order to reach this objective, I have borrowed some concepts from Collins's book entitled *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the politics of empowerment* (2000). These concepts consist of *mule uh de world* in relation to *intersectionality* as well as *the matrix of domination* and its four domains of power. Collins's theory has provided the necessary elements that have led us to conclude, first, that Black women are treated as *mules*. Unfair treatment from their fellow white superiors made them work harder than their white colleagues without getting recognised or awarded for doing so. In addition, I have come to understand that the oppression of Black women is the result of intersecting oppressions due not only to their race but also to their gender and class. Second, I have also deduced that oppression is being controlled, regulated, and legitimized as it works through a *matrix of domination*. This research paper consists of two major chapters, the first chapter entitled 'Intersectional oppression and mule uh de world in *The other black girl'* has sought to exhibit the intersectional oppression and the way Black women are treated like *mules* through the experiences of the main character, Nella who was oppressed by the white-dominated publishing industry she works for. However, the second chapter entitled 'The matrix of domination in *The other black girl*' has shed light on the way oppression takes different shapes according to *the matrix of domination* by studying its four domains of power. Through my analysis of the characters' behaviours and relationships, I have understood the extent to which power and domination of Black women are controlled, regulated, and legitimized.

Keywords: Black feminism, mule uh de world, intersectionality, matrix of domination, racism, white domination, workplace.

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I. General Introduction

During my school years, I have been introduced by my teachers to American literature in general and African-American literature in particular. I have always loved reading and writing essays about African-American writers such as James Baldwin and Zora Neale Huston, among many others. These writers dared to speak their minds and deal with racial and gender issues that are often overlooked. This is how my passion and interest in knowledge about African-American literature had grown, leading me to seek to know more about Black authors and specifically African-American female authors.

America, this nation that has long been known for its fight for liberty and democracy is not as perfect as the world seems to think it to be. When we speak of the United States of America, we usually tend to imagine a land that is built based on freedom, democracy, and equality as its very Declaration of Independence (1776) states:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness… [And that] whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it. (para. 2)

This is supposed to show the extent to which the United States of America is a land where people enjoy their full rights. It has fought for centuries for freedom, democracy and equality from its first war, the War for Independence (1775 – 1783) until this day. Yet, this belief is controversial as what one fails to uncover are the truths of social and racial injustices and even gender segregation. Many minorities endured social segregation such as native Indians, Hispanics and African-Americans. American White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, also referred to as WASPS, have always tried to preserve their nation and identity from immigrants and any other newcomers that were not White Americans and did not share the same beliefs. This is why they were considered a threat. This nativist thinking is what led to the segregation of minorities which has been perpetuated until today. The primary victims of these social injustices are African-Americans, who have long suffered from slavery, stripped out from their native

homes into a foreign land where they have endured the worst atrocities at the hands of white men, and it was not until the declaration of the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) signed by President Lincoln that they had been granted partial-freedom. However, they were unaware that these rights were not enough to protect them from the social segregation they had undergone at the hands of their fellow White citizens. Their discrimination was perpetuated until the end of World War II (1939–1945), which sparked the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s. The United States of America has always been dominated by white men who enslaved, exploited, and did not consider Black people as full human beings. According to Michel Foucault (1978) "*where there is power, there is resistance"* (p. 95) and the power exerted over African-Americans is what led Black people to revolt demanding their rights, and in this regard, we can cite some major figures like Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King, who rose to prominence during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

This dominance of white men was also at the level of literature as a genre. At first, Black people were excluded from the literary world, but African-American literature began to thrive with William Wells Brown's first African-American novel entitled *Clotel or the president's daughter* (1853) as well as his first play *The Escape; or, a leap for freedom* (1853) with many other writers who appeared later on such as W. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington who dealt with the issues of racism in the United States of America. The Harlem Renaissance also played a major role in the history of African-Americans. This literary and cultural movement aimed at spreading their culture around the world in general and had a deep impact on their literature because it rejected the writing norms advanced by traditional White American writers and adopted a creative style that reflected their identity. The Harlem Renaissance (1920s – 1930s) saw the flourishment of many literary masterpieces of famous authors such as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Augusta Savage, to name but a few.

Simultaneously, this white men's oppression also affected African-American women who did not have to endure social discrimination because of their class and race but also because of their gender. In an attempt to shed light on the importance of the racial, gender and class segregation that Black women experienced in their workplace, this dissertation then seeks to explore the different experiences of African-American women, their struggles, and the challenges they faced in a White-dominated world. For this purpose, I have chosen a novel that deals with these issues. *The other black girl* (2022) is a novel written by Zakiya Dalila Harris, who is herself an African-American who has experienced the same mistreatment in her workplace. She spent three years working as an editorial assistant and then as an assistant editor from which she was inspired to write her debut novel about the publishing industry. Her real-life experience makes the novel even closer to reality.

Despite the advancement of American society, women are still marginalized and their issues are not yet settled. Many movements are still rising and fighting for African-American women's liberation. Movements like the Metoo Movement (2006) sought to fight against sexual violence, as Black women are at higher risk of sexual abuse than White females. The Black Lives Matter Movement (2013) also rose to address issues of Blacks in general as well as Black women emphasising the importance of intersectionality between race, gender and class. For African-Americans, race, gender and class have always been important as they still face discrimination from all sides even in their professional life.

As far as the working environment is concerned, it has not been much in favour of Black women. Black women are not granted higher positions at work and are not even given the opportunity to climb the bureaucratic hierarchy. In fact, they are underrepresented in leadership roles. According to a recent study, although Black women ask for promotions at the same rate as men, just 58 Black women are promoted for every 100 white men. In addition, for every 100 men hired into management positions, just 64 Black women get hired. (*Women in the*

workplace, 2022). Black women are also more likely to experience more discrimination and microaggression in their workplace. They are often underestimated and judged due to their race and skin colour. A recent study found that Black women are more likely to be questioned about their competencies and area of expertise by being asked to provide evidence of their abilities. They are also disrespected in many ways. For example, when they are mistaken for someone at a lower level because of their race and colour, or when knowing that people are surprised they are actually skilled at their work. (*Women in the workplace,* 2022).

Nowadays, African-American women indeed enjoy their full rights, yet that does not spare them the racism they still endure at the hands of their fellow white people. African-American women have always been marginalized, and when it comes to the workplace, working industries mostly welcome white men and women workers eventually granting them well-deserved promotions after their hard work. But unlike them, African-American women are rarely even hired by these industries and are even less likely to be promoted despite their hard work and even if sometimes they work even harder than their male and white female counterparts.

Review of the Literature

The other black girl has been reviewed by many journals and magazines. However, given the fact that the novel is too recent and was published in 2021, it has received very little attention from scholars and critics. The novel is described as *Get out* meets *Devil wears Prada* by the author's publicity materials and this literary mashup was impatiently expected by many readers and later became a best-seller (Jackson, 2021). This explains the large number of book reviews that have been written following its date of publication. With the aim of analysing the novel from a Black Feminist lens, a background about Black Feminist theorists is needed to achieve a better understanding of the novel and the position of Black women.

When we speak of feminism, we refer to it as a project, but according to Angela Davis, it should be referred to as feminisms, in the plural. According to her, some Black Feminist ideas may differ in the movement itself. Despite this variance some principles are still the same, focusing on the intersection between race, gender and class as Davis (2019) puts it:

> Black women's experience of racism, sexism, and classism are inseparable. Their needs and worldviews are distinct from those of black men and white women. There is no contradiction between the struggle against racism, sexism, and all other-isms. All must be addressed simultaneously. (Peterson, 2019)

Black women's oppression is different from that of Black men or White women, which means that they require different solutions. Their fight is not only against racism and classism like their fellow Black men, or only against gender discrimination like White women, but it is rather against all of them combined which makes the fight even more difficult. In a report by Castellina (2016) on a talk about black feminism and contemporary American politics at Roma Tre University, Davis points out that *"One third of the world's incarcerated women are locked up in American prisons, even though the US represents only 5% of the global population. And they are Black women."* She also explains that gender does not stand alone and should be addressed along with race and class. Davis then argues that feminism has, in fact, changed. It is no longer a question of identity, but what matters now is gender politics. (para. 5)

In her critical theory explained in *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*, bell hooks (1982) puts forward Black women's sufferings. She argues that during slavery, sexism amplified the suffering of Black women which is perpetuated. She also believes that Black women's oppression is in fact, overlooked by many white middle-classed feminists who have failed to address the issues of race as she explains:

> Ironically, while the recent women's movement called attention to the fact that black women were dually victimized by racist and sexist oppression, white feminists tended to romanticize the black female experience rather than discuss the negative impact of that oppression. When feminists acknowledge in one breath that black women are victimized and in the same breath emphasize their strength, they imply that though black women are oppressed they manage to circumvent the damaging impact of oppression by being strong—and that is simply not the case. (p. 6)

It is clear that Black women's struggle for equality was disregarded. hooks also believes that Black women's oppression is related to the interconnection of social classifications of race, gender, sexuality, and class which needs to be treated simultaneously.

Moreover, as many have criticized Western Feminism for being racist and for dealing with white middle-class women's issues including hooks, Alice Walker also spoke about Black Feminism. Walker is famous for introducing her concept of *womanism.* In her book entitled *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) she defines her concept of *womanism* as:

> A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mother to female children and also a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (p. xi)

Walker expresses the impact of African-American women's struggles which suppressed their abilities. Through her concept, she believes that every woman can achieve wisdom, hope and change. However, the distinction between *womanism* and *feminism* has always been a subject of debate.

Following the date of publication of *The other black girl,* many Journals and magazines have discussed the major issues that the book deals with and have mainly tackled, in general, the experiences of Black women in their workplace. We can cite Arielle Gray's book review entitled "'The other black girl' picks apart tokenism in white workspace" (2021) where she describes tokenism as a fact that is actually as real in Harris's novel as it is in reality. This is what pushes Black women to a *"friendship-turned-rivalery"* (para. 3) as is the case of Nella and Hazel. According to Gray, *"blackness does not always equal kinship"* (para. 8) she explains that experiencing micro aggression, exploitation, and being alone is inevitable for an *'only one'* Black person in a working environment. Another review by Vanessa Willoughby entitled "Sunken place 'The other black girl' magnifies the everyday horrors of racism" (2021) describes Harris's novel as *"neither dishonest in its satire nor exaggerated in its critique of the*

white liberal racism" (para. 3) she points out the racial disparities and those related to the advances given to authors, she says *"advances given to black and non-black black people of color are routinely less than the advances given to white authors"* (para. 3) in addition to the fact that Black people may work twice as much as their fellow white colleagues, yet they will still be underpaid just like Nella who fights *"the role of 'office pet'"* (para. 3). A different book review by Regina Porter entitled "The other black girl by Zakiya Dalila Harris review – an audacious debut" (2021) describes the novel as *"a satire that uproots the insidious ways race and class merge in office dialogue and politics, and a thriller with echoes of the great science fiction writer Octavia Butler"* (para. 7) and as a realistic depiction of the real world. She also explains how assistants are taken advantage of in the publishing industry and how they are over-exploited by their superiors. She also points out the importance of skin colour and hair in the novel which makes up a Black identity.

Issue and working hypothesis

Though the abovementioned book reviews have explored the novel and have shed light in one way or another on the importance of racism and exploitation in the workplace, their interpretation is, in some ways, not based on the use of a critical theory. This is why I intend to see the sights of the novel with an analysis that relies on a Black Feminist theory. Moreover, many theorists have spoken about Black Feminism in numerous ways and have provided different explanations and although people have, indeed, talked about the novel in various different articles. However, to my best knowledge, no study has so far fully interpreted and analysed the novel from a particular angle relying on a critical theory. In the articles mentioned above, the authors have explained briefly the issues of race tackled in the novel and how much of a reality this work of fiction really is. They have referred to the story as a whole depicting the realities and struggles of being the only Black person in a given workspace and the difficulty

to see another Black person step into the space as the so-called friendship cannot always be what the two people would share. I aim to add my personal interpretation to the field which I believe will contribute to and offer more information to the academic world. I am persuaded that this novel is highly important because of its creative approach to such themes.

In this dissertation, I ought to explore the way *The other black girl* has portrayed the power dynamics in the workspace and the treatment of Black females. My purpose is to unfold the relations between race, gender and class with the help of my selected theoretical guide that I shall use throughout my analysis which is the Black Feminist theory put forward by Patricia Hill Collins in her book entitled *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment* (2000). If I have chosen the theory, it is because it provides detailed explanations of Collins's concepts where she relates oppression to race, gender and class. I have also chosen this theory for its cohesion with the novel under examination and also because it explains the necessary concepts required for the successful exploration and analysis of the selected topic and the fulfilment of the study, mainly the *matrix of domination*, and *intersectionality.* These two concepts can be related to the novel through the characters' experiences of oppression in their workplace and the power dynamics, mainly the main character, Nella Rogers, for her experience of an endless cycle of exploitation and her hope for a promotion that never comes true which is not due to her only for being a Black person, but also for being a Black woman. The plot of the novel also plays an important role and can be analysed in the sense that the cycle of oppression never ends; we can notice that the exploitation of Black women in the novel is perpetuated from the flashbacks of the past until the present day of the novel. Thus, the cycle of oppression is not only related to race, but also to class and gender and all of these elements need to be analysed simultaneously.

Methodological outline

As for the methodological outline, the discussion of this dissertation is organized into two main chapters which deal with Black Feminism in the novel. The first chapter will be devoted to the analysis of the concept of *mule uh de world* in correlation to *intersectionality* in the novel. It seeks to analyse the working environment and the treatment of Black women as *mules* in relation to the intersectional connection between race, gender and class as defined by Collins in Harris's *The other black girl.* On the other hand, the second chapter will deal with an in-depth analysis of *the matrix of domination* embedded in the novel by exploring the treatment of Black women in their workspace. This oppression can be explained through four domains of power, *the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic* and *interpersonal* domains of power theorized by Collins. These concepts shall be explained through reference to the novel.

II. Methodology

In order to reach my goals, I ought to appeal to a critical theory that would allow me to approach Harris's novel *The other black girl* (2022) from a Black Feminist lens. It is worth mentioning that several theorists, such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Alice Walker, have devoted their works to the study of Black Feminism through conceptualizing various notions that they have associated with the struggle of Black women. However, for this research, I have chosen Patricia Hill Collins's critical theory, *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2000) because of its compatibility with the novel that this dissertation is analysing. *The other black girl* provides a detailed experience of sexism, racism and classism all combined in one place, the workspace which is why Collins's theory provides the necessary tools that would support my analysis. Therefore, before going into the body of the discussion one might first take a look into what the theory is about and define the different concepts that are to be used in relation to the novel, such as *intersectionality,* and *the matrix of domination.*

1. Collins's Black Feminist theory

Throughout her book, Collins (2000) has explained how Black women have been marginalized throughout history, for she focused on the fact that the experiences of racism and patriarchy among Black women differ significantly from those of white women and Black men. The importance of Collins's critical theory *"lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups."* (p. 9) She suggested that *"oppression describes any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society"* (p. 4) and explained that women's oppression is linked to three different dimensions which are economic, political and ideological dimensions. This means that Black women have been oppressed by the

economic exploitation of their labour, have been denied their political rights, as well as controlled by cultural images that have created stereotypes about them. However, Collins (2000) argued that there is an intersecting relation between each one of the three elements that make up Black women's oppression which consists of race, class, and gender. Therefore, a need for a definition of some theoretical concepts is required for the successful analysis and fulfilment of the research findings.

Collins (2000) pointed out a difference between the two concepts of *intersectionality* and *the matrix of domination.* She explains:

> Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice. In contrast, the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression. (p. 18)

This means that intersectionality is utilized to explain a specific social location of identity using mutually constructing elements of oppression, while the matrix of domination examines the general organization of power in society mainly in four domains.

2. Intersectional oppression of Black women in their workplace

According to Collins (2000), Black women are still subjected to racial discrimination in today's society, but it takes a very different form than it did in earlier times, changing the nature of dominance itself (p. 228). In an attempt to explore and analyse the contemporary oppression of the working environment in Harris's *The other black girl,* I have first borrowed the concept of *mule uh de world* that I will be employing in the coming discussion in relation to Collins's *intersectionality. Mule uh de world* refers to how Black women are treated as *mules* in their workplace. In other words, it is a concept used to describe how Black women are exploited, treated as machines or *mules* with no leisure, and compelled to work their jobs seamlessly and against their natural schedules by taking on much more work than they should. Collins (2000)

also argues that *"black women's paid work is organized within intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender."* (p. 45) which relates to the intersectional oppression of Black women within their working environment. This concept can be related to the protagonist Nella, a middle-classed African-American woman who is taken advantage of by the white publishing company she works for.

3. The matrix of domination:

Collins (2000) explained that *the matrix of domination* is organized into four domains of power which are namely, the *structural, disciplinary, hegemonic,* and *interpersonal domains of power*. She argues that *"In the United States the particular contours of each domain of power illustrates how intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation are organized in unique ways."* (p. 276) She has established a distinction between the different domains of powers as she explained that, as opposed to being managed by the disciplinary domain, oppression is organized by the structural domain. The interpersonal domain shapes daily life experiences and the resulting individual consciousness, while the hegemonic domain legitimizes oppression (p. 276). In other words, a person is expected to abide by the limitations imposed by their race, gender, and class. Disobeying these established rules will result in social persecution.

a. The structural domain of power

According to Collins (2000), *the structural domain of power* is:

> A constellation of organized practices in employment, government, education, law, business and housing that work to maintain an unequal unjust distribution of social resources. Unlike bias and prejudice, which are characteristics of individuals, the structural domain of power operates through the laws and policies of social institutions. (p. 301)

In other words, the structural domain of power consists of the organization of social structures such as law, economy, religion and politics which organize power relations. The structural

domain establishes the broad arrangement of power inside a matrix of domination, relying on multiple forms of segregation such as race, gender and class. In the past, Black women used to work in domestic and agricultural domains but now, according to Collins (2000), thanks to different changes in the United States laws, Black women are offered opportunities to work in different domains such as education, business, and many other industries. She expresses the concern that although Black women have long fought to be part of the abovementioned professions, their fight extends beyond simple employment in these fields. After they are hired, they may find that their workplace is not what they had anticipated. (p. 280)

b. The disciplinary domain of power

Collins (2000) explains in her theory *the disciplinary domain of power* and defines it according to Foucault (1979) as *"a way of ruling that relies on bureaucratic hierarchies and techniques of surveillance, the disciplinary domain of power manages power relations."* (p. 280). She emphasizes that this domain operates more through organizational management than social policies. This domain of power within the *matrix of domination* has grown along with the importance of bureaucracy as a form of contemporary social organization. According to Collins (2000) *"this style of organization becomes highly efficient in both reproducing intersecting oppression and in masking their effects."* (p. 281). This indicates that, though subtly, their surveillance-based control that represents an important characteristic is founded on race and gender prejudice.

Insider hostility to change in that industry could be a barrier for Black women who must find innovative strategies to bring change. Collins (2000) compares it to an egg where its surface appears flawless from a distance, however, after closer investigation, it becomes clear that the egg is full of cracks and according to her, finding cracks to fill and grow in a bureaucracy is like working the cracks. Therefore, change is, once more, gradual and progressive. (pp. 281 –

282) Collins argues that many Black women were able to revolutionize how bureaucracies function. They usually come up with creative ways to manipulate the system so that it becomes more equitable without resorting to the use of terms like *racism*, *sexism*, or *discrimination*. Black women in the United States of America recognize the possibility that they may be subjected to different rules than their white female counterparts whether on purpose or not. Despite having credentials like diplomas and past training, they can, in fact, still be considered second-class citizens. (Collins, 2000. p. 282)

c. The hegemonic domain of power

As defined by Collins (2000) the *hegemonic domain of power* is:

> A form or mode of social organization that uses ideas and ideology to absorb and thereby depoliticize oppressed groups' dissent. Alternatively, the diffusion of power throughout the social system where multiple groups police one another and suppress one another's dissent. (p. 299)

The goal of the hegemonic domain of power is to justify oppression. Through the manipulation of ideology and culture, it connects the structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains of power (Collins, 2000. p. 284). Collins (2000) states that *"racist and sexist ideologies, if they are disbelieved, lose their impact."* (p. 284) which explains the need for the hegemonic domain to constantly refashion images in order to garner support for the matrix of domination which is its crucial aspect. Collins (2000) adds that another important facet of the hegemonic domain *"lies in its ability to shape consciousness via the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies."* (p. 285). These manipulations are what allow society to construct and mould images about minorities.

d. The interpersonal domain of power

Collins (2000) explains *the interpersonal domain of power* by defining it as follows, *"discriminatory practices of everyday lived experiences that because they are so routine*

typically go unnoticed or remain unidentified. Strategies of everyday racism and everyday resistance occur in this domain." (p. 299). This domain represents people's daily life experiences of oppression. According to Collins (2000), people generally acknowledge their oppression but fail to recognize others' oppressions making them seem less significant. This domain also operates on accepted norms of how people engage with one another which might seem so familiar that they usually overlook them (pp. 287 – 288). The *matrix of domination* is to be applied in the novel through the characters' experiences of oppression from the different domains of power.

4. Short synopsis of the novel

The other black girl is written by Zakiya Dalila Harris and was published in 2021. The novel follows the daily life experiences of Nella Rogers, a twenty-six-year-old African American middle-classed editorial assistant who works in the publishing industry of Wagner Books as the only Black employee until the unexpected arrival of a freshly hired Black woman, Hazel. The novel portrays the oppression and micro-aggressions endured by African-Americans at their workplace through the main character, Nella who epitomises the life of all Black women. We first notice that Nella is the only Black girl in a white-dominated industry, which leads us to question the way she is treated by her co-workers as well as her superiors. Harris also puts forward the fact that not many Black women have achieved success in their professional life as we are introduced to the characters Diana Gordon and Kindra Rae Phillips a writer and her editor who made a huge success out of their book, *Burning heart* but we learn later that she was put down as soon as she speaks out about the racism in the working industry which is what pushes her to vanish.

Nella invests her time and energy into diversity meetings that she organizes with the hopes of bringing change into the working environment but fails. Her boss Vera underestimates

her efforts and claims that she puts more effort into the meetings that she considers *"extracurricular"* rather than her job and makes her work harder than her white co-workers. When Vera asked Nella to give her opinion directly to the writer on a novel she was editing, *Needles and pins* by Colin, one of Wagner's most important writers, Nella was honest and exposed her thoughts on his character, Shartricia whom she thought was a stereotypical character. Colin's reaction was very bad as he put the blame on Nella and accused her of calling him a racist and she was forced to apologize. Later on, Nella started receiving disturbing notes commanding her to leave Wagner which she later learns that it was a warning from African-Americans who wanted to protect her from becoming one of what they refer to as 'the other black girls' which her co-worker, Hazel was part of. However, Nella fails to resist and succumbs to becoming one of them. This metaphor is used by Harris to represent the hardship that Black women go through and she uses the other Black girls to represent how society wants them to be, submissive, passive, compliant, and obedient to their white superiors.

III. Results and Discussion

In order to fully grasp the extent of Black women's oppression in their working environment as described by Harris in her *The other black girl* (2022), we have used a Black feminist theory explained by Collins in her book, *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2000). It is quite noticeable that in her novel, Harris has put forward the daily oppressive experiences of her black characters in their workplace, mainly the main character, Nella Rogers. The writer builds up a plot where she explores the oppression exerted over Black women through her main character and her relationship with her co-workers and superiors. The writer describes the micro-aggressions and exploitation that her character had to endure in the white-dominated industry she works in. Therefore, in order to reach a better understanding of the experiences of Black women, in general, and in their working environment, in particular, a deeper critical analysis of the novel is needed. To reach our purpose, we have made use of three theoretical concepts borrowed from Collins's Black feminist theory.

The outcome of the study has revealed two major results. First, we have examined the novel relying on the concepts of *intersectionality* in relation *to mule uh de world*. The two major concepts have been used to shed light on the characters' experiences of daily oppression related to their gender, class, and race. We have concluded from the analysis that Black women are treated as less than humans, more like mules who must work non-stop and please their superiors who are considered the expert figures. For instance, Nella is the hardest worker at Wagner Books; she takes on more tasks than any other assistant and always wants to make her boss, Vera, very content. She even takes her work back home and spends hours reading manuscripts and ended up not even paying attention to her social life. But at the end, we come to realize that Black women are, in fact, considered machines. Indeed, we come to learn that

despite Nella's efforts, she was not rewarded, not even with the smallest promotion that she deserved.

Second, we have explored the concept of *the matrix of domination* and its four domains of power: *the structural domain of power, the disciplinary domain of power, the hegemonic domain of power,* and *the interpersonal domain of power* as portrayed in the novel. We have concluded that oppression functions through *the matrix of domination* which organizes, manages, controls, and legitimizes oppression. For example, the fact that Nella is the only Black employee highlights the lack of work opportunities Black women have. In addition, we learn from the novel that Nella was constantly watched since the day she got into Wagner which relates to the fact that Black women are not entrusted with the work they are given to perform and are in constant surveillance. Another point is that in the novel, Colin, one of Wagner's most important writers, was allowed to have his book entitled *Needles and pins* published despite the stereotypes it contains on Black women. This represents how the oppression of Black women is legitimised. The last point is where we learn about the relationship between White and Black people, while White people believe in their superiority, they fail to understand the oppression Black women endure. We also learn through Nella that Black people also struggle within themselves to forge their own identity.

Chapter one: Intersectional oppression and *mule uh de world* in *The other black girl*

The focus of this chapter is to explore the intersectional oppression of race, gender, and class of Black women in their working environment in Harris's *The other black girl* by deploying the concept of *intersectionality* focusing on *mule uh de world*, both explained by Collins in her *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.* The word *mule uh de world* was first used as a reference to Black women by Zora Neale Hurston in her novel, *Their eyes were watching God* (1937) saying: *"De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see."* (p. 21) The word *mule* refers to Black women being treated like machines and objects to possess and used to please the Whites. In this context, we understand that Black women are associated with a slave's qualities as they are expected to do what they are told without having the right to refuse (Messaoudene & Mokhtar, 2017, p. 34). Although the statement goes back to the 1930s and despite the development of American society, we come to realise that, though subtly, this statement is still functioning in Black women's everyday life in today's American society.

In fact, the exploration of the aforementioned concept would not be successful without the resort to the study of the intersectional oppression of Black women. In 1989, the term *intersectionality* was introduced by Crenshaw in her article *Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics.* The concept became widely used as it was adopted by many scholars and theorists mainly in America in order to show the degree of oppression to which Black people, particularly Black women were subjected to throughout the history of slavery in America. In this regard, Smith (2017) says:

> Since the times of slavery, Black women have eloquently described the multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender—referring to this concept as "interlocking oppressions," "simultaneous oppressions," "double jeopardy," "triple jeopardy" or any number of descriptive terms. (p. 2)

Smith (2017) states that it is not possible to comprehend Black women's oppression without considering their multiple oppression simultaneously and not separately (p. 3). It is true, that Black women are in fact oppressed not only because of their race but also due to their gender and class as hooks (1982) also believes:

> No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women... When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women. (p. 7)

This shows that Black women were not considered as human beings, but as objects, which is the main reason for their oppression. When we talk about the workplace, Black women are among many exploited people. In this sense Porcher and Austin (2021) state: *"Black women carry the load that white men, white women, and Black men refuse to carry; they do the work that no one wants to do, without praise or thanks."* (p. 117). It is well known that Black women are the ones who do most of the work and work harder than any other staff member but at the same time, they are at the lowest level of the office hierarchy, which is exactly the case of the main character of the novel, Nella Rogers.

Thus, in *The other black girl*, the author describes the life of Nella Rogers, a Black woman who struggles in her workplace. Nella was the only Black girl in her workplace until the arrival of Hazel, another Black woman who took away her spotlight. The novel deals with gender and racial issues and portrays how Black women are taken advantage of in their workplace. They are low-paid but are expected to take on more work, perform them to unnatural deadlines, and work even harder than their fellow white folks for the exact same pay. The above example among others leads us to say that Black women are considered as *mules* by their white superiors or employers which is what this chapter illustrates.

Moreover, not only do white supremacists working environments make Black women work harder and more than any of their white co-workers who occupy the same positions as them, but their working conditions are also not ideal and even worse than that of white privileged women. For example in the novel, Nella's colleague, Sophie brought up to her an

article that was anonymously written and tackles the difficulties and what it is like to be a Black woman in a white workplace asking her if she was the one who wrote it to which Nella replied: *"'Yeah, I do … and for the tenth time, I definitely didn't write that article,' Nella reminded her, 'even though I can obviously relate to a lot of the stuff that was in it.'"* (pp. 12-13) and through her answer and by the tone used by the author, we come to understand that in fact, the working conditions in which Nella, as a Black middle-classed woman works are not ideal. As cited in Collins's *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment*, Richardson (1987) believes that no matter the qualities that a Black woman has, *"it is impossible for scarce an individual of them to rise above the condition of servants"* (p. 46). According to the novel, the bad working conditions that Nella faces are not due to the fact that she is an assistant, but it is also because she is a Black woman which is the real reason behind it. In other words, she does not only face the problem of not having an office of her own, boundaries between her and her co-workers, or not being overworked by her boss, but also suffers from the micro-aggressions of the whole industry.

In addition to the conditions at work, promotion is also a matter that Black women struggle to obtain. Even if they deserve it, they are not even considered as such. This is illustrated in the novel many times like when Nella has worked extremely hard for over two years for Vera, her boss, but never had any kind of promotion. Harris states:

> When Nella had asked for a promotion, Vera had listed at least a dozen surprise grievances she'd had with Nella's performance as her assistant, the last being the most unsettling of all: "I wish you'd put half the effort you put into those extracurricular diversity meetings into working on the core requirements." (p. 13)

Throughout the novel, we come to see how much of a hard worker Nella is, and by the above quote, we come to realize that her boss does not even acknowledge her hard work and underestimates her efforts taking them for granted and pushing her to work even more as the boss keeps telling them that their efforts are not enough as an excuse. Not granting Black women any promotion is also in order to push them to work even harder. With no promotion,

Nella's wage remains low which affects her social class which stays the same causing an intersectional oppression that Nella has to endure in her everyday life. The promise and hope of promotion is just a dream that keeps them going but will never get. This may also refer to the letter in Ellison's *The invisible man* (1952) which states *"Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."* The letter shows that despite the fact that it is only a dream, the white people wish to keep the narrator, and Black people in general, running after false dreams. This reflects on Nella's situation since we see that she is overworked but is still not granted any reward. Moreover, calling her efforts to bring on more diversity in the workplace *"extracurricular"* shows how less importance is given to Black people and the way they are seen as *mules* who must only focus on working hard for their white bosses and forget about everything else. This shows to what extent Black women are still treated as slaves, in a contemporary way where it is not only due to their race and gender but also to their social class.

Black women are diligent workers, not only because they want to succeed in their careers, but also because they have no choice. They have to work hard if they even want to keep their job in the first place. Nella works awfully hard and takes her job very seriously. This is illustrated in many passages. For example, through the way she tries to do her best to finish reading the manuscripts that Vera gives her as soon as she can even if that means hurting herself:

> Nella cleared her throat and ran her left thumb down the edge of the manuscript, then across its bottom. She knew that she might cut herself deep enough to bleed if she moved her finger any faster, but she also knew that with this risk came the possibility of a reward—an excuse to flee and win a few precious minutes of stall time—and such a possibility was tempting. (p. 17)

Nella was exhausted because she pushed herself too hard to finish the manuscript that her boss gave her as soon as she can to please her. This shows how much demanding work Nella puts into her work despite being an uncomfortable place that she wants to escape. Her hard work is fuelled by the possibility of a promotion. This is again a way for white people to assert their oppression on black people. It is an illusion that makes white people have control over Black people and make them work harder than they should. As cited in Caplan-Bricker's (2017)

article, Garza said: *"While black women are working hard, democracy isn't working for us, and hard work isn't paying off."* (para. 8). An important statement that relates exactly to the real situation of Black women. In this context, Vera is considered the figure of the master in the novel who perceives her Black employee as a *mule.*

Another example of treating Black women as *mules* is that white people do not value Black women's opinions. They either dismiss their opinion or use them without even acknowledging them. This is shown through the way Vera asks Nella for her opinion on the manuscripts she works on:

> The last time Nella had critiqued a book that her boss favored—six months earlier—Vera had dipped her head and told her that her feedback had been spot-on. But then, when it came time for Nella to overnight the marked-up pages along to the author, she happened to notice her comments on the last few pages hadn't made it in. She flipped through the first chapter and hadn't seen any of her comments on those pages, either. (p. 20)

Vera clearly did not value Nella's thoughts and opinions on the books she gave her to read but made her read everything anyway. This is because Black women are considered inferior and must work more than white people because of their race. They are also exploited and not valued not only because of their race, but also their gender which is seen as intersectional oppression.

Later in the novel, Vera asked Nella for her opinion on *Needles and pins,* a novel which Vera was editing for Colin, one of Wagner's most important writers. Nella had found the character of the novel, *Shartricia* to be a stereotypical character which gave an unbelievably bad image of Black people specifically Black women; an opinion that she shared with Collin at Vera's request. His reaction to the critic was negative and thus, accused Nella of calling him a racist. The oppression of Black women can be shown through Vera's treatment of Nella after the incident: *"I sent you something that needed to be addressed immediately half an hour ago, and resent it again just now. Could you please take care of that? Now? Thanks."* (p. 93) Vera seems to have become even more demanding despite knowing that Nella works harder than anyone in the office. This was a way for Vera to punish Nella because she gave an honest opinion to the writer and not an opinion that was expected of her to give. Vera is mad at Nella

only because she gave her opinion and considered it a big mistake. This suggests that Nella, as a black woman, is not free to speak her mind but has always to take into consideration white people's reaction to that opinion. She is expected to avoid anything that would make white people angry as it is considered to be her fault. This is related to how society functions and to the fact that Black women are expected to be *mules* and abide by the social norms, work hard without questioning and live up to the expectations of white people that are superior to them.

Furthermore, it is commonly known that Black people struggle to find jobs. According to Collins (2000), when they do: *"on average, approximately one-third of Black women and men who find employment work in jobs characterized by low wages, job instability, and poor working conditions."* (p. 62). This resembles much to Nella's situation. We come to learn that Nella's wage is not a good one despite the demanding work she puts herself to. In fact, Black women are less paid because of their race as well as their gender. Harris describes a scene where we understand Nella's financial situation:

> Lunch with Hazel was at Nico's, an independent hole-in-the-wall café that served Au Bon Pain–quality food with a side of Pret A Manger ambiance. It wasn't a particularly nice spot, but Nella often chose it because it was cheap, and the higher-ups who actually did set foot inside always took their food to go. And since higher-ups certainly didn't take agents or authors to Nico's—waitstaff was an absolute must while wining and dining clientele—the café afforded Nella what she wanted and needed most: a lunch spot of her own, since her cube at the office was everyone else's battleground as much it was hers. (p. 50)

From the above quote, we come to learn that the place they had lunch had to be cheap because their wage does not allow them to afford more than that. We also come to know that higher-ups even if they do buy from the place, they do not sit there to eat their food but rather take it with them and they do not meet their agents there but rather take them to a nicer place. This suggests that the place is not considered as a nice place or as an important spot where people of high class can go to. This scene highlights the financial situation of most Black women who are working under the command of Whites as their wages do not allow them to afford a nicer place. It represents another intersectional issue which is class. Her financial situation is actually intersected with her race and gender. Her boss refuses to grant her any promotion due to the

fact that she is a Black woman and her wage is less than White women's. This makes her a middle-classed woman.

Black women are also overworked by their white bosses. This can be shown in the novel through Nella, who sacrificed her time, social life, friendship and even her relationship for her work. We see that Nella did not have time for herself anymore because her boss made her work increasingly as she became consumed with her work. From a passage in the novel, we can see that Nella missed doing a casual fun activity that many friends tend to do with each other, which is looking up people they know on the internet. And Nella did not do that with her friend, Malaika. Nella's friend said: *"I can't believe we haven't done this yet. How have we not done this yet?"* (p. 109) to which Nella replied: *"I don't know. I was looking at her boyfriend's sister's hair café website earlier today, but I never got around to her because Vera was working me like a dog."* (p. 109). The tone of the author suggests that it is indeed a casual thing that most people do, but the fact that Nella did not have enough time even for this small thing illustrates how much Vera has been giving her a huge amount of work. Nella clearly could not even breathe or enjoy silly moments of fun with her friend. This is related to her boss who considers her as a working machine or as a *mule*, she is overworked and treated as a slave but in a more modern way.

Nella works harder than any assistant in her workplace. Yet, she is considered to have made a mistake by giving her honest opinion on a white man's book, and her mistake is linked to the fact that she is Black as illustrated in the following description:

> Come to think of it, the only person in the office who'd had any kind of problem with Nella had been Vera. God, how stern she'd been. How unfair. Just because Nella had spoken her truth about Shartricia, and was absurdly late to work that one time… those things didn't make her a bad assistant. She knew what a bad assistant looked like. *Trust*. All anyone needed to do was look around the office when the other editors went out to lunch. The other assistants were easily distracted. Dispassionate. Neglectful. (pp. 115-116)

Unlike the other assistants, Nella was not only enthusiastic about her work, but she was aware that she was doing her best and even more than she was supposed to. She worked hard than any

other assistant at Wagner. She put on so much time and effort into her work that she became obsessed with it, making it her whole life that it even got into her subconscious as described in the following scene:

> Nella's eyes popped wider than they had hours earlier in bed. She'd forgotten something. Not a hint as to where the note might have come from, but a task for Vera: tweak the online copy so that it spoke to a younger audience. Perhaps *that* was the real reason why she had felt pulled to work so early. It wouldn't be the first time her subconscious was more on it than she was. (p. 116)

The above quote shows the effect her much-done efforts had on her mental state. Nella's work became entrenched in her mind as well as her subconscious. It became the only thing she was thinking of. She wants to succeed, but she knows she must put in much more work than any of her white colleagues as she says *"Well, we know how it goes: We gotta work twice as hard to get what we want."* (p. 122), hoping for a promotion that would allow her to reach her goal and realize her dream of becoming an editor. A promotion that will, unfortunately, never come. Working harder than her white colleagues was not only motivated by her will for success, but it was also motivated by fear, the fear of losing her job. It is hard enough for Black women to get hired in the first place. Therefore, they are forced to do everything they can to keep their position which leads them to experience oppression and contemporary slavery.

Another example of contemporary slavery is the way Vera neglected to send Nella a book that she was working on but seemed to be expecting her to read it anyway and even after that, she gave her even more work to do:

> "Hey… since you were able to get to that one so quickly, any chance you'd be able to read another one by tomorrow? I'll send it to you right now, promise. *Steeled Heart.* It's really, *really* good. It's *Pride and Prejudice* meets *I, Robot.*"
> Nella nodded and said that of course she could, even as she remembered that she and Owen had plans to meet his moms, who were visiting from Denver, at the High Line that very evening. (p. 168)

Nella found herself taken advantage of and thought of the fact that she had no choice but to accept every work that her boss gives her fearing that if she does not, she might end up losing every bit of hope she had of getting promoted which is why she found herself in a position

where she had to give up on her social life for her work. This is another example related to the fact that Black women are treated as *mules* and expected to focus only on their work for white people, forgetting about anything else even their personal life. And Vera had not stopped giving her more and more work to do:

> But she didn't have the time these days. Ever since their conversation about *The Lie*, Vera had been inundating Nella with manuscripts, day after day. She was thinking about which one she should start first when Sophie said, "Wait! Your reading thing's *tonight*? I totally forgot. Where is it, again?"
> "It's at Curl Central. In Bed-Stuy." (pp. 174-175)

This supports the idea of Nella being overworked to the point that she does not even find the time to think about going out with her friends or attending social events and she even forgot about the reading event that Hazel was hosting because of her work. While all the other assistants seemed to have the time to enjoy the conversation about going to the event, Nella had even forgotten that it was happening that night. In addition, she did not even have time to go out and breathe a little:

> Nella had received this message in other ways—for starters, in the absence of invitations to have lunch with Gina and Sophie. They'd stopped asking Nella to eat with them after she declined five lunch offers in the span of two weeks—she simply had too much work to do—and they'd opted to try Hazel instead. (p. 239)

Due to the pressure and the amount of work Vera asked Nella to do, she was not even able to enjoy a quick lunch with her co-workers and refused each time because she had so much work to get done.

As described in another scene, we are told that Vera asked Nella once again to apologize to Colin, which she already did. Nella had no obligation towards Colin yet, her actions were considered to be wrong. Vera asked her:

> "I do think that it's not a bad idea to apologize to him again. Just a small apology. And then, tabula rasa." Nella stopped clicking her pen. "What do you think about that idea?" *I think I already apologized to him before he left the office, four times.* "I have to say… I may need to think on it," Nella said, realizing how hollow her voice sounded. "Respectfully, that is. I'd kind of thought we'd moved past it by now." (p. 169)

Despite Nella's innocence, we clearly see that her boss is blaming her for Colin's anger. We realize from the above quote that no matter who did wrong, Black women are always the ones who are expected to apologize to the white person because they are always supposed to be right. Nella did not even refer to Colin as a racist, but only pointed out a misrepresentation of one of his characters, Shartricia. This was in the hopes that he could correct that by taking into consideration the opinion of a real Black woman and not what is said in the media about Black women. Yet, she was the one who was accused of being wrong and calling him a racist. It may also be pointed out that through this passage, we understand that Nella is in fact trying to vindicate her rights in her workplace by standing up to Colin. But again, because Nella is Black and under a white-supremacist rule in Wagner Books, she could not of course refuse her boss's request as she was expected to perform any task she was assigned and do anything her boss asks her to because she was the *mule*, which is why she told Vera that she was going to think about it. But thinking about it, for Vera, is a "yes" because she cannot accept any other answer from her Black employee, as the following statement shows:

> "Well, respectfully, Nella, I'd have to say that your apology was a little…" Vera wobbled her head from side to side. "'I'm sorry you thought I called you a racist' is a little bit like saying 'I'm sorry you thought I ran over your puppy with my SUV.' It's… a bit empty. You know what I mean?" *Do* you *know what* you *mean?* "I'll do some serious thinking about it," Nella repeated. Vera said that she understood, although something in her last word turned down a bit. Nella looked away. She realized she was crossing her arms, so she uncrossed them. "I can give him a call, I guess." (pp. 169-170)

From the above quote, we understand the extent to which Black women are not allowed to refuse anything their boss asked them. It is obvious that Nella does not want to apologize again to Colin but because it is Vera who asked her to do so, she feels like she has no choice in the matter because her answer might determine her future and if she refuses it might affect her job, by losing either her promotion or even her place at Wagner Books. Nella finally accepted to do so, not because she wanted to, but because she was forced to, by Vera and by society. Nella also never rejected any work Vera had given her even if she was already overwhelmed and has much work to do.

Nella does not just work harder than anyone at Wagner, but she puts all her efforts and prioritises her work every time. Her thoughts are described by Harris in the following quote:

> … she hadn't felt like anyone thought she'd been doing a good job at all, despite how much of her social life she'd given up, and despite how quickly she answered the phone (an impressive 90 percent mid-first-ring rate). She'd even quietly fixed a few catastrophic production issues, then prevented the knowledge of their existence from ever reaching Vera at all. She felt—if she could be so proud—like the unsung hero of publishing at the moment. (p. 257)

This shows how much sacrifice Nella had done for her work and how much hard she worked to get, if even a bit closer to achieving her dream of becoming an editor. Her work even followed her to her relationship. She spent the time reading and working on the manuscripts Vera had given her rather than talking to her boyfriend during their lunchtime. She even missed their scheduled meeting so many times as suggested through the following passage:

> He'd let her read her manuscripts in peace during their meals, had said *no worries* when she'd decided to forego an episode of *The Sopranos* because she had to finish something for Vera. He'd even forgiven her for missing family time with his moms. (p. 292)

This also supports, the fact that Nella had been giving up on her social life for the sake of her work. This was not only with her boyfriend but also with everything that surrounds her:

> She moved away from the wall, approaching the sink once more. A closer look at herself revealed someone who barely saw her best friend anymore, and the few times she did, they talked about her job—not about the video of the Puerto Rican teenager who'd been shot in the face eight times by a shop owner who'd wrongfully accused him of stealing; not about that Fortune 500 CEO who'd been outed just the week before after it was revealed he'd worn blackface to a party while Obama had still been in office. Just her job. (p. 345)

Nella was so absorbed by her work and the will to achieve her goal of becoming an editor that she forgot about everything that was important to her. Her surrounding became all about her work, her conversations, her meetings and even the time she spent with her boyfriend became all about work. She forgot about what is going on in the world to which she paid less and less attention, and all of that was because of her work. This is the case for Black women in American society. Nella is, in fact, a representation of Black women in American society. They are treated as *mules* and expected to work harder than anyone but with no guarantee of success in their careers. They are not granted promotions but are expected to perform more tasks and take on

more work even if it means putting their personal lives aside which makes them machines working for the benefit of the white industry.

American society operates in a way that keeps Black women in the same position they have been assigned for years, that is to say, that of *mules.* Black women have always tried to speak up and make their voices heard, but society always puts them down and prevents them from achieving any social change. This can be illustrated by the fact that one of the most important fictional books in the novel, *Burning hearts* was in fact banned from many schools:

> It was hard to find a copy of *Burning Heart* in any library or bookstore after it came out, and when high schools started banning it for its explicit, occasionally gruesome content—it was the time of Reagan, after all—its comparisons to *Native Son* caused book clubs to spring up in unexpected places: white suburban homes, but also Black lower- and middle-class homes, too. Apparently, something about two Black women—one light, one dark, both college graduates—had captured the heart of America. (pp. 279-280)

This suggests that the book deals with important racial issues and was banned because of that. It is clear that the reason is to prevent awareness to reach young Black students in education, which would make them grow to abide by the social norms they are expected to. The aim is to silence any voice or resistance that might come up from Black women making of them *mules* that white supremacists can use whenever they please.

This can also be illustrated in the novel first by Nella's efforts to bring on more diversity to the publishing industry she works for. We learn that she fails, and no one takes the meeting she organizes seriously, but this makes us think that the reason they do not bring more Black women to the workplace is that they do not need them at the moment. Since Black women are considered *mules*, it is logical to say that they would not bring more until they need to. However, with the arrival of Hazel, another Black woman, we learn with the progress of the plot that she succeeded to make the owner of Wagner Books, Richards, more interested in the issues of Black women and even sponsored an event held by Hazel who announced in her speech:

> "*Burning Heart* was a shining light in a valley of darkness. Or should I say, *white*ness," Hazel continued, and a few people nodded their heads. "It took on some very difficult topics, and we are all the better for it now. So, when I finally found myself at Wagner, I took a chance and asked him [Richard] how he'd feel about helping sponsor our girls. A

> small piece of trivia that some of you may know: Ms. Gordon *and* her editor, Kendra Rae Phillips, were both teenagers when they discovered their passion for the written word. It's *such* an impressionable time, you feel me? (p. 209)

Hazel succeeded to achieve what Nella could not, but when we continue our reading and analysis of the book, we learn about Hazel as being one of what they call the other Black girls. We realize that Richard was easily convinced to help young Black readers not out of charity but because he wants to get more *mules.* The event Hazel held would allow Richard to have a look at more Black women who would later become *mules.* The other Black girls in the novel are described as such:

> OBGs. "Other Black Girls," Lynn had dubbed them, "because they're not *our* kind." They were something else entirely. Something close to alien, although Lynn wasn't out-there enough to suspect that these OBGs—or whatever it was that was changing them—had landed here from outer space. She just knew there was a deeper explanation for why these young women were suddenly no longer beholden to anyone but themselves and the white people they worked for. Why they were so obsessed with success—and with taking down any Black women who got in their way. (p. 229)

These women had no interest in anything but their work. They do not care about what is happening in the world and whether they are misrepresented in the media or not. They gave up on their convictions, their identity and anything that defines them. The only thing they care about is achieving professional success. We also learn, through Hazel, that those other Black girls have a specific way of addressing white people which she refers to as code-switching as she advised Nella to go on with her apology to Colin: *"Yeah. I get the feeling, though, that if you maybe just apologized to Colin, it would all fizzle out. Just think of it as an exercise in code-switching."* (p. 225). This code-switching is a switch that makes Black people put their identity and convictions aside to do what their white superiors ask of them. A mask they got used to wearing until it became part of their identity, their identity that was shifted.

At the end of the novel, we see Nella falling into Hazel's trap which is described by the author using the following words:

> This time, Nella did venture to see what was staring back at her in the mirror. What she saw was someone who hadn't checked Facebook in weeks—a feat that wasn't too unusual. But she also saw a girl who couldn't remember the last time she'd shared a link on Twitter about any Black issues. It'd been weeks. Months, maybe. She saw a girl who'd declined

> her boyfriend's proposal to go see a documentary about wrongful incarceration at BAM, citing too much work as an excuse. (p. 345)

From the above passage, it is worth mentioning that what the author is describing is, in fact, a metaphor for what society wants Black women to be. Society wants to silence Black women and make them as occupied as possible with issues that should be trivial to anyone, issues such as finding a job, getting a promotion, healthcare, and other social rights. The purpose behind that is that White society already considers Black women as *mules* but needs them to accept that by forgetting about everything and only acting the way they are expected to. According to the novel, many Black women became part of the other Black girls:

> The only thing worse than that was knowing that dozens, maybe even hundreds, of other young Black women were experiencing this same kind of humiliation, too… and young Black women were the cause of it. Hundreds of young Black women, probably more, were undergoing severe personality changes all over the world. The degree to which they were changing varied from person to person. Some spoke differently, others dressed differently. But the most important thing was that the change wasn't superficial. It went down to each and every one of their souls. (p. 229)

This refers to the Black women who stopped fighting and just accepted whatever their fate is dictated by the white-dominating society. They have given up their identity and principles to get a place in the working environment as well as a hierarchical position in society that suits them. They benefit from what white men give them and serve them. In return, they will not have to starve or be scared to lose their jobs ever again.

All things considered, we may conclude that Black women's lives are not easy even in today's America. They have been for centuries treated like slaves and despite the advancement and the democracy under which they live, it does not do them justice. They experience intersectional oppression related to their race, gender and class. They are also treated like *mules* and are expected to follow every rule established by the white-dominated society which exploits them and overworks them for its own benefit. Black women have transitioned from direct slave treatment to a modern time one, as they are still slaves in the eyes of white people. Their

oppression works through an established system of domination that manages, controls, and legitimises oppression.

Chapter two: The *matrix of domination* in *The other black girl*

The present chapter analyses Harris's *The other black girl* and the power dynamics in the working environment using Collins's concept, *the matrix of domination.* The latter is divided into four domains of power: *the structural domain of power, the disciplinary domain of power, the hegemonic domain of power,* and *the interpersonal domain of power* which are used to shed light on the extent to which Black women are marginalized in the American society and specifically in their working environment. The chapter aims to contextualise Collins's concepts in relation to Black women's struggle in today's work environment as illustrated in the novel.

The concept was first coined by Collins and according to her, *the matrix of domination* is a combination of intersecting oppression of Black women according to their race, gender, and class which she explains in her theory of *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.* Collins (2000) explains the concept by using it as a notion that represents the behaviours that make up the specific pattern of dominance and resistance that determines the course of African American women's lives thus, by referring to its four domains of power. Therefore, throughout this chapter, each of the four domains is investigated in relation to the novel under study.

1. The Structural Domain of Power

The first domain of power explained by Collins is *the structural domain of power.* This domain of power, according to Collins (2000) organizes power relations and thus oppression in social structures such as law, economy, religion, and politics, in which people are segregated according to their gender, race and class (p. 277). In American society, it is clear that white people are the most privileged ones when it comes to finding jobs, getting promoted, and having a good education, in contrast to black people who are less privileged and face many difficulties

to integrate especially black women who must face discrimination not only due to their race but also to their gender.

To illustrate what we have said about *the structural domain of power* from Harris's novel *The other black girl,* we can extract so many scenes where this concept operates, in which the main character Nella Rogers is concerned. We are introduced to our main character, a dominated, objectified and oppressed Black woman who struggled to get hired; she worked hard until she got into the publishing industry of Wagner Books. We learn that Nella is a middle-classed Black woman who works at Wagner, and we get hints about her financial situation which is not certainly ideal. For example, we are told that Nella and her new Black co-worker Hazel went to have lunch at Nico's which Nella chose because it was cheap, and this is where we get a hint on her financial situation. However, as society defines people according to their race, gender, and class under *the structural domain of power* (Collins, 2000, p. 277) Nella's financial situation somehow defines her social class. Moreover, when Nella answered Hazel that she lived in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, Hazel's reaction was: "*Bay Ridge, huh? Must be weird to live out there, no? It's pretty…"* (p. 90) which Nella finished: *"pretty white, right?"* (p. 90). This reaction tells us a lot about the fact that Black and white people usually do not share one neighbourhood. Within *the structural domain of power*, the separate but equal doctrine established in 1896 is still applicable despite its being overruled in the 20th century (Collins, 2000, p 277). Despite all the advancements that the American society had succeeded to achieve, oppression and racial segregation are still present today which led to what Collins calls rhetoric of *colour-blindness.*

Due to the lack of proper educational opportunities and the poor living conditions in Black neighbourhoods in comparison to those of white people, Black women are forced to leave their homes and travel long distances just to succeed in life and achieve their goals. In the novel, Nella was pictured the same:

> That girl was going to an exceptional university miles away from home, where she'd make some Black friends and fall in love with a Good Black Man and get an exceptional degree in English literature. If she liked UVA enough, she'd stay and get a second degree, get a teaching job at some university, marry that Black man, travel to all the continents with him, and when they were finally ready, they'd have a couple of kids. (p. 87)

Society has never been lenient on Black women. It is well known that they always must travel far away from home for their studies, and jobs, and work harder than any privileged white woman to succeed in life. Although this image that was planned for Nella did not take its full shape, she did work hard and left her home for her studies which brought her to her current job at Wagner.

Harris introduced the main character, Nella a young Middle-classed Black woman who works at Wagner, one of the most successful publishing industries. We learn that Nella is the only Black girl at Wagner until Hazel was employed. *The structural domain of power* also appears in the conversation Nella had with Sophie:

> "I think Maisy's got another potential candidate in." Sophie tossed her head again, this time adding in a suggestive, wiggling eyebrow. "And I don't know for certain, but she seems like she might be… you know."
> Nella tried to keep from grinning. "No, I don't," she said innocently. "Might be what?"
> Sophie lowered her voice. "I think she's… *Black*."
> "You don't have to whisper the word 'Black,'" Nella chided, even though she knew why Sophie did: Sounds, like smells, carried over cubicle walls. "Last time I checked, that was a socially acceptable word to use. *I* even use it sometimes." (p. 12)

From this passage, we notice that the fact of whispering the word 'Black' was because Sophie was trying not to sound racist, but in doing so, it felt like she did. Trying not to seem racist by not referring to skin colour is what Collins calls *colour blindness*. Nella's reaction was to tell Sophie, jokingly, that it was normal to say someone is black, which shows that she is accustomed to people acting that way towards her.

We learn that Nella's dream is to be an editor. A dream that is so hard to achieve especially for a Black woman in a white-dominated industry. Nella must work even harder than any of her white colleagues to just get a glimpse of hope to reach her goal.

> Nella was left wondering what her true purpose as Vera's assistant was. If Vera didn't trust her opinion, then Nella would never be more than just an "assistant;" if she didn't become more than just an "assistant," she'd never become an editor. (p. 20)

Nella's boss overlooks her capacities, making her dream of becoming an editor even harder. This is also related to Black women and the *structural domain of power* which organizes oppression making a Black woman's professional success harder to reach. In addition, we can also interpret this action by the fact that Vera was just trying to hide her racism towards Nella and did not actually want her opinion because she sees her as inferior and more like a second-class citizen.

2. The Disciplinary Domain of Power

The second domain explained by Collins (2000) is *the disciplinary domain of power.* This domain manages power relations and thus, oppression. It consists of the way policies are established within bureaucracies and working environments to keep power over Black people through surveillance. This consists of a contemporary method established by the white-dominated industries to keep a low profile and exert indirect discrimination against Black people. This results in a gap that might be identified in the professional life of Black people. Unlike their privileged white counterparts to whom finding jobs may be easier, Black people have an extremely challenging time finding stable jobs in professional fields. Despite the abolition of racial segregation in the 1960s, bureaucracies still perform racial segregation and oppression of their Black employee but subtly.

In order to exemplify from the novel, *The other black girl* what has been explained about *the disciplinary domain of power,* we may refer to many scenes where the latter is evident. Within the *disciplinary domain of power,* Collins (2000) states that Black women are less likely to be recruited for professional jobs, and it is believed that they want their workspace to stay white (p. 281). This can be illustrated in the way everyone was astonished by the arrival of Hazel, the newly hired Black assistant. It is also shown through the way Nella could not believe at first what her co-worker was trying to tell her:

> Nella withheld eye contact, turned off by the girl's intensity. Yes, it *would* be great to have another Black girl working at Wagner, but she was hesitant to do a celebratory Electric Slide sequence just yet. She'd only believe that the higher-ups at Wagner had finally considered interviewing more diverse people when she saw it. Over the last two years, the only people who'd been interviewed or hired were Very Specific People who came from a Very Specific Box. (p. 12)

Being the only Black woman in a white-dominated workplace is not something pleasant. Nella is prone to experiencing racism and oppression all on her own. It is also noticeably clear that Wagner did not hire Black people and the *"Specific Box"* the author refers to are the people who were getting hired, that is to say, White-skinned people. Wagner books is a white-dominated publishing industry. Its lack of diversity and the presence of only one Black woman, Nella, demonstrate this. White supremacy in the workplace advocates for the preservation of white domination in the industry. This is also apparent in the fact that Nella's calls for more diversity are completely ignored by her white colleagues, which could be interpreted as a wish to preserve white people only in the workplace. Even her boss, Vera overlooks her campaigns:

> When Nella had asked for a promotion, Vera had listed at least a dozen surprise grievances she'd had with Nella's performance as her assistant, the last being the most unsettling of all: "I wish you'd put half the effort you put into those extracurricular diversity meetings into working on the core requirements."
> The word "extracurricular" had hit Nella hard and fast in the eye, like a piece of shrapnel. The company basketball team, the paper-making club—*those* were extracurriculars. Her endeavours to develop a diversity committee were not. (pp. 13-14)

Despite Nella having worked for over two years, she did not even have a small promotion, and her boss's excuse was that she was not working as hard as she did in her diversity meetings. From this passage, we understand that not only did Vera overlook Nella's efforts to bring more colour to the workplace but also deprived her of the promotion she deserved because of her skin colour. Vera did not give importance to bringing more diversity because of her white privilege, like several other white people which prevents her from realizing how unfair it is for Black women to not get a professional job.

We also learn that before Wagner, Nella never worked in a professional field before. Most Black women do not get hired when it comes to big industries and serious professions, but they

only take in part-time jobs like in coffee shops, or as babysitters, so things like health insurance were a luxury. We learn that Nella had only worked in *"food-service jobs"* (p. 24), and the job at Wager was her first professional one. In addition, it was the perfect job that would lead her to make her dream of being an editor come true, which is why she was so happy about it. It is not common for black women to get hired in such places. This is also illustrated in the novel by the fact that few books are edited by Black women which leads us to the conclusion that there are very few Black women editors out there as the following passage suggests:

> *Burning Heart* had been both written and edited by Black women, she placed its societal impact front and centre, along with two other books that were edited and written by individuals of the same race—a rare feat, Nella had come to learn. (p. 46)

It is so rare to even find a book written by a Black woman and edited by a Black woman which is because they are not hired and are marginalized. Black women are often objectified and are not taken seriously. They experience harassment and are under constant surveillance at work since they are expected to abide by social rules established by white supremacists. Nella assumed that Hazel has experienced harassment in Boston as she thinks:

> Had Hazel received nasty emails from her old job's HR department about her loss? *People are starting to complain about the odor coming from your cube*, the note might have said. Or maybe something about eyebrow piercings being too unprofessional. Nella had been to Boston only a handful of times, but she'd read enough to know that Hazel probably hadn't had an easy time. (p. 27)

Nella's way of thinking is due to the experiences of most Black women that are alike. They are constantly harassed at their jobs because of their race and gender. She assumed that she was not taken seriously because of her eyebrow piercings since Black women are often objectified and judged according to their physical appearance.

It is true that Black people in general and specifically Black women do not have high ranks at work, and sometimes they do not even have the chance to work. In the novel, there is a direct reference to the Kendall Jenner Pepsi commercial and how racist that ad was. This ad was allowed to go public by the Pepsi team without even realizing how racist and downgrading it was to the black community. It is said in the novel: *"it was highly likely that there weren't*

any Black decision-makers at Pepsi, which explains its inception" (p. 58), which shows the extent to which black people, in general, are disregarded and not considered as decision makers as their opinion does not matter. It was also described in the scene as follows:

> But what about the Black people who hadn't been in the drawing room, but had been a part of getting the commercial made? That chance Black person who'd maybe helped find the shooting site, or held a camera, or styled some hair? Surely some Black people had to have been nearby; some might have even watched the ad bloom from a germ of an idea into a full-fledged campaign. Had something felt a bit wrong, a bit off to the hypothetical Black camera guy as he watched Kendall Jenner rip off her wig through the lens? Or had he been pummelled so frequently by the industry that he hadn't seen anything wrong with it? (p. 58)

Through this passage, we understand that in working industries, Black people may be employees, but they do not have a say in anything as their opinion does not have value. On the other hand, they are also scared to speak up since it is exceedingly difficult to get a job in the first place, and they are also afraid to get fired. This was also Nella's case. She wanted to speak out about the misrepresentation of Black women through the fictional character Shartricia, but she was also afraid of losing her job. She said it herself, it was hard to get into Wagner in the first place.

Nella received a disturbing letter saying that she must leave Wagner immediately. Her thoughts were obviously that she was being harassed because of her skin colour and gender as she thought to herself:

> *Finally. I've always known this moment would come.* She thought of Colin Franklin with his crumpled cap; of the elderly Black man shot in North Carolina for reaching for his hearing aid. Of Jesse Watson's words about being seen as an equal to white colleagues: "You may think they're okay with you, and they'll make you think that they are. But they really aren't. They never will be. Your presence only makes them fear their own absence." (p. 98)

Nella's thoughts are clearly constructed this way since the white-dominated industry does not welcome Black women as employees. They want to preserve it as they fear Black people ruining all their hard work because the image they have of them is a constructed one. Nella's thoughts are basically based on the fact that she is aware of her own oppression and of the fact that she

knows very well how society functions and how racist people can be, so she started to feel like a stranger who does not belong there anymore:

> She'd been convinced everyone was looking at her. Was she being watched? Followed? Was that man who was standing by the doors looking at her because he wanted to knock her down and take her wallet, or because he didn't like the idea of Black people working at Wagner? Had his own son been denied internships at Wagner year after year, and he'd decided to take it out on the one person he thought nobody would miss? (p. 103)

Nella's thoughts are based on the fact that she knows society does not give much value to Black women nor to their safety as her friend tells her: *"You are Black. The fact that you're Black colors every single thing anyone ever says to you—pun intended," she added, before Nella could. "Whether they admit it or not."* (pp. 106-107) Nella's friend Malaika recognizes that oppression towards Black women is present, whether it is apparent or not, and the letter is just physical evidence of that. Malaika added:

> "Even if it is true that nobody has ever committed any pointedly racist act against you there, *ever*," said Malaika, cutting into Nella's thoughts, "let's talk facts. Fact one: You're Black. Fact two: You're *Black*. Fact three: How many white people do you think have gotten a note like this at Wagner? Or *ever*? These are facts, my friend. Straight-up facts." (p. 108)

Malaika's emphasis on the fact that Nella is black is because she knows too well the experiences of racism in the workplace which she seems to have experienced too since she is also Black herself. Her saying that no one has been racist to Nella refers to the direct discrimination of Black people, but with *the disciplinary domain of power,* as said before, the marginalization of Black people is now discreetly practised which she acknowledges by saying that Nella is Black.

Nella started feeling like she was being watched, which of course she believed is a thing that would only happen to her because of her skin colour. And according to Collins's definition of *the disciplinary domain of power,* Black people are under constant surveillance like Nella:

> Ever graceful, Nella fell on her hands instead. "Shit!" she spat, inhaling a rancid whiff of the ratty welcome rug before pushing her body up. How humiliating. But how lucky she was that no other Wagner employees had seen her fall or heard her swear so loudly.
> Unless…
> Nella spun around quickly. She checked for any conspicuous strangers, ones with and without white sheets. Not a soul was in sight but India at the reception desk. (pp. 113-114)

Nella became somehow paranoid and felt that everyone is watching her. This can be explained through *the matrix of domination* and the surveillance exerted on Black women. In fact, they are thought to be untrustworthy, which is why white people feel the need to constantly manage them.

When Black women make any mistake, it is always related to the fact that they are Black and even if all they do is give their opinion, they are treated like their point of view does not matter. This can be illustrated by Vera when she asked Nella once again to apologize to Collin:

> "I do think that it's not a bad idea to apologize to him again. Just a small apology. And then, tabula rasa."
> Nella stopped clicking her pen.
> "What do you think about that idea?"
> *I think I already apologized to him before he left the office, four times.* "I have to say… I may need to think on it," (p. 169)

Of course, Nella was not happy about it and did not want to do it at all but had no choice. She worked in a white-dominated industry and feared for her job. This is because black women are always treated as inferior. Nella knew that firing her would not be a hard task, so she could not refuse Vera's request, but instead said that she would think about it. Vera considered it as a "yes". Because of her high rank and her white privilege, she believed herself to be superior and therefore that Nella could never reject anything she asks from her because she is inferior to her. In addition to that, Vera even asked her to send her the apology email before she sends it to Collin, and through this, we come to understand that it is true that Black women are not trusted and are under constant surveillance.

Black women are expected to abide by the social norms established by the white-dominated society. Their bodies are objectified, and they are even expected to abide by the dress code, or they would not be taken seriously at their jobs. This can be illustrated by the Black character Malaika who is not free to make her own choices concerning her own body,

> Igor *had* had a particularly hard time adjusting to the tiny emerald-green nose piercing Malaika had whimsically had done the previous summer. He'd thrown a fit, telling Malaika in no subtle terms that "her choice in nose jewelry might come off a certain way to potential clients." Malaika had griped and groaned about it, but she'd received the message and taken

> out the piercing anyway. The pay was too good, and having her own place in Fort Greene was even better. (p. 197)

She is not even free to dye her hair, and she had no choice but to remove her piercing. This was because she feared getting fired and knowing that Black women do not get hired that easily, she could not afford to lose her current job. Her boss's reaction is typical discrimination and objectification of Black women's bodies as he obliged Malaika to abide by certain social norms so that she would be taken seriously by his clients. Objectification of Black women's bodies is also illustrated in the way Nella was viewed at the parties she went to as an easy target. Men approached her intending to get closer to her body, but Nella deconstructs this objectification by showing these men that she is not only a body but an intellectual Black woman with dignity.

Black women are not allowed to be themselves but are expected to abide by the social norms and what is expected of them to be. In the novel, the Black woman character Kendra Rae is said to have committed the sin of being herself:

> Now, Kendra Rae—*that* woman knew about sins. She'd committed one of the real ultimate sins by trying to be herself: Black. Unapologetic. Someone who told it like it was. Someone who rejected what was expected of her as a Black woman in a predominantly white industry. (p. 266)

And by challenging the social norms, she found herself accused of the crime of being something society does not allow Black women to be, themselves. Her thoughts were described in the following scene:

> My mother would disown me if she heard this, God rest her soul, but I truly believe it would have been easier that way. If she *had* done it, that would mean she hadn't seen how much I've given up. It would mean she hadn't read the fluff I've been writing, simply because I want to stay not just fed, but *well* fed. It would mean she hadn't suffered through that *Burning Heart* made-for-TV movie that I never should've signed off on. (p. 277)

From the passage above, we understand that in fact, society pushes Black women to give up their identity and go on with their lives just to keep their jobs.

As the disciplinary domain focuses on the surveillance of Black women, we come to know at the end of the book that Nella was under constant surveillance since the first day she got into Wagner. We learn that through her own discovery of the notes taken by Richards Wagner, the

owner of Wagner books who transcribed everything that Nella did throughout the years she worked there. An example is the following note taken by Richard:

> 7/14/18. Book Center article about black grief in a white space published. NR sent article from SK; according to emails back & forth, this was NR's first time seeing it (said she agreed w/ article's content but said she did not write). (p. 327)

The initials N. R refers to Nella Rogers, and the quote above is a note from Richard Wagner on her activities. This specific note was about the article that Nella's co-worker Sophie had asked her if she wrote it. Nella has been under surveillance which corresponds to the idea that Black women are constantly watched as they are expected to follow the rules put forward by the white bosses, which they are not entrusted to follow. At the end of the novel, we come to know the truth about Hazel. She was turning black girls into what they call 'the other black girls', which means brainwashed black girls who only care about themselves and not about their race. They do not defend their rights anymore but just abide by the social norms like they are expected to. They integrated the white supremacist industry by forgetting about the fact that they are even black and acting more like they are actually white.

3. The Hegemonic Domain of Power:

The third domain described by Collins (2000) is *the hegemonic domain of power*. This domain of power according to Collins (2000) legitimizes the oppression of Black people by manipulating Black people's image in the minds of the citizens mainly using media (p. 284) it aims at controlling the ideologies and constructs stereotypes to normalize oppression, thus keep white people on the top of the society. Black people have always been associated with many different stereotypes which are mainly with the sole purpose of controlling them. They are portrayed as a race that is uneducated, non-intellectual, lazy, and hoes. As Wyatt (2008) puts it *"gender stereotypes exert power by appearing to be 'normal and natural'"* (p. 54) once the stereotypes are embedded into people's heads, they are hard to deconstruct since they become the norm.

With the aim of relating *the hegemonic domain of power* by referring to the novel to the way society shapes a negative image of African Americans, the concept is illustrated in many scenes from the novel. Black women are often given stereotypical images in the media, movies, books, and magazines so often that people start believing that those images represent what a Black woman should be. The typical example of *the hegemonic domain of power* in Harris's novel is the fictional character Shartricia Daniels, the character of one of Wagner's most important writers. The latter had been advised to *"throw some color in there"* (p. 18) by Vera which is what he did by introducing his character, Sharticia. To Nella, the writer felt like he just wanted to add a Black character without even knowing much about Black women and he just associated every Black woman stereotype with her:

> Shartricia was less than one-dimensional. She came off flatter than the pages she appeared on. Her white male creator had rendered her nineteen and pregnant with her fifth child, with a baby daddy who was either a man named LaDarnell, or a man named DeMontraine (Shartricia could not confirm which because both men had fled town as soon as they'd heard). She cussed and moaned in just about all of her scenes, isolating herself from the reader just as much as she isolated herself from her family and non-opioid-addicted friends (of which she had few). Then, there was the kicker: Her name, "Shartricia," was her uneducated crack addict mother's attempt to honor the color of the bright green dress she'd been wearing at the club when her water broke. (p. 19)

Shartricia, even from the name of the character, which is quite like *Shaniqua,* a stereotypical name given to Black women, it was already clear that this is a typical stereotypical character. White people would not understand why this representation is not the real representation of Black women because they have been taught by the media that this is what a Black woman is. In addition, they cannot understand that this is in fact, oppression of Black women because they see it as normal since *the hegemonic domain of power* legitimizes oppression. If this image is allowed to be published, it would give a bad representation of Black women to the world, thus, perpetuating the vicious cycle of the media and frustrating Black women who see themselves portrayed in such a manner.

Black women are also seen as non-professional, they are judged by their skin colour and are not considered intellectuals. The typical stereotype of Black women is that they are not

qualified for professional jobs. Nella overheard a conversation between employees talking about the topic of bringing more diversity to Wagner:

> "Let's just go and do exactly that," Kevin in digital marketing had said indignantly. "*Exactly* that. And then let's watch what Richard does when we start hiring unqualified people here, and things start getting screwed up. I'm sure he'll change his song then." (p. 53)

The employees do not want more diversity in their workplace because they believe that Black people are a threat to them, they are savages who will destroy their peace and everything they had built there. It is as if they see them as sub-humans or animals that destroy everything that comes into their hands. This can also be explained by the fact that *the hegemonic domain of power* controlled the ideologies and shaped the way Black people are seen.

In the novel, we are also introduced to the characters Diana Gordon, a successful writer and the one who wrote *Burning hearts* and Kendra Rae Phillips, her editor. In Kendra Rae's chapter, we notice that the enormous success of *Burning heart* was not easy and both Black characters have worked so hard with the little resources that they have been allowed to use:

> "I still haven't forgotten how so many of these white folks doubted me about *Burning Heart*."
> I turned to Diana. The movement broke our arm-chain link, but what I was about to say needed to be said. "Why else do you think Richard let me edit your book instead of him? And gave us so little money to work with? And that measly two-week author tour publicity gave us… every single one of those moves were calculated, Di. They did all that in case it turned out to be a flop. That's why *I* had to fight him every step of the way." (p. 76)

It is quite noticeable that Black women are overlooked by the white-dominated industries as suggested by the conversation between the two Black women. They have not been expected to succeed which is why they have not been provided with the necessary resources to assure their success because they were seen as non-intellectuals as put forward by the stereotypes. Despite the little faith people had in them, they proved them wrong, and their book became one of the most popular books of that time which can somehow be seen as a deconstruction of that stereotype.

Since *the hegemonic domain of power* aims at legitimizing oppression, it is logical that Black women are given the stereotypes of lazy workers and unintelligent or not intellectuals. We are later on introduced to a new Black character referred to as C. J. He works at Wagner and seems to be Nella's friend. We notice that although we have a Black employee, he still only works as a mail carrier and is not in a higher position. The author tries to deconstruct the ideas built on Black people and the stereotypes that are associated with them as being not hard workers through C. J when he says *"And they say we don't work hard. Shoot, look at you and her, both here at the crack of dawn"* (p. 121). Nella also added *"Well, we know how it goes: we gotta work twice as hard to get what we want"* (p. 122) which suggests that black people must work more than white people. In other words, because of their skin colour, they are seen as inferior which is why they must put on more effort to prove themselves.

In addition, and as previously mentioned, Black women's bodies are objectified and are associated with being *hoes.* As previously referred to, Nella has been approached by many men during the parties she attended with the purpose of winning her body because she is believed to be an easy target. This also supports the stereotype associated with Black women's bodies. Harris reacts to this stereotype by making her character a strong one who showed her intellectual capacities to those men rather than giving in to their whims.

4. The Interpersonal Domain of power:

The fourth concept is *the interpersonal domain of power* which is defined by Collins (2000) as a domain that covers an individual's relationship with themselves as well as with their surroundings regarding oppression. *The interpersonal domain of power* can be related to the daily exchanged conversations between Black and white people that will, most of the time, lead to the discrimination of the Black person. In order to further explore the concept, references from the novel are needed to illustrate the abovementioned concept.

The relationship between Black and white folks is not necessarily of mutual understanding. Sometimes white people tend to be racist without even realizing it, and they do not understand the oppression that Black people endure in their daily life. In *The other black girl,* in Colin's book *Needles and pins,* the character of Shartricia is just thrown as to have a Black character in the story. By doing so, the author believed himself to have added more diversity to his novel which would make his image look good because by doing so he is showing his readers that he is not racist. But, in fact, it is the opposite that happens. By associating stereotypical images with the character, the author is showing the world how racist he is as the author writes: *"'well-meaning white folks' were sometimes far worse than white folks who wore their racist heart on their sleeves."* (p. 19) As mentioned before, Shartricia has all the characteristics of a perfect stereotypical image that is given to black women and within the *interpersonal domain of power,* this type of oppression is not understood by white people because of their white skin privilege that they do not have to experience such racism.

The protagonist, Nella has worked so hard in her campaigns for more diversity in Wagner despite not being taken seriously by her boss when it comes to the meetings she was holding. To her surprise, they did not go as planned:

> Her coworkers could publish books about Bitcoin and Middle Eastern conflicts and black holes, but most of them couldn't understand why it was so important to have a more diverse publishing house. It didn't surprise Nella, then, that the next non-mandatory Diversity Town Hall had half as many attendees as the first. The following, even fewer. By the time the fourth meeting rolled around, its attendees were just Nella and a blue-eyed publicity assistant. (p. 33)

Within the *matrix of domination* white-dominated industries generally want to stay white. This explains why most of Nella's co-workers did not give much importance to the meetings. In addition, they did not fully understand how much it is important for Black women to integrate professional fields, and for those who already work there to have more black co-workers. Another scene that exemplifies how much white people do not realize Black women's

oppression is when Hazel, the new assistant, told them that she used to work in Boston, as Nella said:

> "And Maisy and Vera just kept going on and on about Boston like they always do whenever they get on a roll. Building it up like it was this magical kind of city, or whatever."
> Malaika shrugged and took a sip of her rum and Coke. "Magical for some folks, maybe. What is it Jesse Watson calls it? 'The White Man's Mecca'?" (p. 40)

This shows how much some white people, thanks to their white privilege, do not realize Black people's oppression. They kept the image that Boston is an amazing city where everything is great, but what they do not realize, once more, because of their white skin privilege, the oppression that Black women experience. In addition, Hazel seemed incredibly happy to have Nella as a co-worker as she told her *"I didn't have any Black coworkers in Boston, and I didn't think I would have one here. So, this is… pretty impressive."* (p. 49). This shows how important it is for Black women to have other Black co-workers which white people cannot understand since they already have many white co-workers and do not know how it feels to be the only white employee.

The relationship between Black and White people is a complex one. White folks tend to get frustrated whenever they feel like someone is insinuating that they are racist. They do not comprehend the oppression that Black people endure nor the sexism that Black women are prone to. Later on in the novel, Nella decides to go on and speak her truth to Colin about her thoughts on his Black character Shartricia, and that did not go well at all as his reaction was that of a typical white man's thinking that they are being called a racist:

> *I'm* the writer. Jesus. I'm not a *racist*. Do I need to make her hair curlier, too? Or make her skin a little bit darker? Should I make her speak like… like Sidney Poitier, instead of a Black girl who grew up in rural Ohio without a father? Whose book is this, anyway? (p. 68)

Colin's reaction and the fact that even Vera did not support Nella and left her on her own, show that White privilege makes Colin think that he is always right. Believing that the book is his and that he gets the right to do whatever he wants with it is oppressive towards Black women. In fact, he is giving them a bad image which makes it not only his business but the concern of

all Black women in the world. At first, he took the advice to add more diversity in his book and not sound racist, but by doing so he did the exact opposite. By stereotypically portraying his Black character, he was putting himself in a position where people would think that, in fact, he is being racist.

Even if the relationship Nella had with her co-workers did not seem to be the worst, she still was not comfortable working in an all-white workplace, *"Nella's colleagues at Wagner weren't sociopaths. They all knew where one was and was not supposed to pee. But that didn't make being around them any less stressful"* (p. 82). This suggests that even if they were not being mean to Nella, she could still feel the tension that was caused by the fact that she had Black skin. This is shown in the following quote:

> Once you got used to the fact that almost every time you came into contact with an unknown Black person in your place of work, this person was most likely going to ask you to sign for a package, or offer to fix your computer—it started to grate on you. So much so that, at least once a month, you got up from your desk, sauntered over to the ladies' room, shut yourself in a stall, and asked yourself, *Why am I still here?* (p. 82)

From this passage, we come to realize that Nella is in fact not comfortable even with herself as most of her Black folks did not work in such places, and when they did, they only took on simple jobs and they do not have the chance to get to such positions as assistant editors or editors.

Black women are rarely given the chance to speak their minds, but when they do, they are always the wrong ones. When Nella gave her thoughts about Shartricia to Colin, he reacted as though she was calling him a racist, and Nella found herself alone with no one to have her back. She was even obliged to apologize to him for giving her opinion as if she did something wrong as shown in the following scene:

> Colin had returned to Vera's office about twenty minutes later, his cap restored, his jaw squared, and his eyes more than a little bit red. *I'm sorry that you thought I was calling you a racist,* Nella had conceded, trying her best to move her mouth without vomiting. The words had felt flat on her tongue, like she was apologizing to a man for pulling out her pepper spray on him after he'd followed too closely behind her on an empty street. But she'd said it. Because at the end of the day, she *was* sorry—just for slightly different reasons. (pp. 92-93)

Colin's reaction is a typical white-privileged man's reaction. He cannot take a Black woman's critique and felt that he was being called racist, and he believes that she should be the one who must apologize. Of course, Nella had no choice but to say that she is sorry fearing losing her job because anything she does can be related to the fact that she is a Black woman. This situation can also be related to the fact that white people like dominating Black people and men oppressing women so that they would feel better about their inner being.

At the end of the novel, we come to learn the truth about Hazel and how she is part of what we call the other Black girls and how Nella has been forced to become one of them. Hazel has been part of these other black girls all along, and her mission was to make as many black women as possible like her, that is to say, make them forget about their true identity, their worries about racial matters such as killings that happens all the time, oppression of Black people, lack of opportunities, misrepresentations as Hazel puts it:

> If we're not *what*, Nella? Suffering? Is that what you want? To feel overextended? To feel worn down by every microaggression you experience in the office, and every injustice you see on the news? Are those the kinds of things that make you feel like *you*? "What I'm offering you here," Hazel said, "is an opportunity to be a part of something that will allow you to let go, and go further." (p. 342)

Hazel was offering Nella a way out of what she was enduring as a Black woman, but that came with the cost of giving up her principles and what she fought so hard to achieve, equality and diversity within the industry. Nella was suffering while having a conversation with Hazel, and the latter promised that her suffering would end once she gives in:

> You can. Stop fighting the tide, Nella. Once you stop fighting—once you let this wave wash over you—you'll see. It'll wash over you so quickly, you won't even feel it. You won't feel the pain, the white supremacy. You'll read those articles, watch the police footage, then go to work the next morning without feeling like another part of you has died. That heavy anvil of genetic trauma that's been strapped to your ankle for all these years… gone. You'll swim to the top and be free. You'll be *you.* This is Black Girl Magic in its purest form. (pp. 343-344)

Nella gave up making her suffering suddenly stop. This scene is a metaphor used by Harris to illustrate that a Black woman's suffering never ends, and the only way for it to stop is for them to numb their feelings and give in to what the white supremacist society expects them to be,

good girls and working machines who do not rebel or question but just act the way they are expected to. Nella recognizes her own oppression and is aware of the fact that she cannot do anything about it because white supremacy is very deeply rooted in society which is very hard to change which is why she gives in.

Finally, in the epilogue, we learn that the Black girl Shani decides to take matters into her own hand and post an article about all her knowledge about the other Black girls. But as soon as she decides to publish it, the Black woman she was working with gets replaced with someone she does not seem to trust, thus making her article less likely to get published. Here we come to understand that no matter how hard Black women have always and are still fighting for their rights and for them to be heard, white supremacist society always finds a way to break their resistance and lower them down. And here it was, another Nella-Hazel cycle that was ready to be repeated yet again.

Overall, this is how *the matrix of domination* is exemplified in *The other black girl.* A vicious cycle that entrenched itself so deep in the American society that is nearly impossible to get out of it, and this is shown through the Nella-Hazel cycle as we learn in the epilogue that took place again. The cycle is *the matrix of domination* that is composed of four interrelated domains of power, *the structural domain of power* that forms oppression, *the disciplinary domain of power* which regulates it, *the hegemonic domain of power* which legitimizes it, and *the interpersonal domain of power* that represents their social interactions.

IV. General Conclusion

This master's dissertation entitled *A Black Feminist Reading of Zakiya Dalila Harris's The other black girl* (2022) has attempted to explore the extent of Black women's oppression in their working environment. To reach our goal, we have relied on a Black feminist theory put forward by Patricia Hill Collins in her *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment* (2000). The utilized concepts have helped us reach the conclusion that despite the development of the American society and the years that have passed following the abolition of slavery and the establishment of Black people's rights, it is still clear that Black people, in general, and Black women, in particular, are still oppressed by the white-supremacist society and viewed as slaves. The only advancement the society has achieved is that it found a way to enslave them in a modern way.

Throughout our analysis of the novel, we have concluded that the author portrayed the workplace as a toxic environment for the Black community especially Black women where they are treated with injustice and unfairness by their supervisors who never recognize, appreciate, or award them for all their hard work. Black women were not only being oppressed for their race but also for their gender and class. In the novel, the author highlights the idea of an ongoing existence of racism and sexism that still exists in a time of human advancement. In the first chapter, we explored the intersectional oppression of Black women by developing the concept of *intersectionality* focusing on Black women being treated as *mules* as we found out that they are objectified and treated as machines that can be used in any way, they see beneficial in the workplace as it was portrayed by Nella who was treated unfairly by her superiors. Despite her challenging work, she was not rewarded. The second chapter focused on analysing the characters and the events of the novel from the power dynamics perspective in the workplace using the concept of *the matrix of domination* where we observed how Black women are treated and classified in American society and in the workplace where their marginalization is

categorized. We aimed to relate this categorization to *the matrix domination*'s four domains of power in the daily life struggles of Black women at work through the experiences of Nella, Hazel, Diana, and Kindra Rae. An oppression dictated by the white superiors who control the industry, namely Richard and Vera. Imposing constant surveillance and imposing legitimized stereotypes.

It is obvious that as students of literature and civilization, we always seek new interpretations of the same novel and have a closer look at the work, but from various perspectives. The same thing applies to Harris's *The other black girl.* This is the reason why further research on the novel needs to be considered. The novel provides psychological insight into the building of Black women's identities. I trust that a psychological-based approach study of the novel will shed light on the psychology behind the shaping of Black women's identities as African Americans, their self-consciousness and how the white-dominated society contributes to influencing the building of their identities.

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