



Exploring Freedom in Margaret Wilkerson Sexton's *A Kind of Freedom*

Mochammad Rafli Pontoh

Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya

raflipnth@gmail.com

Yoseph Bavo Agung

Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya

agungprasaja@untag-sby.ac.id

Abstract. This research explores the concept of freedom depicted in Margaret Wilkerson Sexton's *A Kind of Freedom* through the framework of Kimberley Crenshaw's intersectionality represents, forms, types, factors, and narratives of freedom. The concept of freedom reflects process shaped challenges, conflicts, and social relationships. It highlights how characters experience freedom in the novel and social interactions. This study uses qualitative descriptive methods which aims to provide a detailed and straightforward description of the characters' experiences of freedom without excessive interpretation and sociological approach to literature which examines how race, class, and social structures influence the characters' conditions and interactions, especially in the context of racial and social class. Stemming from systemic racism, historical oppression, and sociology limitations affect the characters' ability to define freedom. Key characters representing the state of bondage in the novel *A Kind of Freedom* are Evelyn, Renard, Jackie, and T.C. The relationships between these characters are analyzed in critical stages of freedom, such as social behavior that shows characters experiencing a lack of freedom. The findings of this study indicate that the forms of freedom depicted in the novel take the form of racial, class, and personal freedom. Additionally, the research also finds types formal, social, and intersectional of freedom in the characters' life experiences as freedom manifested within a social context. The last parts of the findings are factors that significantly shape the characters' sense of freedom, including overlapping and intersecting identities, repressive political systems, and social and cultural norms that collectively limit personal agency and restrict the range of choices available to individuals.

Keyword: *Freedom, Class, Marginalized, Sociology, Intersectionality.*

INTRODUCTION

Freedom is a common phenomenon in the world. The issue of freedom is a complex topic that is often debated in various aspects, such as philosophy, politics, law, and communication. In order to address this issue, it is important to first understand the basic definition of freedom. Freedom can be understood as a condition in which a person or community has the space to determine actions or decisions without pressure or coercion from outside parties, as long as it does not violate the rights of others. In simple living systems, types of freedom include independence from fixed materiality, internal rather than external determination, activeness unblocked, and the capacity to choose or alter environmental constraint (Zwick, 2017).

Freedom is not naturally given but emerges through ongoing struggles shaped by historical and systemic oppression. True liberation is hindered by persistent social injustices that affect individuals and communities unequally. Citizenship, influenced by social institutions, is not universally experienced, as public policies often favor dominant groups while marginalizing minorities. As a result, rights and freedoms are

unequally distributed based on factors such as religion, gender, and social position (Hefner, 2021). Achieving social justice requires continuous reflection and collective action.

From a legal standpoint, collective freedoms such as freedom of expression, thought, conscience, religion, peaceful assembly, and association are central to liberal constitutionalism (Masferrer, 2023). Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right essential for individual autonomy and a harmonious society. However, it is often vulnerable to unjust restrictions. Racial and social inequalities continue to affect access to these freedoms, particularly for marginalized communities. True freedom requires equal human rights for all individuals, regardless of race or social status (Katrinada & Thoyibi, 2023)

Freedom influences how individuals engage socially, especially in contexts shaped by racial exclusion. According to (Barzoki et al., 2015), unfreedom can emerge through biased social interactions even without overt oppression. Racial minorities may initially perceive equality but later encounter systemic imbalances in politics and society. When marginalized groups challenge discrimination, dominant groups often react defensively, perceiving a threat to their social status (Danbold et al., 2022). Social freedom impacts broader systems such as civil rights and law enforcement. In literature, freedom is a recurring theme, often shown through characters resisting societal norms or oppressive systems. These narratives reflect personal growth, moral awakening, and the pursuit of autonomy (Ingram, 2019; Nussbaum, 2020).

This study focuses on the theme of freedom in Margaret Wilkerson Sexton's *A Kind of Freedom*, which portrays how African Americans across generations experience, pursue, and are limited by social, historical, and structural conditions. Through characters from the 1940s to the early 2000s, the novel explores not only formal rights but also the freedom to dream, choose, and live without systemic oppression. Using a sociological literary approach and (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989) theory of intersectionality, this study analyzes the forms, types, factor, and implication of freedom in the characters' lives, with the scope limited to their personal experiences within the novel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Freedom is a concept that encompasses an individual's ability to act, make choices, and express themselves without coercion, while remaining within a complex social structure. In a sociological context, freedom is not only about formal rights, but also how individuals respond to their life experiences amid cultural norms, institutions, and power relations. According (Wendy Brown, 2015) freedom is always influenced by social conditions. Thus, freedom is understood as the result of an interaction between individual will and the social structures that shape and limit those choices.

This study uses Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality to analyze three main forms of freedom in the novel *A Kind of Freedom*: racial, class, and personal freedom. Racial freedom encompasses more than just the elimination of formal discrimination, but also challenges social practices that perpetuate racial subordination. Class freedom relates to fair access to social and economic mobility. Personal freedom reflects how individual decisions are shaped by social identities such as race, class, and gender. This study also maps three types of freedom formal, social, and intersectional to examine how characters in the novel experience and fight for freedom amid structural inequality.

There are four main factors that influence the experience of freedom: intersecting identities, economics, society, and the environment. Intersecting identities such as being a poor black woman often render individuals invisible in public policy. Economic factors such as poverty limit a person's life choices and reinforce dependency. Social norms also play a major role in shaping perceptions of freedom, where social pressure can inhibit self-expression. The physical and cultural environment determines the extent to which an individual can access public spaces, education, or feel safe in expressing their identity.

In the novel *A Kind of Freedom*, freedom is depicted as the characters' struggle against systemic barriers that hinder their autonomy. Using an intersectional approach, the novel shows that freedom cannot be separated from the overlap between race, class, and history. Characters like Evelyn, Jackie, and T.C. experience different yet interconnected restrictions on their freedom, reflecting the oppressive reality of society through complex systems. Through Crenshaw's theory, the novel invites readers to understand that true freedom can only be achieved through profound structural changes to eliminate

METHOD

This research employs a literary sociological approach combined with Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality to analyze how freedom is represented, limited, and pursued by characters in Margaret Wilkerson Sexton's *A Kind of Freedom*. Using a descriptive qualitative design, the study draws data from key phrases and sentences in the novel that reflect racial, class, and personal freedom across three generations Evelyn (1940s), Jackie (1980s), and T.C. (2010s). The researcher serves as the primary instrument, conducting close readings to examine how intersecting systems of oppression such as racism, class inequality, and patriarchy shape the characters' lived experiences. The analysis focuses on characterization, plot, themes, and social settings such as segregated neighborhoods and the justice system to uncover the complex structures that constrain individual autonomy. Data is collected through thorough reading, identification, and classification of freedom-related content, then analyzed to interpret how systemic oppression influences the characters' struggles for dignity, agency, and equality in a racially and economically stratified society.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Forms of freedom

This novel is analyzed in the context of freedom, which consists of three forms: racial freedom, class freedom, and personal freedom.

Racial Freedom

The central conflict in this phase is the pervasive racial injustice that defines and limits the lives of Black residents in New Orleans, challenging Evelyn & Renard, Jackie, and T.C. beliefs about the possibility of upward mobility and setting the stage for the struggles that will shape their journey.

Just before he turned his back, she heard a voice behind her. "Get back, nigger, you know you're not supposed to be in there." Renard stopped where he stood. Evelyn turned to see a red-faced officer clutching the baton at the side of his waist. (Margaret, 2017, 43)

This quote is an example of systemic racism, segregation, and institutionalized injustice that occurs in the lives of black citizens such as Evelyn and Renard. The officer's hate

filled curses and aggressive attitude reflect a society where Black people are denied their basic rights to move and be present in spaces controlled by white people.

Class Freedom

Evelyn, born into a modest family, faces limited opportunities due to both racial discrimination and class constraints. Along with Renard, Jackie, and T.C., she struggles with poverty, restricted access to resources, and societal pressures that reinforce class boundaries.

Once he was gone, she walked back up the porch steps. She could hear her parents arguing from the door. “But did you see his shoes? And did you hear what he said about where he lived? Twelve brothers and sisters. Can you imagine? For our daughter? And in a house on Amelia Street the size of a shack? He’s a low-class man, Josephine. Not middle, middle I could take, I could do something with it, but low.” (Margaret, 2017: 49) Evelyn freedom to love and choose a partner is constrained by her parents' expectations to maintain or even elevate their family's social class status, which they measure through material life indicators such as place of residence, house size, and family background.

Personal Freedom

For Jackie and T.C., personal freedom is shaped by inherited trauma, poverty, and generational expectations, making it difficult to pursue authentic lives. Their struggle reflects both internal and external conflicts as they fight to assert individuality in a world that continually limits their potential.

Evelyn sat down next to her to get it all over with. “How’d you find out?” she asked. “How do you think? Miss Georgia’s loud mouth. Lord Jesus, I can’t change my girdle without her getting word. Let that be a note to you, girl. Don’t do anything in front of this house that you don’t want Daddy to know about because lucky for you Mama happened to be home this morning. If it had been Daddy who answered the door, we already know Ray would be a page in your memory book.” She paused. “And you’d be off at the Sisters of the Holy Family convent by now.” (Margaret, 2017: 33)

Evelyn attempts to make choices regarding her romantic life are immediately confronted with the threat of serious social and familial consequences, as evidenced by her mother's warning about what would happen if her father, rather than her mother, discovered the situation

Types of Freedom

This novel is analyzed in the context of freedom, which consists of three types: formal freedom, social freedom, and intersectional freedom.

Formal Freedom

One form of personal freedom in the novel Margaret Wilkerson Sexton's *A Kind of Freedom* is shown through simple but meaningful activities carried out by the character Evelyn as part of her social identity as a young black woman

She looked up now, exhaled the smoke of the cigarette dangling from her fingers. It was still early February, and the winter air hadn’t lost its chill. Still all the Seventh Ward girls congregated after school outside Dufon’s Oyster Shop, the best Negro-owned restaurant in the city, and smoked. Evelyn had come to relish the anticipation of the first, slight inhale—she was a lady—and the long release afterward. (Margaret, 2017: 8) The act of smoking, particularly for a woman in Evelyn social and historical context, represents a form of personal freedom that challenges restrictive gender norms and expectations of femininity. At the same time, Evelyn smoking also signals the tension

between genuine self expression and the societal pressures that shape how she performs her identity as a woman

Social Freedom

This conversation shows how race and class shape the limitations of participation and access for Black people in social and political life, including military participation. It also illustrates the reality of structural inequality faced by Black communities, even in the context of patriotism and sacrifice.

All his people are like that. When my mama passed, they didn't have to take me in. They certainly didn't have to pay my way. Andrew mama lost two of her sons; she has her own grief to tend to." "To the war?" "No, tuberculosis; there aren't too many Negroes fighting in the war." "But Miss Georgia's son is there." "He may be there, but odds are he's not holding a gun." (Margaret, 2017: 36)

In the above data, black people are prohibited from carrying weapons or participating in the war, as stated in the sentence "No, tuberculosis; there aren't too many Negroes fighting in the war." "But Miss Georgia's son is there." "He may be there, but odds are he's not holding a gun." "He might have been there, but he probably wasn't carrying a weapon." (Margaret, 2017: 36) It is also described in the sentence that Ms. Georgia's son died in the war, but not because of the war, but because of tuberculosis.

Intersectional Freedom

Evelyn's father's statement to Renard reveals a harsh truth about the limited roles available to Black men in the military. While all citizens may have the formal right to serve, prestigious positions like pilot or doctor are rarely granted to Black individuals, who are instead often relegated to subordinate roles such as servants or gravediggers.

Daddy scoffed. "Don't hold your breath waiting. Anyway, remember, son, the likelihood is you won't be flying planes or healing the sick over there. You're going to be serving meals, cleaning quarters, digging graves." (Margaret, 2017: 47)

This dialogue underscores the presence of systemic barriers, revealing a rigid labor hierarchy in which Black individuals are routinely assigned low-status, service-based roles rather than being offered meaningful or influential positions. It illustrates the broader pattern of structural marginalization that shaped civic life during that period.

Factor Freedom

This novel is analyzed in the context of freedom, which consists of three factor: intersection identity, political system factors, and social cultural norms.

Intersections of Identity

T.C represents the compounded unfreedom arising from race, class, and criminalization. His identity as a young black man in a society marked by racial profiling and mass incarceration policies limits his agency.

"as a matter of fact, bruh, my auntie offered me a job." "Who, that lawyer?" "Yeah, she want me to start working by her firm." Tiger bust out laughing. "What, you trying to be some lawyer now? Oh shit, now I know you crazy. They ain't gon' let you through the front doors of no law firm. If they do, if they do, they damn sure not gon' keep you the whole first day." (Margaret, 2017: 191)

This situation subtly yet powerfully illustrates how intersectional factors create and perpetuate conditions of disempowerment for black individuals such as T.C. Through this dialogue, it is explained how the overlapping forces of race, class, and criminalization stigma combine to limit T.C. sense of possibility and reinforce his marginalization.

Political Systems Factors

Renard's experiences further illustrate the crushing weight of social and cultural norms. As a black man who aspires to break free from poverty through military service, he is still subject to the racial limitations of the time.

Maybe I best be going," he said. "I have to get up early tomorrow for work." He stood. "At the store?" "No, tomorrow's my day killing chickens. The market sells them live but people pay good money for them already plucked. It's awful work, but . . ." He trailed off as if he wasn't sure if he was going to say the next thing. "The government's hiring plenty for all the ships and tanks and guns they need." He shook his head, and his face darkened for the first time. "Those jobs aren't for us though, so I'm killing chickens." (Margaret, 2017:25-26)

This situation illustrates the quiet yet pervasive mechanisms through which the political system sustains unfreedom for Black individuals like Renard. The scene highlights how systemic racism, rooted in government policies and labor structures, restricts economic opportunities and upholds racial hierarchies.

Social and Cultural Norms

Evelyn's life is heavily influenced by societal expectations of respectability placed on Black women of her social class. She is pressured to maintain family honor, marry appropriately, and avoid behaviors that could bring shame to her community.

Just before he turned his back, she heard a voice behind her. "Get back, nigger, you know you're not supposed to be in there." Renard stopped where he stood. Evelyn turned to see a red-faced officer clutching the baton at the side of his waist. (Margaret, 2017: 43)

The novel portrays a world where Black characters like Renard and Evelyn endure not only overt political oppression but also the daily violence of racially charged social expectations. These norms are shown to intersect with broader systems of power, reinforcing exclusion, humiliation, and fear that uphold white supremacy in everyday life.

Implication Freedom

Intergenerational Struggles for Freedom in *A Kind of Freedom*

Margaret Wilkerson Sexton's *A Kind of Freedom* portrays New Orleans as a symbol of systemic oppression, where characters face intersecting barriers of race, gender, and class. Using Crenshaw's intersectionality, the novel shows that freedom is shaped by structural forces, not just personal will. Through Evelyn, Jackie, and T.C., it highlights that true liberation requires dismantling these systems, offering a powerful critique of inequality and a call for collective change.

Redefining Freedom Through Intersectionality

Margaret Wilkerson Sexton's *A Kind of Freedom* shows how race, gender, and class intersect to limit the freedom of Evelyn, Jackie, and T.C. Each character faces layered oppression Evelyn by social expectations, Jackie by poverty and stigma, and T.C. by criminalization. The novel reveals that true freedom can't be achieved through personal effort alone but requires dismantling systemic barriers.

Impact of Freedom on Character

The generational struggles in *A Kind of Freedom* are shaped by the intersecting identities of race, gender, and class. Evelyn faces strict societal expectations as a Black woman in a segregated society, while Jackie, as a single mother, experiences layered marginalization from both systemic institutions and cultural norms. T.C., trapped by

poverty and criminalization, shows how these forces perpetuate cycles of inequality. The novel acts as a cultural mirror, highlighting how overlapping oppressions limit each character's freedom and exposing the need for systemic change to achieve true liberation.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing *A Kind of Freedom* using Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, it is clear that freedom is not a singular concept but is shaped by race, class, and gender. In the novel *A Kind of Freedom*, the theme of freedom is depicted as something that does not stand alone, but is influenced by race, class, and gender. Through three generations of characters, Margaret Wilkerson Sexton shows that formal, social, and personal freedom are constantly limited by structural systems of oppression. Evelyn and Renard, for example, live in a time of segregation that limits their freedom even though they are legally free.

Class freedom is reflected in the social pressure on Evelyn to marry someone from a "respectable" social class in order to maintain her family's status. This shows that even personal choices are shaped by class norms. Jackie also faces economic discrimination as a single mother, demonstrating how social class and gender intersect to limit her freedom. Meanwhile, T.C. faces a cycle of poverty and criminalization that makes it difficult for him to escape the structure of oppression. Freedom in this novel is not only about individuals, but also about how overlapping systems restrict choices and opportunities in life.

Overall, *A Kind of Freedom* asserts that true freedom can only be achieved if society is willing to dismantle interrelated systems of oppression. The novel depicts not only personal struggles, but also collective, intergenerational struggles in the face of social injustice.

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