



BLACK WOMEN AND SEXUAL SUBJUGATION: CONSTRUCTS FROM ANNE MOODY'S COMING OF AGE IN MISSISSIPPI

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of human race had gone through the struggle of survival of one over the other and the suppression of one another against the other. Similar struggle has taken place between the two sexes- males and females, and over ages they have co-existed despite one trying to subdue the other. This has been a cross-continental, cross-racial and cross-cultural phenomenon. Female suppression has existed among Whites as well as among Blacks, among Africans as well as among Asians, among poor as well as among rich. This suppression has gradually been institutionalized, although there have been innumerable attempts to break through it and a demand of equality of life, livelihood and opportunity has existed/ demanded over time, which has come up as a challenge among the whites, blacks, coloured and others. This movement of anti-subjugation has gained momentum over time and has won inherent inter-familial and inter-societal battles with a change in attitude among males as a proven testimony all over the male world. This paper aims to delve into Black issues through the feminist lens underlying a thorough reading of Anne Moody's autobiography, Coming of Age in Mississippi: A Memoir, which has existed as a masterpiece and a classic of Black struggle with detailed passages on Black female struggle through which she successfully struggled past and secured a reputable state for Black population in American state in particular and as a motivational masterpiece for women of the whole world in general.

Key Words: anti-subjugation, Black feminism, cross racial and cross cultural, intersectionality.

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INTRODUCTION

The struggle for survival among the Human race has always been a timeless and boundary-less phenomenon. The history of the world has witnessed the struggles among the humans since time immemorial and the survival of one has been at the perishing cost of the other. When one has survived, many have perished in the turmoil. This struggle has existed not only among the humans but also among the animals and between human beings and the animals. The heterogeneity of the human race evolved with the separate continental settings. As and when the humans came close with the humans of different race, the conflicts resulted and grew till one gained control over the other. Such an approach not only led to perishing of many a race in the world but also led to intermingling and intermixing of them resulting into the evolution and development of even a superior race. Similar experiments happened among the humans of same race, same culture even. They too struggled for survival and power, for the dominance of one over the other. When such a feeling moved to even an individualistic level, among the sexes in the society, then this resulted in the dominance of one sex over the other. This dominance can be traced even among the various species of animals, who too follow their instincts to survive and maintain an undefined jungle order. Similar is the case among the Humans.

In the book Volga to Ganga, Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan hypothesizes that the initial world order was female centric and driven by the female. Female was the head of the family and community in a nomadic jungle life. This even continued for thousands of generations to come and even today it can be seen in many aboriginal cultures around the world which give a supportive testimony to the hypothetical thought of Rahul Sankrityayan. But as the human conflicts rose for survival and power and with the transformation of hunting and food gathering society into an agrarian society, the roles got defined gradually. The females with the natural responsibility of nurturing the child, chose the household jobs rather than going for hunting and food gathering and agrarian activities with the males and unnecessarily exposing their children to uncertainty and danger when the option existed. Gradually with the development of norms, codes and rules, the women lost the defining position in the society and thus the male considered himself as a bread earner and thus the head of the family. This resulted in a transition of power and dominance from female to male which ultimately resulted in the situation in which the females are today. Gradually with the power and position at hand the male abused their domination status in the society for their comfort and subjugated the female under various crimes of servitude and slavery where no payment had to be given for tough labour they were made to render for the family for free. Their hard work always remained unrewarded and unnoticed and not significant enough even for worthy of praise. This resulted into perpetual subjugation of the female in the society by the male and continues till today.



Such a situation gradually evolved over pan-continental landscapes of the world, irrespective of the race, language and culture. It became a cross-continental, cross-racial and cross-cultural phenomenon. The subjugation of the females became institutionalized through cunning efforts of the males who never allowed them to raise their heads and demand equality, freedom and respect. The institutionalization was done through formation of various codes of conduct by the political and religious leaders of the society who held a clout of authority over the general masses. Similar phenomenon resulted in all cultures of the world with slight differences in the rules of society but spirit being the same. Any effort to raise voices was crushed heavily and mercilessly so as to set an example for others to follow and fear. Thus what started as an animal conflict resulted into the sex struggle and ultimately to domination.

African Americans resisted against their oppression for the want of freedom and dignity. They sacrificed their lives for an equitable space in society and right of the resources. They shaped their future in blood. Assata Shakur remarks that, "Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions. Shaped by our oppression." But a focus on the state of African American women lays even more distressing picture. The situation of African-American women has been no different than the state of females from other parts of the world. They suffered the violation of the same rights as others did, even struggling today. They too aspire for the same dignified life as other females of other parts of the world do. Therefore their struggle has been no less inferior than the females of other societies, but it has been even more complex, similar to the struggles of the depressed classes in the Indian subcontinent has been. They had not only to struggle with the males of their race, their community but also had to take charge against the men of other dominant race, the Whites, even remaining fully aware of the powerful and authoritative status of the whites.

The same male dominated white world created a demeaning image of black woman, so that it can exploit them physically and enslave them mentally. It used 'rape' as a double edged weapon through which on one hand it could subjugate the black women for sexual pleasures and on the other it could control the revolt of black man. The white world created the mythical image of 'Jazebal' which can be traced to slavery. Angela Davis in her analysis asserts that, "it would be a mistake to regard the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery as an expression of white men's sexual urges . . . Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men" (Davis 23). The sex question became even compounded with the issue of race, as has been the case of the Depressed classes with respect to 'Caste' in India. The Constitution of America guarantees same rights to the women as to the men. They have the right to life and dignity, equality, freedom and opportunity as the white women have.



To stand formidably against the suppression of Human Rights of the Black female, it becomes necessary and pertinent to raise voice against the running social order and government functioning when the problems sore to an unbearable level and survival gets difficult to the edge of extinction. Hunger, Poverty, Disease, Illiteracy, Unemployment, Prejudices are burning issues among the human beings. Food, medicine, clothing, shelter and education are the basic necessities of life to continue and an optimum level of these are needed to have dignity in society. Disparity among the people of the same society in the availability of such needs leads to disharmony where a struggle for equal treatment of all becomes necessary. The Blacks suffered at the hands of Whites and the black female suffered at the hands of both the black male and white male and female. Thus the intersectional struggles persist. Therefore Collins hinting on a blunt immediate and swift response to the woman's troubles writes that, "[i]n a climate where one's sexuality is on public display, holding fast to privacy and trying to shut the closet door becomes paramount" (125).

A very necessary requirement for any individual is the necessity of safe and secure environment, where one can work freely and openly with necessary freedom. Prevalence of safety and security issues within a society hamper the freedom desired for realization of complete potential of the individual. Similar safety and security issues persisted against the Black women in the American society where they suffered harassment at the hands of the black and white men. Mental harassment to physical torture and beating existed in the society, where they already remained burdened with the family load they had to bear for the upbringing of the child. Even if they did not receive any support from the family or spouse, they could have carried along well, but obstructing their freedom through a hostile environment complicates the situation further. Black women too suffered innumerable crimes regularly and could seldom raise her voice because of the lack of substitutive options to survive. Limitations of options to survive promotes hostility against the weak. She could seldom raise her voice against the patriarchal authority and succeed. Physical limitations of the women make her even more susceptible to crimes. She needs extra attention and care to keep herself safe. Though in a woman, the realization to care for herself comes at an early age, but the challenges generally appear as she grows, except in few cases of perversion. Thus she has to act in a more concerned and cautious way against the male hostility. Similar concerns result out of the lack of privacy for the women, which is necessary when she is expected to reside outside of her house in an open male adjusted surroundings. Providing a privacy-less space adds to the harassing situation for a woman and complicates her survival.

Through her autobiography, Moody unravels before the world the ordeals of the Black women during the formative years of the Black movement and strengthening of the American democracy. She lays bare the societal difficulties what a woman has been facing and how to stand stealthily against them to make a mark in the society and create one's own space. Moody's autobiography places before the world a message through the struggles of her life.



Writing on the efficacy of autobiography Shirley Nelson Garner, highlights the significance of speaking up to the whole world the horrors of life one has endured and placing before the generations a black and white picture. It is assertive writing which gives space to the marginalized sections of the society, and woman being one. Analyzing Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiography, *The Woman Warrior*, she writes that the author's "breaking of silence makes her a woman warrior . . . Her particular mode of warfare is her writing" (118). Discussing about creating space within male dominion, Moody narrates the situation during her protest days when she had to reside with other protestors, outside her family reach and protection and expose herself to unsafe surroundings among the unknown occupants. She writes,

I started to get sleepy and asked where the girls were going to stay right in the room with all the boys. I was some shocked. Now I understood why Bettye Poole was wearing jeans; just then she was climbing into one of the empty bunks and settling down for the night. Here I was with only a transparent nylon pajamas set to sleep in. Carolyn Quinn wasn't prepared either. The two of us just sat in chairs until some extra pairs of pants were found for us (Moody 273).

She had not only to bother for her life in the protest activities but had also to care for her virginity.

Issues of molestation are another prime concern among the females which demands attention of the civil society. After the age of puberty a girl steps into the age of adolescence and gradually develops into a woman. While adjusting with the physical challenges the girl has to accommodate herself within the social environment and at the same time achieve a standard of life worthy enough to make a meaning of it. But where on one hand she has to struggle against the patriarchal issues of the society, on the other hand she has to deal with the criminalities of the male dominated world. She has to struggle against male gaze, voyeurism, molestation, rape and rape turned into murder. While tackling these challenging issues in the society she has to make way for herself in the world and succeed. She has to pass through uncomfortable situations at various stages of her life. A male gazes her and scans her whole body out of lust which makes the woman uncomfortable and suspicious of the possible outcomes of the situation which may shiver her down the spine thinking about her safety and security. It makes her even more distressed with age till she gradually learns to ignore the male approaches mindfully and cautiously. She devices her own ways of living in the system, while worth fully engaging in her daily tasks and excelling in it. Such a situation impacts the adolescent mind and leaves a permanent scar on the psyche of the women for the rest of her life who may not be able to accept as easily and become a part of the society as she could have been otherwise. She may even face molestation by the same people who have been



caring and loving her till she was a child and she becomes a piece of flesh for those very same people as she grows into a women. This may throw her into traumatic childhood, adolescence or youth and with this dented psyche she may not excel further in her life because of the scars on her body and mind. These stressful situations may even lead to depression and suicidal attempts.

Anne Moody details the incidents in her life where she had to suffer and overcome the gaze of her step-father and this insecure atmosphere even at home led to her mental psychological stresses and development of fractured identity. She writes,

Right after Hicks had cooled off on me I began having problems with Raymond. I would come in from work in the evening and he would be hanging around the house. Sometimes he would be sitting in the yard, under the pecan tree, and when I walked out there, he would stare at me long and hard. One evening I was sitting in my room in front of the mirror, combing my hair. I was wearing a real low-cut blouse. He had walked out of the kitchen past my bedroom window and suddenly I saw him standing outside staring at me. I pretended I didn't see him. He stood out there for a long time giving me wanting eyes. After that I became a little frightened of him. I stopped wearing low cut blouses and even stopped wearing shorts or tight pants around him. But he still continued to look at me wantingly. I got the feeling he thought that I had begun screwing around when I was in New Orleans because I had matured so (Moody 201).

Moody complains that she could not behave normally and comfortably in her house because of the situations she was trapped into till she completely left her house for ever. Before she could launch a struggle against the outsiders, she had to deal with the internal challenges; challenges within the family. Same has been reflected by Bell Hooks who writes, [t]he struggle may not even begin with the colonizer; it may begin with one's segregated, colonized community and family" (*Yearning* 151).

As a woman learns the ways to survive in a vulturous atmosphere, she shares her experiences with other women of her concern and approach and tips her the ways to ward off such situations. Moody too gained confidence to survive through valuable directions and courageous acts of her mother against the white vultures, who advised her to be tough, brave and unresponsive to any malicious approaches. Though in the initial stages it is possible that the mother may not unravel the sexual insecurities of the world before her daughter fearing that it may subdue her free mind and make her insecure against the human existence, but gradually she takes it as her bounden duty to guide her daughter against the challenges ahead. As Troester remarks that the desire to protect within the mother rifts her emotionally. She



writes, "Black mothers, particularly those with strong ties to their community, sometimes build high banks around their young daughters, isolating them from the dangers of the larger world until they are old and strong enough to function as autonomous women (Troester 122). Moody too refers to the mentality of the white men against the black women where they considered them to be easily available for exploitation and gratification of their sexual lust which was not the case with the white woman. They were considered easy targets because of their pitiable condition, poverty and no administrative support. The molestation and rape of black women did not matter as she lacked the notion of 'womanhood'. She is born a whore who took birth for the service of white male. Hazel V. Carby notes, "black women were relegated to a place outside the ideological construct of 'womanhood.' The term included only white women; therefore the rape of black women was of no consequence outside the black community" (308). Moody, suffering the same situation says,

I looked so good that it became somewhat of a problem. Whenever I was in town white men would stare me into the ground. ...Mama said to me, "They think every Negro woman in Centreville who look like anything should lick their ass and whore around with them." She warned me that I must never be caught in town after dark alone and if I was ever approached by white men again, I should walk right past them like I was deaf and blind (Moody 200).

Formally warning Moody of the white men who prey on the black women, her father says, "I don't want you working for these no-good ass white men around here They don't do nothing but mess over those Negro girls working in their houses" (217). Moreover the black woman is considered as seducer even by the white woman because even if knowing the truth about her husband if she acknowledges the truth about white man's lust, then it would undermine the authority of the white race. Moody writes, "Even though the teen-age Negro girls were more desirable for such jobs (helpers), very few if any were trusted in the homes of the young couples. The young white housewife didn't dare leave one alone in the house with her loyal and obedient husband. She was afraid that the Negro girl would seduce him, never the contrary" (137).

Moody further narrates that it was not only the boys of her age or her age group who gazed her and had a lust for the body, but also the teachers had a lust for the body of a woman besides their wife. The perversion of the psychological behavior of such men could not be avoided easily by the women whom they targeted and she had to be cautious always for her safety. She narrates about her Dean, who casted a hard gaze on her and voyeured on her as she passed. She writes,

The Dean was a tall, slim, well-preserved mulatto in his late forties. He liked tall shapely girls and seemed to like me a lot. He had told one of the boys that

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I had one of the most beautiful bodies he had ever seen in a pair of shorts. He even went so far as to tell him he knew that I was scared of men. He often came over to the gym when we were practicing. He would sit and look at us like a sex maniac who hadn't had a woman in years. Every time I passed him he would stare at me and I would look away, then he would laugh like a lunatic (Moody 240).

Thus from the memoir of Anne Moody we see that the Black women suffered at the hands of both the white and the black men. The sufferings ranged from domestic confines to common open social spaces, from family institution to educational institutions, from one inhabited city to the other. From racially atrocious atmosphere to sexual lust, challenges remained for all black women where she had to struggle, survive and shine out combating the subjugative atmosphere. Still she chose the path of struggle and writing to carve out an identity for herself and live with dignity. With choosing to rise against the man, she has "let the world know what was happening to us [a black woman]" (422).

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