

SEXISM AND BLACK FEMALE SLAVE EXPERIENCE

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“Rape was described as something that could happen to you just because you were black and female.”ⁱ

In the 15th and 16th century the black female were brought by the Europeans for slave tradition and they were suppressed by the whites, forced to intercourse in order to produced more labours and gradually this sexual violence become the fate of women. The tortures of black women were increasing day by day during the plantation. They were forced to be pregnant and that they had to carry their pregnancy as a punishment without proper diet and proper care. No medical facilities were available for them. They were forced to give birth to the child on the ship as a result some of them died during birth of their child. The child had no identity in society, no one knew about their parentage. They never became relatives of anyone; they were only slave of their masters and both had to work. The children between five to six years started to work as labourers while the children of white play with toys. In this way the black women were crushed by the whites. They were not only suppressed sexually but also physically. The whites disrobed them publically and beat them up using hot iron and whips. Their bodies were like the punching bags for the whites where they put all their efforts to gain energy. Thus the whites were never missed any chance to give pain to the black. Bell Hooks in her book defines the bitter experience of black females and said-“the observe of slaves experience claim that it is common on a plantation to see a black female stripped naked, tied to stake and whipped hard saw or club.”ⁱⁱ

The women who started to work in order to support their family financially became obstructed by the whites on each and every step. The poor and helpless women disrobed by the whites and forced

to carry their unwanted pregnancy without proper care and diet. As a result some mother and child dies during the time of delivery. And those who survived they were compelled to live troublesome life. In this way Afro American were crushed by the whites and the women were treated more harshly than the males. The torture which the black women bore did not raise sympathy in people's heart for them. Instead of being treated as poor or week they were avoided by whites and devaluated in society to great extent that no one ready to respect to them. Thus the black women were abused not only sexually but racially too. Black women who came in close contact with white women were also abused. So Harriet Jacobs in her book ‘‘Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl’ depicted the poor condition of black women and had written that –Slavery is terrible for men but it is far more terrible for women’’ⁱⁱⁱ during plantation all the black women worked as labourers. Some of them used to work as maid too for doing the household works in the white people's house. They worked as helpers of white women and there they were sexually abused by the white females. Thus there were both the genders as well as racial discrimination of black women in American Society. An enslaved from Alabama Mungo White recalled the poor condition of her mother and said-

‘‘Her task was too hard for anyone. She had to serve as maid to Mr. Whites daughter, cook for all de hands, spins and care four cuts of thread a day, den was. Dare wash on one hundred and forty four threads to de if she did not get all this done if she got fifty lashes dat night.’’^{iv}

Thus we see how the black women were treated. The image presented by Alabama clearly shows the extent to which the white people tortured the black women and how the women had to suffer from the fear of sex. More than teenagers suffered the fear of sex because the white people sexually assaulted them who used to work for their livelihood. They were forced to sleep with their masters and do whatever their asters demanded. Ignorant of these bitter things like sex rape and intercourse the black teenagers were in the clutch of those white vultures that not only harassed them but also hurt them brutally. The white men ruined their womanhood before their step toward being woman. When the girls of other society were enjoying their childhood period the Afro American girls were subjected to bitter pangs of assault which waited in their fortunes. Linda Brennet, a black slave girl in her autobiography wrote about the time she first started to work. She said that she did not

know anything about sex but her masters wanted to have her and threatened that if she would not yield herself willingly than he would forcefully grab her. Further she said that-“I was compelled to live under the same roof with him where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandment of nature. He told me I was his property that I must be subject to his will in all things”^v

The white men treated the black females as prostitutes and paid them for the sexual activities but those girls who denied performing those activities were molested forcefully by their masers. The famous Afro American women writer Alice Walker said: who knows that the black women were think of rape? Who asked her? Who cares?^{vi}

In the 19th century the black women were portrayed as Hottentots or Prostitutes were used to refer to sexualized women. The women of Afro American society were known to European as Hottentots. When America was raising as economically strong country at that time the white women of the country were busy in religious teaching and kept themselves far from sex. They were no more interested in sexual acts and tried to portray themselves as pure as pure and religious and for this also received support from their male counterparts. The white man who portrayed the black women as prostitutes and whores supported the white women to follow the path of Virgin Mary. Now to quench their thirst the white men turned toward the black enslaved women, they treated them as sexual object, raped them. The role of black women at that time was that of prostitute in American society and unwillingly they had to bear all those exploitations, while the white women got relief from the pain of sex and labour pain, the black women were completely trapped in those things. Eugene Genovese discussed the sexual exploitation of black women in her book Roll Jordon Roll-“as rape meant by definition, rape of white women for no such crimes as the black women existed at law. Even when a black men was sexually attracted to a black women he could punished by his master, no way existed to bring him to trial or to convict him if so brought”^{vii}

Thus the assault of the black women by white men was not only for their own satisfaction but also to emasculate the black men. To devaluate the image of black men before their women the white set a trap for them. And all that politics the black women were grinded. And all these politics

created a myth in 19th century that all the black women were sexually and morally loose. So in Reconstruction Era (1865-77) it was big challenge for black women to regain their womanhood, because it was ruined by white colonizers and now it turned torn. To regain their womanhood and to prove the myth false the black had struggle a lot. They just wanted to remove the scars given by the white colonizers and for this they were ready to use any healing ointment. They starting behave like white women, they wore neat and clean clothes, behaved properly but in the eyes of whites there were not any respect for them. The black men also contribute lot and support their women to change their stereotypical image. The black women for the first time broke their silence and raised their voice for equal rights and equal status in society. Many magazines and articles were written in which the black women raised their voice for equal rights and status like those of white women in society. But the white man argued that they could not live with the back people in status quo and especially with the black women as they were morally loose. The white women accused them by saying that they instigate their men to have sex with them. But despite being accused several times the black women never lose their hopes they just took resolution to change their negative images. The black women urged the whites to save their womanhood and prevent them from sexual exploitation but their application crossed over the white's ear and they were still considered as morally loose by white men. Even in 19th century after the Civil Right Movement when the Afro American women got equal rights and were educated and received good posts like those of doctors, lawyers and professor the bolt that was attached to their character was far being removed. After being more educated and active than before black women were not able to change their fate. The devaluation was still continued after the end of slavery. In order to get rid of exploitation the black women shake their hands with white feminists but there also the condition was same. The women residing in urban areas protested against this violence while the women residing in rural areas consider it as their fate. This difference in the thinking of black women of urban and rural areas helped the whites to oppress them even after they got liberation. To get rid of this harassment after the reconstruction era now they raised their voice for similar rights as the whites and amalgamated with the whites. But the white in order to maintain their superiority never wanted this to happen. Jim Crowe propounded a theory 'Equal but Separate'. Later on they joined hand again and plunged into feminist movement. Bell Hooks in her essay *Feminism Is for Everybody* said that:

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“Feminist Sisterhood is rooted in shared in commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form that injustice takes. Political Solidarity between women always undermines sexism and sets the stage for the overthrow of patriarchy. Significantly, sisterhood could never have been possible across the boundaries of race and class if individual women had not been willing to divest of their power to dominate and exploit subordinated groups of women. As long as women are using class or race power to dominate other women, feminist sisterhood cannot be fully realized.”^{viii}

Thus the sexism was main theme of this movement. The black man also plunged into that movement and raised their voice against those voice oppressors. Now the white men feared that things could slip away from their hands so they started to defame the black men by saying that they were emasculated crippled and unable to protect their women. By involving themselves in this movement the black men only try to defeat the white men but still they did not have any soft corner for their wives. The sexual politics of white people diverted the black man’s mind so they started exploiting their own family female members and the reflection of this exploitation we can clearly see in the novels of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker and many other works of black female writers. Now the black women dominated the black women and tried to establish their authority. While the turning of the dices the substantial change was seen once as black males were subordinates now all of sudden they wanted to reins in their hands to take charge of the affairs. As is always the case with absolute power comes chaos and destruction so it was, the black male drowned in the pool of power started to abuse their own family members no female relation was left untouched, daughter, sister, niece, friends, foe all were weighted in the same category and were traumatized with sexual exploit. Bell Hooks in her book **From Margin to Centre** wrote “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation and oppression”.^{ix} Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman were the most daring women of that time who raised their voice against sexual violence. They used to narrate their story publically that how at every turns they faced the challenges while working with the males, physically and sexually how they dragged down with every step on the ladder.

Thus the African American women struggle a lot to gain their own identity. Despite of all the bitter experiences they never stop themselves to move forward. The torture they have bared is beyond imagination. Their image was totally ruined by the whites but they broke their silence and raised their voice. They protected their bodies and made an end to the long practiced thought in which they were simply treated as an object. In the late 90's and 20th century when the feminist movement was at its peak the privileged class women got benefit but the black women were still oppressed. They were just hidden behind the leadership of white women. But in the third wave of feminism the movement the black women also get benefited and finally they were able to gain their own identity. They turned adversity as opportunity and despite of all sufferings and violence they were able to aside all the thorns and make their path smooth. They have chosen all those issues for writings and sexual violence became their main theme. Thus they protested till the end and finally they overcame and swept out the discrimination from society.

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