

Silenced Voices: The Study of Race, and Gender in 'WOMBmanWARs

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ABSTRACT

Judith Alexa Jackson examines sexism, racism and media in *WOMBmanWARs* (1994) with the focus on the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings of 1991. Jackson is inspired based on what was witnessed on the televisions to explore how these hearings could have been employed to silence Black women and how the structure of the society, including the media, had a role to play in undermining the credibility of the allegations of sexual harassment by Anita Hill. The play reflects critically on the power relationships that influence the opinion of the people and how Black women are treated and it also shows the destructive nature of racial and gender-based oppression. With this story, Jackson addresses the larger questions of victim-blaming, media manipulation, and silencing of the marginalized voices as a system

This paper is based on the play *WOMBmanWARs* (1994). Jackson wrote this play after watching the televised hearings of Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas Hearings that rocked the U.S. in 1991

Keywords: racism, gender, media, victim-blame, silencing, marginalization, Black women etc.

INTRODUCTION

The Hill-Thomas hearings are the confirmation hearings that were initiated against Clarence Thomas by President George H.W. Bush to become a U.S. Supreme Court justice in 1991. These hearings saw Anita Hill, a law professor who had been employed at the U.S Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) file charges against him on sexual harassment. Hill had given a public testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee, whereby she accused him, igniting a national discourse on sexual harassment, race, and gender ("Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas: A Timeline of the 1991 Sexual Harassment Hearings").

The hearings were highly publicized and had considerable media coverage, and split society. Clarence Thomas refuted the claims, terming it as a smear campaign, and the testimony of Hill was both disbelieved by some but endorsed by other individuals that considered her a reliable witness in the sexual harassment issue. Finally, however controversial, Thomas was sworn to the Supreme Court by a 52-48 vote to 48 Senate margin. These hearings are an event that is still central to American history on sexual harassment and how women are treated in the workplace ("The Hill-Thomas Hearings: A Brief History").

On July 1, 1991, the first African American justice on the court, Thurgood Marshall, had served in office and was retiring. He was replaced by a person he had nominated, Clarence Thomas, by President George H.W. Bush. Women's groups and civil rights groups did not like the idea of Thomas's nomination. His nomination was opposed by the women's group as they feared that he would not give support on the legalization of abortion, and all other civil rights groups feared that he would overrule what his predecessor, Thurgood Marshall, had struggled and won. Another area that raised their concerns was the legal community with regard to his insufficient experience ("Clarence Thomas Nomination").

As proceedings on his confirmation were winding down, a confidential FBI report leaked to the media the charges leveled against Thomas, claiming that he sexually harassed her. Anita Hill, a professor of law, brought forward the allegations having worked with Thomas in the past. It resulted in press hysteria and additional research. The Senate Judiciary Committee re-opened televised hearings and conducted them again before the nomination was transferred to the full Senate to be voted on ("Anita Hill Testimony").

As a result of the aired news on the hearings, people were exceptionally interested in the vote, which was reflected in the number of phone calls and faxes received on the matter in the capital. Following the two days of hearings, no definite resolution was arrived at as regards to the difference between the stories of Hill and Thomas. Even though opinion polls confirmed that there was some evidence of debate and division across minority groups, such as African-Americans and women, there was also an overwhelming majority of voters who supported Thomas. In the end, the Senate passed the vote on the confirmation of Thomas albeit by a narrow margin, 52-48 ("Clarence Thomas Confirmation Vote").

The play in brief

The play begins with an audio-visual of some section of the hearings held on the case of Hill-Thomas, and we see it being closely followed by a black man, Danny, accompanied by his wife, Sapphire. Sapphire is a working woman who is carrying a bag of groceries home. When asked about the location of their daughter Danisha, Danny responds that he sent her out to play because she was too noisy (Jackson 156). The thoughtlessness and the insensitivity of the man can be seen early on. He dismisses the alarm of his wife that she does not see her outside. He still sits in front of the TV and listens to the hearings. Many years later, when the dinner is prepared, Danny then sets out to find his daughter and is aghast to see her dress shredded up and arguing with her playmate, Jerome, who tempted her into his TEPEE with a cake and was attempting to peep under her dress. Danny punishes his daughter instead of voicing on her behalf.

Although the play is predominated by the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas incident, the case of Mike Tyson-Desiree Washington is also mentioned. Another issue Jackson attempts to deal with, directly, is the media in the muffling of Black women. Among the list of characters, which consists of reporters, senators and a woman activist, two peculiar characters are, one of them is a Gorilla symbolizing Black Man, Anima/Animus, a fetus, the spirit child Sapphire lost in an abortion (the first child a boy). This Anima/Animus is very much involved in the play with a lot of monologues. The symbolic Teepee has also been brilliantly used by Jackson.

ANITA, ANIMA/ANIMUS: It was shortly after my swearing-in that I began to hear voices inside me prompting me to "Drop them. Drop them Anita and speak your name before we all perish with you into the marshy grave of mammy's candied yams, Lucy's confiscated bones, Fanny Lou's sick and tired, Soujourner's truth. Drop them Anita" cried these voices from as far away as wombs in the female fetus. But an obtuse thud from the outside penetrated the ocean of comfort I felt in their chorus. It was urgent to return my consciousness to manland. The natives there seemed agitated. They pointed red-taped fingers at me and chanted what first seemed a toe-tapping mantra.

"Blackwitchmustdie

Blackwitchmustdie

Blackwitchmustdie

Blackwitchmustdie

Black Which Must Die" (Jackson 167).

The performer answers by giving out the name in the respective voice of Astarte, Jezebel, Desiree, Sapphire, Danny, Danisha.

Once again there is a call saying:

SPEAK YOUR NAME ANITA ANIMA/ANIMUS! (Jackson 172)

The play ends with

"My name is Anita F Hill. I believe in myself I believe me (*lights fade out as she chants in Danisha's voice*) Go Anita. Go Anita. Go Anita." (184-185)

The playwright Jackson has added rather peculiar elements to her play: reference to Jezebel, Astarte, Desiree, Feminist Activist, Beauty contestant, Anima/Animus to depict the stereotypes of Black women. Besides the natural settings that Jackson uses in the play such as: The Womb, The forest, Inside Manland and the TV monitor with slides of Senate Judiciary Committee, Thomas, Anita Hill, Haitian Voodoo Priestess, The Exorcist Book cover, Long Dong Silver video cassette box among other slides.

WOMBmanWars, a powerful and aggressive play of the 1994 type that addresses the intersections of race, gender, and feminism in the lives of Black women is one of the powerful plays. The play provides a multi-voiced, poetic challenge of the historical and social forces that constitute Black womanhood in the context of political turmoil, cultural uprising and self-realization. White feminism is challenged, the practice of ancestral heritage, the reclamation of voice, body, and identity, and the application of the archetypal anima

to signify inner strength and change and the performative tactics of the *WOMBmanWars* are discussed. Although the play focuses on the sexual harassment that is constant on the part of women, the play attempts to explore the wars women experience. Sapphire, Desiree and Danisha are all struggling against the forces of the society outside or even the wars that are fought within women, including Anita Hill in the background (Jackson, 145).

As Anita Hill (1991) testified,

Thomas's behavior included "remarks about women having sex with animals and films showing group sex or rape scenes" (Hill 37).

The writer extensively uses the monologues in the play. Although the monologues of Anita provide different information on sexism, the monologue of Gorilla is on racism. The play also provokes light on the different institutions like the society, the church and specifically the media that 'Jezebelized' the Black women. Patricia Hill Collins argues

Controlling images such as the "Jezebel" have historically been used to justify the sexual exploitation of Black women (Collins 81).

In her introduction to the play, Jackson tells us that she wrote the play as a way of venting out her frustration which she experienced after witnessing the result of the hearings (145). Black women know that in the U.S. the major portion of the socio-political issues are based on racism. Nevertheless, the racism and sexism were interchanged in Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas case. bell hooks (1981) observes,

Black women occupy a position where "sexism, racism, and class privilege" intersect to shape their experiences (hooks 15).

Under this substitution of racism with sexism, it would turn out that African American women must deal with a racialized patriarchic society, and a patronized media. It was heard by an all-male Senate. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) notes,

Hearings revealed how Black women were often "excluded from both antiracist and feminist discourses" (Crenshaw 1244).

The questions asked by the senate were not only irrelevant, but very humiliating to Anita Hill and the women who were sitting before television. Crenshaw (1991) argues,

Hill's treatment demonstrated the failure to recognize the "intersectional experiences" of Black women facing both racial and gender oppression (Crenshaw 1245).

Although, sadly, some black females did not qualify whether it was a correct action by Anita Hill to speak up and put the career of a Black man in the top office in the judicial system at risk.

The conflict reflected what Crenshaw describes as the pressure placed on Black women to choose between "racial solidarity and gender justice" (Crenshaw 1265).

As is the norm most of the black women wanted Hill to give the Black man a chance to hold the desirable job. Hill went through incredibly humiliating and decent investigations by the all-male Senate, in the process, though, but Hill played the situation well during the inquiries. Reflecting on her testimony, Hill maintained that she had simply "told the truth" about her experience (Hill 294).

Mainstream (white) feminism is the critical topic of *WOMBmanWars* and the central reason of conflict. The play depicts the Black women as historically marginalized by the feminist discourses that often disregard the racial and cultural specificity along with patriarchal systems. As bell hooks (1981) argues,

"No other group in America has had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women" (7).

The characters articulate the suffering of being left out and the need of a feminism that recognizes the complexity of oppression of women of colour using vituperative monologues and dramatic conversations. The play also takes back power in a historically constructed storyline about Black women by highlighting their bodies as places of both abuse and defiance. Rather aggressive and highly personal language is employed in exposing and confronting patriarchal exploitation be it internal or external to the Black community.

WOMBmanWars possesses a powerful spiritual and historical aspect which overflows into its language and design. The play more often than not makes the lives and legacies of Black women the focus of the play by invoking spiritual mentors, ancestors, and diasporic memory. This call connects personal misfortunes to the

looser historical contexts, in the form of colonialism, slavery, and systematic misogynoir, which demonstrates how sexism and racism schemata work to make the lives of black women intersect with each other to generate a reinforcing repercussion of oppression. (*The Guardian* 2001) The Combahee River Collective notes (1983)

"The major systems of oppression are interlocking" (210).

Resistance and continuity are stressed using chants, rituals and even symbolic objects. The play challenges the individualism and Westernism tendencies towards individualism by laying liberation within a collective memory and community by creating the emphasis on group story telling. *WOMBmanWars* also dwells deeper into their bond with the feminine identity and spiritual divinization to mention Jungian psychological ideas and this is by the Anima. The anima has long been construed of as the female interior self and its presence in the play is both an aspect of creative force and a spirit leading the play. It is the internal oppression and a reconstruction of a relationship with their anima with the help of the poetic invocation and visionary scenes which is viewed as a recreation of wholeness.

Audre Lorde reminds us that "without community there is no liberation" (Lorde 112).

The existence of this archetype is in a bid to be an abstraction; it also exists in a form of ritual, voice and dancing. The Anima is a means of bringing personal trauma and misery of individuals into the power of groups and consequently a means of transforming the bad to good. Having this, the play brings with it the inner feminine as the power which may be freeing, healing and geeing in the right direction.

A reverse of the division brought by the patriarchal and colonizing narratives, the Anima / Animus in *WOMBmanWars* is rather symbolic. This feminine force within makes the characters overturn the dualisms of mind/body, reason/emotion and man/woman which have long established the lower statuses of Black women. The Anima is symbolized as a seat of intuitivism or oracular wisdom and wisdom of the family which are usually denied or discredited by the mainstream ideologies. As a result, theatrical visionary experience is constructed with psychological integration, and spiritual awakening intending to play instrumental roles of liberation.

The liberation of these two or three subordinated women is suggested through the assistance of various strategies/resistance/ performing actions and words exploded. The message is also vital just like the performance in *WOMBmanWars*. The themes of the play are expressed through the means of poetry, movement, rhythm with the depth and urgent concern. Jackson has been using the means of monologues of huge proportions resulting into poetical and confrontational language. The bodily aspect of the performance enhances emotional and political intensity of the writing. Most of female African American dramatists use song, dance and oral word so as to allow the performers to create a communal arrangement of the truth telling and healing.

This kind of activism is performative and crosses the boundaries of theater, ritual, and protest, which encourage the audience not to be passive - to participate. An ideal illustration to remember in this case is the use of the scene of the auctioning of Sally during the rape of black women over the centuries whereby the trauma of institutionalized rape of black women over centuries is brought out when the Black girl goes naked on the stage in the auction block. Sally Rape is also out of the box in that it allows the audience to participate and each time the play is presented, the audience is engaged and involves them, bringing in a difference to the performance.

Alice Walker talks of womanism as being "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker xi).

Saffire, her Danisha, Desiree Washington who was raped by Mike Tyson and Anita Hill all reflect the many-sided plight of Black womanhood. They symbolize the inner and the outer struggles that encompass more social problems. All these are confronted with a war that goes on within women, which also implies the personal and collective struggles concerning womanhood and identity and act as a channel through which these themes are explored. They also provide information on the strength and complication of life of women.

Danisha who is disregarded and dispatched out by her father and seduced by Jerome her playmate into the TEEPEE is quite interesting. After several hours during which her dress is torn, her father comes out and blames the little girl and not Jerome, the boy.

The Jeromes of the black community are not punished and all the responsibility lies on the Danisha-Desiree-Anita- Jezebelized by the black and white men (Jackson 180).

The symbolic and theatrical use of a teepee by Jackson is very strong. The teepee is commonly linked to some of the Indigenous cultures and can be interpreted as an indicator of shelter, belonging, and a link back

to the ancestral roots. The cone shaped tent is a sacred site that has been in use over centuries by the tribal members to hold tribal conventions, meetings and curing sessions. The teepee symbolizes the oneness of the tribe and the relations between the physical and spiritual world.

The teepee is associated with the womb of Mother Earth in most tribes where it offers shelter and protection to those in need of it (Jackson 183).

The irony about most of the assault cases of black women is that the men who commit the violence and rape are Black men. The teepee that Danisha ought to have been provided with emotional and physical security is burned. In most cases, the black women raped are not even able to file a complaint or even raise a voice because it is done by someone familiar and is labeled as date-rape, the woman requested it, etc. (Jackson 187). At another level, in *WOMBmanWARs*, the teepee might symbolize a space of the sacred where characters address and resolve the conflicting issues within them, especially the ones connected with gender and cultural identity. This is in line with the general themes of the play that explore the wars that women waged against each other, (Jackson 190).

Teepee is also a significant part of the Native American spirituality since it is a connection between the physical and spiritual worlds. It is said that the smoke of the sacred fire that is burning in the middle of the teepee has transferred the prayers and messages of people to the spiritual world. The teepee is considered to be a bridge to the nature and the spirits of the land as well as the ancestors. Thus, the teepee is viewed as a vital instrument of individual and group spiritual development, healing, and learning amongst the Native American cultures.

The teepee is also capable of serving as an all-purpose stage of theatricality, offering a physical location of intimate moments, monologue or moments of transformation. Its appearance on the stage might allow a closer look at the inner worlds of the characters and also act as the visual metaphor of the inner world and self-discovery. Another research paper can be the study of the use of monologues by the modern African-American women plays writers. In order to explore the depths of the feminine psyche, Jackson introduces an interesting aspect of psychology. She appeals to Jungian archetypes of the anima and animus. Anima/Animus. In the analytical psychology laid down by Carl Jung, Anima is the inner feminine half of a man, which involves such features as empathy, intuition, and emotionality and Animus is the inner masculine half of a woman that contains such aspects as logic, assertiveness, and rationality. The anima and animus are the concepts which symbolize the unconscious elements of femininity in men and the unconscious elements of the masculinity in women respectively. The archetypes have power in our interactions, perceptions and personal development.

The hearings were an entertainment event at the cross of race, gender, and power enhanced and influenced by aggressive media attention. What would have been an intense analysis of an issue related to workplace misconduct transformed into a critical diversion on racial fidelity, gender reliability, and political philosophy. In its essence, the Hill-Thomas scandal emphasized the intricacies of race and gender relationships in the African American community and otherwise. Clarence Thomas, a conservative Black man, used the hearings as the high-tech lynching of uppity blacks, referring to the theft of the history of racial injustice. His words appealed to the hearts of many African Americans who found the question an assault on the Black male advancement within a white-dominated society (Time Magazine).

But on the other hand, there was another narrative by Anita Hill, who is a Black woman and a law professor, and who worked with gendered abuse in the work realm. Her voice put to the test the patriarchal standards that are typically covered by racial cohesion and thus made classical concepts of victimhood, as well as loyalty, more complicated.

As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) observes,

"Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender" (140).

To most, advocating Hill also implied the recognition of a history of sexual exploitation that Black women have constantly suffered in, yet remained quiet about (West).

The media was key in positioning the hearings to be a binary struggle between Black man and Black woman, truth versus fabrication, justice versus political sabotage. These dichotomies were exaggerated over television, through op-eds and radio shows. Anita Hill later reflected,

"The focus was often on me rather than on the issue of sexual harassment itself" (Hill 223).

The emotion-denials of Thomas were frequently spotlighted on mainstream networks, where her credibility was also cast into question, at other times also suggesting implicitly that she did not exhibit the kind of distress that a victim should (The Guardian). Conservative media often explained the situation by having Hill as a puppet of liberal interest groups indicating that there was politics behind her claims. In the

progressive media, however, she was being portrayed as a courageous whistleblower who was fighting against a strong political machine on her own. Both approaches, nevertheless, tended to avoid going deeper into the finer aspects of race and gender intersections that gave her experience.

During and after the hearings, the polls gave a clear picture of a deep division. Most whites of America were of the view that Clarence Thomas succeeded, whereas the opinion of African Americans was divided, with some being in agreement with Thomas because of shared racial identity and distrust of the majority White Senate committee. There was a role of gender also, women, especially feminists and workers, showed pronounced sympathy towards Hill because there was a reflection of their experience in the workplace in her testimony (60 Minutes). This polarization also indicated more significant tensions in society: the failure to balance the two realities racial oppression and gendered violence. Hill was also a racial insider and gendered outsider, an aspect that made it hard to create a single story of justice.

There was a rapid shift in culture and politics triggered by the Hill-Thomas hearings. The year 1992 was dubbed the Year of the Woman, with the greatest number of women elected to Congress with many being inspired by the hearings.

According to Susan Faludi (1991),

The hearings became "a watershed moment in American consciousness about sexual harassment and women's participation in public life" (89).

The discussion on workplace harassment became mainstream, and laws were changed along with public awareness. The polarized reactions that were anticipated during the hearings would later become evident in the 1980s with the MeToo movement and the Brett Kavanaugh-Christine Blasey Ford hearings. Again, race and gender were hotspots of arguments of credibility, power, and institutional accountability ("Anita Hill and the Clarence Thomas Controversy").

CONCLUSION

The Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings are still a potent example of how the race and gender polarizing forces have worked in American society. Although the media coverage was necessary in popularizing the events, it usually served to enhance the already preexisting divisions by over-simplifying complicated stories to easy-to-consume but inaccurate sound bites. The hearings left a legacy beyond such an appointment of a Supreme Court justice but a long-lasting battle to find a way in the identity politics to seek the truth and justice. By applying this case within the framework of race and gender, one can see the complexities of power, credibility and belonging that still the American discourse is built upon. Jackson in her introduction to the play says:

Writing the play released the frustration about what I was witnessing and disagreeing with, but understanding that there was a lot of manipulation of what was not there at all.

I didn't experience the hearing just as woman thing that had happened: it was a male/ women thing. It demonstrated the gender socialisation that all of our spirits suffer from. The character in the play who carries us through so many times zones and dimensions is Anima/Animus. She is the male/female that exist in us. If the premises that we all have some women in us and we all have some man in us then Anita Hill Clarence's Thomas event couldn't have been about women bashing it was self-bashing.

I wanted to demonstrate that there are wars that go on within women. Our wars started in our womb. All women have wombs even as fetuses. We are inside the womb with our own womb. *WOMBManWARS* are wars that women have with themselves in just trying to be whole in this world. In this country when a lot of socio-political problems are predicated on racism, it was fascinating to witness sexism and racism become interchangeable. It was about whatever was needed at the moment to win the fight so we saw modern warriorism from the point of view of patriarchy, and we saw women trying to fight that war using patriarchal tools. (145)

So, the choice Jackson made is to fight with a female weapon and make HERSTORY. *WOMBManWARS* is a strong work of art that has contributed to the discussion of race, gender and power. It is a critique of the prevailing feminist paradigms, re-networked the oppressed history and presented a radical vision of a strong voice, body, and memory. The play not only exposes the oppression of the system, but also has some kind of cultural and spiritual recovery as it focuses on the lived experiences of the Black women. This applies to the anima archetype, which makes it even stronger through the transformative power of feminine identity and the need to reconcile oneself in the face of the greater injustice through inner reconciliation. It is still an iconic piece of Black feminist theater and an essential reading in knowing the part that performance plays in political protest and identity shaping.

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