

A Study of Anne Moody's Coming of Age in Mississippi as a Record of Her Civil Rights Activities



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Abstract

Anne Moody, a Civil Rights activist wrote her autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi* in which she portrays her growth as a black girl in the rural South, Mississippi, in the 1940s and 50s; her struggle against white dominance; and her joining hands with the black activists to end white hegemony. This book is relevant as a historical and personal document. It provides first-hand information about the Civil Rights Movement, and gives an insight into the number of lives that were staked and sacrificed in the struggle for freedom. In the book Moody shares her experiences as a Civil Rights Activist wherein she functions as a canvasser trying to register Negroes to vote; by being a part of sit-ins she tries to desegregate lunch counters and bus-stations and passes out free food and clothing to poor and needy blacks. Her activities as a Civil Rights worker bring her into direct conflict with the whole racist superstructure of Southern society, because of which she is threatened and harassed with rape and death.

Keywords: Civil Rights, Racist. Segregation, Negroes, Germany, Nazi Concentration Camps.

Introduction

Published in 1968, Anne Moody's highly acclaimed autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi* is a moving and poignant account of a black girl's struggle to survive in a white world. In her autobiography, Moody sensitively details the pain of growing up in a racist society. The book reveals the horrifying experiences Moody underwent during her growing years in the deep South, and gives an insight into the rural Southern black life of America in the 40s and 50s. It is an account of Moody's impoverished childhood, her struggle against pervasive racism, and her work as a Civil Rights activist. The book is divided into four parts – 'Childhood', 'High School', 'College', and 'The Movement', which cover different phases of Moody's life.

Aim of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the struggle which black women underwent during slavery, and at the same time it brings to light the courage of young black girls like Anne Moody who were ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their honor, dignity and for the freedom of their people from the white hands. An analysis of African-American women's writings over time through the lens of human right seems to emphasize the notions of human dignity, social justice, social courage, and social action.

Review of Literature

Autobiographies of Black women writers are the first hand source of information that throws light on the atrocities and the prevalent white hegemony. In the words of Bell Hooks 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.

For the study, a review of books written by black women writers like Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and the book in question, that is, Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* was done. Maya Angelou has stated in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) that the black female is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power. Also journals and articles on African American women writers have been reviewed. The African-American women writers highlight the ungratefulness of the white race whose devaluation of black daughters and mothers is a contemptible act. In

the words of Maya Angelou, black women have nursed a nation of strangers. For hundreds of years they literally nursed babies at their breasts who they knew when they grew up would rape their daughters and kill their sons. Du Bois believes that the victimization of Black women is the most terrible injustice of slavery. In *Darkwater*, he states, that he shall forgive the white South much in its final judgment day : he shall forgive its slavery, for slavery is a world-old habit; he shall forgive its fighting for a well-lost-cause, and for remembering that struggle with tender tears; he shall forgive its so-called "pride of race", the passion of its hot blood, and even its dear, old, laughable strutting and posing; but one thing he shall never forgive, neither in this world nor the world to come: its wanton and continued and persistent insulting of the black womanhood which it sought and seeks to prostitute to its lust.

Anne Moody's Coming of Age in Mississippi

The first part of the book, aptly titled, 'Childhood' covers a life span of ten years – from the age of four, till the time she is fourteen years old. This part is especially important because of its child's eye view of twentieth-century poor black life in the Deep South. The second part, titled 'High School' covers the teen years of Moody's life, beginning when she is fourteen years old, and unfolds her life as an adolescent black girl. In this part Moody mentions about a chain of mishappenings that occur in and around Centreville, unveiling a world of darkness and brutality that surrounded the life of every black living in Mississippi – the murder of Emmett Till, the beating to near death of a Negro boy Jerry, the burning of the Taplin family, and the murder of Samuel O'Quinn.

The third part, 'College', incorporates Moody's college life. She moves into Natchez Junior College through basketball scholarship, and later into Tougaloo College through scholarship for outstanding students. It is at Tougaloo College that she becomes associated with the NAACP, participates in the voter registration drive in Delta, and works with the SNCC workers. Her involvement with the Movement as a high school senior gives her an opportunity to express her outrage at the passivity of black people, and at the oppression of the whites.

In the last part of the autobiography, entitled 'The Movement', Moody actively gets involved with the Freedom Movement. As an activist she translates her subdued emotions into action. She takes part in demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, and even goes to jail several times. Moody discusses the Woolworth's sit-in, the March on Washington, the Birmingham bombing, the death of Medgar Evers, and of President Kennedy. She is forbidden to return home because of her involvement with the Movement. She receives no support from her family or close friends for her radical activities. In 1964, she is awarded her Bachelor of Science degree at Tougaloo College. Eventually, however, disenchanted with certain aspects of the Civil Rights movement – she begins to question the non-violent ideology of Martin Luther King, and even raises question on the existence of God.

In 'High School', Moody incorporates her experiences as a teen-aged black girl growing in

Mississippi. It begins when Moody is fourteen-years-old. This part of the book is particularly significant as Moody comes to realize that in white America, the life of a Negro is nothing better than that of any lowest animal. A Negro can be easily killed and slaughtered by white men. Her experiences as an adolescent black girl living in the deep South, leave her deeply shocked, and set the foundation of her life as a Civil Rights activist. The first horrifying incident in Centreville about which she reports is the murder of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy from Chicago who was killed in Greenwood by some white men, probably because he whistled at some white woman. Emmett Till's murder makes her realize that there existed a bigger fear than the fear of hunger and hell that was the fear of being killed just because she was black.

After Emmett Till, another Negro boy, Jerry is nearly beaten to death. Jerry happened to be Moody's classmate, and was wrongly beaten under the suspicion of making calls to a white operator. The boy told Moody that his parents did not even take him to the hospital in Centreville because they were scared to take him to the white doctors. A far more shocking incident for the blacks in Mississippi occurs when the Taplin family is burned to death. Moody saw the horrifying sight, when the wooden frame house was burning to ashes. Almost a hundred people had collected to see the house and its residents burn to death.

Another Negro, Samuel O'Quinn is shot in the back from close range with a double-barreled shotgun. He was killed because he was an NAACP member, and was trying to organize the Negroes in Centreville. Terribly upset and distraught with the mounting violence, Moody was unable to concentrate on anything. Moreover, the brutality, bloodshed, and heaviness that surrounded the atmosphere of Centreville were almost choking her to death. Being a sensitive girl, Moody decides to quit her condition in Centreville and go to Baton Rouge.

It was at the age of fifteen that Moody began to hate people. She not just hated whites for victimizing blacks, but hated the blacks, too, for passively accepting the injustices and thereby becoming participants in the oppression. To escape the evil and suffocation of Centreville, Moody goes to Baton Rouge, where initially she works for a white woman, and then gets another job at a department store. In the beginning, her Civil Rights activities concentrate in and around Jackson. One of the major demonstrations in Jackson in which Moody participates is the 'Woolworth's sit-in'. This demonstration makes Moody a known black face not only among the Negroes, but also among the whites. The 'Woolworth's sit-in' was a demonstration against Segregated Lunch Counters. Moody and other demonstrators gather at the segregated lunch counter, take seats, and ask for service. The newsmen and the police had already gathered outside the store. Gradually, the crowd keeps on growing and a few white students start chanting anti-Negro slogans. During the sit-in Moody is slapped by a white man and thrown against an adjoining counter. She is

dragged about thirty-feet towards the door by her hair. Other demonstrators are also beaten and injured. The angry mob throws ketchup, mustard, sugar, and pies upon the demonstrators. After three hours they are picked up by Reverend King in his station wagon, and taken to the NAACP headquarters.

Before the sit-in, I had always hated the whites in Mississippi. Now I knew it was impossible for me to hate sickness. That whites had a disease, an incurable disease in its final stage. What were our chances against such a disease? I thought of the students, the young Negroes who had just begun to protest, as young interns. When these young interns got older, I thought, they would be the best doctors in the world for social problems. (Coming of Age, 267)

Moody talks in detail about the various kinds of demonstrations, sit-ins, pray-ins, and rallies in which the Negroes protested against racial discrimination, asking the government for equal rights and opportunities like whites. The Jackson Negroes demanded improvement in job opportunities for Negroes on city payrolls, integration of public parks, libraries and public schools, removal of segregation signs from public facilities, hiring of Negro policemen, encouraging public eating establishments to serve both whites and Negroes, and forcing service station to integrate rest rooms. Although the Mayor refuses to fulfill the demands of the blacks, the Negroes in Mississippi, nevertheless, pledge themselves "to unite in a massive offensive against segregation" (Coming of Age, 268) under the leadership of Medgar Evers.

Moody discusses the workshops conducted by the Movement workers where demonstrators were taught how to protect themselves, and the tasks performed by various organizations like the NAACP that handled all the bail and legal services, and public relations, and the SNCC and CORE that handled the workshops and drew teenagers into the Movement. She also tells about the diverters – the Civil Rights workers who had become known to the Jackson police, and were used to divert the attention of the cops just before a demonstration. These diverters used to lead the cops off on a wild goose chase, while the real demonstrators got time to move to their targeted places. Moody had been a part of all of these activities – be it participating in demonstrations or rallies, acting as a canvasser or a church speaker, conducting workshops, or acting as a 'diverter'.

Moody writes in detail about the ill-treatment, and torture given by the police to the demonstrators, and the bad condition of jails. She also writes about the news distorted by the media to serve its purpose, as in the case of four hundred high school students who were arrested and taken to the fairgrounds. These students had refused to go back to their classrooms, and the police had turned their dogs loose on them. The newspapers reported the minor wounds suffered by the cops, but did not state how many students were hurt from dog bites, and lumps on the head from billy clubs.

The rising fervor of the Movement in Jackson, suffers a heavy setback when Medgar Evers is shot dead. His death shatters all the hopes of the Negroes. The NAACP organizes a march to protest their leader's death. Two hundred policemen with rifles start arresting, and sending the demonstrators to the fairgrounds. Moody is also arrested, and sent to the fairgrounds. The place reminds her of 'Nazi Germany' and 'concentration camps'.

After the death of Medgar Evers, there is a split amongst the Negro organizations, and the Movement too loses its fervor. So, Moody decides to leave Jackson, and move to Madison County. The bombing of the Birmingham Church leaves her completely disillusioned and shocked. It has an adverse effect on Moody's psyche, and also shakes her faith in the existence of God, on the ideas of Martin Luther King, and on non-violence as a weapon to achieve freedom.

Moody decides to leave her work with the Movement for sometime, stating that, otherwise, she would probably have died from lack of sleep and nervousness. Her activism, thus not just alienates her from her family, and places her life in imminent danger, but also leads her to blaspheme the God of her childhood, and takes her to the brink of nervous breakdown.

From Canton Moody goes to New Orleans. She wanted a job to be in an independent position and knew that with her college education, the only thing that she could do in Mississippi, Louisiana, and most of the Southern states was teach. She was the first person from her family to graduate from college.

During her stay in New Orleans, another hateful incident occurs. On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy is killed. President Kennedy's death was a big blow to the Negroes, and to their cause leaving Moody disillusioned with the Movement.

Conclusion

Moody's autobiography is significant as it presents the consistent efforts of a black girl to resist victimization, dehumanization, and oppression at the hands of the white community. She demonstrated the courage to reject the subordinate position allocated to her by society, and fight not only for herself, but also for her race even though she received little support from her family and the community. In the words of Lynn Z. Bloom,

Moody as a young black woman coming of age in the sixties in Mississippi is exceptional – more aware of the evils of segregation, more committed to overcoming them, more willing to take risks and to make hard moral choices than either her parents' generation or her own peers, black or white. Her autobiography, like her life, is a witness to that commitment. (Z. Bloom, "Coming of Age in the Segregated South."122)

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