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Analytic Book Review on *This Bridge Called My Back*

What Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua did with *This Bridge Called My Back* was to give women of color a space to pour out their most intense emotions and thoughts. In this anthology, women share poems, letters, journals, speeches, and other pieces of writing about their experiences as third world women and women of color in the United States. Moraga, Anzaldua, and many other women in this book use the term “third world women” to talk about women of color in the United States and the connection they have with women of color internationally in countries “bearing colonial histories and still suffering from its effects.” So, by “third world women,” they mean women who feel “internally” colonized in the United States” (2015, p. XXV). That term was used to reflect the changes that were happening around the globe in terms of the rise in globalization and in the increase of political awareness in the United States. At this time social progressive values really started to grow. All the hopes, fears and frustrations that these women had is illustrated for all to read. It is an intimate book by women of color in the United States for not only other women of color and third world women, but also for white feminists, white men, third world men, and men of color. Frustrated by their exclusion of the current feminist movement of their time that was led by white feminists, these women emphasize that in order for social progress to truly happen, women of color must be included. There are several topics discussed in this book, one of the main ones being on intersectionality. Women of color understand that is not only their gender alone that brings them discrimination, as a combination and overlapping of their race, class, and sexuality with gender brings them several

modes of discrimination. The purpose for stressing intersectionality throughout the whole book is to make white middle class feminists at the time understand the true definition of feminism that is supposed to include women of color, LGBTQ women, and poor women. Yet, while they call out the problems of white feminism, they do not forget about the battles they have face within the communities they identify in. Women highlight the issues of self-hatred and self-oppression as well as the oppression and racism they commit to others. They are aware that discussing these issues are vital to bringing social progress.

I will be using a few of the readings from KOR to analyze some of the topics in this book. I will be connecting “A Brown Girl’s Guide to Labels” by Mathangi Subramanian to the book’s overall topic on the importance of intersectionality in feminism. I will also be using Allan G. Johnson’s work “Patriarchy, The System: An It, Not A He, A Them, or An Us” to analyze the topic of self-oppression and self-hatred in women of color and third world women discussed in this book and why they occur. Another work I will be using is Daisy Hernandez’s “Even If I Kiss a Women” to connect to the topic of how women of color tend to separate themselves through racism. Furthermore, I will be connecting Whitney Pow’s “That’s Not Who I Am: Calling Out and Challenging Stereotypes of Asian Americans” to the book’s topic of stereotypes women of color have. Lastly, I will be using “Living the Third Shift: Latina Adolescent Street Vendors In Los Angeles” by Emir Estrada and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo to further discuss the topic of gender roles highlighted in this book.

The topic of intersectionality is what encompasses this whole book. Intersectionality is how many women in this book make sense of their experiences as women of color. They look at how the complexity of their identities in terms of their race, class, gender, and sexuality play a role in their oppression. The Combahee River Collective in their work “A Black Feminist

Statement” expresses intersectionality best when they state that “Many Black women have a good understanding of both sexism and racism, but because of the everyday constrictions of their lives cannot risk struggling against them both” (2015, p. 216). The struggle against several forms of oppression because of the combination of their race, class, sexuality, and gender are what many women in this book are emphasizing. Women of color are aware that they are against a system that works against them in two or more ways. Looking back to the Combahee River Collective, their purpose for writing their work was to point out that as lesbian Black women they have several forms of oppression to fight because of the world we live in that is run by white heterosexual men.

Calling out the problems of white feminism is another major topic highlighted. Many women in this book were frustrated by the feminist movement of the 1970s and 80s. Many feminist organizations at the time were run by white middle class women who often overlooked the issues of women of color. Women of color felt silenced by white women. Their frustration lies on their awareness that the people who are supposed to understand them best and be in solidarity with were bringing them down. As Gloria Anzaldua states in “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers,” the “women of color is invisible both in the white male mainstream and in the white women’s feminist world” (2015, p. 169). The experiences these women suffered from the combination of both their race and gender were viewed as unimportant by white feminists. To white women, fighting the sexism they experienced was more important than acknowledging their own racism. Many women of color felt that there was a constant battle of having to choose between caring more about issues of race or issues of gender. Women of color in this book reflect that they do not have pick and choose as their identity involves more than just their gender. The combination of both their gender and race is part of who they are. As

Andrea Canaan states in her work called "Brownness," "I must address the issues of own oppression and survival. When I separate them, isolate them, and ignore them, I separate, isolate, and ignore myself. I am a unit" (2015, p. 234). This topic connects to the reading in KOR titled "The Brown Girl's Guide to Labels by Mathangi Subramanian where she also discusses the issues of white feminism. The concept of women of color referring to feminism as a "white women's thing" comes from their experiences of having to pick and choose between caring more about gender issues or race issues. White feminism tends to push the idea that for a woman of color to be a feminist, they have to let go of their race issues. She states, "No matter where I looked, the message was clear: You could be Indian, and you could be a feminist, but you couldn't be both" (Subramanian, 2020, p. 36). Essentially, what women of color in this book are stressing is for white women to check their privilege and acknowledge their racism. Furthermore, they want them to truly understand that feminism is a "battle for economic, political, and social freedom and not a battle of sexes" (Moraga & Anzaldua, 2015, p. 237). The focus of feminism has to shift to address a whole range of oppressions women suffer. Women of color do not have the privilege of focusing their efforts on one issue alone as what white women having been doing in the feminist movement. Here, women of color want to raise consciousness about the realities of women of color. They are fed up about being written off and seen as nonexistent.

Not only do these women call out white women for their ignorance, they also call out themselves. They open to us the ways they express self-hatred and self-oppression to their own racial, sexual, and class communities as well as how they themselves and their communities oppress others. They describe how women of color can play the roles of both oppressor and oppressed. An example of this is by Rosario Morales in her work "We're All in the Same Boat" when she states her distrust and anger towards Puerto Rican activist women fighting for their

nation's independence who display sexism and support for machoism. She states, "I desperately want Latina women in the feminist movement while I fear the entry of Hispanic & often Black women because I fear they will play an anti-feminist role" (Morales, 2015, p. 87). One of the problems that prevent social progress mentioned here is that there are women of color who tend to remain silent on the sexism that they suffer from. The other part of the problem is the act of remaining silent on the racial issues and class issues that they themselves also suffer from. Cherri Moraga states, "women of color and working-class women often shrink from challenging white middle-class women. It is easier to rank oppressions and set up a hierarchy, rather than take responsibility for changing our own lives. We have failed to demand that white women...be accountable for their racism" (2015, p. 28). By failing to take action they are giving in to a system that works against them in more than one way. One of the reasons as to why they may fail to take action can be explained by Allan G. Johnson's work "Patriarchy, The System: An It, Not A He, A Them, or An Us" in KOR when he mentions the concept of paths of least resistance. Paths of least resistance are when people take the easiest route that avoids any form of resistance. It involves going along. Additionally, it usually involves unconsciously making choices that give in to the system. In other words, paths of least resistance are when we do "what seems most comfortable to us, most familiar, and safest" (Johnson, 2020, p. 65). When we do something or fail to do something, that choice affects the consequences. So, women of color may not call out white women or even fellow men of color because they do not want to face greater resistance. Yet, by failing to take action they face consequences because of it and partake in self-oppression. Another example the book gives is by Mitsuye Yamanda in her work "Invisibility Is An Unnatural Disaster," where she expresses the way in which Asian American women play a part in self-oppression by failing to admit that they are oppressed. Additionally, one of the other

reasons why self-oppression and self-hatred is ongoing is because the oppressor's ideologies is something that is taught, meaning those ideologies tend to be passed down by parents to children. That is what keeps that cycle flowing.

As previously mentioned, the women of color in this book also express the ways they oppress other women of color and even other men of color who have racial backgrounds different from their own. The purpose of calling themselves out is to emphasize the idea that in order to create true solidarity, they have to let go of their oppressing ways. As Moraga states, "...each of us in some way has been both oppressed and the oppressor. We are afraid to look at how we have failed each other. We are afraid to see how we have taken the values of our oppressor into our hearts and turned them against ourselves and one another" (2015, p. 27). There are women of color who has had the words of the oppressor ingrained in them. They then took those words and extracted it. One of the reasons why some tend to believe in the misconceptions they have of each other is because of how the media portrays people of color. From those misconceptions, they set up barriers against each other and view their differences as a way to separate themselves. According to Barbara Cameron in her work "Gee, You Don't Seem Like An Indian," "I've grown up with misconceptions about Blacks, Chicanos, and Asians. I'm still in the process of trying to eliminate my racist pictures of other people of color. I know most of my images of other races come from television, books, movies, newspapers, and magazines" (2015, p. 44). Furthermore, the media tends to emphasize the idea of white being better and is why many women in this book grew up believing that white was better than brown because that was what media told them. It is also why some of the women in this book, such as Nellie Wong and Gloria Anzaldua talk about the desire to be white. They saw how fairer skin was praised more, seen as more beautiful, and that being out in the sun for too long was

discouraged. This idea connects to Daisy Hernandez's work "Even If I Kiss a Women" in *KOR* when she talks about how her family advised her to date "a gringo." She states being told that "A man with a college degree is best, but chose White over Black", to forget Caribbean men because "if they are not Black, their grandmothers might be," to forget Central Americans because "if they are not indios, their grandmothers might be," and to consider Argentineans because most are white (Hernandez, 2020, p. 153). In this example, we see how women of color view men of color of different racial backgrounds. These same racist ideas are practiced by women of color to other women of color and they use it a way to set up a rank system to separate themselves. That practice is what harms any progress in Feminism because they cannot create equality for all women by separating themselves and is why the women in this book call it out.

Stereotypes about women of color was another important topic highlighted. Women of color have certain expectations and ideas concerning their work life, domestic life, and how they should behave. For example, Mitsuye Yamada talks about how as an Asian American woman, she is not expected to call out racism. Due to stereotypes about Asian American women being docile and passive, people did not expect her to be angry about a racist remark she encountered. The thought that people can get away with saying racist remarks in front of Asian American women was prevalent and was why it was called "uncharacteristic of her" to call them out. Again, this particular idea and stereotype comes from what we see in American media. There are these characteristics that are pushed onto women of color that strips away the reality of who they are. Whitney Pow in her work, "That's Not Who I Am: Calling Out and Challenging Stereotypes of Asian Americans" agrees when she states, "The problem in my lived experience is that these few portrayals end up being what people expect of me, and other Asian/Americans, too, and they create a kind of cultural erasure. When people look at me, they expect something that I am not..."

(2020, p. 85). Then there are stereotypes concerning what the roles are between men and women of color. The belief that there are certain obligations and roles women of color have to stick to, one mainly of housekeeping and domestic work are prevalent in society. On top of that, any radical actions by women of color are viewed negatively as they are seen to be outside their perceived obligations. Norma Alarcon in her work “Chicana’s Feminist Literature,” really pinpoints at this idea of what the perceived role is for Mexican and Chicana women and what happens when women try to get outside that role. She states, “Consciously and unconsciously the Mexican/Chicano patriarchal perspective assigns the role of servitude to women...when the wife of would-be-wife, the mother or would-be-mother questions out loud and in print the complex “servitude/devotion/love,” she will be quickly seen as false to her “obligation” and duty” (Alarcon, 2015, p. 185). Yet, the women in this book are encouraging other women to be radical and break away from these roles even if they are viewed negatively by their own communities. At the same time, these gender roles are still prevalent among Latinx communities to this day, but not only are these expectations placed on just on mothers and wives, but on daughters as well. This role of servitude is instilled on daughters where they too are expected to adhere to certain obligations of domestic work. The reading “Living the Third Shift: Latina Adolescent Street Vendors in Los Angeles” by Emir Estrada and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo in KOR further explains this. They state, “Not only do these daughters of Latino immigrant workers attend to their schoolwork, they are saddled with significant household-work responsibilities – cleaning, cooking, laundering, and looking after younger siblings” (Estrada & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2020, p. 326). Furthermore, in their study of observing Latina adolescents participating in street vending, they note that girls “were unhappy about the tasks they were assigned or expected to do simply because they were female” (Estrada, 2020, p. 333). Then there are men of color who also feel

like they are obligated to be masculine. According to Merle Woo in “Letter to Ma,” “These men of color... have brought the white male definition of “masculinity:” men only should take on the leadership in the community because the qualities of “originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity” are “traditionally masculine” (2015, p. 143). Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo in KOR also talk about this when they state that men who try to do domestic work are demasculinized as it is not expected from them to partake in such activities.

To conclude, this book provides us with several ways in how and why the Feminist movement of their time has failed them. At the same time, they talk about their own failures and what they must do to bring about social progress where all women of color are included. It is a book that stresses the importance of intersectionality and why that needs to be looked at and observed. The experiences of women of color should not be forgotten. In the fight for equality for all women, the topics of self-oppression, of we oppress others, the stereotypes we have, and the roles we are placed in also needs to be addressed and fought as well. We really need to take a deep look at ourselves, observe how we participate in this system, and determine what we must do to bring change. The first addition of this book may have been released in 1981, but the topics highlighted are still prevalent in today’s society.

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