

## “COMING OF AGE IN MISSISSIPPI”

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“The classic autobiography of growing up poor and black in the rural south” (Anna Moody). I believe this piece helps those who confuse peaceful means of struggle with mundane sort of parliament election and as well do confuse a course of struggle aimed at changing of a regime with that of human rights movements.

“Coming of Age in Mississippi” a book written by Anne Moody helps me understand what life was like in the south both before and during the Civil Rights Movement. This book recounts how the descendents of African-American slaves struggled to win their freedom and it is also a factual account of series of persistence and struggle of African-Americans against racism. For the most part, the book focuses on in the area of prejudice and racial segregation Anne Moody suffered through out of her life and beyond. Literally, though this well-written autobiography is the story of her life based on her own personal experience in a rural Mississippi and other areas where she grew up into adulthood during the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960s.

Anne Moody was born in Centreville, Mississippi, on September 15, 1940. She was the oldest in the family; her father left the family when she was young and her mother supported the family through domestic work as cleaning, cooking and performing other housekeeping tasks for the white family. She grew up in Centreville, where she attended segregated schools. Despite all that, Anne Moody was a good student. She won a basketball scholarship to Natchez Junior College and attended from 1959 to 1961. Then She won an academic scholarship to Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi, and received a bachelor of science in 1964.

So much so, the spiteful image of segregation in which Ann Moody went through and as well told by her mother when she was a child is read like this “Mrs. Carter is backing teacakes in the kitchen of that big white house, Mr. Carter is reading in the living room and the children are studying upstairs, and Mr. Carter is sitting up counting all the money he made off Negroes” (Anne Moody page 13). This typical story might have led Ann Moody to believe that racial segregation was nothing but a disgrace for the entire black population. Plus, this very story triggered her more to believe that the chasm existed between the two races in the south was utterly amiss and immoral. To that effect, she was totally convinced that challenging a social system in which Negroes forced into serfdom and bondage and allowed whites to bash Negroes at will has to be a good cause to die for. Take a look into this next typical diary Anne Moody wrote in her book as well. “It was Negro women that would make beds, dust the furniture, run the vacuum and clean the bath, and would make three meals a day for the white families”. Moody Yet, when it comes to the eating session, Negro women would put to one side to wait

for the dinner leftovers from whites. Clearly though Anne Moody has seen it that African Americans were treated with disrespect by their white counterparts and had been also denied the right of citizenship the whites enjoyed in America. "I was fifteen years old when I began to hate people. I hated the white men who murdered Emmett Till and I hated all the other whites who were responsible for the countless murders... (Moody 125). "But I also hated Negroes. I hated them for not standing up and doing something about the murders. In fact, I think I had a stronger resentment toward Negroes for letting the whites kill them than toward the whites" (Moody 29). What a sad expression! Indeed very sad! In all honesty, one would say that 15 years old is too young to be consumed by a feeling of intense hostility towards another human being. However, it was that early, that Anne Moody was exposed to such an unfolding racial discrimination and bigotry although practically the same as cited above. In other words, she was brought up into racially segregated society in which both Negroes and Caucasians found themselves caught up with lack of sympathy and resentment for each other. "A house divided itself cannot stand" (Abraham Lincoln)

With that tension in mind, a story narrated by her mother about what was going on in Carter's Big White House on one hand and what Negroes had to do to whatever odd jobs they could find to survive on the other had a serious effect on Anne's life. Virtually, though being born into Negro's family was literally dire and fearsome for Anne Moody and her peers. For instance, she was 14, when she first heard of a black family being destroyed by fire. She was told that a white man of much wealth who set the house of Taplin's house on fire, and was not brought to justice. In other words, no legal action was ever taken by any authority to penalize the perpetrator at all, just because he was white. There were nine bodies found covered by ashes and charcoals in that very incident alone, all of whom were black. Taplin, the victim, like any other Negroes lived in a rotten wood house as opposed to the luxurious life the whites enjoyed, like that of Carter's family.

Herewith, she began to fear whites not only for she heard about what happened to Taplin's family but also she heard that Samuel O'Quinn was murdered while walking on the neighborhood and Emmett's death, another black person that was killed by hanging and continued to hear more of atrocities committed by whites against Negroes in the south and beyond. Emmett Till was killed by whites, suspected that he was engaged sexually with a white woman. And yet, the case of Emmett's death was totally ignored by local authorities. Despite losing the court case, she vividly remembered NAACP's involvement in Emmett Till's defense. As a result, her curiosity grew to the point where she believed that his (Emmett's) death had some sort of serious significance NAACP had to deal with. As she grew older, however, she became well-informed not only Emmett's death but also on issues relating to the widespread violence, of lynching, slaughtering, and injuring Negroes across the south. Thus, she began to fear for her own safety.

Fearing for her life, not only did she enter Willis High with a new name but also with a completely new insight of what life of Negroes was like in Mississippi. While at school, Anne was also working for one of

the meanest white women in town named Mrs. Bruckes. Mrs. Bruckes's son Wayne was flunking Algebra class, so Mrs. Bruckes ordered Ann to tutor him. In a while, they began to have a passionate sort of feeling for each other. In due course, Mrs. Brucke found out that Wayne was attracted to Anne. And then Anne already knew that Mrs. Brucke was mad and had a different look at her. So be it, life goes on. Aside from babysitting, and housekeeping, Anne was also involved in several ballgames, like basketball, softball and other activities at Willis High.

On one occasion, while cleaning the floor, she overheard Mrs. Brucke, talking with friends about NAACP some how linking up with Emmett's death. Then, she thought she'd go out after Emmett Till's case and how NAACP was linked. She asked her mother but in vain. Then she turned her face to one of her teachers named Mrs. Rice and asked her what NAACP stands for and what its cause was. Mrs. Rice told her including but not limited that NAACP is a Negro organization established a long time ago to help Negroes gain a few basic rights, and currently, NAACP is trying to get a conviction in Emmett Till's case. "Up until his [Emmett Till's] death, I had heard of Negroes found floating in a river or dead somewhere with their bodies riddled with bullets. But I didn't know the mystery behind these killings then. I remember once when I was only seven I heard Mama and one of my aunts talking about some Negro who had been beaten to death. "Just like them low-down skunks killed him they will do the same to us," Mama had said. When I asked her who killed the man and why, she said, "An evil spirit killed him. You gotta be a good girl or it will kill you too." So since I was seven, I had lived in fear of that "Evil Spirit." It took me eight years to learn what that spirit was" (Moody 41)

The "Evil Spirit" aside, the other dilemma Anne Moody came across was also the question of what makes whites white, and what makes Negroes different from whites, and the terms that were used by whites to neglect Negroes. She asked her mother to explain but the question was not that easy for her mother to clarify either. As a result, Moody's perceptions of white versus black become more complex. And the other question that has never been resolved in her mind was also the question of being mixed persons in America. What is the formal profile of mixed persons in America? After all, being superior race versus an inferior race is nothing more than a feeling usually in an exaggerated way resulted from a false sense of impression both white and black Americans held against one another. With that in mind, she went on to ask questions like these, why is it that possible for white and yet not for colored people here in America? Why the streets where white kids play, the homes they live in and the schools they go to are better than ours?"

Be that as it may, long-after her father left them, they moved into the well to do white neighborhood, somewhere in Mississippi. There, in the new white neighborhood, Anne and her little brother found new friends, Katie and Bill. There she sat on the porch and watched the two white kids often riding their bikes or skating down the little hill just in front of their house. She wished her mama could buy them a bike or even a pair of skates to share with her little brother but in vain. There she and her brother

became friends and mingled with Katie and Bill. Katie and Bill's parents were rich, own the furniture store in town and had a model playhouse which Moody envied their playhouse more than she did their bikes and skates. There, they would go to the movies together with them but were offered to use a separate entrance into the movie theater and allowed only to sit in the upstairs or in the balcony designated to Negroes. And Katie and Bill on the other hand sat in downstairs where whites would sit. Regularly, though Anne and her brother wanted to mingle with those white kids, although their mother wouldn't let them play with them

Afterward, Anne Moody joined Natchez campus and met Totter; a student she eventually found out that she was a member of NAACP's chapter in the Natchez campus. Conveniently, Totter was the last person next to Mrs. Rice that explained to her about NAACP and its leading role in the movement. From way back, Moody remembered what Mrs. Rice explained to her about NAACP and its involvement in Emmett Till's case. But this time, she even found that Totter was more supportive in many ways than Mrs. Rice was in terms of being free to tell her about NAACP in cheerful manner. Totter also advised her not to worry about having white teachers and several whites' students in Natchez campus. Literally though, Totter told Anne that she was secretary of the NAACP chapter in Natchez campus in response to Anne's curiosity, Totter urged her to take part in NAACP chapter on campus in return. And Anne moody said oh yes! She replied in response to Totter's recommendation to join NAACP. Then Anne Moody promised her that she would go to the next meeting. In the mean time, though Anne went in full swing to think about what happened to Negroes in Mississippi and everywhere else in the south. Then, she thought of Quinn, how he had shot in the back with a shotgun because they suspected him of being a member of NAACP, she thought reverend Dupree and his family who had been run out of Woodville when she was a senior in high school, and she thought of Tapelines family, she remembered the unlawful killings, beatings, and intimidations went on for so long in the south. Although she began to worry about what might possibly be happening to her family if she joined NAACP; she contemplated a little bit and decided right on time to join NAACP and move on. In her mind, committing herself to the cause of Negroes and NAACP was not the case in point for her to worry about but her family's security.

Next, Anne Moody attended the first annual convention held by NAACP on February of 1962 in Jackson in which several interesting speakers including Jackie Robinson, Floyd Patterson, Curt Flood, Margarita Bellefonte, and many more others presented. Once again, she was happy to see the charismatic speakers on stage and to hear their groundbreaking voices on live. She felt relaxed and proud and then decided to confirm her promise she made out to Totter. She even sacrificed seeing her family for the sake of the movement and decided to stay on campus for that summer and continued to work.

Eventually, she became friendly with her social science professor, named John Shelter, who at a time was in charge of NAACP activities on campus. One thing is true though that Moody was the first Negro girl from her hometown to go out in public to demonstrate and worked with NAACP in Jackson. To that

end, she happened to set a strong example for the women who came after her. She developed a leadership skill and begun organizing a demonstration at the state fair in Jackson where she became known as heroine and has shown great courage, strength of character, and brilliance.

On one occasion, however, Medgar Evers, one of the leaders in Jackson came to campus and gave a big hearty speech about how Jackson was going to move. In that meeting, also Moody learned that Dave, the young boy she fell in love with was a member of NAACP. She saw him making a speech right before the public and heard his interview live on the local radio. Unfortunately, however, shortly after his speech, Medgar Evers, was shot to death by public authorities. The entire Negro population and white sympathizers came in mass and protested. Although Evers's death strengthened the ties between Negroes and white sympathizers, the old and conservative individuals in NAACP leadership on the other hand begun to retreat from their previously inflexible position. In other words, after Medgar's death, the rest of the ministries who have been in a leadership position didn't want to be next then things begun to fallen apart.

And yet, Anne Moody was not discouraged; rather, was motivated to move on and rally the youth behind The SNCC and the CORE. By doing so, she formed a defensive line against authorities and proved them wrong that the death of their leader was not in vain! The death of our leader is not in vain! The youth yelled in a loud and angry voice!

Next, the movement of the students organized under the umbrellas of the Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the CORE engaged in launching more demonstrations like freedom rides, sit ins, and boycotting the bus, the stores and other public sectors in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia and across the south. Both the SNCC and the CORE started to let the whites know and proved the authorities that even by killing off Medgar they didn't touch the real core of the movement! The youth shout! At that point, Anne Moody already assumed a new role as leader and become the center of attention in Jackson, Mississippi. In the mean time, she learned that the Jackson Daily News seized the opportunity to cause division between NAACP and Negro protesters. Then, shortly after she paid a close attention to the news bulletin of the Jackson News Letter, she advised the youths to avoid any sign of split from within SNCC and the CORE (Congress on Racial Equality). And most important of all, she urged them to fight back against its intrigue aimed at the very heart of their unity. This time, the degree of her involvement was increased to the point where she worked with many civil rights leaders and organized many key events of the Civil Rights Movement, such as the Woolworth Sit-Ins, the March on Washington D.C., marches in Mississippi, the Mississippi Freedom Summer so on and so forth. Believing that it is the common people that can make a difference in the movement, she went to Madison County where everybody thought it was too rough for girls to deal with Negro boys in Madison Country. There, she mobilized them to stand in solidarity with the rest of their peers in Mississippi and beyond.

Finally, the civil rights movement in which Ann Moody played an active role was a battle waged by Black Americans in order to do away with racial prejudices and social injustice. Therefore, improving Negroes' life condition in the south, bringing about social justice for African Americans in the U.S, pleading for the U.S. congress to take legislative steps that forbid both local and federal governments discriminating against blacks in public facilities, and bringing racial segregation to an end were basically the objectives of the Civil Rights Movement in 1950s and 60s. And also the immediate demand presented on behalf of the entire Negroes in general and of Jackson in particular were

- Hiring Negro policeman and school crossing guards
- Removal of segregation signs from public facilities
- Improvement of job opportunities for Negroes
- Encouraging public eating establishments to serve both whites and Negroes
- Integration of public parks and libraries
- Integration of public schools.

For further reading

Coming of Age in Mississippi.

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