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# Race and Gender Intersected. The Hill/Thomas Controversy

## 1. Introduction

Jezebel, the black castrating matriarch, the black rapist lynched by a white mob – all these characters from myths and stereotypes from the racial history of the United States paraded in front of the American public in October 1991. The accusation of sexual harassment that was brought against a candidate to the Supreme Court by his former assistant provoked one of the most excitedly debated controversies of the last decades. “Washington soap opera,” as the testimony was frequently referred to, took place from the 11<sup>th</sup> until the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 1991. The leading actors of the drama projected on TV screens in American houses were: an affluent black candidate to the Supreme Court of the United States – Clarence Thomas and an ambitious and pious African-American lawyer – Anita Hill. The drama that took place in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee and the whole America was even more captivating as it was played by actors whose race and gender, two intersectionally operative categories in American political and social life, mattered.

As I intend to claim, the interconnectedness of race and gender was revealed during the hearings in two focal debates. The first one concentrated around myths and stereotypes concerning black people, such as Jezebel, a black castrating matriarch, or a black rapist. The second one raised the issues of silence and loyalty of women to men in African American communities and evoked the issues of race solidarity and race/gender priority. The debates are analyzed with the application of the intersectionality of various categories of identity and methods from cultural studies, political science, and social studies.

## 2. Hill/Thomas hearings

The hearings of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas by the Senate Judiciary Committee were an event widely covered by the media. It drew close attention of millions of astounded Americans. Due to the retirement of the first African American Justice Thurgood Marshall in July 1991, President George Bush nominated Clarence Thomas Justice of the Supreme Court. Thomas, a federal appeal court judge of African American de-

scent, was known for his anti-affirmative action and anti-abortion stances (Marable 93-94). His nomination was put on the verge of collapse by the testimony of Anita Hill, who accused her former boss of sexual harassment.

At the time of the hearings Anita Hill was a law professor at the University of Oklahoma. Soon after her graduation from Yale University, she was hired as an assistant to Clarence Thomas, chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. She worked for him from 1981 to 1983. As Hill testified a number of years later, during the time she worked as Thomas's assistant, she was, despite her refusals, repeatedly asked by her supervisor to go out socially together. According to Hill, Thomas frequently used the work situation to initiate discussions about sex, speaking about sexual acts he saw in pornographic films and graphically describing his own prowess. During her testimony Hill talked about a number of instances when Thomas, by referring to sexual matters, made her feel uncomfortable and embarrassed in his presence. In testifying Hill recollected:

One of the oddest episodes I remember was an occasion in which Thomas was drinking a Coke in his office. He got up from the table at which we were working, went over to his desk to get the Coke, looked at the can and asked, 'Who has pubic hair on my Coke?' On other occasions, he referred to the size of his own penis as being larger than normal and he also spoke on some occasions of the pleasures he had given to women with oral sex. (38)

Hill's testimony was a traumatic moment in the so far smoothly running hearings. The whole situation was so disturbing because two main actors – embodiments of American success – were African Americans. Both were conservative Republicans. Hill was a devout Baptist. She would probably not have testified if not asked to do so, because it was not her intention to bring to light an issue associated with women's liberation. However, guided by her understanding of righteousness, she did make accusations against her fellow African American conservative. The Senate Judiciary Committee split 7 to 7 on whether to endorse Thomas but no mention was made by the Committee members of Hill's accusations and the only objection to Thomas nomination was his conservatism. As a result, the nomination went to the Senate without recommendation. In the end, despite Hill's charges, Thomas was confirmed as Associate Justice of the Supreme Court. But it is what happened beforehand that matters most to us. The whole melodrama took place in front of an all-white and all-male Senate committee. Thomas's nomination was backed up by the Senate. Significantly, out of 100 Senate members only two were women, both of them white (Allen and Chrisman 3-6).

The events of October 1991 provoked a variety of opinions among white and black Americans. Undeniably, the hearings drew their attention to sexual harassment and the position and the participation of women in American public life. At the same time, Thomas's naming the hearings as "a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks" (157) evoked a range of racial stereotypes present in American society: the myth of black rapist, and those of Jezebel and matriarch as stereotypes of black women. The set of prejudices that emerged into light during the hearings has its roots in the times of slavery, as well as in the post-Civil War period. The hearings and their result revealed the interconnection of racism and sexism, which was bluntly embodied in the treatment of Anita Hill.

### 3. The lynched black man and the castrating Jezebel

According to many commentators, Thomas was confirmed to the Supreme Court because of his successful manipulation of myths and stereotypes connected to black people that have been a part of the collective consciousness of Americans. Importantly, Thomas used several distinct scenarios (the myth of the black rapist, the myth of a black castrating matriarch, the strategy of de-racing Hill, the stereotype of Jezebel) that might seem to be self-contradictory but brought him success and support of the majority of African Americans. Primarily, Thomas naming the hearings as the "lynching for *uppity* blacks" (emphasis mine) referred to his status of a black man, who due to hard work was able to climb the ladder of American success. Thomas, similarly to Hill, was born in a working-class family, and his professional position and middle-class status were the results of his efforts. Portraying himself as an advancing black man, Thomas maneuvered Hill into the position of a black matriarch – a powerful black woman whose strength was seen as castrating. Within the universe of racial stereotypes, the black matriarch (the evil side of Mammy) is held responsible for the failure and emasculation of black men. Michele Wallace, African American author of the book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, writes about the feeling of guilt that black women internalize due to the myth of the black matriarch, whom she also calls "superwoman": "We had not allowed the black man to be a man in his own house. We had driven him to alcohol, to drugs, to crime, to every bad thing he had ever done to harm himself or his family because our eyes had not reflected his manhood" (299). The myth of the black matriarch has been used as a guilt trigger for women and as an explanation of black men's failures. The fact that skillful manipulation of the image worked so well for Thomas suggests that the myth is still alive. Putting Hill into the position of matriarch, he presented himself as an ambitious black man, whose attempts to gain success are hampered by the castrating female – Anita Hill.

Another set of stereotypes evoked by Thomas was connected to the myth of the black rapist. This myth was conjured up in the after-Civil War period, specifically in the late 1880s. According to it, black men had insatiable desire for white women and would employ any means, including rape, to sexually possess a female of the white race (Bederman 46). The popular justification for lynching at the end of the nineteenth century stated that it was performed in order to protect the honor of white Southern women sexually abused by insatiable and savage black men. In fact, lynching was a tool of control of freed blacks. Similarly to flogging in the times of slavery, it provided a horrifying example of what happened to these who were disobedient. Moreover, as it was demonstrated by such people as Ida B. Wells (an African American woman who began a crusade against lynching at the end of the nineteenth century), in many cases interracial relationships between black men and white women were consensual, and sometimes white women even initiated them. All this is well known today, mainly due to the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s.

Thomas could not have manipulated the myth of the black rapist had it not already been dismantled by American society at large, mainly due to the civil rights movement. Presenting himself as a black man being lynched by a white mob, namely the all-white male Senate committee, Thomas deliberately victimized himself and took advantage of white guilt (Morrison xxiii). Portraying himself as a lynch victim, Thomas also explicitly reduced Hill to the role of a white female, de-raced her, so to speak. Such a manipulation was easy to undertake, as Hill was already stereotypically depicted by her critics and American media as a mentally unstable, ultra-emotional female, who, despite her professional position and education, was determined by sexual desire (Allen 25; Brownmiller 292). Due to her alleged harassment by a black man, Hill was in a sense denied her race, because it is white women who are stereotypically sexually abused by black men and who wrongly accuse blacks of attacking them (James 112; Jackson-Leslie 107). Thus, Anita Hill seemed to have behaved like a white woman accusing a black man of a sexual offence and provoking his victimization. To conclude, Thomas, who presented himself as a victim of lynching, occupied the position of race. On the other hand, Hill was reduced to pure gender.

Due to the successful manipulation of prejudices against black people, Thomas was able to maneuver Hill into two roles, neither of which was workable: she was a black castrating matriarch and white female falsely accusing a black man of sexual abuse. In fact, his suggestion that he was being lynched in front of the American public was irrelevant, as no black man had been ever lynched for the alleged rape of a black woman (Allen 27). Nonetheless, Thomas successfully associated himself with the victims of white violence against black men: this helped him undermine Hill's accusations and won

him the compassion of both black and white audiences. Consequently, by referring to lynching, Thomas racially empowered himself and made the accusations of a *black* woman irrelevant. In short, he managed to play both the race and the gender card right.

Another fact that contributed to Thomas's success in manipulation of myths and stereotypes about black people was the fact that the candidate for the Supreme Court was married to a white woman. As Toni Morrison argues, Thomas, having a white wife at his side, yearned for race transcendence (xxi). The ostentatious presence of Thomas's wife during the hearings helped Thomas to escape the association with a black rapist. As it has been argued, the myth of the black rapist has been set to rest in American culture, mainly owing to the civil rights movement (Davis; Whitfield). Fewer and fewer Americans believed that black men were lynched because they had sexually abused white women. It may be argued that it was the Thomas hearings that contributed largely to debunking the myth. Due to his successful manipulation, the fact that Thomas had a white wife did not put him in the position of a black savage rapist. On the contrary, it helped him to appear as a successful raceless professional, who, due to his position and prestige, was able to attract a good-looking white female. Clarence Thomas could appear with a white woman at his side and expect admiration rather than anger from white men. He was able to take advantage of the guilt and the shame left over from the past.

Thomas's strategy to present himself as raceless proved successful. At the same time, depicting himself as a man, he maneuvered Anita Hill into the position of Jezebel, an openly seductive, licentious black woman – the embodiment of lust. The application of the myth of Jezebel to black women may be traced back to the times of slavery, when it helped to justify the sexual exploitation of black women by slave owners. If black women were Jezebels, they were always ready for sex. Hence, Anita Hill, put by Thomas in the position of Jezebel, could not have been sexually abused as she was supposed to be always willing to undertake a sexual relationship (Painter 212). Susan Bordo, a feminist philosopher and cultural critic, argues that sexual abuse such as rape “implies the invasion of a personal space of modesty and reserve that the black woman has not been imagined as having” (9). Moreover, the association of Hill with Jezebel resulted in people's believing that she was lying because, historically, a black woman's word was not taken as truth, due to the association between lack of chastity and lack of veracity (Crenshaw 414). Thomas's strategy to present himself as a raceless man with a white woman at his side proved to be successful. Thanks to it, he maneuvered Hill into the position of Jezebel – seductive black woman, whom one should not trust.

Due to the shrewd and thoughtful manipulations of myths and stereotypes about black people, Thomas became Marshall's successor. The candidate to the Supreme Court succeeded in presenting himself, according to need, as an African American, whose ad-

vancement is hampered by a black castrating matriarch, as a raceless man, seduced by promiscuous Jezebel, and as a decent and innocent lynch victim, falsely accused by a white woman. Anita Hill became a screen on which myth and assumptions about sex and gender present in American society were projected one by one. Thomas played with a number of myths and stereotypes, especially with the myth of black rapist. He succeeded because the myth had been already debunked in mainstream culture. Such a strategy would not have been fruitful just a few decades before when the vestiges of the myth of black rapist were still present, especially among white Southerners.

#### 4. Silence and loyalty in black communities

In the introduction to her anthology devoted to the Hill/Thomas controversy, Morrison argues that one of the salient issues during the hearings was silence, and specifically Anita Hill's inability to remain silent (xxiii), to abstain from speaking about being sexually harassed by a black man in front of an all-white male Senate committee. According to Carol Swain, a professor of law and political science, Hill was dismissed by African Americans because she was seen as "a person who had violated the code of censorship which mandates that blacks should not criticize, let alone accuse, each other in front of whites" (225). This "unwritten code of silence" is mandated by a fear of white people using black's stories and words against them (Lawrance 137).

The word "silence" appears with significant frequency in commentaries about the Hill/Thomas hearings and is inseparably connected with the issue of loyalty of black women to black men (Guy-Sheftal 75; Hill Collins 40-41). The requirement that black women remain silent about "the devils in the camp" (Boyd 44) is based on the belief that black women should give priority to their race above their sex. A black woman cannot be loyal to both, but she has to choose either her race or her sex (Hernton 87). According to Black Nationalist ideology it is impossible to reconcile the two. A black woman is compelled to give priority to her race; otherwise, she is labeled a traitor. In short, according to a majority of African Americans, Hill should have remained silent: due to her testimony she violated a code of racial loyalty and exposed male chauvinism and sexual violence within the black community. During the hearings African Americans tended to take the side of Thomas (as a fellow black man) against Hill, as a woman, whose blackness was irrelevant (Mansbridge and Tate 488-492).

The issue of black loyalty becomes problematic when we realize that prioritizing race by African American women implies accepting violence and abuse within black communities. The acceptance of exploitation is to be based on the paradigm of self-sacrifice

that was created in African American communities and which assumes that black women should sacrifice their lives and interests for the benefit of black communities and specifically black men. True to this paradigm, Hill should have devoted her energy to fighting racism and done nothing about black or white sexism. As Guy-Sheftal states, a black woman raising issues of sexism becomes associated with a man-hating feminist (75). That is why Hill gained support mainly among white middle-class women, who are more prone to identify with feminism, than black women (Mansbridge and Tate 488-492). Moreover, the notions of loyalty and self-sacrifice are used within black communities as a means of control of women by men (Bray 49). These factors help explain why so many African Americans, and especially black women, dismissed Anita Hill. She did not remain silent but revealed “dirt” in her “camp” in front of an all-white male committee and, even more importantly, in front of white America. Moreover, sexual harassment and abuse were associated as feminist issues, and feminism for many black women was equal to man-hating.

The problem of crossgender loyalty seems not to relate to black men; they are not required to show solidarity with black women. This fact was bluntly revealed during the Hill/Thomas hearings in the way that the candidate for the Supreme Court Justice prioritized gaining approval of an “old boys club” of the Senate Judiciary Committee to loyalty and solidarity with a woman of his own race. As Evelyn M. Hammonds soundly states, “[n]o mention was made of how Clarence Thomas had failed in his duty... to Black women” (quoted in Guy-Sheftal 75-76). As she claims, African American men are allowed to have duty only to themselves, whereas black women have a duty to the race. Such an ethic implies priority of male experiences and interests within black communities and validates black women’s inferior position.

The issues of loyalty and silence are inextricably connected with violence within black communities, black male chauvinism, and scapegoating black women for all the misfortunes of African Americans. All these problems were bluntly revealed during the Clarence Thomas confirmation. The hearings prompted a number of African Americans to acknowledge the sexism within the black communities and to seek its roots. There is a general tendency to look for the causes of black misogyny in the legacy of slavery and the inability of the black slave to provide for his family and to exercise the functions of father and husband. Consequently, slaves were not able to test and prove their masculinity and to assume their patriarchal family roles (Genovese 491). As a result, the reason for black sexism is said to have its roots in racism and in maltreatment of black men. Moreover, it was argued that African Americans have internalized racist stereotypes and myths, which stemmed from white supremacist ideology (Lawrence 137). Thus, just like white men, they tended to “view all black women as bitches, skeezers, and hoes”

(Jackson-Leslie 107), who are promiscuous, loose, and always ready for sex, so that they cannot be sexually abused or raped.

Seeking the roots of black misogyny in white racism, black men tend to create a ladder of oppression with white men at the top, they themselves in the middle, and black women at the bottom. This way of thinking does not contribute to ending oppression within black communities. The Hill/Thomas hearings prompted some African Americans to acknowledge this fact. For instance, Charles Lawrence highlights that loyalty and solidarity among blacks cannot mean silence and that “[i]t will not serve us to fight racism by tolerating sexism within our own community” (138). Similarly, Barbara Ransby, an African American historian, points out that black people “cannot regress... to a point... when black women were told that it was our duty to assume subordinate roles so that brothers could redeem their manhood” (171). With this comment, Ransby again seeks the roots of black sexism in the legacy of slavery. However, as bell hooks states, it is a cliché that the cruelest impact of slavery was denial of black men’s masculinity. Such an assumption is based on the belief that men’s experience is more important than women’s. In her view, such an idea stems from the perception that “the worst that can happen to a man is that he be made to assume the social status of woman” (hooks quoted in Willis 107). hooks also rejects the statement that black men had learned sexism from white men. In fact, African Americans came from patriarchal cultures where women were not equal to men. Hence, hooks does not excuse black men for their misogyny, as many other African Americans tend to do. She argues that black sexism cannot be traced back to times of slavery and denies the sole responsibility of white racism for black chauvinism.

Nancy Fraser, a professor of philosophy and women’s studies, argues that one of the most striking features of the Hill/Thomas controversy was absence of the black feminist voice in the debate (604). Such voices were raised only after the hearings ended. The two most audible were those of Rebecca Walker and a group called the African American Women in Defense of Ourselves.

Rebecca Walker, the daughter of the author of *Color Purple*, heralded in her manifesto the emergence of the new wave of American feminism that takes the interconnected categories of race and gender into account. “Becoming the Third Wave” depicts the outrage of a young African American woman who becomes aware that in the United States, a few decades after the outburst of the feminist movement, “women are negated, violated, devaluated, ignored” (211), that their space is invaded, their rights are taken away, their voice is not heard. In her manifesto, Walker makes a connection to a number of issues revealed during the hearings. One of them is the cultural mandatory requirement for women to remain silent. As has been argued, such an obligation is particularly



stringent in the case of black women who are bound to silence due to their presupposed loyalty to male members of their community. Furthermore, the young feminist discusses the problem of black chauvinism or women's solidarity. She addresses the issue of black men equating their interests with the interests of the black race and their refusal to acknowledge women's oppression within African American communities. Bearing in mind black men, she asks: "When will they stop talking so damn much about 'race' as if it revolved exclusively around them?" (212).

Rebecca Walker was not the only black woman who protested against the negation of women's voice during Thomas's confirmation. The hearings mobilized more than 1,600 black women, who in defense of themselves wrote a public protest against the public castigation of Hill as well as against the Thomas nomination. Similarly to Walker, these women of African American descent, most of them academics, claimed that they would not be silenced. They argued that many voices of African Americans were ignored in the debate about Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court, and they implied that these were especially the voices of black women. They spoke about sexual abuse of black women and the fact that this was never taken seriously in the United States. Underlining that "black women have been sexually stereotyped as immoral, insatiable, perverse; the initiators in all sexual contacts," they alluded to Thomas maneuvering Hill into the position of seductive Jezebel. They highlighted that the allegations against Thomas were not an issue of either gender or sex, but of both. Hence, they acknowledged the interconnectedness between racism and sexism that was embodied in the treatment of Anita Hill. They also opposed the popular conception that "all blacks are men," emphasizing that "[n]o one will speak for us but ourselves" (273-74). Concluding, the African American Women in Defense of Ourselves openly spoke about the influence of both racism and sexism on their lives and on Hill's testimony. They did not hesitate to reveal the fact that black women were treated instrumentally by Americans, both black and white.

## 5. Conclusion

As Morrison states, after the Hill/Thomas hearings it became possible to speak about sex and gender "without the barriers, the silences, the embarrassing gaps in discourses" (xxx). Even more importantly, the Thomas testimony made Americans realize that it is impossible to separate racism and sexism and that "the politics of sex and the politics of race are one and the same politics" (Hernton 87). As I argued, the testimony proved that sexism and racism are interconnected and it is infeasible to separate them while addressing social and cultural issues concerning American society. The intersectionality of race

and gender was revealed during the hearings and in the debates focusing on the myths and stereotypes concerning black men and women and the issue of silence, loyalty and race/gender priority in African American communities.

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