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A Marginalized Identity

Amelia Rice

Being a woman in the 1960s was not easy, but being a Lakota woman was even harder. Mary Crow Dog experienced countless challenges because of her gender; these struggles were amplified by the Lakota Sioux culture, both internally and in the outside world. Two integral aspects of her identity appear right there in the title of her book, *Lakota Woman*. Many of Mary's hardships were specific to the traditions of the culture that surrounded her. Her story includes her journey not simply to overcome these challenges, but to become comfortable with them and herself as a Sioux woman. Although many aspects of the Lakota culture limited Mary as a woman, it is the culture and religion itself that later helped her find her true identity.

Mary Crow Dog's challenges as a Sioux woman began at a young age. At St. Francis' boarding school, she was beaten for being "too free with her body" for holding hands with a boy.¹ There was no evidence that the boy in question received punishment. When Mary and her friend Charlene tried to report a priest for sexual harassment, the nuns accused them of having a "dirty mind."² When she was fifteen, Mary was raped. Even in her young life, she had already encountered so much violence as a result of her gender. These particular challenges introduced her to how she needed to hide and protect her female body. She stated: "If you are an Indian woman, especially in a ghetto, you have to fight all the time against brutalization and sexual advances."³ Due to her negative

¹ Crow Dog, Mary, and Richard Erdoes. *Lakota Woman*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1991, 38.

² Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 40.

³ Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 51.

experiences, Mary's identity as a woman was shaped by the knowledge that she would always be a target and the need to figure out how to protect herself.

One particular challenge that Mary faced as a result of her gender that was amplified by her race was the threat of sterilization. Her sister along with many other Indian women had been involuntarily sterilized. Although this threat was largely an Indian problem, Indian men did not face this struggle. This is perhaps the largest threat to Mary's identity as a woman. To her, having children was an integral part of being a woman. When she was about to have her first child, she wanted to avoid the threat of being mistreated and potentially sterilized against her will in a hospital. Instead, she chose to give birth in an extremely dangerous environment at Wounded Knee.⁴ In order to protect her own body and fertility, she was forced into an unsafe situation. The physical threats surrounding Mary's pregnancy contributed to the reoccurring struggle regarding the ownership of her body.

There were many aspects of Indian culture that challenged Mary's identity as a woman. In the Lakota Sioux and other Indian cultures, women typically get the short end of the stick. Many times the men in their lives beat them and regarded them as mere bodies meant for sex and taking care of the children.⁵ Aside from those cultural norms, the Lakota Sioux religion and rituals limited Mary in some ways as well. As a woman, she faced restrictions in what rituals she could be a part of and when she could participate in them. When her water broke, Mary wanted to pray in the sweat lodge but was not allowed to. She stated: "Maybe there was a taboo against my participating, just as a menstruating woman is not allowed to take part in a ceremony. I was disappointed. I did

⁴ Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 157.

⁵ Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 5.

not feel that the fact that my water had burst made me ritually unclean.”⁶ Because of this attitude regarding women’s bodies, Mary faced the challenge of limited participation within her own culture, which may have hindered her identity and power as a member of the Lakota.

A prominent issue that Mary struggled with was filling the role of the wife of Leonard Crow Dog, the medicine man. She had little power of choice in the marriage and the role as wife. After being heavily persuaded into marriage by a man of authority, Mary had to take on a foreign role of continuously cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the endless guests that filtered throughout the Crow Dog household.⁷ The expectations of Mary were great, and she had a lot to learn about Lakota culture itself and being a wife inside it. Later, Mary temporarily fled from all this pressure; she recounted, “Having four children, being a medicine man’s wife, cooking and cleaning up for innumerable guests, most of them uninvited, listening to countless woes and problems, became just too much for me.”⁸ As a woman in this role, she did not have much power, and her identity was swallowed whole by the expectations surrounding being the medicine man’s wife.

Although aspects of the Lakota religion contributed to Mary’s struggles as a woman, religion played an integral part in her journey to discover her identity. In fact, some of the same rituals that once limited her as a woman later gave her the power that she had been searching for. For instance, when Mary was allowed to take part in the sweat bath, the experience made her feel powerful, reborn, and connected to the Spirit.⁹ The ritual of the sweat lodge provides the connection of Mary to the Great Spirit, her

⁶ Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 161.

⁷ Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 172-4.

⁸ Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 262-3.

⁹ Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 205.

fellow Lakota women and to herself as a Lakota woman. Bruce Lincoln states that “the need for religion [is] for reconnecting that which has been sundered.”¹⁰ Throughout her life, Mary experienced disconnection within her identity; she struggled to find the connection and peace of being a woman and being Sioux. Her participation in Lakota ritual helped her reconnect to the missing pieces in her life.

Another way that Mary shaped an identity separate from the challenges she faced as a woman was living a religious and fulfilling lifestyle. By living among, learning and observing the people at Grass Mountain, Mary stated that she “was becoming a traditional Sioux woman steeped in the ancient beliefs of her people.”¹¹ She gained ownership of the Sioux woman identity that had kept her marginalized for so long. Enveloped in a place full of spiritual significance, Mary strayed farther away from her past life as an undervalued woman and began to find her peace through religion.

Mary’s quest to find meaning in her identity included a quest to find power as a Lakota woman. Participating in the Sun Dance helped her achieve this meaning and power in several ways. The Sun Dance is all about harnessing the Spirit through the sun; Lincoln states: “it is one of the participants’ chief goals to reconnect themselves to the energy and power that are manifest in the sun.”¹² As a woman, Mary’s life was defined through a lack of power, and this ritual helped her reconnect to the power that she lost in every struggle she had faced. Many challenges she faced as a result of her gender left her powerless as a woman trapped in a man’s world. Traditionally, women did not fully participate in the Sun Dance by piercing (important to explain what piercing is), so it was

¹⁰ Bruce Lincoln, “A Lakota Sun Dance and the Problematics of Sociocosmic Reunion.” *History of Religions* vol. 34, no. 1 (August 1994): 1.

¹¹ Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 251.

¹² Lincoln, “A Lakota Sun Dance and the Problematics of Sociocosmic Reunion,” 5.

significant that Mary pierced along with many other women.¹³ This act physically and spiritually injected power into her feminine identity. Mary stated: “I did not feel any pain because I was in the power.”¹⁴ She was finally able to define herself, find the power she had been looking for, and recognize who she was as a Sioux woman.

Mary Crow Dog’s narrative spoke volumes about the challenges that women face being a part of the Lakota culture. From the strict gender roles and power dynamics of the culture to the outside world of body shaming and punitive boarding schools, Mary struggled to feel comfortable in her own skin. However, she was aided in her quest for meaning through participating in the sacred rituals of her religion. She became connected to her community and to herself as a Lakota woman by gaining the power she had been missing in her life thus far.

¹³ Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 260.

¹⁴ Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 260.