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Chanel Miller and Her Desire to Control the Narrative

Raymond Ha

Backwards and in Heels: Gender Inequity

November 30, 2019

Abstract

After four years of bitter silence, Emily Doe, a young woman known across media only as the victim of a Stanford sexual assault incident, shed her false persona and reclaimed her true identity as the compelling Chanel Miller in her riveting memoir: *Know my name*. Though quiet in terms of personality, Miller possesses a tremendous writer's voice that has allowed her to vividly depict the traumatizing situation that occurred and how she was impacted by the events that followed. Since then, her name has become synonymous with resilience and her figure an upstanding symbol of the #MeToo movement. Her powerful story brought forth waves of support and criticism alike, and continue to evoke response from many today. While the episode with Brock Turner has undoubtedly left Miller with an immense emotional scar, her perseverance and determination to take control of the narrative paved the way for a tale rich with pain, recovery, and hope to blossom.

Chanel Miller, otherwise recognized in court documents as “Emily Doe,” was born in June, 1992, in Palo Alto, California. Her mother is a Chinese author, having written four books, and her father is a retired therapist. Since childhood, Miller has had a very close relationship with her younger sister, Tiffany. She recognized that as the elder, she was responsible for taking care of her, creating a sense of kinship among the two. Miller received her education at the University of California, and graduated with a degree in literature. She highly valued her writing, which became apparent when she wrote her first memoir, *Know my name*, as a way to express her feelings about the sexual assault that has forever changed her life. Among the many brave and dignified women who have come forward with their own sexual assault stories, I decided to research Chanel Miller because of how she used her unique writer’s voice as a tool to shape her own story, refusing to let the media take control of the narrative.

Miller’s situation preceded the #MeToo movement, and therefore has no direct relationship to it. However, many activists acclaim that her viral victim impact statement helped in igniting its momentum. Her story began on the evening of January 17, 2015, when she accompanied Tiffany to a party at the Kappa Alpha fraternity house on Stanford University’s campus. According to Miller’s memoir, *Know my name*, she had been constantly drinking throughout the party and felt as if she “had outgrown everything around [her],” at which point her “memory goes black.” She recalled waking up later in an unfamiliar hospital room, wearing unfamiliar clothing, surrounded by unfamiliar faces. Unaware of what had occurred the night before and still confused as to what was happening, Miller merely did what she was told by the

officials present.

After a series of questionings and physical examinations, she was soon reunited with her frantic sister and the two discussed what they knew about the events that recently transpired. Miller stayed in denial throughout this process, refusing to believe she was actually assaulted. She cooperated with authorities while constantly telling herself that it would all eventually be recognized as a mistake and would go away. However, upon reading a news article one day at work, she made the connection between what was written with what has been told to her recently and realized that she was the victim being described. A Stanford student, identified as Brock Turner, was found on top of her unconscious body during the party, inserting his fingers and foreign objects into her. He was caught by two students who chased and pinned him onto the ground, leading to his arrest. Miller later received a call asking if she would like to press charges against Turner, to which she replied affirmatively and then created the fake name “Emily Doe” to use during court proceedings in order to protect her own identity.

During the court trial, Miller delivered an incredibly powerful 12-page victim impact statement which later gained notoriety online and was viewed by millions of users, many of which sympathized with Miller and some of which were sexual assault survivors who gained confidence from seeing her words. She spoke in vivid detail about the horrifying experience she lived through with the assault and what it meant to her that Turner went to such lengths to try and discredit what she was saying so that he could save himself. Ultimately, Turner was convicted of three counts of felony sexual assault and was sentenced to six months in prison as opposed to the six years prosecutors requested (Dwyer & Martin, 2019).

At this point, the world still knew of Miller only as “Emily Doe.” Her intention was to use this pseudonym in order to protect her true identity during the court proceedings as well as shield herself from the backlash she would receive, but she found that having this alter ego eventually started to impede her mental recovery. She stated that “when you keep something so contained, it restricts you from getting the help and support you need,” indicating that she felt the need to expose her true self as a way to help herself cope with the issue (Brockes, 2019). On September 24, 2019, Miller accomplished her goal by publishing her first memoir, *Know my name*. As the title suggests, it was a medium for Emily Doe to relinquish her false persona and let her readers know of her true self, Chanel Miller. It begins with the story of how she attended the party at Stanford and ends with the victim impact statement, reiterating to “girls everywhere” that she knows how they feel and continues to stand by them.

Though the assault happened prior to the outburst of the #MeToo movement, it does not stand as another solitary statistic. Miller’s victim impact statement resonated with the countless people who read it, giving them the courage to speak out about their own stories, leading many activists to credit Miller with helping to incite the #MeToo movement (Lam, 2019). In addition, there were also those that supported Miller when news of her incident started to spread, including her friend’s mother, Anne. An excerpt from *Know my name* states, “People will approach you and say they are an ‘investigator for the court’ ... they probably work for the defense or press... be prepared to say ‘no comment.’ Hang in there, girls.” Despite the crazy situation she was in, Miller still received a lot of support from friends and family.

Nevertheless, while there were many who understood Miller's situation, there were also those that antagonized her for it. The backlash she received as a result of the case was also part of the reason why she felt the need to use her fake name. According to an article from *The Guardian*, "at every stage of the trial and its aftermath, [Miller] has received death and rape threats from random men set on defending Turner online." During the trial itself, Turner and his lawyer attempted to base their argument around the fact that Miller was intoxicated, and thus, could not recall information correctly. However, in an experiment conducted by Heather D. Flowe, Melanie K. T. Takarangi, Joyce E. Humphries, and Deborah S. Wright, that speculation was tested and was found to be baseless. In the experiment, a number of women aged 18-31 were given varying amounts of alcohol and then underwent simulations of sexual assault where they self-imagined themselves in a romantic relationship with a man that quickly derailed and turned into assault. Following that, the participants were given memory tests and the results were measured. From the results, the researchers concluded that it is indeed possible for intoxicated women to accurately provide details to law enforcement (Flowe, Takarangi, Humphries, & Wright, 2015). The data applies directly to Miller's case and shows that she was capable of providing accurate information despite the fact that she had consumed alcohol.

Despite the trial leaning far into Miller's favor, she was not able to get the results she desired because of Aaron Persky, the judge overseeing the case. He imposed a six-month prison sentence, of which Turner only served three, when prosecutors were asking for six years. His basis for his light sentence was that "a prison sentence would have a severe impact on [Turner]."

(Dwyer & Martin, 2019). Much like many student athletes accused of sexual assault, Turner received leniency because of the very fact that he was an athlete (Catalina, 2019). The incredibly lenient sentence led to a national outrage, raising many voices who called for Persky to be recalled. Though there were some who supported his decision, he was ultimately recalled from the bench with 59% of voters favoring the recall and 41% opposing it, according to The Associated Press. In addition to the recall of Persky, Miller's case has also led to significant changes in California law (Dwyer & Martin, 2019). Lawmakers were under the impression that allowing individuals like Turner to go free with little punishment sent a message to the public that rape culture was acceptable (Hatch, 2017). The previous law stated that rape through physical force was punishable by imprisonment, but the new law broadened the scope and included that the absence of force with an unconscious individual would also be of the same offense (Gonzales, 2016).

Miller is a passionate soul who showed defiance in the face of her odds. Even though her story was not one from the #MeToo movement, it undoubtedly showed the struggles that women face with sexual assault and how unjustified the justice system can be. She is one of many individuals who suffered, and by using her voice, she managed to take hold of her narrative and share it with others who can relate, as well as those who can learn from it. In spite of all the challenges she has faced and those that are yet to come, her courageous spirit has illuminated a path forward for all victims of sexual assault, so that everyone will know her name.

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