

Gender Dynamics: Struggle of Women in the Black Panther Party

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Abstract: The Black Power Era which is bracketed between 1966 and 1975 was very masculine and misogynist in nature. Male supremacy was considered to be a tradition which was supposed to be accepted and followed. The women in various movements during the 1960s were seen as mere sexual objects and subordinates. Traces of sexism were apparent in the revolutionary Black Panther Party too but this party was also one of those rare organizations which tried to eliminate the chauvinism in the party and criticised such patriarchal systems in other Black Power groups. The women in the party endeavoured to emphasize that their role in the revolution was equal to that of men. This paper studies how the party evolved and realised that struggle against the draconian power bloc had to be waged equally by men and women. These gender voices were suppressed under the media representation of the party which was manipulated greatly by the state agencies. There is immense contradiction in the accounts which were presented by the media and those narrated by the leaders of the Black Panther Party. Thus the most reliable accounts are the writings of the women who were a part of the party. This paper critically analyses two essays written by the Black Panther women who devoted their lives to the revolutionary cause of emancipation of the blacks in America. Their struggle was not only against the racist system but also the intra-party gender bias that these women overcame through their conviction, perseverance and strength.

Keywords: Black Power, Black Panthers, Sexism, gender.

The phrase “Black Power” has always been associated with evocative and inspiring images of Black men in the 1960s. They wore black berets, dark sunglasses and carried guns or shouted aggressive Black Power slogans that challenged the racist world order. Such masculine images of black power dominated the public attention in the 1960s and 1970s. But despite the presence of women in the visual record, they remained absent from the historical records. The

interest in feminism destabilized and complicated the male-centred histories and research began to be carried out to shape and enrich the concerns of women and gender.

The question of gender and its connection to women has been a burning question across cultures over time. Gender is the social construction of sexual relations. Women have always been categorised as the “weaker sex” and this idea has been met with a lot of criticism in the recent decades. Through ages, women have been defined, not by their work but by their sex. Every effort of women to gain equal rights was condemned by critics as illogical. The women bore this discrimination for long, but with the feminist wave of the 1960s, the women realised that there was no justification for compartmentalizing them as the lesser humans. African American women had to experience the painful marginalization and suffer because of being black and female in a world dictated by whites and males. The voice that these women raised for equality united all the women of the world through a shared plight. Continuing with the same intention, women emphasized their position in social, economic and political realms too. Toni Morrison’s analysis confirms, “The black woman has nothing to fall back on, not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of profound desolation of reality, she may very well have invented herself” (15).

Women have participated in every aspect of the world revolutions but their contribution has always been questioned. In the 18th century, when the focus was on the emancipation of women, it was restricted to Right to Education, not the right to vote. The writers of the era of enlightenment also viewed women as biologically and socially inferior and destined to play the traditional role of family rearing. Every effort of women to gain political rights was condemned by the critics and their demands for equality troubled the set construct of “proper roles” for women.

Black feminism was the second wave of Feminism in the 1960s. The African American feminists examined the race, class and gender linkage in this decade initiating the long process of changes in social and political dynamics. The actions of men and women are influenced by the structure of authority and identity. Politics and gender are inter-related. Political change can make available or curtail the possibility of change in society.

The relation between gender and politics is made clear by the tragedy of Mohamed Bonazizi’s self-immolation, the event that paved the way for the Arab Spring in 2012. The Tunisian street vendor’s action ignited a mass national protest which led to the fall of the Ben Ali government. But the case in point brings forth the bitter fact that he did not set himself on

fire because he was denied his right to make a living, he did so because a woman had slapped him in the face. Bonazizi was a man who had fallen victim to the assault of the abusive state apparatus at many other instances, yet the insult to his masculinity was so improper that it led to the sabotage which engulfed the whole Middle East.

To understand this better, one has to study the beginning of the movement and its composition. The 1960s in America was the time when the people had started feeling tired of “turning the other cheek,” the idea professed by the Civil Rights Leaders of non-violence as the means to achieve freedom from racism in America. The Civil Rights movement was led by eloquent speakers like Martin Luther King Jr. who were relying on peaceful policies.

Within this context, the Black Panther Party was introduced in 1966 to claim the leadership of the African-American masses. The Panthers were the young African-American men who had decided to pick up the gun to defend themselves and demand their rights. The party was initially created to defend the African American community from the rampant police brutality but later it expanded to include the welfare of the community as a whole. Led by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the party gained significant attention due to their visual and rhetorical appeal. They were the young men dressed in black jackets and powder blue shirts, toting guns and speaking with profound charisma. The Black Panther Party was an amalgamation of vigour, wisdom and fearlessness of young educated men who had resolved to organise the community against the injustices of the state powers. Discrimination, oppression and subjugation were the phenomena which had defined the existence of Blacks in America since the beginning. The Blacks had to face harassment every day at the hands of the police who resorted to brutal lynching for the sake of enjoyment. Though many movements began and strived for the betterment of the status of Blacks in America, yet little could be changed.

While the male-centric visual appeal fascinated the men, the women of the community also volunteered to join the party. The Black Panther Party always raked attention due to various controversial reasons and one of the most discussed amongst those was the sexism that the female members of the party experienced. By 1970, women formed two-third of the party, yet the party remained mostly male-centric. Despite the macho portrayal of the party, it was the women who played an instrumental role in sustenance of the party. The Black community was already in the throes of discrimination and segregation; therefore, it became necessary to remove all traces of differences within the party.

The Black Panther Party at the outset was an all-male organisation out on the quest for regaining of Black Manhood. The long history of lynching and discrimination had instilled so much fear in the Blacks that they had begun feeling castrated. So when the party was created, it was an opportunity for these men to reaffirm their masculinity and put an end to racial mistreatment. The inclusion of women in the party was not given much thought and when the women expressed their willingness to join the party, some men took it as a distraction from the main focus of their platform. The masculinism of the Black Power era relegated women to familial, reproductive and supporting roles. The first issue of *The Black Panther* Newspaper published in 1967 had a gendered analysis of the party presented by Huey P. Newton and Elridge Cleaver. The call for recruitment read:

THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY FOR SELF-DEFENCE really has something going. These brothers are the cream of the Black manhood. They are there for the protection and defence of our black community... BLACK MEN!!! It is your duty to your women and children, to your mothers and sisters, to investigate the program of the PARTY. (5)

Tarika Lewis, the first woman to join the party was a Black Panther artist who contributed to the paper in its early years and her focus was only on creating powerful male imagery, but slowly she started drawing women in powerful roles too. Recognizing the potential of *The Black Panther* newspaper in creating iconic images of the male members, Lewis took up the task of drawing real life images of female comrades who stood shoulder to shoulder with male comrades for liberal causes. Thus, these images provided the women the privilege of being the heroes too and expanded their domain from being mere caregivers.

There are some pioneering essays written by the Black Panther women which can be used as a basis for deriving substantial information about the internal politics of the party. Two essays which I have studied for the purpose of this paper are “Why I Joined the Party: An Africana Womanist Reflection” by Regina Jennings and “The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job: Black Panther Party Women, 1966-1982” by Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest.

Jennings in her essay comments that although instances of male dominance formed a part of the prime years of most black women, yet after joining the highly popular party, she realised the existence of double standards within the party too. The aggressive and direct mystique of the Black Panthers attracted thousands across America. The trauma of racism is explained by her through various incidents in the neighbourhood that affected her in adverse ways

emotionally and physically. The recognition and the power that the party provided to her gradually helped her in distancing herself from all vices. During her induction into the party, she was taught about race, society, and self-defence to allow her to understand her situation better and undrug her mind. She mentions how all the new recruits were taught from an Afrocentric perspective. She says in this regard, “I had never considered black people as a subject of knowledge. I had been taught only to revere white people as a source of world progress” (260).

It is interesting to note that she calls the relationship between Oakland, California Panthers and the black community as a “mutual love affair.” She compliments the party by acknowledging how she was impressed by the Panthers who worked in a disciplined manner for the betterment of the society without demanding anything for their personal benefit. She also acknowledges that after 1968, the FBI was on a rampage to destroy the party through instigation and infiltration. Being a young organization, they could not discern what was real and what was fake. Thus the party began crumbling under the pressure of so much tension and despair. What makes this essay significant is the fact that Regina Jennings dared to be vocal about the sexual harassment that the party leaders meted out to her. Despite giving all of herself to the movement, she mentions with great regret that the captain of the Oakland Panther chapter tried to make undue advances on her and her resistance angered him enough to make her survival difficult in the party. This incident throws light on a case like many other Panther women who fell victim to the sexism in the party. Although she is unbiased in her opinions and shares her experiences of sexism in the party, yet she concludes the essay by conveying regard and respect for the party

The second essay, “The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job: Black Panther Party Women, 1966-1982” by Angela D LeBlanc-Ernest is an extensive analysis of the complete tenure of the party. The Black Panther Party in its former years (1966-1967) was a distinctly male-oriented organization which primarily focussed on recruiting brothers off the block. The party soon realised that it was incomplete in the absence of women.

During the most formative years of the party, Kathleen Cleaver joined the party and became the first woman to sit on the central committee of the organization. She never stated any incident of gender discrimination in her tenure in the party. She remained unaware of the gender bias in the party and the reason for that could be the fact that she was the wife of Elridge Cleaver, Minister of Information which shielded her from discrimination. Despite

that she admitted that the male members of the party had a tendency of overlooking the ideas suggested by the women in the party. According to Kathleen Cleaver:

If a woman would express an idea, because that idea is coming from a source that they're not looking for an idea from, it would be discounted... They looked to women to help them, to take care of them, to nurture them, to be their mothers, to be their lovers. But they did not look to women for their ideas. (55-56)

Cleaver rightly remarked in this context that the women were bearing the state repression equally as other men and the intraparty harassment was adding to their repression. In an excerpt from a letter sent to Ericka Huggins from the third world, and published in *The Black Panther* on July 5, 1969, Elridge Cleaver quotes the message sent by Huey P. Newton:

The incarceration and the sufferings of sister Ericka should be a stinging rebuke to all manifestations of male chauvinism within our ranks...let it be a lesson and an example to all the brothers, that we must understand that our women are suffering strongly and enthusiastically as we are participating in the struggle... The minister of Defence Huey P. Newton has said that it is mandatory that all manifestations of male chauvinism be excluded from our ranks and that sisters have a duty and the right to do whatever they want to do in order to see to it that they are not relegated to an inferior position, and that they are not treated as though they are not equal members of the party and equal in all regards. And they are not subjected to male practices. (98-99)

Saying this did not bring a sudden transformation in the attitude of the male Panthers, but this formal position was an advance over other Black organizations in the 1960s which did not even consider gender inequality to be a concern.

The double standards in the party became one of the primary reasons for the demise of the party. The greatest flaw of the party was that the organizational structure of the party had not given thought to the integration of women in the party and when the women started volunteering, there was conflict of opinions in the party. There was no democratic procedure for challenging the men in the leadership positions. The women in the party offices were physically abused at times, yet there was no channel to handle this misbehaviour. If there were any external bodies to check discipline within the party, the unfair practices against women might have been checked. The efforts made by party leaders to address the problems of women proved to be inefficient. Bobby Seale had created rules regarding the appropriate

behaviour with women, yet it appeared to be a feeble attempt to save the public image of the party. The women in the leadership positions also felt that the orders they gave in the party were met with resistance and were contrary in regard to the response the male leaders got. Elaine Brown, who became the Chair of the party in 1974, explains the mindset of male comrades in her autobiography, *A Taste of Power*, as “A women in the movement was considered, at best, irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. A woman attempting the role of leadership was, to my proud Black Brothers, making an alliance with the counter-revolutionary, man-hating, lesbian, feminist white bitches” (357). These problems were left unchecked in the beginning due to which the foundation of the party weakened.

Despite the mixed experiences of women while being Panthers, they all admitted that the discipline and passion that the Panthers had for their work was commendable and the missions were followed aggressively. The presence of the women in leadership positions was a change from the traditional roles they were relegated to even during the Civil Rights era. These women rose above the subordinated roles in order to serve their community. Rather, they set forth models for the efficient working of all races in the society based on the shared love for humanity. The issues raised by the party are salient in the context of the blacks even in the twenty first century.

Conclusion

The women who overcame social, economic and physical barriers to join the Black Panther Party deserve a place within the greater historical narrative. Their struggles allowed them to achieve an alternate identity for themselves. They rose against the oppressive power structure to acquire respect and equality for themselves. Apart from the revolution, these women made a great contribution towards achievement of women’s rights. They proved that they were an indispensable part of the revolution by successfully managing the community programs. These programs were responsible for letting the people see beyond the negative image that the FBI had resolved to present in front of the masses. The stigma which was associated with the guns of the Panthers was replaced by the programs for community welfare. The Black Panther party was not restricted to self-defence, but they made substantial contributions to the African-American masses by rescuing them from the status quo. The party has to be looked at with consideration of the political complexities of representation.

There are accounts which portray a negative image of the treatment of women in the party and there are positive accounts too. What is most relevant is that the Party gave women a

platform to step out of the social and political invisibility. After incarceration of most Black Panther Leaders, the reins of the party were handled by the women and the shift of the trajectory of the party in the positive direction can be attributed to the women who fought like brave soldiers for their civil rights. These women aimed to serve the society with their knowledge and abilities to lead to the “reconstruction” of the society which was plagued by many evils like racism and sexism.

To conclude, it can be said that the women deserve greater respect than the male comrades because their struggle involved fighting *with* the Black Panther Party to attain liberation to fighting *in* the Black Panther Party to demand respect. The women in the party resisted slavery, segregation and racism, thus contributing significantly to the African American history. Overall, the study of Black Panther women offers us rich analytical and descriptive points for framing our historical understanding of the Black Power era.

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